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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 possesses ...

Eric Ormsby's latest book is *Ghazali* (Oneworld).

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