

Walter de la Mare

Arabia

Far are the shades of Arabia

Where the princes ride at noon

Mild the verdurous and thickets

Under the ghost of moon

And so dark is that vaulted purple

Flowers in the forest rise

And toss into blossom against the phantom stars

Pale in the noonday skies.

Sweet is the music of Arabic

In my heart, when out of dreams

I still in the thin clear mirk of dawn

Deery her gliding streams:

Hear her strange lutes on the green banks

Ring loud with the grief and delight

Of the dim-Silked, dark-haired Musicians

In the brooding silence of night.

They haunt me-her lutes and her forests

No beauty on earth I see

But shadowed with that dream recalls

Her loveliness to me:

Cold voices whisper and say

He is crazed with the spell of far Arabia,

They have stolen his wits away.

Walter de la Mare (1873-1956) was the prolific author of many volumes of poetry, short stories and novels, including one of the most enduringly popular poems in the English language, 'The Listeners'. Born in Charlton, Kent, he was educated at St. Paul's Cathedral Choir School in London. At sixteen he started work in the statistics department of Anglo-American Oil. He married in 1899 and had four children and for many years he struggled to balance the life of the writer with the financial demands of family until, in 1908, he received a Civil List pension which enabled him to concentrate on writing. His first book, a collection of poems called *Songs of Childhood* appeared in 1902: the title gives us a clue to de la Mare's key poetic concerns and establishes him in a tradition which stretches back to Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and the ideals of the Romantics. Like them he had a privileged childhood, a time of unique vision uncontaminated by adult perceptions, and he remained throughout his career a keen and successful writer of poems for children. In a lecture on Rupert Brooke, de la Mare described children as "contemplatives, solitaries, fakirs who sink again and again out of the noise and fever of existence and into a waking vision." In his own writing de la Mare is trying to re-awaken this vision which accounts for the yearning tone of much of his poetry. This preference for inward exploration has led, in some ways unfairly, to him being dismissed as an introverted poet of escape, a romantic ducking the complexities of modern life. Certainly his sometimes archaic diction, use of formal verse structures and central concerns are largely at odds with the modernist movement which came to dominate poetic discourse from the 1920s onwards. His critical reputation also suffered from his association with the Georgian movement which was later discredited by the modernists as an inadequate response to the changed circumstances of the world following the First World War. However, such criticism overlooks de la

Mare's great attributes: his technical skill, uncanny ability to create atmosphere and the subtle ambiguities of his elliptical narratives. De la Mare remained popular in his lifetime and writers as respected as W H Auden, Graham Greene and Angela Carter all spoke highly of him: perhaps at the 50th Anniversary of his death a critical re-appraisal is merited.