Introduction: betrayal and the Irish novel

> Supporting characters are, on the whole, credibly drawn,
> The style simple but effective, the plot
> Swings through various worlds, heavens and hells.
>
> That grisly scene on the hill verges on
> Melodrama but the aftermath has a joyous
> Magic. I recommend a large paperback edition.
> I'll bet it sells.
>
> Brendan Kennelly, *The Little Book of Judas*, 213

In a speech in the United States in May 2012, the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, spoke of the 'righteous anger' that Irish people were feeling in light of the revelation 'that various institutions and individuals betrayed the trust placed in them' (Marlowe 2012). What he was referring to on that occasion was the economic recession that had put paid to the Celtic Tiger – more precisely, he was referring to the practices and attitudes that had precipitated Ireland's calamitous fall from economic grace in 2008. Always a figure of suspicion to some, the Tiger had been exposed as a wantonly dangerous beast which thrived only by taking reckless chances with the lives of ordinary people. Hovering in the shadows of the President's speech, meantime, was the spectre of another high-profile modern Irish 'betrayal' – that of its constituents by the Catholic Church. By the second decade of the new century, in fact, the words 'Irish' and 'betrayal' had become closely linked – one never too far from the other when questions of identity, meaning or value were at issue.

What does the emergence of 'betrayal' as a prominent theme within modern Irish life signify?[1] To begin to address that question

we must (unsurprisingly) turn to the past, or at least to 'the past' as it's imagined in various narrative discourses – by which I mean those stories, related by itself and by others, through which a society learns about itself.

One such story is the 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero' (1944), in which the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges imagines the mysterious death of a fictional nineteenth-century Irish revolutionary named Fergus Kilpatrick. A hundred years after his murder in a Dublin theatre, the circumstances surrounding this event begin to intrigue Kilpatrick's great-grandson, a historian named Ryan. As he looks further into the case, certain parallels begin to emerge between Kilpatrick's slaying and the assassination of Julius Caesar, as depicted in Shakespeare's famous play. When Ryan delves deeper still, he also finds connections (some of them linguistic) with *Macbeth*.

Eventually the truth emerges: Kilpatrick was a traitor who, once his treachery had been exposed, agreed to participate in an elaborate theatrical performance designed to cement his own heroic profile and thus to expedite the revolution. Kilpatrick must be assassinated, and his 'martyrdom' must become a rallying point for those whom he had betrayed. This performance was to be set across the whole of Dublin and was to involve large numbers of 'actors', including the central character, Kilpatrick himself, who embraces his role as doomed hero with alacrity. The man who came up with this plan, Kilpatrick's lieutenant James Alexander Nolan, turned to the English dramatist Shakespeare to find effective scenarios and appropriate language with which to mount the show – hence the echoes from two of his most famous tragedies. 'In Nolan's work', the narrator writes,

> the passages imitated from Shakespeare are the *least* dramatic; Ryan suspects that the author interpolated them so that in the future someone might hit upon the truth. He understands that he too forms part of Nolan's plot … After a series of tenacious hesitations, he resolves to keep his discovery silent. He publishes a book dedicated to the hero's glory; this too, perhaps, was foreseen. (1964: 104, original emphasis)

Borges's text (more 'parable' than 'story') is a useful point of departure for a study of betrayal in modern Irish fiction in at least three important respects. First, it broaches the apparently seminal role of treachery in Irish history – a role with which anyone possessed of

even a passing knowledge of that history will be familiar. Modern Irish history might in some respects be said to begin with an act which combines marital infidelity with political treason: Dermot Mac Murrough's abduction of the wife of a rival king in 1152, and his pact with the Norman Richard de Clare (Strongbow) after that liaison was thwarted. Thus the 'English' gained their foothold in Ireland; thus the idea of 800 years of dispossession and oppression took hold.

Interestingly, one of the first reports of the Irish character (by the Anglo-Norman cleric Gerald of Wales, written in 1185) emphasised a national genius for deceit:

> [Above] all other peoples they always practise treachery. When they give their word to anyone, they do not keep it. They do not blush or fear to violate every day the bond of their pledge and oath given to others – although they are very keen that it should be observed with regard to themselves … You must be more afraid of their wile than their war; their friendship than their fire; their honey than their hemlock; their shrewdness than their soldiery; their betrayals than their battles; their specious friendship than their enmity despised.[2]

Despite Gerald's admonitions, it would be difficult to say if medieval Irish society was more treacherous than any other, or if the Irish people of that period possessed a greater propensity to deceive than their contemporaries in other lands. After all, Gerald was a propagandist, looking for reasons to justify a particular political programme – invasion and domination; and while there may be contextual factors (a caste system, the role of honour in social structure, the development of language and literature, etc.) bearing upon the ways in which the idea of betrayal functions in any society, I want to reject at the outset the idea of some kind of inherent Irish proclivity for or susceptibility to treachery.

