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6 Absolute Nonabsolute Singularity

Jacques Derrida, Myles na gCopaleen and Fragmentation

Maebh Long

In 'Shibboleth,' Jacques Derrida describes the illusory 'pure poem,' as 'the impossibility of that which, each time only once, has meaning only by having no meaning, no ideal or general meaning, or has meaning only so as to invoke, in order to betray them, the concept, law, or genre' (2005b, 11). In this, Derrida echoes Paul Celan, who said in 'The Meridian' that the absolute poem does not exist, while haunting every poem. Giorgio Agamben, in *Stanzas*, extends this to claim 'all modern poems after Mallarmé are fragments, in that they allude to something (the absolute poem) that can never be evoked in its integrity, but only rendered present through its negation' (32). He argues these fragmentary poems differ from standard metonymy in that the whole to which the fragment alludes is – he uses the analogy of the fetish – 'like the maternal penis, nonexistent or no longer existent, and the nonfinished therefore reveals itself as a perfect and punctual pendant of the fetishist denial' (32). Poetry, therefore, moves toward a singularity that defies all generalization or formalization, a pure or absolute poem that exists in and of itself and cannot be used as a tool from which to extrapolate method or rule. But as this impossible poem only exists through its absence and the trace of desire in each possible poem, the singularity of the impure poem can be understood as inextricable from the contamination of the absolute and the nonabsolute – Poetry and poetry, if you will – with the result that every poem is always already a fragment, turned toward a non-existent whole: what Derrida names the poematic.

How do we approach singularity? Singularity can be understood as the peculiarity of an encounter or the uniqueness of responsibility. It can be found in the inimitableness of the Other and the distinctiveness that resists thetic exposition. It is 'a thinking of the event (singularity of the other, in its coming that cannot be anticipated, *hic et nunc*) that resists being reappropriated by an ontology or a phenomenology of presence as such' (Derrida 2005a, 96). Maurice Blanchot states that to write is simply to arrange 'marks of singularity,' which he paraphrases as 'fragments' (1992, 51). Writing is always an engagement with the particular as part of an impossible whole, with being impure and improper, shifting, dynamic, impenetrable. As Derrida writes, '[a] singularity is of its nature in secret' (2005a, 162).

This chapter explores the connection between singularity, the absolute nonabsolute and the fragment. Although the writings of Brian O'Nolan's journalistic avatar, Myles na gCopaleen, might seem, in their playful newspaper format, a great distance from these theoretical formulations, Derek Attridge locates singularity within the cultural, describing the singular as an event of innovation,

> a configuration of general properties that, in constituting the entity (as it exists in a particular time and place), go beyond the possibilities pre-programmed by a culture's norms, the norms with which its members are familiar and through which most cultural products are understood. (2004, 63)

Myles's *Cruiskeen Lawn* articles, which he wrote, in his most productive periods, six times a week from 1940 to 1966, are precisely events of innovation, fragmentary singularities that explode cultural norms from within, problematize thetic exposition, and perform and explore the interconnectedness, paradoxicality and fictionality of the 'story-teller's book web' (O'Brien 2001, 19) that was modern, post-independence Ireland.[1]

The *Cruiskeen Lawn* articles form a disjoined corpus of singular, transgressive, fragmentary texts that interrupt, contradict and repeat each other. Their point of commencement is elusive – do they begin in October 1938 with O'Nolan's pseudonymic letters to the *Irish Times*? On 4 October, 1940 with the article signed by *An Broc* [the Badger]? With Myles's early, Irish-language articles from 12 October, 1940? Or with the better-known, typically anthologized English-language articles that, by 1943, had ousted his Irish writings? This series of beginnings is matched by a conclusion that loops in on itself – the final article printed was a repeat of the famous Book Handling Service of November 1941,[2] and the penultimate one on 31 March, 1966, the day before O'Nolan's death, ends with pathos and the promise of continuity: 'These questions and more I will answer the day after tomorrow.'[3] Myles's fragments operate in a space of contaminated fantasy and reality, and present a hyperbolic version of Ireland where the country's own structural uncertainties and illogicalities are emphasized by the articles' contrived etymological and semantic malapropisms. The column mocks and celebrates Ireland's emerging identities, offering alternative narratives of self to those proffered by the Church and the State and to those seen on theatrical stages, albeit a self usually presumed to be male, educated, Catholic and from Dublin. Although there are sustained targets subjected to varying levels of aggressive parody and attack – the Government, CIE, the ESB, *The Bell*, The Abbey Theatre, universities, Joyce scholars, *Gaeilgoirí*[4] – the conclusions of these diatribes often prioritize a pun or unexpected inversion rather than a consistent polemical position. They move, therefore, in a complex space between languages and identities, as they play with macaronics, transliterations, translations, proper names, gender, literary structures and narrative form, presenting singular fragments of an attempt to speak the contradictory language of a nascent national identity.

The fragmentary nature of O'Nolan's work has been commented on; Joshua Esty, for example, deems O'Nolan to be 'the inventor of a wilfully fragmentary postcolonial form' (1995, 37; for fragmentation in relation to *At Swim-Two-Birds*, see Long 2014). However, this chapter focuses on reading an under-researched section of O'Nolan's work – the *Cruiskeen Lawn* articles – through the absolute nonabsolute singularity of the fragment.

