

Baseball, democracy and capitalism

Baseball, as any sportswriter will tell you, is a child's game. It is also a complex business enterprise annually grossing hundreds of millions of dollars. Shaped by the spirit of capitalism, baseball is as contradictory as America itself. Baseball is the game of America, whose shibboleth is free enterprise, yet its business could not be more monopolistic; its labor relations more distorted. Baseball is as seemingly paradoxical as some of its greatest players: Detroit's Ty Cobb, the most hated man in the American League in 1910; George Herman "Babe" Ruth, whose on-field accomplishments were rivaled only by his carnal appetites; and more recently, Pete Rose, who hustled his way into the record books and gambled his way out of baseball.

This paper, which began out of a love of baseball, attempts to explain why baseball can rightfully claim its title as the American pastime. When we really worship anything, G.K. Chesterton wrote, we love not only its clearness but its obscurity.¹ The risk entailed in trying to illuminate and to explain the reasons so many Americans love baseball is not only that one might fail, but that baseball's mysticism might be dispelled. If this essay is successful, it will have thrown enough light on the subject to make the whole effort worthy of your attention, without destroying your appreciation.

Democracy, wrote H. L. Mencken, always seems bent upon killing the thing it loves.² Whether in baseball — our most popular traditional game — our plutocracy, or our political parties, democracy destroys what it creates. We raise up leaders, only to destroy them — or watch them fulfill their destinies of self-destruction. Like capitalism itself, which

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Selected Essays*, (London: Collins, 1939), p. 35.

² H.L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 167.

the economist Joseph Schumpeter described as creative destruction, our political and economic mechanisms continually press on with the struggle for existence. In baseball, the one popular game not subject to a clock's control, that struggle for existence is briefly transcended. In its place we witness a complex struggle on the field.

Baseball is an individual sport played in a team setting. No baseball anecdote illustrates this as well as the pitcher who waves his outfield in to single-handedly retire the side, as the left-hander Rube Waddell and Satchel Paige both did during their careers.³ To Americans, whose national history has mythologized the pioneer, the individual's role has become increasingly unclear. Social safety nets, urbanization and technology, combined with the decline of religious restrictions, have blurred the individual's place further. In baseball, this uncertainty about the role of the individual in society is played out on the field. Through that ritual it is resolved.

During the past 150 years America has changed profoundly: from a rural people we have become a country of city and suburban dwellers; from an agrarian economy we have built an industrialized nation. During that period, while refinements and rule changes occurred frequently, especially during the late 19th century, the basic rules laid down by Alexander J. Cartwright and his Knickerbocker Base Ball Club on September 23, 1845 continue to serve as the game's foundation.⁴

Beginning in the mid-19th century the game gathered a nearly religious significance in American life. It is no accident that the language of baseball is full of religious metaphors. The word fan, of course, is short for "fanatic." Great players are "immortals" or "idols" who are "enshrined" in a hall of fame whose ambiance is not unlike a chapel's.

³ Lawrence Ritter, *The Glory of their Times*, (New York: William Morrow, 1984), p. 24-25.

⁴ Paul Dickson, *The Dickson Baseball Dictionary*, (New York: Avon, 1989), p. 234-5.

The baseball field itself, strictly off-limits to all but the initiated, is clearly separated by crisp, chalked lines. It is, in a real sense, a sacred place.⁵

American institutions have protected baseball from democratic encroachments. The U. S. Supreme Court, in the Federal League case of 1922, ruled that professional baseball was an exhibition and not a business subject to the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890.⁶ No other professional sport has maintained such an exemption from anti-trust law. Until the mid-1970s, the relationship between Organized Baseball and its employees bore considerable resemblance to feudalism or indentured — albeit well-paid — servitude. That state of affairs continued as long as it did because fans and players intuitively regarded baseball as a source of both respite from and a protest against capitalism's relentless spirit.

The ways in which we choose to seek such respite are no less significant, and perhaps more so, than our vocations. As Aristotle observed nearly 2,400 years ago, we work so that we might have leisure.⁷ The word "leisure," if taken in the contemporary sense, will mislead us, for leisure does not necessarily connote relaxation. Rather, it implies an opportunity to live freely. If you believe that how we play says as much about us as how we work, baseball — our national game — assumes great significance. Those who have reflected at length on leisure, including the late A. Bartlett Giamatti, linked the classical Greek conception of leisure, or *scholē*, to present-day communal sporting events. All play, he wrote, aspires to the condition of paradise.⁸ Modern sporting events are not designed to appeal directly to divine

⁵ See Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 48.

