ROMANTIC PLAY: FROM *LUDUS* TO *PAIDIA*, FROM *AGON* TO *ILINX*[1]

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Play oscillates on a continuum between the free and the rule-governed polarity. If we use this paradigm to think about the development of Western thought, we see that it is marked by various stages of accentuation along this dynamic continuum between paidia *(free play) and* ludus *(rule-governed play). This development corresponds to the degree of interest in teleological structures. In the Romantic era, this interest is redefined by a sustained exploration of heterogeneity, performativity, and free play, which manifests itself in the breaking-up or recasting of hierarchical structures. This article addresses the transition from traditional literary aspects of* agon *(contest) to the free-wheeling vortex of* ilinx *(vertigo), which seeks to transgress and subvert accepted structures of hierarchy, thereby redefining our understanding and ways of conceptualisation. Negotiating the issues of becoming, indeterminacy and fragmentation, Romanticism is a precursor of avant-garde movements of modernity, and its channelling of certain play strategies is a case in point. The movement is from closed structures (*ludus *– game) to open systems (*paidia *– play), where structures are metaphysical, political, generic, and gender. The stability these structures had been endowed with by tradition and revolution alike are continually interrogated and destabilised by the heterogeneous contingency of Romantic agenda.*

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When from these forms I turned to contemplate
The World's opinions and her usages,
I seemed a Being who had passed alone
Into a region of futurity,
Whose natural element was freedom –
William Wordsworth, *The Borderers* (1842)[2]

Drawing on the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's pioneering 1938 "study of the play element in culture" titled *Homo Ludens*, the modern typology of play was formulated two decades later by the French socio-anthropologist Roger Caillois in his 1958 treatise *Les jeux et les hommes* (translated into English somewhat loosely as *Man, Play and Games* in 1961). Caillois identified four basic categories of play: *alea* (chance), *agon* (competition, struggle), *mimicry* (masks, deception) and *ilinx* (vertigo-inducing, destabilisation of the mind). These can in turn form various combinations and alignments, or stand in contrast to one another, creating a complex and fluid dynamics of conflicting forces, paradoxes and power paradigms. In Caillois's framework, the four basic play categories of *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx* are locked in a fluid continuum ranging from *ludus* (the orderly sphere of play subject to clearly defined regulations, such as competitive games) to *paidia* (the extreme opposite of *ludus*, a domain of free play where primeval energies abound, unconstrained by rules). Caillois's categories are culture-based and game-oriented and represent "attitudes" which "incorporate anthropological dispositions."[3]

This anthropologically grounded framework of play was later adapted for literary studies by Wolfgang Iser in his works *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (1989) and *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre* (1991). On the abovementioned spectrum of play, *ludus* and *paidia* correspond to Iser's concepts of "instrumental play" and "free play." In *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, Iser identifies play in literature as the dynamic "contraflow of free and instrumental play" (*FI* 247), where instrumental "play strives for a result and free play breaks up any result achieved."[4] "Instrumental play" therefore functions as "a recuperation

2 William Wordsworth, *The Borderers* [1842], IV.2.1815-19. This and all subsequent quotations follow this edition of the 1842 text: William Wordsworth, *The Borderers*, ed. Robert Osborn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982). Accessed at https://archive.org/details/borderers00word_0/page/n9/mode/2up.

3 Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) 259. Subsequent page references are marked *FI* and are given in brackets in the text.

4 Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting*: *From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 257.

of what free play disperses" (*FI* xviii). While free play features impulses unchecked by rules, it represents a force of *an-archē* – lawlessness, which for Caillois constitutes the corruption of play. For Iser, however, this same anarchical tendency of free play represents the postmodern outlook. Instrumental or structured play is defined by a set of strict rules that are put in place to keep impulses in check, such as in a game of chess, and the point of the game is ultimately the preservation or re-establishment of *archē*s (at once origin and command).

For Iser and his theoretical arguments concerning the play of the text, Caillois's four categories of play become "strategies of play" – according to Iser, the four play strategies "generally mix" in literature and thus represent "the constitutive elements of a text game" (*FI* 263). He outlines the four strategies of play as follows: *agon* "is undoubtedly one of the basic games" – it "has to be played towards a result" and marks "a fight or a contest" (*FI* 260).[5] *Alea* "is a pattern of play based on change and the unforeseeable" – when given the upper hand, it aims to "intensify difference" and "reduces all play to mere chance" (*FI* 261).[6] *Mimicry* "aims to make difference disappear" and signifies "illusion" as well as "transmogrification" and "imitation" (*FI* 262). The fourth and last of Iser's play strategies – *ilinx* – marks his most notable literary recasting of Caillois's vertigo-inducing play activity, investing this subversive play strategy with "an anarchic tendency," identifying it with "the Fool figure" and "carnivalization"; its potential rests in subverting given structures, and it represents "free play at its most expansive" (*FI* 262).

