



Ilustração do demônio Picollus por Louis Le Breton, gravada por M. Jarrault (*Dictionnaire Infernal*, 1863). Arte de domínio público. Composição visual remixada.

THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER: A MEDITATION ON DESTITUENT POWER

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Abstract

This short essay ponders themes of Giorgio Agamben's corpus through the story of Colin Smith, the protagonist of the short story *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) by Alan Sillitoe and the film of the same name by Tony Richardson. The essay considers how Smith's infamous refusal to cross the finish line is paradigmatic of Agamben's destituent power. The essay, as a sort of love letter to Smith, further engages questions of thought and feeling in the face of the contemporary apparatuses with which, as Agamben phrases it, we are in hand-to-hand combat.

Keywords

Giorgio Agamben, destituent power, Alan Sillitoe.

LA SOLEDAD DEL CORREDOR DE FONDO: UNA MEDITACIÓN SOBRE EL PODER DESTITUYENTE

Resumen

Este breve ensayo reflexiona sobre los temas del corpus de Giorgio Agamben a través de la historia de Colin Smith, protagonista del cuento La soledad del corredor de fondo (1959) de Alan Sillitoe y de la película homónima de Tony Richardson (1962). El ensayo analiza cómo la infame negativa de Smith a cruzar la línea de meta es paradigmática del poder destituyente de Agamben. El ensayo, como una especie de carta de amor a Smith, aborda cuestiones de pensamiento y sentimiento frente a los aparatos contemporáneos con los que, como dice Agamben, estamos en combate cuerpo a cuerpo.

Palabras clave

Giorgio Agamben, poder destituyente, Alan Sillitoe.

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"Just as a mother is seen to begin to live in the fullness of her power only when the circle of her children, inspired by the feeling of her proximity, closes around her, so do ideas come to life only when extremes are assembled around them."¹

1. My body is mine alone and my mind is my body

I am angry and he is angry, so very angry. And so goes the genre. But being claimed by a genre is something that Colin would never stand for. I love Colin as written, and Tom Courtenay as Colin in the film. The image of Colin. I recognize his anger in me, but not his will. I am not so strong. Colin—we know his name only from the film—will not be cowed, neither by defeat nor by appeasement.

It is a story that I come back to. The boy who wins the race by not winning. Alan Sillitoe's text and the film for which he wrote the screenplay. Colin tells us his story. How he robs a bakery with his friend and then is caught and sent to borstal. There, they give him a number and call him 'Smith'. There, he attracts the governor's attention for running fast, a skill that served him well in eluding the authorities but not so well that he eluded their capture. There, Colin is charged with competing in a long-distance race in order to win a cup that would glorify the borstal. And, there, he does win, but, as he says, "honestly." He reaches the finish line first but does not cross it. His defiance thus denies the possibility of an absolute victory to anyone. Every time I read the words or see him standing before the raving and bewildered crowd, my heart surges at the face of the truth that his gesture reveals.

Colin's action, or his revocation of action, is exemplary of destituent power. He depotentiates the competition by confounding the order upon which a result relies, thus nullifying it. The possibility of quantifying the value of him, of the other boys, and in relation to one another, is gone. He renders inoperative the power that the governor is exerting over him, to follow his rules, to recognize his authority. There can be no doubt that Colin has won the race, and yet the governor is unable to exercise his authority to declare this to be so. Because his authority to do so is only ever a mirage anyway. This is what Colin means when he speaks of honesty.

Colin is not a revolutionary. His honest victory does not institute a new order. The rules of the race will remain. And he would rather remain as he is than take the whip-hand himself. He tells us, "Maybe as soon as you get the whip-hand over somebody you do go dead...it's true, now I think of it again, and has always been true, and always will be true, and I'm surer of it every time I see the governor open that door and say Goodmorning lads."² Colin is just as certain that he will be punished severely for his honest victory, that the governor must overpower him with more force to counter the injury that his gesture has inflicted. And this, too, is honesty. The revelation that the governor's power is only ever maintained through the exercise of force. The softness of his moral instruction conceals a knife. Borstal, clink, rope; reform, imprisonment, execution.

¹ Benjamin, *The Origin of German tragic drama*, p. 35

² Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, pp. 8-9.

