

Literature's Loyalty to Betrayal

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Keywords

**betrayal; identity;
communication;
evil; conflict;
cognitive
dissonance.**

This idiosyncratically titled paper is motivated by an attempt to answer the unexpectedly difficult question about betrayal as a fundamental theme or motif in literature—literature in general, from the first known such work, *Gilgamesh*, through Greek and Roman mythology, fairy tales and folk tales, medieval romances, Dante, Cervantes and Shakespeare, to Goethe, Tolstoy and Joyce, to Anne Sexton and Philip Levine. Our tentative answers: betrayal may represent the fundamental human conflict, as it undermines two of man's essential claims to existence—identity and communication; evil is more powerful than good; betrayal is a prominent form of cognitive dissonance; and all of these are “illustrated” in five betrayal poems by William Stafford, Anthony Hecht, Frank O'Hara, Anne Sexton, and Philip Levine.

Betrayal seeps through literature like a dark stain...
(Karin Altenberg)

Altenberg's statement is chosen as an epigraph here both because of its relevance to the topic and because “seeps” and “dark stain” are not—as our text will most likely prove—quite appropriate. That betrayal and/or treason is part of the human condition can be sustained with another quote: “Throughout recorded human history, treachery and betrayal have been considered among the very worst offences people could commit against their kith and kin” (Julie Fitness); while the “dark stain” part may be argued for through the authority of Malcolm X/Little (Alex Haley—“the thing that is worse than death is betrayal... I could conceive of death, but I could not conceive of betrayal”).

Consequently, any type of however sketchy thematic approach to literature in general would show *betrayal* and its synonyms or associated concepts (treason, treachery, deceit, dishonesty, duplicity, perfidy, infidelity, crime, trickery, cheat, hypocrisy, cunning, backstabbing, conspiracy, disloyalty..., and some thirty or forty others on the *Thesaurus* scale of connotations between betrayal and treason) as an incomparably more frequent topic or psychological motivation than any of its positive antonyms—trust, loyalty, honesty, truthfulness, devotion, fidelity, innocence, friendship... and the rest.

Except for such writings as Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*, Philip Roth's *Deception*, Helen Dunmore's *The Betrayal* or Danielle Steel's *Betrayal*—and others, maybe, which betray their subject from the very title—here is our next-to-impossible, doomed-to-failure attempt at illustrating this unusually attractive theme in world literature, with more examples from the Anglo-American tradition.

Betrayal seems to have been there from the very beginning, i.e. in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*—the first known great work of literature; though the story of the god-hero of Uruk, Mesopotamia is primarily motivated by the importance of loyalty and friendship (Gilgamesh and Enkidu), there are also consequences of violating trust, the Hierodule's seduction of Enkidu or Gilgamesh's betrayal of the goddess of love, Ishtar.¹

See also “The Divine Plot Betrayed,” Chapter 8 in R. Kluger's 1991 *The Gilgamesh Epic. A Psychological Study of a Modern Ancient Hero*.

Gilgamesh (18th century BCE) certainly influenced both Homer (i.e., to a certain extent, Greek and Roman mythology) and the Bible—the two great sources of motifs, themes, plots, and heroes for much of European and Western literature; the betrayals connecting Paris, Helen and Menelaus in the *Iliad* are often cited among the worst betrayals in Greek mythology; only Homer adds to these Achilles, who betrays both Agamemnon and Ajax and is, in turn, betrayed by gods, while the Trojans are most reputedly betrayed by Odysseus with his wooden horse; the *Odyssey* itself is sustained by the themes of betrayal (Odysseus and Polyphemus as a notable one) and revenge, greed and gluttony, with both humans and gods as perpetrators (the Greeks even had a special goddess, Apatē, for deceit, deception, guile and fraud), and a counterpoint in Penelope's loyalty to Odysseus. Next, Aesop's fables (7th-6th centuries BCE) are teeming with animal sinners (foxes, wolves, apes, crows, snakes and vipers...), most often involved in betrayal; and in the next century comes Euripides with one of the greatest tragedies of all time—one of betrayal: *Medea* (431 BCE)—the formidable story of Jason and the child murdering barbarian princess.²

The Roman deities turn out to be more moral than the Greek deities, but Virgil's *Aeneid* (ca. 20 BCE) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 AD) are also compilations of numberless stories of betrayal: Aeneas abandons Dido, Romulus and Remus are almost drowned by their uncle, then Romulus kills Remus and is kidnapped by the Sabine women (Tarpia's betrayal of the City of Rome), the tragic story of Philomela, Scylla's betrayal of Athens..., and many other instances of revenge and betrayal, often accompanied by the role of fate (in *Metamorphoses*).

