THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE LONG-DISTANCE RUNNER

by N. DENNY

In 1959 there occurred an event without parallel in Britain since the publication of 'Daisy Miller' eighty years before. An important literary work other than a novel, play or book of verse—a 'mere' tale in fact, Alan Sillitoe's 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner'—achieved an overnight success with the literati and the general reading public that one looks back on with a certain amount of astonishment. That one does so is a measure both of the official disrepute the tale or short-story still languishes in today and of current standards of literary taste and judgment. No publisher in his right mind, we are reliably informed, will touch a volume of short stories except (cutting his losses) to placate a restive writer already no stranger to the best-selling novel lists; and I can think of only one other recent work—Joseph Heller's Catch-22—that goes some way to justify the acclaim with which its publication here was met (though I can think of several of at least equal seriousness and importance—Raymond Williams's Border Country, for example—whose appearance barely earned a mention in the weeklies and went unnoticed by the reading public). In any event, on this occasion a tale was published, a work of the imagination realized in a form supposed to be entirely out of fashion and out of favour today, which unambiguously seized the public imagination and in so doing probably did more to rehabilitate an important but misprized literary genre than all the productivity we have seen in it since Lawrence.

I should not want to argue the tale's complete artistic success. It has its obvious flaws, though these do not seem to me to affect the full impact of the tale. The concluding paragraphs are weak, an indulgence where they are not redundant, and embarrassing in the forced, juvenile irony of the final sentence. And the same indulgence—of unexamined personal feelings about British society—sporadically wells up in the writing, threatening to flood the galleries where the real rich imaginative ore is being mined, and sometimes succeeding. The symbolic nature of the characters, too, is, sometimes lost sight of, and long-distance runner and prison governor, say, come to stand, momentarily, not for states of mind or moral vitality, but for all delinquents (for a sentimental 'Us'—workers or slum-dwellers or 'Out-laws' or what you will) and all police and prison officers ('them'—management, bourgeoisie, 'in-laws', etc). There are moments, in short, when Mr Sillitoe's
artistic detachment clearly fails and he misinterprets the imaginative significance of his own creations. His readers, admirers and despisers, frequently make the same mistake.

But if 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner' has its weaknesses, it is still a remarkable achievement, the most notable piece of prose fiction, it strikes me—apart from John Wain's *Nuncle* (another short-story collection, as it happens)—to emerge from the so-called 'angry' movement of the past ten years. Even so, the reasons for its general success are hard to find. Mr Sillitoe had *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* behind him, of course (and one can be excused for doubting whether 'The Long-Distance Runner' would ever have reached the printing-shop without it); the success of the earlier book, too, and of the film that was made from it, assured the short-story collection of something more than perfunctory attention from the reviewers; and we should be remiss, I think, to scout the possibility of a quiet revolution having taken place amongst the reading public, pace the publishers and thanks very largely to Penguin Books and their steady publication of a string of first-class short-story collections. All these may have had something to do with the book's reception, but the most telling reason probably lies in the tale's association in theme and attitude, at least superficially, with the film, that dominant and commercially successful type of entertainment now being produced for an apparently insatiable public.

We have grown familiar with this school of modern writing, the novelists, playwrights and scriptwriters of the new 'realism' groping more or less honestly to catch the tempo of the times and to register the modes of consciousness of a welfare-state generation emergent or emancipated from the Bantustans of pre-'affluence' working-class life. I use the word 'register' deliberately, since on the whole no serious appraisal is offered by these writers of the moral landscape they elect to move in, beyond an implicit approval of its radical individualism and non-conformity, and a tacit acceptance of the whole apparatus of a triumphant commercial culture—the real nature of any tensions generated between the two, or between this commercial culture and official British morality, somehow being overlooked in an untidy clamour of protest at anachronistic bourgeois values. Superficially, Mr Sillitoe obviously associates himself with this school. But it is precisely the degree and the seriousness of his moral engagement, at least at an imaginative level, that distinguishes him so sharply from his fellows. The distinction is manifest in the altogether crisper moral focus of 'The Long-Distance Runner', in its greater clarity and tautness, in its firmer unity, moral, thematic, tonal—a clarity and unity, it seems to me, deriving from two advantages Mr Sillitoe enjoys over his competitors: an essentially superior imaginative intelligence—in spite of the wild working philosophy he appears to abstract from his writing (one of the characteristics he does share with Lawrence)—and his having found in shorter fiction the ideal vehicle for his individual exploration of experience.
THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE LONG-Distance RUNNER

