Running Through a Field

Performance and humanness

GREGG WHELAN

1763 and a fishmonger leaves London's Hyde Park, running, with 56 pounds of fish on his head. The challenge is to cover the seven miles to Brentford, in under an hour and claim a considerable wager. He completes the distance in 45 minutes and celebrates, presumably, by taking a lot of fish off his head. Since reading that early race report in Edward S. Sears's Running *Through the Ages* (2009: 53), I have not run a mile without the company of the fishmonger, or his fish.

A Sunday morning in August 2011 and I am standing on the start line of a 50K trail ultra-marathon feeling unsure about what the day may hold. Often run on trails, as opposed to roads, an ultra marathon is a foot race that exceeds the standard marathon distance of 26.2 miles. For some 50K (31 miles) is the shortest ultra distance, for others it's 50 miles. I've quite sensibly decided it's the former. Longer ultras stretch into many hundreds of miles, with 100 miles being a popular distance and 200 and 300 miles common multi-day distances. I've spent many months readying for today, I look around at the other runners and imagine their months of preparation. A woman next to me asks if I've run this course before. I tell her I haven't. I explain that this is my first ultra, that I'm yet to run a standard marathon and that, if truth be told, I'm a little nervous. A man behind us joins the conversation, he clearly deems me underprepared – 'You silly, silly man!' Shorter races, including marathons are generally run for times – that is, the runner has a particular time goal – ultras on the other hand, unless you are an extremely able runner, are generally run for completion, simply to make it to the end, which is my goal today, to finish, as silly as that may seem.

Although I had indeed not run a 26.2-mile marathon ahead of attempting to run five miles further into the land of ultra running, I have been involved in numerous 'marathon' performance events: in the land of Lone Twin it was, for many years, hard to avoid them – dancing for days, walking for weeks, cycling for months, sweating for England. These long 'attempts', as we thought of them, were directed at meeting people: social occasions where the catalyst to get the party started was effort. Roland Barthes sees sport as effort made 'in order to speak the human contract' (2007: 65), which is as close to defining what our ambitions were for those works as we're likely to get. Though we favoured self-propulsion, running hadn't featured highly in our endeavours. So as I stand on the start line with 50 kilometers stretching out before me, it's the broader experience, of dedicating oneself over time to a repeating action, one that tends to undo the doer, that I'm hoping will stand me in good, if not fair, stead.

Knowledge of ultra running, here in the UK or elsewhere in the world, is not widespread. Although a growing number of races have reached 'event' status and are attracting increasingly large audiences, it mostly goes without notice. The mass participation and huge local, national and global audience for races like the London Marathon are a far cry from the ultra scene where a field may contain fifty runners or fewer, and the 'supporters' simply small volunteer crews who help feed, water and pace the runners.[1] This is a far cry

[1] There are exceptions to this, most notably South Africa's 56-mile (90 km) Comrades Marathon, the world's oldest and largest ultra marathon. A national sporting event, it attracts huge television audiences and an international field of many thousands of runners – close to 24,000 completed the seventy-fifth running of the race in 2000.

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from England or the USA in the 1800s and early 1900s when the 'go-as-you-please' endurance races of Pedestrianism were a bigger draw than football and baseball. Thirty-thousand people would fill Madison Square Garden to watch walkers and runners clocking-up 400 miles and beyond.[2] I've spectated at a number of ultra races, and I'm struck every time by how similar they are to small-scale performance events – the kinds of events where only the initiated are in attendance, that is, other performance-makers and perhaps an academic or two. Multi-day races, where runners slog on through successive days and nights, sometimes running a single, mile-long loop many thousands of times over, engage so pragmatically with the politics and aesthetics of 'duration', 'endurance', 'gender', 'subjectivity' etc. that the orthodox strategies of Performance Art are left standing, even for one such as I who might be brave enough to declare himself initiated.