ABSOLUTE NONABSOLUTE SINGULARITY

In 1988, Derrida responded to the Italian journal *Poesia*'s interrogation of poetics – '*Che cos'è la poesia?*' (What [thing] is poetry?) – by rejecting the direct, thetic question in favor of an apostrophe written to an informal *tu*, proffering an event that does not simply engage with the technical details of the meaning or 'essence' of poetry but performs a presentation and demonstration of the singular poematic. In 'Shibboleth,' Derrida writes that to 'create a work is to give a new body to language, to give language a body so that this truth of language may appear *as such*, may appear and disappear, may appear as an elliptic withdrawal' (2005b, 106). In '*Che cos'è la poesia?*' Derrida gives to the poematic the body of the *hérisson*, *istrice*, hedgehog, a fragment of life that turns in on itself, an animal of chance hidden under the false protection of spines, a 'thing which in the same stroke exposes itself to death and protects itself' (229). Derrida's poematic is 'the aleatory rambling of a trek, the strophe, that turns but never leads back to discourse, or back home' (1991, 225). Each turn, each strophe is an apostrophe, a catastrophe, a *metastrophe* – a radical change or transformation that turns away from circularity so there is neither infinite repetition of the same nor totalizing completion. The poematic is neither process nor product, neither *poiesis* nor work. Rather than the permanent becoming of Friedrich Schlegel's romantic poetry, the poematic is a permanent *coming*, the postponed appearance of meaning and determinability. Always the 'advent of an event' (Derrida 1991, 227), its origins recede and it rolls not teleologically forward but across and across the road. The poematic is thus a negotiation between the finite event of experience and the infinite coming of other events. This excess spawns a multitude of commentary but the poetic will always elude exegetical prose.

The poematic is that which 'speaks beyond knowledge' (Derrida 2005b, 34) and is formulated by Derrida as 'a certain passion of the singular mark, the signature that repeats its dispersion, each time beyond the logos' (1991, 235). That is, the poematic is a form that is singular and untranslatable, neither process nor product but an aleatory reworking, an assortment of paratactic phrases that longs to exist rather than represent, to simply *be*, 'without external support, without substance, without subject, absolute of

writing in (it)self' (Derrida 1991, 237). It wishes to be absolutely singular and yet learned by heart, where, for Derrida, learning by heart means an interiorization of that which is radically other, a dictation, a mechanical incorporation. It is the ruin of a totality that never existed, the citation of and dictation from a non-original yet singular source. But the poematic, even as the absolute of writing, cannot allow the 'absolute' to exist as stolid certainty and thus its absolute form is marked by the *absolute nonabsolute*, a state of (counter)law and contamination transgressing the borders and boundaries of limitation itself.

> *Literally*: you would like to retain by heart an absolutely unique form, an event whose intangible singularity no longer separates the ideality, the ideal meaning as one says, from the body of the letter. In the desire of this absolute inseparation, the absolute nonabsolute, you breathe the origin of the poetic. (Derrida 1991, 229–231)

The origin of the poematic lie in the desire for absolute inseparation, which Derrida expresses through entangling formulations of tautologous and oxymoronic contamination. The poematic desires to be ideal and to be real, to be itself and the idea or perfect form of itself, what one might call ideally nonideal or literally nonliteral, and as such is exemplar of Derrida's, Celan's and Agamben's formulations of the conjoined pure and impure poem.

If we attempt to unpack the 'absolute nonabsolute' we begin by acknowledging the 'absolute' as that which is self-referential, unconditional and totalized, and the 'nonabsolute' as contingent, conditional and inseparable from the other. It is tempting to understand the terms as an adjective and noun collocation – absolute(ly) nonabsolute – whose seeming oxymoronic implication serves simply to heighten the contingency and conditionality of absolute inseparability. The 'absolute,' however, can clearly not be reduced to a modifier, and the tension of the opposites and polyvalency of the phrase must be retained. The absolute, centred on itself, is itself and example of itself, itself and other. The absolute is thus *a priori* nonabsolute. The nonabsolute denotes referral without completion, a referral always to the other. It thus contains and refers to everything through the other and as other, and through this totalizing movement acquires a certain completion. In addition to this, the prefix 'non' is both opposition and irreducibility. That is, the 'nonabsolute' is the opposite against which the absolute can be contrasted *and* that which is heterogeneous to definition and comparison. Thus the nonabsolute, in being both the *not*absolute and *a*absolute, doubly stresses both its inseparability and its alterity. Each term in the paradoxical phrase is thus already in contradiction with itself and so each term is *a priori* complicit in the other term.

Hence the absolute nonabsolute is that which, in referring to the other, refers infinitely to itself and relates to itself as other, to itself through alterity.

Its inseparability from the other is the drive to be in alterity *and* to extinguish alterity, to relate to itself through singular alterity such that it ceases to be. The desire for the absolute nonabsolute is as such a wish for contamination or catastrophe, for a law that is predicated on an antithetical, autoimmune counterlaw, a protection that endangers, a self that is other, a presence without presence, an event without event.

FRAGMENTATION

In Derrida's formulation of the absolute nonabsolute we see the origins of the poematic lie in an oxymoronic tautology, a contaminated non-originary origin of singularity, where singularity is not understood as that which expends itself in a burst of pure individualism but is conjoined and impure. In this formulation of alterity and similarity we find the structure of fragmentation. The image Derrida uses for the poematic and singularity is a hedgehog, vulnerable and exposed on the road. This image calls, of course, to the one famously used by Friedrich Schlegel in his description of the fragment: 'A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog' (1971a, fragment 206). However, Derrida states in 'Istrice 2: Ich bünn all hier' that his hedgehog is not Schlegel's, as Derrida's creature 'has no relation to itself – that is, no totalising individuality – that does not expose it even more to death and to being-torn-apart' (1995, 303). It does not gather itself together in strength, but in vulnerability: 'It *lets itself* be done, without activity, without work, in the most sober *pathos*, a stranger to all production, especially to creation' (Derrida 1991, 233). It is, writes Derrida, not a moment of pure production but a contamination, an accident, a catastrophe.

Derrida, who claimed not to have read Schlegel but rather Blanchot, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, treats the word 'fragment' with suspicion, having inherited their reading of it.[5] He claims Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's *The Literary Absolute* clarified the reservations he had always felt regarding the fragment and totalization, as it pointed to a 'certain cult of the fragment and especially of the fragmentary *work* which always calls for an upping of the ante of authority and monumental totality' (1995, 302). This positioning of the fragment as a writing of closed unity misunderstands the complexity Schlegel invested in it. The romantic fragment is not a monument to closure but a deliberate form simultaneously complete and incomplete, sovereign while calling to an indeterminate whole. The absolute of writing was, for the German Romantics, a form that could affirm 'the absolute and the fragmentary; affirming totality, but in a form that, being all forms – that is, at the limit, being none at all – does not realize the whole, but signifies it by suspending it, even breaking it' (Blanchot 1993, 353); that is, the absolute of writing was absolute nonabsolute singularity. Derrida's absolute nonabsolute hedgehog performs the

same gesture as Schlegel's – both, in rolling up, are 'turned toward the other and toward itself' (Derrida 1991, 235).

