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INTRODUCTION

# *Failure aesthetics and the modernist quest narrative*

> If he failed at a thing ten times, he thought he could succeed on the eleventh try, in spite of the fact that everything went wrong with unvarying regularity.
>
> (Kafka, *The Trial*)

> I am doing my best, and failing again, yet again. I don't mind failing, it's a pleasure.
>
> (Beckett, *The Unnamable*)

Literary modernity is committed to failure. Failure aesthetics involves the critique or rejection of previous literary models, the critique of literary "success" and narrative coherence. Structurally, this is often characterized by a repetitive, fragmented, and nonlinear text that privileges moments of paradox, confusion, anxiety, and breakdown over moments of revelation, discovery, coherence, and resolution. Rarely do studies attempt to understand how failure "works" in literary modernity – who fails, why they fail, what the quality of this failure is, how the depiction of failure is different or more excessive than in other literary periods, and finally, what (if anything) "emerges" from this failure. This is because the very idea of failure aesthetics is rife with paradoxes. How can literature succeed to fail? How can a refusal of (aesthetic) "success" still be called an aesthetic?

The goal of this book is to understand failure aesthetics through a structural analysis of the modernist "impossible" quest narrative, many of which are indebted to the medieval Grail romance as it was revealed by nineteenth- and twentieth-century philology. I will argue that Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* (1904), T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Franz Kafka's *Das Schloss* (*The Castle*) (1925), Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (*Journey to the End of Night*) (1932), and Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1951) are failed or "stalled" versions of the Grail romance. By looking specifically at how the modernists adapt (or, depending on how you look at it, fail to



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adapt) the Grail narrative, I will make a case for why failure is the most defining (and original) aesthetic characteristic of literary modernity.

The paradoxes inherent in the very idea of failure aesthetics are first worth considering. The critic Werner Hamacher offers a succinct summary of such paradoxes. "Failure is generally considered one of the fundamental figures of modernity and especially of modern literature," he writes.[1] "Modernity and its literature are said to emerge from the collapse of traditional orders, from the corrosion of conventions, and from the loss of the social and aesthetic codes that were once able to secure a certain coherence and continuity for all forms of behavior and production" (294). Hamacher's description of the emergence of literary modernity could describe the emergence of a number of literary movements. The rational neoclassic conception of art and life of the seventeenth-century French authors and philosophers collapsed in the years leading to the Revolution and gave rise to Romanticism – beginning with Schlegel's *Athenaeum Fragments* and Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. However, Hamacher goes on, literary modernity is not just that which emerges from the breakdown of previous social and aesthetic codes – it also *is* that very breaking down. "Modernity is regarded, however, not only as the result of this disintegration but also as its hero: because it recognizes itself in the collapse of the old, modernity must make failure into its principle" (294).

The disintegration of previous aesthetic models, in other words, is the work of modernity. For Hamacher, literary modernity is a model that arises from the very refusal of any new model to emerge. Modernity consists entirely in "conserving the collapse from which it emerges" (296). The recurring representation of failure, the text that struggles (but fails) to tell a coherent story, and the rejection of any previous model of literary "success," conserves the collapse that is modernity.

Hamacher's definition of failure aesthetics is indebted to Theodor Adorno and especially Walter Benjamin. Benjamin introduces the idea of an aesthetic of failure in a 1938 letter to Gerhard Scholem to describe the uniqueness of Kafka's aesthetic. "To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty," Benjamin writes, "one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the purity and beauty of failure. There is nothing more memorable than the fervor with which Kafka emphasized his failure."[2] According to Benjamin, Kafka rejects all traditional literary or philosophical models that offer a possibility of redemption. Instead, "Kafka's work presents a sickness of tradition" (143). In an article written four years earlier, Benjamin argues that it is the very exclusion of hope in

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Kafka's work – hope for the protagonist to succeed, hope for the literary work to achieve closure or coherence – that allows Kafka to concentrate his attention on the human gesture "divested of its traditional supports" in "ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings."[3] In Kafka's 1917 short story, "Ein Brudermord" ("A Fratricide") for example, a church bell that it meant to wake up the villagers in the town rings so loudly it wakes the angels. Benjamin explains,

> Just as this bell, which is too loud for a doorbell, rings out toward heaven, the gestures of Kafka's figures are too powerful for our accustomed surroundings and break out into wider areas. The greater Kafka's mastery became, the more frequently did he eschew adapting these gestures to common situations or explaining them. (120)

The gesture that is too powerful for its surroundings "breaks out into wider areas" and turns the ordinary event (waking the villagers) into the supernatural event (waking the angels).

