Human Dignity and Social Anarchy: Sillitoe's "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner"
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HUMAN DIGNITY AND SOCIAL ANARCHY:
SILLITOE’S ‘‘THE LONEINESS OF
THE LONG-DISTANCE RUNNER’’

Allen R. Penner

Alan Sillitoe’s “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner,” the title story of the collection awarded the Hawthornden Prize for Literature in 1959, has engaged the attention of most of the critics who have dealt with his works. While there is general agreement that it is one of the best British short novels to have been published in recent years, the interpretations given it have generated some surprising critical conflicts. One scholar submits that the purpose of the story is to depict the “moral decay” of the hero, Colin Smith: “he is lonely, too, because he lives his life according to a ‘code’ that denies him any joy in life, a ‘code’ that consists, in fact, of the denial of the ordinary human pleasures.” He concludes, “we are led into seeing that all of

Smith’s beliefs have been false. . . .”2 Another critic presents a contradictory reading, explaining that Smith attains “‘honesty’ in all its fullness. And at this moment when truth is fully apprehended, the runner’s kinship with humanity (corollary of the liberation and the attainment), as distinct from his former alienation from it, is decisively established. It is almost a Christlike passion, for a tragically deluded society suicidally hostile to life. . . .”8 While such interpretations may be defensible, Sillitoe’s subsequent publications, including the screenplay of “The Loneliness” which he prepared for Woodfall Film Productions, Ltd., suggest that neither is the reading intended by the author. None of the studies thus far published seems to have unraveled the perplexing thematic question of the story, which is essential to an understanding of Sillitoe’s other works.4

“The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner” is written in a tradition in English fiction which dates at least from Elizabethan times, in the works of Greene, Nashe, and Deloney—the rogue’s tale, or thief’s autobiography. These works have traditionally justified their existence by purporting to serve two functions: to allow the reader to learn the tricks of outlaws so that he may avoid falling prey to them, and to lead the reader to virtue through the terrible example of its opposite. The moral in many instances is delineated by the repentant criminal himself. Sillitoe’s criminal in this story is not repentant, and the moral of the tale is not so simple as to promote the cause of virtue as opposed to vice. Defoe, in his famous thief’s autobiography Moll Flanders, satisfies our moral sense by having Moll earnestly repent her past crimes; he maintains our interest by showing how Moll survives physically through cunning. Sillitoe offends our moral sense by having his thief stubbornly refuse repentance, but he maintains our interest by showing how the man keeps his integrity while under the physical and legal authority of those whom he despises.

3 Denny, p. 10.
4 Sillitoe’s published works include two volumes of verse: The Rats and Other Poems (London, 1960) and A Falling Out of Love and Other Poems (London, 1964); two collections of short stories: The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner (New York, 1960) and The Ragman’s Daughter (New York, 1964); and five novels: Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (New York, 1959), The General (New York, 1961), Key to the Door (New York, 1962), The Death of William Posters (New York, 1965), and A Tree on Fire (London, 1967). References in this paper to Sillitoe’s works are to the editions cited above.
In so doing, the author has reversed the formula of the popular crime tale of fiction, wherein the reader enjoys vicariously witnessing the exploits of the outlaw and then has the morally reassuring pleasure of seeing the doors of the prison close upon him in the conclusion. Sillitoe begins his tale in prison, and he ends it before the doors have opened again, leaving us with the unsettling realization that the doors will indeed open and that the criminal will be released unreformed.

Insofar as Sillitoe’s works are dominated by any one theme, that theme is rebellion. In many of his novels and short stories he presents his heroes, who, with few exceptions, are members of the laboring class, rebelling against those mainstays of proletarian literature of the 1930’s, oppressive management and conservative politicians. To those who regard the subjects as anachronistic in the present decade, Sillitoe might assert, as he did in an essay on contemporary British social conditions, “In England there are half a million people out of work, and ten times that number living in real poverty, what I would call below the telly-line, as well as below the bread-line. The gap between the very poor and the normal rich is wider than it has ever been.” Nevertheless, while the equalitarian society which Sillitoe desires is far from becoming an actuality, the theme of rebellion is at best somewhat muddled for a “working-class” novelist, as Sillitoe is, in a country with a Socialist Labour government during a time of comparative prosperity. The conflict, however, can be clearly defined once again by a writer of Sillitoe’s predilections if he places his character in physical bondage. For this reason, I believe, “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner” has proved to be one of Sillitoe’s most successful explorations of the theme of rebellion.

