

THOUGHTS ON THE BOOK *FAILURE: A WRITER'S LIFE*

I've been billing my book *Failure: A Writer's Life* (2013) as a catalog of literary monstrosities. On one level, it is a loosely organized collection of vignettes and convolutes. What I mean by that is that it contains small snapshots of stories in the history of literary failure, small moments that one can reflect on. And then there are these larger convolutes, which are more unruly sheaves dealing in larger concepts. Even thinking back to writing my 2006 book *Ether: The Nothing That Connects Everything*, I never really wrote in chapters. It was very hard for me to send out "chapters" as excerpts or samples; in *Ether* there are four distinct parts, but they are too long to be called chapters, I think. In *Failure*, the sections range from two pages to upwards of sixty pages. So the currency of this book is not the chapter but these more unconventionally sized bits.

One of the premises of this book is thinking about the unpublished and how that impacts artistic work. When I think about the unpublished, it encompasses not only unpublished literary works, stories, or poems that people write, but also the world of data—all of the things that challenge the literary and this mass of noise and text on the web—and how that affects the literary now.

One of the theoretical moves that I make early on—and this was one of those things that you find serendipitously, and you realize that it unlocks all these extremely rich associations—there was a very short 1957 essay by Marguerite Duras called, "One Out Of A Hundred Novels Makes It To Publication."¹ In it, she said published literature is merely one percent of all that exists, all that is written. And the idea that the published is one percent is obviously by now, in the internet age, a quaint notion. That is a huge number compared to now, when there are so many forms of subliterate and paraliterate kinds of machine writing. Duras's idea, or her suggestion, was that what's more interesting is not the world of the published, but the vast abyss of the unpublished. That black abyss is where we should be turning our attention.

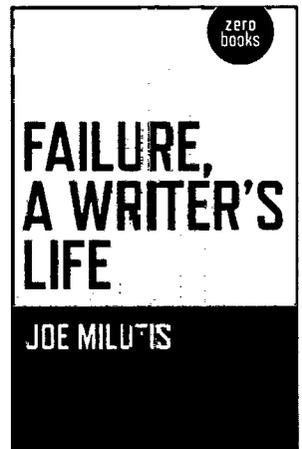
If you know anything about Duras's writing itself, there is this interesting destructive force, but it's almost like a loving embrace of failure that is implicit in her work. That turning of consciousness to the destructive force or the abyss of the unpublished is just part of her attitude toward her work and the creative act, and toward negativity in general.

The reason her essay on the unpublished became such an important tool was that in it, she defined the unpublished as "virtual literature." It was very interesting to me that this notion of the failed, unpublished text could be tied to what we call the virtual. At first, that seems very odd because we think of the virtual as something like wearing our VR (virtual reality) headsets and we're in our caves and we experience electronic literature in this very glowing, floating way. Then, to think about the virtual

as something like this black abyss of the unpublished seems counterintuitive—but a very interesting thing to pursue.

Recoding failed, unpublished work as virtual literature is a way to think about ways in which we can take this unpublished material and turn it and revalue it and transform our notions of it and recycle it and create a new futuristic literature out of it. My gambit in the book is that virtual literature, and what we think of as the future of literature, is not as much this electronically enhanced form of immersivity, but rather more like what we do every time we delete an email. So it's about paying attention to the choices we make about what we're going to read and what we're not going to read, and how we frame the sense of readability in the face of the vastness of the data that's available to us on the web.

One of the things that I think is a pleasure and a challenge in giving talks like this in specific places, and addressing specific audiences in specific ways, is to talk about these ideas in a new context and in new ways. I'm not the kind of person who does the same shtick from location to location to location. We're in the Visual Studies Workshop, so you're going to have different interests in this book than, for example, the poets who I talked to a couple days ago in a different context. But in some ways it's very easy to address this talk to people at VSW because of the fact that you have this really massive, almost unthinkable archive of boring photographs, the collection of photographs that street photography vendor Joseph Selle produced for Fox Movie Flash. I actually spend some time talking about the Selle collection in this book. There's a million plus photos of people on the streets of San Francisco from the 1940s to the 1970s in it, and I'm sure some of you who have worked with the collection have a palpable sense of what a million photos mean. But then I doubt that's the case; I doubt anyone can have any human-scale "sense" of what a million photos mean. So I'm very interested in these numerically monstrous archives—what we do with them, how we think about them, and how they strain the boundaries of thinkability. I don't know how many people here have been exposed to some of the work that came out of the Selle collection. But take, for example, Elisabeth Tonnard's 2007 book *Two of Us*, published by Visual Studies Workshop Press—here is somebody who created an artist's book, and she moved through the data of this massive archive with a constraint that she would compose her book from the images she found of people walking in pairs that spoke to her



in some way. It had to be two people walking together. In some ways she creates an ethnographic limitation, while reflecting on the uncanny nature of the double.