Very rich in betrayals is the Bible itself, scholars identifying over fifty verses about betrayal; first and foremost there is Judas Iscariot, patron-saint of betrayal (in Matthew 16:15, 26:21-23, but also in Mark 14:18-20, Luke 22:21, John 13:1, 21-27...; see also James Wright's poem "Saint Judas," but also K. A. Porter's "Flowering Judas—about the tree Judas hangs himself on—, or Webber and Rice's *Jesus Christ Superstar* for Judas' point of view), depicted by none other than da Vinci in his 1495 "The Last Supper"; then Delilah, the Philistines, Saul betrayed by David, the Absalom story..., several Psalms ("54" among them) and such repeated pronouncements as "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise up against parents..." (Matthew 10-21; Luke 21-16; Mark 13:12), and others in Jeremiah, Lamentations, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 1 Chronicles, Isaiah, Proverbs, Daniel, Micah...

Another fruitful ground for betrayal is that of fairy tales and folk tales, most of which abound in villains and traitors, witches and wizards, lackbeards and stepmothers, evil humans and beasts, bad and good supernatural beings, hobgoblins and leprechauns..., all of them ripe for betrayal and deception; one need only mention Snow White and the Wicked Queen, Little Red Riding Hood and her Wolf, Cinderella and the ugly sisters, the Beauty and the Beast, Hansel and Gretel and their parent, then Bluebeard and Godfather Death and all the others in Andersen, Grimm Brothers, etc., etc...; or one may simply remember that the event that triggered Shecherezade's tales is the betrayal of the Sultan by his wife, followed by all the other betrayals involving viziers, sailors, thieves, savages, cannibals, genies, or Aladdin, Ali Baba, Sinbad...

Treason, betrayal, treachery appear/s as a common motif in the Medieval romances of Sir Gawain and the Arthurian legends; similarly, in the oldest work of (Old) English literature, *Beowulf* (ca. 975-1025), the title Christ figure is betrayed by his disciple-thanes, including his faithful Wiglaf in the long run; second, in an avowedly pagan poem, Grendel, Grendel's mother

² See Emily McDermott's 1989 *Euripides' Medea: The Incarnation of Disorder*.

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and the dragon are all descendants of the Biblical Cain; and third, Beowulf has also got to fight his own (and others') inclination toward pride, greed, betrayal and even cowardice.

Appropriately enough as it were, the oldest major work of French literature, the *Song of Roland* (11th-12th centuries), plotted around the 778 battle of Roncevaux, has Charlemagne and his nephew, Roland, become the victims of the famous betrayal schemes orchestrated by Ganelon, the hero's stepfather.

The medieval world view is convincingly summed up in Dante's *La Divina Commedia* (1320), where traitors are viewed as the worst evil doers of all, so they are all placed in the last/ninth circle of the Inferno (Cantos 31-34), a frozen lake holding together Lucifer and various giants, Cain, Judas, Brutus, Cassius, Atila the Hun, Lancelot, Count Ugolino of course and all those who betrayed their loved ones, friends, countries, cities, guests or masters, as Dante's order of sins visible in the lowest regions of Hell included incontinence, violence, fraud, and betrayal.

Modern literature (and the modern world for that matter—see Harold Bloom's volume on Shakespeare) seems to have been shaped by the work of two writers who were almost perfect contemporaries (died the same year, month, and day) and have been credited with having authored some of the greatest imaginative works of the western world; Cervantes' 1605 *Don Quixote*—the first Spanish modern novel and the most influential Spanish literary work—has Ganelon mentioned as a negative example (as he had already found his place on one of the lowest circles of Dante's Hell) by the unforgettable hidalgo, spending his fictional life between madness and sanity, dreams and illusion, reality and fantasy; first, the hero (Alonso Quijano by his real name) deceives himself all of the time ("things are not what they seem"), then he is deceived by the reality of the windmills and other things (including a wooden horse—Chs.41-50), by his readings (so his library gets to be destroyed), various other distortions (betrayals); then there is his idealized betrayal of lady Dulcinea, his dream of a past world with no deceit in it, his frequent betrayal by Sancho, and the constant betrayal of the reader; and Cervantes does not forget betrayal in some of his *Novelas ejemplares* (1613) or his eight farces.