Between *paidia* (denoting spontaneous play) and *ludus* (denoting rule-governed games), this dynamic continuum goes through various stages of accentuation in the development of Western thought. This development is marked by the degree of interest or ideological investment in teleological structures. In the Romantic era, this interest is redefined, replaced by a sustained, if infinitely varied, exploration of heterogeneity, performativity, and free play, which manifests itself in the breaking-up or recasting of set hierarchical structures. I will address the transition from traditional aspects of *agon* in literature to the free-wheeling overhaul of *ilinx*, which seeks to transgress and subvert accepted structures of hierarchy, and thereby redefine our understanding and ways of conceptualisation. As James Hans portends, "play confirms heterogeneous elements of existence, and it also ties some of these heterogeneities together; but the heterogeneities are connected in series and do not generate a coherent, hierarchical structure."[7] As

5 Iser, *Prospecting* 256.

6 Iser, *Prospecting* 256.

7 James S. Hans, *The Play of the World* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981) 11.

Iser remarks, while "older literature favoured agon as the structure of the plot," "mimicry and ilinx have gradually acquired more importance," even though "previously they have been rigidly channelled by masks and prevailing rituals" – a tendency towards "never-ending," "self-subverting" dynamics (*FI* 264).[8] While traditionally,

> agon appears to be directed at winning the game, in postmodern literature it is frequently used to play a losing game. This may entail all conflicts of norms and values being deliberately marked as things of the past, thus exposing the closed nature of the systems that gave them their function and validity. It may also show that all forms of meaning are nothing but defense mechanisms designed to achieve closure in a world where open-endedness reigns.[9]

Negotiating the obsolescence or inadequacy of closed-system *archē*s and foregrounding the issues of open-endedness, becoming and fragmentation, Romanticism is a precursor of avant-garde movements of modernity, and postmodernity, and its channelling of certain types and individual elements of play is a case in point. The movement is from set structures (*ludus* – game) to open systems (*paidia* – play), where structures are metaphysical, political, generic, economic, and gender. The stability these structures had been endowed with by tradition and revolution alike are continually interrogated and destabilised by the heterogeneous contingency of the Romantic agenda. As Isaiah Berlin puts it, one of the "lasting effects" of Romanticism is the realisation that there is no preordained "structure of things," "no pattern to which you must adapt yourself" – "there is only […] the endless self-creativity of the universe,"[10] echoing Schlegel's "infinite play of the world, the eternally self-creating work of art."[11]

In dramatic terms, *agon* traditionally refers to debate in Attic comedy or "the contest of opposed wills in Classical tragedy or any subsequent drama"[12] – be it confrontation, debate, strife – the very life-blood of traditional dramatic structures. The agonistic scheme, however, requires a certain amount of control to sustain it,

8 Ben de Bruyn, *Wolfgang Iser: A Companion* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2012) 189.

9 Iser, *Prospecting* 256.

10 Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Pimlico, 1999) 119.

11 Friedrich Schlegel, "Gespräch über die Poesie," quoted in Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. W. Glen Doepel, 2nd rev. edn, ed. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall (London and New York: Continuum, 2004) 105.

12 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/art/agon-theatre (accessed 15 October 2019).

hence facilitating a successful dramatic situation – and while *agon* is obviously still very much part of Romantic drama, its degree of dramatic control wanes, giving way to the infinitely more subversive potential of *ilinx*. On the scale of the play polarity between free and controlled play (*paidia* to *ludus*), free play gains considerable momentum in Romantic works, manifesting itself across a broad range of symptoms, thematic, discursive and structural. If, for instance, *agon* functions as orchestrated contest in the confines of rule-governed play – e.g., a duel – it may become the force of uncontrolled violence under the auspices of free play. Equally, if *ilinx* under the auspices of rule-governed play manifests itself as the carnival (i.e., the performance of a set-piece subversion, with a surreptitious reversal back to an establishment-affirming norm), *ilinx* under free play might spin everything out of control without any possibility of or interest in recourse to any recognised norm.

In order to bring these abstract concepts and paradigms into a specific literary focus, I will discuss key examples from the highly transgressive and daringly experimental dramatic universe of the Romantic age. Drawing on some other notable Romantic-era dramatic experiments, namely relevant works by Byron and Coleridge, I will predominantly think about the ways in which William Wordsworth's only drama, *The Borderers*, written in 1795-96 (revised and published in 1842) constitutes a valuable case in point. Wordsworth's drama unambiguously signals the waning of traditional *agon* as a key constitutive function of dramatic action, while also showing the subordination of *agon* to the performative vortex of *ilinx*. Recasting the dramatic structures laid down by *agon*, *ilinx* can be most productively characterised by the subversion of structures, which now becomes the defining dynamic of dramatic action and tension; by extension, alongside dramatic action, *ilinx* also subverts the traditional ethical and teleological concepts defining history in general, conceptualised in particular by the blurred liminal setting on which Wordsworth's drama thrives.

