

BASEBALL AS HARVEST: *FIELD OF DREAMS*

George Grella

Of all the games we play in America, baseball enjoys the closest affinity with the growing season, perhaps even with the ageless rhythms of organic nature itself. Its history, its mode and field of play, a good deal of its specialized vocabulary, its ordinary contemporary reality all connect it with the oldest of civilized, collective human endeavors, agriculture. The sport seems to have originated in the ritualized stick-and-ball games of ancient Egypt, themselves no doubt based upon some *Ur* ball games that predate recorded history. Those contests, part of the annual fertility rites, formed part of ceremonies that included singing, dancing, pageantry, and worship: sport, art, and religion share a common source and retain some connection to that source and each other even in our own time. Egyptian paintings, carvings, reliefs, and texts dating from at least 2400 B.C. through Late Antiquity (3rd Century A.D.) represent or refer to various versions of a pharaonic ball game called *seker-hemat*, “batting the ball,” which initially honored a variety of fertility gods and goddesses and ultimately evolved to serve a wide assortment of religious purposes. Although modern scholars know very little about the actual conduct of the game, they agree that its religious meanings connected it to the natural contest of winter and summer—which summer obviously had to win in order to insure fertility, growth, and prosperity—and from that opposition to the great cosmological struggle of light against dark, good against evil. In the decline of the Egyptian kingdom, later representations of the ritual ball games show that the game changed and adjusted for its times—some carvings depict the image of Caesar Augustus taking his cuts in honor of the relevant goddess, who was by turns, Hathor, Sakhmet, or Tefnut.

Ritual ball games, often related to the natural cycle and to sun worship, appear in many cultures around the world. The round ball thrown through the air obviously imitates the course of the sun across the sky; it also, of course, imitates a head and may indeed have been

an actual head in some societies at some point in time. The Aztecs, the Mayans, and other native peoples of both North and South America played various ball games, some of them stick-and-ball games, apparently both for pleasure and as a religious practice. (That history, incidentally, may account for the high percentage of talented Latin American ballplayers in the Major Leagues over the last several decades.) In the medieval Church, some version of a ball game was played at Easter, when the celebrant and the congregation tossed a ball back and forth, a religious observance probably adapted from pre-existing pagan fertility rituals for Christianity's celebration of the Resurrection. The Finnish game of *pesäpallo*, an odd and lively combination of American baseball with a native stick-and-ball game, probably derives from ceremonies revolving around the same matters as that Egyptian contest between light and darkness, an important struggle in the lands of the midnight sun. In Japan, of course, the national pastime is *beisoboru*, which the Americans introduced around the turn of the century and which the Japanese adopted with enormous enthusiasm and which they play with great competence. The sport's popularity exploded there, however, after World War II, when the American occupation intensified national interest and when Emperor Hirohito was forced to admit that he was not a sun god, but only a man like the rest of us after all. An appropriate solar religion close at hand filled what must have been a vast national emptiness.

In the United States in the twentieth century, of course, we annually celebrate our own Rite of Spring with Opening Day of the Major League Baseball season, which once again signals the beginning of the seven-month relationship between play and work, sport and agriculture, the athletic field and the farm field. That relationship may have sprung up in the necessary agricultural celebrations but it continues in the realm of the ordinary and the everyday that we all like to think of as real life. Under a government that constitutionally forbids the establishment of an official religion, baseball may approach closer than any other repeated, ritualized, communal endeavor to a national faith. (Like any faith, by the way, its history records innumerable instances of heterodoxy, apostasy, heresy, and faction, not to speak of agnosticism and atheism.)

Even the dullest hack of a sportswriter recognizes the connection between the commencement of the baseball season and the stirrings of Spring, when April's sweet showers—often resulting in rainouts—pierce the drought of March and initiate the growing season. The sports pages of our newspapers at that time of year resound to the loud, off-key, secondhand rhapsodizing that unknowingly imitates

the centuries of poetry devoted to Spring and the millennia of celebrations that lead up to the annual reenactment of the Pharaoh's great game. Baseball follows the solar year throughout the season, celebrating the summer solstice with its All Star Game, an annual Midsummer Eve contest that features the best players in both leagues, a gathering of stars, little suns that catch scintillas of light from the great shining baseball in the sky.

Obviously, since the sport occupies the warmest, fairest months of the year in temperate zones, it follows the sun quite literally as in Thoreau's words, the season "rolls on into summer, as one rambles into higher and higher grass." What may be the best nonfiction book about baseball calls the great Brooklyn Dodgers teams of the 1940s and 1950s *The Boys of Summer* and Roger Angell's first of many collections of his very fine baseball essays is entitled *The Summer Game*. As the summer game, of course, baseball therefore shares its time with the growing season; in fact the play of the sport and the practice of agriculture overlap and even sometimes, at least metaphorically, coincide.

Many commentators, from those skills and hacks of the sporting press to serious scholars and eloquent chroniclers of the American game, mention its pastoral and agricultural associations. Often enraptured by bucolic visions, or by the agrarian mythology that still dominates our sense of ourselves, they note the frequent historical and artistic allusions to contests in the countryside, the rural background of many of its early players, the legendary rubes, hicks, clowns, and rustics who populate its copious folklore. Baseball, like agriculture, is an essentially communal activity, requiring some crucial minimum population to field a couple of teams, say, or produce enough spectators to cheer for those teams. It may boast a long history in rural areas, but it also needs at least a small town to provide a context for its existence, much as farms, no matter how distant from each other, depend upon settlements for a central gathering place, a place of worship, a market, a bank, and so forth, or in other words, at least the minimal essentials of what we think of as a community.