The fragment, as Schlegel formalized it, must be totalized, independent and autonomous. Thus each fragment must be its own example and, as a romantic work, theorize and comment upon itself; the literary absolute for the German Romantics was a work that was work and theory of that work. Its uniqueness rejects an example other than itself, and it is thereby itself and representation, theory and exegesis of itself, whole and internally fragmented, one and multiple. The fragment is hence a form of limits and limitlessness, of interruption and borders the margins of which generate excess: 'A work is cultivated when it is everywhere sharply delimited, but within those limits limitless and inexhaustible; when it is completely faithful to itself, entirely homogeneous, and nonetheless exalted above itself' (Schlegel 1971a, fragment 297).

The fragment is a thought that is both complete and incomplete, an instance of a single thought that exists, absolutely in itself, and simultaneously is part of a nonabsolute progression or becoming: '[A] dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments. An exchange of letters is a dialogue on a larger scale, and memoirs constitute a system of fragments' (Schlegel 1971a, fragment 77). Thus while each fragment stands alone and extant, it still calls to the past and the future, sending itself to what preceded and will succeed it. In its divided structure the fragment draws attention to its boundaries, making them not a rift in what was a totalized whole but limiting that call to further, unmappable progression. Each fragment is a project, a 'fragment of the future' (Schlegel 1971a, fragment 22), anticipating what comes next and what will, even with each addition, remain indeterminate. Permanent becomings that call ahead to the unknown, fragments are a sending forward of thought and theory for subsequent and postponed resolution, so '*work in progress* henceforth becomes the infinite truth of the work' (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988, 48).

The fragment is an absolute singularity and yet nonabsolute and contingent, forming a shifting, protean totality in which 'every whole can be a part and every part really a whole' (Schlegel 1971b, fragment 14). In centering on themselves, fragments turn beyond themselves to form continually reordering chains of relation and meaning. Furthermore, Schlegel writes that 'as yet no genre exists that is fragmentary both in form and in content, simultaneously completely subjective and individual, and completely objective and like a necessary part in a system of all the sciences' (1971a, fragment 77). Thus fragments are always haunted by failure and interruption. The possible fragment is haunted by the impossible, pure fragment and as such, each fragment is the singularity of the absolute nonabsolute.

Despite Derrida's reservations regarding the term, his *use* of the fragment is very close to Schlegel's and to his descriptions of singularity. In Derrida's epistolary, fragmentary text 'Envois,' we find the author-character describing the postcards that have survived conflagration as *fragments*, appearing

to use the term in a traditional, colloquial way, that is, as sections torn from a pre-existing whole: 'Out of these two years, I would deliver to them only fragments circled with white' (177). Yet the existence of a unit pre-dating the act of fragmentation is persistently and pointedly in doubt in 'Envois;' the fragments are taken from a whole that (arguably) never existed, as the author insists the letter, that paradigm of the system and of closed units, 'at the very instant when it takes place [...] divides itself, puts itself into pieces, falls into a postcard' (81), that is, into fragments circled in white.[6] A totalized whole never existed and so we 'begin' with fragmentation. Despite this, as we see below, Derrida prefers the term 'aphorism' to refer and perform the contradictions of the absolute nonabsolute we find in Schlegel's fragments.

If we understand singularity as an event that plays on the border between the tautologous and the paradoxical, a dynamism of the absolute nonabsolute, then we find the form of the fragment exemplary of singularity. The absolute nonabsolute singularity of the fragmentary has a subversive and transgressive potential, as in a literary context it destabilizes concepts of structural coherency, logical contradiction, stable identity and uncontaminated narrative frames and presents a plural speech of dissymmetry. It is a non-progressive series of beginnings that never present a secure foundation as there is always something that came before. It is a non-linear series of endings that never offer closure as there is always something more to come. Each fragment is both wholly independent as it functions as a separate monad *and* part of a shifting, interdependent whole. It plays on tensions between form, content and context, and in its self-consciousness heightens the differing ways in which we engage with the oral, aural and visual.

MYLES NA GCOPALEEN

The fragmentary and aphoristic, writes Derrida, 'separates, it marks dissociation, it terminates, delimits, arrests' (2008a, aphorism 2). It is – very much like the diatribes of Myles na gCopaleen – authoritative; it prophesizes, speaks the truth and commands. Its separated form means it 'must never refer to another. It is sufficient unto itself, a world or monad' (Derrida 2008b, aphorism 24). And yet, like Schlegel's fragment, the aphorism 'gathers everything together' (Derrida 2008b, aphorism 44). In including everything in itself the aphorism incorporates inside itself everything it is not, it invaginates itself, taking within what (it) is without. In comprising everything it is nonetheless incomplete and awaiting a further step: '[T]here is always more than one aphorism' (Derrida 2008b, aphorism 45). The aphorism is thus always in a series, hyphenated internally and externally. It is a full stop becoming ellipsis, a closure becoming interruption, omission, openness. It is the fragment of a story in the fragments of a long series of articles in the fragments of a newspaper in the fragments of a nation. Each section is independent and complete while also being part of a shifting, protean mass.

