

Issue 27
2009

GENDER FORUM

An Internet Journal for Gender Studies



Off Centre: Eccentricity and Gender

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ISSN 1613-1878



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Spring Issue:
abstracts (October 1),
completed papers (January 1)

Summer Issue:
abstracts (January 1),
completed papers (April 1)

Fall Issue:
abstracts (April 1),
completed papers (July 1)

Early Career Researchers Special Issue:
abstracts (May 1),
completed papers (August 1)

Winter Issue:
abstracts (July 1),
completed papers (October 1)

About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Detailed Table Of Contents

Ingrid Hotz-Davies and Stefanie Gropper: Editorial	1
Moritz Hildt: Towards a Theory of Eccentricity	15
Bettina Schreck: Eccentricity and Deterritorialization in Natalie Barney's <i>The One Who is Legion</i>	34
Brian Comfort: The Owls Are Not What They Seem: Eccentricity and Masculinity in <i>Twin Peaks</i>	52
Rebecca Kate Hahn: Isak Dinesen's "The Deluge at Norderney" and Eccentric Indifference	72
List of Contributors	87

Editorial

By Ingrid Hotz-Davies and Stefanie Gropper, University of Tübingen, Germany

1 In a manner rare in literary studies, our interest in the eccentric has its origin in our discussions of one specific contribution to gender studies: Ina Schabert's massive *Englische Literaturgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts: Eine neue Darstellung aus der Sicht der Geschlechterforschung* (2006). In it, she establishes for the first time the artistic and aesthetic coherence of a group of authors and their works, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Stevie Smith, Elizabeth von Arnim, and Virginia Woolf among them, who emerge from classic modernism but who also seem to have a place all their own, a place so curiously unclassifiable that they often find themselves in the category of the quirky, the odd, the sui generis, the eccentric (152-171).¹ Their work is characterized not so much by an oppositional (or for that matter: affirmative) attitude to norms but rather by a calculated indifference to them. Their work often features characters who appear "odd": old maids who stubbornly refuse to submit to the regime of having to be either "tragic" or "comic," missionaries forgetful of their missions, narrative voices which weave in and out of various topics in a mode of the spoken, the merely incidental, the chatty. And always: texts which seem to refuse taking up a position which can be firmly determined, "fixed" as it were in any one place, summarized.

2 These texts and the characters which people them seem to have only one aim: to get away. Sylvia Townsend Warner's middle aged renegade Lolly Willowses, for example, moves from the centre in London to a rural periphery in *Great Mop* only to find herself moving even further into the indifferent, non-social company of shrubs and ditches while the novel itself playfully and in total disregard of the "rules" hovers between the realistic and the fantastic, the everyday and the occult, in an ironic mode which ultimately cannot be rescued onto firm non-ironic ground by a process of reversal. Taking her cue from one of the prominent examples of this literary mode, Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), Schabert calls these works "foot-off-the-ground" novels (though in Smith's case one must also assume the existence of foot-off-the-ground poems). Foot-off-the-ground texts are characterized (and united as an identifiable group) by a specific general "attitude" towards all systems of

¹ Romana Huk tries to save Stevie Smith from the damages done by a reputation for eccentricity by translating her into the category of the "ex-centric," understood here as a "liminal position in society and langue" which produces only "fractured sightings of the self in the shadow of ascendant cultural forces" (1). Obviously, having "unfractured sightings of the self" would be preferable in this reading (and appears possible for other subjects) and ex-centricity is a positional deficit which Smith's art tries to work its way around. By contrast, we would insist that the eccentric remain eccentric and should be valued as such, as a choice and a profoundly different model of how one may position oneself in relation to a whole range of issues, including those of seeing oneself in culture or not.

classification and categorization (it is not by chance that one of Stevie Smith's poems begins with the rallying cry: "No Categories!" [Smith, *Poems*, 258]). They display a profound scepticism towards and mistrust of such systems and seek to "lift off" from them, to escape their grasp, to avoid affirming their legitimacy, even their very existence, by trying to avoid positioning themselves either in affirmation or in opposition to them. At the same time, however, as the entire symbolic order – and with it language itself – is one of these systems, in fact *the* system most to be mistrusted and feared, this also means that these texts can "lift off" with only one foot (as Stevie Smith visualized the technique) while having to keep the other foot firmly on the ground in the very system – or we might say "centre" – they seek to escape from.

3 It is Schabert's great achievement to have, for the first time, identified the group characteristics of these texts and given them a name. At the same time, however, the fact that this name had to be generated from the very language used by one of its practitioners, the object of study providing the terms of its own naming, is a measure of the success with which these texts have managed to evade the systems of categorization which they so deviously sought to disarm: there is no critical vocabulary by which they could collectively be named. As the foot-off-the-ground novel was being described by Schabert as a specifically English phenomenon exclusively developed by women writers (indeed Schabert sees it as a specifically female answer to the relentless demands of the symbolic and social order), we were trying to expand the radius of this term, to see if practitioners could also be found in other national contexts (Karen Blixen alias Isak Dinesen immediately came to mind), among male writers, in other media, in different historical periods. For this, a new word was needed, and we followed a suggestion by another colleague of ours, Isabel Karremann, to call these texts "eccentric." This is how the quest for the eccentric began – and opened a view on a whole vista of unsolved problems. In *Quest for the Eccentric*

4 There is, at the moment, a tentative flurry of different works which seek to make the term *eccentric* available for critical usage. One of the earliest attempts is Daniel Sangsue's *Le récit excentrique* (1987), which sets out to establish the term for a group of nineteenth-century French novels which follow the example of Laurence Sterne in developing literary textures of decentered ironies, playful parodies of the novelistic form, texts which resolutely turn away from the serious to embrace the frivolous and the marginal in terms of literary respectability. Here is how Sangsue begins his discussion:

Car si, nous le verrons, le corpus "excentrique" se constitue comme de lui-même à travers une communauté de pratiques parodiques, de références (dans lesquelles Sterne

domine), et un jeu interne de renvois [...] il reste à s'interroger sur sa spécificité et à dégager son originalité. (10).

5 What interests us here is not so much the question if Sangsues post-Sternian texts may be properly termed eccentric or how these may be related to Schabert's foot-off-the-ground texts (though the question would be an interesting one), but how this critical term obviously had to be introduced. It enters the text in quotation marks as if the term could in fact not be applied without marks of authorial distance, could not be taken at face value, was itself unfamiliar in such critical surroundings (which it obviously is), may even be unacceptable for critical usage. No one would consider speaking of Lord Byron as a "Romantic" author in quite this manner (unless one wanted to suggest that there is something wrong with Byron's Romanticism) because the term *Romantic* enjoys a long critical history which renders it immediately comprehensible and rich in meaning. Eccentricity by contrast seems to be a term itself eccentrically evasive and untested for critical usage. This collection of essays sets itself the task of first of all testing the viability and the potential radius of the eccentric as a category of literary analysis.

6 Most current studies focus on the eccentric as a specific personality type and seek to position him (and more rarely her) within the social or psychological regimes of normality from which he or she supposedly deviates (Dörr-Backes, A. Assman et als., Carroll, Weeks/James). Highly suggestive here is Peter Schulman, who begins his study on "Modern French Eccentrics" with an alphabetical "List of Eccentrics" in various subcategories: subdivided into "Literary Eccentrics" (i.e. literary characters) and "Real-Life Eccentrics" and further differentiated by the historical period in which they reside. In this, he follows something that seems to have become standard procedure, for rather than setting out to define the eccentric either as a personality trait or as a mode of being in the world, scholarly and popular engagements with eccentrics have tended to work by establishing lists of eccentrics.

7 In these lists, eccentrics are not so much discussed as collected: assemblies of the odd and the weird, of curious habits and behaviours, of the nerdish and the harmlessly crazy, in short, of eccentric personalities. These personalities are set outside the norm and placed at the centre of the list's interests: who they are, what their idiosyncrasies are, whether they may be genuinely mad or maybe only odd, and how to make sense of their strange indifference to those norms that compel us. These are typically collections of odd human beings who seem to be classifiable in distinct subcategories: crazy scientists, dandyish aristocrats, religious maniacs, off-beat geniuses, dedicated cross-dressers, fashion icons, grandiose architects, magnificent failures, immoderate creators, obsessive collectors. As we shall see, a particularly

interesting example of such a list is itself a good candidate for the eccentric: Edith Sitwells *The English Eccentrics* (1933). Rich in material and also quite amusing among the many lists one may consult is Karl Shaws *The Mammoth Book of Oddballs and Eccentrics* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2000).

8 It is obvious that lists of eccentrics and of their various subcategories could be potentially infinite and the main motive for collecting these specimens of the human seems to be a fascination with who they are, what makes them tick, *what* they are, sometimes with a curious *frisson* of voyeurism in the presence of the shamelessly deviant experienced by those who consider themselves normal (and maybe: condemned to normality). And so we learn that “real” eccentrics – the question of whether they are “real” or not accompanies this literature as a constant irritant – are never troubled about their own selves, live out their desires and refuse to be deformed by the pressures of conformity, and hence may even live longer and healthier lives than other people who are not gifted with this felicitous ability to detach themselves from the demands of normality (Weeks/James). At the same time, however, as these lists and studies assume that eccentricity is an essential quality in certain human beings which can and must be “real,” they also assume that it is an extreme form of performativity since it seeks expression in specific quirks of behaviour, of clothing, of self-stylization. In this way, the eccentric is also always under suspicion that he may not be truly crazy at all but a fake, his eccentricity only a pose, a performative illusion which both veils and reveals the “real” person behind the performance.

9 What these works have in common, then, is the attempt to see and categorize these individuals in relation to an assumed norm, to position them in an otherwise unspecified grid of normality in relation to specific markers: success, gender conformity, civility, sublimation of drives, etc. Its methods are those of psychology insofar as it is their psyches that are under investigation (Weeks/James), of cultural studies insofar as the history of eccentric behaviours is the object of study (Assmann et als., Schulman, Carroll), of sociology insofar as it is the positioning of these individuals within social systems that is at stake (Dörr-Backes). But there is another way of looking at eccentricity, and one that appears even more the proper object for literary studies as a discipline of “close reading,” of the investigation not only of larger structures of interaction but specifically of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has termed “texture” (13-25), the complicated and complex manipulations of affect, logic, and positionality which occur on the microtextual level. In this other perspective, one may think of eccentricity as a literary *technique* rather than a character trait.

10 It may help to go back to the linguistic origins of the word in Greek *ekkentros* and its Latin pendant: “out of” the centre. This is how eccentrics are commonly positioned: outside the centre (Dörr-Backes, 9), a place where they supposedly “are.” But it may be worth following up this coinage of the ex-centric, for example in its Latin roots for “ex”. For there, “ex” definitely does not denote a mode of being, or rather it situates a mode of being in relation to where something comes from, what something is related to, what it is made of: not, then, *outside* as an absolute condition, but *from something*. The sheer spread of these directionalities is quite suggestive. If we take the extensive entries in Lewis/Short, we for example get the following options:

I. In space: [...] 1. To indicate the country, and in gen., the place *from* or *out of which* any person or thing comes, *from* [...] 2. To indicate the place *from* which any thing is done or takes place, *from*, *down from* [...] Hence the adverbial expressions, *ex adverso*, *ex diverso*, *ex contrario*, *e regione*, *ex parte*, *e vestigio*, etc. [...] III. In other relations, and in gen. where a going out or forth, a coming or springing out of any thing is conceivable. A. With verbs of taking out, or, in gen. of taking, receiving, deriving (both physically and mentally; so of perceiving, comprehending, inquiring, learning, hoping, etc.), *away from*, *from*, *out of*, *of* [...] B. In specifying a multitude from which something is taken, or of which it forms a part of, *out of*, *of* [...] C. To indicate the material of which any thing is made of consists, *of* [...] F. To indicate a transition, i.e. a change, alteration, *from* one state or condition to another, *from*, *out of* [...] H. To designate the measure or rule, *according to*, *after*, *in conformity with* which any thing is done.

11 We find ourselves confronted by two closely related notions of what it might mean for something to be “ex-centric”: a notion of directionality which implies that the eccentric is to be thought not as something which is simply “outside,” but rather as something that is the result of a movement “from” an assumed centre, away from there, but also – and this is the second aspect – a notion of connectedness which will always tie the eccentric, however loosely, to this assumed centre as the place where it comes from, which formed it and possibly motivated its very movement away, right up to the possibility that the eccentric may even be a thing put together from materials provided at the very centre from which it seeks to distance itself.

12 At the same time, eccentricity would cease to be a “personality,” it would not even be a specific position or location. It would be a *movement*, a *technique* by which those practicing the art of eccentricity would be continually moving away, out of an assumed centre, to seek for an outside position (Schabert’s one foot off the ground) while never completely relinquishing the centre altogether as a point of origin and reference (Schabert’s second foot on the ground). It would be a technique designed to investigate and question the centre while striving away from it, a radically sceptical technique which would seek not only to question

the centre but to do so from a position which cannot itself be fixed as a firm point (after all, such a firm point would simply set up an opposition of centre and periphery, centre and opposition, norm and deviance).

13 Eccentricity would then be a technique building on a continual tension, a continual negotiation between the “centre” and a position of eccentricity specifically created for this negotiation. This is not just some kind of place on the periphery, as Juri Lotman would have it, but rather a positionality which is being brought forth in a continual and specific process of “ex-centering” performances and utterances. If these techniques are moving towards a point “outside” a given system (the sex-gender system, a literary genre or textual practice, a philosophical tradition, etc.), try to imagine such a location in the act of writing, this ultimate point “outside” would no longer be a place within the universe of signs and meanings, the Semiosphere in Lotman’s terms, the Symbolic in Lacan’s, but an intuited location and mode of being, a place of longing in which the demands of all systems of signification could finally be shrugged off. A place, indeed, which many of Schabert’s foot-off-the-ground texts seem to strain for, in nature, in death, in conditions of oblivion, while never quite reaching it.

14 If, then, the concept of eccentricity were pushed beyond the notion of a character trait towards eccentricity as a technique of thought and artistic creation which makes it possible for individuals to position themselves vis-à-vis a centre, then eccentricity would not in fact be in need of eccentrics. Rather, it would be a technique that would be potentially available to anyone with a desire to try and imagine a state of indifference in relation to the centre of signification, a position which is neither affirmative nor oppositional and which both assumes a centre and seeks to leave it behind. However, this is a game which first of all requires a desire, maybe even an urgent desire for eccentricity, a need to reject not only the centre but also other available sub-centres along the periphery. And it is a risky game as it builds on the continual performance of a deviance which does not have the consolations of being “at home” in a new centre made up of other possibly stigmatized and marginalized but at least identifiable identities. “Eccentrics” would then be people for whom the techniques of eccentricity form a key component in their being in the world: they would be especially adept at manipulating systems of signification in a manner not designed to establish an oppositional “identity” but rather to create an eccentric position, not completely detached from the centre, but looking back on it with irony, refusal, non-recognition, indifference. Scouting the Terrain

15 When searching for a prominent example for the investigation of eccentricity as a technique, there could be no better place to start with than with Edith Sitwell, a writer who is herself rarely absent from lists of eccentrics due to her extravagant self-stylizations, but who

very rarely is given a chance to be heard with her own words, her own literary interventions in the field of eccentricity. Her *The English Eccentrics* (1933), written in the early 1930s against a background of the continual growth of totalitarian movements and regimes all over Europe, is a work which is today seen as one of the early studies on eccentrics (it is a narrated list of eccentrics). However, it is also itself a work saturated with the techniques of eccentricity, one of the more sustained and complete versions of the mode. *English Eccentrics* begins by positioning itself within the tradition of melancholy, a version of *spleen* which has been perceived since the early modern period as a condition of decenteredness and homelessness. Investigating the lives and doings of eccentrics, it is claimed, is itself a cure for melancholy: it is, however, a cure which Sitwell explicitly sets out to find not at the centre but in the “Dustheaps” (17) of culture:

We may find some cure for Melancholy in the contemplation of this, or in the reason given by some scientists for distinguishing Man from Beast. ‘Man’s anatomical pre-eminence,’ we are told, ‘Mainly consists in degree rather than in kind, the differences are not absolute. His brain is larger and more complex, and his teeth resemble those of animals in number and pattern, but are smaller, and form a continuous series, and, in some cases, differ in the order of succession.’ We have, indeed, many causes for pride and congratulation, and amongst these is the new and friendly interest that is shown between nations. ‘Richard L. Garner,’ (again I quote from Herr Schwidetzky) ‘went to the Congo in order to observe gorillas and chimpanzees in their natural surroundings, and to investigate their language. He took a wire cage with him, which he set up in the jungle and from which he watched the apes.’ Unfortunately, the wire cage, chosen for its practical invisibility to imaginative and idealistic minds, always exists during these experiments. ‘Garner, however, tried to teach human words to a little chimpanzee. The position of the lips for the word Mamma was correctly imitated, but no sound came.’ This is interesting, because a recent psycho-analyst had claimed that the reason for the present state of unrest in Europe is that every man wishes to be the only son of a widow. We can see, therefore, that if imbued with a few of the doctrines and speeches of civilization, the innocent, pastoral, and backward nations of the Apes will become as advanced, as ‘civilized’, as the rest of us. Who knows that they may not even come to construct cannon? To go further in our search for some antidote against melancholy, we may seek in our dust-heap for some rigid, and even splendid, attitude of Death, some exaggeration of the attitudes common to Life. This attitude, rigidity, protest, or explanation, has been called eccentricity by those whose bones are too pliant. But these mummies cast shadows that do not lie in their proper geometrical proportions, and from these distortions dusty laughter may arise. [...] This eccentricity, this rigidity, takes many forms. It may even, indeed, be the Ordinary carried to a high degree of pictorial perfection, as in the case I am about to relate. On the 26th of May, 1788, Mary Clark [...] was delivered of a child [...] it seems that this interesting infant was ‘full grown, and seemed in perfect health. Her limbs were plump, fine and well proportioned, and she moved them with apparent agility. It appeared to the doctors that her head presented a curious appearance, but this did not trouble them much, for the child behaved in the usual manner, and it was not until the evidence of its death became undeniable, at the age of five days, that these gentlemen discovered that there was not the least indication of either cerebrum, cerebellum, or any medullary substance whatever.’ Mr. Kirby, from whose pages I have culled this story, and who

seems to have been one of those happy persons who never look about them, but who, when confronted with an indubitable fact, are astonished very easily, concludes with this pregnant sentence: ‘Among the inferences deduced by Dr. Heysham from this extraordinary confirmation, but advanced with modest diffidence, is this: that the living principle, the nerves of the trunk and extremities, sensation and motion, may exist independent of the brain.’ This is the supreme case of Ordinarity, carried to such a high degree of perfection that it becomes eccentricity. Again, any dumb but pregnant comment on life, if expressed by only one gesture, and that of sufficient contortion, becomes eccentricity. Thus, Miss Beswick, who belongs to the former order of eccentrics, did not resemble the child who was born without brains, whose supreme ordinarity and resemblance to other human beings was proved by the fact that it did not know that it was alive. [...]. (19-22)

16 This discussion of eccentricity begins, and this is already an indication of its technique, with a quotation from the textual productions of the “centre,” for what could be more central than science, here employed to contemplate the demarcation lines between animal and human? But all is not as it should be, for while a reference to the impressive size of the human brain may be counted among the standard markers of human superiority over animals, this first quotation already veers off into a rather uncategorizable investigation of the value of human dental equipment which, we are told, “in some cases, differ[s] in the order of succession” from animals. So it is dentistry that is to establish human “anatomical pre-eminence,” a claim which must appear patently absurd in the face of shark teeth, mosquito sucking devices, or the elegant (but nearly toothless!) equipment of poison snakes.

17 The second attempt “from the centre,” which now seeks its grounding in primatology, fares no better and leads to an even more profound questioning of the centrality of human beings. Humans, we are told, have travelled to visit the “backward nations” of the apes in order to learn their language (in keeping with the spirit of an age – 1933 of all years! – marked by a “new and friendly interest that is shown between nations”). But the question as to what and who is central here and what “outside” is immediately complicated beyond our power to disentangle it: humans, it seems, need to move into a cage if they want to observe the apes in safety, thus leaving the apes free to roam the countryside and the humans – like apes? – in cages. Traditionally human attributes like self-determination, liberty, control, etc. are assigned to the apes while the humans – in “centered” misrecognition of their true condition – try to reduce the cage to a “practical invisibility” with the help of their “imaginative and idealistic minds.” Without a doubt humans are “inside” here and the apes “outside”: but this is a reversal of what would normally be positioned as “inside” the centre and “outside” it. If anything, it is the “outside” which appears as a centre in the sense that it is assigned the qualities of the human, but this centre is given over to the apes. This scrambling of the relative locations of “inside” and “outside,” of centre and non-centre, and finally of the

direction from which we are supposed to observe these positionings is precisely what we would call a technique of eccentricity which this text deploys in order to thoroughly upset the place of the human in terms of animal-human differentiation by shifting the parameters without actually creating a new centre of perception.

18 Are the apes here safe from human idiocy because they cannot pronounce the word “Mamma”? After all, this is what protects them from this text’s curiously reformulated version of the Oedipus complex which diagnoses in every human male a desire to be the only son of a widow (a conclusion from the proposition that the Oedipus complex would make every male want to sleep with his mother, kill his father, and tolerate no siblings in the vicinity). This Oedipal desire, which takes the linguistic form of someone saying “Mamma,” is held to be responsible for human males seeking to kill each other in large numbers in recurring historical cycles: after all what better way to reduce the number of siblings and fathers and leave as many widows behind as possible?

19 While we are on the topic of defining the human, what should we make of the story of Mary Clark’s little daughter who was diagnosed – again by science – to have been in perfect health for five days while there was “not the least indication of either cerebrum, cerebellum, or any medullary substance whatever”? One might be tempted to see this as a simple satire directed at incompetent medical doctors. But in the passage’s further development, it is precisely the direction which this story should be looked at which causes problems. For surprisingly, it is not the stupidity of doctors which forms the nucleus of the story (after all, this would just confirm *ex negativo* their relevance as centres of knowledge and power). Rather, the perspective moves to the brain-deprived baby, “whose supreme ordinariness and resemblance to other human beings was proved by the fact that it did not know that it was alive,” and it is this baby that is given the last word on eccentricity, somehow crookedly embodying eccentricity in its off-centre view of the world: “a dumb but pregnant comment on life.”