They allow him out on his own at daybreak every morning, trusting him to train unsupervised, unshackled. When he runs, Colin is nothing but alive, sensing and thinking. The countryside is quiet and frozen, dormant. He feels like the first man on Earth and the last man on Earth both at once. As the first man, he emerges from the sleeping barracks and into the frosty twilight, when even the birds have not yet begun to sing. "Everything's dead, but good, because it's dead before coming alive, not dead after being alive."³ To be dead before coming alive. What is the nature of this potentiality? The brittle branches, the roots concealed in the cold ground. This life conserves its energy in advance of its fulfilment, only to die and be born again as the seasons pass.

But what does it mean to be *with* this death, as Colin is, Colin who is alive? Are we to think of Colin as harbouring a dormant potential? To emerge from borstal having learned a lesson, possessing a newfound desire to contribute as a productive member of society, to have a family, to become a brilliant writer? No, Colin insists otherwise. The happy ending that results from his disenchantment of the powers that oppress him is neither a telos nor a resolution. His vengeful desire to feast on the bones of the governor as the borstal burns shall never be realized; he admits to us that "this story's like the race and once again I won't bring off a winner..."⁴ In the end, it is the exposure, if only a glimpse, of the anarchy of power.

The death before being alive is not the anticipation of life but the infancy that we cannot transcend, the emptiness: "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 me don't want me to die..."⁵ The death after being alive is what is disconcerting to Colin, death not as the cessation of physical life but the death one experiences while remaining alive. The three hundred boys with whom Colin shares his life in the borstal. He fears they are asleep and will never wake up. They are dead just as the governor is dead, captured in the same machine, the articulation of life in the sovereign ban. Colin wants to live.

The governor regards him as a race horse. Colin tells us this in the very first pages of his story and he reminds us of this many times: "They give us a bit of blue ribbon and a cup for a prize after we've shagged ourselves out running or jumping, like race horses, only we don't get so well looked-after as race horses, that's the only thing."⁶ The governor thus privileges Colin's body while nonetheless restricting it, a restriction that extends beyond the confinement of the borstal. His body is always subject to the violence of the police. Expendable. Even the governor's attempt to entice Colin with the prospect of representing his country at the Olympic Games is a ruse for the expropriation of his body, old age at thirty-two. Colin delights in turning the governor's claim upon his body against him. Let him stake all of his great wealth on the sure thing of Colin's victory, his obeisance. We know how this will end. Colin tells us that he will instead live to ninety.

"I'm not a race horse at all," Colin insists. "I'm a human being and I've got thoughts and secrets and bloody life inside me that he doesn't know is there, and he'll never know what is there because he's stupid."⁷ The governor will never know and can never know because he must persist in believing in his own power. The authority he was given by some other governor, who was given his authority by some other governor, who was given his

³ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 11.

⁴ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 46.

⁵ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 19.

⁶ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 14.

⁷ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 13.

authority by some other governor, and so forth. Colin is not the governor's race horse, but he is an animal all the same, an animal freed of the lure of the toy rabbit dangled in front of him, freed of the brutality of the collier's cosh behind him.⁸ His body in space; it is in the running that the narrative takes place. And Colin's prose is filled with the feeling of his body, his feeling of running.

Colin's life and his body are his own. In winning the race by not winning, he disarticulates the link between *zoē* and *bios*. Running. "Having the time of his life." Not just the first and last, but the only man on Earth, caring neither for good nor for bad.⁹ When Colin runs, he is no more the governor's race horse than he is a ward of the state. He is alone and unrestrained and yet not so naïve to think that his material circumstances are any different running through the wood than they are penned up with the other boys; the borstal, the factory, the prison, the army. There is no novelty in suggesting that one's thoughts are their own, and yet this is a truth that is easily forgotten. "They can't make an X-Ray of our guts to find out what we're telling ourselves."¹⁰ The freedom that Colin experiences as he runs is the experience of contemplation. He is a form-of-life, free to think, and this they can neither foreclose nor abide.

2. We are together, but I am not one of you

Colin's mother is exhausted. You can see it as she fights herself to get food on the plates of all of those children, Colin's younger siblings, who are all clamoring for her attention. The noise is unrelenting. And her husband is dying in the next room. Colin, who held his father back when he tried to beat her during their rows, sees it all. Colin's father was a union man and gave his life to his factory and comrades. For this, the factory has awarded him £500, paid out upon his death. The family spend the money on new clothes and a television. Colin burns the note that his mother gives him; it means nothing to him. "No, thanks," Colin says when the factory manager offers him a job.

