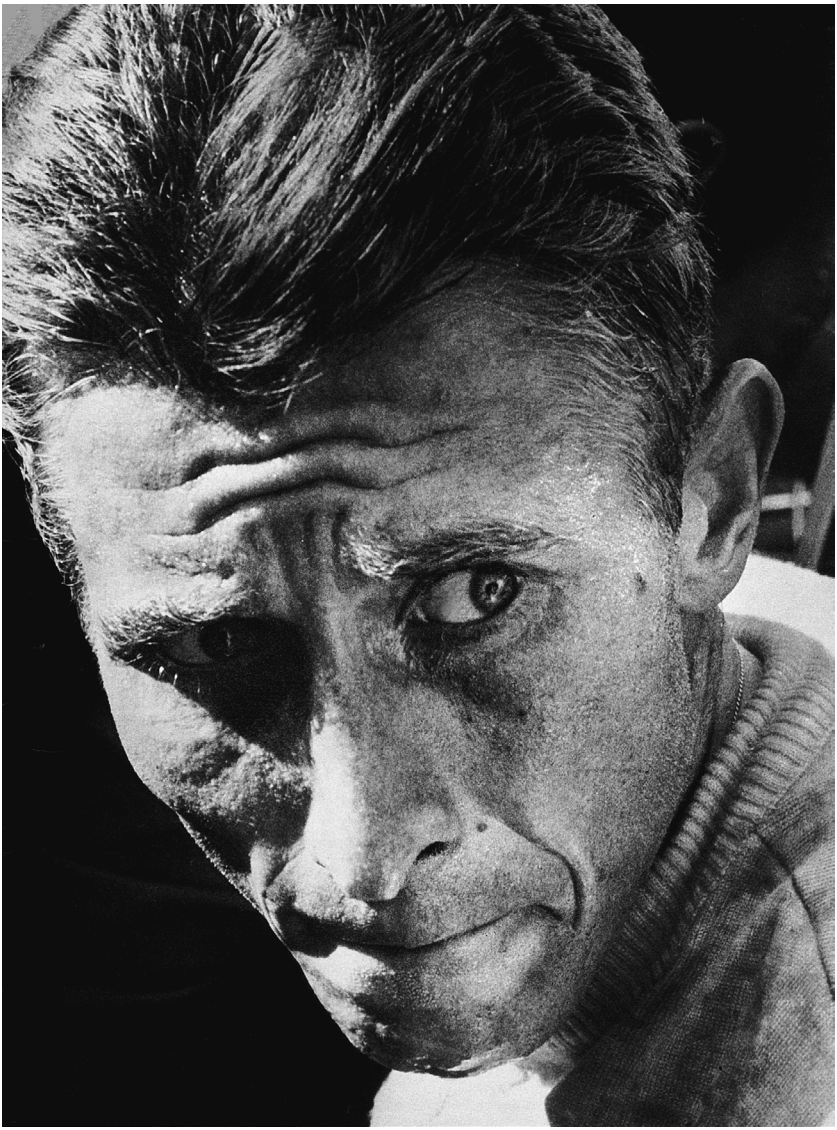
ANQUETIL, *Alone*



ANQUETIL, *Alone*

PAUL FOURNEL

Translated from the French
by Nick Caistor

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by
PURSUIT
An imprint of Profile Books Ltd
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London
WC1X 9HD
www.profilebooks.com

First published in French in 2012 by
Editions du Seuil, entitled *Anquetil tout seul*

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Granjon by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 731 9
eISBN 978 1 78283 298 0

Geldermans told me that before every climb, Anquetil used to take his water bottle out of its holder and stick it in the back pocket of his jersey to lighten his bike. I decided to look more closely. I discovered that, in all the photos of Anquetil in the mountains, the bottle was in its holder. But that was an illusion: Geldermans' story is the true one. That's the one that gets to the heart of the cyclist. It's the photos that are lying.

Tim Krabbé, *The Rider*

Over-exertion is a vain notion for cyclists.

Antoine Blondin

A reactor, an IBM machine and a spirit-still.

