

Gertrude Stein, Success Manuals, and Failure Studies

Matthew Sandler

A real failure does not need an excuse. It is an end in itself.
—Gertrude Stein (1947)

Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* encapsulates a major theoretical shift in the attitude of cultural criticism toward failure. Halberstam argues for thinking of failure as a "way of life" characterized by "anticapitalist logics of being and acting and knowing" (2011, 23, 20). This vision guides Halberstam's reading of a range of cultural materials, from avant-garde photography and performance art to Hollywood children's films, and in this she sketches an alternative understanding of modern life in which "failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods" (3). At the same time, Halberstam does not suggest such dangerous failures as failing to pursue economic security. Despite its broad argument with "norms" of "human development," that is, *The Queer Art of Failure* takes its subject as cultural in a more restricted sense, borrowing its orientation from modernism's reaction to modernity.¹

For some years before the appearance of Halberstam's manifesto, scholars of modernism had been modeling a similar approach to the period's landscape of failures. Where once Peter Bürger (1984) complained about the avant-garde's failure to transform everyday life, and John Berger (1993) decried Picasso's failure to fulfill the promise of the Cubist revolution, now critics tend to acknowledge that cultural responses to modernity are necessarily, even happily, failures.² This tendency has centered on the sense, already present in many modernist projects, that while failure is endemic to modernity, failed art might provide for aesthetic possibility, a sense crystallized in Samuel Beckett's *Worstward Ho*:

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“Try again. Fail again. Fail Better”(1983, 7). Such a view has expanded the archive of material that falls under the heading of modernism, helping critics represent the self-awareness of modernist artists and writers. Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz’s introduction to their collection *Bad Modernisms*, for example, takes a broad view: “No other name for a field of cultural production evokes quite the constellation of negativity, risk of aesthetic failure, and bad behavior that ‘modernism’ does” (2006, 4).³

This scholarly interest in failure also responds to the concept’s increased circulation throughout contemporary American public life, as failure appears across the horizon of debate about the economy, much of which centers on failure as necessary to the systemic function of capitalism. This premise is so widely accepted that, during the financial crisis of 2008, the idea of the big banks as “too big to fail” came under attack from both the left and the right. And in the few short years since, venture capitalists have created a second technology bubble by anticipating the failure of internet start-up companies. The motto capturing current Silicon Valley management and investment strategy practically plagiarizes Beckett—“Fail fast, fail often”—and the tech elite even hosts a yearly conference on failure, mordantly named Failcon. Such developments have trickled down into new conceptions of work. The figure of the alienated artist pursuing transformative innovation has done a lot of cultural work in a job market increasingly defined by the uncertainty of short-term employment. In this context, avant-gardist arguments about bringing art into life no longer serve to critique bourgeois norms but, rather, to describe the actually existing function of art in a period increasingly defined by inequality. If everyone is an artist of failure, and this collective presumption legitimizes the unstable economic conditions produced by neoliberalism, then redemptive critical attitudes toward the art of failure may not be what the present demands.⁴

With failure seeming to appear everywhere across the terrain of American life, no wonder that popular audiences have flocked to films about that earlier moment in which failure became the object of cultural celebration—the so-called Lost Generation. Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris* (2011) and Baz Luhrmann’s *Great Gatsby* (2013) romanticize the happily dispossessed expatriates, gorgeously frenetic flappers, and nervous stock drummers of the twenties. These glittering depictions of the modernist heyday frame failure as a blip in the erratic fantasy of bohemian life. Flexible labor can be fun, one imagines, watching an attractively cast Hemingway storming through cafés drunk on the occasional flush

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of strong, freelanced American dollars. Glamorous fictions of the “gig economy” resonate from the uncertain rise of the American Century to the precarity of its slow decline.

In what follows I offer a small counter-history of the idea of failure in modernism, focusing especially on Gertrude Stein, whose work has come to draw increased attention in a critical conversation about redemptive failure. I begin by demonstrating that many American modernists actually derived their ideas about failure from the rhetoric of late nineteenth-century success manuals. I then go on to show how, initially, Stein’s particular interest in failure informed her critique, articulated in naturalist fiction, of success ideology from the perspective of queer ethnic womanhood. I then track failure through Stein’s increasingly recondite poetic experiments, which grow out of a sense of art as a cloistered space in which failure might be more fully explored. During the Depression, as she became a celebrity in the United States, she presented her arguments for an art of failure to a mass public, retailoring the idea in terms of the rugged individualism she saw as the solution to the period’s ills. She turned the lush racial and sexual “disidentifications” that first drew her to the idea of failure into an argument for and about white masculinity.⁵ Stein thus poses real challenges to twenty-first-century understandings of failure as a redemptive mode of progress and to “failure studies” as a mode of engaged criticism. Failure was, and still is, one of those little words overloaded with significance that Stein so effectively exploited. However, in the crisis of the 1930s, when she settles on its most regressive political and economic applications, its limitations as art become apparent.