It's through textual interventions such as Gerald's, nevertheless, that the idea of treachery as a crucial element of Irish history was established and continued to circulate; and this is an idea that the story by Borges picks up on and contributes to. The fact is that Irish history since Gerald has been in large part one of faction and strife, and that is a context primed for deception. Thus we find the landscape of Irish history littered with acts, exchanges and personalities redolent of betrayal: Hugh O'Neill, Kinsale, the Flight of the Earls, Aughrim, the Penal Laws, the Act of Union, Emmet, the Famine, the loss of Gaelic, Parnell, Casement, Haughey, and so on. Betrayal,

from this perspective, is deeply embedded within Irish history – the punctuation and the grammar of the Irish historical narrative. Things, people, situations – these are never what they seem; the representation always masks an underlying reality which is in some senses always 'other' to itself.

Nolan's employment of Shakespeare is another interesting aspect of 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero'. Of course, it's somewhat ironic that the work of a great English literary icon should be invoked in order to facilitate the Irish revolution; thus the spectres of authenticity and fidelity (and their opposites: inauthenticity and treachery) are raised, not for the first or last time, in Irish cultural history. Leaving that aside for a moment, Borges's story invites us to acknowledge that Shakespeare is in some respects the 'inventor' of the modern human subject, and it's to his work that we turn when we wish to find iconic representations of the traits and emotions that constitute 'the human'. One of those key constituents, as the Shakespearean canon so readily demonstrates, is betrayal.

I shall be expanding in Chapter 1 upon the Shakespearean depiction of treachery and its influence upon the wider cultural imagination. Here it's enough to note that because of its central role in the idea of 'the human', treachery has constituted a recurring theme for the artistic imagination throughout history; and that when artists come to depict the act of treachery, they invariably defer to a recurring repertoire of 'scenes' – incorporating characters, actions, emotions, motives, justifications, etc. – many of which have received their quintessential articulation in Shakespearean drama. Whenever betrayal is the issue (and, given human nature, it's so often the issue), the shadows of Caesar and Macbeth – as well as Othello, Hamlet, Coriolanus, Lear and a host of other Shakespearean characters – lie over the pages of the Western literary imagination.

The metaphor of 'punctuation' introduced above alerts us to a third interesting aspect of Borges's story – Ryan's decision to write a book ignoring his ancestor's treachery, and thus to compound the original treacherous act with a second, textual, one. Borges himself, of course, was no stranger to the duplicities of narrative and language – indeed, his entire *oeuvre* is in some senses an extended exploration of the failure of language as a medium of communication, and of the lengths to which people (including the author named 'Borges') will go to mitigate, or even to deny, its inadequacy. Borges anticipates a perspective that would become theoretical orthodoxy

in the late twentieth century: the idea that every textual trace is in some sense an exercise in bad faith, in betrayal – of the thing by the word, the real by the virtual, the event by the representation. Ryan's deceitful history of a deceitful man is thus an allegory of the remorseless drive – constantly thwarted, constantly renewed – to find a means to represent the truth of the human condition.

There's a particular cultural form which is intimately connected with the discourse of betrayal: the novel. This is so for a number of reasons. Firstly (and probably least significantly), there's a sense in which the novel form itself represents a kind of betrayal of the artistic mission itself. Hopelessly mortgaged to the bourgeois world view, hopelessly limited in its focus on individual consciousness and its reliance on crude narrative forms, the novel represents a late, thoroughly compromised contribution to the repertoire of artistic media – one lacking purchase and/or seriousness in comparison with music, poetry or the plastic arts. The charges stack up: all art retains an economic dimension, but only the novel is so fully *determined* by economics; all art (even sculpture) retains a narrative dimension, but only the novel is so fully *determined* by narrative; all art negotiates a relationship between human experience and nature at large, but only the novel locks the former into such a limited model of perception and growth. The novel pretends to be on the side of the angels, but is deeply implicated in the ways of the devil.

Such a pejorative estimation has shadowed the novel throughout its modern evolution, and has prompted generations of practitioners and critics into elaborate defences of the form. The debate has tended to coalesce around a particular issue: the extent to which the novel is concerned with the connection between language, narrative and truth – 'truth', that is, as a function of the relationship between the world represented inside the text (no matter how fantastic or how removed in time or space) and the 'real' world in which the text is consumed. And this is the second sense in which the novel is intimately connected with a discourse of betrayal: while this drive towards truth is always looking to register in some form of social, political or existential context, the former two elements (language and narrative) are constantly undermining that connection – constantly picking away at the knot with which the author or the critic attempts to tether the text to the real world.

