

The Race Report as a Form of Literary Expression? Evidence from the CRC

One may think that the CRC is simply a running club. Nothing is further from the truth. It is also a group of women and men with strong literary aspiration and credentials. Skeptical? Go to the CRC Web page and read a sample of the race reports submitted by the members and you will realize the hidden literary talent you can find in this distinguished club. Actually it is surprising that some critic (or at least a poor Ph.D. student desperately in search of a topic) has not discovered yet this remarkable production and has not written about it.

What strikes the reader is the diversity of literary forms and styles across the various authors. Some reports are modeled on the "De Bello Gallico" by Julius Caesar and are notable for their concision and effectiveness in communicating the main message. The basic structure is: "The day was auspicious. I came, I ran, and I finished in a good time".

Others take more elaborate and complex forms, ranging from Greek tragedies to Hollywood movies, Medieval romances/knights tales, etc.. In the Greek tragedy form the very human runner tries as hard as he/she can, but is usually defeated by vindictive gods who cause bowel discomfort, or other afflictions. At times the tragedy is concentrated simply in crossing the line a handful of seconds beyond the desired time (a marathon in 3.00.02 or 3.30.08). In a way however, there is always a cathartic resolution: at least the race and the most intense suffering is over and the curtain can fall on the tired or dead runner.

In the Hollywood movie genre, there is an initial build up culminating in our hero being almost down and out, overcome by immense tiredness, but one power gel later strength returns and our hero sprints to the finish with the music of Chariots of Fire in the background (I know Chariots of Fire was not produced in Hollywood, but the music is the only appropriate one for a glorious finish).

Finally the Medieval romances tell, chapter by chapter, of the quest for that "optimal time I would like to run at" that resembles the search for the Holy Grail and is just as impossible to attain. Evil magicians and strange monsters are encountered during the quest and are battled with. In these reports the final success is not what matters, because there cannot be a final success (there is always a better time that one would like to reach). What counts is the quest itself and the telling of it by the brave knight. The style is often lyrical and refined ("It was a beautiful misty morning when I put on my running shorts...") and contrast sharply with realistic depictions of human suffering often found in other reports ("At mile 5, I was hit by a sudden attack of diarrhea that caused me to bend over .").

Those of you, who are empirically inclined, may find some regularities that characterize the reports interesting. The first one is that the length of the report tends to rise in proportion with the length of the race. Hence marathon runners, tend to be more logorrheic (their words, like their feet, run longer), compared to the rest, although there are significant exceptions to the rule. However, there is only a weak positive correlation

(probably not statistically significant) between the total pages of reports submitted in a given time period with the speed of the runners: faster runner write a little bit more, but not much, and there are plenty of budding writers among the slower runners.

This brings us to a final and fundamental question about the reports: why such a rich production? What spurs runners to put on paper their most secret thoughts? There is probably more than one answer. Race reports, in a way, are like letters sent, not to a single person, but to a community of individual that share a love (some non-runners would say obsession) for running, in the hope that there may be fellow souls out there that can empathize with and share one's joys and tribulation. Note also that race reports are very discrete in the sense that nobody is forced to read them, unless so inclined, and are much less obtrusive than having to listen to a fellow runner bragging or complaining about a race. A functionalist approach would also emphasize that, apart from an attempt at reaching out, writing about and reliving a race helps in focusing one's thoughts on successes and failures of various strategies. Hence race reports serve as a powerful training device. However, I am not a coach and I am entering a territory about which I know nothing (even less than about literary criticism). Hence I better stop, but not without a final word: keep those reports coming; they make a marvelous read!

An Anonymous Reader of Race Reports