

A BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY OF THE WORK OF WALTER DE LA MARE

Dr. Priyam Ankit

Associate Prof., Dept. of English, Agra College, Agra

ABSTRACT

In making an assessment of the work of Walter John de la Mare, we find that the same mind is at work in all the various types of writings. Hence the study of the background of the development of de la Mare's exquisite mind is essential. Real difficulty arises because the poet has nowhere given any sustained autobiographical account of his life. The difficulty is further aggravated because of the fact that much of the material of autobiography, however tenuous it may be, has been transformed by imagination into poetry or fiction and has become one with what was purely imaginative. References to the natural charm of the poet and his work in the letters and memoirs of his friends and acquaintances can be of help to us. A closer study of the life of the poet and the background of the writing reveals facts which run contrary to the general opinion of the critics. One discovers that the various incidents of the life of de la Mare are of value in making a just estimate of his literary work. The life and letters are thus very closely connected. Hence one may begin at the beginning and trace through the life of the author some inspirations and influences which have great bearing on the study of his work.

Key Words: *Imagination, Memoirs, Childhood, Psycho-analysis, Supernatural, Solitude, Tranquility, Still Moments.*

It is a truism that a writer's work is 'all of a piece', whatever its form, in that it derives from a single mind. This however becomes a central canon of criticism in making an assessment of the work of Walter John de la Mare. The same mind is at work in all the various types of writings of this author. About de la Mare's mind Lacon makes this observation, "A certain type of mind was requisite for the reproduction of that dreamy wistfulness which has been your chief charm".¹ Hence the study of the background of the development of de la Mare's exquisite mind is essential.

Here, however, real difficulty arises because the poet has nowhere given any sustained autobiographical account of his life. The difficulty is further aggravated because of the fact that much of the material of autobiography, however tenuous it may be, has been transformed by imagination into poetry or fiction and has become one with what was purely imaginative. References to the natural charm of the poet and his work in the letters and memoirs of his friends and acquaintances can be of help to us. But here again, an objection is raised. G. K. Chesterton says that "he who is simply the imaginative man can only be found in the images he makes and not in the portraits of him that other people make".² Going still further, and thus taking an extreme

view of the situation there are critics who maintain that the knowledge of the background of de la Mare's work will be of little help in the study of his literary work. Mention may here be made of only two critics who have put forth such extreme views. Forrest Reid, a friend and critic of de la Mare, says: "Such a biographical introduction as one may prefix to the study of a living author's work is rarely of much significance".³

A closer study of the life of the poet and the background of the writing reveals facts which run contrary to the general opinion of the critics. One discovers that the various incidents of the life of de la Mare are of value in making a just estimate of his literary work. The life and letters are thus very closely connected. Hence one may begin at the beginning and trace through the life of the author some inspirations and influences which have great bearing of the study of his work.

The poet Walter John de la Mare was born in Kent. Kent along with other Eastern countries is "more fragrant of literary associations than any area of equal extent in the United Kingdom".⁴ It was to this garden of England that the heart of de la Mare turned with ever-increasing love and refreshment. It was part of "a country of foaming orchards, or primrose or bluebell woods of sedate, unostentatious villages and of little surprises waiting to be discovered".⁵ It is to this place of his birth that de la Mare goes and again for "the Englishman is at heart a countryman, towns do not come naturally to him."⁶ Thus it is that many poems of Walter de la Mare have as their setting, though very much transformed in the process, the hop fields and the cherry-orchards of Kent. An example of this has been furnished by Thomas Burke in his delightful and instructive book 'The Beauty of England'. He describes a place called Chiddingstone in Kent and relates its scenery to that of de la Mare's well-known poem 'The Listeners': "Chiddingstone is little more than a line of old timbered houses, an inn, by its castle gate and a noble church, sleeping among the quite meadows that surround it..... and the grey church tower, mantled in red creeper, is claimed as one of the finest in all Kent: but your footsteps upon the cobbles before the inn announce themselves almost without intrusion". Looking out from the latticed windows of this castle inn, you look upon a beautiful but empty scene, recalling the spirit of Walter de la Mare's poem 'The Listeners' :

"Is there anybody there?" said the traveler,

Knocking on the moonlit door;

And his horse in the silence champed the grasses

Of the forest's ferny floor".⁷

It is therefore, not difficult to point out that the source of much of ethereal beauty of de la Mare's writings is the "unreal beauty" described by Arthur Symons.

