

Active Speech

Critical Perspectives on Teresa Deevy

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Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

Cover image: Photo by Jed Niezgoda (www.jedniezgoda.com). © All rights reserved. Suzanne Savage and Lianne Quigley performing in Teresa Deevy's *Possession* which was created and directed by Amanda Coogan in collaboration with Lianne Quigley, Alvean Jones, Linda Buckley, Dublin Theatre of the Deaf, and Cork Deaf Community Choir. Creative producer Lynette Moran produced *Possession* at the Project Arts Centre 21–24 February 2024, while Susan Holland produced the production at the Granary Theatre for the Cork Midsummer Festival performances, 21–23 June 2024. *Possession* was funded as part of ART:2023: A Decade of Centenaries Collaboration (the Arts Council and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, and Media).

5. ‘Very Seldom Are Messages Properly Given’:¹ Teresa Deevy’s Dark Matter

Chris Morash

In the summer of 2017, the Mint Theater in New York staged a very belated premiere of one of Teresa Deevy’s late plays, the one-act *In the Cellar of My Friend*, where it made up a four-play bill entitled *The Suitcase under the Bed* with *Holiday House*, *Strange Birth*, and *The King of Spain’s Daughter*.² Before that, however, apart from a rehearsed reading in August of 2011, it had only been performed once before, for a brief two-day run in 1957,³ and only existed in two manuscript copies, one in the Maynooth archive and the other in the National Library of Ireland; and before that, it had been part of the pile of papers that had been gathering dust under a bed in Teresa Deevy’s family home in Waterford, Landscape since her death in 1963.

Dot ... dot ... dot ...

Like many of her later short plays, *In the Cellar of My Friend* appears deceptively simple, almost hopelessly naïve. The world of the play seems to be a sleepy little world in a realist box set, in this case made up of the

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- 1 Teresa Deevy, ‘In the Cellar of My Friend’, in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, 2 vols, ed. by Jonathan Bank, John P. Harrington, and Christopher Morash (New York: Mint Theater, 2011 and 2017), II, 111–122 (p. 114).
 - 2 *The Suitcase under the Bed*, dir. by Jonathan Bank, Mint Theater, New York, 21 July–23 September 2017. Texts of the plays were published in the accompanying volume: *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, II.
 - 3 Kate McCarthy and Una Kealy, ‘Writing from the Margins: Re-framing Teresa Deevy’s Archive and Her Correspondence with James Cheasty c. 1952–1962’, *Irish University Review*, 52.2 (2022), 322–340 (p. 333).

drawing room of a large house in the Irish countryside, Grantsthoron House, in which 'it is a July morning—about nine thirty and through the window can be sensed some of the loveliness of the morning'.⁴ This world of suffused sunlight is a signature in Deevy's work, its very intensity signalling to us to mistrust the textures of the material world, as much as we revel in their materiality. It is a world we recognise from the opening of *Wife to James Whelan* on the sun-soaked bench behind the garage that they call 'the South of France'.⁵ We find Deevy reflecting on this quality in her work in the letter to Florence Hackett written after the opening night of *The King of Spain's Daughter* in 1935, when Deevy declared that 'the whole play had turned for me on the April day atmosphere'; she subsequently dedicated the play 'To an April Day'.⁶ This quality of 'atmosphere' is explored most explicitly in the 1948 play, *Light Falling*, where the character of Mr Leslie at one point says: 'For me truth is embodied in light falling... (*Speaks with quiet intensity.*) if I can get that down on canvas others will see in it the eternal mystery, the beneficence—oh, damn it all,—there's nothing new'.⁷

In the Cellar of My Friend begins, then, with a quality of light. Into this glowing world enters the character of Belle Dobbryn, where her friend Patty Keane and her family live. As the play opens, Patty compliments Belle on her dress, telling her 'you look like a summer morning'. To which Belle replies:

Well isn't it summer—and a lovely morning...the most lovely— (*Breaks off.*)...See, this basket—nothing really but a platform for the roses to rest on...and the great handle arching over them like a rainbow...no sides, nothing to hold them...but they hold on.⁸

There are a couple of things worth noting here. In the first place, there is the way in which the phenomenological world—the summer's morning—is constantly veering towards becoming a signifier of some unspoken significance, just as the roses manage to be both roses, and

4 Deevy, 'In the Cellar of My Friend', p. 111.

5 Teresa Deevy, 'Wife to James Whelan', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, I, 109–158 (p. 109).

6 Maynooth, Russell Library (RL), The Teresa Deevy Archive, Frank McEvoy, Teresa Deevy: Her Plays: Read to the Kilkenny Literary Society, 25 March 1966, p. 7, PP/6/III/176 16.

