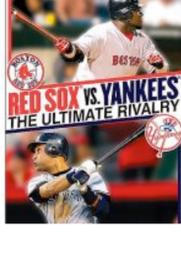


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Saturday, October 4, 2008

Poetic Transcribed Baseball



Sports, by Kenneth Goldsmith (Make Now Press, 2008)
Yo-Yos With Money, by Ted Berrigan and Harris Schiff (United Artists, 1979)

In *Sports*, a verbatim transcript of a radio broadcast of the longest nine inning baseball game ever played, conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith swings . . .

. . . and lines a double off the top of the left field wall.

Almost a home run, in other words, but not quite.

Sports is the final part of a trilogy that includes *Traffic* (a day's worth of six-times-an-hour traffic reports) and *Weather* (a year's worth of weather reports, frequency not specified). The text of each of these consists entirely of words transcribed from radio broadcasts. These books, then, are conceptual acts: appropriated or found poems, arguments for the (ir)relevance of quotidian blather, verbatim history, a selection of words found useful to sell ads on radio, and a recording of what is caught by the ear of poet Goldsmith. Maybe surprisingly given the commonness of the source and the project's heady intellectual underpinning, the books are mostly compelling reads. There are stories and characters, both in what happens, and among the people (identified or not) who spoke the now-transcribed words we read.

All this is especially true of *Sports*. A baseball game is a drama in which the and plot outcome are uncertain. There are strategies which unfold, unexpected twists, stretches of the prosaic, and, usually, moments of intense focus and sudden energy. Baseball also has performers both on the field (the players) and, when broadcast, in the booth – the announcers, whose choice and method of relaying details of the game, as well as the opinions they share, reveal different facets of personality.

So Goldsmith's decision to use a baseball game is pretty savvy. On top of the sport's inherent charms, Goldsmith chose a ringer of game to transcribe: The New York Yankees playing the Boston Red Sox at Fenway Park, a match-up of traditional rivals in a classic setting. But even more: this particular August 2006 contest was the longest nine-inning game in baseball history, taking four hours and forty-five minutes to complete. The game literally was one for the (record) book.

People who like baseball will love *Sports*. The game lives again in the transcription of the play-by-play, color commentary, paid commercials, and even – right in the first paragraph on the first page of the book – the major league baseball boilerplate copyright and permissions announcement, prohibiting any and all reproduction of any and all “accounts and descriptions” of the game! This is big fun to read. Grab your glove and cap, get some peanuts or CrackerJack, open the book, and have at it.

Although not all pages in *Sports* keep your attention, there are plenty that do. The top of the seventh, for example, is epic. The Yankees rally to take the lead and the announcers just go crazy along with the action. There are rookies and veterans, statistics, loaded bases, and innumerable balls and strikes (except, of course, you could count them!). There are numerous foul balls, including one that hugs the first base line causing everyone to stop – a sort of Joseph Cornell moment – while the umpire figures it out. There are enough hits and runs to fill out most normal games, and enough in-the-clutch two-out heroics for a Hollywood blockbuster or any ten year old's dream.

The half-inning also features a fairly major milestone, players who fail dramatically or redeem themselves marvelously, and events or sidebars that allow the announcers to talk about spring training, the World Series, Lou Gehrig, and (who'd have thunk it) Glen Cove, Long Island. There are also, match, paid commercial announcements, including from Indian Point Energy Center (“the regions most reliable source of electrical power”) and Allstate Insurance (“for every year of safe driving, you earn \$100 off your deductible”). Eventually, of course, there's a third out.

This half-inning is a majestic marathon dramatic comedy action adventure opera poem movie, right there on the pages. As one of the announcers puts it, “pretty fabulous.”

Goldsmith, however, makes one big error in *Sports*. His transcription does not indicate the silences or pauses in the broadcast. The broadcast instead appears as a more-or-less constant flow of words. But baseball on the radio is not an uninterrupted stream of words. Even the most loquacious announcers pause. These silences are important. The pauses in the announcer's talk show the passing of time. The silences, even if momentary, also build or relieve tension. The pauses also allow ambient crowd noise to come through to the listener. More generally, the pauses and silent moments frame the announcers' spoken words, providing the yang to the talk's yin, similar to what white space on the page does for lineated poetry.

The yang of silence is missing from Goldsmith's book. This absence seems especially significant here in the longest nine inning game in hours and minutes. The eliding of the pauses and brief silences is a major league mistake. I don't understand it. The gaps in the broadcast talk could have been indicated with . . . ellipses of varying lengths, corresponding roughly or (better yet) precisely with the length of the pause or silence in the broadcast. Goldsmith, though, uses the “dot dot dot” marker only to show that a spoken sentence was interrupted or otherwise left incomplete.

More simply, silence could have been shown with

[white space]

including indentations and

double or

triple spacing, again depending on the length of the pause or silence. In Goldsmith's transcription, white space on the page is entirely unrelated to silence in the broadcast. It appears only when there is a paragraph break, and those breaks are used to mark when one announcer stops and another starts talking, without regard to whether there was any appreciable pause between the words.

Measuring the lengths of pauses in the broadcast, then relating them to textual devices that could be seen on the page, would have been a time-consuming task. But that's what a pro would have done. Oh the wonder if Goldsmith had done it. *Sports* could have been a majestic home run, a transcript that truly reflected the words in time as they were said.

