

Introduction

A MODERN SENSATION

They cry fie now upon men engaged in play; but I should like to know how much more honourable their modes of livelihood are than ours. The broker of the Exchange who bulls and bears, and buys and sells, and dabbles with lying loans, and trades on state secrets, what is he but a gamester? The merchant who deals in teas and tallow, is he any better? His bales of dirty indigo are his dice, his cards come up every year instead of every ten minutes, and the sea is his green table.

—William Makepeace Thackeray, *Barry Lyndon*¹

What did modernity feel like to the Victorians? What trusted metaphors did they employ to describe the sensation of modern life? Some felt modernity in their guts: the jolt of a railroad carriage, the lurching landscape, the rattling window. Modernity filled the ears of others: a deafening doubt roused by the ocean, its endless surface, its mockery of heaven. For some, modernity meant an exhilarating leap into darkness, or a mechanized march into light, or the tread of ghost feet beside one's bed. This book explores one modern sensation in particular: a trope invoked frequently by the Victorians to describe a world unhinged from a past. Despite its ubiquity in Victorian literary and cultural texts, despite its centrality to nineteenth-century British self-understanding, few critics today pay it much heed. At first glance, it seems a slight creature, incapable of bearing the cultural and political weight it did.

The modern sensation is *play*, specifically the bewildering experience of a world in play. A world in play is not the same thing, of course, as a world *at* play, which is how the Victorians depicted that apocryphal age known as Merry Old England, a time when the omnipresence of play was still satisfying, its expression enchanting. A world in play means two things. First, it means a world in flux: an inconstant and unsettled condition, a queasy state, as Marx and Engels describe it, in which “all that is solid melts into air.”² But a world in play also means a world that throws

itself headlong *into* play, inside it, where it constructs a parallel universe, a ludic microcosm of itself, which eventually displaces that world. The membranes of play, its elastic fibers, stretch to the point where they encircle all of existence. Modern life is subjected simultaneously to a miniaturizing, reductive pressure and to an increasingly erratic, oscillating motion. Recall for a moment *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), in which Victorian England, in the shape of a little girl, leaps into a microcosm of itself, a world of toylike objects and childish creatures, a world riven with epistemological undecidability and political strife, where a queen with a penchant for beheadings reigns. Lewis Carroll's rabbit hole captures, in whimsical fashion, the precise psychological state that many Victorians associate with modernity: a narrow space without a floor, constricting but unfixed, finite but unending, a world in play.

Consider, too, the quotation from *Barry Lyndon* (1844) with which I began. Thackeray's notoriously unreliable narrator, the professional gambler and con artist Redmond Barry, regards himself as a vestige of an aristocratic world at play, the last of a dying breed, in a modern middle-class commercial world that is very much in play. Writing from prison, utterly defeated in his various schemes, Barry has come to the startling metahistorical conclusion not that he is being punished for his outmoded playfulness but that modernity has expertly outplayed *him*, the commercial ethic that governs modern life proving more ruthlessly ludic, more winning, than his own more modest con artistry. Formerly confined to the casino, the game has expanded exponentially, shrunk the sea to the size of a gaming table, and turned bales of merchandise into dice, the very calendar into a turn at the table. A man at play feels, for the first time, the overwhelming reality of a world in play, grasps the extent to which modern play has no outside, no floor. Like Alice, who shrinks to the size of a rodent, a diminished Barry has been baptized into modernity and awakens in a labyrinth of play. As J. Jeffrey Franklin has so superbly documented in the context of the nineteenth-century realist novel, "play functioned as a linch-pin concept within the discursive infrastructure by which Victorian society represented itself to itself."³ Franklin is one of the few critics who recognizes the extent to which the logic of play shapes nineteenth-century British culture and identity. We can gaze at the railroad, the factory chimney, the clunky nineteenth-century camera on

its tripod. The Victorians themselves, however, in considerable numbers, located modernity—felt its presence most powerfully—in the interstices of play, in its jumbled folds and myriad overlappings. It is down this rabbit hole we now plunge.