In his turn, Shakespeare the playwright seems to have had betrayal as a favourite theme or motif; in *Julius Caesar* he approaches one of history's (and literature's) greatest betrayals, with Caesar's assassination on the Ides of March, 44 BCE, engineered by his best friend, Marcus Brutus—the archetypal betrayer ever since (a close contemporary of Judas)—and power-hungry Cassius; as if in some kind of competition, Shakespeare also invents Iago, in *Othello*, as the most malignant backstabber of all time; a play of power and betrayal from beginning to end, *Macbeth* gives us an honest, noble and courageous hero whom a series of betrayals (his king, Banquo, Duncan, Scotland, his own nature) change into a dark, dishonest, greedy, and power-hungry one, also married to a great betrayer (of hospitality, of feminine nature, of herself); in *King Lear*, madness and insanity accompany the harsh effects of betrayal by one's loved ones: Lear betrays Cordelia and later Kent, Goneril and Regan betray Lear, then Cordelia and then each other, Gloucester betrays his son Edmund who also betrays him—all these in a kingdom in chaos, full of false promises, deceptions, and other betrayals; to a lesser extent, *Romeo and Juliet* is a play of errors and mistakes, violence, hatred and revenge, where Juliet is always betrayed or let down, even by her nurse; *The Tempest* and *Winter's Tale* are provided by Shakespeare with their share of sorrow, grief, regret, anger, jealousy, and betrayal; and so are *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Richard III*, and *Richard II*, but also some of the comedies: *Much Ado About Nothing* is a play of deceit and betrayal, with Hero, Claudio, Margaret, Don Pedro and Don John betrayed at one time or another; in *As You Like It*, the love, courtship and rivalry end less in peace than in enmity and

betrayal; *The Taming of the Shrew*—basically a play of false identities—is pushed forward by lies and deceit; and one could add *A Midsummer Night's Dream*... and...; and let us not forget *Hamlet*, which is, in fact, a play about corruption, revenge, and betrayal, with the prince himself as “a master of deception,” who is all the way through putting up an act and simulating insanity; as one critic notes, there are no characters in the play that feel the need to be honest, loyal, or seek the truth; and so all relationships (Claudius and his brother, King Hamlet; Gertrude and Hamlet; Claudius and Gertrude; Polonius and Hamlet; Ophelia and Hamlet; Hamlet and Laertes; Laertes and Hamlet) in the play are marred by betrayal (except, perhaps, the Hamlet-Horatio one); one also remembers Updike’s 2000 *Gertrude and Claudius*, a revenge tale based on Shakespeare and Saxo Grammaticus.

Since no one can entertain the idea of being exhaustive—but only vaguely suggestive—on such a topic (an accidental Internet search gave 746 results—Anglo-American literary works where betrayal is “used” or occurs as a motive/motif/theme), we have decided to choose the highly selective method of sampling (a couple of dozen) instead of cataloguing (several hundred); and so, before the coming of Americans on the world scene, our betrayal names are those of Swift and his dystopias, Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (the heroine’s dubious liaisons), the sentimental novel (Richardson and Fielding) and the Gothic one (Victor’s betrayal of nature in *Frankenstein*), or Austen’s innocent betrayals; then, contemporary Poe’s stories abound in betrayals and deceptions, Irving gives us Rip Van Winkle’s great betrayal of himself, Melville’s is a world of betrayed hope; and to a great extent so is Hawthorne’s (*The Scarlet Letter*, *The Blithedale Romance*, “Young Goodman Brown”...).

The Mill on the Floss, *Silas Marner* and *Romola* (“betrayal dulls all the finer impulses of our souls”) make George Eliot a strong contender for a “betrayal novelist” nomination, while *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* strongly recommend the Brontës; *Huck Finn* and all its betrayals provides a good American counterpart for Miss Havisham’s great and tragic betrayal in *Great Expectations*, just as Crane’s “Blue Hotel” for Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*; Hardy (*Two on a Tower*, but not only), James (*Washington Square*, *The Golden Bowl*, ...), and Conrad (*Lord Jim*, *The Return*, *An Outcast of the Islands*) are the turn of the century’s betrayal masters.

