Rainer Emig

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Culture from the Margins

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Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische
Daten sind im Internet über www.dnb.de abrufbar.

wbg Academic ist ein Imprint der wbg
© 2023 by wbg Academic, Darmstadt
Die Herausgabe des Werkes wurde durch die
Vereinsmitglieder der wbg ermöglicht.
Gedruckt auf säurefreiem und
alterungsbeständigem Papier.
Printed in Germany

Besuchen Sie uns im Internet: http://www.wbg-
wissenverbindet.de

ISBN 978-3-534-45028-2

Elektronisch ist folgende Ausgabe erhältlich:
eBook (PDF): 978-3-534-45029-9

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Acknowledgements

This book results from years of engaging with the concept of eccentricity. Like many projects it was triggered by a rather naive observation: why does eccentricity play such a large part in assessments of Englishness, both by the inhabitants of the British Isles and by foreigners? What does this concept really signify? Where does it come from? Is it harmless, trivial even, or does it have more serious implications? Is it still alive, or are we merely dealing with its remote echo today?

My students at Cardiff University, where I occupied the eccentric position of a German lecturing in English Literature, and at Regensburg University in Germany, where I again appeared somewhat exotic at first, as a new professor with more experience of the British system than the German, were among the first to help me structure my ideas. They suggested new and often exciting ways of exploring the above questions, all the way from Medieval saints to rave parties, while asking the hardest questions, some of which even the present book can only acknowledge, but not solve. To my students this book therefore owes a great debt.

Cardiff deserves my gratitude for permitting me to teach eccentricity as part of their MA courses in English Literature and Critical and Cultural Theory, while Regensburg gave me the chance to continue the work with students in advanced seminars. My colleagues in Regensburg also patiently sat through several presentations of my material, and even pretended to enjoy them. This continued at Leibniz University Hanover, where I held a Chair in English Literature and Culture, and Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, where I am currently employed in the same function. The same applies to various conference audiences in Britain, Germany, and elsewhere.

Wolfgang Funk was an incredibly fast, accurate, and intelligent provider of sources and references and a very helpful reader of my draft for stylistic excesses and logical inconsistencies. Johanna Marquardt also found my approach stimulating in conjunction with her own project on Flann O'Brien.

Gerald Siegmund, as always, has patiently lived with my project for years.

All remaining mistakes and inaccuracies are entirely mine.

Introduction: Eccentricity – Problems of the Concept

Even the term 'eccentricity' provokes unease. Is it not an artificial category? Does one not rather speak of 'eccentrics' as individuals or 'eccentric' as a label for behaviour, expression, or style? Does eccentricity deserve the status of a debatable concept at all?

These questions are justified, and they echo established attitudes in cultural debates that relegate eccentric forms and styles to the realm of the marginal and individual without granting them sufficient relevance to deserve a structural, historical, ideological, in short, a theoretical investigation. A survey of the available literature on the topic is instructive. It is characterised by an odd contradiction: on the one hand, books on eccentrics abound. There are countless biographies that present their objects – either implicitly or explicitly – as eccentric. There are also a vast number of more general case studies of eccentric travellers, collectors, scientists and inventors, or even eccentrics in general. They all follow an anecdotal pattern of telling the reader about the particular foibles of some better or lesser-known individuals, while their ambition towards structuring the field does not extend much beyond categorising the individuals presented under more or less useful labels.[1]

On the other hand, this wealth of anecdotal studies is not at all matched by an equally vast literature on the concept, history, or implications of eccentricity in culture. In fact, the very few studies that exist also tend to follow the individual and generally anecdotal patterns, even when their authors stem from areas usually considered quite remote from genteel literary entertainment. David James and Jamie Weeks's *Eccentrics* of 1995, hailed in its cover notes as 'the first-ever scientific study of eccentricity', is a collaborative project undertaken by a neuropsychologist and

[1] See, for instance, John Timpson, Timpson's *English Eccentrics* (Norwich: Jarrold, 1991) or William Donaldson, *Brewer's Rogues, Villains, Eccentrics: An A–Z of Roguish Britons Through the Ages* (London: Cassell, 2002).

a sociologist. But already in the still quite scientific introductory description of its methodological premiss, the book drifts into tautologies and circularities:

> Having decided to undertake a systematic study of eccentricity, the first challenge was to find the eccentrics. They tend to take themselves seriously, and there was a danger that they would not want to be part of a study in which they might fear they would be associated with mental illness or ridiculed. The economic motive – offering prospective subjects money to participate – might not prove to be effective, for eccentrics also tend to be idealistic and are rarely motivated by greed. Moreover, normal surveying methods were not applicable, because eccentrics are rare and geographically spread very wide.[2]

Here, then, is a systematic study that knows its results before it even sets out to select its material. In fact, the study is a mere variant of the common anecdotal collections, as is already evident in its initial section, which relies on the well-publicised case of Joshua Abraham Norton, a self-declared 'Emperor of the United States' in the late nineteenth-century.[3] Throughout its 'systematic study', James and Weeks's book mixes the usual florilegia of well-known cases with some attempts at their own statistics, the latter just as problematic as the field of cultural lore and gossip that they shamelessly exploit, since their contemporary examples were procured by an advertising campaign!

This leads to an abundance of dubious claims, such as 'Although eccentricity is a phenomenon that affects both men and women, male eccentrics have been more widely recorded than their female counterparts, with about nine men eccentrics for every woman in the historical sample', as well as generalising pronouncements, some of which can already be glimpsed in the headings of the chapters of their study. They contain 'The Artists', 'The Scientists', and even 'The Eccentric Personality'.

Ultimately, James and Weeks's book makes decent enough entertainment and adds another facet to the attempt to categorise forms of eccentric behaviour throughout history. Yet it goes badly wrong in its psychological or even psychiatric endeavours, in its attempt to provide an assessment of eccentric personalities in relation to established (albeit not uncontested) concepts of personality disorders. Here, the authors follow a strong individualist and liberal ethos that

2 David James and Jamie Weeks, *Eccentrics* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), p. 13.
3 James and Weeks, *Eccentrics*, p. 1.

sits badly with the many cases of misery that they portray in their book.[4] That the outcome of this mismatch is often mere psychobabble becomes abundantly clear in the conclusion of their study:

> This research has shown that certain types of deviant behavior can be healthy and life-enhancing. The condition of eccentrics is freedom: not for them the stifling habit of obedience. In an era when human beings seem more and more to be the prisoners of their culture and their genes, eccentrics are a refreshing reminder of every person's intrinsic uniqueness. By flouting norms of behaviour that most of us never question, eccentrics remind us how much of our own liberty we needlessly forfeit, and how great is our ability to forge our own identities and shape our own lives, if only we will use it.[5]

The present study, while not even wishing to signal its attachment to the empiricist and scientific principles that James and Weeks's book first subscribes to and then wilfully perverts, will look at the contradictions and grey areas that become visible even in the otherwise vacuous conclusion to their study. What is the relation of eccentricity and deviance in certain cultural moments and formations? Is eccentricity really the manifestation of an intrinsic freedom within the power structures of societies, or does it perhaps negotiate (and define) the relation between the norm and its transgression? What is its role in the, itself historical, idea of individual uniqueness, and does it undergo changes with the changing ideologies that tell us at one point to conform, then even make us forget our conformity in systems of hegemonic consensus, and nonetheless demand of us at other times that we 'forge our own identities and shape our own lives', preferably in a 'healthy and life-enhancing' way?

That it is not merely their attachment to a kind of American subject-psychological naivity that makes James and Weeks's study stumble so blindly into the morass of historical anecdote and self-help manual, but most likely the challenge of conceptualising a non- or not-yet-concept such as eccentricity, is demonstrated by a very different attempt to grant eccentricity some status in contemporary cultural debates. The German quarterly *Kursbuch* (the title is a pun on railway timetables whose literal meaning is also 'manual that shows the way') is a left-wing periodical

4 That they are hardly alone in this attitude can be shown in a number of German contributions to the debate. See, for example, Tina-Katrin Zenker, *Die Außerordentlichen: exzentrisch – genial* (Berlin: VWB, 2001).

5 Weeks and James, *Eccentrics*, p. 180.

that generally debates political issues, such as the demolition of the GDR, the new Russia, or questions of German identity. Occasionally an issue is devoted to a cultural feature, such as design. Its December 1994 issue, however, bears the title *Exzentriker*, 'eccentrics'. It contains essays on dandies, hysterics, revolutionaries, i.e. eccentricity inside the literary and cultural canon, and intellectuals in general.

All in all, however, it does not attempt a systematic inquiry of eccentricity. It rather appears to employ the terms for a somewhat nostalgic and slightly defeatist reassessment of the position of a left-wing intelligentsia after the collapse of socialist regimes. And yet there are some crucial similarities with anecdotal studies of eccentricity and even with pseudo-scientific investigations such as Weeks and James's. *Kursbuch* also chose 'eccentrics' and not 'eccentricity' as its title. Its introductory sketch confirms this impression. It starts with an anecdote that I am reproducing here in translation:

> When the conversation in British anthropologist circles turns towards Professor S., those in the know exchange meaningful glances. The visitor is made to understand that he is *quite a character*. He indeed sports a long beard that extends all the way to his feet, and occasionally even a real nose ornament – some say it is a bone – that is often considered offensive at scientific conferences.[6]

Anecdote is once again the means of approaching eccentricity, here even in a political periodical usually geared towards wider social and ideological analysis, not towards individual peculiarities. Defined etymologically as 'secret meaning' or 'things unpublished', the anecdote belongs to the realm of so-called peritexts or paratexts (the terms are those of the French structuralist Gérard Genette). These are texts that are themselves marginal, such as dedications, prefaces, footnotes, comments, interviews, etc., each of them forming a peritext, while their sum of information equals a paratext.[7] Once again, a dialectic of centre and margin opens up when the favourite form of

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[6] Fritz Kramer, 'Exotismen', *Kursbuch*, 118, *Exzentriker* (December 1994), pp. 1–7 (p. 1):
Wenn in britischen Anthropologenkreisen die Rede auf Professor S. kommt, werfen die Eingeweihten sich bedeutungsvolle Blicke zu. Dem Gast gibt man zu verstehen, er sei *quite a character*. Tatsächlich trägt er einen Vollbart, der bis zu den Füßen reicht, und zuweilen einen veritablen Nasenschmuck – manche sagen, es sei ein Knochen –, der auf wissenschaftlichen Kongressen oft als anstößig empfunden wird.

[7] See the important claims concerning the textual status of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* in Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Die Melancholie der Literatur: Diskursgeschichte und Textfiguration* (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 1997), pp. 93–94.

text for conveying eccentricity appears to be that which is commonly marginal in ordinary literary and cultural communication. Joel Fineman, in one of the few theoretical investigations of the anecdote, indeed grants it a particular bridging function between fiction and the real:

> The anecdote, let us provisionally remark, as the narration of a singular event, is the literary form or genre that uniquely refers to the real. This is not as trivial an observation as might at first appear. It reminds us, on the one hand, that the anecdote has something literary about it, for there are, of course, other and non-literary ways to make reference to the real – through direct description, ostentation, definition, etc. – that are not anecdotal. On the other hand, it reminds us also that there is something about the anecdote that exceeds its literary status, and this excess is precisely that which gives the anecdote its pointed, referential access to the real; a summary, for example, of some portion of a novel, however brief and pointed, is, again, not something anecdotal. These two features, therefore, taken together – i.e., first, that the anecdote has something literary about it, but, second, that the anecdote, however literary, is nevertheless directly pointed towards or rooted in the real – allow us to think of the anecdote, given its formal if not its actual brevity, as a *historeme*, i.e. as the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact. And the question that the anecdote thus poses is how, compact of both literature and reference, the anecdote possesses its peculiar and eventful narrative force.[8]

What is further noteworthy in *Kursbuch*'s introduction to the topic is that it unwittingly reproduces a crucial feature of eccentricity, namely its role in national stereotyping. Eccentricity is strongly associated with the British, more precisely the English, a fact evident in the choice of title of the perhaps most famous literary investigation of the issue, Edith Sitwell's *English Eccentrics*, first published in 1933. It is therefore no coincidence that even the *Kursbuch* introduction uses a British example – and even an English expression ('quite a character') as its shorthand definition of eccentricity.

If eccentricity is one the one hand not so much associated with general cultural features as with individual foibles, yet on the other hand provides general cultural identifications that are strong enough to become national stereotypes, it seems to be a cultural feature whose paradoxical status as a concept that dare not speak its name ought to provoke inquiry. It is the aim of the present study to examine eccentricity not so much as an individual characteristic than as a cultural concept. What will be investigated is whether cultures (and here the study will have to restrict itself to Western cultures, with particular emphasis on Britain, France, and Germany, and

8 Joel Fineman, 'The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction', in: *The New Historicism*, ed. Harold Aram Veeser (New York and London: Routledge, 1889), pp. 49–76 (pp. 56–57).

some glances across the Atlantic to North America) employ and accept a concept of eccentricity in particular historical periods. It will ask if eccentricity, if known, means similar things across cultural epochs. What is its relation to norms and their transgression, in particular to ideas of deviance, particularly madness, perversion, and crime? What, on the other hand, is the role granted to it in cultural production, in concepts of creativity?[9]

The material of the investigation will inevitably derive from existing cultural manifestations, i.e. texts and artefacts. The choice of terms here is cautious, since it is a well-known fact that 'eccentricity' frequently tends to manifest itself in individuals. In the case of fops and dandies, for instance, their cultural 'product' is nothing but themselves. This leads us into the murky territory of biographical criticism, a form of investigation all but discredited in literary scholarship, at least since the attack on the intentional fallacy by the New Critics. Yet if we refrain from positing intentions and speculating about ideas and desires of individuals and attempt to regard their productions of themselves (for which even the French theorist Michel Foucault employs the German term *Lebenskunst*, 'life-art') as texts within a structural and contextual framework, we might be able to overcome the problem.

Far from wishing to treat those individual historical manifestations of eccentricity as mere illustrations of its own general theory, the present analysis wishes to employ them with some critical reservations in mind and in the context of current debates on culture and the arts, but also the role of the individual within them. As one of the crucial problems of this analysis the ambivalence between a formal and a historical approach will emerge. Historically, the term 'eccentricity' emerges from a formalist, indeed a geometrical thinking. Its first recorded uses relegate it to the field of astronomy, where it describes the fact that the orbits of celestial bodies are rarely circular. Even when the concept undergoes a significant shift in the seventeenth century and becomes a label for social status and behaviour, it continues to imply a spatial model of centres and peripheries, established order and increasing disorder.[10] Its analysis will therefore, in part at least, have to follow a structural pattern that asks about the arrangements of social and symbolic spaces that determine the existence and relevance of eccentricity.

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9 A collection of scholarly essays that appeared some years ago contains some interesting selected aspects of eccentricity, e.g. its gender question or attention to readership circles, yet cannot in its very form provide a structured and structural investigation. See Sophie Aymes-Stokes and Laurent Mellet, eds, *In and Out: Eccentricity in Britain* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

10 *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), vol. 5, p. 50.

At the same time, the fact that the term 'eccentricity' changes its meaning implies that a mere synchronic approach that tries to pin down a structure once and for all would fall short of the inevitable historicity of the concept. Indeed, already the original astronomic and geometric use of the term contains at its core the problem of temporality: an orbit is a movement in time, and eccentricity is a feature that emerges only in a particular time span of the observation. A useful analysis will therefore have to merge a structural, intratextual, or synchronic approach with a historical, intertextual, or diachronic one. That this is not without problems can be seen in the theory debates in the Humanities. There, exactly these positions frequently emerge as antithetical: the formalists then accuse the contextualisers and historicisers of methodical lack of attention to forms and structures; the historically and contextually-minded in turn confront the formalists with the accusation of ahistoricity, of ignorance concerning the social, political and ideological contexts that determine a work of art as much as its structures, and indeed might determine these structures as well.

Although the present study cannot contain a suitably detailed outline of these positions and their quarrels and wishes even less to present itself as a way of overcoming them, it will keep its contested theoretical premisses in mind and expose them whenever they present a problem for the analysis. Thus, rather than overcoming a theoretical dispute, it might, if successful, ultimately demonstrate at least how to live with theoretical paradigms that have not only become pluralised in the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first century, but have opened up contradictions that question many of the formerly so seemingly easily available truths and knowledges concerning culture.

With the term 'culture' in its subtitle, the present study aims at pinpointing one of its central convictions, a conviction that is meant to be substantiated in the course of its argument. This belief concerns the way in which cultures construct meaning and significance, strategies which also entail subjectivity and art. Rather than considering eccentricity as a marginal or by-product of cultural processes, the present study wants to demonstrate that, throughout history, eccentricity has acted as a dominant structure with which culture, at least in its Western varieties, has produced and reproduced itself, especially in its works of art and its artistic subjects. Eccentricity would then not be a limited variant of culture to be found in its margins, but embody the very mechanism of cultural (re-)production. Culture would therefore not so much possess margins as appear as the product of these very margins. The relationship and entanglement of centre and margin will consequently form the focus of all the historical analyses of the present study.

This critical reversal of established viewpoints is not meant to imply that being marginal or 'eccentric' is to be or has ever been valued more highly than one usually takes for granted.

Indeed, much of what is to follow will prove that the opposite is true: to be marginal is to be endangered. The more the centre will be shown to depend on margins, the more these margins will be carefully defined, supervised, and indeed policed. Eccentricity will be shown to be definable both 'internally', as the approximate relation to a centre, and 'externally', as the borderline towards that which ceases to be acceptably eccentric and then becomes the persecuted 'outside' of deviance, madness, illness, and crime.

Authorship and authority

As was pointed our above, eccentricity presents some problems for a fashionable approach to interpretation that has firmly internalised Roland Barthes's postulate of the 'death of the author'. Keen on overcoming authorial and biographical criticism with its reduction of the analysis to intentions and personalities, Barthes employed his slogan to re-evaluate the role of the reader in the construction of meaning.[11] Yet what is there to be read when the object of the analysis is the strange living habits of self-declared hermits or the dress-sense of a dandy? What happens in such examples appears to be a merger of author and text. This does not disqualify Barthes's position: by presenting themselves as constructed out of and participating in cultural codes, eccentrics still invite us to ascribe meaning to them, their behaviour, and sometimes the artifacts they produce, even when these rarely resemble the 'texts' with which literary or cultural scholars are familiar. In fact, a 'Barthesian' approach to eccentricity can easily be shown to assume the function of an act of historic justice: too often eccentric personalities and manifestations were relegated to possessing little or no value for the cultures they inhabited. Yet the fact that they have remained with us, at least as stimulating anachronisms and departures from the norm, indicates that reading processes have been at work throughout history which did not rely on the traditional concept of authors authorising interpretation through their personalities and intentions.

This is the point where Michel Foucault's critical extension of Barthes's idea of the 'death of the author' comes into play. In his essay 'What is an author?', he points out the power issues behind

[11] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in: *Image – Music – Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 42–48.

ascriptions of authorship and emphasises the link between author and authority.[12] Working with what became known as Foucault's archaeological strategy, he pointed out that all historical notions of authorship require an underlying understanding of authority, cultural power. This understanding, however, shifts throughout history. It is itself a cultural construct posing as an implicit ontology, and it is reinforced by the authorised 'authored' texts and the authors that it produces in tandem.

This idea of culture authorising certain utterances and in doing so producing both authors and authority is highly relevant for the discussion of eccentricity. This might appear surprising at first: is it not a characteristic of eccentricity that it somehow evades the authority of hegemonic culture, that the implicit or explicit authorities do not care for it, and that its protagonists do not acquire established and lasting authority? This is indeed correct. Yet power, this is another crucial issue that Foucault investigates, relies for its manifestations on the existence of people and realms that are seemingly disempowered and powerless. If everyone had power, no one would have it. If power was distributed evenly within a culture, it would cease to exist, as would institutions, canons, etc. Anarchism is the ideology that aims to achieve such a state – with many attendant problems within its own logic.

Policing the margins – Marginalising dissidence

Power, as Foucault tells us, relies for its own establishment on its opposite: powerlessness. More than that, it relies on resistance, since power does not simply rest in institutions, but in its own performance. Simply building a police headquarters does not guarantee power; the police also have to assert their power continuously, and to do so, they have to find subjects to protect, guide, but also to arrest.[13] The etymology of the crucial term 'subject' is instructive here: it derives from the same root as 'submission', and the French sociologist Louis Althusser developed a theory that, in order to become a subject, a what he calls 'interpellation' (a mixture of being called,

[12] Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in: *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), pp. 113–138. For a detailed discussion of contemporary theoretical positions concerning authorship, see Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1992).

[13] Foucault's writings on power are now gathered in Michel Foucault, *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al., *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 2002).

being called up, and being ordered to do something) by ideology is required.[14] The East German author Heiner Müller dramatized this scenario in his play *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* [The Road to Wolokolamsk], in which two policemen fear the end of their authority when everyone starts conforming to the rules. In order to safeguard their power, one of them is then selected to break the law by driving across a red light.[15]

Within the Foucauldian model of power as a reciprocal relation, eccentricity assumes a tricky position: by being relegated to the margins it implicitly confirms the existence of a centre (something that will become highly potent in the emergence phase of modern eccentricity, the seventeenth century). By struggling for recognition and against oblivion, it challenges hegemonic and canonical thinking in a culture. In the cases where eccentricity manages to overthrow the existing hegemony (we will see examples of this in many periods with a particular cultural climax in Romanticism), it becomes itself this power. In consequence, it loses its eccentric status, becomes the norm, but also immediately calls into existence new eccentricities continuing the process.

