Three Chances

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I. *Seven Diaphorisms*

Like all of you, I am a slave looking for a master I can dominate.

Television is the opium of those who do not relish addiction.

Lie to me, please, and then I'll believe you. Sincerely yours.

A father is an unnecessary evil but also a random ghost who makes sense fitfully, once we have lost him.

The end of history is the wet dream of capitalism: balance sheets that never dry.

I hereby donate my heart, my liver and my penis to the body without organs.

Walnut Street, early April. A man walks steadily westward on the other side of the street, half in shadows. He jerks his head to the right and in the oblique morning light it explodes into shimmering translucent spittle. Jeff Wall all over again.

II. *On Conley and on Error*

Tim Conley has published a wonderful book entitled *Joyces Mistakes: Problems of Intention, Irony, and Interpretation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003). I have rarely laughed as hard and as often while reading a book on Joyce. Not only does it contain hilarious one-liners and facetious remarks, it also forced me to look at basic issues of literary hermeneutics in a new key. Conley questions concepts like sense, authority and intention all of which are not entirely circumscribed by Joyce. This is the book about Joyce that Wittgenstein would have written if he had read *Finnegans Wake* and concluded that Joyce suffered from dyslexia. If philosophy begins with wonder and ends with therapy, the field of hermeneutics opens out when one catches oneself reading or writing a mistake. From Rimbaud's fatidic *"Il faute être absolument moderne"* (quoted p.39) to Benda's classic *La traduction des clercs* (quoted p.42), via Defoe, Melville, Moore, Pound, Lewis, Woolf, Blanchot, Pessoa, Saramago, we are ushered into a gallery of accidental errors and productive misreaders, enlisted in Spooner's confederacy of compulsive blunderers, punsters, stutterers, manglers, and distorters of homely truths. As the Appendix states, quoting Fred Allen, "Hanging's too good for a man who makes puns, no, he should be drawn and quoted." (p. 152) Conley's humor is not of the wisecracking type we meet with cultural critics like Slavoj Zizek. It is closer to Nabokov's unforgettable Kinbote from *Pale Fire*, without the touch of paranoia, or germane to a Pierre Ménard who would copy assiduously entire pages of *Don Quichote* but would misspell, skip lines and indulge in countless slips of the pen, Conley has the knack of performing or dramatizing what he talks about, which is error, error, and again error.

Allen's quip is taken from the Appendix in which Conley lists all the misquotations he has found in books he has quoted so far (I am sure that he forgets a few, quite deliberately). If he does not spare Robert Graves or Hélène Cixous, John Bishop, or Anthony Burgess, he proudly includes himself in the list. This is perhaps why, in half the quotations one finds in this book, the last "unquote" sign is missing. In *Joyces Mistakes*, quotes and misquotes seamlessly bleed into one another, thus generating a meta-discursively self-conscious text that provides a critical rationale for their pervasive osmosis or anastomosis. This almost invisible process actually begins with the title: "Joyces Mistakes." It is likely that younger readers will not have winced; after all, apostrophes are small diacritics whose absence is rarely caught by a Spellcheck (which might be why more and more students spell the possessive "its" as "it's"). Here, one has to wait until p. 83, after having followed a stormy discussion of Romantic irony via Schlegel's view of the bad infinity created by an unstoppable ironization of irony by itself to find something like a confession: "One reader of this book may look at its title's lack of apostrophe and say, 'how ironic, how clever of Conley,' with whatever degree of enjoyment or dis-

taste. (...) Another reader may certainly see nothing in the title *Joyces Mistakes* but incompetence on the part of the author, and say, 'how ironic that Conley should err in a study or errors.'" (p.83-84) After all, we have the example of Joyce himself, and Conley has not missed the presence in our libraries' comedies of errors of "that oft-cited but undiscovered volume, *Finnegan's Wake*." (p. 51)

