Baseball and literature| The center field cannot hold| Examining the failure of the American pastoral in postwar baseball literature

David Thomas Holmberg

The University of Montana

2005

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
Holmberg, David Thomas, "Baseball and literature| The center field cannot hold| Examining the failure of the American pastoral in postwar baseball literature" (2005). Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. 1647.

https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/1647

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
The University of Montana

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

**Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature**

Yes, I grant permission  
No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature:  
Date: 4/29/05

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
BASEBALL AND LITERATURE: THE CENTER FIELD CANNOT HOLD:
EXAMINING THE FAILURE OF THE AMERICAN PASTORAL IN POSTWAR
BASEBALL LITERATURE

by

David Thomas Holmberg

B.A. University of California, Los Angeles 2003

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

May 2005

Approved by:

[Signatures]

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

[Date]
For American writers baseball transcends its public role as mere “sport.” Early American artists suggested that baseball could play a role in the future of the nation, shaping a previously shapeless culture through the popularization and commodification of distilled American values. These early writers proclaimed baseball as a relevant and powerful force in both national history and national psychology, thus allowing baseball to become something more than a game. For over a century, baseball was bigger than itself, becoming a metaphorical substitute for the character and accomplishments of the nation.

It is in the postwar, postmodern epoch that America's greatest creation somehow failed, although not simply in the sense of its supposed recent faltering as America's true "national pastime." The failure lies in the failure of the promise of baseball, specifically the promise of the redemptive powers of a mythologized baseball. Baseball becomes a concept, a representative substitute for an American ideology rooted in a pastoral idealism. Baseball is often characterized as reminder of simpler times in the nation’s history, and to conflate it, then, with the anxieties of postmodernity warps that pastoral idealism. Baseball implicitly define the boundaries of American culture, of historicity as mythology or, even more problematically, history as desire, desire of what we wish history might have, and might yet, become.

Postwar writers—starting with Bernard Malamud’s The Natural and continuing into the works of some late-twentieth-century authors—now consider the ways in which, despite the flaws of this entire narrative, the national plot still maintains meaning by considering the impact of the failure of this American narrative. The failure becomes the narrative, and in doing so becomes part of the larger narrative of postwar anxiety and postmodern alienation. Although Philip Roth’s American Pastoral, Don DeLillo’s Underworld, and Richard Ford’s Independence Day all approach the postmodern condition from slightly different superlative positions, all employ baseball as a complex but useful symbol in the representation of an American culture at the brink of critical meaning, just one step away from dissolving into emptiness, just one step away from making that final out at home plate.
# Table of Contents

Introduction: “If they don’t win it’s a shame”: Baseball in the landscape of American literature  
1

Chapter I: “Say it ain’t true, Roy”: Situating baseball literature in the context of postmodernism, and an analysis of Malamud’s *The Natural*  
10

Chapter II: “Thank God for center field”: Youthful innocence and civic religion in Roth’s *The Great American Novel* and *American Pastoral*  
36

Chapter III: “The Giants win the pennant and they’re going crazy”: Conflating nuclear apocalypse, baseball and failure into the heterotopian zone of DeLillo’s *Underworld*  
54

Chapter IV: “Fuck you, bunt. Bunt when it’s your turn”: Father-son relationships and the search for mythic origins in Ford’s *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*  
75

Conclusion: “At the old ball game”: Representing the collapsed American ideology through baseball and literature  
92

Bibliography  
97
Introduction: “If they don’t win it’s a shame”

Baseball in the landscape of American literature
Baseball began in a bright green field with an ancient name when this country was new and raw and without shape, and it has shaped America by linking every summer from 1846 to this one, through wars and depressions and seasons of rain.

—A. Bartlett Giamatti, “Men of Baseball, Lend an Ear”

He said this was the shame in his life, that his fate, somehow, had always been the same (on a train going nowhere)—defeat in sight of his goal.

—Bernard Malamud, The Natural

In March 2005, several weeks before Opening Day, the United States Congress called a hearing to discuss the role of steroids in Major League Baseball. Five players attended—coerced by subpoenas—as well as key MLB executives. The U.S. government, it seemed, felt some concern regarding the current MLB steroid policy and the potential for a weak policy to weaken the integrity of the national pastime. Congress felt that baseball’s failure to police themselves necessitated congressional intervention. Some read these hearings as a necessary step to jumpstart MLB’s disgraceful feet dragging. Others saw it as mere congressional grandstanding, shifting focus from partisan quarrels towards a popular and apolitical debate.

Although the long-term effect of these hearings will likely be negligible, the willingness of the U.S. government to suggest regulations on baseball, ostensibly to preserve the integrity of the game, provides an insight into the pervasive role baseball plays in contemporary American culture. The congressional intervention suggests the
widespread belief that the integrity of baseball reflects on the integrity and well-being of
the nation, and that maintaining baseball’s purity is as important as maintaining any other
element of American democracy. It is entirely irrelevant whether this claim is true.
America believes it is true, and so does baseball.

For American writers—like American politicians—baseball transcends its public
role as mere “sport.” As a type of American civil religion, mythologized and
conceptualized nearly to absurdity, baseball enters into the American consciousness in a
quasi-biblical capacity. Even before the game assumed its modern form, American artists
assigned this so-called child’s game an importance it hardly deserved, with writers
proclaiming the relevancy of baseball to the consciousness of the American public as
early as the mid-nineteenth-century. Walt Whitman, poet of democracy and all things
American, mentions baseball as early as 1855, inaugurating a pre-industrial celebration of
the game that extends into twentieth-century modernism—Ernest Hemingway and F.
Scott Fitzgerald leading high-modernist sports writing—and into our own postmodern era
that features baseball writings by Philip Roth, Don DeLillo, and Richard Ford and others.
Baseball served as the national pastime long before it had any rightful claim to that status,
and seemingly will continue holding its mostly ceremonial title long after it has fallen—if
it has not already—from popular (i.e. economic) grace.

Early American artists suggested that baseball could play a role in the future of the
nation, shaping a previously shapeless culture through the popularization and
commodification of distilled American values: democracy (although hierarchical),
freedom (within bounds), competition (i.e. winning). These early writers proclaimed
baseball as a relevant and powerful force in both national history and national
psychology, thus allowing baseball to become something more than a game. For over a century, baseball was bigger than itself, becoming a metaphorical substitute for the character and accomplishments of the nation. Firmly entrenched by the outbreak of World War II, baseball symbolism—with its Arthurian Roundtable of Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Lou Gehrig, and Joe DiMaggio—actively transformed men into legend, and legends into myth. This mythologizing process continues today, and one need look no further than the hyperbolic polarization of good and evil presented by the much-hyped rivalry between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees.

It is in the postwar, postmodern epoch that America's greatest creation somehow failed, although not simply in the sense of its supposed recent faltering as America's true "national pastime." Baseball today maintains ties to baseball of the past two centuries, and as an anachronistic relic the game represents the idealistic hopes and mid-century optimism of the nation. The failure, then, lies in the failure of the promise of baseball, specifically the promise of the redemptive powers of a mythologized baseball. For over a century, early baseball writers consciously aligned baseball with everything American, starting with fundamental democratic principles the country is (anecdotally) founded on and extending to a faith in the idyllic pastoral as innate to the American consciousness. Baseball becomes a concept, a representative substitute for an American ideology rooted in a pastoral idealism. Although drawn to baseball since its inception, writers and intellectuals rarely deal with it as a straightforward game, instead preferring to imbue the sport with meaning pertaining to the American spirit. But if several generations attempted

---

1 In a strictly economic sense, football deserves this title in the United States. Worldwide, however, soccer provides the same unifying appeasement of the masses (despite the all-too frequent riots and murders) that was once assumed baseball would provide.
to align baseball with the essence of everything American, what does it mean when postmodern, late-twentieth-century American writers represent baseball as ultimately and unequivocally a failure? Baseball is often characterized as reminder of simpler times in the nation’s history, and to conflate it, then, with the anxieties of postmodernity warps that pastoral idealism. Postmodern writers employ baseball as emblematic of the American dream or America generally, but they do so only to see it fail. Baseball inhabits multiple roles in American society, functioning as a game and as a symbol, as a literal and as a literary event, and as the cornerstone of America’s cultural mythology.

Baseball’s role in modern/postmodern society and its literature is complex, primarily because of the centrality of myth to “theoretical” baseball—the intellectualizing of the game, distinct from any literal representations—and the problematic integration of mythology into contemporary conceptualizations of history and culture. Baseball literature maps fictional baseball onto the real game, although in an entirely unsatisfactory manner because the events of baseball must unfold in real linear time or they become meaningless. Baseball’s anachronistic devotion to timelessness and seasonal dictates makes possible an aligning of the psychological baseball within a framework of cyclical mythological time, of synchronous beginnings and returns and of time as a process of renewals rather than a linear progression. By entering the discourse as a part of a larger mythology, baseball in literature no longer need be baseball as such but rather a part of a simulacrum of American popular mythology. In this way the values of baseball implicitly define the boundaries of American culture, of historicity as mythology or, even more problematically, history as desire, desire of what we wish history might have, and might yet, become.
As an extremely malleable metaphor, the potential exists to misrepresent or over-read baseball's socio-cultural relevance. From this perspective, baseball becomes merely a repository for any number of general social theories or cultural histories. I believe this is certainly possible, and I have therefore made every attempt to avoid such a trap, although arguably even by criticizing baseball in an academic context I have already committed this fallacy. Upon closer analysis, however, baseball literature begins assuming specific characteristics unique to its genre, and breaks down into two general types of baseball literature, each struggling with the explicit role and implicit significance of the national pastime in the national consciousness. The first type of novel is the straightforward, literal baseball story, the tale of an underdog baseball team that miraculously find inspiration in a new player, which in turn sparks a pennant race that, whatever the outcome, ends in a renewed faith in the game. The second is the metaphysical baseball novel, in which baseball enters thematically into the text and becomes a type of literary event rather than an actual game, serving to represent a larger ideological project more concerned with the American psyche than the game itself. The former suffers from the inability of fiction to capture the intensity of the unknowability of real game, and the latter labors under the symbolic weight that even baseball cannot always sustain.

The first chapter situates my analysis of late twentieth-century baseball literature within the context of “traditional” intellectual baseball theory, with particularly emphasis on Bernard Malamud's The Natural as a paradigmatic postmodern baseball text. Baseball theory is by no means a stable framework, but I intend to synthesize previous theoretical inquiries by baseball critics A. Bart Giamatti, Roger Angell, and Stephen Jay Gould into a working premise of baseball literature, and then explore that theory in the context of the
postmodern historical environment in which contemporary authors write. As the archetypal metaphysical baseball novelist, Malamud does not use baseball as baseball—his knowledge of the game appears rather shaky—but as representative of American mythology and its role in society. He clearly identifies baseball's cultural importance and then seeks to exploit that significance, turning the game into a representation of the failed American mythology that will become even more apparent in the latter years of the twentieth-century.

Chapter two focuses on the work of Philip Roth and his ideological exploitation of baseball in *American Pastoral*, as well as his earlier comic send-up of baseball and American history circa World War II, *The Great American Novel*. Unlike his earlier works, *American Pastoral* implicitly incorporates baseball as an ideology underlying the text rather than explicitly witnessed. Swede Levov was a high school sports star, a first baseman, and the significance of his teenage sports heroism defines his entire life, and consequently serves to contrast his fall from Edenic or American pastoral grace all the more dramatically. For Roth, Baseball becomes a pluralistic symbol in its representations of childhood innocence and American idealism, while simultaneously representing the failures of both institutions. Roth continually reengages baseball, from his 1960s *Portnoy's Complaint* through his most recent mid-nineties Zuckerman series, and its recurrence signifies his own interest in its relevance as American symbol. Roth provides the sport with all the requisite mythological and ideological consequence, and then scatters the potential meaningfulness of the baseball into the furthest corners of modernism and postmodernism’s failures.

Chapter three examines Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, a sprawling commentary on
twentieth-century modernity and impending postmodernity. DeLillo reenacts one of the most famous games in baseball history, but it is mapped onto the fiction—or the fiction is mapped onto a real—as the characters move through a fictive simulation of real events. Through a chance historical reality, DeLillo conflates baseball and the atomic bomb into the centerpiece for a spiraling narrative spanning fifty years of history, into an American ideological odyssey, with baseball as its organizing crux. He uses the national pastime in the Malamudian tradition, as baseball is baseball only as long as it must be, and even then it is as a simulacrum. As an American artifact, baseball acts as a symbolic trope winding through a cacophony of history, becoming the echo of history, haunting the twentieth-century as it nears its conclusion and calling forth all history into a single act: Bobby Thomson’s winning home run off Ralph Branca in the bottom of the ninth inning, to end the game and win the pennant for the 1951 New York Giants.

The final chapter explores two of Richard Ford’s most important novels, The Sportswriter and Independence Day, and their relationship with the tragi-ironic position sports, particularly baseball, has on popular cultural mythology. Ford’s protagonist in both novels, Frank Bascombe, is the “classic” postmodern “aheroic” leading man—if such a thing exists, and if such a thing does not exist, Ford undeniable gives birth to him—as his odyssey through these novels remains intentionally unfulfilled, despite hope lying ready and waiting within his reach. One of the most prevalent myths surrounding baseball is its redemptive qualities, particularly in relation to fathers and sons and the ability of the sport to unite men throughout the ages and bind one male generation to the next. When considered broadly, the history of baseball employs the same ahistorical mythic tendencies that dictate father and son bonds. Baseball is considered a static game
that functions like the seasons in its mythic cycles, as a constant in the life of American man whose rules and mythologies predate even the game itself. Precisely because the presumed redemptive nature of baseball has become integrated into the national mythology, Ford is able to subvert the paradigm and then oversee the collapse of the ideology surrounding baseball’s popular mythological nature into the void of uncertain postmodernity.

These authors do not use baseball as an isolated event or a moment through which history traverses. Baseball *is* history, it *is* mythology, and its pluralism coerces what was once a sport into becoming a substitute for America. Baseball offers a point of intersection for cultural history, postmodern theory, and late-twentieth-century literature, providing a distinctly American vantage to interpret a distinctly American phenomenon. Gregory Erickson, in the *Cooperstown Symposium 2000*, writes: “Because American baseball and religion come out of a while/black, fair/foul, safe/out, and heaven/hell mentality, they find themselves in tension with an increasingly relativistic and postmodern world that is questioning our knowledge of such concepts as truth” (54). This insight is critical to understanding the fundamentally problematic nature of viewing baseball as a symbol *as such* in postmodern literature, because the game’s significance relies on its transcendence of its own self-imposed borders of meaning. Baseball maintains a crucial position in the overarching American narrative, and the manipulation of this symbol by contemporary postmodern authors suggests the instability and potential failure of the institutionalized myths of the national consciousness.
Chapter I: “Say it ain’t true, Roy”

Situating baseball literature in the context of postmodernism, and an analysis of Malamud’s The Natural
Have we, of America, a National Game?

—Albert G. Spalding, "Why Base Ball Has Become Our National Game"

That's beautiful: the hurrah game! Well—it's our game; that's the chief fact in connection with it: America's game; has the snap, go, fling, of the American atmosphere; it belongs as much to our institutions, fits into them as significantly, as our constitution's laws; is just as important in the sum total of our historic life.

—Walt Whitman on baseball

That gap in baseball between first promise and eventual execution is with us to this day, as it is with us in so many other ways.

—A. Bartlett Giamatti, *Baseball and the American Character*

A quick scan of the box scores in the daily sports pages on any given day between the first week of April and the last day of September reveals a game of unadorned numerical statistics, a game of averages and probabilities, a game of mathematically tinged chance. Batting averages, errors, stolen bases, home runs, ERA, RBI, OBP, and a virtually endless series of statistics describe the outcome of what is actually a very human game. Of course, no accounting can be made of the moments in baseball history that defy statistical probability—the Boston Red Sox remaining pennant-less for 86 years, only to

---

2 As quoted in Zoss and Bowman's *Diamonds in the Rough* from an article by Professor Ed Folsom in the Fall 1984 issue of *Arte*, entitled "The Manly and Healthy Game: Walt Whitman and the Development of American Baseball."
go down 3–0 to the arch rival New York Yankees in the ALCS and then to come back to sweep the 2004 World Series against the St Louis Cardinals—and that is the very reason the game remains so compellingly unpredictable. Theoretically, mathematics determines the game, but at any moment in any game, anything seems possible.

