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Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

CHAPTER ONE

Ineffable Longings: the Dramas of Teresa Deevy

The plays of Teresa Deevy deserve republishing for three reasons. Primarily, she is worth remembering because she is that rarity, an Irish woman playwright. During the 1930's, her plays were regularly staged at The Abbey Theatre and Sean O'Faolain once remarked to Joseph Holloway that he liked Deevy's plays best of all the Abbey playwrights: '*She comes the nearest to Chekhov's technique*' (Holloway, 14th March 1938). Secondly, for all of her adult life, Teresa Deevy was profoundly deaf and she chose to work most successfully in the medium of stage drama and, even more remarkably, through radio drama. As a director of one of her plays, Judy Friel remarked: *It astonished me that Deevy never heard her plays. Why did she write for theatre? Of all the literary forms she could have chosen, why drama? (Irish University Review 118)*. Thirdly, Teresa Deevy is one of the few writers to come out of Waterford City and the language, topography and the history of her native place, although never actually named, infuse her plays.

With Lady Gregory, Christine Longford and Maura Laverty, Teresa Deevy was one of only four Irishwomen whose work was consistently staged by the mainstream Abbey and Gate theatres between 1890 and 1980. At the centre of all her plays was the plight of her young women and men characters, confounded by

ungovernable longings for a more expansive sense of selfhood. Each of her Abbey Theatre plays of the 1930's dramatises this lyrical, ineffable yearning for selfhood, for greatness even. Deevy's representation of vacillation and indeterminacy led many of her critics to dismiss her work as unstageable but I would argue that what Deevy excelled at dramatising was irresolution itself, just like Chekhov. Deevy once remarked that her plays were '*as fine as thistledown and if not produced properly, they fell apart*' (*Journal of Irish Literature* 14). Her contemporary, the novelist Temple Lane, wrote admiringly of Deevy's interest in dramatising inchoate longings. She noticed that Deevy's work turned on the choice: "*between aspiration and fulfilment ... A sensitive discernment: culture in a sense not exclusively linguistic: fastidiousness, non-materialism: the drama of perpetual conflict, not only between diverse characters but within an entity*' (*Journal of Irish Literature* 3.) Another perceptive contemporary, John Jordan admired the distinctive calibre of her work for similar reasons: "*Miss Deevy frequently writes about 'Romantic' people, that is, people who go in for 'romancing'. But the dramatist herself is little given to romancing. Indeed no other Irish dramatist of the last quarter century has been more concerned with probing realistically the vagaries of human nature.*' (*University Review* 1956 26).

On the other hand, the diarist and theatre-goer, Joseph Holloway dismissed her 1931 play, *A Disciple* : *The piece was all noise and bustle, signifying nothing and most of the audience laughed at the sheer absurdity of the whole thing and kept wondering if the Directors had gone dotty in seeing merit in such a whirlwind of noisy shouting.* (*Irish Theatre* 77). This critical ambivalence dogged Deevy's professional life and, in his history of Irish theatre, *The Backward Look*, Frank O'Connor recounted Yeats '*grumbling to me against the charming plays of Teresa Deevy and muttering that "she wouldn't let us rewrite them for her"*. Lennox Robinson said rudely "*Teresa Deevy rewritten by you would be like Chekov rewritten by Scribe!*" (179.)

The other important reason for reconnecting with Teresa Deevy's plays is the extraordinary fact that she was deaf for all of her adult life. Deevy developed Meniere's Disease in her early twenties, while a student at University College, Dublin, and she became profoundly deaf as a result. However, this loss never deterred her in her resolve to become a professional writer – as she remarked in an interview: *'some people thrive on sympathy, others are braced by setbacks'* (Hoehn 121.) When Judy Friel directed Deevy's *Katie Roche* at the Abbey Theatre in 1994, she commented on: *'Deevy's acute, almost hyperactive ear for dramatic language ...Despite or because of her deafness, maybe the most liberating literary medium would primarily be spoken and heard rather than read? In the same way, a composer that has the ability in silence to hear a score as he reads it, to hear with their eye, Deevy transposed what she heard in silence on to the stage...Drama for Deevy was a striving to accurately express the emotional register (Irish University Review 118)*.