This entanglement of power and resistance, hegemonic identity which remains invisible and unquestioned and the moments and manifestations that violate such unspoken agreements, once again points towards the necessity to examine both individual manifestations of eccentricity and the larger areas where culture itself (especially British culture) not only displays eccentricity, but moreover defines itself through it. The subsequent section demonstrates that already in the 'prehistory' of eccentricity the status of Britain was negotiated on the basis of terms resembling eccentricity with its interplay of centre and margin.

Crucial for the functioning of this dialectic in Foucault's thinking is visibility. In several of his early works he emphasises the nexus of discipline and surveillance. The clinic and the development of our modern concept of madness are related to it, as are the prison and its new understanding of crime and its control, but also the military and the school system.[16] Madness is certainly of relevance for the discussion of eccentricity, since here a distinction manifests itself that has traditionally concerned writers on eccentrics. They have always been at pains to point

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[14] Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and the State', in: *Lenin, Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1977), pp. 160–162.

[15] Heiner Müller, *Wolokolamsker Chaussee I: Russische Eröffnung*, in: *Shakespeare Factory 1* (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1985), pp. 241–250.

[16] His most detailed elaboration of the topic is *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Random House, 1965).

out that their eccentrics are not mad. What, one must ask, are they then in the Foucauldian model of normality as the result of the creation of a surveying authority and a surveyed normality as a norm? In the discussion of eccentricity as distinct from madness an important structural moment emerges, yet one that only becomes fully historically realised at the time when modern Western culture has devised a consistent concept of madness (though not one of eccentricity). The Foucauldian model is, despite its dialectical dynamics, still a predominantly binary one of outside and inside. In terms of cultural norms, madness is outside normality – in the same way that, with the birth of the clinic, it is now firmly 'inside', after having ceased to lead a peripatetic nomadic existence.[17]

Eccentricity, on the other hand, does not normally find itself imprisoned in mental asylums, hospitals, and jails – in the same way that it is not relegated to the 'outside' of culture. It is not normally perceived to be in its hegemonic and canonical centre either, yet it is also not usually excluded. This points towards a necessary adjustment and differentiation of the binary Foucauldian model. The 'inside' of cultural normality apparently contains its own space for a deviance that is not so 'Other' as to require exclusion. Modern critical terminology has appropriated the word 'margin' for it. As a difference inside the norm, its changing functions will be examined in the course of this study.

Visibility remains a crucial element in this changed dynamic of centre and margin: the centre views the margin with more or less tolerance, but also frequently with disdain. Yet part of the power struggle within this now centric and marginal culture is also the continual gaze of the margin back towards the centre. It is a benchmark of eccentricity that it consistently violates established cultural norms – by transforming, extending, and thereby seemingly ridiculing them. It is telling in this respect that in eccentric manifestations one rarely finds claims that they are challenging a norm; they rather appear to think in terms of their own norms. This shows that the dialectic turns centre and margins into mirrors of one another. Yet it is not a symmetrical mirror, and eccentricity's gaze, as we shall see in the discussion of melancholy in chapter 2, is not directed straight at normality as a form of contest. It is indeed the obliqueness of eccentricity's perspective that will turn out to be its most productive and unsettling quality, an obliqueness that prevents it from entering a simple dialectic or engaging in binary reversions of the norm.

[17] See the chapter 'The New Division' in *Foucault's Madness and Civilization* (pp. 221–240), which is concerned with the novel distinction between crime and madness in the Enlightenment. Still, both continue to function as binary models – with legality and sanity as their opposites.

This in turn means that we might be able to approach the trickiest of issues, the 'normality' of a culture, by looking at its eccentric mirrors. Yet the hierarchy of the gazes still follows the binary model proposed by Foucault: hegemony, culture's agreed and accepted norms, manifests itself in manifold ways, yet remains ostensibly invisible. Eccentricity is generally ostensibly visible, but watched with suspicion and interest by hegemony, whose agents are all of us who subscribe consciously or unconsciously to an idea of normality.[18]

This also explains why gender is of particular interest in debates on eccentricity. As one of the key concepts of culture, it also rests on notions of binaries and hierarchies, thus on power, while visibility is a crucial element in its establishment and performance. In many of the manifestations of eccentricity to be discussed in this study, gender will assume a crucial role. Yet the intimate entanglement of eccentricity and the norm also leads to some significant distortions of views. When James and Weeks claim in their problematic historical survey that men dominate eccentricity by ninety percent to ten, this points towards at least two things. Normality feels less need to survey women with regard to general cultural norms and/or leaves them fewer opportunities for resistance against such centric norms. Alternatively, and this is the position that will emerge in several sections of the present study, femininity itself can be regarded as an eccentric element inside culture's notions of normality – and therefore sees its visibility diminished by becoming residual, like a shadow within a shadow.

The subsequent sections will illustrate in greater detail how the relationship emerges throughout history, what happens when eccentricity gains a name, and what its fortunes have been since then. It will outline as the *modus operandi* of eccentricity two concepts that are by now established currency in literary and cultural studies, yet whose status is radically different: the concept of melancholy, whose genealogy has been well researched by philosophers, scientists, and scholars of literature and culture; and that of carnival, which has become popular in literary and cultural studies since its introduction as a critical model by Mikhail Bakhtin in his study

[18] The crucial theorist of hegemony as a potent form of ideology functioning by consensus is Antonio Gramsci: See *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971). Theories of normality are a fairly recent area of theoretical thinking, with the German scholar Jürgen Link at the forefront with numerous essays and a monograph entitled *Versuch über den Normalismus: Wie Normalität produziert wird*, 2nd revised edition (Opladen and Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1999).

Rabelais and His World, but has experienced little conceptional deepening since.[19] It will further show that the historical genealogy of eccentricity since its introduction as a cultural concept in the seventeenth century depends on a mode that has become of interest to literary scholars since the 1960s: intertextuality. This might surprise at first, since we are accustomed to regarding eccentricity as a unique and individual phenomenon and not as an exchange or a tradition. Yet by focussing in some detail on selected key texts from the history of eccentricity the present study will demonstrate that they develop an implicit and frequently even explicit network. Among these texts are Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833–1834), and Edith Sitwell's *English Eccentrics* (1933). More than that, by linking intertextuality with melancholy and carnival, the study will also argue for an extension of the conventional understanding of intertextuality (and this includes its poststructuralist variants) to include some basic questions concerning the definition of culture. Here, the many uncanonical 'texts' also featured in the present investigation as well as the dominant mode of textualising eccentricity, the anecdote, will be granted their rightful place.

[19] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana State University Press, 1984).

1 The prehistory of eccentricity

Since eccentricity only emerges as a cultural and social term in the seventeenth century, strictly speaking there should not be any cultural manifestation deserving the label before that time. Nonetheless, if the structural model of centre and margin is taken into account and eccentricity is meant to imply a strategic distancing from a centre while remaining in touch and in a productive exchange with this centre, then there are a number of cultural phenomena which represent an 'eccentricity *avant la lettre*' or a 'prehistoric' eccentricity in Western cultures. This chapter will look into some of these facets of cultural history to determine not merely the ancestors of the cultural concept of eccentricity, but also certain cultural formations whose legacy is still noticeable today.

1.1 'Eccentricity' in antiquity

One of the crucial characteristics that historians associate with the development of so-called 'high cultures' is their clearly defined regulation of space. The common benchmark of such cultures is the regulated and fortified city, with walls, central squares, and buildings of pivotal importance, such as temples, capitols, etc. Yet rather than a model of centres and peripheries, these cultures seem to follow a pattern of inside and outside. Be it the Greek city states or the Roman Empire: the question in all of them was that of belonging – of being a citizen or a barbarous alien (the term 'barbarous' interestingly also implies linguistic Otherness) – and not so much that of being a central or marginal part of society.[20]

[20] This applies even to the internal stratifications of those societies: despite the very different ranks, for example of free-born men and slaves, or men and women, the important thing in legal as well as cultural terms was to be 'inside' the system.

Yet even in these clearly spatialised cultures there are interesting manifestations of a dissent within accepted ideological structures. In the first Western high culture, that of Greece, such a manifestation occurs in philosophy, one of the central ideological backbones of politics and state, but also individual life. The figure of Diogenes is today with us as a comical figure of an outsider who preferred life in a barrel to that of a respected teacher and member of society. This Diogenes of Sinope – who is often called Diogenes the Cynic to differentiate him from namesakes, among them his biographer, Diogenes Laertius – far from presenting a marginal comic figure, appears in the many anecdotes that have survived about him (the anecdote being an indication of his usefulness as an illustration for the present study) as a serious opponent of the most refined idealistic philosophy of his age, that of Plato. One of the drastic little vignettes symbolising his attitude has him stomping on Plato's carpet, shouting 'I am stomping on Plato's pride' (to which Plato is supposed to have replied: 'With a different kind of pride').[21] Better known today, since it has become associated with Cynicism, is his dictum 'Get married or remain unmarried: you will regret both.'[22] In a similar way as in his dismissal of the central tenet of most cultures, the marriage bond, Diogenes treated participation in affairs of the state. How much this cynical attitude provoked his contemporaries can be seen in the fictional revenge that the writer Lucian took on Diogenes by marrying him to the courtesan Lais in the afterlife in his *Vera Historia* (II, 18).

Cynicism as a strategic refusal to side with any of the available options, the refusal to come up with positions and to produce 'truths', is as provocative in the discipline of philosophy as it is in everyday social and political life. It gains the greatest poignancy when it refuses to endorse the central elements of classical Western civilization, the family and politics. And yet Diogenes as the founding father of Cynicism does not remove and distance himself from society either. He might anecdotally inhabit a nonconformist abode, but he continues to be active at or near the centre of cultural exchange, as can be seen in the imagined dispute with the much more accepted philosopher Plato. (The wrongly attributed meaning of Cynic as 'dog' might be an unwitting echo of this ambivalence: like dogs, Cynics are omnipresent in culture, yet generally relegated to the margin.)

[21] A detailed discussion of the many possible meanings of this reported exchange are in Kurt von Fritz, *Quellenuntersuchungen zu Leben und Philosophie des Diogenes von Sinope*, Philologicus, Supplement Volume xviii, no. ii (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1926), pp. 13–14.

[22] von Fritz, *Diogenes von Sinope*, p. 14.

Independence is one of the key terms that characterise Cynicism. This is well illustrated by the famous anecdote of Diogenes' encounter with Alexander the Great: when the tyrant invites the poor philosopher to ask a favour of him, Diogenes is supposed to have replied: 'Step aside a bit. You're blocking the sun.'[23] Yet independence never implies isolation and detachment. On the contrary. Be it fictional exchanges with the influential philosopher Plato or the then most powerful man in the Western world, they all prove the simultaneous centrality and unusualness of Diogenes' position. Never does the philosopher of Cynicism leave the dialogue with the dominant forces of his culture. These features combined form benchmarks of eccentricity.

Historians of philosophy frequently relate Scepticism and Stoicism to Cynicism. They share their refusal to accept traditional values and therefore present one of the characteristics of eccentricity. Scepticism in its distancing relativisation is both clearly connected with Cynicism and displays the second characteristic of eccentricity as outlined above: its dialogicity that keeps it in a permanent exchange with that from which it differs. Neither Cynicism nor Scepticism are ultimately possible without a pre-existent point of orientation, a truth or a norm that they interrogate or negate.[24]

Stoicism is a more difficult case in point. It, too, emerged in opposition to existing philosophies, here mainly Epicureanism with its ideal of the happy life brought about by a careful balancing of pleasure and pain. Yet Stoicism denies the ultimate goal of Epicureanism; it questions the existence or rather the possibility of achieving happiness and instead opts for an acceptance of suffering as the greatest object to which philosophy and actual practice can aspire. This sets the Stoics apart from the dominant ideologies of their day, while they nonetheless continued to exert considerable power within their cultures. Stoics were advisors to rulers and often themselves successful and important politicians. Ultimately, even Christianity proves to be influenced by Stoic

[23] von Fritz argues that the anecdote lacks historical plausibility in *Diogenes von Sinope*, p. 27. Yet this does not diminish its symbolic importance.

[24] A very interesting investigation into Scepticism, since it investigates the links between Scepticism and melancholy in a manner resembling the strategy of the present study, is Verena Olejniczak Lobsien, *Skeptische Phantasie: Eine andere Geschichte der frühneuzeitlichen Literatur* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1999). Already in her Preface, Lobsien points out a feature of Scepticism that forms an important link with eccentricity: 'Skepsis ist eine andere Philosophie. Vielleicht ist sie gar keine Philosophie, sondern, wie die Frühe Neuzeit mitunter gemeint zu haben scheint, eher eine Frage des persönlichen Stils …' (p. 7) [Scepticism is a different kind of philosophy. Perhaps it is not really a philosophy at all, but – as the Early Modern period appears to have believed occasionally, a question of personal style …].

ideas, and it is no coincidence that Stoic philosophy has continued to shape Western thinking through the Renaissance and Enlightenment into modernity and postmodernity.[25]

Jesus himself and many of his followers are represented in biblical texts as the equivalents of Diogenes the Cynic and other 'prehistoric' eccentrics. The figure of John the Baptist is perhaps the clearest example of an eccentric that the New Testament provides. Marked out by his ascetic life style, his way of dressing and feeding, he nonetheless maintains vital links with his contemporaries. Indeed, they appear to seek him out as much as he seeks to influence them. In the ultimate symbolic act of baptism, he turns them into something resembling him: followers of a promised Messiah. At the same time, however, he does not seem to wish to persuade them to imitate his behaviour. His separateness is as pronounced as is the dialogue with his contemporaries.[26] A similar ambivalence will be detected in the early Christian hermits and later in the anchorites that we will encounter in the section on Medieval 'eccentricity' below.

Jesus marks himself out as eccentric by his repeated declaration that he is the son of God.[27] At the same time, and this is a central element of Christian teaching, he is God who has decided to share the physicality and the life of ordinary human beings. Within and without – or rather at the extreme borderline of then normal existence, he occupies a space, theologically as well as historically and anecdotally, that can be called eccentric. Similar to Diogenes, his dismissive attitude towards power finds symbolisation in an anecdote, here the temptation by Satan (Matthew 4.1–11; Luke 4.1–13). He also displays a similar awareness and simultaneous denial of the central structures of society: the family and political power. He never marries and in fact encourages his disciples to value their vocation more highly than family bonds and social status ('He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth

[25] For a comprehensive introduction to Stoicism, see John Michael Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

[26] Compare, for instance, Matthew 3.1–4; Mark 1.2–7; Luke 3.2–20 (Luke does not mention the hair shirt and locust-eating that both Matthew and Mark relate, but, like Matthew and Mark and John, mentions John's eventual imprisonment, though not his execution); John 1.6–34 (John omits physical descriptions, but enlarges on the different roles of prophet and messiah). All in all, it is significant that all the gospels are in agreement in granting John a place of importance.

[27] For instance, in Matthew 28.18; Mark 8.38 and 14.62; Luke 7.27; John 1.51 and 4.26. At the same time, there is evidence in the gospels of Jesus' reluctance to be identified as the Son of God by others, especially demons he exorcises (see, for instance, Luke 4.41: 'And devils also came out of many, crying out and saying, Thou art Christ, the Son of God. And he rebuking *them* suffered them not to speak: for they knew that he was Christ'; or Mark 3.11–12: 'And unclean spirits, when they saw him, fell down before him, and cried, saying, Thou art the Son of God. And he straitly charged them that they should not make him known').

son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me'; Matthew 9.37; 'And everyone that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life'; Matthew 19.29; 'My mother and my brethren are these which hear the word of God, and do it'; Luke 8.21). At the same time, he does not denounce marriage, and indeed attributes its with Divine sanction ('What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder'; Mark 10.9), since not everyone is capable of becoming a 'eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake' (Matthew 19.12) and even shows some tolerance towards illicit forms of sexual relations, such as prostitution (Luke 7.37–48). A further 'eccentric' feature is his frequent association with other outcasts, such as lepers and other 'unclean' characters, or simply the poor (Matthew 9.20–22 and 32–33 and 11.5; Luke 8.43–48).

In terms of political power, his measured response towards the trick question concerning his acceptance of Roman rule is significant: 'Render to Caesar the things that are Ceasar's, and to God the things that are God's' (Mark 12.17). A clear-cut denial of worldly power in the shape of refusing to accept Roman coins (they contained the portraits of their god-like rulers after all) would have placed him on the side of political rebels. It would have positioned him 'outside' the rules as a deviant, that is. An acceptance, on the other hand, would have disqualified him as an opportunist by placing him safely 'inside' the ruling power structures (a stance with which Christianity, once established, has had remarkably few problems). His diplomatic reply is both scholastic *avant la lettre* in its subtle distinction of realms of authority as it is ultimately impracticable – and therefore almost cynical again.

Scepticism becomes evident throughout Jesus's 'career', for example in the preposterous act of teaching in the temple when still a young boy (Luke 2.46) or in his many outspoken contradictions of established rules. His ultimate act of self-sacrifice, on which Christian religion rests, is also an expression of Stoicism taken to an extreme, although one could argue that it is a half-hearted Stoicism, since it has not entirely given up the promise of happiness, but only locates it beyond earthly existence.[28]

What becomes the dominant ideological norm for all of Western culture in later years, Christianity, itself starts out as a marginal movement triggered by individuals whose attitudes

[28] For a discussion of the Stoic elements within Christianity, see Marcia L. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought, vols 34–35 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985).

and behaviour mark them out as 'prehistoric' eccentrics. This can teach us a further important aspect of eccentricity. In its flexible historical and ideological positioning towards a shifting centre, it is very well capable of assuming the part of this very centre. (As far as Christianity is concerned, this movement is indeed visible in the fact that it very quickly, indeed under its first pope Peter, established itself in the very centre of the power that prosecuted it: Rome.) The eccentric can therefore become the centric. We shall see below how this manifests itself – when artistic ideology is at stake – in the era of Romanticism. The question provoked by such a reversal is then: does this abolish eccentricity – or does the centring of eccentricity create new eccentricities in new locations?

1.2 Medieval 'eccentricity'

As the cases of John the Baptist and Jesus himself made clear, a self-fashioned eccentric life-style does not of necessity exclude the possibility of creating followers, indeed a movement, an ideology, a religion even. Yet while John the Baptist and Jesus encouraged their followers to imitate them in some crucial respects (including the willingness to become martyrs for their faith), they differ in the propagation of other characteristics of their way of life. While Jesus asked his followers to leave their ordinary bonds of bread-winning, family structures, even political allegiances behind, John the Baptist, though in many ways the more extreme self-fashioning character, seems to have held no such desires. Yet it is interesting that his example proves the model for the first Medieval manifestations of eccentricity. Early Christian hermits fled the life of the teeming cities of their time, which they considered sinful, and sought spiritual purity and purgation in remote and isolated location, in deserts, caves, and forests, on mountains and deserted islands. Sometimes they created spatial detachment themselves in the shape of columns that they climbed up and inhabitated, reputedly for a very long time in some cases of the so-called stylites.

Yet the decentring movement that distanced these extreme believers from their contemporary society also had unexpected effects on the 'normal' people that the hermits tried to leave behind. Attracted by the extraordinariness of their actions and apparently fascinated by their example, they started pilgrimages to their abodes. Rather than self-centred, isolated existences, early Christian hermits thus entered a, sometimes very intense, relation with the cultures they ostensibly despised, to the extent that some of them became important teachers of the church. St Simeon the Stylite (ca. 389–459), for example, appears to have single-handedly generated a world-wide

tourism to his abode in Syria.[29] Medieval anchorites, who insisted on voluntary imprisonment in cells commonly attached to churches, made sure that they could see the altar, the centre of religious worship, from their little prisons – and vice versa a congretation could hardly ignore the presence of an anchorite in their church. They also cleverly pulled strings from their cells, as is well documented, for instance, for the spiritual advisor of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Jutta of Sponheim (ca. 1084–1136), and, of course, for Hildegard herself, who communicated with many of the most important worldly and religious leaders of her day.[30]

The status of being an anchoress offered particular opportunities for women. Otherwise clearly limited to very few accepted social roles (maid, wife, spinster, widow, prostitute), all defined through their relation to men and their authority, the life of a religious recluse offered two things not normally granted to Medieval women: space and time of their own. Despite the strict religious observances followed by anchoresses, there remained much time at their disposal, which enabled some of them, for instance Julian of Norwich (1342–ca.1416) – whose real name is unknown, her adopted one refers to the church of St Julian that housed her – to write long religious tracts. In terms of space, the demands of visibility become evident once again: anchoresses occupy a completely secluded space, but one within a Christian church. They are present *and* invisible, and their space is a self-determined one safe from intrusions from the outside.

