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Notes on Failure

To Whom the Mornings stand for Nights,
What must the Midnights—be!
—Emily Dickinson

IF WRITING QUICKENS ONE'S SENSE OF LIFE, like falling in love, like being precariously in love, it is not because one has any confidence in achieving *success*, but because one is most painfully and constantly made aware of *mortality*: the persistent question being, Is this the work I fail to complete, is this the "posthumous" work that will draw forth so much pity . . . ?

The practicing writer, the writer-at-work, the writer immersed in his or her project, is not an entity at all, let alone a person, but some curious mélange of wildly varying states of mind, clustered toward what might be called the darker end of the spectrum: indecision, frustration, pain, dismay, despair, remorse, impatience, outright failure. To be honored in midstream for one's labor would be ideal, but impossible; to be honored after the fact is always too late, for by then another project has been begun, another concatenation of indefinable states. Perhaps one must contend with vaguely warring personalities, in some sort of sequential arrangement?—perhaps premonitions of failure are but the soul's wise economy, in not risking hubris?—it cannot matter, for, in any case, the writer, however battered a veteran, can't have any real faith, any absolute faith, in his stamina (let alone his theoretical "gift") to get him through the ordeal of *creating*, to the plateau of *creation*. One is frequently asked whether the process becomes easier, with the passage of time, and the reply is obvious—*Nothing gets easier with the passage of time, not even the passing of time.*

The artist, perhaps more than most people, inhabits failure, degrees of failure and accommodation and compromise: but the terms of his failure are generally secret. It seems reasonable to believe that failure may be a truth, or at any rate a

negotiable fact, while success is a temporary illusion of some intoxicating sort, a bubble soon to be pricked, a flower whose petals will quickly drop. If despair is—as I believe it to be—as absurd a state of the soul as euphoria, who can protest that it feels more substantial, more reliable, less out of scale with the human environment—? When it was observed to T. S. Eliot that most critics are failed writers, Eliot replied: "But so are most writers."

Though most of us inhabit degrees of failure or the anticipation of it, very few persons are willing to acknowledge it, out of a vague but surely correct sense that it is not altogether American to do so. *Your standards are unreasonably high, you must be exaggerating, you must be of a naturally melancholy and saturnine temperament* . . . From this pragmatic vantage point "success" itself is but a form of "failure," a compromise between what is desired and what is attained. One must be stoic, one must develop a sense of humor. And, after all, there is the example of William Faulkner who considered himself a failed poet; Henry James returning to prose fiction after the conspicuous failure of his playwriting career; Ring Lardner writing his impeccable American prose because he despaired of writing sentimental popular songs; Hans Christian Andersen perfecting his fairy tales since he was clearly a failure in other genres—poetry, playwriting, life. One has only to glance at *Chamber Music* to see why James Joyce specialized in prose.

Whoever battles with monsters had better see that it does not turn him into a monster. And if you gaze too long into an abyss—the abyss will gaze back into you. So Nietzsche cryptically warns us: and it is not implausible to surmise that he knew, so far as his own battles, his own monsters, and his own imminent abyss were concerned, much that lay before him: though he could not have guessed its attendant ironies, or the ignoble shallowness of the abyss. Neither does he suggest an alternative.

The spectre of failure haunts us less than the spectre of failing—the process, the activity, the absorbing delusionary stratagems. The battle lost, in retrospect, is, after all, a battle necessarily lost to time: and, won or lost, it belongs to another person. But the battle in the process of being lost, each ges-

ture, each pulsebeat . . . This is the true abyss of dread, the unspeakable predicament. *To Whom the Mornings stand for Nights, / What must the Midnights—be*!

But how graceful, how extraordinary these pitiless lines, written by Emily Dickinson some four years earlier, in 1862:

> The first Day's Night had come—
> And grateful that a thing
> So terrible—had been endured—
> I told my Soul to sing—
>
> She said her Strings were snapt—
> Her bow—to Atoms blown—
> And so to mend her—gave me work
> Until another Morn—
>
> And then—a Day as huge
> As Yesterdays in pairs,
> Unrolled its horror in my face—
> Until it blocked my eyes—
>
> My Brain—begun to laugh—
> I mumbled—like a fool—
> And tho' 'tis Years ago—that Day—
> My Brain keeps giggling—still.
>
> And Something's odd—within—
> That person that I was—
> And this One—do not feel the same—
> Could it be Madness—this?