The story is related in the first person by Colin Smith (the first name is given in the film script but not in the short story), who tells of a theft which he has committed, his imprisonment in Essex Borstal, his decision to lose deliberately a long-distance race, and his hatred of prison officials. One may be tempted to justify Smith’s crime, as Professor Denny does, in terms of his “unfortunate home background (working-class insecurity, slum life, unemployment, periodic want) . . .” (p. 3), but it is embarrassing to attempt to do so in relation to the facts of the story. The crime was not committed out of economic necessity. After Smith’s father died of cancer, the factory

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6 In his letter to me of May 18, 1967, Mr. Sillitoe cited The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner and Key to the Door as being, in his estimation, the best of his published fictional works.
where he had been employed paid the family five hundred pounds in insurance benefits; as Smith explains, "how could any of us go to work after that?" (p. 21). Sillitoe’s sympathies are with the poor, but he does not pretend, in this story at least, that the 1950’s are the 1930’s. Smith is unemployed because he does not want employment. He commits the crime—stealing a bakery cashbox—not out of necessity but out of choice. Moreover, he is utterly without a sense of remorse or guilt: “I don’t say to myself: ‘You shouldn’t have done the job and then you’d have stayed away from Borstal’; no, what I ram into my runner-brain is that my luck had no right to scram just when I was on my way to making the coppers think I hadn’t done the job after all” (p. 20). The matter which the story presents is not the question of whether or not Smith is guilty or innocent. Once the crime has been committed, his guilt determined, and the sentence passed, the social questions of guilt, innocence, and responsibility regarding the theft are no longer the central issue, for they have, in effect, been settled. The subject of the story then becomes a presentation of the more complex conflict between the captured and his keepers.

Smith has not been assigned to a prison but to a Borstal, designed especially for young offenders and intended to rehabilitate them for a useful life upon release. Officially, the essence of the system is that the young person under training is to be regarded as “a living organism . . . with a life and character of his own. The task is not to break or knead him into shape, but to stimulate some power within to regulate conduct aright. . . . It follows, therefore, that the men and women engaged in his training have first to know him, outside and inside, learning a little more each day about him.”

Ironically, Smith’s most tenable complaint against the governor of his Borstal might have been based upon the above: “I’m not a race horse at all . . . . I’m a human being and I’ve got thoughts and secrets and bloody life inside me that he doesn’t know is there . . . .” (p. 13). As in most human endeavors, practice falls short of theory in the Borstals, and it is Sillitoe’s purpose to explore in this story the nature of the failure. The analysis is not objective. Smith does not conceive that he is in any way in error; he tells his story, not the governor’s. He does, however, carefully point out the failure of this particular attempt at rehabilitation. The officials depicted in the story perform compe-

tently the duty of providing for the physical necessities of their charges, but their actions clearly indicate that they have little interest in them as human beings. The governor in charge of Essex is most concerned with winning the field competition between the Borstals of all of England in the annual cross-country running match. His primary purpose seems to be to further his own professional prestige by using Smith’s unusual abilities as a long-distance runner.8 From Smith’s point of view, such an act—using another man’s talents—is more insidiously criminal than his own, stealing a man’s wealth. Smith does not pretend that stealing is not theft, but the governor pretends that his actions are motivated by a desire to improve his prisoners: “We want hard honest work and we want good athletics. . . . And if you give us both these things you can be sure we’ll do right by you and send you back into the world an honest man” (p. 10). That is to say, the governor will teach him the art of appearing to be honest.

It is this particular type of dishonesty, of pretending to feel what one does not, which Smith succeeds in avoiding, and which his moral exemplars willingly perform. What Smith recognizes is that “honesty” is not an absolute term: “another thing people like the governor will never understand is that I am honest, that I’ve never been anything else but honest, and that I’ll always be honest. Sounds funny. But it’s true because I know what honest means according to me and he only knows what it means according to him” (p. 15). The moral inversion in this story is not the simple and obvious one commonly found in proletarian social thesis fiction, in which the “haves” are flagrantly, but legally, dishonest, and those convicted of crimes are either innocent or perform their acts out of necessity for physical survival. Smith is quite guilty of breaking the laws of his society, but he does not break the laws which he feels comprise a man’s humanity. In consequence, the matter of “existing” or “not existing” in this story operates on a moral rather than a physical plane. As G. S. Fraser has observed, Sillitoe emphasizes the governor’s duplicity by observing that Stacey, the best runner in the Borstal before Smith’s arrival, will believe in the governor’s conception of honesty only “so long as the Governor stands by his rules and principles in even the most subtle aspects. Should the Governor deviate from them in order to give preference to Smith as the better runner when all the time Stacey has believed that it is the spirit that counts with him and not distance/speed, then there is no further guarantee for Stacey’s good behaviour.” The governor, of course, does precisely that: he abandons the rules and gives preference to performance over spirit.