The precision of her language and her interest in radio drama is all the more remarkable when one remembers that she was unable to hear her own plays and it is clear that Deevy composed using her dialogue and her stage and sound directions to create a soundscape. To an RTE radio producer who was working on her play, *Supreme Dominion*, Deevy wrote: *'I dislike a harsh note at the start – thinking of the play always as a piece of music – a thing that opens and reveals itself not too suddenly. (National Library of Ireland. MS33665)*. In many ways, one could argue that her radio play, *Supreme Dominion*, is evidence of a greater confidence in her dramatic development. Perhaps radio enabled Deevy to create more heroic texts where her realisation of a successful, confident protagonist was possible.

Elizabeth Bowen believed that: *'A writer needs to have at command, and to have recourse to, a recognisable world, geographically consistent and having for him or*

her a super-reality (Bowen 36). Teresa Deevy's plays have a geographically consistent, recognisable terrain - her native city of Waterford. She was born there on the 21st of January 1894, the last child of Edward and Mary Deevy. Her parents were of the prosperous Waterford merchant class and Teresa, known to her family as Tessa, was their thirteenth child and ninth daughter. Edward Deevy died when Teresa was three and Mary Deevy became the most important parental influence on her youngest child's life, encouraging her writing interests and urging her towards publication. Deevy's upbringing in the family home, Landscape, was a contented, conventional one and her Catholic faith was crucial to Deevy's development as an adult writer. Also her education at the Ursuline Convent in Waterford, where she was a boarder and where one of her sisters was a nun, reinforced her lifelong Catholic faith. It is worth noting that, despite the conventionality of her upbringing, Deevy's imaginative and political interests led her to write again and again of working-class women and men. Other women writers of the Irish middle-class, novelists like Deevy's contemporary, Kate O'Brien, or the Waterford based, Katherine Cecil Thurston, kept their fictive sights focussed exclusively on their own bourgeois world. Interestingly, Deevy sought to dramatise the predicaments of the Irish working class or emergent lower middle-class. Throughout her writing career, Waterford gave her the locus for these imaginative explorations. Her particular use of Hiberno-English for her working class characters is taken directly from Waterford, as can be seen from this passage from *The King Of Spain's Daughter*: 'Do she belong to you? Do she? When she do, then you can talk' (27). Places and events from her native city like the river, the regatta and the Hill of Knock are central to the action in *Katie Roche* and, of course, the subject for her most sustained radio play, *Supreme Dominion*, was her fellow-Waterfordian, Luke Wadding. However, Waterford is never actually named as the locus for her plays and this is due to Deevy's navigating between the contradictory elements within her imagination, her conventional Catholicism, her feminism and her socialist leanings. Deevy leaves the places of her conflicts

imprecise, attempting to draw on universal rather than particular elements within her experience.

Teresa Deevy left Waterford for University College, Dublin in 1913, intent on becoming a teacher, but she began to suffer the onset of Meniere's Disease and transferred to University College, Cork where she became a patient at the Cork Eye and Ear hospital. By the time she graduated, her hearing was completely gone and she moved to London to study lip-reading. There she extended her interest in theatre, attending performances of Chekhov and Shaw. On her return to Waterford in 1919 at the age of 25, Deevy resolved to become a playwright. There is some evidence of political activism on Deevy's part, when she joined Cumann Na mBan around this time and she incurred her mother's displeasure by visiting political prisoners at Ballybricken Jail in the centre of Waterford City. These political interests led her to her dramatic renderings of Irish working class life and to historical dramas taken from moments of crisis in Irish history.

After several rejections of earlier plays, The Abbey Theatre finally accepted and staged her play *Reapers* in 1930, thanks to the support and interest of Lennox Robinson. *Reapers* was not universally admired, as evidenced by Joseph Holloway's diary entry: *Some of the characters attacked religion and others the republicans and so the prejudice of the (Abbey Theatre) Directors was appeased and a bad play accepted...One hoped against hope that something would come along to redeem it but alas nothing did – the young women who wrote it is stone deaf. (Irish Theatre 59)*. However it was her next play, *Temporal Powers*, that established Deevy as an Abbey playwright and, along with Paul Vincent Carroll, she was awarded best new author prize. 1935-6 was Deevy's most fruitful time at the Abbey, with productions of *The King of Spain's Daughter* in 1935 and *Katie Roche* in 1936. Deevy's feminism informs the structure of these plays and each Deevy protagonist longs for a fate beyond the limited modes available. Yet, despite

this yearning, the working class protagonists, Katie Roche and Annie Kinsella, are confounded in their desire for escape and for an independent autonomous selfhood. Instead they are chastised into submission by physical violence or a figure of patriarchal authority, evidence of Deevy's disaffection with the patriarchal Ireland of the 1930's. Throughout these plays, Deevy found striking expression for the longing for otherness in her creation of these working-class young women. As Shaun Richards argues in the foreword to this volume, these plays articulate Deevy's explicit feminism in her attack on the oppression of female autonomy.