Success manuals and failure

Gavin Jones has recently argued that nineteenth-century literature provides a compelling foil to modernist celebrations of failure: “The nineteenth-century story of failure warrants special attention in its refusal, or inability, to fully invert itself to become an anti-normative alternative” (2014, 14). And this “refusal or inability” also marks the cultural field of success manuals. Indeed, nineteenth-century self-help philosophers often praise failure precisely as a normative force, claiming that failure taught lessons about hard work and the inner resources needed to become a better man. In his classic *Self-Help*, the British popularizer of the idea of self-help, Samuel Smiles, writes: “Failure is the best discipline of the true worker, by stimulating him to renewed efforts, evoking his best powers, and carrying him onward in self-culture, self-control and growth in

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knowledge and wisdom” ([1859] 2002, 4). Smiles casts failure as a helpful god, dispensing fortune and education at turns, a programmatic claim that undergirds his compendium of sketch biographies of successful men. Such optimism, however, assumes both that this “true worker” has the resources to “carry onward” after failing and that he is capable of perceiving the paradoxical “discipline” of failure. In Smiles’s text, failure communicates clearly—“stimulating” and “evoking”—but in practice its messages were entirely ambiguous.

In *Successful Men of Today and What They Say of Success*, another self-help advocate, Wilbur Crafts, elaborates on failure’s social function:

Failure often leads to success, by rousing a man to greater energy, or leading him to greater watchfulness, or putting him in a more suitable place. . . . A man who weighs one hundred and fifty pounds on the earth would weigh only two pounds on the planet Mars, and so could hardly stand; while on the sun he would weigh two tons and so would sink, like a stone in the sea, into its hot marshes. Each man is too light for some places, too heavy for others, and just right for others. Failing in a work for which he is unfitted often brings him to his true place. (1883, 177)

Failure begins here as vaguely personified, “rousing” and “leading” young men to their variously successful futures, but Crafts then turns to an astronomical metaphor, naturalizing failure as a law of the cosmos. In thus obscuring the human experience of failure (both individual and systemic), this figurative turn casts failure as a form of social engineering, helping men find their “true place.” Such rhetoric appeals to the overlapping audiences of success manuals, which addressed workers and managers at the same time, and it also frames failure as a scientific process—inherent in bodies to differing degrees.

A condition of the body, male failure in nineteenth-century success manuals is equated with femininity—some men might be from Mars but “too light” in the loafers to stay put there. Commensurately, historians of masculinity have found that as middle-class work became increasingly less physical near the end of the nineteenth century, the gendered language around professionalization paradoxically intensified,⁶ and success and failure became a gendered dyad. The word “failure” derives from the Old French *faillir*, meaning to lack, to miss, or to be found wanting, and in its customary opposition to “success”—with that word’s connotations in genealogical “succession”—failure thus implies fundamental privations not limited to career success. While the protagonist of success ideology

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was invariably white and male, the consequences of nineteenth-century failure were often suffered by women and people of color. But despite its undesirability as an outcome, failure appears in success rhetoric as a necessary starting point. People *need* a little early failure to succeed. Indeed, it is precisely by often returning young men to feminized spaces of domestic care that early failure ideally spurred them to seek masculine achievement that much more urgently.

In the nineteenth century, failure functioned paradoxically as one of the “punishing norms” Halberstam writes against in making the case for a “queer art.” The social Darwinist positioning of failure as a measure of occupational fitness, for example, depends on the existence of straight white men as successful exceptions. As Orison Swett Marden, editor of *Success* magazine, lists the great men who failed early on because they landed temporarily in “misfit occupations” (Galileo as a physician, Milton as a teacher, and Dickens as an actor), he speculates that “when misfortunes happen . . . they may be paving the way for great successes. Our failure may be due to our superiority” (1897, 98). At the end of the nineteenth century, the conditional framing of passages like this pointed to the precarity of countless American lives, just as the “superiority” that might ultimately be clarified by means of temporary failure was often associated with whiteness and masculinity. Even white men, however, experienced failure as an interpretive problem. The rhetorical gambit of redeeming failure covered for a nineteenth-century American social landscape littered with failures. How could one know whether to find a new occupation, or simply to try harder? Was failure caused by spiritual limitation or physical ones? These questions would necessarily remain unanswerable for people in cycles of economic failure—which is to say, a vast majority of the American population.