Here the poet communicates, in the most succinct and compelling imagery, the phenomenon of the ceaseless process of *creating*: the instruction by what one might call the ego that the Soul "sing," despite the nightmare of "Yesterdays in pairs"—the valiant effort of keeping language, forging language, though the conviction is overwhelming that "the person that I was— / And this One—do not feel the same." (For how, a scant poem later, *can* they be the same?) And again, in the same year:

The Brain, within its Groove
Runs evenly—and true—
But let a Splinter swerve—
'Twere easier for You—

To put a Current back—
When Floods have slit the Hills—
And scooped a Turnpike for Themselves—
And trodden out the Mills—

The Flood that is the source of creativity, and the source of self-oblivion: sweeping away, among other things, the very Soul that would sing. And is it possible to forgive Joseph Conrad for saying, in the midst of his slough of despair while writing *Nostromo*—surely one of the prodigious feats of the imagination, in our time—that writing is but the "conversion of nervous force" into language?—so profoundly bleak an utterance that one supposes it must be true. For, after all, as the busily productive Charles Gould remarks to his wife, a man must apply himself to *some* activity.

Even that self-proclaimed "teacher of athletes," that vehement rejector of "down-hearted doubters . . . / Frivolous, sullen, moping, angry, affected, dishearten'd, atheistical," that Bard of the American roadway who so wears us out with his yawp of barbaric optimism, and his ebullient energy—even the great Whitman himself confesses that things are often quite different, quite different indeed. When one is alone, walking at the edge of the ocean, at autumn, "held by this electric self out of the pride of which I utter poems"—

O baffled, balk'd, bent to the very earth,
Oppressed with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,
Aware now that amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon me I have not once had the least idea who or what I am,
But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd,
Withdrawn far, mocking me with self-congratulatory signs and bows,
With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have written

Pointing in silence to these songs, and then to the sand beneath.

—"As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life"

Interesting to note that these lines were published in the same year, 1860, as such tirelessly exuberant and more "Whitmanesque" poems as "For You O Democracy," "Myself and Mine" ("Myself and mine gymnastic ever, / To stand the cold or heat, to take good aim with a gun, to sail a / boat, to manage horses, to beget superb children"), and "I Hear America Singing." More subdued and more eloquent is the short poem, "A Clear Midnight," of 1881, which allows us to overhear the poet in his solitude, the poet no longer in the blaze of noon on a public platform:

This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless,
Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done,
Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou lovest best,
Night, sleep, death and the stars.

One feels distinctly honored, to have the privilege of such moments: to venture around behind the tapestry, to see the threads in their untidy knots, the loose ends hanging frayed.

Why certain individuals appear to devote their lives to the phenomenon of interpreting experience in terms of structure, and of language, must remain a mystery. It is not an alternative to life, still less an escape from life, it *is* life: yet overlaid with a peculiar sort of luminosity, as if one were, and were not, fully inhabiting the present tense. Freud's supposition—which must have been his own secret compulsion, his sounding of his own depths—that the artist labors at his art to win fame, power, riches, and the love of women, hardly addresses itself to the fact that, such booty being won, the artist often intensifies his effort: and finds much of life, apart from that effort, unrewarding. Why, then, this instinct to interpret; to transpose flickering and transient thoughts into the relative permanence of language; to give oneself over to decades of obsessive labor, in the service of an elusive "transcendental"

ideal, that, in any case, will surely be misunderstood?—or scarcely valued at all? Assuming that all art is metaphor, or metaphorical, what really *is* the motive for metaphor?—is there a motive?—or, in fact, metaphor?—can one say anything finally, with unqualified confidence, about any work of art?—why it strikes a profound, irresistible, and occasionally life-altering response in some individuals, yet means very little to others. In this, the art of reading hardly differs from the art of writing, in that its most intense pleasures and pains must remain private, and cannot be communicated to others. Our secret affinities remain secret even to ourselves . . . we fall in love with certain works of art, as we fall in love with certain individuals, for no very clear motive.