Even at the 'literal' level of the tale—the level on which Mr Richardson chooses to mount his film version of it, and at which most of the other new 'realists' are content to deploy their talents—the play of this moral intelligence is apparent. Indeed, the tale's subordination to a higher imaginative control, and the economy and discipline enforced by the more exacting literary form, supply 'the Long-Distance Runner' with a range and an impact quite unusual in the novels with which it is loosely classified. At this level the central character and narrator ('Smith') is representative of a legion of other boys inexorably nudged in the direction of the juvenile courts by environmental forces over which they have no control, and by unresolved—or unresolvable—stresses produced by some of the more disruptive contradictions in modern life. He is the classic delinquent or problem child of the new age, the expendable jetsam of industrial 'affluence'. All the ingredients are there, sufficient to satisfy the sternest Encounter sociologist: the unfortunate home background (working-class insecurity, slum life, unemployment, periodic want); the unsettling parental factor (ambiguous relationship with the father, parental violence and—in sociologists' terms—neglect, maternal promiscuity, orphanhood); the moral vacuum (born of environmental confusion of priorities—
itself a product of the age—contempt for authority, casual criminality). The drabness, the moral torpor, the uncomprehended restlessness—the brutalized nature of this background—and with it its extraordinary vitality, its cheerful stoicism and warmth, are deftly evoked and completely convincing at every point. Yet it is a brooding background as well, heavy with a sense of hopeless inevitability. The youth lives on the page as both victim and hero.

His heroic nature expresses itself in his collision with 'society', a conflict which provides the basic tension of the tale. It is a genuine collision this, the magnitude and reality of the opposition properly conceded, not the cocked-snook braggadocio of our heroic 'anti-heroes' for a buffoonish papier-maché Establishment. Here, although such representative figures as policeman, Borstal governor and psychiatric social worker are also caricatured to a certain extent, the comedy is soberingly qualified by a genuine menace ('them bastards aren't as daft as they most of the time look'), and the created 'world' of the tale is real at the deepest levels. These figures are the custodians and the inculcators of a sterile moral code that an authoritarian middle-class British society officially decrees all men shall uphold and live by, regardless of its relevance to the facts of life of a depressed and exploited minority on whose very debasement the 'moral' quality of the social structure depends. The issue here is one of integrity. It is not so much the anti-heroic or the delinquent or even the rebel mind being studied, as it is a deep and stubborn honesty being marvellously realized—not always clearly seen or expressing itself in action, perhaps, but grimly true to itself, completely beyond the comprehension of society's agents for the 'correction' of such spirits, and innocently,
frighteningly perceptive of the rottenness and hypocrisy and hatred of life lurking at the heart of conventional morality. The ‘honesty’ of the exemplars and preservers of society’s *principes de convenance*—‘all the cops, governors, posh whores, penpushers, army officers, Members of Parliament’—is delicately presented in all its fraudulence and its irrelevance to the boy’s world, despite the bitter caricature of the presentation; and so is the deep and outraged honesty of the boy himself, Lawrence’s honesty, the bright live honesty of being.

People like the governor will never understand . . . that I *am* honest, that I’ve never been anything else but honest, and that I’ll always be honest.

And this honesty finds its beautiful and heroic expression—its perfect expression in this case—in the boy’s refusal to win the cross-country race, despite the liberation of the spirit, the joy, the pride in his own prowess and achievement—the self-discovery—that running has come to mean for him, and the certainty of its vindictive deprivation now.

The rush and the rhythm of this running, the elemental delight it holds for the runner, the expansion of his horizons that it brings—nothing is more beautifully and surely delineated than all this, and at the same time the brightly burning ‘honesty’ it is image for. But I’m not sure that ambiguity doesn’t blur it at this point. Possibly I am wrong, but it does seem to me that the imaginative drift and dialectic of the tale prepare us for a *discovery* or a quickening of heretofore dormant or deeply buried ‘honesty’ in the boy, in or through his running. In other words, the initial rejection of the governor’s world should be different in kind from the rejection that grows out of the running: straightforward adolescent rebellion and loss of moral bearings should be dislodged by positive moral polarization and fidelity to new-found ‘honesty’. It seems to me Mr Sillitoe, against the current of the imaginative disclosure, insists on an honesty that was always there, a kind of *donnée* in his ‘Us’ representative (as it were by right)—an insistence perhaps occasioned by that external sentimentalization of his outcast, ‘Out-law’ characters he is sometimes guilty of elsewhere in his writing. In any event, the long-distance running is a liberation, compellingly and unambiguously realized, and symbol to the runner himself of a good life (clean, simple, vigorous, joyous) surely wholly alien from that other, masturbatory ‘good life’ proposed by the admass high priests of a frantic hedonism. For the tale itself would seem to dramatize a threat to compromise any essential ‘honesty’ in the boy, to stunt his moral awareness, a threat that comes from the pervasive pressure of a determined commercial culture. Here, before the boy is persuaded to train for the cross-country race, the corruptive power of admass persuasion, its strangling of the imaginative centres and disabling of the individual for anything approaching a real—full and rewarding—‘good life’ are
realized for us with extraordinary economy, power and sureness of touch.