The twentieth century is just as rich in the use of betrayals: it is one of Joyce’s most prominent themes (*A Portrait...*, *Dubliners*, *Ulysses* ...), Woolf has it in *The Waves* (but also elsewhere), Ford in *The Good Soldier* and *Parade’s End*, Lawrence in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *The Trespasser*, Wough in *A Handful of Dust*, Buck in *The New Year*; the American experience of betrayal is quintessentially illustrated, as it were, in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (not only do all characters—Tom, Daisy, Myrtle, Gatsby, his father... betray one another, but there is also the greater betrayal of the American dream), and also in many Faulkner stories, Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (“traitor” Robert Cohn), Steinbeck’s *The Winter of Our Discontent* (betrayal victim Ethan Allen), *Of Mice and Men*, “The Chrysanthemums”; and women novelists (Chopin, Cather...) could not be less interested in betrayal.

The British parallel continues Swift somewhat, with betrayal as a common theme in a dystopian society—Orwell’s *1984* (Winston Smith himself betrays Julia) and *Animal Farm* explore the mandatory relationship power-betrayal in totalitarian societies; Maugham’s *The Painted Veil* and Muriel Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* provide other relevant examples where betrayal works havoc. The American dream is again betrayed in Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (plus Ben is betrayed by Willy, who also betrays his sons, especially Biff), but the practice of lying to each other and themselves is also used in *The Crucible*, *A View from the Bridge* and *All My Sons*.

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How betrayal functions in a totalitarian regime is revisited by Arthur Koestler in *Darkness at Noon*, while Golding echoes the betrayal of Jesus in *Lord of the Flies*; and we gradually come to the American fifties, a great period of betrayal, so Ellison's confusion in *Invisible Man* is created by the repeated betrayals of the nameless narrator, or Holden's in Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* by his betrayal of himself, his memory, his innocence; and one could continue with *Dubin's Lives* (Malamud), *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (McCullers), *Laughter in the Dark* and *The Eye* (Nabokov)...

All we can do for the near and very near "betrayal" contemporaries is pick and choose: Roth's *American Trilogy*, Updike's *Rabbit Redux*, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, "Sorrowful Black Death Is Not a Hot Ticket," bell hooks' "Seduction and Betrayal," Munro's *Dear Life*, Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* and *The Robber Bride*, Oates' *Do With Me What You Will* and *Cybele*, Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*, *Talking It Over* and *Before She Met Me*, McInnerney's *The Good Life*, Erdrich's *Tracks*, McEwan's *Atonement*, Westerfeld's *Uglies*, Ondaatje's *English Patient*, and, quite naturally, George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* and Rowling's *Harry Potter*; as an afterthought, as all spy novels are necessarily based upon duplicity and double-dealing, le Carré has his own place here (*Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, *The Honourable Schoolboy*, *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold*).

Time for a detour outside the space of betrayal literature in English, to mention, first, Alexandre Dumas' great story of one man's quest for revenge on those who betrayed him in *Monte Cristo*; and go back to other authors (Gibran, Tagore, Brecht among them), and masterpieces that have betrayal at their center: Goethe's *Faust* (grafted onto the Job story) and *Gotz von Berlichingen* (who dies exclaiming "Freedom!" and predicting—prophesying?—the dawn of a treacherous age: "The time of betrayal is coming, it will have no limits..."); Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* ("Anything is better than lies and deceit..."), Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (Emma betrays her husband, her marriage, but also her idealism in fact), Dostoevsky's sinners in *Crime and Punishment*, Kafka's Christ figure in "Metamorphosis," *A Doll's House* by Ibsen, *The Chronicle of a Death Foretold* by García Márquez...; so, more or less, all of the greatest writers and their great works.

A number of poets have already been mentioned, including Shakespeare, who appeared to be all betrayal-stricken as a playwright, only his sonnets are also touched by the "false plague": from 6 and 18 to 42 (a most intricate double betrayal), 93, 96 ("How many lambs might the stern wolf betray/If like a lamb he could his looks translate!"—see also translation as betrayal), 130, 133, 137 ("To put fair truth upon so foul a face?"); and so are many of the courtier and cavalier poets in the 17th century, followed by Milton and his *Paradise's* betrayals, the Romantics, Blake ("A Poison Tree"), a couple of narrative poems by Christina Rossetti, and quite a number of poems by Yeats.

The Americans may very well start with Whitman, who, in "Manhattan Streets I Saunter'd Pondering," sees betrayal (for our later use here) as related to "putridity..., pecculation, cunning, murder, seduction, prostitution" and opposed to "self-denial..., sweet love, ...precious suffering..., grandeur, ...divinity," the good cause, manfulness, well-thinking, truth, righteousness, and, above all, prudence—which is the central topic of his "pondering"; his great contemporary, Emily Dickinson, has ten or so poems of/on betrayal (mostly), and so does, a little later, Cummings, then Frost, Sandburg, Plath, Hughes...

