

## EXPLORING THE WORLD OF WALTER DE LA MARE'S "THE LISTENERS"<sup>1</sup>

Giles de la Mare

"The Listeners" is one of the most quoted poems of the past century, and it is familiar to an extraordinary number of people. It seems to stick in the memory in an unusual way, and quite often its words and images rise to the surface in our minds. Many are the headlines I've seen in newspapers and elsewhere on the lines of "is there anybody there?," often humorous ones. Once someone said to me, out of the blue: "Tell them I came..." And in a list of events and entertainments in London some years ago I spotted an art exhibition at the WW Gallery called "Is There Anybody There?"; it featured the work of eight artists on the themes of the paranormal and the unexplained.

The popularity of "The Listeners" is confirmed by its inclusion in *The Nation's Favourite Poems*, published by the BBC, after the poll in 1995, and it came in at number 3. And there's another volume of poems, *The Top 500 Poems: A Columbia Anthology* (1992), which contains the most widely anthologized poems in English according to *The Columbia Granger Index to Poetry*. It was number 100 there. In this context, there is something important that many of you probably know already, which is that Walter de la Mare is not a one-poem or a two-poem poet. He is a multi-poem poet. As one of the Literary Trustees of my grandfather's literary estate, I conducted with my cousin Nick Thompson, another trustee, a survey in the mid 1990s of the poems that had been anthologized over the previous five years, as revealed by the Society of Authors' monthly accounts. The result was completely unexpected: during that period no less than 137 different de la Mare poems had been anthologized. That helps to put into perspective the position "The Listeners" has in the public imagination.

Numerous critics and others have speculated about the haunting qualities of the poem, and tried to put their finger on where the frisson it generates comes from. But few have succeeded. It is above all a most beautifully crafted, steely tempered, and musically complex poem, which seems to have