It is the sly, overmastering insinuation of this voice that particularly undermines the position of the Smiths of this world. Drawn by the horses of undirected energies in the normal course of events, they are quartered in moments of stress and decision by the drill-sergeant commands of an irrelevant 'straight-bat' moral code, the facts of their own existence, their own 'natural' moral impulses, and the seductive appeal of a materialistic society consumptive (in every sense) behind the parade-ground facade of British respectability. The boy's particular, pathetic image of 'the nice life', before his running starts (what they intend to do with the proceeds of the burglary) is 'a big beano' in Skegness or Cleethorpes with a couple of amenable tarts, having 'a good time' in the arcades and pierside boarding-houses. (The vision of his elder brothers—and secretly of his preceptors too, so advanced is the schizophrenia of British moral life—would be different only in degree: a 'posh whore' instead of a casual pick-up, a casino instead of the arcades, Miami Beach or San Remo instead of Skeggin—the James Bond fantasy.) The corruption already undergone by the boy is evident in the equivocal nature of his response to the admass projections of the good life.

And the telly made all these things seem twenty times better than we'd ever thought they were. Even adverts at the cinema were cool and tame, because now we were seeing them in private at home. We used to cock our noses up at things in shops that didn't move, but suddenly we saw their real value because they jumped and glittered around the screen and had some pasty-faced tart going head over heels to get her nail-polished grabbers on to them or her lipstick lips all over them, not like the crumby adverts you saw on posters, or in newspapers as dead as doornails.

The seduction of the projection is exposed in the intimacy, meretriciousness and sexual reference of its basic appeal. And the damage already successfully done to the boy's imaginative centres seems to me suggested by the hopelessly misdirected language of judgment Smith employs here (and elsewhere in the tale, until the running commences), and by his morbid attention to the nail-varnished hands and lipsticked mouths of the advertising models: an imaginative orientation towards life that is echoed later, when a characteristic 'mixing' of admass images is also hinted at (of tip-top 'things' to be 'consumed'—Ian Fleming's favourite word), in the blown kiss to the 'everloving babe of a brand-new typewriter' the burglars are forced to leave behind. The damage is further implied by the ambiguous attitude displayed to the (themselves ambiguous) television plays:

The films they showed were good as well... because we couldn't get our eyes unglued from the cops chasing the robbers who had satchel-bags crammed with cash and looked like getting away to spend it—until the last moment. I
always hoped they would end up free to blow the lot, and could never stop wanting to put my hand out, smash into the screen . . . and get the copper in a half-nelson so's he'd stop following the bloke with the money-bags . . . And it was when these cops were chasing the crooks that we played some good tricks with the telly, because when one of them opened his big gob to spout about getting their man I'd turn the sound down and see his mouth move like a goldfish or mackerel or minnow mimicking what they were supposed to be acting.

Anybody who has worked with young people will recognise not only the youthful irreverence and boisterousness reflected here, the outward contempt for the crude absurdity of pop culture's interpretations of reality, but also the painful ambiguity of attitude lying behind it. Although he says at one stage that he knows a ‘big boot is always likely to smash any nice picnic (he) might be barmy and dishonest enough’ to make for himself—just as he and his mates had wantonly smashed up the picnic of the kids with the ‘high-school voices’—Smith seems to me to be sufficiently affected by pop culture's appeal at this juncture to simultaneously regard life, if one is ‘cunning' enough, as a gay ‘Teddy-Boys' Picnic'.

If I’m wrong about Mr Sillitoe's loss of focus here, about his refusal to accept the implications of his imaginative imitation, I am not wrong about the general success of the tale at even this, the 'literal' level of its deployment. 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner' is a stark and deeply moving realization of a handicapped boy's mind and 'world', of his struggle to find and assert himself, of his obscurely perceived honesty, of his courage and the humanity he attains to in his final loneliness.

