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Chris Ware's Failures

DAVID M. BALL

Why bother taking the time to read this? Aren't there better things you could be spending your money on? Isn't there something worthwhile you could be doing right now? This is the immediate reaction we might expect from Chris Ware at the thought of a critical volume of essays devoted to his work. Indeed, he had much the same reaction when first informed about the 2007 Modern Language Association roundtable on his comics that served as the origin of this present collection: "I must say, I'm not sure whether to be pleased or terrified that my stuff would fall under the scrutiny of people who are clearly educated enough to know better. I'd imagine that your roundtable will quickly dissolve into topics of much more pressing interest, or that you'll at least be able to adjourn early for a place in line at lunch, etc."1

Ware's readers and fans have come to expect this characteristic self-abnegation in all of his public performances and publications, an insistent rhetoric of failure that imbues everything from Ware's interviews and critical writings to the layout and packaging of his hardbound, book-length publications. Ware artfully edits the least flattering portions of reviews on the inset pages of paperback editions of Jimmy Corrigan, informing his readers that the volume they hold is both "weighed down by its ambition" and "nearly impossible to read."2 Ware's self-written catalogue for his 2007 solo exhibition at Omaha's Sheldon Memorial Gallery appeared under the title "Apologies, Etc." and lamented the collection's "unerringly inexpressive" contents (see plate 4).3 The exterior band of Ware's hardcover The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book (the title itself devaluing the contents of the book to the realm of the sub-literary) is graced with a prolix apologia promising that readers will be "gravely disappointed by the contents of this volume" and offering a long list of other functions the discarded book might serve: "A Disappointment * A Used Book * Trash * A Cutting Board * Food for Insects and Rodents * A Weapon * Fuel * Attic Insulation * The Focus of an Angry Review * Recycled Wood Pulp in the Paper of a Better Book * Something to Forget about on the Floor of Your Car * A Tax Shelter for the Publishers."4 Even the very barcodes of Ware's works rarely appear without a self-flagellant quip or reminder to the book's purchasers that their time and money could be better invested elsewhere.

Both casual and scholarly readers of Ware have puzzled over the prevalence of such expressions of insufficiency and uselessness, examples of which are legion in his work and permeate his entire career, from Ware's disavowals of his earliest strips to the latest volume in his ongoing serialization of The
ACME Novelty Library. This rhetoric of failure appears both paratextually—in places such as dust jackets, publication information, and author biographies that customarily codify and reinforce the text's value as a signifying tool—as well as narratively, in stories that routinely revolve around themes of anomie, humiliation, and despair. For some, this abnegation is nothing more than the outward manifestation of a self-effacing author, part and parcel of comics artists' carefully constructed personae as neglected outsiders in a harsh and uncaring world. For others, this unrelenting return to narratives of futility and human suffering reveals a morbid fascination with stories of loss and meaninglessness. Douglas Wolk summarized this view in his *Reading Comics* with a chapter titled "Why Does Chris Ware Hate Fun?" There he writes that Ware's comics "have an emotional range of one note [. . .] forcing] his readers to watch his characters sicken and die slowly, torment (and be humiliated in turn by) their broken families, and lead lives of failure and loneliness." Ware's rhetoric of failure, according to this unreflective critique, thinly masks the bravura pretensions of a graphic genius, acting as a kind of false consciousness behind which he can shield his genre-defying approach to graphic narrative. While all of these explanations reflect certain truths about Ware—he is in fact exceedingly modest, does focus his creative energies into a worldview indelibly infected with angst and existential terror, and frequently does disavow the scope of his ambitions behind self-effacing remarks—at the same time these readings (Wolk's most prominent among them) unnecessarily restrict the interpretive possibilities of Ware's texts to mere personal (and by implication, perverse) predilections. In doing so, they obscure a broader literary understanding of the work of Ware's rhetoric of failure and the role it plays in his attempts not only to write comics with the texture and sophistication of literary fiction, but to have them treated as such.