7 Teresa Deevy, 'Light Falling', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, II, 63–75 (p. 69).

8 Deevy, 'Cellar', p. 112.

seem to be straining towards some other meaning. However, perhaps most striking, when we see the passage on the page, is the fragmentation of the language in a stage world that otherwise seems so whole. In a passage that is only forty-five words long, there are no fewer than five ellipsis, and three long em-dashes; or, on average, one irregular break in syntax every six and a half words. There is, in short, as much silence as sound, and this feature is central to the way in which Deevy's theatre language works. What is more, were we to go back to Deevy's plays of the 1930s, we would find multiple examples of this kind of broken syntax. Nor is this accidental; in fact, it can be argued that the same shattered syntax can stand as an image of *In the Cellar of My Friend* as a whole, where it appears that we are looking at a theatrical world that is basking in its own fullness and completeness, but which on closer examination turns out to be as splintered as the speech.

In the first instance, objects in the play's world have a habit of breaking into fragments. As Belle looks at a basket full of roses, the basket itself effectively disappears, becoming, in her perception '—nothing really but a platform for the roses to rest on... [...] no sides, nothing to hold them ...'. The basket becomes, in phenomenological terms, a tool, an object of which the sole purpose is to accomplish a task, and thereby erases itself as an object. At the same time, the roses both become more fully present as roses, but as she sees the roses as having an intensity of presence that is almost like a kind of immanence, they too cease to become pure objects, instead becoming available as symbols. So, when the character of Tom, Patty's brother, pricks his finger on them, he immediately veers away from the actual rose before him to an unspoken idea: 'Ah-h...those roses are treacherous... I often think it...hidden thorns always in them—' (a line, it is worth noting, with fourteen words, three ellipses, and an em-dash).⁹ He goes on to ask Belle what she once said to him about red roses, 'What did you once say about them? Drops of the Precious Blood, you told me, scarcely heeded, yet making for gladness...—to which Belle replies: 'Did I say that? Then I was cribbing—not my own words at all, but Barney's...'.¹⁰

In the same way, we can also think of the plot of *In the Cellar of My Friend* as being like one of Deevy's sentences where what looks like an

9 Ibid., p. 114.

10 Ibid., pp. 114–115.

ordinary, innocuous sentence is broken up and the real significance of what is happening resides in the pieces that are missing—in the silences. The character of Barney mentioned here is the play's fourth character, Tom's son (and hence, Patty's nephew), a young man of about twenty-one. We first hear of him when Tom enters raging about Barney's 'latest idea! ...so absurd...so preposterous', upon which Belle cuts her finger on a rose, startled because she believes—as does Patty—that Barney's 'latest idea' is to propose marriage to Belle.¹¹ And this is what Belle (and, indeed, the audience) think is happening right up until the play's final scene, when we discover that Barney's great epiphany of the previous night was not that he should ask Belle to marry him: it was that he should join a religious order, live in a monastery, and commit his life to God. Indeed, it is not until the play's final moments that Tom actually states what is taking place—that Barney is leaving Grantsthorpe 'to be a monk'—leaving the audience with the sense that they had been distracted by some other play, and have somehow missed the real play that was taking place unseen in front of their eyes.¹² Or, to put it another way, it is as if the words in the sentence suddenly appear like shining irrelevances, and the real meaning lies in the silence of the ellipsis.