The *Cruiskeen Lawn* articles were very aware of both their serialized nature and their physical form, and O'Nolan played with progression and interruption, included 'plagiarized' images, made references to surrounding articles, and played with editorial instructions and typography:

> Is this † a dagger which I see before me?
> [...]
> † It is.
> (CL 10 December 1941)

The installments of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, often blamed for O'Nolan's failure to produce a novel meeting the caliber of his earlier writings, operate as a fragmentary hypertext, a singularity of shifting parts that play not only on the purity and impurity of writing but on the contaminations, progressions, and interruptions of Ireland and the Irish language. They are metonymies – parts of a whole – that point to the general absence of an uncontaminated totality, be it of the thing itself or that from which it supposedly originated. O'Nolan understood language in general as comprising units of shifting, impermanent meaning, and he argued – in playful earnestness – that Irish is particularly inconsistent, so that an Irish-speaking 'peasant' employing a vocabulary of 4,000 words in fact has 400,000 at his or her disposal, as apart

> from words with endless shades of cognate meaning, there are many with so complete a spectrum of graduated ambiguity that each of them can be made to express two directly contradictory meanings, as well as a plethora of intermediate concepts that have no bearing on either. [...] Superimpose on all that the miasma of ironic usage, poetic license, oxymoron, plamás [flattery], Celtic evasion, Irish bullery and Paddy Wackery, and it is a safe bet that you will find yourself very far from home. (CL 11 January 1941)

Thus a column of fragments arose from a comprehension of the basic unit of language as singular, excessive and polyvalent. Each fragment is, like the poematic, an event of singularity; gathered together they lack set progression, instead reworking and rereading through difference and alterity, as the aphorism is 'that which hands over every rendezvous to chance' (Derrida 2008a, aphorism 11). One might think of the difference between the aphoristic singularities of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* in terms of Lyotard's problem of the differend, in which a case between parties 'cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule applicable to both arguments' (Lyotard 1988, xi); their particularity is such that no general law can provide justice. And yet, as Derrida writes, 'aphorisms can only multiply or be put in a series if they either confirm or contradict each other' (2008b, aphorism 44). Thus Myles can take every side of an argument without contradiction, as his fragments are too separate to bow to rules of logical continuity. At the same time, his

articles-as-fragments are inevitably brought together, sometimes ordered by the act of reading, sometimes in riotous cacophony, and part of their popularity was based on the interruptions and connections resulting from their longevity. Reworking – reading, interpreting – occurs through the false but necessary imposition of a system on singularities, be it hedgehogs or fragments, and the absolute is always operative as nonabsolute.

In understanding singularity in terms of a conflicted pattern of the absolute nonabsolute, we recognize that every identity is interrupted by difference. As Timothy Clark writes: 'Identity-to-self, as a structure of auto-affection, is necessarily constituted through otherness in a movement that prevents subjectivity being conceived except nonabsolutely, as an impure difference' (1997, 265). Myles na gCopaleen is a singularly multiple identity, one whose fragmentary, serialized form freed O'Nolan – and Myles – from the logical requirement of consistency. Thus not only can Myles be on whichever side of the argument appears most provocative or most humorous, his own personality also need not be stable and consistent. Myles's defining characteristics are fragmentary mutability and volatility, as there is no single identity to which the name Myles na gCopaleen can be assigned. Eventually even the spelling of his name changed from Myles na gCopaleen to the English-friendly Myles na Gopaleen. Over the course of the *Cruiskeen Lawn*, Myles was rich and poor, handsome and repulsive, young and old, Irish and English, married and single, important and ignored, a scholar and a fool, an upstanding citizen and a thief. While pedantry and hyperbolic erudition allowed for engagement with a wide range of topics, and Myles insisted upon an intellectual sophistication mixed with the most basic of puns and word play, he could be vicious in targeting 'intellectsects' (CL 30 May 1942), scholars who 'burn the midnight oil in the graveyeards of dead jargon in which normal people have no interest' (CL 5 January 1942). He is an amalgamation of the high and low in Irish life and literature, an absolute nonabsolute singularity of deliberately contaminated impurity. He is the avatar of every contemporary Irish literary figure:

> In those days one lived one's life, went to Paris to translate one's *Riders to the Sea* into verse, wrote one's *Confessions of a Young Man*, founded one's National Theatre, wrote one's *Portrait of an Artist*; one drank with poor Cassie Marcievicz, founded the congested districts with AE, won one's Nobel prize, founded one's Gate Theatre and finally – sick to death of it all – one emigrated to New York. (CL 23 December 1942)

His surname, na gCopaleen, is an admixture of linguistic purity and impurity, as the correct eclipsis of 'gC' is undone by the inaccurate, Anglicized 'leen,' which should read 'lín.' The name Myles-na-Coppaleen originates in Dion Boucicault's stage-Irish play *The Colleen Bawn*, and thus every *Cruiskeen Lawn* article, from pedantic denunciation of malapropisms

to whimsical histories and inventions, is signed by the kind of stereotype Myles repeatedly condemned. On the opening night of his stage play *Faustus Kelly* in the Abbey Theatre in 1943, O'Nolan had an actor take his author's bow, 'dressed as the traditional stage Irishman with pipe, caubeen and cutaway coat, who did a bit of a jig and then vanished' (Cronin 1998, 134), thereby reminding the audience of Myles na gCopaleen's origins, continuing his satirizing of the Abbey as a theatre of debased archetypes and yet also rendering himself complicit in this caricaturing. The criticism of cliché is thus singularly performed from within the cliché.

The fragmentary is always a performance of contamination and complicity, and this is exemplified by Derrida in an aphoristic piece entitled '52 Aphorisms for a Foreword.' Derrida prefaces a book on architecture with a series of aphorisms, causing an immediate tension between content and form as '[t]here is a genre forbidden to the preface – it is the aphorism' (Derrida 2008b, aphorism 20). The prefatory and the architectural imply systematicity, laws, legitimization, authority, order, points of entry to that which can be inhabited, that is, made present (to itself), known, understood and intellectually possessed. In opposition to this is the aphorism, which '[o]ne never enters or leaves [...]; it has therefore neither beginning nor end, neither foundation nor end, neither up nor down, neither inside nor outside' (Derrida 2008b, aphorism 11). The aphorism, always in a state of reworking, always waiting for another step, does not exist as *an* aphorism as such. Despite its appearance as axiomatic truth it has no univocal meaning; its serial position means it is always in a state of flux. Hence the aphorism has to be left on the threshold as '[a]rchitecture does not tolerate the aphorism' (Derrida 2008b, aphorism 11).

