

George Will's baseball— a conservative critique

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BASEBALL, more than any other sport, has inspired good writing from important authors and gained serious attention from thoughtful people. From Ring Lardner's ignorant and mean-spirited "busher," Jack Keefe, to Mark Harris's intelligent and warm-hearted southpaw Henry Wiggen, to Bernard Malamud's mythical Arthurian hero, the "natural" Roy Hobbs, writers have used baseball and its players to say something about the world and the people in it. How someone sees the game and its players reveals the kind of person he is and what he values.

My friend Bart Giamatti was a student and explicator of epic poetry before he became president of Yale University, president of baseball's National League, and commissioner of baseball. He viewed the game as an epic, whose elements were simple and primordial: a man stood on a hill and hurled a rock at another man, who waited below with a tree trunk in his hands. (Malamud had a similar vision, in which the bat was "like a caveman's ax.") So it must have been from the time of the Stone Age. A dramatically heroic and potentially tragic confrontation stands at the heart of this most poetic game.

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From a more classical perspective Giamatti regarded baseball as a kind of Homeric *Odyssey*. The batter is its hero. He begins at home, but his mission is to venture away from it, encountering various unforeseeable dangers. At each station opponents scheme to put him out by strength or skill or guile. Should they succeed he dies on the bases, defeated. If his own heroic talents are superior, however, he completes the circuit and returns victorious to home, there to be greeted with joy by the friends he left behind. But Giamatti knew the *Iliad*, too, and as a long-time Red Sox fan he believed that the tragic epic best corresponded to baseball; thus he observed that the game "was meant to break your heart."

That is not how George Will sees it. Educated at Connecticut's Trinity College and at Oxford and Princeton, the holder of a doctorate in political theory, a former professor himself and the son of a professor, he has become a Pulitzer Prize winning columnist and a political commentator on national television, and he has earned a reputation as the most thoughtful and urbane of conservative journalists. His best-selling book *Men at Work*¹ clearly shows his characteristic analytic intelligence, a witty and graceful writing style, a deep knowledge of baseball and its history, and a love for the game and the men who work at it in the major leagues. It is not a book, however, for those who look to the game for the celebration of that heroic greatness that can inspire and elevate the rest of us to admire a natural excellence that we ourselves can achieve only in dreams. His book is not for humanists, poets, or hero worshippers—but for systems analysts, social scientists, and computer programmers.

As we would expect from its author, it is no mere narrative account but makes a powerful argument. Supported by a formidable array of statistics and testimony from current participants, Will rejects the widespread assertion that baseball today is a degenerate perversion of the great game that once was. Critics point to the dilution of talent caused by the expansion from sixteen to twenty-six teams, and to the unseasoned and untutored players who still must learn the rudiments of the game when they are brought too soon to the majors to fill out the added rosters. They complain of the absence of the great dynastic championship teams that we knew in better times, the decline of hitting (the most difficult and most ex-

¹George F. Will. *Men at Work: The Craft of Baseball*. Macmillan Publishing. 368 pp. \$19.95.

citing part of the game), the shortage of great players—in short, the mediocrity of baseball today.

Will dismisses these complaints as the usual crabbing of elders, almost as old as baseball itself. To him “the national pastime is better than ever in almost every way and is getting better every year.” For this conclusion he offers three major reasons:

(1) The games are getting closer. The powerful 1988 American League champion Oakland Athletics scored only 180 runs more than their opponents for a per-game average margin of victory of 1.1 runs. The great Yankees of 1927 had an advantage more than twice that size—2.45 runs—and the Yankees of 1939 defeated their rivals by an average of 2.67 runs per game.

(2) Competition for the championships is becoming more equal. No team has won the World's Series for two consecutive years since the Yankees of 1977 and 1978. Since then there has been tremendous volatility: in the eleven seasons from 1979 through 1989 nine different teams won the American League pennant and seven won in the National League. Compare this with the dynasties that dominated the past: the New York Giants won four pennants in a row from 1921 through 1924; the Brooklyn Dodgers won six out of ten from 1947 through 1956, and the Los Angeles team that has usurped their name won three of four from 1963 through 1966. The greatest dynasty of all, of course, was created by the New York Yankees. From 1921 through 1928 they won six of eight pennants; from 1936 through 1943 they won seven of eight; from 1947 through 1964 they won fifteen of eighteen (winning four consecutive pennants once and five in a row twice during that last stretch).