'Exultant'

When Barney first appears in *In the Cellar of My Friend*, he is described as being 'exultant and charged with eagerness'.¹³ This might not seem like a remarkable set of stage directions; however, it is worth paying particular attention to the word 'exultant'. In *The King of Spain's Daughter*, the same word is used at the play's end, when Annie Kinsella has decided—inexplicably from the audience's perspective (and, indeed, from that of the other characters)—to marry Jim Harris, after hearing that Jim has been busily saving his shillings week by week. Having seen the grubby savings book of the man she is to marry, Annie exclaims: 'He put by two shillin's every week for two hundred weeks. I think he is a man that—supposin' he was jealous—might cut your throat'. At that point,

11 Ibid., p. 114.

12 Ibid., p. 122.

13 Ibid., p. 116.

the stage directions describe her as 'Quiet, exultant [...]'.¹⁴ The same word appears in the stage directions for the closing lines of Deevy's best-known play, *Katie Roche*. Again, a woman trapped in the domestic cage of a realist set chooses to marry a man she does not love, but in her final lines announces (exultantly): 'I will be brave! [...] I was looking for something great to do—sure now I have it'.¹⁵

This suggests that there is a kind of precision in Deevy's writing that extends even to her stage directions. The moments of Annie Kinsella's exultation, and Katie Roche's exultation are, on one hand, the products of their particular situations as women in an Irish society of the 1930s, a situation so precisely and theatrically encapsulated by the 'Road Closed' sign that dominates the stage in *The King of Spain's Daughter*. However, with Deevy's use of the word 'exultant', we glimpse the curious paradox at the heart of her work. For both characters, this moment of 'exultation' erupts at the moment they are, in dramatic terms, resigned to a particular fate. At the same time, their male counterparts in two of these plays—Jim Harris in *The King of Spain's Daughter* and Stanislaus Gregg in *Katie Roche*—end their respective plays curiously defeated, even though they have gained what they desired, or thought they desired. In *Wife to James Whelan*, Deevy plays a variation on the theme by extending this understanding of acceptance as a kind of ecstasy. In that at the play's conclusion Whelan accepts that he will never marry Nan, and he ends the play '(Soaring.)', then '([...] with his head thrown back, [...] gazing into his own future.)'.¹⁶

In a letter, possibly written in 1939, about an unidentified lost (or perhaps re-titled) play that Deevy called 'Port of Refuge', she wrote to one of her most trusted confidantes, Florence Hackett: 'Tell me what you think of 'Port of Refuge'— I liked the way it brought out the disillusionment that follows on getting what we have put too much store on having'.¹⁷ It could be said that we have the coordinates of Deevy's theatrical world in that letter: that which can be possessed can only

14 Teresa Deevy, 'The King of Spain's Daughter', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, II, 17–26 (p. 26).

15 The stage direction is '(Grows exultant.)'. Teresa Deevy, 'Katie Roche', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, II, 57–102 (p. 102).

16 Deevy, 'Wife to James Whelan', p. 158.

17 Dublin, Eavan Boland Library (EBL), Florence Hackett Collection, Teresa Deevy to Florence Hackett, 2 February 1939(?) [sic], MS 10722, item 24.

produce disappointment, whereas when we renounce possession, the result is a kind of exultation. However, the nature of this renunciation—and this is the paradox of Deevy's theatre—is not a renunciation of the phenomenological world. Instead, in accepting that one cannot possess that world, that world becomes more fully present in its own terms.

In *In the Cellar of My Friend*, it is this complex dynamic of renunciation and exultation that is at work, but the gender roles are reversed. Where *The King of Spain's Daughter*, *Katie Roche*, and *Wife to James Whelan* are all—quite rightly—now widely studied and respected as plays about women's experience in Ireland in the mid-twentieth century, in *In the Cellar of My Friend*, that elusive central role—the Annie Kinsella, the Katie Roche, the Nan Bowers—is occupied (as is the case in *Wife to James Whelan*) by a male character: Barney Keane. This does not suggest that gender is irrelevant in relation to the earlier characters. It is not. However, we can say that their gender puts those earlier characters in a position in which Deevy can use them to explore a particular relation between acceptance and freedom. In the later plays—*Wife to James Whelan*, and to an even greater extent, *In the Cellar of My Friend*—Deevy begins to explore the possibility that this relation can be extended to her male characters as well. In this respect, Barney Keane is effectively a development of those earlier characters; indeed, he is not Deevy's first protagonist to have imagined his life in terms of entering a religious order. There is a curious line in *Katie Roche*, where the character of Reuben asks Katie if she loves Stanislaus: 'I didn't know that was love till he asked me now, and I said to myself, "there's your convent"'.¹⁸ In other words, for Katie, marrying Stanislaus involves the same renunciation—and the same 'exultation'—as entering a convent.