Benjamin does not present a systematic account of what this aesthetic of the gesture looks like. He links the gesture to the moment of "reversal" (*Umkehr*), which he calls the "direction of learning that transforms life into writing," or, in his letter to Scholem, as "the attempt to metamorphize life into Scripture."[4] Somehow, the gesture transforms (ordinary) life into writing. Benjamin hints at the redemptive potential of this reversal to Scholem:

> I endeavored to show how Kafka sought – on the nether side of that "nothingness," in its inside lining, so to speak – to feel his way toward redemption [*Erlösung*]. This implies that any kind of victory over that nothingness, as understood by the theological exegetes around Brod, would have been an abomination for him.[5]

Kafka's aesthetic precludes any possibility of "victory" as it is traditionally conceived. And yet it is his commitment to portraying a world without hope, in which the only goal is to delay what is to come, that gives rise to these gestures, which are mystical transformations of the everyday that represent a possibility of redemption.

Adorno offers a somewhat more systematic account of failure aesthetics in literary modernity. Although he discusses a wide range of artworks in *Aesthetic Theory* (written between 1961 and 1969), Kafka and Beckett figure prominently. "Modern art," Adorno writes, "with its vulnerability, blemishes, and fallibility [*ihrer Anfälligkeit, ihren Flecken, ihrer Fehlbarkeit*], is the critique of traditional works, which in so many ways are stronger and more successful: It is the critique of success."[6] Modernist

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art critiques traditional works by appearing to be "antiart," an art of fragments and dead-ends, built from the refuse of traditional art. The texts of Kafka and Beckett, for example, complicate and "stall" simple narrative events to the point of absurdity, such as locating an employer (*Das Schloss*) or preparing to go on a journey (*Molloy*).

Adorno also uses the concept of the "gesture" in order to explain what emerges from failure aesthetics. In his "Notes on Kafka," he defines the gesture as "counterpoints to words: the pre-linguistic that eludes all intention."[7] In *Aesthetic Theory*, the gesture is a pre-conceptual "expression" of the artwork: "what radiates wordlessly from artworks is that *it is*, thrown into relief by *it* – the unlocatable grammatical subject – *is not*; it cannot be referred demonstratively to anything in the world that previously exists" (105). Throughout *Aesthetic Theory*, the concept-name for this expression of the artwork changes to avoid the trap of concrete conceptualization – from *Sosein* (or *So-und-nicht-anders-Seins*) (77) to *So ist es* (112) and finally to "comment c'est," which Adorno equates both with "that's what it's like out there" (223) [*so geht es zu*, *so ist es draussen* (331)] as well as "how it is" (133) [*wie es ist* (200)]. This is a "pre-conceptual" concept, an expression that "radiates wordlessly" from the artwork through the gesture: the "*It is thus* [*So ist es* (171)] that [the artwork] announces with the gesture of letting oneself fall" (112). The modernist artwork is "about" itself, about the history of artworks, and hence, for Adorno, about the nature of all art. Interestingly, Adorno's last formulation of this fundamental pre-conceptual gesture/expression is "comment c'est," the title of Beckett's prose piece from 1961 (itself a play on *commencer/commencez*), as if Adorno's theory of failure in modernist art is best elucidated by Beckett's work.[8]

Beckett's often-quoted description of his philosophy of composition in "Three Dialogues" (1949) is perhaps the most succinct definition of his aesthetics of failure. Beckett describes an art that turns away in disgust from the "puny exploits" of traditional modes of representation, "of going a little further along a dreary road," preferring instead

> the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.[9]

Rather than illuminating what the aesthetics of failure is or even what failure "does," this passage performs failure at the level of the idea. Partly an echo of Kafka's description of "a literature impossible in all respects" from a letter to Max Brod in 1921,[10] Beckett speaks of the artist's obligation to express that nothing can be expressed. But whence comes this obligation?

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Why is it important? And if there really is nothing to express, nothing from which to express, and no power to express, how can one express that?