(3) The culminating reason for the superiority of the modern game is that it is smarter; now, as never before, intelligence is the decisive element in the game.

The very name of his book is ominous for Will's approach to the subject: *Men at Work: The Craft of Baseball*. It is not a game but a *craft*; the participants do not play, they *work*. “Baseball was evolving from lower forms of activity about the time the colonies were evolving into a nation, and baseball became a mode of work—as distinct from a pastime—remarkably soon after the nation got going.” The participants succeed at their craft as men do at any other, by means of hard work and intelligent study. Will knows, of course, that baseball players need physical ability and natural talent, but he mentions these as little as possible. In his

view baseball has progressed and improved because intelligence and knowledge have come to the fore, aided by advances in technology. Charts, computers, and videotapes have made it possible to acquire and organize information better than ever before and therefore to use it more effectively and decisively. "Games are won by a combination of informed aggression and prudence based on information."

As George Orwell once put it, only an intellectual could believe that. This is the fantasy of a smart, skinny kid who desperately wants to believe that brains count more than the speed, power, and reckless courage of the big guys who can play, but it is also the dominant message of this book. More puzzling than this bizarre prejudice is Will's defense of the modern game against its detractors. As a conservative, a self-proclaimed Tory, he might be expected to be a *laudator temporis acti*, a praiser of the past even beyond justice. An admirer of a nobler time should look askance at the use of the designated hitter and other specialists who demean the all-roundedness esteemed by both the principle of aristocracy and liberal education.

Decline and fall

One need not be a conservative, however, to be appalled by what has happened to baseball. Aesthetically, the decline is evident. Baseball was meant to be played on nature's green grass in the sunshine. Bart Giamatti liked to point out that "paradise" derives from an Old Persian word that meant "enclosed park or green." Baseball responds to "a vestigial memory of an enclosed green space as a place of freedom or play." For Will, of course, it is a place of work—hard, dangerous, and exacting. Most modern baseball fields suit Will's vision better, for they are anything but parks, not to mention paradise. Many of them have replaced the grass with a surface hard as a pool table, whose covering has seams that sometimes come undone. In some of them the sky is shut out, turning the game into an indoor sport, like bowling and roller derby. The fields tend to be uniform and standardized, lacking the delightful peculiarities that real ball parks like Ebbets Field, Griffith Stadium, Crosley Field, and the Polo Grounds used to have. The modern stadia seem fake, manufactured, unnatural. They are noisy, distracting, and offensive places, where scoreboards ceaselessly blare rock music and show cartoons. They sound military charges, tell the fans when to cheer, and produce mechanized

rhythmic noise that used to be supplied rarely, spontaneously, and at appropriate times by the collision of human palms. Everything possible is done to turn the spectator's attention from the game.

This may well be necessary, because the game has become much more boring. In the 1940s the Yankees began their games at three o'clock in the afternoon, and they were generally over by five. On June 25, 1990, a day picked at random, omitting a twelve-inning game that lasted four hours and fifteen minutes, twelve games were played in the major leagues. The quickest lasted over two and one-half hours, the longest over three and one-half; the average was two hours and forty-three minutes. This is not because there is more scoring today: the highest-scoring team in 1987 averaged 5.5 runs per game; the figure in 1941 was 5.6.

The percentage of elapsed time that involves significant action in a baseball game is always small, but it has become intolerably so. Part of the increased dead time results from a prodigal use of relief pitchers unknown in better days. Much of the rest consists of pitchers holding the ball or throwing to first to limit the running game that is the modern substitute for the most difficult part of the game and its life's blood—hitting. As Ted Williams neatly put it: "When you're coming towards the park and you're two blocks away, and you hear a tremendous cheer, that isn't because someone has thrown a strike. That's because someone has hit the ball." The threat posed by batters who can hit with consistency and power is what gives the game excitement and drama, and what provides the danger that alone makes great pitching and fielding impressive. Baseball was not meant to be a track meet, but the new fields—with their distant fences that make home runs into outs, and their hard surfaces that produce singles out of ordinary ground balls—are turning it into one.

