INTRODUCTION

ON FAILURE

You are going to fail, repeatedly, for the rest of your life. You know this. You're going to burn food or undercook it, you're going to get a speeding ticket or arrive too late for things, you're going to assume a less than worthy political perspective on at least some topic. I say this not to persuade you to give up; quite the contrary. Instead, I've written this book to propose strategies for making the most of your failure.

Before going further, I should establish what I mean by "failure." I mean 1) an inaccurate translation from experience of the world into your thoughts, or 2) an inaccurate translation from your thoughts into worldly action.

In short, by "failure" I mean imprecise representation, whether that representation exists in your mind or is transferred from your mind into the world.

I have examples.

Example #1: You take a swing at a baseball and miss. Your mind and body have read the ball's location differently, or your body acted on your perceptions incorrectly. Either way, that which is physically in the world—the baseball—was not received or acted upon in the way you meant. You didn't accurately translate what was perceived, or you didn't accurately represent your thoughts and intentions into action. You have failed.

Example #2: You notice an increasing and dismaying degree of income inequality in your civilization. To address that inequality, you post something on social media that nobody reads, or that only people who agree with you read (and they soon forget what you've posted), or that only people who constitutionally disagree with you read (and they, too, soon forget what you've posted). Your thoughts represent a worldly situation with accuracy, but then the translation from your thoughts back into worldly action has failed. You have failed—again!

Example #3: Your civilization is marked by systemic and rampant income inequality that is sure to grind people down and destabilize the planet, but

you do not recognize that inequality's systemic nature, nor do you recognize that inequality much at all, and thus you never address this problem. In this case, you have failed to represent mentally whatever's happening in the world.

Example #4: A slice of pizza looks delicious. You eat it and it burns the roof of your mouth and, also, it tastes terrible. Here you have failed in at least two ways. You have failed to represent, within your mind, the full extent of the pizza's scorching, awful reality, and you have failed to represent via action your wish to consume pizza happily, because you have inadequately pursued consumption of that pizza.

So different kinds of failure are all failures of representation. Either the world is represented inadequately in your mind, or your mind is inadequately represented through your actions.

These two failures are the source of much embarrassment, moral decay, political debacles, and sadness. And they're always with us, both varieties of failure, *because the very nature of our representations—of our thinking and our action—entails failure.*

We can never maintain in our heads a perfect, complete representation of the world. And we can never communicate the mysterious stuff of our minds

perfectly. Too much gets in the way: our selfish modes of thinking and communicating; the selfish manners of others; a car parked between us and the people we're speaking to; a bad phone connection; the distance imposed by space and time.

For future reference:
A. Whenever we try to do anything, no matter what it is, stuff will always get in the way. That can be stuff in our heads or stuff outside our heads.
B. Our mental representations of the world and our communications of our thoughts will therefore never be perfect.

Failure is with us all the time, every time we try to represent anything or communicate anything. And because failure-to-represent-things-perfectly is so dominant, it's especially worth considering failure as it appears in artistic efforts, those most thoughtfully deliberate experiments with representation and its complications.

Abstract art eschews conventional representation, therefore providing one way to deal with representation's failures. But let's consider art that attempts

photographic representation. Think about narrative film that depicts the human form, human places, human drama; even there, again and again, we find failure of representation. We never see the sustained, perfect, whole truth of any matter. Yet from that failure of representation there emerges something compelling, something moving, something surprising and dramatic and thrilling that can expand your thoughts. That something is a good movie.

I'll turn now to a brief reflection upon a film. In the 1998 John Frankenheimer movie *Ronin*, a career criminal played by Robert De Niro claims that he never enters a place without knowing how he can exit, or escape. I don't have the exact quote in front of me—a failure of research on my part, but that failure has created something else, a personal and immediate description of a scene from a film that made an impression on me.

The film generally impressed me with its exit plans. *Ronin* is mostly an extended, beautiful car chase, and therefore it is a filmic elaboration on escaping. Knowing how to escape defines the protagonist, encapsulates something like his philosophy for living the good life, supercharges the scenes with De Niro, and gives those

scenes a fuller, vital meaning that springs from character and emanates through action.

Ronin's scenes of escape result from things going wrong: the movie is, at its core, a story of failure and creative response to failure, the two working together to sustain a narrative. Failure and escape, escape and failure, failure and escape: the cycle chugs along, and a story takes its shape, because Robert De Niro in *Ronin* is no chump—he's not going to despair about everything that goes wrong—but failure isn't going anywhere, either.