Beckett's formulation of his aesthetics of failure is paradoxical. It is already part of his own aesthetics of failure. Georges Duthuit, with whom Beckett is in dialogue, replies, "but that is a violently extreme and personal point of view, of no help to us in the matter of [the painter] Tal Coat." Beckett's response is to say nothing, signified by a blank space on the page. Dutuit concludes, "perhaps that is enough for today," and the dialogue ends. The effect is comic. It is as if the idea of failure puts an end to any serious or critical discussion about aesthetics.

Beckett modifies his definition of failure aesthetics two years later through the voice of Molloy:

> Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition.[11]

The weighty idea of obligation is gone, and the end of the sentence turns the whole thing into an Irish bull: a logically absurd or incongruous statement of which the implied speaker isn't perhaps aware. The impossibility of expression is something that Molloy keeps in mind while he is busy expressing.

## Commitment

Failure is a theoretically complex idea, one that seems to contradict itself and even "perform" itself as an anti-theory, or a theory to end all theories. However, this complexity is in many ways deceptive. After all, the modernist narrative committed to failure simply *fails* – it fails to tell a complete or coherent story, it defers its outcome, it collapses into fragments or ends abruptly, it gets side-tracked or reaches a deadlock, it fails to present a coherent idea even of *why* it fails, and the narrator or implied author seems to fall prey to the despair or confusion of his protagonist. The modernists "plot with irony and bad conscience," as Peter Brooks puts it, "intent (in their very different ways) on exposing the artifices of formal structure and human design."[12] As Frank Kermode puts it, it is a literature of "perpetual crisis" that cannot get on with the story.[13] Equally important: it does this in what Wayne Booth calls a "controlled" way.[14] It fails "expertly," – or, as Benjamin puts it, beautifully. Modernity does not champion inferior writers and first drafts.[15]

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The commitment to representing failure and the refusal to valorize even that commitment is what Adorno champions in his 1974 essay, "Commitment" (*Engagement*). He argues that "genuine" modernist literature like the work of Kafka and Beckett *performs* the failure that other authors like Sartre and Brecht only talk about:

> Kafka's prose and Beckett's plays and his genuinely colossal novel *The Unnamable* have an effect in comparison to which official works of committed art look like children's games – they arouse the anxiety that existentialism only talks about. [. . .] Anyone over whom Kafka's wheels have passed has lost both his sense of being at peace with the world and the possibility of being satisfied with the judgment that the course of the world is bad.[16]

For Adorno, Kafka and Beckett force us to experience negativity and failure rather than just read about it. It is like getting run over by a carriage – or maybe an automobile.

The critic Andreas Huyssen helps to elucidate Adorno's idea of commitment in an essay arguing that Ernst Jünger is *not* a modernist in line with Kafka, Joyce, Proust, Woolf, Céline, Beckett, and Döblin. Huyssen does this by comparing the aesthetic of Jünger with that of Kafka:

> Where Jünger claims the archimedean position of *Haltung* and distance, the subject in Kafka, both narrator and protagonist, is always sucked into the spectacle, his role ambiguous, and the effect on the reader is one of irritation, insecurity, and hermeneutic dead ends. Kafka writes out of the abyss of modernity, while Jünger is comfortably installed in the Grand Hotel Horror at the edge of the abyss.[17]

Writing out of "the abyss of modernity" allows for no distance. The implied author immerses himself in the failure he depicts. When we read *Das Schloss*, we are not just reading a novel about a man who cannot find a castle; we are reading a novel that seems choreographed to make us doubt whether the author has any idea himself where the castle is or what it represents.

Julia Kristeva presents a similar idea of commitment in *Powers of Horror.* She describes Céline's aesthetic as "apocalyptic," because it narrates the very collapse of revelation and distance, and the disintegration of the speaking "I":

> If *apocalypse* means, etymologically, a vision, it must be understood as the contrary of revelation of philosophical truth, as the contrary of *aletheia.* There is no apocalyptic *being*, scored, fainting, forever incomplete, and incapable of setting itself up as a being, bursting among the flames or reverberating amid the clamors of universal collapse.[18]

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To "see" apocalypse according to Kristeva means to be immersed in the spectacle, not detached from it. "Céline, for his part, speaks from the very seat of that horror [of the Second World War], he is implicated in it, he is inside of it."[19] The implied author of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* is not simply reporting his story: he is reliving the trauma he suffered by recounting it.

