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► To cite this version:

Sophie Chapuis. Little Failure, Great Success: the writer's memoir as a fail-safe genre. *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines*, 2020, 2 (263), pp.59-71. <10.3917/rfea.163.0059>. <hal-03950179>

HAL Id: hal-03950179

<https://hal.science/hal-03950179v1>

Submitted on 27 Jun 2023

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Little failure, great success: the writer's memoir as a fail-safe genre

SOPHIE CHAPUIS

Keywords: memoir ; autobiography ; failure ; Gary Shteyngart ; postmodernism

Résumé : L'engouement pour les mémoires, notamment d'écrivain, ressuscite la figure de l'auteur que le postmodernisme avait fini par enterrer. Cet article propose d'envisager les mémoires comme une forme accueillant volontiers le récit de l'échec, précisément parce qu'il surgit dans une période d'anxiété sur le plan littéraire. En soulignant la dimension fictionnelle que revêtent de plus en plus les mémoires d'écrivain, nous souhaitons analyser plus globalement les mutations du récit de soi tout en démontrant que, par leur constant recours au comique, les mémoires semblent vouloir tenir l'échec à distance, le traitant plus que jamais comme une fiction.

Summary: The surge of writers' memoirs has resurrected the figure of the author after he had been declared dead by decades of postmodernism. This article argues that the memoir's proneness to tackle failure reflects a wider literary anxiety. However, as fiction gradually contaminates the memoir form, the narrative of the self radically mutates, which informs the way failure is dealt with. Kept at a distance by an excessive use of comedy, failure seems bound to remain a fiction.

"To have written an autobiography is already to have made yourself a monster." Those are the words of William Gass who, in an article written in 1994, laments the narcissistic turn fiction has taken over the past decades. Accusing his fellow-writers of indulging in conceit and egotism, he denounces the "return of the significant self," to be understood, in his scathing demonstration, as the triumph of insignificance and triviality. Back in the mid-nineties, the word autobiography was in vogue and the word memoir was still largely used for texts dealing only with the "recollection of another place or personality," (Gass) texts narrating major historical upheavals—texts which, on the whole, were rather marginal and ignored by literary critics.

A major shift occurred at the turn of the century when the publishing industry appropriated the word memoir, transformed it into a marketing strategy, up to the point where memoir gradually became "a byword for autobiography." (Rak 2004, 306) Since the late nineties, a confessional crave has gained momentum in North America and the last two decades saw what Leigh Gilmore early identified as the "memoir boom." (Gilmore 2) Indeed, the publishing of memoirs rose by "400% between 2004 and 2008" (Yagoda 7) while an

estimate of 10 million copies are sold every year in the United States¹. There is no denying that celebrity memoirs largely contribute to this successful market but, according to Julie Rak, critics have too readily dismissed this trend, seeing it only as a late capitalist phenomenon: a celebrity manufactures a story for the literary marketplace and the final product sold panders to the voyeuristic instincts of his/her audience. In her essay, *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*, Julie Rak contends that both memoirs written by celebrities and by anonymous people have something to say about American life: “In the United States, it is widely believed that anyone can tell the story of his or her life and connect the story to American ideals.” (Rak 2013, 32)

Therefore, the popularity of the “somebody memoir” coincides with that of the “nobody memoir”—the latter, according to journalist and novelist Lorraine Adams, falling into three categories: “The largest by far is the childhood memoir—incestuous, abusive, alcoholic, impoverished, minority, ‘normal’, and the occasional privileged. The second largest type is the memoir of physical catastrophe—violence, quadriplegia, amputation, disease, death. The third is mental catastrophe—madness, addiction, alcoholism, anorexia, brain damage.” Celebrity memoirs and their tales of success thus coexist with a wide range of failure narratives that often receive more popular than critical acclaim. In a vehement column published in 2013, New Yorker contributor Giles Harvey rants about the rise of what he coins “the failure memoir,” accusing “literary screw-ups” of having invaded the marketplace, leading him to conclude that “failure is not what it used to be.” The fierce tone of the article reveals how fervent the debate is whenever the memoir is at stake, but also when failing becomes the operating paradigm chosen by contemporary memoirists. Indeed, the assumption of Harvey’s article is that failure is a mere opportunity for success, a dishonest strategy that has become an easy option for average writers and publishers alike. In that logic, failure in nonfiction would be fated to remain the narrative of some petty incident while fiction only could be able to accommodate the throes of a hero’s failure. Such a perspective certainly betrays the discomfort triggered by the exposure of personal failure in a country whose national narrative relies on success and positivity. In her essay, *Bright-Sided*, Barbara Ehrenreich explores the negative dimension of positive thinking, arguing that it “may be a quintessentially American activity, associated in our minds with both individual and national success, but it is driven by a terrible insecurity.” (Ehrenreich 4) The failure memoir does combine elements that shake core American values: not only is it about being a loser but

