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Gerry Smyth

‘Trust Not Appearances’: Political and Personal Betrayal in James Joyce’s

Ulysses

On 22 March 1907 James Joyce published an article entitled ‘Il Fenianismo: L’ultimo Feniano’ (translating as ‘Fenianism: The Last Fenian’) in a journal published in Trieste (where he was then living) entitled *Il Piccolo dello Sera*. Joyce wrote the article on the invitation of the journal’s editor, Roberto Prezioso, to whom he was teaching English and who he considered to be a good friend and supporter. In that article the exiled Irishman invoked one of his favourite themes: the inevitable betrayal of those who had dedicated themselves to the winning of political freedom for Ireland. In respect of the failed Fenian insurrection of 1865, Joyce asked: ‘Why this collapse of such a well-organized movement? Simply because in Ireland, just at the crucial moment, an informer appears.’¹

A few years later, Joyce accosted the same Prezioso in a Triestene square and accused him of trying to seduce Nora Barnacle, Joyce’s partner since 1904.² The Italian was devastated, especially as he believed that his extremely tentative advances had been made with the knowledge, if not the tacit encouragement, of his Irish friends. On the contrary, Joyce was mortally insulted, although [it’s not](#) clear from any account whether he was more offended with this instance of a friend’s betrayal or with the idea of himself as a cuckold. In any event, Prezioso was summarily dismissed from the Joycean circle, although the tears of humiliation he wept during the Irish writer’s onslaught left a deep imprint on all parties.

Joyce is the only Irish author who has an index entry for ‘betrayal’ in his standard biography;³ with the inevitable exception of Shakespeare, he may be the only author in

literary history to be so endowed. In fact, Richard Ellmann's exemplary study established betrayal at the core of Joyce's life and art, and ~~it's~~it is true to say that much of the critical discourse attending his work has been inflected to some degree by this idea. As the two instances cited above suggest, moreover, this engagement has been multi-focused and multi-disciplinary: political, historical, psychological, aesthetic, linguistic, racial, and so on. Just as he was the precursor of so much else that would engage subsequent critical attention, Joyce it is who establishes betrayal at the heart of modern Irish experience.

The causes of Joyce's fixation with treason and betrayal are no doubt many and various,⁴ but one key factor was certainly the fate of Charles Stewart Parnell. An austere Anglo-Irish Protestant, Parnell was deposed as leader by his colleagues in the Irish Parliamentary Party after his citation as co-respondent in a divorce case in December 1889.⁵ This blow was felt keenly in the Joyce household, where it was regarded by paterfamilias John as an outrageous act of betrayal, and where (after Parnell's death) it inspired his nine-year-old son to compose a poem entitled 'Et Tu, Healy', in which the precocious writer likened the relationship between Parnell and Tim Healy – trusted lieutenant and chief agent of the fall - to that (as portrayed in the Shakespeare play) between Julius Caesar and his friend Brutus.

It was at this point, as Ellmann writes, that 'the word betrayal became a central one in Joyce's view of his countrymen.'⁶ That sense of betrayal, however, was not only political. Parnell's great sin, after all, was to be implicated in a series of personal relationships which undermined the institution of marriage; and his reputation crumbled in the face of contemporary Irish Catholic attitudes towards adultery, which history tells us were stringent.⁷ No-one knew his own constituency better than Parnell; no-one appreciated better than he the fragility of the broad political front which had been so painstakingly established during the 1880s in the name of Home Rule and land reform. In a sense, he 'betrayed' that constituency

when he entered into an affair with Katherine O'Shea; in a sense he betrayed his own cause when he engaged in activities so repugnant to those upon whose support his causes relied. Reading backwards from Joyce, furthermore, we might say that in yet another sense Parnell may have betrayed himself if he had failed to act upon his desire for the woman he loved.

The fall of Parnell, then, instantiates a matrix of traitorous impulses and actions – some politico-cultural, some subjective and interpersonal; and [it's](#) clear, as remarked above, that this same matrix was a crucial component of Joyce's artistic vision. *Ulysses* represents the key element of that vision, and it comes as no surprise to find the shade of Parnell stalking the pages of that novel. In fact, *Ulysses* is haunted by many ghosts – personal, political, aesthetic – each of which represents a dimension of what one critic refers to as Joyce's 'pathological obsession with betrayal – an almost voluptuous desire to be betrayed.'⁸ But in order to appreciate how betrayal comes to occupy such a central position within one of the key texts of twentieth-century literature we have to follow a circuitous path through the history of the novel (in Ireland and elsewhere), taking in an infamous incident in Joyce's life along the way.

Adultery and the Novel

In his 1979 study *Adultery and the Novel* Tony Tanner examined the overlapping trajectories of the novel form, the bourgeois society in which it emerged and flourished, and the institution of marriage which operated as the key ideological mechanism whereby such societies were validated and reproduced. There is an obvious reciprocal link, Tanner suggests, between the emergence of the modern family and the emergence of a narrative form which takes the family as its principal focus. Implicitly linked with discourses of property-ownership and inheritance, marriage represents a contract whereby patrilineal law – the basis of bourgeois society – is underwritten. At the same time, that particular form of social

organization implicitly endorses narrative forms which appear to ensure its own normality — which is to say: marriage and the family. Society, marriage and the novel thus enter into an alliance of interests and expressions.