20 What exactly is the import of this “dumb but pregnant comment on life” is made to remain enigmatic, imprecise, and this too is one of the techniques of eccentricity. To name the point of attack unambiguously and thus free the reader from having to solve the riddle of eccentric perception would be precisely taking up a definite position (for example “humans are dead in life,” “being without consciousness is desirable, “ ”matter is real beyond the diagnoses of medics”, etc.). Naming a precise point from which this observation is launched would mean to once again locate the critique within the everyday regimes of logic and of meaning. Instead of this, the passage projects a place from which this critique may not so

much be understood as intuited, a place outside, without speech and “dumb,” a hypothetical point from which the dead baby (or the baby living without a cerebrum) may voice a damning condemnation of the centre – of any centre of meaning – whose very condemnation consists of an indifferent turning away rather than an antagonistic mooring in an identifiable oppositional stance.

21 It is in this manner that the entire text of *The English Eccentrics* may best be understood as a continuous – and in no sense harmless! – game with various “centres,” a game whose aim is in no way the development of an alternative programme, not even that of a literary avant-garde, but rather the production of a continual destabilization of the direction of the narrative gaze, of the places we are looking from and the objects we are looking at, of the places we assign values from, of the differentiation between “inside” and “outside,” of “authoritative” and “deviant,” “defective” perception. In this game, it is even the dichotomy between centre and periphery itself that can no longer be maintained, for what is being imagined here is a model of thought and of perception in which finally the “centre” is everywhere and the place towards which the imagination is forever reaching without reaching it, the place of philosophical longing, is neither centre nor periphery but a place outside any structure.

22 Sitwell’s collection of eccentric personalities may be considered paradigmatic for an investigation of eccentricity. She herself defines eccentricity as “the supreme case of Ordinarity, carried to such a high degree of perfection that it becomes eccentric. Again, any dumb but pregnant comment on life, any criticism of the world’s arrangement, if expressed by only one gesture, and that of sufficient contortion, becomes eccentricity” (21-22). In this vision, eccentricity would be an extreme reduction of contact with “the world’s arrangement,” a refusal to feel with and care for the world, in its final resting point a reduction to a mere physical presence in the world. However, the literary production of eccentricity is an attempt to develop from within this movement of retreat – to communicate *by* and *through* this retreat – a distinct aesthetics and mode of communication. If, then, for Sitwell the eccentric is a form of normality that has been pushed to an extreme and thereby “becomes eccentricity,” it is this which the non-eccentric public has to be made aware of: “Might I not, indeed, write of those persons who, beset by the physical wants of this unsatisfactory world, can, by the force of their belief, satisfy those wants through the medium of the heaven they have created for that purpose. In this heaven, anything may happen; it is a heaven built upon earth, yet subject to no natural laws” (24). What is at stake, then, is the presentation of human beings who went in search of a place in which anything may happen, a “heaven built upon earth” which would not

be subject to any “natural laws” (here not so only the laws of nature but also those social and cultural “laws” simply deemed “natural”). In providing its list of eccentric personalities, it is in fact the text itself which creates them as eccentric, making them speak to and for this desire for an eccentric location from which to look back with indifference on the values and meanings generated at the “centre.” Exploring the Grid

23 As Schabert’s intuition about the foot-off-the-ground novel being a specifically female mode of interacting with the social and symbolic order already makes apparent, and as Sitwell’s intervention in the debate on what it means to be “human” would confirm, the eccentric – both the personality and the technique – has to be investigated in terms which take into account both the gendered expectations which render a mode of thought or behaviour identifiable as eccentric and the gendered investment an individual may have or not have in the options provided or withheld at the centre. For clearly norms and expectations, the “centres” against which eccentricity would seek to articulate itself, have different values, different contents, even a different desirability for men and women, for heteronormatively compatible and non-compatible subjects. In fact, as some of the contributions will show (Schreck, Hahn, Comfort), we may assume that eccentricity stands in a special relationship to those techniques currently discussed as “queer” if by “queer” we mean not the establishment of a sexual identity but rather its opposite: the destruction of sexual identities. One may further hypothesize that the attractiveness of the eccentric would very much depend on how heavily an individual is invested in the “centres” (of meaning, of power, of knowledge, etc.) he or she can or cannot be a part of, wants to or refuses to side with. The question then would be: for whom and under which circumstances does it make sense to cease cooperation with such a centre and the pre-defined “others” it is orbited by to embrace the eccentric?

24 In its focus on the investigation of specific literary textures and in its attempt to think outside the binary box, an investigation of eccentricity may, we hope, prove to be useful in following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s demand that we need to find new, non-automatized ways of investigating the full reach of our ways of being and interacting beyond the modes of inclusion and exclusion, essence and deconstruction, the normal and the deviant, etc. which ordinarily structure our grids of perception even when we seek to “deconstruct” such binaries (Sedgwick, 1-3). Sedgwick thinks of this as an “art of *loosing*” (3, her emphasis), of releasing our objects of study from such binary blinkers. Rainer Emig has recently put forward the idea that the eccentric (as a personality concept) may in fact be one way towards such a move beyond a binary identity politics and pleads that we should try “to establish eccentricity in theory as a counterweight to binary structuralist models of culture and as an ally of

postcolonial studies and Queer Theory” (93). We believe (and our experience confirms this) that an exploration of the eccentric – both in the models provided by those considered eccentric personalities and as a technique of positioning narratives, voices, perspectives – would be nothing less than a training programme for the “art of loosing.” For this to work, however, we believe that such an investigation of the potentials of eccentricity as a critical tool should begin by first circling, surrounding, investigating the notion itself, to move it more into the theoretical realm in order to produce more and more varied models of what the eccentric may do for us and we for it.

25 A history of eccentricity and its uses in gendered performances does not exist at the moment. However, it would be well worth writing and we understand our collection of essays as a very small first step in this direction as we have asked our contributors to provide discussions designed specifically to fathom various theoretical options for making eccentricity viable as a concept and as a critical tool. In keeping with our concept of eccentricity one may expect that eccentric texts do not present (or simply deny) a binary concept of gender but that gender will emerge as a blurred, ignored, or simply indifferent, invalidated category, and this is borne out by the majority of the articles collected here.

26 For the purpose of fathoming the potential reach of a concept of eccentricity we conducted a graduate seminar in the summer term of 2009 dedicated to the exploration of “Literatures of Eccentricity.” We invited graduate and some doctoral students to work with us on various literary and theoretical texts, a task they took to with great enthusiasm and intelligent alertness so that the experience was a source of enlightenment for all of us. For the most part, the works presented here are the works of participants in this seminar and of the doctoral programme *Abgrenzung, Ausgrenzung, Entgrenzung: Gender als Prozess und Resultat von Grenzziehungen*. As our seminar was focused on eccentricity as a technique rather than on eccentrics, we invited Brian Comfort, a specialist in American historical and cultural studies, to work on those aspects our seminar had tended to ignore by contributing his expertise in eccentrics (the personality type) to the collection.

27 As it seemed useful to first detach a theory of eccentricity from gender concerns, Moritz Hildt’s essay provides an investigation of how eccentricity may be imagined as a general personality trait and as a general literary technique by drawing on Helmuth Plessner’s very prominent use of the word in his hypothesis of the “eccentric positionality” of human beings. Bettina Schreck sets off the dynamics of centre and periphery as defined by Juri Lotman and as evidenced in the development of literary canons against the work of a prominent member of the lesbian community of the Paris Left Bank in the 1920s, Natalie

Barney's *The One Who is Legion*, which seeks to deterritorialize gender and sexuality altogether in a model of "identity" that is profoundly a-centric. Rebecca Hahn investigates the short stories of Karen Blixen with Ina Schabert's concept of the foot-off-the-ground novel and Queer Theory in mind. Brian Comfort, finally, investigates the use of eccentric characters in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* and in American culture at large.

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Towards a Theory of Eccentricity

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Abstract:

This essay seeks to develop a literary theory of eccentricity taking as its point of departure everyday usages of the word *eccentric*, Helmuth Plessner's notion of the eccentric positionality of human beings, and Thomas Nagel's model of the interplay of subjective and objective viewpoints in human (self)positioning. Its key assumption is that eccentricity should be thought of as an attitude to life determined by a systematic indifference to "objective," external viewpoints and values. While this is taken to characterize eccentricity as a personality trait, by extension the concept can then be made to also work for literary texts. These are also seen to be indifferent to important external determinants, thus producing the "eccentric text." These suggestions are tested and developed in an analysis of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760-1767), which is being read as a novel featuring both eccentric characters and an eccentric literary technique.

1 At the very end of Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1760-7), Tristram's mother asks a question which the reader has been asking himself all along: "What is all this story about?" (IX 33, 457).¹ The answer she gets is at the same time the closing of the novel: "A Cock and a Bull, said *Yorick* – And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard."

2 After this final remark we shut the book and are left with many open questions: although Yorick's answer suggests that what we have been reading was just a big jest, a cock-and-bull story (Booth discusses the several meanings of the novel's last sentence, 545), this does not satisfy. The question of what this novel is all about, what its message could be, still seems to be open. We feel that we are not able to get a grip on the novel's ultimate purpose or its communicative intent. We are left with a certain kind of discomfoting feeling towards the novel, a text which appears to be so unusual, so strange.

3 There are a number of other literary works which leave us with the same kind of uncomfortable feeling, resulting from similar interpretative problems. Take, for example, such diverse texts as Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), short-stories by Karen Blixen, the movie *F for Fake* (1974) by Orson Welles, or David Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2006). Although they do not have much in common, in every case we experience this discomfoting feeling with regard to the interpretation and the question as to what the story is about and why we are being told this story in the first place. Thus, it might be reasonable to ask whether it would be possible to develop a concept of a narrative genre which would allow us to subsume

¹ References to *Tristram Shandy* are given in the following form: book in Roman numbers, chapter in Arabic numbers, and page number in the Norton Critical Edition.

all these texts and make sense of them as a group. This paper is an attempt to approach this question by proposing thoughts on a – necessarily very tentative – literary theory of eccentricity.

4 This paper thus takes on the question: “What might a theory of eccentricity look like?” I will try to develop a concept of eccentricity which I take to be useful for describing the kinds of literary texts we are dealing with. It will emerge that we can talk of eccentric characters (as a narrative motif) and of eccentric texts (as a narrative genre in its broadest sense). Since eccentric characters can be – and are frequently – employed by non-eccentric texts as well, the main focus of this paper will lie on the eccentric texts. However, since eccentric texts often employ at least one eccentric character, the main protagonist, we need to take eccentric characters into consideration, too. At the end, I will try to apply my concept of literary eccentricity to a very prominent piece of literature, Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, arguing that the novel’s peculiarities might best be explained by its eccentric character.

1. The use of "eccentric" in everyday language

5 Although the noun “eccentricity” appears rarely in ordinary conversations, “eccentric” (both as a noun and as an adjective) is quite commonly used in everyday language. The *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* notes for the adjective: “strange or unusual, sometimes in an amusing way” and lists as examples “eccentric behaviour,” “eccentric clothes,” and “Don’t you think it’s eccentric to keep a pet crocodile in the bath?” The example given for the noun is: “She’s a real eccentric – she does the strangest things” (439). These synonyms and examples match with those which people usually give when asked to explain what they mean by “eccentric,” the most frequent being “strange” and “weird.”²

6 What catches one’s attention is that we do not get any kind of information regarding the content of what it means to be eccentric – all we get are negative attributions which serve to distance the speaker from the behaviour or person he describes as “eccentric.” This is an important aspect because it is the reason why there is a genuine difficulty in defining “eccentric” with regard to what it means *positively* to be eccentric, apart from just being different in a certain sense. It might be worth mentioning that from an etymological perspective this aspect already holds true for the origin of the English word: the adjective “eccentric” originates from the Greek *ekkentros*. Unlike many other words, it has kept its

² This is the result of a personal survey I did with approximately 20 participants.

meaning ever since: *ek* is a prefix, meaning “out” and “out of”, whereas *kentron* is Greek for “centre” (cf. Liddell/Scott 1953).

7 A second feature of the everyday usage of “eccentric” is more subliminal. If you take a closer look at the synonyms and also listen carefully to the tone when somebody describes someone as eccentric, it emerges that this description always has a certain pejorative sense to it: being labeled as an eccentric is a depreciatory judgment.

8 The final feature I want to draw attention to is in a certain way the result of the first two: usually, nobody describes himself as being eccentric. Instead, it is always an attribution from the outside. More to the point, it is always made by somebody who does *not* consider himself eccentric.

9 Summing up, we get three notable features of “eccentric” from its usage in everyday language.

2. The realm of the eccentric

10 In her marvelous book *English Eccentrics* (1933), Edith Sitwell brings together short biographies and stories of strange and odd individuals. The book itself mingles scientific aspects – citing historical sources and displaying an index of names at the end – with a literary writing style, a fusion which results in a rather unusual, almost essayistic style. It is not easy to access the work because it appears to be very difficult to pin down what Sitwell is actually aiming at. Is she displaying the eccentrics, like a freak-show, just for everybody’s amusement? Presumably not, since she makes extensive use of irony throughout the whole book with regard to people who consider themselves not to be eccentric. Is it, then, a defense of eccentricity? Again, this does not seem to be the case since Sitwell never offers such a defense. We are therefore left with a dissatisfying feeling with regard to the book’s aim, to its communicative intent, because it appears to be somewhat indifferent to its readers and to what they are likely to make of the book.

11 However, does Sitwell’s book get us closer towards an understanding of eccentricity? I think it does for two reasons. The first reason is the affirmation that we are on the right track: we can find the three features of “eccentric” distinguished above in Sitwell’s use of the word as well. When we take a look at all the different people Sitwell tells us about, there is only one feature that they have in common. All of them differ in a very profound way from the “centre,” from that which is supposed to be the usual. This matches our first feature. In her first chapter, Sitwell defines eccentricity as an “exaggeration of the attitudes common to Life” which “has been called eccentricity by those whose bones are too pliant” (16). Here,

regardless of how this quote may be understood in its details, the other two features obviously are present: the pejorative sense as well as the fact that it is not the eccentric herself who employs the word “eccentric” but someone who considers himself to be in the centre.

12 The second reason why a look into Sitwell’s book proves to be fruitful for our purposes is that we get a new piece of information concerning the realm of eccentricity. As Sitwell writes in her definition of eccentricity and afterwards shows us throughout the book, eccentricity has to do with the “attitudes common to Life” (16). This tells us something important with regard to where we have to look for eccentricity. Being eccentric is not just a fashion, resulting from a desire to, say, look different. It does not have to do with attitudes relating to hobbies, interests, or style, but with attitudes on how to live. The realm of eccentricity is therefore much more fundamental. It is our attitude towards life, the way we attach value to the things around us and the way we deal with other people. This gets us closer to an understanding of what it means if someone is being described as eccentric because now we know where we have to look: the realm of eccentricity is our relation towards life itself, towards establishing value and participating in culture. And at this point we are in a better position to understand why it is so difficult – or even impossible – to give a positive definition of “eccentric.” We are dealing with such a fundamental question that if someone differs in this respect in a certain way from the others (who consider themselves to be in the centre), it simply might not be possible for the ones who describe this person as eccentric to understand her. Maybe nothing more is possible than to acknowledge: this person is ex-centric. In any case, what we now need is an answer to the question in what way the eccentric person differs from the non-eccentric with regard to fundamental attitudes towards life.³

3. Philosophical Anthropology 1: eccentric positionality

13 It emerged in the previous section that the realm of eccentricity is the attitude towards life itself, the way we attach value to things around us. Thus, we are now, on a very basic level, dealing with the question of how we understand ourselves and our relation towards others. These kinds of questions are discussed in Philosophical Anthropology.

14 Philosophical Anthropology developed as a distinct line of philosophical thought at the beginning of the 20th century in Germany. Its main aim was to overcome the popular conceptual opposition of the natural sciences and the humanities in order to construct a single,

³ Sitwell, of course, talks about an exaggeration of the attitudes common to life. As will become clear on the following pages, my own concept of eccentricity will be somewhat different and it would be interesting to go into the differences between Sitwell’s and my concept.

unified theory about the various forms of living beings in the world and thereby discovering what distinguishes us humans from animals.

15 Not only does Philosophical Anthropology deal with the questions we are interested in for shaping our concept of eccentricity, but one of its main representatives, Helmuth Plessner, also employs the word “eccentric” very prominently in his theory. According to him, *eccentric positionality* (“Exzentrische Positionalität”) signifies the human condition as distinguished from that of animals and plants.

16 Plessner develops his theory in his seminal work *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (1928). He tries to provide an estimation of the relative modes of being of the various spheres of the organic world: plants, animals, and human beings. To distinguish these three spheres, Plessner introduces the concept of *positionality*. The sphere of plants he calls an *open*, that of animals a *closed* and that of humans an *eccentric positionality*.

17 Plessner explains his concept of *eccentric positionality* by opposing humans to animals. Animals, according to Plessner, have a centre of their existence but do not know about it. This is why he calls their distinctive mode of existence *closed positionality*: they are centered and conscious, but their position is closed in a way they are unable to transcend. Humans, by contrast, have a centre and know about having this centre; they are not only conscious, but self-conscious: “Der Mensch als das lebendige Ding, das in die Mitte seiner Existenz gestellt ist, weiß diese Mitte, erlebt sie und ist darum über sie hinaus” (Plessner 364). Thus, it is the ability of self-awareness, of self-knowledge, which causes the distinctive human mode of existence, which is defined by an inherent possibility of transgression: the moment human beings know about and experience their centre, they already are transgressing it by the very act of self-awareness. To use a metaphor common to anthropology, humans are able to “take a step back” and look at themselves from a distance. Whereas an animal just experiences, a human being is, by means of taking a step back, able to experience its experiencing: “er erlebt sein Erleben” (364).

18 This distinctly human mode of existence Plessner calls *eccentric positionality*. It should by now be clear in what sense he understands “eccentric.” Plessner uses it in a very literal sense, meaning “out of the centre.” The centre, in Plessner’s theory, is a conscious creature’s position, its place in nature and in itself. Take, for example, the sentence “Oh, so now this is what vanilla ice-cream tastes like.” An animal could not make sense of it, for it would simply experience the taste and afterwards know: this object tastes good/not good. A human being, on the other hand, is able to experience the very act of experiencing the taste of vanilla ice-cream by means of taking a step back and observing the act itself. Through this act

of stepping back, human beings step out of their centre and are ex-centric: “Ist das Leben des Tieres zentrisch, so ist das Leben des Menschen, ohne die Zentrierung durchbrechen zu können, zugleich aus ihr heraus, exzentrisch” (364).

19 The distinctly human position, according to Plessner, is threefold: it is the body, in the body (the inner life, the soul) and at the same time out of the body, as a viewpoint from which it is both (365). Human beings have a body, experience things through the body and are able to take a step back and observe themselves as having a body and experiencing through it. For Plessner, this situation leads to the creation of three worlds, i.e. three distinct modes of human existence: *Außenwelt*, *Innenwelt* and *Mitwelt*, each of which is characterized by an irresolvable double aspect, analogous to the double aspect of human existence as such, the *eccentric positionality*.

20 What Plessner calls *Außenwelt*, the outside world, is the world of material things surrounding us (366). Here, the double aspect is the tension between the human being as *Leib* (body) and as *Körperding* (a material thing among others). A human being is experiencing her own body as belonging to herself (*Leib*) and at the same time recognizes that it is, from an objective perspective, just one of the objects of the *Außenwelt*, a *Körperding*.

21 The second world is the inner world, *Innenwelt*. This is the world given to the human being inside her own body (*Leib*). The double aspect here lies in its existence as a soul and as an experience (*Erlebnis*). Humans recognize their self (or “soul,” as Plessner calls it) as underlying every experience and, at the same time, are able to experience their own experiencing by taking a step back (364).

22 The third and final mode of human existence is what Plessner labels the *Mitwelt*. This is the world of human interactions, ontologically not different from the first two worlds (376). The *Mitwelt* is necessary to form one’s character. As a consequence of their *eccentric positionality*, humans are in a constant state of unrest, since they have to create themselves over and over again: “Als exzentrisch organisiertes Wesen muß er sich zu dem, was er schon ist, erst machen” (383). Human beings have lost the instinctiveness of living; this is how and why, according to Plessner, culture is founded (385). It is specifically human that human beings care about their own existence: “bis auf den Menschen kennt es [alles Lebendige] keine Sorge um das eigene Dasein oder gar um das Dasein anderer Wesen” (394).⁴

23 After this sketch of Plessner’s theory, we might now ask how it helps us further for the concept of eccentricity we are searching for. We took an interest in Plessner because it

⁴ The thought that caring about oneself is distinctly human, on which Plessner draws here, became only recently very popular in contemporary ethics through the writings of Harry G. Frankfurt, see for example his collection of essays entitled *The Importance of What We Care About* (1988).

emerged that eccentricity has to do with very fundamental questions of living and valuing, which is Plessner's field of research, and because the word "eccentric" features so prominently in his theory.

24 Contrary to our expectations, however, it appears that Plessner's theory is of no direct use for our purposes. Although Plessner builds his theory of human beings on what he calls *eccentric positionality*, he talks about a wholly different thing than the kind of eccentricity we are trying to grasp. Why is that? In Plessner's use of the word, "eccentric" signifies, as we have seen, the characteristically human mode of existence. However, what we are looking for is a concept of eccentricity which signifies certain individuals as being different in a certain way from others. Our concept of eccentricity is a concept of discrimination, whereas Plessner's concept of *eccentric positionality* is a concept which of necessity applies to all human beings, since it is their distinctive mode of existence. With Plessner's use of "eccentric" in mind, we would never be able to call someone "eccentric" as we do in everyday language because the crucial point here is that the person using the word considers himself *not* to be eccentric.

25 Thus, if we were to adopt Plessner's meaning of "eccentric," we would have to abandon all our previous points about the features of eccentricity and this would mean that we would be talking about a totally different subject. We started with the question in what way the eccentric person differs from the non-eccentric with regard to fundamental attitudes towards life and Plessner's theory is unable to provide an answer to this because from his point of view this question simply is without any meaning. However, although his concept of eccentricity is categorically different from ours and therefore not useful for us, his description of the human condition nevertheless captures something very important which will lead us, as I will argue, to a final understanding of eccentricity.