The critical path drawn from the bitter lessons of the French Revolution to the Romantic sense of history as overwhelming chaos is well trodden – what might prove rather more interesting for our purposes are the implications of the systematic erosion of the *theatrum mundi* trope in Romantic drama, as Martin Procházka has shown in his essay on the conceptualisations of the Other therein – as Procházka persuasively posits, in Romantic dramas "action is meaningless" and "suffering limitless."[13] In the case of Wordsworth's drama, the antagonist, Oswald, pits the concept of action as fundamentally arbitrary and hence pointless

[13] Martin Procházka, "Imaginative Geographies Disrupted: Representing the Other in English Romantic Dramas," *European Journal of English Studies*, 6.2 (2002): 208-209.

against the ethos of equally pointless but inevitable infinite suffering, in a transgressive bid to overthrow any notion of historical progress or indeed action-endowed meaning, as the following existentially-charged speech shows:

> OSWALD:
>
> Action is transitory – a step, a blow,
> The motion of a muscle – this way or that –
> 'Tis done, and in the after-vacancy
> We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed:
> Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,
> And shares the nature of infinity.
>
> (III.5.1539-44)

While the original draft has Mortimer reply "I do not understand you," the 1842 version rewrites this entirely, with Marmaduke now responding in the affirmative: "Truth – and I feel it" (III.5.1544). Indeed, as Theresa M. Kelley has shown, Wordsworth was all too aware of the "troubling proximity" between his own poetic voice and that of this dramatic "villain" in terms of their "sublime isolation," to the point that the 1842 version of the drama deliberately "minimizes verbal parallels" between this character and "the speaker of *The Prelude*," as well as changing his name from Rivers to Oswald.[14] Disconcerting similarities do remain, however, as Oswald's lines in the epigraph to this article attest. As Procházka enlightens, in Wordsworth's *Borderers* "the specularity of *theatrum mundi* is disrupted and the moral meaning of this figure perverted,"[15] resulting in a blurring almost unto dissolution of traditional ethics as well as the moral vestiges of the tragic form.

The ramifications of the increasingly forking path of moral import and dramatic action and ethos have been long in the making, but it is during this particular era of dramatic history that we sense a decisive breaking point. Concerning moral purpose in drama, the following well-known quotation from Shelley's Preface to *The Cenci* serves as a pertinent reminder of this decisive shift:

> There must also be nothing attempted to make the exhibition subservient to what is vulgarly termed a moral purpose. […] The highest moral purpose

[14] Theresa M. Kelley, *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 77.

[15] Procházka 208.

> aimed at in the highest species of the drama is the teaching the human heart, through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself.[16]

If, from Shelley's firm conviction in his Preface to the controversial tragedy, we learn that a "moral purpose" constitutes a "vulgar" paradigm which corrupts drama, and that drama's "highest moral purpose" ought to be unequivocally engaged in "teaching the human heart" "the knowledge of itself," there is also a growing concern about the efficacy or indeed possibility of such moral education in the face of the drama's own bewildering and centrifugal ethos. The paradigmatic wedge between moral purpose and the ethos of the dramatic work becomes increasingly more pronounced in these Romantic texts. According to Gerhart Hoffmeister, Romantic "tragedies" feature fate that is "man-made" and therefore meaningless – and while the "passive" victims in these dramas might ultimately "surmount" the senselessness of fate by "uphold[ing] a voice of providence," the protagonists "reinforce" it "by ending in complete despair."[17] The moral of this critical reading is itself quite telling – and we have to ask, is such "complete despair" enough to assuage the ultimate ethos of senselessness and salvage some meaning? As Procházka proposes, *The Borderers* presents "a fundamental failure to incorporate the hero's action as well as the representations of the Other into the system of general moral assumptions."[18]

The tendency towards, or rather deliberate performance of, subversion, marked by an increasing centrality of *ilinx*, signals a gradual shift in the ethos of Romantic drama that is best summarised by Foucault's shorthand of Nietzsche:

> [t]he forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms but respond to haphazard conflicts. They do not manifest the successive forms of a primordial intention and their attraction is not that of a conclusion, for they always appear through the singular randomness of events. […T]he world of effective history knows only one kingdom, without providence or final cause, where there is only the "iron hand of necessity shaking the dice-box of chance."[19]

16 P.B. Shelley, Preface to *The Cenci*, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 316.

17 Gerhart Hoffmeister, "The Romantic Tragedy of Fate," *Romantic Drama*, ed. Gerald Gillespie (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1994) 175.

18 Procházka 210.

19 Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977) 154-55, quoting Aphorism 130 from Nietzsche's *Daybreak*.

History becomes an arena of forces that respond to "haphazard conflict" in unpredictable ways. The paradigms of causality endowed with meaning are incompatible with the perceived reality of history which subsists overwhelmingly as "the singular randomness of events." While Wordsworth's drama overall tries to resist this view of human history as *mala fide* mayhem, its performance, and the centrality of its rhetorically endowed antagonist, Oswald, ultimately signals the opposite. In the rather deliciously ludicrous wording of this villain of Wordsworth's *Borderers*, the arbitrariness of existence and the intellectual vacuity of remorse is epitomised as follows:

> OSWALD: Remorse –
> It cannot live with thought; think on, think on,
> And it will die. What! in this universe,
> Where the least things control the greatest, where
> The faintest breath that breathes can move a world;
> What! feel remorse, where, if a cat had sneezed,
> A leaf had fallen, the thing had never been
> Whose very shadow gnaws us to the vitals.
>
> (III.5.1560-67)