But it is in the extra, metaphorical dimension that the real urgency and power of the tale most unambiguously manifest themselves. Fusing the two 'levels' of the tale, besides the figure of the long-distance runner himself ('Smith' he is called, once, by the governor, his anonymity emphasizing his representative function in the tale), are two symbols, Borstal and long-distance running, which are imaginatively opposed in a manner that seems to me wholly successful, growing as they do, beautifully and inevitably, out of the rich loam of the tale's literal dimension. Though only cursorily referred to explicitly, 'Borstal' pervades the tale like some stifling, oppressive presence, pregnant with menace. Perhaps much of this stems from the inevitable associations and emotional colouring of the word—it is odd how even the name (more appropriate to some rough repulsive beast from Germanic epic) seems to possess an ugliness, and suggest a climate fetid, brutal and debased, probably quite at variance with the actual nature of the institution it refers to. In any event, 'Borstal' rolls ominous and grey through the pages of the tale, a murky vapour out of which a distinct shape is made imperceptibly to materialize, so that Borstal comes to stand, compellingly, for the known modern world, for Britain itself.
It’s supposed to be a good Borstal . . . They called it a progressive and modern place, though they can’t kid me . . . Borstal’s Borstal no matter what they do.

For Borstal merely reflects in extreme form the regimen fondly devised by British society for the achievement of its official ideal, the ‘gentleman’, or, in more prosaic terms where the general populace is concerned, the ‘good citizen’, who can be relied upon to do nothing to upset the status quo. It stands, only slightly exaggerated, for all those agencies—the church, the law, the schools, the successfully castrated ‘community’—delegated by an authoritarian society, or assuming the responsibility themselves, to force a dead, travestied way of life on the weak and underprivileged. The hypocrisy of the attempt and the fantasy of the way of life itself are betrayed in every utterance and every action of its dedicated curators. ‘If you play ball with us’, says the governor, his dishonesty and bogus matelyness creaking through the incongruous American idiom:

‘. . . we’ll play ball with you.’ (Honest to God, you’d have thought it was going to be one long tennis match.) ‘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.’

‘Hard work, athletics, chastity’ (its role is stressed later): the military-public school Rule is familiar, keystone of the British myth of ‘character’ or ‘the honest man’. Life is ‘one long tennis match’: train for it as the nineteenth-century preceptors taught you how and you’ll never let the side down—maybe you’ll play well enough to get some trophy from the Queen one day. The irony of Borstal’s being the purest form of public school is grimly underlined.

But Smith is not seduced. His gaze penetrates with disturbing accuracy to the dead heart of society’s ‘honest man’, and he is contemptuous, and reassured of his own essential moral superiority: ‘I’ll win in the end . . . because I’ll have more fun and fire out of my life than he’ll ever get out of his . . . when I look in his army mug (I know) that I’m alive and he’s dead . . . Maybe as soon as you get the whip-hand over somebody you go dead . . . Be honest. It’s like saying: Be dead, like me.’ He is aware of a life within him, pure and vigorous and inviolate, that the governor and his like are incomprehending of and incapable of ever affecting.

They can spy on us all day to see if we’re pulling our puddings and if we’re working good or doing our ‘athletics’ but they can’t take an X-ray of our guts to find out what we’re telling ourselves . . . I’ve got thoughts and secrets and bloody life inside me that he doesn’t know is there.

The word ‘guts’ acquires a symbolic reference as the tale proceeds, similar to Lawrence’s overworked ‘blood’, but generally more effective and relates to the life Smith’s running comes to stand for.

This experience of Smith’s running is beautifully realized at all its
multiple levels of significance. Cross-country running, like climbing and swimming (and at a short remove riding and sailing) is one of the few elementally challenging and satisfying, 'pure' recreational activities left to man, when not disfigured by the competitive element, and it grows in the tale into its second sustaining symbol. First and foremost it is an activity, but an independent activity, generating its own rewards and satisfactions, an activity engaged in for its own sake and not on any basis of rivalry, like another form of tennis match. The runner runs alone, unaided, in an elemental untamed world a-tremble with life, calling on supreme but basic qualities of effort and endurance in order to dominate the terrain, and finding in the effort, the rhythm, the obstacles overcome, the solitude, a communion with the whole uncorrupted living world—with life—and a joy and a liberation of the spirit not easily found in any other of modern man’s myriad pursuits. I suppose the most memorable and deeply touching thing about the whole tale is its wonderful realization of the haunting beauty and loneliness of Smith’s private, runner’s world. The metaphorical extensions of this world are obvious enough: it has a poetic reverberation throughout the tale, signifying the only really ‘honest’ life available to us.