As with any social phenomenon, no single intellectual theory of baseball exists that definitively answers the metaphysical and even religious questions baseball poses. But a survey of intellectual writings about baseball—of which there are numerous—seems to suggest that the search for a theory of baseball is a worthwhile expenditure of time and energy, and far be it for me to doubt that impulse. A number of theories attempt to explain the abundance of baseball literature—it is said to be ten times more common than other sports literature\(^3\)—from its structural parallels with the novel to its evoking of a certain nostalgia for childhood or, more realistically, boyhood. The history of baseball also parallels the history of the nation, with the transition from agrarian to industrial nation reflected in the evolving rules and fan perception of the game, with the history of the civil rights movement embedded in the Negro Leagues and Jackie Robinson’s breaking of the color barrier, and the shift from a rough and violent game played by blue-collar men to the present ostensibly clean and ostensibly leisurely game played by men who make astronomical salaries for playing a boy’s game. As a timeless game, baseball appears constant throughout the last one hundred and fifty years because the game’s internal changes appear so closely linked with the external changes of the nation. The *New Yorker* baseball columnist Roger Angell writes: “Baseball’s time is seamless and

---

\(^3\) Noted by Robert Ochsner in the *Cooperstown Symposium, 2000* from an Amazon.com listing.
invisible, a bubble within which players move at exactly the same pace and rhythms as all their predecessors. This is the way the game was played in our youth and in our father's youth" (319-320). Time and space are essential to baseball—both will be discussed later in relation to postmodern theory—and its unique use of these temporal and spatial boundaries allows a direct link to be made with mythic structures of thought.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth-century, writers and intellectuals began speaking of the murky quasi-mythic importance of this new game of baseball, an importance that arose from an unexplained and, perhaps, unexplainable nationwide enthusiasm for the sport. In *The Faith of Fifty Million*, a religiously heavy-handed but often interesting examination of the relationship between baseball and Christianity (which also derives its title from a line in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*), Christopher Evans and William Herzog II write:

> Baseball was born in the Elysian Fields of Hoboken, New Jersey, during the 1840s and, from its earliest days, has conveyed a sense of the mythical magic of its origins to generations of Americans. Baseball was always more than a game. In a mysterious and unexpected way, it captured the imagination of nineteenth-century Americans and rapidly became "the national pastime." (1)

No one can explain the *why* of baseball's mythic underpinnings, but no one questions its existence or relevance. Paradoxically, most discussions of baseball's inception treat the game as though its laws existed prior to the existence of the game itself; it was as if the game was created to fit the rules already floating somewhere out in the ether. Some of the most notable figures in nineteenth-century literature, including Walt Whitman, Mark
Twain, and Stephen Crane all expressed varying degrees of interest in the game, from Twain’s ignorance of the rules—but admiration for the players—to Crane’s flunking out of college because of an uninhibited devotion to the sport. And as the second epigraph suggests, Whitman sees baseball as integral to the American spirit, as is demonstrated again by his listing in *Leaves of Grass* of the game in his poetic catalogue of all things American: “Upon the race-course, or enjoying pic-nics or jigs or a good game of baseball” (section 33). Although throughout the late nineteenth-century the actual game of baseball was still solidifying itself into its modern form—the game barely resembled the baseball of today until nearly the 1900s—there remained an almost mystical devotion to the sport, a belief in the role that baseball would assume, which seems all the more apparent with the benefit of retrospection.

In 1911, Albert G. Spalding published the first and arguably most biased history of baseball, *America’s National Game*, which set out to prove baseball’s definitively American origins. Spalding wanted to prove that it was invented in America by Americans doing appropriately American things, and that it was in essence demonstrative of all things American. The factual weakness of Spalding’s argument and the obvious personal investment in his claim results in a factually poor historical account of the game’s origins:

To enter upon a deliberate argument to prove that Base Ball is our National Game; that it has all the attributes of American origin, American character and unbounded public favor in America, seems a work of

---

4 Bowman, John and Joel Zoss. *Diamonds in the Rough*, pg 257-263.
supererogation. It is to undertake the elucidation of a patent fact; the sober determination of an axiom; it is like a solemn declaration that two plus two equal four. (2)

Spalding attempts to prove his case by assuming as fact that baseball is America's national game, and that any attempt then to disprove this is impossible because of his prior assumption. For Whitman, this sort of unfettered and unabashed love of the game is enough to prove his devotion; but a poet Spalding is not, and his reaching his goal demands more than a priori assumptions. Although intellectuals and poets of the previous century might have extolled the virtues of baseball and its general American-ness, no one before Spalding sought to prove it, regardless of the ultimate inaccuracies of his claims. Although clearly not a historian, Spalding's writings must not be dismissed out of hand simply because of their inaccuracies; despite his obvious fictions, or perhaps because of them, Spalding is an important transitional baseball theoretician: he desires to bring into being his theory, not simply to passively proclaim it. Ironically, Spalding did somehow prove his questionably motivated belief that baseball was undeniably American, or at the very least convinced everyone else that his explanation was a good enough representational truth:

... Base Ball owes its prestige as our National Game to the fact that as no other form of sport it is the exponent of American Courage, Confidence, Combativeness; American Dash, Discipline, Determination; American Energy, Eagerness, Enthusiasm; American Pluck, Persistence, Performance; American Spirit, Sagacity, Success; American Vim, Vigor, Virility. Base Ball is the American Game par excellence, because its
playing demands Brain and Brawn, and American manhood supplies these ingredients in quantity sufficient to spread over the entire continent.

("Why Base Ball has Become Our National Game," 3^)

Although baseball history is independently a fascinating subject, my intent here is not to situate Spalding in the history of the game, but the history of the theory of the game. Baseball could easily have remained a simple sport, a "boy's game played by men," that occupied a role of simply enjoyment in American life, but that was not to be: whereas writers like Whitman enthusiastically celebrated the game itself, men like Spalding, arguable baseball's first theorist, sought to redefine and indeed recreate the game in an image of his choosing, namely that of America: "The genius of our institution is democratic; Base Ball is a democratic game. The spirit of our national life is combative; Base Ball is a combative game. We are a cosmopolitan people, knowing no arbitrary class distinctions, acknowledging none" (5). In addition to Spalding's claims regarding baseball's supremacy, he set out to discover the who, what, when and where of baseball's conception or, if this proved impossible or at odds with his own vision, to create a new history. Largely responsible for promoting baseball's essential patriotic qualities, Spalding was able "to convince Americans that to participate in the game, as a player or a fan, was to engage in the quintessential American experience" (The Faith of Fifty Million 2). Spalding assisted in bridging the gap between sport and ideology, not an easy task but one that was necessary for baseball to assume its now nearly permanent position of prominence.

^ Over sixty years later Philip Roth would borrow this same alliterative exuberance in his Great American Novel, as a mock-homage to his predecessor in the realm of fictive historical recreations.
I speak of Spalding as the first baseball theorist because, unlike enthusiastic followers like Whitman and Twain, he had something specific and important to prove: he believed in the ideological significance of the game and its cultural relevance to American society. In the second half of the twentieth-century, several intellectuals have emerged to follow in Spalding’s tradition, although each would surely take issue with being identified with baseball’s first critic/conman: scholar A. Bartlett Giamatti, writer and sportswriter Roger Angell, and paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould. A majority of baseball critics are content reliving their own Little League experiences and attempting to draw parallels from these nostalgic revelries between baseball and broad socio-cultural themes. However, these three critics understand baseball as a dialectical experience, as both distinctively a game and distinctively not a game, as an individual’s experience of a collective event, as a physical game interpreted psychologically. These writers believe in the intellectual relevance of the game—as well as possessing a personal love for the sport—and in keeping with their writings I have attempted to distill the essence of each theorist’s fundamental conceptions of the experience of baseball.

Giamatti, whose circumstances are entirely unique and yet entirely common, represents the perfect academic/intellectual baseball obsessee. A lifelong baseball fan, he was the president of Yale for eight years before leaving his post to become the president of baseball’s National League and, three years later, the commissioner of Major League Baseball. As both an academic and a consummate baseball fan, Giamatti’s writings are lucid and profound, entertaining and philosophical. He writes about the relationship the game maintains to the American narrative:

To know baseball is to continue to aspire to the condition of freedom,
individually, and as a people, for baseball is grounded in America in a way unique to our games. Baseball is part of America’s plot, part of America’s mysterious, underlying design—the plot in which we all conspire and colude, the plot of the story of our national life. Our national plot is to be free enough to consent to an order that will enhance and compound—as it constrains—our freedom. That is our grounding, our national story, the tale America tells the world. Indeed, it is the story we tell ourselves. I believe the story in its outline and many of its episodes. By repeating again the outline of the American Story, and placing baseball within it, we engage the principle of narrative. We posit an old story, sufficiently ordered by the imagination so that the principle of design or purpose may emerge. ("Baseball as Narrative," 89-90)

Giamatti’s assertion that a “national plot” exists and is integral to the American consciousness, and that baseball is a necessary and vital part of this narrative, serves as the basis for his entire project. Although partly a literary elaboration of Spalding’s earlier claims, this is also an entirely unique theory, because by asserting a “national story” and than placing baseball within it, Giamatti constructs a framework for the telling of the national story, a structure that will become important in relation to the novels to be discussed. Instead of being a metaphor for America, baseball becomes a surrogate for the American experience, and this allows the later manipulation of that narrative in the postmodern epoch. Giamatti suggests a balance inherent to baseball that positions the game as a perfect preordained system existing in contrast to the violent improbability of existence, and the contrasting of formulaic structure with the element of the unknown
allows baseball to accumulate meaning.

As the *New Yorker* sportswriter and critic for the last forty years, Angell has been afforded an opportunity not possible for most sportswriters: to simply make observations on the game as it is and as it is interpreted through its fans. In his own words from the foreword to *The Summer Game*: “The daily happenings on the field . . . were so enormously reported in the newspapers that I [had] to find some other aspect of the game to study. . . . I wanted to concentrate not just on the events down on the field but on their reception and results; I wanted to pick up the feel of the game as it happened to the people around me” (6). Unlike Giamatti who, like Spalding, is connecting the game with a larger sense of America, Angell approaches baseball as a complete but complex unit, examining the game in relation to itself:

> Baseball is an extraordinary subtle and complex game, and the greatest subtlety of all may well be the nature of its appeal to the man in the stands. . . . Baseball’s clock ticks inwardly and silently, and a man absorbed in a ball game is caught in a slow, green place of removal and concentration and in a tension that is screwed up slowly and ever more tightly with each pitcher’s windup and with the almost imperceptible forward lean and little half-step with which the fielders accompany each pitch. Whatever the pace of the particular baseball game we are watching, whatever its outcome, it holds us in its own continuum and mercifully releases us from our own.

(149-150)

Angell views baseball as an event isolated from the quotidian, occurring within its own systematic structure. While Giamatti’s interpretation of baseball is extremely useful,
particularly as it bleeds the meaning between the sport and national identity, Angell’s insular vision is necessary as a complementary position. By interpreting baseball through baseball, by evaluating the sport on its own terms, different aspects become highlighted, particularly in its relationship with time. Baseball is not timeless, as is often argued, but instead time is governed by events within the game itself, with pitch and every inning constructing a postdated temporal structure. As Angell posits, the pace of the game is determined by the game, and therefore relates more acutely to an earlier, pre-industrial sense of time. Deanne Westbrook connects this temporality with the understanding of time found in mythology:

Baseball’s mythology includes the claim that here is a realm, theoretically free of the negative effects of time, where play may last forever. . . . Since the progress of the game is measured not by machine but by deed, its participants maintain a measure of control over time. In other words, as in myth, in baseball the laws of nature are superseded by the rules and acts of the game, human constructs enacted on the field. (Ground Rules, 100)

As Angell also implicitly argues, baseball is a game of present possibility, with each action opening the possibility for a series of actions to occur or not to occur, and this allows for a freedom from linear time. Despite the modern/postmodern reliance on clocks making baseball’s timelessness into something of an anachronism, Angell insists on the renewal afforded by baseball’s unique sense of time. Particularly in the game’s broader seasonal cycles, with birth in the spring on Opening Day to death in the fall with the final out of the World Series, the game offers the possibility of escaping modernity by returning to ancient mythological structures of time and meaning.
Although first and foremost a paleontologist, Gould’s writings on baseball are fascinating in their emphasis on a scientific and logical excavation of the sport, a mix of fondness and analytical data. In a field of writing that prefers gross simplifications and analytic insinuations rather than the truthful representations, Gould believes fully in baseball as baseball, that “baseball is profound all by itself and needs no excuses” (Triumph and Tragedy in Mudville, 46). Gould suggests that while baseball itself is not meaningful, the belief in baseball as meaningful is what has had a radical impact on the role of the game in the national psyche: “Baseball evolved from a plethora of previous stick-and-ball games. It has no true Cooperstown and no Doubleday. Yet we seem to prefer the alternative model of origin by a moment of creation—for then we can have heroes and sacred places” (48). Gould’s significant contribution to baseball criticism lies, somewhat inadvertently, in his emphasis on the meaning of baseball lying in the belief in the meaning of baseball. In his essay “The Creation Myths of Cooperstown,” Gould investigates baseball’s creation myth and the strange persistence by baseball fans and promoters to continually promote what is surely a fiction. According to legend, Abner Doubleday, later a general in the Civil War, invented baseball in Cooperstown, NY in 1839 when he outlined the immortal baseball diamond in the dirt. Again, Spalding is mostly to credit with the invention and perpetuation of this myth, as virtually no factual data exists to collaborate this story, and any of the documents that do remain all seem to contradict the Doubleday myth. But Spalding wanted an American in America to invent the American pastime, and so he forced this myth past the skeptics and, miraculously, the Doubleday story remains, more or less intact, as the most common explanation of baseball’s origins:
And so, spurred by a patently false creation myth, the Hall of Fame stands in the most incongruous and inappropriate locale of a charming little town in central New York. Incongruous and inappropriate, but somehow wonderful. Who needs another museum in the cultural maelstrom (and summer doldrums) of New York, Boston, or Washington? Why not a major museum in a beautiful and bucolic setting? (52)

Although the Doubleday myth is widely discredited, and the site of the Cooperstown Hall of Fame therefore meaningless, no one seems to feel any need to reevaluate the present mythology. And, as Gould nicely states, why should we? Baseball believes in the stories it tells, as Americans believe in the national narrative and baseball’s role within this plot. As long as baseball plays by baseball’s rules, the myth can be perpetuated unhindered.

The creation myth of baseball brings forward one of the most fascinating features of the game as literary event: its consistent and deliberate involvement with mythological systems of meaning. In *Diamond in the Rough: The Untold History of Baseball*, Joel Zoss and John Bowman explore overlooked narratives traversing the history of the game and the psychological role the baseball inhabits for many Americans:

As such a product of the imagination, baseball very easily takes on the attributes of a mythological system. . . . In the United States, which as a nation is largely defined by its lack of any sense of history or tradition, the citizens turn to myths for continuity, and to sport for myths. Baseball is not only America’s oldest popular team sport, but one of the oldest institutions in American society. (39)

The connectivity of baseball and mythology derives from a historical desire on the part of
Americans to have separate and distinctively American institutions, which may inadvertently explain the recent decline in baseball’s popularity and social relevance\(^6\).

Through a process of heavy mythologizing, baseball became a beacon for American culture, thus allowing the people of the United States a concrete institution, but malleable metaphor, by which to orientate themselves. Although the subject of baseball and mythology will remain pertinent throughout this critical exploration, it should be noted that postmodern fragmentations make the conceptual project linking these ideologies increasingly more difficult and problematic, and the connectivity of baseball and myth must be continually reevaluated.