Even in the title we can discern a creative response to failure. "*Ronin*" refers to the masterless samurai of Japanese history and legend, such as those of *Chushingura*, the legend of the 47 ronin who ended up pursuing some greater good in the name of their slain master. Notice the cascading failures to represent precedent: the original ronin themselves didn't assume the usual role of samurai, but in that failure they accessed possibilities immortalized by the *Chushingura* narrative; Robert De Niro's mercenary character somewhat mirrors those ronin but fails to match or represent perfectly their classical, epic roles—he's a global wanderer, divorced from any clear national narrative, a criminal for hire who ends up in car chases.

By dramatizing these failures via car chases, the film makes us think through our broader sensorium about failure. We watch *Ronin* and our stomach clenches and our lungs contract during the tense chases, as our imaginations ponder escape plans in our own worlds. Where might we make our own escape, how many escape options might we have, and to what thrilling ends could such escapes lead us?

Here I'll pause to reflect on what's been done. I have failed: I didn't adequately quote the film in question, but my incomplete recollection of *Ronin* took its form from what I love about the film, which is its imaginative response to failure.

We can trace in what I just wrote, then, a genealogy of failure to represent something along with creative response to that failure: we can trace it from A) the failure of ronin to represent properly the role of samurai to B) De Niro's failure to represent properly classical ronin to C) De Niro's failure to access a steady, safe kind of communication with his world to D) my failure to represent the film thoroughly. These all proved to be creative failures, leading into potential-rich places.

There are limits imposed on us.

Often those potential-rich places where our imaginations go after a failure can resemble actual places. Right now I'm in Philadelphia—I will not be in Philadelphia as I write most of the other paragraphs in this book, nor when I edit this paragraph, but as I'm now writing (the first draft, at least) I'm in a hotel room by Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia. I'm happy to be here. Having in the past scarcely seen Philadelphia, I'm in a position to find the city really new and refreshing. It helps that there's glimmering snow falling on Philadelphia at this moment, and that, therefore, the whole city is sparkling.

But as I'm trying to describe the city, trying to put it into language so I can transport this feeling with me hereafter or communicate this feeling to you, I realize that I lack the architectural vocabulary necessary for producing an accurate literary representation of the Philadelphia details that I have noticed. Are the churches Gothic, neo-Gothic, or something called Romanesque? Are these buildings I see everywhere brownstones, row-houses, town-houses? It's embarrassing, and I know Google exists to settle some of these questions, but if I simply defer to Google, there

will still remain unnamed details and textures and specifics. I'd just have to keep going back to Google eternally. No, I must accept that my description of the city must always be incomplete. And this saddens me; it makes me feel as if I'm incompletely knowing Philadelphia, as if I'm neglecting my own feelings or thoughts or both by failing to give them the perfectly appropriate language.

So what can I do? I can give up, never try assigning words to anything, and I'm sure this is a path some find appealing. Or, I can work with what language I have and what words I can obtain, do at least a little Googling, establish that the Philadelphia City Hall looks like a Gothic cake made out of creamy stone, that the lit-up park nearby looks through the snow like a peaceful city seen from space or from the Hollywood hills. I could narrate what I have recently experienced in a rather direct way, too, forgetting the flourishes and ornaments: I walked through this city with people who turned out to be nice. They were people I'd known for years but not so well, and I'm sure that conversation with those people improved my version of Philadelphia, improved it as we walked distracted by a city bearing the stamp of different times, of Ben Franklin, etc.

Even when writing about Philadelphia without all the necessary words, then, I've found a place to go with my failure: a literary place of my own creation, this place that fuses together multiple timeframes, from personal lifetimes to the lifetime of the city, those layers of time illuminating and obfuscating one another.

We are nearing my preamble's payoff.

So far, while writing about *Ronin* and the city of Philadelphia, I've been doing what I'll continue to do for the rest of this book: I've been displaying strategies for imaginatively confronting failure. In what follows, I'm going to explore such strategies mostly through literary criticism, because, above all, this is a book of literary criticism, even if it's in the form of a how-to manual for making the most of failure.

Under normal circumstances, I don't trust literary criticism that declares how one ought to do anything. But occasionally, when people are suffering from overwhelming failures of cerebration or failures of the imagination, I think some literary how-to discussion is in order, because literature does offer paths toward enhanced thoughtfulness and expanded imagination.