I know what the loneliness of the long-distance runner running across country feels like, realizing that as far as I was concerned this feeling was the only honesty and realness there was in the world and I knowing it would be no different ever, no matter what I felt at odd times, and no matter what anybody else tried to tell me . . . It was hard to understand, and all I knew was that you had to run, run, run, without knowing why you were running, but on you went through fields you didn’t understand and into woods that made you afraid, over hills without knowing you’d been up and down, and shooting across streams that would have cut the heart out of you had you fallen down.

We can go dead in the swivel-chairs of the emasculated ‘gentlemen’; we can freewheel down the lazy metalled circuit the admass engineers have laid for us; or we can run direct, as the crow flies, over the hard terrain of real life, being truly honest and electing to live by engaging with an intractable, elemental moral world and seeking by grit and courage and endurance to dominate it, and achieve in the process a fulfilment and a liberation, and in the end attain to an undistracted and perhaps tragic awareness of reality, which are the only credentials for being fully human and alive. For there are landscapes of experience, the ‘summer afternoons’ of our running that may mature out of the ecstatic ‘frosty mornings’ (the seasonal imagery beautifully collaborate with the ‘running’ image), to which the cliché, the conditioned reflex and the stock response provide no entrée; where we recognize, at the very moment of our domination of these landscapes, that our condition is a finite and irrevocably lonely one. ‘I feel like the first and last man of the world, both at once.’ The
condition may be equivocal, containing both the joy and challenge of undaunted independence and the grief and loneliness of separation, but it is a condition—the artist's one, essentially—possessing satisfactions and vital relations with truth and with reality that no substitute can offer.

A voice is going like a wireless in my mind saying that when you've had enough of feeling good like the first man on earth of a frosty morning, and you've known how it is to be taken bad like the last man on earth on a summer's afternoon, then you get at last to being like the only man on earth and don't give a bogger about either good or bad.

The close relation, or the identification, of this experience with the artist's is dramatized in the heightened sensitivity and clarity of thought it encourages, and in the almost dreamlike quality these processes possess, where openness of mind is so complete that thoughts and images come unbidden into the mind. 'On these long-distance runs I'm liable to have anything crop up and pester at my tripe and innards (so that) I'm not so sure I like to think and that it's such a good thing after all . . . magic-lantern slides (slide) into my head that never stood a chance before (but) only if I take whatever comes like this in my runner's stride can I keep on keeping on . . . and . . . win, in the crunch-slap end.' The most notable thing about Smith's thinking during his running is its complete independence, its distance from cliche and from processed thought: the perception that maybe 'you go dead' as soon as 'you get the whip-hand over somebody' needed 'a few hundred miles of long distance running' for Smith to arrive at. His thinking is discovery, the formulation of conclusions out of the felt pondering of his own experience.

And this long-distance running lark is the best of all, because it makes me think so good that I learn things even better than when I'm on my bed at night . . . So as soon as I tell myself I'm the first man ever to be dropped into the world . . . as soon as I take that first flying leap out into the frosty grass of an early morning when even birds haven't the heart to whistle, I get to thinking . . . I go my rounds in a dream . . . It's a treat being a long-distance runner, out in the world by yourself with not a soul to make you bad-tempered or to tell you what to do, or that there's a shop to break and enter a bit back from the next street. Sometimes I think that I've never been so free as during that couple of hours . . . Everything's dead, but good, because it's dead before coming alive, not dead after being alive.

The running can never be competitive, however, and retain its 'honest' character. This is one of Smith's most important perceptions, itself made possible by the heightened awareness his 'running' promotes. Even a pure and independent activity such as this,
society will seek to corrupt or to hobble and turn into something tamed and manageable. And this Smith cannot bring himself to permit.