This does not mean that the option of becoming a religious recluse was in all cases uncontested by the women's environment. When they left manifestations of their ideas, these usually also included a struggle with doubts that their choice might have been influenced by egoism – and therefore by the devil rather than God. When Julian received her first vision during a life-threatening illness, she debated with herself what would be more egotistical: the desire to stay alive or to join God through death:

> And when I was thirty year old and a half, God sent me a bodily sickness in the which I lay three days and three nights; and on the fourth night I took all my rites of holy church, and went [thought] not to have liven till day. And after this I lay two days and two nights; and on the third night I weened [supposed] oftentimes to have passed, and so weened they that were with me. And yet in this I felt a great loathsomeness [reluctance] to die, but for nothing that was on

[29] See David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 387–388.

[30] See Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen, 1098–1179* (London: Routledge, 1989).

> earth that me liketh to live for, ne [nor] for no pain that I was afraid of, for I trusted in God of his mercy.
>
> But it was for I would have lived to love God better and longer time, that I might by the grace of that living have the more knowing and loving of God in the bliss of heaven. For me thought all that time that I had lived here so little and so short in regard of that endless bliss, I thought: Good Lord, may my living be no longer to thy worship? And I understood by my reason and by my feeling of my pains that I should die; and assented fully with all the will of my heart to be at God's will.[31]

What she is hoping for from life is indeed knowledge of God, i.e. theological truths, something strictly confined to men since the time of St Paul. The tradition of the early Christian church – although aware of the role of women in its ranks as well as that of women in the Old and New Testament – often regarded females as potential trouble-makers in need of control. In St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we read: 'Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but *they are commanded* to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church' (1 Corinthians 34–35). In his first letter to Timothy, he writes: 'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. And I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve' (1 Timothy 11–13).

Julian indeed endeavoured to teach her reading audience theology – and in a form that was truly eccentric *avant la lettre*. Her visions showed her Christ as a mother, i.e. the central religious symbol of her faith in the characteristics of her own gender:

> And thus is Jesus our very mother in kind of our first making, and he is our very mother in grace by taking of our kind made. All the fair working and all the sweet kindly offices of dearworthy motherhood is impropered to the second person, for in him we have his goodly will, whole and safe without end, both in kind and in grace, of his own proper goodness.
>
> I understood three manners of beholding of motherhood in God. The first is ground in our kind making, the second is taking of our kind, and there beginneth the motherhood of grace,

[31] Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*, ed. Marion Glasscoe, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1983). The quoted modernized excerpt derives from Meyer Howard Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt, eds., *The Norton Anthology of English* Literature, 7th edition, vol. 1 (New York and London: Norton, 2000), p. 356. All further references are to this source and are given parenthetically in the text.

> the third is motherhood in working. And therein is forthspreading by the same grace of length and breadth, of high and of deepness without end. And all is one love. (pp. 362–363)

Julian's complicated argument tries to link the abstract doctrine of the Trinity with Medieval ideas of procreation (in which the father provides the embryo in his seed, while the mother gives it substance and shape in her womb). In doing so, she manages to establish a feminine element in the Trinity (this has more recently been attempted by feminist theology which claims that the Holy Spirit can also be conceived as feminine). Julian's problem is, however, that Christ is also a child, a son, as well as a mother of mankind. A further problem is that her thinking relegates the Virgin Mary to the sidelines, the figure who traditionally represents femininity in Catholic theology. At an early stage in her vision, God shows her Mary:

> In this he brought our Lady Saint Mary to my understanding: I saw her ghostly in bodily likeness, a simple maiden and a meek, young of age, a little waxen above a child, in the stature as she was when she conceived. (p. 358)

One could argue that her unorthodox vision of Mary (which she is at pains to correct later on) both highlights the subservient role that women occupy in the teaching of the Medieval church, while her re-gendering of Christ swaps the positions of centre and margin very much in the way that the Introduction of the present study has declared to be a possible manifestation of the eccentric dialectic.

Silencing these unorthodox religious women was a problem when they had achieved prominence. It is no coincidence that the otherwise very courageous Hildegard of Bingen is eager to have her visions authorised by Bernard of Clairvaux and the Pope. Another English visionary, Margery Kempe (ca. 1373–1438), did not have the privilege of leaving behind a worldly existence for one of self-determined solitude, but was a married mother of fourteen children. Her religious visions and the determination they created in her to seek a religious life clashed considerably with her status in society. Although she probably enjoyed some privileges as the daughter of the mayor of the affluent market town of King's Lynn, she had to visit Julian of Norwich to have her visions approved – and commemorates this visit and its results in the text she dictated (she herself was illiterate). An interesting feminine network of dissenting religiosity emerges here. Kempe also resorted to blackmail and bribes to eventually gain permission from her husband

to leave the marriage bond. This, however, did not lead her into a convent or an anchoress's cell, but on a journey to Jerusalem, at the time the goal of Christian crusades.[32]

Christianity does not only contain an eccentric element at its core in the shape of Christ himself. During its history it had to cope with crucial losses, such as that of the Holy Land, the physical stage on which the events of the Bible had taken place, and where its most important relics, those related to Christ's presence on earth, were deposited, to the Muslims. The Medieval church responded to this threat to elements that were at the core of its theological doctrines in two ways. The crusades were the political form in which the now centric and hegemonic power of Christianity asserted itself. Only recently escaped from the persecution of worldly powers and traditionally at least in a sceptical distance from them, it now employed them for a purpose whose violence and bloodshed clearly contradicted the Church's official doctrine. Not unimportantly, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) was one of the most outspoken promoters of the crusades. Yet when this strategy failed to establish lasting dominance over the Holy Land, the Church resorted to two 'eccentric' strategies. The first was the proliferation of relics: now, through the dubious means of body parts of Christ and the saints or supposed fragments of the Holy Cross, a sacred presence could be created everywhere.

Even more cunning in its utilisation of decentering for purposes of strengthening the religious centre is the sudden vogue for Corpus Christi processions, which became popular in the 14th century (they stem from France and were extended to the whole Catholic world in 1264 and then by a decree in 1311). At a time when it became increasingly obvious that no crusade would be able to guarantee lasting Christian possession of the Holy Land (the last crusade to Jerusalem took place between 1248 and 1254), Christ's bodily presence was thereby divorced from his original historical location, decentred that is and diffused, only to achieve even greater theological power. Related to it is the increasing importance of the sacrament of the Eucharist – which ultimately guarantees the actual bodily presence of Christ wherever mass is celebrated. After the loss of a centre follows the proliferation of centres, a tendency that we will re-encounter in a period not frequently compared with the Middle Ages: postmodernity.[33]

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[32] Margaret Gallyon, *Margery Kempe of Lynn and Medieval England* (Norwich. Canterbury Press: 1995).

[33] Lawrence Blair, 'A Note on the Relation of the Corpus Christi Procession to the Corpus Christi Play in England', *Modern Language Notes*, 55:2 (February 1940), pp. 83–95. See also Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Saints are one of the crucial manifestations of eccentricity *avant la lettre* in the Middle Ages. Especially in their female variety they pose a challenge to orthodox normality and its regulatory institutions. It was easier to be 'diagnosed' as possessed by the devil than to be accepted as a spokeswoman of God. But one should not forget that even male saints usually created the basis of their sanctity by dissent from the orthodox teachings and habits of the ruling Church. St Francis and the Franciscans or the Cistercians following the ascetic rules of Bernard of Clairvaux were all initially in opposition to the establishment. In fact, granting them the status of religious orders in their own right often proved a way of incorporating dissent, of making it part of the (now slightly enlarged) norm, when the alternative, exclusion as deviant, i.e. heretic, would have led to the danger of schism.[34]

Yet precursors of eccentricity in the Middle Ages can also be found in the secular sphere. There, it forms a concept that still erroneously colours our perception of Medieval culture as factual truth to the present day, but which only ever existed as part of an intertextual network, as a fiction feeding fiction, that embodies the dialectic of marginalising exceptionality while integrating the exception into the norm. Chivalry embodies this dynamic model of reforming culture's norms through recourse to its margins.

The fifteenth century witnessed a cult of chivalry. Its practitioners considered it a revival, though it is by no means certain that it really possessed actual precedents. Tournaments and chivalric combats (often themselves based on literary romances, such as Layamon's *Brut* from around 1210, the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from ca. 1380, or the most comprehensive Arthurian romance, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* from 1470) were elaborately staged all over Europe. A Burgundian knight called Jacques de Lalaing even lived like a knight errant, travelling Europe in search of knightly combat. Chivalric orders flourished. One of the earliest was Edward III's Order of the Garter, consciously imitating King Arthur's fellowship of the Round Table – which was in turn mentioned in *Sir Gawain and the Green*

[34] Robert Norman Swanson, 'Literacy, Heresy, History and Orthodoxy: Perspectives and Permutations for the Later Middles Ages', in: *Heresy and Literacy, 1000–1530*, ed. Peter Biller and Anne Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 279–293.

Knight![35] Chivalry is therefore a literary phenomenon and an intertextual one and represents what postmodern theory calls a 'simulacrum', a copy without an original.[36]

Nonetheless, it is easy to see which function such elaborate fictions fulfilled: they countered the realities of the day: blood feuds, political intrigues, and civil wars – with their attendant evils of plundering (often of churches and religious houses) and rape. It is no coincidence that the ideal(ised) knight was seen as the defender of women and the church. The civilizing function of chivalry extends to the public and to the private sphere (where it has continued to flourish to the present day). Yet originally the chivalric ideal required as its reference point an idealisation: the perfect knight. This knight, soon fitted out with a religious task, such as the search for the Holy Grail, to distinguish him from ideal secular warriors of earlier tales, is originally an asocial creature, an absolute individualist, not easily and rarely permanently bound to a lord (this, after all, was the basis of the dominant feudal system: allegiance). As a knight errant, he represents clearly what is later called an eccentric: determined by his mission, never really at home in any centre (such as Arthur's court), only truly himself when in search of adventure. It is no coincidence that among those idealised creatures are very extreme types, such as the otherworldly Galahad or the naive Percival. We shall also see in the subsequent chapter how the knight errant becomes a central model for eccentricity – in the shape of Cervantes' Don Quixote.

It is not surprising either that the integrative figure in many Medieval chivalric fictions, King Arthur, remains such as pale character. Habitually and conventionally praised as the greatest knight of all, occupying a static position at his own court, at the centre of the new chivalric norm, he hardly has the opportunity to establish himself through distinction. He illustrates what happens to the symbols of the norm, to the centres that have been such potent ideas in Western culture: they remain of necessity empty points of orientation that would be nothing if they did not have the contrast of their periphery.

It is no coincidence either that Arthurian romances with their merger of idealised individuals and an equally idealised companionship following the feudal rules of king and aristocracy become such potent fictions in the course of the Middle Ages, not only in Britain, but also in France and

35 A very entertaining, though itself slightly eccentric history of this order is Stephanie Trigg, *Shame and Honor: A Vulgar History of the Order of the Garter* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

36 Richard Barber, *The Knight and Chivalry*, revised ed. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1995). Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, ed. Jim Fleming, trans. Phil. Beitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski (London: Pluto Press, 1990), p. 11.

Germany. If the chivalric ideal gains a particular poignancy in the British context, then this is not only due to its mythical origins in the Romano-British culture of the so-called 'Dark Ages'. Arthur soon mutates from a defender of Romano-Britain against Saxons and Celts to a Celtic hero and then to an all-British king. As a passepartout hero, however, he could hardly achieve such an integrative function within culture.[37]

It is no coincidence that the Round Table, this potently unifying symbol, appears for the first time around 1155 in Wace's Norman-French *Le Roman de Brut*, at a time when the by then successfully completed Norman conquest required as its follow-up a mythological merger of all the ethnicities of twelfth-century Britain. It is no coincidence either that this unification myth was written in Jersey, one of the Channel Islands, both eccentric in terms of the British mainland and continental France, but indeed at the very intersection of both, geographically, politically, culturally and linguistically. It proves the perfect eccentric space *avant la lettre* for a reassessment of contempory culture and nationality. Nationality is emphasised in all fictional histories of Britain of the Middle Ages.[38]

In Wace's *Brut* (its label '*Roman*' does not have the modern implication of fictionality, but only indicates that it is not written in Latin), the '*Brut*' of the title is Brutus, supposedly the great grandson of Aeneas, prince of Troy. Already in the Middle Ages and not only, as is sometimes assumed, since the Renaissance, did British culture look for its roots in classical Antiquity. By the time Wace's plot has moved on to Arthur, Arthur is indeed ready to challenge the then greatest power in the known world: the Romans. The marginal, here a band of semi-barbarians on a remote island in the Atlantic, decide to fight Rome on equal terms. Following a Roman demand

37 Rosemary Morris, *The Character of King Arthur in Medieval Literature*, Arthurian Studies, 4 (Cambridge et.al: Brewer, 1982).

38 Historians have hotly debated the emergence of nationalism in Britain. While Linda Colley's influential study *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992) locates it in the years of an emerging empire, i.e. the eighteenth century and later, others already identify it at work in the politics, culture, and literature of the Renaissance. See, for instance, Andrew Hadfield, *Literature, Politics, and National Identity: Reformation to Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). In fact, if one retains an awareness that 'nation' meant very different things before the proper emergence of nation states in the eighteenth century, one can even spot embryonic debates on nationality (very tellingly always defined against a hostile Other) in such very early texts as the late tenth-century Anglo-Saxon epic 'The Battle of Maldon', where the lines 'here stands a worthy earl with his troop of men who is willing to defend this his ancestral home, the country of Æthelred, my lord's nation and land' occur; *Anglo-Saxon* Poetry, ed. and trans. Sidney Arthur James Bradley (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 521.

for tribute (which, in the feudal economy and ideology would make the Britons the subjects of Rome), Arthur makes the following speech:

> But first I shall reply how matters stand with regard to Britain. They claim that Caesar conquered it; Caesar was a powerful man and carried out his will by force. The Britons could not defend themselves against him, and he exacted tribute from them by force. But might is not right; it is force and superior power. A man does not possess by right what he has taken by force. Therefore, we are allowed to keep by right what they formerly took by force. […] They once got tribute from Britain, and so they want to get it from us. By the same reason and with equal cause we can challenge the Romans and dispute our rights. Belinus, who was king of the Britons, and Brennus, duke of the Burgundians, two brothers born in Britain, valiant and wise knights, marched on Rome, laid siege to the city, and took it by assault […] I won't dwell on Belinus and Brennus but will speak of Constantine. He was British by birth; […] he held Rome in his own right. Maximinian, king of Britain, conquered France and Germany, crossed the Alps and Lombardy and reigned over Rome. These were my ancestors by direct descent, and each one held Rome in his possession. Now you may hear and understand that we have just as much right to possess Rome as they do to possess Britain. The Romans had our tribute, and my ancestors had theirs. They claim Britain, and I claim Rome.[39]

Arthur's 'history' of Britain is partly accurate and partly legendary (just like Arthur himself): his claims concerning Caesar are correct; Brennus and Belinus derive from an amalgamation of Celtic stories of warring brothers; Constantine III (Flavius Claudius Constantinus) and Maximinian (Magnus Maximus) were fourth- and early fifth-century Roman generals, but hardly British heroes, since they abandoned Britain and went to challenge the Roman emperors by setting themselves up as rulers in Gaul.[40] 'History' is therefore a strategic fiction, and its aim is to please the audience, but also to unite it under a common fictional 'truth'.

Such a fictional truth used to ascertain the identity and the status of Britain is already at the core of Geoffrey of Monmouth's earlier and highly influential *History of the Kings of Britain* from 1136–1138. In it, Brutus has a dream vision of the Roman goddess Diana who promises him the island of Britain:

[39] Wace, *Le Roman de Brut*, *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 1, pp. 120–121. The full text is in Wace, *Roman de Brut: A History of the British*, trans. Judith Weiss, Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999).

[40] Stephen Johnson, *Later Roman Britain, 55 BC–449 AD* (London: Granada, 1982).

> Brutus, where the sun sets beyond the kingdoms of Gaul
> Is an island in the ocean, closed all around by the sea.
> Once on a time giants lived on that isle in the ocean,
> But now it stands empty and fit to receive your people.
> Seek it out, for it shall be your homeland forever;
> It shall be a second Troy for your descendants.
> There kings shall be born of your seed and to them
> All nations of the earth shall be subject.[41]

A place without history at the very periphery of the then known world is turned into a new centre with old traditions when invested with the glory of the destroyed Troy. As is common in myths of conquest, the conquered lands are usually declared to be deserted (even though here they have been deserted by an impressive race of giants – perhaps here is an implicit task for the new settlers, to match their stature). What is original and highly relevant here is, moreover, that this marginal location carries the promise to become the centre of the world when in the future it will subject all nations of the earth. Much of British identity, or at least the auto-stereotype of Britain as an island nation, yet also one that governs the world through its Empire and its culture, are already visible in a nutshell at a time when it was hardly certain that the new construct of Britain (with contested possessions in France and uneasy borders with Wales and Scotland) would last.

What is furthermore relevant in all the above examples is that historiography in the shape that has remained dominant well into the twentieth century as writing the history of great, i.e. extraordinary persons, utilises the mechanisms that this study calls that of eccentricity. It adds a dynamic to history by employing characters and events that are beyond the norm, yet it also finds integrative patterns that enable it to connect their extraordinariness with the normality of the community for which they are designed. A similar structure can be observed in all popular heroes of folklore, be they Robin Hood or others. We will re-encounter this strategy in a figure working during the heyday of historiography, the nineteenth century: Thomas Carlyle.

[41] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 1, p. 117.

1.3 Renaissance 'eccentricity'

Two images have become emblematic of the Renaissance to the present day. Both of them are connected with the geometrical and astronomic paradigm out of which eccentricity eventually emerges as a cultural concept in the seventeenth century. The first image is Leonardo da Vinci's (1452–1519) drawing of a male human figure surrounded by circles and squares, the so-called 'Vitruvian Man' (named after the classical architectural theories of Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, who lived ca. 90–20 BC, on which the drawing is based). It is often taken to symbolise a characteristic feature of the Renaissance: its shift of the human into the centre of cultural concerns.[42] The second image is that of the solar system with the Sun in the middle of concentric rings created by the orbits of the planets of our solar system. The replacement of the former geocentric world view (which regarded the Earth as the centre of the world) by the new heliocentric one proposed by the likes of Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) and Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) is a further shift regarded as a benchmark of the Renaissance, one that would eventually pave the way for the Enlightenment.[43]

What people familiar with these emblematic images rarely realise is their tension: the one shifts the human being and its life-world into the centre of attention; the second places exactly this world in the shape of our planet into the fringes of the solar system, into an orbit that is as concentric as it is eccentric, at least when compared to Earth's previous position as the centre of the known or imagined universe. Eccentricity *avant la lettre* is therefore also a possible characterisation of many crucial features of the Renaissance.

Humanism is such a movement often used to establish the Renaissance against the Middle Ages. Its standard definitions list as its characteristics a continuing respect for established religion, yet a rejection of its ultimate authority in all, especially worldly, things (which would eventually lead to the Reformation). It redefines human existence, characteristics, and culture in terms taken from the human life-world and therefore shifts idealism from the transcendental to a

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[42] Charles Carman, 'Leonardo's "Vitruvian Man": A Renaissance Microcosm', *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association*, 16–17 (1995–1996), pp. 115–160.

[43] Jerzy Dobrzycki, ed., *The Reception of Copernicus' Heliocentric Theory: Proceedings of a Symposium Organized by the Nicolas Copernicus Committee of the International Union of the History and Philosophy of Science, Toru'n, Poland, 1973*(Dordrecht: Reidel, 1972).

more pragmatic sphere.[44] As a consequence, human cultures and their products become values in their own right (and not merely deficient ways of praising God). This can be seen in changing motifs in art and literature, where human beings, their concerns and actions, now assume centre stage and replace religiously motivated characters and plots. (That this movement is by no means total needs to be remembered, in the same way as the fact that the Middle Ages knew and enjoyed art and literature focusing on secular affairs, even though these generally held an inferior status in cultural debates.)

Yet the question remains how this now seemingly centric humanity is defined – and against what? Stephen Greenblatt's aptly titled study *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* contains the mechanism in its title and also features discussions of such crucial concepts as 'emulation' (overcoming through imitation).[45] What is evident is that the newly central humanity in Renaissance art is devoid of individuality: neither Michelangelo's famous statue of David (the first nude public statue since Antiquity) nor Botticelli's women nor Leonardo's so-called 'Mona Lisa' represent identifiable individuals. Yet this is always assumed to be a crucial shift away from the stylisation of Medieval art: the attempt to portray individuality. Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), whom we will significantly re-encounter in the debates on melancholy in the subsequent chapter, is one of the notable exceptions with his recognisable portraits of individuals, including himself.

Perhaps the process is indeed a tricky one, and if it is, its difficulties arise once more from a dialectic of norm and exception. Michelangelo's, Botticelli's, and Leonardo's figures are still idealisations.[46] Yet now the location of the ideal lies within the secular human sphere and not a transcendental otherworld of heaven and hell. Their figures are idealised abstractions from existing human shapes, in the same way as Renaissance art and architecture (whose evident obsession with ordering space makes it of interest to a study of eccentricity) develops the ideal of the 'golden mean', a measure that is ultimately derived from the proportions of the human body, and make those the guidelines for the construction of the Renaissance life-world. Thus,

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44 Albert Rabil, Jr., ed., *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, 3 vols (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988). A much more concise, though idiosyncratic survey is the section 'Humanists Before Humanism: The Renaissance', in: Tony Davies, *Humanism*, The New Critical Idiom (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 72–104.