Her one-act play *The King of Spain's Daughter*; the first play in this edition focuses on the daydreams of the factory girl, Annie Kinsella. Deevy has left us an account of the epiphanic moment of creation, which led to this play: '*One April day she was crossing the bridge near the courthouse in Waterford on her way through the public park. Men were working in Catherine Street and there had been a wedding in St John's street nearby. Teresa suddenly stood still on the bridge. Nell grabbed her arm and told her to come on. The idea for the King of Spain's Daughter was born at that moment and the play, when published, was dedicated 'To an April Day'.* (*Journal of Irish Literature* 14) In the play, Annie is transfixed by a glimpse of the bride at a wedding party, imparting a momentary vision of splendour.' *She was like a livin' flame passin' down by us'* (25) Deevy contrasts Annie's romantic and factually inaccurate account of the wedding with the harsh options for selfhood and identity available to the girl - Annie must either marry the dull, but devoted, Jim Harris or go into servitude in a factory. At the end of the play, Annie fears the unheroic nature of her destiny- '*I couldn't bear I'd be no more than any other wife...It won't be all they'll say of me: "She married Jimmy Harris"*' (36). However she is triumphant when she discovers that her husband has a temper and a possessive nature – '*I think he is a man might cut your throat'*(37). Deevy's next play, *Katie Roche*, was her most enduringly popular play. When Sean O'Faolain saw the first production in March 1936, he saw it as full of that '*old*

electrifying blend of realism and lyricism, which I call intimacy'. (Programme note: 1994 Abbey Theatre Production). Katie Roche is Deevy's most striking dramatic creation, a young woman of unknown birth, caught between middle-class and working class identities, longing for a more expansive sense of self. Katie is illegitimate and without an identifiable father but yet filled with vitality, dissatisfaction and a desire to make something great of her life.

Fintan O'Toole, in a 1994 article on *Katie Roche*, argues that Deevy's plays register the gulf between the patriarchal nature of the Irish State in the 1930's and any possible desire for female autonomy. He contends that the domestic role imposed on Irish women by the sanctification of the family resulted in a narrowing of Irish female selfhood. So Deevy's plays, particularly *Katie Roche*, chart the resultant loss of identity for Irish women of her time. *'While her contemporary authors, Eamon De Valera and John Charles McQuaid were writing about women's place in the home, Teresa Deevy is down in Waterford, putting together an enactment of a woman in the home and finding that she has neither home nor place'* (*The Irish Times*, 26 April 1994)

As a result, the play is structured around Katie's anger at limiting female modes of being, her search for a name and an identity and her struggle for power. She attempts to gain equality and recognition from the older, patriarchal Stan, the man she agrees to marry. Katie has immortal longings but by the end of the play she finds that the combination of the overbearing Stan and the mystic Reuben too overwhelming and she is forced into dutiful wifedom and unwilling exile from her home town.

In her next play, an historical drama called *The Wild Goose*, the main character, Martin Shea, also experiences this same sense of impatience and irresolution. It is interesting to note the way in which Deevy places Martin's struggle and his sense

of constriction within the political turmoil of the Ireland of his time. Like many other writers of her generation, particularly O'Faolain and O'Connor, Deevy's faith in Irish cultural nationalism met with progressive disillusion amid the insular political climate of the Irish State in the 1930's. Indeed, at one point, she publicly attacked Irish censorship on religious grounds, deploring its philosophical basis and abhorring any assumed disparity between individual comprehension and state control of literature. At a time in twentieth-century Ireland when political autonomy had been achieved, to the detriment of freedom of expression, Deevy turned to key moments in Irish history where such national independence had seemed inconceivable. In plays like *The Wild Goose*, she was searching Irish history for other key moments of pressure and urgency between faith and national identity. In particular, the clash between the philosophical basis for European Catholicism and the insular nature of Irish nationalism interested her. In her work she sought to rekindle a connection between faith and national identity, a connection that would consolidate individual purpose for her dramatic protagonists.