In *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, Scott Sandage elaborates the premise that “failure pervades the cultural history of capitalism” (2005, 9), pointing to the invention of a variety of institutional machineries for managing and recording failure, such as bankruptcy courts, credit-rating agencies, and charitable organizations. This administration of failure depended on the popular self-help philosophies that developed from the most urgent contemporary debates about the nature of the human. “In the culture of ‘intense individualism’ that emerged after the Civil War,” Sandage writes, “success and failure—not slavery and freedom—became the quintessential American axis” (2005, 251). As success manuals theorized the nature of success and failure, if freedom and slavery were native, bodily conditions, then perhaps so were success and failure. In this

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way, in accounting for the fate of individuals success rhetoric thus set aside the role of large-scale market forces and vertically integrated corporations, as well as of ideological formations like racism and sexism.⁷

To counter the confusion of living in a society defined by failure, some success advocates recommended cultivating failure-resistant habits of mind. The New Thought, a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spiritual movement, treated success and failure as functions of faith and attitude. “Courage begets success, fear begets failure,” wrote Ralph Waldo Trine, one of the most popular exponents of the New Thought (1910, 144), and he recommended a strict program of meditation to banish negative thinking:

A simple effort to control one’s thoughts, a simple setting about it, even if at first failure is the result, and even if for a time failure seems to be the only result, will in time . . . bring him to the point of easy, full, and complete control. Each one, then, can grow the power of determining, controlling his thought, the power of determining what types of thought he shall and what types he shall not entertain. . . . This is a case where even failure is success, for the failure is not in the effort, and every earnest effort adds an increment of power that will eventually accomplish the end aimed at. (1900, 3)

Where previous writers had posed early failure as ultimately useful, Trine cordons failure off in a mental space, built by cognitive practice—a circumscribed space of the mind that mirrored the idea of culture as conceived by artists and thinkers of the same period. Both sought a retreat from the encompassing, and reductively economic, opposition of success and failure.

Modernism and failure

The American Renaissance writers had already begun to coopt failure in the 1850s. Of Hawthorne, Melville had famously written, “He who has never failed somewhere, that man can not be great. Failure is the true test of greatness” (1984, 1164). “Vivas to those who have fail’d!” Walt Whitman ebulliently added (1982, 205). By the end of the nineteenth century, bohemia had transformed anxiety about failure into a rallying cry. This attitude became an organizing principle for a cultural vanguard disgusted with what, in a 1906 letter to H. G. Wells, William James called “the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS” (1920, 260).

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Surrounded by the wrecks of failure at every turn, the moderns suspected that the mechanisms by which society decided success and failure were out of order. Joseph Freeman wrote of his days as editor at the *New Masses* in the 1920s: “We had begun to develop an idea common to nineteenth century romantics and twentieth century bohemians, the idea that success was synonymous with philistinism. . . . Unable to distinguish between success and conventional standards of success, we made a cult of failure” (quoted in Leuchtenberg 1993, 146–47).

The literary culture of the early twentieth century began to elaborate on failure in a myriad of ways: the wrecked careers of characters in Dreiser, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway; the ambient dread and discordant syntax of Eliot and Pound; and the perpetual appearance of little magazines trumpeting cultural revolutions, only to disappear months later. Failure thus became a style that tested the comprehension of audiences for modernism. And as modernist intellectuals bore witness to a history of failure, they also worried about the adequacy of their response, about the likelihood of art’s failure to reflect, engage, or help to remedy life. What oppositional effect could an “art of failure” have on a society seemingly defined by failure? If art became a “cult of failure,” was it really so different from the “bitch-goddess SUCCESS” it sought to escape? Did failure really offer the possibility of escaping the totalizing economic logic of success?

Gertrude Stein makes an especially apt example of the modernist engagement with failure, failing in Halberstam’s queer sense to conform to late nineteenth-century gender norms at nearly every turn. Stein’s “failures” follow shifting ideas about women’s conduct, as she failed to follow through on her plan to become a doctor, and thus a professional New Woman.⁸ Even her decision to go to Europe to become a writer and art collector was also at first a failure. In the 1930s, when she attracted a broad American audience, she became an outspoken commentator on the idea of failure in American life, and lately scholars (including, in passing, Halberstam herself) have begun to wrestle with Stein’s own failures from this period—especially her faltering political judgment and rear-garde ideas about race and gender.⁹

For a variety of reasons, then, it makes sense to see Stein’s commitment to “beginning again and again” (1998a, 525) as a kind of commitment to failing again and again. In the early fiction, this failure involves economic privation, ethnic and gender identity, and more performative matters of comportment. *Three Lives* (1909) narrates the impoverishment of its main characters, all ethnic women, as failures. “Melanctha” centers on the fate