45 Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

46 Lorne Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits: European Portrait-Painting in the 14th, 15th and 16th Century* (New Haven et al.: Yale University Press, 1990).

Leonardo's geometrically enclosed figure of a man must not be understood as a human being measured or constructed by abstract geometry, but – on the contrary – as human measures structuring the universe.

This is a reversal of traditional hierarchies that also finds expression in the intellectual debates of the time. When it comes to re-defining what it means to be human, the so-called Humanists also took as their point of departure not divinely sanctioned ideals, but the manifestations of human imperfection. Erasmus of Rotterdam (ca. 1466–1536), one of the key thinkers of the Renaissance and a very interesting diplomat who managed to straddle the divide that ensued from the Reformation (something that will become very important for British culture below), called one of his key tracts *Praise of Folly* (1509). Something that in Medieval terms would have to be interpreted as a sign of the imperfection – and therefore fallenness – of human beings, something that is traditionally seen to be in league with the devil, now becomes the starting point for a new idea of the human. The tract was dedicated to Thomas More, the important English statesman and philosopher, and written while Erasmus was a guest in More's house. Its original Latin title *Moriae Encomium* is indeed a pun on More's Latinised name Morus. An intellectual who was respected but occupied a marginal position in his abode in Rotterdam, without public office, unconnected to the usual patronage of aristocrats, and strangely neutral in the raging theological disputes, corresponds with the Lord Chancellor of England and even dedicates a book that makes folly the benchmark of being human to him.

The book stands in the tradition of the 'ship of fools' texts that, as Michael Foucault points out in *Madness and Civilization*, occupy an important position in the rearrangement of normality and madness that characterises modernity. From free-ranging vagrants via symbolic groupings, such forms of deviance would eventually end up disciplined in mental asylums and clinics. Foucault also points out that these ships of fools had both a symbolic and a very real significance, since madmen and vagrants were habitually moved away from towns and cities and not infrequently shipped off. He also underlines the sudden vogue for the literary theme in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, with works like Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* of 1494 and Hieronymus Bosch's painting 'Ship of Fools' of 1490–1500.[47]

Yet Erasmus' treatise differs from the mere allegorical depictions of diverse forms of foolishness and madness in that it presents foolishness as self-aware, a feature that is crucial also for the distinction between eccentricity and madness. His *Praise of Folly* is not only about folly, but

[47] Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, pp. 7–8.

spoken by folly itself in the guise of a persona called 'Stultitia'. A paradox is thereby created, since folly cannot normally discuss folly sensibly. This paradox interacts with the pun of the treatise's title: is it a praise of folly (which would in itself be ironic) or a praise of Thomas More, who was of course held to be the very opposite of foolish?[48] One is therefore left with the alternative of regarding *Moriae Encomium* either as a farcical text out of line with Erasmus' serious philosophical undertakings, i.e. as an early form of eccentric literary production. This would sit oddly with the centric project of Humanism. It is also contradicted by the immense success of the treatise, which became Erasmus' most successful book at a time when his writings already dominated the intellectual debates in Europe, in the first two decades of the sixteenth century that is.[49] The more serious alternative would be to view it as a critique of this project from within, albeit with the project of retaining or 'framing' the irony and paradoxes inside a perfectly logical and Humanist form (folly or 'Stultitia' knows the rules of a logical argument and follows them). Eccentricity would then be in the service of the centric – a contradiction that we will encounter repeatedly.

Kaiser points out the legacy of Erasmus' paradox in the soon established literary figure of the Wise Fool: 'So widespread it was that one may doubt if Viola could have observed of Feste that "This fellow is wise enough to play the fool, / And to do that well craves a kind of wit," had she not, like a good pupil of Ascham, read her Erasmus.'[50] Roger Ascham (1515–1568) is a famous Renaissance educationalists, tutor of Queen Elizabeth I and author of the posthumously published and very influential pedagogic treatise *The Schoolmaster* (1570). We shall see below how dissembling becomes part of the Renaissance dialectic of centres of power and their margins. In the subsequent chapter we will re-encounter wise fools again in the shape of Shakespeare's Hamlet as well as their dissociation into wits and fops in the plays of the Restoration.

Erasmus is further crucial for an understanding of eccentricity as a thinker who redefined the concept of imitation – and thereby implicitly that of originality – something that will be of great importance in the discussion of fops, dandies, and ultimately Romantic genius in the subsequent chapters. Departing from Cicero's classic model (which was reiterated with modifications by Quintilian), which simply recommended the slavish copying of the style of an individual author,

[48] These paradoxes and ironies and their complex interplay with philosophical and rhetorical tradition are analysed in Walter Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 25 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 27–100.

[49] Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly*, pp. 22–23.

[50] Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly*, p. 22. His allusion is to William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (ca. 1600).

Erasmus upheld a much more flexible model, which also embraced amplification and variation in his crucial treatise *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum* [On the twofold abundance of expressions and ideas] of 1512.[51] His model was now meant to be nature, and the aim of the 'copyist' to emulate the best its supposed features offered. The problematic anthropocentrism of Erasmus' concept is as evident as is that of the entire Renaissance project, which meant to pay attention to the human life-world, but could, of course, only do so through a human lens. The golden mean has already been cited as evidence, linear perspective (which envisages a single human eye as a focal point) is another.

While the importance of variation, which can only be conceptualised with regard to a norm that it than violates without leaving it behind, for eccentricity is evident, we shall see in the sections on the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century how amplification structures eccentricity in the form of ostentation, exaggeration, and even extreme idealist positions.

More, too, has his share of eccentricity. An unwilling politician who would much rather have been a full-time philosopher and man of the church, he was at the core of the English Reformation, a project that he by no means wholeheartedly supported. As such, he in fact helped King Henry VIII write *In Defence of the Seven Sacraments* in response to Luther. Eventually, his refusal to sign the Act of Succession of 1534 led to his execution in 1535.[52] But even before that, at the start of his career, he had produced a text that sat very uneasily with his philosophical and religious interests and his budding political career.[53]

Utopia of 1516 is a strange product considering its author's position and predilections, since it neither contains an established church nor a feudal hierarchy in politics with a king at its head. Instead, it relegates all these traditional requisites of order and normality to the inhabitants of its imagined country and establishes them out of their supposed 'nature' and the necessity evolving out of their social interactions. Once again, one would be hard pressed to call the

[51] Erasmus of Rotterdam, *On Copia of Words and Ideas*, trans. and ed. Donald B. King and H. David Rix, Mediaeval Philosophical Texts in Translation (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1999). See also Edmund J. Campion, 'Erasmus's *De Copia*: Classical Learning and Epideictic Rhetoric in Montaigne's *Essais*', *Fifteenth-Century Studies*, 4 (1981), pp. 47–60.

[52] The first Act of Succession nullified the marriages of people who had previously married (with dispensations) in spite of the fact that they were closely related (this applied to King Henry VIII's first marriage to the wife of his deceased brother). It also approved the succession to the throne of any children Henry might have with Anne Boleyn. A second Act of Succession in the same year specified the form of oath required to be taken. Refusal to take the oath was considered high treason.

[53] Peter Ackroyd, *The Life of Thomas More* (London: Chatto & Wyndus, 1998).

inhabitants of More's fictional island individuals, since they seem to lack the features associated with individualism in our time (it will be shown in the subsequent chapters that these features, for example originality, are themselves historical development that can be associated with the discourses of eccentricity). As with the art works of Michelangelo, Botticelli, and Leonardo, they are idealised abstractions from actual observations. This also explains the many examples of inflexibility and cruelty among 'Utopian' attitudes: they derive from the observation of an existing world where violence was regulated by violence, where the individual still mattered little, and where the supposed welfare of the nation was privileged over any idea of a moral or ethical interaction with others.

The idealism accompanying utopian creations also tends to create strong binaries (once again of 'inside' as belonging to the utopian world and 'outside' as being foreign or a dissident within it). This explains why there is only absolute opposition in More's *Utopia* and no example of eccentricity.[54] The project itself, and especially its full title, *Libellus Vere Aureus, nec Minus Salutaris quam Festivus, de Optimo Reipublicae Statu deque Nova Insula Utopia* (A truly golden little book, no less beneficial than entertaining, about the best state of a commonwealth and the new island of Utopia), however, smack very much of it, and its various contradictions are its give-away: golden, but little; the best state of something well-known, yet also new and unfamiliar.[55] There are also, quite tellingly, no stories of eccentricity among Puritans (only, as we shall see in the subsequent section, about them), one of the most extremely utopian factions produced by the Reformation. This will change once we reach the eighteenth century and a different conception of culture and society, for example in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

The concept of utopias itself – which More's text helped found and which has continued to flourish in its positive as well as negative shapes until today – follows the eccentric dialectic. As is well known, the term *utopos* can be translated variously as 'no place' or 'good place'. In both cases, it marks a distance from a (historical, geographical, political, and ideological) reality that the text therefore mirrors critically. Like the eccentric, a utopia looks back critically towards the reality against which it has been conceived. In the same way this reality generally carefully watches utopias (even in the form of literature, but more so in the form of political manifestos)

[54] An interesting essay that traces the discussion of misanthropy in Erasmus' *Moriae Encomium* and More's *Utopia* is Harry Berger, Jr., 'Utopian Folly: Erasmus and More on the Perils of Misanthropy', *English Literary Renaissance*, 12 (1982), pp. 71–290.

[55] Northrop Frye, 'Varieties of Literary Utopias', *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences*, 94 (1965), pp. 323–347.

and frequently performs censorship on them. This was also the case with More's *Utopia*, which was published in Latin and in Louvain on the continent, a place later associated with the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Yet it is also well understood that utopias cannot work in reality: even when they portray ideal states of society, these remain frozen in time and lack development. Ideals cannot be made more ideal, or they would be flawed from the start. This indeed seems to be a crux at the heart of the ideology of the United States of America: as a realised utopia from its inception, it literally had nowhere to go in terms of its ideological set-up – and perhaps consequently went out to conquer first a continent, then, economically and culturally, the world, and then space in the shape of the moon and now Mars.[56] The moon, incidentally, became a projective foil for human aspirations very early on. Later utopian texts, such as Margaret Cavendish's interesting feminist utopia *The Blazing World* (1666), used a mirror-image of the known world (in Cavendish it is even attached to it at one of the poles) as a setting for their projects. Here, the astronomic origin of 'eccentric' as orbital, at a distance, but in a continual relation (in the case of the moon and a connected globe, that of the constant impact of gravity) comes to the fore again.

Orbital was also the position of Britain in the Renaissance, when one regards (as one should) the Renaissance as a European phenomenon with its origin in Italy and further hot spots variously in France, Spain, the Netherlands, and Germany. Far from exerting influence or even being considered important, Britain was a European backwater when the rise of the Tudors supposedly dragged the country out of the Middle Ages. Internal struggles, such as the Wars of the Roses, with their attendant economic decline, which also affected the arts and intellectual life, but mainly its geographic location on the fringes of the European continent had left Britain behind. The English language was considered cumbersome, and learning it seemed unnecessary in a world in which cultivated persons communicated in French, Italian, and Latin. The relative tardiness of British culture when it comes to picking up Renaissance elements can be seen very well in the fact that Geoffrey Chaucer travelled to Italy and absorbed the influences of, among others, Boccaccio, one of the great writers of the early Renaissance – only to return to Britain to turn them into Medieval literature, most famously in *Troilus and Criseyde* (ca. 1385–1390) and *The Canterbury Tales* (1387–1392).

Yet when Britain had caught up with a vengeance at last in the reign of Henry VIII, it was no longer content to stay marginal. The adoption of fashions, including literary ones, such as the

[56] This is a central idea behind Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1988).

sonnet, and their transformations into particularly English forms, has been aptly documented. The extension of diplomacy throughout Europe – with its attendant travels and exchange of ambassadors and its proliferation of correspondence (of which the More-Erasmus one forms part) – is well known. Yet in at least one aspect Britain went ahead of the rest and turned itself from a marginal culture into a trendsetter, but then, perhaps into a marginal 'eccentric' one again. The English Reformation is the event that places Britain in a very crucial position in the dialectic of norm and dissent, centre and margin, which was outlined as the pattern of eccentricity in the previous chapter.

This English Reformation was, of course, no original affair without precedents. Throughout history, there had been interventions criticising the established Catholic Church and attempts to end its authority and shift it onto the more ordinary members of the population. Already in the Middle Ages the peasants' revolt of 1381 had demanded similar things. There had been debates about translating the Bible into English (and thereby making theology accessible to non-experts) since John Wyclif (ca. 1320–1384).[57] Henry VIII himself had been ambivalent about such issues, and while he on the one hand officially banned and burned Protestant manifestos and also some overly ardent Protestants, he was also known to read and even promote some of them. The Reformation had, of course, started with the likes of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin in Germany and Switzerland, and was therefore, originally, perceived as foreign. Yet in a similar way the Pope with his vacillating political leanings (often towards Britain's traditional enemies France and Spain) was increasingly perceived not only as hostile, but also as alien to British interests.

When Henry VIII declared his country reformed and divorced from Rome, he turned it into a dissident, though perhaps not eccentric one, since the Reformation was by no means a unique and idiosyncratic British event. Yet by simultaneously making himself head of the church and by retaining many of the characteristics of Catholicism in the now Anglican Church of England, he indeed made himself, his country's religion, and by extension its culture eccentric. The mirroring of power and dissent here went full circle – leading to a substitution of the norm by its Other. What was once the norm, Catholicism, now became even more than eccentric: it became illegal and dangerous, a force to be persecuted and exterminated. What was once dissent, Protestantism, now became the norm. Yet by doing so, it instantly lost its critical edge.

57 Richard Marsden, 'Cain's Face, and Other Problems: The Legacy of the Earliest English Bible Translations', *Reformation*, 1 (January 1996), pp. 29–51.

It is therefore hardly surprising that Anglicanism soon produced its own dissent, in the shape of Puritanism most prominently, while the now vilified Other, Catholicism, continued to haunt British culture, both in practice and, perhaps even more potently, as a threatening spectre. Freud's idea of the uncanny will be discussed in connection with the status of eccentricity in theoretical debates at the close of the present study. But perhaps it is no coincidence that the Tudor period was also the one in which revenge tragedies featuring ghosts as vocal reminders of the guilt of the past were all the rage. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is, of course, the most prominent, though already far-developed example, and critics like Stephen Greenblatt have demonstrated the theological disputes of Catholicism and Protestantism that are enacted under the cover, so to speak, of the ghost motif.[58]

In terms of politics, a realm that was impossible to separate from religion in those days, Britain also occupied an interesting position in the dialectic of centre and margin. It had been at pains to create itself as its own centre throughout the Middle Ages, first with the conquest of Wales by Edward I in 1283, later with the never quite completed domination of Scotland, and even less successfully when it came to Ireland. At the same time, those extensions in France that troubled the conceptualisation of Britain as one distinct island nation were gradually lost, Calais as late as 1558 – with only the Channel Islands remaining. Yet this did not mean that Britain had achieved a centric identity. It is one of the great ironies of history that the period often taken to embody the emergence of a fully-fledged British nationalism with Englishness as its ideological core, the Tudor era, is one that sees a Welsh dynasty ascend the throne. More than that: in a way that was very obvious to ambassadors from abroad (but is now often ignored in presentations of English history) well into the reign of Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth I, the court in London was peopled by Welshmen and -women, in the same way that they had a surprisingly large share in the emerging British colonisation enterprises.[59]

One must not forget that even the centring of power in the royal court in London was a relatively recent affair that replaced a peripatetic form of rule of the country as late as in Elizabeth I's reign. Yet once established as a political centre, this court created orbital competing centres of power, as will be shown at the end of the present chapter. It also created fringes and backwaters, and it is an interesting historical irony that the Welsh, who were so much at the core of Tudor power in London, were considered the back of beyond only about a hundred years

58 Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).
59 Gwyn Alf Williams, *When Was Wales? A History of the Welsh* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 114–139.

later, for example in William Wycherley's Restoration Comedy *The Country Wife*, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

When the reign of the Tudors ended with the death of the childless Elizabeth, the Stuarts brought Scotland on the English throne – and with it once again the old disputes concerning Catholicism and Protestantism, connected with the one about allegiances (to Spain and France – or alternatively the Protestant European countries). These disputes had again come to a head in the quick and unhappy succession of Henry VIII. First his juvenile son Edward VI (or perhaps rather his advisors) had established a staunchly Protestant policy – including the persecution of any remnants of Catholicism in the country, which led to the wholesale destruction of Medieval English art. Then, after Edward's early death, Henry's daughter Mary had reversed matters, married the Spanish king, and burned Protestants and their writings. Elizabeth I, as a consequence, had chosen a path of moderate Anglicanism and also avoided any political allegiance with the rest of Europe through marriage. One could therefore ironically ask if there ever was such a thing as an English Renaissance, and if it was not really Welsh and Scottish.

Elizabeth I herself occupies an interesting position in debates concerning a possible Renaissance eccentricity. As a female ruler, she is an anomaly, though not an absolute exception. She had, after all, been preceded by her sister Mary. Yet Mary had stuck to the conventions for female rulers and sought the traditionally required male support in marriage. The cultural conventions regarding women as inherently inferior to men and therefore problematic when it came to governing even extended to queens. Elizabeth I did no such thing. Yet throughout her reign she remained acutely aware of the ambiguous and nearly paradoxical position that her sex and her status produced. Her famous 'Tilbury Speech' to her navy before the decisive battle against the Spanish Armada is only one of many instances in which she rhetorically negotiates her eccentric status as a ruler (a traditionally masculine role) in the body of a traditionally feeble woman. The ideology of the 'two bodies of the king' came to her aid here, the understanding that there is a distinction between the ruler's symbolic power and his (or her) physical presence. The first is supposedly eternal, the second influenced by chance, nature, time, etc. Yet what Elizabeth cleverly outmanoeuvred were any attempts to make her correct or at least stabilise the situation with the help of a consort and, even more importantly, a preferably male heir.[60]

[60] Mihoko Suzuki, 'Elizabeth, Gender, and the Political Imaginary in Seventeenth-Century England', in: *Debating Gender in Early Modern England, 1500–1700*, ed. Christina Malcolmson and Mihoko Suzuki (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002), pp. 231–253.

She was therefore vilified by her enemies, especially the Catholic ones of course, as a bastard and a whore, all of which were attempts to shift her into the realm of excluded Other, with the pragmatical legal consequence of excluding her from the legitimate succession to the British throne. Nonetheless, she continued to insist on her marginal position even within her own culture – and indeed attempted to make this position a centric one again, as can be seen by the amazing proliferation of pictorial and literary representations idealising her unusual (and in itself paradoxical) model of being a 'Virgin Queen'. What is often called one of the golden periods of British history is also one balancing precariously on several margins: that of internal and external politics, that of religion, and that of gender.

A further dialectic that, together with the observed ones of philosophy, literature, and the arts, religion, and politics, would pave the way for the particular situation of Britain in the seventeenth century and thereby the ground for the proper emergence of eccentricity as a cultural concept is the social mobility that the English Renaissance initiated. Never before had it been possible for people born into the lower ranks of the population to rise to the highest positions. The strict feudal order, which only knew the church, worldly rulers, free men, and serfs, had increasingly become porous. The development of mercantilism and trade had enabled ordinary people to amass wealth – and with wealth, power. The ruling élite, in turn, found itself more and more dependent on money, especially when proper permanent courts as centres of power were created and instantly started competing with others, both at home and abroad.[61] A further element in this development of an increasingly powerful mercantile class (which would eventually become the so-called 'middle class') had been the official banning of all Jews from the British Isles in 1290. This made the élite look for other sources of ready money, and it also necessitated a relaxation of the traditional restrictions on money-lending for Christians.[62]

A complex situation was generated in which power, on the one hand, now manifested itself in identifiable and stable locations, the courts, and especially in London, but where, on the other hand, these centres of power were themselves dependent on an orbital periphery of money-lenders, tradesmen, etc. who supported, fed, and serviced them. As with all such reciprocal

[61] See, for example, Christina Malcolmson, '"What You Will": Social Mobility and Gender in *Twelfth Night*', in: Valerie Wayne, ed., *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 29–57, and Rosemary Kegl, '"Those Terrible Approches": Sexuality, Social Mobility, and Resisting the Courtliness of Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie*', *English Literary Renaissance*, 20:2 (Spring 1990), pp. 179–208.

[62] David S. Katz, *The Jews in the History of England, 1485–1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

relations, more often than not those on whom the élite depended (but who were theoretically totally dominated by it) made sure that they established themselves closer to the power centres in order to gain their share of influence. The emerging concept of the courtier is a result of this. Though often from an aristocratic and gentry background (again, not only blood counted here, but allegiance to the rulers, more often than not expressed in financial terms), page boys and waiting ladies were also provided by the middle ranks of society. Thus, Geoffrey Chaucer, the son of a wealthy wine merchant, received his first training as a page at the royal court, before he became a soldier and diplomat, and eventually held the important post of comptroller of the customs for the port of London, an important source of income for the king.

