

Sacrificial Escalation: The Wishes of Human Vanity

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Surely everyone wants to win. But there is no point in winning if everybody can. Equally, though, there is no point in wanting to win if hardly anybody ever does. How, then, to prevent the possibility either of the losers taking up pitchforks and torches, or the Hobbesian glory-war of all the would-be winners against all the others? The solution is through modulation, the invention of different ways of winning, through the multiplication of game procedures. One of the most ancient of these ways of snatching victory from defeat is to turn defeat itself into symbolic victory.

Human beings have access to complex forms of symbolic calculus that allow the negativity of losing to be inverted into positivity in the market of social prestige. A small but telling example is provided by the anthropology of esteem among young American girls of which I have recently read a description. The problem is how to win socially, or how to avoid losing, if you do not belong to a group aureated by ordeal. What, in particular, are you to do, if you belong to the zero-degree category sneeringly denominated as 'basic white bitch' (white, or at least 'white', economically comfortable, comely, well-educated and well-adjusted)? The answer, it is reported, is that you need an 'offset', namely some form of defect or fortunate fall, often taking the form of some mental illness, to assure your passport to social acceptability.

This may be regarded as a minor contemporary variation on a well-established pattern of value-inversion characterised by the anthropologist Roger Gomm, in the context of the social dynamics of female spirit possession among the Digo in South Kenya, as 'bargaining from weakness'. He describes this as

a class of social phenomena in which someone can be represented as bargaining for something, not on the basis of what he or she has to offer in return, but on the basis of what he lacks, is about to lose, suffers from or is deficient in. Within this class we can include the suicide on the parapet, the invalid, the beggar, the victim of witchcraft attack, and certain types of behaviour bracketed as 'mental illness' in advanced societies. Similar are pleas of mitigation at law and in everyday life when someone makes a shortcoming an excuse for otherwise unacceptable behaviour. (Gomm 1975, 536)

Let us be in no doubt as to the extraordinary range and almost immeasurable power in human history of the practices of bargaining from weakness, or winning at failure.

Every child learns very quickly the gains to be had from being at a disadvantage. It is still routinely claimed that literature records the stories of history's victors, but literature is almost entirely preoccupied with the minor glory of losing and the glory of minority itself. The most potent kind of hero is a tragic hero, and only a loser would prefer the tedium of Tamburlaine to the avid agonies of Antigone. The success of Christianity is surely largely due to the centrality in it of the image of humiliated divinity, and the glorification of pathos for adherents of what Nietzsche famously saw as the loser ethics, or 'slave morality' arising from it, neatly described by Keith Ansell-Pearson as a process in which 'the slaves stylize their own natural weakness into the result of a choice for which they can claim moral credit' (Nietzsche 2006, xxi).

The fortunes of the word *vain*, from Latin *vanus*, entering English from French in the early fourteenth century, indicate the ambivalence indicated in the inversion of Johnson's title in mine. Vain meant empty, futile or trivial, often indicating the failure of some hope, which has proved to be delusive. The transitive use *to vain* meant to frustrate or cause to be in vain. Only from the end of the seventeenth century does vanity start to be attached definitively to a condition of pride or excessive self-esteem. The use of the word in this sense allows for a slide from an attachment to vain or futile things to a narcissistic attachment to the very vanity of those things.

The Aesthetics of Failure aims to consider the consequences of this diversified economy of winning-by-losing for what is called art and aesthetics. For well over a century, artists have developed a special category of prestigious failure in the different ways of failing to live up to the demands of art. These techniques of failing to make art, in the special way that only persons wishing to be taken to be artists can fail, have been justified by various kinds of aesthetics of failure. But the generalisation of the kinds of failure-prestige that Mara Selvini Palazzoli calls 'sacrificial escalation' (Palazzoli 1988, 195-7) must lead to a failure of aesthetics, precisely because, when anything and everything is artful in the way previously reserved for the 'aesthetic', nothing is any longer specifically so. Another way of saying this would be that artistic failure is just one of the arts of failure, and they are legion, and so not beyond but beneath the pleasure principle, and in its busy midst.

Are we talking here about aesthetic failure in the sense of failure in aesthetic, for which read artistic circumstances? Or about the aesthetics of failure, whether or not anything artistic is involved in it? My preference will be to speak of the latter, and in doing so, to gloss aesthetics as pleasure. Most people who use the word aesthetic pleasure are trying to imply that they are referring to a particular kind of pleasure, almost always distinguished as well as distinctive. But I do not believe we can know what we mean in evoking such pleasure, not because it is mysterious, but simply because it is various – literally 'all over the place' – and permanently in process of

evolution. So 'aesthetic pleasure', in my view, does not distinguish a particular kind of pleasure, so much as pay a particular kind of compliment, apparently specific but in fact hazy, to the idea of pleasure. Aesthetic pleasure is pleasure subjected to the approbation of being credited as being 'aesthetic'. There is no way out of this circularity, since it is the circularity that is just what the idea of the aesthetic is.