The Wild Goose was produced in the Abbey in 1936 and in a letter to John Jordan in November 1955, Deevy commented that she had sent it to one agent but her returned the script to her complaining that there were no highlights! Set in 1692, the play explores the contradictory pressures of country and of religion on the protagonist, Martin, the "Wild Goose" of the title. The title is a deliberate singularising of the familiar historical term 'wild geese' to suggest the dilemma of individual identity at this turbulent time. As a central character, Martin evinces precisely the same attributes as Katie Roche, unable to choose definitively between a number of unsatisfactory options, struggling to be free in a narrowing universe. Unlike Katie, Martin is independent and propertied and therefore in control of his own destiny, but like Katie, that destiny is constricted by the state of his nation. His impulse towards dignity and self-sufficiency is overwhelming but his options

are few. In the course of *The Wild Goose*, Martin explores many potential destinies, torn between the priesthood, love for Eileen, and a wish to leave and fight for Ireland elsewhere. While he believes in resistance and violence as a means for self-respect, Eileen disagrees and argues, "*Tis a cowardly thing to be leaving the country.* (134). At the same time Martin respects the priest for his courage and faith but resists any assertion of absolute clerical authority. He tells the priest, '*It isn't the law that the priest can say where we'll kneel*' (139). By the end of the play, with all of his potential lives explored and then rejected, Martin is, for Deevy, a man made tragically inept and useless by his time. Like Katie and Annie, he lacks the opportunity to realise his heroic possibility, self-destructive in his search for selfhood.

Unfortunately, her next play, *Wife to James Whelan*, was turned down by the Abbey Theatre in 1942, thus ending her connection with the national theatre. This rejection was personally traumatic for her, although the play was broadcast in 1946 and then produced in a Dublin theatre in 1956. The reason for the refusal was assumed to be conservatism of the Abbey theatre director, Ernest Blythe and in re-reading the text now, it is difficult to understand his dislike of this play and of her later writings. *Wife to James Whelan* marks a new direction for Deevy and remains, in fact, one of her most accomplished plays, dealing with the emergent Irish lower middle class and the growth of a new business class in Ireland. In *The King of Spain's Daughter*, Annie Kinsella dreaded being known only as someone who married Jim Harris. However, the three women in this play, Nan, Kate and Nora are all potential wives for the up and coming businessman, James Whelan. Whelan is the independent, confident, working class boy who transforms himself into the owner of the motor business *The Silver Wings Motor Service* during the course of the play. In the end it is the socially advantaged Nora that James Whelan decided to marry rather than Nan Bowers, the object of his affections or Kate Moran the woman who loves him. After the rejection of this play by the Abbey

Theatre, Teresa Deevy turned to radio and to independent theatre companies and radio production. She parted company with the official network of mainstream and subsidised Irish theatre and, in some sense, this liberated her imagination.

In the later part of her writing career, radio proved a valuable source of work for her and the final play in this collection, *Supreme Dominion*, comes from this period of her writing life. Fr Luke Wadding (1588-1657), the subject of *Supreme Dominion*, is perhaps the best-known of Deevy's fellow Waterfordians. His is the only non-religious statue in Waterford City. A Franciscan priest and eminent churchman, Wadding had been responsible for papal policy towards Ireland in the seventeenth century and had also been an important ally and advisor of the Gaelic leader, Owen Roe O'Neill. Described by his biographer, Urban Flanagan, as the greatest Irishman of his century, Wadding founded several Irish colleges in Rome for the education of young Irish priests and in 1641 he was appointed representative to the Confederacy of Kilkenny. The consequent failure of this Confederacy weakened Wadding's standing in Rome, as did his supplying of arms and money to O'Neill and his career ended in some disrepute.