After so many (great) names and titles connected to betrayal (rather than love and hatred, trust and distrust, friendship and enmity, life and death even...) one is entitled to the simple question of "why?" or "how come...?"—so we need both a few tentative answers and some

kind of illustration. Both research on identity *per se* and the illustration we have managed to put together (*infra*) suggest two important dimensions—identity and communication—that literature, on one hand, relies upon in most of its imaginative investigations, and, on the other, betrayal undermines in most of its forms (personal or group disloyalty, breach of trust or violation of what is good and proper in romantic, political, national security relationships—adultery, infidelity, opportunism, foul play, double-cross—, moral ties and a shared set of values...).

For one thing, therefore, betrayal may very well be the ultimate conflict (see Beth Hill) as it represents a fundamental threat to one's identity, which, moreover, includes both the betrayer's and the betrayed one's identity; rooted in self-deception, vanity and pride, betrayal almost always results in repression of the self which, in itself is a form of duplicity or betrayal; no wonder in literature betrayal packs the strongest emotional influence for readers, and with long-lasting problems for their (readers') characters; at the heart of every betrayal lies a skewed set of values, especially since it never comes from one's enemies, so distrust is your only protection against it (see also "betrayal blindness"); and this is where it is mostly evil, i.e. hateful, ugly, vicious, foul, harmful and damnable, loathsome, and malignant; nothing decent, beautiful, gentle, honest, right or morally good can ever compare in psychological force with it; appropriately enough, you can read books, essays, sites titled seven/ten/twenty-five betrayals that changed the course of human history, but nothing like ten kindnesses that changed the world.

Similarly, an interested reader may find books and articles on the sociology or trickery, on "betrayal and betrayers" (Akerstrom, for instance), or even an 800-page *Encyclopedia of Psychological Trauma* (2008—*trauma* = "a type of damage to the mind that occurs as a result of a severely distressing event"), where "the severely distressing event" of betrayal is treated alongside other *similar* ones, such as abuse, anxiety, fear, depression, disasters, extinction, genocide, holocaust, hysteria, nightmares, psychosis, racism, suicide, terrorism, torture, war... and the traumas associated with them; and so we learn that betrayal is confusing and disconcerting, it can cause mental stress and tension, rage, irrational acts and revenge, negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors, it can cripple or destroy us, and it can result in post-traumatic stress disorders (sleeplessness, nightmares, moral injury)—see, among others, Jennifer J. Freyd (1994), Robert Hogan (1997), or Alan L. Hensley (2009); Freyd also approaches the problem of betrayal blindness, but literature does not seem to find it appealing as a topic.

Being thus an assault on the integrity of the individual self, betrayal implicitly ruins positive human relationships, cooperation, and communication; any violation of trust produces moral, intellectual, and psychological conflicts between individuals, individuals and organizations, groups, parties...; experts also talk of cultural betrayal traumas, involving communication problems on larger scales; anyway, distorted or blocked communication has always been an attractive subject for all writers.

More recent research on betrayal trauma has also focused on cognitive consequences (betrayal blindness included), as the individual separates himself, in such a case, from the conscious awareness of his situation; this is a "thought conflict," a psychological discomfort caused by one's holding contradictory cognitions, i.e. items of knowledge, opinions or beliefs that are dissonant with each other; and so, one of the most widely accepted and analyzed theories after Leon Festinger (1919-1989) first proposed it in 1956, then developed in 1959 with its "experiment in deception" (begun three years earlier), and taken over by A. E. Myers (1963), D. G. Myers (1987), J. E. Turnbridge and G. J. Ashworth (1996). Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance is centered on how people try to reach internal consistency so his basic psychological

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assumption is that every person has innate drives to keep all his cognitions in a harmonious state and avoid a state of tension or dissonance; in other words, most people want to see reality in a way that supports their cognitions, which would deserve much more than this passing note; so Festinger identifies three ways to deal with cognitive dissonance: minimize (or forget) the importance of the dissonant thought (about betrayal); acquire or develop new (consonant) thoughts that would outweigh the dissonant ones; or/and incorporate the dissonant thought/s into one's current belief system ("do not trust anyone" in the case of betrayal).

