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Introduction

Walter de la Mare's reputation these days has sunk a little from what it was in my childhood fifty years or more ago. I dare say that every British child of my age will have heard, or read, and some of them will have learned by heart, his poem "The Listeners":

> "Is there anybody there?" said the Traveller,
> Knocking on the moonlit door . . .

It used to be a staple of every school anthology, and it is still the piece for which he's known best. In a recent attempt to revive the practice of learning by heart and recitation, the organisers of a televised contest for children in Britain included it among the poems the young contestants were invited to choose from. Some did, but it was by no means as popular as Roald Dahl's coarse and derivative take on Little Red Riding-Hood. "The Listeners" is immensely subtle and delicate, a poem of the half-light and the silence, and if it's to be recited, it needs a thinking voice that's equal to its music. I think it's likely that fewer people read it now. The novelist Russell Hoban says, in an essay published in the *Walter de*

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la Mare Society Magazine (1998), "Often when I mention Walter de la Mare I'm astonished to find that the person I'm speaking to has never read anything of his." I've had similar experiences.

De la Mare was born in Kent, England, in 1873, the descendant of a Huguenot family. He attended St. Paul's Cathedral Choir School, and left at sixteen to work in the accounting department of the Anglo-American Oil Company, where he remained for eighteen years, marrying, raising a family, and beginning to write and publish. In 1908 he was awarded a Civil List pension, a government grant of a hundred pounds a year, which enabled him to write full-time. His novel *Memoirs of a Midget* (1921) made an immediate impression on critics and the public and is still in print. His short stories include some of the finest ghost stories of the twentieth century: "All Hallows," for example, is to my mind unequalled. No one who has read it will easily forget the grinding sound of stone on stone in the darkness as the mysterious cathedral by the sea is repaired by . . . by what? The forces of evil? Reading the story, it's easy to believe so.

His poetry was from the start, and remained, Georgian: almost deliberately old-fashioned in manner and style, with words like *'tis* and *'twas* and *'mid* and *'gainst* helping out the traditional versification. Along with that, though, went an ear attuned to the subtlest music, and a mind of a deeply metaphysical turn. He had admirers among those who might be expected to have quite different tastes: W. H. Auden, for example, thought very highly of his poetry, and edited a selection in 1963.

De la Mare's other literary activities included the editing of anthologies. *Come Hither* and *Behold, This Dreamer!* showed his taste at work among a very wide background of reading: dreams, reveries, the twilight, the uncanny, and always the importance of the child's imagination were the substance of his preoccupations.

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Told Again: Old Tales Told Again consists of nineteen folk tales, including several from Grimm, told in de la Mare's firm and careful prose. It belongs pretty clearly to that class of books intended for children. The intention isn't always that of the author: booksellers and librarians need to know what shelf to put the book on, and publishers like to know how to market and sell it, and whether to commission illustrations. Authors might have a slightly different audience in mind—a bigger one, for example—but if a publisher labels a book as a children's book, that's how it's likely to be seen by the reading public. Whether children themselves like such books is a different matter; if they feel they're being patronised or talked down to, they certainly won't. Getting the tone right is an important task, second only to telling the story clearly.

It's not hard to imagine how a writer approaching these stories could get them badly wrong, especially if he or she came out of the tradition of fey and winsome fairy-talk that was so common among writers for children in the early years of the twentieth century. De la Mare gets them right.

Here's the opening of one of the tales:

> Once upon a time there was a poor miller who had a beautiful daughter. He loved her dearly, and was so proud of her he could never keep from boasting of her beauty. One morning—and it was all showers and sunshine, and high, bright, coasting clouds—a stranger came to the mill with a sack of corn to be ground, and he saw the miller's daughter standing by the clattering mill-wheel in the sunshine. He looked at her, and said he wished he had a daughter as beautiful as she. The miller rubbed his mealy hands together, and looked at her too; and, seeing the sunbeams glinting in her hair, answered almost without thinking:

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> "Ay! She's a lass in a thousand. She can spin straw into gold."
>
> Now this saying was quickly spread abroad, and at last reached the ears of the King, who, in astonishment at such a wonder, at once sent for the miller, and bade him bring his daughter with him.