While Oswald's argument about the necessity of abolishing moral conscience, one of many, marks him decisively as the villain of the piece, and his example is clearly designed to shock the reader/audience (as well as the "righteous" band of Borderers, who kill him in the finale), the spectral power of remorse is still present here despite the fervent negations – its "shadow gnaws us to the vitals." Key to our discussion about the paradigm-dissolving maelstrom of *ilinx*, however, is Oswald's argument about the forces that abound in and influence existence in arbitrary ways, corroding the planned moral fabric of the drama. The seemingly capricious "if a cat had sneezed, / A leaf had fallen, the thing had never been" strikes a resounding chord if we read the drama alongside play theory, attesting to an open system governed solely by chance, precluding any concept of unifying meaning to arrange its arbitrary nexus of occurrences. The only way Wordsworth's drama effectively posits meaning is in the playing out of Oswald's elaborate ploy to entrap Marmaduke.

Romantic drama in general, and Wordsworth's drama in particular, thus also erodes the structures of tragedy and its derivatives (revenge tragedy, Gothic drama), exploring the limits of dramatic form. As Matthew Bevis proposes in his most recent academic book, and dare we say one with a most unlikely title,

Wordsworth's Fun, "'*The Borderers'* is a story of the revenge of the Clown."[20] One example among many of Oswald's witty rationale will suffice here: "Were I a Moralist, / I should make a wondrous revolution here; / It were a quaint experiment to show / The beauty of truth" (III.4.1621-24). The performative dynamics of Oswald's speeches and asides ripple through the fabric of Wordsworth's intended moral in stimulatingly subversive ways. His resourceful strategy deploys vertigo-inducing *ilinx* and illusion-weaving *mimicry*, the key play elements of the carnivalesque, destabilising both the mind and conscience of his prey, the intolerably trusting chief of the Borderers, Marmaduke. A "fool of feeling" (II.i.558), his moral principles are deftly twisted into a dynamically woven illusion of reality, which gradually uproots the ethos of the entire drama. While Oswald's Machiavellian strategy pivots around a key *mimicry* of truth, repeated in turns to further undermine the target's values (external *archē*s) and conscience (internalised *archē*s) – "a few swelling phrases, and a flash / Of truth, enough to dazzle and to blind, / And he is mine for ever." (II.1.563-65) – his darker manipulative strategies persistently disorientate and goad Marmaduke: "We should deserve to wear a cap and bells […] for playing the fool here." (II.3.768-69). More pronounced still, Oswald's shrewd delusions seek to untie the very foundations of values and consequently identity: "So meet the extremes in this mysterious world, / And opposites thus melt into each other" (III.5.1529-30). We could hardly look for a more apposite quotation to characterise the dynamics of *ilinx* – for in Iser's theory, "[i]linx is a play pattern in which the various positions are subverted, undercut, canceled, or even carnivalized as they are played against each other."[21] And, as Iser explains the textual interaction of *ilinx* and *agon*: if "ilinx gains the upper hand […] the contest between norms and values becomes illusory," reminding us of the implications gleaned from Oswald's pithy observation that "opposites" "melt into each other" (III.5.1530).

Indeed, Oswald's interaction with other characters, in this case the beggars, is also rife with the rhetoric of *ilinx*, elemental and carnivalesque at once: "Begone […] or I will raise a whirlwind / And send ye dancing to the clouds, like leaves" (II.3.944-45). His asides betray an intricate psychology of double-edged destabilisation at work, however – "Then shatter the delusion, break it up / And set him free. What follows? I have learned / That things will work to ends the slaves o' the world / So never dream of." (II.3.934-37). The same freedom from the confines of conscience prevents Oswald from releasing Marmaduke from the web of delusions. As Hans-Georg Gadamer elucidates the nature of play in general,

[20] Matthew Bevis, *Wordsworth's Fun* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019) 148.

[21] Iser, *Prospecting* 256.

there is "no difference between being and playing"; the "primacy of play takes over the consciousness of the player."[22] With *ilinx* firmly taking hold of Oswald and unleashed by him with ever-increasing intensity to enthral Marmaduke, we gain insight into the surprisingly rational intrigue of this *ilinx*-wielding mastermind – revaluating values, Oswald's soliloquies and asides unsettle the very premises of ethics, giving all up to indiscriminate playful scrutiny: "It were a pleasant pastime to construct / A scale and table of belief […] We dissect / The senseless body, and why not the mind?" (III.2.1146-47, 1166-67). In the end, Marmaduke, the epitome of traditional *agon* in the drama, "strong" and "valiant" (in Idonea's exhortation, I.1.160-61), is duped by the "clown's" "revenge" into a powerless and witless subject of *ilinx*: "Which way soe'er I turn, I am perplexed" (II.3.878). As Oswald puts it: "the mind of man, upturned, / Is in all natures a strange spectacle" (III.2.1168-69). His dissembling, freely shared with us and feeding dramatic irony, is finally revealed to Marmaduke, too, with symptomatic flair: "The mask, / Which for a season I have stooped to wear, / Must be cast off" (IV.2.1860-62). The subversive psychology of Oswald's strategy and its compelling effects constitute by far the most intriguing dramatic force in the text, upstaging dramatic action itself which cedes ground to the twinned tactics of *mimicry* and *ilinx*. As Robert Osborn emphasises in his Introduction to the drama, the 1842 version sees Oswald elevated "to the central experienced commentator on the main psychological and philosophical themes in *The Borderers*," which marks a "fundamental shift […] toward emphasis on the philosophical basis of action and suffering. This redirection greatly enlarged the intellectual scope of the play."[23]