Yet not only financial reasons led to a weakening of the traditional social hierarchies. An increasingly formalised and complex system of administration could no longer rely on its members being recruited simply for reasons of blood. Intelligence and learning were important now, not always traditional values of the aristocracy and gentry. The new grammar schools and scholarships helped to create a class of educated young men from the mercantile classes that would form the backbone of Renaissance bureaucracy. When they showed particular promise and ability, they could indeed rise to very high and sometimes the highest ranks. Such an example is Thomas Wolsey (ca. 1473–1530). He was the son of a butcher and therefore clearly not from a promising social background, but proved impressively gifted in manners of etiquette, but also adapt at administrative work. More importantly, he appears to have played the necessary diplomatic games at court with great skill. For, of course, there were strict implicit and explicit rules of how to negotiate power at work at the time. Some of them were even put down in writing. The most famous examples are Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* of 1528 – translated as *The Courtier* into English in 1561) – and Niccolò Machiavelli's *Il Principe* [The Prince] (1532).

Castiglione stresses that refinement in manners is the courtier's ultimate goal. Acknowledging the new social mobility, he emphasises that 'grace' is something that some are born with (the traditional élitist conception of blood), yet others have to learn by manipulating appearances and memorising social rituals. He calls this art *sprezzatura* and defines it in a paradoxical way as the art of concealing art, of making acquired behaviour appear natural.

This is relevant for a discussion of eccentricity *avant la lettre* in at least two aspects. The first is that of sincerity. Traditionally a Christian virtue and one that is part and parcel of the traditional feudal bond, it now becomes outmoded or at least flexible. What you appear to be is no longer what you are, but since everyone around you follows the same strategy, all are equally 'true' again – as acknowledged manipulators of appearance and opinions. The idea of patronage comes into this in a large way: when Elizabeth I makes a speech to her troops in which she declares

her love for them – and insists on theirs for her – she does not refer to individual emotional or indeed amorous and erotic relationships, but to allegiance, respect, and support – which in turn generate security, promotion, and reward. The so-called 'Court Poetry' of this period reflects this contractual nature of relationships drastically.

Yet there are continuing tensions with this model, for example with the traditional privileges of the élite classes. Although it is a crucial achievement of the Tudor court to eventually have turned warriors into diplomats and ultimately bureaucrats (something for which the fiction of chivalry had paved the way), the conflict between 'in-built' aristocratic pride and the necessary and not infrequent humiliations involved in social climbing remained. Thus, there are constant power struggles between aristocrats claiming inherited rights and privileges in the English Renaissance, and so-called commoners demanding their share on the basis of their wealth and education.

To return to Wolsey: once he had worked his way up on the social ladder to become the advisor of the young king Henry VIII, there seemed to be no stopping him. He was made cardinal following the initiative of the king (who by then still officially submitted himself and his country to the Pope in Rome). He also founded colleges, such as Cardinal's College in Oxford. He did what traditionally rulers, their wives, and members of the higher ranks of the aristocracy performed to ensure their ever-lasting fame. And he went even further than that. When he built Hampton Court, an edifice that even outshone the king's palace in Whitehall, he toppled the equilibrium between centre and competing margin.[63]

Henry VIII's former tutor, the poet Robin Skelton, who had withdrawn from court to become the curate of a county parish in Norfolk (it is still debated whether this is due to a fall from grace, i.e. unsuccessful social climbing, or a distaste for it), wrote several mocking poems criticising this violation of traditional hierarchies. Yet it is not altogether a violation, but rather the acknowledgment that inside the old hierarchy new dynamics now operated along the lines of centring and decentring. After all, the traditional Medieval view of the world order showed the prominent members of the clergy, i.e. the Pope and his cardinals, higher in rank than kings. Yet the newly emerging absolutist rulers were increasingly loath to accept this order themselves.

'Why Come Ye Nat to Courte' (1522) is the most explicit of Skelton's mock poems targeting Cardinal Wolsey (but also, implicitly, the king and his subjects). Its crucial lines run 'Why come ye nat to court? / To whyche court? / To the kynges courte? / Or to Hampton Court? / Nay, to the kynges court! / The kynges courte / Shulde have the excellence; / But Hampton Court /

[63] Nancy Lenz Harvey, *Thomas Cardinal Wolsey* (New York: Macmillan, 1980).

Hath the preemynence! / And Yorkes Place' [Wolsey's London residence].[64] They emphasise the confusion that ensues when power becomes plural, when it loses its recently established unique centre and proliferates into several – at the price of destabilising itself. Skelton is not only a unique writer with regard to his technical experiments, which were rarely imitated and often resemble the rap lyrics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but also in his outspoken and highly undiplomatic views (no *sprezzatura* there).[65] He certainly profited from his status as the king's former tutor (Wolsey had him arrested at least once as a result of his mockery). But it is also important that he seems to have understood and used his geographic position as outside the immediate orbit of the court and its power structures. His eccentric status *avant la lettre* enables him to be an outspoken critic of a power that sees itself as almost absolute.

In the end, Wolsey was no absolute power-broker. Henry VIII became increasingly unhappy about his advisor's creation of an alternative power base and eventually deposed him. What is telling, though, is that he did not raze to the ground, give away or sell off Hampton Court, but made it his own royal abode – in the same way that he first closed down Cardinal's College in Oxford and then re-established it as 'King's College' (it is Christ Church today). A process seemed to have started in British politics and culture in which even the highest representatives of power entered a game of mirroring and swapping position, in which a new monolithic centre quickly turned into competing centres, and it became vitally important not to be the eccentric one of the two, since this could quickly become the excluded one. At the same time, this dynamic offered spaces for many others to establish their own critical or advantageous mirrors, either following the rules of *sprezzatura* and the demands of patronage – or criticising them. The stage was set for the transformations that would enable eccentricity to emerge as a cultural concept with a name of its own in the seventeenth century.

64 John Skelton, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Scattergood, The English Poets (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 289.

65 Greg Walker, *John Skelton and the Politics of the 1520s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

2 The birth of eccentricity

2.1 Competing melancholies: engendering the early modern subject from the spirit of eccentricity[66]

When the shepherdess Urania in Lady Mary Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (1621) enters a cave where she hopes to be alone with her sorrows, she is in for a nasty surprise: there is already another occupant. A man who calls himself Perissus, the lost one, has stretched himself out on a bed of leaves and is waiting for death. What then ensues is a near-comical quarrel for the right to the cave with each candidate trying to come up with the most convincing claim to suffer the most:

> '[…] O God,' cried Perissus, 'what devilish spirit art thou, that thou thus dost come to torture me? But now I see you are a woman; and therefore not much to be marked, and less resisted: but if you know charity, I pray now practice it, and leave me who am afflicted sufficiently without your company; or if you will stay, discourse not to me.'
>
> 'Neither of these will I do,' said she.
>
> 'If you be then,' said he, 'some fury of purpose sent to vex me, use your force to the uttermost in martyring me; for never was there a fitter subject, then the heart of poor Perissus is.'
>
> 'I am no fury,' replied the divine Urania, 'nor hither come to trouble you, but by accident lighted on this place; my cruel hap being such, as only the like can give me content, while the solitariness of this like cave might give me quiet, though not ease. Seeking for such a one, I happened hither; and this is the true cause of my being here, though now I would use it to a better end if I might: Wherefore favour me with the knowledge of your grief; which heard, it may be I shall give you some counsel, and comfort in your sorrow.'

66 An earlier version of part of this section has appeared as 'Competing Melancholies: (En-) Gendering Discourses of Selfhood in Early Modern English Literature', *EREA*, 4:1 (Spring 2006), pp. 59–65 [<www.e-rea.org>].

> 'Cursed may I be,' cried he, 'if ever I take comfort, having such cause of mourning: but because you are, or seem to be afflicted, I will not refuse to satisfy your demand, but tell you the saddest story that ever was rehearsed by dying man to living woman, and such a one, as I fear will fasten too much sadness in you; yet should I deny it, I were to blame, being so well known to these senseless places; as were they sensible to sorrow, they would condole, or else amazed at such cruelty stand dumb as they do, to find that man should be so inhuman.'[67]

This episode is by no means merely a funny interlude. What is debated and challenged by the protagonists of Wroth's tale is access to, and therefore the claim to possession of, one of the crucial cultural concepts of the seventeenth century: melancholy. It will be shown in this chapter and the subsequent ones how melancholy forms one of the means with which eccentricity is established as a cultural force. Moreover, it will be demonstrated how melancholy is instrumental in creating that which we found so tellingly lacking in Renaissance art and culture, a notion of the individual subject.

Melancholy is not a completely new phenomenon in the Renaissance. It derives from classical and Medieval notions of the balance of bodily fluids. The earliest ones are attributed to a follower of Aristotle, probably Theophrast, whom we will re-encounter in George Eliot's nowadays little read *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such* from 1879 in the chapter on eccentricity's heyday, and to the famous physician to the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, Galen of Pergamon (Galen's family was Greek). With Cassian melancholy was appropriated by Christian thinkers in the second half of the fourth century. It also became of interest to Arab thinkers, including the famous Ibn Sina, around the turn of the tenth into the eleventh century – whose ideas the Christian part of Europe re-appropriated under the name Avicenna. It is no coincidence that among the most elaborate Medieval treatises on melancholy are those produced by none other than Hildegard of Bingen. With Marsilio Ficino the concept then firmly entered the Italian Renaissance in the fifteenth century.[68]

Already Aristotle (or his follower, very likely Theophrast) accepts for his ideas on melancholy the theory of bodily fluids outlined by the fifth-century BC physician Hippocrates, according

[67] Mary Wroth, *The Countesse of Mountgomeries Urania* (London: John Marriott & John Grismand, 1621, p. 5. The slightly modernised version quoted here is a reprinted excerpt from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 1, pp. 1426–1427.

[68] For a useful assembly of the most important positions on melancholy and their backgrounds, see Jennifer Radden, ed., *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford, New York et al.: Oxford University Press, 2000).

to whom the most important of these fluids – which were also called 'humours' – were blood, phlegm, yellow and black bile. Their harmony created healthy and balanced individuals. Yet much more interesting (and frequent) were thought to be the cases in which their imbalance produced certain character types, but also illnesses. These character types are still familiar to us today: the sanguine person supposedly full of energy, enjoying life, but also prone to passion and lust; the phlegmatic type, thought to be passive and slow, often subject to laziness and bouts of inactivity; the choleric type, jealous and envious, easily enraged and aggressive. Lastly, the melancholic type, suffering from an excess of black bile believed to be produced by the gall bladder. This type was held to be susceptible to what we would nowadays call depression, withdrawn, seeking isolation, and finding his or her (it was usually his) preferred realm of (in-) activity in meditation, reading, and study.

Yet already Aristotle (or Theophrast) was unsure about the borderline when melancholy ceased to create exceptional persons and instead produced madness and even led to suicide. He boldly asks 'Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts are melancholic, and some to such an extent that they are infected by the diseases arising from black bile […]?'[69] He continues, a little below, after confusingly claiming that melancholy exists in forms of excessive heat *or* cold of the brain: 'But those with whom the excessive heat has sunk to a moderate amount are melancholic, though more intelligent and less eccentric, but they are superior to the rest of the world in many ways, some in education, some in the arts and others again in statemanship' (p. 58). Already in the classical age the discourse of melancholy meets that of eccentricity, and both work by means of a shading over of normality or norm into the exceptional, with positive of negative consequences. Even more fascinating is the repeated connection that this Aristotelian treatise makes between melancholic eccentrics and power, its examples being drawn not merely from what is nowadays called the cultural sphere, but from that of politics and the military. Thus, it lists, besides Empedocles, Plato, and Socrates, also Lysander the Spartan, Ajax, and Bellerophontes (p. 57).

It is easy to figure out that the discourse of such 'humours' from Antiquity to the Renaissance offers a primitive means of negotiating individuality. It is primitive because of its strong schematism, yet eventually permits a massive step away from Medieval binary notions of good and bad – according to conformity with God's plan for mankind and the supposed roles this

[69] Quoted from *Problems* in Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy*, p. 57. Further page references are given parenthetically in the text.

plan contained. At the same time the particular humour of the melancholic clearly brings with it some privileges over the others: it contains the greatest amount of self-determination (even the lusty sanguine type is ultimately dominated by his passions) and brings with it an attraction to those forms of activity which an age that places increasing value on individual reflection, study, and learning appreciated. Moreover, it freed such reflection and study from the conventions of its traditional authority: the church. The melancholic meditates, but he does not always pray; he studies and reads, often indiscriminately, and not always the Bible and other religious tracts. In some ways, the melancholic gains access to privileges that resemble those of the Medieval anchorites and anchoresses discussed in the previous section. Despite the associations of suffering and illness, melancholy therefore proved an attractive state, and it is no coincidence that women also lay claim to it once it has been established – if they do not indeed participate in its construction.

Shakespeare's character Hamlet is frequently taken to embody the emergence of this concept. His dress and behaviour, but most importantly his reflections, which are shared with the audience in several monologues, clearly point towards this identification. His character also shows the status of melancholy vis-à-vis established cultural norms: in order to become a minimal subject through melancholy, one has to distance oneself from the norm, make oneself eccentric that is.[70] Hamlet, no lesser person than the son of the deceased king with a strong claim to the throne, is an outsider at his own court of Denmark. He is even more of an outsider since he is a student currently at leave from the university at Wittenberg (the explicit hints towards the Reformation are important here, too).

What is frequently called his characteristic indecision and hesitation, though, often too quickly identified as his variant of a traditional tragic flaw, the prerequisite of a classical tragic hero, is in fact his reluctance to leave his eccentric status behind and exchange it for a centric one. If his aim was a simple reversal of the power dialectic outlined in the previous chapters, he would stage a revolt and replace the supposed usurper on the throne, his uncle and now step-father Claudius, with himself. Yet this is evidently not Hamlet's goal. None of his actions, not even the ones related to his plan to avenge the death of his father, explicitly have this end in mind. It is as if Hamlet cherishes his eccentric status, a fact supported by his vacillation concerning

[70] One of many views that see a link between Hamlet and melancholy is Judith Kegan Gardiner, 'Elizabethan Psychology and Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 38 (1977), pp. 373–388 (see especially pp. 380–381).

another 'normalising' aspect of his life at court, his tortuous courtship of Ophelia. Despite their status differences, there is no real reason why Hamlet should not marry her. Not even his plan of revenge is a real obstacle. Yet he not only thwarts any hope of eventual marriage he or Ophelia might have; he also divulges his reasons for abstaining in terms that can once again be called melancholic. This opens up the interesting possibility of reading the ghost of Hamlet's father as the equivalent of Wroth's temptress Urania: here, the ghost tempts Hamlet to integrate himself into the pattern of the avenger, while the court tempts him to integrate himself as the heir apparent to the throne. Both voices are equally devilish – as those of the ruling ideology.

At this point it is helpful to bring in an anachronistic, but very influential view on melancholy, since – as will be shown – it offers some explanation towards its functioning even at a time when one cannot seriously talk about a developed concept of the human psyche. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories distinguish carefully between mourning and melancholy. In an eponymous essay, Freud describes mourning as the process of letting go of a lost object. Melancholy, on the other hand, is a trickier affair: it actually refuses to give up its lost object and keeps it in a vacillating state where the subject on the one hand refuses to acknowledge that it is gone and on the other keeps on killing it symbolically – paradoxically to thereby ensure its continuing presence.[71] In the case of Hamlet, as has been pointed out by several critics, this object is his dead father, whose death is once more made manifest to him in the narrative of the ghost, while this very ghost represents Hamlet's attempt to keep his father even after his loss.[72]

More than just a family or individual matter, Hamlet's melancholy contains important elements for a discussion of eccentricity. The melancholic does not know what he or she is sad about and strongly refuses to identify any object of his misery. This often leads to the impression that misery itself is the object of the melancholic, something that we shall see confirmed with some important modifications in the discussion of Robert Burton's seminal *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Sustaining his or her state of being without a motivation and justification normally required by the world, however, is the secret behind and *raison d'être* of the melancholic as an individual. The self-imposed and unjustifiable distance from the norm enables him or her to be – as an eccentric.

71 Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in: *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards, The Pelican Freud Library, 11 (London et al.: Penguin, 1984), pp. 245–268.

72 Marjorie Garber, 'Hamlet: Giving up the Ghost', in: *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 124–137.

Wroth's Urania is in exactly such as position of self-legitimation through keeping the secret of her sorrow hidden – even from herself. She mourns that she does not know her parents. Tough luck for a shepherdess, one feels compelled to comment. For someone suffering no other pain or deprivation, entrusted with a simple task that enables her to take as much time off for private musings, she is hardly entitled to sadness. Perissus seems to have the upper hand. His loss is real, that of his beloved wife. Yet rather than being a mourner who eventually lets go, he, too, becomes engaged in a melancholy cycle whereby he keeps his supposedly lost object alive by staging an elaborate theatre of suffering – for himself. Urania, not very pleased with such a lesser form of melancholy (lesser, because it knows its object), consequently offers him a conventional piece of advice, one that employs the strategies of contemporaneous revenge tragedies. She tells him that it is his duty to avenge his wife's death. This would integrate him in a regular pattern of loss again, conventionalise him, that is. Male fool that he is, he falls for this ruse and leaves the realm of melancholy to Urania.

Revenge tragedy and melancholy indeed have much in common. In both, issues of loss and the proper or improper attitude to it are debated. In both of them one sees the self carving out a niche for him- or herself at the expense of the emerging individual's role in – or rather versus – society. In keeping with the characteristics of eccentricity outlined in the introductory chapter of the present study, both revenge tragedy and melancholy contain a strong element of observation and visibility linked with established power hierarchies. In revenge tragedies, the avengers observe their future victims, while these often watch their presumed enemies or have them watched (*Hamlet* again is a great, though by no means the only example). The melancholic appears to watch him- or herself mainly. Yet his or her privileged segregated state depends on a careful and often implicit observation of his or her surroundings in order to make sure that the separation is successful. It contains a continual awareness that the melancholic also feels watched, and needs to control this observation by others closely. A space is thereby created for an early form of individuality through mechanisms that can be called eccentric. They are mechanisms, however, that do not establish a modern individual once and for all and place it an uncontested realm. Whatever is positioned in an eccentric realm of its own remains in a relation with the power against which it is erected – a power that jealously watches its orbital dissenters and tries to pull them back under its mastery.

This becomes comically evident in Wroth's Urania – who can only be sad on her own and not in company. It is more implicit, but no less pronounced, in traditional descriptions of melancholy which place melancholics in isolated places, such as remote rooms, even the 'ivory towers' of learning – not a million miles from the columns of early Christian stylites. This negotiation of

eccentric spaces and regimes of observation will be shown to dominate such superficially different embodiments of eccentricity as the descriptions of melancholy and the hilarious goings-on in Restoration Comedies.

2.2 Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

Though nowadays often (and all too easily) classified as a typical, if not seminal manifestation of eccentricity, Burton's massive tome of a book is neither untypical in its form nor its subject matter in the context of the time of its production. Burton first published it in 1621, and its instant success persuaded him to revise and expand it, until it had reached its fifth edition by the time of Burton's death in 1640. Even the sixth and first posthumous edition (on which the edition used in the present study is based) apparently contains amendments that Burton had planned (he left no manuscript, so that all we can deal with are various printers' versions). Its form and nowadays strange label 'anatomy' are conventional as collections of established wisdom in some form of organisation, a body of knowledge, one might say.[73] Even the proliferation of this body over eventually much more than a thousand pages should not surprise in an age that had become increasingly fond of both its own advances in learning and the access to earlier and foreign sources. Yet there is a difference between books of the type of Burton's *Anatomy* and classical or Medieval collections of knowledge about medicine. Although Burton does spend a great deal of text on the somatic and psychic manifestations of melancholy (to the extent that, ultimately, almost everything can be related to it), he does not organise his text in a simple binary of cause and effect. In a way that is important for the present study and its claim that melancholy is at the heart of the eccentric project in culture, he places melancholy at the centre of cultural manifestations, while simultaneously making it a deviation from the norm. The paradoxical space allocated to melancholy resembles that of eccentricity.

This arrangement is evident throughout the book's complex structure. It begins with the authorial fiction of Democritus junior who supposedly wrote it, dedicates it to George Berkeley, addresses it in a dedication to itself (which to us seems eccentric, but was another convention),

[73] On the conventionality of Burton's project, see Lawrence Babb, 'The Character and Content of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*', in: *Sanity in Bedlam: A Study of Robert Burton's 'The Anatomy of Melancholy'* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), pp. 1–42.

then addresses the reader, and then, finally, after more than 120 pages in the modern edition, gets down to its task. Democritus junior is a name well-chosen with regard to the book's simultaneous claim to cultural centrality and its removal of itself to a realm that this study calls eccentric. Democritus was a classical philosopher and therefore represented one of the acceptable points of reference of a learned treatise. Yet he was also known as 'the laughing philosopher'. Thus, the repeated address by his supposed successor opens up the uneasy possibility that all the learning meticulously arranged in Burton's treatise might be an extended joke at the expense of the reader, but also at the expense of the genre. Democritus junior's dedication to his own book therefore not only contains the usual rhetorical gesture of self-deprecation and the equally conventional disclaimer that it is up to the readers to approve or disapprove of what is to follow.[74] It also encompasses a distinctly odd vision of their possible reaction that is in line with what has been claimed for the book's self-consciously eccentric status: 'They may say "Pish!" and frown, and yet read on: / Cry odd, and silly, coarse, and yet amusing.'[75]

Oddness and silliness are, of course, familiar attributes of eccentricity today. In Burton's age, however, they were yet to enter this connection. However, not even then they were labels that a self-respecting treatise on a scientific subject readily accepted. Burton's rhetorical move in the dedication is therefore doubly odd: it potentially disqualifies the scholarly status of his treatise (which creates a contradiction with its elaborate and methodical structuring in the two analytic partitions), and it also spoils the joke, if the text is meant to be one. What is equally significant is that the envisaged readers' reaction is ambivalent: a rejection as insignificant (another aspect attributed to eccentricity today), yet a simultaneous acknowledgement of its appeal, in the same way as the supposedly insignificant eccentricity has stayed with us for centuries.