**Deanne Westbrook’s *Ground Rules: Baseball and Myth*** is the single most important theoretical text dealing with the intersection of baseball, literature, and mythology. Although baseball’s dependence on mythology arises partly from its historical context, Westbrook focuses her exploration on the mythic structures inherent to the game, and emphasizes the appropriation of this mythology by baseball literature:

Mythic time and space, or what may be called the space-time continuum of the gap, constitutes the world of baseball and its texts. Indeed, baseball is not only a visual representation but a working model, a concrete metaphor, of both the stasis and the dynamics of the mythic dimensions. Addressing these dimensions we may become interested not in the physics of the matter but in the metaphysics, the world and plot of narrative (as

---

\(^6\) Now a worldwide phenomenon, ‘American-ness’ is such a pervasive ideology that many take pains to disassociate themselves with its rampantly spreading institutions. From this perspective, the larger project of establishing an America identity, a project baseball has always been a key component in, might be deemed an unmitigated success.
encompassing not simply fictions and myths but also visions, dreams, and others plots that take shape in the gap), which is in some sense the space and progress of desire and fear, "sacred" time and space and they appear, rebuslike, in image, symbol, metaphor, and archetype. (93-4)

Westbrook examines a number of crucial baseball texts, including Malamud’s The Natural, and concludes that baseball is highly invested in mythological systems of thought and that the structure of the game, both literal and literary, is organized around the same principles as mythology. She presents a compelling vision of baseball literature as a cohesive genre, tracing structural patterns and recurrent imagery throughout a number of “high” baseball texts, and in the process constructs a convincing representation of the game as part of an authentic American mythology.

Academic baseball and literary baseball share several common concerns with postmodern theory: temporality, failure, unknowability, and an untenable landscape that begs unanswerable questions. Brian McHale says of postmodernism: “No doubt there ‘is’ no such ‘thing’ as postmodernism. Or at least there is no such thing if what one has in mind is some kind of identifiable object ‘out there’ in the world, localizable, bounded by a definite outline, open to inspection, possessing attributes about which we can all agree” (Constructing Postmodernism, 1). Baseball is a physical, real sport played in real time on (often) real grass, but its relevance, intellectually and academically, is entirely abstracted, as typified, for example, by the title of Giamatti’s essay “The Green Fields of the Mind.” Baseball exists between these poles of actuality, between the game on the field and in the mind, privileging neither, content to keep them in tension. Arguably the conceptual baseball exists between the post-modern and the pre-postmodern, between knowability
and unknowability, a region postmodern critic McHale labels the "amphibious," a liminal region existing between or running through the modern and postmodern: "The real question is, if a text can be . . . 'amphibious' . . . simultaneously and in about equal measure modernist and postmodernist, then what consequence does this fact have for our literary-historical categories of 'modernism' and 'postmodernism'?" (163). Although the schism between the 'real' and 'imagined' object dates back to Plato's *Republic*, as an event baseball simultaneously occupies neither and both realms, a complex position that suggests the instability of categorization in postmodern environments.

Two compelling concerns raised by literal, literary, and theoretical baseball pertain to the instability and subjectivity of spatial and temporal realities. Theoretically, the baseball diamond renders inconsequential all external forces, and in the process creates a unique region in space that acknowledges but disrupts the flow of time and history. Baseball creates its own time, separate from outer realities, becoming both a real and unreal space, with its existence in the mind arguably as important as its physicality. The conflation of spatial dynamics operates concurrently with baseball's self-proclaimed exemption from time, a timelessness represented by the absence of a game clock and the counter-clockwise running of the bases. Although considered "timeless," I would argue that baseball is continually attempting to move back to specific moments in time, at least as it is represented by late-twentieth-century writers. It is a boy's game played by men, but writing about it is a man's game of boyhood speculation. Gould claims that the intellectual's obsession for baseball stems from nostalgia, as most boys play baseball and therefore adult interest in some ways is an attempt to return to this time. Baseball does not simply flounder in the "vast" not-quite two hundred year history of the American
pastime, seeking any time other than the now. Always moving backward towards the middle of the century, baseball maintains an obsessive relationship with the late 1940s and 1950s, and the concurrent representations of America and Americans during those times. DeLillo, Ford, and Roth all came of age in this period and, as a nation, this time is perhaps the most ideologically relevant to us today. Although the game concerns itself entirely with the present and the forward movement of the time towards a specific unknown conclusion, conceptually baseball always moves backwards towards the childhood of the self and of the nation which, arguably, is represented most definitively by the mid-century.

Baseball moves simultaneous towards and away from the simulacra, similar to Westbrook's notion of the diamond as the Nordic Valhalla, "home of slain warriors" and "ritualized aggression" (109), but with a postmodern manipulation. Every baseball game reenactments all that have preceded it, every action maps over each previous event occurring within that same space, in such a way that baseball simply cannot maintain its "constancy" that it repeatedly professes to control. The reproduction of an event eventually causes the alteration of that event, as Baudrillard discusses in relation to the reproduction of myths: "In its indefinite reproduction, the system puts an end to the myth of its origin and to all the referential values it has itself secreted along the way. Putting an end to its myth of beginning, it ends its internal contradictions (no more real or referential to be confronted with), and it puts an end also to the myth of its own end: the revolution itself" (Simulations, 112). Although now relegated to mythic status, the story of baseball's origination in Cooperstown was believed true, before decades of subsequent discrediting. And yet a century later the story still persists, partly because a lie repeated
for generations tends to take hold, even if only as a myth. Now, while baseball still
believes its myth, any authentic meaning this myth once held has long since evaporated.
In contemporary baseball, the idea of the myth replaces the actual myth, because both the
sport and the nation need and demand the perpetuation of a mythic superstructure. But the
"infinite reproduction" destroys the myth, and leaves it useless, except as a reminder of
that now-abandoned mythic structure. Giamatti still believes in the myth, particularly that
of the homeward journey:

If baseball is a Narrative, it is like others—a work of imagination whose
deep structures and patterns of repetition force a tale, oft-told, to fresh
and hitherto-unforeseen meaning. But what is the nature of the tale oft-told
that recommences with every pitch, with every game, with every season?
That patiently accrues its tension and new meaning with every iteration? It
is the story we have hinted at already, the story of going home after having
left home, the story of how difficult it is to find the origins one so deeply
needs to find. ("Baseball as Narrative," 98-9)

What Giamatti seems reluctant to conclude is that this story of "going home after having
left home," as represented on the baseball diamond by every base hit, walk and homerun,
is that this return home is, finally, an empty metaphor. One never truly returns home, in
baseball or in life, because "home" is no longer "home" once those first steps have been
taken in departure. Although important individually, runs scored, i.e. returns home,
become increasingly unimportant when viewed collectively from a larger psychological-
historical perspective. When a ball player crosses home plate, that event is meaningful on
a humanistic level, but when that player's total runs over an entire season is examined it
becomes merely a statistic. As a statistic this event loses its original meaning and, although the event remains real, Baudrillard would argue that the quality of the “real” becomes increasingly subjective:

The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control—and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational. In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelopes it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. (Simulacra & Simulation, 2)

The near-infinite reproductions of the game propel baseball towards becoming hyperreal, a state in which the game distances itself increasingly from any outside ideologies and becomes increasingly internalized. These progressively internal and highly structured ideologies found in baseball push the sport towards becoming a type of civil religion. With its independent history and internally determined code of ethics, the game becomes less a game and more a type of pop-cultural religious experience. The conceptualization of baseball “no longer measur[ing] itself against either an ideal or negative instance” presents a contradiction because the game refers always to an ideal form or, paradoxically, to what baseball is not. Based philosophically on intentionally fictitious ideals, baseball derives meaning from the repetition and perpetuation of these foundational myths.

As a fundamental component of the American narrative and American pop-
mythology, the major conceptual movement of baseball is towards erecting a cohesive structure of meaning out of an otherwise meaningless system. In this way baseball is similar to the modernist movement. As a rational and meaningful product of an often irrational and senseless society, for decades baseball served its duty as unifying symbol, an animated iconographic representative for all things good and American. But from a late twentieth/early twenty-first century perspective, this type of cohesive meaning has been all but lost. What remains are the fragments of cultural meaning that have become impossible to reassemble, of which baseball remains a prominent symbol. Yet when employed today, the meaning of baseball has been distorted and mangled by years of subjugation to a weakened system of cultural understanding. Today baseball has become somewhat of an anachronism, a game resonating with nineteenth and early-twentieth-century history that is still played 162 days a year despite the increase of potential ‘national’ pastimes and the much-discussed disintegration of the attention spans of youth. The postmodern collapse of culture is baseball, and therefore any examination of reveals a greater insight into the complex attitudes of contemporary society.

All sports involve a healthy dose of failure—no matter how many teams play, all but one are losers—but none revel in disappointment quite like baseball. What other sport considers individual success to be achieving three out of ten times, total mastery four out of ten? Baseball delights in losers—the Chicago Cubs and pre-2004 Boston Red Sox are ready examples—despite the belief that the sport fundamentally strives towards redemption. In regards to the theoretical/literary dimensions of baseball, this sense of failure is more complex, more intangible. Angell eloquently states the case for baseball and failure: “It all looks easy, slow, and, above all, safe. Yet we know better, for what is
certain in baseball is that someone, perhaps several people, will fail. They will be searched out, caught in the open, and defeated, and there will be no confusion about it or sharing of the blame” (311). The specificity and locality of the failure in baseball is deliberately assigned to a single person and this, coupled with the fact that the slowness of the game allows for consideration and contemplation of these errors, contributes to the uniqueness of baseball’s relationship to failure.

Although not a particularly popular or common subject for critique, writer and critic William Gaddis critically analyzes failure in his essay “The Rush for Second Place.” Gaddis often turns to sports for his examples or, perhaps more accurately, he often turns to politicians/writers/intellectuals/coaches that turn to sports as referents for explaining both success and loss:

The Reformation swept away the intercession of the Roman church in the sixteenth century and posed man’s direct accountability to God. We might do worse, then, than to pursue this accountability in an effort to discover what became of it in the form Christianity took in the shaping of America; whether, in fact, the Protestant ethic fostered the very secular humanism it is now being summoned to do battle against and, if this is so, whether it can prevail with half the equation missing. (43)

Although critical discussions rarely frame the theoretical discourse in quite this way, the concerns of postmodernism relate intimately to this idea of failure, both in theory and application. Largely understood as a reaction to modernism, postmodernism views modernism as an unequivocal failure and because of this failure postmodernism becomes inevitable. Modernism served its pre-World War II purpose, but following the war and
the dropping of two atomic bombs, how can a hope for redemption, through art or mythology, be found? Baseball would seem the perfect symbol to retain such a hope, although, as shall be shown, even baseball in the postmodern age is a fragile metaphor.

In 1952 Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* was published, marking the inauguration of a new genre of serious-minded adult baseball fiction. The novel reads like a baseball version of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* with all of its overt Arthurian references, specifically to the story of the Fisher King and his barren kingdom. The novel begins with the "divinely" gifted protagonist Roy Hobbs as a young man, embarking on a quest to become a major league ball player. The seduction by a beautiful woman, and her subsequent inexplicable and unexplained shooting of the hero, tragically interrupts Roy's destiny, physically and psychologically scarring him for life. When the novel picks up again fifteen years later, Roy is in his mid-thirties and trying again to break into the big leagues, this time as the oldest of rookies on the transparently named New York Knights. With his bat Wonderboy, crafted in true mythic fashion from a lightening-cracked tree, Roy eventually earns a spot in the outfield and attempts to become the "best there ever was in the game" (27), and he almost succeeds. Unfortunately, he has a weakness for women, and falling for Memo Paris dooms him and his career again, and this time with clear finality and no hope for redemption. Westbrook relates the impossibility of redemption to the story of the Fisher King: "Percival may have failed to ask the pertinent

---

7 The film version of *The Natural*, released in 1984 and starring Robert Redford, contains a vastly altered ending: instead of Roy Hobbs's final strikeout and ultimate grizzly moral despair, cinematic Roy smashes the ball out of the park and goes on to have a lovely life with his new wife (who he does not bean in the head with an errant fly ball) and their new son who, appropriately, he plays catch with in an afternoon field. The tonal changes transform Malamud's novel of mythic postmodern despair into the standard baseball-as-redemption melodrama.
question, but for Roy there may well be no pertinent question. If there is, and it is
discovered and asked, the modern reply might prove unthinkable or unbearable” (192).
As a deliberate reinterpretation of the Fisher King narrative into modern/postmodern
terms, it becomes clear that the crucial differences between Malamud’s novel and the
Fisher King story originate in generational disparities: medieval times may have
prompted moral skepticism, but the insufferable answer to modernity does not even have
a question, to mention nothing of a response.

As a paradigmatic postmodern baseball text, *The Natural* exhibits many of the
characteristics evident in DeLillo, Ford, and Roth. The first novel to engage baseball as
mythology, Malamud’s text suggests baseball as something more, or other than, baseball.

Westbrook draws a direct line from the postmodern “hero” to Roy Hobbs: “The mythic
dimensions of Roy Hobbs’s world are created by echo, allusion, suggestion, parody, and
image, which are the hallmarks of a postmodern scene. The novel’s mode is irony, its
theme is terror, and Roy Hobbs is unmistakably a twentieth-century man” (212). When
compared to previous baseball players in literature, Roy Hobbs certainly appears unusual;
although the classic enigmatic but extraordinary star, Roy does not carry his team to
victory because he cannot make the necessary play, and he therefore cannot achieve the
requisite redemption baseball so adamantly posits: “He thought, I never did learn
anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again” (190). Removing the possibility
of redemption from a sports text, especially a baseball text, proves a radical and startling
choice by Malamud, because essentially sports novels are—this relates to Westbrook’s
conception of baseball as mythically structured as well—designed as a modern form of
the salvation story, rooted in a chivalric tradition that offers redemption as reward for a
successful quest. But Roy Hobbs is the failed hero, the fallen man, an image nicely depicted when Harriet shoots the young hero: “A twisted dagger of smoke drifted up from the gun barrel. Fallen on one knee he groped for the bullet, sickened as it moved, and fell over as the forest flew upward, and she, making muted noises of triumph and despair, danced on her toes around the stricken hero” (33). This passage imparts a certain sense of ritualization, as Roy’s wounding becomes a reenactment, or even simulation, of the Fisher King’s rather graver injury—usually some form of castration—although Malamud’s hero will never be allowed to redeem himself, by physical action or moral salvation.

Participating unaware in a world structured on mythology, Roy believes he is simply playing baseball. Here the fundamental rift between baseball the concept and baseball the reality reveals itself. Roy attempts to act like a ballplayer despite the (fictional) world demanding something more: “No, that wasn’t what she meant, Harriet said. Had he ever read Homer? Try as he would he could only think of four bases and not a book. His head spun with her allusions. He found her lingo strange with all the college stuff and hoped she would stop it because he wanted to talk about baseball” (26). Roy believes that by maintaining a singularity of vision, by thinking only of those four bases, he will become the best of his profession. However, a much graver situation persists, because in truth he is not even playing baseball: Roy Hobbs acts out a mythic narrative which he remains utterly helpless to alter. This irony of displacement, of an average-guy baseball player unknowingly participating in a highly predetermined mythic narrative, changes a novel superficially in the modernist vein, a la Eliot, to a text disruptively postmodern: “The novel, Malamud’s myth, is crafted of mythic rubble from the Western
past, with transformed and deformed archetypes whose chains of association constitute an uncanny semantic field, ambiguous even to the point of absurdity” (181); “Malamud’s novel is full of ghosts of earlier texts and myth systems. When these are called together for service in a twentieth-century novel, they cannot bring their original contexts (the world in which they operated as living myths), and so they do not bring their original pattern, order, and meaning” (212). These myths in *The Natural* suggest a simulacrum of meaning, an artificiality induced from intensive, even obsessive, layering of mythology that forms an impossible backdrop for the poor realist Ray Hobbs’s quest. His egoistic and narrow-minded quest to become the best ballplayer of all time appears to contribute to his final failure, although in actuality fate (i.e. Malamud’s sense of mythology) never affords even the possibility of success. In the final lines of the novel, Roy Hobbs reenacts the infamous scene involving “Shoeless” Joe Jackson, one of the eight Chicago White Sox who notoriously threw the 1919 World Series:

Roy handed the paper back to the kid.

“Say it ain’t true, Roy.”

When Roy looked into the boy’s eyes he wanted to say it wasn’t but couldn’t, and he lifted his hands to his face and wept many bitter tears.

(190)

Roy Hobbs possesses few options for success, and even after trying to right a wrong he has only nearly committed he finds only failure. *The Natural* suggests that man’s condition in the postmodern age is one of failure, that regardless of action or inaction this eventuality cannot be prevented. The novel represents the disjunction between baseball as event (Roy Hobbs) and baseball as literary event (the text), and ultimately offers no
possibility of reconciliation, no hope to bring these two visions that exist within a single
concept into a singular unity. Instead, the gap widens: “He said this was the shame in his
life, that his fate, somehow, had always been the same (on a train going nowhere)—defeat
in sight of his goal” (125).
Chapter II: “Thank God for center field”

Youthful innocence and civic religion in Roth’s *The Great American Novel* and *American Pastoral*
Of course, there are those who learn after the first few times. They grow out of sports. And there are others who were born with the wisdom to know that nothing lasts. These are the truly tough among us, the ones who live without illusion, or without even the hope of illusion. . . . I need to think something lasts forever, and it might as well be that state of being that is a game; it might as well be that, in a green field, in the sun.