26 As I have tried to show, the underlying distinctly human phenomenon throughout Plessner's theory is the ability to take a step back from the immediate situation and thereby to observe oneself. This phenomenon, the ability of self-awareness or self-reflection, is widely regarded to be a central feature of human existence, in Plessner's times as well as in contemporary anthropology, social sciences and philosophy. In fact, the two other prominent exponents of early 20th-century Philosophical Anthropology, Max Scheler and Arnold Gehlen, use similar points of departure for their respective theories. Since we are still looking for an answer to the question in what way the eccentric person differs from the non-eccentric with regard to fundamental attitudes towards life, we might be able to find an answer by looking into this prominent phenomenon of human existence.

27 In *The View from Nowhere* (1986), Thomas Nagel, an important contemporary American philosopher, tries to give content to the idea that the ability to take a step back not only is distinctly human, but also the root of many of our most pressing persistent philosophical problems. Nagel opens his book by saying:

This book is about a single problem: how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included. It is a problem that faces every creature with the impulse and the capacity to transcend its particular point of view and to conceive of the world as a whole. (3)

28 The parallels to Plessner's theory are obvious. Both regard this capacity to transcend the particular point of view as crucial. Nagel clarifies this idea by introducing his concept of two different points of view: the *subjective* and the *objective viewpoint*. Nagel's basic idea is that humans gain (scientific) knowledge by objectifying their viewpoint. We start with the subjective viewpoint in which "I" is the centre of the world. By means of objectification, the "I" then takes a step back and views herself as just one being among others, of no special significance.⁵ According to Nagel, this process is how we make sense of the world (15-6). We try to eliminate subjective features and aim at a conception of the world that is as objective as possible because we think that this captures the true nature of reality.

29 However, at some point we get into trouble. While we may form a view of the world that is more and more objective, it is always *us* forming this viewpoint, which in effect means that the subjective element in all objective conceptions is ultimately irreducible. Nagel's overall point in his book is the attempt to show that this irresolvable tension between the subjective and objective viewpoint is present in all of our reasoning concerning the world and ourselves.⁶ Thus, what Plessner calls *eccentric positionality* matches with Nagel's description of the irresolvable ever present tension between the subjective and the objective viewpoint.⁷

30 If we follow Nagel (138-188), this phenomenon allows for the following picture of how we form attitudes towards life. We have two different sources of information, the subjective and the objective viewpoint. According to the subjective viewpoint, we are the centre of our world; the "I" is the only thing that matters. However, according to the objective viewpoint we are just one entity among many others to which no special significance is

⁵ Note that this corresponds to the dual aspect Plessner detects in the Außenwelt: The experience of my body as my own body (Leib) and, at the same time, as just an object among others (Körperding).

⁶ An easy example is our attitude towards death. From the objective viewpoint, it is perfectly conceivable that, since we are a living organism, we will have to die at some point in time, just like every other creature does. However, from the subjective perspective, our own death is simply not conceivable, since here the "I" is the centre of the world (Nagel, chapter XI).

⁷ Notice the ingenious title of Thomas Nagel's book: *The View from Nowhere* of course refers to the objective viewpoint, but read as *The View from Now Here* additionally refers to the subjective viewpoint.

attached. Thus, from the two viewpoints stem very different kinds of values. The reasons (for action) coming from the subjective viewpoint are all aiming at my personal good. In philosophy, they are commonly called *prudential* reasons. The reasons from the objective viewpoint are *altruistic* reasons, since they stem from the recognition that there are many individuals none of whom is more important than anyone else. The first kind of reasons has as its source solely our own interests, whereas the latter has as its source, in a very general way, the values of the society we live in, namely the values taken as a point of reference, even if controversially, by the members of a given community (i.e. Plessner's *Mitwelt*). It seems to me that this model catches our intuitive idea about valuing quite well: we value everything around us with a mixture of such reasons which aim at promoting our own good and such which take into consideration moral values or the values of the society we live in.

31 Now, with this picture of the standard attitude towards life in mind, I am interested in one specific kind of “dysfunction.” What if somebody does not take this step back (although she certainly is able to do so) but remains in her subjective viewpoint with regard to values? What about a person who is simply indifferent to all objective values?

32 Such a person would only get reasons out of the subjective viewpoint and only prudential reasons aiming at her own good. Let's call this person *egocentric*. It is very important to understand that this concept of egocentricity significantly differs from the use of “egocentric” in everyday language. The common usage of the word describes a person who always thinks about himself, but not in such a fundamentally different way from other human beings as I am suggesting here. The sort of egocentricity I am interested in completely lacks the interest in objective values, whereas the common egocentric just attaches a disproportionately high value to his prudential reasons.

33 This *egocentric* person, as I said, judges and decides only out of her very own values and never takes into account values and reasons stemming from the objective viewpoint. To be sure, she does not lack the ability to take a step back, but she simply does not accept those kinds of reasons as her reasons; she is indifferent to them. In the world of the *egocentric*, she herself is the absolute centre from which everything is measured and valued. The world of the average person, by contrast, involves a variety of sources in addition to the subjective viewpoint: oneself, the interests of others, cultural and moral values. Thus, the whole process of valuing functions in a totally different way. In fact, it is highly probable that other people who form their values out of the interplay between the subjective and objective viewpoint would simply cease to understand the *egocentric*. There would be no common ground to

relate to because the *egocentric* is not interested in the reasons and values of those other people.

34 To the others, the egocentric would very likely seem strange or weird because they would completely lack the ability to understand this person, since all common bases are neglected by the egocentric. Furthermore, the others would probably wish to distance themselves from the egocentric, given her indifference to what is important to them and her attitude towards life, which is so different to theirs. It is, in fact, so radically different that they will not be able to say anything positive about the egocentric, but just what she is not: she is not in the centre – i.e. where the others are – since she does not relate to the values of the centre (i.e. the objective values in Nagel's sense) – she is ex-centric.

5. The eccentric person

35 Finally, we have found our concept of eccentricity. We started by distinguishing three features of the use of “eccentric” in everyday language. It is (i) only a negative description which tells us what the depicted person is not, it has a (ii) pejorative sense to it, and (iii) the speaker who describes a person or a behaviour as “eccentric” considers himself to be in the centre from which that person significantly differs. We then found out that eccentricity has something to do with fundamental questions concerning our attitude towards life. After an examination of the thoughts of Helmuth Plessner and Thomas Nagel, we established a picture of human attitudes towards life which tells us that we determine value out of the interplay between two distinct sources, the subjective and the objective viewpoint. I then suggested imagining a person who is totally indifferent to the values stemming from the objective viewpoint, namely all kinds of interpersonally shared values. In the way other people would react to such a person, we found exactly the same behavioural patterns we distinguished with regard to the use of “eccentric” in everyday language.

36 We are now in a position to develop certain criteria of how to identify an eccentric person: (i) An eccentric person has as her only point of reference herself and her own values. She furthermore is (ii) indifferent to objective values and thus, we might add, indifferent to other people's interests. Finally, (iii) other people have, as a result of the first two features, immense difficulties understanding the eccentric person, since they cannot assign her to any given categories. This sense of incomprehension will give rise to a discomforting feeling which leads them to distance themselves from this strange person by means of labeling her as “eccentric.”

37 Literature, perhaps not surprisingly, employs many eccentric characters. However, when it does, this does not mean that these are already eccentric texts. An example of a literary text which has an eccentric protagonist is the series *Pippi Longstocking* (1945-48) by Astrid Lindgren.⁸ The main protagonist, Pippi Longstocking, is a prototype of an eccentric personality, according to the criteria developed above: it is not hard to comprehend that for Pippi the only point of reference indeed is she herself. She decides what is “appropriate” in a given situation and is totally indifferent to other people’s interests and values. This becomes clear not only in the way she treats adults, but also in every other aspect of life: her house, the way she dresses, her pets, her super-power. This is why other people, especially adults, have a very uncomfortable feeling with regard to Pippi because they do not know how to handle such a strange person. Tommy’s and Annika’s parents, for example, do not want their children to play with Pippi, since she is so unusual – or, we can now say: eccentric.

38 In this context, we encounter a new aspect which is worth pointing out. Throughout the last section, it might have appeared as if eccentrics were incapable of inspiring love or maintaining personal relationships. Tommy and Annika, however, and also numerous other characters, sympathize with Pippi and certainly Pippi is capable of real friendship. So, there is a possibility for non-eccentrics to get involved with eccentrics beyond the mere classification and dissociation from them. There even seems to be a certain attraction coming from eccentric individuals if one is willing to approach them and does not just distance oneself from them. Thomas and Annika, for example, experience this attraction at the beginning of the book, when they are watching Pippi from afar and afterwards in their first personal encounters with her.⁹

6. The eccentric text

39 Apart from literary works which employ an eccentric person as a main character, there are also distinctly eccentric literary texts. They may feature eccentric characters as well, but one can, as probably Pippi Longstocking again is a good example of, perfectly well write a non-eccentric literary work and employ an eccentric protagonist.

40 What is an eccentric text? To answer this question by means of an illustration, I will take a closer look at Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*,

⁸ It is quite an interesting aspect that children’s literature often employs eccentric main protagonists. But there are numerous other examples to be found in the vast history of literature, ranging from William Shakespeare’s Richard III (1591) and Miguel de Cervantes’ Don Quixote (1605/15) to more recent books such as Sylvia Townsend-Warner’s Lolly Willowses (1926) and Austerlitz (2001) by W.G. Sebald.

⁹ This attraction of the eccentric, although a crucial phenomenon in this context, would need much more analyzing than I am presently capable of, given the scope of this paper. I will therefore leave it at these very preliminary remarks.

Gentleman (1760-7) in the next section. I will now spell out the features I take to be essential to an eccentric text. I will do this mainly by drawing an analogy to what it means to be an eccentric person.

41 All literary texts stand in certain relations to the world outside themselves, just as people do. They relate, for example, to other texts, synchronically as well as diachronically. From a synchronic perspective, a work is written in a specific time with specific literary standards concerning major topics and writing-styles. Literary texts also establish diachronic connections, for example by taking up and modifying an already existing story or by taking on certain traditions. Furthermore, and most crucially, a literary text has a relation to the reader; it usually wants to communicate in a manner that is meaningful, i.e. it wants to build up a communicative frame in which communication is purposefully directed at an interlocutor, here a reader, whose response is relevant within the frame of communication.

42 I suggest that we understand an eccentric text as standing in the same kind of relation to others – readers and other texts – as eccentrics do to the outside world:

- (1) Eccentric texts have as their only valid point of reference themselves.
- (2) They remain indifferent with regard to all kinds of relations to others; they do not adopt the topics and writing-styles which are considered to be of a certain value in their time.
- (3) Although eccentric texts might allude to other texts, it remains – as a consequence of their indifference – impossible to tell for what purpose they do this.
- (4) Eccentric texts also remain indifferent with regard to the reader: in this respect, they do not comply with basic rules of communication or the transmission of a message.

43 All of these four features remain quite general and it would need much more time to spell them out in more detail. However, this list results from our examination of the word “eccentric” used in everyday language and the way it has to do with our fundamental way of existence. Therefore the overall form of the features of eccentric texts should not come as a surprise. This list is in no way intended to give a full account of what constitutes an eccentric text. Rather, it is supposed to supply us with the relevant coordinates to help us further develop such a theory.

44 The fourth point seems to convey the fundamental feature of eccentric texts: they remain indifferent with regard to the reader and in this sense refuse to communicate in a manner that is “meaningful.” What I am concerned with here is the peculiarity of eccentric texts that they seem to refuse to give a definite – or even an indefinite – answer as to what the story is about. Their remaining indifferent towards the reader may evoke on the reader’s side the same kind of reactions as the eccentric person does in non-eccentrics: they may trouble

the reader in a way that she distances herself from the text by labelling it “eccentric,” or they may exert an attraction on the reader which leads to further examination of the text (as, admittedly, is the case with myself).

45 This indifference towards the reader is what I take to be the explanation for the specific discomfiting feeling we experience after having read an eccentric text because we cannot answer the question “what is this story all about?” Since this is a fundamental question we may want an answer to when reading any kind of literature, we are – at first – disappointed and regard the text as strange. However, if we want to appreciate the peculiarity of an eccentric text (which, of course, presupposes that we recognize it as such), we have to regard our dissatisfied response as an essential feature of such texts, rooted in their indifference towards anything apart from themselves.

46 Since the next section is concerned with an example for an eccentric text, I will not go into any examples here. I just wish to draw attention to the fact that a literary theory of eccentricity, as outlined here, might also provide interesting insights in areas not immediately associated with literary texts. Bearing the four features of eccentric texts in mind, one is, for example, tempted to interpret Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) as an eccentric text. One of the main difficulties in approaching the text is that it is impossible to talk about it without taking on its language, which amounts to saying that the text admits only itself as a valid point of reference. Additionally, with regard to the indifference concerning other texts, one finds one of the maxims, so to speak, of eccentric texts spelled out in Wittgenstein’s introduction:

Wieweit meine Bestrebungen mit denen anderer Philosophen zusammenfallen, will ich nicht beurteilen. Ja, was ich hier geschrieben habe macht im Einzelnen überhaupt nicht den Anspruch auf Neuheit; und darum gebe ich auch keine Quellen an, weil es mir gleichgültig ist, ob das was ich gedacht habe, vor mir schon ein anderer gedacht hat.
(9)

7. An example: *Tristram Shandy* as an eccentric text

47 Laurence Sterne’s novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1760-7) is today considered one of the most important works of 18th-century British literature, indeed of world literature. It “was a sensation – first in England, then through all of Europe – from the time the first two volumes appeared in the winter of 1760. And [...] it maintained its renown (though at times somewhat dubiously) through the nineteenth century, to emerge in our own time as the most modern of eighteenth-century novels” (Anderson vii). Anderson sees the explanation for this in the fact that *Tristram Shandy* is “a paradoxical

synthesis of the old and the new,” which “raises nearly all the questions that matter in the study of fiction in whatever age” (vii-viii).

48 I want to propose a somewhat different explanation for *Tristram Shandy*’s abiding popularity in literary studies. The reason why *Tristram Shandy* still raises all the important questions is that we are not able to satisfactorily describe the novel in its overall impact with our usual equipment of literary studies. Every analysis seems to fall short of getting hold of the novel’s complexity and we, as readers, remain with a discomfiting feeling as to what the novel actually is about, even in the most basic determination of the novel’s genre (Olshin). A better explanation for that phenomenon might be that *Tristram Shandy* is an eccentric text. Thus, in combining the seemingly irreconcilable features of being eccentric and, at the same time, immensely popular, *Tristram Shandy* proves to be a very interesting example of an eccentric text. In what follows, I will try to argue that *Tristram Shandy* can be described as an eccentric novel, both with regard to its characters and to the text itself. Eccentric Characters

49 *Tristram Shandy* has few main characters apart from the narrator, Tristram. I will focus on the two most important ones for Tristram, namely his uncle Toby and his father, Walter Shandy. Tristram states at the beginning of the first volume that his purpose “is to do exact justice to every creature brought upon the stage of this dramatic work” (I 10, 12). He introduces a rather unusual method of describing the characters that surround him: every character gets associated with a “hobby-horse” defining the character’s identity. Tristram thinks of “hobby-horses” as what might be called the “ruling passion” of a person, that activity which is most important to the person. In chapter 23 of the first volume, Tristram discusses several modes of characterization, only to dismiss them because they are insufficient to grasp the whole of the character. Tristram comes to the following conclusion: “To avoid all and every one of these errors, [...] I will draw my uncle *Toby*’s character from his HOBBY-HORSE” (I 23, 54). He then remarks on the originality of Toby’s hobby-horse but before revealing what it is, the first volume ends. However, from the volumes to come we can infer that Toby’s hobby-horse is his fanatic rebuilding of the siege of Namur where he fought and suffered injuries. Tristram comments: “my uncle *Toby* mounted him [the hobby-horse] with so much pleasure, and he carried my uncle *Toby* so well, – that he troubled his head very little with what the world either said or thought about it” (I 24, 55-6). This is, no doubt, expressed in a quite understated way: Toby in fact is unable to communicate about anything else except his hobby-horse. In every conversation Toby participates in, all he can contribute are remarks about his experiences in Flanders, and when the Widow Wadman tries

to seduce him, he does not understand her innuendos but always relates them to military language.

50 Toby's world, therefore, is solely shaped by his hobby-horse and all information coming from outside this concern is received only if it relates in some way or another to Toby's hobby-horse. This is an almost prototypical example of the eccentric person outlined above: Toby is only concerned with the world as far as it is represented in his subjective viewpoint. He values everything according to his very own values, stemming from the subjective viewpoint; in Toby's case, these are the ones which bear a relation to his hobby-horse. He recognizes others, but not as being of equal importance; his whole world is shaped only according to his subjective viewpoint.

51 One might object that Toby obviously is not regarded as an eccentric by the other characters of the novel. This is true, but due to a very significant aspect of the novel: all its major characters are depicted as eccentric. Thus, we have the very unusual situation – even for eccentric texts – that there is not just one eccentric, but that the eccentric is depicted as the usual mode of existence, though certainly not in a way Plessner would have envisaged. All major characters are driven, like Toby, by their singular hobby-horse, which shapes not only their thinking, but also imposes on the whole outside world the restriction that it must relate to the hobby-horse in question in order to be perceived.

52 Another example is Tristram's father Walter. His hobby-horse is pseudo-philosophical theories. Tristram tells us of a few, all of which have to do with Tristram's misfortunes: Walter's theory that the nose of a man is causally related to a successful life (Tristram's nose gets crushed during his birth by Dr. Slop's forceps), and that the first name of a man is equally important (the best name being Tristmegistus; because of the maid's forgetfulness Walter's son instead gets baptized with the worst of all names: Tristram). We learn that throughout his life Walter is concerned with composing the *Tristrapaedia*, which is intended to convey all knowledge important to life – judging from his theories so far, we can imagine how useful the “knowledge” of the *Tristrapaedia* would prove. Although Walter appears to be an educated and distinguished gentleman, he nevertheless is unable to relate to life or other people without having developed one of his pseudo-philosophical theories. Thus, the same holds true for him as for Toby: they both are eccentric protagonists.

35 That Tristram, the narrator himself, is eccentric, is obvious almost from the beginning of the novel. It does not take much time before we know what his hobby-horse consists in: digressions (Bowman Piper, 31-46). It would go beyond the scope of this paper to examine Tristram's narrative techniques in detail. What I want to stress now is that Tristram's hobby-

horse exemplifies very distinctly what it means for the eccentric to shape the world according to his subjective viewpoint. Since Tristram is the narrator, we have no choice but to participate in the digressions and in doing so we experience what the world looks like for Tristram. And it is evident that the world he presents to us is a very subjective world which revolves solely around the egocentric subject as defined above, ultimately the eccentric subject in the context of this discussion.

Eccentric text

54 We have seen that *Tristram Shandy* contains various eccentric characters, as well as an eccentric homodiegetic narrator. I now want to argue that *Tristram Shandy* is also an eccentric text. Keeping with the list from the last section, an eccentric text has as its only valid point of reference itself, remains indifferent to the outside influences of its time and ultimately resists every interpretation as to what the communicative intent of the text might be; eccentric texts remain indifferent to everything outside themselves, including the reader.

55 It already emerged at the end of the last section that the only valid point of reference in *Tristram Shandy* is the text itself. This is due to the narrative situation: Tristram is the homodiegetic narrator who tells us about his “life and opinions” – or at least tries to do so. Of course, Tristram employs elements of heterodiegetic narration as well, since the majority of incidents he tells us about happened either before his birth or while he was still an infant. However, this is of no consequence for the question whether there are objective points of reference, since we never get to understand how Tristram knows about these incidents. All events in the novel are filtered through Tristram’s perception, more precisely, through his subjective viewpoint, just like Toby and Walter receive outside information only insofar as it matches with their hobby-horses. There is nothing in the book which we could judge with any other measure; the novel has itself as the only point of reference.¹⁰ Thus, much of *Tristram Shandy*’s eccentricity is due to its peculiar narrative situation.

56 It is obvious that *Tristram Shandy* contains a lot of intertextual references, both to older and to contemporary texts. It is often said that the difficulty of interpreting *Tristram Shandy* lies in the nature of this synthesis (Anderson). I do not think that the synthesis itself is the cause of trouble, but rather the way it is presented. The text itself remains completely indifferent to these references with regard to what purpose they serve, which makes it

¹⁰ Hartley notes a peculiar consequence of this which should be very dissatisfying to critics: “The irony is that the critic who attempts to impose any kind of system on *Tristram Shandy* immediately assumes the role of Tristram’s father” (498).

impossible to eventually understand their function in the story. This mode of handling outside references is distinctly eccentric.

57 A good example is the reference to philosophy. One of the major questions in philosophy during Sterne's times was how we perceive the outside world and if our mental concepts form a correct representation of objective reality. When we think of how Sterne depicts his characters as perceiving the world only insofar as the information matches with their hobby-horses, we have one of these references. However, it is completely unobvious why the novel does this. Most interpreters, in Sterne's time as well as nowadays, see it as a kind of mockery and relate it to the literary technique of the mock-heroic prominent in Sterne's days. But even if it is mockery, the text gives us no clue as to why it is being employed, apart from leading a philosophical question ad absurdum. Another reference, where it is even more unusual, is Tristram's reference to John Locke with regard to his doctrine of the association of ideas, which Tristram employs to explain why his mother was not paying proper attention during Tristram's conception. Usually, Tristram's father winds up the clock before turning to "some other little family concernments." In the night Tristram is conceived, however, Walter feels a certain need quite strongly and forgets to wind up the clock prior to going to bed with his wife, which in turn leads to her not being in the proper mood. Tristram explains this by referring to Locke, who claims that through a process of habituation certain ideas get associated in a way that whenever the first occurs, the second one follows immediately. This Tristram claims to be the case with his mother, who "could never hear the said clock wound up,– but the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popp'd into her head – & *vice versâ*" (I 4, 5). All of this is certainly funny because Locke's philosophical theory is here applied to such a mundane pair of ideas, but again we are left with the question to what purpose Sterne uses it.