However – there is always a 'however' with the fragmentary – '[t]here is nothing more architectural than a pure aphorism' (Derrida 2008b, aphorism 43). In its (seeming) autonomy the aphorism is dogmatic, a self-legitimising, self-supporting structure that 'reassembles in itself, arranges the foreword, the project, the master of the work and the putting to work' (Derrida 2008b, aphorism 44). The preface – explanation, justification and authorization of a book – is always disordered; placed first, it was written last and thus disrupts logical, progressive order. Similarly the architectural is at its most authoritative when it revokes the traditional demands of the edifice, 'when it does everything to save itself [*faire économie*] a structural demonstration' (Derrida 2008b, aphorism 43). Thus the systematic is contaminated by, or hyphenated to, the asystematic, and the aphorism exists, if and when it does, to proclaim: 'This is not an aphorism' (Derrida 2008b, aphorism 21). An aphorism is never wholly self-present and is always less than or more than itself: a point, a plan, a preface, a project, a problem. It both promises and perjures, a performative that is also a constative, a plan of itself enacting itself, a separation and a contamination, an absolute nonabsolute singularity. What better way than through the fragmentary could Myles na gCopaleen be a stereotype while condemning stereotyping?

Attridge writes that singularity is that which explodes or defamiliarizes cultural norms, operating within them while moving beyond them. Its opposite, 'for which there are many names (triteness, imitativeness, banality, hackwork, cliché, stereotype), has always been seen as a mark of weakness and a cause of boredom and irritation' (2004, 64). Myles introduced otherness into Ireland's self-understanding and was vehemently opposed to the stagnation of language, the cliché being a particular target. He defined the cliché as

> a phrase that has become fossilised, its component words deprived of their intrinsic light and meaning by incessant usage. Thus it appears that clichés reflect somewhat the frequency of the incidence of the same situations in life. If this be so, a sociological commentary could be compiled from these items of mortified language. (CL 27 August 1943)

Myles took it upon himself to present Ireland through overworked and quotidian language use, and enable the country to see itself by defamiliarizing that which had become invisible through pervasiveness. So began the Myles na gCopaleen Catechism of Cliché, which lambasted lazy writing, lethargic thought and idle expression by simply listing, in Q&A format, the hackneyed expressions of papers and the streets.

> At what time did he speak Irish?
> At a time when it was neither profitable nor popular.
> With what cause did he never disguise the fact that his sympathies lay?
> The cause of national independence.
> And at what time?
> At a time when lesser men were content with the rôle of time-server and sycophant. (CL 1 May 1942)

Repeating this structure of beyond/within – moving beyond cliché from within cliché – Myles introduced an inventive singularity, albeit one a more mournful Myles said made his 'sole contribution to the terrestrial literatures [the refutation of] each and every claim to originality on the part of other writers' (CL 4 March 1958). Singularity, writes Attridge, 'is not *pure*: it is constitutively impure, always open to contamination, grafting, accidents, reinterpretation, and recontextualization. Nor is it inimitable: on the contrary, it is eminently imitable' (2004, 63). The singularity of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* is a radical impurity, a cultural commentary arising from the stagnation and creation of singularities, an extreme contamination of the pure and impure arising from cultural impasses and torpor.

The singular complexity of Myles na gCopaleen is compounded by authorial ambiguity, as not all of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* articles were written by Brian O'Nolan. As fragments, the articles are a symphilosophical – perhaps

sym-antiphilosophical – coming together of different voices that present commentaries on and performances of perceived societal tendencies, and Myles is neither O'Nolan nor the two writers who sometimes stood in for him, Niall Montgomery or Niall Sheridan.[7] Instead, in his multiplicity, he is a singularity, a polyphonic yet highly subjective voice on – and of – Ireland. This equivocality means that although the *Cruiskeen Lawn* is predicated on the provocative discourses of a single character, Myles is peripheral, a formless form; he becomes the means through which an idea, pun, invention, argument, theory is voiced and can provide whatever backdrop that theme requires. This contaminated centrality-marginality is performed in the positions assigned to Myles. Even when he is the greatest living novelist, advisor to the government and internationally renowned sage, he is a foreigner, external to the country's institutions. This distance permits him to present a picture of Ireland made uncanny – familiar and other – by an absurdist or overly pedantic focus purportedly derived from the clarity of an exterior position. Myles is no vulnerable, poematic hedgehog but he does operate through a form of singular dictation. He is the defamiliarized expression of Ireland, a form of authentic inauthenticity that turns dictation from the nation into singular diatribe. His is a border discourse of interruption, a singularity as the fragmentary absolute nonabsolute.

Myles wrote most passionately, at least in the early days, about the position of the Irish language in Ireland. He was radically opposed to those who wished to institutionally calcify Irish, claiming the 'language has been bullied by sod-faced University know-alls, who prattle about "correctness" and "exactness" or any other tab they think will justify their picturesque immunity from the hurly-burly of mart and dram-shop. This is of all cancers the most pernicious' (CL 19 April 1941). He was equally opposed to those who wanted to create a romanticized, rural Irish identity, mocking those

> fine Irishmen [who] have declared that we must all live like the good folk in the Gaeltacht, leading that simple life, speaking that far-from-simple language, presumably occupying ourselves with the uncomplicated agricultural chores which distinguish all ethnic groups the world over which have been denied the enervating influence of H.M. English language. (CL 25 April 1944)

He was fundamentally concerned with the gradual erosion of Irish, once mapping it out mathematically:

> 'Gaeltacht' means Irish-speaking district, 'Galltacht' [...] means English-speaking district. Now 'breac-Ghaeltacht' means part-Irish-speaking, part-English-speaking district. Clearly also 'breac-Ghalltacht' means precisely the same thing. If then in the equation breac-Ghaeltacht equals breac-Ghalltacht we observe the ordinary decencies of mathematics and cross out the 'breac' common to both, we get Gaeltacht equals Galltacht. Somebody's stole my Gael. (CL 25 November 1942)

Myles believed Irish needed to be treated as a vibrant, living language but was never ready to give way to an overly emotional engagement with the language, calling the Irish problem the very state of being Irish: '[T]he somewhat embarrassing condition of being an Irishman – that "man" whose mortal ailment is not so much nationalism as nationality' (CL 31 May 1943).