⁶ The position was upheld in 1953 in *Toolson v. New York Yankees, Inc.* In 1955 the Supreme Court broke the monopolistic power of the International Boxing Club. In 1957 the Supreme Court held that professional football was subject to the Sherman Act.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 10.7.1177b ff. See also *Politics*, 1333a-b, 7-8; 1334a, 2; 1334a, 14-15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42ff.

beings. Yet they do serve to create a communal condition that resembles shared religious experience. The individual's relationship with the rest of society is mediated in that communal experience.⁹ Giamatti's position, therefore, places him opposite social theorists such as Allan Guttman, influenced by Max Weber and to a lesser degree, Karl Marx, and in the camp of anthropologists such as Mary Douglas and Claude Levi-Strauss, who insist that cultures demonstrate universal ways of coping with existence. Guttman sees modern day athletic events – such as baseball – as profoundly different from their classical antecedents.¹⁰ Ancient athletic contests, such as those so loved by the Greeks, were conceived as religious festivals.¹¹ Contestants vied not to break records, for records were not kept, but rather to win. Like the funeral games in the *Iliad*, athletic contests honored the gods by displaying excellence.¹² In our post-industrial age, Guttman argues, athletic contests are mass entertainment that have acquired the characteristics of our industrial society, including an obsession with records.¹³ Continuing that neo-Marxian analysis, however, soon exhausts its potential. The Marxist analysis, by definition materialistic, interprets economic behavior without bothering to explain the reasons why baseball should be played and enjoyed so assiduously.

Writers, who by nature are keen observers of human ritual, have been fascinated by baseball. From Ring Lardner to Bernard Malamud to Thomas Wolfe and W.P. Kinsella, writers have used baseball and its settings to tell important stories about the human condition. They have done so because they

⁹ See Douglas, p. 204.

¹⁰ Alan Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1978)

¹¹ By the 5th century, however, the festivals at Delphi, Olympia and Nemea, were noted for social, literary, artistic, as well as athletic, rivalry.

¹² *Iliad*, 23.257ff.

¹³ For baseball's quantitative nature, see Elting E. Morison, "Positively the Last Word on Baseball," *American Heritage*, August/September 1986.

believe that through the lens of baseball one can discern important truths about American life and culture. The imagery they have used to describe baseball has been remarkable for its consistently naturalistic, pastoral themes. Baseball's pleasures and its purpose, as Giamatti argued, do serve a communal purpose, as did traditional athletic contests.

Baseball, a game that celebrates our pastoral legacy, no longer has the field to itself. Technology early on aided baseball's growth as a business. The nation's railway network enabled teams to play in widely separated cities. The telegraph enabled newspapers to report baseball scores. Technology also has steadily provided more leisure diversions to Americans, such as cable channels, videocassette recorders and computer games - as well as changing the game itself through the introduction of artificial turf, night games and the threat of aluminum bats.

Games involving a bat and ball undoubtedly predate recorded history. One researcher, Robert W. Henderson, argues that all games played with a ball and bat descend from a fertility rite practiced by priest-kings in ancient Egypt.¹⁴ In the 1930s an Italian anthropologist wrote of a game he observed being played by one Berber tribe in Libya. The game, called *Ta Kur om el Mahag*, or "the ball of the pilgrim's mother," bears an uncanny resemblance to baseball.¹⁵

Baseball's more recent ancestor was an English children's game called rounders common in the 18th and early 19th centuries.¹⁶ Rounders, a variant of which is played today in Great Britain, was played on a field on which were placed four or five stones in a diamond-shaped patterns. Though different in many respects from modern baseball, rounders was similar to the game we know. Each team took turns playing "out," that is, in the field defensively, and "in," or

¹⁴ *Ball, Bat and Bishop* (New York: Rockport Press, 1947).

¹⁵ Corrado Gini, "Ritual Games in Libya," *Rural Sociology*, 4 (1939), 283-99. Cited in Guttman, pp. 106ff.

¹⁶ See Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p.4ff.

offensively. The "feeder" pitched the ball to the "striker," who, when successful in batting the ball, ran the bases clockwise. Rounders also had a three-strike rule.