In 1955, in the final year of his life, as profusely honored as any writer in history, Thomas Mann wryly observed in a letter that he had always admired Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, "The Steadfast Tin Soldier." "Fundamentally," says Mann, "it is the symbol of my life." And what is the "symbol" of Mann's life? Andersen's toy soldier is futilely in love with a pretty dancer, a paper cut-out; his fate is to be cruelly, if casually, tossed into the fire by a child, and melted down to the shape "of a small tin heart." Like most of Andersen's tales the story of the steadfast tin soldier is scarcely a children's story, though couched in the mock-simple language of childhood; and one can see why Thomas Mann felt such kinship with it, for it begins: "There were once five and twenty tin soldiers, all brothers, for they were the offspring of the same old tin spoon. Each man shouldered his gun, kept his eyes well to the front, and wore the smartest red and blue uniform imaginable. . . . All the soldiers were exactly alike with one exception, and he differed from the rest in having only one leg. For he was made last, and there was not quite enough tin left to finish him. However, he stood just as well on his one leg as the others did on two. In fact he was the very one who became famous."

Is the artist secretly in love with failure, one might ask.

Is there something dangerous about "success," something finite and limited and, in a sense, historical: the passing over from *striving*, and *strife*, to *achievement*—? One thinks again of

Nietzsche, that most profound of psychologists, who tasted the poisonous euphoria of success, however brief, however unsatisfying: beware the danger in happiness! *Now everything I touch turns out to be wonderful. Now I love any fate that comes along. Who would like to be my fate?*

Yet it is perhaps not failure the writer loves, so much as the addictive nature of incompletion and risk. A work of art acquires, and then demands, its own singular "voice"; it insists upon its integrity; as Gide in his Notebook observed, the artist needs "a special world of which he alone has the key." That the fear of dying or becoming seriously ill in midstream is very real, cannot be doubted: and if there is an obvious contradiction here (one dreads completion; one dreads the possibility of a "posthumous" and therefore uncompleted work), that contradiction is very likely at the heart of the artistic enterprise. The writer carries himself as he would carry a precarious pyramid of eggs, because he is, in fact, a precarious pyramid of eggs, in danger of falling at any moment, and shattering on the floor in an ignoble mess. And he understands beforehand that no one, not even his most "sympathetic" fellow writers, will acknowledge his brilliant intentions, and see, for themselves, the great work he would surely have completed, had he lived.

An affinity for risk, danger, mystery, a certain derangement of the soul; a craving for distress, the pinching of the nerves, the not-yet-voiced; the predilection for insomnia; an impatience with past selves and past creations that must be hidden from one's admirers—why is the artist drawn to such extremes, why are we drawn along with him? Here, a forthright and passionate voice, from a source many would think unlikely:

> There are few of us who have not sometimes wakened before dawn, either after one of those dreamless nights that make us almost enamoured of death, or one of those nights of horror and misshapen joy, when through the chambers of the brain sweep phantoms more terrible than reality itself, and instinct with that vivid life that lurks in all grotesques, and that lends to Gothic art its enduring vitality. . . . Veil after veil of thin dusky gauze is lifted, and by degrees the forms and colors of things are restored to

> them, and we watch the dawn remaking the world in its antique pattern. The wan mirrors get back their mimic life. . . . Nothing seems to us changed. Out of the unreal shadows of the night comes back the real life that we had known. We have to resume it where we had left off, and there steals over us a terrible sense of the necessity of the continuance of energy in the same wearisome round of stereotyped habits, or a wild longing, it may be, that our eyelids might open some morning upon a world that had been refashioned anew in the darkness . . . a world in which the past would have little or no place, or survive, at any rate, in no conscious form of obligation and regret. . . . It was the creation of such worlds as these that seemed to Dorian Gray to be the true object . . . of life.

That this unmistakably heartfelt observation should be bracketed, in Wilde's great novel, by chapters of near-numbing cleverness, and moralizing of a Bunyanesque—a truly medieval—nature, does not detract from its peculiar poignancy: for here, one feels, Wilde is speaking without artifice or posturing; and that Dorian Gray, freed for the moment from his somewhat mechanical role in the allegory Wilde has assembled, to explain himself to himself, has in fact acquired the transparency—the invisibility—of a mask of our own.

As the ancient legend instructs us, Medusa, the image-bearing goddess of Greek mythology, could not be encountered directly by the hero Perseus, for her power was such that she turned everyone who gazed upon her into stone. (The Gorgon, Medusa, had once been a beautiful woman who had been transformed into a monster—with wings, glaring eyes, tusk-like teeth, and those famous serpents for hair.) Only through shrewd indirection, by means of a polished shield, could she be approached in order to be slain—that is, "conquered" by a mortal man.

Medusa—Perseus—the polished shield: one is led to read the tale as a cautionary parable, which tells us that the inchoate and undetermined event, the act without structure, without the necessary constraint (and cunning) of the human imagination, is too brutal—because too inhuman?—to be

borne. Perseus, aided by Athene, conquers the barbaric in nature, and in his own nature, by means of *reflection*.