—A. Bartlett Giamatti, “The Green Fields of the Mind”

Somewhere, it seems, in the space of baseball—the game, the myth—is a white house with green shutters and a tricycle overturned on the porch, a father to verify the son’s frightened recognition that some kid lives here, and inside, a pretty, ever-young woman in a blue apron. It is this space, this gap, to which symbolically a son returns to announce, probably reluctantly, “I’m home, Mom.”

—Deanne Westbrook, *Ground Rules* 265

Philip Roth’s novels present a postwar America that struggles with itself and its identity, with its own sense of representation and its historical place in the American narrative. His novels evoke a narrative landscape filled with thematic ambiguities and unresolved narratives that simultaneously conjures the *too* real world in which we live as well as this indeterminate spirit of America. In *The Great American Novel*, Roth tells a revisionist history of 1930s and 1940s America through the lens of a fictitious baseball league. Decades later Roth wrote *American Pastoral*, a tragedy, in the true Shakespearean
tradition, of a man whose perfect American life—principally defined by his high school sports stardom and a beauty pageant wife—is laid waste by a single, unexplainable event. Philip Roth uses baseball as representative of the complex and often alienating experience of being American, of embracing a specific nationality in an environment of otherness. For Roth, baseball represents childhood innocence, but it also represents the failure of this innocence and the search for a secular national religion or patriotism disconnected from nationality or national identity.

Roth does not question baseball’s role in the national narrative. What Roth questions is the narrative itself. His vision of America by way of baseball reveals the sport as so integrated into the national consciousness that, like apple pie and Elvis Presley, baseball becomes part of the unquestioned façade of the American consciousness. But even more than most institutionalized American symbols, the idealized model of baseball suggests a sacred national relic and, in the realm of religion, becomes a secularized Church of America: “At the center of baseball’s symbolic power there resides a unique language of civil religion, proclaiming that the game can redeem America and serve as a light to all nations. . . . Baseball became the national game because it succeeded in creating its own narrative tradition. At the core of that narrative tradition was a faith that the game was as pure as America itself” (Evans and Herzog, Faith of Fifty Million, 15). Baseball as “civil religion” is a familiar interpretation—the film Bull Durham opens with Susan Sarandon proclaiming: “I believe in the church of baseball. I’ve tried all the major religions, and most of the minor ones. . . . The only church that truly feeds the soul day in and day out is baseball”—and various explanations abound for this common experience. Gregory Erickson, in an essay in the 2000
Cooperstown Symposium “Jesus is Standing at the Home Plate: Baseball and American Christianity,” argues that American Christianity and baseball follow similar trajectories, with both originating in popular culture in the mid-nineteenth-century and progressing from there along parallel paths. His argument, despite being somewhat subjective, highlights the search for tangible evidence of an otherwise ephemeral feeling that baseball and religion are somehow inexorably linked. However, Erickson does make a compelling argument when he claims: “From their beginnings, American Christianity and baseball have looked back to some imaginary golden age when things were good and pure. American Christianity looks to an original primitive church of the early Christians, un tarnished by 2000 years of history. Baseball has insisted upon an earlier untouched more honest version of the game that we need to get back to” (43). This sense of the Edenic qualities—primarily in the desire to return to a prelapsarian state—of the myth of baseball become important in Roth’s texts because baseball, in its intimate ties with childhood, reflects a now-corrupted state of being. The characters in Roth’s work wish to return to this Edenic existence, and yet there is an implicit awareness that such a return remains an impossibility because the symbol itself has been altered beyond recognition.

Roth frequently writes with a vaguely autobiographical approach, and therefore any reading of his work benefits by some knowledge of his life. In the context of this analysis, his boyhood obsession with baseball illuminates his frequent textual melding of childhood innocence with baseball; the two become virtually synonymous in his texts. In Reading Myself and Others, Roth writes: “Between the ages of nine and thirteen, I must have put in a forty-hour week during the snowless months over at the neighborhood playfield. As I remember it, news of two of the most cataclysmic public events of my
childhood—the death of President Roosevelt and the bombing of Hiroshima—reached me while I was out playing ball” ("My Baseball Years," 179). That Roth contextualizes his childhood memories through baseball is important because it demonstrates his own particular fascination with a game which he seems more concerned with thematically or symbolically than in any “real” sense:

[My parents] probably would have been shocked if I had made the team. . .
Surely it would have put me on a somewhat different footing with this game that I loved with all my heart, not simply for the fun of playing it (fun was secondary, really), but for the mythic and aesthetic dimension that it gave to an American boy’s life—particularly to one whose grandparents could hardly speak English. . . . For someone whose roots in America were strong but only inches deep, and who had no experience, such as a Catholic child might, of an awesome hierarchy that was real and felt, baseball was a kind of secular church that reached into every class and region of the nation and bound millions upon millions of us together in common concerns, loyalties, rituals, enthusiasms, and antagonisms.
Baseball made me understand what patriotism was about, at its best. (180)

Roth insightfully articulates the sense of baseball as secular religion, particular for a child of recent immigrants. The most telling statement regards his sense, even as a child, of the mythic and aesthetic relevance of baseball, of the possibility to enter into the American experience via this unique national diverse and collective experience. In the Faith of Fifty Million, Evans and Herzog explain that “baseball’s enduring stature as a sacred symbol of American identity highlights how the sport occupies a unique crossroads between
historical realities and popular myth. Baseball flourished because of its ability to convince Americans that to participate in the game, as a player or a fan, was to engage in the quintessential American experience” (2). From Roth’s perspective this certainly seems true, although I would qualify this “American experience” in Roth’s work as referring specifically to youth, both in a literal sense of childhood and in the Judeo-Christian Edenic implications. This Church of Baseball, as it has been called, is of critical importance to Roth’s work, although some consideration should be given to Roth, as a Jewish American, participating in the creation of a type of median religion American religion, in which Christians and Jews might partake equally. Particularly in the second half of the twentieth-century, the fragmentation of religion—^with the seemingly peaceful coexistence of Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, etc. etc.—led to the reproduction and proliferation of religion. The Church of Baseball, as a secular national religion, acts as a force bringing together disparate dogmas and ideologies in the name of a unified national consciousness. I mention this primarily because the complexity of Roth’s project—the simultaneous division and conflation of Judaism, innocence, masculinity, American-ness, and baseball—suggests an insistence on both positive and negative readings of this secularized American religion, and any attempt at resolution is finally impossible.

Historically—albeit unexplainably—baseball maintains a role in the American psychology as a potentially redemptive force that represents the possibility of salvation through a return to some kind of imagined pastoral innocence. Theories abound for the reasons behind this association, although none are entirely satisfactory. In *Baseball/Literature/Culture*, Greg Ahrenhörsrter writes: “Since the dawn of the
twentieth-century. . . Americans have become increasingly more aware of the
dehumanizing properties of this American society. Not surprisingly, around this same
time, Americans began to search for a cure for, or at the least an escape from, the
oppressive system. Curiously, as early as the 1870s, baseball has been identified as a
panacea for the beleaguered masses” ("Baseball as a Symbol for Capitalism," 22). This
explanation recognizes the reasons behind these associations, and the events that
produced them. Although possibly coincidental, the increasing degradation of the quality
of life that the Industrial Revolution brought about certainly provides a valid explanation
for the concurrent rise of baseball’s popularity and widely perceived innocence.
Ahrenhörsrster continues: “By the 1920s, baseball had developed into a popular symbol
of innocence. Against the complexity and callousness of the industrialized cities, baseball
was seen as pure and pastoral ideal. Indeed, Major League Baseball’s appointing of its
first commissioner and the particularly harsh penalties he assessed to the participants in
the 1919 Black Sox scandal seem a curious attempt to maintain baseball’s wholesome
reputation” (22-3). I do not pretend to understand or explain baseball’s obsession with
innocence and pastoral idealism, but it is undeniably an integral part of the game’s appeal.
Ahrenhörsrster’s assertion that baseball’s lifetime ban on any player who gambles on the
game relates to this obsession with a certain pastoral idealism is highly suggestive.
Baseball symbolizes the human—although clearly a more masculine than feminine
characteristic, judging from the predominantly male fascination with sports—desire to
recreate or recast history into an ideal, into a personal Eden from which we have been
exiled, but to which we may someday return.

In one of his earliest novels, *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth conflates Judaism,
“deviant” sexual desire, and, to a lesser—but I would argue no less necessary—extent, baseball into the single portrait of a young Jewish man. Although neither deviant sexuality or baseball has really anything to do with one another, both find common ground with Judaism or, more universally, religion generally. The novel is framed as a man’s session with his psychologist, and his revelations of a sexual obsession derivative, in part, from his relationship with his mother. As a Jewish man, he also deals with various feelings of alienation and “otherness” arising from his religion. Early in the novel, a crucial and telling schism develops in the psyche of young Alexander Portnoy between adolescent sexual desire, represented by obsessive masturbation, and ahistorical guiltless masculinity, characterized asexually by baseball. As a boy, Alex’s father gives him the paradigmatic young boy’s birthday present: a baseball, a bat and a glove. In what he considers a crucial moment in his “history of disenchantment,” he describes a childhood moment on the diamond with his father:

“Oh, Big Shot Ballplayer,” he says, and grasps my new regulation bat somewhere near the middle—and to my astonishment, with his left hand where his right hand should be. I am suddenly overcome with sadness: I want to tell him, *Hey, your hands are wrong*, but am unable to, for fear I might begin to cry—or he might! “Come on, Big Shot, throw the ball,” he calls, and so I do—and of course discover that on top of all the other things I am just beginning to suspect about my father, he isn’t “King Kong” Charlie Keller either. (11)

His father’s failure to even approximate the appearance of being able to play baseball represents the emasculation of the father in the eyes of the boy, and the archetypal failure
of the father generally. Alex's love of baseball illustrates an ahistorical event in which participation grants a peace and connectivity to a world separate from the problematic psychological complications of the domestic or familial sphere: "Thank God for center field! Doctor, you can't imagine how truly glorious it is out there so alone in all that space... where you are able to see everything and everyone, to understand what's happening the instant it happens" (69). In a classical Judeo-Christian sense, baseball embodies the pure, unspoiled Eden of childhood innocence that the satanic sexual lust of young adulthood destroys. Roth employs the image of baseball in a mostly autobiographical manner—judging from the similarities between Roth's descriptions in "My Baseball Years" and Alex's affection for the sport—and in a way that frees the game from any sense of the guilt that Alex expresses over virtually every other event of his childhood. Baseball emerges unscathed, a happy, hopeful symbol of childhood innocence that does not, although not necessarily cannot, become soiled by the events off field and of the often unpleasant events of growing up.

Although the most obviously baseball-oriented text, the highly satirical nature of *The Great American Novel* suggests that the thematic use of the game has less to do with representations of the game than to do with a relentless parody of America and American history via the subtext of baseball. The novel follows the plight of the fictional homeless baseball team, the Ruppert Mundys, and the collapse of their fictional third major league, the firmly ironic Patriot League, at the hands of a Communist plot, and in doing so covers considerable satirical ground. Smitty, a paranoid sportswriter who is desperately trying to prevent the rewriting of history to exclude his beloved Patriot League, ostensibly writes the novel as a reclamation of history. Roth plays with the irony of a homeless baseball
team in a game that, at least linguistically, is rooted in the quest for home by subverting
the game's reliance on this imagery. While Roth seems clearly critical of the actual
ideologies supporting baseball mythology, the novel as a whole is difficult to classify
critically because its satire is both obvious, in its general aim to rethink American history
circa World War II, and remarkably obscure in its details, as Roth satirizes actual
American history via semi-fictional baseball history. The novel even mocks its own
excessive ambition without ever attempting to restrain or curtail that ambition. Roth
asserts that it is the implications of American history he is concerned with far more than
the specifics of baseball's role, real or psychological, within that history:

    . . . the fierce, oftentimes wild and pathological assault launched in the
sixties against venerable American institutions and beliefs and, more to the
point, the emergence of a counterhistory, or countermythology, to
challenge the mythic sense of itself the country had when the decade
opened with General Eisenhower, our greatest World War II hero, still
presiding—it was these social phenomena that furnished me with a handle
by which to take hold of baseball, of all things, and place it at the center of
a novel. It was not a matter of demythologizing baseball—there was
nothing in that to get fired up about—but of discovering in baseball a
means to dramatize the struggle between the benign national myth of itself
that a great power prefers to perpetuate, and the relentlessly insidious, very
nearly demonic reality. . . that will not give an inch in behalf of that
idealized mythology. ("On The Great American Novel," 89-90)

Although Roth said this in the late seventies, the issues he raises in this passage,
particularly the rewriting of history and emergence of counterhistories in the 1960s, still remain vitally relevant in his novel American Pastoral, written twenty years later. The thematic concerns of The Great American Novel extend beyond its often narrow borders and into many of Roth’s later works. That demythologizing baseball was “nothing to get fired up about” allows a wonderful insight into Roth’s project because it suggests both his awareness of baseball’s innate mythological status in the American psyche as well as the lack of interest in disrupting that mythology. Roth accepts baseball on its own terms, and is therefore uninterested in any criticism of what he elsewhere describes as simply a game because, well, it is just a game. The novel, then, uses baseball as its structure, and then attempts to spiral outwards into world events of the mid-twentieth-century. Steven Milowitz, in Philip Roth Considered explains:

> The Holocaust-pattern is clearly present in The Great American Novel, a past burrowing its way into the consciousness of the present. And the Holocaust-thematic is alive in the structure of the text. There are two truths, Smitty’s and the “real American history” (Reading Myself and Others 91). And both are somehow true and somehow false, facts rewritten to serve an agenda: Smitty’s nihilistic agenda of deconstruction and the American government’s agenda of ideologic myth-making. (177)

Clearly, The Great American Novel is not just a farcical baseball text—Milowitz identifies the serious nature of the “saga of the Ruppert Mundys [taking] place from 1933 to 1945, the years of Hitler’s reign” (178)—and its deep involvement with its own historical context should not be underestimated. That Roth chose baseball as his “subject” seems suggestive of both his awareness of the game as representative of the national
narrative, in the sense described by Giamatti, and his desire to subvert that myth on which so many Americans depend.

The role of narration in Roth's work always maintains a prominent and problematic position. His use of first-person narration frequently complicates the seemingly objective distance that a narrator often assumes, luring the reader into a false sense of narrative impartiality, despite the implicit biases of that narrator. In *The Great American Novel*, Smitty writes a revisionist history with the intent of shedding light on a supposed governmental conspiracy to destroy the national pastime and, in the satirical context of the novel, this seems completely fanatical. He wants to restore a forgotten baseball team to its rightful historical place of honor, remember the glory of a now-dead league, and generally bestow hope and love upon the game of baseball. Is this not, in at least some sense, the implicit goal of every book written about baseball, or any sport? Smitty comes across as somewhere between fanatic and paranoid delusional, despite the familiarity of his theoretical claims. In *Reading Myself and Others*, Roth described Smitty's "text" as an attempt "to imagine a myth of an ailing America; my own is to some extent an attempt to imagine a book about imagining that American myth" (92). The novel's title should be taken seriously, or at least as seriously as Roth intends *Smitty* to mean it; this is Roth's meta-narration of a sportswriter's imagining of the great American novel, in all its preposterousness. Roth's manipulates the American narrative to such an extent that the *real* history becomes something of a mythology, with the *fictional* history assuming at least the sensation of an authorized truth. As the ultimate unreliable narrator, Smitty attempts to recast and rewrite an entire segment of history. Roth employs this same type of meta-narration, albeit less heavy-handedly, in *American Pastoral*, as Roth
writing Nathan Zuckerman writing Swede Levov attempts to understand the failed American experience.