Oswald's master-puppeteer instinct is also commented upon by the insightful Borderers. While the astute Wallace comments that "Natures such as his / Spin motives out of their own bowels […] Power is life to him / And breath and being, where he cannot govern, / He will destroy" (III.4.1427-28, 1432-34), effectively summarising the combination of *ilinx* and *agon* in a shorthand of the will to power, we sense that Oswald can only be fully understood as a representative of unbridled *ilinx* – ultimately defined not so much by agonistic power-mongering but rather by the trickster's chaos-mongering. As Bevis concludes, Oswald is in many respects a Fool figure, who "stands on the threshold between play and community, continually prompting consideration of how his fictional antics are a part of life, part of the way in which people are tempted to make fictions out of their lives."[24] Here we might elucidate Bevis's argument further – if we isolate a

[22] Gadamer 104.

[23] Robert Osborn, "Introduction" to *The Borderers* 15.

[24] Bevis 153.

point from Eugen Fink's play theory (on the whole somewhat unhelpfully positivist), we may add here that "[p]lay is primordially the strongest binding power. It is community-founding."[25] With all drama by definition transcending the confines of the merely discursive in this "community-founding" manner, Wordsworth's drama, on the one hand, joins a long tradition of the trickster or fool figures (which, though related, are not interchangeable as in Bevis's reading, where he freely blends the "Vice" of mystery plays with the "Trickster," "Fool," and "Clown"). As Bevis argues, the "Trickster/Vice has ever been a borderer […] this sense of the figure is combined with an awareness of someone we watch because we yearn to be made uncertain of where we stand"[26] – the ultimate performative appeal of *ilinx* in the drama, our own yearning for the destabilisation of ex-stasis. The larger perspective envelops the stage in relation to the world – as Iser explains: "The need for staging is marked by a duality that defies cognitive unravelling. […S]taging allows us – at least in our fantasy – to lead an ecstatic life by stepping out of what we are caught up in, in order to open up for ourselves what we are otherwise barred from" (*FI* 303). On the other hand, *The Borderers* signal towards the freeing of play from the confines of genre and tradition, including that of the Fool figure, because while the Fool operates within a certain radius of ambivalence, always on a tangent of a moral, and the antagonist or Vice are the foil against which we may glean the moral, Oswald's transgressive presence in Wordsworth's drama unravels the very foundations of these moral structures, opening up avenues for unrestrained anarchy.

In this transgressive respect, Wordsworth's drama shares, rather unexpectedly, perhaps, certain key play dynamics with Byron's last two dramas – the tragedy *Werner* (1823), set in the Silesian borderlands at the brief interbellum Peace of Prague during the Thirty Years' War, and his last, unfinished play, *The Deformed Transformed* (1824), set in Germany and Rome (specifically the catastrophic 1527 Sack of Rome). In this last unfinished drama, the Stranger, a Mephistophelean architect of the protagonist, Arnold (whom he transforms from a suicidal hunchback into the form of the demigod Achilles), becomes Caesar the hunchback doppelganger, having assumed the protagonist's discarded body. Caesar persistently disparages human history as a repetitive gory spectacle too tawdry to entertain. The dramatic universe here is that of meaninglessness, violence and untrammelled absurdity, enjoyed only by this cosmic spectator, and us, spectators

[25] Eugen Fink, "Towards an Ontology of Play," *Play as Symbol of the World and Other Writings*, trans. I.A. Moore and C. Turner (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016) 27.

[26] Bevis 153.

or readers in turn. Read in juxtaposition, the exchanges between Wordsworth's Oswald and Marmaduke resonate deeply with those between Byron's Caesar and Arnold. Taking a leaf out of Machiavelli's book, Oswald preaches to Marmaduke that "[f]ortitude is the child of Enterprise" (III.5.1535), in an attempt to mould him, *ex post facto*, into a suitably insouciant companion, telling him to obey what Oswald understands as the only law "that sense / Submits to recognise; the immediate law, / From the clear light of circumstances, flashed / Upon an independent Intellect" (III.5.1493-96). The ultimate solipsism of this pseudo-rational philosophy abolishes any validity of morals or indeed any superstructure that one might refer to for guidance as one moves through life. The only law is the "law of circumstances" according to which "an independent Intellect" decides its next move. The resulting ethos is that of endless repetition in a quest for "enterprise," largely emptied of meaning:

OSWALD:
You have cast off the chains
That fettered your nobility of mind –
Delivered heart and head!
Let us to Palestine;
This is a paltry field for enterprise.
MARMADUKE: Ay, what shall we encounter next? This issue –
T'was nothing more than darkness deepening darkness
The Borderers (V.3.2248-53)

CAESAR: Where shall we now be errant?
ARNOLD: Where the world
Is thickest, that I may behold it in
Its workings.
CAESAR: That's to say, where there is War
And woman in activity.
The Deformed Transformed (I.i.493-96)[27]