Tonnard placed a single word from Charles Baudelaire's *Les Sept Vieillards* (1857) on the corner of each page, so there's this connection to strolling, tying the flaneur of Baudelaire's nineteenth-century Paris to the more quotidian or accidental flaneur of mid-twentieth-century America on the streets of San Francisco. It's a moment that all these people didn't think would be immortalized in any way, but then all of a sudden was captured by this street vendor photographer. So here is an example of something we could call virtual literature, where somebody is creating a literary artifact or creating literature out of a vast archive of data, and finding a way to frame it and aestheticize it in some way.

Another project that came out of the Selle archive is David Mount's 2008 project *17523 Pictures*², which is almost like GIF art (before GIF art was GIF art, I guess you could say), where you're seeing what kind of accidental animations happen. He has 17,523 pictures from the Selle archive for a moving image installation, and it appears he gives the exact same amount of time for each still frame as a way to give it some kind of dynamism, but also to give us a sense of the immensity and the diversity of the archive. So these are two very modest ways of framing this virtuality and framing the vastness of the data that's available through this one archive.

On the one hand, there's this form of creative filtering: figuring out how to take these artifacts or these archives and create new artifacts to produce sensation and be able to understand and read these archives that dwarf human readability. But then, of course, if you think about Selle and the one million photos his Fox Movie Flash company made, in relationship to the project of Google Maps, the one million photos is completely dwarfed by Google's vast photographic "project," the surrealism of which is mined by things like Jon Rafman's *The Nine Eyes of Google Street View* (2011), where he's made an artist's book based on the odd things that the Google mapping camera picked up, in which the faces are blotted out because of legal issues. Because the data set for Google Maps is so massive, that has to be done by a computer algorithm, and obviously a computer algorithm is going to be imprecise sometimes. It's not going to blur the faces out completely, or it's going to blur out the wrong area. There are certain rules in the Google mapping universe where, whether they are privacy rules, or an attempt to make a relatively abstract representation rather than something that has traces of history and identity, one must make distinctions between the utility of the map per se, and the multifarious Real that Google's process records or misrecords. The dream of being a purely rational, scientific, or utilitarian map is always thwarted.

There are always images that make it into Google Maps that have sort of an artistic quality, or give more information about the people who live in that area than Google Maps wants to admit—things like socioeconomic markers or images of violence that all of a sudden the Google car picks up. One of the things I want to

think about besides the artistic projects that emerge out of these vast data sets and how we can think of them as types of literary artifact, are the projects that deconstruct the filter entirely.

For example, somebody like André Breton and his book *Nadja* (1928). In his surrealist manifesto he talked about the surrealists as "we, who have made no effort whatsoever to filter."³ He talks about blackening paper with writing, and the whole idea of automatic writing was to just write and write and write and write, and not let the conscious mind filter what one is writing—to get at something by resisting the literary impulse. Instead of trying to make something that was intentionally pretty or intentionally compelling, to connect oneself to a machine, whether it's a typewriter, a radio, or whatever, and by engaging in these inhuman dynamics of the machine, to generate something unexpected that might actually, in some way, tell us more about what it means to be human. The fact is that all of these experiments that extend the literary really force this question about what constitutes the human.

How is the inhuman an interesting force in the creation of literature? How do we make alliances with the inhuman when we create these new forms and when we create new mechanical assemblages for creating art? Again, that's something that VSW and Rochester should be very down with. In fact, photography, which is of course very important here in Rochester, also becomes an interesting competing force in relationship to the work.

Failure is about virtual literature, the writing impulse, and the failure of the literary impulse, but it's also about how literature itself has failed. Or how it responds to competitors like photography. For example, the competing forces of photography and literature are evident even in a book like *Nadja*. *Nadja* is an interesting example where Breton makes alliances with photography. He's using photography to show the readers where he had different experiences. He brings the reader to various places that he and Nadja inhabited at certain points in their affair. He shows objects that were talismanic for their relationship, and he creates a sort of catalog of the things and the places that this love affair circulated around.

One of the interesting things I noticed was that the photo of Breton at the end of the book was by somebody named Henri Manuel. Breton never talks about Henri Manuel, but Manuel was somebody who, in his lifetime, took over one million photos for the French government. I almost feel this is a weird form of competition, this idea that the surrealists are trying to break out of literature to get at life. Imagine the activity of somebody taking one million photos and how much more that connects one to life and the life process than the act of writing, which tends to be very lonely. Breton even said to Nadja in this book, when she asked him for some of his books, "Life is other than what one writes."⁴