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/426841/ebook-market-distribution-by-genre-usa/>, Accessed November 15 2019.

being a real-life loser—two characteristics that copiously feed *Little Failure, a Memoir*, published in 2014 by Gary Shteyngart.

The greatest irony probably lies in the fact that Shteyngart himself was not born American, having spent his childhood in the Soviet Union, the country of “satire, failed empires, ridiculous dreams.” (LF 42) When the Soviet dream was cut short, his parents left then-called Leningrad in 1979 to settle in the United States, the land where Igor, aged seven and soon-to-be-called Gary, hears on TV shows mottos like “[b]etter, stronger, faster.” (LF 163) The sense of national failure will soon transform into a persistent sense of personal failure that evinces from this injunction to perform, which to him, rings as an obstinate duty to succeed as a writer, and above all, as an American writer. Shteyngart’s memoir epitomizes an anxiety that more generally pervades most contemporary memoirs. Indeed, numerous writers have turned to non-fiction and their retreat to the self should not be understood only as a wish to ride the wave of the “memoir boom” nor should turning away from fiction be interpreted as an episode of creative block.

Memoir’s proneness to tackle failure reflects a formal anxiety that probably proceeds from the uncertain path fiction writing has been taking since the new millennium. In the wake of postmodernity, writers write back, rethink the notion of authorship, and resurrect the author, put to death by Roland Barthes. In so doing, they blur the generic boundaries between autobiography and fiction. Indeed, as Julie Rak observes, “the attempt to write oneself into a narrative results in the creation of oneself as ‘other.’” (Rak 2013, 8) Standing thus at the crossroads of fiction and nonfiction, the writer’s memoir could be a privileged channel for experimenting and accommodating failure, while being, paradoxically, a successful attempt at negotiating the post-postmodern turn.

Fail it until you make it

Shteyngart’s sense of failure primarily derives from a sense of national collapse that imparts failure with an ontological dimension: “We were all connected by failure back then. The whole Soviet Union was just fading out.” (LF 11) Born at the dusk of the USSR, in 1972, Shteyngart confesses that such a condition continues to have long-lasting effects through adulthood: “I’m still operating on the theory that I will fail at everything I try.” (LF 15) In his memoir, Shteyngart portrays himself as a loser whose propensity to misfortune even prompts his mother to coin a hybrid moniker for her son, “*Failurchka*, or Little Failure,” based on a “fusion of English and Russian.” (LF 11) This single word interestingly conveys the idea that failure can be transnational. However, it seems that the memoir reveals that there definitely is

an American way of failing and that Shteyngart chooses to embrace it. Watching his first American show on his grandma's television, Shteyngart is fascinated by NASA astronaut Steve Austin, the hero of *The Six Million Dollar Man* whose bionic implants have allowed him to recover from multiple injuries after the crash of his aircraft. As an education to failure, the show leads Shteyngart to conclude: "After all, this is America, and you can swap out the parts of yourself that don't work. You can rebuild yourself piece by piece." (LF 158) In that perspective, failure, be it physical or not, is temporary—it can be mended, compensated for, and it is a condition for enhanced potentiality and eventually success.

Shteyngart's memoir seems to draw on the underlying conviction that failure is a transient condition to overcome. His obsession to sign a book deal redefines failure as being only a lack of success, an incapacity to have his share of the "publication pie." (LF 5) Most of his memoir relies on the frustration of not being acknowledged by the book industry: "Surely these blue-blooded American publishers, those most Random of Houses, would see right through my overeager immigrant prose and give the ring to some jerk from Brown, his junior year at Oxford or Salamanca giving him all the pale color needed for a marketable bildungsroman." (LF 5) An anxious crave for recognition, most importantly, in the United States, exudes from those words as the book opens on the news that Shteyngart has been rejected from one of the most competitive writing programs, taught at the University of Iowa. In an essay entitled *Memoir, an Introduction* (2012), G. Thomas Couser partly holds creative writing programs responsible for the boom of the memoir: "Another contributor to the rise of the nobody memoir may be the professionalization of creative writing and the concomitant rise of the Master of Fine Arts as a terminal degree and credential." (Couser 145) To a certain extent, memoir writing requires well-honed skills assessed and graded according to standards set by professional mentors, Shteyngart being one of them now as he teaches writing at Columbia University. As *The New Yorker* deplores the rise of "professional failurists" (Harvey), Couser warns that "what goes on behind the scenes in publishing is still largely opaque to literary scholars, but there is mounting evidence, not just anecdotal, that publishers play a powerful role in shaping the contemporary memoir." (Couser 145)