What, we might wonder, is success? This word has experienced a remarkable expansion of meaning, which is still apparent in the difference between the words *successive* and *successful*. Well into the eighteenth century, success was used to mean sequel, result or outcome. When Milton introduces the figure of Satan, he is said to be 'insatiate to pursue/Vain war with heaven, and by success untaught' (Milton 1968, 509), where Milton clearly does not mean that Satan has failed to draw the lessons from success, but rather has failed to draw the lessons from the failure that has been, or must assuredly be, the sequel to vain war with Heaven. Satan's reference later on to 'ill successes' (Milton 1968, 667), which sounds like 'something out of Beckett', to quote something out of Beckett, the great contemporary Miltonian, makes the meaning of success as sequel clear. As Alistair Fowler observes (Milton 1968, 509), Milton's later usages in *Paradise Lost* and in *Paradise Regained* tend toward the more modern meaning of a 'successful outcome'. *Successful*, a word without the possibility of meaningful employment when success meant sequel, seems to make its first appearance in print in the 1594 printing of *Titus Andronicus*, in which Andronicus is described as "Successful in the battles that he fights", with 'unsuccessful' succeeding upon it twenty years or so later, in Fynes Morison's reference to 'griefe of vnsucsessefull loue' (Morison 1617, 2.48). Macbeth's quibbling 'and catch with his surcease success' equivocates between these two meanings of consequence and happy outcome. We may speculate that for the idea of simple succession, or coming after, to be heightened into the idea of winning may include some idea of the inversion of losing into winning, or the exaltation of low into high.

When Kipling reflects that triumph and disaster should both be regarded as 'impostors', he is recalling a particular strain that is present in earlier uses of the concept of failure, in which to fail is to deceive, or disappoint. The inheritors of this association are the words *false*, deriving from the past participle of Latin *fallere*, which in Middle English was an intransitive verb meaning to fail, give way, or prove unreliable, and *fallacy*. Failure is something that betrays hopes, proves, or plays, them false.

I think we can see the trace of this in the extraordinary success of the phrase 'being let down'. When somebody is stinging or reeling from the effects of some piece of institutional failure or incompetence, judicial or academic or medical, the interviewer for TV news will very often ask them 'do you feel let you down?' This milk-

and-water enquiry almost always seems like a bizarre and even insulting understatement, given the distressing or enraging circumstances that are being reported. At the same time, the very silliness of the understatement points to an excess. The point of abstract or impersonal systems is not in the least to delight or disappoint those who meet with their effects, but to work. Being asked whether you feel let down by having had unnecessary and life-changing surgery performed on the wrong eye invites and instantiates a fundamentally infantile relationship to the perpetrators, in which one has seen all the hopes that one has sunk in the enterprise dashed. An appropriate answer to the there-there, mock-sympathetic 'Do you feel let down?' is 'No, because this is not a birthday party at which the balloons have not arrived'. When turned, so often, into an accusation – 'do you feel you have let your customers/constituents/the country down' – the question 'will you publicly admit to failure?' (itself a playground demand) is turned into 'are you going to own up in front of all these people to having been really *bad*?' Doing a terrible job is just what it is, terrible, and it is in no way intensified by disappointing people when you do do it.

We need to understand that the expansion of the arts of winning at failing takes place *pari passu* with the intolerance of failure, amounting indeed to a kind of theft of the very possibility of failing. Though they might seem like opposites, the first being preoccupied with failing, the second fixated on the avoidance of failure, winning at failing and refusing failure, they are in fact reciprocally reinforcing. And the practice of art has in fact been a brand leader in this, as, from roughly the late nineteenth century onwards, the definitions of art and its value have become simultaneously broader and ever more insulated from the extrinsic kinds of judgement that are necessary for failure to be possible. External criteria allow us to determine with high confidence when a juggler has performed well or badly, which is implicitly to say, as a juggler. But it is a much more ticklish matter to decide whether a piece of performance art intriguingly entitled *Juggle*, consisting of an apparently inexpert person attempting to juggle, possibly wearing oven-gloves, has succeeded or not in being the kind of performance art it has set out to be. One can fail *at* art – failing to get any grants or commissions or approving write-ups – though what this usually amounts to is a failure to get recognised *as* art. It is much harder than it used to be to fail *in* art, that is, for some undertaking to succeed incontestably well in being characterisable as some kind of art, but to come clownishly short of being any good as the kind of art it is. Nobody can doubt that *Wuthering Heights* is some kind of novel. When it is a question of the success or failure of art, the artistic and the autistic, in the literal sense of the latter, go hand in glove. You know that any articulation of failure will be met with the smug assurance that the work was simply not attempting to succeed in that obvious and trivial way. The category of art is thereby indemnified by the ever-present possibility of category error in its audiences.