The way to keep Irish alive, however, was not in the retrospective creation of a history and, through that, identity. Thus many of the cultural events that started in the Gaelic Revival were, O'Nolan believed, no more than farcical fabrications of a non-existent past:

> The Oireachtas is in full swing. It is supported by considerable manifestations of step-dancing, pipe-playing, kilt-wearing and ball-play – for none of which, I may say, do the older hagiologies (for such is the sum of our literature) offer any authority. In troth the Oireachtas (Dinneen says the word means 'a synod') is a terrible exhibition of foreignism. Nay, worse, I know of no civilisation to which anything so self-conscious could be indigenous. Why go to the trouble of proving that you are Irish? Who has questioned this notorious fact? If, after all, you are not Irish, who is? (CL 23 October 1944)

Furthermore, he argues, the folk culture used to underpin national identity is not unique to Ireland but both 'national and universal. Indian, Icelandic and Kerry peasants will bore you with identical "stories"' (CL 23 October 1944). A national identity had to be based on more than an arbitrary myth of origin, as origins were fractured and subject to infinite regress: 'If nothing can live unless "rooted in tradition", how come that the works comprising that tradition exist at all? Surely somebody has to begin ... somewhere?' (CL 23 October 1944).

This problematization of the origin and originality is explored in Derrida's 'Aphorism Countertime.' The serial (il)logic of the fragmentary is such that each 'aphorism in the series can come before or after the other, before *and* after the other – and in the other series' (2008a, aphorism 9). Each aphorism is center of a series and the border of (another) series, and the fragmentary thus introduces a spatial and temporal exigency. It is through this radical temporality that Romeo and Juliet, as Derrida argues, can both impossibly die before the other *and* survive the other. Romeo sees the 'dead' Juliet and kills himself. Juliet awakens, sees the dead Romeo and takes her own life. Thus both see the other dead, both die before and after the other.[8] The aphorism is of an impossible synchronization, an 'exemplary anachrony, the essential impossibility of any absolute synchronisation' (Derrida 2008a, aphorism 11);

each aphorism is as separate and removed as (the dead) Juliet is from (the dead) Romeo. Yet the aphorism – and Romeo and Juliet – could not exist 'without the promise of a now in common' (Derrida 2008a, aphorism 13), a temporal space in which and from which comparisons and conjunctions can be made. Each aphorism is always in *contretemps*, in countertime or counterpoint. Their relation is one of syncopation. A normally unaccented note is stressed, a usually unstressed beat is foregrounded and the regular flow of the tempo is interrupted. Fragments interrupt ('normal') rhythm, producing an off-beat, irregular time, a time out of joint. This fragmentary time out of sync, with shifting beginnings and endings, enacts an Ireland out of step with itself, fictionalizing origins and traditions, trying desperately, impossibly, to distil purity from the impurity of the past.

This sense of the problems of origin and of originality is found in a *Cruiskeen Lawn* fragment on J.M. Synge.[9] Synge was one of the regular recipients of Myles's vitriol, as Myles felt that Synge, with Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats, was responsible for continuing the stereotype of the Irish as insular and pre-modern. Speculating on the possibility of translating the Hiberno-English of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* back into Irish, Myles writes:

> [L]et us assume that the 'Playboy' is in fact a masterpiece. Surely its unique and supreme merit lies in the fact that it is the *translation of a non-existent original*? Write that original and you cannot possibly avoid having something absolutely commonplace and pedestrian on your hands, shorn of the 'magic', the 'strangeness' of the play Synge wrote? (CL 24 January 1951, emphasis added)

Although the mocking aspect of Myles's writing must be noted, the very Derridean concept of art as the translation of that which never existed brings his work in line with the contaminations of singularity and operates as a concise description of Myles's own writings: the translation of a non-existent precursor, the dictation from a non-originary source, the referring to the self through the other.

The temporal complexities of the fragment are performed again in Myles's descriptions of academic piracy. Insisting there is nothing more 'scabrous than plagiarism,' Myles asserts the very worst kind of intellectual theft takes place when 'the dead steal from the live [sic] – how very thrice detestable!' (CL 20 July 1945). Attributing the following doggerel to Robert Lynd,[10] Myles writes:

> You say I copy Browning?
> (Loud Laughter)
> I was first and he was after
> Time did the clowning. (CL 20 July 1945)

He then insists Laurence Sterne copied one of his Keats and Chapman anecdotes, and that Walter Savage Landor's *Imaginary Conversations* (1824–1829) were based on his work. This is the confusion of time and lineage of Derrida's 'Envois.' As Socrates inherits from Plato and Plato inherits from Socrates, there is always 'the one in the other, the one in front of the other, the one after the other, the one behind the other' (1987, 19). Thus temporal progression is denied; in the off-beat space of the fragment, and in a country basing itself on a romantic past that never existed, origins become loose and the advancement of time uncertain. A similar situation was explored a few years earlier when Myles writes that a

> well-known painter of our own unfortunate day has confessed to me that he makes a good thing out of making copies of his own pictures – under a pseudonym of course. When he accidentally paints a better picture than the one he is copying, he denounces the original as a fake [...]. He even thinks it smart to get money by forging his own signature on cheques. (CL 14 August 1941)

The concept of forging one's own signature and signing inauthentically both disrupts the legitimacy of the signature and makes the most legal act fraught with uncertainty, while establishing, as Derrida later does, that the signature is predicated on the possibility of each signing being inauthentic, as each time one signs one is reproducing – forging if you will – the mark of one's singularity. Myles, be it consciously or unconsciously, both establishes the impermanence of the origin, the inauthenticity of the subject and the folly of presuming that structural or philosophical understandings operate within legal situations.

