



False Starts: The Rhetoric of Failure and the Making of American Modernism

David M. Ball

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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," the rhetoric of failure has served as a master trope of modernist American literary expression. David Ball's magisterial study addresses the fundamental questions of language, meaning, and authority that run counter to well-rehearsed claims of American innocence and positivity, beginning with the American Renaissance and extending into modernist and contemporary literature. The rhetoric of failure was used at various times to engage artistic ambition, the arrival of advanced capitalism, and a rapidly changing culture, not to mention sheer exhaustion. "False Starts" locates a lively narrative running through American literature that consequently queries assumptions about the development of modernism in the United States.

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