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of a hedonistic young African American woman who falls in love with the upwardly mobile Dr. Jefferson Campbell, and the narrative largely consists of conversations between the two as they worry over the possibility of failure. Telling Melanctha, “I ain’t got any use for all the time being in excitements and wanting to have all kinds of experience all the time. I got plenty of experience just living regular and quiet and with my family, and doing my work, and taking care of people, and trying to understand it. I don’t believe much in this running around business and I don’t want to see colored people do it” (1998a, 148), Campbell offers a colloquial version of the ideology of racial uplift, which promised that black assimilation to white Victorian modes of conduct would encourage white elites to grant African Americans full access to citizenship.¹⁰ Here, Stein has Campbell adopt Progressive and Jamesian terminology of habit, disavowing “excitements” in favor of “work, and taking care of people,” even as his repetition of “all the time” signals anxiety about the totalizing discipline of respectability. Struggling to maintain his austere professionalism while allowing himself the pleasures of Melanctha’s wanton lifestyle, Campbell hedges and qualifies: “I don’t believe much.”¹¹

Melanctha responds to her lover’s prescriptions with a withering critique:

I certainly did wonder how you could be so live, and knowing everything, and everybody, and talking so big always about everything, and everybody always liking you so much, and you always looking as if you was thinking, and yet you really was never knowing anybody and certainly not being really very understanding. It certainly is all Dr. Campbell because you is so afraid you will be losing being good so easy, and it certainly do seem to me Dr. Campbell that it certainly don’t amount to very much that kind of goodness. (154)

Here, Melanctha’s insistent gerunds agitate against the practice of dogmatic uplift ideals “all the time,” and the repetitive prose rhythms mimic the pull of temptation. Puncturing Campbell’s fragile self-regard, she points to his fears—“You is so afraid you will be losing being good so easy”—and posits a “goodness” more pliantly consistent than Campbell’s rigid masculine purity. With “Melanctha,” as Michael North suggests, “the shift of race seemed to make it easier for Stein to see the senses, even the body itself, as ruled by convention” (1998, 70). Despite Melanctha’s tragic end, Stein did not commit her career to exploring the psychological effects of racial capitalism. Neither did she revise her stereotypical sense

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of black womanhood as hypersexual. She did, however, expand on the correspondences among language, habit, and more ideological conceptions of success and failure. In Parisian bohemia, Stein sought the freedom to pursue the positive effects of failure represented in “Melanctha” without suffering the consequences of racial, sexual, and economic repression.

A number of critics have focused on how in Stein’s work alternate forms of domesticity were elaborated in her recondite language games.¹² I suggest that in such games she also consistently played with the grammar of American bootstrapping and the public, implicitly masculine culture of success manuals. For instance, in the short piece “Studies in Conversation” (1927), Stein dismantles an old cliché: “Practicing, practice makes perfect. Practicing, perfect, practicing to make it perfect. Practice, perfect, practice. As perfect. Practice. Perfect. Practice” (1973, 124).¹³ The stuttering repetition sounds like a person trying, and failing, to memorize the motto, while deforming the little cliché draws attention to nominals, making liberal perfectionism visible in a grammatical trick. But how else does practicing work? The original cliché, “practice makes perfect,” conceals the messiness of the process: practice is not itself perfect. Casting practice as a series of failures, the passage thus performs failure as the key to success. Here, and elsewhere, Stein does the nineteenth-century American apostles of success one better—enacting in grammatical experiment what their blithe prose can only prescribe.

Stein’s work in this vein persistently questions many of the elements of mainstream self-help’s discourse. In “An Instant Answer or a Hundred Prominent Men,” a 1922 piece later collected in *Useful Knowledge* (1929), she mimics self-help’s pretenses to scientific accuracy: “I will select a hundred prominent men and look at their photographs hand-writing and career, then I will earnestly consider the question of synthesis” (1998a, 479). Stein never makes good on this promise—there are no photographs or handwriting, for instance—and the pretense to scientificity, drawn from her beginnings in psychological and medical research, as well as in naturalist fiction, is subverted by presenting her findings with a kind of mock-Barnumesque flair.¹⁴ Stein also ignores a number of the self-help genre’s formal requirements. She withholds the names of her subjects, diminishing their ostensibly exemplary character by referring to them only numerically, and also does away with realistic, causal narrative structure, subjecting the narrative and psychological language of upward mobility to playful tinkering: “The thirteenth has not neglected the zenith” (480). In this oddly mathematical context, the men seem unsexed, deracinated, and disembodied.

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Throughout “An Instant Answer,” Stein plays on gender as an aspect of self-making: “The twenty-first nursed what was to him becoming” (481). In standard self-help mythology, early failure results from familial disruption, but in the absence of a nurturing home life successful men learn to “nurse” themselves. Stein inverts this premise, suggesting that the men’s “success” might lead to gender inversion: “The twenty-fifth is moderately a queen. What did you say. Anger is expressive and so are they.” The self-help manual, usually a repository of compulsory gendered behavior, becomes a record of explosive gossip in what Marianne DeKoven calls Stein’s “voices style” (1983, 85), as disjunctive syntax de-links economic success from gendered and raced behavioral codes. Instead of the clear-cut equations of habit and success or failure, the reader finds critical, recursive assertions: “The fifty-fourth one is the one that has been left to study industrialism. No one asks is there merit in that. No one says is there something noble in that” (Stein 1998a, 485). These questions, presented here but absent from the public conversation, target the means-ends rationality of American education, from the archly ironic vantage of European bohemia. In this way, Stein’s contribution to a critique of hegemonic masculinity here relies on her location outside American public discussion (“no one asks”) and on the anonymity of the men (who might otherwise take offense).