This study enters the story of the Irish novel (in 1922, two years before Ryan's fictional biography of his treacherous ancestor) just

at the point when the novel has begun to ruminate self-consciously on both its own form and its aesthetic legacy. *Ulysses* (1922) is, as we shall see in the chapter dedicated to it, a treacherous book about treachery – which is to say, it's a novel in which the betrayals perpetrated at the level of plot resonate in relation to the betrayals embedded within the medium of language, *and* within that medium's projection (in the form of narrative) into the 'real' world of space/time. Thus, the modern Irish novel falls into a knowledge of its own treacherous status; and whatever else it may be about in the decades that follow, *after Ulysses* the Irish novel will always in some degree be *about* betrayal.

There's a final sense in which the novel is ineluctably enmeshed with betrayal (illustrated, not coincidentally, in no novel ever written better than in *Ulysses*). In so far as the novel is concerned with the fate of the individual in society, in so far as its formal constitution is based on the author's ability to manipulate a relationship between appearance and underlying reality, the novel has been, is, and will continue to be to a defining degree a prose dramatisation of the politics of betrayal. The reason for this is that behind the Irish experience of treachery (whatever it may be) lies a more fundamental story – of a species with a capacity for duplicity hardwired into its physical and mental composition.

In recent years, a range of 'postal' philosophies (postmodernism, poststructuralism, posthumanism) have speculated on the ordering of discourse (knowledge and ethics, for example) in terms of the evolution of, and relationship between, the various species that share the planet. What are the bases for comparison between species? What's the role and status of justice, of rights, of emotional traffic between different animals, including the human animal? Whatever the answer to those questions might be, there's seems little doubt that only humans possess the levels of high-order intentionality required to betray – to go beyond mere (first-level) intention or (second-level) feigning in order to expedite secret desires or affiliations. The paleoanthropologist Chris Stringer has explored some of the evolutionary reasons for this, claiming that the human brain has 'evolved via selection for life in large groups', and that this has in turn led to the ability to 'mind-read' – that is, to 'observe and interpret the actions of [others] in the group, to learn and pass on "cultural" behaviour within the group, and to cooperate not only for mutual benefit, but for the benefit of others in the group' (2011: 112).

The evolution of the group has been essential to the success of *homo sapiens* in a number of ways. It has brought us co-operation, trust, cumulative knowledge and numerous other evolutionary benefits. When people start to congregate together in groups, however, the ability to 'mind-read' can be put to other, less salubrious uses. Stringer quotes the evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar, who has explored the human capacity for 'mind-reading'

> with reference to Shakespeare's play *Othello*, where the playwright had to simultaneously handle four mind-states: Iago intends that Othello should believe that Desdemona loves Cassio and Cassio loves her. But Shakespeare moved beyond that because, to be successful, he also had to be able to visualize the audience's reaction to what he was writing – and so he was working to at least a fifth-order intentionality, right at the limits of human mind-reading abilities. (2011: 112)

In *The Science of Love and Betrayal* Dunbar goes on to make a special study of the kinds of emotional turmoil to be found in *Othello* – of the kind only to be found, that is, in a species capable of high-order linguistic and mental manipulation. 'With the acquisition of theory of mind,' he writes, young children

> can, for the first time, do two key things they had not previously been able to do, and which no other species of animal can do: engage in pretend play and lie convincingly. The second of these is particularly crucial: they can now understand the mind behind your behaviour, and so appreciate much better how they can manipulate your knowledge of the world to mislead you. (2012: 76)

That the complexity of the human mind should be exemplified by a classic narrative of betrayal alerts us to the centrality of a capacity for treachery in the evolution of the species. Few of us, thankfully, ever experience the levels of disorientating, debilitating suspicion that prompt Othello to murder Desdemona. Each society includes enough 'Othellos' to maintain the currency of the stereotype, but a community containing a large number of violent, suspicious husbands simply could not function; and it's generally regarded as a sign of psychosocial dysfunction if a person maintains too high a level of intentionality – something of the kind demonstrated in Dunbar's example: '*I suppose that you think that I wonder whether you want me to believe that* [something is the case]' (76, original emphasis). Each one of us, however, constantly has to manage an

innate capacity, bequeathed by millennia of evolution and natural selection, for high-order intentionality – for working out, that is, the relationship between appearance and reality.