In this essay, I argue that the rhetoric of failure is one of the means by which Ware negotiates his attempts to place comics in the literary canon. In doing so, he is inhabiting a much older American literary tradition, one that begins as early as the mid-nineteenth century. American authors have long cultivated a self-conscious rhetoric of failure as a watchword for literary success, effectively transvaluing the meanings of success and failure in reference to their own writing. This represented an effort, among other objectives, to establish a concept of literary prestige in an era of the bestselling novel. By spurning commercial success and romanticizing the neglected artist, American authors began to classify the literary itself in opposition to mass culture, a definition adopted and amplified by subsequent generations of readers, critics, and literary theorists. In American literature, Herman Melville serves as the archetype for this rhetoric, writing in his famous review essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" that "it is better to fail in originality, than to succeed in imitation. He who has never failed somewhere, that man can not be great. Failure is the true test of greatness. And if it be said, that continual success is a proof that a man wisely knows his powers,—it is only to be added, that, in that case, he knows them to be small." Writing in a time of expanding literacy, especially among newly leisured and monied women readers within a broadening American middle class, American authors for the first time had to distinguish their aspirations from a growing mass audience at the same time that they nonetheless sought economic viability and sustainable readerships.
It was the conflicted desire to both capture and renounce this mass audience that first gave birth to a rhetoric of failure-as-success among American writers, what would become a guiding and lasting paradox of celebrated literary failure. We can witness this same rhetoric in Nathaniel Hawthorne's strange boast to be "the obscurest man in American letters" and his corresponding disparagement of the "d---d mob of scribbling women [among whom] I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed." In their conspicuous division of popularity from literary value and celebration of failure as an exclusive province of (male) literary writers, authors such as Melville and Hawthorne inaugurated a discourse that would be elaborated throughout the American literary canon among both authors and critics.

Chris Ware, I argue, recognizes this literary historical trajectory—he illustrates and cites from "Hawthorne and His Mosses" in his 2006 cover illustration of the "Writers on Writers" special issue of *Virginia Quarterly Review*—using this canonical divide between literary value and popularity to navigate his own ambivalences about comics' status as high art. On one level, Ware is keen to establish comics as a medium that can both embody the psychological complexity and epistemological difficulty of literary texts and cultivate thoughtful and discerning adult readers. Yet, Ware is also attentive to the fact that his chosen medium remains closely bound to the expectations and audience of adolescent literature, a popular cultural foundation that the rhetoric of failure would conventionally disown. Ware's own rhetoric of failure must then negotiate comics' rise to the status of "graphic narrative" while not abjuring their mass-cultural appeal, calling into question the popular/prestigious divide that continues to vex both literary scholarship and comics theory. "If one wants to tell stories that have the richness of life," Ware states, "[comics'] vocabulary is extremely limited. It's like trying to use limericks to make literature." In equal turns embracing and repudiating the mass cultural foundations of comics, both acceding to and having serious misgivings over comics' rise to the status of literature, Ware's rhetoric of failure maps his characteristic ambivalence toward the very notion of "graphic literature."