Tanner discovers the roots of the adulterous novel in Rousseau's *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), and in Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809). The exemplary articulation, however, remains Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856). In Emma Bovary's tortured, self-delusional emotional career, in her oscillation between states of virtuous marriage and banal adultery, Tanner discerns the primary ideological motor of the nineteenth-century novel. The figure of the adulterous woman, whose desires outstrip the limitations of bourgeois marriage and who is forced to pay with her life for succumbing to those desires, was to be revisited in novels such as *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) and *Anna Karenina* (1878). And it was this tradition, and in particular the concept of a human desire that was at odds with the social disposition of desire (which is to say, marriage), that was to prove influential upon James Joyce when he came to imagine his own fictional world.⁹

A crucial problem emerges in relation to this correspondence, however. The institution of marriage operates with reference to *repeated* instances of the *same* contract: a particular couple is supposed to rehearse the same emotional commitment again and again until death.¹⁰ The novel, however, depends upon conflict and disruption to drive the narrative forward; and much of the time, conflict and disruption take the form of an assault upon the most obvious, and at the same time the most available, expression of bourgeois value: marriage. Furthermore, while the novel apparently works to obviate this threat, its evocation in fact undermines the ideology of marriage as an expression of 'normal' social relations. As Tanner writes:

Apparently complicit with the sanctity of the family, the centrality of marriage, and the authority of the Father, the novel has, in fact, in many cases harboured and deviously celebrated quite contrary feelings. Very often the novel writes of contracts but dreams of transgressions, and in reading it, the dream tends to emerge more powerfully.¹¹

The history of the novel in the nineteenth century alerts us to the absolute centrality of adultery as a constitutional element of the genre.¹² To revisit the metaphor introduced above in relation to Parnell and *Ulysses*, we might say that adultery ‘haunts’ the nineteenth-century novel, although it does so in different ways and to different degrees in the various national traditions. Although English fiction after Richardson is obsessed with the role of marriage in securing patrilineal law, for example, adultery *per se* does not feature particularly strongly. The *idea* and the *possibility* are broached constantly: in the troubled relationships between Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester, Becky Sharpe and George Osborne, Dorothea Casaubon and Will Ladislav, Bathsheba Everdene and William Boldwood, and so on. Despite this, the English novel by and large tends to steer clear of explicit instances of adultery, preferring to develop elaborate, frequently melodramatic, plot devices in order to avoid the final sexual liaison that would constitute an act of legal adultery. [It is](#) as if the English novel is content to approach the gates of adultery, but not to enter therein.

Late nineteenth-century Irish realist fiction (which most commentators consider to be the principal local reference point for Joyce’s work) is likewise concerned with the legal and moral status of marriage, but for different reasons and to different ends.¹³ In his book *Catholic Fiction and Social Reality in Ireland, 1873–1922* (1997), James H. Murphy discusses the ‘devotional revolution’ which overlapped with Joyce’s early life in Ireland, and

the impact such a phenomenon may have had upon contemporary fiction. Whatever its causes, Murphy avers, the devotional revolution had the effect of placing Catholicism and the family at the centre of Irish cultural experience. Essentially an expression of the lower middle class from which Joyce emerged, this emphasis was opposed to two contemporary impulses: one – that of a Protestant ascendancy class – which sought comfort for its increasing economic and political marginalization through the imagination of an heroic Celtic history; and another – that of a Catholic intelligentsia – which, finding itself at odds with the mores of the Catholic centre, ‘valued self-realization and the liberty of the individual.’¹⁴

The emphasis on the family amongst that section of the community which was moving towards hegemony worked to fetishize the institution of marriage, and to demonize those practices which undermined it: divorce and adultery. In *Irish Novels 1890–1940*, John Wilson Foster points out that the first of these – was simply too far off the Irish radar to be much of a problem.¹⁵ The bulk of contemporary Catholic opprobrium, therefore, was reserved for practices which appeared in some form or other to undermine marriage and family – the cornerstones of national morality. Wilson Foster notes the ‘hostility to adultery or even second marriages contracted out of true love’¹⁶ characteristic of life in Joyce’s Irish youth; but he notes also those many novelists – Catholic *and* Protestant, Irish resident *and* exiled – who attempted to broach a range of issues which implicitly questioned the moral economy of contemporary Ireland: unhappy marriage, unfulfilled desire, unrealized ambition.

Certainly, Joyce’s work may be approached in terms of these local issues and debates. Murphy, for example, suggests that ‘the confrontation between Simon Dedalus and Casey, on the one hand, and Mrs Riordan or Dante, on the other, over the fall of Parnell’ (in the opening chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) represents the *locus classicus* for the contemporary intellectual’s rejection of Catholic Ireland.¹⁷ And Wilson Foster notes that

[a] major preoccupation of Joyce is the nature of the Blooms' marriage, and although its secret and rich infidelities of thought and deed make it an unusual union among the legion of fictional marriages in the 1890-1922 period, *Ulysses* can nevertheless be added, in that respect, to the long list of marriage novels of the time.¹⁸

This may be so: at the same time, it's [sit is](#) clear that Joyce looked neither to Ireland nor to England for his primary literary references, but to Paris, Rome, Moscow, and Oslo. And there he found in abundance a willingness to engage with the clash between protean human desire and the social conventions (including marriage) that society has evolved to organize and restrict desire.