Structurally, the aesthetic of failure is as much about the excessive depiction of failure as it is about representing the inability to gain a perspective on this failure, meaning that failure is "performed" again by being narrated. The implied author cannot detach himself from his material; he is "sucked into" the apocalyptic "universal collapse" of his aesthetic. He speaks from the "abyss of modernity," "from the very seat of horror." And he takes us with him. "When K. stumbles," as Wayne Booth puts it simply, "we stumble with him."[20]

## The Quest Narrative

In order to understand failure as an aesthetic in modernity, the focus should be on how the modernist text fails to offer what Benjamin calls "the consistency of truth": how it immerses itself in the very failure it depicts, and how it carries the reader along in confusion.[21] Wayne Booth argues that the origin of this confusion often lies in the fact that the goal of the protagonist's quest is unclear. "No one tells us in *The Castle* what K.'s goal is, or whether it is attainable, or whether it is a worthwhile goal in the first place. Our puzzlement is intended to be as great as K.'s." "It is too bad," Booth concludes, "that we have no careful structural study of the many kinds of quest-novels using this effect."

*The Quest to Fail* attempts to understand failure aesthetics at the structural level: to understand the modernist "quest to fail" by focusing on the genre of the modernist quest narrative. A significant portion of modernist texts associated with failure aesthetics are written as "impossible" quest narratives in which the object of the quest is unclear. Donald Adams titled his 1934 review of the first English translation of Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, "A Quest without Any Meaning."[22] In an article written a few years after Beckett's own translation of his trilogy first appeared in English, Ruby Cohn argued that the supposedly radical new style of Beckett's fiction "links back to the medieval romance," and that "the quest theme structures all the novels, down to the most apparently irrelevant detail."[23] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a rebirth of critical interest in medieval romances, especially in the medieval Grail quest.

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James's *The Golden Bowl*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Kafka's *Das Schloss*, Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, and Beckett's *Molloy* are each recreations or "continuations" of the medieval quest romance.

One reason that the modernists borrow the model of the medieval quest narrative is that few other literary genres are so focused on depicting success. The quest narrative therefore presents an optimal means of staging and highlighting failure. The medieval knight takes on any quest introduced to him, however absurd. The medieval quest romance is often a concatenation of chivalric tests: tests of prowess, tests of constancy and chastity, tests of interpretive skill, tests of uncovering deception, and tests of faith. The genre sets up a listener's expectation to hear stories of marvelous successes. The Grail is the most difficult of all medieval quests. Because the title and subject matter of *The Waste Land* invokes the medieval Grail romance, a reader is immediately struck by the fact that there is no Grail (as it is traditionally understood), the vaguest of quests, and no meaningful reflection on such incoherence. By contrast, a reader of Apollinaire's "Zone" (1913) accepts the fragmentary aimlessness of the poem because the title and subject matter invoke a vague peripheral space contemporary to Apollinaire's audience.[24]

The reason that the modernists adapt the Grail quest in particular is because of its special status among other medieval quests. The Grail is not a traditional quest object like Queen Guinevere or the Bleeding Spear. It is a quest for an interpretation. The Grail quest is achieved when the quester learns the answer to the question, Whom does the Grail serve? Or, more simply: What is the Grail? (In most cases, the answer is that the Grail is the Holy Grail, the cup that caught Christ's blood on the cross.) The restoration of the Waste Land, the healing of the Fisher King, and (in some versions) the ascension of the Grail into heaven follows soon after.

The Grail quest is also a romance about the breakdown of the chivalric system whereby questing is possible. As Norris Lacy puts it, the Grail narrative is about the "crisis of chivalry."[25] In Chrétien de Troyes's unfinished *Perceval* (c1181), the first extant Grail narrative, Perceval must shift his understanding of his quest from a teleological model (looking for the Castle of the Fisher King, proving his chivalric valor along the way by passing tests) to a model of self-purification (praying and repenting for his sins of abandoning his mother and forgetting God, renouncing his chivalric ideals) in order to gain knowledge of the Grail. In the French Vulgate Cycle (c1215–35) and the Post-Vulgate Cycle (c1230–40), which was Malory's source, the great Arthurian knights Perceval, Gawain, Lancelot, and Sir Bors learn that they are unworthy of the Grail quest. The story of

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the Grail is about the transition from one code of virtues to another – from a chivalric system, where virtue is gained by winning honor through battle, to a Christian system, where virtue is gained through fasting, repentance, and the renunciation of chivalric virtues. The Grail quest is the last chivalric quest: it marks the end of chivalry, the disbanding of the Knights of the Round Table, and the death of Arthur.