The demonic flood of emotion represented by Medusa is, then, successfully subdued by the stratagems of restraint, confinement, indirection, craftiness, patience—which is to say, by a kind of art: the deliberate artfulness that substitutes intellectual caution for the brashness of primitive instinct. So art labors to give *meaning* to a profusion of *meanings*: its structures—inevitably "exclusive," and therefore inevitably "unjust"—provide a way of seeing with the mind's eye that is unquestionably superior to the eye itself.

(And if Medusa were not terrible of aspect, threatening both sanity and life, who, one wonders, would trouble to gaze upon her? It is precisely the risk she represents, the grave danger, that makes her a Muse.)

Will one fail is a question less apposite, finally, than *can one succeed?*—granted the psychic predicament, the addiction to a worldly skepticism that contrasts (perhaps comically) with the artist's private system of customs, habits, and superstitious routines that constitutes his "working life." (A study should really be done of artists' private systems—that cluster of stratagems, both voluntary and involuntary, that make daily life navigable. Here we would find, I think, a bizarre and ingenious assortment of Great Religions in embryo—a system of checks and balances, rewards, and taboos, fastidious as a work of art. *What is your work-schedule*, one writer asks another, never *What are the great themes of your books?*—for the question is, of course, in code, and really implies *Are you perhaps crazier than I?—and will you elaborate?*)

How to attain a destination is always more intriguing (involving, as it does, both ingenuity and labor) than *what* the destination finally is. It has always been the tedious argument of moralists that artists appear to value their art above what is called "morality": but is not the artist by definition an individual who has grown to care more about the interior dimensions of his art than about its public aspect, simply because—can this be doubted?—he spends all his waking hours, and many of his sleeping hours, in that landscape?

The curious blend of the visionary and the pragmatic that

characterizes most novelists is exemplified by Joyce's attitude toward the various styles of *Ulysses*, those remarkable exuberant self-parodying voices: "From my point of view it hardly matters whether the technique is 'veracious' or not; it has served me as a bridge over which to march my eighteen episodes, and, once I have got my troops across, the opposing forces can, for all I care, blow the bridge sky-high." And though critics generally focus upon the ingenious relationship of *Ulysses* to the *Odyssey*, the classical structure was one Joyce chose with a certain degree of arbitrariness, as he might have chosen another—*Peer Gynt*, for instance; or *Faust*. That the writer labors to discover the secret of his work is perhaps the writer's most baffling predicament, about which he cannot easily speak: for he cannot write the fiction without becoming, beforehand, the person who *must* write that fiction; and he cannot be that person, without first subordinating himself to the process, the labor, of creating that fiction . . . Which is why one becomes addicted to insomnia itself, to a perpetual sense of things about to fail, the pyramid of eggs about to tumble, the house of cards about to be blown away. Deadpan, Stanislaus Joyce noted in his diary, in 1907: "Jim says that . . . when he writes, his mind is as nearly normal as possible."

But my position, as elaborated, is, after all, only the reverse of the tapestry.

Let us reconsider. Isn't there, perhaps, a very literal advantage, now and then, to failure?—a way of turning even the most melancholy of experiences inside-out, until they resemble experiences of *value*, of *growth*, of *profound significance*? That Henry James so spectacularly failed as a playwright had at least two consequences: it contributed to a nervous collapse; and it diverted him from a career for which he was unsuited (not because he had a too grandly "literary" and ambitious conception of the theatre but because, in fact, his theatrical aspirations were so conventional, so trivial)—thereby allowing him the spaciousness of relative failure. The public catastrophe of *Guy Domville* behind him, James writes in his notebook: "I take up my *own* old pen again—the pen of all my old unforgettable efforts and sacred struggles. To myself—today—I need say no more. Large and full and high the future still opens. It is now indeed that I may do the work of

my life. And I will." *What Maisie Knew, The Awkward Age, The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove, The Golden Bowl*—the work of James's life. Which success, in the London theatre, would have supplanted—or would have made unnecessary.

Alice James, the younger sister of William and Henry, was born into a family in which, by Henry's admission, "girls seem scarcely to have had a chance." As her brilliant *Diary* acknowledges, Alice made a career of various kinds of failure: the failure to become an adult; the failure to become a "woman" in conventional terms; the failure to realize her considerable intellectual and literary gifts; the failure—which strikes us as magnificently stubborn—to survive. (When Alice discovered that she had cancer of the breast, at the age of 43, she wrote rhapsodically in her diary of her great good fortune: for now her long and questionable career of invalidism had its concrete, incontestable, deathly vindication.)