The colonized, even after the end of Empire, operate in a position of cultural anxiety and inauthenticity as their identity has long been bound up in the iteration of cliché and a power discourse aligned to their suppression. How does one find a voice that manages to be representative of a nation while not descending into the death of individuality and singularity? How does one speak without stereotypes and clichés while moving toward community and shared identity? How does one lament a devalued tongue? With the language of disaster – the fragment. Werner Hamacher described fragmentation as

> precisely the language that is not entirely language, not entirely itself but something other than, and different from language itself: [...] a fragment would be the language in which something other than itself – nothing, for example – also spoke and, therefore, a language in which at least two languages always spoke – a broken language, the break of language. (1996, 225)

Myles's fragmentary writings, especially during his early years, present and perform a broken language, a language other to itself. Irish is presented as a haunted tongue, split and interrupted by a turbulent history of invasion, rejection and attempted recuperation. No language is pure, but a language almost lost during a colonial period and subject to concerted efforts to revive it becomes excessively troubled by the question of legitimacy and faithfulness, albeit primarily for those by whom the language is not naturally spoken. In response to *Seachtain na Gaeilge*[11], and in rejection of the idea that Irish was something to be spoken only on rare, designated occasions – 'The stern decision to use Irish once a year makes it clear that the "Gaels," as they are called, know very little Irish, or none at all, and won't be bothered to learn it' (CL 13 October 1941) – on 12 August 1941 Myles staged an English-language week, interrupting his usual Irish language articles with English. He presented Irish anecdotes in assorted Gaelic and English type and combined spelling and pronunciation rules, proffering English spelled according to Irish phonics and Irish according to English phonics, which turned it into the visually disconcerting 'Kunahyv naw fwil Gwayleen er shool agut inyuv?' (Why aren't you using Irish today?) (CL 16 August 1941). 'For years,' he writes, 'I have been thwarted in my agitation to have the English matter in Irish newspapers printed in Gaelic type and *vice* (well, more or less) *versa*' (CL 19 April 1941). Through this phonic and typographic exchange Myles played on the fact that linguistic and cultural colonization, often not perceptible in one sense – the Irish text *sounds* exactly the same – is insidious in another – the Irish text has been *visually* transformed into a monstrous, Anglicized parody of itself.

Myles's performance of contaminated languages also took the form of macaronic jokes and homophones. Thus, for example, we get the following:

> 'An ndíolfá an bád sin liom má's é do *hull* é?', arsa mise.
> 'Níl *bawd* ar bith agam' ar seisean go colgach, 'imthigh *yacht*!'
>
> ['Will you sell me that boat please?' said I.
> 'I don't have any boat/brothel owner,' he said angrily, 'go away!'] (CL 5 September 1942)

The play of the joke, of course, is that the Irish for 'please' is 'más é do thoil é,' where 'thoil' sounds like the English 'hull.' 'Boat' is 'bád,' which sounds like 'bawd,' and 'go away' is 'imigh leat,'[12] where 'leat,' at a stretch, sounds like 'yacht.' But whereas the joke plays on the fact that a conversation about boats in Irish contains puns on boats in English, the respondent, also speaking Irish, chooses to hear the word 'bád' as the English 'bawd' and replies to the innocent question about purchasing a boat with a denial that he can sell a brothel keeper. The conversation oscillates between languages and plays on jokes that operate visually and aurally, innocently and sexually. This confusion – not knowing in which language verbs and nouns will be understood and whether an innocent question will produce offence – performs an

Ireland positioned between languages, histories, heritages and futures, and makes the Irish language, as Myles wrote, 'a dialectic rather than a dialect' (CL 19 April 1941).

This creative exploration of social and linguistic contamination and colonization is further performed in Myles's experiments in literal translations. The following, for example, is one of Myles's translations from Tomás Ó Criomhthain's narrative of life in the Gaeltacht, *An tOileánach*: 'There was a great surprise on me he coming from being over there the second time, because the two sons who were at him were strong hefty ones at that time, and my opinion was that they were on the pig's back to be over there at all' (CL 8 September 1941). Although the literal translation is amusing – Mark Twain did the same with German in *A Tramp Abroad* – it contains a cutting edge, a sneer at those who present literal translations as evidence of the quaint nature of a people and their romantic 'otherness.' As Myles later wrote, accusing Synge of fabricating a version of the stage Irishman by creating a pseudo-Irish dialect from the translation of singular idioms:

> Synge invented an 'English' language based on Irish which rings in the foreign ear with strangeness and charm. It is strictly an export job [...]. It is just the old unfunny trick of deadpan, absolutely literal translation from one language to another. (CL 24 January 1951)

But while condemning the depiction of the Irish-speaking populace as premodern peasants, O'Nolan was not blind to the difficulties of life in the Gaeltacht. An Irish-language tale in the *Cruiskeen Lawn* in 1941 presents nouns associated with urban life, consumer-related exchange and a certain level of prosperity 'dress,' 'shop,' 'money,' 'food,' 'town,' 'dresser,' 'polisman' [sic] – in English. While one could attempt to interpret this linguistic shift as indicative of the vibrancy of Irish, as a living language will always assimilate foreign words, this supposed vitality is undercut by the very specific economic nature of the nouns, which operate as a subtle condemnation of the poverty in which people in the west of Ireland lived: Words of prosperity are foreign to them.

> N'air bhí a' lánúin tamalt pósta, dúirt Biddy gur mhaith leithi *dress* úr fhághailt.
> '*Well*,' arsa Síomus, adeirse, 'rachainn go dtí an *shop* agus cheannochain *dress* úr duid go fonnmhar,' ar seisean, adeirse, 'ach chan fhuil pighinn amháin *money* agam.'
>
> [When they had been a married couple for a while, Biddy said that she'd like to get a new *dress*.
> '*Well*,' says Síomus, he said, 'I'd go to the *shop* and buy you a new *dress* eagerly,' said he, he said, 'but I don't have a single penny of *money*.'] (CL 30 August 1941)

More cutting than the reminder of Gaeltacht poverty, however, is the text's condemnation of those for whom the insertion of the English terms is inevitable. In pretending that Irish has no terms for law enforcer, or place where goods are exchanged for money, or money in excess of a penny, or even edible sustenance, Myles parodies those who position Irish and Irish-speakers as embedded within a remote, miserable past. In this guise Irish 'naturally' speaks of indigence and antiquity, and it is only through England and the English language that intimations of advancement can be seen. Through macaronic play Myles thus insists on the poverty of the west of Ireland, while denouncing those who would see that poverty as inherent to Irish and the Irish speaker.

