Sporting with the Gods

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Sporting with the Gods

The Rhetoric of Play and Game in American Culture

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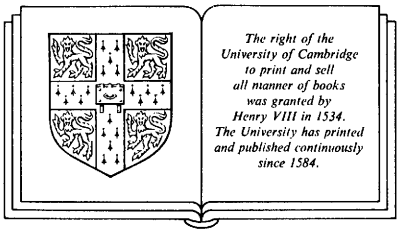

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For Julie, Colin, and Alan
For my father
And in memory of Ronda O'Leary Oriard

We live in a skeptical age in which games are increasingly important. When life has no ontological meaning, it becomes a kind of game itself. Thus it's a metaphor for perception of the way the world works, and also something that almost everybody's doing – if not on the playing fields, then in politics or business or education. If you're cynical about it, you learn the rules and strategies, shut up about them, and get what you can out of it. If you're not inclined to be a manipulator, you might want to expose the game plan for your own protection and ask how it can be a better game than at present. And formal games reflect on the hidden games, more so in an age without a Final Arbiter. So it's an important metaphor to be explored.

Robert Coover (1983)

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Preface

> When the One Great Scorer comes to write against your name He marks – not that you won or lost – but how you played the game.
>
> Grantland Rice

This study explores the cultural history of a metaphor, a cliché, the trope in a variety of forms that says life is a game. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have described how metaphorical language, even when it has become utterly conventional, not only reveals human thought processes and cultural values, it also creates the perceived reality.[1] The rhetoric of "games" and "play," I argue throughout the book, has functioned in just this way. Its presence early in the nineteenth century, its full flowering during the Progressive Era, and its continuing proliferation through the 1980s obviously bear some relationship to the widely acknowledged shift in America from a work-centered culture to one that has increasingly privileged the values of play. If my subject is the metaphor, then, its context is not just the history of sport and play but that larger cultural transformation as well, with the result, as I discovered early on in my writing, that what I was attempting to cover was potentially unmanageable. The more I pursued my simple metaphor in its many not-so-simple incarnations, the more I realized how much was at stake: American ideas not just about sport and play themselves, but about all of the things for which sport and play have become emblems – heroism, success, gender, race, class, the law, religion, salvation; the relations of Humankind, God, and Nature. A couple of sporting lexicographers in 1989 – going well beyond my generic "sport," "game," and "play" – identified more than seventeen hundred metaphors in common American usage derived from sports, games, and recreations.[2] Several times, usually at

the moment of realizing that yet another potentially vast subject ought to be considered, I felt like the mother in a folk tale read to me as a child, who has been given a magic pot to make porridge for herself and her daughter so that they will never go hungry; but who one day, after setting the pot to cooking, forgets the magic words to turn it off and soon finds herself and her entire village shin-deep in mush.

All along I remained convinced that what was most valuable in my study was the pattern I was discovering. As I came to realize that my subject could easily fill several volumes, I persisted in clinging to a sense of the whole by maintaining a narrow focus on the metaphors themselves while attempting to ground them adequately in their cultural contexts. In the following chapters, then, the reader will find discussions of the explicit sporting rhetoric in a range of American texts and only secondarily a consideration of the many cultural phenomena clearly related to sport and play. This book is not an exploration of four centuries of American history *sub specie ludi;* it is not a study of actual sports and games – football and baseball, gambling and board games, children's play and adult recreation – that have their own rich histories; it is not a study of game*like* or play*like* behavior and values (an analysis, say, of rule-bound social structures *as* games; of sexual desire, the cultivation of style, or literature itself *as* play). Nor is it a study of the mass media or the popular arts marketed through those media, the numerous options for American recreation and leisure. Culture itself, as Huizinga first argued in 1938, is playlike in fundamental ways; modern "mass culture" or "consumer culture" is rooted in conspicuous playfulness of a kind that Huizinga considered not truly play at all. All of these topics appear here only sketchily as a general context for my specific subject.