For we postmodern subjects are all too familiar with the world in play, with the uncanny sensation—a decidedly nineteenth-century one—that the boundaries have blurred between signifier and referent, not temporarily but irrevocably. We alternately frighten and titillate ourselves with thoughts that modern consciousness has become permanently mired in a ludic representation of itself. From virtual reality to artificial intelligence, from the game theory of WTO economists to the war games of NATO commanders, from *The Matrix* (1999) to *The Truman Show* (1998), from online “communities” and flash mobs to so-called reality television and the pornographization of sex, from the ever-expanding “infotainment” industry to people “tweeting” their own suicides, from our phantom hordes of Facebook “friends” to the South Korean couple arrested in 2010 for raising a virtual child online in an Internet café, while their flesh-and-blood baby starved to death in an empty apartment—the evidence increasingly suggests that we live in a world of lotus-eaters, weaned on a digital perfume more consequential, more compelling, than the reality it enhances and supplants.

Skeptics will wonder what all the fuss is about. “All the world’s a stage,” they remind us. “Been there, done that!” The concept of a ludic world order, they insist, is no freak of the modern imagination. Some will trace it to antiquity, to Plato’s shadow-flecked cave, or to Heraclitus’s capricious Cosmos making and breaking the lives of men. They will claim that Jaques’s meditation upon the seven ages of man proves that the world in play predates the Victorian period by at least two and a half centuries, with its stilted, earnest play, so naïve and one-dimensional by early-modern standards, or by ours. Compared to the world at play, however, the concept of the world *in* play is a relatively recent invention. While its protracted birth might be contemporaneous with the gradual coalescence of modernity in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it finds its voice and flexes its young muscles in the eighteenth century. It comes of age and acquires its mature, historically coherent shape in the nineteenth century. Today, we see it in its prime. How long it will persist is unknown.

It appears to be fairly hearty. Although Shakespeare's metaphor of the world as a stage, we as actors, contains a prescient glimmer of our trope, it differs in a significant way. A stage implies the existence of an audience, an orchestra pit, a mezzanine, balconies, or in other words, an *outside*, a psychological and epistemological vantage from which to observe oneself, one's world, at play. Jaques has perspective, philosophical distance. *The World in Play* makes the case that this epistemic foothold offstage, this solid ground outside the game, dwindles and eventually disappears, in the minds of a growing number of people, by the early nineteenth century, swallowed by the totalizing concept of a world truly in play, by the modern conviction that we are trapped in the infinite regress of ludic representation, in a game that never ends, in the illusion's reflection. To put it bluntly: the Victorians wipe the smirk off Jaques's face.

How does one survive and thrive in a world in play? How does one forge political and ethical agency, experience meaningfulness and the fullness of being, in modernity's funhouse mirror? While this book cannot provide conclusive answers to these questions, it does provide what I hope is a compelling account of how various Victorian misfits, underdogs, and iconoclasts—antiestablishment literary figures with a penchant for questioning the middle-class worldview—grappled with, transformed, or in some cases made reluctant peace with the world in play: not from outside it, for the world in play has no exteriority, but from *below*, from their subaltern positions as oddballs and Others. If you want to learn the truth about a respectable family, don't ask Mama or Papa, ask the chambermaid; she will take you to the family portrait gallery and peel off those masks. While there is no "outside" to the world in play, there is a "below": an opportunity to achieve critical distance from within, to hack into the mainframe of Victorian culture. I toyed with the idea of titling this book *Play and Its Discontents*, but it sounded too fatalistic and clinical. It failed to capture the spirit of rebellion and intellectual dexterity with which certain Victorian writers and thinkers—melodramatists of the 1830s, Emily Brontë, Robert Louis Stevenson, John Muir, and Oscar Wilde, among others—battled the world in play in the name of play, struggled valiantly, like Alice, to find their footing in a seemingly innocuous logic that had swallowed the cosmos whole.

For all its purported fun, play is a notoriously inscrutable philo-

sophical concept. Mihai I. Spariosu and James Hans have documented how Western philosophers and cultural critics, over the last two and a half centuries, have cloaked the concept of play in an airy undecidability, an aesthetic mysticity, making it all the more difficult to grasp even as these same thinkers—Schiller, Kant, Ruskin, Arnold, Nietzsche, Husserl, Gadamer, Derrida, Feyerabend, Deleuze, and Rorty, among others—have asked play to do some heavy lifting, to act as a cornerstone in their respective philosophical systems (or antisystems, as the case may be).⁴ In Part I of *The World in Play*, I bring the concept of play back down to earth, while preserving its definitional complexity. Building on the groundbreaking scholarship of play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith, and using Dickens as my primary touchstone, I present an extensive albeit provisional taxonomy of play in nineteenth-century British literature and culture, revealing the surprising extent to which the concept of play infiltrates the infrastructure of everyday life in the Victorian period, indeed, how a network of contradictory and overlapping logics of play constitutes the very architecture of *being*.⁵ Part I provides readers with a user-friendly planimeter, an analytical frame, with which to map the various logics of play in hundreds—indeed, in thousands—of nineteenth-century literary and cultural artifacts. Whence did the world in play come? What caused play to proliferate conceptually in the first place, to spread virally through modern consciousness? At the end of Part I, I provide some tentative answers to these difficult questions.