**High and Low in the Comics Library**

In the December 1997 issue of the *Comics Journal*—four years after the first number of *The ACME Novelty Library* was published, but well before he had emerged as a figure outside the consideration of the comics community—Chris Ware designed a cover and appeared in a long-form interview in the pages of a periodical explicitly founded to promote comics as high-art cultural treasures. On the cover, Ware depicts a "youth library" housing only comics and populated by some of their most recognizable creations: Charles Schultz's Charlie Brown, Rudolph Dirks's Hans Katzenjammer, Richard Outcault's Yellow Kid, and, in the left foreground, his own Jimmy Corrigan (see fig. 4.1). Displaying his characteristically encyclopedic regard for comics history and inscribing himself within this exalted genealogy of comics icons, Ware at the same time ruthlessly parodies comics as a medium, displaying a laughable taxonomy on the library's shelves under the category of "Art." Structured like a nineteenth-century ladder of progress, Ware divides graphic narra-
tive into the descending genres of “Experimental” (the appropriately shaped Donut Comics), “Romantic” (Potential Movie Script Comics), “Confessional” (I Hate Myself Comics), “Satirical” (Superheroes Sure are Dumb Comics), “Political” (Did You Know Bad Stuff is Happening All the Time? Comics and War is not Good Comics), “Scatological” (Bicycle Seat Sniffing Comics), and finally the joint category of “Pornographic and Criticism” (shared by the visually mirrored Eros Comics and the Comics Journal itself). In part, this corresponds with the journal’s reputation for scathing reviews of mainstream comics production and its aspirations to have a small cadre of comics artists recognized as worthy of the regard given to fine artists and literary authors. Yet Ware does not spare himself from this withering critique, caricaturing himself on the covers of three successive volumes in the “Confessional” row: I Hate Myself Comics, I Might Jerk Off Now and Then Comics, and ME! Comics. Even amidst the patently uninspiring content of this library, Ware nonetheless prevents any reading from taking place, the spectacle of Nancy’s visible underwear rendering the thought bubbles of the assembled “youth” opaquely black. It seems that the adolescent urge and the prurient gaze that dominates the bottom rung of his comics ladder of progress win the day over whatever more noble motives might animate the well-meaning readers in Ware’s “youth library.” Try though they might, the allegorical embodiments of the comics reader are unable to elevate themselves to the realm of the literary.

Wryly satirizing the stated mission of the Comics Journal to promote “the best the art form has to offer, particularly those comics which are fulfilling reading material for adults,” the accompanying text serves as the second half of this diptych of comics ambivalence:

The Comics Journal - The magazine of news, reviews, and mean-spirited back-stabbing. Published by the Fantagrifics [sic] Co. who shrewdly employ it as a promotional organ for the promulgation of their own products & periodicals. The critical companion for those connoisseurs of the cartoon art who are otherwise too mentally incompetent to judge whether something is of quality themselves. Celebrating a decade and a half of

- Muscular Weightlifters in stretchpants & capes
- Monsters, aliens, spaceships, and robot girls with tits
- Cute animals that drive cars and talk to each other.

It’s a big party and everyone’s invited! Featuring lengthy discussions with artisans who make their livings drawing weird-looking bald kids.

Marvel at the survival of a children’s literature stuck in the twilight of puberty for over one hundred years and join in a spirited roundtable positing its future as a mature medium capable of worldly accomplishments, derring-do, and a host of other thrilling stations. All spiffed up with fancy covers, heartfelt tributes, and inarticulate spite, this issue will be the one to keep for weeks to come.

There are none involved in the production, transmission, and consumption of the magazine—editors, subscribers, readers, even Ware himself—who remain unscathed by this uproarious send-up of self-promotion. At the time, Fantagraphics served as both the publisher of The ACME Novelty Library and the Comics Journal, and Ware’s interviewer, Gary Groth (pictured at the bottom of the composition as Schultz’s Lucy sitting behind her iconic lemon-ade-stand-cum-psychiatrist’s-couch), was both the magazine’s editor and
Ware's. While the cover image represents a lending library that transcends the realm of the commodity, however parodically, the text reintroduces the mass-market milieu in which comics remain ensconced. Despite Ware's and the journal's manifest desire to elevate comics to the status of the literary, the cover complicates an easy negation of comics' conventional associations with the mass readership in which it first emerged in America, beginning with the newspaper circulation wars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century ("The Yellow Kid" being at the center of these newspaper wars) and extending through the hegemony of superhero genre comics since the late 1930s. Ware reminds us that the ascendant "alternative" comics and graphic novels so vigorously promoted in the pages of the *Comics Journal* are equally implicated in, and susceptible to, the influences of mass culture.