With the above lines in mind it will not be difficult to accept the challenge of Herbert Read when he said: "I defy anyone to deduce from the writings of de la Mare that he was born in Kent and spent his youth in London".⁸ In addition to what has been said above with the relation of poet's early background with his writings, it may here be pointed out that initially and also ultimately the genius of the landscape is the genius of the people around it. Each influences the other. Did de la Mare not, to his last breath, sing of 'O Lovely England'? It is this which ultimately makes de la Mare, like Hardy, belong to that specifically English tradition, which according to Herbert Read "is neither Celtic nor symbolist, but something as autochthonous as the fools or fairies of Shakespeare".⁹ The difference, however, between de la Mare and Hardy is that whereas Hardy is a regionalist and his work springs from a specific soul, the poems of de la Mare, though reminiscent of a Weald country of hop-gardens and oat-houses and spinney and pastures of the best part of Kent are on the whole chronicle of "the little nowhere of his brain".¹⁰

What the child de la Mare had so early and so eagerly absorbed in the dawn of life became the warp and woof of his early writings. Thus the study of the background of de la Mare's writings is necessary for a proper appreciation of his works. This study must begin from the beginning, the childhood. The importance of the study of the childhood of a writer for the understanding his writings is sufficiently appreciated after the advent of psychoanalysis. Here it will be sufficient to quote the opinions of two great psychologists Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler. Freud holds that "the little human being is frequently a finished product in his fourth or fifth year."¹¹ Adler goes so far as to say that "one can determine how a child stands in relation to his life a few months after his birth."¹²

James Edward de la Mare, the poet's father, died when Walter was only four years old. On his death, his family moved over to London and "an exile, Adam has been cast forth".¹³ This phase of de la Mare's life and the aching sense of exile found expression later on in his poem "The Exile":

"I am that Adam who, with snake for guest,
Hid anguished eyes upon Eve's piteous breast
I am that Adam who, with broken wings,
Fled from the seraph's brazen trumpeting,
Betrayed and fugitive, I still must roam
A world where sin, and beauty, whisper of Home."¹⁴

Thus we find that the awareness of the transience of beauty figures very prominently throughout his poetry and other literary work. Here the study of the personal background of de la Mare's life would be of immense use. Mr. H. G. Baynes defines personal background in his learned paper on "The Psychological Background of Parent-Child Relation":

"The personal background consists of those personal factors which affect the child through its continuity, or state of emotional identity, with one or other of the parents and also by character of the relationship existing between the parents."¹⁵

The primal world of Walter de la Mare's childhood was as solitary and phantasmal as was the world of Hans Christian Anderson. While living in this morning of life the child de la Mare explored the library-country in the quiet seclusion of his London home. This quiet and seclusion, this unique solitude, played an important role in the shaping of his personality then and later on. Of the significance of solitude, de la Mare says: "Even if an artist were in nothing else to be envied, there is one necessity for a happy life in which he is rich indeed. And that is a solitude – a solitude self-imposed and spent in doing what he loves most and does best."¹⁶ This is precisely what we find in the life of de la Mare. He was all along a man of retiring habits viewing the world from behind the screen of anonymity. In this respect his life very much resembles that of eighteenth century French painter Jean Baptiste Chardin. In the lives of the two artists, one writer, the other a painter, there were few of events or highlights which dazzle and excite us in the biographies of men of action affairs or fashion; and even these few were closely related to their art. Hence what de la Mare says of the life of Chardin may hold equally true about the life of Walter de la Mare himself: "his essential life, however, self-oblivious and intent, was that of his imagination, of his solitude."¹⁷ Thus we see that in him there was a quality of reticence and withdrawal. It is sufficiently clear that it was part of his adjustment to life. One is reminded, in this context, of another writer who also had felt the need of solitude and had like de la Mare a private world with its own laws and its own myths. The writer's name is Charles Lamb who possessed the same saturnine cast of feature and the same air of quiet meditation.