Evidence exists showing that ball games similar to rounders were played much earlier in the United States, as well as Great Britain. Published in London in 1744 but widely distributed in the colonies, John Newberry's *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* refers to a game called "base-ball." A revolutionary war soldier, George Ewing, wrote in his diary that he participated in games of "base" while at Valley Forge in April 1778. By the early 19th century Americans in rural villages and towns in New England were playing "town ball." Two styles of playing developed. The "Massachusetts game" was played on a square field. The other style, called simply the "New York game" and played on a diamond-shaped field, gradually displaced its rival by 1860.

The transformation of baseball into a professional amusement business began with the amateur teams that were so common in the mid-19th century. Of these, the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club of New York, played a particularly significant role.¹⁷ The Knickerbocker Club's purpose was to bring young men together to play baseball, followed by a feast. To that end the club wrote a constitution, nominated a board of directors, had annual elections and published a detailed book of rules and procedures - including a schedule of fines to be levied for infractions, such as profanity, disputing an umpire or even expressing an opinion about the play in question.

The first recorded match occurred on June 19, 1846 between the Knickerbockers and the New York Base Ball Club. The site, across the East River from Manhattan, was Hoboken, New Jersey's Elysian Fields.

To the Elysian Field, according to Homer, heroes such as Menelaos were carried after their deaths. The ancient Greek world-view had no heaven, such as we might think of, for

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15ff.

ordinary mortals. But reserved for certain heroes of the Trojan war was this paradise at the ends of the earth.¹⁸ Baseball, which gained popularity as the industrial age built up steam, offers us pastoral respite, as well.¹⁹ Our ballparks are Elysian Fields in their own rights, where heroes – both living and ghostly – make their homes.²⁰ Baseball, which had become an American ritual, had converged with myth.

If baseball was derived from the English game of rounders, how then, did it become America's national pastime? Sentiment in favor of declaring a national game had been building. Americans had more leisure time. The frontiers had been pushed back. Waves of immigrants crowded growing urban areas. Baseball, which required a bat, a ball, some rudimentary bases and a field, was well-suited to the urbanizing country. Until the Civil War, cricket drew more spectators than did baseball. But cricket was clearly British. The German *turnverien*, or gymnastic clubs, also failed to take hold. In the years after the Civil War, baseball's popularity grew rapidly. The *New York Times* estimated that 1,000 clubs were active in 1869.²¹

In 1889, at Delmonico's restaurant in New York, a group of nearly 300 people gathered for a lavish dinner in honor of baseball entrepreneur Albert G. Spalding, who had led an international tour of American baseball stars. One of the speakers at that dinner, Col. Abraham G. Mills, fourth president of the National League, rose to defend baseball's honor against the claim that it was descended from the English game of rounders. To his assertions the audience rallied with cries of "no rounders!"

Fourteen years later, America's first great sportswriter, Henry Chadwick, brought the matter to a head by lending his support to the theory that baseball was descended

¹⁸ *Odyssey*, IV, 561ff. See also Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 156ff.

¹⁹ See Mark Twain as quoted in Guttman. Also A. Bartlett Giamatti, *Take Time for Paradise*.

²⁰ See James T. Farrell, "The Death of an Idol," in *My Baseball Diary*

²¹ *Baseball: The Early Years*, p. 42.

from rounders. Spalding, eager to settle the matter, called for a blue-ribbon commission to determine officially the origin of baseball.

In December 1907 the Mills Commission issued its report. Baseball, according to the commission, was originated in the United States by Gen. Abner Doubleday at Cooperstown, New York in 1839. Scholars, such as Henderson, and others have proved that the Doubleday story was fictional. Yet the legend, nurtured by Organized Baseball, gained a life of its own. Cooperstown, as many writers have acknowledged, is a wonderful old New York town. But its status as the *axis mundi* of baseball is important baseball mythology, for it shows how Organized Baseball saw itself as a pastoral, pure game. Although the choice of Cooperstown as baseball's Mecca was in many ways coincidental, its bucolic setting exemplifies baseball's character. Once again, it seems, history had converged with myth.

