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**“The Verge at Which They Fail”: Language, Relationship,  
and Journey in the Poetry of Walter de la Mare**

In his 1973 centenary address, David Cecil claimed that “Walter de la Mare is in the truest sense of a misused overworked word, a symbolist”<sup>1</sup> and “our last great writer in the original romantic tradition.”<sup>2</sup> Despite this authoritative advocacy, de la Mare’s star remains in eclipse. In Walter Kirkham’s words:

Walter de la Mare’s poetry has not received the attention from serious critics it deserves....Because their work did not answer to the received definition of modern poetry, Edward Thomas, Robert Graves, and Edwin Muir, poets of strong individuality and substantial achievement, had to wait until the second half of the twentieth century to be noticed in academic circles. De la Mare is still waiting.<sup>3</sup>

A notable exception to this neglect is Mary Kaiser Loges’ doctoral dissertation of 1985. Loges argues that “de la Mare is a fully modernist poet, whose closest affinities are with Thomas Hardy and Robert Frost, but who also takes part in the symbolist tradition.”<sup>4</sup>

This discussion considers de la Mare as a symbolist, and a strong poet in that modern tradition of “belated” romanticism, which has been recently charted by Harold Bloom and J. Hillis Miller.<sup>5</sup> My particular emphasis is on de la Mare as a poet of absence and silence, and on three recurrent motifs in his poetry: language, relationship, and journey.

For de la Mare, as for many romantic and symbolist writers, quotidian reality is an illusion, a veil, behind which lies a transcendent realm, “Where all things transient to the changeless win.”<sup>6</sup> This realm is most readily approached in dreams or music. Poetry as a means of attaining the changeless is encumbered by its necessary reliance on a

transient medium: namely those “obstinate and artificial symbols,”<sup>7</sup> words. Only when poetry approaches incantation can it aspire to the condition of music or dream. Since silence is for de la Mare the essence of the changeless realm, it follows that human communication is most finely tuned during the silence in the interstices of speech. Silence between lovers, for example, generates “a rarer speech” (131) than that conveyed by words. Silence, or even absence, seems requisite for de la Mare, before the truth of any relationship can be perceived. The quest or journey motif in a de la Mare poem will often lead to a synthesis of other motifs, especially those of relationship and language. His questing figures—who may well be dreaming their journeys—are most typically in search of a somewhat shadowy, yet ideal female figure akin to C. G. Jung’s anima archetype.<sup>8</sup> Beneath this modern version of the chivalric quest, the reader may also encounter a direct or indirect metafictional quest for the poet’s “own sublime.”<sup>9</sup> In “It is a Wraith,” the second to last of de la Mare’s published poems, he seems to fuse desire for the anima—“a strange loveliness time cannot share”—with a longing for the “full recognition” (627) of achieved metaphor.

My discussion of de la Mare focuses on three groups of three poems, each group illustrating one of his three most favoured motifs: for language, “Incantation,” “Good-bye,” and “The Scribe”; for relationship, “The Tomtit,” “The Ghost,” and “Solitude” a); and for journey, “The Assigination,” “The Visionary,” and “The Listeners.” My main justification of this selection is that the poems are good and motifically representative of their author. The selection does not demonstrate the kind of poetic development from volume to volume that a reader can find in, for example, W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney. I have not found such a development in de la Mare, who remains a writer best explored spatially rather than chronologically. There is, however, a dialectical pattern in each group which, I would argue, provides a way of approaching this haunting but elusive poet. In each group, the first poem seems deliberately to construct absence, a strategy identified by Anna Balakian in such symbolist writers as Paul Valéry, Rainer Maria Rilke and Wallace Stevens.<sup>10</sup> Absence or silence in these poems is positive, something to be desired. In the second poem, however, the construction of absence is fearful or daimonic, in Karl Reinhardt’s definition of the daimonic as something imposed from without by a super-human force or daimon.<sup>11</sup> In “The Scribe,” “Solitude” a), and, above all, in “The Listeners,” de la Mare achieves a complex and delicate balance of fear and desire. There is a subtly Gothic effect in the evocation of absence or silence; at the same time, the reader experi-

ences pleasure as he or she is led through fear to the verge of revelation. To borrow de la Mare's own metaphor from "Solitude" a), each poem is seen to "fail" at this verge, but this failure is, paradoxically, a key element in the poem's metaphoric power.

