

By Grayson Perry
Atlas Press, £16.50/\$30 (hardcover)

First published in a limited edition by the Atlas Press in 1992, *Cycle of Violence* is, in the words of its author (writing the foreword to the current edition), 'a striking encounter with my younger, angrier self'. In *Cycle...*, that past self invites us into a future world based on caring, sharing and the righteousness of green causes, led by gay presidents, peppered with 1980s nostalgia pubs ('you can almost smell the cigarette smoke') and looked after by policemen who are... ha, ha, ha... 'thoroughly trained in sensitivity towards members of our community who are psychosexually disturbed'. Which is what our 'hero', a champion cyclist called Bradley (this a long time before the emergence of UK cycling hero Wiggins), is. Fusing a slightly clunky J.G. Ballard with a more raw and brutal Aubrey Beardsley, Perry's intricately scratchy black-and-white drawings take us through a slew of more-or-less kinky sexual murders as impotence (as a cyclist and a man) and Bradley's attendant psychological problems overtake him, before guiding us through the roots of his trauma and, from there, with a certain naive optimism, onto our homicidal cyclist's eventual salvation. While Perry rather forcefully suggests that his graphic novella might provide a simplistic insight into himself (Bradley is a man driven by mother issues, gender confusion and a passion for Japanese ceramics; and in case you remain unconvinced, Perry points out that when he went into therapy six years after creating *Cycle...*, he immediately presented his therapist with a copy) what makes it worth reading is that it stands apart from its creator as a reflection (albeit a warped one) of the shared psychology of its time. Unless, of course, your heart's desire really is to get to know Perry as well as he apparently knows himself...

MARK RAPPOLT

CONFESSION

Failure, A Writer's Life

By Joe Milutis
Zero Books, £14.99/\$24.95 (softcover)

Halfway through *Failure, A Writer's Life*, Joe Milutis clarifies why his book is such a challenging if sometimes exhilarating read. His unstructured philosophic/critical patchwork, he says, is a 'sincere attempt at creative failure'; in an afterword, he'll call it 'literary hari-kari... a book that strained against its bookness'. The author, a media artist, is trying to write something that, in failing, is apposite to its subject, a self-assembled canon of literary and sometimes nonliterary endeavours – from André Breton's automatism to the constraint-driven experiments of Oulipo, from the *Fortean Times* to teenager-dominated 'dump' websites for spliced .gif files – which are inadequate as literature or art, but which Milutis doggedly interprets as successful in another way.

That is, they illuminate what he calls 'the virtual' and what Gilles Deleuze, the book's intellectual polestar, called 'the whole, spirit, thought, potential, the open...' etc. What this means, one knows instinctively – the whole sprawl of life, within which the glowing wilds of the Internet, while analogous to it, are merely contained. Cultural production, meanwhile, can't bottle this expanse but can point to it, and the works that Milutis considers as 'failing' by consensual standards seem to him to do so. When his book excites intellectually, it's in lateral linkages that show this approach at work across time. Charles Fort of the *Fortean Times*, for example, racked up iterations of weird phenomena but never explained them, producing unreadable books that add up to a 'hulking monotone of the fantastic. I could only get through about half', writes Milutis admiringly, 'without coming to the conclusion that to finish would be a monumental waste of time.'

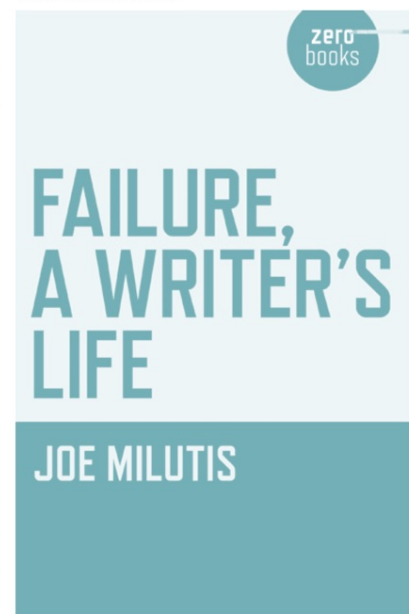
At times, *Failure* inspires the same thought. Milutis has plenty of erudition, sometimes to the point of showiness. He can find his subject in *Citizen Kane* (1941) (in the way its multiple viewpoints point to the final unknowability of a single life), in Richard Owen Cambridge's obscure 1751 epic of English doggerel, *The Scribleriad*, in H.P. Lovecraft's indescribable figure of horror, Cthulu, and in a 104-page FBI report on the coded writings of the biodefense expert suspected of the 2001 anthrax attacks. But the book's murky structure – ostensibly divided into past, present and future, yet ending with Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin – makes the book feel like it is

only accruing weight via accumulation.

Seemingly Milutis wants to be an archivist of an obscure lineage and, consequently, an inspirer, outlining a style of cultural production appropriate to our digital condition, even if the digital is only illustrative of the larger, Deleuzian morass. The Web, or more generally the media, is today's premier ocean of crap to be sifted and transformed, just as the brain, for the automatist surrealists, was that of yesteryear. The modern result is 'uncreative writing' like Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day* (2003), 'his 836 page transcription of an entire day's *New York Times*'. Another example is 'Flarf' poetry, found text from the Web broken into poetic lines; one poem, repurposing lines about eating, leads Milutis to the priceless comment: 'The most telling food-scenario-fragment, "Who poo'ed vindaloo?" returns us to the more primal transcoding that happens at the toilet.'

In terms of visual art, Milutis unsurprisingly admires Ryan Trecartin, probably the artist most adeptly reflecting the chaotic, identity-bending spoor of online life now. But the American artist is most likely too embedded for his taste in a professional artworld of which the author seems deeply suspicious; also maybe too tidily successful, since for Milutis an apt response to the swamping 'virtual' might involve self-conscious sabotage. So I spent much of this book waiting for him to mention Joe Gould, hero of (in turn, a hero of mine) Joseph Mitchell's 1965 nonfiction book *Joe Gould's Secret*, about an intellectual hobo who claims to have written a colossal oral history of the world. Gould's magnum opus, so Milutis approvingly recounts on the last page, turns out not to exist and thereby represents a failure of formidable dimensions. Artists and writers of the future, are you inspired?

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