The second self-conscious eccentric act of structuring then follows in its frontispiece by Christian le Blon, another important convention of books at that time. Burton's *Anatomy* contained it from the third edition onwards[76] as a neatly segmented arrangement of twelve rectangles, with the complete title of the work occupying the centre, its author's portrait the space beneath it, and the printer's details in the central bottom position. The remaining rectangles and the author's portrait are explained by another piece of text in neatly rhyming couplets. They contain

[74] James S. Tillman, 'The Satirist Satirized: Burtons Democritus Jr.', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 10:2 (1977), pp. 89–96.

[75] Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson, intr. William H. Gass (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), p. 5.

[76] Compare Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Die Melancholie der Literatur*, pp. 94–95.

allegorical landscapes inhabited by equally symbolic animals, human types representing a lover, a hypochondriac, a superstitious man, and a maniac, as well as two plants, borage and hellebore, traditionally regarded as antidotes for melancholy. Yet the explanation starts with the namesake of the treatise's fictional author, Democritus of Abdera, also called Democritus Abderites:

> Old Democritus under a tree,
> Sits on a stone with a book on knee;
> About him hang there many features,
> Of cats, dogs, and such-like creatures,
> Of which he makes anatomy,
> The seat of black choler to see.
> Over his head appears the sky,
> And Saturn, Lord of melancholy. (p. 7)

This innocuous introduction continues the eccentric game outlined above: it presents a venerable figure in little more than a children's rhyme. It mentions, but also ridicules, his science, that of literally anatomising by cutting up creatures,[77] by making them 'cats, dogs, and such-like creatures', random specimen that is (with perhaps an echo of common English sayings involving these animals, such as 'it's raining cats and dogs' or 'a cat-and-dog life'), and by furthermore counterpointing his empirical studies with a very different 'seat' of melancholy, the planet Saturn. The supposed founding father of melancholy is already caught between an empirical and a transcendental position towards it, and what is worse, does not even seem to realise it.

The illustration to which the quotation above refers is even more informative. It shows Democritus as a bearded old man in the position itself strongly associated with melancholy (Dürer's famous woodcut *Melencolia I* of 1514 has forever imprinted this image on the Western mind), that of the head pensively laid into one's hand (the same posture is given to the hypochondriac in the row below). It also shows him under a tree outside and above a formal garden with symmetrically arranged lawns, i.e. at the margin of culture. The person who is supposed to anatomise existence to discover the seat of melancholy is a marginal eccentric himself. He also

[77] There are, however, more serious links between anatomy and melancholy, as pointed out in Lobsien, *Skeptische Phantasie*, pp. 151–152. The seminal study on anatomy and its cultural significance in the Renaissance is Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

looks into the wrong direction, neither at the apparently wasted animal corpses scattered behind and beneath him nor at the planet Saturn indicated by its astrological symbol in the sky and visible for us, the readers, but not for the philosopher to whom it is of concern.[78]

Democritus, in a way that is also characteristic of other images of melancholics, looks ahead of himself but seemingly at nothing, while he is looked at by us. In the regime of visibility outlined in the previous chapter, this echoes the curious (and concerned) gaze of normality (here, surprisingly or not, us, the readers) on eccentricity. Yet the returned gaze, important for a dialogue, is missing. The oblique gaze instead destabilises our and normality's position. What is he looking at? Is there more to see (behind or beside us) that we cannot register? What has been described as eccentricity's challenge in the discussion of visibility above here manifests itself as the potential to make normality doubt its omniscience and omnipotence, symbolically contained in its belief that its point of view is a panoptic one capable of registering reality and truth objectively and completely. An incomplete and marginal counter point of view fractures this belief by not participating fully in its regime, while still remaining within its structure as an irritant.[79]

The explanatory verses mirror this game of looking and being looked at when they repeatedly invite the reader to supplement possibly missing or unclear elements from his or her own store of knowledge and experience. In the stanza on the landscape of Jealousy, for instance, the text itself tells the reader about the elements of the depiction, 'Symbols are these; I say no more, / Conceive the rest by that's afore' (p. 7). In other words: you do the interpreting now! The reader is held to be competent, since he or she is nothing but a melancholic him- or herself. Thus, the description of the lover concludes, 'If this do not enough disclose, / To paint him, take thyself by th' nose' (p. 8), and that of the madman ends with the not very reassuring claim, ''Twixt him and thee there's no difference' (p. 8). In the same way as the book invites us to look at melancholy in a literal sense (regarding the frontispiece) and metaphorically by following its complicated textual analysis of the same, it looks at us as its melancholic objects. The play of the gazes is at

[78] On Burton's interest in astrology, see J. B. Bamborough, 'Robert Burton's Astrological Notebooks', *Review of English Studies*, 32 (1981), pp. 267–285.

[79] The inspiration behind my idea of eccentricity's manifestation in an exchange of gazes stems from Laura Mulvey's influential gendered reading of film, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', reprinted in: *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 58–69, yet extends it into different territory while making the exchange of gazes a very different one with regard to power structures.

work once again and very radically, and its elaborateness and complexity – much more than the wealth of details and digressions of Burton's book – are what make it an epitome and in fact the first great manifestation of eccentricity as a literary text.

'The Author's Abstract on Melancholy', a further poetic digression preceding Democritus junior's address to the reader, elaborates the potential of this oblique position of the melancholic. It begins by outlining his or her privileged state, alone, with time on his or her hands, 'Void of sorrow and void of fear' (p. 11), real sorrow and fear that is, concerning objective reality, since soon this privileged individual will find ways of creating its own 'Fear and sorrow' (p. 11) out of its own thoughts. Yet though melancholy is then variously described as 'sweet', 'sad', 'sour', 'damn'd', 'harsh', 'fierce', and 'divine', it has certainly supplanted all other emotions, since the couplet in which these attributes occur is invariably of the type: 'All my joys to this are folly, / Naught so sweet as melancholy' or 'All my griefs to this are jolly, / Naught so sad as melancholy'. The first reiterates the *vanitas* motif, while the second establishes a paradox (griefs are jolly) along the lines of the wise fool in Erasmus in the preceding chapter.

In the same way in which established wisdom is thereby problematically coupled with a sophist game, the text works with paradoxes throughout, and this prevents the reader from establishing whether it is serious or not. In keeping with this strategy, the 'Abstract' seems to end in an 'orthodox' fashion by counterpointing the scandalous declaration that melancholy is 'divine' with its rejection as 'damned'. Yet the order hitherto followed by the poem has always made 'sweet' precede any negative characterisation of melancholy, with the effect that the label 'sweet' dominates the list of attributes with five mentions (followed with much distance by 'damned', which occurs only twice). Once again: is melancholy praised or rejected? The text cunningly avoids our inquisitive eye again.

'Inquisitive' it then calls its reader in the long address (110 pages in the modern edition), but once again the inquisition is not that of a dialogue (a philosophical one in a best-case scenario, a religious inquisition in the worst-case one). Already the first sentence of the address places the interaction on a theatrical stage. There the fictional author appears as an 'antic or personate actor' playing a part 'upon this common theatre' where he 'insolently intrudes' 'to the world's view' (p. 15). All the ingredients observed as essential for the creation of the asymmetrical eccentric exchange of gazes are there, the normality of the common theatre (although this is already qualified as a fictional space), which is constituted by the world's view, the hegemonic gaze ascertaining itself by a panoptic control of its surroundings, but also the dissenting position of the not-so-easily-classifiable individual, whose insolence and intrusion signify a lack of respect ('respect' being itself a term connected with looking) for this very norm. Here we are again

temporarily subsumed under the gaze of the norm; our inquisitiveness (and later in the address our concern as readers which genre of text we are dealing with) makes us complicit with the world, but also 'common' as the theatre that it is.

The theatre becomes the dominant metaphor of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* when it attempts to define its cultural context – and the foil from (and perhaps against) which it is designed. In the subsequent section we will inquire into the historical motivations for such a scenario as the ostensible cradle of eccentricity. We shall also see how the literal theatre of the seventeenth century becomes an expression of similar movements, and even how melancholy appears in it in unexpected shapes. Yet here are once more Burton's descriptions of the context out of which melancholy emerges. It is no coincidence, as will become evident soon, that he cleverly shifts the imagery from that of a classical market (the *agora*, where not only commercial transactions were negotiated, but supposedly also politics and philosophy) to that of the marketplaces of his own time, but also to the theatre, while simultaneously moving the theatre out of the fixed abodes that it had been given in the sixteenth century and in which it still took place in the seventeenth – after the interruption of the Puritan Commonwealth:

> What's the market? A place, according to Anacharsis, wherein they cozen one another, a trap; nay, what's the world itself? A vast chaos, a confusion of manners, as fickle as the air, *domicilum insanorum* [a madhouse], a turbulent troop full of impurities, a mart of walking spirits, goblins, the theatre of hypocrisy, a shop of knavery, flattery, a nursery of villainy, the scene of babbling, the school of giddiness, the academy of vice; a warfare, *ubi velis nolis pugnandum, aut vincas aut succumbas* [where you have to fight whether you will or no, and either conquer or go under], in which kill or be killed; wherein every man is for himself, his private ends, and stands upon his own guard. (p. 64)

Although one might be tempted to register such a passage merely as one of the frequent expressions of Burton's histrionic style, it does contain a wealth of crucial elements for an understanding why eccentricity emerges as a useful cultural concept in the seventeenth century. First and foremost, the passage again demonstrates an awareness of the functioning of social interactions, attributions, and values through exchange and visibility.[80] That this exchange is

[80] That Burton – despite his later reclusive life in Christ Church, Oxford – is by no means an otherwordly scholar who lacks awareness of his social and cultural context can be seen in Richard N. Nochimson, 'Studies in the Life of Robert Burton', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 4 (1975), pp. 85–111.

complex to the extent of appearing chaotic is also evident enough. Instability reigns, and under all the surfaces there is a clear threat of violence (martial terms such as 'troop', 'warfare', 'fight', 'conquer', and 'guard' abound in the passage). There is already an attempt to relegate some manifestations of deviation to places like the madhouse. Its emergence as a fixed cultural space for some forms of deviance in the seventeenth-century has been famously outlined by Michel Foucault.[81] Yet equally important are the vague 'impurities' mentioned in the passage. Apparently, neither the erection of madhouses nor the threat of violence succeed in keeping the cultural sphere 'pure' (and it remains to be seen in which shape this purity might have been imagined).

Yet there are also elements in Burton's description that are reminiscent of our discussion of melancholy in Freudian terms above, such as the refusal to let go and the painful and pleasurable insistence on commerce with ghosts (and again, we have to ask which ghosts walk Burton's marketplaces). The quotation ends with an insistent portrait of the consequences of the newly established individual. Every man is for himself now, determined by his 'private ends', and also his 'own guard'. Very early on, Burton's text shows an uncanny awareness that there is a price to be paid for individuality, especially since this individuality is predominantly based not on spurious abstract notions such as 'freedom', but on sound materialist interests. Indeed, the passage quoted above continues:

> No charity, love, friendship, fear of God, alliance, affinity, consanguinity, Christianity, can contain them, but if they be anyways offended, or that string of commodity be touched, they fall foul. Old friends become bitter enemies on a sudden for toys and small offences, and they that erst were willing to do all mutual offices out of love and kindness, now revile and persecute one another to death, with more than Vatinian hatred, and will not be reconciled. (pp. 64–65)

Community, whether on the small scale of individual friendship and family ties or on the largest of the often proclaimed brotherhood of all Christians (already a rather cynical idea after the Reformation and in an age that would see the Thirty Years War with its supposed justification in religious issues), is ultimately made impossible by this rampant individualism with its bases in materialist concerns and what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would label 'cultural capital' in the twentieth century.[82] One page further on, Burton once again drastically outlines

[81] Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*.

[82] Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital': in John Richardson, ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 241–258.

the dominance of these false gods. Yet what is more interesting for the present study is that he also indicates a possible resistance to them in a form of behaviour that we now recognise as eccentric:

> Our *summum bonum* is commodity, and the goddess we adore *Dea Moneta*, Queen Money, to whom we daily offer sacrifice, which steers our hearts, hands, affection, all: that most powerful goddess, by whom we are reared, depressed, elevated, esteemed the sole commandress of our actions, for which we pray, run, ride, go, come, labour, and contend as fishes do for a crumb that falleth into the water. It is not worth, virtue (that's *bonum theatrale* [a theatrical good]), wisdom, valour, learning, honesty, religion, or any sufficiency for which we are respected, but money, greatness, office, honour, authority; honesty is accounted folly; knavery, policy; men admired out of opinion, not as they are, but as they seem to be: such shifting, lying, cogging, plotting, counterplotting, temporizing, flattering, cozening, dissembling, 'that of necessity one must highly offend God if he be conformable to the world,' *Cretizare cum Crete* [to do at Crete as the Cretans do], 'or else live in contempt, disgrace, and misery.' One takes upon him temperance, holiness, another austerity, a third an affected kind of simplicity, wheneas indeed he, and he, and he, and the rest are hypocrites, ambidexters, outsides, so many turning pictures, a lion on the one side, a lamb on the other. (p. 65)

The passage describes hegemony, a form of ideology that rests on consensus, an unspoken implicit agreement on values and rules (here those imposed by materialism). This particular form of hegemony rejects and denies the authenticity of abstract values as much as that of individuals and instead demands hypocrisy and double-dealing. Yet it is interesting that even the possible forms of dissidence outlined in the last sentence participate in the theatricality described for hegemonic ideology. A formula such as 'takes upon him' still potentially echoes religious formulas, such as 'taking upon him the Cross' or any sacrifice, and indeed what is practised (temperance, holiness, and austerity) is strongly reminiscent of the early Christian hermits or Medieval anchorites and anchoresses encountered in the chapter on 'prehistoric' eccentricity. Yet an 'affected kind of simplicity' ends the potential ambiguity and shows that the dissent outlined here is clearly aware that it is trying to beat hegemony at its own game.

This is not surprising since, as I have argued above, eccentricity is not only in a continual relation with whatever rules as centric. This relation is also one of visibility, an oblique exchange of gazes. Consequently, theatricality is necessary for the manifestation of eccentricity. This theatricality unites the eccentric with the melancholic (Walter Benjamin would later call the theatricality of melancholy 'ostentation' in connection with his treatise on the German *Trauerspiel* also of the seventeenth century). It also points at the second form of expression of melancholy in Western culture: the carnivalesque. Its features will be outlined in the next section of the

present chapter. Yet neither melancholic nor carnivalesque theatricality are designed to sever the connection between eccentricity and norm. In fact, as the exchange of gazes indicates, their very existence depends on their mutual construction, and this in turn rests on a structural similarity at their core (this, incidentally, makes it highly problematic to talk about the 'nature' of melancholy, eccentricity, or normality).

This structural analogy as well as their interdependence also explains the ultimately circular argument for which Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* has become infamous. As the formal correlative to the panoptic (if admittedly chaotic) gaze of Burton's inclusive culture, melancholy needs to be everything, manifested in everything, and caused by potentially everything. The 'First Partition' of his *Anatomy of Melancholy* follows a pattern that can only be described as encyclopaedic, as an attempt to include all possible interpretations of and opinions on melancholy in its set-up – even when these multiple views do not add up to a possible synthesis, but themselves only arrive at an eccentric hotchpotch. The encyclopaedia as a dubious attempt at negotiating the norms and normality of a specific culture will concern us again at the end of the present chapter. Burton's encyclopaedic attempt, however, is closely related with the debate of the subsequent section on the cultural background of the emergence of eccentricity as a cultural concept in the English seventeenth century.

In keeping with the dominant discourses of his day, Burton first divides his *Anatomy* into manifestations and causes of melancholy. The empirical interest in manifestations is here a clear inheritance of Francis Bacon's radical redefinition of the natural sciences as fact-based rather than speculative. Yet contrary to what Antony Easthope argues in his study of *Englishness and National Culture*, Bacon's empiricism did not rule supreme.[83] It was in fact all the more radical since it challenged hitherto dominant idealist beliefs and superstitions which did not simply go away once empiricism had arrived on the scene. What happened instead was a continual struggle for dominance between idealism and empiricism, something by no means restricted to the English or British cultural context, yet, as will be explained below, with some crucial political, religious, and cultural modifications in Britain.

Already in Burton one sees the uneasy co-existence of a Baconian empiricism with traditional Christian orthodoxy, when in Section 1, which is supposedly concerned with manifestations of melancholy, 'Their causes' make an illogical appearance – only to be followed by the most orthodox (and anti-empirical) *passepartout*: sin (p. 126). Before the structure moves on to physical

[83] Antony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 63–92.

and psychological forms of melancholy, which it does in great detail, it signals its conformity with Christian orthodoxy. That this was considered absolutely essential can be seen in what is in some ways a counterpart to Bacon's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (1642), a treatise on religion by a practitioner of medicine. Seventeenth-century culture was by no means a period in which the natural sciences and religion enjoyed a harmonious relationship, and it is telling that Bacon's 'scientific' study needs to give an approving nod in the direction of theology, while Browne's is frequently at pains to signal that being a physician does not equal being an atheist.

This humble nod recurs in Burton's second section, where, again, under the 'Causes of Melancholy' the supernatural ones take precedence, of course with 'As from God immediately' taking pride of first place. Yet this does not automatically make Burton's enterprise centric. Indeed, conformity to the orthodoxy of cultural norms, here the religious ones, becomes questionable when God's primary position with regard to an affliction as seemingly diverse and widespread as melancholy, which can affect almost every part of the body and assume almost any shape, is counterpointed by the many lesser, but also more numerous alternative causes. Of these, the devil comes next. But he, too, is quickly supplemented by more 'spirits and devils', then made present again 'mediately' or indirectly by 'magicians' and 'witches' (p. 127). A further relegation of God (and devil) happens when the stars and their influence now enter the scene. (Eccentricity, as we recall, originates in astronomical thinking, which was for a long time indistinguishable from astronomical lore; and what happens here is indeed nothing but putting forward more and more potential causes of melancholy, only in order to relegate them into more or less distant orbits around the issue.)

The patient's physical condition and his genetic make-up are then considered, followed by possible external, but now no longer supernatural causes. Their list is curious, but again instructive. It contains 'Nurses; Education; Terrors, afrights; Scoffs, calumnies, bitter jests', but also 'Loss of liberty, servitude, imprisonment; Poverty and want' and, finally, 'A heap of other accidents, death of friends, loss, etc.' (p. 127).

Anything from bad childminders to the merest accident can cause eccentricity. The section heading which labels such causes 'Non-necessary, remote, outward, adventitious, or accidental' (p. 331) could indeed also function as an initial checklist for eccentricity. More particular causes are then sought in the entire human anatomy, starting – traditionally again – from 'Innate humour' via 'A hot brain' to problems with bodily 'evacuation', yet not without including an organ on which the interest both of scholars of melancholy and soon those debating eccentricity would

eventually focus: the spleen. We shall see below, in Anne Finch's famous poem of that title, how this organ becomes the new locus for a debate that was already evident in Mary Wroth's *Urania*.

Moving on from physical causes, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* then progresses into food that might cause melancholy (not surprising, anything from bread, water, milk, and wine, all types of meat and fish, herbs and seemingly all vegetables, in short, everything, can be responsible). Again, what strikes us as a ridiculous lack of logic and scientificity in Burton is traditional, so traditional that it echoes the earliest writings on melancholy, in which it was supposed to be caused by too much heat or too little heat in the brain. What distinguishes Burton's treatise, however, is that its encyclopaedic move not only encompasses almost everything as possible causes of melancholy; it also makes almost everything a possible cure of the same. This is not only explicable as part of Burton's possible extended joke, but – just like Hamlet's illogical insistence on his own marginality – it is a clever move to make melancholy ubiquitous and impossible, in short: to create for it an incontestable space in the form of a paradox, a move that we have already noticed in the early modern subject, for instance in its fictional shape as Wroth's Urania.

That it is a fictional space is evident in what becomes a crucial cause of melancholy in Burton and also a potent antidote: the imagination. One needs to recall that the concept does not enjoy universal acclaim in Western cultural history. In fact, Antiquity and the Middle Ages had generally been rather sceptical of this human faculty. Only slowly, during the Renaissance, did the term merit a more positive evaluation, until eventually the eighteenth century and Romanticism at the turn of the nineteenth turned it into the benchmark of human achievement.[84] It is tempting to see it as a symbiotic follower of melancholy and eccentricity, since in Burton 'Overmuch Study' is still ranked among the prime reasons for melancholy.