Excluding the men’s names points toward the formulaic discourse central to self-help biography, suggesting that the men are reproducible, serialized instead of exceptional. One of them anxiously needs people to hear the story of his success:

The seventieth come again and listen were the origin and the beginning of his success. Come again and do not go away. Come again and stay and in this way he succeeded. He was successful. Have you meant to go away he would say. Oh no indeed he meant to stay they would say. And he meant to stay. He was successful in his hey day and he continued to be successful and he is succeeding to-day. (487)

The titular “instant answer,” in the seventieth man’s case, is the telling of his story—“come again and listen were the origin and beginning of his success”—as Stein suggests that the reiteration of successful men’s stories itself constitutes their success. The imperatives demand that the reader “stay” at the site of storytelling, here coded as maternal, domestic, and pedagogical, and underlining this context are the rhymes that evoke children’s books (way, stay, away, day)—the memorable formulae

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of recitative education. By its end, “An Instant Answer” has made the men’s multiplicity a joke on the reproduction of success: “One hundred and won. When this is done will you make me another one” (492). At every turn, the piece queries the success manual’s values of hard work, of conventional masculinity, and of straightforward language. At the same time, in reducing self-help biography to its formal components, and trying thus to make it fail, Stein actually accomplishes what success manuals purport to do but cannot: make illuminating generalizations about success. With her syntactic idiosyncrasies, however, Stein also ensured that her work would, for a time, remain inaccessible to the kind of audiences nineteenth-century success manuals sometimes found.¹⁵

Stein’s success, the Depression, and nineteenth-century individualism

For decades, Stein wrote for small groups of initiates, who sometimes themselves struggled to understand her experiments: “Nobody knows what I am trying to do but I do and I know when I succeed” (1954, 365). But with the popularity of *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932) she abandoned this monkish posture for the role of a modernist public intellectual, taking her ideas about the American “cult of failure” to a mass audience. In an interview about the memoir, for example, Stein reflects on her conversations with the Parisian visual artists, then much more economically successful than her: “One of the principal things that I have quarreled with them about was once they have made a success they became sterile, they could not go on. And I blamed them, I said it was their fault. I said success is all right but if there is anything in you it ought not to cut off the flow not if there is anything in you” (quoted in Mellow 2003, 338). Associating recognition and reward with sterility, Stein here cuts against hetero-reproductive framings of success, and in the flush of her own success she famously honed a public persona that carefully sidestepped the question of her own sexuality. She also sought broader applications for the ideas about success and failure she had long incubated in bohemia, as in the lecture “Portraits and Repetition” (1935), where Stein arrived at a conviction that sounds straight out of a success manual and turns the interior experiments of the earlier work toward US nationalism: “I am certain that what makes American success is American failure” (1998b, 291). Despite its ostensible “certainty,” this conclusion begs a number of essential questions. Whose success does whose failure

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make? Does failure produce success within individuals, psychologically? Does one have to know failure to also know success, dialectically? Or does one need failure to stay motivated, as she tells Matisse? Why is gender elided entirely? Where in America does this process take place? Is she referring to a particular aspect of American political economy? Does she mean to respond to the Depression? Does she mean to imply the logic of scarcity—that success can only happen at the expense of failure: “one man’s loss is another man’s gain”?¹⁶

In her first major work after the *Autobiography*, Stein works through these questions by returning to the nineteenth-century ideal of the self-made man. *Four in America* (1947) consists of four counterfactual biographies, recasting key figures of American history in occupations they never took up: Henry James as a war general, George Washington as a novelist, Wilbur Wright as a painter, and Ulysses S. Grant as a religious leader. *Four in America* thus produces failure in the narratives of otherwise successful exceptions. In contrast to the conventional success advocates cited above, Stein does not assert that great men have learned from or been motivated by failure. Instead, she writes their success out of their lives, testing their mettle in hypothetical contexts, and blithely insisting that they would all still have achieved greatness in these other walks of life. That the book did not find a publisher until after Stein’s death is not the least of its ironies as a document of the national mythology of success.¹⁷

The discussion of Grant takes off from the confusion around his name. Grant’s given first name was Hiram, which he discarded as a young man, and he later acquired the middle initial S through a mistake in the nominating process at West Point, where the cadets also gave each other nicknames, a few of which Stein runs through: Sam Grant, Uncle Sam Grant, United States Grant, and Unconditional Surrender Grant. She herself calls him Hiram, an Old Testament name that in the 1930s would have associated the general with Jewishness, though Stein proclaims with her typical confidence: “If he had remained Hiram Ulysses, as he was born, would he have been ultimately successful. I am unable to doubt it” (1947, 3).