This passage in *Katie Roche* is pivotal for understanding Deevy's work. It opens with the entrance of Reuben, who in performance is a menacing, dangerous character, who disrupts not only the fictional world of the play, but also *Katie Roche's* dramatic form, grating against its surface realism, like a character who has wandered in from some dark fairy tale. He is about as close as Deevy ever comes to creating a character who is less an individual, and more the embodiment of an idea. So, when he first enters, and Stanislaus says, innocuously enough: 'Good

18 Deevy, 'Katie Roche', p. 62.

evening'—Reuben replies: 'It is a fine evening. It is one of these golden evenings that God still lavishes on a sinful world'.¹⁹ Now, this might seem like a line that is simply there to establish him as a puritanical old curmudgeon, but in the context of Deevy's insistence on atmosphere and the quality of light as 'the eternal mystery, the beneficence', it suggests something more far-reaching.²⁰ In the scene from *Katie Roche* that opens with Reuben referring to the 'golden evening that God still lavishes on a sinful world', he goes on to state his theological position unambiguously: 'Christ left no doubt. He was at war with this world, worldly thoughts, and worldly values', and Reuben as a wandering 'holy man' (as he is described) thus embodies a theological view of the phenomenological world as inherently sinful and fallen, and hence to be rejected in every way possible.²¹ Katie takes a different view: 'Ah, you couldn't go very much by the Bible; what's said in one place is unsaid in another, and that's the great puzzle;—often you'd think you had an answer'.²² Again, in performance this can seem like one of those moments when Katie is simply being vague, but again it is a case of doing something serious with something apparently casual. In fact, Deevy seems to be setting up an opposition, in which Reuben represents a form of Catholicism that is dogmatic, and which is founded on a kind of dualism, for which the world is evil, and only that which is not of the world can be good—in short, a strain that ran strongly through the Catholic dogmatic theology that was so influential in the early decades of the Irish state. Whereas for Katie, goodness—or God—can be immanent in the world—as it can be immanent in light falling for Kenneth Leslie in *Light Falling*, or in an April morning. And here is the important thing: that immanence can never really be known, only experienced; it remains 'a great puzzle', although 'often you'd think you had an answer'.

In the Cellar of My Friend thus comes into a focus as a pivotal play because through it we glimpse the deeply unfashionable idea that Teresa Deevy's theatrical aesthetic is at least partly engaged with a very particular form of Catholic mysticism. By mysticism, we can take a line from William James, in which he writes that it is about a kind of

19 Ibid.

20 Deevy, 'Light Falling', p. 69.

21 Deevy, 'Katie Roche', p. 63, p. 61, respectively.

22 Ibid., p. 63.

‘transport’, and, furthermore, ‘the incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism’.²³ Or, to put it in Deevy’s language, religious mysticism is ‘exultant’, but sprinkled with ellipses.

To put this in context, all of the scant biographical writing we have about Deevy mentions her deeply-held religious beliefs. Her nephew Jack Deevy claimed that she made a pilgrimage to meet Padre Pio, who ‘was apparently rather rude to her on account of her deafness’.²⁴ Martina Ann O’Doherty reports that she was told by a family member that Deevy ‘was a daily communicant and embarked on pilgrimages to Lisieux, Lourdes, Fatima, Assisi, San Giovanni and Rome’, and was ‘an active member of the Legion of Mary in Dublin’.²⁵ Catherine Rynne, writing in *The Story of the Abbey Theatre* in 1967, noted: ‘Miss Deevy has travelled extensively on the Continent and can speak and lip-read French fluently. She used to act as brancardièrè during her annual visits to Lourdes’.²⁶ Going beyond such third-person testimony, however, we see a deep religious conviction in Deevy’s most unguarded moments. In particular, there is a letter to her close friend Patricia Lynch, written in 1954 shortly after the death of her sister, Nell, apparently responding to Lynch writing that she still considered Nell as part of a ‘gathering of friends around a fire’. ‘It is just what I feel too’, responds Deevy, ‘... and I love to know that Nell is in your fireside group. The great fire we gather at is the glowing heart of God—pulsating with love... I do feel that Nell is living her life somewhere else’.²⁷