Colin does not want his father's life and he does not want another father, in spite of the men who try to assume this role. His mother's fancy-man, the analyst resident at the borstal, the governor. He resists their advances. Their filial gestures are not reciprocated. The reconciliation they expect, feel they are owed, does not materialize. Colin does not break from one familial order to be reconstituted within another, whether it be the brotherhood of the union or the brotherhood of the army. Colin will not play husband either. One night, Audrey, his girlfriend, asks if he will get a job as they stand in front of an illuminated shop selling furniture.¹¹ They are in love. But the bourgeois domesticity that she dreams of is just an artifice. The transparency of the glass, the dream feels within touch, as if they are already inside of it. But this is an illusion, a product in the shop window, and they are on the outside, in the shadows. Simply playing at being adults. "What do you want to do, Col?" Audrey asks again. Not knowing where to start in a world in which the workers have no share in the profits, Colin wants only to live.

⁸ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 43.

⁹ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, pp. 46-7.

¹⁰ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 10.

¹¹ *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*. Tony Richardson.

When Colin is running, as the first man on Earth, it is a feeling of unity, a form-of-life within life and living life; as the last man, it is a feeling of separation. A form-of-life emerges as the biological and social conditions that determine that life are rendered destitute.¹² When Colin runs, he is empty and his body is released from its instrumentalization in the governor's purview. When Colin runs, and he is the only man, he is freed of his social position: "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 tell you what to do or that there's a shop to break and enter a bit back from the next street."¹³ No authorities, no parents, no friends.

The fraternity that Colin feels with the boys in the borstal is disjointed in the race. They are together but they are not unified, unified but not together. As he stood before the finish line, the boys, Colin tells us, "were shouting themselves blue in the face telling me to get a move on, waving their arms, standing up and making as if to run at that rope themselves because they were only a few yards to the side of it. You cranky lot, I thought, stuck at that winning post...." The boys urge him to win, for their borstal to be the best, and wish to win themselves, to be the ones running, and the best, to break free of the position of the spectator.

But Colin knows better. He knows better what the best is, in winning honestly, and he knows that this is all, anyway, a pantomime. The boys are not spectators watching him, but actors like him: "... I knew they didn't mean what they were shouting, were really on my side and always would be, not able to keep their maulers to themselves, in and out of cop-shops and the clink. And there they were now having the time of their lives letting themselves go in cheering me which made the governor think they were heart and soul on his side when he wouldn't have thought any such thing if he'd had a grain of sense."¹⁴ The boys cheer wildly. Unruly. They cheer Colin for winning and not-losing simultaneously. They are on his side, of his class, but their orientation is indiscernible in this anarchic moment. Their kinship is oblique; misapprehension indistinguishable from mockery.

The borstal boys, like Colin, are Out-laws. There are In-laws and there are Out-laws, he tells us.¹⁵ The In-laws are in good standing with the law, and the Out-laws are those that the law is unfavorable towards, whether they be breaking or obeying the law at any particular moment. Colin and his kind can only ever be Out-laws; this is the common condition with which he feels a solidarity. Not class or blood, but the outlaw relation. His father is an Out-law for refusing palliative care as he died of throat cancer. His mother is an Out-law for her demeanor, her refusal to not be angry, her unrelenting affection for her criminal son, her unflagging fidelity to motherhood whose moral conventions she cannot obey. The In-laws are always at the ready to give away an Out-law, to hang onto every righteous penny, to let the bullets fly. And yet, according to Colin's construction of this social order, despite their opposition, In-law and Out-law cannot but coincide, revealing their identity: "In-law blokes like you and them, all on the watch for Out-law blokes like me and us...." As I read, I wonder if I am 'you' or I am 'us'? I am both with Colin and without Colin. What is inescapable, as Colin's hyphenation discloses, is being in relation to the law.

This point is staged slightly differently in the film. In the film, Colin's borstal competes not against other borstals for the long distance cup as in the short story, but

¹² Agamben, *The Use of bodies*, p. 277.