The World in Play encourages readers to rethink their relationship with play not just theoretically or historically, but emotionally as well, to sweep aside the sentimental fluff, thoughts of frolicking toddlers and utopian politics, that has accrued around the concept of play over the years, even in hard-nosed academic circles, obscuring its ugly and sometimes brutal underbelly, its breathtaking ubiquity, the extent of its ideological work. While it would be unwise to claim that play is inherently bad, it would be no wiser to declare it inherently good. Many may find this painful to accept, for the concept of play has come to function in the popular imagination as a readymade philosophical and political antidote to all things unpleasant: unfreedom, regimentation, suffering, somber seriousness, uncomfortable truth, overweening power, repression, stifling conventionality, and joyless work, for example. Let's face it, we love play, or

rather, we are in love with play, blinded by affection. Thinking rigorously about play means breaking our own hearts.

In the four chapters that comprise Part II of *The World in Play*, I break hearts. I present each chapter as a portrait of a nineteenth-century writer or group of writers, misfits all, who struggled to make sense of play from within what they perceived as the prison house of play, its infinite regress. Portraits of ludic angst, these four chapters lay bare the paranoia, rage, and melancholy induced by this fixed game called modern life. Portraits too of survival and heroism, however, these chapters tell the story of how these same writers succeeded, sometimes at a high cost to themselves, in gaining an ethical and political perspective on play from within play, turning play against itself, discovering ludic worlds within worlds, pockets of possibility, hope, and love. These writers made the most of the world in play. In the process, they taught their Victorian contemporaries the joyful art of modern life: how to be at play in a world in play. If Part I is a map, then Part II is a record of four literary voyages, each of which sets off in a different direction at a different moment in the nineteenth century, their dotted lines diverging and crisscrossing on our map, each subsequent voyage coming a bit closer to discovering that elusive cove, a treasure trove of peace, in this choppy world in play.

We begin in the 1820s and 1830s with an account in Chapter Two of nautical melodrama, which constitutes, at first glance, a relatively crude phase in nineteenth-century British theatre. Though we can trace the melodramatic tropes that punctuate so much of Victorian literature to these scrappy texts, critics today all but ignore them, for extant copies of scripts are difficult to acquire. Taking as its subject the trials and tribulations of Jolly Jack Tar and of the seafaring life, nautical melodrama, and the unruly working-class theatres that showcased it, delighted plebeian audiences by indicting the world in play, by exposing the alienating and unsettling effects of global capitalism on the lives of industrial workers. Nautical melodrama mourned a bygone world at play, an apocryphal order, pastoral and customary. These wildly popular plays provided audiences with underdog strategies for outwitting predatory authority, for achieving fair play in an increasingly unfair world. If working-class literary skirmishes with the world in play erupted in the intersubjective space of the public sphere, in London's gaudy theatres, then middle-class literary

attempts to make sense of the world in play were confined, for the most part, to the private realm of interiority: to that rabbit hole we call bourgeois subjectivity. Hence, in Chapter Three, we turn our attention from raucous representations of sailors to the existential musings of a Yorkshire recluse, to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). I read this famously recalcitrant novel as a polemic against the middle-class pedagogization of child play, against the modern impulse to transform play activity in children into an industrious expression of psychic development. Invoking the circular logic of cosmic time, Brontë plucks the ludic child from the stifling telos of domesticity and forges instead a future-destroying model of child play, which refuses to subordinate itself to the demands of socialization. It is a refusal that leads to a sacred death that is more life-affirming, in Brontë's eyes, than life. In Chapter Four, one sees a similar though less brutal, more hopeful dynamic at work in the California travel narratives of Scottish free spirits Robert Louis Stevenson and John Muir, who set out to purge the Victorian cult of leisure, specifically, outdoorsy sportiness, of its proprietary egoism. They reimagine the Golden State, their adopted home, as a sublime Romantic playground where the middle-class male ego disintegrates in the face of destructive nature, and where competitive men are reborn as little cosmic boys. Stevenson and Muir's literary efforts to rebrand California as a postapocalyptic, neo-Caledonian playground, as a land of death and play, helped shape the fledgling state's image of itself as an otherworldly and exceptional place. Modern California is a product, in part, of the Victorian world in play.