From amateur baseball clubs in the New York area, such as the Knickerbockers, the Gothams, Eagles and Empires, grew a commercial entertainment enterprise unlike any other. Despite the best efforts of the gentlemen's baseball clubs to discourage the game's growing popularity among the masses, baseball was rapidly attracting fans. The nation was gradually shedding its Calvinistic antipathy toward sports. Baseball was incorporated into a growing public school system influenced by progressive ideas about exercise, childhood and health.

By the late 1850s baseball was already being called the national game.²² In 1870 more than 400 amateur and professional clubs were represented in the National Association of Base Ball Players, which had been formed in

²² *The Dickson Baseball Dictionary*, p. 271. A letter in the National Baseball Library identifies a reference in the Jan. 31, 1857 *Spirit of the Times*. "Baseball has been known in the Northern States as far back as the memory of the oldest inhabitant reacheth, and must be regarded as a national pastime, the same as cricket is by the British."

1858.²³ During the next 18 years the amateur tradition would reluctantly give way to a chaotic professionalism that typically mounted poorly matched exhibitions, rather than competitive games. This imbalance was addressed by the creation in 1876 of the National League of Professional Baseball Clubs.

The National League was created, primarily through the leadership of Chicagoan William H. Hulbert, to correct practices created by unchecked professionalism. Among these evils was the practice of "revolving," in which competitive bidding for players prompted them to move from club to club during the season. Throwing games, known as "hippodroming" in the mid-19th century, was a pernicious by-product of gambling, which was rife. The primary reason for the creation of the National League, however, was the quest for financial stability in the inchoate universe of professional baseball.

Opportunities existed for entrepreneurs. With few competing leisure pursuits, baseball had the field to itself. What was originally a game for the upper classes was quickly embraced by the growing middle and lower classes. Baseball, like most athletic contests, offered the opportunity to participate in conspicuous leisure, as Thorstein Veblen noticed, because it satisfied the requirements of "substantial futility combined with a colorful make-believe of purpose."²⁴ As the average work week shrunk from 66 in the mid-1900s to roughly 60 by 1890, the working class residents of rapidly growing urban areas, many of them recent immigrants, found the time to devote to a little leisurely respite. Long hours laboring at factory machines created an appetite for excitement. The battles over Sunday baseball in many cities demonstrated how the newly arrived European immigrants sought some diversion from long, but gradually lightening, work weeks. Club owners had a gentlemen's

²³ *Ibid.*, P. 35ff. See also Gerald W. Sculley, *The Business of Major League Baseball* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989)

²⁴ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 258.

agreement to fix the general admission price at 50 cents. For an additional 10 cents you could get a seat on the "bleaching boards." Or, for an additional 25 cents, you had a grandstand seat.

Entrepreneurs saw how the industrializing nation, thirsty for some hard-won leisure, loved baseball. The formation of the National League was designed to make the business of baseball more profitable for its eight member clubs. Big cities, such as New York, were able to generate the attendance needed to make clubs profitable. Smaller cities, such as Baltimore, struggled. From this issue stems all of baseball's institutional problems. Players' salaries, which amounted to two-thirds of team costs, were the other big concern in the early days of the National League. A club's ability to pay its players was, of course, dependent on its ability to generate revenue from ticket sales.

But the National League scarcely solved Organized Baseball's problems. Ensuing decades were turbulent ones, with frequent trade wars between rival leagues. The trade war sparked by the formation of the American League in 1901 and the brief Federal League war that began in 1913 were followed by the infamous 1919 Black Sox scandal that came to light in 1920. Babe Ruth's feats helped to blur the painful memory of the scandal.

From the beginnings of professionalism, baseball's economic development depended on the same two, related issues of market size and competition for players. Broadcasting revenue has only exacerbated this problem.²⁵ Early on, in 1879, the league surreptitiously introduced a collusive agreement to restrain competition for players by assigning each club exclusive property rights to five of its players. Four years later the league enacted the reserve rule, which assigned each club property rights to its entire roster. This was the infamous reserve clause that stood essentially

²⁵ See "Baseball girds for financial battle of big vs. small," by Jerome Holtzman, p. 1, sec. 3, Dec. 13, 1992 *Chicago Tribune*.

unaltered for another 92 years. The 1883 reserve rule proved too inflexible and in 1885 a formal waiver rule was adopted: For a 10-day period after a player was released by a club, only other clubs in the league could negotiate with him. After the 10-day period, the player was free to negotiate freely.²⁶

