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Nothing succeeds like failure

by [Joseph Epstein](#)

On Cyril Connolly and "promise."

When Maurice Bowra, then a young don and not yet Warden of Wadham College, Oxford, used to introduce Cyril Connolly, a man six years his junior, he would say, "This is Connolly. Coming man." After which he paused, then added, "Hasn't come yet." Nor would Cyril Connolly come—not quite, never ever, really, at least not by his own lights. To be promising when young can be a terrible thing, for one's promise all too often turns out to be a pledge on which one isn't able to deliver. "Promise is guilt," Connolly would write in his thirties, "promise is the capacity for letting people down."

When young, Cyril Connolly had that easy brilliance that prods predictions of great things ahead. But he had a taste—a propensity?, an aptitude?—for failure that never left him. He first indulged it seriously by taking a third-class degree—easily enough done when o ...

Joseph Epstein is the author of *Fred Astaire* (Yale University Press).

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