There is almost a self-loathing toward writing, because writing is this huge filter. Think about the way words filter reality as opposed to the photograph, which is able to capture reality in some kind of fine-grained way and with an almost inhuman speed. For us

to represent the same thing with words takes a lot more craft and is much more apt to fail the reality that you are describing. If you think about it, even back in surrealism, the competing forces were between photography and writing. Susan Sontag said in *On Photography* (1977) that photography managed to outstrip the centuries-old dream of the surrealist to offend the bourgeois sensibility. There was something about photography that was more surrealist than surrealism itself. As Julio Cortázar noted, the reason for this was the fact that photography “reconstitutes things in their true stupidity.” This idea comes from Cortázar’s story “Blow-Up” (1959), which is really about the competing forces of the typewriter and the camera to make sense of an event.⁵ This comes into play in Antonioni’s 1966 film of the same name, but the film seems to be more about photography and the breakdown of photographic representation and the ultimate unknowability of the scene that the photographer takes a picture of. In the story, it’s really a metafiction about these representational regimes and how they capture the everyday—how they capture reality in a way that we don’t even really quite understand.

When Cortázar says, “[Photography] reconstitutes things in their true stupidity,” what he’s implying is that when we’re writing, we’re constantly filtering reality through human intelligence. We’re constantly making these decisions that are sorted through the linguistic impulse, whereas when we take a photo we’re not even quite sure what it means. The meaning comes after the fact, or there’s this ambiguity of the photograph. This is why, for example, film theorist André Bazin thought that widescreen film was more religious, in a way, but definitely a higher form of filmmaking than that which was montage-based. In montage, where you had a lot of editing, you knew what the things you recorded meant and you were organizing meaning so that it conveyed some kind of an emotion, some kind of narrative, some sort of thread through the images. Whereas if you had widescreen CinemaScope, you were able to allow the ambiguity of the image to flourish and it was a more religious experience for Bazin. It was as if the filmmaker was not playing God, but witnessing God. When the filmmaker edits in a way that gives reality a certain intention it’s a way in which the director plays God, but if the filmmaker does not edit with this intentionality it’s as if you let the ambiguity of God in everyday life be manifest. You’re not pointing to things and you’re not directing vision but you are, in some ways, emulating this “stupidity,” or the blandness of reality without human meaning. For some, that’s a mystical take on consciousness.

As we move into the internet age, there’s a point at which literature—in competing with or allying with the machinic impulse—starts to become something that is no longer literature. We can even think of this just in terms of cross-genre work. For example, if a writer starts working in film or photography, at what point is it still considered writing or literature? At what point does that artist cross over and start to be a photographer? Since we’re dealing in the world of the computer, with data, where photography, text, video, and sound can all be reduced to the same type of digital format,

are these notions of media specificity even worthwhile? A lot of the questions I ask have to do with why we are even holding to this notion of literature.

It’s very interesting to talk about Breton again, and this is something that’s not in my book but powered the ideas behind it. I had one of those mind-blowing museum experiences in the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. It was the first time I had gone through the Pompidou. There is a painting there called *Écriture Rose* (1958–59), by an artist named Simon Hantaï. It’s the same thing you get with a Jackson Pollock painting when you see it in real life and it’s overwhelming and it immerses you. And the marks with which it is composed seem like a minutely obsessive secret writing that somehow became a purely abstract field of color.

It was interesting to see how this type of writing-as-painting or painting-as-writing might give us tools to think about literary works crossing media, and how the literary can become pure action, color, and energy just like abstract expressionism. But because of Breton, this connection was left unexplored. To step back a little, Hantaï was an associate of Breton, and Breton became very famous for excommunicating people who had doctrinal differences with the core members of the group. Hantaï wanted the surrealists to recognize that action painting was a form of automatic writing, and vice versa. Breton refused that connection. Here is the missing link between painting and writing that I think is coming to the fore today when people are thinking about the very nimble ways one can mine and access and shape large portions of data. Many writers now—especially those who are dealing with data—are writing in nearly the same way that action painters painted, except that now we’re more than fifty years past the moment in the history of art when that was done. It is just now being taken up as a form of active data processing and writing for the pure dynamic of it and the curiosity of what results. Among other things, you can think about the ways people have used textual materials like spam. Or you can think of poetic movements like Flarf, which uses primarily internet search materials to create lyric poetry, but whose adherents also give themselves the license to write things that are, as they say, “cute,” “cloying,” and “unPC.”⁶ There is this exploration not only of internet noise and spam and comments box junk from YouTube videos, but also a deep exploration of the inappropriateness of internet language and all the violence and the inherent awfulness of the web. It’s an interesting reflection of the culture right now.

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NOTES 1. Marguerite Duras, “One Out Of A Hundred Novels Makes It To Publication” (1957), in *Outside: Selected Writings*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 42. 2. 17523 Pictures was exhibited at Tower Fine Arts Gallery at The College at Brockport—SUNY in 2008. 3. André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924), in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 27. 4. André Breton, Nadja (1928), trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 71. 5. Julio Cortázar, “Blow-Up” (1959), in *Blow-Up and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 122. 6. Gary Sullivan, electronic mailing list message, 2003, retrieved from <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/syllabi/readings/flarf.html>.

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