

Review Essay

Take Me Out to the Polity: Baseball as a Synecdoche for Community in George F. Will's *Men at Work*

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When the game begins, nobody yells “Work Ball!”

—Willie Stargell

“Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball, the rules and realities of the game—and do it by watching first some high school or small town-teams. The big league games are too fast for the beginner and the newspapers don’t help.”

—Jacques Barzun

Jacques Barzun had it wrong.¹ If we are to understand Americans, we must understand not only baseball, but also how Americans write about baseball. That is, we must understand myths—the stories we tell ourselves about the struggle between good and evil, stories that we use to represent more accessibly, through ritualistic form, the profound and even ineffable aspects of the human condition.

A major function of myth, Ernst Cassirer argues in *The Myth of the State*, is a kind of metamorphosis: to make public and social what are otherwise private, subjectively felt experiences.² One such transformation is particularly important, the transformation of uncertainties: myths organize, and therein attempt to control uncertainties by placing them in public narrative which explains them and

give them meaning. Cassirer also notes that myths are remote from reality, and may even be a flagrant contradiction of it. There is danger in such remoteness: myths lack what Cassirer calls “philosophical freedom”—the self-reflective capacity that recognizes every myth as an image which can be criticized, changed, enriched, or rejected.

Men at Work is George Will’s contribution to a myth-making about a better polity, told in terms of some of the ritual forms of baseball.³ In it, he tells the stories of baseball craftsmanship and excellence: Oakland Athletics’ manager Tony LaRussa, the Cy Young Award-winning, Los Angeles Dodger pitcher Orel Hershiser, the San Diego Padre batting champion Tony Gwynn, and the Baltimore Orioles’ Golden Glove shortstop Cal Ripken Jr. In telling those stories, he constructs a utilitarian story of the battle between human excellence and selfish mediocrity; but in this attempt, he incurs some of the very rhetorical and ethical shortcomings he is elsewhere first to condemn.

John Stuart Mill, who developed his theory of utilitarianism in response to perceived anxieties about self and society, helps put these issues of uncertainty and remoteness into context. His six “social monsters” parallel those animating Will’s myth of baseball quite precisely. In each instance, Will sees Good Baseball as organizing and controlling fear of our social monsters by providing what he finds lacking in our polity—an exemplar superior to degenerate politics-as-usual.

Mill decried the social failure to confront hedonism and to encourage people to develop their higher selves. Baseball encourages individuals to develop by cultivating a craftsmanship based in what Will sees as “high purpose,” “character and achievement”; in this, selfish hedonism is effectively replaced. Indeed, for Will the whole realm of the passions is effectively displaced, by the “happiness of work.”⁴

Mill’s utilitarianism criticized disinterest in civic responsibilities. And what is true of good baseball players is even true of good baseball fans: they are attentive and knowledgeable when it comes to shared matters. “To be an intelligent fan is to participate in something. It is an activity, a form of appreciating what is good for the individual’s soul, and hence for society.”⁵

Utilitarianism excoriated the failure to perform social roles to benefit self and society. Baseball depends on the principle that for a team to succeed, each player has to perform what amounts to his social role, “functions dictated by the order of the game.”⁶

Mill also inveighed against the failure of leaders to lead. The “players in the game of government” may be “spared the sort of remorselessly objective measurement of their performance that ball players see in box scores everyday,”⁷ Will says, but the art of managing baseball is more tightly and clearly focused on “small things executed in a professional manner.”⁸

Mill mourned the conditions which encouraged individuals to pursue crudely selfish interest, particularly the pursuit of wealth, instead of self-development. Baseball resists—with conspicuous if uneven success—the moral degeneration

that degrades society generally. “About one thing Karl Marx, a lefty, was right,” says Will. “Change the modes of production and you will change the nature of work, and consciousness.”⁹ Baseball’s productive modes have changed over the years, enough to make its premier figures almost a thousand times better paid in raw numbers than their counterparts near the turn of the century—say, John McGraw, Cy Young, Jesse Burkett, Nap Lajoie. Yet even baseball struggles to emphasize its founding values, in what Will takes to be their constitutive order: “play hard, win, make money, and have fun. The problems start,” he says revealingly, “when the third and fourth take precedence over the first and the second.”¹⁰ (Prescient words indeed, given the gloom of the 1994-95 baseball strike.)