Nor is the argument from equality compelling, for modern baseball is so equal because it is mediocre. The critics' complaints are sound; the quality of play is diminished everywhere, and no team can stock itself with enough talent to establish itself as a dynasty. Instead, an equality of incompetence reigns. The last time when great dynasties flourished was the 1950s, when the Yankees dominated the American League and the Dodgers controlled the National League almost as completely, challenged most successfully by an impressive Giants team. This is precisely the period that Will particularly scorns. Home runs, he tells us,

began to drive out other forms of offense. When home runs became the center of baseball's mental universe, the emphasis shifted away from advancing runners. The new emphasis was on just getting runners on base to wait for lightning to strike. The major league teams of the 1950s were like the American automobiles of the 1950s. There was not much variety or subtlety.... The stolen base was like the foreign car: It was considered cute and fun and not quite serious, and was not often seen....

The wonder is that baseball took such a wrong turn in ... the 1950s. Yes, that was a conservative decade. The Eisenhower years have been characterized as "the bland leading the bland." Bland was fine in politics.... But baseball is entertainment and bland entertainment is not fun.... It was insufficiently entertaining because it was not sufficiently intelligent.

That is an extraordinary passage to be written by a conservative and a baseball fan. Consider the contempt for "wait[ing] for lightning to strike." That is just what thrilled fans did in the 1920s and 1930s, as they watched the Yankees of Ruth, Gehrig, and Lazzeri, waiting for their legendary "five o'clock lightning." Whatever else may be said of American cars of the fifties, they had size and power; *the* foreign car of the day was the Volkswagen beetle, a tiny simulacrum of an automobile, miserably cramped and powerless.

In defense of the fifties

The fifties were when the first great black players—Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, Roy Campanella, Don Newcombe, Henry Aaron, Frank Robinson, and Ernie Banks—came into their own and raised the quality and excitement of the game to a new level. All the thrills offered by baseball were present in abundance. If you like hitting you could have enjoyed watching Stan Musial, Williams, Aaron, Mays, Duke Snider, Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra, and Roberto Clemente. If pitching is to your taste you could have seen Bob Feller, Warren Spahn, Early Wynn, Whitey Ford, and a host of other outstanding hurlers. If defense is what you want, the fifties were graced with such brilliant shortstops as Pee Wee Reese, Phil Rizzuto, and Luis Aparicio. Stealing bases, to be sure, was an appropriately minor part of the game, but no one who saw Willie Mays run the bases will ever forget it, and the thrill of watching Jackie Robinson steal home cannot be matched.

In the fifties these great players were not scattered about one or two to a side, as at best they are today, but were often collected in one place to make a great team. At their peak the Dodgers terri-

fied everyone with a lineup that included Robinson, Snider, Campanella, Gil Hodges, and Carl Furillo; and the 1951 Yankees could field a team that included Joe DiMaggio, Mantle, Berra, and Johnny Mize, who averaged 353 career home runs apiece. Great pitching staffs, with a depth not equalled in our time, were also assembled. The same Yankees had three pitchers (Allie Reynolds, Vic Raschi, and Eddie Lopat), each of whom averaged almost eighteen victories a season from 1950 through 1952; in 1953 they were joined by Ford, who won eighteen that year. The Cleveland staff of the same era—which included Feller, Wynn, Bob Lemon, and Mike Garcia—was even more impressive.

But even though pitching is generally conceded to be between 75 and 90 percent of the game, these Indians won only one pennant, in 1954, when they won 111 out of the 154 games (162 are played today) to beat out the Yankees, who won “only” 103. The Dodgers and Yankees faced stiff competition in the fifties, and there were tight pennant races. In fact, the 1950s witnessed two of the most thrilling pennant races and the single most miraculous game in the history of baseball. In 1950 the Phillies won the pennant by beating the Dodgers at Ebbets Field on the last day of the season on a tenth-inning home run by Dick Sisler. In 1951 the Giants came from thirteen games behind on August 11 to tie the Dodgers on the last day of the regular season. With the Giants trailing 4-2 in the bottom of the ninth inning of the third and final game of the playoffs, Bobby Thomson hit a three-run homer to win the game. It was the only time ever that the pennant was decided by the last pitch of the season.

Why does Will think that such a glorious era was dull? It was a time of heroic greatness and consistent excellence, when dynasties were challenged by other dynasties. The war between the Yankees and Dodgers extended from 1947 through 1956, a decade—the very length of the war between the Greeks and Trojans. It is true that most of the action took place in New York City among the Dodgers, Giants, and Yankees, and that Will is devoted to the Chicago Cubs. But in the twelfth century B.C. all the action was at Troy, and you didn't have to root for Troy or Argos or Ithaca to appreciate the show. Of course, the Cubs haven't won a pennant since 1945 or a World Series since Teddy Roosevelt was president; no doubt such lengthy frustration makes a man disgruntled and causes him to lose his judgment.