Grant’s American religion has the itinerant status of a “camp-meeting,” and Stein worries that this might interfere with his success: “A real American a true American cannot earn a living. If he could earn a living he could be waiting. Waiting is what makes earning a living be part of existing and succeeding. No American can succeed no American can earn a living. . . . He cannot wait and therefore he cannot earn a living and therefore he cannot succeed” (1947, 16). In this view, the stereotypical

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restlessness of American life precludes the possibility of success, just as the rootlessness of pioneer religion troubles the certitude of the Protestant ethic, a point Stein simplifies in *Everybody's Autobiography*: "I used to be fond of saying that America, which was supposed to be a land of success, was a land of failure. Most of the great men in America had a long life of early failure and a long life of later failure" (2004, 88). Following the model of great men, she suggests, means throwing yourself into crushing failure, sometimes again and again. Such "beginning again and again," or failing again and again, relies on faith, just as does the success ideology Stein travesties so well. In her definition, success is an external judgment of a life always otherwise experienced as failure (the question of who constitutes a "real" or "true" American for Stein remains unanswered, but *Four in America* points toward her preoccupation with white masculinity).¹⁸

Restoring Grant's Old Testament name belies his 1862 General Order no. 11, what John Higham calls the "principal nativist incident of the war years" (2002, 13). In it, Grant attempted to dismiss all the Jews under his command, when he had come to believe that Jewish Union soldiers were secretly trading for cotton with Confederate Southerners. A few weeks after the order, Lincoln rescinded it, and Grant would offer apologies and excuses over the years, not least during his presidential campaigns and after the publication of his own wildly successful memoirs. Despite the Order, participation in the war effort on the Union side helped German Jewish immigrants secure citizenship through military service, and though no one in her own family had fought, Stein herself would later claim: "I was always in my way a Civil War veteran" (1998a, 778).

As she points out, Grant cuts a miserable figure of success mythology by any measure. He had resigned from the US Army to avoid dishonorable discharge for excessive drunkenness, then failed as a farmer in Missouri, and so, in 1860, moved his family to Galena, Illinois, to help his father and brothers at the family's tannery. Galena has taken on a mythic quality in stories of Grant's life—a frontier purgatory in which the military genius awaited his ascension to greatness. After the war, Grant went on to fail again, first through the corruptions of his presidency and in late life the speculations that brought his family to financial ruin. For Grant, the myth of a purgatorial Galena functions like her textual domesticities do for Stein, so that, in time and again drawing on its potential energies, he is, in Stein's terms, "beginning again and again," and, in the language of American bootstrapping, his "success" appears as a Steinian masterpiece: unrecognized in its moment, ugly to its contemporaries, implicitly masculine, and a sublime object of historical fascination to later generations.

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In the early 1930s, Thornton Wilder wrote Stein from Galena, where he had taken a weekend away from his teaching job at the University of Chicago: "Wherever we are now, we your children, we carry your ideas about with us, finding a thousand corroborations in the life around us to those ideas as far as we are able to grasp them, that we call Recognition, Daily Life, Talking and Listening, Vitality and Sensitivity, and so many others. But Galena has above these a special reference to yourself and you know what that is" (Burns et al., 1996, 21). Wilder took his discipleship to Stein especially seriously, but other modernists too shared her interest in Grant. In *Tender Is the Night* (1934), F. Scott Fitzgerald twice compares his protagonist Dick Diver to Grant in Galena. Before the narrative properly begins, Diver appears "like Grant, lolling in his general store in Galena, ready to be called to an intricate destiny" (Fitzgerald 2003, 126). Diver's "intricate destiny" does not, however, mean victory in battle or the arts, as it might in Stein. Instead, he has a ruinous extramarital affair with a young actress and loses his loving and wealthy, though psychologically unstable, wife. At the end of the book the ex-wife wonders at Diver's fate, and recalls the comparison to Grant: "Perhaps, so she liked to think, his career was biding its time, again like Grant's in Galena; his latest note was post-marked from Hornell, New York, which is some distance from Geneva and a very small town; in any case he is almost certainly in that section of the country, in one town or another" (315). Here Fitzgerald points up the absurdity of mythologizing Galena, framing Stein's idealized view of the place against a hysteric's wan hopes about her alcoholic ex-husband.¹⁹ In spite of Stein's ironic modernist optimism, some people, even white men, do finally waste away in Galena or Hornell, their "beginning again and again" leading nowhere.