## New Medievalism

The special status of the Grail romance became a major topic to medievalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The birth of medieval studies in Germany, France, and England during this period inaugurated a renaissance of interest in medieval texts, especially in the Grail narrative. The "new medievalists," as they are generally referred to, characterized their scholarship as a vehement rejection of the Romantic and Victorian conception of the Middle Ages. When Gaston Paris became the chair of medieval studies at the Collège de France in 1872, he announced that the stories of King Arthur would no longer be the stuff of women's romance: the sentimental retellings by Tennyson; the decadent art of the Pre-Raphaelites; and the kind of "scholarly" editions his father, Paulin Paris, was known for, such as the five-volume *Les Romans de la table ronde* (1868–77), made up of selections and abridgements of medieval Grail texts adapted into modern French. Emulating the scientific rigor of the German philologist Karl Lachmann, especially his scholarly editions of Walther von der Vogelweide (1827) and Wolfram von Eschenbach (1833), Gaston Paris declared that French medieval romances should be subject to the same rigorous philological scholarship given to classical literature.

In a short space of time, over twenty journals devoted to medieval studies were created, including *Revue des langues romanes* (1870); *Romania* (1872) (which was meant to rival *Germania* [1836]); *La revue de philologie française et provençale* (1887); *Le Moyen âge* (1888); and *Annales du Midi* (1889). Gaston Paris's 1872 edition of *La Vie de Saint Alexis* was groundbreaking in its scientific presentation of a medieval text, with copious notes discussing variants from twelfth-, thirteenth-, and fourteenth-century manuscripts. Paris founded the Société des anciens textes français with Paul Meyer in 1875, which was dedicated to publishing critical editions of medieval literature. The program declared that it would be in the national interest to follow the example of Germany and teach medieval literature in schools. In 1880, medieval French literature was

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added to the prescribed syllabus for lycées.[26] Works published by the Société des anciens textes français included the two-volume *Merlin* (1886) and Joseph Bédier's *Roman de Tristan* (1902). Bédier had successfully argued that the French versions of the myth by Béroul and Thomas of Britain predated that of Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristam.* By doing so, he effectively "reclaimed" the story as a French national epic. His *Roman de Tristan* was translated widely and influenced the work of Rimbaud, Apollinaire, Cocteau, and Joyce.[27]

Likewise, in 1900, the British publisher Alfred Nutt had established a series called "Arthurian Romances Unrepresented in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*." The tales of Arthur were known to the general public mainly through Malory's fifteenth-century adaptation of the thirteenth-century Vulgate Cycle, itself an adaptation of texts from the twelfth century: Chrétien's *Perceval*, the four Continuations, and Robert de Boron's cycle. The real mystery for the new medievalists was not whom the Grail served but where the Grail myth originated. Unlike other stories, it seemed to have no classical precedent. It was puzzlingly repetitive and at times even incoherent. Gaston Paris, Alfred Nutt, and Marie Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville traced the elements of the story back to Celtic myths.[28] Jessie Weston, combining the philological rigor of her mentor, Gaston Paris, with the anthropological technique of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915), advanced the theory that the origins of the Grail myth were ancient fertility rituals predating Christianity, and that many Grail romances contained "coded" references to these pagan rituals.

The scholarship of Gaston Paris and Arbois de Jubainville on medieval Ireland and Britain directly influenced the Irish Literary Revival of W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and George Russell. Henry James's friend Edwin Austen Abbey decided that he would paint his mural based on the Holy Grail for the Boston Public Library in the "Celtic theme" reflecting recent scholarship, and James began writing his exquisitely convoluted version of the Grail narrative, *The Golden Bowl*, a year later. In 1910, Ezra Pound wrote *The Spirit of Romance*, an enthusiastic appreciation of medieval literature and contemporary medieval scholarship, in which he cites the work of Gaston Paris, Joseph Bédier, Jessie Weston, W. P. Ker, William Wells Newell, among others. Pound's study, along with Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), profoundly influenced the subject matter and methodology of *The Waste Land*: a poem that attempts to excavate the primitive "ritual" from the ruins of the Grail romances and other texts. Kafka's own nightmarish version of the Grail myth, *Das Schloss*, was inspired by a wealth of critical editions of Grail texts, including the

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