How else can we explain Will's failure to appreciate the lost grandeur of baseball in the fifties? For the last time the national game held its place as part of nature, timeless and regular as Newton's universe. In the beginning God created sixteen major-league baseball teams, eight in the National League and eight in the American. Baseball was played on natural grass and mostly in the daytime. Each team played every other team in its league twenty-two times a season, eleven games at home and eleven away; the seventy-seven games at home and seventy-seven away made for a perfectly symmetrical season. The Yankees ruled this world as the Olympian gods ruled theirs. The mighty Dodgers and Giants challenged their supremacy as the Titans and Giants challenged the Olympians, and to no more avail. The Yankees ruled with steadiness, serenity, and justice, and only the unworthy gnashed their teeth in envy and prayed for chaos to shatter the unwelcome order.

Then, at last, the forces of disorder held sway. The Yankees, a pale copy of the great teams, won their last pennant of the era in 1964. Then came *Götterdämmerung*: burning cities at home, frustrating and divisive wars abroad, one president forced not to seek reelection and another to resign his office, debasement of the schools and universities, the rise of a drug culture, the collapse of sexual decorum and restraint.

If, in a future age, Western civilization should come to an end, some perceptive scholar will point with certainty to the era that marked the beginning of its decline. The first clear sign came in 1953, when the Boston Braves moved to Milwaukee; the next year the St. Louis Browns became the Baltimore Orioles. Beginning in 1961 new teams were added, and in 1969 each league was divided into two divisions. The Dark Ages had begun. It is not clear that we shall ever see a Renaissance. It boggles the mind that a serious thinker who passes for a conservative could applaud such a decline.

OVERRATING INTELLIGENCE

What must lie behind Will's assessment is his passionate delusion that intelligence, not power, controls the modern degenerate game. Certainly, the men he admires most in the game today all rely on intelligence and on the new informational tools to enhance their success.

The heart of Will's book is a study of four such men: the manager Tony La Russa of Oakland, the pitcher Orel Hershiser of Los Angeles, the batter Tony Gwynn of San Diego, and the shortstop

Cal Ripken of Baltimore. The choices are by no means obvious. It is true that managers like Casey Stengel, John McGraw, and Leo Durocher are no longer around, but it is most unlikely that Will would have chosen them if they were. No more did he choose the Cardinals' Whitey Herzog, the Dodgers' Tom Lasorda, or the Tigers' Sparky Anderson, highly successful managers who resemble those past greats in their blue-collar, extroverted, non-intellectual styles. Instead he chose La Russa, a fine manager who is greatly respected and has had remarkable success with two different teams, and who perfectly fits Will's model of the intellectual in baseball. He is the fifth manager in major-league history to hold a law degree and, as Will points out, the other four are in the Hall of Fame.

La Russa's Athletics have won the last three American League championships chiefly because they have the best hitters and pitchers in the league, but La Russa plays and talks a brainy game. It is the game that Will loves, in which runners aggressively take extra bases, and managers engage in intellectual warfare by stealing the enemy's signs and making complicated calculations. Will recounts that La Russa once precisely timed an opposing pitcher's natural delivery to the plate at 1.6 seconds, one-fifth of a second more than a good runner needs to steal second base. La Russa inserted a speedy pinch runner on first to take advantage of the opportunity. The pitcher adjusted to the danger by hurrying some of his deliveries, at the paradoxical cost of losing speed on those pitches. La Russa carefully decided when the next delivery would be slow and signaled the runner to steal. He guessed wrong, but the runner was still safe, although according to the calculation he should have been out. Now Oakland had an advantage, for the runner could score from second on a mere single. On the other hand, the pitcher no longer needed to worry about a stolen base, so he pitched naturally at his highest efficiency. "The tricky stuff was over. Now it was pitcher against the hitter. The pitcher won. Henderson hit a fly ball caught by the left fielder. Texas won."

However technically sophisticated and intelligent La Russa's strategy might have been, it was confounded by the performance of the pitcher and the batter, which was not intellectual but physical. Besides, it is not even clear that La Russa's strategy was smart. It was based on anticipating the pitching pattern, which he got wrong, only to be saved by the sheer speed of the runner. Was he wise to order a steal at all, and thus to take the pressure off the

pitcher? Might La Russa not have done better to keep the runner on first, and to compel a fat pitch that the batter could have demolished? It is not possible to know, as is true of all such decisions. The dictates of inside baseball are like maxims; different ones prescribe mutually exclusive courses of action. "A stitch in time saves nine," but "haste makes waste." In the same way, it is good for a pitcher to throw over to first to keep the runner close, but it is bad to do so too often, for that wears him out and distracts his attention from the batter. How often is too often? It depends. Clever managers always tell you about their shrewd moves that worked out, and blame the players' faulty execution for their failures. But by far the most important element in the contest is not intelligence but the natural ability of the players—a point that Will does not make.