Alice lies on her couch forever. Alice, the "innocent" victim of fainting spells, convulsions, fits of hysteria, mysterious paralyzing pains, and such nineteenth-century female maladies as nervous hyperesthesia, spinal neurosis, cardiac complications, and rheumatic gout. Alice, the focus of a great deal of familial attention; yet the focus of no one's interest. Lying on her couch she does not matter in the public world, in the world of men, of history. She does not count; she *is* nothing. Yet the *Diary*, revealed to her brothers only after her death, exhibits a merciless eye, an unfailingly accurate ear, a talent that rivals "Harry's" (that is, Henry's) for its astuteness, and far surpasses his for its satirical and sometimes cruel humor. Alice James's career invalidism deprives her of everything; yet, paradoxically, of nothing. The triumph of the *Diary* is the triumph of a distinct literary voice, as valuable as the voice of Virginia Woolf's celebrated diaries.

> I think if I get into the habit of writing a bit about what happens, or rather what doesn't happen, I may lose a little of the sense of loneliness and isolation which abides with me. . . . Scribbling my notes and reading [in order to clarify] the density and shape the formless mass within. Life seems inconceivably rich.

Life seems inconceivably rich—the sudden exclamation of the writer, the artist, in defiance of external circumstances.

The invalid remains an invalid. She dies triumphantly young. When a nurse wishes to commiserate with her about her predicament, Alice notes in her diary that destiny—any destiny—because it *is* destiny—is fascinating: thus pity is unnecessary. One is born not to suffer but to negotiate with suffering, to choose or invent forms to accommodate it.

Every commentator feels puritanically obliged to pass judgment on Alice. As if the *Diary* were not a document of literary worth; as if it doesn't surpass in literary and historical interest most of the publications of Alice's contemporaries, male or female. This "failure" to realize one's gifts may look like something very different from within. One must remember that, in the James family, "an interesting failure had more value than too-obvious success"—as it does to most observers.

In any case Alice James creates "Alice," a possibly fictitious person, a marvelous unforgettable voice. It is Alice who sinks unprotesting into death; it is Alice who says: "I shall proclaim that anyone who spends her life as an appendage to five cushions and three shawls is justified in committing the sloppiest kind of suicide at a moment's notice."

In Cyril Connolly's elegiac "war-book" *The Unquiet Grave, A Word Cycle by Palinurus* (1945), the shadowy doomed figure of Palinurus broods upon the melancholic but strengthening wisdom of the ages, as a means of "contemplating" (never has the force of that word been more justified), and eventually rejecting, his own suicide. Palinurus, the legendary pilot of Aeneas, becomes for the thirty-nine-year-old Connolly an image of his own ambivalence, which might be termed "neurotic" and self-destructive—unless one recalls the specific historical context in which the idiosyncratic "word cycle" was written, between the autumn of 1942 and the autumn of 1943, in London. *The Unquiet Grave* is a journal in perpetual metamorphosis; a lyric assemblage of epigrams, reflections, paradoxes, and descriptive passages; a commonplace book in which the masters of European literature from Horace and Virgil to Goethe, Schopenhauer, Flaubert, and beyond, are employed, as voices in Palinurus' meditation. Palinurus suf-

fered a fate that, in abbreviated form, would appear to cry out for retribution, as well as pity:

> Palinurus, a skillful pilot of the ship of Aeneas, fell into the sea in his sleep, was three days exposed to the tempests and waves of the sea, and at last came to the sea shore near Velia, where the cruel inhabitants of the place murdered him to obtain his clothes: his body was left unburied on the seashore.
>
> (Lemprière)

Connolly's meditation upon the temptations of death takes the formal structure of an initiation, a descent into hell, a purification, a cure—for "the ghost of Palinurus must be appeased." Approaching forty, Connolly prepares to "heave his carcass of vanity, boredom, guilt and remorse into another decade." His marriage has failed; the France he has loved is cut off from him, as a consequence of the war; it may well be that the world as he has known it will not endure. He considers the rewards of opium-smoking, he broods upon the recent suicides of four friends, he surrenders his lost Eden and accommodates himself to a changed but evidently enduring world. The word cycle ends with an understated defense of the virtues of happiness, by way of a close analysis of Palinurus' complicity in his fate:

> As a myth . . . with a valuable psychological interpretation, Palinurus clearly stands for a certain will-to-failure or repugnance-to-success, a desire to give up at the last moment, an urge toward loneliness, isolation, and obscurity. Palinurus, in spite of his great ability and his conspicuous public position, deserted his post in the moment of victory and opted for the unknown shore.