It was this love of solitude which we find distilled in the poems of Walter de la Mare. The form it takes is that of an eerie stillness of silence. D. H. Lawrence refers to this quality of de la Mare in these words: "Mr. de la Mare's perfect appreciation of life at still moments."¹⁸ Edmund Gosse refers to the same quality in different words: "If the central feature of his poetry is its tranquility, it is not quiet with self-satisfaction or aplomb; but hushed as one who hangs on tiptoe to hear a rustling sound or to watch a furtive shadow in the woodland."¹⁹ De la Mare's little poem "The Mocking Fairy" will suffice to throw light on his method in nearly all of the poems of this type:

“What has they done with you, you poor Mrs. Gill?”

Quoth the Fairy brightly glancing in the garden,

‘Where have they hidden you, you poor old Mrs. Gill?’

Quoth the Fairy dancing lightly in the garden;

But night’s faint veil now wrapped the hill,

Stark neath the stars stood the dead-still Mill,

And out of her cold cottage never answered Mrs. Gill

The fairly mimbling, mambling in the garden.”²⁰

This solitude was not empty; it was peopled with elves, fairies, ghosts and apparitions as we have seen in the above poem. De la Mare was greatly interested in the supernatural and its various manifestations in the world of the human beings. We have no evidence whether the poet as a child saw such creatures but the eminent psychologist C. W. C. Valentine tells us: “At the age of 5 and 6 two at least of my children expressed surprise apparently genuine, that I could not see things in their dark bedroom – fairies and little men on bedrails, seen in the vivid colors which they readily described.”²¹ Perhaps de la Mare was also such a child.

REFERENCES:

1. Lacon, *Lectures on Living Authors*, London, Geoffrey Bles, 1995, p. 65.
2. Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Autobiography*, London, Hutchinson and Co., 1996, p. 284.
3. Forrest Reid, *Walter de la Mare: A Critical Study*, London, Faber and Faber Ltd., 1969, p. 11.
4. Ernest H. Rann, *The Homeland of English Authors*, London, Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1987, p. 1.
5. Thomas Burke, *The Beauty of England*, London, George G. Harrap Co. Ltd., 1997. P. 268.
6. W. S. Shears, *This England*, London, The Right Book Club, 1988, p. 8.
7. Thomas Burke, *The Beauty of England*, London, George G. Harrap Co. Ltd., 1997, p. 269.
8. Herbert Read, *A Cost of Many Colours*, London, George Routledge & Sons, 1995, p. 240.
9. *ibid*, p. 239.
10. Walter de la Mare, *Pleasures and Speculations*, London, Faber & Faber Ltd., 1980, p. 183.

11. Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, tr. James Strachey, London, Penguin Books Ltd., 2014, p. 298.
12. Alfred Adler, *Understanding Human Nature*, tr. W. B. Wolfe, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1986, p. 42.
13. J. B. Priestley, *Figures in Modern Literature*, London, The Bodley Head Ltd., 1924, p. 33.
14. Walter de la Mare, *Collected Poems*, London, Faber & Faber, 1986, p. 248.
15. H. G. Baynes, *Analytical Psychology and The English Mind*, London, Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1990, p. 78.
16. Walter de la Mare (Introduction and Notes), *Chardin*, London, Faber & Faber, 1948, p. 2.
17. *ibid.*, p. 4.
18. Edward D. McDonald (ed.), *Phoenix*, London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1990, p. 306.
19. Edmund Gosse, *Book on the Table*, London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1989, p. 314.
20. Walter de la Mare, *Collected Rhymes and Verses*, London, Faber & Faber, 1986, p. 123.