¹³ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 11.

¹⁴ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 52.

¹⁵ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 10.

against a public school. It is thus class warfare beyond the ruled and the rulers, but among the ruled themselves, the boys. In the changing room before the race, the boys compare their situations. The Ranley School boys speak the Queen's English, and with a distinctly different accent.. They use different words for cigarettes. The borstal boys are allowed to smoke but the Ranley School boys are not. You mean your parents pay the schoolmasters to beat you? "We do have a lot in common, don't we?" Living under the stick. "Yes, we ought to get together and join forces." "Yeah, that's an idea. Bit of a revolution."¹⁶

This race, the pitting of lower-class boys against upper-class boys, is one that the governor is especially invested in. "You are here for us to try and make something of you, to turn you into industrious and honest citizens. Well, as we see it, that shouldn't be too difficult."¹⁷ For Colin to win would affirm the transformative capacity of discipline. Bad boys turned good, good enough to compete with the best boys and good enough to best them, thanks to the governor's good stewardship and moral instruction. But Colin knows that the real enemy is not class but authority. He will not vindicate his class to vindicate the governor's authority. No matter the class of the boys, no matter their privilege, Out-laws or In-laws, they are still captured in their relation to the law, and subject to its violence.

How can one think togetherness without relation? A proximity; a contact? A sort of immanence, to be sure; a spatial rather than temporal configuration. Coextensive but not coincident. There is no before and no after to be thought with the with and without. A prismatic superimposition in which layers combine yet do not touch. Blurred vision. The need to strike an image; thought by this means becomes more convoluted, more abstruse. How often I have pondered this construction, seen only its impossibility yet felt it to be true. To be together without relation. In contact with no relation. The mother. He is not her and he is of her. The children are of her but they are not her. I love Colin, but Colin is, of course, just an idea. How is it to care for an idea but feel indifference towards the person? There is no interest, none to be conflicted, no dividends due and none received.

3. Nothing works anyway

If you play ball with us, we'll play ball with you. Keep quiet, get on with it. Accept as natural everything that is not. This little machine I'm typing on. The hours of the day. The march of progress. There is no alternative. It has already been decided. And yet, there is only ever misunderstanding. Truth and misunderstanding. Colin's strength is in his awareness of this. Not only that the game really is a game and not just a figure of speech, but also that there is only ever a game, only figures of speech. That freedom is to be found within the game, and not without. The key is recognizing the rules, or recognizing the absence of rules.

"If you play ball with us, we'll play ball with you," says the governor.¹⁸ The games that Colin is so expert at playing are not what he had in mind. "What is your name?" "Smith." "Say 'Sir' when you answer the governor." "Sir Smith," Colin says.¹⁹ A matter-of-fact look, specious passivity, inscrutable defiance. An easy gag that never fails to get a laugh. Yet

¹⁶ *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*. Tony Richardson.

¹⁷ *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*. Tony Richardson.

¹⁸ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 9.

¹⁹ *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*. Tony Richardson.

with his playful use of language, Colin is so easily able to defuse the power that he is confronted with. Colin's relationship with authority is thus. He neither opposes authority nor does he fall in line. His transgression is something else. His feigned compliance exposes their impotence without deposing them. The emptiness of a word that signifies not merely an individual but an entire socio-political formation and its vast history.

So goes his discourse with the police interrogating him. Did you rob the bakery? Where is the money? Day after day, he is asked *ad nauseam*. But Colin never tires of this casual conversation. Not exactly repartee, but nonetheless betraying a quick wit. The kind that enrages the parents, the teachers, the police. Tiresome, banal, ordinary talk. Always plausibly genuine, the sarcasm so deeply concealed, so plain to see. It is effortless for Colin. He taunts his inquisitor. Do you mean the bakery where I buy Mam's bread? The few bob that I was saving for a pack of fags? That Mam took to work to buy her tea at the canteen? Colin will not acquiesce, not for the promise of a lighter sentence, for the promise of a lighter beating. He will play, though. Play the game that lies beneath the game that the men in the heavy boots play: "It's all very well, us talking like this, it's like a game almost, but I wish you'd tell me what it's all about, because honest-to-God I've just got out of bed and here you are at the door talking about me having pinched a lot of money, money that I don't know anything about."²⁰ Colin plays as if his words matter, when he and the copper both know that they do not. Colin knows that they cannot force him to say the words that they want him to say or say them when they want him to say them. He knows that his profession of innocence is as genuine as the copper's authority. Colin knows that he is winning and that he will always win.