58 Thus, although we have several sorts of references to other works in *Tristram Shandy*, the text remains completely indifferent with regard to the question why it refers to them in the first place. They simply are there, but they are not placed in a sort of tension with other texts or values. The novel itself is the only point of reference, and, very much like the characters, all outside information is employed only insofar as it matches with the hobby-horse, so to speak, of the text itself.

59 Furthermore, *Tristram Shandy* is a good example of an eccentric text with regard to its communicative intent. Critics of Sterne's age saw the novel mostly as a satire (cf. the collection of reviews in the Norton Critical Edition of *Tristram Shandy*, 471-484). Because of the individuality of his writing style, Sterne was in the early 19th century hailed as a very

important predecessor of Romanticism. In the 20th century, however, critics became skeptical as to whether the satirical interpretation actually captures everything that is in the novel. Today, even such fundamental aspects are disputed as to whether Sterne actually completed *Tristram Shandy* (Booth) or to what genre it belongs (Olshin, for example, argues that Sterne in fact invented a new genre). Thus, it seems that the more we analyze and discuss *Tristram Shandy*, the more questions arise, none of which can be satisfactorily answered. This is, as I argued before, a situation which should make us ask whether this text might be an eccentric text, since the crucial feature of an eccentric text is – as a result of its indifference towards anything else apart from itself, including the reader – its missing message and its indifference to the question as to what the novel is about.

60 Laurence Sterne, it appears, was well aware of this aspect and anticipates the reaction of the reader in the last chapter of *Tristram Shandy*, where Obadiah tells the others (note that all main characters of the novel are present in this scene – except Tristram, who is not born yet) the story of his cow, which he expects to calve soon. Tristram's mother, irritated by the various threads of the conversation, asks: "What is all this story about?" This, of course, is the same question the reader asks himself all throughout the novel. Sterne, aware of the double-meaning of the phrase, ingeniously puts an answer into Yorick's mouth which captures at the same time both the final answer to the question of the communicative intent of *Tristram Shandy* and the ultimate proof that we are dealing with an eccentric text which remains indifferent to all objective meaning: "A COCK and a BULL, said Yorick

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Eccentricity and Deterritorialization in Natalie Barney's *The One Who is Legion*

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Abstract:

Rather than focusing on eccentricity as a character trait in human beings or literary characters, this essay engages with Natalie Barney's experimental novel *The One Who is Legion* (1930) in order to demonstrate how its techniques, in following a Deleuzian trajectory of deterritorialization, are "eccentric" in the sense that they are designed to elude altogether any binary dynamics of the centre and its peripheries. Drawing on Yuri Lotman's model of the semiosphere as a structure defined by a centre, a periphery and a boundary, the essay shows how Barney's novel resists the normalizing attempts of a criticism eager to recover a tradition of "lesbian" writing by insisting on its own eccentric conceptions of gender and sexuality. The "eccentric" is here a literary technique that seeks to deviate from an identified centre in unforeseeable, as it were "elliptical," ways.

1 The literary world seems to be swarming with eccentric authors. Within the community of the Paris Left Bank, Natalie Barney as "the most active and candid lesbian" (Benstock 8) of her times has entered the lesbian archive as an eccentric person due to her promiscuity and sexual liberty. However, while we are quick to award the label "eccentric" to describe a certain type of people, other uses of this notion have remained unexplored. How can we conceive of eccentricity as a possibly productive concept for cultural or literary analysis? Can this notion, which seems to be so very commonsense when it refers to actual persons, be expanded to work in different and more complex environments as we encounter them culturally or in a literary text?

2 What I am trying to do in this essay is approach the slippery and mostly unexplored concept of eccentricity from two different angles. The first part of this essay will attempt to come up with a working definition of the eccentric for literary analysis and as a writing practice. I will then connect the notion of eccentricity with Yuri Lotman's cultural model of the semiosphere that revolves around the dynamism of periphery and centre. I will show how Lotman's model operates by taking a closer look at the reception of Natalie Barney and her novel *The One Who is Legion* by lesbian feminist critics.

3 In contrast to this established process of reception, a process that I will read as an effort to crop and tame the eccentricity and conceptual daring of Barney's novel, I will endeavour during the second part of this essay to see eccentricity as a specific textual practice; in particular, I will propose that in the case of Barney's novel, an eccentric way of writing can best be understood as a radical effort in deterritorialisation and becoming in the

Deleuzian sense. The result is not only a new way of perception but a systematic de-gendering of the novel's main "character".

1. Eccentric comets

4 One of the definitions of eccentricity that captured my attention is despite its simplicity a useful one to start from. James Kendall, a priest charged with and censored for his alleged "eccentricity" in the 19th century, responded to these charges with a book entitled *Eccentricity, Or, a Check to Censoriousness*. This extensive attempt to justify (his own) eccentricity and feed it back into a religious context contains the following definition of the term: The word *eccentricity*, refers primarily to the motions of certain heavenly bodies, and must, therefore, be considered an *astronomical* term. *Comets*, for instance, by not describing an exact circle in their pathway through the general heavens, are said to take an *eccentric* course, that is, oval, or elliptical. *Deviation from a centre*, in fact, is the very thing which constitutes eccentricity. And I may suppose that the amount of eccentricity is in proportion to the degree of deviation. (Kendall 27)

5 What fascinated me most about this astronomical concept – which is still used in astronomy to refer to the degree to which the orbit of a star or planet deviates from a circular course – is that eccentricity does *not* refer to the fact of being *outside* a given centre – a notion that would certainly be the commonsense explanation of the term. This is not, however, the deviation that the term eccentricity primarily describes. Rather, I would propose that while being outside a given centre is a precondition for the eccentric, eccentricity lies in the degree to which one deviates from a circular orbit. Thus the deviation and its route are already prescribed by the centre (which due to its mass exercises an amount of gravity according to which objects circle it). Put differently, one could argue that each centre already restricts the way by which it can be transgressed or deviated from: we may assume, for instance, heterosexuality as the centre to which homosexuality is the prefigured transgression. Eccentricity, in contrast to that, occurs when an object *deviates* from this prescribed location, orbits differently, elliptically instead of circularly, spins off in directions that the centre could never have anticipated. Of course, the movement of the eccentric is still related to its centre but its potential lies in the aberration from a prescribed path. It is this potential to deviate with a difference, so to say, that I would like to claim as the core feature of the eccentric.

2. Eccentricity, canon formation and the semiosphere

6 To come back to Natalie Barney and the literature of the Paris Left Bank, then, I would like to trace the formation of a lesbian literary canon with the help of Yuri Lotman's model of the semiosphere. Contemporary canon debates resonate strongly with a rhetoric of centre versus margin, demanding the opening or expansion of the canon to include "forgotten" texts or texts peripheral to the canon. Debates about the disparity between canonized texts and those outside it

tend to imagine cultural dynamics as a battleground between two polar forces – the oppressors and the oppressed – and to charge either of these diametric forces with absolute responsibility for either the perpetuation of the canon (equated with social injustice) or its rejection (equated with justified progressive revolutions). (Sela-Sheffy 150).

This debate results from an increasingly ideological notion of the literary canon which makes the problematic claim that representation within the canon mirrors representation in other spheres such as the social and political (Guillory 6-7; Kolbas 47-48).

7 One of the archives to have undergone a radical revision is the literary period of modernism. After the feminist interventions of the 1970s, the inquiries of lesbian critics posed a second challenge that uncovered a bulk of "lesbian" literature written during the modernist period but excluded from the canon. This attempt is an example of the kind of notion of eccentricity that I would label commonsense, namely the assumption that anything outside the centre or deviating from it is eccentric. It is quite obvious that this notion informs much of (lesbian) feminist criticism that poses male (heterosexual) modernist writing against supposedly suppressed lesbian writing, thus following the prefigured part of how to deviate from the centre:

Modernism as we were taught it at midcentury was perhaps halfway to the truth. It was unconsciously gendered masculine. [...] Typically, both the authors of original manifestos and the literary historians of modernism took as their norm a small set of its male participants, who were quoted, anthologized, taught, and consecrated as geniuses. (Scott 2)

By reclaiming what has been erased from cultural memory, an archive of the past is being reconstructed with the intention of providing a sense of the historical continuity of lesbian communities and a self-confident lesbian literary tradition. The lesbian community situated on the Paris Left Bank formed the centre of critical attention. The specific location as an expatriate Bohemian enclave on the left bank of the river Seine, detached from the rest of Paris and its rather repressive gender stereotyping, marks a distinctly eccentric space: "Indeed, certain neighborhoods in Paris may have seemed [...] like the eroticized coterie

based on their defiance of conventional codes of behavior and their pursuit of an artistry linked to their love affairs." (Gilbert/Gubar 218/219)

8 Natalie Barney as the most liberated lesbian, "the mythic world of Parisian Lesbos over which Natalie Barney had presided" (Benstock 306), the activities in her backyard as well as her weekly salon feature strongly in accounts of the period by lesbian criticism and turn Barney into the central lesbian role model of her time. The lives of Barney and other lesbian writers such as Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Bryher and Hilda Doolittle, as well as their effort in establishing a distinctly lesbian community by searching for and creating their own lesbian literary tradition, provide a rich repository of the past. Bonnie Zimmermann stresses the special appeal of this period and its writers for lesbian critics: "Contemporary lesbians – literary critics, historians and layreaders – have been drawn to their mythic and mythmaking presence, seeing in them a vision of lesbian society and culture that may have existed only once before – on the original island of Lesbos" (141/142).

9 Much as a male-biased literary criticism has shaped the canon of modernism as distinctly male and heterosexual, lesbian literary criticism has shaped the cultural memory of the Paris Left Bank by adapting "lesbian" texts according to its own premises. In order to illuminate the process of this adaptation further, I will briefly introduce Lotman's model of the semiosphere. Lotman views culture – in analogy to the earth's biosphere – as a "semiosphere" that contains all languages, texts and the codes to decipher them. The centre of the semiosphere is rather static and highly organised. It is also the location where rules, norms and a given culture's metalanguage are produced when the system starts to describe itself. In this way, the integrity and organisation of the sphere is ensured because, according to Lotman, a system can only tolerate a certain amount of diversity. If the elements are too heterogeneous, the system will start to homogenize its cultural space. The centre of the semiosphere is inextricably bound to its periphery; the periphery consists of unorganised zones that trigger cultural dynamisms because they come into conflict with the norms of the centre. The continuous interplay between periphery and centre is the only way, according to Lotman, to initiate and maintain cultural change.

10 This aspect is especially relevant to my notion of eccentricity since it becomes obvious here how intertwined the centre and its outside are: the texts produced by the periphery can only come into conflict with the centre if they run contrary to its norms. I would argue that this, to stretch Lotman's model a bit further, can only be the case if the centre recognises the conflict as a deviation and it can only do so if the deviation is already prefigured as the flipside of the norm. In other words, there seems to be no escaping the never-ending binary

interaction between centre and periphery. The process by which external texts are adapted into the semiosphere also shows the interdependence of periphery and centre. Adaptations of external texts into the semiosphere are regulated by its boundary that also guards the semiosphere's integrity. External texts can only enter by passing through the boundary whose basic function is their translation into the language of a given sphere, as well as selecting which contents are adapted. The criteria for the selection process as well as the language of translation correspond to the metalanguage of the semiosphere's centre. Thus, the centre at first identifies and even produces standardized transgressions from its norms and then adapts or assimilates the periphery's texts into the semiosphere in an attempt to homogenize its discourse once again.

11 If we transfer this to the making of the modernist canon, it becomes clear that the majority of texts by women writers could not enter the male-biased semiosphere because the filters of the boundary would not “choose” to adapt them in the first place. Thus, the function of the boundary during the making of a male-biased modernist canon was largely restricted to ensuring an organised whole based on a gendered difference between centre and periphery. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the whole modernist project is, in fact, an outcome of a “battle between the sexes” and that the rise of feminism and the New Woman led to an ever fiercer demarcation of male literary territory which constructed as its counterpart, so to say, a whole body of writing by women and/or lesbian writing that remained unacknowledged on the periphery. Shari Benstock, author of the much-acclaimed study *Women of the Left Bank*, also points out that literary studies of modernism have wilfully erased women writers and the intention of her study is to return them to their rightful place:

The impetus for this study of expatriate women was the desire to replace them in the Paris context from which they had been removed by the standard literary histories of Modernism. With few exceptions, the women whose lives and works are recorded here have been considered marginal to the Modernist effort. [...] In rediscovering the lives and works of these women, however, I also confronted the ways in which our working definitions of Modernism [...] and the prevailing interpretations of the Modernist experience had excluded women from its concerns. (ix/x)

12 The deconstruction of the modernist canon was triggered by a shift in the metalanguage, as Lotman would put it, within literary criticism. Lesbian feminist scholars successfully challenged the monolithic canon with its limited number of towering male geniuses. The adaptation of “forgotten” texts into a lesbian canon, however, proceeded under almost reversed conditions: rather than wilfully excluding a certain group of texts, lesbian feminist criticism shows a tendency to eagerly claim as many texts as possible for a lesbian literary heritage. Although this move was immensely important, it is well worth taking a

closer look at the practice with which texts are adapted into this lesbian canon. Lotman argues that in order to create cultural memory through adapting texts, each system must have a subject and a code. The code which is embedded in the metalanguage of each culture must remain coherent and its job is the restructuring of incoming texts according to its rules. In our case, the code as well as the subject of the system is lesbian identity. Invoking this signifier is necessary for the creation of a literary heritage but it also involves, as we shall see, uniting very diverse versions of “lesbian” identity in the broadest sense into a unified whole.¹ As Lotman suggests, a move from the periphery into the centre of a given system always entails “an inevitable toning down” (141) of the elements. For this reason, the incoming texts are also stripped of their original characteristics to a certain extent so that “here, in the heart of the receiving culture they will find their true, ‘natural’ heartland” (146).

13 Lesbian feminism's attempt to recuperate the as yet “eccentric” texts robs some of them, as I would argue, of their very eccentricity. By uniting them under the banner of “lesbian” literature and by prefiguring the way in which these texts are thought to deviate from the assumed centre of male heterosexual modernist writing, the path of transgression is already set, as statements such as the following clearly show: “A lesbian version of modernism has always existed; constructions of masculinist modernism include it through their very act of exclusion.” (McCabe 63). That the creation of a unified female/lesbian canon inevitably leads to a much too narrow focus is obvious: “In some ways, the creation of an alternative „female“ canon (which sometimes seems to function as the binary opposite of traditional male practices) has led to a disconcertingly simplified framework.” (Elliott/Wallace 13). As this process of assimilation operates on the basis of a notion of unified (lesbian) subjects, it can only theorize a certain kind of difference which remains inextricably bound to a centre. This strand of thinking, which revolves around the “episteme of Man” (Nigianni/Storr 4), can only result in a centre-periphery dynamic anticipating a distinct kind of difference from the outset:

Within this framework, difference can only be conceived of as deviation from one, single model: a hierarchical differentiation starting and descending from the dominant signifier (the white (hu)man Face, the majoritarian, white, hetero, able bodied male) [...] that leads to a prolific production of minoritarian others always in response to the established norms. It thus fails to conceive of difference beyond the level of the signifier (Nigianni/Storr 4).

¹ To assign the label “lesbian” to any text of this period is highly problematic since it subsumes so many different concepts such as androgyny, hermaphroditism, inversion, or mannish women. As Judith Halberstam argues: “I have argued to keep the label 'lesbian' at bay throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Neither Fred (Anne) Lister, Woods and Pirie, John (Radclyffe) Hall, Colonel Barker, Robert (Mary) Allen, the women in Havelock Ellis' case histories nor their lovers would have identified as lesbians. When we describe them as such, we tend to stabilize contemporary definitions of lesbianism.” (Halberstam 109).

14 This tendency to acknowledge only a prescribed form of difference is prominent within most lesbian feminist criticism dealing with lesbian writing in the 1920s and 30s. Not only is the label lesbian the prescribed way of transgressing; lesbian feminist criticism has also strongly determined *how* such a lesbian transgression might be brought about as there is a strong bias in favour of texts that are “progressive” in that they display early versions of feminism: “Their [Barney's and Vivien's] almost uncanny anticipation of the preoccupations of feminist writers whose work began almost sixty years after Vivien's death gives them a place as foremothers of feminist literature.” (Jay xv) The link between feminism and lesbianism is prevalent and desired in the majority of (lesbian) critical work on this period. Again, Natalie Barney, or rather her body, serves as a stand-in for this particular version of feminine and feminist lesbianism:

For Barney, lesbian eroticism was defined by a sharing of sensual experiences, each of the partners taking pleasure in the other's body. [...] lesbian sexuality allowed her to direct her own desire and discover through her body her own sensual purposes. The women of Natalie Barney's Sapphic circle believed that lesbian love preserved and honored the female body, beautified it, sanctified it, and kept it safe against the ravages to which heterosexuality subjected it. [...] Thus for Barney and others of her group, lesbianism signified not only a sexual orientation but a feminist position, a radical denial of heterosexual dominance. (Benstock 289/290)

15 This, then, is a privileging of a “lesbianism” epitomized by “feminine” lesbians and a liberated and guilt-free celebration of femininity and lesbianism on the one hand and an uneasiness with authors and works that seem to display too strong an investment in masculinity on the other. It is assumed that this investment is due to the fact that the authors rely too heavily on sexologist theories, suffer from internalised homophobia and are prone to resort to drugs. The overall logic in this seems to be that they are just not liberated enough to step out of the closet and feel comfortable in a woman's body. The discomfort of lesbian feminist critics with Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* bears witness to this. Shari Benstock, for example, comes to the following verdict regarding the novels of Radclyffe Hall, Bryher, and Djuna Barnes

With few exceptions, however, these novels tended to reflect scientific thinking about homosexual behaviour that cast lesbian women as sexual deviants – men trapped in women's bodies. These works portrayed women who wanted to be men, lesbian marriages that took their models from heterosexual unions, and visions of lesbian existence as fraught with pain and suffering, disguised by makeup and clothes, eased through drugs and alcohol, carried on in the dark, in secret, and in fear. [...] the Barney-model of lesbian behaviour constituted a minority opinion among homosexual women of the Left Bank community, most of whom demonstrated that they had internalized homophobia and misogyny. (59)

Natalie Barney's person as well as her writings stand out as a feminist beacon because her “writings proclaim the delicacy and tenderness of lesbian love and demonstrate a subtle eroticism excluded by phallic notions of sexual desire redefining female sensuality.” (Benstock 283/284)

3. *The One Who is Legion*

16 The reception of Natalie Barney's novel *The One Who Is Legion* (privately printed in 1930) bears witness to the urge to read femininity back into a text that defies stable gender categories as well as identity categories. The novel tells the story of the resurrected shadow spirit of A.D. which merges with an angelic light and enters a genderless body, forming a multiple and ungendered “character” referred to as “the One and its legions.” This character follows the footsteps of its dead master/mistress through Paris, seeking to solve and revenge A.D.'s suicide. A.D., like the One, remains ungendered throughout the narrative. Critical reception of the novel suffers from a heavy autobiographical focus, reading it as Barney's attempt to come to terms with the suicide of her lover Renée Vivien (figuring as the dead A.D.). Shari Benstock, who certainly deserves credit for discussing this to then rather unknown novel, resorts mostly to an autobiographic reading and then claims that the novel “constitute[s] an effort to recover through language the feminine in Western culture” (298). Benstock reaches this quick and rather unsubstantiated conclusion because she anticipates exactly what the mode of resistance for a lesbian writer in a patriarchal society must “naturally” be. Lesbian critic Anna Livia provides a good account of the ungendered and plural narrative perspective but also reads the androgynous figure of the One as lesbian: “[Barney] presents this androgynous, dual being to demonstrate the expanded consciousness of the homosexual who must know both her own gender functions and how the lover of this sex should behave.” (64) Karla Jay also acknowledges the hermaphroditic and androgynous nature of the One and claims that the One is genderless and asexual, but still reads a femininity back into the character. She proposes that in contrast to the Platonic concept of the androgyne as a softened man, “the androgynes of Barney and Vivien are unique in that they begin with the Platonic model but always place the female principle in the primary position.” (99) Employing a rather monstrous neologism, Jay regards *The One Who Is Legion* as Barney's bid to proclaim a transcendental femaleness: “The aim of the creation of the gynandromorph is the emergence of a higher, more perfect being which would re-establish the principle of Femaleness in the universe.” (100) Although both Jay and Livia seem to work with notions of androgyny regarding the “nature” of the One, it is striking to see how fast this

notion is neatly fed back into an identity category once more – be it the homosexual or the “gynadromorph”.