Joyce's artistic ambitions, as well as his moral vision, were profoundly influenced by the contemporary writer he most admired: Henrik Ibsen. In plays such as *Ghosts* (1881), *Hedda Gabler* (1890) and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), Ibsen dramatized, with maturing insight and subtlety, the confrontation between individual desire and social convention, especially as it pertained to established gender relations. Joyce utilized these influences in his one surviving play, *Exiles* (1918); but he was also to carry Ibsen's influence into his own favoured medium – narrative fiction – and to incorporate it alongside the novel's inheritance as a genre whose very existence depended to a defining extent on the institution of marriage and, more pointedly, on the implications of threatening or undermining that institution.

There was, however, one more key factor waiting to be brought to bear: intense sexual jealousy.

Intrigue in Dublin, July / August 1909

On 29 July 1909 Joyce stepped off a train at Westland Row Station in Dublin. With him was his son Giorgio, who had just celebrated his fourth birthday, and there to meet them was

Joyce's father and all his sisters. The exile had returned to the city of his youth in order to attend to issues arising from the publication of *Dubliners*, to inquire into the possibility of a job, and to introduce Giorgio to his relations in Dublin and Galway. It was to be a memorable trip.

Joyce had been living in Trieste with his partner Nora Barnacle since March 1905; they had been joined there by Joyce's brother, Stanislaus, in October of that year. The Joyces had two children whilst living in Trieste: Giorgio (26 July 1905) and Lucia (25 July 1907). Besides writing occasional articles for influential friends such as Roberto Prezioso, Joyce eked out a living teaching English at the Berlitz School and taking private students. During this time he gave himself over with alacrity to the role of exiled artist. As Ellmann and Maddox reveal in their respective biographies, however, much of Joyce's time during the early years in Trieste was taken up with Nora Barnacle and with the issues that her presence posed: the nature of domestic life and, more pressingly, the importance of gender and sex in human experience.

These concerns were to react in spectacular fashion with Joyce's ultra-suspicious nature when he returned 'home' for the first time in nearly five years. Stanislaus was supposed to make the trip, but Joyce – perhaps feeling the need to face some of his demons – pulled rank and set off with his son. As Ellmann writes:

It was time for Joyce to go to Jerusalem, which for him was Dublin. What had happened to his own betrayers? What new crisis could be brought about by his return to the scene of their betrayals? ... The next six weeks were to provide him with material central to two books, though he did not anticipate that the acquisition would be so painful. He plunged deeper than ever before into the black pool of Dublin.¹⁹

The defining events of that trip are well-known. Joyce met Oliver St. John Gogarty, but refused to be drawn into nostalgic bonhomie, or to pretend that the old offences (whatever they were) had been forgiven or forgotten. With everyone from the old life, in fact – the Sheehy-Skeffingtons, AE, John Eglinton, Con Curran – he was cool and condescending. Dublin had betrayed him, and everyone who lived there was implicated to a greater or lesser extent in that betrayal; Nora had saved him, and he walked the streets of Dublin safe in the knowledge that her total, committed love afforded him a license to be as ‘honest’ as he wished in respect of his former acquaintances.

This was the context in which Joyce was psychologically mugged by Vincent Cosgrave at some point on August 6. The latter had been a member of Joyce’s university circle, known for his quick wit and dissipated habits. Joyce portrayed him as the character Vincent Lynch in both *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*, and had one grievance against him: Cosgrave had declined to intervene when Joyce was beaten up in St. Stephen’s Green in June 1904 (shortly after his first meeting with Barnacle) by the offended escort of a woman he had addressed.²⁰ Back in Dublin after five years abroad, Joyce was willing to overlook this minor betrayal, and happily spent time with Cosgrave during the first week of his sojourn. On this occasion, however, the latter claimed that he and Barnacle had ~~spent time ‘known’ with~~ each other after 10 June 1904 – *after*, that is, her first meeting with Joyce. On those evenings when she said that she could not see Joyce because of work commitments, Cosgrave declared, she had in fact been walking out with him, and they, too, had experienced a degree of intimacy.²¹

Joyce believed Cosgrave in the first instance, and rushed home to write two impassioned letters to Barnacle in Trieste, in the first of which – amidst protestations of sorrow, mortification, bitterness, and despair – he accused her of disloyalty. After a few hours of reflection he wrote a second letter questioning her as to Giorgio’s paternity, whilst repeating the accusation of deception.²² The next day he shared his anguish with another old

university friend – J.F. Byrne (the Cranly of *Stephen Hero* and *Portrait*) – who managed to convince Joyce that Cosgrave’s claim was ‘a blasted lie’,²³ inspired by jealousy, possibly part of a plan (and possibly co-hatched with Gogarty) to revenge himself on a former friend for various perceived offences. As Ellmann points out, the inference of conspiracy appealed to Joyce because the presence of betrayal, while retained, was removed from his common-law wife – that person in whom he had invested all his trust – and transferred instead to individuals whom he suspected to be, if not already possessed of, then certainly capable of, ill will towards himself.²⁴

Joyce’s almost immediate invocation of the issue of his son’s status is a classic reflex, and accords with all that was noted above regarding the absolute centrality of paternity in nineteenth-century fiction. Joyce here was a victim of the legal truism – noted by Freud in a short essay entitled ‘Family Romances’ (published coincidentally in 1909) that *pater semper incertus est* (the identity of a child’s father is always in question) while the mother is *certissima*.²⁵ More fundamentally, the concern with paternity, as Mark Patrick Hederman has pointed out, interfaced significantly with the issue of Joyce’s relationship with his own parents, with his interest in Thomist aesthetics, and with his theories relating to the ‘family romance’ underpinning the work of William Shakespeare – all of which were to feature strongly in *Ulysses*.²⁶