That subject, to repeat, is not the play element in American culture but the specific rhetoric of sport, play, and game, and my sense of that rhetoric's most significant functions. The history of this rhetoric necessarily coincides with the social history of sport and play in America, which begins, ironically, at that very moment when, according to Huizinga, the play element began to disappear from Western civilization. The concurrent rise of capitalism, Puritanism, and industrialism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – the historical moment when permanent European colonies were founded in the New World – separated play from work and assigned them to different spheres, to the disadvantage of play. Contrary to a prevailing stereotype, the Puritans in the New World did not ban all play, but they did indeed grant it decidedly minor importance. Colonial Americans, Puritan and otherwise, banned sports and games selectively: gambling always but recreational activities only when pursued to excess, at inappropriate times, or in a dangerous manner. By the eighteenth century, particularly in the South but also in

New England, assured economic survival and the consolidation of a prosperous leisure class led to greater tolerance for play generally, and to a range of specific sporting practices closely tied to the economic and social hierarchy. Frontier settlers sported in one way, merchants and wealthy planters in others; poor and rich, slave and free, rural and urban, male and female, Calvinist and Deist all found, or were allowed, different modes of play. The Revolution, however, followed by the responsibilities of new nationhood and the renewed asceticism of a second great religious awakening, reasserted the primacy of work and the frivolity of play.

Beginning in the 1830s, reformers began to call for a change. The Industrial Revolution completed the triumph of capitalism ironically by devaluing work through the total separation of capital from labor. With the Industrial Revolution came not just a new kind of leisure but the beginning of an uncomfortable awareness that perhaps leisure, not labor, offered the best opportunities for human fulfillment. By the 1860s a sporting revolution was underway throughout American society in a multiplicity of forms determined as before by gender, race, social or economic class, religion, occupation, and region. Over the next century and more, down to our own day, a work-centered culture increasingly granted play a vital place in human life. From the long view this transformation may seem a steady, gradual response to the shift from a producing to a consuming economy, but in the decade-to-decade, generation-to-generation working out of American culture, no such simple development appears. Cultural change in America has been a matter of fits and starts, gropings and hesitations, sudden advances and abrupt recoilings – all within the framework of overall transformation – and such is the cultural history of play in America. A wide range of documents suggests that the Progressive Era from the 1890s to the First World War was that moment when the opposing principles of work and play contested in more or less troubled equality within middle-class American culture, making this period a cusp between America's Century of Work and its Century of Play.

The rhetoric of sport and play that I examine records Americans' troubled accommodation to the changes that lie behind this social history. But it also reveals American attitudes toward many things – business, politics, religion, personal relations – not directly related to sport and play. Behind my account of specific rhetorical figures lies a cultural history not of play as physical activity, nor of play as an element within culture, but of play as a projection of the society's inner life, its understanding of human possibility.

As a window into that inner life, then, I trace the histories of a number of rhetorical figures – images, similes, metaphors, analogies – that express

heroic codes, strategies of survival, states of being, life itself as "sport," "game," or "play." I am not responding to Huizinga's charge in *Homo Ludens* that modern civilization, judged from the perspective of a transcendent ideal of play, has been impoverished by a decline of the spirit of play. Rather, through historically specific and changing definitions I seek not to judge the quality of American culture according to timeless standards but to understand it as a complex system of responses to historical change.

The key terms of my inquiry – "play," "game," and "sport" – have in fact had shifting definitions over time. "Play" appears in this study also under the guise of "mirth," "frolic," "amusement," and other obvious cognates, the term "play" itself becoming common as the equivalent of those words only after the mid-nineteenth century. "Play" under all of these linguistic signs has connoted spontaneity, freedom, intuition, naturalness, release; but also disorder, anarchy, abandon, chaos – depending on both the historical moment and the specific writer's values. (The obvious use of "play" that I do not consider is its meaning as mimickry, pretending, or performance – a parallel universe of meanings whose history would double the size of an already large book.) Throughout the colonial period and into the nineteenth century, "game" was chiefly associated with gaming, or gambling, the most objectionable of all recreational vices. "Sport" referred to hunting and fishing or was used in the context, to "make sport" of someone's infirmity, or to "sport with" one's moral duties, that is, to mock or belittle. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the largely negative or narrow connotations of "game" and "sport" began to compete with altogether positive and broader ones, as sport itself became an increasingly prominent fact in American life. A "game" most simply became a playful contest between opponents (or against "the house"), according to agreed upon rules, for a particular stake. The "games" important in American culture overwhelmingly fell into two classes: competitive contests and games of chance (*agôn* and *alea* in Roger Caillois's well-known typology). But "game" also could mean plot or scheme, evasion or trivialization (as in "playing games" in the contemporary pejorative sense). The linguistic confusion created by a "game" that could either affirm or defy social values reflects not only the flexibility of American usage but also a divided culture. "Sport" during this period came to refer almost exclusively to the newly popular athletic contests, as usages such as "dead game sport," a favorite in dime novels, disappeared by the twentieth century.