In Stein's usage, however, "Galena" functions, I suggest, as another name for "whiteness," or perhaps, "white privilege." It implies that, when one's experiments (temporarily) fail, one can rely on the security of the established family business (like the Midwestern frontier tannery for Grant). Stein and Wilder take the simple advantage of the Grant family's inherited capital for granted, and Fitzgerald suggests how the ritualized intonation of a purgatorial Galena covers for the protagonist's unredeemed failure. But Stein's African American contemporaries had their own views of the landscape of failure, stretching from the Civil War into the twentieth century. Sterling Brown, in the persona of a white Southern woman, famously glossed Harlem nightlife as the "logical outcome of Appomattox" (1996, 169). The splendor of everyday African American culture in the urban North forces Brown's narrator to reflect on the failures of the

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Confederacy. In comparison, Stein's hero-worship of Grant seems like a distraction from the vital historical concerns of the moment. African American writers of the period were also less likely to see their own failures as fodder for art. In Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932), a Depression-era postmortem on the aspirations of the Harlem Renaissance, Eustace, a queer singer, "wanted to branch out and entrance larger and more discriminating audiences than Harlem offered, but every attempt he made to get in a Broadway show, or arrange for a radio or concert audition, had ended in failure" (1992, 104)—but this "failure" results not from Eustace's lack of talent but from the culture of white supremacy. Like Stein, Eustace's "discriminating" taste is an expression of his queerness, his "resistance" to "norms of human development." Quite unlike Stein, however, Eustace has neither inherited wealth or an increasingly valuable art collection to rely on while his work goes unrecognized.²⁰

Conclusion

Despite every indication that the Depression stemmed from systemic problems, Stein consistently emphasized individual effort as its antidote. She wrote editorials against the New Deal in the *Saturday Evening Post* and, in the preface to *Brewsie and Willie*,²¹ exhorted Americans to revive the "spiritual pioneer fight" (1998b, 778) that had conquered the frontier, and although literary and cultural historians tried to weigh such views against the contribution Stein made to twentieth-century aesthetics and queer culture, her views do parallel those of the 1930 pillars of the twentieth-century self-help canon: Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) and Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* (1937). Like Stein's, though more sharply, Hill's work offers a warmed-over synopsis of nineteenth-century rugged individualism: "One of the most common causes of failure is the habit of quitting when one is overtaken by *temporary defeat*," he writes, observing that "every adversity, every failure, and every heartache carries with it the Seed of an equivalent or a greater Benefit" (1987, 3, 55).

In the decades since the Depression, cultural critics have distinguished Stein's attempt to rhetorically redeem failure from Hill's by focusing on her artfulness, on what she herself declared her genius. And her work has increasingly become an inspiration for experimental writing by American writers from a variety of marginalized communities. At the same time, however, other contemporary developments give reason to be less sanguine about new modernist studies notions of the art of failure.

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Now that the worker-as-artist serves as an ideal for an emergent “creative class,” it makes less and less sense to differentiate modernist, artistic failure from the failures of ordinary people. Such thinking does already underpin much historicist scholarship on modernism, but its polemical force in relation to the present has not yet been realized—not least because so many of the failures that presage success are still disproportionately experienced by white men, just as the nineteenth-century authors of success manuals imagined.

Discussions of failure in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were not so different than the one we are having now. Like contemporary theorists of “grit” and “resilience,” nineteenth-century philosophers of success knew failure was good for young people,²² though they couldn't quite say how *much*. The American modernists, drilled on this message in their youth, found ways to amplify its hypocrisies, to use its rhetorical legerdemain as a tool of social critique. They found themselves unable, however, to escape the atmosphere of failure through aesthetic irony. Indeed, even their greatest successes came to feel like failure by other means. Stein's career thus follows a trajectory from the stunted critique of racial capitalism in *Three Lives* to the deep grammatical and psychological experiment in her middle period and, finally, to the conservative idealizing of individualism in the Depression, an echo of the nineteenth-century success manuals' worst lies. That trajectory suggests that the rewards of celebrating failure as an art may not sufficiently ensure against the risks of celebrating a culture of failure. Her career thus demands we pay more attention to discriminating among the implications of the term “failure”: failure as a category, an experience, an affect, a person, an economic condition, a temporary state, and a final one. Sure of herself as a failure, obsessed with success, and an archly alienated insider, Stein left behind aesthetic experiments that sound out the busted promise of success rhetoric. Though we may sometimes hear in her work a resonant solidarity with failures across time, space, and forms of trauma, “the mother of us all” (1998b, 788) knew many of her children were doomed.



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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Carol Stabile and Michael Golston for their extravagant generosity at different moments during the composition of this essay.