With only each other as witnesses, we make our way along the trail and towards the first of four long hills we'll face today. Because I'm running at a relatively slow pace, and because it's early in the race, my ability to generate and attend to thought is largely intact. I wonder why we're all here, this strange group running through a field in Wiltshire. Ultras attract a famously eclectic field. There are clearly a lot of runners close to and beyond retirement age, perhaps more women than men. As we mature, women can fare better than the average man in becoming strong endurance runners, more physically and mentally able to eat up the miles.[3] Ultras are about the mind, the saying goes, not the legs – that is, it's more a mental feat than a feet feat (or so I'm hoping). What then was in our minds when we signed up for today's race – why are we running? It is a question that 'recreational' runners are often asked, because without the fishmonger's wager to claim, recreational runners are running, it appears, only to experience running – and, to put it simply, running hurts. At the heart of running, at a biomechanical level, there is conflict, something biologist David Carrier calls the energetic paradox of human running (1984), because running, an evolved human ability, costs the human body dearly. In running, there is a clear conflict between the will to continue once started and the feeling produced once underway, which is the feeling that one should stop running and start sitting down. No matter how fit one becomes, whether one is born to Kenya's Rift Valley, the cradle of modern distance running, or to the fells of Yorkshire, run far enough or fast enough and your brain – the 'central governor'[4] – will ask the body to have a long hard think about what it's doing. Once the seductive and arguably addictive endorphins of a 'runner's high' have faded – and the effortless glide that running sometimes becomes for the well-trained has long gone – there is little left other than an internal argument which, Beckett like, circles in short lines around an ending which may or may not begin: 'I can't go on like this, I'll go on' (Beckett 1975: 132).

So why run? To keep fit, has, since 1953, been our more available answer. Epidemiologist Jerry Morris and his team 'invented' exercise in 'Coronary heart-disease and physical activity of work' (Morris et al. 1953). In the wake of massively increased levels of heart-related deaths in post-war Britain, Morris established a link between physical activity and coronary health. Morris compared the occurrences of heart disease in London bus drivers to that of bus conductors. The seemingly short straw of conducting, with a daily, accumulative, ascent and descent of close to a thousand steps between the lower and upper deck, was actually the long straw: the activity helped to prolong life. The sedentary drivers were left holding the shorter straw with worryingly high levels of heart disease. Morris's research established emphatically for the first time that physical activity had a positive effect on life expectancy – keep on the right side of your central governor and your feet will protect your heart. So from 1953 onwards running and other related physical activities were framed in utilitarian terms. And then came the 1970s, and with it the jogging boom, fuelled by bestselling books that offered to instruct and guide us to a healthy,

[2] Ignored by intellectuals of the day, presumably because of its mass popularity and largely forgotten in today's literature on walking, Pedestrianism (a mix of distance walking and running) was once a mainstay of British and American cultural life. Eccentric figures such as Captain Barclay and Ada Anderson entertained the public with great journeys and displays of physical endurance. See Thor Gotaas, *Running: A global history* (2009).

[3] The great 100-mile racer Ann Transon, USA, held, by 50 years of age, some twenty world records. See also the British ultra runners Ellie Greenwood (winner of the 2011 Western States 100-mile race, USA) and Lizzie Hawker, 100 km World Champion and 24-hour world record holder.

[4] First proposed by Nobel Prize winner Archibald Hill in 1924 and expanded by University of Cape Town Professor Tim Noakes in 1997, this is the theory that the brain works to regulate the intensity of physical excursion in order to protect the body's vital organs, chiefly the heart. It is our central governor, the theory proposes, that stops us running ourselves to death.




Gregg Whelan running an Ultra-Marathon in Wiltshire. *Unknown Photographer*

happier and longer life – forever linking the will to run with the desire for good health and making bus conductors of us all. Which is a rather recent development in our relationship to running, an activity that over many millions of years has served a more complex set of biological, cultural and political contexts: running and running events marked marriages, wakes, the passing of seasons and the such – it would be used ceremonially, enjoyed aesthetically and deployed politically. Hence the reason I find myself in a field in Wiltshire. I'm happy that my heart is happy, but I'm running because I'm interested in everything that running is, was and can be. As I attempt to keep up with the stragglers at the back of pack, I am almost exactly one year into a five-year research project that looks at endurance running and performance practice. I am certainly not 'doing a performance' by running this race (though I am in training for one), instead I am here to get some purchase on how a performance-maker might begin to work with a practice that is arguably the thing that makes us human: an action, a doing, that performs humanness.