At the limits of abstraction, "work" and "play" in this country have always defined a fundamental antinomy: "work" as action for the sake of some exterior goal, "play" as action for its own sake. Work is concerned with ends, play with means: product and process. If "work" and

"play" are imagined, then, as absolutes defining the boundaries of a continuum (rather than as activities that can exist in a pure state), "games" are activities on that continuum embodying in varying degrees both "work" and "play." While play is always defined in opposition to work (to effort, striving, earnestness), a "game" marks the meeting of "play" and "work" in the social world. A game is paradoxically a workful expression of the play spirit, or a playful kind of work. The "games" described in American writing are thus wonderfully revealing as expressions of conflicting values. The "game" of business, for example, a pervasive metaphor from the late nineteenth century to the present, celebrates work by casting it as play with the tension between work and play in the metaphor often unacknowledged. For the student of American culture such metaphors can become specific and discrete prisms through which to examine large-scale and highly complicated responses to shifting economic, social, and political realities.

In its largest ambition this book thus seeks to develop resonant contexts for examining the relationship of work and play as a cultural dichotomy whose importance is as fundamental as the more widely studied conflicts between nature and civilization, individual and society, self and other. As these terms have been embedded in written narratives, the results have included representations of Western and Southern sporting myths; the "games" of love, business, politics, and life itself; and the "play" of holy children, childlike blacks, and other popular icons (often racist or sexist) of countercultural freedom. In the following chapters, I will develop the well-known concepts of sportsmanship and gamesmanship in what I hope are unfamiliar ways: not just as fair or unfair tactics in games but as contrasting worldviews, incompatible yet interwoven into the basic fabric of American culture (Part I); I will examine the theologically grounded rhetorical figures of the "game of life" and the "sport of the gods" by which an increasingly secularized culture clung to belief in the transcendent possibilities rooted in its religious past (Part II); I will trace the development of these various figures of the "game" in the twentieth century, as structural continuity accommodating profound change (Part III); and finally, both in contrast to these "games" and in summation of their underlying impulse, I will consider the idea of "play" itself as a fundamental expression of both countercultural rebellion and middle-class desire from the 1830s to the 1980s (Part IV). The history of what "play" and "game" successively represent and what they oppose provides a concrete record of cultural transformation. Throughout these chapters, by tracing a handful of specific tropes through a detailed cultural history, I have attempted to negotiate between the alternatives of grand synthesis and microhistory, between pattern and particularity.

No theoretical model but my material itself has governed my inter-

pretation of America's sporting rhetoric. Whatever claims I make on the reader's attention lie not in any original contribution to cultural theory but in the mass of details I have assembled. I wish, however, to acknowledge here the basic assumptions that lie behind my study. The "American culture" I examine has been variously called the "dominant," "hegemonic," or "mainstream" culture. In preferring the more neutral term "middle-class," I am well aware of the implications. I take the double challenge of cultural studies to lie in recognizing cultural diversity without ignoring the relationship of culture to political power. The sporting rhetoric I examine is predominantly the language of white middle-class males. In discussing that language I attempt to give proper attention to the significance of gender, race, and class, but also to avoid reducing the so-called mainstream culture to a single voice of consensus. At the same time, while rejecting the notion of "dominance" that is sometimes too simply attributed to this culture, I attempt to explore the more complex relationship of cultural forms to political power. Middle-class American culture has not been uniform but diverse, not coherent but contested, not simply coercive but frequently at odds with itself. White middle-class males and females share common bonds of race and class but not of gender; white and black males share common bonds of gender and sometimes class, but not of race. The intersections of gender, race, and class are frequently inscribed in the various tropes I consider; but in addition, the white middle-class male "mainstream" has itself always been contested.

