

# The Road All Runners Run

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The title—"The Road All Runners Run"—comes from a poem by the English poet A. E. Housman. The poem, entitled "To an Athlete Dying Young," is an elegy in which the speaker recalls the day of the athlete's triumph:<sup>1</sup>

The day you won your town the race,  
We chaired you through the marketplace.

But the youthful runner has died:

Today, the road all runners come,  
Shoulder high we bring you home,  
And set you at your threshold down,  
Townsmen of a stiller town.

The threshold, of course, is the grave; the townsmen are the dead. The mood of the poem is elegiac. It is typical of Housman's poetry in that it expresses, in remarkably direct and simple language, a tragic sense of life. And that—a tragic sense of life—is exactly what a remarkable number of European novelists have expressed in their novels about runners. Of a runner who appears in André Cazenave's *Le Stade aux cent portes*, which was published in 1930, the author wrote, "The man seems to run against eternity."<sup>2</sup> In the novels that I shall discuss, the protagonists are almost always distance runners, not sprinters, and they are lonely. They struggle against a hostile society; they rebel like existential heroes against the constraints of time and space, against the inevitability of physical decline and death.<sup>3</sup>

I must acknowledge that there *are* novels of some literary merit whose runner-characters are *not* tragically doomed. In *La Ligne Droite*, which Yves Gibeau published in 1956, the hero is a German athlete who lost an arm in the Second World War. When the novel begins, he is an embittered newspaper vendor. He returns to his sport, however, runs the 800 meters against an international field, and achieves his personal best. Since his name—

Stefan Volker—is meant to suggest the German people—*das Volk*—the novel is a Frenchman’s statement about postwar Germany’s Phoenix-like emergence from the ashes of the destruction that Germany brought upon itself.<sup>4</sup> Similarly positive is the novel of an American writer, Patricia Nell Warren.<sup>5</sup> *The Front Runner*, which appeared in 1975, celebrates both the joy of sports and the homosexual love of a young Olympic champion and his coach. These two novels, and several others that I have banished to my footnotes, are the exceptions to my generalization about tragic runners.<sup>6</sup> I turn now to four works of fiction that I believe are more characteristic of their genre and more profound in their significance.

Dominique Braga’s novel, *5.000*, appeared in 1924. As the protagonist Monnerot runs the 5,000-meter race, he recalls, in stream-of-consciousness fashion, his victory at the previous games, in Antwerp in 1920. Then he had beaten the Finnish record-holder (whose mechanical style indicates that the author modeled his character on Paavo Nurmi). Now, thinking of himself as another Jean Bouin, Monnerot drives himself to prove that the journalists are wrong. He is not too old for the race. At first, the prose is lyrical. The two-word sentence “Il court”—“He runs”—sounds like a refrain. Monnerot is confident that he can win. As the novel and the race draw to their simultaneous conclusion, the language changes. Monnerot exclaims silently to himself, “Ah! What have I done!” The third-person-narration underscores his despair: “He sinks into a depression. He sinks into decrepitude.” A medley of metaphors describes how Monnerot falters. “He loosens the string of his bow. He lets fall the quiver of his arrows.”<sup>7</sup> The sexual symbolism is obvious. The exhausted runner is likened at the end to someone “decapitated by death.”<sup>8</sup>

Although there is an uncanny resemblance between *5.000* and Siegfried Lenz’s novel, *Brot und Spiele*, published in 1959, there is no evidence that Lenz had ever read Braga’s novel. Bert Buchner, the distance runner of *Brot und Spiele*, is a character revised from the hero of a short story, “Der Läufer,” that Lenz had published a year earlier. Technically, the novel is simplicity itself—the journalist narrator, describing a 10,000-meter race for the *Europameisterschaft*, remembers his first encounter with Buchner when both were German prisoners of war. He recalls how Buchner had begun his career as a member of an obscure working-class sports club and how he ascended into the ranks of Europe’s best distance runners. Once Buchner had become famous, he abandoned his club for a more prestigious one. In the process, he left behind the friends—including the narrator—who had nurtured his talent when he was a mere beginner. He does worse. He ignores the woman who loves him and commits adultery with the fashionable wife of one of his wealthy new sponsors. He behaves as unethically on the track as he does in the bedroom. He intentionally cripples a teammate whom he perceives as a rival.

He had always run, writes Lenz, “as if his life depended on it,” which is exactly how he runs the 10,000 meters. The race is unmistakably a symbolic one. Like the marathon, it is—in the words of one of the characters—a “run from death that leads to death.” Buchner, who is the oldest of the eight contestants, runs to defy the critics who have described him as too old to compete. The nameless narrator—who is among those whom Buchner has betrayed—wants Buchner to lose because a loss will punish him for his moral lapses, but even the narrator becomes ambivalent as he responds to the loneliness—the “Einsamkeit”—of Buchner’s effort. The lonely effort is doomed. Buchner stumbles and falls a few meters

from the tape. He crawls forward, collapses completely, and then smiles enigmatically—as if to accept the inevitable. As he is carried from the track, the narrator thinks, “Where will they bring him? Where?” “Wohin bringen sie ihn? Wohin?”<sup>9</sup>

The British sportswriter Brian Glanville published *his* contribution to the genre exactly a decade later, in 1969. Although *The Olympian* is astonishingly similar to *Brot und Spiele*, I doubt that Glanville knew about his predecessor’s work. I suspect that the two novels are similar because the two authors meditated on similar themes.