Raphaël Geminiani, *Les années Anquetil*

Anquetil enjoyed the blessing of the winds. His pointed nose and face like a fine blade sliced the road open for him, and his whole body flowed behind it, cutting through the mistrals, piercing the winter breezes and the summer storms. He seemed to be diaphanous, almost ill, with a slender build that was half a Van Looy, a third of Rudi Altig. His profile was like one on a medal, and when you saw him looking so slight you would never have imagined he had such a barrel chest, a barrel hiding the gunpowder of the most explosive engine, or that his legs and lower back were made of latex.

The way he pedalled was a lie. It spoke of ease and grace, like a bird taking off or a dancer in a sport of lumberjacks, riders who crushed the pedals, gluttons for hard work, masculinity in all shapes and sizes. Anquetil pedalled blond, with supple ankles; he pedalled on points, back bent, arms at right angles, head straining forwards. No man was ever better suited than him to riding a bike, never was the harnessing of man and machine so harmonious. He was made to be seen alone on the road, silhouetted against the blue sky; nothing

about him suggested the peloton, the crowd and the strength of being united. He was cycling beauty, out on its own. 'For a long while I thought of him as a sorcerer who has found the Great Secret', Cyrille Guimard said of him. From his first turn of the pedal, he exchanged the legendary toughness of the 'galley slaves of the road' for an unprecedented kind of violence, something that looked elegant but was secretly brutal, and from which his opponents were going to suffer, without being able to imitate him. It should be added that Anquetil doesn't grimace, bare his teeth, jerk his head as he struggles. He is hard to read. He simply turns pale, his face is imperceptibly sunken, his eyes turn light grey. At the hardest moments of a race, when he's going at 50 kph, you would think he was consumptive.

I was ten years old. I was small, brown-haired and tubby. He was big, blond and slender, and I wanted to be him. I wanted his bike, his allure, his nonchalance, his elegance. I had found my model and my opposite wrapped into one. Both of these were impossible to achieve, which meant I had a long way to go.

For Anquetil, the essential takes place in solitude. He doesn't like mass races, he doesn't like to show off. His opponents are there to be beaten; they aren't there to get

to know or to play games with. His team-mates are there to work hard to make him win and to earn their own livelihoods. Nothing more. There are things he does alone and things that he alone does. In both cases, solitude is his kingdom. This solitude is not simply a way of considering what cycling is about, it's an overall way of life, the defining characteristic of his soul, whether that has been sold to God or the Devil.

Against Himself

Anquetil is standing naked, balanced nervously over the bathtub as it fills with boiling water. The steam grips his sex, buttocks, legs: the precious calves, the golden thighs. The head receives the vapours, becomes a thermometer. Anquetil peers down at his feet, but can't see them. He absorbs the heat, gorges his muscles on it. He doesn't think of the race he's taking part in, doesn't go through the bends and contours in his mind. The outline is rolled up in his belly: he can feel it there, hard, compact, painful, knotty, and knows that soon, right after the start, it will unroll and follow every last centimetre, like the most detailed route map. He is scared. The steam swells his quadriceps and eases his torment. He has followed all the rituals one by one: he has had a haircut, well-groomed on top and trimmed well above the ears, like a grooved artillery shell … he has been to see his healer, who laid his hands on his weak throat and all the parts of his body where he is going to feel pain beyond pain. On Friday, he rode the 120 kilometres of the ritual at the speed of his old trainer Boucher's motorbike, nestled in its shelter at the limits of his strength; on Saturday he

dug the length of the course metre by metre, studying it on the map, taking in every detail; and now he is warming himself over the bathtub.

On the chair next to the washstand, the black shorts, white socks, his jersey – all of them brand new; the shoes with black leather soles, polished and already worn to avoid any nasty surprises, the cleats carefully nailed underneath. He won't be wearing a cap.

ANQUETIL: I'm wedded to the crown of the road, at its highest point, I don't cut across at the bends, saving myself having to descend and climb back all the time. I leave that line to the cheapskates, the penny-pinchers. I retrace the road-builder's design and his pure line, choose the part that vehicles have worn smooth, leaving the edges to flints, shards of glass, dust. The road glides beneath my stomach. I've learned all about it on the rim of my wheels. I know that after this house it will turn left and start to climb, I know this stand of trees below will protect me from the wind for a moment. The whole width of the road is mine, and I trace the cleanest path along it that I can. The narrowest tubulars have been inflated to 10 bars, and I'm flying on my path of air.