17 Barney's novel, however, does not allow any such identification of fixed identities, nor does it have an agenda to reinstate “femaleness,” transcendental or otherwise. Rather, I would suggest, the novel does something completely different, and *doing* is here an operative term: the focus I propose for a productive reading of the text is deliberately set on what the novel and its “characters” *do* rather than struggling to determine what they *are*. This kind of reading – as opposed to a hermeneutic reading practice – is one Deleuze and Guattari favour and employ, as Claire Colebrook points out:

It is always possible to read literature as an art of recognition, as about 'ourselves' and 'the' human search for meaning. This art of interpretation or hermeneutics requires that we 'overcode' literature, seeing each text as an expression or representation of some underlying meaning. [...] Alternatively, literature can be read for what it produces, for its transformations. (137)

18 To come back to my hypothesis that the eccentric can be thought of as an unexpected deviation from the centre, I propose that the novel's trajectory describes exactly that: a movement away from what the novel sets as its centre – the dead A.D. – that spins off in many unforeseen directions thus employing eccentricity as a mode of writing. Therefore, *The One Who is Legion* should be aligned with the concept of a Deleuzian minor literature that “does not write to express what it *is* (as though it had an identity to repeat or re-produce)” (Colebrook 118) but creates new styles of perception through a series of becomings and deterritorialisations that contrast sharply with any stable concepts of gender, sexual orientation and, in fact, identity. In contrast to this trajectory, lesbian feminist criticism has employed a strategy to interrupt this eccentric movement by pinning the main “character” down and making it *signify and represent*. Claire Colebrook notes that this line of thinking is often at work when

we start to think of women's writing as the expression of an underlying femininity that was lying in wait for literary inscription. The group becomes subjugated to an image of its own identity; its becoming is no longer open but is seen as the becoming *of* some specific essence. Writing becomes prescriptive and *majoritarian*. (117)

19 These two different concepts of thinking or, indeed, these different forces, are captured by Deleuze and Guattari with various terms; they are played out on the plane of organisation (which I would align with the reading of Barney's novel by lesbian feminist criticism) on the one hand, and on the plane of consistency on the other (this is the one on which the eccentric trajectory of the novel unfolds):

The plane of organization or development effectively covers what we have called stratification: Forms and subjects, organs and functions, are “strata” or relations between strata. The plane of consistency or immanence, on the one hand, implies a destratification of all of Nature, by even the most artificial means. The plane of consistency is the body without organs. Pure relations of speed and slowness between particles imply movements of deterritorialization, just as pure affects imply an enterprise of desubjectification. Moreover, the plane of consistency does not preexist the movements of deterritorialization that unravel it, the lines of flight that draw it and cause it to rise to the surface, the becomings that compose it. The plane of organization is constantly working away at the plane of consistency, always trying to plug the lines of flight, stop or interrupt the movements of deterritorialization, weigh them down, re-stratify them, reconstitute forms and subjects in a dimension of depth. Conversely, the plane of consistency is constantly extricating itself from the plane of organization, causing particles to spin off the strata, scrambling forms by dint of speed or slowness, breaking down functions by means of assemblages or microassemblages. (ATP 297/298)

20 As can be observed from this statement, the notions of becoming, deterritorialisation, lines of flight and assemblage are all interrelated. Hopefully, they become clearer as we proceed with the novel. For now, let it suffice to draw attention to the movement of the plane of consistency, especially to the “particles” “spin[ning] off the strata” and to the fact that the movement of deterritorialisation is not anticipated by the plane of consistency – thus, it is a movement that describes exactly the kind of eccentricity I have proposed.² The novel effects this movement of deterritorialisation – “the movement by which ‘one’ leaves the territory” (Deleuze/Guattari ATP, 559) – by employing a “character” engaging in becomings and assemblages as opposed to a character with a fixed identity. *The One Who is Legion* effectively disengages from its territory and, indeed, its centre.

21 I would first like to take a closer look at the very beginning of the novel which describes the creation of the main “character” and sets up the relation of the One and its legions to their alleged centre – the dead A.D. The creation of the One makes it clear from the outset that we are not dealing with a subject or being but rather with a becoming in the Deleuzian sense. Becoming is directly related to deterritorialisation as it opposes notions of minority (e.g. lesbian subjects): “Jews, Gypsies, etc., may constitute minorities under certain conditions, but that in itself does not make them becomings. One reterritorializes [...] on a minority as a state; but in a becoming, one is deterritorialized.” (Deleuze/Guattari, ATP, 321) A minority, then, is constructed by the centre – the state – and so is its prescribed deviation with little leeway for escaping this condition.

² “Deterritorialisation frees a possibility or event from its actual origins. [...] Deterritorialisation occurs when an event of becoming escapes or detaches from its original territory” (Colebrook 58/59).

22 The beginning of the novel is set in a gothic Parisian graveyard. Over the grave of the dead A.D., her/his shadow, who is also the narrator, hovers: “I, the most faithful of dead shadows, have hovered about this spot since my master-mistress' burial” (Barney 11). The graveyard is described as reeking with the residue of buried corpses ready to jump on you: “Graveyards are places of infection; not all is taken away by the dead – the diseases of their brain, their last thoughts, their desires, their failures, lurk in the air like poisoned wine to intoxicate the new-comer with the besetting characteristics of the deceased” (Barney 12/13). The “birthplace” of the One can thus be considered as a typical Deleuzian setting of infection that opposes “traditional” ways of conceiving and reproduction:

How can we conceive of a peopling, a propagation, a becoming that is without filiation or hereditary production? A multiplicity without the unity of an ancestor? It is quite simple; everybody knows it, but it is discussed only in secret. We oppose epidemic to filiation, contagion to heredity, peopling by contagion to sexual reproduction. (Deleuze/Guattari, *ATP*, 266)

The shadow-narrator explains that apart from him/her there are many “disembodied fragments” (Barney 13) who are keen to join a source of light that is also present. The light itself is not a unity either for it contains “so many personages only remotely connected with its centre” (Barney 13). It finally allows the shadow to merge with it and together they enter a genderless dead body they find lying on the ground murdered – “This fallen rider whom a nightmare had thrown seemed neither a man nor a woman” (Barney 15). The resurrection of A.D. is completed by the arrival of a woman who “breathed into the pinched nostrils that expanded to her breath” (Barney 18/19), thus bringing the One to life. The result of the conjunction of A.D.'s shadow, the light and a dead ungended body is the multiple entity “the One and its legions” who describe themselves as such: “We've met with too many persons and allowed them all to cross and join in us. We shall never get ourselves clear now. This collective organism must at least be made harmonious” (Barney 24/25). From then on, the narrator also refers to this multiple character using plural forms (“we”, “our”) which can be read as another refusal to attribute gender or a unified identity.

23 Before we look at the One and their legions in more detail, let us briefly return to the alleged centre of the novel, the dead A.D. As has been proposed by various interpretations of the novel, A.D. signifies the dead Renée Vivien whose suicide Barney could not overcome. The resurrection of the One thus serves to investigate the suicide of A.D who killed herself, according to Shari Benstock, because she could not deal with the “effects of self-division in women” (Benstock 299) enforced on her by a patriarchal society. However, One's efforts at revenging A.D.'s suicide – “We would revenge the suicide, make good the failure, go back in

A.D.'s stead, [...] take over this broken destiny, be stronger than life" (Barney 30) – are immensely complicated by the fact that the One and its legions are reborn without memories.

24 The plot of the novel unfolds in a quasi-detective style, the One trying to piece together fragments and clues about A.D.'s life. This endeavour is complicated and in the end doomed to failure due to several facts. The first is the rather uncertain subject status of A.D. Going back to the beginning of the novel, the reader is left unable to fathom who, or indeed how many, A.D. was/were. The gender question cannot be solved since the narrator refers to A.D. as her/his "master-mistress" (Barney 11), and A.D.'s sexual orientation cannot be pinned down as the One and its legions find love letters to A.D. by male and female admirers. Karla Jay's rather desperate effort to maintain A.D.'s lesbianism is not convincing at all: she argues that the fact that the book the One and its legions find in a chapel close to the graveyard is bound in leather made of breasts "suggest[s] that A.D.'s particular interest was in women" (102). The second complication is that it is left open whether A.D. was indeed one or many or maybe a couple. At the very beginning, the shadow-narrator refers to A.D.'s grave as follows: "I, [...] have hovered about this spot since my master-mistress' burial. This is *our* tombstone with an engraved urn – the double of the urn in which *their* ashes are mingled and sealed together." (Barney 11; emphasis added). This passage is highly confusing since it can be read in different ways: one could claim that the narrator is the surviving part of a couple ("our" ashes); or, that A.D. was a hermaphrodite, a "master-mistress": "Had I not already shadowed a master-mistress, a couple so united that I could never cut one from the other in separate silhouettes" (Barney 14). The last sentence in which the narrator detaches himself/herself from A.D. – referring to "their" ashes – brings the final confusion because we can now also view A.D. as consisting of at least two persons. A further confusion arises out of the novel's exceptional set-up "beyond time": since it is the One's task to piece together the fragments of A.D.'s past life and possibly remedy it, the trajectory of progress is to step back in time. This scrambles the whole endeavour and entirely confuses the One whose additional problem is memory loss: "By progressing we risk a fall into the past. What past?" (Barney 25), "As we cannot well remember, let us move on to forget. Movement backward or forward?" (Barney 43). Since the novel ends without providing the reader with a notion of *who* A.D. was and who the One and its legions *are*, I would argue that instead of following the futile attempt in recovering A.D.'s identity, the novel rather invites the reader to drop this detective plot-line altogether. As I have stated earlier, it is much more productive to look at what this novel does and so refuse a narrative of representation and identity.

25 To come back to the question of how the One and its legions are related to their alleged centre – the dead A.D. – it should be obvious by now that the novel thwarts any attempt of the reader to establish a clear-cut connection between the two, the three, the many. This is due to the fact that the resurrection of the One is neither a rebirth nor a creation of a subject but a becoming that typically lacks an origin, is not an imitation of someone else and is therefore not a version of A.D. Deleuze and Guattari's thoughts on becoming and the relation it establishes, or rather evades, between its two reference objects best express the relation between the One and their centre A.D.:

A line of becoming is not defined by points that it connects, or by points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes *between* points, it comes up through the middle, it runs perpendicular to the points first perceived, transversally to the localizable relation to distant or contiguous points. A point is always a point of origin. But a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination; [...] A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in between, the border or line of flight or descent running perpendicular to both. (*ATP*, 323)

26 The notion of becoming, as well as much of Deleuzian thought, resonates strongly with the notion of queer and has in recent times often been brought together in productive ways. Cohen and Ramlow, for instance, align the two in the following way:

These permutations of queer theory share [...] an assertion of the non-teleological, non-unitary status of 'queer', and in doing so directly echo many of Deleuze and Guattari's elaborations on 'becoming'. [...] Becomings have neither origin nor destination; like the queer, they are neither filial nor teleological. They do not confer identity – molar, sedimented, unitary – but produce an entity cobbled from disparate, provisionally allied parts, a relation of affects and speeds. (3)

27 Let us now take a closer look at the One and its legions – not to establish what they are but in order to follow their line of becomings, and to show how their perception of the world opens up new perspectives. A mirror scene follows soon after the resurrection but does nothing to clarify the status of the One either in terms of gender or in terms of a self-recognition:

The One stood up from the bed, confronting the mirror. A simultaneous succession of reflections, more rapid than vibration, gave back through endless corridors of crystal, *a body*, still partially clothed, the seraphic head charged with new life. The electrical eyes seemed fed from a near battery – that close mesh of blue veins coursing through the temples? (Barney 24; emphasis added)

As this passage shows, the narrator employs the mirror and the light imagery to defer the viewing of the body which is clearly marked as “a” body, indicating both its genderlessness and the One's detachment from it. The One and its legions thus remain unintelligible in terms of gender, and, as a consequence, cannot attain subject status. The dissolution of gender is,

according to Deleuze and Guattari, linked with the notion of the the assemblage – a connection that makes sense when we look at the creation of the One out of light, shadow and a dead ungendered body (a mixture that is certainly highly unlikely to confer gender):

there are as many sexes as there are terms in symbiosis; as many differences as elements contributing to a process of contagion. We know that many beings pass between a man and a woman; they come from different worlds, are borne on the wind, form rhizomes around roots; they cannot be understood in terms of production, only in terms of becoming. [...] These multiplicities with heterogeneous terms, cofunctioning by contagion, enter certain *assemblages*. (Deleuze/Guattari *ATP*, 267)

28 Gender attribution is also avoided in the depiction of the sexual intercourse of the One and a character called the Glow-Woman (who is a former lover of A.D). The narrative voice takes a detour in its account of the scene: it describes the act by drawing the reader's attention to the shadows of the lovers on the wall:

too excited to choose a gesture, we battled, finding no issue to each other. Surprise her into unwilling pre-nuptial ecstasy – break in through her hand barriers? Bedded on the wall, our shadow cut an audacious figure [...]. Were we they were they we? Where joined, where separate? Lie down, you shadow woman, and beget us darkness, semblances to feed our Shadows on. (Barney 81)

In addition to the refusal to depict gendered bodies in this scene, the narrative perspective further complicates issues: “we battled” could either refer to the One battling with the woman or to the One battling with the legions. The next sentence indicates that they ponder „taking“ the woman using a certain amount of force – an endeavour that could be aligned with male sexual behaviour. Then the narrator blurs the boundaries completely, asking which is which. Finally, the imperative of the One that the shadow woman “beget us darkness” connotes a female gender rather than a male.

29 A third passage similarly shows the narrator's refusal to reveal the body of the One as a gendered body – a fact that is all the more obvious since the One and its legions get drenched to the bone, an event which could easily reveal their sex. Instead, the narrator again employs light imagery to describe, or rather to avoid the description of the One's body. Furthermore, the One and its legions appear translucent and reflect back their surroundings:

Under the curdling white shirt the One appeared drenched in nakedness. The rhododendrons' reflection made a stained-glass of the transparent flushed cheeks and the translucid eyes. The thin enamel of the teeth let the under-light through. Broken prism were playing about everywhere. The base of a rainbow feeding with fresh colours the pigment of the flowers. (Barney 39)

30 Not only do they reflect their surroundings due to being transparent; since the One and its legions are a multiple entity, an assemblage, their body is open and prone to connect with all kinds of things. This ability once again scrambles the notion of a deviance that revolves

around terms easily anticipated. Instead, the One and its legions are a creature that seems to come straight out of Deleuze/Guattari: “a multiplicity [...] continually transforming itself into a string of other multiplicities, according to its thresholds and doors. [...] And at each threshold or door, a new pact?” (Deleuze/Guattari *ATP*, 275) Right after their resurrection, the One and its legions experience this state of openness and becoming one with their surroundings as follows: “The body baring itself for communion, receptive of efflux and influx, ready for exchange, taking from passing things their pleasure-hints, unions innocent of possession” (Barney 16). In this state before the One and its legions encounter others who will make claims of possession, they can be aligned with the Deleuzian notion of a desiring machine which “constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented. Desire causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks the flows” (Deleuze/Guattari *AO*, 6). Wherever the One and its legions go, they merge with their surroundings: “We became so easily what we chanced to see, to sense, divine, that we had some difficulty in summing back our legion” (Barney 85). The legions seem to be wandering off continually and form new alliances with all kinds of things. Likewise, the One's perception of the world is dominated by a loss of boundaries, by things merging into one another – “Hardly discernible the uniting of trees with their reflections, the exchange of river with road, each becoming the other” (Barney 79) – and by unforeseen new alliances and assemblages. For instance, the One and its legions perceive a stop at a gas station as a merging of human and machine: “we slowed down and stopped before the blue-oblong-breasted-red-machine woman who nourished the motor. [...] The machine-woman's umbilical tube had been taken from our motor to another” (Barney 58/59). The people at a railway station are all perceived as hybrid beings, ranging from a “falcon profile asleep under hood” to “a mastiff dog-faced mother, deserted by her batch” (Barney 84). The perception of other people is frequently linked to gender ambiguity: “Women in masks seated by men in beards; some sphinx-like heads bound up in leather helmet. Women or men?” (Barney 56). Although the One and its legions perceive some people as clearly gendered, the preferred mode of seeing is not to attribute gender characteristics: “Fairer to look at a strenuous adolescence, androgynous through exercise, male hardly distinguishable from female” (Barney 61).

31 Since the One and its legions *become* everything, they scramble the notion of ever having emerged from or related to a centre: “to be all. The ebb of life within charged with life from without” (Barney 31). This move can certainly be called eccentric according to my definition since it is ever changing, not to be anticipated and, in the end, leaves nothing to deviate *from*. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this way of perceiving as becoming imperceptible;

rejecting the common way in which we perceive the world, namely by sorting perceptions into objects,

we become *imperceptible* [...] by becoming one with the flow of images that is life. [...] By approaching or imagining the inhuman point of view of animals, machines, and molecules we no longer take ourselves as unchanging perceivers set over and against life. We immerse ourselves in the flow of life's perceptions. (Colebrook 128)

At the end of their “quest,” the One and its legions fuse back into A.D.'s tombstone and become literally imperceptible by dissolving further and further: “We looked at our hands, through our hands, our bloodless shadowless hands, relieved from form and motion, folded within each other, at rest in the still centre of movement, as immaterial as the crystal air, and hardly distinguishable from the crystal objects still about us” (Barney 157).

32 The One and its legions “are” not a subject but engage in a line of becoming that brings them further and further away from their alleged centre. It should also have become quite clear that whatever they “are” or become, we are certainly not dealing with a suppressed lesbian subject.

4. Conclusion

33 If a minor literature has the power to engage in a movement of deterritorialisation, Barney's main “character(s)” certainly proceed upon this path. The One and its legions move on a Deleuzian line of flight that is “a path of mutation precipitated through the actualisation of connections among bodies that were previously only implicit” (Parr 145). In doing so, they radically undermine the notion of a stable and clearly gendered subject that progresses and evolves in predictable ways. Through constantly engaging the reader in a radically different way of perceiving the world, the novel thwarts any attempt to be pinned down, categorised and made to represent a certain (lesbian) identity. This novel resists falling into a dynamic of centre and periphery because of its constant, unexpected turns, alliances, becomings. Lotman's model aptly captured the novel's treatment by lesbian critics because it showed that they indeed operate strongly on a binary centre-periphery dynamics. This runs counter to anything this novel attempts to do: it offers us a truly eccentric way of writing that spins off its centre in entirely unforeseen ways. These “particles [...] spin[ning] off the strata” will never be captured by the “plane of organisation” (*ATP* 297/298), or, in other words: no matter how hard you squeeze, you will never make an eccentric orbit circular.

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The Owls Are Not What They Seem: Eccentricity and Masculinity in *Twin Peaks*

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Abstract:

This essay asks the question: what is the function of eccentrics in American culture and attaches this question to recent research in “freaks.” It argues that eccentrics occupy an ambiguous place in the American imagination, providing both incentives for a broadening of normative horizons and models of the human to be distrusted and feared. Using David Lynch’s television series *Twin Peaks* as its example, the essay shows how eccentric characters are used to push the boundaries of acceptable masculinities.

1 In the first regular episode¹ of *Twin Peaks*, the camera takes us to the hotel room of FBI special Agent Dale Cooper and slowly reveals him to be hanging upside down from an exposed water pipe, practicing some sort of yoga. Cooper had been introduced as the main character of the series in the pilot episode, which first aired on ABC on April 8, 1990. In the pilot, Cooper was shown to be an offbeat, non-traditional detective with more than a few personal quirks that set him off as unusual. This first re-introduction to the series’ protagonist confirms this: Cooper is an eccentric, and as an eccentric, he turns things upside down and contemplates the world from a reverse angle.

2 And so we are immersed in the world of *Twin Peaks*, where an eccentric character is our guide to this strange, new place hidden in Washington State. Eccentricity is, paradoxically, at the centre of *Twin Peaks*, where the lines between good and evil, real and unreal, logic and intuition are confused and blurred. Eccentric characters are deployed in order to challenge conventions and to challenge those who do not consider themselves eccentric to question the lines of demarcation that separate “normal” from “odd,” acceptable from unacceptable, conformist from nonconformist. One thing the deployment of eccentricity in *Twin Peaks* achieves is opening up alternative spaces and this works for gender roles as well. In particular, I will argue that the valorization of eccentric characters in the series opened up space for alternative conceptions of masculinity. As many of the main male protagonists in the series exhibit eccentric behaviours, these behaviours often challenge normative masculine gender roles and allow for a freer conception of what masculinity entails.

¹ Various numbering schemes have been used to refer to the 30 installments that comprise the two seasons of *Twin Peaks*. Hardcore fans on websites today devote forum threads to the various merits and shortcomings of the differing schemes. For the sake of this paper, I will refer to the pilot episode as the pilot, and then the first regular episode that follows as episode 1, then 2, etc. up to the finale, episode 29, as this is how it is labeled in currently available DVD editions of the series.

3 For two seasons, *Twin Peaks* aired on ABC and, one may assume also through its creation and use of eccentric characters, developed a loyal following. The series created by film director David Lynch and TV veteran Mark Frost was initially an enormous hit, with the pilot episode reaching nearly 20 million households (Rosenbaum 26). The series continued to receive high Nielsen ratings and was nominated for eight Emmys, won three Golden Globes including best TV series and won the Television Critics Association award for program of the year. Then, according to many critics, viewers, and, ultimately, executives at ABC (see, for instance, Lavery 1-3), it became a confusing mishmash of needlessly complex plots and unconnected strangeness. As the series wore on, the viewership declined to the point where the series was finally suspended, resuscitated for a few episodes and then finally cancelled, with the last show airing on June 10, 1991.

4 But even now, almost two decades later, there are dozens of websites dedicated to the show. Many Internet forums are abuzz daily with active users who debate tirelessly the various intricacies of the plot, the strange but lovable characters, the genius of the show's creators and all manner of esoteric details of the series. When innovative, successful television series like *The X-Files* or *Lost* appear today, critics are quick to compare them to *Twin Peaks*. For such a short-lived series, the show has remarkable staying power. A large part of this is due to its depiction and use of eccentric characters.

5 Eccentrics here illuminate some of the fundamental paradoxes of American culture: the tension between individuality and community and between conformity and nonconformity. *Twin Peaks* skillfully employed eccentrics and ideas of eccentricity to confound viewers' expectations and force the audience to question conventions: those of genre as well as those of gender. Through the appealing qualities of eccentric characters, these challenges to conventions were humanized and viewers' emotional attachment to them was thereby increased. Eccentric characters are lovable, confounding, interesting, confusing, enlightening and frustrating, and *Twin Peaks* offered a picture of them that encompassed their many traits and investigated how they operate in culture.

6 Eccentricity is under-studied within American culture. I am aware of only two academic studies that deal directly with eccentrics, one by a psychologist and one by an anthropologist. Academic work from a related field – the study of “freaks” – can be instructive here. Though different from eccentrics in important ways, notably in the fact that people designated as “freaks” have physical attributes that set them apart and mark them as “other” while those considered eccentric engage in behaviour that departs from more widely accepted conventions and attitudes, both freaks and eccentrics exhibit and embody ideas of

difference. They both function, for those who are not considered freaks or eccentrics, as examples of the many possibilities of human existence and provide a measure against which “normal” can be defined and questioned.

7 Eccentrics ride the boundary line between the social construction of the mad and the non-mad, as Foucault would have seen the issue. David Weeks, a psychologist, has performed the only clinical study of eccentrics that I am aware of. He identified eccentricity as existing on a continuum. One end of the continuum would be absolute conformity and the other end would be “utterly bizarre nonconformity” (11). Eccentricity lies on this continuum as a measure of some deviation from conformity. Perhaps a more useful measure for eccentricity is seeing it as lying on a continuum of the rejection or acceptance of conventions. Conformity implies an active acceptance of norms as a means of fitting in, while a mere acceptance of conventions need not imply a commitment to the norms that underlie them, but may remain wary of these norms.