Connolly rejects his own predilection for failure and self-willed death only by this systematic immersion in "Palinurus' " desire for the unknown shore: *The Unquiet Grave* achieves its success as a unique work by way of its sympathy with failure.

Early failure, "success" in being published of so minimal a nature it might be termed failure, repeated frustrations may have made James Joyce possible: these factors did not, at any rate, humble him.

Consider the example of his first attempt at a novel, *Stephen Hero*, a fragmented work that reads precisely like a "first novel"—ambitious, youthful, flawed with the energies and naive insights of youth, altogether conventional in outline and style, but, one would say, "promising." (Though conspicuously less promising than D. H. Lawrence's first novel *The White Peacock*.) Had Joyce found himself in a position to publish *Stephen Hero*—had his other publishing experiences been less disheartening—he would have used the material that constitutes *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; and that great novel would not have been written. As things evolved, Joyce retreated, and allowed himself ten years to write a masterpiece: and so he rewrote *Stephen Hero* totally, using the first draft as raw material upon which language makes a gloss. *Stephen Hero* presents characters and ideas, tells a story: *A Portrait of the Artist* is about language, *is* language, a portrait-in-progress of the creator, as he discovers the range and depth of his genius. The "soul in gestation" of Stephen Dedalus gains its individuality and its defiant strength as the novel proceeds; at the novel's conclusion it has even gained a kind of autonomy—wresting from the author a *first-person* voice, supplanting the novel's strategy of narration with Stephen's own journal. Out of unexceptional and perhaps even banal material Joyce created one of the most original works in our language. If the publication of *Dubliners* had been less catastrophic, however, and a clamor had arisen for the first novel by this "promising" young Irishman, one might imagine a version of *Stephen Hero* published the following year: for, if the verse of *Chamber Music* (Joyce's first book) is any measure, Joyce was surely not a competent critic of his own work at this time; and, in any case, as always, he needed money. If *Stephen Hero* had been published, *Portrait* could not have been written; without *Portrait*, its conclusion in particular, it is difficult to imagine the genesis of *Ulysses* . . . So one speculates; so it seems likely, in retrospect. But James Joyce was protected by the unpopularity of his work. He enjoyed, as his brother

Stanislaus observed, "that inflexibility firmly rooted in failure."

The possibilities are countless. Can one imagine a D. H. Lawrence whose great novel *The Rainbow* had enjoyed a routine popular fate, instead of arousing the most extraordinary sort of vituperation ("There is no form of viciousness, of suggestiveness, that is not reflected in these pages," said a reviewer for one publication; the novel, said another reviewer, "had no right to exist"); how then could *Women in Love*, fueled by Lawrence's rage and loathing, have been written? And what of the evangelical *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in its several versions? In an alternative universe there is a William Faulkner whose poetry (variously, and ineptly, modelled on Swinburne, Eliot, and others) was "successful"; there is a Faulkner whose early, derivative novels gained him a substantial public and commercial success. Imitation Hemingway in *Soldiers' Pay*, imitation Huxley in *Mosquitoes*—with the consequence that Faulkner's own voice might never have developed. (For when Faulkner needed money—and he always needed money—he wrote as rapidly and as pragmatically as possible.) That his great, idiosyncratic, difficult novels—*The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*—held so little commercial promise allowed him the freedom, the spaciousness, one might even say the privacy, to experiment with language as radically as he wished: for it is the "inflexibility" of which Stanislaus Joyce spoke that genius most requires.

But the genius cannot know that he is a genius—not really: he has hopes, he has premonitions, he suffers raging paranoid doubts, but he can have, in the end, only himself for measurement. Success is distant and illusory, failure one's loyal companion, one's stimulus for imagining that the next book will be better—for, otherwise, why write? The impulse can be made to sound theoretical, and even philosophical, but it is, no doubt, as physical as our blood and marrow. *This insatiable desire to write something before I die, this ravaging sense of the shortness and feverishness of life, make me cling . . . to my one anchor*—so Virginia Woolf, in her diary, speaks for us all.