

# The New Criterion

## Features

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## The kingdom of Never-to-be

by [Eric Ormsby](#)

On Walter de la Mare.

Walter de la Mare (1873–1956) was never a Poet of Importance. He made no prophecies, issued no manifestos. To the burning questions of the age he responded, if at all, only with dreamy silence. He was doggedly vague. If he ever contemplated the Zeitgeist, he would probably have personified it as “Herr Professor Zeitgeist” and included him, like “John Mouldy,” in one of his riddling children’s poems:

I spied John Mouldy in his cellar,  
Deep down twenty steps of stone;  
In the dusk he sat a-smiling,  
Smiling there alone.

De la Mare was, in his vexing way, deeply frivolous. He preferred the misty, the ill-defined, the indeterminate, to the hard-edged fact. In a 1909 review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, he praised the Dorset-dialect poet William Barnes for possessing “the magnanimity of refusing to peer too closely.” But he himself posses ...

**Eric Ormsby's** latest book is *Ghazali* (Oneworld). Eric Ormsby was born in Atlanta, raised in Miami, and now lives in Montreal, where he is a professor in the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. His Poetry has appeared in most of the major journals in Canada, England and the U.S., including *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *Paris Review*, *Descant*, *Parnassus* and *The Oxford American*. In recent years he has been a regular contributor of essays and reviews to *The New Criterion*, as well as to *Parnassus*, *Books in Canada* and *The Yale Review*. His first collection of poems, *Bavarian Shrine and other poems*, appeared in 1990 and won the QSpell Award for 1991. In the following year he received an Ingram Merrill Foundation Award for “outstanding work as a poet.” His 1992 collection entitled *Coastlines* was a finalist for the QSpell Award of that year. A third collection, *For a Modest God: New and Selected Poems* appeared in 1997 with Grove Press in New York. His work has been anthologized in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* as well as in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*. A fourth collection of poems, entitled *Araby*, appeared in 2001 with Signal Editions (Montreal). A collection of essays, most originally published in *The New Criterion*, will appear in Fall 2001. As a scholar, Ormsby specializes in medieval Islamic theology and philosophy and regularly contributes articles to academic journals in that field. He has travelled widely in the Islamic world as a researcher and a consultant. He is married, with two sons, and lives with his wife Irena, an architectural historian in Montreal.

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