If [it’s not](#) straightforward enough to understand Joyce’s grateful acceptance of Byrne’s interpretation, [it’s not](#) less easy to understand why the former’s chief biographer accepted that explanation so readily and so consistently. As Maddox points out:

It is clear that Byrne reassured Joyce on the basis of speculation rather than information. Byrne did not know that Cosgrave’s story was true or not; he himself had never even met Oliver Gogarty. His words to Joyce were emotional first aid, spoken

to calm a friend as a parent might offer a child a less painful explanation for an imagined result.²⁷

She goes on to point out that Byrne revised his story in later life (in a letter written to Ellmann in 1957), to the effect that Cosgrave probably did enjoy ‘carnal knowledge of Nora *before* he introduced Joyce to her – *not* afterwards.’²⁸ Joyce’s horror, after all, was occasioned by the possibility that Nora was not a virgin when the couple first had sex, *but also* by the inference that Nora had been seeing another man *during* the period when he was in the process of committing himself emotionally and sexually to her. In Joyce’s mind, it would appear, the latter was at least as important a source of betrayal as the former. Maddox concludes: ‘The chances are high that there was some truth in the tale Cosgrave poured into Joyce’s ear ... and that Joyce fashioned them into the story that he craved to hear.’²⁹

Of course [it’s not possible](#) to know the truth of Cosgrave’s claims; that he was acquainted with Barnacle, and that he featured in some of the earliest letters between her and Joyce, is certain.³⁰ In the absence of proof one way or the other, the emphasis must fall on Joyce’s *reaction* to what he believed happened, rather than on speculation about what *really did* happen. And from that perspective, [it’s clear](#) that the events of early August 1909 had a profound effect on him, both emotionally and artistically. Amongst other things, the novel Joyce spent the next decade writing represents an experiment in understanding the one (emotional response) in terms of the other (artistic response).

Joyce’s experience, as represented in his letters and imaginative writing, points to the fact that having once felt the power of personal betrayal (whether actual or imagined), he became fascinated by it. [It’s probably](#) not going too far to say that he became addicted to betrayal, or at least to the emotional charge associated with it. As Maddox puts it: ‘He had a need to feel deceived ... for which world literature is the richer.’³¹ This manifested itself in

the first instance in his domestic life, as soon after his return to Trieste in 1909 Joyce began to encourage Barnacle to flirt with attractive men such as Roberto Prezioso. Maddox sees this as a possible indication of troilism – ‘a psychological vagary ... in which a homosexual desire for someone is expressed in sharing, or dreaming of sharing, a partner.’³² There was, moreover, a precedent from an earlier stage in the relationship: on 26 August 1904, the night before he famously sang on the same bill as John McCormack, Joyce sent a short letter to his new girlfriend:

My dear Nora. I hope you will accept these [tickets]. Mr Cosgrave will meet you at 7.30 tomorrow (Saturday) evening ... What a long time since I have seen you!³³

At one level, this is merely an innocent moment snatched from the everyday activities of a group of busy young people. At another level, and regarded in the light of his subsequent obsessions, we observe Joyce engineering a situation in which his friend and girlfriend can be together in his absence. The reference in the closing sentence to the deferment of the ‘real’ relationship is particularly interesting: mentioned in such close proximity to each other (in a very short letter), [it’sit is](#) as if Joyce was making a subconscious connection between Cosgrave’s presence and Barnacle’s unavailability.

The suggestion of troilism is interesting (Joyce was aware of the complex), and it may indeed be possible to link Cosgrave and Prezioso (and Robert Hand) in this regard. From the present perspective, [it’sit is](#) more useful to regard Joyce’s behaviour after August 1909 as a symptom of his growing addiction to the intense emotional energies associated with betrayal. The idea of cuckoldry afforded Joyce an opportunity to indulge a range of fantasies relating to Barnacle’s emotional and physical infidelity; while Prezioso’s tentative advances earned

him a verbal assault from Joyce playing the dual role of dishonoured husband and betrayed friend.

Joyce's developing obsession with personal betrayal may be tracked through texts such as *'The Dead'* and *Exiles*; indeed, if one counts the juvenile essay *'Trust Not Appearances'*, written during his time at Belvedere College, it may be said to be present from the ostensible beginning of his career.³⁴ Although this short piece represents nothing more than an entirely conventional meditation on the discrepancy between outward appearance and underlying reality, regarded from the perspective of its author's subsequent career it assumes a compelling resonance. For it was precisely the relationship between appearance and reality that was to exercise Joyce so much in *Ulysses*; and it was the search for a style and a technique with which to render that inscrutable relationship that was to occupy the remainder of his career. Particularly interesting is the youthful author's use of the word *'traitor'*:

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Still however, there is a *'something'* that tells us the character of man. It is the eye. The only traitor that even the sternest will of a fiendish villain [sic] cannot overcome. It is the eye that reveals to man the guilt or innocence, the vices or the virtues of the soul. This is the only exception to the proverb *'Trust not appearances.'*³⁵