The clause itself in a player's contract stipulated that in case the signing club and the player could not agree on a new contract, the club had an option on the player's services for one additional year.²⁷ That clause had been interpreted since its introduction as a recurring option, so that a player's contract could be renewed year after year.²⁸

More than any other part of baseball, the reserve clause pointed to the deep-seated ambivalence Americans held about democratic capitalism. The capitalistic economy, wrote Weber in 1905, "is an immense cosmos into which the individual is born ... an unalterable order of things in which he must live."²⁹ In Weber's analysis, capitalism – which destroyed the medieval regulation of economic life – enforces an economic survival of the fittest. He calls traditionalism the most important opponent of capitalism, as an ethically sanctioned standard of life. For examples of traditionalism he first turns to regulation of labor wage rates by employers, which was what the reserve clause did.³⁰

In few other parts of American life were Americans willing to allow tradition to run roughshod over individual

²⁶ Sculley, *The Business of Major League Baseball*, p. 3.

²⁷ Marvin Miller, *A Whole Different Ball Game: The Inside Story of Baseball's New Deal*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), *passim*.

²⁸ That interpretation had been challenged by Danny Gardella in 1947, and again by Kurt Flood in 1969. In 1975, however, Andy Messersmith, the best pitcher in the National League in 1974, insisted on a no-trade provision in his contract negotiations with the Los Angeles Dodgers. Dave McNally, a former Montreal Expos pitcher, joined Messersmith in filing a grievance challenging the perpetual renewal interpretation of the reserve clause. In December 1975 arbitrator Peter Seitz ruled in favor of Messersmith and McNally's interpretation of the clause as a one-year club option.

²⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (London: HarperCollins Academic, 1991), p. 54.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58-59.

employee rights for so long. Most players, fans and sportswriters bought the baseball club owners' argument that the reserve clause was at worst a necessary evil to protect clubs from preying on one another. As Weber suggested, inevitably the spirit of capitalism, works itself out, usually through the efforts of men who had grown up in the "hard school of life." That description applied to Spalding, Hulbert and others. It applies equally well to Marvin Miller, founding executive director of the Major League Baseball Players Association, whose efforts ultimately led to the repudiation of the reserve clause.

The reserve clause, then, provides an economic case study of baseball's meaning. For Americans, baseball was our traditionalistic way of resisting capitalism's relentless force. Baseball was different. Clarence Darrow, recalling his boyhood playing baseball, called baseball "the only perfect pleasure we ever knew." Who, having escaped the chaotic urban streets to behold the ballpark's green expanse, can disagree with Darrow?

Entrepreneurs, such as Spalding, Harry Wright, Hulbert, Ban Johnson and others knew intuitively that baseball was more than just a game, a commercialized amusement business or sport. And while their defenses of baseball owners' collusive practices may have been self-serving, they knew their continual fights over their industry's markets and raw materials were predicated on an inescapable economic fact: demand. The fans wanted baseball. They didn't much care how much their idols were paid, or whether clubs were predatory trusts. It was more than just a game, or an afternoon's diversion. This was baseball. In 1913 Frank Robison, president of the National League, in response to the Senate's Pujo Committee investigation of baseball's monopolistic ownership, said, "What the American people want is good baseball. They don't care who owns the clubs."³¹

³¹ See Seymour, *Baseball: The Golden Age*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 33.

Social theorists influenced by Weber and Emil Durkheim insist that post-industrial revolution humankind is fundamentally different from its predecessors. Guttman argues that whereas sports were once a ritualistic link to the sacred, they have since the industrial revolution become a secular phenomenon.³² Others contend that sports serve essentially the same universal function in today's society that they have always served. While Giamatti argued his case unequivocally, writers – the metaphysicians of baseball – have made a similar case in literary fashion.

Roger Kahn, the author of *The Boys of Summer*, began an essay on intellectuals and ballplayers by noting that the romance between the two was "one-sided to the point of absurdity."³³ Kahn, like Ring Lardner a couple of generations before, had found baseball players all too human off the field. The single consolation, however, for the sportswriter tired of the idols' idiosyncrasies, was what Kahn called the tragedy of fulfillment. Life, despite the achievement of making the major leagues, remains distressingly short of ideal.