Luke Wadding is an ideal figure for Deevy, the perfect synthesis of nationalist and devout Catholic. Her idealisation of the priest is connected with her frustration at the narrowing of contemporary horizons in Ireland. Deevy's priest is a simple, heroic figure, uncompromising and uncomplicated in his devotion to church and country. In a letter to the producer of the Radio Eireann version, Deevy wrote '*I think of Luke always as very spiritual. He is all the time serene and has lightness of heart. (Deevy to Rooney: September 1955, NLI ms33665.)*'. Indeed Wadding is unique in this steadfastness, as the archetypal Deevy protagonist is habitually beset with self-doubt and impatience. In this play, Wadding stands resolute and determined without the torments of indecision suffered by other Deevy protagonists like Martin, Katie, James Whelan and Annie.

Supreme Dominion, unlike other Deevy plays, is set outside Ireland, in Rome, and is structured around Wadding's political activities and the armed rebellion in Ireland. From the opening, the familiar division between idealistic men and sceptical women is used as a dramatic device to introduce Wadding with those around him questioning and debating his innovations and his ambitions in Rome. His access to the Pope is envied and his interest in the freedom and faith of his own small country is distrusted.

When Wadding is finally introduced into the dramatic action, Deevy uses political events in Ireland as a backdrop to build up her sense of him as a saint, achieving a balance between his continental Catholicism and his Irish nationalism. His ambition to promote the cause of political justice for Ireland is linked with a desire to educate young Irish priests in Rome. Deevy considers the dual nature of Wadding's political agenda, the healthy interconnection of local and international imperatives but, more significantly, she admires the uncompromising nature of his nationalism. In *Supreme Dominion*, Deevy concentrates on Wadding's direct links with Owen Roe O'Neill, illustrating his belief in armed resistance and highlighting his securing of papal money to this end. A man in favour of violent resistance and opposed to any compromising political settlement, Wadding is challenged by a fellow-priest and countryman, Father Ambrose, who asks him, "*Is wisdom to be measured by affection?* (240)" Wadding's response reflects his abiding support for a doomed cause, "*I think so. I think it is the only true measure.*" (240) Against his many achievements, there is some disquiet as the play ends, a perception that Wadding has backed the wrong cause, thereby sacrificing his career in Rome unnecessarily. His fellow-priest Ambrose suggests this when he comments, "*Some are wondering why Fr Wadding did not use his power more wisely*" (252) and all that Wadding had worked for in Ireland now lies in ruins. The political and military leaders are fled; the priests are either dead or on the run and the British

State institutes repression against the Irish church. In the face of this political failure, Wadding proposes a curious philosophy of sacrifice and apparent surrender, "*offer your life to God - like a wafer, ready to be crushed, immolated,*" (257), a philosophy that Deevy endorsed. Ultimately Wadding offered Deevy a historical precedent for a disinterested Irish Catholicism. Wadding's calm and steadfastness in the face of conflicting interests appeal to her, even though discontent is the primary characteristic of all her other Irish protagonists.

Deevy's dramatic writing effectively ended with *Supreme Dominion*. In the late 1950's, she retired back to Waterford to her family home, Landscape, where she died in January 1963. However critical and theatrical interest in her plays has continued and her work has been the subject of two special journal editions, *The Journal of Irish Literature* in 1985 and the *Irish University Review* in 1995. The Abbey Theatre had revived *Katie Roche* twice, first in the early 1970's and again in 1994, the centenary year of Teresa Deevy's birth. Thanks to the biographical research of the late Sean Dunne, a fellow-Waterfordian and the academic interest of critics like Eileen Kearney, Shaun Richards, Cathy Leeney and Fiona Beckett, contemporary Irish critical thought has continued to engage with the singular and rewarding plays of Teresa Deevy. In the words of the theatre director Caroline Williams, "*It remains rigorously structured drama which eschews sentimentality and melodrama. Her plays offer a host of complex, vibrant characters and, in particular, her woman characters are strikingly rich and unique in the canon of Irish drama. (Note for The Abbey Theatre production of Katie Roche, 1994).*" These selected plays are a tribute to a life lived successfully in the imagination.

Eibhear Walshe. University College, Cork.2002.

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Katie Roche. Three-act stage play.

The Wild Goose. Three-act stage play.

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Wife to James Whelan. One-act radio play.

Dignity. One-act radio play.

Strange Birth. One-act stage play.

Polinka. Radio playlet adapted from Chekhov's short story of the same name.

Light Failing. One-act radio play.

Light Falling. Full-length stage play.

Within a Marble City. One-act stage play.

Within a Marble City. One-act radio play.

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