This religious sensibility becomes more pronounced in Deevy’s later work. For instance, the late radio play, *Supreme Dominion*, about seventeenth-century Irish priest, Fr Luke Wadding (who was founder of the Irish College in Rome, and who was from Deevy’s hometown of Waterford), is very much about the incommunicable nature of

23 William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Library of America (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 343, p. 366, respectively.

24 Maynooth, Russell Library (RL), The Teresa Deevy Archive, Jack Deevy in interview with Frank McEvoy, 3 November 1983, PP/6/176.

25 Martina Ann O’Doherty, ‘Teresa Deevy, Playwright (1894–1963)’, *The Waterford Archaeological and Historical Society Journal* (1995), 108–113 (p. 111).

26 Catherine Rynne, ‘The Playwrights’, in *The Story of the Abbey Theatre*, ed. by Sean McCann (London: Four Square, 1967), pp. 69–100 (p. 88).

27 Dublin, National Library of Ireland (NLI), Papers of Patricia Lynch and R.M. Fox, Teresa Deevy to Patricia Lynch, undated 1954, MS 40,327 /2.

certain kinds of religious experience.²⁸ 'I think of Luke always as very spiritual', she wrote to a radio producer at the time, '- this is hard to convey. [...] About Luke Wadding himself my idea, when writing, was to reveal him more by the reactions of others to his personality than by any "wonderful" sayings or doings of his. This makes your job (on the air) hard'.²⁹ By the time we reach one of Deevy's final works, *One Look and What it Led To*, this incommunicable mysticism has become the clear focus of the work.³⁰ Broadcast posthumously on Radio Éireann in 1964, but dating from that same later period as *Supreme Dominion* and *In the Cellar of My Friend*, the play opens in the time of Christ, and features Jesus and his disciples, before moving to a final scene in contemporary France, in which a seemingly immortal Mary Magdalen is still living on a mountainside in France as a kind of bride of Christ, speaking to him through the birds. 'Of late we've had so many interruptions... In the beginning You spoiled me,—those lovely years when no one came, only the birds,—and *You...You, my beloved...*'. The 'You' here, in the script, has an upper case 'Y': in other words, Mary Magdalen is addressing the absent Christ as her 'beloved'.³¹ The play ends with the two French characters, Pierre and Antoinette, marvelling at a shooting star, and a fragrance in the air. It is about as close to a theatre of religious experience as you will find in Irish theatre.

What makes *In the Cellar of My Friend* such a key work in this group of late plays is that it helps to place the Catholicism of Deevy's theatre in a very particular theological tradition, quite distinct from the dualist dogmatic theology that predominated in Irish Catholic teaching at the time (and of which Reuben can be taken as a kind of exemplar and a rejection). Instead, this is a mystical tradition predicated on the immersion in religious experience. The key to this reading is the title of the play, *In the Cellar of My Friend*, which comes from the *Spiritual Canticle* of the Spanish saint and mystic, St John of the Cross:

28 Teresa Deevy, 'Supreme Dominion', in *Selected Plays of Irish Playwright Teresa Deevy, 1894–1963*, ed. by Eibhear Walshe (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), pp. 207–252.