Hence, in a fragmentary text in a fragmentary series, Myles uses an interrupted, layered language to signal a complex array of positions. The broken, disrupted style Myles employs performs the writing of an absolute nonabsolute singularity: the defamiliarizing explosion of a culture from within, a contaminated amalgamation of innovation and cliché, originality and repetition, purity and impurity. The fragmentary form of *Cruiskeen Lawn* thus presents a singular engagement with the problems and provocations of modern Ireland and evokes, through its fractures and ties to a non-existent whole, the inextricable contaminations between authenticity and inauthenticity in a country's identity.

NOTES

1. Current convention in referring to the different pseudonyms and personas of O'Nolan dictate that his works are attributed to the name under which he penned them, and general or biographical detail attributed to O'Nolan. As Myles na gCopaleen is popularly known as 'Myles,' this nomenclature has been retained, even in academic usage.
2. Perhaps the best known of Myles's parodic schemes, the Book Handling service (a play on *Buchhandlung*) offered to send professional handlers to people's houses and make their untouched books look well worn, thus elevating them to the status of well read. For increased fees the 'Superb Handling' bracket would insert learned comments into the margins and inscribe grateful dedications by the book's author.
3. Myles na gCopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' *The Irish Times*, 1 April 1966. Further references to 'Cruiskeen Lawn' will appear in the text abbreviated as CL, followed by date.
4. CIE is *Córas Iompair Éireann*, Ireland's transport provider. ESB stands for Electricity Supply Board, *The Bell* was a literary journal founded by Seán Ó Faoláin that ran from 1940–1945, and *Gaeilgoirí* are Irish-speakers, for Myles usually second-language speakers of Irish.
5. Blanchot criticized Schlegel for a formulation of the fragmentary, which rendered singularity as the 'closure of a perfect sentence' (1993, 359), writing that Schlegel's fragment is to be faulted for 'having its center in itself rather than in the field that *other* fragments constitute along with it' and forgetting the fragment 'makes possible new relations that except themselves from unity, just as they exceed the whole' (359). In other words, Blanchot rejects the sense of the fragment as a totality, as a monad or absolute closure, and instead insists the fragment is exemplary of a writing we have understood through the absolute nonabsolute. His opposition is based on a misreading – Schlegel's fragments and Blanchot's fragmentary are in fact reworkings of the same idea.
6. The image of 'fragments circled in white' also clearly refers to the way the text operates on the page; there are elisions, white spaces, circling the fragmented text.
7. In a letter to the Department of Finance (13 November 1946, Boston College Archives), O'Nolan names Niall Montgomery and Niall Sheridan as his substitutes. For more on this, see Taaffe 2008, 126–127.
8. Juliet's death, it should be noted, is as real to Romeo as her eventual death after him is to the remaining characters.
9. J.M. Synge was an Irish playwright and poet and an important figure in the Irish Literary Revival. He is best known for his play *The Playboy of the Western World*, which resulted in riots during its first run in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1907.
10. Robert Lynd was an Irish writer and essayist who, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Brian O'Nolan, wrote for the *New Statesman* from 1913 to 1945, most famously under the pseudonym YYs (pronounced 'wise').
11. Irish-language week, established by *Conradh na Gaelige* in 1903 in an attempt to increase the use of the Irish language in everyday affairs.
12. The difference in spelling between the original text and my own is due to spelling reforms that took place. The spelling I have used is modern Irish spelling.

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7 Rusty Rails and Parallel Tracks

Trans-latio in Yoko Tawada's *Das nackte Auge*

Leslie A. Adelson

Travel and translation are the two most common points of entry for a growing field of international scholarship on the contemporary literary author Yoko Tawada, who writes primarily in German and Japanese to probe, in writing, structures of language and forms of innovation that might properly be called productive in one sense or another.[1] As I have summarized elsewhere, 'Tawada scholars generally regard spatial movement and translational turns of various sorts as crucially and productively linked to a reinvention of subjectivity as a conjoined literary and social project in the author's oeuvre' (2011, 158). A prominent scholar of new translation studies in Germany, Doris Bachmann-Medick calls for more refined critical attention to specific 'forms of movement' in contemporary literary texts generally in order to understand cultural transformations in subjectivity as social life in Europe is transformed by diverse new technologies of 'spatial appropriation' around 2000 (see Bachmann-Medick 2009a, 257–58).[2] Whereas travel and translation frequently appear linked in both Tawada scholarship and the author's literary projects, and whereas the linkage does serve the writer's explicit and repeatedly invoked passion for transformation in the German sense of *Verwandlung*, I will argue here that the linkage is neither casual nor coincidental but pivotal for the very form that transformation takes in key passages from Tawada's German-language novel *Das nackte Auge* (2004; translated as *The Naked Eye*, 2009), a Japanese version of which appeared simultaneously with a title in kanji referencing a 'traveling' naked eye.[3] Transformation for Tawada does not necessarily but might conceivably involve transformations of subjectivity. Tawada's early poetic lectures were published under the rubric and title *Verwandlungen: Tübinger Poetik-Vorlesungen* (1998; Transformations: Tübingen Poetics Lectures), and both the term and the motif figure prominently in subsequent works as well. Transformation is, however, not tied to questions of subjectivity alone for Tawada.

Because the argument advanced in this chapter concerns something related to train travel in particular – yet another ubiquitous motif in Tawada's many literary experiments and countless biographical descriptions of the author's arrival in Europe via the Trans-Siberian Railway in 1979 – it is important to clarify that the argument here will not pivot on the trope of trains as such but on the figure of the rails. Petra Fachinger persuasively

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