In *American Pastoral*, Roth returns to baseball as symbolic of the loss of something indefinable beyond the awareness of its disappearance. Nathan Zuckerman, a reclusive and now-impotent writer, ostensibly writes the story of a childhood acquaintance and local sports legend, Seymour “the Swede” Levov, and his perplexing fall from grace that results from his daughter Mary’s actions. Zuckerman explains that in the 1960s a rebellious young Mary, in the age of rebellion, blew up a post office to make an anti-war, anti-government statement, and unwittingly killed a man. Her subsequent escape from the law, and her family, initiates “the Swede into the displacement of another America entirely, the daughter and the decade blasting to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking, the plague America infiltrating the Swede’s castle and there infecting everyone. The daughter who transports him out of his longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk” (86). Roth resumes his exploration, begun in *The Great American Novel*, of the effect of 1960s counterhistories and countermythologies, although in *American Pastoral* he uses these theoretical frameworks not to unmake American history, but to unmake the paradigmatic American boy/man.

The novel focuses on the making, and subsequent unmaking, of the Swede, and through these events a glimpse can be had of the correlating creation and destruction of the concurrent American dream. A major force in the creation of the Swede as the archetypal American boy becomes his status as all-around high school sports star—“end
in football, center in basketball, and first baseman in baseball” (3)—although Zuckerman best explains that literal deification of the Swede

... into the household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews can best be explained, I think, by the war against the Germans and the Japanese and the fears that it fostered. With the Swede indomitable on the playing field, the meaningless surface of life provided a bizarre, delusional kind of sustenance, the happy release into a Swedian innocence, for those who lived in dread of never seeing their sons or brothers or their husbands again. (3-4)

The war provides an important backdrop for the success of the Swede, with his stellar performance as a Jew placed into the same global-historical context as Hitler’s death camps. In this context, the Swede became the central figure around which the entire Weequahic community could rally. Zuckerman describes the Swede as fulfilling the role of the hero at a time when a hero was needed, and yet it is this inevitable detaching of the “hero” Swede from the “real” Swede that makes his downfall so compelling. As with most tragedies, the infallibility of the hero must be juxtaposed with the frailty of man:

He’d invoked in me, when I was a boy—as he did in hundreds of other boys—the strongest fantasy I had of being someone else. But to wish oneself into another’s glory, as boy or as man, is an impossibility, untenable grounds if you are not a writer, and on aesthetic grounds if you are. To embrace your hero in his destruction, however—to let your hero’s life occur within you when everything is trying to diminish him, to imagine yourself into his bad luck, to implicate yourself not in his
mindless ascendency, when he is the fixed point of your adulation, but in
the bewilderment of his tragic fall—well, that’s worth thinking about. (88)
This fascination with bad luck and the unimaginable “tragic fall” seem both definitively ancient—think Sophocles—and remarkably postmodern. The elevation of the Swede to localized divinity because of his skills in sports, combined with the societal need of such a figure, makes him a compelling character. The general irony of Zuckerman’s wanting to be someone else, when Zuckerman already is another writer’s escape from personal identity, comes through strongly in this passage, and suggests Roth’s attempt to again, as in *The Great American Novel*, collapse these mythological substructures that inform the American narrative. He creates the American paradigm, and then shatters it across the pages of his novels.

Although the Swede plays all sports, baseball becomes the sport he is most clearly associated with early in the novel. Zuckerman, a childhood friend of the Swede’s brother, remembers seeing John R. Tunis’s *The Kid from Tomkinsville* on his boyhood hero’s bookshelf and, although it is an actual novel, the fictive and meta-fictive layers again begin accumulating. Roth writing Zuckerman imagines Zuckerman reading Tunis writing the *Kid from Tomkinsville* and sees in the fictional Kid a doubling of his own doubly fictive Seymour Levov. Zuckerman imagines the Kid in the novel as a double for the Swede and, in a real but uncomfortable sense, Tunis’s novel becomes a foreshadowing of the events to come:

I was ten and I had never read anything like it. The cruelty of life. The injustice of it. I could not believe it. . . . Needless to say, I thought of the Swede and the Kid as one and wondered how the Swede could bear to read
this book that had left me near tears and unable to sleep. . . . Did it occur to him that if disaster could strike down the Kid from Tomkinsville, it could come and strike the great Swede down too? Or was it a book about a sweet star savagely and unjustly punished—a book about a great gifted innocent whose worst fault is a tendency to keep his right shoulder down and swing up but whom the thundering heavens destroy nonetheless—simply a book between those “Thinker” bookends up on his shelf? (9)

The more I consider it, the more I find it increasingly strange and uncomfortable that the ten year old Zuckerman indeed does find truth in an adolescent’s book about baseball; in a real way, the Kid and the Swede are cut from the same pop-mythological cloth of American baseball narratives. Intimations of Job pervade this passage, and the prognostic nature of *The Kid from Tomkinsville*, although just a book for kids, does in its own way participate in this larger Church of Baseball phenomenon, particularly through Tunis and Roth’s portrayal of the virtuous brought down unjustly, at least by the standards of human perception. Nevertheless, the Swede at least succeeds in getting from childhood to adulthood, giving every indication that he will follow a different tack from the Kid’s. As Zuckerman explains, he “heard from a schoolyard pal still living in the neighborhood that the Swede had been offered a contract with a Double A Giant farm club but had turned it down to join his father’s company instead. Later I learned through my parents about the Swede’s marriage to Miss New Jersey. . . . He’d done it” (15). Although he never actually plays professional baseball, just the opportunity to do so seems enough, and therefore his abandonment of the sports world for the world of capitalist exploitation—i.e. the fulfillment of the American dream—is a satisfactory change of course. He achieved
success within the larger context of the American narrative and its corresponding ambitions.

What destroys the Swede, or more accurately what Zuckerman *imagines* destroys the Swede—although how much emphasis do we give these individual layers of fiction, when we know Roth is imagining everything, *including* Zuckerman’s imaginings?—is his teenage daughter, an ironic engine of ruination for the quintessential American man. The Swede believes that his daughter could not have been the cause of his grief and that he, as both man and father, must have done something. Zuckerman, therefore, imagines a moment that incorporates both into a single instant of fallibility:

Driving alone with him back from the beach one day that summer, dopily sun-drunk, lolling against his bare shoulder, she had turned up her face and, half innocently, half audaciously, precociously playing the grown-up girl, said, “Daddy, kiss me the way you k-k-kiss umumumother.” Sun-drunk himself... [and] just when he had come to understand that the summer romance required some readjusting all around, he lost his vaunted sense of proportion, drew her to him with one arm, and kissed her stammering mouth with the passion that she had been asking him for all month long while knowing only obscurely what she was asking for. (89-91)

The scene is classic Roth, as he describes a brief and fairly unintentionally incestuous moment between father and daughter, an isolated incident between the two that nonetheless becomes for the Swede his great moment of failure, and in a way, it *is* his great moment of failure. Regardless of whether this caused the subsequent devastating
events, in the context of the novel’s fiction, it certainly represents the moment of the Swede’s, if not the daughter’s, destructive loss of innocence. This moment sharply contrasts to his role as star first baseman, a role, like all sports positions, that gives no insight on how to live life, particularly in a moment such as this that so severely challenges the established social norms and cultural boundaries. As with Portnoy’s Complaint, baseball and aberrant sexual behavior occur within the context of narrow narrative space and, while I do not believe that Roth intends these moments to be implicitly related, they should be read against one another, as forms of both paradigmatic success and destruction in the context of the American psyche.

Philip Roth’s use of baseball exists somewhere between Don DeLillo’s and Richard Ford’s in that he suggests the historically critical role the game plays while maintaining the sense of the sport as ultimately good, as a positive force or at least a positive metaphor, even if life does not always support the kind of optimism it suggests. Childhood ends, innocence ends, and the collapse of baseball as metaphor—in the sense that the game fails in its supposed redemptive role—must be read alongside these concurrent failures. The Swede fails because he was great and he was great because he was a childhood sports hero. We therefore find ourselves left to contemplate the price of the dream on which the American narrative has been erected.
Chapter III: “The Giants win the pennant and they’re going crazy.”

Conflating nuclear apocalypse, baseball and failure into the heterotopian zone of DeLillo’s Underworld
Base Ball, I repeat, is War! and the playing of the game is a battle in which every contestant is a commanding General, who, having a field of occupation, must defend it; who, having gained an advantage, must hold it by the employment of every faculty of his brain and body, by every resource of his mind and muscle. But it is a bloodless battle; and when the struggle ends, the foes of the minute past are friends of the minute present, victims congratulating victors, conquerors pointing out the brilliant individual plays of the conquered.

—Albert G. Spalding, *America's National Game*

He speaks in your voice, American, and there’s a shine in his eyes that’s halfway hopeful.

—Don DeLillo, *Underworld*

Heralded as America’s greatest love song to baseball, Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* is a masterpiece of postmodern historical and cultural fragmentation, although it might more accurately be described as a requiem for the modern and pre-postmodern eras. DeLillo’s novel exists at the breaking point of historical and cultural accumulation. The text challenges nearly everything related to existence in the second half of the twentieth-century, from garbage and pop art to baseball and the atom bomb; the novel reads like a catalogue of postmodernity. As an extremely aware cultural critic, DeLillo engages baseball as a crucial symbol in the nation’s psychology, using an actual baseball to tie together events spanning nearly half a century and dozens of dissonant encounters. His
navigation of this symbol through the text results in the linkage of the redemptive powers of the national pastime to the biggest threat to its existence humankind has ever experienced: the nuclear bomb. As John Duvall writes, "Underworld evokes American nostalgia about baseball and the early 1950s in order to critique both, and it is this critical evocation of nostalgia that allows the novel to double as a commentary on post-Cold War American life and the ways it is implicated in authoritarian—indeed almost proto-fascist—urges" (30). The correlation of baseball and nuclear annihilation becomes the basis of the novel and, as the text itself represents American culture of the last fifty years, the modern/postmodern existence as well. By joining these two emblematic events, DeLillo restructures the context through which we view America.

Criticism of DeLillo's work frequently comes by way of Baudrillard's theories of the simulacra and the postmodern implosion of knowledge, primarily via DeLillo's frequent consideration of the quasi-omnipotent role of media in modern culture and his displacement of the real by the real, of signs multiplied to a point verging on interpretive exhaustion. (Criticism of White Noise in particular focuses on this phenomenon in his work). In this examination of Underworld I will be applying Baudrillard's theories to DeLillo primarily by way of their impact on baseball. In Simulacra and Simulation, Baudrillard claims that in the era of simulation, it "is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for

---

8 Although I agree with Baudrillard's theories of simulation and implosion, his thoughts on America, as published in his rather strange America, seem to grossly gloss over the very questions I seek to ask: "America is the original version of modernity. [Europeans] are the dubbed or subtitled version. America ducks the question of origins; it cultivates no origin or mythical authenticity; it has no past and no founding future... it lives in a perpetual present... it lives in perpetual simulation, in a perpetual present of signs" (76). Externally true perhaps, but Americans certainly want mythical authenticity more than any other country, and indeed writers from Hawthorne to DeLillo have sought this point of origin.
the real” (2). In *Underworld*, the ball game itself represents a kind of simulation. The novel recreates the original game for the reader, and, in doing so, it becomes no less real than the original, no more and no less authentic than the fading memories of the historical moment itself. The Thomson home run represents a single instant in the national collective memory, in American nostalgia at its most profound and most irreplaceable. Baudrillard latches onto these moments of inimitable memory as representative of the postmodern “real”:

> When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality—a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production. . . . a strategy of the real, of the neoreal, and the hyperreal that everywhere is the double of a strategy of deterrence. (6-7)

The prologue to *Underworld*, “The Triumph of Death,” categorically illustrates this “panic-stricken production,” with DeLillo writing into existence a game that previously lived in memory alone. The fictive recount of the game, then, becomes the real, and the real of memory therefore replaces the real of fiction. This “secondary objectivity” of DeLillo’s text assumes the role of the real, and in a sense it is the real, at least insofar that it is more or less indisputable. The literal event of baseball, in its own way, assumes the form of a simulation, as Westbrook explains: “The field itself, each game, the players, and all their acts are by nature ritualistic, haunted by the fields, games, players, and deeds
that have preceded them, against which they are measure and by which they achieve significance” (101). If the game were a fiction, then the events of that game, even if they are relayed fictitiously in the text, would lose all meaning. But the game is real, and the replication of the game—which ultimately replaces the original in the larger textual/contextual consciousness—must therefore be as real, or even realer, than the original. And yet the real of the baseball game, either the real of 1951 or of 1997 when DeLillo published Underworld, consumes the real of the secondary meaning of that date in history, in this case the Soviet explosion of an atomic bomb. The game at the Polo Grounds and the Russian nuclear test exist at the same historical moment, although history has shown a fondness for the pennant races rather than atomic detonations.

The novella-length prologue, which will be the focus of most of this analysis, concerns itself entirely with the final game of the 1951 pennant race between rivals the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants. The game took place, coincidentally, on the same day Russia exploded its first nuclear weapon, sparking the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union that lasted the next nearly forty years. The game remains prominent in the national memory for its dramatic conclusion: in the bottom of the ninth with one out and the Dodgers up by two, Bobby Thomson hit a three-run home run off of pitcher Ralph Branca, a home run dubbed the “Shot Heard 'Round the World.” John Duvall, a prominent critic of DeLillo’s Underworld, writes in his article “Excavating the Underworld of Race and Waste in Cold War History: Baseball, Aesthetics, and Ideology” about the particular significance of these two events coinciding: “In Underworld DeLillo explores a massive irony: if America remembers October 3, 1951, it is for the Thomson home run and not its significance in Cold War history. Yet the confirmation of Soviet
nuclear capability meant that the United States now had an adversary powerful enough to sustain post-World War II paranoia about threats to American sovereignty” (259).

American mythology has replaced a moment of lasting global and historical significance with one of fleeting glory for New York Giants fans: after winning the pennant the Giants went on to lose the World Series to—who else?—the New York Yankees. DeLillo’s novel attempts to recover both the peculiar coincidence of these two events occurring on the same day, and the even more startling fact that nuclear annihilation is, from a popular historical viewpoint, less important than a baseball game. In the novel, a man reading the daily paper feels a sense of this disproportionate emphasis placed on the game:

The front page astonished him, a pair of three-column headlines dominating. To his left the Giants capture the pennant, beating the Dodgers on a dramatic home run in the ninth inning. And to the right, symmetrically mated, same typeface, same-size type, same number of lines, the USSR explodes an atomic bomb—\textit{kaboom}—details kept secret.

He didn’t understand why the Times would take a ball game off the sports page and juxtapose it with news of such ominous consequence.

(668)

This inability to understand why the \textit{Times}, and history generally, would inordinately emphasize sports news over momentous global events becomes in many ways the subject of the novel. In a \textit{New York Times Magazine} article published right before the release of \textit{Underworld}, DeLillo remarks upon his own shock when he discovered the newspaper headlines from October 4th 1951: “What did I see in this juxtaposition? Two kinds of conflict, certainly, but something else, maybe many things—I could not have said at the
time. Mostly, though, the power of history... The home run that won the game... had found its vast and awful counterpoint. A Russian mushroom cloud” ("The Power of History," 60). As part of the landscape of American history, baseball possesses the power to subsume any other part of the culture. DeLillo’s project recovers those lost histories by asking why the nation’s cultural memory chose this particular national narrative over any other.

While global history may have been occurring on this particular day, any fanatical Giants fan might reasonably suggest an alternate, contradictory attitude, because why the news of Russia’s atomic bomb should be considered equal to a hometown pennant win on the final day of the season is anyone’s guess. As a world superpower, was it not inevitable that the Soviet Union would one day possess the bomb? Did the United States believe that, once unleashed, the secret of nuclear fission could remain a secret? And could the average American citizen be expected to fully grasp the long-lasting impact such an event would ultimately have, particularly when compared to an event of such exuberant immediacy? But a Giants win, that was news. No one could have foreseen a three-game playoff at the end of the season between the rival New York National League teams, and no one could have predicted a bottom of the ninth three-run homer to win the series and the pennant. The immediate significance of the game far outweighed a nuclear

---

9 To set the historical record straight, DeLillo’s assertion that the two headlines read Giants capture pennant and Soviets explode atomic bomb is only partially accurate: although the former is a faithful reproduction (Giants capture the pennant, Beating Dodgers 5-4 in 9th on Thomson’s 3-run homer), the latter actually reads Soviet’s second atom blast in 2 years revealed by U.S.; Details are kept secret. Certainly the truth does not negate DeLillo’s general point, but it does, I think, reveal a little more clearly why the New York Times might juxtapose these headlines: it was widely known since 1949 that the Soviets probably had the bomb, and so this news merely confirmed what was already a general assumption.