Will's preferred game is as old as the hills; it dominated baseball in the era of the dead ball, when power hitting was rare. In recent years it has been most closely associated with Gene Mauch, who managed four different teams over twenty-six years, winning much admiration but no league championships, chiefly because he lacked hitters like Oakland's Rickey Henderson, Carney Lansford, Mark McGwire, and Jose Canseco, and pitchers like Dave Stewart, Bob Welch, and Dennis Eckersley. It is a game meant to compensate for lack of talent, but even so, natural ability, speed, strength, and skill are more important to its success than anything else. In the words of Whitey Herzog, whose speedy, light-hitting Cardinals won three pennants playing that game: "When I managed Kansas City I wasn't too smart because I didn't have a closer. I got smarter in St. Louis because I've had Bruce Sutter, Todd Worrell, and Ken Dayley." Today only Dayley is left, and by the last week of the season he had only four wins and two saves. It is no accident, as the Stalinists used to say, that the Cardinals finished last this year and that Herzog is no longer managing.

Will's favorite pitcher, Orel Hershisser, has achieved wonderful things, including breaking the record for consecutive scoreless innings and taking his team to the world championship in 1988. He is a worthy subject of attention for the student of baseball, but by no means the most obvious. As Will points out, no one in baseball history has had a more sensational first five years than the Mets' Dwight Gooden. He has great speed, an outstanding curve, and remarkable control. He is a great strikeout artist and has one of the best winning percentages ever, much better than Hershisser's.

Gooden has the best chance of breaking an assortment of pitching records before he is through, yet Will is more interested in Hershisier. The reason he gives is that Hershisier has done something very rare: he is "pitching with steady success in his thirties." That is, indeed, a fine achievement, but the Texas Rangers' Nolan Ryan is still pitching with astonishing success at the age of forty-two! (Hershisier, who turned thirty-two in September, had no success whatever this year, because of a sore arm.) Ryan has struck out more batters and thrown more no-hitters than any pitcher who ever played in the major leagues, won his three hundredth victory this past season, and led the league in strikeouts. Yet Will chose Hershisier, and his real reason is clear. Gooden, Ryan, and Boston's Roger Clemens are hard throwers, "naturals," whose success plainly comes from their extraordinary physical abilities. None is very talkative about his skills, which is why Will is less interested in them than in the articulate Dodger, whose success "is more an achievement of mind than muscle."

The story is the same with Baltimore's Cal Ripken. He is a very good hitter; after his first six years in the majors he had a batting average of .283 and 160 home runs, easily the best among active shortstops, with no serious competition. (Some perspective on the pitiful decline of hitting in today's game is provided by the fact that in 1941 seven of the sixteen major-league shortstops had a combined batting average of .299, and this was no fluke. Their combined career average, covering 110 years of play, was .297.²) He is also the modern iron man of baseball, having played in more consecutive games than anyone except Lou Gehrig. By dint of hard work and ceaseless study he has learned to position himself so as to compensate for his lack of extraordinary speed and agility. He is a fine fielder, but he happens to be a contemporary of Ozzie Smith, whom Will rightly calls "the most elegant shortstop of his era, and perhaps the finest fielder ever." Why, then, is Ripken his chosen subject? Again because Smith is a "natural," blessed with the skills and talents that make him superb. Ripken, on the other hand, is the intellectual's shortstop, relying on thought and knowledge for success. He was voted the "smartest defensive player" by his peers and says of himself, "I'm not blessed with the kind of range a lot of shortstops have. The way I have success, I guess, is by thinking."

²I owe this observation to Michael Seidel's splendid book *Streak: Joe DiMaggio and the Summer of '41* (McGraw-Hill, 1988), p. 13.