In this context, Leopold Bloom's response to the fact of his wife's infidelity represents in some respect Joyce's artistic idealisation of his own conflicted attitude towards personal and national betrayal. In the fictional world created by Joyce, at some time after 4.00pm on 16 June 1904, Molly Bloom has sex with Blazes Boylan in the bedroom of a small house in north inner-city Dublin. Despite his attempt to *'[think] no more about that'*,³⁶ her husband is aware of this: thus, whereas the author Joyce the author lived only in the shadow of Barnacle's potential infidelity, the character Leopold Bloom has to face up to the reality of

being a cuckold. This ‘reality’, moreover, is ‘shadowed’ throughout the day by other instances of betrayal, variously encountered in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ, the Citizen, the Croppy Boy, Stephen Dedalus, Robert Emmet, Henry Flower, Anne Hathaway, Judas Iscariot, Lily Langtry, Vincent Lynch, Buck Mulligan, Kitty O’Shea, Charles Stewart Parnell, William Shakespeare, and a host of other characters. As Stephen Brown writes: ‘Joyce gathered and carefully incorporated into his writings the minutiae of adulterous intrigue.’³⁷

Beyond this again, there is a sense in which Joyce’s entire modernist enterprise engages with a discourse of betrayal in respect of the national cultural history within which he was operating. That betrayal is embedded in *Ulysses* at a deep structural-linguistic level, and [it’s sit is](#) to that level that I wish finally to turn.

Ulysses

In so far as [it’s sit is](#) an extended anecdote relating to marital infidelity amongst the *petit bourgeoisie*, then, *Ulysses* may readily be located within the trajectory of nineteenth-century European fiction.³⁸ In as much as it universalizes, internalizes, and ironizes the emotional energies associated with that act of infidelity, however, Joyce’s novel is very much a modernist rejoinder to, or development of, that tradition. Let’s observe that development in action.

The following passage appears in the twelfth chapter of *Ulysses*, the one entitled ‘Cyclops’ in all schemata:

- The strangers, says the citizen. Our own fault. We let them come in. We brought them. The adulteress and her paramour brought the Saxon robbers here.
- Decree *nisi*, says J.J.³⁹

This snatch of conversation takes place in a pub on the north bank of the Liffey soon after 5.00 pm.⁴⁰ A number of characters featured throughout the book are present, and at least three conversations are taking place simultaneously: Leopold Bloom is talking to Joe Hynes about an advertisement; the failed lawyer J.J. O'Molloy is discussing a recent case with Hynes, Ned Lambert and Alf Bergin; and the citizen is discoursing to the room in general on his perennial topic – perfidious Albion.

‘The adulteress and her paramour’ refers to an infamous episode in Irish history, when in the year 1152 Diarmait Mac Murchada, King of Leinster, abducted Derbforgaill, the wife of a rival, Tigernán Ua Ruairc, king of Bréifne. After he was deposed (in 1166), Mac Murchada sought help from the king of England, Henry II, in order to recover his kingdom, thus supposedly initiating British involvement in Irish affairs. The first incursions were actually led by a French-speaking Norman baron based in Wales named Richard fitz Gilbert (Strongbow); but the citizen is not about to let such historical details get in the way of his extended indictment of ‘the Saxon robbers’.

Although separated by 750 years of Irish history, the parallel between the two cases is clear, and intended to be so: Blazes Boylan plays the part of Mac Murchada the aggressive interloper, while Bloom and Molly reprise the roles of Ua Ruairc the cuckolded husband and Derbforgaill his ‘dishonoured wife’.⁴¹ Knowingly or not, the citizen emphasizes the symbiotic connection between political treason and personal betrayal which is one of the central themes of *Ulysses*. Modern Irish history begins, in this sense, with a series of betrayals, and all subsequent acts and personages are tainted by this original sin.

At this point, J.J. O'Molloy interjects a legal phrase: ‘Decree *nisi*’. This may be part of a conversation relating to ‘that Canada swindle case’ which he had been conducting with Lambert, Bergin and Hynes, before the latter gets diverted by Bloom.⁴² (The fact that it is a

swindle case – that is, concerning deceit and deception – and that the judge who tried it is susceptible to a fabricated hard-luck story, is not coincidental.) Alternatively, O’Molloy could be making an ironic comment on the Mac Murchada / Derbforgaill / Ua Ruairc case. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 established the pattern whereby a decree *nisi* could be granted once a court was satisfied that the grounds for divorce had been proved, although remarriage was not possible until after the granting of a decree absolute, six months later. O’Molloy may or may not have been aware of medieval Ireland’s complex and sophisticated attitude towards divorce.⁴³ If regarded as a response to the citizen rather than to an uncited comment from Bergin or Hynes, O’Molloy’s interpolation is ironic in so far as it engages distant historical events and persons in terms of contemporary legal discourse. As such, it could be regarded as yet another instance of the parodic intertextuality (including inflated legalese) adopted by Joyce as the prevailing style of ‘Cyclops’.