The protagonist of *The Olympian* is Ike Low, a runner whose working-class origins are like Bert Buchner’s. The story concerns his fanatical coach, Sam Dee, as much as it does Ike Low, who at times seems more victim than hero. Dee is a familiar type:

Strength is not just the strength of the body [he intones], it is the strength of the mind. The strength of the will prevails over the weakness of the body....A champion is a man who has trained his body and his mind, who has learned to conquer pain, and to use pain for his own purposes.<sup>10</sup>

Dee, who seems clearly to be modeled after the Australian coach Percy Cerutti, is the ultimate authoritarian idealist. He demands that Ike surpass human possibility.

Pain and time [intones Dee]. These are your opponents, and they are inseparable. Moreover, they have this in common, that no victory against them can be complete because the body ages and the body dies. . . .<sup>11</sup> Youth can, however, win a partial victory and through his partial victory Ike Low can vindicate Sam Dee, the prophetic teacher, who has been scorned and rejected because of his unconventional theories.

The plot is complex, but the moral is simple. Failure is inevitable. At the 1960 Olympics, competing in the semifinal of the 1500-meter race, the twenty-two-year-old runner had pulled a muscle and dropped out. In the intervening four years, he had set a world’s record for the mile and won a gold medal at what were then known as the Empire Games. Now, competing again in the 1964 Olympics in the 1500-meter race, Ike pursues the African runner who leads the pack.<sup>12</sup> He runs “through the pain barrier” and he hears Sam’s voice urging him on, but he fails to accomplish the impossible. Nearing the finish line, he blacks out. The novel ends with almost exactly the same words used by Dominique Braga in 1924 and by Siegfried Lenz in 1959: “Not running any more. Just falling, falling.”<sup>13</sup>

My fifth and last example is Alan Sillitoe’s *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*. The novel was published in 1959, the same year as *Brot und Spiele*. The filmed version, directed by Tony Richardson, appeared three years later.

Sillitoe’s hero, Colin Smith, is the angry, resentful son of a father who worked himself death at a factory job and left his family an insurance policy too small to provide them with more than a momentary escape from poverty. Colin’s improvident mother quickly squanders what little money they have. Colin’s frustration leads him to petty crime and petty crime leads him to imprisonment in the Essex Borstal. (“Borstal” is the generic term for detention centers for youths.)

There, as a socially despised “Borstal Boy,” he discovers a redeeming talent. He can run:

I’ve always been a good runner, quick and with a big stride as well, the only trouble being that no matter how fast I run, and I did a very fair lick even

though I do say so myself, it didn't stop me getting caught by the cops after that bakery job.<sup>14</sup>

The ambitious warden of the prison approaches sports as if he were the headmaster of a prestigious school. He sees Colin as his golden boy. With the warden's enthusiastic backing, Colin begins to train, to run—unguarded, unwatched—through the countryside. On his runs, he experiences a sense of freedom and accomplishment that he had never known before. "It's a treat," he says, "being a long-distance runner, out in the world by yourself with not a soul to make you bad-tempered or tell you what to do. . . ." <sup>15</sup> There is no ambiguity about symbolic implications. Colin imagines that "the long-distance run of an early morning makes me think that every run like this is a life—a little life, I know—but a life as full of misery and happiness and things happening as you can ever get. . . ." <sup>16</sup>

As his times improve, the warden begins to dream of vicarious glory. In the novella, he talks of the Borstal Cup. In the film, which expands upon but does not distort the story, the warden talks of Colin representing England at the Olympic Games. This is the basic irony. "England" is the society that has imprisoned Colin. He has been asked, in the classic Freudian formulation, to "identify with the enemy." The most heartbreaking moment in the film comes when the imprisoned boys sing the beautiful hymn, "Jerusalem," with the poignant words, "We shall build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land." *Somebody* may build England's Jerusalem, but it will not be these unfortunate boys.

The warden's immediate, somewhat more practical goal is the Borstal Cup, but Colin is as clear about that as he is about Jerusalem. He knows exactly what is at stake for him:

The pop-eyed potbellied governor said to a pop-eyed potbellied Member of Parliament who sat next to his pop-eyed potbellied whore of a wife that I was his only hope for getting the Borstal Blue Ribbon Prize Cup for Long Distance Cross Country Running (All England), which I was, and it set me to laughing to myself inside, and I didn't say a word to any potbellied pop-eyed bastard that might give them real hope.<sup>17</sup>

(The film, incidentally, improves upon the novel at this moment in that the viewer—unlike the reader—is kept in suspense until the last moments of the race.) Symbolically then, Colin runs against the Borstal prison, against the oppressive class structure of English society, against the injustices he suffers from but cannot adequately describe.