Using fiction to represent this heterogeneous middle class might seem to risk reducing its diversity; after all, those who write and read novels represent a narrow slice of the populace. Moreover, my study pays considerable attention to that same small group of white male writers who not too long ago were assumed to comprise *the* American literary tradition. Yet I emphatically do not want to present here another "melodrama of beset manhood," deaf to all the voices that lie on the periphery or altogether outside Anglo-masculine angst. In four specific ways I have attempted to counter the potential limitations in my approach. First, as suggested above, I wish to challenge the too often overstated claims for the uniformity of the white male literary tradition. Second, I wish to consider the canonical male writers *in,* not against, the American grain. The definition of the "dominant" American literary tradition as an "adversarial," one which has been the custom since the 1920s when high modernism triumphed at the same time that professional study of American literature began, is one of the more curious paradoxes of our literary history. Third, in order to describe a heterogeneous and contested cultural center, I attempt to take into account the broad range of writing of which canonical texts comprise only a small part. And fourth, by emphasizing

conflict rather than consensus, I at least leave room for the many voices that remain unheard, although I by no means account for every one.

In giving more extended treatment, then, to the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, Hawthorne and Melville, Twain and James, Hemingway and Faulkner, I intend these writers to be more representative than exceptional. Set within my overviews of cultural attitudes as expressed by dozens of other novelists, popular preachers, success prophets, and the like, these writers are meant to illustrate the complex interplay between the individual author and the culture. I use these novelists, that is, not to represent the artist as prescient seer whose understanding cuts through the confusion of lesser mortals, but to represent the individual consciousness within American society. At times these "major" authors have in fact cut through the confusions of their day; at other times they have succumbed to them.

If my long labors on this book have taught me anything, it is the difficulty and risk of generalization; but I would identify one overriding tendency in the rhetorical traditions I trace in these chapters. My ultimate subject, less by design than discovery, is a popular American "metaphysics" and its complex interplay with "politics" in the broadest sense. The rhetorical figures of "sport," "game," and "play" are abstract renderings of concrete social behavior; and this process of abstraction itself, this cultural impulse toward metaphysics or transcendence, has political implications. When western expansion and Indian warfare are explained by analogy to a "game," the real human cost can be forgotten as the workings of brute force are transformed into "fair play." When business is explained metaphorically as the great "game of life," the actual impact of economic competition or monopolistic practices may become lost in the celebration of the successful businessman's sporting success. When readers are urged to "play" in the world rather than to work in it or conform to its demands, assumptions about the leisure and abundance necessary for life to be play may be left unexamined.

The popular rhetoric of "play" and "games," in other words, is profoundly ideological, yet its relationship to political power is not at all straightforward. The function of rhetoric is to persuade. The rhetorical figures I discuss are sometimes popular fantasies of an idealized past or future, sometimes more ambivalent wrestling with an intransigent present; they express values, hopes, fears, desires, anxieties, even entire social philosophies or worldviews. Ultimately, the linguistic construction of life as game or play has served to reinforce existing power relations, but that generalization does not adequately account for the messier relations of language and power. Sometimes the sporting rhetoric overtly resists the prevailing political power of the day; sometimes it endorses, promotes, and enhances it; sometimes it seems to resist but tacitly augments

the power arrangements through its evasions. And sometimes, though not all that often, it is evoked by those in power in ways meant to consolidate that power. The resulting ambiguity and confusion reveal a culture often at odds with itself.

In the following chapters I offer mostly brief readings or summaries of a large number of texts, restricted to discussion of the rhetorical figures that are the subject of this book. The result, I fear, is that some readers may be frustrated by the absence of longer, more fully developed discussions of individual novels or stories. I feel there is no choice in this matter, that no claim for pattern can be convincing without quantity of evidence. In lieu of detailed analyses of the numerous relevant texts, I hope to have developed persuasive and meaningful contexts within which any number of texts can be read. But I also discuss a handful of texts and writers in greater detail to explore the ways in which the rhetorical figures have sometimes structured entire worlds, both "real" and fictional. And although I trace each specific rhetorical figure separately, I intend that all of them be seen as the many strands in a single complex pattern whose shape will be complete only with the final chapter. It is only in the coexistence of multiple meanings of "play," "game," and "sport" – all within the rhetorical performances of a single American middle class – that the diversity and complexity of that middle class's values and beliefs will fully emerge.

The question of play's role in human experience has engaged a number of famous thinkers: from Friedrich Schiller in the eighteenth century to Fourier, Marx, and Nietzsche in the nineteenth; to Huizinga, Ortega, Heidegger, Sartre, and Derrida in the twentieth. The pattern I construct does not record that grand ongoing intellectual debate but the homelier history of ordinary as well as extraordinary Americans' groping, uncertain, often confused efforts to come to terms with the meaning of play, and the meanings of the many things represented as "sport" and "game" and "play," in their socially grounded lives.

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