The ironies of commodification are even present in the pages of the journal itself where, in the mode of the faux advertisements for commercial goods in *The ACME Novelty Library* that falsely promise consumer bliss, Ware designed a page selling a freestanding cardboard display for his *ACME Novelty Library* volumes. Originally constructed for use in retail stores, the display has "gracious pockets [that] hug each issue of the series with the same care a proud female marmoset would give to a new litter," the advertisement promising that "this gargantuan monstrosity will surely fill that previously undefined void in your unsaturated existence. HAPPINESS IS ONLY $150.00 AWAY!" An advertisement for an advertisement, a promotion for the promotional organ, the floor display transacts the very "promulgation of their own products and periodicals" so vehemently mocked in the *Comics Journal* cover.

This keenly perceived ambivalence for commercial success, coupled with Ware's pained awareness of the comics as a medium ineradicably bound to the commercial, could be understood as the guiding motif of his entire oeuvre. In the *Comics Journal* interview, Ware consistently parries Groth's insistent denigration of the "media bath" and "pop culture pap" of his and Ware's childhoods, highlighting the importance of mass-cultural resources in literary authors such as Flaubert and Tolstoy and pointing toward the origins of the novel and the now-canonized American musical traditions of jazz, ragtime, and the blues from within a popular-cultural frame. Indeed, the very omnipresence of the ACME Novelty Library—the name Ware has given not only to the fictitious producer of his comics, but now that he self-publishes his own work, the actual name that appears in his Library of Congress data—reminds Ware's readers that his texts are also commodities: bought, sold, exchanged, appreciating or depreciating in value irrespective of their form or content. Ware's publications simultaneously seek to fascinate and infuriate collectors with their variable sizes, editions, serialized iterations, and cut-out dioramas that encourage readers to alternately destroy and preserve (or, in doing both, purchase multiple copies of) the text and subsequently showcase them in their own personal floor display.

In his novel-in-progress "Rusty Brown," Ware's exploration of main characters who are at the same time fanatical, if pitiable, comics collectors only extends what has been a long-running metatextual meditation on comics' status as mass-market materiel. In the childhood scenes that constitute a large portion of *The ACME Novelty Library* 16, Rusty carries with him a Super-girl action figure that serves as both a security blanket and erotic fetish. The
doll ensures Rusty will be the target of the other children's abuse while also anticipating his later mania for collecting and preserving the lost totems of his traumatized childhood. While such totems relive these early failures, they also remind Ware's readers of the mass-market superhero comics that stand as uncomfortable forebears to his own work, much in the same way Jimmy's Superman sweatshirt haunts the second half of *Jimmy Corrigan.* Collecting is thus both the agent of Rusty's precipitous decline in adulthood—in *The ACME Report* he is playing with his collectibles, often wretchedly naked and in tears, amidst a rapidly deteriorating home life—and a reminder of comics' ties to commercial exchange. In a miniature series titled "The Adventures of the G. I. Jim Action Club," where Rusty publishes a fanzine in order to defraud his friend and fellow collector Chalky White out of his collectibles, Rusty falsely assures Chalky, "You know I'm not in it for the money . . . I'm more interested in the artistry of the piece." Here the high-art potentialities of the comics medium so clearly prized by Ware serve merely as abject exchange, Rusty's act of authorship serving as nothing more than a thin veil for commercial activity.

True to form, Ware both evinces and performs this dialectic between artistry and commerce in his own role as author. In *The ACME Report,* Ware has one of his fictional personae, George Wilson—an alias Ware reserves for his self-described "crass hackery which I feel was altered enough from my original 'idea' (if there was one) that I don't want my name on it"—pen a faux scholarly history of the ACME Novelty Company. Buried in its footnotes is a meditation on Ware's own name that states: "Though some researchers have suggested 'Ware' to possibly be a surname, the word literally means 'commodity' in English, and, I believe, the Letterer [a figure Wilson posits as the 'true' author and guiding founder of ACME] also intended it to be read as such." Down to the multiple resonances of his name, Ware repeatedly reminds us that the specter of the commodity inheres in his comics despite their high-art and literary aspirations.