Kahn stops short of extending his line of thought in that essay. But he might well have looked to the tragedy of Achilles, the favorite of Athena, for a classical prototype. Son of a goddess, Achilles ultimately leads the Achaeans to victory by slaying Hektor. He knows that fulfilling his potential means he will never return to his native Pythia. That is the tragedy of fulfillment in its classical sense. What is that tragedy of fulfillment but the misgivings of someone whose destiny – however great – is fulfilled?

Baseball appeals most strongly, Kahn observed, to imaginative people. That may account for the curious, one-sided love affair intellectuals have for baseball, which in its golden age was designed by its proprietors to appeal

³² Guttman, *Ibid.*, *passim*.

³³ Roger Kahn, "Intellectuals and Ballplayers," in *American Scholar* 26, (Summer 1957), p. 342-349.

mainly to the laboring classes. Writers have returned repeatedly to baseball as a source of metaphors for American life.³⁴ Indeed, Giamatti saw baseball as narrative.³⁵ Poets, including William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Donald Hall and Carl Sandburg, have used baseball themes. The number of prose writers is even greater: Thomas Wolfe, Roger Kahn, Roger Angell, James T. Farrell, Bernard Malamud, Ring Lardner, W.P. Kinsella; each has focused on baseball in a distinctive way. Writers communicate through images. The images of baseball are primarily rural. Thomas Wolfe, in *Of Time and the River*, tells us of "the pattern of forty thousand empetalled faces" before which the ritual occurs. Or the evocations aroused by the sound of bat and ball: "the jonquil, the maple tree, the smell of grass upon your hands and knees, the coming into flower of April."³⁶

In Kinsella's story, *The Thrill of the Grass*, a fan carries out an off-season conspiracy to replace a ballpark's artificial turf under cover of night, a square foot at a time. The repudiation of our industrial age's technological offerings in favor of living grass puts a clear message in front of us: Baseball's purpose is to bring us closer to our roots.³⁷

Barnard Malamud's novel, *The Natural*, synthesizes the Arthurian romance of the fisher king, with a modern baseball setting. Malamud draws on Jesse Weston's seminal treatise, *From Ritual to Romance*, which influenced T.S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land*, to portray baseball's mythic character and purpose. Roy Hobbs, who hails from the far West, arrives in the city to play baseball with his magic bat, Wonderboy. His lover, Harriet Bird, shoots Hobbs in his hotel room. Like Adonis, Hobbs rises from the dead. After Pop Fisher, manager of the New York Knights, arrives, Hobbs heals his infected

³⁴ See *Take Time for Paradise*, p. 82 ff. See also Guttman, p. 102 ff.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103ff.

³⁶ Cited in Guttman, p. 101.

³⁷ *The Thrill of the Grass*, (Ontario, Canada: Penguin, 1984), p. 185-196.

hand and brings rain to the drought-stricken field. Like Stravinsky's shocking symphonic composition, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, *The Natural*, speaks to us rather self-consciously of a cycle of birth, death and rebirth that would have been more immediately understandable to our ancestors.

William Carlos Williams's poem, "At the Ball Game," alludes not only to the seasonal cycle, but also to the communal satisfaction the crowd draws from the ritual of the ball game.³⁸ Underlying his poem's celebration of a crowd at a ball game, however, he — like Stravinsky — sets the malevolent potential of the crowd. Diverted for now, engaged in this apparently benign act, the crowd — a being in itself — is peaceful.

*It is the Inquisition, the
Revolution*

*It is beauty itself
that lives*

*day by day in them
idly—*

*This is
the power of their faces*

*It is summer, it is the solstice,
the crowd is*

*cheering, the crowd is laughing
in detail*

*permanently, seriously
without thought*

³⁸ William Carlos Williams, *The Selected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 31.

This "spirit of uselessness," as Williams describes the crowd's mood, like Veblen's "substantial futility," describes the condition of leisure baseball provides. Its qualities tell us of its religious dimensions: the suspension of external time, the beauty of detail, the boundaries between the field and the fans, the players kept strictly apart. Above all, it is the time spent in what Angell calls "a green place of removal." By providing this place apart, baseball mediates one of democratic capitalism's fundamental contradictions: the insecurity of the individual in a constantly changing society. Together, we search for those moments in which we can revere the human excellence that a difficult game demands. In so doing we remove ourselves temporarily from our own struggle. We become like the gods on Olympus, watching the mortal heroes below us struggle.