In a chapter that goes even further in this ludic performativity, Conley multiplies typos: "Intermittences of sullemn fulminance" begins a first-person narrative with "it is a sumny afternoon in April." (p.95) I have to confess that I read "sunny" the first time—so much for hurried readers: their error is not to see, in their normativizing precipitation, the beautiful mistakes carefully, strategically planted by authors. But when we stumble upon "Cvortazar," "Jouyce" and "attenmtion," a doubt creeps in. A man of genius makes no mistakes; we have learned our lesson: errors are volitiommal and open the mortals of discovery, please pay more attemntion. Note however that "(t)he last thing I want is to be ironic" (p. 97). We are at our most ironic when we don't want it. Isn't this how we should read *Finnegans Wake* anyway? The same strategy for misreading ought to be generalized to the whole corpus of Joyce's works. Conley has a lot of ground to cover in these pages. It is clear that the vexed issue of textual studies and the heated discussions of *Ulysses*'s competing editions provide an irrefutable proof of the principle's validity as most scholars will agree. Drawing heavily upon Vicki Mahaffey's groundbreaking "Intentional Error" and the formidable array of evidence mustered by Christine Froula in her now classic *To Write Paradise: Style and Error in Pound's Cantos* (1984), Conley has no difficulty in multiplying instances of erroneous tangles and textual riddles that abound in the publication history of Joyce's works.

Conley has a few wonderful pages on the famous telegram Stephen received in Paris: COME BACK NOTHER DYING FATHER. In fact, was it Mother or Nother who was dying? This sustained discussion is excellent and uses the Morse code to show how close an M is to an N. Debunking terms such as "final," "authorial" and "intentions"—often used precisely in that order and without their scarequotes—Conley attacks convincingly two fundamental critical "fallacies": intentionality and authority. If this looks at times like the rehearsing of post-structuralist arguments, they are deployed in a very convincing fashion. He shows very subtly how Joyce decided to delete from *Stephen Hero* the passage mocking "the hand of Jesuit authority" firmly placed upon Stephen's heart, only to re-inscribe that mockery more cunningly in subsequent rewritings and expansions (p.60). In a bold comparison of how passages are anthologized and annotated in student's editions, he forces us to steer away from the idea of accuracy and editorial perfection. He points out rather viciously the paradox of McHugh's *Finnegans Wake Experience*, an experience of reading assuming that one can be a "virgin" facing the text and yet leading to a series of guides and commentaries for other readers. Conley is at times sympathetic to Umberto Eco's semiotics although of course much more skeptical when it comes to defining what an "ideal reader" of *Finnegans Wake* can be, and

comes down hard on E. D. Hirsch's idea of an "objective interpretation," showing how Jerry Hobbs and Hirsch both offer mere "banalities" couched in "ludicrous sentences" (p. 120).

Conley is convincing in his critical readings of other critics while failing at times when he uses his method as a procedure for reading the texts themselves. He pays close attention to lapses in the wording of McGee or Hayman's books, or provides ironic parallel accounts of the Wake's architecture in Campbell and Robinson, Tindall and Glasheen, but often remains at a level of self-awareness that prevents him from grappling with the text. This limitation comes from a constant hesitation between a skeptical position—there is not truth, all we have are varieties of error—and a more positive assessment of Joyce's strategies half-way between Fritz Senn's cautious philological probity and Michael Groden's textual and historical knowledge. At times, the position is almost Derridian but with a Rortyan slant: "The ghosts of erroneous interpretations—and all interpretations, I propose to argue in this chapter, can be thought of as errors—mean that reading is a haunted act." (p. 118) There is nevertheless a crucial difference between concluding that we will never be able to explicate the full truth about a text (in its meaning or in its textual history) and the somewhat glib comment that all interpretations are erroneous. We fall back quickly into all the paradoxes of lying: how could one lie without knowing the truth? How can one speak of an error without having at least an adumbration of what the true meaning might be?