The fishmonger made his seven-mile run in 45 minutes, averaging around 6 minutes 15 seconds per mile: fast for a human, especially one carrying fish, but slow when compared to other running animals. We are poor runners in terms of speed with a lion's share of animals capable of out-running us over short distances. But give us a long, slow run and we have the ability to out-last almost every living creature, especially under sun-bleached skies: 'cooling by sweating is the key to human superiority' (Sears 2009: 8), and our five million sweat glands make us the most moist mammals around. We're also the most advanced users of oxygen of any landlocked mammal, with a respiratory system that allows us to switch between differing stride-to-breath rates. We are endurance runners, and it is this ability, according to Dr Dennis E. Bramble, 'that made us human' (Cheever 2007: 12). In 2004, with Harvard paleontologist Dr Daniel Lieberman, Bramble, a specialist in animal biomechanics and Professor of Biology at the University of Utah, published the ground-breaking article 'Endurance running and the evolution of *Homo*' (2004). Their hypothesis suggests that the present shape of the human body is due to the evolutionary effects of many thousands of years of running, with fossil evidence dating biomechanical modification occurring some two million years ago, roughly half a million years after the Homo genus evolved from *Australopithecus*. The paper maps twenty-six points on the human skeleton that attest to the fact that we evolved to run long and run slow. In biological terms we were 'selected' for endurance running in order to survive. Endurance running (ER) is allied to persistence hunting, in which prey is exhausted by being outrun.[5] This is how the light *Homo sapiens* survived when the heavier Neanderthals did

[5] For an anthropological perspective on persistence hunting, see Bernd Heinrich, *Why We Run, A natural history* (2001), and Louis Liebenberg, *The Art of Tracking: The origin of science* (1990).

not: 'ER may have made possible a diet rich in fats and proteins thought to account for the unique human combination of large bodies, small guts, big brains and small teeth' (Bramble and Lieberman 2004: 351). We are human, the hypothesis implies, because we ran, and we continue to inhabit the bodies of endurance runners. Which doesn't mean we find all running easy. Echoing David Carrier's research, Bramble and Lieberman find that 'running is more costly for humans than for most mammals' (2004: 345), but that's only the case when we compare ourselves to the speeds and favoured distances of other animals. ER is a 'different type of running … defined as running many kilometers over extended time periods using aerobic metabolism' (2004: 345), a skill which is uniquely human and something that no other primate has achieved.

Whereas traditional thought had posited walking as our defining evolutionary influence and running as 'merely the by-product of enhanced walking capabilities', Bramble and Lieberman suggest that 'walking alone cannot account for many of the other derived features' that signal running as an evolutionary factor in the development of the human body because 'they have little role in walking' (2004: 351). These features include: 'an extensive system of springs in the leg and foot that effectively store and release significant elastic energy' (2004: 351). In 2009, Lieberman was part of another research team addressing ER. The article 'Walking, running and the evolution of short toes in humans' (2009) focused solely on the foot and tracked the shortening of our toes over two or so million years, finding that: 'The increased mechanical cost associated with long toes in running suggests that modern human forefoot proportions might have been selected in the context of the evolution of endurance running' (Lieberman 2009: 713). In other words, running with long toes was less efficient than running with short toes, so a long-toed walking foot evolved into our short-toed running foot.

The foot is the site of the key event that defines running as running, as opposed to walking. When we run, both feet leave the ground at the same time; when we walk one foot is always landlocked. Running is a series of jumps, a series of attempts to defy gravity. To run is to become momentarily airborne. On landing, forces in excess of four times our body weight hit the foot, which the arch, planta fascia, twenty-six bones and various muscle groups work to absorb and dissipate: the foot has evolved to carry the four of us with relative ease.[6] It is the resistance of gravitational forces in the ascent and aerial phase of running that marks running out as what might be termed a 'difficult' practice. Walking, on the other hand (or foot), uses gravity to swing the body forwards. Walking is characterized by a 'pendulum' action: as one foot gains earthly purchase, stopping the body's trunk from twisting, the other leg swings past it taking us forward – it is an action likened to an egg rolling end-over-end (Carrier 1984: 485). Walking uses the earth to move forwards easily, with little energetic cost to the walker. Running, by contrast, casts the body as a spring, with the foot and Achilles tendon absorbing and releasing energy, as it works against the earth and the force that keeps us pinned to it. Rebecca Solnit certainly isn't writing about running in her discussion of gravity in Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* (1958). In her thinking gravity is framed as being

> about motion, weight, resistance, force, the most primary experience after all the touches on our skin, of being corporeal. And so it might be that gravity is a sweet taste of mortality and our strength to resist it, a luxuriating in the pull of the earth and the pull of the muscles against it. (Solnit 2006: 148)

There is little to luxuriate in as I pull myself up hill number three, but there is a strong sense of mortality, about as strong a sense of mortality as a field in Wiltshire has to offer.