Both excerpts attest to the arbitrariness of agonistic action if no *archē*s bind it in place, yielding no meaning other than the ceaseless and impulsive pursuit of action (the errant career of the Orient or indeed outright war). Being becomes action – which on the surface offers unfettered freedom from social or moral

[27] Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 6, ed. Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

constraints, is exposed in both dramas as largely meaningless and fettered in turn by the self-multiplying nature of conflict – reduced to *agon*, existence does not include meaning or indeed freedom. As Reiner Schürmann notes of the correlation among *archē*, action and meaning: "The *archē* always functions in relation to action as substance functions in relation to its accidents, imparting to them sense and *telos*."[28] Without *archē*s, we find ourselves in a world without end or meaning, imbued with the potential of highlighting rather than subsuming difference – and the element of the nomadic which permeates Wordsworth's drama, epitomised in its very title, invites explorations into the nature of anarchical modes of being.

The nomadic is equally at the centre of Byron's *Werner*, a play which resonates with Wordsworth's *Borderers* in intriguing ways.[29] Both dramas centre around the reinstatement of a wrongfully seized inheritance, the re-establishment of hierarchy and genealogical succession. Both dramas are also set in the dramatically productive lawless borderlands wedged between contending political territories which abound in free-mover dynamics of deceit, where the play strategy of *ilinx* signals the supremacy of the nomadic, eroding history. The following examples from *The Borderers* highlight the ambivalent arena upon which the drama unfolds, similarly to the subsequent examples from Byron's *Werner*. The borderers' liminal existence is perceived from conflicting perspectives:

> HERBERT: My Child […]
> Had given her love to a wild Freebooter,
> Who here, upon the borders of the Tweed,
> Doth prey alike on two distracted Countries,
> Traitor to both.
>
> (I.1.204-10)

And elsewhere, from the obsequious speech to Marmaduke:

> OSWALD: Yours is no common life. Self-stationed here,
> Upon these savage confines, we have seen you

[28] Reiner Schürmann, "'What must I do?' at the End of Metaphysics: Ethical Norms and the Hypothesis of a Historical Closure," *Tomorrow the Manifold: Essays on Foucault, Anēy, and the Singularization to Come*, ed. Malte Fabian Rauch and Nicolas Schneider (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2019) 44.

[29] For a more detailed reading of the nomadic in the context of Deleuze and Guattari's war machine in *Werner* and other Romantic dramas, see Procházka, "Imaginative Geographies Disrupted." See also Horová, "'Look[ing] Into the Fiery Eyes of War': Byron's *Werner*," *AUC Philologica*: *Prague Studies in English*, 1 (2016): 31-43.

> Stand like an isthmus 'twixt two stormy seas
> That oft have checked their fury at your bidding.
> 'Mid the deep holds of Solway's mossy waste,
> Your single virtue has transformed a Band
> Of fierce barbarians into Ministers
> Of peace and order.
>
> (II.1.605-12)

"Self-stationed" connotes a freedom of choice and purpose, as well as the absence of traditional law. Marmaduke's "single virtue" is the only law, potent enough to "transform" "fierce barbarians" into peacekeepers. Yet from the context of Oswald's tactics, we sense the precarity of Marmaduke's "single virtue." Oswald's praise clashes fundamentally with Herbert's assessment of Marmaduke: the dispossessed baron sees a treacherous "wild Freebooter," preying on Scotland and England alike. This kind of ambivalent transgressive existence is of course at the very heart of Sturm und Drang dramas such as Schiller's *Robbers*. Here, however, the agency of Marmaduke, thwarted into submission by Oswald's ploy, is ultimately self-governing and self-punishing – he pronounces his own sentence in the play's finale. In Byron's *Werner*, we see "the war" having "dwindled into" "bandit warfare" of all against all (II.i.126-29).[30] In Stralenheim's, the antagonist's, terse rendition, "[A]fter thirty years of conflict, peace / Is but a petty war, as the times show us / In every forest, or a mere arm'd truce." (II.i.169-71) Wordsworth's and Byron's plays ultimately present "the disruption of dramatic form, social order and law,"[31] and in both the restitution of the inheritance is thwarted by the involvement of free play fuelled by *ilinx* – while in *Werner*, it is Ulric himself who ultimately renounces his familial ties and storms off stage to wreak havoc and war, in *The Borderers*, the gullible Marmaduke spoils the hopes of the old baron's restitution and those of his daughter, Idonea. As Kelley notes of the original draft, "the irony of Mortimer's effort to hold the Border for its rightful lord is of course that he is responsible for the death of the man he has been waiting for. A deeper Wordsworthian irony is the discrepancy between Mortimer's 'outlaw' status and his hope to restore an aristocrat to power."[32]

The jury's out as to the ethos of Wordsworth's borderers and their chief – are they self-serving warlords or the self-professed peacekeepers in these lawless

[30] All quotations from *Werner* follow Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 6, ed. Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

[31] Procházka 219.