The ocean swell that has moved so effortlessly and irresistibly through the tale—the controlled colloquial diction so perfect a medium for it—embodies in the prose the very nature of the experience treated, gathers itself into a comber now as it rolls towards its climax. The summer of the last man in the world—the blue skies full of sunshine, the green grass and honeysuckle—has flowered from the winter of the first—the frozen ponds and fields, the ‘phlegmy sunlight’ and the bare, ‘frosty-dew twigs of beech and sycamore’. The concluding pages, grown so organically out of their predecessors, are the most moving and compelling in the tale. The mounting tension, tempo and excitement of the race’s final furlongs, when the ‘honesty’ of Smith’s running must be tested, are realized in the texture, pace and rhythm of the writing, and both of them sustain and carry forward the mounting emotional crisis in the runner himself. At the climax, when the awareness ‘running’ brings reaches its point of most dazzling illumination and Smith makes his heroic decision, the ‘blocked up Boulder dam’ of his heart finally bursts. He is crying as he slows, crying for he knows not what—lost innocence, his fated parents, the squalid death of his father, his father’s courage, the sickness of society, the ‘murderous’ rage of ‘Them’ at his chosen outlawry, the loneliness of the long-distance runner . . . In any event ‘the Boulder dam’ breaks and Smith is overcome by a grief that seems to me not only to relate to perceptions of the ultimate loneliness of our condition, but also to act, poetically, as an image of regeneration: the world that was ‘dead before coming alive’ has come alive, the corn is high in the fields, the birds that hadn’t ‘the heart to whistle’ have ‘come back to whistling’ now: Smith has escaped from admass and from ‘Borstal’ and attained to summer ‘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 Christ-like passion, for a tragically deluded society suicidally hostile to life (‘I have the feeling that it’s going to get colder and colder until everything I see . . . is going to be covered with a thousand miles of ice, right up to the sky . . .’) and in its schizophrenia sentencing not only the recalcitrant to ‘correction’ by different means, but also vast sweeps of its own members to be drawn and quartered by those same centrifugal forces that, more sensationally only, cause havoc with the young. If the grief is not for all humanity, it is certainly for all ‘Out-laws’, everywhere, not only in the limited sense of some of Mr Sillitoe’s more faltering moments (slum dwellers and so on) but in the extended sense of all those who are persecuted and abused by an intolerant society, and particularly, I should say, those whose innocence and vitality constitute such a threat to an arid system of conventional values that society must attempt to hamstring or
destroy them. Smith's grief is for the moral death-wish in society, for life hated and spurned and embattled. Borstal will 'get its own back' if it possibly can.

I smell the hot dry day now... passing a mountain-heap of grass emptied from cans hooked to the front of lawn-mowers pushed by my pals; I rip a piece of tree-bark with my fingers and stuff it in my mouth, chewing wood and dust and maybe maggots... swallowing what I can of it... because... I'm not going to smell that grass or taste that dusty bark or trot this lovely path (until I'm freed)...

I could hear the lords and ladies now from the grandstand, and could see them standing up to wave 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.

Because I heard a roar and saw the Gunthorpe gang throwing their coats up in the air and... (the Gunthorpe runner) passed me by and went swinging on towards that rope, all shagged out and rocking from side to side, grunting like a Zulu who didn't know any better, like the ghost of me at ninety when I'm heading for that fat upholstered coffin. I could have cheered him myself: 'Go on, go on, get cracking. Knot yourself up on that piece of tape.'... But he was already there, and so I went on, trot-trotting after him until I got to the rope, and collapsed, with a murderous-sounding roar going up through my ears while I was still on the wrong side of it.

This is the effectual end, the finale, of the tale. The four paragraphs that succeed these may spoil the close, but even with its other imperfections they fail to diminish the full orchestrated effect of the finished tale. Its experience lingers in the imagination as few other recent works of fiction succeed in doing. What we are left with is a shaped, complete 'emotional' condition, a tone, a flavouring of the mind and moral consciousness. For what ultimately distinguishes this tale, and lifts it to the plane of genuine artistic achievement is that indefinable quality that I think Dante had in mind when he spoke, in the Convito, of that fourth 'principle sense' or level of meaning a work of literary art would seem to possess. (In addition to the literal, allegorical and moral dimensions—the last two perhaps better combined under 'metaphorical'—he posits an 'anagogic' dimension: 'The fourth sense is called “anagogical”, or mystical, that is beyond sense'.) Out of the literal and metaphorical dimensions of 'The Long-Distance Runner' another seems to grow, and subsume the other two, that some critics might attempt to account for under 'style'. This is that distinctive aura or 'life' or spirit (it is there in Border Country and Catch-22) that we all respond to in the more disturbing and memorable of the literary works we
come across and keep returning to. I can only hint at it obliquely in terms of 'tone', by pointing, once more, to the haunting lonely beauty that lingers round the tale and possesses it like a fragrance, the quality that is annunciated in the very title and is so much a presence of the enchanted wintry world the long-distance runner must forever stride through in our memory—the spirit Mr Richardson so beautifully captures (the tribute must be made) at moments in the film.