Paradoxically enough, the Major League version of baseball, played in the great cities of America, displays most clearly the combination of rural and urban settings, the interdependence of farm and town, and even its agricultural origins and meanings. The great expanse of green enclosed within the bowl of concrete and steel perfectly represents both the contrast between and the fusion of the two poles of American experience, a living pastoral immured in the structure of industrialization. The city can support the complicated

and expensive business of maintaining a Major League baseball club, while the athletes on the field can remind us all of the games we played and where we played them—in vacant lots, asphalt streets, school playgrounds, and at least on the terrain of memory, on pastures and prairies, the natural fields of the American landscape. One very brief moment from the beautiful film *Days of Heaven* captures the duality of the playing field—some immigrants who have journeyed west from Chicago in the early years of the century to work in the wheat harvest play a joyous, impromptu ball game on the prairie, using cushions from the grand house as bases. Transforming the prairie into a place of play does not limit it, but rather reminds us of the great forever field of the American dream, stretching unbounded to the horizon and beyond.

Those fields that participants turned into the sacred space of play functioned primarily as places where crops grew or animals grazed, a fact that reconnects the sport to the land somewhat differently from the traditional notions of the spring and summer game. If baseball descends from vegetation rituals and celebrates a rite of spring, if it obeys the rhythms of the growing season, then it must inevitably also celebrate the culmination of those events, the harvest. If we regard autumn not as the time of the sere and yellow leaf, but in Keats's terms, as a "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,/Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun," then we can understand that the end of the baseball season should correspond to its beginning. As the annual World Series reminds us, the game extends well into the harvest season—note the pun on Ceres, the goddess of the grain, another fertility figure perhaps descended from those Egyptian deities. Echoing the title of Roger Kahn's wonderful book about the Brooklyn Dodgers, a lesser tome about the detestable Yankees appeared some years ago, entitled *The Men of Autumn*; one of the greatest players of that Yankee team of forty years ago, the late Mickey Mantle, entitled a volume of his reminiscences about that time *All My Octobers*, which strikes exactly the right melancholy, bittersweet tone. The harvest, after all, may represent the culmination of a full season of agricultural or athletic endeavors, but also marks its conclusion. When the World Series ends, baseball ends, the prolonged summer ends, and Winter once more descends upon the land; only the advent of Spring training, when the teams, mixing memory and desire, practice and sharpen their skills in warm climates, signals hope for the year to come.

To accept the full possibility of baseball's agricultural functions and meaning, however, the season must offer not only a point of closure, but a goal, a hoped-for conclusion, an actual yield, the

product of the long period stretching back to plowing and planting through cultivation and care; baseball must, in other words, harvest *something*. The obvious fruits of successful play consist of the various championships that teams attain, which have proliferated alarmingly in recent years—divisional playoff spots, league pennants, and with a great deal of skill, effort, and luck, a victory in the World Series. (Individuals can also win a number of prizes for their performance, but they possess much less value and esteem than the championship.) Because so many teams compete, and only one can achieve the last victory of the season, however, the crop must consist of something more than simply winning; otherwise, only one team out of both leagues would gather in the sheaves and would deserve to be known as harvesters.

Among a great many representations of the association between the sport's goals and the ultimate purpose of agriculture, a couple of novels—and especially the films adapted from them—indicate some of the magic that attaches to any mythic activity. Those essential facts of existence, death and rebirth, growth and ripeness, the cycle of the seasons coalesce with the normal conduct of the game most appropriately in the mode of magic realism. Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*, the most densely layered novel about baseball, includes a wide variety of words, deeds, and people derived from both the sport's crowded history and the timeless tales of myth. The film adaptation changes far too much of the novel's meanings, but shows, in the protagonist's last game, the contest that ends the season and his career, but wins the pennant for his team, the New York Knights and his manager Pop Fisher, the Fisher King. The final harvest turns into a harvest of light, then returns Roy to the farm where he began, throwing the ball to his son as he threw it with his father, completing the circle and the cycle, restoring the sport to its simple beginnings.

W.P. Kinsella's novel *Shoeless Joe* employs baseball, agriculture, and magic even more audaciously (if less artfully) than *The Natural*. It presents as matters of fact the voice of God commanding its protagonist, Ray Kinsella, to build a ballfield in the middle of his cornfield, which he does; he then kidnaps a famous American writer—in the book it's J.D. Salinger—and brings him to his cornfield/ballfield, where they play ball with Kinsella's dead father and the dishonored players of the 1919 Chicago White Sox, nicknamed the Black Sox for their part in the fixing of the World Series. The eponymous figure of the title is the great Shoeless Joe Jackson, one of the best players in history, but the director, Phil Alden Robinson, realized the movie needed a new title and hit upon the brilliant and evocative *Field of*

Dreams, which says it all. One scene, out of innumerable examples, shows the intersection of the natural and the supernatural world as the players return to the golden corn like a group of nature gods merging with the earth and its fruits. The moment suggests some of the many possibilities in baseball's harvest—it gathers in a crop of corn, of ballplayers, of emotional fulfillment. The characters all reach some point of closure in their lives, Iowa becomes another name for Heaven, and Ray Kinsella reconciles himself with the memory of his father. That field of dreams perfectly suits our dream of fields, of fecund landscapes and green pastures. As I once pointed out in a previous work on baseball,¹ all true fans end like Falstaff, babbling of green fields.

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¹ George Grella, "Baseball and the American Dream; *The Massachusetts Review* (Summer 1975), pp. 550-66.