### 1. Language

Mirach, Antares, Vega, Calph, Alcor—  
From inch-wide eyes I scan their aeon-old flames,  
Enthralled: then wonder which enchants me more—  
They, or the incantation of their names. (546)

Throughout his poetic career, de la Mare maintained an ambivalent relationship to language. The act of writing can too easily become "Scribbling on for scribbling's sake" (604). Words are "all-useless" (59) and "shallow" (113); they are "obstinate and artificial symbols"; and yet their incantation, as in a poem, can restore presence and meaning. This ambivalence is familiar in symbolist poetics. Lloyd James Austin says that Stéphane Mallarmé, in *Les Mots anglais*,

begins with the hankering after a primeval "mystical" language in which sound and sense might have been perfectly related; moves on to the realization that existing languages give glimpses of an only occasional relation of this kind and more often than not have contradictory sound and sense; but finally affirms that in the line of poetry, or in words in combination, this feeling of unity between sound and sense can be restored. The line of poetry is thus a kind of "new, total and as it were incantatory word," possessing properties which no single real word can ever have.<sup>12</sup>

"Incantation" might be read as an enactment of Mallarmé's linguistic theory:

*Vervain...basil...orison—*  
Whisper their syllablings till all meaning is gone,  
And sound all vestige loses of mere word....  
'Tis then as if, in some far childhood heard,  
A wild heart languished at the call of a bird,  
Crying through ruinous windows, high and fair,  
A secret incantation on the air:  
A language lost; which, when its accents cease,  
Breathes, voiceless, of a pre-Edenic peace. (368)

The first three words have been carefully chosen. The herb vervain was considered holy by the druids, "for magic rites renowned," and credited with healing and aphrodisiac powers. The more common basil was associated with royalty, love and healing. Both herbs are "good

agaynst...serpentes.”<sup>13</sup> Orison is an archaic word for Christian prayer. When de la Mare uses these words, they have been worn down by time to arbitrary symbols. Their whispered repetition, then, drains them, not just of archaic association, but of all meaning and vestige of *mere word*. They thus become, in succession: pure sound; a secret incantation; and “a language lost,” but recovered in the poem. Such is the striving for pure distillation that even the accents of this lost language must cease before we are ushered into absolute origin or presence: “a pre-Edenic peace.”

“Good-bye” is a contrastingly bleak poem about the end of language:

The last of last words spoken is, Good-bye—  
 The last dismantled flower in the weed-grown hedge,  
 The last thin rumour of a feeble bell far ringing,  
 The last blind rat to spurn the mildewed rye.

A hardening darkness glasses the haunted eye,  
 Shines into nothing the watcher's burnt-out candle,  
 Wreathes into scentless nothing the wasting incense,  
 Faints in the outer silence the hunting-cry.

Love of its muted music breathes no sigh,  
 Thought in her ivory tower gropes in her spinning,  
 Toss on in vain the whispering trees of Eden,  
 Last of all last words spoken is, Good-bye. (238)

“Good-bye” might almost be read as a poem about its own extinction. Kirkham notes that the details “enforce a new forlornness and desolation,” especially “the bitter irony of the word *good-bye*'s origins—‘God be wi'ye.’”<sup>14</sup> Now a dead metaphor, the word is only the last in a Beckettian catalogue of last things which the poem introduces in order to erase.