O’Molloy is commonly known by the initials of his Christian names – J.J. – a common practice in Ireland. We note, however, that these initials replicate those of the author of the novel in which this character appears: James Joyce. How would it be if [we](#) regarded this passage as ‘James Joyce’ weighing in with a comment (‘Decree *nisi*’) relating to the provisional nature of any judgement? How would it be if we refused to regard ‘says’ as typical of the local narrator’s Dublin idiom, but as a usage of the continuous present tense which represents the author’s gloss on his own work? In this interpretation, ‘– Decree *nisi*, says J.J.’ – would translate as something like: ‘In this novel James Joyce insists upon the provisional nature of all attempts to articulate meaning’.⁴⁴

Now, [it’sit is](#) clear enough that ‘J.J.’ refers to the fictional character with whom the reader is already familiar: first introduced in ‘Aeolus’,⁴⁵ he has been present for much of this scene, he is wont to offer legalistic pronouncements, and the narrator – despite ‘his customary scorn’⁴⁶ – refers to him throughout as ‘J.J.’. And yet the name constitutes enough of a

coincidence to warrant consideration, however brief or dismissive; for even if no other reader has ever remarked it, the fact that I did means that the possibility – however eccentric, however implausible – was always there: a secret lying dormant in the text waiting to be revealed.

The point is not that it *is* or *is not* J.J. O'Molloy, or that it *is* or *is not* James Joyce, who 'really' speaks. Rather, it is that, in a chapter emphasising rhetoric and perspective, this is another means whereby the text signals to the reader the fact that language possesses signifying potential above and beyond that intended by the language-using subject, whether character or author. Language possesses secrets, in other words, and this fact implicates all language users (everyone, in other words) in a constant process of concealment and revelation. Nobody can say just one thing, for the medium through which they might attempt to articulate 'just one thing' is itself dialogic – always already pregnant with other potential meanings.

This insight is of central significance to Joyce's intentions here and throughout *Ulysses*. David Lloyd has discussed the context within which this particular novel was conceived and written, pointing out that 'not only the anti-representational tendency in Irish literature but also the hybrid quality of popular forms constantly exceed the monologic desire of cultural nationalism, a desire which centres on the lack of an Irish epic'.⁴⁷ Because 'the principal organizing metaphor of Irish nationalism is that of a proper paternity, of restoring the lineage of the fathers in order to repossess the motherland',⁴⁸ Joyce's relentless exploration of adultery in *Ulysses* represents a scandalous threat to contemporary nationalist discourse. At a more fundamental level, however, his deployment of an 'adulterated' narrative style flies in the face of nationalism's anxious search for authentic expression.⁴⁹ This is because of the multiplicity of available voices which the novel makes available, and

the ease with which they can be ‘quoted’. With direct reference to the passage in question, Lloyd continues:

For the nationalist citizen, the identity of the race is adulterated by ‘la belle infidèle’ and, as in the old expression, the restoration of that identity by translation (*traditore*) is haunted by the anxiety of betrayal (*traduttore*). This chapter, that in *Ulysses* in which issues of nationalist politics and culture are played out most intensely and in which the various elements of Irish culture are most thoroughly deployed, circulates not only thematically but also stylistically around adulteration as the constitutive anxiety of nationalism. For while the citizen is militant against the hybridization of Irish culture, the chapter itself dramatizes adulteration as the condition of colonial Ireland at virtually every level.⁵⁰

This, then, brings us to the heart of Joyce’s lifelong obsession with political and personal betrayal. The reciprocal relations between these two apparently ineluctable forces infused his imagination and his work from early life. Modern Irish history represented a search for an authentic voice in which a ‘proper paternity’ could be affirmed; such a search, however, was always haunted by the possibility of deception and failure – the mocking alliance of the bastard and the betrayer. In his fear at succumbing to the inevitability of betrayal, Joyce himself adopted the role of traitor, deploying his mastery of language to expose the machinations of nationalist rhetoric. In this respect we might say that in relation to contemporary Irish cultural nationalism, Joyce *was* himself the traitor that he so feared; or, to deploy another figure, he was the legitimate son who needed to cast aspersions upon his own legal status. And yet, it was always in the name of *another* Ireland, a *better* Ireland, that Joyce undertook his deconstructive work.

This paradox extended to his personal relationship with Nora Barnacle, and to his general understanding (as represented in his writing) of the politics of desire. Joyce's search for a soul mate – one in whom he could trust implicitly – led him to Barnacle and to a difficult, unconventional life across Europe. That trust was temporarily shattered in August 1909 when he was led to believe that she had deceived him, and was continuing to do so. And yet, [there is that](#) in his subsequent letters and behaviour which reveals his fascination with the idea of Barnacle and he betraying each other in some manner or degree. In this, Joyce was perhaps acting hysterically, seeking to pre-empt a pattern his unconscious had convinced him was both inevitable and universal. In any event, revisited and reworked throughout his *oeuvre*, this fascination is played out most visibly in the pages of *Ulysses*, where Leopold and Molly Bloom work through the dynamics of interpersonal fidelity and betrayal, from casual white lies (blackberry juice on a bed sheet as 'proof' of *virgo intacta*, for example) to the most resonant cultural echoes (*Othello*, *Hamlet*, Parnell, Derbforgaill, etc.).

Comment [JB1]: How about: 'And yet, his subsequent letters and behaviour reveal an increasing fascination with the idea of Barnacle and Joyce betraying each other in some manner or degree.'