I love fine-grained roads, broad, well-designed ones where you can give it all you've got, the wide, flat bends, gentle ups and downs … the climbs where you can start and then build your effort without losing speed. Picardy, Châteaufort, the long level stretches across the wheat fields of Chevreuse combed by the wind. Lower your

chest still further, barely raise the eyes to spot the horizon rather than actually look at it, split open the air with the bridge of the nose. 52 × 15, 52 × 14, 52 × 13. The road glides beneath my stomach like an endless black ribbon. I live on the road. My houses, my châteaux are stopovers.

The wind is solid matter I plunge into, rounded back, nose pointed at the centre of the handlebars, arms stuck to my sides. An immobile egg fitted with connecting rods. Even at the most difficult moments, when my body is so taut it becomes unbearable, I force myself not to change my posture an inch. My back is crying out but I pull even harder on the pedals. Simply to raise my head for an instant to relieve the pain in the nape of my neck would cost me seconds. In any position, nothing is dearer than disorder. Skiers have taught me that.

I never tire of telling journalists my secret: in a time trial you have to start flat out, finish flat out, and in between take a moment to catch your breath, snatch some rest, a few kilometres where the pressure is lowered and strength is rebuilt before the final sprint. Of course, I never do that, but I tell anyone willing to listen that's what I do. My rivals all end up trying the same. 'Maybe he's right. Maybe that's the secret of his strength.' They lift off the pedal for an instant, and that always gives me the edge. While they're slowing down, I go flat out from start to finish. I am a machine, an escaped robot. I attack. I have fork-arms, connecting-rod thighs. I'm free.

I'm hurting. The nape of the neck, shoulders, kidneys, and then there's the hell of buttocks and thighs. You have to resist the burning sensation, the knotted

muscles, the stabbing pain that returns with every turn of the pedal, be alert to the instant where there's a risk of paralysing cramp setting in. Resist the lead that is added to your muscles every quarter of an hour of the race. Keep your mind clear to make sure the movement is always complete: push, pull, lift, slam down, never forget to make the roundest circle. To pedal properly, raise the ankle. Switch to the biggest gear possible as quickly as possible, and stick with it. Don't listen to the body and head uniting to tell you this has to stop right now. Pedal in a world of pain of which only I know the secret, and convince myself that if I am suffering so much it's impossible for the others to keep up.

I've stocked up on pain. In training, behind Boucher's derny, behind Janine's Mercedes, or even in front of it when she is pushing me on. At 60 kilometres per hour, I'm going faster than in a race, faster than myself. I train in pain. My trainers aren't allowed to slow down, they have to pull me into zones of suffering that I alone know of. Even if I beg them to, they are not to slacken the pace. Clench your teeth, keep going, never put your hands behind your back. On race day, when I'm on my own and am suffering like a dog, I know that deep inside I'm aware of much worse pain. This gives me the slight edge that allows me to hurt myself more than the other cyclists. The harder the race, the more I can feel the others' pain, and that soothes mine.

Behind me, on the bumper of the maroon Hotchkiss or the white 203 Peugeot, my name is painted in capitals so that the public will recognise me. Black letters

on a white background: ANQUETIL. My name pursues me and pushes me on. I am on my own heels. Fleeing myself.

In the distance, at the end of the straight line, the lead vehicle swerved to one side, and I saw Poulidor, who had set off three minutes ahead of me. I caught a glimpse of his purple jersey, the Mercier team colours. My eyes impaled his back like a harpoon; now I've got him. He's going to pull me in on the line that has just been stretched between us. He set off three minutes before me and yet there he is, already within reach. The road bends now and hides him from me, his support car conceals him, but I'm not letting him go. He's going to reel me in. Now is the right moment. In the next few minutes I'm not going to ask myself any more questions. I'm being sucked along. I've already gained a good kilometre per hour just at the thought of catching him. It'll soon be two kilometre per hour. At the next straight, my eyes will be fixed on his purple shoulders and he'll pull me in even more. To take full advantage of his strength, I need to accelerate steadily. I have to resist the desire to go flat out; I want to leave him in my wake. I leave one side of the road to him; I'm going to overtake on his left, sweep past without looking at him, my eyes on the tarmac, making sure not to move a millimetre in the saddle. My speed will crush all his hopes. He's bound to turn his head to the left, give me a worried look. He's done for. 'I've already lost three minutes', he'll tell himself. My legs have to be the only moving part of my body. He doesn't count. All Poulidor will feel is the rush of wind.