The hitter as anti-hero

Perhaps the strangest of Will's choices, however, is his batter, Tony Gwynn. In general, Will seems to prefer defense to offense, citing with approval the sportswriter Tom Boswell's observation that defense is "the cognoscenti corner of baseball...." If he must have offense, Will prefers running to hitting. If he must have hitting, he prefers thought and finesse to power. Thus it is Gwynn's cerebral approach to batting that explains Will's selection. No student of the art of hitting is more dedicated than Gwynn, whose quest to perfect his style is such that he is distressed at hitting a home run with an imperfect swing, and pleased by a hard-hit out when the ball went where he intended it. He is the first National Leaguer to win three consecutive batting titles since the great Stan Musial won his third straight in 1952, and his .370 average in 1988 is the highest since Musial's .376 in 1948.

But Gwynn, unlike Musial, is a singles hitter. Compared with the outstanding hitters in the game he lacks power, as revealed in home-run totals and slugging average, and the dominant hitter's chief contribution, runs batted in. To be sure, there are few Musials in the game today, but there are at least two batters who clearly have a better claim to greatness than Gwynn: the veteran George Brett of the Kansas City Royals and the Yankees' Don Mattingly, Gwynn's baseball contemporary. The statistics in the following table make Gwynn's inferiority clear:

Table: Career Batting Statistics (through the 1989 season)^a

	Gwynn	Brett	Mattingly	Musial
Batting average	.332	.310	.323	.331
Slugging average	.443	.501	.520	.559
Runs batted in*	59	82	102	93
Home runs*	6	17	23	23

*average per full season

^aSources: *The Sporting News Official Baseball Register* (1990 edition), Barry Siegel, ed. (*The Sporting News*, 1990); *The Baseball Encyclopedia* (7th edition), Joseph L. Reichler, ed. (Macmillan Publishing, 1988).

Will's choice of Gwynn instead of Brett or Mattingly crystallizes the shortcomings of his approach to the game. Bemoaning Gwynn's failure to win recognition in spite of his high average, Will complains, "What has all this earned Gwynn? He is called 'the West Coast Wade Boggs.' That is because Gwynn practices his craft at the wrong end of the continent." No, that is because both Gwynn and the Red Sox' high-average hitter have failed to provide

the kind of heroic leadership by performance that carries a team to victories and championships, the combination of power and timeliness that drives in runs and inspires teammates.

This year, in an extraordinary departure from the tight-lipped protectiveness usual in the game, Gwynn's teammates have expressed their disappointment. One of the Padres complained that Gwynn "cares only about his hits.... He doesn't care about this team...." Another objected to Gwynn's decision to bunt with two men on and nobody out:

If you sacrifice, you can protect your average, but what that does is put the pressure on the other guy. Tony has a chance to be a game-breaking player. We expect him to take his chance and hit. If you sacrifice, the pressure goes to the next guy, and the next guy and the next guy, and they think now they have to get a hit. And when you have to do that, your chances of doing it are going down the toilet, and so are your chances of winning.

A third said, "You like to see a No. 3 hitter with 100 RBI. Tony has the potential to do that. He can drive the ball. He's the type of player who can lead a team to a championship, and he knows that. If I was hitting .350 and there were runners on first or second and they see me bunt and they say to me why don't you hit away, it makes a lot of sense."

Gwynn defends himself as follows: "This is a game based on numbers. It's not based on character or heart or work ethic. It's the numbers. At contract time people say, 'Did you hit .300?' The people want to see numbers on the board. I'm a high-average hitter. Some hit for power. Some move a runner over. Some hit for average. I try to do what I am capable of doing, whether people like it or not."³ That is not the voice of Roy Hobbs, Malamud's fictional "natural," who literally knocked the cover off the ball in his first at-bat in the majors, and whose goal was to be "the best there ever was in the game"; nor is it the voice of the real-life Ted Williams, who said at the age of twenty, "All I want out of life is that when I walk down the street folks will say, 'There goes the greatest hitter that ever lived.'" Gwynn's is the voice of our times,

³The preceding quotations appear in Peter Richmond's "Trouble in Paradise," the *National Sports Daily*, June 25, 1990, pp. 36-39. Richmond is not persuaded by Will's account of Gwynn: "Traditionally, Gwynn's talents have been viewed by the baseball community at large with the clinical detachment we afford the chemist's feats. When columnist George Will devoted 100 pages of his recent book to Gwynn he glorified only the deeds that could be measured in quantifiable units, and managed to avoid characterization of the man entirely—a test-tube profile, and, in retrospect, quite naive...."

of the anti-hero who knows his limitations and accepts them, who shuns the burden of leadership, who goes his own way and "does his own thing," who is satisfied with well-rewarded competence and does not seek greatness. And that is what Will likes about Gwynn: "'Stay within yourself is baseball's first commandment'.... A player's reach should not exceed his grasp." If Mighty Casey came to bat at a crucial moment today, George Will would want him to punch a grounder through the right side to move the runner to third and leave things up to the next batter.