Molly Bloom's affair with Blazes Boylan represents an attempt to empower herself in one of the few ways that would have been available to her. It implicates this lower middle-class Dublin housewife in a network of resistance to what Timothy P. Foley describes as 'bourgeois society's official self-knowledge' – that the late nineteenth-century Irish woman was the exemplar of 'self-abnegation and self-sacrifice'.⁵¹ At the same time, it affords Molly an opportunity to rewrite what sociologist Annette Lawson, in her book *Adultery: An Analysis of Love and Betrayal* entitles 'The Myth of Me' – as a pro-active, attractive sexual agent.⁵² [Her Molly's](#) husband, meanwhile, displays levels of 'tolerance and emotional equilibrium' in respect of his partner's infidelity that were signally absent in his creator.⁵³ *Ulysses* is ideological in many ways, but none more so than its depiction of the central male character's resigned attitude towards the transference of the central female character's sexual attentions to another. An ordinary Dublin man, Bloom cannot afford the luxury of tears and

grand gestures; given the times, given his position, his age, his background and his temper, he does what he has to do. It may be that Bloom's attitude represents Joyce's response to the unapproachable and ultimately insoluble mystery of Nora Barnacle's activities in the late summer of 1904.

As stylistic adulteration is to nationalist discourse, so adultery is to marital fidelity; each inheres within the other, each is a function of the other's very possibility. Thus Joyce sets the agenda for the Irish novel in the coming century – an artistic practice in which questions of political and personal betrayal (and the relations between these) will feature seminally.

NOTES

1. James Joyce, *Occasional, Critical and Political Writings*, ed. by Kevin Barry (Oxford: Oxford World's Classic, 2000), pp.138-41 (p.139).
2. The precise date is uncertain: in *Nora: A Biography of Nora Joyce* (London: Hamilton, 1988, p.157), Brenda Maddox places it after September 1913, when Prezioso was still in friendly contact with the Joyce household, whereas in *James Joyce* (1959; New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp.316-17), Richard Ellmann seems to have it at least one, possibly two years earlier.
3. Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p.819.
4. Joyce's attitudes towards marriage and personal betrayal were naturally enough influenced by prevailing discourses of gender, sex and sexuality, which was characterized by its 'hidden' ubiquity and (in an Irish context) the Catholic Church's insistent idealization of the patriarchal family. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* (New York: Vintage, 1980), and Tom Inglis, *Lessons in Irish Sexuality* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998).

5. In a speech in Cincinnati on 18 April 1891, Parnell's mother, Delia, condemned those who had 'betrayed Parnell with a kiss' (quoted in Roy Foster, *Charles Stewart Parnell: The Man and His Family* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1976), p.237). The Judas motif is prevalent throughout Joyce's oeuvre.

6. Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p.32.

7. See Timothy P. Foley, 'Public Sphere and Domestic Circle: Gender and Political Economy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland' in *Gender Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century Ireland: Public and Private Spheres*, eds. by Margaret Kelleher and James H. Murphy (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1997), pp.21-35; and Inglis, pp.23-49.

8. Ulick O'Connor, 'Joyce and Gogarty – Royal and Ancient: Two Hangers-On' in *James Joyce: The Artist and the Labyrinth*, ed. by Augustine Martin (London: Ryan, 1990), pp.333-53 (p.343).

9. Tanner considered Joyce (along with D.H. Lawrence) to represent the end of a bourgeois 'contractual' aesthetic, which includes not only the marriage contract which is at the heart of the nineteenth-century novel, but the implicit contract that obtains between writer and reader. For a more wide-ranging consideration of these issues see Judith Armstrong, *The Novel of Adultery* (London: Macmillan, 1976).

10. Tanner writes: 'One of the basic problems about marriage is that its security depends upon repetition ... and that repetition and habit diminish the feelings, particularly the erotic intensity, upon which the marriage was founded. Hence, and only apparently paradoxically, marriage can breed the need for 'irregularité', 'des explosions capriceuses,' 'désordre et l'infraction' (*Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1979), p.375). It was the acceptance of the relationship between security and *irregularité* that led the young Stephen Dedalus to disdain the marriage vow. See James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, ed. by Theodore Spencer (1944; Jonathan Cape, 1969), p.206.

11. Tanner, p.368.

12. In fact, the pattern may be much older: ‘Adultery as a phenomenon is in evidence in literature from the earliest times, as in Homer (and indeed we might suggest that it is the unstable triangularity of adultery, rather than the static symmetry of marriage, that is the generative form of Western literature as we know it)’ (Tanner, p.12).

13. In an interesting chapter in his book *Terror and Irish Modernism: The Gothic Tradition from Burke to Beckett* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009), Jim Hansen considers the extent to which *Ulysses* may be approached as a gothic text. Such considerations are beyond the scope of this essay.

14. James H. Murphy, *Catholic Fiction and Social Reality in Ireland, 1873–1922* (London: Greenwood Press, 1997), p.149.

15. Wilson Foster writes: ‘The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 ... had not been extended to Ireland, nor was it protested much that this was wrong. Between 1857 and 1910, there were only thirty-nine divorces granted to Irish residents, no doubt because anyone there seeking a divorce had to submit a private bill to parliament and because the costs involved in doing so exceeded £500 in 1910’ (*Irish Novels, 1890–1940: New Bearings in Culture and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p.63). On Joyce’s use of British divorce-court journalism, especially in ‘Eumaeus’, see Barbara Leckie, ‘The Simple Case of Adultery’ [in](#) *The James Joyce Quarterly*, 40.4 (2003), 729-52.

16. Wilson Foster, p.267.

17. Murphy, p.145.

18. Wilson Foster, p.495.

19. Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p.275.