Viewed broadly, Ware aligns this mass-market/high-art tension within the comics medium to the rhetoric of success and failure, respectively. The figure of George Wilson, both as a commercial hack and a hapless researcher of the ACME Novelty Company, is one such gesture. Wilson's exhausting and laughably inept effort in the introduction to *The ACME Report* (he suffers from nervous exhaustion in the waiting room of the company's headquarters) can thus be read as one such noble failure. Wilson's failed introduction is also a layered homage to other celebrated literary failures. In correspondence, Ware has called Wilson the "Ishmael character" of *The ACME Report,* a reference to the exceedingly meditative and scholarly narrator of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick.* Charles Kinbote, the brilliantly mad and obsessive literary critic in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire,* is another explicit literary reference evoked in Wilson's labyrinthine introduction. Both Ishmael and Kinbote serve as figures of the admirably foolish metatextual narrator, characters whose love for letters both sustains and destroys them. Wilson's failed attempts to tell the story of ACME can thus be seen as a literary heroic act of reading, however quixotic, a similar exegetical task asked of Ware's own readers as they strain their eyes to navigate the sinuous and demanding introduction. Failure is similarly the hallmark of all Ware's most iconic characters—Quimby
the Mouse's violently ambivalent loves, Jimmy Corrigan's perpetual social awk­wardnesses, Rusty Brown's unremitting loserdom—who despite these manifest failings are nonetheless drawn to engage readers' sympathies.

The flip side of this celebration of, and self-identification with, heroic failure is the thoroughgoing disavowal of success. Like the rhetoric of failure, this literary suspicion of success has an equally long history in American letters, one origin of which is Ralph Waldo Emerson's lecture "Success," first delivered under that title in 1851. Almost exactly contemporaneous with Melville's celebration of failure, Emerson writes: "Rien ne réussit mieux que le succès. [Nothing succeeds like success.] And we Americans are tainted with this insanity, as our bankruptcies and our reckless politics may show. We are great by exclusion, grasping, and egotism. Our success takes from all what it gives to one. 'Tis a haggard, malignant, careworn running for luck." If failure was the touchstone for an emerging literary elite in America in the mid-nineteenth century—a move mirrored by the contemporary genera­tion of comics artists championed by Ware who aspire to write graphic narratives with the emotional and epistemological depth of literature—success represents the grasping, acquisitive disposition that has equally defined the American character from its earliest history. Ware renders a starkly literal representation of this suspicion of success in his advertisement for "Success Brand Snort" in the opening pages of The ACME Report (see fig. 4.2). Here Ware parodies the rough masculinity of cigarette and alcohol advertisements that equate self-poisoning with rugged individualism, narrating mail pilots' use of methamphetamine on the job (with predictably disastrous results) to "do the work of ten men, and still feel great when I get off of work at eight." Yet it is not drug culture that is the target of Ware's satire so much as the idea of success itself, relentless commercial activity as opposed to intellectual and literary sensibilities, which is here and elsewhere conflated with reckless consumption and figured as a dangerous and debilitating addiction. "Start snorting Success today," the advertisement promises, "and see for yourself. So smoothe. So sure. So . . . Success."