Finally, Mill sought the kind of knowledge that led to social progress and a creed of accomplishment. Baseball resists degeneracy because in the practice and extension of its craft, “[K]nowledge matters, knowledge is cumulative, knowledge travels.”¹¹ “The best baseball people are Cartesians. That is they apply Descartes’s methods to their craft, breaking it down into bite-size components, mastering them and then building the craft up bit by bit.”¹²

But there’s something surprising happening to Will here: in Will’s appropriation of utilitarian concepts to discuss baseball’s mythic qualities, George Will finds it necessary to adopt principles of Mill’s liberalism as well.

For example, liberal *egalitarianism* emerges in Will’s comically uneasy discussion of Mickey Mantle hitting a home run while drunk. Egalitarianism dictates that players have the same moral status when they perform well, despite other characteristics or distinctions; the centerfielder’s drinking was, at least in this case, a self-regarding action that did not harm others. Mantle, Will uncomfortably concludes, cannot be criticized for ethically dubious behavior since he performed his assigned duty. Moreover, Will’s focus on the craft of baseball—rather than, say, on its ritual aspects—celebrates *the ultimate moral primacy of the individual*. He recapitulates Mill’s belief in *capitalism*—free enterprise, free markets, production and not merely accumulation, even accumulation of statistics, as an end in itself. And his treatment of Tony LaRussa underlines a *confidence in control and benign leadership* (a generalization that Will, a longtime Cub fan who is also aware of the travails of the Red Sox, has more reason to doubt than he here admits: what would the dynamics of the “managing” chapter be if it concerned, say, Don Zimmer, John McNamara, or any of the other familiar faces in the old boy’s club of managerial firing and hiring?).

There is a further similarity. Will has constructed an elaborate analogy: statecraft as ballcraft. In allaying essential fears of the public, *Men at Work*’s construction of baseball is to our polity what J.S. Mill’s utilitarianism is to politics generally: a way of “educating the passions.”¹³ If such education were taken seriously, Will thinks, it would make us appreciate baseball and politics alike as “a place of freedom or play.”¹⁴ The irony lies in how this virtue is also its shortcoming, what Will might see in others as a characteristically liberal short-

coming: Will's rhetoric of ballcraft fails as soulcraft. In its inadequate account of fear and in its studied remoteness from other realities of the game—realities both harsher and gentler—it falls short of Cassirer's "philosophical reflectiveness"; in its advocacy of the possibilities of excellence, it tells a partial and misleading story, both about baseball and about the American community.

The dean of American sportswriters, Leonard Koppett, recently articulated what every knowledgeable fan already knows about the basic uncertainty of the game: "Fear is the fundamental factor in hitting, and hitting the ball with the bat is the fundamental act of baseball."¹⁵ Will leaves little room for examining the most central and tangible fears that players face in the ordinary practice of their craft. Consider the fear of being hit by a major league pitch, which could reduce a Tony Gwynn to a Tony Conigliaro¹⁶ or a Cal Ripken to a Dickie Thon in four-tenths of a second. There is some craft in avoiding being hit (though it is demonstrably complicated by the Charlie Lau/Walt Hriniaik school of hitting currently ascendent), but confronted with either the personal malevolence of a Carl Mays, or the tantrums of Rob Dibble, or the strategic, fully craftsmanlike purposes of "pitching inside" as practiced by a Sal Maglie or a Don Drysdale or a Bob Gibson, anyone's season or career can be ended.

What may be a player's greatest fear is surely the least avoidable, the implacable attrition of aging, and against it, craft offers no ultimate consolation. For even for so durable a player as Ripken as for every player (even Nolan Ryan), there comes a time when the productive skills, notwithstanding the most earnest and systematic upkeep, ineluctably decline. Will is silent on what it is for a craftsman to live on, much less live well, after the "productive" years. His myth, sadly like baseball and even more sadly like society, gives little guidance as to the other goods and excellences available to those who outlive their "productivity."