10 Although perhaps more people than you would think. As leading baseball statistician Bill James points out in his The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract, “Thomson’s pennant-winning home run against
explosion on the other side of the planet, as Nick Shay, the postmodern quasi-protagonist of the novel, explains: “I had a portable radio I took everywhere. The beach, the movies—I went, it went. I was sixteen. And I listened to Dodger games on the roof. I liked to be alone. They were my team. I was the only Dodger fan in the neighborhood. I died inside when they lost. And it was important to die alone. Other people interfered. I had to listen alone. And then the radio told me whether I would live or die” (93). The visceral irony develops from Nick’s recounting of the game as he should be describing the Soviet’s atomic testing, but on some level it is a believable attitude, particularly in the context of Underworld where the two concepts of the national pastime and nuclear holocaust overlap, forming a tenuous coexistence.

Although critics frequently point out the supposedly autobiographical portions of the novel—DeLillo’s childhood as the son of Italian immigrants living in the Bronx mirrors, to some degree, Nick Shay’s upbringing—the importance of this particular baseball game, which DeLillo remembered from when he was 14, serves a grander purpose in the larger narrative of U.S. and baseball history. Both Spalding and Giamatti rely on this notion of the game as not only national pastime but national narrative. Giamatti asserts that “baseball is part of America’s plot, part of America’s mysterious, underlying design. . . . By repeating again the outline of the American Story, and placing

Ralph Branca, who was called into the game to pitch to him, was his third home run that season off of Branca. . . . Altogether, the Giants that year hit eleven home runs off of Branca, and beat him six times, one less than the record for a single team defeating a single pitcher during a single season” (240).
baseball within it, we engage the principle of narrative” (“Baseball as Narrative,” 89-90). DeLillo appropriates this interpretation of baseball, capitalizing on a game from the shortlist of all-time greatest, and subjects it to a rehistoricizing project that leaves the game inalterably tainted with the failure of history, both in its uncomfortable proximity to the Russian detonation and the historical failure to recognize that proximity.

Baseball is not an open-ended metaphor, capable of explaining any phenomenon placed within ten feet of it; its resonance in the American pop-psyche remains deep and pervasive, but it extends only as far as the American consciousness reaches. Baseball typically functions as a pillar of the imagined American narrative or ideological American mythology. Westbrook invokes the mythological aspects of the game to explain its particular resonance in American culture: “The image of the prelapsarian paradisiacal garden in Genesis, a place untouched by time, is particular evocative and enduring in the archetypal lexicon of the Western imagination. It is a nearly indispensable signifier, undergoing endless transformations as the domestic signifier of signifiers” (98). Westbrook convincingly argues for the conflation of the “paradisiacal garden” with the baseball diamond in popular imagination. Giamatti makes a similar argument regarding the baseball diamond’s pastoral, even biblical resonance: “Today, in those enclosed green spaces in the middle of cities, under smoky skies, after days that weigh heavy either because of work or because of no work, the game reminds the people who gather at that field in the city of the best hopes and freest moments we have” (37-8). DeLillo’s awareness of the importance and persistence of these tropes makes his subversion of them in *Underworld* profoundly disturbing. Into the prelapsarian Garden DeLillo releases the snake of atomic fission, a power more fearfully awesome and uncontrollable than God,
whose plans for world-wide destruction at least provides salvation for the blessed and
damnation for sinners. Recalling Lacan's representation of a psychological gap in which
“something happens,” Westbrook identifies baseball's crucial participation in this space
as a function of the national consciousness:

Baseball presents the dimensions of the gap (the unconscious, the human
primordial, the space of art) in a form that reveals both their archetypal
nature and a pervasive intertextuality . . . archetypes as signifiers tend to
bring along their semantic freight, their sacred implications, and traces of
their plots. Therefore, in evoking this ancient signifier (this archetype, this
bit of intellectual bricolage) of sacred time and space, baseball is itself
laden with significance; a myth in game form, baseball both interprets and
demands to be interpreted. *(Ground Rules, 99-100)*

In evoking baseball, DeLillo evokes all of this ideological baggage as well, dragging forth
an entire history of mythological representations and epistemologies. The game played at
the Polo Grounds on October 3rd, 1951 becomes an example *par excellence* of the
mythologizing of baseball, of baseball both interpreting and demanding to be interpreted.

Unexplainably, much of the criticism of DeLillo’s novel emphasizes the global
news over the local, giving preferential treatment to the role of the atom bomb while
playing lip service to the importance of baseball, despite the novel’s desire to treat the
events equally. Nevertheless, before continuing into an in-depth analysis of *Underworld*
and baseball, the game’s metaphysical counterpart, the nuclear bomb, must be given some
longstanding interest in apocalypse: “Long before *Underworld*, DeLillo had taken up the
threat of nuclear annihilation in his second novel, *End Zone* (1972), an allegorical novel in which college football players embody various philosophical positions and which meditates on the connections between football and that of nuclear war” (11). DeLillo’s *End Zone* confronts the conflation of the apocalypse and the sports world in a more basic fashion than *Underworld* because football really *does* seem to represent twentieth-century war in its calculated brutality, at least more obviously than baseball’s antiquated gentlemanly scuffle. *End Zone* follows a running back through the course of a single football season, diverting often into discursive philosophic monologues and dialogues, ranging from theories of new asceticism to nuclear holocaust, that appear so wholly out of place on this West Texas campus that they must, as Duvall also asserts, be allegorical. These are not football players but voices from the void echoing everyone from Wittgenstein to Vince Lombardi. In *Constructing Postmodernism*, Brian McHale discusses the general trend of the last fifty years of textually locating the apocalypse in postmodern literature:

> Consequently, postmodernist fiction has developed a range of strategies for *displacing* nuclear apocalypse in ways which, potentially at least, might make this theme available to the imagination while preventing it from lapsing into the merely familiar, the automatic, the cliché. One such strategy, for instance, involves the displacement of nuclear holocaust onto some other apocalypse scenario, some other form of large-scale or global disaster, natural or man-made. (160)

Although McHale never directly discusses the role of the apocalypse in sports literature, this concept of the artificial “apocalypse scenario” speaks directly to a work such as *End*
Zone. Even within the novel, DeLillo acknowledges the erroneousness of conflating football and war—one of his characters even proclaims: “I reject the notion of football as warfare. Warfare is warfare. We don’t need substitutes because we’ve got the real thing” (111)—but he persists so ardently in discussing only these two topics, and often concurrently, that ultimately they inevitably fuse into a single concept. Gary Harkness, the novel’s narrator-protagonist and erratic star running back, obsesses about two things: football when he is on the field and nuclear holocaust when he is not:

I liked reading about the deaths of tens of millions of people. I liked dwelling on the destruction of great cities. Five to twenty million dead.

Fifty to a hundred million dead. Ninety percent population loss. . . . I liked to think of huge buildings toppling, of firestorms, of bridges collapsing, survivors roaming the charred countryside. . . . Pleasure in the contemplation of millions dying and dead. (20-1)

We want to read this as analogous to the football being played by these young men because otherwise the utter awfulness of such pleasures seems unforgivable, yet we are prevented from doing so by the text. As Coach Emmett Creed concludes: “Football is brutal only from a distance. In the middle of it there’s a calm, a tranquility. The players accept pain. There’s a sense of order even at the end of a running play with bodies strewn everywhere. . . . There’s a harmony” (199). Another of the voices, Major Staley of the ROTC, discusses at length with Gary the role of the atom bomb, specifically in popular psychology:

There’s a kind of theology at work here. The bombs are a kind of god. As his power grows, our fear naturally increases. . . . It used to be that the
gods punished men by using the forces of nature against them or by arousing them to take up their weapons and destroy each other. Now god is the force of nature itself, the fusion of tritium and deuterium. Now he's the weapon. So maybe this time we went too far in creating a being of omnipotent power. (80)

As the novel progresses, these disembodied voices evolve into a cacophony of theoretical stances, each recoiling off of one another to create an impossible overlap of sport and holocaust. A text that preaches pleasure in annihilation, tranquility in football, and theology in the atomic bomb seems contradictory at best, but this is the world DeLillo provides the reader, however unsatisfactory it might be.

I read *End Zone* as a lesser—not so much qualitatively as ideologically—version of *Underworld*, and therefore by reading through the lens of his earlier text his later work is revealed. In *End Zone*, DeLillo imagines a connection between the sports world and the possibility of nuclear holocaust, and, as dissimilar as these two subjects might be, he establishes and maintains a tension between the two. By the time he writes *Underworld*, DeLillo has developed sports into a larger metaphor for American pop-mythology—in which baseball serves more appropriately than football—and the possibility of nuclear apocalypse constitutes an implosion of the "amphibious" pre/postmodern existence. The cohabitation of these conceptual spheres of myth and epistemological history, in a single textual space and relatively linear narrative time scheme, creates a heterotopian zone.

---

11 Arguably, *Underworld* might be read usefully in conjunction with any of DeLillo's other works because it represents a type of culmination of all his earlier themes and an anticipation of those to come. The apocalypse culture appears in nearly all his works, as does this sense of postmodernity's failure to live up to its promise, although I imagine DeLillo would be first in line to deny any claims as to what that promise might be.
Michel Foucault first introduced this concept of the heterotopia as a zone of simultaneity of worlds, time, and thought in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. He utilizes the term as a method of conceptualizing a space between the microcosmic conventions of self-imposed human culture and the macrocosmic universal regulations of scientific law, and the resulting creation of an intermediary zone where these codes cannot be, but also cannot not be, directly applied. Foucault's study traces the development of this hypothetical space over the last five hundred years as a region in which knowledge and thought move towards subjectivity, not objectivity; this subjectivity of the heterotopia becomes most apparent as it relates to the idea of the fantastic:

> [. . .] *Utopias* afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'. (xvii-xviii)

Foucault carefully labels this other zone of existence a heterotopia, not a distopia; whereas a distopia inverts the utopia, the heterotopia acts as an affront to rational thought, breaking down post-Descartian notions of thinking. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale uses the concept of the heterotopia not, as Foucault does, to trace the history of
intellectual thought, but as a way of conceptualizing a new space and new theoretical possibilities being constructed in postmodernist literature:

The space of a fictional world is a construct, just as the characters and objects that occupy it are, or the actions that unfold within it. Typically, in realist and modernist writing, this spatial construct is organized around a perceiving subject, either a character or the viewing position adopted by a disembodied narrator. The heterotopian zone of postmodernist writing cannot be organized in this way however. Space here is less constructed than *deconstructed* by the text, or rather constructed and deconstructed at the same time. Postmodernist fiction draws upon a number of strategies for constructing/deconstructing space, among them *juxtaposition*, *interpolation*, *superimposition*, and *misattribution.* (45)

McHale describes the heterotopia as a literary zone in which the human sense of the universe or existence has its absolute antithesis of meaning incorporated into its being, of the utopia not having a distopia, but something far more disturbing, although much more integral, to its basic being. This zone is two places at once, becoming a third: a superimposition of worlds, utopias or distopias or something between, becoming the heterotopia.

Using McHale's theory of the text constructing and deconstructing itself simultaneously, along with the dichotomy of sports and apocalypse established by *End Zone*, a possible point of entry emerges to continue discussions of *Underworld.* The narrative action of the prologue occurs almost entirely at the Polo Grounds, the site of the Dodgers-Giants game, but also strangely relevant to the Soviet detonation. DeLillo
explains that it was “Hoover’s presence on the scene that enabled me to bring news of the Soviet atomic test into the Polo Grounds and to set an early tone for the shifting conflicts I hoped to examine” (“The Power of History,” 62). By bringing these two moments into coexistence, DeLillo problematizes our historical understanding of these events; how can history be so cruel as to imagine these two polarized experiences being inexorably linked? Yet DeLillo superimposes these images of life and death onto a single playing field, and the result suggests the grotesque experience of postmodernism’s celebration of failure. In *Allegories of Violence*, Lidia Yuknavitch’s examines DeLillo’s use of violence as a “background noise,” a haunting but unavoidable feature of modern existence:

Don DeLillo’s texts are disturbing, writes one critic, because they reflect the “bloodless” heart of postmodernism, where violence and consumer culture fill the same spiritual void that Nazism—the last authentic evil—filled. In a world that levels all of history and human experience to representation and commodity, even Hitler, the antagonist who ought to serve as the ultimate narrative telos of stories of evil, could become a product of the open market, a routine, an identity dissolved in a sea of possibilities. (55)

Yuknavitch writes specifically of *White Noise*, but her interpretation of DeLillo’s representation and commodification of evil as horribly leveled resonates in *Underworld’s* treatment of the threat of nuclear holocaust. Without reservation, *Underworld* creates a scenario in which a jubilantly triumphant crowd coexists with the threat of apocalypse. Yet even if postmodernity seeks to level all experience, and even if it succeeds, that does not prevent the supreme discomfort that arises from this possibility, nor does it
necessarily mean that this act of leveling can be maintained. DeLillo brings nuclear annihilation into a baseball game as the supreme act of steamrolling history, but he does it in order to revert that process, to reclaim the history flattened by cultural mythmakers. In his act of creating the heterotopia, DeLillo recovers these moments as singular events even at the instant he conflates their meanings.

Two artifacts still remain from that famous game: the actual baseball, and the memory of the game. These dual remnants create a polarity similar to that established between mythologized baseball and the displaced/misplaced apocalypse. Although a reproduced and reproducible object—the baseball owes its standardization to the Industrial Revolution, and has inhabited its current form since the 1920s—once put into play, once hit out of the baseball park, it is an artifact, a work of art, a veritable grail of American mythos. Walter Benjamin, discussing the reproduction of a work of art, asserts that "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence" ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 222). The culture surrounding baseball inverts Benjamin's theory, turning a mechanical reproduction into a work of art because of its role in history; this baseball derives sole importance from its unique presence in space and time. DeLillo then manipulates the meaning of the single ball and its historic value into a more general representative of baseball mythology:

I had the baseball in my hand. Usually I kept the baseball on the bookshelves, wedged in a corner between straight-up books and slanted
books, tented under books, unceremoniously. But now I had it in my hand.
You have to know the feel of a baseball in your hand, going back a while,
connecting many things, before you can understand why a man would sit
in a chair at four in the morning holding such an object, clutching it. . . .
How the hand works memories out of the baseball that have nothing to do
with games of the usual sort. (131-2)

Compare this to Roger Angell’s meditation on the ball: “. . . any baseball is beautiful. No
other small package comes as close to the ideal in design and utility. It is a perfect object
for a man’s hand. . . . You want to get outdoors and throw this spare and sensual object to
somebody or, at the very least, watch somebody else throw it” (Five Seasons, 12). Lest
we forget, both DeLillo and Angell speak of a baseball, a leather and cork sphere
produced by the billions that costs a couple of bucks at the local sporting goods store. But
the object acquired historical meaning by crossing over the outfield wall. Duvall
describes the narrative moment the ball crosses the threshold separating fan and player,
fact and fiction: “When the baseball Thomson hits breaks the plane of the outfield wall
giving the Giants victory . . . we leave the space of fictionalized history and enter
historicized fiction. The illusion of a timeless aesthetic space in which racial differences
don’t matter dissolves as Cotter and Bill scramble to recover the ball Thomson hit” (268).
Duvall emphasizes the fictive implications of DeLillo’s rephrased history, of the moment
of narrative transcendence, but this moment implies more than just a narrative shift; at the
instant its crosses the wall, the ball moves from the public space of history into the
private world of ownership, and in doing so comes to represent the movement of cultural
or public mass memory into the singular, personal remembrance.
Although *Underworld* engages in dialogues both relevant and tangential to postmodernity, this tiny baseball and its story after leaving the Polo Grounds ties the novel, and history, together. Duvall suggests that the ball’s first owner, an African-American boy named Cotter, “believes in baseball and to believe in baseball is to believe in America” (266). DeLillo manipulates the hopeful connotations of the game, via the ball itself, after it has left the confines of the game. Cotter’s father betrays his son and sells the ball for a thousandth of its later value. Even as the ball becomes a mere commodity, its meaning remains relatively stable and obvious: the winning home run, the ball that won the pennant, etc. However, the ball equally represents failure, equally remains the *losing* home run, the ball that *lost* the pennant. As Nick Shay explains, he purchased the ball as a monument to and reminder of the lasting power of failure:

> Well, I didn’t buy the object for the glory and drama attached to it. It’s not about Thomson hitting the homer. It’s about Branca making the pitch. It’s all about losing. . . . It’s about the mystery of bad luck, the mystery of loss. . . . Then to buy it for the reason I bought it. To commemorate failure. To have that moment in my hand when Branca turned and watched the ball go into the stands—from him to me. (97)

For Nick, the Dodgers loss means the death of the once-hopeful metaphysical significance of baseball, and the sport now represents only failure. Nick represents the postmodern baseball fan, the baseball fan for which baseball has come to represent the failure of the prototypical American ideology for which it stood, and the failure of the sport to retain the redemptive powers it so artificially laid hold to.