Though scholars and journalists tend to demonize the book industry and speculate about its marketing strategy, the memoir's conditions of production are certainly informed today by the looming possibility of literary success. One of the consequences is that the failure memoir paradoxically becomes a fail-safe genre, obeying rules and principles that completely transform the core definition of failure. Risk-taking is limited and one can fail until he makes it. Back in 1995, the tag line of the movie *Apollo 13* popularized the motto "failure is not an

option.”² Two decades later, a slightly-revised version of the slogan hails failure as an opportunity, as suggested by American actor Harry Jon Benjamin’s book *Failure is an Option, an Attempted Memoir* (2018). Whether failure memoirs tend towards life-guides or motivational books, they, for most part, feed on comedy, failure being hilarious, liberating, exhilarating. Shteyngart’s failure is “little” and the oxymoronic dimension of the title downplays the reach of failure while comedy keeps it at a distance.

Failure is a performance which requires much staging and the writer enthusiastically puts on a total show. The narrative is augmented with a gallery of pictures that all point at the writer’s lameness or at his family’s misfortune. Captions often corroborate the self-deprecating tone of the book as Shteyngart’s captions are fraught with dark humor and a sense of looming failure. Chapter three opens with a family portrait whose caption reads: “The Ukraine, 1940. The author’s father, bottom row, second from left, being held by the author’s grandmother. Just about everyone else is going to die soon.” (LF 27) The gallery mostly features the writer alone or surrounded by family but also presents places where he lived. Overall, pictures spot flaws that often amplify physical defects. Chapter ten opens with an image of his garden apartment while the caption stresses that this is where “the author grew short, dark, and furry.” (LF 129) The black-and-white photo album celebrates imperfection, displays a gallery of losers, and adds visual performance to the already “attention-seeking verbal performance” (Wanner 144) of the whole book.

Acting out failure is also the option chosen by Gary Shteyngart and his publisher at Random House to advertise the memoir before its release. The outcome is a self-deprecating trailer³ whose opening scene stars the writer himself in a meeting-room with his publishers, played by actors Rashida Jones and Alex Karpovsky. Shteyngart is being told the name of his upcoming book after a focus group has been consulted: “Little, because of your small stature. And failure, because you are a failure. Little failure, it’s funny and it’s true.” (0:30-0:45) The whole trailer is a four-minute clip composed of repeated jokes that never relate to the content of the memoir—the most unexpected scenes being James Franco, in a pink bathrobe, playing Gary Shteyngart’s husband and exchanging a kiss with him or Jonathan Franzen in the role of his psychoanalyst. The trailer celebrates failure as an entertainment and non-performance as a limitless potential for comedy. The plot, the pictures, and the trailer all contribute to make of Shteyngart a public *persona* who poses as different characters. Consequently, the performance

² “Failure is not an option” is, in the movie *Apollo 13*, associated with NASA Flight Director Gene Kranz although he apparently never pronounced those words during the mission.

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sowt9Wq7zYU0> , accessed November 15 2019.

shifts the non-fiction perspective of *Little Failure* as additional screens hinder the confessional intention. Shteyngart often uses “the author” in lieu of the first-person pronoun creating thus a distance that raises interrogations as to the possibility of ever getting to grips with failure. It seems that failure cannot be the object of a candid and straight account as it develops according to a tight plot and a well-tailored performance.

