

## "Writing and Failure"

In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.

-- Emerson

My childhood friend Nic and I recently had a phone conversation about my forthcoming memoir *Old White Man Writing*, which I'd sent him an advance copy of, and which deals, among other things, with personal experiences of shame, guilt, failure, and the like. With some vexation, Nic opined that I had said enough on these topics - especially failure (he had also read my previous memoir, *Failure: An Autobiography* [2007], with similar feelings) - and should now move on. I knew where he was coming from. Nic is a surgeon; he cannot afford to spend much time thinking about failure. He and his patients count on positive outcomes.

It was only after I got off the phone with him that I had my "staircase moment", and realized I should have replied that I couldn't move on. I had no intention of moving on. Moving on would not only be impossible for me, but undesirable. The subject of failure, and its associated chagrins, is my beat. It is what I know best. And aren't we supposed to write what we know? As an autobiographer, I have never questioned this truism. In my chosen vocation, I am as committed to failure as Nic is to

success. It would be foolish indeed for me to renounce my literary bread and butter -- rancid though it may be. (And the rancider the better.) Nor do I imagine I'm alone in this regard. For writers, the subject of failure is broad, universal, and inexhaustible. We may prefer to remember our successes, but it is our failures that have formed us - another truism, and one finely delineated in Stephen Marche's small gem of a book, *On Writing and Failure* (2023), from which I take the title of this article. (A failure of originality on my part.) Marche writes: "Even in the face of massive success, a little part, maybe a big part, maybe the biggest part of the writer's heart, dwells in failure." Sing it, Stephen.

Failure is certainly the burrow I dwell in (with a nod to Kafka and Dickinson - strange but apt bedfellows here!), sheltered from the harsh, noonday light of success. For success, you see, requires follow-up, and I am not good at follow-up. Follow-up entails pressure of a kind I find unbearable. My way is rather to choke in the clutch, and return to the bench - or better, the dugout; the back of the dugout - to nurse my wounds. An ignoble reaction, to be sure, but more congenial to my being than having to run around the bases and deal with the public (and private) embarrassments of acclaim, which is always felt by me to be spurious. The bench, the dugout, the burrow are where I

belong. In a sense, I represent an alternative version of the runaway bunny - the one who never even thought of leaving home.

Reading Marche's book produced in me a double shock of recognition. Not only did he beat me to the punch on the title I ended up choosing for this article, "Writing and Failure"; he also scooped me on the first title I had considered: "Writing as Failure".

Writing itself is failure. Even the successes are failures. In the best work, the intentions of the author fall away, leaving an open field for readers to play in, and they create meanings that may have nothing to do with the author's... Nobody knows what they're writing. Intention never aligns with result. You never know how readers will react. It's all what quantum physicists call "spooky action at a distance". And here we come to the real crux of the matter at last: the spirit, and its daemon language, live in failure.

Then again, it appears the English romantic poet Shelley scooped us both -- me by 186 years, and Marche by 202. In *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), Shelley wrote:

...for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness;...but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the Poet.

Compared to its original conception, the literary product we end up with inevitably falls short.

So why write at all? Why not be like Margaret Wise Brown's actual bunny and just be content to fantasize? Because (you may reply) those who do that are just dreamers. Yet Shelley seems to think those dreamers are closer to the truth of how the imagination really works. In their inability to see the original inspiration reproduced in the actual final product, these poets-in-their-minds succeed in preserving the integrity of the unwritten idea in all its pristine, imaginary perfection. Maybe Springsteen was on a similar wavelength when he wrote, in "Jungleland" (1975): "And the poets down here don't write nothin' at all/They just stand back and let it all be..." Sing it, Bruce.

Marche stole my thunder, and Springsteen stole Marche's, and Shelley stole all three. So where does that leave us? Just picking up the pieces of the now-exploded pretensions we had to any originality or truth-telling we once deluded ourselves into thinking we possessed? As Marche reminds us, language, in its very essence as an expressive medium, is bound to fail.

I would add here only a footnote to these other writers: to consider language as a vehicle of failure is also to believe in it as a consolatory balm. Writing as therapy. In my youth, I used to scoff at such a degraded, vulgarized idea of the literary art. But now that I have reached the beginning of old age, the need for the therapy of ordered thought seems the

starting point of all writing. We write out of a need to summon hope and reassurance in the face of life's pains and disappointments. Following on the idea of language as failure, writing then becomes a kind of specialized homeopathic remedy, whereby you inoculate yourself with the substance you are fighting against. "Success destroys what gives success". That is Marche's gloss on Updike, whom he quotes (presumably from *Self-Consciousness* [1989], though no explicit source is given):

Most of the best fiction is written out of early impressions, taken in before the writer became conscious of himself as a writer...the 'successful' writer acquires a film over his eyes... The binge, the fling, the trip - all attempt to shake the film and get back under the dining room table, with a child's beautifully clear eyes.

Ah yes, the spot under the dining-room table! Our safe and happy place. Sing it, Updike. Don't we remember it well? What a fresh and inexhaustible delight it always was, as a child, to slide under the table during dinner parties and enjoy a perfect vantage-point - seeing without being seen -- from which it was possible to regard the ungainly spectacle of adult shoes and legs, and thereby discomfit the adult sense of propriety. In writing, Updike suggests, we seek to regain that lost under-the-table perspective.

Becoming an adult is yet another a kind of failure, one of whose tributaries is the inability to live up to a - maybe *the* --

chief vow of childhood (mine, anyway): to never forget, when you became an adult, what it felt like - *really felt like* -- to be a kid. To always remember the firm childhood resolution to "never do that kind of thing when I grow up". (E.g., like the songs of Frank Sinatra; drink scotch; have political discussions. Of course I have long since broken all three pledges; and what's worse, I can't say I regret it. But that's another one of my failures, and I guess I'll just have to live with it.) Putting oneself back under the dining room table - which is to say, writing -- is to relive that childhood vow, and, if only in one's imagination, where the coal still, and always, burns bright, attain once again to the child's infallible state.