20. This incident would be revisited in *Ulysses* (1922) when an inebriated Stephen Dedalus is threatened by two British soldiers outside a brothel in Nighttown. As his companion Lynch

withdraws Stephen says: ‘Exit Judas. Et laqueo se suspendit’ (*Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1993), p.557). The Latin translates as: ‘Judas left. And went and hanged himself’. The comparison took on a disturbing resonance when in 1926 Vincent Cosgrave committed suicide, not by hanging, but by apparently throwing himself from London Bridge.

21. Joyce was suspicious and possessive from an early point in the relationship. In a letter from late July, Joyce wrote: ‘Where will you be on Saturday night, Sunday night, Monday night, that I can’t see you?’ Quoted in Richard Ellmann (ed.), *Letters of James Joyce, Vol. II* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p.44.

22. In the first he wrote: ‘I cannot call you any dear name because tonight I have learnt that the only being I believed in was not loyal to me’. In the second: ‘If I could forget my books and my children and forget that the girl I loved was false to me and remember her only as I saw her with the eyes of my boyish love I would go out of life content’ (Ellmann, *Letters of James Joyce*, pp.232-3).

23. Ellmann, *Letters of James Joyce*, p.235.

24. Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p.281.

25. Sigmund Freud, ‘Family Romances’ (1909), reproduced in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1981), pp.217-25 (p.224). Paternal uncertainty is a ‘truism’ which the discovery of DNA has rendered increasingly obsolete.

26. Mark Patrick Hederman, ‘The “Mind” of Joyce: From Paternalism to Paternity’, in *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions*, ed. by Richard Kearney (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985), pp.244-66.

27. Maddox, p.125.

28. Maddox, p.128, original emphases.

29. Maddox , p.127. In his memoir of his brother's early life in Dublin, Stanislaus Joyce also avers that Byrne was 'correct' and that Cosgrave lied, although he offers no evidence either way. See *My Brother's Keeper: James Joyce's Early Years* (1958: Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003), p.212.

30. See the letters from Joyce to Barnacle on 26 August, 12 September, and 29 September in Ellmann, *Letters of James Joyce*, pp.48, 52, and 57. Ellmann suggests that Cosgrave was 'humiliated' when he failed to lure Barnacle away from Joyce (*James Joyce*, p.160).

31. Maddox, p.129.

32. Maddox, p.156.

33. Ellmann, *Letters of James Joyce*, p.48.

34. Joyce attended Bevedere College between 1893 and 1898. There is no precise date attached to this essay, although Ellmann (*James Joyce*, pp.36-7) seems to suggest that it probably predates 1897 when Joyce won the first of two consecutive prizes for best English composition in the national Intermediate Examinations.

35. Joyce, 'Trust Not Appearances' in *Occasional, Critical and Political Writings*, 3 (p.3).

The concept of 'the traitor's eye' has resonances in contemporary discourses focused on sincerity and revelation, such as those advanced by Oscar Wilde in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Richard Ellmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 290-434, and Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961).

36. Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.147.

37. Brown, p.39.

38. 'By the time that Joyce was writing *Ulysses*,' Barbara Leckie (2003, p.729) writes, 'the representation of adultery no longer carried the same transgressive charge that had marked its

reception throughout the nineteenth century, but it nevertheless remained inflected by this history.’

39. Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.310.

40. The setting is highly significant; as sociologist Tom Inglis writes: ‘The ritual sublimation of desire through drinking was also a means of males bonding and developing and maintaining their emotional independence from women, even in marriage. The pub became a sanctuary for men, a place where they could displace their sexual frustration through a repetitive, compulsive pattern of drinking’ (p.320).

41. Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.308. Boylan is already associated with treachery, as earlier in the chapter the citizen refers to him as the ‘traitor’s son’ on account of his father selling horses to the British Army during the Boer War (p.305).

42. Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.308.

43. In *Celtic Women: Women in Celtic Society and Literature* (London: Constable, 1995), Peter Berresford Ellis writes: ‘In the area of [modern] women’s rights, much of the long struggle is only to regain what was once enjoyed by Celtic women fifteen hundred years ago ... they could divorce and, if they were deserted, molested or maltreated, they had the right to claim considerable damages’ (pp.15, 18).

44. Brown writes: ‘Matrimonial anomalies, in his reading interests and worked into the detail of the books, provided Joyce with a means of sustaining his sense of the inadequacy of conventional marriage. To take such delight in anomaly, though, Joyce needed to have an especially accurate sense of the law itself, and of his interest therein much evidence remains’; and further: ‘Marriage law was a strongly present interest in the composition of *Ulysses* from the first idea of a story about a Dublin cuckold, which occurred to Joyce in 1906’ (1985, pp.40-1, 43-4).

45. Joyce, *Ulysses*, pp.120-1.

46. Harry Blamires, *The Bloomsday Book: A Guide Through Ulysses* (London: Methuen, 1966), p.130.
47. David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), p.89.
48. Lloyd, p.105.
49. Making a related point, Barbara Leckie discusses how Bloom's attempt to describe a 'simple case of adultery' in 'Eumaeus' 'is repeatedly frustrated, and the fantasy of the transparent window through which one sees the "awful truth" of adultery is exploded' (p.736).
50. Lloyd, p.106.
51. Foley, p.35.
52. Annette Lawson, *Adultery: An Analysis of Love and Betrayal* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p.25ff.
53. Brown, p.19.