It is notable that each last thing is itself on the threshold of dissolution or silence. The bell is thin, feeble and far; the last flower is already dismantled; the last rat is blind; the burnt-out candle “shines into nothing.” Almost every line is built from a double or triple negative: already wasting incense “wreathes into scentless nothing.” Where the first two stanzas eliminate objects available to the physical senses, the last stanza erases human emotion and intellect, and with these all dreams of paradise regained. De la Mare's “whispering trees of Eden” are like “All the dead voices” in *Waiting for Godot* that whisper and rustle like leaves, to haunt Vladimir and Estragon with traces of lost meaning.<sup>15</sup> This insubstantial pageant of dissolution is framed by the

extinction of language, the first line repeated almost exactly in the last, with the small but telling variation, "Last of *all* last words spoken," serving to guarantee this extinction; or seeking to, since the trace of religious origin Kirkham hears in the last word suggests that language will not be wholly silenced.

"The Scribe" details, not the end of things, but plenitude: the "lovely things" made by the hand of God. "The smooth-plumed bird / In its emerald shade" is an Edenic image from a medieval tapestry. It is not creation, but the poet's ability to catalogue creation, that is "dis-mantled" during the poem:

Though I should sit  
     By some tarn in thy hills,  
 Using its ink  
     As the spirit wills  
 To write of Earth's wonders,  
     Its live, willed things,  
 Flit would the ages  
     On soundless wings  
 Ere unto Z  
     My pen drew nigh;  
 Leviathan told,  
     And the honey-fly:  
 And still would remain  
     My wit to try—  
 My worn reeds broken,  
     The dark tarn dry,  
 All words forgotten—  
     Thou, Lord, and I. (217)

This long-breathed stanza is an exquisite allegory of mimesis in its relation to time. A clue to the slightly mystifying tarn is provided in a later poem where "Memory" with her "tarn-dark eyes" is the poet's muse and keeper of his language:

Why, every single word here writ  
 Was hers, till she surrendered it;  
 And where, without her—I? for lo,  
 When she is gone I too must go. (375)

With the tarn of his memory/inspiration dry, and his already worn technique (I take this to be the figure in "reeds") broken, the scribe must face absolute presence without the mirrored shield of language. The last line, "Thou, Lord, and I," is deceptively plain. At first reading it would seem to be a religious affirmation recalling the last lines of George Herbert's "The Collar" and "Love." Then one notices that the

scribe has preserved a comma and a conjunction between himself and whatever deity presides over the end of writing. The result is a tremor of fear disturbing an initially placid poem.

## 2. Relationship

Absence will meet you everywhere—  
Mute lips, dark eyes, and phantom brow.  
I warned you not to invite in ghosts;  
No power have I to evict them now. (605)

“Absence”; “Alone”; “The Ghost”; “The Revenant”; “Solitude.” This selection of de la Mare’s titles (the first four used twice each, and the last three times) reflects two strange constants in his poetry: almost all the speakers or protagonists of his poems are discovered alone; and when there are two or more characters in a poem’s dramatic world, one at least will likely be a ghost. This instinct for solitude looks forward to the drama of isolation in such late twentieth-century plays as Beckett’s *Rockaby* and Harold Pinter’s *Landscape* and back to the symbolist plays of Maurice Maeterlinck and August Strindberg. A possible ur-text for de la Mare’s concern with solitude is Walter Pater’s conclusion to *The Renaissance*:

Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of these impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world.<sup>16</sup>

Does any voice pierce “that thick wall of personality” in the poetry of de la Mare? While poems such as “The Ghost” a), “The Familiar,” and “The Revenant” a) and b), effectively answer to Pater’s theory, there are poems in which some form of communication does take place, though not necessarily through the medium of language, or even between two human beings. The paradox of relationship in de la Mare is that a purity of absence is necessary before any signals can be received from whatever is “without.” In “The Tomtit” and “Solitude” a) such signals are received from the natural and supernatural worlds by an intense and empathetic listening.