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8 In an explanatory note in the film script [“Final Screenplay: ‘The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner,’” unpublished script, Woodfall Film Productions, Ltd. (London, 1961), p. 25], Sillitoe emphasizes the governor’s duplicity by observing that Stacey, the best runner in the Borstal before Smith’s arrival, will believe in the governor’s conception of honesty only “so long as the Governor stands by his rules and principles in even the most subtle aspects. Should the Governor deviate from them in order to give preference to Smith as the better runner when all the time Stacey has believed that it is the spirit that counts with him and not distance/speed, then there is no further guarantee for Stacey’s good behaviour.” The governor, of course, does precisely that: he abandons the rules and gives preference to performance over spirit.

ALAN SILLITOE | 257
Aeschylean animal and world."

The theme of the tale is the ancient Aeschylean one—an indomitable will pitted against an overwhelming force, but Sillitoe has rendered it in an antisocial, nihilistic context. From Smith’s point of view, the basis of the moral and social order, as he has experienced it, is “cunning”: it is “what counts in this life” (p. 7). What he means by “cunning,” as we learn, is not simply a talent for animal survival in terms of a jungle existence, for both the stakes and the means of survival here are more subtle than that. What is at issue is not food but human will.

The matter of choice, or will, or spirited selfhood, is associated in Smith’s mind with life itself. His own position is clear; it is the rest of mankind, even the “outlaws,” that he is not sure about. Consequently, he feels alternately like “the first and the last man on the world.” As he explains,

I feel like the last man in the world because I think that all those three hundred sleepers behind me are dead. They sleep so well I think that every scruffy head’s kicked the bucket in the night and I’m the only one left, and when I look out into the bushes and frozen ponds I have the feeling that it’s going to get colder and colder until everything I can see, meaning my red arms as well, is going to be covered with a thousand miles of ice, all the earth, right up to the sky and over every bit of land and sea. (p. 9)

Dante used ice in the ninth circle of the Inferno as a punishment for the violators of various political and familial obligations; Sillitoe uses it to represent a traitorous act of a more insidious kind. The icy scene which Smith envisions represents appropriately a massive death of the human spirit, the failure of all mankind. Smith defines the second part of the analogy—his feeling of being the “first man on earth”—in terms of his own circumstances, without relation to others: “I feel like the first man because I’ve hardly got a stitch on and am sent against the frozen fields in a shimmy and shorts—even the first poor bastard dropped on to the earth in midwinter knew how to make a suit of leaves, or how to skin a pterodactyl for a topcoat” (p. 8). But “first” does not define well in terms of itself, for it necessarily implies extension in time and number, so Smith adds to his explanation. The psychological state of feeling that one is the “first” man on earth differs from its contrary in that when one is first, “Everything’s dead, but good, because it’s dead before coming alive, not dead after being alive” (p. 11). What Smith hopes will come alive are the “three hundred sleepers,” but even if they do not, his own task lies before him,
unaltered. For Smith, the difference between being the “first and the last man on the world” is hypothetical, not actual. Smith’s consciousness and his sense of dignity remain absolute, even though the scale of the rest of humanity may fluctuate and vary.

The point is underscored during a practice session sometime before the actual running of the race. Far out in the countryside, where Smith has reached the halfway point of the course near a “sunken lane,” the setting becomes primal, suggesting a time antedating man and his particular moral and social consciousness. Sillitoe has his long-distance runner associate himself with a creature from the Mesozoic era, an extinct flying reptile which appeared, flourished, and expired more than one hundred million years before the appearance of man. Each time Smith makes his rounds, he follows an impulse to hurl himself down a “steep bush-covered bank and into the sunken lane, when there’s still not a soul in sight . . .” (p. 19). While he recognizes the danger, the impulse to perform the act is irresistible: “I can’t not do it because it’s the only risk I take and the only excitement I ever get, flying flat-out like one of them pterodactyls from the ‘Lost World’ I once heard on the wireless, crazy like a cut-balled cockerel, scratching myself to bits and almost letting myself go but not quite” (p. 19). The episode suggests a type of primal and instinctual will to survive in man that transcends all his notions of morality and social law. It seems to be more fundamental and innate than anything produced by cognition; as Smith describes the particular pleasure which he finds in the experience, “It’s the most wonderful minute because there’s not one thought or word or picture of anything in my head while I’m going down. I’m empty, as empty as I was before I was born, and I don’t let myself go, I suppose, because whatever it is that’s farthest down inside don’t want me to die or hurt myself bad” (p. 19). The same quality that’s “farthest down inside” forbids him to give over his will to his captors, for that would involve a death of spirit. It is for this reason that Smith, in the most intense scene in the story, intentionally loses the race, stopping short of the finish line, where the governor and other officials can see him marking time as the other runners at last catch up and pass him. What Smith recognizes is that the governor’s race is not his race, nor is any contest arranged by captors for their captives. What Smith does not recognize is that the race which needs to be won by both sides is one of comprehension.