Here we must note one respect in which Will proves regrettably unlike J. S. Mill:¹⁷ he is himself unreflective. Will ignores the extent to which some allowance must be made for those left behind by the otherwise positive consequences of capitalist competitiveness and "productivity." And in telling this myth of baseball, Will is not merely unreflective but speaks as an unreflective liberal of just the sort he loves to criticize. In particular Mill was alive, though Will is not, to the ways in which the dynamics of social change distort, if not pervert, otherwise valued ends. Mill was self-reflective in his writings in that he struggled with the compatibility of democracy and capitalism, whereas Will presumes baseball embodies and integrates both to good ends. This view of baseball-cum-polity is static, and lacks any apparent appreciation of the extent to which all social activities transform themselves and their participants over time. Another revealing example of this lack of self-reflectiveness is the discussion of a manager's fears. Koppett remarks, resonating Machiavelli, "The longer a man manages, the longer he stays with one club, the surer he is to wind up being disliked by a majority of his players."¹⁸ He knows that knowledge is not performance: managing is "the endless search for ideas that always work

sometimes,”¹⁹ and “the reality of the game is dynamic, human, intuitive and unpredictable, and even the most elaborate numerical description barely scratches the surface of complex actuality.”²⁰

While Will gives only a partially adequate account of the fears that Koppett notes, he says almost nothing about another great uncertainty of the game, luck, even though Machiavelli’s *Fortuna* sometimes does run the baselines. Will chronicles Hershiser in his glory year of 1989, not in 1990, the year in which his style did not prevent him from—indeed, may have been complicit in—blowing out his arm. With enough time, a few pitchers can have the luck to come back to semblances of their former selves. Yet Will omits notice of a Steve Blass, who mysteriously and utterly lost his control, and fell out of the majors; nothing in the craft of baseball, through years of subsequent coaching and trial runs, could bring him back.

Nor does Will say anything about social conditions beyond any individual craftsman’s control. Consider the catchers and outfielders who were stacked like cordwood in the Yankee minor league system and prevented from pursuing their craft at highest levels. They missed such opportunities thanks not to inadequacies of their own but rather to the presence of Dickey, Berra, and Howard, DiMaggio, Keller, and Mantle and above all to the Reserve Clause, management’s cudgel that bound a player inescapably to the team that held his contract until Curt Flood invigorated took baseball to the Supreme Court and invigorated the effort to take it away. Just as for some in our community today, there were no opportunities in their tracks of advancement, nor did they control their entry into the larger market.

More tragically—from both baseball’s perspective and from society’s—was the systemic racism that excluded the likes of Josh Gibson, Rube Foster, John Henry Lloyd, Oscar Charleston, Buck Leonard, Cool Papa Bell, Cristobal Torriente, Ray Dandridge, Bullet Joe Rogan, Smokey Joe Williams and perhaps many others, craftsmen at the highest level, from entry into the game. About this, the statecraft-asballcraft analogy is strangely, culpably silent. Indeed, it was exactly the sort of control-oriented craftsmen of baseball on which Will chooses to focus—namely Ty Cobb, one of the game’s greatest players; nonpareil centerfielder and alleged KKK member Tris Speaker; and most culpably Cap Anson—all of whom sought to prevent their black and brown peers from practicing their craft. And as could be attested by Bill Veeck, who at the end of his life was looking for a woman who could throw the knuckler, and by Pam Postema, who was simply looking for a fair chance to umpire in the major leagues, baseball has only had only *men* at work. Clearly there is more, in baseball and by clear extension in politics, than is dreamed of in Will’s philosophy.

Nor does Will tell cautionary tales of the grotesque personal distortion, the megalomania spawned of this craft: allegories of brilliant baseball craftsmen and self-destructive people like Ty Cobb and Pete Rose; or stories about what can be seen as problematic in the single-minded practice of craft within the dynamic of

a team: Cal Ripken has been accused, it would seem unjustly, of putting his consecutive game streak above the team's good; Tony Gwynn has been accused by his teammates of being selfish in his pursuit of hitting stats.

Will's focus on craft excludes another aspect of play on the highest level: the importance of natural ability. No amount of craft could lift, say, the authors of this paper to even Double-A ball; on the other hand Lonnie Smith continues to skate by in the majors, maintaining his apparent innocence of the qualities Will extols. Any coach or player knows that even the most concerted and extended application of craft cannot make a silk swing or stab or slider out of a sow's ear. At the highest levels, craft must blend with abundant natural ability—the exuberant ability of a “Natural” like Rube Waddell, Willie Mays, Ken Griffey Jr., even the jubilation of a Dizzy Dean or a Mark “the Bird” Fidrych.²¹ A theory of baseball *and* politics that cannot come to terms with the game's greatest Natural and ultimate anti-craftsman Babe Ruth—as Will's cannot—is questionable on baseball, much less politics.