Pairing with his publisher to promote his memoir is both a way to parody and laugh at the marketing strategy publishing houses can carry out for a book release, but also a sign that Shteyngart has been adopted as a major American writer—a concern that pervades the whole book as, for example, when Shteyngart, freshly relocated in the United States, ironically mentions that he tries to answer questions in his “best American” (LF 29), while being haunted by the following interrogation: “What if I were born to American parents instead?” (LF 67). Some critics have blamed Shteyngart for being an all-American writer who embraced American culture as he admits in his memoir that he has been “working ridiculously hard at becoming an American.” (LF 242) Adrian Wanner quotes a reviewer of *TimeOut Moskva* accusing Shteyngart of “masquerading as a Russian” because “his style and his jokes are always completely American.” (Wanner 121)

Most importantly, Shteyngart’s book reveals that there is a certain way of failing according to American standards. Failure must be part of a narrative and is to be considered as a preliminary stage to success. The choice of the memoir form to accommodate failure narratives entails generic interrogations. Indeed, at the core of his text lies an ambiguity between fiction and non-fiction. As soon as Shteyngart starts composing his first drafts, he is fully aware of the intricate link between writing and lying: “I begin to write out my first lies in the new language.” (LF120) By the end of the novel, the writer confesses that upon re-reading his three novels and his latest memoir, he was “shocked by the overlaps between fiction and reality.” (LF 318) Shteyngart’s candid remarks further obfuscate the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction and reveal that narrating the self necessarily proceeds from retrospective recreation.

The anxiety of failing, and most specifically, failing to be a writer, reflects a very contemporary concern with genre partitioning and the difficulty of renewing literary practices. In an essay entitled *Failure and the American Writer*, Gavin Jones observes that narratives of failure, as early as in the nineteenth century, sought “ways to transmute negative experience into peculiarly American literary experiments.” (Jones 14) Contemporary writers’ memoirs do contribute to delineating new directions for fiction to take. When Lorraine Adams argues that “fiction is exhausted, memoir is vital,” her analysis perpetuates the underlying assumption

that the gap between fiction and memoir is unbridgeable. Isn't the so-called "memoir boom" symptomatic though of a failure to accommodate narratives of the self within fiction writing?

Writers write back: exiting the postmodern deadlock

To a certain extent, writers write back today and the recent autobiographical strain may be the backlash of decades during which the author was declared dead. The "memoir boom" can be seen as a way to get out of the postmodern deadlock—"a dead end that has been reached," according to Robert McLaughlin, "because of postmodernism's detachment from the social world and immersion in a world of nonreferential language, its tendency [...] to disappear up its own asshole." (McLaughlin 55) Contemporary writers have, for most of them, stopped considering the author as a sole linguistic sign, the real as mere artifice, as they strive to produce a more interventionist literature, trying to repair the severed bonds with the readers and connect with the community at large.

The exhaustion of literary forms gave rise to some generational anxiety and the insecure relation to literary genres generated a rhetoric of failure that, for example, permeates Shteyngart's memoir: "I have failed my parents. I have failed myself. I have failed my future." (LF 219) *Little Failure* yet reads like a *bildungsroman*. It is a tale of becoming as we witness Shteyngart's metamorphosis from "'staff writer' at an immigrant resettlement agency" (LF 4) to bestselling American writer. The anxiety to belong and be accepted by the American literary scene runs parallel with an anxiety to find literary mentors. When studying creative writing at Oberlin, Shteyngart evokes the aura of "the guru editor Gordon Lish, famous for his editing of Raymond Carver and his grueling \$2,600 workshops back east." (LF 278) Though Shteyngart never got to meet him, he becomes some divinity he fervently worships when he happens to attend the Hebrew school prayer: "'*Sh'ma* Oberlin, Gordon Lish *Eloheinu*, Gordon Lish *Echad*.'" (Hear, O Oberlin, the Gordon Lish is our God, the Gordon Lish is One.)" (LF 278) The supplication here reveals, with great irony, that editors, not authors, turn out to be the idols of wannabe writers.

In an interview with Larry McCaffery, David Foster Wallace explained, back in 1993, that authors writing at the turn of the century suffer from a cruel lack of tutelary figures:

The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years. We're kind of wishing some parents would come back. And of course, we're uneasy about the fact that we wish they'd come back—I mean, what's wrong with us? Are we total pussies? Is there something about authority and limits we actually need? And then the uneasiest feeling of all, as we start gradually to realize that parents in fact aren't ever

coming back—which means “we’re” going to have to be the parents. (Wallace in McCaffery 150)