The author inevitably acts as judge, whether overtly (as Henry Fielding preferred to do), or reticently yet implicitly, as Sillitoe does here. Smith has received one trial, conducted by society’s judge and
jury; he receives another one conducted by the author. The difference between the inquiries is that society asks what the accused will say publicly that may bear relevance to legality and morality; Sillitoe asks what Smith thinks when he is alone. In so doing, the author conveys to us with superb artistry the psychology of a recalcitrant mind. The point of the story, however, as a solution to society’s problems, is simply nihilistic.

The Borstal system described in the story does not succeed because at its base is a failure of understanding. The in-laws do not understand the out-laws, and despite Smith’s claim that he can “see further into” the governor than the governor can see into him, Smith sees with a jaundiced eye. The central problem is that both Smith and the governor make the mistake of assuming that a classification of humanity according to the terms “in-law” and “out-law” is in any sense meaningful. What the story suggests, although perhaps not intentionally, is that such simplistic categorizing is at the base of much human agony. The art of fiction is one means of promoting understanding between individuals, and this story can convey to the governor and to us, if we are willing to listen, what the “out-law” point of view is. Communication, however, is complicated by the fact that the reader is “they,” a person who must have the nature of prison life explained to him, and who, moreover, is morally and socially opposed to the narrator: “And there are thousands of them, all over the pox eaten country, in shops, offices, railway stations, cars, houses, pubs—In-law blokes like you and them, all on the watch for Out-law blokes like me and us—and waiting to ’phone for the coppers as soon as we make a false move” (p. 10). The narrator assumes that the audience is composed of those who have not, heretofore, comprehended the motivations behind his actions. He believes, moreover, that the failure of communication is irremediable: “they don’t see eye to eye with us and we don’t see eye to eye with them, so that’s how it stands and how it will always stand” (p. 8).

We are thus led into a philosophical and sociological cul-de-sac. We may feel—by way of justifying the author’s apparent sympathy with Smith’s position, and the impasse to which it leads—that if there is among criminals an incorrigible attitude, then it is Sillitoe’s obligation, as a writer of realistic fiction, to convey the attitude to us accurately in his portrayal of such men. It is what we as readers ought to hear, even if we would prefer to be told that reform schools make people first contrite and then obedient and lawful. On the other hand, we may feel, as Professor Hurrell does, that no justification is neces-
sary, in that the reader is at last "led into seeing that all of Smith's beliefs have been false. . . ." Early in Sillitoe's career (when in fact Professor Hurrell's article was written), such an interpretation would have been vulnerable but defensible, since the first-person narrative of the story leaves the author's position technically indeterminate. At the present time, it would be a mistake to suggest that Sillitoe intended Smith's views to be read as "false." In his essay on the circumstances of the writer in the modern age, for example, Sillitoe is as pessimistic as Smith regarding the possibility of communication between opposing factions, in this instance between what he calls writers of the Left (such as himself) and writers of the Right (who are the "mouthpiece of government and ideology," including party Soviet writers):

For the purpose of this argument I will call the writer who is content with the society he lives in a man of the Right, and a writer who is by his nature against society I will call a man of the Left. . . . In writing a man of the Left is not a member of the opposition, which implies similarity in basic ideas and the possibility of becoming allies, but a revolutionary, for the Left and Right of literature that I have in mind can never meet for compromise.9