It would not be fair to suggest that Will has no place for the heroic; it is just that he understands heroism in a peculiarly modern and constricted way. He endorses the novelist John Updike's view that baseball heroism "comes not from flashes of brilliance, but ... from 'the players who always *care*,' about themselves and their craft," and adds his own observation that "those who pay the price of excellence in any demanding discipline are heroes."

In his famous essay about Ted Williams's final game Updike spoke of his hero's "hard blue glow of high purpose." For him "Williams is the classic ballplayer of the game on a hot August weekday before a small crowd, when the only thing at stake is the tissue-thin difference between a thing done well and a thing done ill." Such heroism is aesthetic more than it is moral. The game in question was meaningless, for the Red Sox were out of the pennant race. The "high purpose" was entirely personal and made no contribution to a practical or elevated goal. Williams wanted to end his career with a home run. He did so and sat out the team's last few games on the road. In his nineteen brilliant years with the Red Sox they won one pennant and no World's Series. In the ten key games of his career—seven in the Series and the other three in which a Red Sox victory would have brought a league championship—Williams hit .232 and made no important contribution. Like Tony Gwynn, but with infinitely greater power and talent, he was a keen student of the game, a tireless perfectionist who refused to swing at a pitch out of the strike zone or to change his style to meet particular situations. What he did he did beautifully and with meticulous care. His last game was a fitting end to the career of a great hitter and stylist—but not of a hero.

Will's concept is less aesthetic but more democratically modern: everyone is a potential hero, provided that he cares for his craft and works hard to perfect it. That definition flatters us ordinary people, but it also badly diminishes the status of the meritorious,

establishing a kind of affirmative-action heroism. It is not what people have sought for millennia in their heroes, who instead are expected to perform great and wondrous deeds, so marvelous that they verge on the magical. Heroes must far outdo ordinary mortals, to the point where their actions give rise to song, story, and legend. Heroes do not, however, perform their deeds for themselves alone; instead their deeds are vital to those who rely on them. Achilles is heroic because even other heroes cannot match his speed and strength, without which the Greeks cannot take Troy; Odysseus is heroic because he surpasses all others in cleverness, without which his men will die and never reach home.

True heroism

Babe Ruth was a true baseball hero, because his achievements dwarfed all others'. When he hit fifty-nine home runs in 1921, the next best slugger had twenty-four; when he hit his seven hundredth homer, only two others had over three hundred. Even more important, throughout his career his hitting brought victory and championships to his team. Legends sprang up of Ruth's vast appetite for food and drink and women, of his visits to dying children and the fulfillment of his promises to hit home runs for them, of his pointing to the place in the stands where he would drive the next pitch for a home run (and then hitting it there). Will remarks that "[i]t is inconceivable that a protean figure like Babe Ruth could burst upon baseball today," and he is glad of it. He scolds Ruth for his bad habits (the faults of a hero can be as gigantic as his virtues) and concludes that such great superiority in performance could not exist today—not because of the general mediocrity of today's game, but because today's players "are generally bigger and stronger and faster, and they know more about a game that rewards *knowing* [emphasis in the original]."

But the more important point is that none of today's players is likely to match the achievements or epic status of such real heroes as Ruth or Joe DiMaggio. Will is impressed by DiMaggio's commitment to excellence and his knowledge of the game. The one specific achievement that he singles out for praise, however, is that DiMaggio was never thrown out going from first to third! That is what he finds noteworthy about a man who was one of the great batters and fielders of all time, who led his team to ten pennants and to victories in nine World Series in his thirteen years as a player, and who holds what is generally agreed to be the most re-

markable and unapproachable baseball record of all time—a hitting streak of fifty-six consecutive games.