By challenging the notions of genres, forms and above all, authority, postmodernism’s *tabula rasa* left younger generations at a loss, with a harrowing urge for self-examination and a concern for filiation and origins. The numerous questions raised by David Foster Wallace hint at an ongoing literary anxiety that often results in narratives of physical distress, memoirs of “physical catastrophe.” (Adams) Indeed, Shteyngart portrays himself as an asthmatic “weakling,” (LF 167) prone to dizziness, a “disappointment” (LF 4) to his parents for he is forever sick and physically non-performing. The emphasis on poor health conditions recurs in disease narratives, illness memoirs, and attest to the fact that this obsession for the body marks a return to the physical. Jamie Redgate explains this shift in the following terms: “Unlike the postmodernist hero who is under threat of dissolution in a meaningless world, the post-postmodern hero has a stubbornly material body and is emphatically stuck *in* there, tragically and meaningfully encaged.” (Redgate 135)

Though the memoir form has often been criticized for its narcissistic dimension, looking at the self derives from a pressing urge to look back and search, both literally and figuratively, for the parents David Foster Wallace hints at. One way of interpreting this withdrawal to the self is to see it as a failure to come to terms with the present. In the early nineties, critics started to voice concern as to the transformation of the real into something that could no longer be apprehended. About the novel, Sven Birkerts remarked that “we have a great many writers who can tell us where we’ve been, and very few who can tell us what is happening now,” adding that “many writers don’t write about the present because they don’t trust it to be real.” (Birkerts 122) Such a statement is corroborated by Mark Currie who argues, in his essay *Metafiction*, that the novel, “based on an extension of a nineteenth-century realist view of the world may no longer be viable,” because “its lack of a fixed identity” has left it “vulnerable.” (Currie 46) Currie demonstrates that metafiction or experimental writing emerged at a time when questioning the exhaustion of this art form was legitimate while today’s literature is rather characterized by a “quest for fictionality.” (Currie 46) Contemporary memoirists have somehow substituted self-reflexive practices for self-examination narratives, leading to what literary editor of *The Guardian*, Claire Armitstead, early identified in 2001 as the “rise and rise of the memoir,” falling more largely, according to her, in the category of “interpretative fiction—a form that allows the possibility that someone else might have an entirely different reading of the same events.”

One productive way of welcoming the “memoir boom” is to look at the return of the self as an opportunity to observe its mutation in the context of a “media constellation” that G. Thomas Couser lists as follow: “portraiture, both painted and photographic; documentary films and biopics; oral anecdotes and family lore; blogs and electronic diaries; social media like Facebook; the obituary and death notice; the scrapbook, and so on.” (Couser 9) More than ever, the self expands into a network of multiple identities, that often fuse the private and the public *personas*, adding to its core definition a fictional dimension. When asked by *The Guardian* a question about the hero of his first novel, *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook* (2002), Shteyngart’s answer encapsulates the intricacies of contemporary narratives of the self: “I knew I wanted to write a novel,” he goes on, “and I knew what it would be about. When you’re 21 there really is only one subject. It appears in the mirror each morning, toothbrush in hand.” His remark underlines how convergent fiction and non-fiction are as life writing keeps destabilizing genre boundaries. Revealing that his novels feast on an autobiographical crave, Shteyngart already takes for granted that the definition of the novel has transformed and more than ever resists generic categorizations.

Fiction shall overcome

In 2002, Rick Moody published a text which was originally entitled *The Black Veil, a Memoir with Digressions*. At the request of the author, the title was shortened to *The Black Veil* in the following paperback printings. By removing the initial subtitle, Rick Moody deliberately turned his memoir into a work of fiction. Such a change is not anecdotal and unveils that significant generic hesitations haunt contemporary writers. Dave Eggers published in 2000 *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, a text which, according to critics, falls into the category of non-fiction despite the numerous disclaimers to be found in the preface and the acknowledgements. Eggers immediately confesses “this is not, actually, a work of pure non-fiction” (ix) and further reports a conversation he had with an acquaintance about his upcoming book:

ANECDOTE: midway through the writing of this...this...memoir, an acquaintance of the author’s accosted him [...] sat down opposite, asking what was new, what was up, what was he working on, etc. The author said Oh, well, that he was kind of working on a book, kind of mumble mumble. [...] I guess it’s a kind of memoir-y kind of thing—Oh no! said Oswald, interrupting him, loudly. [...] Don’t tell me you’ve fallen into that trap! [...] Memoir! C’mon, don’t pull that old trick man! He went on like for a while, using the colloquial of the day, until, well, the author felt sort of bad. After all, maybe Oswald, with the purple velour and the brown corduroys, was right—maybe memoirs were Bad. (Eggers xxi-xxii)