“The Tomtit” is a strong rewriting of Thomas Hardy’s “The Darling Thrush.” De la Mare’s “curious bias towards the miniature”<sup>17</sup> is at once evident in the greater economy with which he sets a scene of winter twilight and individual depression—two lines to Hardy’s six-

teen: "Twilight had fallen, austere and grey, / The ashes of a wasted day." It is at this point that the poet hears his "visitor" tapping at the window-pane:

What ancient code, what Morse knew he—  
This eager little mystery—  
That, as I watched, from lamp-lit room,  
Called on some inmate of my heart to come  
Out of its shadows—filled me then  
With love, delight, grief, pining, pain,  
Scarce less than had he angel been?

Suppose, such countenance as that,  
Inhuman, deathless, delicate,  
Had gazed this winter moment in—  
Eyes of an ardour and beauty no  
Star, no Sirius could show!

Well, it were best for such as I  
To shun direct divinity;  
Yet not stay heedless when I heard  
The tip-tap nothings of a tiny bird. (470)

In the middle stanzas, de la Mare sets up an unusual choice between two versions of relationship, both of which have emerged from the grey twilight of the opening lines. These are a bird tapping at the pane, and the inhuman beauty of an angel's face gazing into the room. The question, "What ancient code, what Morse knew he," effectively fore-shadows which choice the speaker will make: "To shun direct divinity" in favour of a tiny bird's "tip-tap nothings." Underneath the poem's anecdotal charm, de la Mare is defining the strengths of his own bias towards the indirect and miniature, in contrast with the "direct" romantic sublime. Here of course, after tactfully correcting Hardy, de la Mare reveals his debt to an acknowledged master.<sup>18</sup> That "Well" introducing the last stanza is pure Hardy, in linguistic terms a tip-tap nothing which yet calls on some inmate in the reader's heart to come out of its shadows.

"The Ghost" b) is a miniature tragedy of failed relationship. A dead woman returns to haunt a man, her former partner, who lives in a lonely house. The finely crafted dialogue, however, reveals that the relationship itself was dead while the woman was alive:

"Who knocks?" "I, who was beautiful,  
Beyond all dreams to restore,  
I, from the roots of the dark thorn am hither.  
And knock on the door."

“Who speaks?” “I—once was my speech  
 Sweet as the bird’s on the air,  
 When echo lurks by the waters to heed;  
 ’Tis I speak thee fair.” (196)

The man’s harsh challenges and the woman’s lovely flowing self-definition suggest that, like Duff and Beth in Pinter’s *Landscape*, these two people have always spoken a different language. It is clear that the man failed to value or even “recognize” the woman in life; otherwise, how could he fail to know it is her knock and her voice speaking now? Echo *heeded* her voice. The man did not. The slightly sinister idea of echo lurking by the waters recalls a motif in romantic poetry. Echo, as Michael Ragussis describes her,

sits, less grand than Urania, mourning absence. No guide herself to heavenly heights, she inhabits all lonely and desert places, and is a sign of the poet’s isolation, of the self’s desire for the other. She seems to represent, for these reasons, verbal power gone awry....Ovid describes how the young nymph wastes away until she is nothing but a voice.<sup>19</sup>

For failing to *listen* to the woman when she was alive, the man is punished by her being nothing but a voice now she is dead.

The woman’s “’Tis I speak thee fair” seems to create a pause in the dialogue, for the man’s next comment is an evasive non sequitur:

“Dark is the hour!” “Ay, and cold.”  
 “Lone is my house.” “Ah, but mine?”  
 “Sight, touch, lips, eyes yearned in vain.”  
 “Long dead these to thine...”