Further, Will deals only with the big leaguers. There are other baseball stories to be invoked as checks and counterpoints, for both baseball and politics. Absent from *Men at Work* are minor leaguers struggling with *A False Spring* as Pat Jordan did; the people behind the scenes who make the game possible, as in *Baseball Lives* or in the great Ernie Harwell's *Tuned to Baseball* or in baseball writer-turned-minor league owner Roger Kahn's insistence on being *Good Enough to Dream*. In thinking baseball, Will countenances no scruffy schoolkids in the happy company of their dads,²² as in Donald Hall's *Fathers Playing Catch With Sons*. Further, Will's emphasis on craft fails to acknowledge limits to what we observers can know, as regularly acknowledged in, of all places, in Bill James's *Baseball Abstracts*.

Surely Will makes no place for those who take such undiluted and untidy joy in coming to the park, as Bill Veeck admits to in *Veeck as in Wreck*. Joy is an uncertainty bordering on mystery, and about mystery Will's utilitarianism tells us nothing useful. Will offers no discussion of the wellsprings of motivation—the passions—that are needed to sustain beginning practitioners in the acquisition and development of a craft so difficult, so frustrating, and so intimately acquainted with fear and failure on every level. When Will says that “managing, like politics, is mostly talk,” he privileges the control of ideas and planning over the passions of playing. Here, the social order of Will's chapters parallel Mill's: manager, pitcher, batter and defense; aristocrats first, masses second.

When Will makes a “case for today's game”²³ he turns away from the sometimes troubling game played on the field by children and in the minds of adults who have not forgotten the child within to a more comforting “utopia” of performances consistently well done, ultimately a world of work. In doing so he begins to talk us out of (or at least, distances us from) the heart-lifting, often heartbreaking game which always required honest self-identification with failure and the sometimes almost lyrical fantasies of getting better.

Need we really choose, as Will sets us up to do, which images are the more essential to a truthful baseball myth: Cal Ripken making the play, or Tony Kubek being hit in the throat by an easy grounder on the rocky infield at Forbes Field, in a game that the Yankees had clawed back to lead and were about to win, ultimately costing them not just the game but a World Series? Orel Hershiser's ace-year or Herb Score finishing that distinctively awkward follow-through of his and being hit in the eye by McDougald's liner, then coming courageously back to pitch (more effectively than is remembered) only to develop the arm problems that stole his fast ball? Baseball is a game which is loved because it prompts both dreams and nightmares. It is fair enough to admire professionals because of their dream-like success. But as good storytellers know, without the nightmares, the dreams could have no plot, no drama; admiration distorts baseball's mythic qualities when it elevates craft at the cost of giving the nightmares their due.

Playing baseball with craft *and* joy requires a self-reflective capacity which comes to grips with the demonic secrets that are its warp and weave. As David Kagan, puts it, "a dramatically heroic and potentially tragic confrontation stands at the heart of this most poetic game."²⁴ Will *knows* that, but his rhetoric gives him no way to say how he *feels* it; thus his account of baseball treats those demons as if they can be swept away by craft, just as J. S. Mill thought ignorance and violence could be swept away by education. Will tells a partial truth about baseball—but one which can never adequately represent a game which puts pitcher, batter, and fielder alone out there, subject to their own "horrific vulnerability."²⁵

Put another way, Will's ethical shortcoming expresses itself in the range of his rhetoric, in its narrative limits. In uncritically recapitulating the values of capitalism, Will's attempt at statecraft-as-ballcraft breaks down; his narrative indisposition to catch and share the range of experience leaves him strikingly like the soulless liberal he elsewhere, with some force, abhors. For example, Will is compelled to give us chastely homogenized characters. That is reflected not only in the figures he selected (can one imagine this book with, say, Barry Bonds or Rickey Henderson, ultimately better players, subbing for Gwynn, or Casey Stengel or Earl Weaver for La Russa?), but also in how he portrays them. The shades of business suit grey allotted to Cal Ripken, for example, admit no interest in how he is ravenously competitive; yet judging by Ripken's own statements, that kind of playfulness—vying with teammates to see who can negotiate the steps from the dugout up to the clubhouse in the fewest bounds—may be as much at the root of his consecutive game streak as his routine of preparation is. It is perhaps only a natural, defensible selection that Will's characterizations steer clear of such dispositions, but it is revealing nonetheless. It marks the limits on Will's rhetoric—the moral limits on the stories he can tell, the limits on what he can be depended upon to ken and to miss in our baseball and public experience.