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan extended this insight to the level of language. In his essay on 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious' (2006: 671–702), Lacan notes the prevalence of first-level pretence throughout the natural world – as when, for example, a bird feigns injury in order to lure a predator away from its nest, or a predator uses camouflage to expedite a successful hunt. A capacity for play (noted by Dunbar in the quotation above) might also be regarded as a form of feigning, as when wolf cubs play-fight – 'pretending' that they are attacking each other.[3] 'But an animal does not feign feigning', Lacan writes:

> It does not make tracks whose deceptiveness lies in getting them to be taken as false, when in fact they are true – that is, tracks that indicate the right trail. No more than it effaces its tracks, which would already be tantamount to making itself the subject of the signifier … But it is clear that Speech only begins with the passage from the feint to the order of the signifier, and that the signifier requires another locus – the locus of the Other, the Other as witness, the witness who is Other than any of its partners – the Speech borne by the signifier to be able to lie, that is, to posit itself as Truth. (683–4)

For Lacan, it appears, Subjectivity is defined by Speech, and Speech itself is defined by an ability to lie. The consequences for our understanding of language and for human experience are profound – as Jacques Derrida, one of Lacan's illegitimate intellectual heirs, explains:

> There is, according to Lacan, a clear distinction between what the animal is capable of, namely, strategic pretence … and what it is incapable of and incapable of witnessing to, namely, the deception of speech [*la tromperie de la parole*] within the order of the signifier and of Truth. The deception of speech … involves lying to the extent that, in promising what is true, it includes the supplementary possibility of telling the truth in order to lead the other astray, in order to have him believe something other than what is true … According to Lacan, the animal would be incapable of this type of lie, of this deceit, of this pretense in the second degree, whereas the 'subject of the signifier,' within the human order, would possess such a power and, better still, should emerge as subject, instituting itself and coming to itself

> as subject by *virtue of this power*, a second-degree reflective power, a power that is *conscious* of being able to deceive by pretending to pretend. (1991b: 26–7, original emphases)

Derrida was sceptical (as was his wont – indeed, his reflex and his credo) as to the 'presence' of deceit within the human order, and its facilitation of the Lacanian 'subject of the signifier'. Nevertheless, I quote these passages at length because the points made here have a seminal bearing on what follows throughout this book – namely, the connection between language, identity and treachery, and the articulation or exploration of this complex connection (or set of connections) within the compromised cultural form known as the novel.

Given the situation – the politico-cultural context of decolonisation, the socio-historical genealogy of the novel form, the focus on an inherently conflicted subject – I think it would be surprising if the modern Irish novel was *not* engaged at some level or to some degree with issues of betrayal. Of course I'm not claiming that every modern Irish novel is self-consciously *about* betrayal: rather, that in so far as the modern novel emerges (during the eighteenth century) as a means to explore and to articulate human experience at a particular phase of its social, cultural, economic and political evolution, and in so far as that form is subsequently co-opted as part of a revolutionary programme in which issues of identity are of paramount importance, then it seems inevitable that treason and betrayal will emerge as recurring themes within the discourse of modern Irish fiction – within the texts themselves as well as within the critical discourses which attend those texts.

Such at least is the assumption which motivates the six analyses comprising Part II of this study: James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Liam O'Flaherty's *The Informer* (1925), Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1949), Francis Stuart's *Black List, Section H* (1971), Eugene McCabe's *Death and Nightingales* (1992) and Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007). Between them, I believe, these novels engage with some of the most potent instances of betrayal as it impinges upon the modern Irish consciousness, whether it be adultery in Joyce, touting in O'Flaherty, spying in Bowen, writing in Stuart, murder in McCabe or child abuse in Enright. Read together in this way, these books locate betrayal running like an artery through the body of modern Irish history. They also stand as testament, however, to a need – as potent and as persistent as that which it resists – to

identify betrayal and to try to counter its effects in the name of something else – betrayal's 'Other': truth.

And herein lies the irony, of course. A drive towards the truth of the Irish historical condition generated the possibility of betrayal which so many of the country's writers have identified and explored in their work. Such is the subject of this book. But truth itself persists beyond that essentially deconstructive gesture: on the other side of betrayal, as it were – betrayal's own secret affiliation. In that place, at that time, these writers are more concerned with reconstruction than deconstruction, ready to contribute to the reconstitution of Ireland as a Utopian rather than an English colony. Betrayal appears to be in essence a doctrine of despair: those whom we trusted proved untrue. But betrayal has more positive connotations also – as a defining moment of change, as that which enables insight, understanding, transformation and growth – and these resonate likewise throughout Irish history and Irish art. Within the treacherous moment lie the seeds of a hope that treachery itself will pass and that some kind of rapprochement between representation and reality – between the way things *seem* and the way things really *are* – will emerge. And just as truth lies on the far side of treachery, so Utopia lies on the far side of the various Irelands we have been made to endure since 1922.

That's the theory, anyhow.