

The Heissenbüttel Experiment and the Question of Failure

A few months ago I stumbled across a copy of Helmut Heissenbüttel's *Texts* (1977), a collection of experimental writings drawn from (among others) his *Would-Be Novel*, *Generalization* and *3 x 13 More-or-Less Stories*. I can hear eyes rolling, but although these sorts of books *seem* self-serving, I find them interesting, weird, funny and unpredictable. Everything that makes good writing: "I am a story / I am a story about somebody / Somebody about whom I am a story is the story that I am ..." I admit, this Dr Seussian stuff isn't everyone's cup of tea, but it needn't be, it just needs to *exist*.

I researched Heissenbüttel, tried to find reviews of his works, checked his profile on Goodreads, noted his three followers (panfletx, Sz, and me) and thought, Maybe we're the only ones interested in experimental German literature? Which made me wonder whether Heissenbüttel was a failure. Is anyone a failure who bites off more than he or she can chew and ends up choking on it? Was Barbara Cartland (1901–2000), with her 723 books, successful, or a failure? Was Harold Alfred Manhood (1904–1991) a failure because he stopped publishing stories and spent the rest of his life brewing cider in a converted railway carriage? If that's the case, wouldn't J.D. Salinger be a failure? And he's not, is he?

Which made me wonder what might constitute a "valid" failure? Dying, for one. Keats, the Brontës, Chekhov, Austen, Pushkin, Marlowe, failures, the lot of them (so who are the writers we *wished* had died early?). Other excuses? Getting lost at sea, retiring from writing or finding better things to do (Harper Lee, Adolf Hitler), locked away in a gulag or concentration camp (Solzhenitsyn, Elie Wiesel), changing artforms (Juan Rulfo turning to photography), and on it goes. Point being, success is only ever in the eye of the beholder.

So, with the theme of failure firmly planted in my head, I examined a range of writers who (though not necessarily unsuccessful) had had bad endings.

I collated quotes, tried to develop a scheme to hold the piece together, printed it all off, made a coffee, sat down, then tore the lot into small pieces (the size always a function of the self-disgust), binned them and watched Netflix. A week passed, two. I thought, hold on, tomorrow's recycling day, do I really want the Heissenbüttel Experiment to fail? Out to the bin, through a mountain of milk bottles, TV Snaks, bottles of syrup dripping down my arms. Retrieved my notes, brought them in, sat at my desk and taped them together, opened a Word doc, Ctrl A, justify, 1.5, Times New Roman, page numbers. Named it (though I've changed it six times since then) and began writing: "A few months ago ..." Rearriving back at this spot and thinking it's time to jump into the world of originality, premature death and self-loathing.

Helmut Heissenbüttel wasn't a failure. In fact, he was quite successful, winning (among other things) the 1969 Büchner Prize for his "textbooks". But 1969 was a long time ago, and humans have a habit of forgetting. Ironically, in 1969, Samuel Beckett was at the height of *his* Nobel Prize fame. What gives us a Beckett but forgets a Heissenbüttel is another topic, but Beckett was no friend of success, either. I don't think a writer *needs* to be a failure to be a success, but it helps. Having found success, most good writers do their best to get away from it as quickly as they can (Jean-Paul Sartre, Patrick White).

Scanning my bookshelves recently, I realised most of my favourite authors were failures. The classic failures like Franz Kafka: "It would have been so pointless to kill himself that, even if he had wanted to, the pointlessness would have made him unable" (*The Trial*, 1925). Yet a recent reading of Max Brod's 1937 Kafka biography shows a man mixing depression with the odd, occasional good time.

I'm not here to quantify failure, depression, any of it, but it seems tragedy and humour are lumped

together for a reason. Estragon and Vladimir are as funny as they are pathetic. The same thing's there in the works of Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, Pinter, Grass, Albee. Absurd, all of it. Which is some consolation, isn't it? Liberation from predictability, from taking things too seriously. Which leads us back to safe, predictable texts (and lives). Is it that we tend to forget *how* absurd things are? If we're reduced to a life of Lego-as-living, then what about all we lose, or as Albert Camus explained: "A man devoid of hope and conscious of being so has ceased to belong to the future." *Conscious of being so*. But we're not, so it doesn't matter, right?