The celebration at the Polo Grounds serves as a sort of mock apocalypse, a safe
simulation of the impending doom that surely awaited all 1950s mankind. Paper tumbles from the sky—harmless fallout—and one of the papers that falls on J. Edgar Hoover is a rather unlikely reprinting in *Life* magazine of Bruegel’s painting, *The Triumph of Death*. The painting depicts a “landscape of visionary havoc and ruin” (41), from which the images of death begin to merge with the havoc and ruin on the baseball field. Duvall identifies this moment as an evocation of nuclear holocaust in the midst of what might otherwise be taken as a moment of populace triumph: “

Even after Thomson has scored and the fans pour onto the field, Hoover still contemplates “the meat-blood-colors and massed bodies,” which become in his mind a figuration of nuclear apocalypse. Looking up from Bruegel’s images, Hoover sees the confusion and moiling of celebrants on the field, and they become indistinguishable to him from the ravaged sinners he has been scrutinizing on the page. (33)

Pieter Bruegel’s 1562 painting delightfully horrifies, with its depiction of skeletons gleefully assuming dominion of the world of the living, of the literal “triumph of death,” whose title DeLillo appropriates for that of the prologue. Hoover aligns the delirious crowds with these images of skeletons harvesting the living, revealing an imaginative detour similar to Gary Harkness’s conjuring of U.S. cities burning in nuclear flames. By introducing these images into the Polo Grounds, gives unsettling life to the news of the Soviet blast. The superimposition of the apocalypse onto one of the most memorable

---

12 The prologue itself was actually published separately as a novella, although DeLillo retitled it *Pafko at the Wall* for unknown reasons; perhaps Bruegel’s imagery from *The Triumph of Death* did not as accurately depict the tone of the novella, when isolated from the remainder of the text, as the photograph of Pafko “at the 315 sign looking straight up with his right arm braced at the wall and a spate of paper coming down” (42). In the context of the novel, the images blur together inseparably, horribly.
moments in baseball history disturbs the once-static role of the game in the national
narrative. Bruegel’s painting depicts death on a gruesome scale, but with the real threat of
annihilation on the nation’s horizon his images of Death appear almost comically hopeful
compared to the mass holocaust that a nuclear war promises. At this moment, at the
inception of the threat of apocalypse, the fear of global destruction still remained a real
possibility. Yet by the end of the twentieth-century, a moment such as October 3rd 1951
and its threat of nuclear holocaust has been reproduced and abstracted to the point that
imagining it is no longer difficult and no longer even disturbing.

The peculiarity of the transposition of these events onto a single day in our
national history speaks to both the existence and impossibility of a cohesive national
narrative. By superimposing the legendary Giants-Dodgers game at the Polo Grounds
with the nuclear apocalypse suggested by the Soviet detonation, DeLillo subverts the
modern conception of baseball as a hopeful, redemptive symbol with the postmodern
impression that failure remains the only event worth celebrating. To this end, Nick Shay
clutches the ball that lost the series, the ball Ralph Branca threw high and inside, the ball
Bobby Thomson turned on and just cleared the outfield wall with, the ball that
commemorates the failure of baseball, and all of the modern and postmodern dreams with
which it is inexorably fused.
Chapter IV: “Fuck you, bunt. Bunt when it’s your turn”

Father-son relationships and the search for mythic origins in Ford’s *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*
Its evocations, overtones, and loyalties, firmly planted in the mind of every American male during childhood and nurtured thereafter by millions of words of free newspaper publicity, appear to be unassailable. It is the national pastime. It is youth, springtime, a trip to the country, part of our past. It is the roaring excitement of huge urban crowds and the sleepy green afternoon silences of midsummer. Without effort, it engenders and thrives on heroes, legends, self-identification, and home-town pride.

—Roger Angell, *The Summer Game*

In its own way, Cooperstown invokes for the baseball fan a feeling of transcendence, a sense that one entered into a timeless realm of heroic deeds and eternal bonds between parents and children.

—Evans and Herzog, *The Faith of Fifty Million*

Other than a suicide, a nearly maimed son, a career change, a dozen lovers, a father-son road trip and memories of a lost child, a subsequent divorce, and an unfinished novel, not much happens in either Richard Ford’s brilliant *The Sportswriter*, or its Pulitzer-winning sequel, *Independence Day*. And despite everything that *does* happen, it often feels like nothing more than a litany of the quotidian voiced by a willfully apathetic hero. Tension in his novels builds from these two forces, the overwhelming and the irrelevant, coexisting without comment; this itself becomes representative of the postmodern existence, of the cacophony of cultural voices becoming undecipherable. Within these cultural forces the seemingly undemanding world of sports subsists, and the
hope that a summer ball game might just solve the world's problems. Of course, it cannot
and does not in Ford's novels, and yet the metaphors of the sports world, particularly
baseball and its emphasis on the prevailing symbolism of the journey homeward, provide
the framework for hope, even if ultimately only a vain hope.

In his introduction to Roger Angell's latest collection of baseball writings,
Richard Ford discusses his own associations with baseball and the role the game plays in
modern society. In an extended and insightful passage, Ford discusses the interrelatedness
of this cultivated skepticism and his fondness for the sport:

Back in the late sixties, a teacher of mine—now a famous novelist—used to say that baseball was just a stylized enactment of the basic
Freudian paradigm: the catcher was the mother, the pitcher the father, the
batter the hapless son, seeking with his waggling appendage to intercept
the father's pitch and give it a pasting before the ball got in between the
catcher's legs, after which... well, after which I seem to remember the
formulation kind of broke down and everyone lost interest.

But ever since then, I've stayed watchful of the deft balance
sportswriting must achieve between its preoccupation with "the game" and
the game's context, the outside world, where moms and dads and sons
really do struggle, and where things matter a lot and are rarely soluble, and
where baseball—its rules, history, conduct—isn't a very useful
microcosm, and life's lessons can't be taught very well by overpaid
twenty-two-year-old phenoms. Sports may occasionally be a little like life
and occur within it. But it's a game. That's its fun, its privileged
irrelevancy and occasionally its beauty. (xi-xii)

By distinguishing between the game and the game’s context—an invaluable delineation for any interpretation of this pair of novels—Ford situates himself within the theoretical framework established by Angell and Gould’s emphasis on the importance of viewing baseball as an insular structure. His amusing retelling of the Freudian retelling of the baseball narrative displays the depressing willingness of intellectuals to assign metaphoric significance to an external world that really offers no indication of the validity of such criticism. Baseball is just a game, and any attempts to complicate its meaning will result only in further complications, not elucidations. However, the role of these retellings and the role of the stories we tell ourselves baseball is telling—and not the story baseball actually tells—persist in important ways. The tension between the game and the game’s context represents the crucial schism in postmodern baseball literature, where a ball game can no longer be represented as printed word and any greater meaning simply dissolves into the background.

Although Ford warns against making broader overtures towards baseball’s metaphysical significance, his novels raise certain theoretical concerns that, if not derived explicitly from the game, certain rely implicitly on the significance of baseball in the contemporary cultural psyche. In his literary explication of the literal game of baseball, Giamatti writes that “baseball is about going home, and how hard it is to get there and how driven is our need. It tells us how good home is. Its wisdom says you can go home again but that you cannot stay. The journey must always start once more, the bat an oar over the shoulder, until there is an end to all journeying. Nostos; the going home; the game of nostalgia, so apt an image for our hunger that it hurts” (A Great and Glorious
Theoretical baseball writing frequently asserts that home plate represents the symbolic or figurative "home" to which we all aspire, and certainly compelling reasons exist to want to believe this critical invention. However, it seems rather unlikely that the literal game of baseball offers any such inherently redemptive possibilities. What is relevant about Giamatti's claim is its indication of the popular perpetuation of that myth. As will be seen in the penultimate scene of *Independence Day*, Cooperstown is the home of the homes, the (false) birthplace of America's greatest invention, and therefore when Ford uses it as the final destination for the renewal of the father-son bond, the entire arc of the novel becomes something akin to a narrative base path—in *Ground Rules*, Westbrook notes that the "progress of the runner on the base paths is counterclockwise, and his end, his destination, is his beginning" (97)—a thematic running of the bases that ends with the sudden realization of the inadequacy of the metaphor. Although a poetic explication, Giamatti's claim inaccurately represents the actual game of baseball, even if his assertions resonate with the intellectualized perception of the game.

Both novels center around writer turned sportswriter—later turned real estate agent—Frank Bascombe, a late-thirties divorcée intent on remaining optimistic even though his life turned out differently then he thought it might. Both novels occur over relatively short spaces of time—Easter weekend in *The Sportswriter* and 4th of July weekend in *Independence Day*—with narratively little happening, leaving instead the bulk of both novels to the subjective inner ruminations of their first-person narrator. Critics frequently question the reliability of Frank as narrator—is this question even relevant in postmodern literature?—but that avenue of discussion ignores a more crucial inquiry: how to interpret Frank's refusal and/or inability to write fiction as a reflection of
postmodern concerns with the impossibility of representation. In her critical study of Ford's work, Elinor Ann Walker writes about the subjectivity of the inner reality that the author creates through the metanarrative evoked by this layered narration:

[Frank] also expects literature to tell the truth, but of course it doesn't; the reader must discern truth from falsehood or, better yet, acknowledge the artifice inherent in any story's telling. After all, even if it records events that actually happened, the story itself is once removed from its subject. The story is not the thing itself but rather the imagined version of what happens or a mere reflection of the life that it describes. . . . But Frank ignores the artifice in art, desiring instead for there to be a seamless union between truth and fiction. (Richard Ford, 74)

This interrelatedness of truth and fiction begins resembling the gap between text and context, particularly in the way that the narrator, author, and even reader must attempt to reconcile these two concepts that cannot, realistically, ever be separated. Frank's dismissal of art as artifice, in light of the self-referential qualities of the novel, does at least move towards a collapse in the artifice of art. Frank's failure as a writer—a "failure of imagination" (46) as he says—is made all the more problematic by his success at writing sports, at "assaug[ing] the life-long ache to anticipate" by being a sportswriter. Frank thinks that his ex-wife would "probably like to tell me again that I should've gone ahead and written a novel instead of quitting and being a sportswriter" (22), even though he consciously and deliberately chose to quit writing in seemingly everyone's best interests. Still, his youthful talent torments him with the possibility of what might have been. In a country with the dogma "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," it is
always the last concept in this trinity that causes the most trouble because it makes no promise that such a quest can end with success. As the paradigmatic American, Frank seeks happiness in a world that offers plenty but promises none, and wasted talent ranks among the worst offenses.

Although framed by death—starting with Frank’s visit to his son’s grave and ending with the suicide of an intimate acquaintance—*The Sportswriter* occurs on or around Easter Sunday, thus suggesting the possibility for resurrection, if not actually providing it. Knowing Ford’s own feelings for the game, as well as its dominant position in his follow-up novel, discerning the role of baseball in *The Sportswriter* becomes much easier. Early in the novel Frank thinks of his perfect-day scenario which, inevitably, will never see fruition: “Nothing, in fact, would I like better than to have a whole new colorful world open up to me today, though I like things pretty well as they are. I will settle for a nice room at the Pontchartrain, a steak Diane and a salad bar in the rotating rooftop restaurant, seeing the Tigers under the lights. I am not hard to make happy” (22). Frank’s desires seem representative of the general necessities of humanity in modernity: food, shelter, and spirituality (fulfilled, significantly, by a night ballgame). Food, shelter and baseball might not be the typical configuration of essential human needs, but in the context of this representative American individual, they might be more accurate than first glance would suggest.

As a sportswriter, Frank reports on sports for a living, but the fate of the Detroit Tigers in the AL East becomes a recurrent personal motif running through *The Sportswriter*. The Tigers, as representative of baseball, uniquely figure into the novel because they stand as one of the only overarching and consistent sports references in the
text. Although Frank watches two specific basketball games and interviews an ex-football star, all three events occur at moments of personal crisis for the narrator; these are not happy times. Frank says of athletes that they "by and large are people who are happy to let their actions speak for them, happy to be what they do . . . never likely to feel the least bit divided, or alienated, or one ounce of existential dread. . . . you can bet he isn't worried one bit about you and what you're thinking" (62-3). Ironically, none of the sports stars Frank encounters in the course of the novel are anything like his vision of the typical athlete. Yet somehow baseball seems unconnected with Frank's profession, and serves instead as a happy reminder of what sports should be. In the final chapter, a chapter overflowing with Frank's intense optimism after having unceremoniously abandoned his entire life to live in Florida, he remarks on Detroit's fate, a fate symbolically interchangeable with his own: "The Tigers have clinched at least a magic number, and seem to me unstoppable" (369). Ford uses the Detroit Tigers as representatives of the world of baseball, a world apart from the more desolate and mundane worlds of basketball and football. Baseball acts as a hopeful light shining from somewhere behind the gloom, a sustaining force for the wandering hero.

In *Independence Day*, we find Frank having undergone another career change, this time from sportswriter to realtor, and Frank's quasi-failure in the last novel now becomes undeniably real. With no offense meant to realtors, Frank-as-realtor represents an even grosser failure than his earlier turn from literature to sports writing. Although his failure as a writer seemed an understandable and acceptable turn of fate, turning to realty represents the total abandonment of his dreams, and his son suggests as much: "he's come to believe I need to ditch the realty business—'not interesting enough'—and move
away from New Jersey—ditto— . . . "maybe get back to writing stories"" (341); later he asks his father: “Is there a Real Estate Hall of Fame? Where would it be? Buttzville, New Jersey?” (400). Paul cannot accept his father’s career change, and I find myself having a difficult time of it as well, particularly when Frank discusses the virtues of real estate, believing, as he does, that it possesses qualities capable of transcending its materialistic emphasis. But can, or should, we really believe him? His abandonment of literary aspirations for sportswriting seems acceptable, an honorable defeat mitigated from a fairly benevolent God. But reality is too real, too real to suffer any suggestions of its larger humanism. Frank continually tries to convince us and, by extension, himself of the virtues of his decision to quit writing, and his insistent rhetoric nearly succeeds. But in the context of Ford writing Frank, of a proficient writer writing a failed writer, can we not assume that Ford views Frank’s choice as failing his art?

The apparent narrative structure of Independence Day becomes clear early in the novel, and suggests a return to pre-postmodern conceptions of the redemptive powers of baseball. Frank Bascombe will take his troubled son on the ultimate father-son road trip over Fourth of July weekend to visit the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, NY. Frank laments the impossibility of visiting all of the sports hall of fames:

We’ve vowed to visit them all in two days, though of course we can’t and will have to satisfy ourselves with basketball, in Springfield (it’s close to his house), and Cooperstown—which I’m counting on to be the ur-father-son meeting ground, offering the assurances of a spiritually neutral spectator sport made seemingly meaningful by its context in idealized male history. (I have never been there, but the brochures suggest I’m
The Cooperstown Hall of Fame becomes, in Frank's words, the "ur-father-son meeting ground," and in this capacity serves as the perfect culmination to both novels. As representative of a symbolic return home for father and son, it initially seems that this is Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe*, or Costner's *Field of Dreams*, all over again. Although somewhat metaphysical, Frank's need to return "home," to psychologically regroup, appears relatively clear: he suffers from the anxieties and alienation that postmodernity so willingly bestows on members of modern society. His son Paul, however, has problems of a more concrete nature: "He was arrested for shoplifting three boxes of 4X condoms ('Magnums') from a display-dispenser. . . . he bolted but was wrestled to the ground, whereupon he screamed that the woman was a 'goddamned spick asshole,' kicked her in the thigh, hit her in the mouth (conceivably by accident) and pulled out a fair amount of hair before she could apply a police stranglehold" (11); and later: "He and Charley [his stepfather] got into a fracas in the boathouse, about the right way and the wrong way to varnish Charley's dinghy. He hit Charley in the jaw with an oarlock" (180). Paul's ideological rebellions range far and wide, from sexual falsifications to racial insults to parental confrontations; nothing unusual for an adolescent male. Paul seems to be a relatively normal adolescent, particularly given the divorce of his parents and the death of this older brother. However, for the same reasons that his father pulled away from societal participation, it is the postmodern culture that magnifies and intensifies his actions, giving no room for expression of anxiety and alienation in a society that does nothing *but* produce anxiety and alienation. It is to Cooperstown, then, that Frank and Paul must journey to find personal and cultural redemption. Westbrook finds this narrative in
baseball literature to be particularly prevalent and significant: “The attempted reconciliation and the journey to beginnings it entails appear to be baseball’s central myth, the endlessly repeated tale of a descent into the abyss of time and, sometimes, the journey back. The object of the quest is part feeling and part relationship, a beloved father-hero and a blessing” (253-4). Although the novel never succeeds on either account, Ford’s utilization of this mythic structure for his otherwise postmodern text reveals something of the complicated nature of his novels. In this regard Christopher York, in his article “‘HBP—Runners Advance’: Postmodernism and Baseball in Richard Ford’s Independence Day,” discusses the manner in which the narrator serves as emblematic of a postmodern society:

Frank’s superficial, isolated feelings are revealed as widespread in America and a symptom of our postmodern culture. . . . Frank’s existence period is perhaps best understood as a manifestation of the postmodern culture in which he lives. Contemporary American culture is marked, most significantly, by the constructed nature of truth, and the ambiguities that exist between the real and the imagined, particularly in the mass media.