29 Dublin, NLI, Teresa Deevy to Philip Rooney, 22 August 1955 and 7 September 1955, MS 33,665.

30 Teresa Deevy, 'One Look and What It Led To', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, II, 125–114.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

In the inner cellar
 Of my Beloved have I drunk;
 Over all the plain I knew nothing,
 And lost the flock I followed and when I went forth before.³²

The image of Christ as the 'beloved' is, it will be noted, picked up in Mary Magdalen's address to the absent Christ in *One Look and What it Led To*. St John of the Cross' *Spiritual Canticle* had a profound influence on a certain brand of Catholic mysticism—particularly that of St Thérèse of Lisieux, which was one of the sites of pilgrimage that Deevy is reputed to have visited during her life. The *Spiritual Canticle* was written when its author (Juan de Yepes y Álvarez)—known as St John of the Cross—a Carmelite monk who was a disciple of St Teresa of Ávila was imprisoned for heresy in a cell barely large enough to hold him and brought out only for weekly scourgings; it is about suffering, and spiritual revelation through suffering. The *Canticle* is a remarkable work, with no real equivalent in English literature, taking the dramatic form of a dialogue between the Soul (as a bride) and Jesus (the bridegroom), in which the Soul ultimately enters into full communion with Christ. St John of the Cross later wrote his own analysis of the *Canticle*, in which he glossed the passage that Deevy uses as being about the irrelevance of knowledge to love (particularly love of God). He writes, that 'God can infuse love without specific knowledge of the thing loved'.³³ The suggestion of a wine cellar in the title of Deevy's play (and hence of drunkenness), hints at the idea of going beyond rationality, particularly when we realise that the 'Friend' (the equivalent of the 'Beloved') is Christ. In short, the play's title signals that it is about spiritual revelation; and yet, the nature of the revelation can only be spoken in Barney's halting explanation, which ultimately turns to another passage from St John of the Cross:

BARNEY: Last night something happened... I was... invited...
 (*Slow—looking for words to describe an experience.*) to come
 nearer... Not the first time... but always before I had drawn

32 St John of the Cross, 'A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ', in *The Mystical Doctrine of St John of the Cross*, ed. by R.H.J. Steuart (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2006), p. 169.

33 Ibid.

back—dreading. Last night, being happy, I went on, in spirit I mean... I opened the door—or it was opened for me... Something was offered... How foolish is all our dreading! (*Exultant.*) ...our withdrawals... hesitations—how utterly foolish!³⁴

Capped by the tell-tale direction '*Exultant*', this is perhaps the closest Deevy comes to a mystical vision—which is, ironically, not very close at all; because once more we are back in the world of broken syntax, of language that is inadequate to the task of communication. 'Last night something happened'. What? Neither the characters nor the audience ever really know.

And this is what makes this play so fascinating, perhaps more than the more straight-forward religious world of the later *One Look and What it Led To*. *In the Cellar of My Friend* is not just about mystical revelation. It is about how easy it is to misread—or to miss—the signs of this revelation all around us, and, in this regard, we can consider the play to be a comedy, at least in terms of the way in which Teresa Deevy understood comedy. *In the Cellar of My Friend* is a comedy in the same sense that *The King of Spain's Daughter* is a comedy, in that it is a play about misreading the world. The entire play hinges around an unseen, offstage moment the night before, when Barney has had a moment of religious epiphany powerful enough to convince him to join a monastery and devote his life to God. But when he attempts to write down this revelation in a letter, drawing on one of the most powerful texts in the Catholic mystical tradition, the *Spiritual Canticle* of St John of the Cross, all that remains are some broken pieces of misunderstood sentences, chewed by the family's puppy. 'It doesn't make one bit of difference...', Barney says, 'Maybe the puppy had some wisdom...'.³⁵ The chewed letter, of course, is the visual equivalent of the fractured syntax of Deevy's spoken dialogue. All that his father Tom can make out, as he and Belle pour over the letter is the word 'explanation', followed by some puppy chew, are a few broken lines from St John of the Cross, ending: 'And coming forth knew nothing of all this plain | And lost—'.³⁶