Both examples reveal the problematic reception of the memoir and consider different strategies to blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction. Eggers's meandering opening fails to clearly state the nature of his text while comedy again is a trick that he resorts to in order to downplay this embarrassing confession and deride the anxiety generic compartmentalizing generates. As for Moody's memoir, it first reads like a genealogical survey up to the moment when the narrator reveals that he totally made up a family connection with some Reverend Moody who inspired the character of Reverend Hooper in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "The Minister's Black Veil." Eggers's transparent strategy contrasts with Moody's opaque confession but somehow, both writers strive to renew the practices of narrating the self. Ben Yagoda recalls that when Eggers published his book, he attempted to "kill the memoir [...] until it was unrecognizable" and consequently "refused to use the subtitle *A Memoir*, choosing instead *Based on a True Story*" which he eventually, like Moody, asked to remove in the subsequent paperback edition, which was also augmented with a corrective appendix called *Mistakes We Knew We Were Making*.

These radical alterations suggest that the scope of the memoir is constraining because of formal limitations. In his literary manifesto, *Reality Hunger*, David Shields contends that the memoir "is as far from real life as fiction is" (Shields 39) while Couser reminds us that memory is a "notoriously unreliable and highly selective faculty." (Couser 19) Overall, the "memoir boom" revitalizes fiction and further complexifies the issue of representation as it feeds on conflicting influences. On the one hand, the memoir is permeated with a postmodern heritage as the use of parody, ironic self-awareness or metacommentary shows. Yet, it also welcomes the return of storytelling and referentiality while the self becomes the object of sociological and phenomenological investigations.

Indeed, the memoir, as a hybrid and transitioning form, remains an opportunity for writers to write back and fully engage their subjectivity. to the "humanist ends of generating empathy, communal bonds, ethical and political questions, and, most basically, communicable meaning." (Holland 17) In her essay entitled *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*, Mary K. Holland strives to demonstrate that late postmodernism can successfully coexist with a more humanistic dimension. In the words of Nancy K. Miller, the memoir is "fashionably postmodern, since it hesitates to define the boundaries between private and public, subject and object." (Miller 2) Couldn't the memoir then represent a successful way to negotiate this period of literary transition? Its "democratic potential" forbids it becomes an elite genre as "being rooted in these everyday practices, it is more available to amateurs than other genres." (Couser 26)

The popularity of the memoir may also lie in its capacity to generate a plurality of narratives that counter the dominant narrative on success. As Judith Halberstam demonstrates in *The Queer Art of Failure*, failure obeys an anticapitalist logic for it has the power to upend the dynamics of success: “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.” (Halberstam 2) However, considering the proliferation of failure memoirs, Halberstam’s paradigm seems threatened by the very fact that failure seems to lose its subversive potential. Capitalizing on failure has become a publishing strategy that goes beyond American borders. British writer and journalist Elizabeth Day has recently concluded a book deal to publish *How to Fail: Everything I’ve Ever Learned from Things Going Wrong*—a self-help manual inspired by her popular series of podcasts called *How to Fail with Elizabeth Day*. Central to it is the idea that failure is a transient condition, a necessary stage before success is reached. Failure memoirs, Shteyngart’s memoir included, plot failure, and doing so, organize it into a linear narrative. Besides, the very nature of the memoir imposes a retrospective outlook on failure and strips it of its randomness and disorderliness. “Maybe this is what America does to you,” Shteyngart writes. “With the daily fight for survival abated, one can either reminisce about the past or face the singular destiny of the future.” (LF 166) The quote reveals a binary logic that assumes that failure relates to the past and success to the future. It also suggests that there is an American way of mending one’s ways. Born in a country where people were all “connected by failure,” (LF 11) Shteyngart’s sense of failure gradually becomes foreign as he relocates to the United States and strives not to be seen as “*just some Cold War loser*.” (LF 88) In that perspective, the memoir refutes the subversive potential of failure, accommodating it into a narrative that maintains it as a fiction. In that respect, the failure memoir shies away from the Beckettian injunction “Fail again. Fail better” (Beckett 7) as losing out is neither considered as an ongoing condition nor a prospect since it posits that losers can be redeemed.

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