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Running with Derrida

(by when I say that I run, I’m not talking about jogging, although...
but even though they cannot bear that I run, or that I write, they
indefinitely prefer that I practise jogging or writing for publica-
tion: it never goes very far, it comes back in a closed circuit, like
a child in its playpen. What they cannot bear is what you know:
that jogging and writing for publication are for me only a train-
ing with you in mind, in order to seduce you, to have some wind,
for some is necessary, the strength to live what I risk with you).

The exact difference between running and jogging is not estab-
lished in the Oxford English Dictionary, which merely defines
jogging as “to run at a gentle pace (esp. as part of a ‘keep-fit’
schedule).” When someone is referred to as a jogger the re-
sponse will often be to correct this, to assert that they are, in
fact, a runner, the activities treated as distinct despite one being
a form of the other. The narrator of the “Envois” is aware of this
distinction, saying that they “cannot bear that I run,” preferring
him to jog. Running is privileged over jogging.

It’s not speed that separates running from jogging. There is
something awkward about the motion of a jogger, expressed
through its homonymic associations, jogging someone’s pen for
example. Jogging is more restrained than running, often part of
a schedule, something programmed and therefore predictable.
Certain people prefer the narrator to jog because it “never goes

1 _PC, 247/264._
very far” — a runner’s reach is greater than a jogger’s. Indeed, jogging is “only a training,” not an activity in itself, preparation to provide some wind, “the strength to live what I risk with you.”

According to J. Hillis Miller, Derrida “briefly took up running at Yale in the campus cemetery […] under the tutelage of James Hulbert,” with Hulbert stopping Derrida every few hundred yards to check his pulse which, Miller writes, “must have been a funny scene.” Hulbert was a graduate student in comparative literature, one of the team that translated Le facteur de la vérité for Yale French Studies. Hulbert ran with Derrida in the Grove Street Cemetery and, according to Hulbert, Derrida took to the activity “like a duck to water,” although some were concerned that he not be allowed to over-exert himself. These runs are described by the narrator in the “Envois,” who exercises in the same cemetery and writes of how “from time to time I stop, panting, next to a tomb” (PC, 157).

According to Derrida “La Carte Postale is haunted by Joyce, whose funerary statue stands at the centre of the Envois,” and of whom the addressee asks, at one point, “what made him run [ce qui l’a fait courir]” (PC, 240/257). Murray McArthur has written about the interplay between Derrida and Joyce and how this works through pairings such as the two cemetery scenes, one in Zurich, where the narrator visits Joyce’s memorial, the other when he runs in Yale.

Derrida has written about how the “Envois” have “a whole family of James, Jacques, Giacomo,” and McArthur places “Jim” (“who sounds awfully like this Jim or James or Jacques”) in the role of Joyce, the reverse of the Joyce portrayed by the statue,

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3 Personal communication.
5 Ibid., 151.
“the languid European with his sedentary position, his aerobi-
cally unsound cigarette, his cane.” The shifting of the relation-
ship between the figures of Joyce and the narrator provide fur-
ther examples of the strange baton passings that fill the Envois. For McArthur, the scene of Hillis and the narrator in the Swiss
cemetery contrasts with the one in Yale: “the master in this cem-
etery who knows everything is Jim, a metaleptic troping of the
European scenes, this running of jogging buddies running side
by side.”

According to the narrator of the “Envois,” Jim was “crazy with
his jogging [il est un peu fou avec son jogging]” (PC, 157/170).
This mention of jogging rather than running seems significant,
particularly when Derrida is obviously alert to the difference
between the terms. Indeed, as a runner, Hulbert asserts that he
was not a jogger, stating that “I was perhaps more crazy ‘about
running’ than ‘with jogging.’” Other than these brief mentions
in the “Envois,” jogging disappears from Derrida’s work, as if
running were a fad that he took up briefly in the 1970s.

I took up running and my study of Derrida at the same time,
in my early thirties. In both activities, being a late starter does
not devalue my participation—knowing that I will never win
a race doesn’t limit my enjoyment of such events. One can run
with other people while still racing against oneself. Indeed, it is
good to have someone to keep pace with, to force you to strive a
little harder—to prove that one is running, not jogging.

Derrida’s writing paces me. I enjoy his work because he is not
simply “writing for publication,” but seems driven by something
more important. His prose sometimes feels like hard work, the
epic sentences that are hard to read aloud, the breathless hitch
of the ellipsis in the passage above (“I’m not talking about jog-
ging, although… but even though”). A work like the “Envois”
is exhausting, pursuing the proliferation of pronouns: I, they,
you; a paranoid chase of correspondence that leaves me panting.

7 Ibid., 236.
8 Ibid.
9 Personal communication.
And then there is the confusion — can the narrator be directly identified as Derrida, am I chasing him or a literary phantom? While Miller is prepared to “testify under oath, moreover, that what the speaker says happened the three or four times I am mentioned by name in “Envois” really did happen as ‘historical events,’” the “Envois” always disturb my footing and I am not sure whose trail I’m following. Does the narrator describe the runs Derrida took with Hulbert or not? Every word of Derrida’s seem limitless, language coming alive. His work defies simple programs and schedules. Even a concept as peripheral as running explodes with puns and plays: the couriers and relays of the “Envois,” the confused baton-handover between Plato and Socrates, the step in passages, the jambes of the chimney in Poe’s Purloined Letter. McArthur points out the “perpetual movement that the addresser engages in, an Odyssean voyaging, but also the theme of legacy or legs, the walking, running, pedalling, limping that the accident-prone addresser does throughout.”

Derrida claimed in 1982 that “I haven’t even begun to read Joyce” and I have the same feeling when I read Derrida. But from my experience of running I know that it is not what one achieves that is important but the feeling of striving, to be able to say that I am a runner, not a jogger. Even if I never “master” Derrida’s work, the experience of reading it is still a positive one. It is about more than training. This experience of reading Derrida recalls something Haruki Murakami wrote in his book about writing and running:

Most runners run not because they want to live longer, but because they want to live life to the fullest. If you’re going to while away the years, it’s far better to live them with clear goals and fully alive than in a fog, and I believe running helps you do that. Exerting yourself to the fullest within your indi-

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vidual limits: that’s the essence of running, and a metaphor for life — and for me, for writing as well.¹²

This brief response can only be a prelude to a work that I will never have enough breath to write. I could never exhaust all meaning in Derrida’s work, never reach a finish line. I will always be run ragged by the “Envois,” its couriers always ahead of me, but when I run, my life feels fuller.