As the vast majority of people/betrayers or betrayed in this world may never (or could not) read Festinger, writers have depended on the less investigated fundamental tendency of human behavior to be irrational most of the time; Virginia Woolf (letter to Ethel Smith and elsewhere) for one was obsessed by this psychological reality (the gulf between what is professed and the truth)—betrayal by language (saying too much or not enough)—and became an exponent of the unsaid; better even, SF writer Stephanie Meyer (*The Host*, 2008) imagines a language that has "no word for betrayal or traitor."

As far as our illustration goes, let us hazard the statement that most poetic minds, in a simplified/simplistic view, find fulfillment in reconstructing aspects of the world and universe according to the possibilities offered by one language or another; so a reader can have access to the inner workings of such reconstructions by contemplating the conceptual-linguistic shapes they are built on; each such mind, while pondering on a situation, a psychological aspect, feeling, emotion, idea, issue... may be supposed to be putting together the words/concepts circumscribing that topic; and when the topic is betrayal (there is a word for it!) and there are five such poetic minds (all Americans, writing in the fifties-sixties and later—the period of "cognitive dissonance"—modern/modernists therefore: "A Ritual to Read to Each Other" by William Stafford, 1914-1993, "Chorus from Oedipus at Colonus" [sic] by Anthony Hecht, 1923-2004, "Death" by Frank O'Hara, 1926-1966, "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)" by Anne Sexton, 1928-1974, and "The Negatives" by Philip Levine, 1928-2015) viewing this "fascinating" human act/feature/conflict and its implications, one also expects that their conceptual areas would be at least similar.

The five poems may be described as either betrayal poems, poems of... or poems about betrayal; thus, Stafford begins his "Ritual" with the cognitive "problem of other minds" and of identity and communication—"If you don't know the kind of person I am/ and I don't know the kind of person you are..."—and his "betrayal in the mind" is accompanied by evil shaping concepts: ignorance, cruelty, death, horror, fear, and darkness ("the darkness around us is deep").

Taking us back to Greek mythology, Anthony Hecht sees his Oedipus with betrayal moving in on him, accompanied by envy, calumny, bloodshed, Old Age, unwisdom, death (the "gaunt bailiff"), sorrow, misery, infirmity, ruin, oblivion and winter; denial of identity comes almost naturally: "Not to be born is, past all yearning, best."

Split personality is what O'Hara begins his "Death" with—one half that does, another that does not accept betrayal—and continues with the Conradian problem of "betraying one's conscience..., all a man can betray"; the identity problem is paradoxically "solved" in the last/sixth stanza—"I am not dead," immediately followed by that of communication, words and language: "Nothing remains let alone 'to be said';" and betrayal comes in one pack with pain, danger, death, tears, vermillion...

“Speaking with the gift of tongues” and dreaming of a “faltering crone...[who]...eats betrayal like a slice of meat,” Anne Sexton takes us back to a folk tale originally reworded by the Brothers Grimm and has betrayal contextualized by evil, death, (“Death rattles in my throat/like a marble...”), sleep, curse, zombies, crucifixion, fear, prison, and old age; not only language, but her own identity is a problem: “Each night I am nailed into place/ and forget who I am.”

“The Negatives” has betrayal staged in the prose of the first lines: “On March 1, 1958, four deserters from the French Army of North Africa, August Rein, Henri Bruette, Jack Dauville, & Thomas Delain, robbed a government pay station at Orleansville. Because of the subsequent confession of Dauville the other three were captured or shot. Dauville was given his freedom and returned to the land of his birth, the U. S. A.”; Levine’s conceptual area is a little more comprehensive (a longer poem), and includes prison, terror, rot, death, insanity, cowardice, pain, anger, darkness, winter, old age, fear, evil and blindness; the betrayer, Dauville, sees his act as a psychological punishment and is tortured by memories in his Tampa, Florida hotel, and all four wonder about “who I was” or/and “if I had words...”

Therefore, except for being a threat to two fundamental features (identity, communication) of humanity (there are authors, like Salman Akhtar, who deal with man’s compulsion to betray or the need to be betrayed, and others, like Crystal Parikh, who write about the “ethics of betrayal”), and being associated with the most repulsive human features, the proportion of the theme of betrayal is, paradoxically somehow, huge, not only in literature, but also on the internet (hundreds and thousands of sites recommending other thousands and millions of titles); of all these we have also included among our References Bringsjord and Ferrucci’s book for two relevant reasons: two computer scientists thought that a story of betrayal (by BRUTUS) is the best type of conflict humans can offer an artificial intelligence to write about; and second, it is a campus story (PhD defense), suggestive of how academics view cognitive dissonance, with betrayal as a teacher/adviser.

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