Colin. Colin sets the terms of the game that he plays. Honest rules. The therapeutic complex that is there to supply the truth to him about himself. Another game of "newfangled theories" that the governor is dubious of. What is wrong with good honest competition? "Do your worst," the governor tells him.²¹ The "four-eyed, white-smocked bloke with the notebook."²² We are both new here at the borstal, the analyst says to Colin, "Perhaps we can help one another." The analyst's methods may be different, but the game is nonetheless the same. It is a game of exchange in which what is due can never be paid out. The stream of questions, pressing for an admission of guilt, pressing for an admission of feeling. What were you thinking when you broke into that bakery? How did you feel? He is asked *ad nauseam*. Free association to turn the screw? The analyst offers to demonstrate: "Say a word to me," he says to Colin. "Tape Recorder," Colin replies, his eyes on the device whirring on the table. Colin knows that this therapeutic exercise is a disciplinary exercise; he knows that the analyst is surveilling him. That he is a subject.

Colin's play with authority is not merely antagonistic but can also bring joy. A Tory Minister blathers on the television, promises of good government, good life, in exchange for votes. Another bad-faith bargain. Colin does not turn the television off; he turns down the sound. The man's face remains on the screen, moving, mute, cartoonishly miming expressions. Big gob opening and closing "like a goldfish or a mackerel or a minnow." Choosing not to shut him down, Colin instead transforms the vacuous moralistic prattle into the puppet show that it really is, "slack chops rolling, opening and bumbling, hands lifting to twitch moustaches...."²³ The paternalistic message a mere image, devoid of

²⁰ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 33.

²¹ *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*. Tony Richardson.

²² Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 26.

²³ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 22.

meaning, but now honestly so. This is a favorite game of Colin's; the whole family raucous and laughing. Even the mother is delighted. In this moment, they are happy, together.

This is but one moment in a life, however. One moment, a cessation of work, the joyful sight of power made inoperative. The love that can be and is not torn apart by circumstances. Circumstances that are not changed. A government that continues to govern. Colin and Audrey are on the beach. He has been there once before. As a young child. Before his mother was tired and his father was broken. When things were good and there was enough money. The way it should always be. Colin ran away that day and was found hours later, still happy. "I was always trying to get lost when I was a kid. I soon found out that you can't get lost though."²⁴

What is victory really? In a game that cannot be won or lost, that cannot end? Colin doubts. Maybe they have been in his head all along; maybe the pain that is inside of him was put there by them from the beginning, as now, in the space of contemplation, the painful images appear in his mind's eye like magic-lantern slides. "I'm not so sure I like to think and that it's such a good thing after all."²⁵ The doubt, he beats it back. He must run, and in his runner's stride he can still feel empty. The magic-lantern dims and he is empty, Colin tells us, empty when he runs. And this is "the most wonderful minute because there's not one thought or word or picture or anything" in his head. Yet, every run is a life, a little life, "a life full of misery and happiness and things happening as you can ever get really around yourself."²⁶ Not fate, but immanence. A contraction of time, a life in all its fullness.

Colin knows that there is no end to the race and that we are all alone, alone together, together alone. Feet on the ground and gangly arms and bags full of nails rattling in our guts. The governor, he is empty too, "hollow like an empty petrol drum." Colin knows that the governor needs him, boys like him, "to give him glory, to put in him blood and throbbing veins he never had..."²⁷ Colin must show us this. He must show us the impotence of the governor's will: "to show how—if I can—his races are never won even though some bloke always unknowingly comes in first."²⁸ This is the final blow, how Colin gets them beat at last, even though the race is unceasing and even though he is never really free. Colin allows us to glimpse, if not seize, the anarchy that "becomes thinkable only at the point where we grasp and render destitute the anarchy of power."²⁹ Colin lives.

²⁴ *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*. Tony Richardson.

²⁵ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 48.

²⁶ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 19.

²⁷ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 49.

²⁸ Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the long distance runner*, p. 46.

²⁹ Agamben, *The Use of bodies*, p. 275.

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