So, our feet are built to run, as are our heads – or, to be more accurate, our necks. The neck contains the nuchal ligament, an elastic, fibrous membrane that stretches between base of the skull and the seventh vertebra of the spine. Lying between the neck muscles, the nuchal

[6] Relative is the word. Running, of course, tests the foot like no other activity, as even the most casual of runners will know. In 2008 legendary ultra runner Marshall Ulrich completed a 3,063-mile trans-America run from San Francisco to New York in 52 days, averaging just under 60 miles a day. Roughly half way, in Colorado, Ulrich understands that gaining as much distance between himself and an aching right foot is key to completing the challenge: 'This foot doesn't belong to me anymore. It doesn't fit in with who I am, what I'm trying to do or where I'm going. *This is not my foot*' (Ulrich 2011: 132).

ligament allows us to hold our heads steady as we run, stopping it from lolling forwards or from side to side, and it is present in animals that need to run efficiently. It is the nuchal ligament that would allow a running fishmonger to carry 56 pounds of fish on his head and arrive in Brentford smiling and allows me to carefully watch the back of the pack drift away into the distance as August's sun, and Wiltshire's hills, get the better of me and I begin to lag behind. But I am indeed an endurance runner, as are you: our bodies are no different in evolutionary terms from any of the bodies that Bramble and Lieberman speak of. In the relatively short time, evolutionarily speaking, between humans being dependent on running-down prey in order to eat and the present day, nothing of significance has altered our embodied ability as distance runners. As you read this you are a runner, you may not be a practising runner – some of us are quite the content bus driver – but, if you can stand on two feet unaided, you have the capacity to run further than you'd ever want to.[7]

The endurance-running hypothesis asks a fundamental question of performance practice, because it asks us to reconsider the very nature of the human body. In evolutionary terms running produces humanness; it is the body's first performance. Long before arts disciplines and practices, there was running – the act accomplished by human bodies that produced human culture. There are many readings of performance practice that put the body centre stage and that see the field as a body-based enquiry into a number of cultural phenomena. Admittedly, this is a broad definition for a broad practice, but it perhaps does passing justice to the field's interest in bodies doing something in front of, or with, other bodies. So how does the body-based discipline of contemporary performance practice react when the body has been rediscovered and reimagined as one defined by running and endurance? The question, as I see it, is not whether running can be discussed in terms of being 'art' (of course it can[8]) but rather what are the possibilities of using endurance running as a mode and site of performance-based research? The dancing body, a cultural phenomena that has engendered multiple modes of enquiry – training, the rigours of 'technique', discursive mappings of its social and political agency etc. – is a known site of performance research: the running body is unknown.[9] Imagine if our only experience of dance were as a mode of exercise, and if Zumba, the current fitness craze, were our only practised choreography – this is generally where we are with running. As Benjamin Cheever has it: 'Running is like breathing, men and women have always done it.... And like breathing, running is not always noticed' (2007: 236).

So, how to notice running? How to engage with a difficult practice? It is a question that for most of this and the last century we've had little time to answer, primarily because we've been very occupied by walking. John Bale in *Running Cultures* suggests that running, though 'not mere perambulation' has 'eluded serious study in the humanities and social sciences' (2004: 1). Sidestepped in favour of the ramble, wander and *dérive*, running, although for many civilizations at the heart of social, cultural and political life, has for ours dramatically receded. For me, the reason behind this is painfully clear: gravity. Walking is easy, running is not. Walking allows the mind itself to wander and so constitutes, in parallel, its own cultural space, which the male, bourgeois, European intellectual is free to explore as he drifts through the arcades and avenues of modernism. As Bale comments 'The sensory effect of running is different from that of walking' (2004: 1). Running, especially when one is new to it, consumes the mind as it does the body. There is little opportunity for joined-up thinking because the effort involved in keeping going is simply too great. Novelist and ultra runner Haruki Murakami runs a lot, and thinks a lot, although 'really as I run, I don't think much of anything worth remembering' (Murakami 2008: 19), which makes *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* an interesting read (it is). Walking promotes thought, helps it, encourages it – and so a tradition of walking writers, theorists and artists emerges; one defined, quite clearly I think, by an often

[7] For an anecdotal account of ultra running, see Christopher McDougall, *Born To Run* (2009). McDougall tracks down and runs with the infamous Mexican Indians, the Tarahumara – the 'running people', a tribe whose extensive daily mileage continues to attract much attention from Western ethnographers and the like. (Antonin Artaud also visited the Tarahumara in 1936, though there's no record of Artaud lacing up his running shoes). *Born To Run* also introduced Bramble's and Lieberman's research to a wide audience, along with being partly responsible for widespread interest in barefoot running. As poplar texts on running go, it has had more impact than anything published in the last thirty years.