[32] Kelley 83.

lands exposed to Scottish forays from across the river? Byron's foresters, on the other hand, pose a more acute question, only hinted at in Wordsworth's drama – if peace brings back traditional hierarchies, how can freedom-fighters simply resume their former lives? And, in the midst of a decades-long war, is peace even possible or indeed meaningful anymore, as Stralenheim bleakly remarks. As Byron's Ulric flees the scene to wage war on the system, *ilinx* marks a distinct departure from both traditional tragedy and Shelley's theory of gleaning knowledge of the human heart from dramatic art. The ethos of these transgressive dramas escapes straightforward moral purpose.

Where Wordsworth and Byron part company – and here we are at least partially back in charted waters – is the conceptualisation of history. Contrary to Byron's imaginative explorations of anchoring drama in historical circumstances and thereby rendering the absurdity of history through the invaluable insight into the dynamics of play, Wordsworth's tragedy is deliberately ahistorical:

> As to the scene and period of action, little more was required for my purpose than the absence of established law and government, so that the agents might be at liberty to act on their own impulses. Nevertheless, I do remember, that having a wish to colour the manners in some degree from local history more than my knowledge enabled me to do, I read Redpath's *History of the Borders*, but found there nothing to my purpose. I once made an observation to Sir W. Scott, in which he concurred, that it was difficult to conceive how so dull a book could be written on such a subject.[33]

The stoic critique of Redpath's *History* aside, Wordsworth's note clearly describes an arena of free play, unrestrained by "established law and government," where characters are "at liberty to act on their own impulses." What recurs rather resplendently in Wordsworth's drama is a pastiche of disjointed intertextual vestiges scattered across the dramatic canvas. Much has been said about this rich and heavy Shakespearean, Miltonic, and Schillerian substrate – Wordsworth's text is rife with a Iago – Othello dynamic, Macbethian guilt, Lear-like wastelands, a fool's caustic retorts, as well as a Satanic polemic of a high-functioning malcontent protesting the freedom of unchained intellect, and the bravado of the feuding *Robbers*. But the same can be conceived of as a game of arbitrary signifiers – while these canonical predecessors would always be anchored in a degree of structured presence, signalling at least in part towards an *archē* and/or a *telos*, the universe of Wordsworth's *Borderers* is open to the unravelling potential of free play, *paidia*,

[33] Wordsworth, [The Fenwick Note (1843)], *The Borderers* 814.

under whose auspices, as Iser reminds us, *ilinx* results in "ceaseless undermining," which, if unchecked, "serves to exceed all constraints" (*FI* 271). The intertextual medley, scattered across the drama in varying degrees of intensity, is a case in point, attesting to the free reign of *ilinx* over *agon*: for, as Iser points out, "with ilinx dominant, the conflict of norms, values, feelings, and whatever else is incorporated into the textual repertoire will become illusory; in consequence, the opposing positions will seem like a past world that has been left behind" (*FI* 273). This is manifest throughout the drama, and highlighted even in its moral-binding finale.

Marmaduke's final speech is replete with remorse. Evoking biblical penance, he sentences himself to wander in the wilderness, exiled from humankind. Heavy with Miltonic resonance, he pronounces his bleak future to his band of borderers thus:

> MARMADUKE: […] a wanderer must I go,
> The Spectre of that innocent Man, my guide.
> No human ear shall ever hear me speak;
> No human dwelling ever give me food,
> Or sleep, or rest: but, over waste and wild,
> *In search of nothing*, that this earth can give,
> But expiation, will I wander on –
> A Man by pain and thought compelled to live,
> Yet loathing life – till anger is appeased
> In Heaven, and Mercy gives me leave to die.
>
> (V.3.2312-21, emphasis added)

The nomadic existence in the Borders which before signified freedom now becomes a prison to a mind already tortured by "pain and thought," in "search of nothing" but "expiation." The Romantic autonomy of the mind is once again, as in Byron's *Manfred*, its own heaven or hell, but in contrast to Byron's drama, "Heaven" is yet the hoped-for source of conciliation. However, the spectrality that looms large throughout the drama, with Marmaduke rehashed into a spectre of Oswald's making, is revisited even here in the finale. This peculiar relay of spectrality in the play, finally turned into a moral of penance in Marmaduke's closing speech, is worth noting. Oswald sums up his sinister carnivalesque bid to create an outcast doppelganger as follows: "The goal is reached. My Master shall become / A shadow of myself – made by myself" (V.1.2008-9), a spectral masquerade aimed to forge an unbreakable connection between Marmaduke and himself, allegedly "to enlarge / Man's intellectual empire" in "fellow-labour" (IV.2.1855-7). Oswald's multifaceted game is summed up by his now fully aware victim, Marmaduke, as merely baleful spectrality, for want of any rational

causality: "I believe that there are phantoms, / That in the shape of man do cross our path / On evil instigation, to make sport / Of our distress" (V.2.2053-6). The drama's intense spectrality and doubling, complemented by ample instances of confounding encounters and sensory vertigo that transcend the Gothic, resonates with the dynamics of absence, difference and suppression that mark the workings of *ilinx*. As Iser explains of *ilinx*, the game is one

> of subversion whose "vertiginous" element consists in carnivalization. […] There is clearly an anarchic tendency in *ilinx*, and this not only liberates what has been suppressed; it also reintegrates what has been excluded. Thus it allows the absent to play against the present, and in everything that is present it opens a difference that makes whatever has been excluded fight back against the representative claims of what excluded it. Whatever is present is as if mirrored from its reverse side. (*FI* 262)

In Marmaduke's parting words, his sense of resolution is troubled by the semantic triggers of uncertainty – far from a meaningful closure, the idea of "raising a monument" on the "dreary waste" to "record" his "story" in a "few," "delicate" "words" (V.3.2293-97) seems like a simultaneous rewriting and erasing of whatever it is we have just witnessed – the desired illumination of Marmaduke's story imparted by the word "light" falters in the qualifier "delicate" – for what sort of legacy or history is likely to be recorded in this manner?