[Note: An update regarding silence in *Sports*, including information from Goldsmith himself, can be found by clicking [here](#)]

Those interested in baseball, poetry, and transcription should also track down *Yo-Yos With Money*, a collaboration between Ted Berrigan and Harris Schiff that presents a verbatim transcript of the two berrigan and poets' conversation in the stands during a Yankees vs. Red Sox game held in September, 1977 at the now dearly departed Yankee Stadium. The book was published in 1979 in an edition of 500 copies.

Berrigan and Schiff were loaded, by which I mean (to use Schiff's term on the first page) “totally ripped.” The back cover reproduces photographs of the two popping something in their mouths outside a subway entrance, and the transcript references washing down codeine and other pills, and having a few beers. As such, the description of the on-the-field action is neither complete nor always coherent, to say the least.

Yet – or perhaps in part because of the observers' impairments – the *Yo-Yo* transcript, including the game narrative, is transfixing and a hoot-and-a-half. A chief charm is irreverence. A player who makes an out is likely to be described as a “jack-off,” and there are similarly profane descriptions on nearly every page.

There are plenty of musings too on rarely discussed ballpark oddities, such as the varying amounts of space between various numbers on the scoreboard and whether a batter who “squares around” to bunt should more accurately be described as forming the shape of a parallelogram. Poets are important because they often take sideway looks at things usually considered only straight-on. The de-centered perspectives in *Yo-Yos* are of all-star caliber.

Berrigan and Schiff also pay close attention to what goes on in the stands, including fights between fans and the “loveliness” of “the girls” sitting to their left (and whether they could “score” with them). There's also an admirable and mostly successful attempt to transcribe the chants and noise of the crowd (“REGGIE REGGIE REGGIE REGGIE” and “LouLouLouLouLou” for example).

Maybe best of all, the transcript of the poets' conversation uses white space to indicate pauses in the talk. The reader here experiences more precisely the ebb and flow of the words and the game.

The impaired-fans-in-the-stands transcript of *Yo-Yos With Money* is a kind of through-the-looking-glass parallel universe to the *professionally* announced game transcript of *Sports*. Taken together, the two are an amazing double-header. Play Ball!

Posted by Steven Fama at 1:28 PM

2 comments:

Patrick Lovelace said...

Steven, I'm happy to see you write on these texts in unison, as I had a similar idea upon reading *Sports* (& recently re-reading *Yo-Yo's*), & certainly the two texts do work well together.

Your discussion about the use of white space in the two texts is insightful, but I ultimately wonder about your discussion of Goldsmith's 'mistakes' & your use of the phrase "truly reflected", in regards to some sort of as-close-as-possible duplication of his work, is going for. I simply don't think that's what Goldsmith, in this trilogy or really any of his works, is doing for. I'd wager that his layout decisions were intentional rather than an oversight. And the question that follows when you notice something such as this is a major part of what makes the work interesting, which is simply, why?.

While reading *Sports*, I wondered if Kenny had *Yo-Yo's* in mind at any time when he was working on this project. I would get into the poetry scene, since Berrigan had been dead for a decade or so before Goldsmith got into the poetry scene (mostly via Bruce Andrews--I am getting this from recollections of Soliloquy, btw), & *Yo-Yo's* is such a minor Berrigan book (popularity-wise), along the lines of *Clear the Range*. Both of which were left out of the recent *Collected*.

But back to my point, which is that the distance between the broadcast & the work on the page that you point out is actually central to Goldsmith's recontextualization projects. Take *Day* for example. The less that heavy tome is like a newspaper, the more intense the realization of effect. Of course, this is an oversimplification, but I feel the point stands.

Different genres do different things, after all.

October 7, 2008 12:01 AM

Steven Fama said...

Patrick --

Thanks for suggesting that perhaps the difference between the content of *Day* and the NY Times as it actually appears to the eye is a part of why that book works as it does, and that Goldsmith may be putting something similar "in play" with the difference between the constant stream of words in *Sports* and the more measured pace of an actual broadcast.

Yet, the lay out of the text in *Sports* paragraphs each change of an announcer's voice, and at least one of the commercial announcements (the one that repeats each phrase) is spaced out to suggest what I assume was its chant-like "real-life" presentation. This suggests Goldsmith isn't just presenting a constant stream of words, and makes it hard, given that pauses were elided, for me to figure out, when pauses were elided, principle(s) behind the layout.

As for the trilogy more generally, I take *Traffic* as a no-tongue-in cheek nothing-up-the-sleeves transcribed playback of the reports. No concept but that concept. The damndest thing about that book, as alluded to in my post, is that although it's a sort of one-trick pony (the appropriate admit is the only thing) I can't put the dang thing down when I start reading it. But I'll accept that there may be other things happening, both in *Traffic* and *Sports*, as with Dylan's Mr. Jones, I just don't understand....

Permit me to tip my (ball) cap again to the Berrigan-Schiff book. I'm lucky to have a copy, and lucky to be able to forget many of its particular's every year (maybe because I like reading it after a few beers!), such that the annual summer read of the thing is a massive rush.

October 7, 2008 10:29 PM

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