One example will serve here. Conley quotes the moment of almost slapstick comedy in "Cyclops" when Alf Bergan claims that he has just seen Paddy Dignam walking in Capel Street with Willy Murray, adding: "He's no more dead than you are." This allows Joyce to use his father's famous reply: "Maybe so... They took the liberty of burying him this morning." After this, Conley comments: "The reader cannot positively confirm or deny that Alf Bergan, whom Bloom guesses to be the author of the 'U.P.' postcard, saw Paddy Dignam in Capel Street; because the reader is not privy to such a scene. This is a remarkable lacuna in a novel that so exhaustively provides data and has its own kind of positioning system by which characters' whereabouts can be confirmed. Alf's response that Dignam 'is no more dead than' Joe is a metafictional wink in that it is correct: Dignam the fictional construct is as alive or as dead as any other fictional construct" (p. 130). Here, I think that Conley's skepticism makes him miss the point: the joke can only be a joke if we assume that the scene 'Hades' had evoked earlier so masterfully concerned Paddy Dignam and not a heap of stones for instance. There is no doubt that Paddy Dignam is "dead" in *Ulysses*—the limitation provided by its being a fiction that we, as readers, cannot verify by opening his grave, say, cannot change anything: there can be a consistent truth in fictional worlds. To seem to think that the only criterion for truth would be real life verifiability is a negation of fiction's autonomy.

In fact, Conley generalizes the principle of error or erring-ness to modernism as a whole. Modernism would be an esthetic movement intent upon "failing" as no

one dares fail. Such a rush to over-generalization follows the pattern of a passage to the limit, often the counterpart of mainly thematic readings listing all the occurrences of sentences that imply mistakes, typos, and errors. The idea of a pervasive modernist failure was endorsed by Blanchot and Sartre more or less at the same time, but it seems at first blush anachronistic to apply it systematically to Joyce's modernism. Can we ascribe the idea to Joyce who would then have passed it on to Beckett? Beckett often reiterated that "to be an artist is to fail" and perhaps he is echoing Stephen Dedalus's proud claim that he is not "afraid to make a mistake, even a great mistake, a lifelong mistake." Each time Beckett develops this idea (as for instance in the German letter of 1937), he opposes his decision to "fail" to what he perceives as Joyce's mastery over language and indisputable artistic triumph. Joyce's triumph is predicated on a mistake that will lead him upward while one finds no such confidence in the redeeming powers of art in Beckett. It might help to distinguish between "failing better" and "failing worse" as *Ill Seen Ill Said* tends to suggest. As we know or soon learn, there are many ways of failing, and one might want to distinguish between sin and error, and also between the triumphant failure of an esthete who takes Lucifer as a guide and stakes all on heresy as a mode of salvation and the subjective destitution that a confrontation with radical negativity and the "night" of non-being entails—to allude once more to Blanchot. But it does not suffice to multiply ironical strategies or use rhetorical indirection so as to avoid being caught in an error. As Lacan brilliantly showed, it is precisely those who want not to be "dupes" that are most prone to err, and Conley is no exception to the Dupin syndrome. It is because there is something like truth that *Les non-dupes errent* will always double and invert the "law" upon which Symbolic systems are based, *les Noms-du-Père*. Lacan agrees with the later Wittgenstein.

In *Wittgenstein's Poker*, David Edwards and John Eidinow have described quite entertainingly how all the Cambridge students who worked with Wittgenstein started imitating his mannerisms, the most remarkable being the habit of pondering a difficult question in silence for a while, until a formidable slapping of the forehead with one's fist, accompanied by a loud "Ach Ja!," would signal a solution. Although this masochistic way of thinking offers no guarantee of avoiding mistakes, we would need to apply such a procedure when we are bogged down in semantic uncertainties and perverse Joycean *coincidentia oppositorum*. Another cautionary tale is provided by paragraph 506 of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: "The absent-minded man who at the order 'Right turn!' turns left, and then, clutching his forehead, says 'Oh! Right turn' and does a right turn.—What has struck him? An interpretation?" A Joycean or a Freudian "intrepidation of our dreams," yes.

III. *Seven More Diaphorisms*

Like all of you, I am a slave thinking I am a master who is dominated by mere circumstances.

Vision is the opium of those who are addicted to deafness.

Never lie to me, please, if you want me to deceive you sincerely.

A father is a necessary evil and a random ghost who makes sense once we are lost without him.

The end of history is the wet dream of capitalism: balance sheets that will soon dry.

I hereby donate my brain, my pancreas and my anus to the body without organs.

A man walks steadily westward on the other side of the street, half in shadows. He carries his head in his arm. In the oblique morning light, it explodes into shimmering translucent spittle. Never do the Jeff Wall trick again.