34 Deevy, 'Cellar', p. 119.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

Dark Matter

The welcome resurgence of theatrical and critical interest in the work of Teresa Deevy that has emerged over the past ten years has resituated her in Irish theatre both as a woman, writing at a time when women's experience was largely occluded in Irish culture; and, more recently, as a deafened artist, again working at a time when disability was often invisible in Irish society. However, in the shell-game of blindness and insight, these new (and welcome) perspectives produce their own occlusions. And one of these, I am suggesting here, concerns religious experience. The reasons for this are complex and have much to do with the involvement of the Catholic Church as an institution in determining, and restricting, the lives both of women in Irish society, and of those with disabilities. The result of this has been a tendency to sort repressed experiences and identities to one side of the equation, and to sort anything to do with religion to the other side of the equation. The reality, however, was often more complex. It was possible—as we see with Teresa Deevy—to be deafened, to be a woman, and to take seriously certain forms of religious experience. What is more, not only is Teresa Deevy all of these things, she was also a playwright, fascinated by what theatre could, and could not, do: and it is on stage that the disparate elements of her identity collide in productive tension.

Read in this way, the later religious plays—*In the Cellar of My Friend*, *One Look and What it Led To*, *Light Falling*, and *Supreme Dominion*—are not a departure from the concerns of her earlier, better-known plays, such as *Katie Roche*; they are entirely consistent with them. In Deevy's work, there are pivotal moments of experience that are, to use William James' term, 'incommunicable'; and in the later plays, these moments are most often associated with religious experience. What is more, because they are fundamentally incommunicable, these moments are intensely private; they belong the individual alone. It is this that constitutes the pivotal point of intersection between a Catholic (or, indeed, any other kind) of mysticism, and something even the most secular amongst us can recognise as a very modern sensibility. Indeed, one of the ways in which we recognise this existential solitude in modern literature is through the failures of language; we need only think of Beckett here, from the collapse of syntax in *The Unnameable* to the drift towards silence

in the late plays.³⁷ Similarly, *In the Cellar of My Friend* is a play about the failures of language. Indeed, we are more or less told as much. Very early in the play, when Tom makes his first entrance, he asks Patty why she did not wait for him in the meadow. She must not have received his message, she tells him: 'Very seldom are messages properly given'.³⁸ In some respects, indeed, the entire play is summed up in what could be read as a throw-away line from the play's fifth character, the gardener Martin, who is something like the old retainer Firs in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*: 'It do seem to me there is no two people can to the full com-pre-hend one another. Not fully... not as I sees it'.³⁹

If the source of these failures of vision and language is a kind of religious mysticism in *In the Cellar of My Friend*, and if it finds its language from a very particular tradition within Catholic mysticism—one that runs from St John of the Cross through Thérèse of Lisieux—such failures, as Beckett learned, are also profoundly theatrical. All that an actor has to work with is what can be seen or heard: voices, bodies, light, objects on the stage. And yet, from this, they must construct an inner state, an inner life. In *Dark Matter*, Andrew Sofer uses the term 'dark matter' to refer to 'the invisible dimension of theater that escapes visual detection, even though its effects are felt everywhere in performance. [...] No less than physical actors and objects, such invisible presences matter very much indeed, even if spectators, characters, and performers cannot put their hands on them'.⁴⁰ All theatre involves 'dark matter' of some sort; however, some theatre manages to make the paradox of dark matter not just a condition of production, but its subject matter. This is the case with Teresa Deevy's theatre, where we are working with a medium that is fundamentally visual, and fundamentally about speech. That visual world is both as fully present as the sunshine on a July day, and as elusive; and speech is ever-present, but full of gaps and elisions, little more than the chewed bits of a letter eaten by a dog. It is thus

37 Samuel Beckett, *The Unnameable* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).

38 Deevy, 'Cellar', p. 114.

39 Dublin, NLI, Manuscripts, Teresa Deevy, 'In the Cellar of My Friend', MS 29,169. The lines published in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, II, differ slightly, as follows: MARTIN 'To my way of seeing there's no two people who can to the full com-pre-hend one another...not fully...as I sees it— (He goes.)'. See Deevy, 'Cellar', p. 120.

40 Andrew Sofer, *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theater, and Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), p. 3.

theatre that stages the comedy of a world in which the possibility of certain forms of experience—including religious experience—can only be intimated. Equally, we can now begin to see that acknowledgement of religious experience as the dark matter of Deevy criticism.

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