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Simon Sandison, 'Review of *Failure and the American Writer: A Literary History* by Gavin Jones'

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Reviews

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Failure and the American Writer: A Literary History by Gavin Jones
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Gavin Jones's engaging study of failure as a literary device reveals a surprising irony: that canonical nineteenth century U.S. authors took inspiration from the condition of failure and utilised its creative possibilities. In investigating this counterintuitive process, Jones shows that a succession of American writers found new forms of productivity in their own sense of themselves or their work as inadequate or incomplete. Furthermore, Jones argues that this process is rooted in, and to some extent explains, the

repeated ‘curious crises of narrative authority that haunt even the most canonized works of American literature’ (p.14). His success in establishing failure as a unique characteristic of U.S. writing in this period—both in its use as a thematic metaphor and, significantly, as a literary style in its own right—rests on the early reframing of failure as ‘an expansive concept’ which should be considered ‘beyond the socio-economic lens through which it is usually viewed’ (p.13). Once failure is considered not simply in terms of personal defeats and disappointments—those ‘narrow concepts of error and mistake’ (p.13)—then it ‘becomes a much bigger and more complex idea: a process of thinking, knowing, feeling, and being’ (p.13). It is this complexity that permits Jones to not only interpret failure through his textual analysis but, further, to contend that failure becomes a kind of literary methodology.

This recognition that failure has a distinct literary character is accompanied by an understanding that this is only possible because the American national character is similarly informed by it. Jones establishes this through a reading of the autobiographical text *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), with a particular focus on the chapter entitled ‘Failure’. Opening his study with a text which looks back to the close of the nineteenth century, and which itself positions the personal failures of Adams in parallel to the failures of the United States as a nation—‘an idea of the nineteenth century as a failed century, told through the story of his life’ (p.2)—Jones effectively establishes that the twentieth century modernist aesthetic fascination with failure has its roots in a much more embedded sense of literary and national failure. Jones, through Adams and the rest of the authors under discussion, characterises the nineteenth century as a period in which ‘the nightmare of a failed democratic experiment, destroyed by inequality and greed, came to haunt the American dream of success’ (p.20). The entire literary century is determined by a historical dissonance that forced the United States and its writers to come to terms with their own cultural duplicity. For Jones, this reconciliation resulted in a ‘remarkable

collection of authors who, like Adams, wrote not around failure but *through* it' (p.14). Their response was not simply to represent this character, but to embody it.

Through this recognition and exploration of a previously unexplored literary metaphor, Jones is able to divorce his chosen texts from their specific historical contexts, and instead reformulate them as belonging to a much broader national narrative of failure. However, at the same time, he succeeds in couching these issues of failure and success in markedly economic terms. He posits early that the sense of failure which invades the national character of the United States and its writers seems 'economic at base', the 'inevitable result of modern pressures to define success as a market value' (p.13). That is to say that as writing becomes a professional pursuit, success, and by inversion failure, are measured financially. Both are measurable and no longer abstract. According to Jones's persuasive readings, the 'material conditions of authorship' (p.53) vie with artistic imperatives to create an ambivalent landscape in which success at either becomes impossible. Turning to Herman Melville, Jones notes that as he wrote *Pierre* (1852) he was 'deeply in debt [and] struggling to pay the mortgage', but that its 'affected style', 'incoherent plot', and 'formal uncertainty' meant that it was 'designed to fail' (p.38). The material conditions of the novel's production beget its own failure; the pressures of necessity render Melville incapable, and he falls victim to failure as 'a moral category of being, an essential condition of human fallibility' (p.38). The new economic imperative attached to authorship leaves Melville and the rest impotent under the unfamiliar corporate conditions of 'surveillance and control' (p.83), struck by a 'fear of being made small of in public' (p.81). Literary failure, then, becomes simultaneously a demonstration of public and economic shortcomings and—as implied by Jones as he accuses Melville of 'designing' the failure of *Pierre*—a subtle protest against the financial imperatives of literary materiality.

There is a unique character to this failure, however. In Melville's work in particular, and more broadly in that of the other selected authors, Jones identifies a specific failure of missed or abandoned potential. These are not bad writers writing badly, or even good writers writing badly. They are genre-defining writers explicitly failing to capitalise on or develop early potential or actual success. The correlative of this failure is ambiguity: the continued positioning of these writers between economic and artistic imperatives and the hazy definitions and criteria attached to them. Beyond his identification of *Pierre* as a 'study in failure' (p.37) Jones highlights Sarah Orne Jewett's continued and active refusal to 'construct a coherent plot' (p.112) in a literary era obsessed with it, Stephen Crane's interrogation of the 'binary of authentic and inauthentic heroism' (p.99) in *The Red Badge of Courage* (1871), and Henry David Thoreau's outright denial of 'the power of analogy itself to generate meaning from experience' (p.71). Herein lies Jones's real achievement in this work. He recognises that successful literary criticism does not lie solely in close textual analysis nor in contextual and historical distractions and diversions, but rather 'in the shuttling between specific social problems, ideological contradictions, and historical crises on the one hand, and the anxieties of literary creation and identity on the other' (p.158).

Literary form shares in the failure of the wider economic projects of the nineteenth century. Jones is clear that this is a 'failed century' (p.2) which is characterised by a 'persistent disappointment' (p.129) which, in turn, is a 'condition not an event' (p.129). Eschewing any kind of specific, historically moored approach, Jones is able to use this conditional appraisal to establish a heretofore unseen literary character shared by the authors of the century, which may previously have been assigned to their particular circumstance. Each of these authors responds *both* to their circumstance but also to its position in the historical decline of the century. They become agents in this failure as well as a 'source of ethical resistance to dominant social pressures' (p.161). By bringing these familiar writers together under this new umbrella

of failure, Jones provocatively, and most significantly, proposes a return to a synthesised mode of literary criticism, taking an approach to texts and contexts which is at once microscopic and macroscopic.