Understanding this larger literary historical treatment of celebrated failures, where success is viewed as antithetical to artistic aims, allows us to better understand the counterintuitive thrust of Chris Ware's omnipresent rhetoric of failure. In the same 1997 Comics Journal interview with Gary Groth, Ware states: "You have to have high standards. . . . You have to be self-critical. . . . It's an honest feeling of failure most of the time. But it's about the only way you can keep a clear view of things." Rather than sense­less self-deprecation or morbid fascination, failure becomes a kind of artistic vision, part of a larger tradition of American authors' persistent invocations of the rhetoric of failure to convey their highest aspirations for literary success. From Herman Melville's claim that "failure is the true test of greatness" to Henry Adams's self-identification with the "mortifying failure in [his] long education" and William Faulkner's eagerness to be judged by his "splendid failure to do the impossible," such rhetorical gestures have occupied the center of canonical claims to American authorship and authority. This rhetoric is particularly recognizable in Ware and his peer comics artists precisely as they aspire to literary sophistication, recapitulating a move made by American novelists and essayists before them. Thus even despite Ware's critical
successes and strong sales figures, despite his insistence on the mass-cultural and inexorably commercial nature of the comics medium, the rhetoric of failure continues to hold sway over his notion of the possibility of a "graphic literature."

**Misadventures in Literary History**

Chris Ware offers one of the most visible representations and embodiments of this literary rhetoric of failure in his 2006 cover illustration to the *Virginia Quarterly Review*’s special issue titled “Writers on Writers” (see fig. 4.3). Conceived as a study in literary influence, with contributions from contemporary writers who were asked to incorporate literary forebears as characters in their stories, the issue is adorned with Ware’s wraparound cover that offers a comically brief history of literary influence from the prehistoric era to James Joyce. In the manner of his thumbnail histories of comics and fine art, “Writers on Writers” is at once encyclopedic and parodic, demonstrating a commanding knowledge of its subject and a patent desire to hold that same subject to a playful ridicule. It is also a catalogue of literature as a confrontation with failure: the authors of the gospels debating the accuracy of their transcriptions of Jesus’s words, a blind Milton with a recalcitrant amanuensis, Dickens contending with a deadline, and Dostoevsky in chains (see fig. 4.4). All of these failures at the same time anticipate subsequent literary achievement, be it the long exegetical tradition generated by the gospels’ internal inconsistencies, Milton’s seminal poetic achievements such as *Paradise Lost* subsequent to his blindness, Dickens’s innovations in prose fiction and prodigious output as a result of his serial demands, or Dostoevsky’s towering novels composed after his exile to Siberia. Dispute, misunderstanding, and suffering are represented throughout as the preconditions of literary production.

Another of Ware’s allegories of authorship confirms his treatment of failure as a generative device for literature: his Superhero/God figure that appears in a silent, cyclical narrative that wraps throughout *The ACME Report*. Overtly the narrative of an unredeemed egotist, one who destroys everything he touches (in one episode he tears the fuselage off a plane in flight to “save” a young girl as his consort), this figure also evinces two distinct moments of authorial creativity. The first comes in prison, where he scratches out, with a nail, his entire narrative in miniature on the prison walls. It is a consummate Wareian moment, endlessly referring to his own act of authorship as he turns the narrative mirror of his own comics in upon itself, one instigated (like Dostoevsky in chains, or Dickens chained to his desk) by the author’s abjection. The second act of creation happens at the very beginning of the narrative’s cycle when his protagonist, doomed by immortality to outlive the human relations in his life (and, by the logic of the narrative, having ingested bite by bite the entire universe he had previously created), idly punches holes in the surrounding blackness that become the stars of a new world. Both acts of creation are the consequence of failure and its attendant suffering.