It is important, also in connection with the intertextual model of eccentricity proposed in the present study, that Burton does not declare the free roaming of the imagination responsible, but rather the excessive concern with established learning in the form of tradition and their textual manifestations. This is, of course, doubly ironic, since Burton's treatise is itself nothing but a manifestation of such an excess. Indeed, in less than one page on 'Overmuch Study' it mentions

[84] That the process was indeed a slow one can be seen in Norman R. Smith, 'Portentous Births and the Monstrous Imagination in Renaissance Culture', in: *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, ed. Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Press, 2002), pp. 267–283.

no less than fourteen scholars who have opinions on the subject (pp. 300–301). It is aware also of its reasons for making the scholar a prime example of melancholy, undoubtedly also because of his dubious status in contemporary society, and not without reason it contains a 'Digression of the Misery of Scholars', but also its implicit justification: 'why the Muses are melancholy'. Melancholy becomes the basic condition of all cultural production as well as the characteristic of cultural practitioners, who in Burton's time dominantly came from the emerging middle ranks of society. Their endangered position between acceptance and patronage and ridicule or even the madhouse is trying and tiring:

> How many poor scholars have lost their wits, or become dizzards, neglecting all worldly affairs and their own health, *esse* and *bene esse* [being and well-being], to gain knowledge for which, after all their pains, in this world's esteem they are accounted ridiculous and silly fools, idiots, asses, and (as oft they are) rejected, contemned, derided, doting, and mad! […] Go to Bedlam and ask. Or if they keep their wits, yet they are esteemed scrubs and fools by reason of their carriage: 'after seven years' study,'
> statua taciturnus exit,
> Plerumque et risu populum quatit.
> [Dumb as a statue, slow he walks along,
> And shakes with laughter loud the gazing throng.] (p. 303)

It is significant that scholarly existence is viewed not idealistically, but on a similar level as the afflictions caused by poverty and want in previous sections of Burton's treatise. This means that it remains acutely aware of the status of the individual in society and the material consequences of this status. It is also important that the effects such a disrespected scholar has on 'normal' society is that of provoking hilariousness. Once again, the uneven dialectic of norm and dissent functions on the level of visibility and thereby becomes theatrical. Even the terms applied to him we will re-encounter in the section on Restoration Comedy below, where labels such as 'idiots', 'fools' and 'asses' abound, where other forms of 'carriage' will provoke an epithet that etymologically derives from 'fob', as in 'cheat', but is now associated with eccentricity: 'fop'.

But let us first spend our last look at Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* on the second partition. This should, in a balanced and logical work, do what it pretends to do: supply the cure of melancholy. Indeed, it is structured as expected, as the seeming mirror of the first partition, once more subdivided in matching encyclopaedic fashion, taking up challenges that range from devilish influences, but also God's will – a trickier case for which prayer is recommended – to diets, herbs and spices, change of location and habits, exercise, and even surgery. The section again insists on orthodoxy by distinguishing 'Unlawful means forbidden' and 'Lawful means' (p. I). It contains

the usual conventional attempts at outbalancing supposed physical disequilibria with ingredients or actions that supposedly produced heat or cold mainly. It also contains some common-sense advice, for instance to prefer clear water and good food and to avoid unwholesome dwellings, fogs, and tempests (p. I).

Moreover, and here it becomes interesting for the present study, it recommends activities that are meant to fight melancholy. These are generally leisure pursuits, such as 'hawking, hunting, riding, shooting, bowling, fishing, fowling, walking in fair fields, galleries, tennis, bars', which clearly hint at the middle and upper classes as their addressees, since they require spare time and lack obvious economic value and instead form part of a growing culture of consumption and expenditure – which during the seventeenth and eighteenth century led to lively debates on the newly emerging concept of luxury.[85] We shall see some if its manifestations in connection with debates on foreignness, decadence, and eccentricity below.

To these exercises of the body it adds those of the mind, such as 'chess, cards, tables, etc. to see plays, masks, etc., serious studies, business, all honest recreations' (p. I). This is an odd list indeed. Not only does it contain several contradictions ('cards' were rarely seen as an honest form of recreation (Burton himself warns against their abuse on p. 82), and business and serious studies clash with the non-profitable entertainments of games and – again, and now explicitly – the theatre, in the shape of public theatre or private or court masques). Most paradoxical, though, is the inclusion of 'serious studies' in the list, since the first partition had ranged it among the prime causes of melancholy. Now Burton claims: 'But among those exercises or recreations of the mind within doors, there is none so general, so aptly to be applied to all sorts of men, so fit and proper to expel idleness and melancholy, as that of study' (p. 86).

Yet while it praises study and its objects, the accepted hegemonic and centric artefacts of cultural greatness, as being 'so full of content' (p. 86), only a page further below it acknowledges that they are only 'artificial toys', whose value consists in moving us 'for the present' and pleasing us 'but for a time' (p. 87). Burton's examples are Achilles, who is consoled by his mother after the loss of his friend Patroclus with a shield manufactured by the god Vulcan. He also lists the fashionable collections of the Roman cardinals (not exactly cultural models in Protestant Britain

[85] For a history of the concept, see John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). An interesting study that traces the genealogy of luxury back to Scepticism is Timothy Dykstal, *The Luxury of Scepticism: Politics, Philosophy, and Dialogue in the English Public Sphere, 1660–1740* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 2001).

at the time) and, even more tellingly, the cabinets of various princes of Europe, each containing curiosities from all over the globe. Burton turns the vogue for collecting artefacts, but also other people's ideas and works, into an endeavour to beat melancholy – and implicitly includes his own encyclopaedic efforts in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* in this strategy. What is important for melancholy's role vis-à-vis eccentricity is that Burton keeps insisting that their possession and enjoyment is an affair of style ('*O argumenta! O compositionem!* [...] What argument! What style!', he quotes Julian the Apostate; p. 88). Further below he praises the enjoyment of studies (not their results!) as more excellent than 'all those baubles of wealth', meaning precious stones and ornaments (p. 90).

Yet what are studies if they are pursued for their effect (today we would call it psychological effect) on the subject? Burton once again translates idealism of the scholarly type into social and cultural capital. Rather than separating studies from wealth, he discusses them on equal terms with wealth, something that shows his involvement in current debates on patronage, yet also a dissident position that refuses to participate in the *quid pro quo* logic current in the Renaissance. By making the collecting both of worldly goods and of supposedly abstract and ideal cultural capital a superficial affair, he ridicules and decentres both material wealth, social status, and cultural value. He makes it ridiculous by making it melancholy, and thereby shifts it into an eccentric realm where acquisition becomes an emblem of loss and not a sign of achievement. Even the Scriptures ultimately become a mine for combating melancholy through means of what we would nowadays call entertainment. And yet Burton cannot separate studies from either side of his cause-and-effect model of melancholy, despite the obvious paradox thereby created. As the means with which culture reproduces itself intertextually, it must – like eccentricity – remain on both sides of the uneven dialectic of acceptance and dissent. Like Hamlet's marginality, that of intertextual hunting, gathering, storing, mining, and sharing cannot be abandoned, since this would not only endanger a recently born concept of subjectivity, but – as it emerges in the treasure house of culture that is Burton's treatise – an equally recent and still vague concept of culture.

2.3 Melancholy and carnival as eccentricity's expressive modes

The Russian Formalist Mikhail Bakhtin has theorised carnival in connection with the French sixteenth-century writer François Rabelais.[86] Bakhtin regards carnival as a temporary suspension, indeed a reversal, of values and hierarchies. By foregrounding that which is normally taboo in society (such as sexual organs, defecation, etc.), the carnivalesque achieves an outlet for suppressed impulses and forces in a culture. Yet far from permanently reversing its order, the temporary safety valve of carnival ultimately stabilises this initial order. This is also the reason why carnival is an element tolerated by culture's hegemony, even when it clearly contradicts its usual norms. Telling evidence of this is the ritualised excess of the traditional Western carnival period immediately preceding lent: during Carnival all that which is supposed to be foregone during lent (food, drink, music, merriment, and sex) is ostensibly celebrated and practised. This leads to a marked contrast between the two periods, and therefore, at least theoretically, to an increased awareness of the meaning of lent; yet it also makes the austerity of lent more bearable. What happens when the boundaries between 'carnival' in its widest sense and normality disappear will be of concern in the section on eccentricity in postmodernity.

Carnival is not only a useful concept for dealing with the theatricality of eccentricity described in the section on melancholy. It is also structurally related to melancholy, even when this connection appears strange at first sight. Indeed, the carnivalesque can be considered the structural inversion of melancholy: it externalises what melancholy internalises; it emphasises transience where eccentricity is characterised by a focus on duration (even modern-day depressives are said to lose their sense of time); and yet carnival is just as ostentatious, its practice is

[86] In Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Rabelais easily deserves a chapter of his own in a treatise on eccentricity. Not only is he among the ranks of those whom Kaiser calls 'praisers of folly' (*Praisers of Folly*, pp. 103–192). He also presents a vision of utopia in *Gargantua: Les grandes et inestimables cronicques du grand et énorme géant Gargantua* (1532) and *Pantagruel* (1532 or 1533) as well as reiterating the story of the classical patron of prehistoric eccentricity, Diogenes at the beginning of his *Tiers Livre* (1546). *Tiers Livre*, with its assortment of foolish characters, can indeed be regarded as a version of the 'ship of fools' model outlined by Foucault. Rabelais's works were translated into English by Sir Thomas Urquhart in 1653 and 1693 (the second volume was already published posthumously by Peter Anthony Motteux, whom we will re-encounter in the subsequent chapter as an important translator of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Motteux also published a translation of Rabelais *Tiers livre* in 1694). For an essay that links carnival and Rabelais with Erasmus, see Donald Gwynn Watson, 'Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* and the Spirit of Carnival', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 32 (1979), pp. 333–353.

just as much characterised by insistence, as is melancholy. We shall see in the historical section below how both can become expressions of social frustration. Yet for the purpose of analysing English Restoration Comedies as means of using eccentricity to define 'character', once again Freud's model is helpful. Where Freud regards melancholy as a reluctance to give up a lost object (which, nonetheless, is ritually or symbolically killed by the melancholic), carnival is the inversion of this process: the theatrical abjection or celebrated loss of that which is normally considered essential and eternal (morality, authorities, truths). Yet while the melancholic stealthily 'kills' that which he or she ostensibly refuses to abandon (by reifying it in metaphoric or symbolic terms and by turning it into the secret cause of his or her suffering), carnival secretly keeps that alive which it ostensibly abandons. Social and cultural order emerge from carnival as strong as they were before, if not stronger, and hegemonic authority has no need to feel seriously threatened by it.

This also once again points to the fact observed in the discussion of melancholy above: both the hegemonic centre and the dissident eccentric margin must be seen – and see each other – as wearing 'masks'. Their roles are not essential, but relational. Their significance depends on the gaze of the respective other; even though their positions are not exchangeable and the interchange is unequal (similar things apply to subcultures in general).

Dissident eccentricity is not only generally loath to claim a centric position, but if it does, as has been argued for Stoicism and Christianity, it loses its oppositional subversive potential and becomes itself the hegemonic gaze that aims at panoptical knowledge and ubiquitous influence (see the infamous Inquisition). Even when eccentricity generates new playing fields (the metaphor is chosen deliberately, since it takes up both the competitiveness and theatricality of eccentricity as well as its generally subordinate character to the 'real' powers), it therefore establishes that which it designs not as stable, but as part of an ongoing exchange with whatever occupies the centric hegemonic perspective. This applies especially to the imagination, which suddenly moves from a dubious force into the position of at least an ambivalent one in the seventeenth century. It also, perhaps surprisingly for us, applies to the concept of the modern subject.

This subjectivity, as the discussion of melancholy and its attendant competition has shown, is a premature birth, if not a stillbirth, once it has appeared on the cultural stage in the seventeenth century. The subsequent section will discuss the historical reasons for its uneasy status and its resulting frustrations, features that lead many cultural theorists to describing melancholy as the symptom of a frustrated emerging bourgeoisie. Yet, like Burton's melancholy, once established, it insists on its relational survival despite possible frustrations – by making itself simultaneously

part of the problem and part of its cure. We shall see how this manifests itself in such crucial terms for English culture as 'character', 'wit', but also 'fop' below.

2.4 Inner circles and foppish margins: Restoration culture

There are many reasons why eccentricity emerges as a cultural concept in Britain in the seventeenth century. When one considers that eccentricity is an implicit challenge to a centre that need not remain stable, an exchange of distrustful glances from uneven positions, glances from which new possibilities might emerge, positions of dissent, yet also those that can be discarded as marginal without any visible and lasting effect on hegemony, one sees that if ever a culture and a historical period was in need of such a flexible concept, it was English culture in the seventeenth century.

Britain is often teased for having failed on the front of bourgeois revolutions, accused of having somehow skipped the upheavals that shook continental Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and culminated after the First World War. Yet Britain did have a revolution that was at least as radical as the French one of the eighteenth century or the one that turned the American colonies into the United States of America when clumsy attempts at an absolutist rule by Charles I led first to a Civil War from 1642 onwards, then to the execution of this very king in 1649, and eventually to the introduction of something unheard of before, a 'Commonwealth', a form of government not based on hereditary status, but (at least in theory) on merit. The experiment lasted until 1660 when the so-called 'Restoration' reintroduced a king in the shape of Charles I's son Charles II.[87] Yet despite the name, the Restoration did not restore things to their former state, even though nominally a Stuart king was again on the throne. There remained a pronounced awareness of some of the issues that had led to the Civil War and the Commonwealth in the first place: absolutist behaviour by the rulers, which was at odds with the by then firmly established power of parliament, especially its tax-raising rights. These ill-advised absolutist attitudes manifested themselves in unwise and unpopular alliances, often with Catholic countries, which – together with the habit of Stuart kings to choose Catholic spouses – led to a widespread suspicion that they were planning to reintroduce Catholicism to Britain. In

[87] A very readable account of this period is Austin Woolrych, *Britain in Revolution 1625–1660* (Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Charles II's successor, James II, Britain then indeed had a Catholic king once more, and such an unpopular one that the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' swept him from the throne after only three years in 1688 and replaced him by his Protestant daughter Mary and her equally Protestant Dutch husband William. Just as the 'Restoration' was no such thing in the fullest sense of the term, the 'Glorious Revolution' was neither very glorious nor much of a revolution, since it did not reverse power structures. Yet it did bring about something that still determines British politics to the present day: a constitutional monarchy whose powers are clearly defined vis-à-vis a strengthened parliament.

What such official names and dates often obscure is that behind these changes Britain emerged as a dominant commercial and political world power by means of a combination of rampant mercantilism and a growing network of colonies. The Industrial Revolution also started in the seventeenth century, although it gained its strongest momentum in the eighteenth. The people who dominated in these changes at the bases of British culture and society were no longer primarily the traditional upper class, the king or queen and their court of influential aristocrats. The former were increasingly turned into symbolic figureheads of a state that was really run by parliament. The latter had frequently lost their ancestral lands and fortunes in the Civil War and Commonwealth (the Restoration had indeed restored it to some, but also frequently 'restored' land and money to lower-ranking people who had shown themselves loyal to the Crown). As a consequence, the new 'upper class' of the landed gentry emerged, no longer bearing long-established aristocratic titles, but running their estates on new mercantile and no longer purely feudal principles.

Together with them, the manufacturers and traders became the economic masters of Britain. It is their power, which was not (yet) matched by proper political representation, which must be looked at when discussing the frustrations of the newly emerging middle classes and their expressions in shapes such as melancholy or Restoration Drama.[88] These frustrations are therefore related to, but also different from, those of the Renaissance courtiers who, often also from the middling ranks, were frequently superior to their patrons and masters in education and knowledge, but yet unable to capitalise on their 'cultural capital', since this did not count for much without inherited rank. In both the Renaissance and the seventeenth century, however, art and especially literature, and among the literary genres noticeably the public form of drama,

[88] A historical study of this process is John Smail, *The Origins of Middle-Class Culture: Halifax, Yorkshire, 1660–1780* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

were the means of negotiating status, ambitions, and frustrations. Intertextuality is once again the pattern that characterises cultural (re-)production.

What such a complex culture needs is not the clash of binary oppositions (such as Catholic versus Protestant, king versus parliament, city versus country, aristocrats versus merchants and manufacturers, etc.) but a careful balancing of positions in a field characterised by tolerance. It is no coincidence that even parliamentary acts acknowledged the need for such a concept (which would make little sense under feudal Medieval conditions or those of absolutist rule). Thus, an important act of 1689 which was supposed to put an end to religious controversy and the fear of drastic religious changes was called 'Act of Toleration'. Three unsuccessful 'Declarations of Indulgence' to Catholics and dissenters had preceded it in 1672, 1687, and 1688.

Tolerance, however, is a tricky concept, since it simultaneously implies and departs from firm rights and positions and depends on those (here the country's government) who grant it. It also, and this is important for the present study, requires dissidence that it tolerates, or it would make no sense. Similar to carnival it accepts difference in clearly defined forms – and thereby stabilises the hegemonic power that grants it, here the now firmly established Church of England. Eccentricity becomes a means of negotiating difference without the need for binaries and exclusions – and their attendant dangers of violent resistance, rebellion, and revolution. It is no coincidence that in the same year a so-called 'Bill of Rights' was passed, which, once again, negotiated the rights of individuals, but also of the king, carefully (the latter had to be a Protestant, for example).

We shall see below how these socio-political changes find an expression in the supposedly intimate private sphere of the individual and affect its redefinition as a 'character'. Again, such shifts are not purely idealist ones. On the contrary, in the British tradition individuality had traditionally been defined in clearly anti-idealist and indeed very material terms. Already the 'Magna Charta' reluctantly signed by King John in 1215 had merely talked about the limits of rightful imprisonment (but only of nobles, not of commoners). The equally famous 'Habeas Corpus' act of 1679 extended this to every person, yet again did not provide any idea of what a person was beyond its physical body.[89] Again, one can see the debates that happen inside forms that the present study considers eccentric, such as melancholy, fops, or 'characters', as ways of

[89] See Anselm Haverkamp and Cornelia Vismann, 'Habeas Corpus: The Law's Desire to Have the Body', in: Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, eds., *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 223–235.

internally holding a debate on modernising definitions of the self when culture has to tread carefully in its external measures.

Restoration Drama is such a means of straddling the divide between internal and external cultural debates. Puritan hostility to the theatre had closed the London stages (but not some provincial ones) in 1642. Plays continued to be performed as 'private entertainment', yet commercial possibilities were severely restricted, and, as a consequence, the creation of new material came to a halt.[90] With the Restoration in 1660 theatres opened again, but only for a short time. Then they were suppressed again, until Charles II eventually licensed only two companies, The King's Company and the Duke's Company (whose patron was the king's brother, the Duke of York). Clearly, theatre was considered a social force in need of tight control. Yet internal changes happened too. The new theatres had roofs, proscenium arches, changeable scenery, and – for the first time – female performers.

The subjects of the plays were also modernised. Before the Civil War, Renaissance plays had in general cautiously pretended to look away from contemporary culture and politics by setting their plots in fictional exotic locations or, if they dealt with British matters, in the past. Ben Jonson had caused a stir when he confronted the audience of his *Bartholomew Fair* with a scene of contemporary London in 1614. Clearly, the audience was not used to seeing itself on stage, no matter how much later-day critics and scholars indulge in the idea of art as a mirror of life. Jonson remained a staple of theatrical entertainment after the theatres reopened in 1660. But the mirroring of contemporary life in drama moved on from the mixed and generally low crowd of his *Bartholomew Fair* to the audience who now patronised the modernised and more expensive theatres: the aristocracy, gentry, and wealthy emerging middle class.[91] Their relations were depicted in new plays in a manner that ostensibly focussed on issues such as marriage (a standard theme of comedy), sexual conquest and betrayal. The latter themes were far from new in drama, but had never been staged in such an explicit way, with the presence of real women on stage adding to the new 'realism'. Most importantly, the new plays debated social recognition and standing.

[90] See Dorothy Turner, 'Restoration Drama in the Public Sphere: Propaganda, the Playhouse, and Published Drama', *Restoration and 18th-Century Theatre Research*, 12:1 (Summer 1997), pp. 18–39.

[91] Harold Love, 'Who Were the Restoration Audience?', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 10 (1980), pp. 21–44; Arthur H. Scouten, '"Restoration Comedy" and Its Audiences, 1660–1776', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 10 (1980), pp. 45–69.

As was pointed out above, the new powers in society only enjoyed a peaceful coexistence through the subtly calibrating forces of tolerance. Frictions with regard to status, economic power, claim to cultural (and this also meant moral) dominance, etc. remained. We shall see that they were sometimes debated in the mode of melancholy in Anne Finch's poem 'Spleen' below. But they were more prominently negotiated in carnivalesque terms in Restoration Comedies. In order to achieve their purpose of venting dissent, competition, and tensions while avoiding confrontation, the plays employ means that can be characterised as eccentric. The analysis of William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* of 1675 and George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* of 1676 and a glance at what is often considered the culmination of the genre, William Congreve's *The Way of the World* of 1700, will demonstrate this.