(Baseball/Literature/Culture Essays, 1995-2001, 52)

Similar to The Natural, Ford utilizes mythology to structure his novel, although he implements the mythic elements in a less obvious way than Malamud because of his investment in a vaguer American mythology. York’s identification of the postmodern elements of Frank’s existence aligns usefully with these implicit mythic structures because it demonstrates the complete futility of his attempt to escape postmodernity through a pre-modern narrative. Frank tries escaping from the postmodern alienation of
his and his son’s lives by beginning the mythic journey homeward, to the site of
baseball’s, and by implication the nation’s, origins. And although Frank and his son
perform the ritualized movements of this journey, the redemptive potential of the quest
inevitably fails because postmodernity cannot support such expectations.

The importance of Cooperstown in baseball mythology cannot be overstated. As
the allegorical birthplace of baseball, it acts as a point of origin for the national
consciousness, at least in relation to the American mythos. No one completely believes
that Cooperstown was the site of Abner Doubleday’s invention of baseball, but nor is it
necessary—and this is certainly true of all mythologies—for that story to be true to be
relevant. Frank comments on the falsity of baseball’s creation myth in a conversation with
his son: “Baseball was supposedly dreamed up here in 1839, by Abner Doubleday, though
nobody really believes that. . . . It’s just a myth to allow customers to focus their interests
and get the most out of the game. . . . It’s a shorthand to keep you from getting all bound
up in unimportant details and missing some deeper point. I don’t remember what the
point is with baseball, though” (294). Frank’s forgotten point refers to the redemptive
powers of baseball, and its ability to reestablish lost male bonds through a journey
towards some spiritual “home.” And, whether it is or not, baseball is essentially
American, something Spalding made sure of nearly a hundred years ago. More
metaphysically, the forgotten point refers to the interconnectedness of these two ideas:
the mythology of baseball fundamentally derives from some innate American essence or
nature, and that that same American consciousness spontaneously delivered baseball,
intact, from its national womb. So even if the myth of Cooperstown is a well documented
and widely known fraud, Frank can still believe in it enough to bring his troubled son to
the Hall of Fame as a way of reestablishing their father-son bond. But if Cooperstown is based on a false pretense, so must the means of restoring their filial relationship.

The reason Cooperstown fails as a symbol of redemption for Frank and his son seems obvious enough at first glance: if the myth is false, the redemption will be false. While certainly true, the question of Cooperstown runs deeper than its purported falsity, because such preoccupations with truth tend to be less worrisome in mythology. Cooperstown, like the rest of baseball, is aware of its own mythological significance, and this awareness creates an atmosphere of simulation, wherein a simulation of a false ideal supplants the real, wherein the fictional replaces the fictional. Despite Cooperstown's admittedly false mythological standing, the city depicted in Independence Day acts as an imitation of even its own mythology:

It seems in fact and on first blush like an ideal place to live, worship, thrive, raise a family, grow old, get sick and die. And yet: Some suspicion lurks—in the crowds themselves, in the too-frequent street-corner baskets of redder-than-red geraniums and the too visible French poubelle trash containers, in the telltale sight of a red double-decker City of Westminster bus and there being no mention of the Hall of Fame anywhere—that the town is just a replica (of a legitimate place), a period backdrop to the Hall of Fame or to something even less specific, with nothing authentic (crime, despair, litter, the rapture) really going on no matter what civic illusion the city fathers maintain. (293)

The city consumed itself whole, leaving nothing but the empty shell of an empty mythology in its place. Understanding the specific failure of the Cooperstown ideal
elaborates the more general failure of the baseball narrative because it stresses the problematic structure of a system based on the continual reproduction of a system that cannot maintain its initial sense of meaning. Although once linked, the progressive one hundred year alteration and division of the baseball narrative and the American narrative, along with their individual disconnection from meaning, led to the perpetuation of a replica, of the simulacra of the playing fields of the American psyche.

The relationship between fathers and sons as a narrative theme dates to time immemorial, particularly in mythology, and so it seems natural that baseball narratives often focus, sometimes obsessively, on these relationships. Baseball links generations of fathers and sons into a single obsessive chain, stretching as far back as the imagination can see, or at least into the early years of the twentieth-century. Westbrook explains the importance of baseball mythological investment in father-son relationships:

> If there is a compelling preoccupation central to baseball's mythology, it may well be found in the realm of kinship relations, and specifically in the father-son relation. The opposites it seeks to reconcile rest in the conflicting emotions of love and hate and the conflicting acts of competition and cooperation, along with corollary matters as youth and age, power and weakness, the growing and the dying, and failure and success. (*Ground Rules*, 245)

Instead of merely enacting these relationships, baseball *reenacts* them, reprising the mythic obsession with parental bonds. In *Independence Day*, the death of Frank's first son, Ralph, simultaneously heightens and complicates the importance of the father-son relationship. Beyond the normal demands of a parent-child relationship, Frank strives to
restore the severed connection with his dead son by saving his relationship with Paul, who must serve as both living son and surrogate dead son. If Frank fails Paul then he also fails Ralph, thus failing the living and the dead. Westbrook describes the mythic baseball journey as fundamentally emphasizing the role of the son over the father:

Baseball’s sons, like other mythic heroes, are given impossible tasks: to gain the blessing of the beloved but feared, powerful but weakening, ultimately failed father, to surpass him, and to avoid the psychological dangers of both the beloved but feared woman to whom the father fell victim and all her various incarnations, who call with irresistible siren song, promising all but providing only grief and disappointment as they spoil life and ruin the game. (Ground Rules, 264)

Ford manipulates this configuration into a modern/postmodern context with his portrayal of the father trying to win the love of the son. In this sense, the modern/postmodern man becomes infantilized—a logical step given his dependence on a “boy’s game played by men”—thus creating an inverted progression of time. As Frank says of Paul, “I had the feeling he was far out ahead of me then and in many things. Any time spent with your child is partly a damn sad time, the sadness of a life a-going, bright, vivid, each time a last. A loss. A glimpse into what might have been. It can be corrupting” (402). Frank sees in Paul what he will be, but it is a static and identifiable future, whereas his own, with his own uncertainty on the horizon, remains the life he seeks to overcome.

In Cooperstown—birthplace of American mythology and site of eternal rejuvenation of father-son relationships—the myth of baseball utterly collapses, forcing Frank into a confrontation with his—and our—postmodern existence. After arriving in
Cooperstown, Frank and Paul head to the batting cages before visiting the Hall of Fame. After Frank’s unsuccessful battle with the machine, Paul enters the cage, ostensibly to act out the mythic usurpation of the father’s dominance and complete the son’s emergence from adolescence to adulthood through the highly Americanized test of manhood: hitting the “Dyno-Express” (75mph) fastball. Frank picks up a bat, “holding it in front of [him] like a knight’s sword, sighting down its blue aluminum shaft” (355), and begins what should be the metaphorical passing of the torch of manhood. This moment draws into tension Benjamin’s concerns with the mechanical reproduction of an art—pitching—and the precession of simulacra, of the replicated fastball and the reproduction of the son’s mythic conquest of the father, although maintaining these intellectual preoccupations for any extended period of time becomes impossible because the force of “real” events intrudes too powerfully:

Paul, his bat on his shoulder, watches a moment, and then, to my surprise, takes a short ungainly step forward onto the plate and turns to the machine, which, having no brain, or heart, or forbearance, or fear, no experience but throwing, squeezes another ball through its dark warp, out through the sprightly air, and hits my son full in the face and knocks him flat down on his back with a terrible, loud *thwock*. After which everything changes.

(361)

Somewhat surprisingly, nothing real does change. Although the journey to Cooperstown has proved, it seems, tragic—Paul will, of course, survive, although he might need glasses—this does not necessarily imply that the tragedy will *itself* be the cataclysmic bonding event. Instead of finding hope in Cooperstown, they have found calamity, but I
do not believe that the two can be substituted for one another just because both involve an intensity of mutual emotions through a shared experience. Perhaps not surprisingly, the description of the machine mirrors that of the typical athlete in The Sportswriter: "people who are happy to let their actions speak for them, happy to be what they do" (27). The equating of the ball mechanism to the standard athlete represents the reduction of a human being to a single action, to a mechanized existence made all the more ironic by the fact that a machine can, and does, do it better. But this is a human tragedy, performed by a mechanized arm, and the dramatic explosion/implosion of the event appears to break the hold of everything that has held sway over Frank, his son, and the narrative concerns generally. York explains that now "baseball’s seminal archetype, the Father-son confrontation, is at last satisfied but not in the classic combat. No words or artifice stand between father and son, only the pressing imperative for Frank to help the boy" (58). This might be true if the novel had not, at the moment the ball hit Paul’s eye, moved beyond the need for satisfying baseball archetypal narrative; the text finally realizes its own post-mythological status and the futility of employing a system of meaning on a world which no longer recognizes any epistemological structure, let alone America’s baseball narrative. Ford dissolves the entire mythic structure with the thwack of the ball, despite the novel’s insistent progression along the lines of a standard tale of father-son redemption through baseball. For Frank and Paul, there is no “field of dreams” calling out of the blackness; only a hospital bed and the long night of postmodern alienation.
Conclusion: “At the old ball game”

Representing the collapsed American ideology through baseball and literature
It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart. The game begins in the spring, when everything else begins again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rains come, it stops and leaves you to face the fall alone. You count on it, rely on it to buffer the passage of time, to keep memory of sunshine and high skies alive, and then just when the days are all twilight, when you need it most, it stops.

—A. Bartlett Giamatti, “The Green Fields of the Mind”

But there is no joy in Mudville—mighty Casey has struck out.

—Ernest Thayer, “Casey at the Bat”

In the final pages of John Updike’s *Rabbit, Run*, Rabbit Angstrom, a man whose life revolves around remembrances of his once-great high school basketball career, sprints off into the woods surrounding the cemetery where his infant daughter has just been laid to rest, running away from everything his life has become, running because it is the only thing left that he truly knows how to do. On the basketball court Rabbit was a star. In his life he is a failure. Rabbit’s high school stardom reflects success at a particular instant in time, a seventeen-year old’s triumph as he hits a game winning shot at the buzzer and life is only winning and the concept of losing, let alone death, never existed. But the moment does not last, despite any and all attempts to the contrary. Sports provide the ultimate escape from the temporal restraints of reality, an escape into the weightless glory of a single shared moment that feels as if it may last forever, but ultimately becomes one more
reminder of the hopeless fragility and ephemeral brevity of life.

As a distinctly American achievement, baseball—certainly more than other sport, and arguably to a greater extent any other phenomenon—maintains a symbiotic relationship with the nation, as baseball represents America but America also clearly represents baseball. Baseball wraps tightly into the fabric of the American experience, particularly into the spectacle of the American dream. The failure of the American dream has been proclaimed *ad nauseam* during the last quarter of the twentieth-century, but the fulfillment of the dream really has nothing to do with its usefulness as metaphor. The dream's existence attests to the distinctly American (i.e. Protestant) belief in self-improvement and the possibility of success, religious and social, through hard work and determination. The American dream is a dream like any other, and the mere attempt to achieve it often stands as an accomplishment in itself. Therefore, the failure of the American dream becomes a rather unspectacular and unsurprising failure, and its passing, either into disappointment or irrelevance, deserves little more than passing notice.

What *has* failed—discreetly and troublingly—might be called the *dream* of the American dream, the dream that baseball so wonderfully represents with its anachronistic ballparks of green Elysian Fields surrounded by the ever-threatening approach of skyscrapers and industrialism. Baseball tells the nation's story and meaningfully participates in that narrative, and the failure of baseball, as represented by late-twentieth-century American writers, signals two possible alternatives for the ideological future of the American narrative: either a reorganization of the narrative to reflect postmodern concerns with this failure or, in a poststructuralist sense, the haunting collapse of this entire American narrative.
For American writers of the last one hundred and fifty years, baseball represents a peculiar entry point into the psyche of the American experience, of the American dream or narrative and all its ideological resonance. Although the game’s usefulness as a metaphor or substitute for larger artistic projects can be traced back to the game’s “origins” on those Elysian fields, Peter Bjarkman writes in *Baseball and the Game of Life* of the moment that baseball as a critical literary event truly occurred: “Over the past three decades a new literary phenomenon has arisen, the serious adult baseball novel, a legitimate American art form. . . . The way was first paved by Bernard Malamud, who single-handedly launched the adult sports novel in 1952. With *The Natural* Malamud effectively exploited for the first time the inherent mythic potentials of baseball as literary subject” (11). Yet baseball as symbol represents a potentially dangerous substitution, particularly because, as a substitute for the actual experience, it necessitates a certain reduction: “baseball—its rules, history, conduct—isn’t a very useful microcosm, and life’s lessons can’t be taught very well by overpaid twenty-two-year-old phenoms. Sports may occasionally be a little like life and occur within it. But it’s a game” (Ford, *Game Time*, xii). And yet writers continually return to this now archetypal symbol of America, even if only to try and subvert its unexplainable but undeniably persuasive hold on the national psyche.

Baseball may not be a very useful microcosm, but neither do I think that it can be dismissed so quickly as simply “a game.” The rejection of baseball as microcosm reflects the refutation of baseball as a redemptive force, as a representative of a larger salvation narrative—linked to Weberian notions of the Protestant work ethic—that in a post-religious age no longer seems neither useful nor particularly relevant. Baseball’s
traditional narrative follows the modern trend from Hegel onward of secularizing Christian narratives of progress or salvation, of transforming the random and chaotic flow of history into a story with beginnings, middles and spectacular utopian conclusions; in this context, baseball no longer represents a useful microcosm because microcosms are no longer useful.

Baseball, then, is as good a metaphor for life as any other, and thus its primary failure rests in this more general failure of metaphors to accurately represent their subjects. In a modern or structuralist mode of epistemological representation, this Hegelian type of metaphor was useful because history, national and individual, could be characterized by symbolic journeys home or long balls hit over the centerfield walls of Eden. Baseball maintains a close and intimate connection with our national history, such that events on the diamond mirror external cultural events, from corruption to racial integration to the outrageous inflation of profit margins and the excessive zeal of capitalism. Yet postwar writers—starting with Malamud and continuing into the works of some late-twentieth-century authors—now consider the ways in which, despite the flaws of this entire narrative, the national plot still maintains meaning by considering the impact of the failure of this American narrative. The failure becomes the narrative, and in doing so becomes part of the larger narrative of postwar anxiety and postmodern alienation. Although Roth, DeLillo, and Ford all approach the postmodern condition from slightly different superlative positions, all employ baseball as a complex but useful symbol in the representation of an American culture at the brink of critical meaning, just one step away from dissolving into emptiness, just one step away from making that final out at home plate.
Bibliography

Primary Sources—Baseball Fiction


Secondary Sources—Baseball Non-Fiction


Yale University Press, 1981.


**Secondary Sources—Cultural Criticism/Mythology/Theory**