Having argued the case for the predominance of the strategy of *ilinx* in Romantic drama, it is worth pausing now, at the close, at a notable rewriting of an originally highly transgressive drama and explore its implications. The example is Coleridge's play originally titled *Osorio* (1797), later recast, published and successfully performed as *Remorse* (1813). The original version, *Osorio*, written within a year of Wordsworth's *Borderers*, ends with the wronged Moor widow Alhadra's victorious crescendo of soon-to-be-satisfied revenge, voicing a powerful, transgressive bid for revolution and liberty:

> ALHADRA: […]
> This arm should shake the Kingdoms of the World;
> The deep foundations of iniquity
> Should sink away, Earth groaning from beneath them;
> […]
> Till desolation seem'd a beautiful thing,
> And all that wore and had the Spirit of Life

> Sang a new song to him who had gone forth,
> Conquering and still to conquer!
>
> (V.ii.206-15)[34]

While the Moors drag Osorio off stage to an uncertain end, Alhadra's incendiary speech imbues the finale with a worryingly seductive combination of *agon* and *ilinx* – where *agon* stands at the fore in the call to "shake the kingdoms of the world," tearing down "the deep foundations of iniquity," and further "conquering," and *ilinx* comes across most strongly in the latter part, transforming, again rather worryingly, "desolation" into a seemingly "beautiful thing." The danger of this revolutionary zeal, albeit incited by a quest for liberty and a desire to right wrongs, is dispelled in the later version, *Remorse* – the very title, in the style of Joanna Baillie's popular "plays on the passions," already suggests what sort of drama we might expect. Here Coleridge deliberately blunts the revolutionary edge and rewrites the finale in a more straightforwardly moral manner: the villain, now called Ordonio, is duly dispatched on stage by Alhadra, managing both to forgive her ("She hath aveng'd the blood of Isidore!"; V.i.259)[35] and beg forgiveness of his brother Alvar, against whom he has persistently schemed, before dying. Alhadra's incendiary speech remains but it is upstaged by the newly appended moral, Alvar closing the drama with god-fearing resolution: "In these strange dread events / Just Heaven instructs us with an awful voice, / That Conscience rules us e'en against our choice" (V.i.286-88), highlighting the workings of "dire REMORSE" (V.i.291).[36] Coleridge's rewriting curbs potential allegations of untoward libertarian fervour to secure a more likely bid from Drury Lane, which, as we know, worked. Overall, Coleridge's new ending counteracts the free reign of *ilinx* in his drama more profoundly than the moral of Wordsworth's finale, which is not forthright enough to diffuse the play's accumulated subversions with ease.

While these and many other Romantic dramas signal with varying intensity towards the subversive irresolution which marks the ethical conundrum we have often, for want of a better word, labelled modernity, they do so in ways that channel *ilinx* rather than *agon*, and favour free play over rule-based play. In Iser's

[34] *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, *Poetical Works vol. III, Plays, Part 1*, ed. J.C.C. Mays (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) 148.

[35] S.T. Coleridge, *Remorse* (Printed Version), *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, *Poetical Works vol. III, Plays, Part 2*, ed. J.C.C. Mays (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) 1323.

[36] Coleridge, *Remorse* 1324-25.

words, "[i]linx has an anarchistic tendency which releases things suppressed"[37] – and there are many instances facilitating the potential of *ilinx* to "destroy the stability of perception," where "this vertigo is readily linked to the desire for disorder and destruction."[38] Moreover, as Iser notes elsewhere, the "unbridled, all-consuming passion for play" that is *paidia* manifests itself "most strongly" "in mimicry and ilinx" (*FI* 338), while in older literature and drama, *agon* and *alea* hold various *archē*s in place, limiting the expanse of free play. In this respect, these Romantic works are less a set of failures, eccentricities of renowned poets whose egotistical hubris or pecuniary need led them astray – or indeed, as some traditional critical narratives have it, the nineteenth-century nadir of dramatic history, only redeemed by the great works of realism and naturalism of the latter half – and more the natural precursors of modern experimental drama: the theatre of cruelty, the theatre of the absurd, or the holy theatre of Peter Brook, all preoccupied with recovering the mystery of the dramatic through *paidiac* disruptions of the conventional notions of space, action and its meaning through the subversive deployment of *ilinx* across the board.

[37] Wolfgang Iser, *Laurence Sterne: Tristram Shandy*, trans. David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 104.

[38] Caillois, quoted in Iser, *Tristram Shandy* 104.