Notes

1. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno stresses the contradiction of “art’s double character as both autonomous and *fait social*” (1997, 5).
2. In the American context, Andrew Ross (1986) and Suzi Gablik (2004) also offer early examinations of modernism’s failures.
3. Among critical prompts for Halberstam’s work, a key one is Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward* (2009), which returns to modernist articulations of unfulfilled forms of queerness as a foil to contemporary normalizations of queer life. Martin Puchner’s *Poetry of the Revolution* (2006) takes a more formalist approach, following the history of the manifesto, from Marx and Engels onward, through its repeated failure to realize theory as practice.
4. For the role of “creativity” and “artistic critique” in new theories of management, see Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, and for an account of this phenomenon in self-help culture, see McGee 2005.
5. “Disidentification” is José Muñoz’s term, exemplified for him partly by Stein’s influence on Latino installation artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1999, 166).
6. See, for instance, Kimmel 2006, 57–124; Rotundo 1993, 194–221; and Bederman 1996.
7. Describing the importance of failure to the function of capitalism as bourgeois revolution, Marx and Engels write that “the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production” (1978, 476), and thus it leaves behind a stream of obsolete machines, ideas, entrepreneurs, and workers. Later, a contemporary of Stein, Joseph Schumpeter, named this aspect of capitalism “creative destruction” ([1942] 2008, 81–86).
8. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg demonstrates that the female modernists of the 1920s took advantage of educational, professional, and political advances made by late nineteenth-century feminists. “They *assumed* their right to exist outside of gender,” and so “the political solidarity of the successive generations of New Women slipped away as their discourses became more disjointed and conflicted” (1986, 296).
9. Barbara Will (2011) offers the definitive accounting of Stein’s relations to fascism. I discuss Stein’s disagreements with the New Deal below, along with

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scholarly accounts of it. For useful accounts of Stein's celebrity, see Leick 2004 and Biers 2013. Finally, for Stein and genius, see Will 2000 and Perelman 1994.

10. For an account of racial uplift, see Gaines 1996. For uplift and masculinity in modernist African American literature, see Ross 2004.

11. For Stein and black culture, see Saldívar-Hull 1989, Blackmer 1993, North 1998, Peterson 1996, Smedman 1996, and Weiss 1998.

12. For my use of the Wittgensteinian term "language game," I rely on Marjorie Perloff's reading of Stein (1999, 83–114). Perloff takes interest in the question of domesticity in Stein but less so in its geopolitical echoes across the Atlantic.

13. The phrase "practice makes perfect" is customarily traced back to the vernacular Latin "*fabricando fit faber*" ("working makes the worker") and to the discussion of habit in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, an important source for Stein in *The Making of Americans* (1955). There, Aristotle points out that "we learn an art or craft by doing the things that we shall have to do when we have learnt it: for instance, men become builders by building houses, harpers by playing on the harp. Similarly, we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts" (1926, II.1).

14. For an account of Stein and science, see Meyer 2002.

15. In "Literature as Equipment for Living," Kenneth Burke points out that success manuals themselves often bracket the experience of reading: "We usually take it for granted that the people who consume our current output of books on 'How to Buy Friends and Bamboozle Oneself and Other People' are reading as *students* who will attempt the recipes given. Nothing of the sort. *The reading of a book on the attaining of success is in itself the symbolic attaining of that success.* It is *while they read* that these readers are succeeding" ([1941] 1974, 298–99). For Stein's "illegibility" as a key feature of her work, see Dworkin 2003. For a reading of her difficulty in terms of "distant reading" and "women's work," see Cecire 2015.

16. Most accounts of the Depression agree that it stemmed from problems with the administration of abundance, not scarcity. For Stein and the period's economics, see Carson 1999.

17. Stein had enlisted Wilder and Van Vechten to circulate the manuscript of *Four in America*, as she tried in vain to find a publisher. It appeared posthumously in the Yale edition (1947) of her work. Fredric Jameson, following modernist studies' interest in modernist failures, has called the book an "unknown masterpiece at the very heart of Stein's work" (2007, 353).

18. This is one place we might recall Stein's apparently lifelong commitment to Otto Weininger's ideas about female masculinity. See Ruddick 1991 and Will 2000.

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19. Both Alan Trachtenburg (1968) and John Callahan (1972) comment on the mythic references to Grant in the novel.

20. Academic accounts of the Harlem Renaissance from the 1970s and 1980s, for instance by Nathan Huggins (1971) and Levering Lewis, parallel unforgiving scholarly positions on modernism from the same period by emphasizing the “failure” of the New Negro Movement to achieve what Lewis calls “civil rights by copyright” (1997, xxviii). My thinking also benefits from Robin D. G. Kelley’s (2003) discussion of failure, aesthetics, and black radicalism.

21. Michael Szalay (2000) and Sean McCann (2008) both associate *Four in America* with Stein’s reaction to the New Deal, and both compare her to Ayn Rand. Stein’s most explicit arguments with Roosevelt appeared in a series of pieces in the *Saturday Evening Post*, now collected in *Reflection on the Atomic Bomb* (1973).

22. For “grit,” see Duckworth 2016. For “resilience,” see James 2015.

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