They also, in their rewriting of already-written narratives, speak to a larger struggle attendant on every other author figured in “Writers on Writers”: they are all tellers of twice-told tales, all haunted by anteriority. Cursed by
repetition, literally consuming the world he creates, the writer perpetually contends with an already-written universe. In rewriting literary history as a romance of failure, a failure each author is doomed to repeat for themselves, Ware writes his own fascination with failure into a longer trajectory extending from Greek antiquity to literary modernism. Yet this defining failure in the urge to create anew is also always a noble failure, establishing a fraternity of esteemed authors who struggle heroically against the demands of their art and the mass culture that exerts its pressures upon them. When they aren’t confined to their respective garrets, in chains, or condemned to hell—those remaining authors not shown at work over their desks are frequently bedridden (the blind Milton, the mad Cervantes, the opium- addled Coleridge)—they are subject to the equally confining pressures of the literary marketplace. Plato exhausted by presenting his Dialogues as pantomime shows, Virgil beholden to his imperial patrons, Shakespeare exasperated with his actors for missed lines, Dickens held captive by his serial deadlines—each specter of the literary marketplace takes shape alongside these more conventional images of suffering attendant upon the act of writing. Yet the very intrusion of the marketplace in this mock literary history points toward Ware’s acknowledgment of its dialectical force and the generative role it has in the production of art, his sense of the literary never wholly unbound from the forces of economic exchange.

Indeed, what holds true for literature in Ware’s thumbnail history also holds true for the history of comics, as evidenced by an analogous compo-
osition first completed for his 2004 McSweeney's comics anthology. From a prehistoric cave artist clubbed to death for missing a deadline to Rodolphe Töpffer's outrage at the piracy of American copyright law, Ware's comics history documents the medium's development amidst stultifying market pressures. All three episodes also picture the comics artist in Ware's habitual pose: clenched miserably over his easel, his life doomed "to decades of grinding isolation, solipsism and utter social disregard," as Ware writes on a facing page of The ACME Report titled "Ruin: Your Life Draw: Cartoons!" Ware pictured this same miserable cartoonist on the cover of his exhibition catalogue Unlinked surrounded by caricatures of happy creators in other media (sculpture, theater, song, balloon animal artistry), singling out the comics creator for especial suffering. These narratives of misrecognition, abjection, and abandonment imagine a history whose progress is repeatedly thwarted by an uncaring or unimaginative audience, one intent on reducing the medium to its lowest common denominator. Ware pictures various "cheerleaders for the cause" who demean the medium in their praise: a professor avers, "I used to love to read them as a boy!"; a Roy Lichtenstein stand-in opines, "I use them as a symbol for the spiritual poverty of American culture"; and a librarian gushes, "I think they're wonderful, because they get people interested in real reading!" (see fig. 3.3). To an enthused reader who states, "Comics are now, like, a respected language, with an aesthetic grounding all their own! [. . .] They address topics like the holocaust, spirituality, notions of identity, and sex! Plus they win Pulitzer Prizes . . . and Harvey Awards!" Ware imagines nothing but thoughtless disregard: "Don't ever bother me again! I'm trying to get to the top level of my Superman video game!" What held true for Ware's comics readers in his lending library on the cover of the Comics Journal applies to comics artists themselves in this later history. The work of comics-as-literature is repeatedly confined to and constituted by the reality of comics-as-commodities. Yet this is equally true for literature and fine art; an emerging comics avant-garde shares with these other conventionally privileged media the desire to transcend the commercial, and the failure to completely do so. These failures taken together—the failure to transcend mass culture, the failure to produce texts liberated from the weight of previous authors, the failure of a medium doomed to misrecognition and neglect—are all integral parts of Chris Ware's sense of the literary.

The reward of reading Ware's rhetoric of failure remains the ability to perceive his work as an extension of a long literary tradition and as a theorization of that tradition's ambivalences and anxieties. Locally, this allows us to see Quimby's vaudevillian violence as an engagement with early twentieth-century American popular culture, Jimmy Corrigan's ignoble failures as part of a tradition of American authors' literary losers from Melville to Nabokov, and Rusty Brown's ruined life as homologous to the author's own quest for literary prestige. Seen more globally, remaining attentive to Ware's rhetoric of failure allows us to appreciate his work within a broader literary context. In a contemporary moment in which graphic narratives are aspiring to the canonical status of literature, Ware posits that the history of comics as a mass-cultural medium reflects similar translations undergone by the literary canon. Chris Ware's "failures" are one mechanism of this translation of comics into literature.
Notes