[8] In cultural, political and aesthetic terms, Edward S. Sears (2009) makes a clear case that running is at once our first sport and first art form.

[9] That is not to say artists are comprehensively ignoring running. In terms of contemporary performance practice in the UK, Adele Prince, Search Party, Martin O'Brien, Eddie Ladd and GET IN THE BACK OF THE VAN have addressed running and its contexts.

stifling, melancholy air. Why? Perhaps walking promotes the backwards glance; perhaps walking's pendulum, its swing back and forth in real time moves those, who wish to be, between past and present, as end-over-end the egg – or Guy Debord – rolls. Either way, if in the humanities and the arts we look for running in the places we find walking, but for a handful of contexts, we'll draw a blank.

One per cent of the world's population will run at least one marathon in their lives. This is a considerable number of people embarking on what is, at the very least, sixteen weeks of dedicated training in order to face the relative challenge of 26.2 miles. If we find endurance running anywhere, it's to the streets of major cities and to ourselves that we need to turn. The marathon, as legend and Robert Browning have it, is an homage to a run made by the ancient Greek *hemerodromos*, or foot messenger, Pheidippides, from the battle of Marathon to Athens with news of a victory against the Persian army. Popular understanding has Herodotus chronicling Pheidippides's journey in *The Histories*, a journey that turns out to be the fabled courier's last, as Browning's poem describes it:

> And Athens was stubble again, a field which a fire runs through,
> Till in he broke: 'Rejoice, we conquer!' Like wine through clay,
> Joy in his blood bursting his heart, he died – the bliss! (Browning 1994: 587)

However, a close reading of Herodotus mentions nothing of a run between Marathon and Athens. Instead he has Pheidippides running the 140 miles from Athens to Sparta before the battle, a journey he makes easily in a day and a half, without causing injury to himself.[10] It isn't until in the later writing of Plutarch that a run between Marathon and Athens is chronicled, but that's by a runner called Eucles, who does 'immediately expire', but then again so does a runner called Euchidas in another text by Plutarch, who, after running from Delphi and back from Athens, 'immediately collapsed' (Sears 2009: 37). Bad luck the *hemerodromoi*? Or bad luck to feature in one of Plutarch's tales? Either way it is Robert Browning who centuries later seals Pheidippides's fate and has him jogging off this mortal coil after the twenty-five miles between Marathon and Athens, a terrible eulogy for a runner who regularly notched up a hundred miles with ease. And it is thanks to the popularity of Browning's piece that a race of 25 miles was added to the first modern Olympics in 1896, as a nod to the ancients, thus crowning the first and all subsequent games with 'a race that commemorated an event that never took place' (Harvie 2011: 128).[11]

What certainly did take place, and today's marathon is its confused echo, are the many hundreds of years when running performed a distinct social and political function. From Pheidippides's time onwards, running messengers once protected every civilization on every continent on Earth (Gotaas 2009: 9). For thousands of years, avoiding conflict or reigning supreme in battle was largely decided upon by the abilities of your runners. Without the wheel, the Inca Empire built its much admired roads for professional runners or *chasquis* (meaning 'to give and take'), who would live roadside, six to a hut, ready to intercept the knotted string carried by an incoming messenger and to take it onwards. The knots contained the message, not that a runner could read the strings. With each runner covering relatively short sections, a message could travel in excess of 200 miles in 24 hours. 'At any one time there were thousands of runners on duty … receiving food and lodgings from the state. They were so important they earned the same amount as the mayors' (Gotaas 2009: 10). Runners were the celebrated 'nervous system of the empire' (13). Little is known in such detail of running messengers in other civilizations, only that they were there, coming and going from front line to civic centre. As Edward Sears observes, 'Running is such a common human activity that most historians of the time did not bother recording it' (Sears 2009: 40). Fifteenth-century running messengers were common in central Europe, as recorded in the German family names of Laufer

[10] In 1982 a team of runners from the British Royal Air Force, led by Colonel John Foden, set out in Pheidippides footsteps. Attempting to cover the 250 km (155 miles) between Athens and Sparta, the team wanted to test Herodotus's account. They found it entirely plausible, making the journey in around 40 hours. Since 1983 The Spartathlon has been run as an annual event. For a firsthand account of the race, see Robin Harvie, *Why We Run* (2011).