This terse dialogue, placed at the centre of the poem and surrounded by silence, has a dramatic and elliptical power. De la Mare’s ability to convey precise tone of voice is felt in the woman’s wonderfully understated reproach: “Ah, but mine?” The word “Silence” at the top of the fourth stanza reads like a stage direction, indicating that all has been said and total absence achieved:

Silence. Still faint on the porch  
 Brake the flames of the stars.  
 In gloom groped a hope-wearied hand  
 Over keys, bolts, and bars.  
 A face peered. All the grey night  
 In chaos of vacancy shone;  
 Nought but vast sorrow was there—  
 The sweet cheat gone. (197)



Henry Charles Duffin provides a useful description of what happens in these two stanzas: “With hope-wearied hand he draws the bolts and looks out, to find *as so often before* only the grey and vacant night”; Duffin refers to the poem’s “stark despair, making the form hard and jagged like ice.”<sup>20</sup> In his reading of the poem, absence is issueless. There are, however, indications that the man’s “vast sorrow” is a form of tragic recognition beyond self-pity and illusion.

In his anthology entitled *Love, de la Mare* twice quotes Rilke’s dictum: “Love consists in this that two Solitudes protect and touch and greet each other.”<sup>21</sup> “Solitude” a) begins with that favourite Gothic image, a haunted house at midnight, but soon becomes a poetic exploration of Rilke’s idea:

Ghosts there must be with me in this old house,  
Deepening its midnight as the clock beats on.  
Whence else upwelled—strange, sweet, yet ominous—  
That moment of happiness, and then was gone?

Nimble than air-borne music, heart may call  
A speechless message to the inward ear,  
As secret even as that which then befell,  
Yet nought that listening could make more clear.

The tomtit’s “ancient code, or Morse” is conveyed by a tapping sound. In “Solitude” a), the ghosts use a secret code but one so subtle that only “the inward ear” can receive and interpret its “speechless message.” The two solitudes of ghosts and speaker try in this way to touch and greet other, but to no avail:

Delicate, subtle senses, instant, fleet!—  
But oh, how near the verge at which they fail!  
In vain, self hearkens for the fall of feet  
Soft as its own may be, beyond the pale. (367)

In this last stanza, desire for pure relationship has become a metaphor for the act of writing poetry, which de la Mare later defined as the endeavour to “enshrine...the inexpressible” (595) in language. Since his medium consists of “those obstinate and artificial symbols, words,” the poet can only receive and transmit delicate and subtle senses “near the verge at which they fail.” *The poem* desired by poet and reader will always be walking softly beyond the pale of language.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. Journey

What is desire but this one tryst to keep?  
What my heart’s longing but to await the hour

When to full recognition it shall leap,  
As into summer flames the opening flower? (627)

Most of de la Mare's travellers are on a "vain quest" (68). Their long-awaited tryst is either unfulfilled or destructive. In "The Assigination," however, the dreamer's "mystic assigination" (372) completes that "symbolic process of healing" which Anthony Storr has identified with Jung's individuation theory.<sup>23</sup> The poem begins with an apparently detached stanza which reads like an epigraph:

Echoes of voices stilled may linger on  
Until a lapse of utter quiet steal in;  
As 'tis hushed daybreak—the dark night being gone—  
That calls small birds their matins to begin....

A key to these lines is provided by their structural similarity to "The Incantation." In both cases we have the symbolist dialectic of reducing language to echo and silence before it can be reborn. The echo of Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* in the fourth line<sup>24</sup> suggests the "voices" may be those of the great romantics, which must be "stilled" before the "small birds" of belated twentieth-century romanticism can begin. This means that the dreamer's journey from sickness to health will also be about the analogous journey of poetic language, an idea reflected in the mock-romantic diction of the fourth stanza:

But of these wanderings one remembered best  
Nothing exotic showed—no moon-drenched vale,  
Where in profound ravines dark forests rest,  
The wild-voiced cataracts their nightingale.... (371)

It is easy to see de la Mare constructing absence here by "stilling" his romantic precursors. In place of their "exotic" landscapes, he chooses as the setting for dream-assigination a bleak wintry landscape, again reminiscent of Hardy:

But only a sloping meadow, rimed with frost;  
Bleak pollard willows, and a frozen brook,  
All tinkle of its waters hushed and lost,  
Its sword-sharp rushes by the wind forsook:

An icy-still, grey-heavened, vacant scene,  
When whin and marron hummocked, and flowerless gorse...  
And in that starven upland's winter green,  
Stood grazing in the silence a white horse. (372)

With the “wild-voiced cataracts” replaced by a brook and even the sound of *its* waters “hushed and lost,” de la Mare has indeed created a “vacant” or neutral scene. The horse, like Shelley’s eyeless figure of Rousseau, seems to grow from the landscape, though not “To strange distortion”:<sup>25</sup>

No marvel of beauty, or strangeness, or fable, this—  
*Una—la Belle Dame*—hero—or god might ride;  
 Worn, aged with time and toil, and now at peace,  
 It cropped earth’s sweetmeats on the stark hill’s side.

Spellbound, I watched it—hueless mane and tail  
 Like wraith of foam upon an un-named sea;  
 Until, as if at mute and inward hail,  
 It raised its gentle head and looked at me—

Eyes blue as speedwell, tranquil, morning-fair:  
 It was as if for aeons these and I  
 Had planned this mystic assignation there,  
 In this lone waste, beneath that wintry sky.... (372)

The allusions to Edmund Spenser and John Keats complete the poem’s stilling of romantic voices. More privately, de la Mare has also erased two *direct* anima figures: *Una*, the mother-goddess; and *la Belle Dame*, the witch. The dream provides a safer archetype in the old horse, a strange cross between one of Jung’s displaced anima figures—the horse as the “mother-libido”<sup>26</sup>—and his “old man” of fairy-tales who “always appears when the hero is in a hopeless and desperate situation from which only profound reflection or a lucky idea...can extricate him.”<sup>27</sup> The horse in “The Assignation” is one of de la Mare’s finest images. Almost insubstantial with its “hueless mane and tail / Like wraith of foam upon an un-named sea,” it yet provides the “lucky idea” or symbol which begins the dreamer’s process of release from illness:

Strange is man’s soul, which solace thus can win,  
 When the poor body lies at woe’s extreme—  
 Yea, even where the shades of death begin—  
 In secret symbol, and painted by a dream! (372)

The last line indicates that, as in “The Tomtit,” archetypal presence must be rendered safe by displacement—“in secret symbol”—and mediation—“painted by a dream.” The next poem of journey to be discussed, “The Visionary,” concerns the dangers of unmediated presence.

According to Balakian, the fictional world of symbolist poetry “does not merely construct absences; more often it explores worlds of the in-between.”<sup>28</sup> Two examples of this in-between world are: Valéry’s reflection of Narcissus, “which is neither Narcissus nor the water,” but a trembling distance “Entre moi-même et l’onde”; and Rilke’s vision of Orpheus, “also of the in-between, neither of this nor of the underworld, but of nature tinted with the memory of the other, visited for a brief moment; it is the space in the mirror.”<sup>29</sup> Where Valéry and Rilke unhesitatingly celebrate these worlds of the in-between, de la Mare often views them with wariness or fear. In “The Visionary,” a Wanderer, “Worn with night-wayfaring,” comes to a sinister forest pool “whose waters clear / Reflect not what is standing near.” Stooping to bathe his eyes, he sees:

A face like amber, pale and still,  
 With eyes of light, unchangeable,  
 Whose grave and steadfast scrutiny  
 Pierced through all earthly memory.  
 .....  
 And still he stooped; and still he yearned  
 To kiss the lips that therein burned;  
 To close those eyes that from the deep  
 Gazed on him, wearied out for sleep. (300)

The Wanderer does make his journey back from daimonic experience, but the last stanza reveals that the face in the water has turned his existence to stone:

He drank; he slumbered; and he went  
 Back into life’s wild banishment,  
 Like one whose every thought doth seem  
 The wreckage of a wasting dream;  
 All savour gone from life, delight  
 Charged with foreboding dark as night;  
 Love but the memory of what  
 Woke once, but reawakens not. (300)