That is from Grimm, of course: Rumpelstiltskin. But where de la Mare is expansive, Grimm is laconic:

> Once upon a time there was a miller who was poor, but he had a beautiful daughter. Now it happened that he was talking with the king one time, and in order to make himself seem important, he said to the king, "I have a daughter who can spin straw into gold."
>
> "That is an art that pleases me!" the king replied. "If your daughter is as talented as you say, then bring her to my castle tomorrow, and I'll put her to a test." (translation by Jack Zipes)

Two things are especially interesting, it seems to me, in de la Mare's version. One is the set dressing given by description: the miller's mealy hands, the sunbeams glinting in the daughter's hair, and especially the little passage "and it was all showers and sunshine, and high, bright, coasting clouds," which is delightful, but in narrative terms completely redundant. It would make no difference to the events in the story if it were pouring with rain, except that it would *feel* different. De la Mare knows the importance of set dressing, and how strongly it affects our perception of what's going on. (In one of his ghost stories, "Crewe," there is this marvellous description of a gloomy waiting room at a railway station on a late

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afternoon in winter: "And the grained, massive, black-leathered furniture becomes less and less inviting. It seems to have been designed for an act of extreme and diabolical violence that has never occurred.") Such things make a story stay in the mind.

The other interesting thing is the miller's boast. In Grimm it comes out of nothing—the thoughtless boast of a stupid man—and is meant and taken literally. De la Mare prepares us for it with the sunshine, the sunbeams in the daughter's hair, and in his version it seems like a metaphor suggested by the golden light that's already in our mind's eye, the more natural exaggeration of a proud father: "She can work wonders, she can walk on water, she can charm the birds out of the trees, she's a treasure, she can spin straw into gold." It's the king who takes it literally. De la Mare's version is slower, but more psychologically convincing.

Throughout this book, in fact, he's willing to sacrifice swiftness for a richness of description:

> She lay there in her loveliness, the magic spindle still clasped in her fingers. And the Prince, looking down upon her, had never seen anything in the world so enchanting or so still.
>
> Then, remembering the tale that had been told him, he stooped, crossed himself, and gently kissed the sleeper, then put his hunting-horn to his lips, and sounded a low, but prolonged clear blast upon it, which went echoing on between the stone walls of the castle. It was like the sound of a bugle at daybreak in a camp of soldiers. The Princess sighed; the spindle dropped from her fingers, her lids gently opened, and out of her dark eyes she gazed up into the young man's face. It was as if from being as it were a bud upon its stalk she had

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> become suddenly a flower; and they smiled each at the other. ("The Sleeping Beauty")

It's beautifully put, but it isn't swift-moving. These are stories to take slowly, stories for a thoughtful child, or for a parent who makes a habit of taking time to read aloud. And incidentally, Walter de la Mare in 1927 didn't need Bruno Bettelheim (*The Uses of Enchantment*, 1975) to tell him about the sexual implications of this story: the last sentence in that paragraph says it all.

In telling stories like these, de la Mare wasn't bound by every turn of the originals; these are tales told again, not straight translations, and from time to time he softens and sweetens them. In "The Four Brothers," for example, which in Grimm has the four brothers follow their successful rescue of the princess by quarrelling over which of them should marry her, de la Mare has them discuss the problem quietly and then ask instead for a pension for their aging father, and as for the princess, they very diplomatically think it better that she should choose a husband for herself.

His version of "Rapunzel," too, leaves out the distressing business of the Prince's blinding and his long search for the lost Rapunzel, and the frank way the witch discovers that the girl has a lover: Rapunzel begins to remark that her clothes no longer fit. The Grimms themselves prudishly moved away from that in the later editions of their tales, and instead had Rapunzel asking the witch why she weighed so much more than the Prince—rather a silly thing for her to do, but at least it wouldn't bring a blush to the cheek of a young person, the effect that Dickens's Mr. Podsnap was so keen to avoid. I don't think de la Mare was moved by Podsnappery—he was too intelligent for that—but we should remember that sometimes these tales have the decorousness their period demanded.

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All in all, these nineteen stories are a fascinating glimpse into the work of one of the twentieth century's most subtle and underrated writers. They are beautifully done, and if none of them has the power and mystery of his great ghost stories, they do preserve some fine tales in an elegant and witty telling. And there is a great deal to be said for that.

Philip Pullman

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