The arts of winning at failure are actually part of what the outlawing of the possibility of failure, which is most illustriously evident in the world of education, but is generally at large and apparently getting larger. It is, for example a feature of much academic research. Despite the fact that funders often advertise the fact that they want to fund 'high risk, high return' projects, the point of most funding applications is to reassure the funder that there is no chance whatsoever of the research not working out in just the way it is projected to do. It used to be the case that there was a difference in this respect between interpretative work in the humanities, which could never really succeed precisely because it will always have succeeded in having been done in some way or other, though only in that, and investigative work in the sciences, in which it was in principle possible for a project to fail to confirm some hypothecated results, and therefore to succeed. But that is no longer the case even in the investigative sciences, which is in a fair way to becoming the same kind of 'quite unlosable game' (Larkin 1988, 167) as research in the humanities.

This insulation against failure can lead to a failure of the ability to fail, or the ability not to be able, which Giorgio Agamben follows Aristotle in calling *impotential* (Agamben 1999, 182). If one never really encounters failure, learning in the process that one can survive it simply by succeeding it, rather than trying to forfend it by succeeding *at* it, it is not clear how one can come to understand that failing to be something is not a failure of your being-as-possibility, but an acquaintance with the being-possible of failure that is impotentiality.

The desire for failure, or at least the cultivation of the arts of failure, is part of the much larger and entirely unmistakable phenomenon of contemporary infantilisation, distinguishable, as a systematic programme of becoming-infant, from infantilism, as the insulting but episodic reduction or retreat to the condition of the child. I mean with this word to refer both to the ways in which allegedly grown men and women are infantilised in almost every relation into which they enter and transaction they undertake, and also, more cardinally, to the internalisation of these solicitations in actions and impulses of self-infantilisation. Nothing confirms this more decisively than the general requiring and requiting of impatience, emotional, epistemic, economic and political, in the light of which the intolerance of failure appears as a willed failure of the power to tolerate.

Infantilism involves the avoidance of adulthood, not in the sense of authority or responsibility, which are the usual associations of adulthood, but the jeopardy of adulthood, or adulthood as jeopardy itself, the failure of reigning no longer as His Majesty the Ego. The most obvious effect of this is the contemporary phenomenon (though it follows an ancient and exceptionless law that twins prosperity with reproductive inhibition) of dramatically declining fertility, across every developed economy in the world. Nobody wants to have children when it would get in the way

of continuing to *be* children in adulthood. Permanent minority is the unimprovable luxury, as Kant observes – ‘Es ist so bequem, unmündig zu sein’ (Kant 1784, 482). What does it mean to be an emperor if it is not the attainment of ultimate helplessness – not having to do, and not even being able to do, anything for yourself. Only babies live sovereign, or so we enviously dream, so having them must entail being pushed to the side of our own lives, to adapt the words of one of the glummost if occasionally rueful, anti-natalists (Larkin 1988, 121). Nature has seen to it or, since we are talking of nature, seems to have seen to it so far, that the last thing that reproduction ever allows you to do is reproduce yourself, though it may be just this immortalising prospect that tricks you into it.

In essence the cultivation of failure is a mortification-game deployed immunologically against the actuality of mortality. What I mean by mortification is a pantomime of mock-death for the gratification of the living. The games of mortification – kneeling on peas, self-starvation, auto-asphyxiation, consensual mutilation and so on – can always, of course, go too far, but that is precisely what makes them games. If they never went too far, or if they always went too far, they would be, as we say, ‘deadly’ serious, as opposed to not being seriously deadly. The onanistic dalliance with dating apps (Bandinelli and Bandinelli 2021) and the insular satisfactions of the incel state are similar deferrals of the risk of desire and dashed hopes, and the fear of success. The failure to win is thus defended against by the arts of winning at failure.