If these three literary attempts to outplay modernity, to outmaneuver the world in play, seem nostalgic, to varying degrees, for an outside that does not exist, that is because, as I demonstrate in my concluding chapter on Oscar Wilde's anti-athleticism, it is nearly impossible psychologically to confront the viral logic of the world in play, in all its nihilistic fury, head on, without emotional recourse to an outside, a fantasy of primitivism or premodernity, howsoever illusory that outside may be. Wilde, however, achieved the seemingly impossible. Though many critics still cling to the popular image of Wilde as ludic martyr in a tragically unplayful age, his relationship with Victorian culture was more complicated than that. What made Wilde so controversial was his refusal to take play seriously or show it the proper respect by competing with his fellow Victorians in

the mandatory sport of modern life. Wilde considered earnestness a form of moral athleticism, the apotheosis of the competitive impulse: an ugly desire to win. Wilde was a spoilsport. He refused to catch the ball or score a manly victory, enraging his fellow players and inviting the wrath of the world in play to rain down upon his head. In his courageous willingness to lose a game from which there is no escape, and thus to live forever in *loss*, Wilde discovered the art of love. For this reason, he is the hero of this book.

Early nineteenth-century melodramatists and their working-class audiences experienced a very different world in play than did Wilde or Brontë or Stevenson and Muir. The world in play has a thousand faces, yet there is an underlying structure. Rather than a narrative of chronological development, an account, for example, of the minute changes that rugby or dollhouse construction underwent between 1856 and 1879, this book focuses mostly on capturing that elusive and, in some academic circles, dubious creature known as historical constancy. What is constant in the world in play, however, is not some ontological entity or metaphysical category called “play,” but the proliferation of ludic multiplicity itself, the definitional dynamism of this fluid concept, the play of play. The world in play is constant much as the ocean is constant, for it expresses itself steadily in endless waves of variability. It is this steadiness I want to capture, the rhythm of change, the pattern of play. Wilde, for instance, defines modern consciousness as the internalization of violent sport. Brontë, on the other hand, defines modern consciousness as the moment one directs one’s play impulses toward a socially productive end. What is constant is not a specific logic of play or the meaning of play, but the idea that one always already operates from within play, that one must therefore combat discourses of play with counterdiscourses of play. Wilde presents Christian folly as the antidote to sport. Brontë presents the deadly play of the cosmos as the antidote to rational play. The logic might have changed but the dynamic, the historical rhythm, the form, remains the same. For too long the Victorian world in play has gone uncharted, the breathtaking ubiquity of play ignored. We have been taught to distrust big pictures, and play is *big*, so big we cannot see it, like the curvature of the earth. “The Game is so large,” Rudyard Kipling writes, “that one sees but a little at a time.”⁶ Equipped with the map from Part I and the historical models from

Part II, readers, I hope, will feel emboldened to strike out on their own, to be done with fear, to explore the vast stretches of the world in play that bend beyond the confines of this book.

To readers who have a vested intellectual or psychological interest in the notion that the Victorians were unplayful, or that they were playful in a circumscribed, innocent, or crude way, *The World in Play* will seem like a brazen attempt to overturn decades of conventional wisdom, to turn Victorian studies on its head. I sympathize with these readers. As I discuss in detail in the chapter on Wilde, the world in play is a disturbing idea; it disturbs *me*. For years I resisted it, sought to discover some phenomenon, some flicker of an idea or cultural force that could not be co-opted by play or subsumed in it, some phenomenon that is *intrinsically* antithetical to play and escapes its totalizing grasp. Such a phenomenon does not exist. This does not mean that everything, therefore, must be understood as play. A world in play is not the same thing as a world in which everything is straightforwardly ludic. Rather, it is a world in which nothing is immune to the infectious logic of play, in which everything—death, war, earnestness—has the capacity in theory to be exposed to play, overwritten by it, infiltrated by it, represented by it. An unsettling ludic potentiality lurks within the logic of modernity. Like Vesuvius, play threatens to erupt at any moment. The very ground beneath our feet—our convictions, rootedness, truth—is haunted by an epistemologically catastrophic illusoriness, by a nagging modern sensation that, to quote Marx and Engels, “all that is solid melts into air.” With this book, I do not seek to impose a totalizing concept on history. My intention is merely to write the history of a totalizing concept, a concept that the Victorians themselves imposed on history.