1. Chris Ware, e-mail to the author, September 1, 2007.
6. For an analogous moment, one among many, see Art Spiegelman’s claim that “[by being] forged in a crucible of humiliation and trauma, cartoonists are made, not born. . . . The young misfit must escape into fantasy and/or develop a rarefied sense of humor to survive.” Art Spiegelman, Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*! (New York: Pantheon, 2008), n.p.
13. Chris Ware, cover illustration for the Comics Journal 200 (1997).
14. Ibid.
15. For an analysis of Ware’s editorial role in republishing early twentieth-century comics artists like George Herriman and Frank King, see Jeet Heer’s essay in this volume.
16. Here, and throughout his oeuvre more generally, Ware’s cultivation of a coterie audience, am-
bivalence toward mass culture, and relentless citationality can be regarded as an extension of literary modernist aims and anxieties within contemporary graphic narratives. For a more in-depth look at these literary historical stakes, see my “Comics against Themselves: Chris Ware’s Graphic Narratives as Literature” in Contemporary American Comics: Creators and Their Contexts, ed. James Lyons and Paul Williams (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, forthcoming).

17. Chris Ware, advertisement, Comics Journal 200 (1997): 103. True to form, Ware adorns even this display with the rhetoric of failure, noting in his instructions to the comics retailer the “many wonderful features is [sic] has to offer, such as weakness of structure, flammability, and recyclability.” See http://acmenoveltyarchive.org. For an analysis of this display, see Martha Kuhlman’s essay in this volume.


19. For an analysis of Ware’s ambivalence toward superhero comics, see Jacob Brogan’s essay in this volume.

20. See Ware, The ACME Report, 2, 15, 63, 69, 85, 87, 90, 95, 101. The focus on Rusty’s and Chalky’s collectibles, as opposed to Jimmy’s disavowed comic collection in Jimmy Corrigan, itself represents a further remove of comics into the realm of the commodity.

21. Ibid., 2.


23. Ware, The ACME Report, 19.

24. Chris Ware, e-mail to the author, January 25, 2009.


27. For a fascinating history of success and failure in nineteenth-century America, especially with regard to economic history and bankruptcy law, see Scott Sandage, Born Losers: A History of Failure in America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

28. Ware, The ACME Report, 2.

29. Ibid.


32. Daniel Worden in his “The Shameful Art: McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern, Comics, and the Politics of Affect,” Modern Fiction Studies 52 (2006), makes an analogous claim for Ware’s turn as editor, stating “that the intersection of intimacy, shame, and gender melancholy provides an avenue for this anthology to make a case for the artistic merit of comics” (894). Indeed, authorship is exclusively gendered male in the “Writers on Writers” composition discussed below (with the one exception of a tea-sipping and giggling Jane Austen), a bias perpetuated in many places throughout Ware’s oeuvre. See, for example, his 826 Valencia mural depicting male desire as creative force, reprinted in Chris Ware, Quimby the Mouse (New York: Pantheon, 2003), back cover. For a critique of this impulse in Ware’s editorial work, see Marc Singer’s essay in this volume.

33. Chris Ware, cover illustration, Virginia Quarterly Review, Special Issue: Writers on Writers (2006).

34. For these parallel thumbnail histories, see Ware, The ACME Report, 6–9, 24. For a more thorough analysis of Ware’s “Our History of Art,” see Katherine Roeder’s essay in this volume.

35. This storyline can be traced by reading pages I, 3, 44–55, 57, 60, 76–77, 76, 96, 100–1, 104, and the endpapers of Ware’s The ACME Report in succession.

36. The oedipal narrative in Harold Bloom’s account of misprison, which privileges the primal

37. The flip side of this coin is equally telling: scenes of pleasure (Chaucer’s guilt-ridden masturbation, Flaubert’s pederasty) are shown to be moments of self-satisfaction or willed expropriation.