Whose is the face in the pool? The first image recalls that “direct divinity” shunned by the poet in “The Tomtit”; the second is, apparently, the Wanderer’s own reflection. Doris Ross McRosson argues persuasively that the face is an anima archetype encountered in the Wanderer’s unconscious (the pool).<sup>30</sup> The poem’s strange effect of being pastiche Shelley, however, suggests two other readings. The first is that the Wanderer is Shelley as portrayed in *Adonais*, and the face a Shelleyan self-projection:

he, as I guess,  
 Had gazed on Nature's naked loveliness,  
 Actaeon-like, and now he fled astray  
 With feeble steps o'er the world's wilderness,  
 And his own thoughts, along that rugged way,  
 Pursued, like raging hounds, their father and their prey.<sup>31</sup>

The second is that the Wanderer is de la Mare himself, or at least the modern poet, overwhelmed by his great romantic precursors.

An ideal dramatic performance of "The Listeners" would indicate for the audience two major and two minor silences. The poem emerges from and flows into silence, and a silence seems indicated at the end of line 8, and again at the end of line 28, in both instances after the words "he said" (126). The resulting structure allots eight lines to the Traveller's first two attempts to make his presence known, twenty lines to the "response" of the listeners and its effect on the Traveller, and the last eight lines to his departure. This means that the larger framing of the entire poem by silence is reflected in the way the silence-oriented listeners' section is framed by two outer sections dominated by words and sounds.

It is important to note that the imposition of such a three-part sound-silence-sound structure is useful but reductive. The poem is essentially built from a continuous interweaving of opposing figures and modes of being: language and silence; masculine and feminine; presence and absence; human and natural; inner and outer; darkness and moonlight. Nor can these pairs of opposites be read as units of a melodramatic conflict-structure. Rather, each element in each pair seems to penetrate the other element's defence system, like "the faint moonbeams on the dark stair," or the enjambment of long, irregular lines and their unrhymed feminine endings with shorter, metrically reliable lines ending with masculine rhymes.<sup>32</sup>

The poem's overall structure is adumbrated in the first eight lines. Line 1-2 and 7-8 contain the Traveller's famous challenge to the house and his knocking on the moonlit door, with the sequence carefully reversed the second time. Line 3-6 focus on the natural scene which is soft and feminine, with the horse placidly champing "the grasses / Of the forest's ferny floor," and the bird disturbed by the unaccustomed sounds of knocking and human voice. One of the fascinating things about lines 9-28 is that it is never made clear to what extent the Traveller himself constructs the absence and silence of the "phantom listeners" in the house. As in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, the reader believes in the ghosts while he or she is "there" in the story, and

only starts to question their “reality” in retrospect. In “The Listeners,” this effect is enhanced by the cinematic shifting of point of view. We begin as it were behind the Traveller, sharing his view and experience of the house. Then, unnervingly, we pass through the locked door into the listeners’ world, and begin like them to listen rather to watch, to stand: “Harkening in an air stirred and shaken / By the lonely Traveller’s call.” When the point of view shifts back to the Traveller, something of the listeners’ mode of being has penetrated his: “And he felt in his heart their strangeness, / Their stillness answering his cry.” As if afraid that he will be unnerved by absence and silence, the Traveller makes his third and last attempt at establishing his presence through words and sound:

For he suddenly smote on the door, even  
 Louder, and lifted his head:—  
 “Tell them I came, and no one answered,  
 That I kept my word,” he said. (126)

The words “I kept my word” sound like a confession from the poet that words are all he has to “keep” against the silence that is continually seeping between the lines.