Such a statement leaves little doubt concerning the author's position. Where this thesis would ultimately lead Sillitoe was not readily apparent when The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner appeared in 1959. Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1958) had seemed on the whole a type of proletarian Lucky Jim (1954), despite the occasional anarchistic grumblings of its hero, Arthur Seaton. Sillitoe, accordingly, was grouped by reviewers and critics with other novelists who were at the time being labeled "angry young men": Kingsley Amis, John Wain, and John Braine. Sillitoe later facetiously acknowledged the association himself by referring to an imaginary novel, "Hurry on Jim" by Kingsley Wain that started by someone with eighteen pints and fifteen whiskies in him falling downstairs on his way to the top" (The Death of William Posters, p. 166), which is, in effect, a description of Arthur Seaton's entrance in Saturday Night and Sunday Morning. Grouping Sillitoe with those novelists is less appropriate now than in 1958 or 1959, and it was not wholly appropriate then. John Wain's Charles Lumley of Hurry on Down (1953) is indeed angry, but his anger is not of the same quality or intensity as that of

Sillitoe's heroes. Lumley most resents the boorish nature of "the respectable," those who "wear a uniform" of purposefulness. His aim is not to reform but to escape the values and the class system of society by remaining aloof, and he at last attains what he calls "neutrality," working as an anonymous gag writer for a radio comedian. The job gives him the economic security which he desires, but makes him, ironically, a part of the educated middle class which he had attempted to escape, but to which he belongs. Jim Dixon of Amis' Lucky Jim is, of course, less an angry young man than a humorous, bumbling, befuddled young man. His rebellion against the pretensions of academia, like Charles Lumley's rebellion against middle-class values, ends in an adjustment to society, and a partial acceptance of its values. Dixon wins a beautiful girl and a better job, a fanciful conclusion appropriate to the humorous tone of the novel. Sillitoe's works have more often been compared with those of John Braine, partly because their heroes seem to have a kindred anger, and partly because both authors are from working-class backgrounds. Braine's Room at the Top (1957)—which Sillitoe may have reference to in his description of a character "falling downstairs on his way to the top"—demonstrates the important differences between them, however. While Sillitoe's heroes champion the poor and despise the rich, Braine's Joe Lampton desires most of all to imitate the rich, culturally and materialistically, and he refers with disdain to the laboring class, into which he had been born, as "the overalled and sweaty,"10 an attitude clearly alien to Sillitoe and to his heroes.

A work from the same general period, more closely in accord with Sillitoe's spirit, was John Osborne's drama Look Back in Anger, which seemed to Sillitoe, when he first saw it performed in the spring of 1957, to be the harbinger of a new era in British letters: "Jimmy Porter's shrapnel bombs were bursting with marvellous accuracy above the neatly stacked sandbags of Coward and Rattigan. I knew that the front was wide open, and to me it was a more impressive and spectacular breakthrough than Lucky Jim had been on the fiction sector a few years earlier."11 Sillitoe's enthusiasm is clearly genuine, but the bellicose images he selects to convey his praise suggest why, in the final analysis, Look Back in Anger would not seem to him the most significant dramatic achievement of the day. Jimmy Porter's anger expresses a sense of urgency, of justifiable rancor, and of needed

11 Alan Sillitoe, "Novel or Play?," Twentieth Century, CLXIX (February 1961), 209.
redress; but one realizes, finally, that his anger is essentially egocentric and directionless, as, for example, when Porter reflects, "I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and the forties, when we were still kids."12 For Sillitoe, the social causes worth fighting and dying for are legion, despite the general increase in Britain's prosperity during the past twenty years. It is not surprising, in retrospect, that the work which Sillitoe found to be closest to his own spirit was written not by Kingsley Amis, John Wain, John Braine, or even John Osborne, but by John Arden, whose Sergeant Musgrave's Dance13 espoused the same violent social rebellion which has gradually come to dominate Sillitoe's poetry and prose. Arden's play, in its details of costume and setting, suggests England of the period 1860–1890, although the exact time of the setting is not given. The message of the play, however (as its subtitle—"An Unhistorical Parable"—suggests), is intended to bear relevance as much to the present as to the past. Its theme, in part, is that violent overthrow of the government, the rich, the clergy—the Establishment in general—is both justified and desirable, as a means of correcting current social evils and redressing the wrongs of the past. Sillitoe clarifies his attitude toward the place of revolution in social reform in his sympathetic reaction to Arden's rebellious hero, Black Jack Musgrave: "The rage of Black was a step beyond the anger of Jimmy Porter—both were melancholics, and Arden took Black Jack as far as one can go in this direction—to extreme yet understandable rebellion so that where Jimmy ended married, Musgrave hanged."14