8 In this, the matter of choice is an important determinant: “Eccentricity is taken on at least partly by free choice, and is something positive and pleasurable to the individual” (Weeks 14). This is in contrast to neuroses, which according to Weeks are unwanted and are not a matter of choice. However, as the anthropologist George Marcus argues, eccentricity, though a matter of choice, is not a particularly self-conscious identity. He argues that eccentricity is rarely a term of self-reference, rather it is a social construction imposed upon certain individuals to address a range of identities and behaviours (Marcus 48).

9 What distinguishes it from other categories of deviance is that it is not medicalized or criminalized and carries both negative and positive connotations. As such, eccentricity is seen as something different from neuroses or insanity, or rather, it exists in an uneasy relationship to both insanity and sanity, synonymous with neither, yet not entirely separate from either. Free will and self-identification, however, are very much a component of the eccentric personality. In fact, Weeks goes so far as to claim that eccentrics “have a higher general level of mental health than the population at large” as eccentrics often adopt their strange thinking patterns deliberately and their “difference” is functional rather than dysfunctional (Weeks 16 and 146).

10 Mental illness itself, I believe, is a cultural construct, a diagnosis that is made not only because of biological symptoms but also due to cultural factors and value judgments. In the various histories of psychology and insanity written in the past several decades, a basic schism is evident. One school, comprising for example Thomas Szasz and Michel Foucault, see mental illness as a cultural construct. Szasz maintains that mental illness is not a disease,

rather it is a myth manufactured “by psychiatrists for reasons of professional advancement and endorsed by society because it sanctions easy solutions for problem people” (Porter 2; see also Szasz 1970 and 1974). Foucault argues that a change in attitude, indeed the very creation of separate categories of madness and non-madness, reason and non-reason, arises at the end of the 18th century in Europe. From that time onward, communities only interact with insanity through medical professionals: it is seen as a disease, something to be treated and ideally cured, and, importantly, removed from society until such time when the “insane” will have been readjusted to “normality.” In this model, one must conform or risk being labeled mad. In this view, madness, and I believe we could add eccentricity, is a social construction rather than something inherent in one’s being (Foucault ix-x).

11 The other school of thought argues that insanity is indeed a biological reality and that “the stability of psychiatric symptoms over time shows that mental illness is no mere label or scapegoating device, but a real psychopathological entity, with an authentic organic base” (Porter 4; see also Roth and Kroll). While there is some truth to the idea that there is a biological basis for the symptoms of mental illness, this perspective ignores the formative role that social forces play in the valuation and stigmatization of those symptoms as a mental illness; in fact, these social forces – working along definitional axes like race, class, gender, and sexuality as well as the power relations embedded therein – have an undeniable role in the very definitions put forward for mental illness. These definitions change over time, even if certain physiological symptoms of mental illness remain constant.

12 The anthropologist Marcus has studied how class and socioeconomic status affect our understanding of eccentrics. He studied the occurrence of eccentricity among very wealthy, dynastic families in the U.S.A. in the 20th century. He found that at certain points in history, as discourses of distinction were undergoing change, many wealthy families turned to eccentric behaviours, valorizing eccentricity as a means of distinguishing themselves in ways that their wealth, power, and celebrity formerly, but, for varying reasons, no longer did. It was a means of creating specific family characteristics, for “while ambivalently discussed and focused upon, eccentricity also serves to mark distinction and honor, when there are few other resources with which to do so” (Marcus 46). As the traditional authority and power accorded to dynastic wealthy families began to wane while industrialization and the economy expanded in postcolonial times, the discourse of what made “character” began to change. Marcus sees a shift from character as being something distinct, elusive and limited to aristocratic families, to character becoming more related to reliability and thus more accessible to a wider range of middle class people. At this time, then, Marcus charts a shift in the attitudes of aristocratic

families towards the character traits they valued. Eccentricity, since it is a form of distinction, became valorized and celebrated in these families as a mode of separating the aristocratic families from others. Since other new families were coming into money, economic opportunity and power, and as the power base of traditionally aristocratic families eroded, this new form of distinction, an eccentricity which in wealthy cases is often marked by social withdrawal and forms of great excess, became a means of retaining the feel of aristocratic privilege (45-46).

13 Marcus also notes, particularly in England, how when lower and working class people adopted eccentric attitudes, they were often disdained for appearing to be putting on airs, claiming this aristocratic privilege for themselves by imitating the behaviour of excess. What is overlooked is that these working class eccentrics may also have been using the behaviour of excess as a means of acting out against a society that denied them many basic opportunities. By flouting norms of behaviour and modesty, eccentric behaviour can here be seen as an act of resistance, a statement against the denial of opportunity by individuals flagrantly seizing new, unconventional opportunities as their own. However, this adoption on the behavioural patterns of eccentricity, as Marcus notes, could (and was often) interpreted not only as a pretension to aristocracy, but also simply as an unacceptable claim to singularity: why should this one individual be allowed to disregard the rules and norms of society that the rest of us feel compelled to obey?

14 This influence of ideas of class on the definitions of eccentricity strengthens the idea that eccentricity is a very specifically socially constructed category. The world of *Twin Peaks* – its text, creators and intended audience – is most assuredly a white, middle class one, where perceptions of eccentricity are ambivalent and where eccentricity has a troubled history because of its associations with aristocratic privilege and excess. It has also been established that race and class complicate notions of gender, so that *Twin Peaks* is a fictional universe which is American, white and middle class not only in relation to eccentricity but also in relation to masculinity.

15 The cultural work, then, that eccentrics perform is a mixed business. In order to get a better idea of how difference and identity are created and used in culture by groups of people considered strange or excessive, it is helpful to turn to a significantly wider body of academic work focused on “freaks.” “Freak” is a contested and not universally accepted term applied to people with certain birth anomalies such as extreme tallness or shortness, conjoined twins, missing limbs, etc. Certain birth anomalies evoke what Leslie Fiedler has called “images of the secret self.” He describes watching a freak show as “the sense of watching, unwilling but

enthralled, the exposed obscenity of the self or other” (18). He finds this awe to be pornographic in nature. What we see in a freak show, he argues, is not so much an utterly alien abomination of humanity, but rather a part of humanity writ large; a possibility of humanity that is present in all of us, yet hideously exposed or ridiculed in these ”freaks” as they are being exhibited to a “normal” audience. Key to this understanding, both of the fascination and of the disgust, is that it could happen to any one of us. Thus, freaks have indeed been displayed as grotesque spectacles but have also figured in more humane treatments where the audience is asked to empathize with the freak’s humanity (one notable example of this is David Lynch’s own Oscar-nominated feature film *Elephant Man* [1980]).

16 If we follow this logic of the ”freak,” displays of eccentricity work in a similar manner: as something everyone may partake of to some extent, in deed or in fantasy, while only the truly eccentric adopt the character of excess and obsession as a primary means of identification. They ostentatiously violate the conventions of acceptable behaviour (*which* behavior exactly will have to be specified for each eccentric) that bind together the rest of society, but society itself is in a constant battle with these same conventions. Rules and norms are seen as necessary to maintain a sense of orderliness and minimize deviance. However, without any disregard for convention society would stagnate: creativity is needed for expansion and progress. Thus, as with freaks, there is an inherently ambivalent attitude toward eccentrics: they are both necessary and excessive, deviant or disturbing. Freaks are necessary in that they help “normal” folks define themselves as normal by establishing an opposite, a distance between “freak” and “normal.” In this way, they are reassuring to the non-grotesque. The same holds true for eccentrics: they offer a matrix against which others can measure their behaviour and establish their normalness. At the same time, they are necessary to help expand and challenge the very definitions and limits of normalness which appear to constrain them, as the “normal” is itself a concept that is in constant flux.

17 Freaks and eccentrics, indeed, raise questions about boundaries. Fiedler writes, “Only the true Freak challenges the boundaries between male and female, sexed and sexless, animal and human, large and small, self and other, and consequently between reality and illusion, experience and fantasy, fact and myth” (24). For challenging these boundaries, freaks are both admired and despised. They are admired because they embody possibility and difference, and this possibility and difference is within the reach of everyone. Freaks put on display “the freakishness of the normal, the precariousness and absurdity of being, however we define it, fully human” (347). And yet, for these same reasons, freaks are despised, as eccentrics can be. For many there is little comfort in disrupting notions of normality, of expanding the

possibility of freakishness to all. Many define their very being in terms of distance from freakishness, nonconformity, and excess. There is comfort in the normal. Eccentrics and freaks alike ride this boundary between individuality and community that is such a central paradox in American culture as it valorizes individuality, freedom of opportunity and expression, and the individual pursuit of happiness while at the same time extolling the virtues and norms of the home and a coherent community. The “common good” (and the sacrifices to be made in its name) are in turn sharply contrasted with a capitalist ideology which would subordinate everything to the individual consumer’s will and desire. As a stark representation of individuality, eccentrics force non-eccentrics to confront this paradox between individual needs and the common good. Through their defiance of social norms, they also open up space for others to conceive of alternative approaches to living their lives.

18 Since *Twin Peaks* uses eccentricity in generally positive terms, I argue that it is using eccentricity to question conservative conventions of the late 1980s and to valorize the need for difference in a time when the ascension of conservative values denigrated difference as deviant and a possible moral failing. Discussing the shift from the more liberal ideology of the 1960s to the rise of the modern conservative movement in the 1980s,² the historian and religious scholar Philip Jenkins writes, “At home and abroad, the post-1975 public was less willing to see social dangers in terms of historical forces, instead preferring a strict moralistic division: problems were a matter of evil, not dysfunction. Ideas of relativism and complex causation were replaced by simpler and more sinister visions of the enemies facing Americans and their nation” (11). The historian Robert M. Collins has noted that at the same time as the American political landscape was shifting to the right with the election of Reagan in 1980 and the formation of the Moral Majority in 1979, many of the country’s mainstream cultural institutions remained attached to the more radical ideologies of the 1960s (173). The tensions between the challenging 1960s worldview and the 1980s conservative framework bubbled over into what has been termed the culture war, a battle still very much raging in 1990 when *Twin Peaks* first aired. The critical and popular success of the series suggests that its refusal to capitulate to Manichean notions of good and evil struck a chord with large numbers of people. *Twin Peaks’* uses of eccentricity and eccentric characters served to question boundaries that were very much in contention elsewhere in American culture at the time. The series featured eccentricity as a way of showing that the boundaries between good and evil were not so clearly defined and that there could be value in rejecting conventions in favour of exploring the enormous possibilities of a stubbornly held belief in individuality.

² Jenkins actually argues that the rise to political triumph of conservatism that was embodied by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 can be more accurately dated to 1975 and the post-Watergate atmosphere.

19 The culture war that was widening as *Twin Peaks* hit the small screen was also very much concerned with the opening up of gender roles that occurred in the 1960s, and as a result, there was a concerted effort in one corner to cement traditional gender roles in a backlash against the women's liberation movement. And these openings were very real: the marriage rate went down 25 percent between 1960 and 1980 and by 1985 the median age of marriage had jumped to 25.5 years of age. Abortion, sterilization and the increased availability of birth control led to a decrease in the birth rate while the number of divorced men and women skyrocketed 200 percent from 1960 to 1980. The traditional two-parent family accounted for only 60 percent of all families by 1980 as unmarried cohabitation and female-headed households were on the rise (D'Emilio and Freedman 330-332). All this is to say that the traditional nuclear family was becoming increasingly less the (statistical) norm, and in its place alternatives to traditional masculine roles as father and breadwinner were opened up.

20 The 1960s and the 1970s had seen a very real challenge to traditional ideas of masculinity. This challenge would not go unmet, as historians of sexuality John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman point out in their landmark work *Intimate Matters*: "Reacting to the gains of both feminism and gay liberation, and distressed by the visibility of the erotic in American culture, sexual conservatives sought the restoration of 'traditional values'" (345). Cultural critic Barbara Ehrenreich adds that not only did the backlash come in response to women's and gay liberation; it was also a response to the "male revolt." Since men had been allowed to imagine a life outside of the traditional breadwinner role, they now needed to be reined in. As she puts it, "Men are the problem and wives, in the old-fashioned sense, are the solution." Only through containing the male revolt by consigning men back to their roles as jobholders and heads of families could a sense of order be restored to American society. Men were wild and needed to be tamed; only jobs and marriage could successfully accomplish this (165-7). Though throughout this period there was a significant tension between traditional ideas of masculinity and newer, "softer" ones, the rise of the New Right and its critique of the by now very apparent restructuring of the American family brought these tensions to the surface throughout the cultural realm. Susan Jeffords writes about the "remasculinization" of America in the 1980s. By "remasculinization" she meant "a regeneration of the concepts, constructions, and definitions of masculinity in American culture and a restabilization of the gender system within and for which it was formulated" (51).

21 *Twin Peaks* would step into this contested world of masculinity, and through its use of eccentric characters and their role as boundary questioners would argue against these forces

of “remasculinization.” But before fully diving into that portion of my argument, a little background on the television series and one of its main creative forces, David Lynch (a personality who himself was seen as something of an eccentric), may prove useful.

22 David Lynch and TV may have seemed a strange pairing from the onset. Lynch was born in Missoula, Montana, and grew up in Washington and Idaho before moving to Virginia for high school. He went to art school and eventually got into filmmaking, directing several animated short films. In 1977, after five years of work, he released his first feature film, *Eraserhead*, a dark, surreal meditation on fatherhood set in a depressing, menacing industrial city. Lynch first achieved mainstream success with *The Elephant Man* (1980), a sympathetic depiction of a “freak,” for which he received the first of three eventual nominations for an Academy Award for directing. On the heels of *The Elephant Man*, Lynch got his first opportunity to direct a big-budget, more mainstream project, *Dune*. It was a failure, critically and at the box office. Lynch then returned to smaller features and directed what has been remembered by many critics as one of the best films of the 1980s, *Blue Velvet* (1986). Set in a small town in Washington State, the film follows a young man who after finding an ear in a yard stumbles into the dark underworld of a town that seems wholesome and idyllic on its surface. Lynch was nominated for another Academy Award, but his directing talent seemed to be best suited for smaller, offbeat independent features rather than the larger Hollywood films. There was little indication at this point that his work could appeal to a mass audience on network television.

23 In his career, David Lynch repeatedly stylized himself as a committed eccentric, as for example in one interview in 1991 for the *Playboy* magazine (nothing less!), in which he lets his interview partner participate in his own perception (and hence creation) of himself as “odd.” His father, we learn, was a scientist for the US Forest Service and Lynch was often embarrassed because he felt his parents were too normal. In counterdistinction to these humble and uneccentric beginnings, we are told, Lynch’s many quirks were apparent early on and continued into adulthood, leaving him at the time of the interview as a person who he says drinks 20 cups of coffee per day, ate at Bob’s Big Boy everyday for 7 years, collected chunks of wood that he used to build a series of elaborate additions to his garage, prepared a book of his own photographs solely of dental equipment and “uses words such as neat and golly and cool and peachy keen” (Pond). As Steve Pond, his interview partner, concludes: “It didn’t seem possible that Lynch’s reach would be so broad back when he was making *Eraserhead* and *Blue Velvet*; his idyllic daydreams and horrific nightmares seemed poor bets to reverberate beyond the art-house crowd, much less make it in prime time”

(Pond). However, pairing up with Mark Frost, who had written 17 episodes for the successful series *Hill Street Blues* from 1982-1984, Lynch came up with a pilot for a TV series, and ABC took a chance on it. The show was a big success in television terms, immediately winning a 33 percent market share (Zoglin) despite (or because of) the fact that the show sported a large cast of eccentric characters and installed its own story line in an unresolved fusion of realism and fantasy in which dreams make it to the status of forensic clues and evil is perpetrated under conditions of demonic possession by a BOB.

24 The show starts out with the homecoming queen Laura Palmer's body washing up on the shore of a lake. Twin Peaks Sheriff Harry Truman is soon joined by FBI agent Dale Cooper, who employs unusual methods to investigate the murder but is soon accepted by Truman and others in Twin Peaks. The first half of the series revolves around the question of Laura's murder and while the mystery of her murder deepens, romances both real and unrealized, business dealings and double crosses, drug deals, prostitution rings and other subplots are unraveled. Cooper discovers many of his clues in dreams, which include visits by giants and dwarfs who reside in a place called the Red Room, which is a waiting area between the White Lodge (a sort of heaven) and the Black Lodge (a version of hell). Cooper finds out that it was Leland Palmer who raped and killed his own daughter, but Leland reveals that he was in fact inhabited by an evil spirit named BOB at the time. In the second half of the series, the main plot line revolves around the appearance of Windom Earle, Cooper's former partner who has gone insane and terrorizes the town and Cooper. He too is trying to gain access to the White and Black Lodges. Cooper must stop Earle, but in so doing, Cooper himself, in the very last scene of the series, becomes inhabited by BOB.

25 When *Twin Peaks* first aired on ABC in 1990, critics who liked the show framed it as a novel, interesting, ironic take on soap operas, mysteries and other genres. Much of its critical acclaim was grounded in what contemporary critics and scholars felt was its use of irony and parody (Worrell/Zoglin, Hughes, Rafferty, Millman, Goodwin, Lavery). *Twin Peaks* seemed to create an idealized world – a nostalgic, fifties-like suburbia of wholesomeness and small town perfection – and then tore this world up to show its dark underbelly. As it did so, it used the conventions of various genres to expose a hidden world beneath the surface reality of Reagan Era wholesomeness and the return to “family values” espoused by the new right.

26 Genre itself, as Thomas Schatz has shown, is a form of cultural consensus. The creators, producers and consumers of genre films collaborate to draw up the conventions of a particular genre: the producers and the creators, in the early formulations of a genre, try out

certain codes and conventions, and the mass audience articulates which attempts are successful or not by patronizing or not patronizing films with new twists on the conventions. A dialogue thus develops, and when an audience watches a genre film, it brings with it a prior knowledge of its codes and conventions. The successful genre film then tweaks and improves upon those codes, creatively expanding or changing them without fundamentally altering the basic structure of the genre. Creativity is used to intensify rather than confound expectations. Familiar characters perform familiar actions to celebrate familiar values: “In addressing basic cultural conflicts and celebrating the values and attitudes whereby these conflicts might be resolved, all film genres represent the filmmakers’ and audience’s cooperative efforts to ‘tame’ those beasts, both actual and imaginary, which threaten the stability of everyday lives” (Schatz 11-29, quote p. 29).

27 Twin Peaks, however, employs generic conventions ultimately to disrupt them, and one of the ways the series is able to accomplish this is through its deployment of eccentrics. At first gloss, the show appears to be a mix of, primarily, police procedural, mystery and soap opera. The main character Agent Cooper plays the role of lead detective in the show. But he is a non-traditional detective to say the least. He has the eccentric habit of talking into his tape recorder, addressing it as Diane, and reporting not only the pertinent facts of the murder mystery he is attempting to solve but also mundane details like what he ate for lunch and what types of trees there are in Twin Peaks. He regularly flashes a good-natured thumbs up, and, of course, loves coffee and cherry pie. Film studies scholar Martha Nochimson sees the character of Agent Cooper as a trailblazer among TV detectives. More than a mere composite or melding of film and TV conventions and ideas of a detective, Cooper invents a new mode, one that does not sacrifice desire and the sensual on the altar of reason and deduction (Nochimson 144-6).

28 Cooper’s work has less in common with the hard realities of most detective shows than with the land of dreams: dreams and visions are most often the sites where significant clues are found in *Twin Peaks*, and this serves to mitigate the hegemony of logic. Nochimson notes Cooper’s expertise in this netherworld between dreams and reality, which I would argue is a key feature of his eccentricity: “a boundary specialist, Cooper is not the disavower of the body, the purger of bodily fluctuation through the rigid limits of convention, but a specialist in crossing boundaries, a quester capable of moving confidently and productively between the mental clarity of law enforcement and the intelligent fluidity of the body” (Nochimson 147).

29 The law is supposed to operate on the basis of common sense, but common sense is confused in *Twin Peaks* because the very nature of a fact is under debate. In the second

episode, for example, Cooper employs what he calls the Tibetan Method to narrow the list of suspects in the murder case. The Tibetan Method involves Sheriff Truman calling out the names of the various suspects as Cooper throws a rock at bottles lined up precisely sixty feet and six inches away. If he hits the bottle or breaks it, that person remains a suspect whereas if he misses, the name is crossed off the list. Midway through the exercise, Truman pulls Cooper aside and asks, “Coop, tell me. The idea for all this really came from a dream?” Cooper smiles broadly and says “Yes, it did.”

30 Facts and clues, then, emerge from dreams in *Twin Peaks*. Cooper’s willingness to believe in them as he would in “hard” evidence renders him eccentric in terms of the genre conventions of the police procedural. As the series in its entire trajectory establishes that the most eccentric methods are also the most successful, these conventions are themselves systematically undermined. In making use of and upending generic conventions, particularly through its embrace of eccentric characters, *Twin Peaks* potentially threatened to upend the cultural consensus that bound together the audience and creators of this genre, disrupting the attempt to “‘tame’ those beasts” of deviancy and irrationality the police procedural is designed to combat.

31 Eccentricity is foregrounded right from the start in the pilot episode. One of the series’ more unusual characters, the Log Lady, was immediately shown to be an accepted part of the community, and her eccentricity is also an accepted, unquestioned part of *Twin Peaks*. When she first appears, Cooper notices her and asks Sheriff Truman, “Who’s the lady with the log?” Truman replies, “We call her the Log Lady.” This is a very matter of fact, unelaborated answer, just like his answer to Cooper’s question about what kind of trees there are or what kind of rabbit he saw. This indicates that the Log Lady and her eccentric habit of carrying a log around with her wherever she goes is a permanent fixture in *Twin Peaks*, something as common and unquestioned as the Douglas firs.

32 It seems then that it is not only characters who appear eccentric: it is the very world they are embedded in. One of the ways *Twin Peaks* has an eccentric feel to it is through its continual toying with the intrusion of the incongruous into the regimes of order. Literary critic J.P. Telotte, drawing on the work of Foucault, argues that order is a human creation imposed on nature. Annie Blackburne, Cooper’s love interest at the end of the series, quotes German physicist Werner Heisenberg: “What we observe is not nature itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning.” But since order is an artificial construction, it is susceptible to the fallacies of humans and human logic. *Twin Peaks* exposes these fallacies: “Here, the order of our world begins to show just how threadbare and fragile it really is, while the signs that

sustain that order, including the various codes of the television narrative, reveal a sense of meaninglessness or blankness that also haunts our world” (Telotte 160).