I'd like to explore writing as an addiction, and a nasty one at that. I'm most interested in depression as the primary cause of this addiction. Depressives constitute the biggest group of literary failures. It hardly matters if someone is *born* depressed or *becomes* depressed. Probably a combination of the two, and these are probably inseparable. Classic depressives such as Virginia Woolf succumb to pathologies of introspection. "Dearest, I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what it seems the best thing to do." *This* is what I mean by a failure. The fight, the struggle, the words written and fear and love and hope expressed, despite everything. This is why failed writers are, by definition, successful (and vice versa). "You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be ..." (1941 suicide letter). Maybe this is what Camus meant by his (possibly misattributed) quote: "The literal meaning of life is whatever you're doing that prevents you from killing yourself." Or Emil Cioran: "A book is a suicide postponed" (*The Trouble with Being Born*, 1973). Then there's Nietzsche, bringing up the rear: "The thought of suicide is a great consolation: by means of it one gets through many a dark night." Hemingway, too, saying the same thing before he got up early one morning in 1961, took his shotgun downstairs and placed both barrels in his mouth. "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those it will not break, it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry"

(*A Farewell to Arms*, 1929).

Maybe we shouldn't confuse fact and fiction, but even the most detached writer bleeds into his or her characters and plots, litters the page with observations and confessions he or she has no ability (or desire) to hide. After all, if it can't come out on the page, it stays in the head (though it probably stays there anyway). The point of being a writer, and paying the miscellaneous costs.

Similarly, the blogger and critic Mark Fisher, who predicted the slow death of a culture that had nothing new to say, endless reboots of Harry and Hermione, forever, amen. "The depressive experiences himself as walled off from the lifeworld, so that his own frozen inner life—or inner death—overwhelms everything; at the same time, he experiences himself as evacuated, totally denuded, a shell" (*Ghosts of My Life*, 2014). As with David Foster Wallace: "The parts of me that used to think I was different or smarter or whatever, almost made me die" (*Infinite Jest*, 1996). And what about John Berryman and Ernest Hemingway, with their histories of depression, suicidal fathers and alcohol abuse (more on this later)? Berryman's *Dream Songs* works as a cipher and his anti-hero Henry as an avatar for his attempts to wrestle the past from the present which, in the end, proved too problematic. Berryman jumped from the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis in January 1972. "Tears Henry shed for poor old Hemingway / Hemingway

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in despair / Hemingway at the end, / the end of Hemingway / tears in a diningroom in Indiana ..." (*The Dream Songs* [235], 1969). The aptly-named Art Hitman witnessed the suicide and later said: "[Berryman] jumped up on the railing, sat down and quickly leaned forward. He never looked back at all." And yet this had all been made clear years earlier. "Save us from shotguns & fathers' suicides / It all depends on who you're the father of / if you want to kill yourself".

I'm having trouble reading my notes from these torn pages. But that's fitting, I suppose. Modern publishing uses BookScan, Goodreads, data and analytics to work out what should and shouldn't be published. Books edited into smooth, flowing, unproblematic wastes of time. Which makes me think of Heissenbüttel: "Anti-grammatical, anti-syntactical transformation and reproduction of language are effective principles in twentieth century

literature" (*Texts*, 1977). Indeed, the thing it might most be remembered for (Joyce, Pound, Dos Passos siring Richard Brautigan, Jon Fosse and others). Publisher eats publisher, conglomerate, equity firm, and we're back to the mighty dollar. Twenty years ago, self-publishing (Sylvia Beach-style) promised solutions, but it didn't work out that way. In the end, a world where *everyone's* a writer is just as problematic.

Which brings me to the substance abusers. Again, too many to mention, but Malcolm Lowry stands out. Lowry could really drink. His biographer, Douglas Day, opens his account of Lowry's life with a newspaper clipping from the Brighton *Argus* a week after Lowry's death, aged forty-seven:

SHE BROKE GIN BOTTLE. FOUND HUSBAND DEAD.

One evening last week Mrs Margerie Lowry, of White Cottage, Ripe, tried to stop her 47-year-old writer husband, Clarence [Lowry], from starting on the gin. She smashed the bottle on the floor. And he hit her. Afraid, Mrs Lowry fled next door, and did not go back to the cottage until nine o'clock the next morning. When she did she found her husband dead.

Lowry spent nine years working on *Under the Volcano*, the story of alcoholic British consul Geoffrey Firmin's last day and death in the Mexican town of Quauhnahuac. Not a lot happens, but it happens wonderfully. Concluding with Firmin's executed body thrown into a ditch, a dead dog thrown after him. "Nothing is altered and in spite of God's mercy I am still alone. Though my suffering seems senseless I am still in agony. There is no explanation of my life" (*Under the Volcano*, 1947). Alone. Maybe that's what the greats want to tell us—that despite everything, we're alone. In the same category, we find literature's best-known alcoholic, Dylan Thomas, as well as the American author of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, James Agee, trying to make sense of why we're here in the first place. "By some chance, here they are, all on this earth; and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying, on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening, among the sounds of the night" (*Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, 1938). Before succumbing to a heart attack in the back of a taxi on the way to a dentist's appointment.

