“Books! –” : *Pleasures and Speculations in Walter de la Mare’s Library* - Anne Welsh, UCL

Books! –
   for the heart to brood on; books for peace;
From the dull droning of the world release;
A music snared, a spring distilled from Spring;
At one spare board to feast on Everything! –
Plain, wholesome, racy, various and rare;
…
Books! – whose sweet witchery retrieves again
All that the heart of childhood may retain
…
Abiding joy is theirs …

Pleasures and Speculations, pp. xv-xviii
“CURiosities OF liTERATURE.”
WALTER-supEr-MAre (with SOFT PEDal) GREETS THE DAWN.

Punch, November 22nd, 1922. Image © Punch Ltd., used under license.
Among my early – though not my very earliest – recollections is that of a far-away Christmas morning … I can very easily descry … the small boy of six or seven I then was … It is not, however, the orange or the apple or the threepenny bit that incarnadines the occasion, but a Book: a limp, broad picture-book, printed in bold type, with half a dozen or so full-page plates in the primary colours – Gulliver, pinned down by lank strands of his hair and being dragged along by a team of cart-horses, fifty strong, on a vast shallow dray with wheels like reels of cotton; Gulliver entertaining (and being richly entertained by) two sneezing Lilliputians in his gold snuff-box; Gulliver with desperate head just emerging from a Brobdingnagian bowl of cream.

Quoted in Reid’s (1929) Walter de la Mare, pp. 11-12
These pages are concerned chiefly with the ‘pleasures’ to be found in books whatever their intrinsic value; from the supreme heights of poetry itself down to – almost anywhere. As a bibliophagist, too … I have never succeeded in keeping ‘life’ out. Hence the ‘speculations’.

Pleasures and Speculations, p. xii
The good die first … And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust Burn to the socket. –Wordsworth

Whom the gods love die young was said of yore. – Byron

Pleasures and Speculations, 1940

For those whom the gods love (and poets beyond most men seem destined to die young) a hundred years affords ample time, not only for their life’s achievement, but also for a lull, a brief reflective silence in which posterity may hope to count up its gains.

Times Literary Supplement, 1909
Such is the fate of the vast majority of writers. And in fiction, if to be not forgotten and revivable is one’s faint hope, it appears to be wiser to aim at the imaginatively real than at the realistically exact or over-earnest.

_Pleasures and Speculations, 1940_

_In the midst of the battle maybe it is indiscreet to muse on the tranquil moonlit indifference of the night that will follow. Yet one cannot but be reminded of it as one grubs and burrow in these old novels – re-animating old heroines, not merely dead and buried (for no novelist has power to keep them so) but forgotten. It may be that many devotees still visit the derelict scene. If it is not so, may I be forgiven for disturbing its peace._

_Granville-Barker (ed.). _The Eighteen-seventies: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature, 1929_
In so many of the longer poems there are traces of that social prudery, and of the genteel, exemplified in the opening line of Sea Dreams: ‘A city clerk, but gently born and bred.’ His salary is referred to as ‘gains.’ And often when Tennyson mentions the merely ordinary it is with a rather wry effect. It shows in its context like a patch of wool in silk embroidery.

Pleasures and Speculations, p. 37
A CITY clerk, but gently born and bred;
His wife, an unknown artist’s orphan child –
One babe was theirs, a Margaret, three years old:
They, thinking that her clear germander eye
Droopt in the giant-factoried city-gloom
Came, with a month’s leave given them, to the sea:
For which his gains were dock’d, however small:
Small were his gains and hard his work

Tennyson (1936) Poems, 1830-1870, p. 720
Underlined in [WdIM] 404
720 Cause a vague disquietude

He wont [sic] put the right word if it won’t fit into the poem
quite rightly, as if the poem justifies the attention. But does it?

more on the [sic]

The nature bits are superficial like / fagots
of embroidery or too simple

Transcription of back-of-book annotation in Walter de la Mare’s hand in [WdIM] 404

Excuse me!
27. iv. 38

Transcription of note in Walter de la Mare’s hand at base of front fly-leaf of [WdIM] 404
... For, it seemeth there are certaine motions in these vast bodies, some naturall, and other some febricitant, as well as in ours.


... who nevertheless to publish this little scantling, will undertake to write of all the Physickes ...


... Scattering here one and there another word: Scantlings taken from their maine ground-work, disorderly dispersed, without any well-grounded design and promise ...

The fact remains that while there is a vast amount of verse that is not poetry, the majority of those whom the world regards as poets have written in verse, and at this point it is, therefore, clearly legitimate to return to our original question, and to ask ‘Why is poetry written in more imaginative prose?’


But is it the music that does this; x
is it not rather the irrational use of alliteration assonance & so forth?