What, for example, could Will capture of Steve Fireovid's experience? Fireovid spent so many years being not quite good enough to make the majors that

before going to camp with Texas in the spring of 1992, he published an autobiography entitled *Twenty-Sixth Man*. But in the season opener against Seattle, Fireovid got his chance at a save—and blew it! In an inning and a third he gave up three hits and two earned runs. Will could talk about that failure—but how much could he capture of the pitcher’s experience of baseball (and ours) when the Rangers improbably rallied for nine runs and made Fireovid, after all these years, the winning pitcher on Opening Day?

This is not to deny that Will’s stories about baseball can be true and useful as far as they go. There are good reasons, both in baseball and in politics, to celebrate “ideas” over the “passions,” not in the least because to do so maintains our confidence in the notion that over the long haul, craft can rise above mediocrity. “When that faith disappears the operation of authority unravels; it gives way to disorder or to other modes of social control or, more likely, to both together.”²⁶ But we must be vigilant against the celebration of baseball or of politics as *solely* a tradition of “craft”—as if all that is required to compensate for a culture which breeds the very self-indulgence that Will finds so threatening is to take the craft seriously, no matter how it may work at tragic crosspurposes to itself, no matter how great the role chance may play, no matter how many people are unfairly excluded from its practice. As if, indeed, the craft could attract practitioners or sustain their effort without what Will’s myths of baseball and of politics both lack: a love of the smell of the grass.

Notes

1. Jacques Barzun, *God’s Country and Mine: A Declaration of Love Spiced with a Few Harsh Words* (Boston, 1954), 159.

2. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, 1946).

3. George Will, *Men at Work: The Craft of Baseball* (New York, 1990), 5.

4. *Ibid.*, 6, 329.

5. *Ibid.*, 2.

6. *Ibid.*, 3.

7. *Ibid.*, 1.

8. *Ibid.*, 7.

9. *Ibid.*, 195.

10. *Ibid.*, 49.

11. *Ibid.*, 319.

12. *Ibid.*, 324.

13. *Ibid.*, 5.

14. *Ibid.*, 2.

15. Leonard Koppett, *The New Thinking Fan’s Guide to Baseball* (New York, 1991), 15.

16. Tony Conigliaro was the youngest player to reach 100 home runs. A fastball by Jack Hamilton put him out for two years and effectively ended what promised to be an extraordinary career.

17. Wendy Sarvasy, “J. S. Mill’s Theory of Democracy for a Period of Transition Between Capitalism and Socialism,” *Polity* XVI (1984), 567-587.

18. Koppett, *The New Thinking Fan’s Guide to Baseball*, 113.

19. *Ibid.*, 128.

20. *Ibid.*, 235.

21. Note that none of the players Will selects has a nickname more colorful than Cal Ripken Jr., being called “Junior” or more genuine than Tommy Lasorda laughingly trying to label Orel Hershiser “Bulldog”—this, in the attempt to understand the gamewhose texture has been woven by guys called the Big Train and the Georgia Peach; Ducky, Dizzy and Daffy; Pepper and Peanuts and Pie; Red, Rusty, Black Jack and Whitey; the Gator and the Bird; Pee Wee and Hondo and Skoonj; the Yankee

Clipper, Splendid Splinter, the Iron Horse and the Bambino. And as Art Hill wonders in *I Don't Care If I Never Come Back* (Simon and Schuster/Fireside, 1980:255-256), why was Arlie Latham called the Freshest Man on Earth"? How did Carlos Clolo come to be known as "Sea Lion Hall"? What in the world made Hub Perdue "the Gallatin Squash"? And why was Albert Schweitzer—the one who played for the Browns 1908 through 1911—called "Cheese"? Surely the answer goes beyond craft, but not beyond baseball.

22. And as Casey Candaele could attest as son of a star in the woman professional baseball league, often in the happy and athletically demanding company of their mothers.

23. Will, *Men at Work*, 22.

24. David Kagan, "George Will's Baseball—A Conservative Critique," *Public Interest* 101 (Fall 1990), 3.

25. The terms are Christine Di Stefano's and appear in her feminist critique of J. S. Mill's conception of human nature (1991).

26. William Connally, *Politics and Ambiguity* (Madison, 1987), 137.