33 Order is consistently disrupted and our expectations are continually confounded by *Twin Peaks*. Telotte discusses a scene where Cooper and Sheriff Truman go the bank to look at Laura’s safety deposit box. There is a deer head lying on the table for no apparent reason. This is a particularly jarring depiction of the intrusion of the incongruous, one might say the “eccentric,” in the hyper-orderly world of the bank: “But this dead head, lying there amid the orderly world of the bank, turning its blank, wild eyes on the calculated business of man, inserts in an unsettling way a spirit of chaos, disorder, and death that moves through this world, and hints at the connection of those forces to the neat, orderly world of business and exchange” (Telotte 163).

34 This confounding of expectations of order is central to the show, particularly in the first half of the series. One remarkable scene that warrants comment is the very first scene of the second season. The first season of *Twin Peaks* ended with Agent Cooper shot by an unknown person. The show was nominated for eight Emmy awards, Laura Palmer was listed by *People* magazine as one of the 25 most intriguing people of the year, and *TV Guide* asked several best selling authors to come up with a solution to the mysteries of the first season.

35 So how did Lynch (who directed this episode) choose to start this reopening of a series that had ended with such a cliffhanger and that had received such publicity? For the first five minutes of the new season, we see Agent Cooper lying on his hotel room floor, bleeding, while an elderly waiter brings him warm milk, hangs up his phone, gives him a thumbs up and a wink, all in agonizingly slow, real time. The old waiter even gives Cooper the room service bill to sign, and before signing it, Cooper bothers to ask if the gratuity is included. What could justifiably be expected to be an action-packed season premiere was slowed down to a grinding halt as the old waiter slowly shuffles about the room in a long scene that has little to do with any of the various plot developments. The pathos of the scene is already bewildering. Adding to this, in the next scene (where we might hope that things would pick up), Cooper is visited by a giant (!) who offers up three clues that will help him solve the murder. This visionary fantasy world is in turn disconcertingly connected back to reality as the Giant reminds Cooper, not unreasonably, that he will require medical attention.

36 Clearly, Lynch is hoping to confound the audience’s expectations of television shows. But there is also a disconcerting lack of directorial guidance as to how these eccentric goings on should be viewed, “re-centred” as it were, by the audience. As a consequence, some recent scholarly work on *Twin Peaks* has looked beyond seeing the series as simple irony or parody

in its exploration of genre. Sheli Ayers argues that *Twin Peaks* generally encouraged an empathetic response rather than ironic distancing (Ayers 94). Others have noted that the show rode the line between irony and sincerity (Rombes 61-3). David Lynch has said that he is not an ironist but rather that his films depict what he sees in America. Discussing the dark sequences in much of his work, Lynch said: “This is the way America is to me. There’s a very innocent, naïve quality to life, and there’s a horror and sickness as well. It’s everything” (qtd. in Rombes 65). Aaron Lecklider has offered a helpful concept that he terms the post-ironic: The post-ironic is that which is so ironic it is sincere. Rather than using irony as a mechanism for avoiding commitment, the post-ironic employs the tools of ironic detachment to express a deep commitment, albeit one which recognizes its own contingency. It is a reversal of appearances, where sincerity not only masks as utter disregard: such disregard deepens the experience of commitment. Where the ironist exploits appearances to discredit reality, the post-ironist assumes the gravity of appearances and uses their transparency to develop political commitments in a world ruled by appearances (qtd. in Melnick 16).

37 *Twin Peaks* is very much a post-ironic work: it highlights appearances and their contradictions with ironic detachment, but it refuses to provide a comfortably superior viewpoint from which these contradictions and absurdities could be put into perspective. Rather, they appear as essential to the very nature of the people they represent. The outward appearance of eccentric characters can seem ridiculous and funny – it may appear that they are being used to set up ironic commentary – but *Twin Peaks* does not use these characters to create an ironic distance to the underlying emotion of the plot developments but rather to enhance that emotion, to install the disconnected, the absurd, the incongruous, in short the “eccentric” as an everyday component of the fictional universe it creates. Leland Palmer, for example, grieves for his murdered daughter Laura with a genuine anguish that is then interrupted by his eccentric bursts, out of the blue, into song and dance. Irony is used against itself in his case, as viewers are encouraged to both laugh with him and share in his pain rather than distance themselves from his emotional turmoil as an ironist would have it.

38 It is through its use of eccentric characters and eccentricity that *Twin Peaks* most often achieves its post-ironic recognition that internal contradictions of flawed appearances are constitutive of the world and the characters’ positions and options in that world. As discussed earlier, eccentrics are associated with the dissolution of boundaries, through parody, recognition and disregard of those boundaries. Eccentricity, in many ways, is the ultimate post-ironic condition and few characters are used as compellingly as Agent Cooper. After Laura Palmer’s murder has been solved partway through the second season, Cooper is forced

to defend himself to the FBI's internal affairs agent, Roger, after he has been suspended for crossing the border into Canada twice, during which time several people were killed and cocaine was planted and found in his car. Cooper defends his unorthodox methods and his eccentricity: "I've started to focus out beyond the edge of the board on a bigger game...The sound the wind makes through the pines. The sentience of animals. What we fear in the dark and what lies beyond the darkness." "What the hell are you talking about?" Roger asks him. Cooper responds, "I am talking about seeing beyond fear, Roger, about looking at the world with love." Roger shakes his head in disbelief and says, "They're liable to extradite you for murder and drug trafficking." "These are things I cannot control," Cooper answers.

39 This is an important exchange as Cooper defends himself and his eccentricity to the outside world and to the official government overseers. Roger only sees the real world manifestations that a crime may have occurred and that Cooper might get sent to jail. Cooper, in true eccentric fashion, acknowledges that he has no control over those who cannot see beyond the logical and rational, the languages of the 'normal' and of convention on which the police procedural depends, and that he can only accept the worldly manifestations of this failure – going to jail – because he cannot make others see as he does. Of course, the audience, since it is aware that Cooper has solved the crime and only done good in his transgressions, is inclined to side with Cooper against this real world that cannot privilege love over fear, eccentricity and openness over a strict adherence to the rules. But the government, in the form of Roger, sees it differently: Roger, at the end of the scene, suggests a full psychological evaluation. It seems that if Cooper cannot conform to the strict, artificially constructed rules of an orderly society, his condition is deficient and he needs to be treated. But because the show trades so freely and positively in eccentricity, we are encouraged to dismiss Roger's assessment and valorize Cooper's resistance.

40 Major Briggs, an Air Force officer working on the secret Blue Book project in the woods of *Twin Peaks*, is another character who trusts in otherworldliness and dreams. It is interesting that two of the most sensual, intuitive characters in the series are also agents of the government, men who would traditionally be thought to be rational, logical people. However, these two men are probably the most eccentric characters in the show, and they are also the most crucial to solving the different mysteries in *Twin Peaks*. They have to be eccentric rather than crazy because they are working to solve real mysteries – Laura's murder, Windom Earle's reign of terror – even if that "real" world terror is grounded in another, "unreal" place. Only eccentrics are equipped to cross over into the supernatural world of the White and Black Lodge – the realms in *Twin Peaks* for good and evil souls – because they are not restrained by

the boundaries that prevent rational, logical people from recognizing the existence of these other worlds. Yet, at the same time, these eccentrics, unlike the truly insane, are not confined to this other world. They can float back and forth, inhabiting otherwise incompatible mental universes.

41 This floating back and forth extends to gender roles as well. Major Briggs and Agent Cooper are in roles traditionally encoded as masculine: an officer in the armed forces and a government agent. These roles, traditionally, are performed by men who believe in logic, action, and a sense of duty. Without actually crossing over into the feminine, Cooper and Briggs are allowed to trust in their intuition in addition to their logic, action and sense of duty. Intuition is also connected to emotion and emotion has traditionally been coded as feminine. By giving Cooper and Major Briggs a heightened sense of intuition and also a respect for the sensuality of the body, *Twin Peaks* challenges rigid boundaries of gender and opens up space for a wider range of acceptable masculinities. Cooper and Briggs are not only deemed acceptable in their eccentricity and their recognition of emotion and intuition, they are valorized for it. By casting official government figures like Cooper and Major Briggs as eccentrics, in touch with their more “feminine” qualities of intuition, *Twin Peaks* has opened up space for differing notions of masculinity. At the same time, however, traditional masculinity as embodied by strong, virtuous men like Sheriff Truman and Big Ed is not discarded or even vigorously questioned. Such characters are shown to be decent, honorable men, though it is important to note that, contrary to typical law enforcement dramas, they play a subordinate role to their eccentric partners.

42 The one character who most explicitly challenges the male/female binary, the cross-dressing DEA agent Denis/Denise (played by David Duchovny, who would play another eccentric FBI agent a few years later in the TV series *The X Files*), again opens space for boundary crossings in regard to gender roles. While dressed as a woman, he remarks on the beauty of Audrey to Cooper, who says he didn’t think Denis/Denise would still be interested in such things. Denis/Denise responds, “Coop, I may be wearing a dress, but I still pull my panties on one leg at a time if you know what I mean.” Cooper responds, “Not really.” Though he wears women’s clothes, Denis/Denise maintains his claim to heterosexuality and masculinity, a sexuality and masculinity, however, far removed from the demands and exclusions of heteronormativity. This at least seems to be the meaning of his utterance. But then, pulling one’s panties on one leg at a time is, in fact, not helpful in determining either sexuality or gender as most human beings, male, female, homosexual, heterosexual, may be assumed to proceed in exactly this manner when putting on panties. Denis/Denise’s “if you

know what I mean” then certainly offers something of a poser not only to Cooper but also to the audience who are invited to speculate on what exactly this *can* be taken to mean. In this, it seems that even the eccentric Cooper is bested for once, as this mode of being (and of being male), this mode of perception and of framing such basic concerns as those of gender and sexuality is obviously beyond him. Does he know what this means? “Not really.”

43 Though originally sent to investigate Cooper, Denis/Denise is clearly an ally of Cooper and for this we are inclined to accept him. In crucial moments when he can be of most service to Cooper, Denis/Denise is most fluid in his dissolution of gender boundaries. He is introduced in women’s clothes and remains in them until he goes undercover, this time dressed as a man, to help Cooper trap his opponents in a drug deal set-up. When this set-up goes awry, Denis/Denise, this time dressed as a sexy waitress delivering food to the drug dealers, gains access to the house where Cooper is being held hostage. It is precisely Denis/Denise’s ability to transgress gender boundaries that serves to aid Cooper, and these boundary crossings are deeply intertwined with the series’ sense of eccentricity. His cross-dressing, in the scheme of *Twin Peaks*, is generally cast as just another eccentricity. In fact, it is precisely the fact that Denis/Denise comes off as another eccentric that makes his gender bending acceptable, “ordinary” within the standards of acceptability that reign in *Twin Peaks*. Because he is an eccentric and non-traditional law enforcement agent, he fits neatly into the version of expanded masculinity that the *Twin Peaks* universe has privileged, extending it into territories explicitly prohibited by heteronormative gender codes while at the same time making this masculinity look no less extraordinary than all the others to be found in *Twin Peaks*.

44 In *Twin Peaks*, eccentricity is used as a bridge between competing binaries such as reality/illusion, good/evil and male/female. The show trades freely in eccentricity, and when it is at its most successful (and popular), this eccentricity is privileged as crucial to the solving of real world problems. As the series progressed, many of the eccentric characters like the Log Lady were used merely to bring a further layer of quirkiness to the town rather than being given a central role in the developing drama. In turn Cooper, the beloved eccentric from the first half of the series, becomes more inclined to privilege logic and rationality over intuition and a reliance on otherworldliness. When eccentrics start to fade from the foreground and instead are used as atmosphere, the show loses some of its uniqueness, and, consequently, its audience. The show was canceled after two short seasons. But *Twin Peaks* never fully ceded to convention, and as such never lost its core audience. For a brief moment in time, the show

was able to harness its eccentric characters to question the many boundaries that society erects, and in so doing offered space to challenge these conventions.

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Isak Dinesen's "The Deluge at Norderney" and Eccentric Indifference

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Abstract:

Taking Isak Dinesen's short story "The Deluge at Norderney" as its example, this essay explores the ramifications of Ina Schabert's definition and characterization of the "foot-off-the-ground novel" as a model for thinking eccentric literature. In this, it turns on the idea of *indifference* as a key component and technique of eccentricity. While in the realm of gender and sexuality "queer" may be a strong rival for the "eccentric," the essay shows that eccentric indifference follows a logic which sets it apart from the interventionist aesthetics of queer.

1 In Edith Sitwell's *English Eccentrics* (1933), the narrator describes various personages whose behaviour and actions deviate from societal conventions and norms. For example, the reader makes the acquaintance of Charles Waterton, who "had no idea that he was doing anything out of the general course of things if he asked a visitor to accompany him to the top of a lofty tree to look at a hawk's nest" (226). In contrast to Waterton himself, the people around him do not generally regard his actions as ordinary but as eccentric. In the context of *English Eccentrics*, eccentricity is considered to be a character trait inexorably linked to a person. While Waterton is certainly a character who could have come straight out of a story by Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), this essay does not only focus on eccentricity as a form of behaviour but aims to show that there are also texts that display evidence of eccentricity, i.e. "the condition of not being centrally situated" (OED), on a textual level.

2 This essay intends to provide an investigation of eccentric texts by linking them to and distancing them from queer approaches to literary works. To exemplify this method, I refer to Isak Dinesen's short story "The Deluge at Norderney," from her collection *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934). I focus on the way the narrator and the literary characters deal with identity and demonstrate that identity is presented as not only inconsistent and malleable (which could be expected) but that in fact it may be entirely invented. The analysis shows that this mainly stems from the fact that each literary character is given the opportunity of telling the story of his or her life without an authority to restrain him or her. The circumstances they find themselves in allow them to modify their lives and fill them with the sets of people and events of their choice. Furthermore, I want to explore the way in which the stories told within the story oscillate between reinforcing and destabilising the text and also show how the narrative path itself is structured so as to elude the reader.

3 I begin by highlighting the connection between Ina Schabert's notion of the "foot-off-the-ground" novel and eccentric texts, since Schabert's definition of "foot-off-the-ground"

novels forms a helpful starting point to commence defining eccentric texts, and follow on by presenting an analysis of passages from “The Deluge” that suggest a queer reading. Subsequently, I show that an analysis of the story from a queer perspective is by itself not sufficient to comprehend the special politics of this text because queer approaches aim at *disclosing* and combating

Foot-off-the-ground Beginnings

4 In her gendered history of English literature of the twentieth century, Ina Schabert ties together a number of texts by women writers mostly from the first half of the century whose works had hitherto not been seen as forming a group of texts united by shared techniques and concerns. In works, for example, by Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Stevie Smith, or Elizabeth von Arnim, Schabert demonstrates how these novels pursue what might be called an aesthetics of “indifference.” They try to remain comprehensible within frameworks of generic and cultural expectations while simultaneously trying to reach positions “away” from them, an elsewhere that cannot be understood as a site of opposition but rather as a trajectory of thought which tries to escape from the centre of cultural norms without reaching a counter-position, remaining in transit, floating, wilfully ignorant of or indifferent to what is left behind. Borrowing her term from Stevie Smith, one of this group’s most prominent practitioners, Schabert calls these novels “foot-off-the-ground novels”:

Der Boden, von dem die *foot-off-the-ground novels* abheben, ist die allgemeine Kultur, die akzeptierte gesellschaftliche, politische, moralische und literarische Sinnstiftungspraxis. Die Autorinnen halten Abstand zu dem, was das Ihre nicht ist. Sie erzählen mit anderen als den gewohnten Prioritäten, Ordnungs- und Wertvorstellungen. [...] Ganz ohne diesen Boden [der Norm] geht es nicht; strenggenommen kann deshalb auch nur ein Fuß vom Boden gehoben werden und ‚woanders‘ sein. [...] Das Woanders kann nicht der einfache – und damit in Sprache und Literatur einfach formulierbare – Gegensatz zum kulturell Vorgegebenen sein, nicht das Andere des Gleichen, das dieses letztlich vom Negativen her noch einmal bekräftigen würde. Es weicht auf unlogische Weisen ab. [...] Die Texte mögen eigensinning, bizarr, manchmal auch frech wirken, nie aber sind sie eindeutig aggressiv oder versuchen, die Leserin auf eine alternative Norm einzuschwören. (153)

5 The authors, we are told, “keep their distance” (*halten Abstand*) from what they do not wish to identify with, they organize their priorities differently and try to reach a place, a position “elsewhere” (*woanders*). This “elsewhere” is not meant to be a simple reversal of the norms that irk them (*nicht das Andere des Gleichen*) and neither is it meant to be a new centre of inscription, an alternative norm which may be set up as the improved version of the given. The movement these texts seek to execute can therefore be described as being profoundly eccentric: away from a centre which is neither affirmed nor negated, towards an “elsewhere”

which must not under any circumstances become a new centre. The characters depicted in these novels read like blueprints for what common usage understands as eccentric personalities: “Die Heldinnen der Romane gehen mit stiller Selbstverständlichkeit eigenen Vorlieben nach. Zumeist scheint es, dass sie einfach nicht so richtig begriffen haben, was Frausein in der Gesellschaft bedeutet“ (154). These are characters who do not appear fully socialized but indifferent to or (wilfully) ignorant of what is expected of them.

6 Ina Schabert’s definition of “foot-off-the-ground” novels forms an important context for an investigation of eccentricity. Her notion of a movement to an “elsewhere” gives an idea of where eccentric texts are headed for. In Schabert’s treatment, foot-off-the-ground novels mainly focus on the “foot-off-the-ground person” who displays an indifferent attitude towards society, to whom “die reale, gesellschaftliche Welt an den Rand der Aufmerksamkeit [rückt]” (Smith 39; Schabert 159). This essay takes this indifference as one of the defining marks of a literature which may be termed “eccentric” and seeks to extend the scope of this indifferent attitude to reach beyond the characters into the field of literary technique. As this essay will show, Isak Dinesen’s short story “The Deluge At Norderney” features not only eccentric characters who pursue their ways in an unconcerned and carefree manner, “mit stiller Selbstverständlichkeit” (Schabert 154), but also displays a form of eccentricity that is apparent on a textual level.

7 With regard to the heroines of “foot-off-the-ground-novels,” Schabert points out that they are very often “Old Maids, die sich mit ihrem Schattendasein nicht identifizieren,” who do not identify with the role society has in store for them, and old women, “die sich jenseits von Gut und Böse wähnen,” who think they are beyond the categories of “good and evil” (154). This description perfectly matches Miss Malin Nat-og-Dag, one of the main characters of “The Deluge,” who chooses to live her life in a reality she modifies and creates at her pleasure with little regard for societal norms – she is notorious for fearlessly letting her imagination run wild. Yet at the same time she is aware of the fact that she cannot act out her fantasies in the society she lives in. Instead of loudly passing criticism on her surroundings, she uses her imagination to create her own reality without relying on established norms, an inner life so spectacularly her own that as the narrator ironically remarks “[no] young woman could, even from a nun’s cell, have thrown herself into the imaginary excesses of Miss Malin without fear and trembling” (Dinesen 134).

8 As the following passage shows, Miss Malin displays various features of foot-off-the-ground characters. For instance, the reader learns that she does not attempt to blend into her surroundings but follows her own rules without paying any attention to social expectations

but also without confronting those expectations. As Schabert notes, the heroic is not what such characters are interested in: they are “anders *ohne* subversive Absicht” (Schabert 154, my emphasis). In line with this description, society perceives Miss Malin as “a little off her head” (Dinesen 130). The society she moves in does not seem to know what to make of her and her behaviour and therefore classifies her as mad, but only “a little.” The narrator hints at the fact that there remain doubts as to whether she is actually mad or simply pretending to be; had she

been given the choice of returning to her former reasonable state, and had been capable of realizing the meaning of the offer, she might have declined it on the ground that you have in reality more fun out of life when a little off your head. (130)

9 Miss Malin does not actively seek to overthrow or flaunt the rules and conventions set up by her fellow beings. She moves freely within society and remains blissfully unconcerned regarding “what sort of figure she [cuts]” (131). It is indicative of foot-off-the-ground novels that their protagonists never face real danger; that “trotz ihres Leichtsinns [ihnen] nichts wirklich Schlimmes zustoßen [kann]” (Schabert 157). In this respect, Miss Malin differs from the exemplary foot-off-the-ground person: although the short story has an open ending, there are certain passages that foreshadow her death. However, Miss Malin does not show any fear of the imminent danger; the narrator describes her as “perfectly indifferent to what should become of her” (Dinesen 124).

10 Strikingly, Miss Malin’s full name is “Miss Malin Nat-og-Dag,” that is, Miss Night-and-Day. At first glance, her name represents contradictory elements; however, the coordinating conjunction “and” gives an indication of their inextricability. Seemingly opposing elements can also be found in the motto of the Nat-og-Dag family, “The sour with the sweet” (150). The preposition “with” suggests a close connection between the two binary terms and foreshadows Miss Malin’s indifferent attitude towards life. Throughout the story it becomes apparent that the statements she makes very often include contradictory elements that undermine opinions she voices in other passages. Miss Malin is not governed by any coherent point of view but expresses freely what she believes to be true – or maybe just amusing – at any given moment in time. She does not act subversively and does not deconstruct oppositions in order to change established “truths”; Miss Malin has no interest in converting people and is nonchalantly indifferent to conventions and hierarchical beliefs. It is this mixture of indifference and particularity that for the purpose of this essay we will take to be the defining characteristic of eccentricity. And it is in this respect that Miss Malin perfectly mirrors the main tenor of the short story as a whole. This effect is the result of a narrative technique which relies on a constant shifting of focus and a narrative non-commitment to the

events narrated. The hypothesis I will be working on is that eccentric texts are precisely such texts which translate what I have described as the characteristics of the “eccentric” Miss Malin into their own artistic vision and literary technique. They will therefore avoid centring themselves in terms of narrative or content; they will maintain an indifference to the various worlds and world views narrated in them.