Suicide seems an inevitable part of many writers' career trajectories. Often, the manner of death lingers longer than the sum of life. Kierkegaard: "I have just now come from a party where I was

its life and soul; witticisms streamed from my lips, everyone laughed and admired me, but I went away ... and wanted to shoot myself (1836 journal). Or Sylvia Plath: "And if you have no past or future which, after all, is all that the present is made of, why then you may as well dispose of the empty shell ... and commit suicide" (*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 2000).

But it's not all depression and grog. The German essayist Walter Benjamin, for example, fleeing the Nazis in 1940, trying to exit France for Spain, unable to obtain a transit visa, returning to his room in the border city of Portbou, writing a letter of explanation and overdosing on morphine. "But to start everything anew after a man's 60th year requires special powers, and my own power has been expended after years of wandering homeless. I thus prefer to end my life at the right time, upright, as a man for whom cultural work has always been his purest happiness and personal freedom." Or, similarly, Stefan Zweig, unable to accept the loss of his world of yesterday. Writing, after years of exile, supported by admirers and friends, settling in Brazil: "A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile, human body" (*Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 1955). Before retiring to the privacy of a room in his Petropolis home and committing suicide with his wife, Lottie Altmann.

Bad endings. Here's Yukio Mishima, Shintoist and ultra-nationalist, author of *Confessions of a Mask*, and four other revolutionaries, barricading themselves in the Tokyo office of military commander Kanetoshi Mishita. The rebels tie Mishita to his chair, then Mishima, hoping to inspire a *coup d'état* to restore imperial rule, steps out onto the balcony and addresses the troops. He's jeered and mocked, gives up, goes back inside and commits ritual suicide (*seppuku*). Or no ending. Social worker and author Ernst Haffner, author of *Blood Brothers* (a favourite of Goebbels's book burnings), summoned by the Nazi writers' union to explain his depiction of seedy Berlin, thieves, murderers, child prostitutes. "But the children, committed to the institutions whose function is to guard them against turpitude, only learn from their comrades how to make money in the easiest way" (*Blood Brothers*, 1932). After this, nothing is heard from him again. Twenty-one-year-old Arthur Rimbaud forsaking poetry to become an Abyssinian arms dealer, eventually returning to Marseilles in agony,

his right leg amputated, dying of bone cancer aged thirty-seven. Alone, again, and pragmatic: “True life is elsewhere. We are not in the world” (*A Season in Hell*, 1873).

Similarly, Albert Camus: “There is but one truly philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942). Dying in a car accident in 1960, aged forty-six. And what about Cistercian monk and literary sage Thomas Merton, electrocuted by a dodgy fan in Thailand in 1968; Hart Crane, jumping overboard (“Goodbye, everybody!”); George Orwell, succumbing to TB a few years before the antibiotics that might have saved his life; Robert Walser in his asylum (“I’m not here to write. I’m here to be mad”), Flannery O’Connor, Hans Fallada, dozens of others I could talk about, if any were different to another.

Why do writers put themselves through all this? As Michael Cunningham explained: “We throw our parties; we abandon our families to live alone in Canada; we struggle to write books that do not change the world, despite our gifts

and our unstinting efforts, our most extravagant hopes” (*The Hours*, 1998). In their minds, they’re all Shakespeares, retiring to their personal Stratfords after blessing the world with their words. Each artist sitting on his or her egg, regardless of its chances of hatching. Despite all of this, or maybe because of it, they discover the mysteries that remain hidden to most of us—the shadows of moonlit leaves dancing across a pavement, a dog panting, Exit lights flickering, wood fires taking us back thousands of years to wherever it all began. It only takes one reader, browsing the shelves of one shop, to find the book he or she needs, saving Heissenbüttel and his kind from the mouldering of memory, taking them home and assuring them they’re no longer failures.

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A promise

Bring back the boy who used to laugh with me in bright flashes
of silver light. Bring back the sparkle of his hazel eyes.

The warm, gentle voice in the last song he sang for me.
Bring back the guitar he played like a goofball.

Bring back the beach and the long days surfing, salt spray
dancing in the air as we rode the waves.

Bring back the cozy feeling of the sleeping bag,
his arms around me. Bring back all the dreams

we shared that night, when he whispered, softly,
in my ear, before falling asleep, something

I never forgot, the promise we made, when we knew, and we always did, how good it was,
how lucky we were, to find each other in this world.

Bring back that moment just before the sun rose up
and woke us up, when he kissed my forehead,
and smiled, after a long sigh, happy to see me.

Diem Okoye