The day of the race arrives. The spectators include not only the Borstal Boys but also quite a number of upper-class visitors. Colin runs, takes the lead, approaches the finish line, hears the frenzied encouragement of everyone connected with the prison—and stops:

And I could hear the lords and ladies now from the grandstand, and could see them standing up to save me in: "Run!" they were shouting in their posh voices. "Run!" But I was deaf, daft and blind and stood where I was, still tasting the bark in my mouth and still blubbing like a baby, blubbing now out of gladness that I'd got them beat at last.<sup>18</sup>

He refuses the victory asked of him by his oppressors and he triumphs morally over those who have deprived and injured and imprisoned and humiliated him. Failure, for once, is success.

It is for A. E. Housman's runner as well. To that extraordinary poem I must return. Precisely *because* he dies young, Housman's athlete is spared the metaphoric death that waits for every athlete when he reaches his peak and begins to decline. He will never

experience defeat, and he will never be ignored by those who had once idolized him. A.E. Housman had it right:

Silence sounds no worse than cheers  
After earth has stopped the ears.

Housman's runner, dying young, will never know what it is to outlive one's fame:

Now you will not swell the rout  
Of lads that wore their honors out,  
Runners whom renown outran  
And the name died before the man.

In a way that is quite uncanny, Housman hinted at the concept of the sports record, a concept that has fascinated me for decades now:

Eyes that shady night has shut  
Cannot see the record cut.

The athlete's physical decline is unlike anyone else's. Athletes suffer the assaults of time as others do not. Strikingly handsome men, stunningly beautiful women—they too suffer from the assaults of time, but the aesthetics of physical *appearance* are different from the kinetics of physical *achievement*. They are—to use the fashionable phrase—socially constructed. Appearance is subjective, achievement—for runners if not for divers and gymnasts and figure-skaters—is objective. Friends can flatter you about your allegedly youthful appearance—"Oh! You look really wonderful!"—but no one can convince you that you are faster than you were twenty years ago. No one can convince you that your record has not been surpassed. How fortunate then the fate, says Housman, of the athlete dying young:

Eyes that shady night has shut  
Cannot see the record cut.  
And silence sounds no worse than cheers  
After earth has stopped the ears.

Like Colin Smith, Housman's athlete is a tragic hero who wins because he loses. Not for him the more literal failures dramatized by Montherlant, Braga, Lenz, and Glanville.

What do this poem and these four novels have in common? All of them, each in a different way, are versions of tragedy. All of them, each in a different way, imagine a fictional race as a symbol for the course of human life. Or, to put it the other way around, life itself is, in Housman's words, "the road all runners run."

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1. A.E. Housman, *Collected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939), 32-33. The poem is from *A Shropshire Lad*, first published in 1896.
  2. André Cazenave, *Le Stade aux cent porter* (Paris: Flammarion, 1930), 142.
  3. I regret that my theme requires me to omit track-and-field novels whose protagonists are throwers or jumpers rather than runners. I especially regret the necessary omission of Per Olov Enquist's *Der Sekundant*, which, unfortunately, I have read only in the German translation (München: Hanser, 1979), and Silvio Blatter's *Love Me Tender* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980).
  4. Yves Gibeau, *La Ligne Droite* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1956).
  5. Patricia Nell Warren, *The Front Runner* (New York: William Morrow, 1974).
  6. Although it is utterly inept as a work of fiction, *An Olympic Victor* (1908) survives as a curiosity because this story of the Greek runner who won the first Olympic marathon was written by James Brendan Connolly, himself an 1896 Olympic victor. A much better novel by Pierre Naudin, *Les*

*Dernières Foulées* (Lausanne: Éditions Rencontre, 1968), is another exception. The protagonist wins his race, but he is then destroyed by a moral lapse. In the era of strict amateurism, he accepts money to repay a debt. He is then banned from sports. Hugh Atkinson's *The Games*, is a third exception to my generalizations about runners. In this miserably written novel, the crucial race is the marathon. The rival runners are (1) a spoiled brat from Yale, who says that the Olympics are just "horseshit," and (2) a noble aborigine from a recently discovered Stone Age tribe. In the course of the marathon, the spoiled brat dies—good riddance!—and the noble aborigine wins. Since the good guy is victorious, the outcome of the novel is hardly tantamount to tragic failure. On the other hand, in a book of nearly five hundred pages, Atkinson managed one suggestive sentence supportive of my theme: "Death," says the novel's hero, "is the adversary" *The Games* (1967; reprint ed., London: World Books, 1968), 472.

7. Dominique Braga, *5.000*. (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française, 1924), 161.
8. *Ibid.*, 186.
9. Siegfried Lenz, *Brot und Spiele* (1959; reprint ed., Munich: DTV, 1964), 19, 52, 173.
10. Brian Glanville, *The Olympian* (1969; reprint ed., London: Seeker & Warburg, 1974), 6-7.
11. *Ibid.*, 50.
12. Keita, the African runner, is described as an almost mindless animal who runs "naturally." The stereotype was ubiquitous.
13. *Ibid.*, 310.
14. Alan Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (London: W.H. Allen, 1959), 7.
15. *Ibid.*, 11
16. *Ibid.*, 19.
17. *Ibid.*, 39.
18. *Ibid.*, 52.