[11] The marathon distance was lengthened for the London 1908 Olympics from 25 miles to 26 miles 385 yards. A route of 25 miles was created during preparations for the games but was lengthened after concern that the final few miles contained too many cobbles for the athletes to contend with. Instead a route was made across Wormwood Scrubs. The course was then lengthened again to start in front of Queen Victoria's statue at Windsor Castle and end in front of the Royal Box in the Olympic Stadium. In 1921 the International Amateur Athletic Federation set the somewhat arbitrary length of the London 1908 Olympic Marathon as the official marathon distance.

('runner'), Loper and Bott ('messenger') (Gotaas 2009: 14), though these runners were perhaps closer to footmen or forerunners, servants working privately for moneyed individuals who required the services of a runner to go before the coach.

Running's association with combat endures, and although the relative number of infantrymen in modern armies declines each year, the legacy of foot soldiers, trained to cover ground and fight on foot, descends from the Greeks by way of the Romans. Historian Robert Cowley tells Benjamin Cheever: 'In the days before walkie-talkies and portable radios, runners carried messages back to regimental headquarters. They usually worked in pairs, in case one was taken out by a bullet or shell burst' (Cheever 2007: 18). Neither bullet nor shell took out Adolf Hitler, who ran messages during the First World War, but a shell did enough damage to his leg during the Battle of the Somme to cause him to be hospitalized, so ending his posting as a dispatch runner. Soon technological advances rendered the post of military runners unnecessary. In the context of conflict and the broader need for society to have an effective 'messaging' service (a need expressed ten-fold today of course), running is easily understood as a technology, perhaps our first. For John Bale running was 'as important as the stagecoach, the railway, the aeroplane and the telephone', it is the first attempt 'through human agency to compress time and space' (Bale 2004: 1)

Running messengers, and the familiar bedfellows of war and poetry, gave us today's central context for endurance running. Seventeen runners ran the first Olympic marathon in 1896, and the bleed away from distance running as an elite sport to mass participation is impressive to say the least. This year many thousands of first-time marathon runners will embark on their own passage through Browning's poem and towards the wall: the fed and fit human body seems perfectly tuned to manage about twenty miles of running without rest or sustenance before it 'hits the wall' – the moment when the body's more effective and available energy source, glycogen, runs dry and it switches to burning fat instead, which gives much less energy much more slowly. You can manage your glycogen stores by topping up on sports drinks and gels on the way round, or you can chance it. The general consensus is that 20 miles is halfway in a marathon: the last 6.2 being as difficult as the first 20. In the fields and woodlands of my 50K race there are regular food stops, and I try to eat something at each station. Even an AHRC Creative Fellow can't run 31 miles without a snack. As I pass the 26-mile marker, I nod to myself, marking the fact that soon I'll pass the marathon distance, and then I nod again, this time no, no to another 5 miles. No way.

If running, and its conflicts, 'perform humanness', today it is the big city marathon – London, Paris, Berlin etc. – that stages that performance, and on a grand scale. If one is in a city during its marathon, one knows it. Like its cousin, the protest march, the marathon temporarily disrupts the the city's preoccupations. A large marathon attracts a large audience seemingly because it is such a large event – its scale has almost a gravitational pull, even to those who perhaps know they'll not like what they find. Jean Baudrillard, less a man of the foot than the screen, finds himself in the mid-1980s at the finish line of the New York City Marathon:

> I would never have believed that the New York marathon could move you to tears. It really is the end-of-the-world show. Can we speak of suffering freely entered into as we might speak of a state of servitude freely entered into …? (Baudrillard 1989: 19)

Baudrillard, the sociologist as provocateur, finds the event's scale, the sheer number of runners, to be its essential problem: 'there are simply too many of them and their message has lost all meaning, it is merely the message of their arrival' (1989: 20) It is a catastrophe not because of any conflict it may provoke (political, biomechanical, energetic or otherwise) but rather because it destroys all meaning. Its popularity as 'suffering freely entered into' renders the race a pre-programmed task to

complete only in order to have the thing completed, it 'produces the same sense of futility that comes from doing anything merely to prove to yourself that you can do it' (21). Baudrillard locates the runner's motivation – many will be running simply because the marathon is there to run – and reverses it, likening it to suicide, or graffiti, 'they simply say: I'm so-and-so and I exist! They are free publicity for existence' (21). Which, of course, considering Baudrillard's playfully nihilist tendencies, is a predictable response. But we should not forget that Baudrillard starts out in tears – which, because we are not Baudrillard, we are free to imagine as genuine, real tears.