In the central section of the poem, the listeners might well be versions of the anima archetype. In lines 29-36, however, it is more useful to understand them as pure metaphor, the function of which is now redefined as listening, as being not so much the “speechless message” as “the inward ear.” De la Mare himself spoke of his listeners as “the essence of attentiveness” and “the ears deep within us who keep listening to all we say,”<sup>33</sup> and it is hard not to think of the listeners being as it were metaphors for metaphor in the poem’s last eight lines:

Never the least stir made the listeners,  
 Though every word he spake  
 Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still house  
 From the one man left awake:  
 Ay, they heard his foot on the stirrup,  
 And the sound of iron on stone,  
 And how the silence surged softly backward,  
 When the plunging hoofs were gone. (126)

Loges notes that de la Mare “injects a degree of subtle eroticism into these lines, so that a degree of sexual frustration enters into the effect of emptiness and isolation.”<sup>34</sup> This eroticism is not only evident in the phallic “plunging hoofs,” but in the way the listeners are left hugging their silence to themselves. Yet there has been an exchange of gifts. The

Traveller has felt *in his heart* the listeners' strangeness and stillness; and their silence is impregnated with some of his energy. The silence is said to "surge softly backward" into the house, where one imagines it waiting, recharged, for the approach of another traveller.

## NOTES

1. David Cecil, *Walter de la Mare* (London: Oxford UP, 1973), 5.
2. Cecil, 3.
3. Walter Kirkham, "Walter de la Mare," *British Poets, 1880-1914*, ed. Donald E. Stanford, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 19 (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1983), 110.
4. Mary Kaiser Loges, "The Poetry of Walter de la Mare: A Re-Evaluation," (Dissertation, U of Denver, 1985), 1.
5. See especially: Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976); and J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985).
6. Walter de la Mare, *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 205; quotations from de la Mare's poetry are from this edition, and page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text. Different poems with the same title are distinguished by a letter in parenthesis, to indicate their order of appearance in *The Complete Poems*.
7. De la Mare, *Behold, This Dreamer!* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 6.
8. Doris Ross McRosson, *Walter de la Mare* (New York: Twayne), 16-20.
9. Robert Browning, "The Last Ride Together," in Browning, *Men and Women*, ed. F. B. Pinion (London: Macmillan, 1963), 90.
10. Anna Balakian, *The Symbolist Movement: A Critical Appraisal* (New York: New York UP, 1977), 201.
11. Karl Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, trans. Hazel Harvey and David Harvey (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), 35.
12. Lloyd James Austin, "Presence and Poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé: International Reputation and Intellectual Impact." *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages*, ed. Anna Balakian (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1982), 54.
13. Information on vervain and basil is taken from: *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford UP, 1971); and Claire Loewenfeld, *Herb Gardening: Why and How to Grow Herbs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 215.
14. Kirkham, 119.
15. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), 40.
16. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), 151.
17. Cecil, 4.
18. See de la Mare's poem, "Thomas Hardy" (388).
19. Michael Ragussis, *The Subterfuge of Art: Language and the Romantic Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), 230-32.
20. Henry Charles Duffin, *Walter de la Mare: A Study of His Poetry* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1949), 119, my emphasis.
21. De la Mare, *Love* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943), xl, 171.
22. There is a significant similarity between "Solitude" a) and Valéry's "Les Pas." Where, however, Valéry's poem is about the conscious *deferral* of relationship, de la Mare's is about the verge at which desired relationship may fail. Edmund Wilson says that the woman in "Les Pas" is kept in "timeless imminence"; see his *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), 73.
23. Anthony Storr, *Jung* (London: Collins, 1973), 104.
24. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford UP, 1943), 507. The line echoed is: "To which the birds tempered their matin lay."

25. Shelley, 511.
26. C. G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), 421.
27. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), 217-18.
28. Balakian, 201.
29. Balakian, 202.
30. McRosson, 62-63.
31. Shelley, 438.
32. See Robert M. Pierson, "The Meter of 'The Listeners,'" *English Studies* 45 (1964): 381.
33. Frederick Prokosch, *Voices: A Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 78.
34. Loges, 99.