Winning at failure is really ludic rather than merely ludicrous, and the general gamification of life is an important part of general infantilation. One of its most palpable proofs is the universal prerogative of silliness, which, though it sets out to be the gadfly antagonist of seriousness, can easily become one of its modulations. Michael Bywater’s rather delicious book *Big Babies* (2006), for example, rather irritatingly adopts the mode of silliness for its comic protest against the universal dominion of the silly. It is hard, but I think worthwhile to try to be serious about silliness. Silliness is a serious matter precisely because, as well as being the opposite of the ‘hunger ... to be more serious’ (Larkin 1988, 98) it is in fact animated by the dread of seriousness. The judge who delivers a sentence of death traditionally puts on a black cap in order to do it rather than just saying ‘I have decided that you should be killed for what it looks like you have done, even though it can do no conceivable good apart from gratifying nasty impulses of revenge, and reminding other people that they too can be killed if they lose their temper and get caught. Putting it like this makes it seem rather childish, though, so I am going instead to ensure its solemnity by balancing a kind of symbolic extra hat on top of the funny wig that I am already wearing to safeguard my dignity. And may God have mercy on your soul, by the way’ (Connor 2023, 101).

The paradox is that to be grown up is also to be able to play, but to play seriously, to play without pretending that you are not, rather than as a way of keeping seriousness at bay. It is the *ars morituri* of Nietzschean gaiety rather than the pantomime season of, say, zero-covid, net zero, zero tolerance, or indeed anything involving the word zero. This is true in particular of the *in articulo mortis* play of deathbed facetiousness, which in my view is to be distinguished sharply from the death-deferring mortifications of infantilisation. W.B. Yeats's poem 'Upon a Dying Lady', describes the death of Mabel Beardsley, the sister of Aubrey Beardsley, who spent her final days 'Thinking of saints and of Petronius Arbiter' amid dolls and playthings, in a nursing home in Holford Road, Hampstead, where Yeats visited her (Yeats 1979, 177). Yeats's allusion is to the elegantly-choreographed public suicide of Petronius, known as 'Arbiter' because the jaded Emperor Nero 'found charm and delicacy only in what Petronius recommended'. Tacitus records his suicide at Cumae:

nec tulit ultra timoris aut spei moras. Neque tamen praeceps vitam expulit, sed incisas venas, ut libitum, obligatas aperire rursum et adloqui amicos, non per seria aut quibus gloriam constantiae peteret. Audiebatque referentes, nihil de immortalitate animae et sapientium placitis, sed levia carmina et facilis versus.

He declined to put up any longer with the longueurs of fear and hope. But he did not rush to see off his life, but having opened his veins, had them bandaged up, then let them out again, *ad lib*, while he conversed with his friends, though not of grave matters, or as though seeking the reputation of resoluteness in death. He lent his ear, not to talk of the immortality of the soul or the gratifications of philosophy but to pleasing songs and light verse. (Tacitus 1937, 344-6; my, beta-minus, translation).

Just occasionally, writing for children seem to allow for a lifting of the veil's hem, as in the exchange between Alice and the gnat regarding the improvident life-cycle of the bread-and-butter fly.

'And what does *it* live on?'

'Weak tea with cream in it.'

A new difficulty came into Alice's head. 'Supposing it couldn't find any?' she suggested.

'Then it would die, of course.'

'But that must happen very often,' Alice remarked thoughtfully.

'It always happens,' said the Gnat.

After this, Alice was silent for a minute or two, pondering. (Carroll 1998, 154)

I have whirled you so far in my toy tornado that it would be civil of me at least to remind you of the stages of the journey. I have been saying that the arts of failure, under the sway of the wishes of human vanity, currently abound, at least in the media-dense conditions of the societies of abundance. This is because they are ways of harvesting minor forms of advantage from disadvantage, victory from victimage, which deploy and diversify the forms of ‘bargaining from weakness’ for which every human society seems to make provision, especially for its children, and thereafter for those induced to lay claim to the exemptions of infancy. Though such arts have been worked up into the esoteric prerogative of paradox typically claimed by artists, their generalisation is part of the widespread deregulation of art, and so the failure of the aesthetic as any kind of privileged arena of the aesthetics of failure. In a more boosterish sense, of course, it might be the infallible proof of the roaring success of the aesthetic, in a prodigious enlargement of its franchise. I have been hoping to help you see the arts of failure, through the ever more widely divagated caucus-race of disadvantage, as part of a general infantilisation, or an indefinitely-prolonged, collectively-approved allergy to adulthood: that stately, apotropaic tantrum designed, though determined always to fail, to let us off the grave.

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