It is easy to be moved at the end of marathons. And perhaps it is that ease that Baudrillard is actually writing against, but it takes a hard-hearted sociologist not to be moved by the sight of people crossing a line and finding themselves changed – changed if only because it offers them the opportunity to stop running. Those of us who are drawn to the ends of durational performance works to simply be there as they conclude, and those of us who begin durational performance works simply to find their conclusion, will understand that the opportunity to stop running at the end of a marathon – to halt the considerable difficulty that running has generated – is the most humane of offerings, the opportunity to re-enter the non-running world, to begin the world again.

In 2010, in Kuopio, Finland – a country well-known for its distance-running prowess – I watch a work by London-based performance-makers GET IN THE BACK OF THE VAN. The performance happens over 12 hours and is located in a public gym. For the first 90 minutes of every 2 hours, performer Hester Chillingworth runs on a treadmill; as she runs, she reads from a screen on which a long looping list of apologies appears:

> I am sorry I never finished the book I started writing
> I am sorry I did not go to the university longer
> I am sorry I don't have any children
> I am sorry you never loved me
> I am sorry I didn't manage to show you how good I am
> I am sorry I have a problem with authority
> I am sorry I was too late
> I am sorry I don't like beer (GET IN THE BACK OF THE VAN 2010)

The anonymous apologies were collected from earlier performances of the same piece. While Hester runs and reads, Lucy McCormick feeds new offerings that have been sent in online during the day of the performance. Anyone can contribute; the only criterion is that the apology must be a true one. As the day draws on, the list, instead of getting shorter, and so heading for an end, steadily grows longer. Hester runs for the first 90 minutes of every 2-hour block and then rests for the remaining 30 minutes, a period in which she doesn't speak. The piece is called *Weigh Me Down*, evoking the burden of the anonymous apologies but also the gravitational pull on the runner's body: Solnit's motion, weight, resistance and force. The performance lasts for 12 hours, with Hester's ability to run and read deteriorating as the day progresses. Around her, gym-users come and go; we watch them run for a while on neighbouring treadmills. As the hours pass the gym thins out until Hester is running alone. Still the litany continues, still she runs, until with 30 minutes to go she enters the final rest stage. The 12-hour performance ends with 30 formal minutes of rest, the runner stretched out on her back, head in hands. The moment of ending, the moment of the new world appearing and the running world receding is elongated, a wrong-footing 'climax' and all the more eloquent for it. We watch the runner not running for 30 minutes, and then we leave.

The runner experiencing not running is perhaps the reason why one might set out to run in the first place. A good number of distance runners would agree that a very long run is a catastrophe of sorts – meaning that something that could go right, and perhaps has in the past, is going wrong now. But it is a catastrophe that ends, and for that reason the marathon is welcomed and willingly returned

Weigh Me Down (2010), *GET IN THE BACK OF THE VAN*. *Photos: Pekka Mäkinen*

to: it is freely-entered-into suffering; suffering undertaken so suffering can end. And, if for Baudrillard, this hollows out to an empty victory, to the committed runner it is an act of faith, faith in the act of testing one's ability to survive conflict until conflict abates. As fell runner and writer Richard Askwith has it, as he crests a northern hill, 'And then – the recurrent miracle at the heart of every runner's faith – it is over' (Askwith 2005: 105). The finish line of a marathon is akin to the last act of every satisfying story: it is a (manifold) conflict finding a (proliferation) of resolutions. No need for the runner to expire, no need to collapse (Plutarch, take note), finishing is itself enough for the story to end brilliantly.