This early appreciative response to "extreme yet understandable rebellion" suggests that Sillitoe was never, really, simply an "angry young man." His hostility was not a transitory emotion of youth, but a permanent rancor well-grounded in class hatred. "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner" contains the seeds of the revolutionary philosophy which would eventually attain full growth in his works. At the base of Sillitoe's moral perspective is the conviction expressed by Smith that those who are in accord with the present organization of society "don't see eye to eye with us and we don't see eye to eye with them, so that's how it stands and how it will always stand." The position permits two possible conclusions: an impasse, as I have suggested,

or revolution, which is the path that Sillitoe has chosen. Smith makes the point with brutal clarity: “in the end the governor is going to be doomed while blokes like me will take the pickings of his roasted bones and dance like maniacs around his Borstal’s ruins” (p. 46). At the time the story was published, it seemed to some readers that Smith’s views were clearly intended to be read as “false”; to others, such as Professor Denny, that Smith evidences an “almost Christ-like passion, for a tragically deluded society” (certainly a most ingenious reading); and to others—perhaps the majority of readers—that Sillitoe had produced a remarkable and sympathetic portrait of a recalcitrant, revolutionary young man whose extreme views were not necessarily those of the author. His subsequent publications (and his first novel as well) suggest that Smith’s views and Sillitoe’s are virtually the same.

His long poem, “The Rats,” is frankly revolutionary. Its raison d’être is instructional, and its intended audience the poor of England (Ogads): “The rats are government, and Ogads slaves / Who know not where they go nor what road paves / The way to Revolution” (p. 20). The poet exhorts the poor,

Tutor yourselves in map-reading and crime  
And devil’s courage for the sad bleak time  
When you alone will face the empty plain  
Armed only with a visionary brain. . . .  
(p. 42)

The heroes of four of his novels share similar sentiments. Arthur Seaton of Saturday Night and Sunday Morning took pleasure in imagining the machine-gunning of “blokes with suits and bowler hats” (p. 221). His older brother, Brian Seaton, of Key to the Door is described accurately by one of the characters in the novel as a “socialist-anarchist” (p. 432). The hero of The Death of William Posters, Frank Dawley, envisions a type of social-theological revolution in which men’s conceptions of the soul and of God are to be displaced by the products of modern technology: “All the space that’s left by kicking out the soul is taken by a railway, a hammer, a whole landscape of industrial and material necessity. . . . The bum-bailiffs march up to the soul and sling God out kicking and screaming. Then the real things of life move in . . .” (p. 260). In his most recent work, A Tree on Fire (a sequel to The Death of William Posters and the second volume of a projected trilogy), Sillitoe—through the novel’s hero—apothesizes revolution. Fighting with the Algerian F. L. N.
against the French, Frank Dawley conceives his mission to be essentially religious in nature:

Evil is no mystifying concept. It is the inability to change for the good. It is being slothful among bad conditions of life, and preaching that the acceptance of present suffering makes the adventure of change unnecessary, thereby implying that suffering is sufficient adventure for the soul. One must prove that it is not—by making it possible for the weak to inherit the earth and become strong, and to use their newly won strength in order to help those still weak in the world, which is no less than the fight for eternal justice, a uniting of mankind to give everyone equality and food and dignity that will enable them to become individuals in a universal sense. The tree must purify and burn, shed its leaves in the fires of insurrection. (p. 195)

The idealistic and selfless intentions proffered seem innocuous enough, but they do not extenuate the tone of puritanical fanaticism apparent in the passage.

To summarize, then, the paean to violence conveyed in Sillitoe's most recent work had its genesis in "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner." The earlier work remains a powerful expression of the necessity of human dignity; it is, indeed, an exemplum of the forcefulness with which the human will is capable of sustaining itself. The necessity of human dignity which the story implies, however, has traditionally been counterbalanced within the consciousness of Western civilization by an equally strong sense of the necessity of human order. We are faced, quite simply, with the ancient, paradoxical problem of balancing any individual's conception of human freedom against the inevitable restriction of freedom necessitated by living with others in society. The tale suggests, whether intentionally or not, that the "governors" of the world, who are the instruments of social order, must come to know that order is not in itself an end, that one may establish a well-ordered colony of animals through systems of force and of punishment and reward, with a resultant civilization hardly worthy of the name. Conversely, what the "Smiths" of the world must recognize is that conceptions of human dignity are not the prerogative of any one social class—and that anarchy and social chaos are less likely to lead to freedom than to tyranny.

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