My wind. I won't turn my head. I mustn't meet his gaze. He doesn't exist. Only the road exists and I'm back in the crown of the road. I pass him. Completely.

He's behind me. He reeled me in, now he has to push me on. I still need to use his strength. Pretend I am scared: imagine he's fighting back, that he's going to catch me, remember Albert Bouvet who resisted me for a while on the Côte de Bullion, pedal harder still until I feel the line snap at last and imagine Poulidor swallowed up in the depths of the road all alone, emptied of himself. And now think of nothing but the rider who left six minutes before me, the one my eyes are already searching for at the far end of the straight line.

This scene takes place during a time trial between Bourgoin and Lyons (62 kilometres). Raymond Poulidor, who set off three minutes before Anquetil, is about to be caught. His trainer Antonin Magne ignores the regulations and pulls alongside him. Instead of shouting at him, he simply says: 'Move over Raymond, and watch the Caravel as it sails by.' And the two men watch the Caravel go by. 'I couldn't see him pedalling,' Poulidor confirms, 'he was gliding along.'

The Caravel glided through my cycling childhood with a mysterious majesty. Too young to understand, I was

old enough to admire. I feasted my eyes on this champion who was like a star in spiked shoes. I rode round and round my house, pedalling like a madman with my chubby legs and splayed feet, dreaming of the Grand Prix des Nations. I too contorted myself into the perfect position, back and neck bent at the ideal angle, bright red, jaw locked. I spent whole summers like that.

My cyclist father and bicycle-maker uncle had fashioned an ideal bike that perfectly met the twin demands of dreams and apprenticeship. It had all the appearance of a racing bike, combined with the prudence of a teaching machine (for a first-year pupil). Above all, and this was something I insisted on, it was green. I can still remember my glee when I first saw it at the far end of the dark workshop, glinting like a new penny piece, gleaming in the sparks of the soldering. Green, like Anquetil's. This was after several long, impatient weeks because in those days, around Saint-Étienne, you had to learn to wait for a bike to be custom-made. As the days went by, I had been to see first the frame itself, freshly forged, and then all the extras being added. I was on tenterhooks while it was enamelled and assembled. I waited and waited … until finally there it was, my own bike. I'd show them. I started racing against the clock, beating my own records on the paths around our house in the Haute-Loire. I did the whole loop in 'one or two minutes'. It's true that my watch had no second hand and I often wasted precious seconds when I dismounted to see what my time was when I was halfway round … but I had so much energy that these imprecise timings never threatened my utter

domination of the Grand Prix des Nations. Soon I set off on the roads and my dreams expanded to fill the much vaster universe of the paths and roads beyond.

And we saw Anquetil. My father was a responsible admirer who willingly chose to cross France to see the great Jacques. The only condition was that he had to get there on his bike to better understand and share with him, in however small measure, the effort of cycling. I came across Anquetil on four occasions 'for real', in my childhood and adolescence, but he peopled all my daydreams … my admiration was the clear-sighted admiration of a child cyclist. I preferred him to Poulidor, and that allowed me to analyse them both. In doing so I was behaving like most French people of that time, who chose one camp or the other – and above all Poulidor's.

Later, when other champions came along, when other ways of winning emerged, I began to ask myself questions. How had a champion like Anquetil been possible? How could someone like him have been such a devastating racer? Where once he had seemed so clear to me, he now became unfathomable, because he had been so different to the new champions I was discovering. Anquetil became an enigma, which I've been trying for a long, long time to decode, in search more of questions than answers, convinced that this inimitable model holds the secret of all the characteristics and contradictions that set a champion apart from everyone else.