The parallel between running and durational performance events feels strong here. *Ghost Dance*, Lone Twin's 12-hour line-dancing piece, consists of two blindfolded fancy-dress cowboys slowly dancing in unison. Without music, or sight, we listen to each others' footsteps so as to keep in time as midday moves inch by inch to midnight, when finally the dance can cease. Although there is no suggestion to do so, no prompt, audience members often learn the dance and join in, with the group increasing in size as midnight approaches – sometimes many hundreds of people are dancing together as midnight comes and, as a group, we can finally stop. When you are in the middle of this experience, as I have been, the communal dancing feels like an act of support – in fact, people tell us it is, they talk to us, they whisper

messages of good will, offer food and water. Support is given in relation to the idea of completion; the hope that an end will come and that there is value in finding it. If there is value in the act, it is generated by the group. The two performers who begin the process are just that, the two who begin it, but it is the group that ends it with their applause or their touch. We have no way of knowing the time so it is the audience that tells us the performance can end. It is on the promise of the dance finding an end that we all began dancing – the image of the dancers not dancing is the resolution we find ourselves rooting for.

In the marathon the group also generates value. Spectators obviously play their part, but it is the other runners, like other dancers, who carry each other forwards towards a shared resolution. This is not only a case of camaraderie, as with dancing it has to do with rhythm, with accompaniment in the musical sense. Running distance races often means spending a considerable amount of time running with other people, strangers who have planned to run at a similar pace. As a pair, or a small group, you create a rhythm and that rhythm sustains you; it makes it easier to continue. You may talk together, at other times you remain silent; often at some point, as the shared pace falters, you slip apart after hours together. Filming runners passing at mile 20 (the halfway point) of the Melbourne Marathon in 2009, I stand next to the tripod and watch a woman and man run together up the long slow hill to the mile marker; they are clearly in each other's rhythm, but they aren't talking, they look straight ahead. There are no crowds of supporters in this part of the city, and with no traffic on the roads it is quiet but for the breath and footfall of runners. At this point in the race the couple approaching may have run side by side for three hours or more. As they pass the camera, just out of shot, the woman breaks the silence:

'What's your name?'

'I'm Rod.'

'Rod, OK, I'm Nina.'

And then Nina and Rod fall back into silence, back into helping each other along. It struck me that this exchange asks 'who were you before this began'. Equally, it could have been phrased 'what did you do?' or 'where did you live?' before this began. Either way, until it ends, the answer is perhaps not important. What is important is that we're helping each other. From a Baudrillardian perspective, there is no meaning here; it is simply the meaningless performance of a task undertaken only for it to conclude. Try telling that to Rod and Nina, who, after 20 miles appeared to be made only of meaning, their running form – ideally back straight, chest pushed forwards, arms pumping – had said its goodbyes at mile 19.

The performance of running – the doing of it and what it does, culturally, socially, politically, subjectively and aesthetically – feels to be a ground, a field, with huge potential. And if running today is largely understood as exercise and as sport, those contexts also offer fertile territory. Roland Barthes writing on sport's social agency sees it modelled on an idea of combat, of conflict, but 'this combat is distanced by the spectacle, reduced to its forms, cleared of it effects, of its dangers and of it shames: it loses its noxiousness, not its brilliance or its meaning' (Barthes 2007: 61). His assertion that sport speaks the human contract aligns sport so closely to cultural activities, like making theatre, that articulating any kind of difference between the two feels patently unnecessary. Today running has a reduced social and cultural role compared to its historical and evolutionary standing. But if running is primarily 'made' in contexts of competition, health and fitness, Barthes reminds us that this itself is a cultural phenomena, and one with the body at its core. The human contract finds a concrete expression in Rod's and Nina's exchange in Melbourne. And perhaps the contract's proposition is no more evident than in large city marathons as run by non-elite runners, simply because the runners need each other; and the event – for its own scale and agency – needs them. It is a mirror of the relationship between running and humanness, a relationship founded on performance: an embodied speaking-out of ourselves.

What I need in Wiltshire is a lie-down. As the finish line approaches, with my running form left in a pile along with Rod's and Nina's, and with 56 pounds of fish weighing ever heavier on my head, I ready myself to accept the miracle at the heart of my faith: the runner-not-running, the end. There are about twenty or so people gathered around the finish, a friend shouts my name as I lope into view. I cross the line, become, in very loose terms, an ultra runner and wobble uncertainly to a stationary position next to a table laden with calorie replenishing cake. Behind me 50 kilometers of running, ahead of me, stretching further than I can see, everything that running made.

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