Telling stories and inventing identities

11 The following passage illustrates how the different stories told in “The Deluge” render the text itself eccentric. On one level, the story’s many stories-within-the-story draw attention to the absence of a fixed centre and highlight the way in which the focus of the story is constantly changing, trying to avoid focus altogether as it were, preventing the story from building up an ethical, philosophical, or even just narrative centre. At the same time, it becomes apparent that the stories the characters choose to tell serve to expose not only the constructed but in fact the invented nature of reality and identity, especially in that seemingly most urgent identity category: gender. It is this in-differentiation of gender which suggests a specifically queer reading.

12 In order to learn more about those companions who have taken temporary shelter with him from the ever-encroaching flood and to “remember what life be really like,” the Cardinal alias Kasparson invites Miss Malin, Calypso and Maersk, the fourth companion, to relate the stories of their lives (Dinesen 139). It is not until later on in the night that he reveals his true intentions to Miss Malin: he did not ask them to narrate their stories to learn more about their personality and life in general, but to “create” the night. Susan Hardy Aiken points out that “[when] the ersatz Cardinal invites his companions to reveal their identities, then, it is in terms that make ‘self’ inseparable from fabrications [...]” (90). Kasparson is not interested in learning the “truth” about the other characters but in putting together his own personal piece of art. He believes that “few people can say of themselves that they are free of the belief that this world which they see around them is in reality the work of their own imagination” (Dinesen 180). In this respect Kasparson, an actor by trade, sees himself as a puppeteer who manipulates his fellow beings to create reality – *his* reality. At first, this may seem an outrageous act of hubris; however, he concedes that every human being has the privilege of creating his or her own reality independent of others. Therefore, while he may tell Miss Malin “I am genuinely proud of having made you, I assure you,” we know that from her perspective, she may very well have made him (181).

13 This scene shows that there is not one “true” reality but that numerous “realities” exist more or less independently of one another. It stresses that reality is always determined by individual perception, is even an effect of a more or less conscious creative act. Throughout “The Deluge,” the reader is confronted with a barrage of shifting truths and realities, a refusal on the part of the text to establish any one truth as its centre. It is this that we may posit as a key element in the establishment of an eccentric text: the way in which given truths, realities and focal points shift unpredictably throughout the narration. This can be clearly seen within “The Deluge” where the thread of the story does not follow a teleological objective but changes from one story to the next.

14 “The Deluge At Norderney” features different stories of creation – creations that fail and creations that appear to be successful. In all of them, it seems that the characters inhabit their own and each other’s fantasies, even down to the fact that their gendered identities appear phantasmic. Miss Malin begins the story of Calypso’s previous life, a story that involves different stages of creation, with the theatrical words, “I will lighten the darkness of this night to you, by impressing upon it the deeper darkness of Calypso’s story” (152). These words of introduction hold promise of a dramatic story and resemble the beginning of a tale of fiction rather than the account of a young person’s life. They hint at the fact that Miss Malin is not interested in relating simple facts but in entertaining her companions with her narration and that basic biographical facts do not seem enough to her to portray her goddaughter adequately. Miss Malin describes Calypso as a product of various creators, amongst them Calypso herself. The first person to influence and shape her was her misogynistic uncle Count August Platen-Hallermund, “Count Seraphina” as Miss Malin calls him. Count Seraphina is obsessed with the idea of turning his castle Angelshorn into a place devoid of any form of female existence. Yet, as Miss Malin recounts, “in the very centre of it he had, most awkwardly for himself and for her, this little girl about whom he had doubts as to whether or not she might pass as an angel” (152). Count August accepts his niece as long as she is a child and “[takes] pleasure in her company, for he had an eye for beauty and grace.” At this early stage of her life, Calypso does not appear explicitly female to her uncle. He takes great effort to dress her in boy’s clothes and suppress anything that could reveal that she is not that most “angelic” of creatures, a boy. Miss Malin believes that Seraphina

was much occupied by the thought of showing himself to the world as a *conjuror*, a high white Magician, capable of transforming that drop of blood of the devil himself, a girl, into that sweet object nearest to angels, which was a boy. (152, my emphasis)

15 It seems, then, that Count Seraphina has very clear gender notions – there are boys and girls and he prefers the former – but at the same time that he thinks that these gendered

creatures can be turned into one or the other as desired. Miss Malin's first interpretation of Count August's efforts suggests that he wishes to turn Calypso into a boy to demonstrate the "conjuring" power of his will to the world. Furthermore, it suggests that Miss Malin is only able to think in pairs of oppositions, in this case of boys and girls and of heaven ("angel") and hell ("devil"). Yet she has second thoughts and adds, "[or] perhaps he even dreamed of creating a being of its own kind, an object of art which was neither boy nor girl, but a pure Von Platen" (152). This would mean that Seraphina wishes to turn Calypso into an unimaginably gendered *objet d'art* while denying her any human qualities, making her a "pure Von Platen." It also, contrary to Malin's first interpretation, annihilates any form of opposition and replaces it with non-existence ("neither boy nor girl"). Arguably, the quality of being "neither girl nor boy" could refer to androgyny. Androgyny, however, would consist of a fusion of male and female, a "both ... and" of gendered attributes, while the use of "neither" annihilates both options without establishing a new one that could be seen as endowed with human qualities. Miss Malin's interpretations of the Count's actions, whether of her own invention or not, demonstrate that her way of thinking turns on a point of radical de-categorization in terms of human gender: neither the one nor the other nor a third consisting of a fusion of the two.

16 Yet, as Miss Malin informs her listeners, Seraphina fails in his mission. He realises that he is unable to create the being he desires Calypso to be. Whereas Count August gives up and shuns what was supposed to become his masterpiece, Kasparson continues pursuing his own personal goals of inventing himself without any scruples. He reveals that he murdered the very Cardinal whom we have so far taken him to be to be able to take his place.¹ Again it appears as if there were a firm identity category to be established, that of being someone else, "the Cardinal." But "the Cardinal" for Kasparson is not so much a personality he wishes to assume as it is an image in the eyes of others. For all he ever desired in life was for the ordinary people to worship him: "If they [the peasants and fishermen] would have made me their master I would have served them all my life" (179). As these people prefer the Cardinal to him, Kasparson thinks that he has to *become* the Cardinal in order to win the people's admiration. He realises that they will never admire him as long as he remains the Cardinal's attendant.

17 Given the different frames within the story, it seems feasible that someone can literally take somebody else's place as Kasparson remarks to Miss Malin: "Not by the face shall the man be known, but by the mask" (179). He is convinced that "at the day of judgement" God

¹ Sara Stambaugh considers Kasparson Cardinal Hamilcar von Sehestedt's alter ego (cf. 88-89) but the text makes clear that these two characters cannot be mistaken for one (Dinesen 176).

will not be able to call him a bad actor or condemn him for the crime he committed (179). Retrospectively, he is convinced that he has managed to create his most perfect illusion, his best performance of all times. He believes that the people, who admired him as the Cardinal, without knowing that he was simply the Cardinal's servant, will recall that there was a "white light" over the boat in which Kasparson-as-Cardinal braved the flood with them (179). In this way, encompassed by a (genuine?) halo, the Cardinal turns into a saintly figure without anybody knowing that the person they saw was not the Cardinal but, in fact, his murderer, and – which is more disturbing – without Kasparson seeming to mind. Once again, "identity" seems to be not only a matter of invention but in terms of its very existence also a matter of indifference. The beginning of the story foreshadows the truth of Kasparson's idea that it is "by the mask" that these characters will be "known," not by any identity markers of their own, in Kasparson's case not even that most basic of identity markers, his name: "After the flood it was said by many that he [the Cardinal] had been seen to walk upon the waves" (122). "Truth" itself becomes marginal, a matter of indifference as Kasparson knows that he will probably not survive the night and that his creation will not in fact have changed the way in which the peasants and fishermen have always perceived the person called Kasparson.

18 Three out of the four companions tell stories to communicate to their listeners the way they perceive – or wish to perceive – their or other people's former lives. Whereas the actor does not at first reveal his true intentions, Miss Malin makes it clear from the beginning that she believes she has contributed to having created her goddaughter Calypso. She tells Maersk, a young man who has also had the experience of having been the "creation" of another person: "I am making [Calypso], as much as my old friend Baron Gersdorff ever made you" (150). The truth these words hold is illustrated by Calypso's reaction to parts of the story her godmother recounts in her place. When Miss Malin tells her audience about Calypso's decision to "cut off her long hair, and to chop off her young breast" in order to "mutilate and desexualize herself," Calypso "began to listen with a new kind of interest, as if she herself was hearing the tale for the first time" (155; Stambaugh 87). At this point of the story, Miss Malin seems to allow her fancy full flight and starts embellishing Calypso's story on a grand scale. By modifying her past, Miss Malin effectively takes part in "making" and shaping the Calypso the others become acquainted with. In doing so, Miss Malin does not merely modify and create Calypso's past, but also shapes her present and future.

19 As Miss Malin states, Calypso "had to create herself" (154). Although Miss Malin emphasises this, it becomes obvious that by telling her story it is Calypso's godmother who really creates, maybe even invents, Calypso. Miss Malin recounts that Calypso is not able to

“create” herself and to free herself from her uncle until she enters a room with “a long looking glass on the wall” (155). It is here that she recognises her own beauty. On seeing the reflection of her half-naked body along with that of a painting showing nymphs, fauns and satyrs in the mirror, Calypso learns to acknowledge her own “loveliness” and reject her uncle’s rules (cf. 156). Miss Malin tells her listeners that

[...] what surprised [Calypso] and overwhelmed her was the fact that these strong and lovely beings were obviously concentrating their attention upon following, adoring, and embracing young girls of her own age, and of her own figure and face, that the whole thing was done in their honour and inspired by their charms. (156)

20 With regard to this scene, Aiken stresses that “unlike the Lacanian construction of the mirror stage, Calypso’s jubilant self-recognition leads not to fragmentation, alienation and acceptance of the law of the father as the price of identity but to ‘a great harmony’” (106). Calypso’s discovery convinces her that she does not have to accept her fate at Angelshorn but that “she [has] friends in the world” (Dinesen 156). The discoveries she makes that night encourage her to leave the castle and to turn to her godmother. Previous to her departure, she enters her sleeping uncle’s bedroom. On looking at what she believed to be “a minister of truth, an arbiter of taste,” she comes to realise that there is no longer any reason for her to fear him since she was “a hundred times as strong as he” (157). Remarkably, she is not inclined to resent Count August – she does not regard herself “a freed slave, but a conqueror with a mighty train, who could afford to forget” (157). If she referred to herself as a “freed slave,” she would have to accept having been a “slave” at some point. Yet Calypso renounces the social system that governs Angelshorn – a system that first rendered her “neither a boy nor a girl” and after puberty invisible – and refuses to make use of terminology that would locate her within this system. As a figure rendered invisible, she ceased belonging to the centre of the exclusively male society long ago and only led an existence on its periphery. Earlier that night, she had hoped that by mutilating her body she would be accepted into her uncle’s exclusive circle again. However, the discovery she makes in front of the mirror changes her mind – she no longer aspires to be part of Angelshorn, nor does she seek any other, alternative centre of meaning beyond the realisation of her own imperial indifference. This scene shows that it is not only Miss Malin who remains indifferent to society’s expectations but that Calypso also gradually learns to distance herself from the society she moves in, to turn away from it not as a “freed slave” but with the indifference of “a conqueror with a mighty train, who could afford to forget.” The indifference an eccentric holds for his or her surroundings is not governed by the nature of the society in which he or she moves but is an intrinsic feature

of establishing a position one may once again phrase in the words of Miss Malin: neither the one nor the other of anything.

Differently Queer

21 According to Linda G. Donelson and Marianne Stecher-Hansen, “the young woman Calypso [...] realizes her *true nature* by gazing into a mirror. In studying an erotic painting, she comes to understand the power and pleasure of being a woman” (46, my emphasis). With regard to the diegetic level of Calypso’s story as told by her godmother, this statement is accurate. Calypso learns that she does not have to observe the rules of her uncle and that his misogynistic worldview has little validity. Yet set against the background of the short story, it becomes obvious that this only touches the surface: Calypso’s is one of various stories told that night to entertain the other companions.

22 It remains open to what extent the characters choose to mislead their listeners. However, it becomes obvious that they are able to invent their respective identities in the same way as they are able to invent the stories they tell, whether these are based on facts or not. In this light, identity does not appear coherent and persistent but rather inconsistent and subject to a changeable will. With regard to gender identity, Judith Butler points out that certain “words, acts, gestures, and desires produce the effect of an internal core or substance [of identity]” and continues by stating that these

acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.” (185, emphasis in the original)

Butler suggests that gender is a result of performative acts and that, just like the identities the characters in “The Deluge” invent, it is neither static nor stable. Dinesen’s story, however, goes beyond this in that the entities constituted by these “words, acts, gestures, and desires” have no identity “substance” at all but remain entirely indifferent to such a notion of a “core.”

23 At an earlier point of the story, Miss Malin informs Maersk that she is searching for a nurse, governess, tutor, and “a *maestro*” for Calypso and that he is “to be all that” (150, emphasis in the original). She believes that Maersk can embody all these roles and ignores the fact that she assigns female as well as male gendered roles to him: she does not naturally link gender to specific tasks. This opinion reflects the basic ideas of Queer Theory which criticises heteronormative categorisations and works against “normalisierende Normierungen rund um Geschlecht und Sexualität” (Degele 15).

24 However, in the same story, we actually find various different positions towards gender and identity such as, for example in a later passage in which Miss Malin relates the circumstances of Calypso's life to Maersk, the Cardinal and Calypso herself. As she tells her listeners, Calypso's problem, contrary to Maersk's, results from being rendered invisible by her uncle and his followers. Whereas Maersk could not escape being the centre of attention in his previous life as a singer and son of a nobleman (Maersk is no stranger to being another person's artefact), Calypso did not receive any attention at all. At Angelshorn, "she did not exist for nobody ever looked at her" (154). In Miss Malin's opinion, being is closely linked to being *acknowledged* and requires creators. Therefore she states, "The loveliness of women is created in the eye of man" (154). Her words hint at the fact that, in her opinion, "loveliness" does not exist as such but only comes into existence if man is willing to recognise it, that "woman" is not real if "man" does not approve of her beauty. Yet in a previous sentence Miss Malin states that she is convinced that Calypso "would have adorned the court of Queen Venus, who would very likely have made her the keeper of her doves" (154). Here Calypso would have been able to exist independent of man's acknowledging gaze – a female goddess would have approved of her. Neither of these two statements takes into account that Calypso is also credited with having recognized her "loveliness" in her *own* acknowledging gaze. While in both of her statements Miss Malin assigns her niece – and women in general – rather passive roles, this forms a strikingly stark contrast to the life Miss Malin herself is said to have led. These opposing attitudes and statements reflect Miss Malin's "unfixed," uncentered position. Aiken notes that Miss Malin "constitutes so extreme a contradiction that she can be accounted for only under the sign of 'madness'" (98). Little is gained by trying to define this eccentric character and her perspective on life since she refuses to remain fixed in any one point of view. The narrator likewise makes no comment on the validity of the stories told and passes no judgement. At its core, then, "The Deluge" expresses a diversity of viewpoints on life and reality without taking sides in terms of morals or even "truth" and constitutes itself as a text without a centre.

25 However, it appears that the characters are willing to try to seek salvation in that most centred of institutions, marriage. To end her search for a person who can be everything to Calypso that Miss Malin wants him to be, she initiates a wedding between Calypso and Maersk. In this way, like Kasparson, Miss Malin is able to create her "picture" and to continue making "her" Calypso in accordance with the most sacred of heteronormative customs. As her acts of creation are always linked with telling stories and creating worlds, she allows herself to be inspired by Jonathan Maersk's reaction to her telling of Calypso's story:

“If I had been in the castle of Angelshorn [...] I should have not minded dying to serve this lady” (159). She comes up with the idea of celebrating a wedding, solemnly telling the prospective bride and groom: “Come Jonathan and Calypso [...] it would be sinful and blasphemous were you two to die unmarried” (159). Driven by her fancy, she invents a romantic plot and tries to convince the two young people that they are (heteronormatively) destined for each other and that “[they] have been brought here from Angelshorn and Assens, into each other’s arms” (159). While up until that moment neither Calypso nor Jonathan had any romantic feelings for each other, Miss Malin’s inspirational words seem to have the power to change that. She assures Calypso that Jonathan left the boat in order to be with her and adds in an all-knowing voice, “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it” (159). Jonathan, who “had not even, at the time, been aware of the girl’s existence,” confirms that he left the boat for the sole purpose of being with Calypso. Subsequently, the two young people act out the roles Miss Malin assigns them without questioning her authority. Once more the heterodiegetic narrator of “The Deluge” mentions Miss Malin’s imaginative power and states that “it was enough to sway anybody off his feet” (159). In order to proceed with the ceremony, Miss Malin asks the (fake) Cardinal to create a “new marriage rite” since their uncertain situation does not allow for conventional rituals. She even toys with the idea of overcoming time and tells the couple, “[one] kiss will make it out for the birth of twins, and at dawn you shall celebrate your golden wedding” (160). When it comes to creating realities or “making” people within “pictures,” temporal aspects do not seem carry weight.

26 As mentioned earlier, the foot-off-the-ground person is “anders ohne subversive Absicht. Sie hebt ab, weil sie nie die richtige Bodenhaftung hatte, weil sie plötzlich Lust dazu bekommt, weil sich eine günstige Gelegenheit dazu bietet” (Schabert 154). Miss Malin seizes the opportunity of the presence of a young man, a young woman and a “Cardinal” to continue creating the night. Kasparson, impersonating the Cardinal, actively engages in her game. Playing the role of the man he murdered, he alters the traditional wedding ceremony at his will (161). The wedding ceremony is not held for sentimental reasons but because of Miss Malin’s desire to be responsible for shaping the night. In general, people marry out of love, because they are expected or even forced to, or simply for financial reasons. None of these reasons apply in this case since, as Miss Malin rightly puts it, with death almost upon them, they “have no need for procreation,” “run but little risk of fornication” and could not escape each other’s company even if they wanted to (160). Miss Malin’s intentions are of a playful nature; she plans the ceremony because she wishes to add fanciful details to “her” night.

27 In general, marriage is part of the heteronormative system that includes “Institutionen, Denkstrukturen und Wahrnehmungsmuster, die Heterosexualität nicht nur zur Norm stilisieren, sondern als Praxis und Lebensweise privilegieren” (Degele 19). Clearly, Miss Malin’s invented wedding ceremony does not fit this ticket as without procreation, sex, or indeed very soon without life, there is no life style to privilege or heteronormative regime to practice. But neither is it an act of subversion: she does intend to defeat the traditions and conventions that a wedding ceremony usually entails. Instead, she is interested in getting all her companions involved in performing a play – *her* play. It is at this point that a queer analysis has its shortcomings since it must be stressed that Miss Malin does not show any interest in *challenging* social norms but rather remains indifferent to the institutions of marriage and family beyond the confines of her own artistic imagination.

28 Miss Malin does not display any interest in future events. She does not arrange the wedding to secure the future but to entertain her present company. In this respect, she takes a position opposite to what Lee Edelman terms the “reproductive futurism” (2) which characterizes heteronormativity. Speaking from a political viewpoint, Edelman states that “politics [...] remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its Inner Child” (3). He describes how most actions within society are carried out to serve future purposes and “links queer theory to the death drive in order to propose a relentless form of negativity in place of the forward-looking, reproductive and heteronormative politics of hope” (Halberstam 823). Although Miss Malin organises the wedding, she encourages her companions to live for the present rather than project their hopes onto the future. In this, she is neither a proponent of “futurism” nor of Edelman’s “no futurism” but remains indifferent with regard to the demands of teleology. It becomes evident that she pays no regard to social conventions or economic benefits. Her form of negativity is not political; she does not engage in a political negativity that promises, as Halberstam describes it, “to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment” (826). Miss Malin simply turns away from the outside world and pursues her path without allowing anybody to disturb her.

Conclusion

29 This essay shows the extent to which “The Deluge At Norderney” is concerned with telling stories, inventing truths and creating realities and why these aspects are interesting from a queer perspective and how they additionally make the story eccentric. The way in which the characters repeatedly reinvent themselves and their life stories creates a profound

indifference to notions of stability and truth. With regard to Queer Theory, Nikki Sullivan states that “as a deconstructive strategy, [Queer Theory] aims to denaturalise heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, sociality, and the relations between them” (81). The emphasis here lies on deconstructive strategy: queer approaches pursue a political goal and aim at showing that human perception and society are subject to discursive mechanisms. While it is worthwhile to apply this theory to texts like “The Deluge,” this essay shows that it does not suffice to explore the text satisfactorily. Eccentric texts are not subversive in the sense that they make a point of disclosing power formations or of actively opposing hierarchies. Rather, they remain indifferent to actions that occur in any established centre. It is with regard to this eccentric positioning that queer approaches fall short. The indifference that becomes apparent on different levels of eccentric texts derives from the awareness that any action carried out by humans can only ever be carried out within the confines of human society and is always limited by human perception. Rebelling against these confines or even entire systems would merely confirm them from a different point of view while precisely the same framework and limitations would apply. Therefore eccentric texts such as “The Deluge At Norderney” do not aim to instruct or to convey an ideologically angled message but remain detached from the *doxa* and its implications.

30 As Sullivan describes the “relationship between reader and text” with reference to Foucault and Barthes, “We are always [...] implicated in the production of meaning and identity, and hence are both agents and effects of systems of power/ knowledge” (189). That is to say, the reader always participates in the process of producing *text* in the Barthesian sense (cf. Barthes 1470-1475). In this sense, readers always engage with and develop the texts they read, even the eccentric ones. Yet on a different level a text such as “The Deluge At Norderney” and its stories-within-stories often slips away and deliberately risks leaving its readership entirely disoriented.

31 The complex structure of “The Deluge At Norderney” and its various narrative voices succeed in mystifying the reader concerning his or her reception and understanding of the story. In addition, it becomes obvious that this short story does not seek answers and conclusions but embraces disengagement. This is characteristic of the way in which eccentric texts display a subversive quality after all, though not one aimed at establishing new *doxa* and irrespective of the statements made or the actions carried out in the text itself. On a textual level, the queer aspects of an eccentric text can be seen in the way in which it succeeds in maintaining a fluid and unstable quality and in the way it does not acknowledge the readership as its centre but revolves around its own core.

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