That streak is the subject of Michael Seidel's recent book, which displays a better understanding of baseball heroism: "The individual effort required for a personal hitting streak is comparable to what heroic legend calls the *aristeia*, whereby great energies are gathered for a day, dispensed, and then regenerated for yet another day, in an epic wonder of consistency." DiMaggio's exploits, moreover, had meaning not for himself alone, but carried and inspired his companions, as the deeds of epic heroes do. During his great streak Johnny Sturm, Frank Crosetti, and Phil Rizzuto, none of them normally great hitters, each enjoyed a lesser streak of his own. At the beginning of DiMaggio's streak the Yankees were in a terrible slump, five and one-half games out of first place. At its end they had destroyed the will of the opposition, were safely in first place, and on their way to clinching the pennant on September 4 (the earliest date in history), and finishing twenty games ahead of the next best team. That summer a song swept the nation:

From coast to coast, that's all you hear
 Of Joe the one-man show
 He's glorified the horsehide sphere,
 Joltin' Joe DiMaggio.
 Joe...Joe...DiMaggio...
 We want you on our side.

He'll live in baseball's Hall of Fame
 He got there blow-by-blow
 Our kids will tell their kids his name,
 Joltin' Joe DiMaggio.

So did the raging Achilles inspire his fellow Achaeans against the Trojans, and, so, at somewhat greater length, did Homer sing of his deeds.

But there is more still to true heroism: the qualities of courage, suffering, and sacrifice. These DiMaggio displayed most strikingly in 1949. Before the season he had a bone spur removed from his heel (as with Achilles, a vulnerable spot). The pain was great enough to keep him out of the lineup until the end of June, when the Yankees went to Boston for a three-game series against the team that they had to beat. DiMaggio blasted four home runs in three games, batting in nine runs as New York swept the series.

The importance of that manifestation of *aristeia* was very clear at the end of the season, when the Red Sox came into Yankee Stadium for the two final games. Had they won even one of the three played in June, the championship would have been theirs already; instead the Red Sox had to win one of the remaining two. DiMaggio had missed the last couple of weeks, felled by a case of viral pneumonia. Once again, the ailing warrior returned to the field of battle. Weak as he was, he managed two hits and led his mates to victory. The next day, the staggering DiMaggio managed to run out a triple and to last until the ninth inning (when weakness and leg cramps finally forced him from the field). The inspired Yankees won the game and the championship.

That is the sort of thing Ernest Hemingway had in mind when he told of the old fisherman in *The Old Man and the Sea*, who struggled in a life-and-death battle with the greatest fish he had ever seen, despite a body cramped with pain and a wounded hand: "I think the great Joe DiMaggio would be proud of me today. I had no bone spurs. But the hands and the back hurt truly." Nor was this the end. In the sad, confused 1960s, when heroism seemed only myth, Simon and Garfunkel caught America's longing for a true hero: "Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio? A nation turns its lonely eyes to you."

No one ever thought that DiMaggio's greatness came chiefly from intelligence, care, and hard work. Millions of people have those admirable qualities without significant result. Heroes arise by means of natural talents that are beyond the rest of us; the secret of their success is mysterious and charismatic. As Toots Shor put it:

There never was a guy like DiMaggio in baseball. The way people admired him, the way they admire him now. Everybody wanted to meet Joe, to touch him, to be around him—the big guys too. I'm not just talking about fans coming into the joint. Joe was a hero, a real legitimate hero. I don't know what it takes to be a hero like Joe. You can't manufacture a hero like that. It just has to be there, the way he plays, the way he works, the way he is.

George Will set out to write an antiromantic book about baseball, and he succeeded. In so doing, however, he has missed what baseball is all about. Baseball without romance and heroism is like *Hamlet* without poetry or the Prince of Denmark—just words. We care about baseball not because we enjoy watching working men try hard to improve their craft, or because we seek models for aes-

thetic appreciation, but because we keep hoping that some hero or team of heroes will come along and do something wonderful and magical, something never done before, something neither we nor any other player could do. Will concludes his book with the words of Malamud in *The Natural*: "When we are without heroes we 'don't know how far we can go,'" but he has curtailed the quotation. The original reads: "Without heroes we're all plain people and don't know how far we can go." His heroes are just like the rest of us, who concentrate their intelligence, work hard, and apply themselves to reach a level that is somehow within the reach of anyone with intelligence and discipline. In hard times, however, and all times are in some way hard, we need greater and more potent heroes—to tell us not what all of us can do but what only the best of us can do. Their doing so inspires the rest of us to do the best we can. What we need are heroes like Malamud's Roy Hobbs: "He belonged [the sportswriters wrote] with the other immortals, a giant in performance.... He was a throwback to a time of true heroes, not of the brittle, razzle dazzle boys that had sprung up around the jack rabbit ball—a natural not seen in a dog's age, and weren't they the lucky ones he had appeared here and now to work his wonders before them."