Both Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and Etherege's *The Man of Mode* contain eccentric manifestations on a number of levels. Striking in terms of structure is their careful geographic layout. In both plays, it is of enormous importance where characters are from, which spaces they frequent, to which they are admitted, and from which they remain excluded. This determines not only their success and failure in plots revolving around marriage and fidelity, but also their social status. Both plays clearly have their centre in London, not very surprisingly in a country that had been centralised since the time of the Tudors. Yet inside London there are locations that are more central and centric, and others that are less so. In *The Country Wife*, the central character Pinchwife, though a former Londoner, has decided that a London wife brings with her the risk of being cuckolded and therefore opted for one from the country. 'Country' here means such distant regions as Hampshire, which demonstrates the enormous symbolic 'pull' of London as a supposed cultural centre.

Though not as unspeakable as the real aliens in the piece, his 'Welsh cousins' (who are only ever alluded to as a potential threat, but never materialise), he has nevertheless distanced himself from the centre through his marriage, and this is one of the reasons why Horner, the rake hero of the play, wishes to teach him a lesson. Horner's house in London forms the centre of polite company – together with historically prominent public spaces for the fashionable Londoners of the time, such as the New Exchange, the Mall, certain parks, such as Mulberry Garden (on the site of today's Buckingham Palace) and St James's Park,[92] and – importantly – the theatre.

[92] These, and the New Exchange, are the sites for fashionable London walks, as recommended by Alithea, Pinchwife's experienced sister, to Pinchwife's naive wife Margery; *The Country Wife*, Act I, scene 1 in: *Restoration Plays*, ed. Robert G. Lawrence (London: Dent, 1994), p. 28.

Restoration plays frequently contain references to Restoration theatre as a space of social exchange and encounter, as a mirror of society. This is important in the arrangement of oblique gazes that has been discussed as a way of conceptualising eccentricity and normality.

Even within the homes of the protagonists, spaces have symbolic value. Thus, Horner receives general visitors, like the quack doctor who has helped him spread the false rumour of his impotence, but also his supposed friends Harcourt, Dorilant, Sparkish, and Pinchwife as well as the semi-official visitors Sir Jasper Fidget, his wife, and Mrs Dainty Fidget, in his 'lodgings', but reserves his private rooms and his bedchamber for select (female) company. In Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, this London centre is formed by the private lodgings of the play's hero Dorimant (a character probably modelled on the notorious Earl of Rochester[93]). Again, social prestige depends on access to this privileged social sphere, and the play even opens by showing us Dorimant in gown and slippers in his 'Dressing-room'.

Yet all this centring contains an irony: in both plays the real centre of culture is not in England. It is not London, but Paris, where the latest fashions are created and where all the eyes of the fashionable London crowd depicted in the plays are constantly directed. Horner has just returned from France, and the very fact of his stay there is enough to support any story – even though one of impotence caused by venereal disease picked up there is certainly a likely one in those days, to the extent that 'French' carried the connotation of syphilis, also called 'pox', a common expletive.[94] In *The Man of Mode*, the fop who provides the sub-title of the play, Sir Fopling Flutter, has just been to Paris and picked up all sorts of fashionable gadgets as well as some dubious habits there.

What is the point of such as cultural 'squinting'? It embodies a form of contradictory behaviour that seeks to accept that Britain was no longer on its own and culturally isolated, as it had been during the Commonwealth, but remained connected to mainland Europe after the return of the king from exile in Paris. At the same time, the derogatory view of France, which is evident despite all lip-service to its attractions, stands for a form of nationalist pride and even contains a more

[93] The density of intertextual entanglement can be seen in the possible influence of Erasmus on Rochester's literary works, as outlined in David M. Vieth, 'The *Moriae Encomium* as a Model for Satire in Restoration Court Literature: Rochester and Others', in: *Rochester and Court Poetry*, ed. David M. Vieth and Dustin Griffin (Los Angeles: William Andrew Clark Memorial Library, Univ. of California, 1988), pp. 1–32.

[94] See Leon Guilhamet, 'Pox and Malice: Some Representations of Venereal Disease in Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Satire', in: *The Secret Malady: Venereal Disease in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France*, ed. Linda E. Merians (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), pp. 196–212.

than ironic criticism of foreign things and attitudes that would become a dominant note in British culture from then onwards.[95] By making foreignness eccentric, one can avoid having to take a clear stand towards it. Unlike under the Puritan Commonwealth, Restoration plays contain no outbursts of hostility against foreign influences, but much mocking of their exaggerated appeal. Eccentricity once more becomes a safety valve that permits criticism without the need for consequences. Or rather, the consequences themselves appear in an interesting discursive form that itself carries many characteristics of the interplay of eccentricity and normality. They appear in the shape of 'wit', a discursive strategy that will be discussed below.

The most noticeable characters who fail to outbalance 'foreign' influences with hegemonic 'native' behaviour are the so-called 'fops'. Although Restoration fops function as comic elements in plays of the period, they bear little resemblance to the fools of Renaissance plays. They are neither lower-class nor in the service of rulers. They are also not marked as wise in their honesty or naivety. Instead, they represent what happens when the careful balancing act between hegemonic norm and individualistic dissidence goes wrong. As was noted in the discussion of melancholy, the Early Modern period experiments with ways in which social subjects can achieve and claim a form of individuality. Yet this attempt is only ever possible by a certain decentring of this subject from whatever happens to be the norm. The Restoration fop embodies this double bind doubly, so to speak, since he (and it is usually a he, although some female characters display similar attributes, although usually in weakened shape) simultaneously aims to be special, different, unlike every one else in his exquisite dress, impeccable manners, and latest acquisitions, yet measures (and has to measure) them against the ruling norms of fashion. Thus, the title of Etherege's play, *The Man of Mode*, especially in conjunction with its subtitle, *Sir Fopling Flutter*, leaves it open whether its 'man of mode', i.e. the epitome of fashion, is its obvious hero Dorimant – or indeed its anti-hero Sir Fopling.

At the same time, the fop's ambivalent position vis-à-vis cultural norms also affects the people surrounding him: ridiculed by the simple servants and tradespeople as well as by the upper class that he is part of, he is also the secret foil against which all of them measure themselves in terms of outfit and manners. In fact, all men in the play are men of mode, and the women also keenly follow established codes. That even the 'centric' characters acknowledge that which was claimed in the discussion of study and learning in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, that when viewed from

[95] A comprehensive overview is provided by Jonathan Gil Harris, *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic: Discourses of Social Pathology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

an eccentric perspective they also become mere ornaments, can be seen in Dorimant's ironic welcoming words to Sir Fopling Flutter, after Fopling has reminded him of an encounter with a French aristocrat in the Tuileries. This marquis 'mistook' Dorimant – i.e. Dorimant's social skills were so pronounced as to make him a perfect imitation! Dorimant's comment is consequently: 'I would fain wear in fashion as long as I can, sir, 'tis a thing to be valued in men as well as baubles.'[96] Dorimant is himself aware that the difference between him and Sir Fopling is one of degree, not of kind; and one could read his cynicism as the melancholy counterpart of Fopling's carnivalesque eccentricity. The telling names of fops (e.g. Sir Fopling Flutter in *The Man of Mode* or Sparkish in *The Country Wife*) hint at their presumed superficiality, frailty, and transience – something also commonly attributed to eccentricity, though in marked contrast to its cultural longevity.

Indeed, it is difficult to say if the plays really make all their jokes at the expense of their fops, since the characters representing the norm or even the ideal are either dramatically weak (like the conventional lovers Young Bellair and Emilia in *The Man of Mode* and to a certain extent even the more subtle pair Harcourt and Alithea in *The Country Wife*) or themselves in danger of appearing eccentric and foppish. In *The Country Wife* it is not even clear if normality and ideal have representatives at all: although Harcourt and Alithea act as male and female representatives of common sense, they are nonetheless often involved in very silly disguises and pretences, to the extent that Harcourt performs a mock-wedding of Alithea and his supposed friend, but in fact rival, Sparkish. Normality indeed participates in the theatricality and carnival of eccentricity. If normality is to be sought outside decadent London, then it has a hard time finding an incarnation in *The Country Wife* either: Margery Pinchwife quickly turns out to be much interested in other men underneath her rustic naivety. Her husband Pinchwife has not only left his London attitudes and manners behind, but has indeed exchanged them with manners that would be intolerable in any society. He goes as far as threatening his wife with violence and

[96] George Etherege, *The Man of Mode*, act III, Scene 2, p. 153.

even prepares to draw his sword on her when convinced of her adultery.[97] He thereby becomes more than another version of an eccentric. He becomes anti- or asocial and potentially deviant.

The oblique exchange of gazes between the norm and eccentricity (which in Restoration Comedy occurs between the fops and their environment) also threatens the normality of this environment. That this is not merely an issue affecting individuals can be seen in the double joke of Sir Fopling Flutter's entourage in *The Man of Mode*. Sir Fopling affects an equipage of 'six footmen and a page' (Act III, scene 3, p. 159) when making public appearances, here in the fashionable Mall. This is perceived as exaggerated even by his style- and status-conscious hangers-on. In keeping with the ruling fashion, he has further chosen Frenchmen as his attendants – with one exception: 'There's one damned English blockhead among 'em: you may know him by his mien' (Act III, scene 3, p. 163). His name turns out to be John Trott, appropriate for a footman, yet Sir Fopling decides to rename him after his county of origin, Hampshire (Hampshire has a pretty bad standing in Restoration Comedies in general, it appears). Decent simple Englishness only uneasily keeps pace with French sophistication.

The joke on Sir Fopling is therefore also a joke on Englishness and its supposed virtues of simplicity – an inheritance from the Puritans. Yet Fopling has already gone further. Earlier in the scene he had mustered his attendants and then, when suddenly spotting Dorimant, included the latter in his role-call: 'Hey, Champagne, Norman, La Rose, La Fleur, La Tour, La Verdure! Dorimant! –' (Act III, Scene 3, p. 159). What has been claimed above applies again here: it is not easy to tell who is the man of mode, the fop or the play's rake-hero. 'Dorimant' is as affected a name as 'La Verdure' (which signifies 'greens', as in 'vegetable'). The same ambivalence can be detected in the use of terms such as 'baubles' (for ornaments and jewels, yet also for the

[97] 'Write as I bid you, or I will write "whore" with this penknife in your face', 'I will stab out those eyes that cause my mischief'; Act IV, scene 2, p. 67, 68. Margery writes in a letter to Horner: 'let him not see this, lest he should come home and pinch me, or kill my squirrel' (Act IV, scene 3, pp. 77–78). Pinchwife's name seems to confirm Margery's fears. When Pinchwife threatens to kill Margery (and thereby, symbolically, all women) and even the men who might stand in his way with the words 'I will never hear woman again, but make 'em all silent thus', he is stopped by Horner with words whose seriousness matches the violation of cultural norms suggested by Pinchwife: 'No, that must not be' (Act V, scene 4, p. 99). It is interesting that the silencing of women is a recurring topic in the debates on normality, eccentricity, and its limit, deviance. It indicates that women occupy a position within Western culture that itself precariously straddles these symbolic realms.

superficiality of behaviour and supposed cultural knowledge – the word 'decorum' would soon occupy a similar status[98]) and 'bubble' for a dupe.

The means with which Restoration Comedy tells the 'baubles' from the 'bubbles' is wit. This is in itself a curious concept, since it derives etymologically from the Old English word 'wit', which signified a right mind or good judgement, yet is also related to 'witan', which means 'to know'.[99] Yet knowledge in the sense of learning is not what wit is about. It is also curiously different from its European counterparts, since both French *ésprit* and German *Geist* clearly hint at abstract, spiritual, even transcendental qualities. Wit, on the other hand, matches perfectly the observed trademark of eccentricity as a cultural ordering procedure and realm of experiment. It signifies intertextual skills (its test is often the characters' ability to use similes in Restoration plays). It denotes an expert knowledge of conventions, yet also a subtle skill in variation (an echo of Erasmus' *copia*). Transient, designed to be short-lived, and ornamental, wit is the benchmark of men and women of mode. Yet wit that goes wrong is equally the litmus test for fops. Their failure to participate in the production of witticisms is often already indicated in their telling names, 'Witwoud' in Congreve's *The Way of the World* and its earlier counterpart 'Truewit' from Ben Jonson's *Epicœne* of 1609 being the obvious examples.[100]

Yet where does true wit end and lack of wit begin? Since wit is without essence and foundation, very similar to the encyclopaedic learning that nonetheless does not add up to a proper body of knowledge in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, it can hardly supply the basis for the much-celebrated English pragmatism. It sits uneasily with common sense, unless one recognises that this fabled common sense is itself a product of an oblique exchange of suspicious gazes with eccentricity. Wit as a crucial means of establishing social distinctions and cultural capital functions as an attempt to wrench knowledge and expertise, much of which is linguistic, textual, and literary, from the hands of scholars and turn it into a consumable commodity of the new leisured classes. This is not so much an act of democratisation as a reification and can be regarded as an early

[98] *The Oxford Dictionary of Etymology*, ed. Charles Talbut Onions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) interestingly lists the first use of 'decorous' as 'seemly' in the seventeenth century and as 'proper' in the eighteenth century (p. 249).

[99] *Oxford Dictionary of Etymology*, p. 1009.

[100] See Paul G. Stanwood and Lee M. Johnson, 'The Structure of Wit: "Is All Good Structure in a Winding Stair?"', in: *The Wit of Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), pp. 22–41.

symptom of what theorists like Adorno would call the 'culture industry'.[101] It is part of an ongoing and multilateral struggle for social and cultural dominance between the newly empowered middle ranks and the economically threatened upper classes and can be considered a kind of backlash, since it reduces learning to an ornament, a 'bauble' for the leisured classes.

The dedication of Congreve's *The Way of the World* to the unscrupulous Earl of Montague clearly signals an awareness that such a social delineation of characters was one of the main aims of Restoration Comedy. It also shows explicitly that there are certain dangers attending the creation of what the text now calls 'characters' and relates to the classical philosopher Theophrastus (whom we have already encountered as possible early theorist of melancholy and will re-encounter in the Victorian period). For 'characters' are designed for the stage – as exaggerated, eccentric embodiments of human foibles. Yet a character is also what the audience wishes to be. The English language still retains this ambivalence in the expression 'quite a character' that we encountered at the start of the present study:

> Those characters which are meant to be ridiculed in most of our comedies are of fools so gross that, in my humble opinion, they should rather disturb than divert the well-natured and reflecting part of an audience; they are rather objects of charity than contempt; and instead of moving our mirth, they ought very often to excite our compassion.
>
> This reflection moved me to design some characters which should appear ridiculous not so much through a natural folly (which is incorrigible, and therefore not proper for the stage) as through an affected wit; a wit, which at the same time that it is affected, is also false. As there is some difficulty in the formation of a character of this nature, so there is some hazard which attends the progress of its success upon the stage; for many come to a play so over-charged with criticism that they very often let fly their censure, when through their rashness they have mistaken their aim. This I had occasion lately to observe: for this play had been acted two or three days before some of these hasty judges could find the leisure to distinguish betwixt the character of a Witwoud and a Truewit. (pp. 489–490)

The difficult attempt to create plausible characters while maintaining both social distinctions and a distinction between stage characters and the characters of the audience finds its expression in

[101] Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 85. For a critical discussion of the concept, see Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 61–64.

Congreve's use of the traditional term 'fools'. Their grossness makes it easy to categorise them.[102] Yet he also wishes to give up the earlier method of creating 'natural' fools (and 'natural' here means anything from genetic ability via hereditary social status to disposition according to the theories of humours). Yet if that is Congreve's aim, he has to acknowledge that the 'formation of a character of this nature' is a cultural formation, and therefore subject to hazards which derive from changing cultural norms and their attendant ideological interpretations, in short: derive from the exchange of gazes between centric norm and eccentric margin. This blurs the boundary between stage character and the characters in the audience. Rash, filled with pre-existing, i.e. intertextual, opinion, they themselves become fops and therefore unable to tell the false wits from the true ones.

That Congreve's model of stage characters and audience character is a carnivalesque one not only becomes evident through his comic way of presenting the audience as if it was watching the play for two or three days in a row before understanding its message. He also explicitly lists an (again intertextual) genealogy of classical forerunners of his attempt to create characters. Three crucial ones among the four names that he lists are writers of comedies: Plautus (whose coarseness is, however, criticised by Horace), Terence, and his model Menander, who in turn based his types on Theophrastus. Theophrastus (who lived ca. 370 to 288 BC) is repeatedly invoked as the originator of the concept of 'character' in literature. Yet, like the writers of comedies that he supposedly influenced, his characters do not represent norms or ideals. On the contrary, they (like the modern-day English 'character') embody exceptions, even abnormality.[103] Thus, as with normality, its attendant concept of individuality, which in debates on fictionality, but also on social and cultural roles, becomes one of character, has as its starting point not the centre, a norm, or indeed normality, but a form of distance from the norm that does not yet equal deviance, but remains integrated in the mirroring process of cultural self-identification in the form of eccentricity.

That the relation between eccentricity and norm is one of continual friction, that it must be so, since dynamics are at the heart of their joint enterprises, becomes more than evident in the debates on decadence, which are also always debates on foreignness and luxury and

[102] The Prologue of Congreve's play instantly problematises this again when it calls poets 'scribbling fools', yet still distinguishes them from 'nature's oafs'. Nonetheless, the superficiality and theatricality, but equally the commodity status of literature is clearly implied when the text claims: 'Poets are bubbles [dupes], by the town drawn in' (p. 493).

[103] See Theophrastus, *The Character Sketches*, ed. Warren Anderson (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1970).

started with force in the seventeenth century and culminated in the eighteenth. At the time, therefore, when eccentricity becomes a cultural concept, manifestations of eccentricity were by no means welcomed, even though a writer like Congreve is at pains to explain that they can have a useful function.[104] This loosening of cultural norms, which is enacted in fictional terms in Restoration Comedies, but certainly also found impression in everyday life and interactions, all the way to trade, business, as well as politics, almost instantly provoked tendencies to erect new value systems to support and stabilize what were now the dominant ideological key terms and forces of the day: an emerging middle-class culture based on mercantile values. These co-existed (often uneasily) with a remaining aristocratic grandeur based on ostensible expenditure, but more frequently than not erected on anything but solid economic foundations. The return to political stability also saw a renewed exchange (again in cultural as well as economic terms) with the European continent. It is in this intersection of defining economic value and cultural integrity that the debates on foppery can be placed. A typical (if already quite late) pamphlet poem about fops is Henry Carey's 'A Satyr on the Luxury and Effeminacy of the Age' of 1729. It contains stanzas like the following:

> Britons! For shame, give all these Follies o'er,
> Your antient Native Nobleness restore:
> Learn to be manly, learn to be sincere,
> And let the World a Briton's Name revere.
> Let not my Countrymen become the Sport,
> And Ridicule of ev'ry foreign Court;
> But let them well of Men and things discern,
> Their Virtues follow, not their Vices learn.
> Where is the Noble Race of British Youth,
> Whose Ornaments were, Wisdom, Learning, Truth?
> Who, e'er they travel'd, laid a good Foundation
> Of Liberal Arts, of Manly Education;
> Nor went, as some go now, a Scandal to their Nation.
> Who travel only to corrupt the Mind;
> Import the Bad, and leave the Good behind.
> To Learning, and to Manly Arts estrang'd,
> (As if with Women Sexes they'd exchang'd)

[104] An earlier version of the following section has appeared as 'Right in the Margins: An Eccentric View of Culture', in: *Post/Theory, Culture, Criticism*, ed. Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, Critical Studies, 23 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 93–111.

> They look like Females, dress'd in Boys Attire,
> Or Salmon Waxwork Babies, prop'd by Wire:
> And, if a Brace of powder'd Coxcombs meet,
> They kiss and slabber in the open Street.
> Curse on this damn'd, Italian Pathic Mode,
> To Sodom and to Hell the ready Road!
> May they, when next they kiss, together grow,
> And never after Separation know.
> Our Petits Maitres now are so polite,
> They think it ungenteel to Read or Write:
> Learning with them is a most heinous Sin,
> Whose only study is to Dress, and Grin,
> To Visit, to drink Tea, gallant a Fan,
> And ev'ry Foolery below a Man.
> Powder'd and Gum'd the Plaister's Fop appears,
> The Monkey's Tail hangs 'twixt the Ass's Ears,
> Just Emblem of the empty apish Prig,
> Who has more Grin than Grace, less Wit than Wig.
> […][105]

Invoking traditional cultural control mechanisms, such as shame, it complains about what it perceives as a decline in a seemingly innate British 'nobleness' brought about by luxuries and specifically by too much contact with the habits of the European continent. It is almost funny how much the sentiments of a cultural conservative of the early eighteenth century match the prejudices of the so-called 'Europhobes' of today's Britain. What is less funny is the basic contradiction that is typical of all forms of cultural essentialisms (but rarely weakens the convictions of their holders). Whichever value is supposed to be upheld as essential and quasi-genetic (here: 'antient Native Nobleness') is simultaneously – and contradictorily – perceived as something that must be acquired, and can therefore also be unlearned and corrupted. This is the reason why the British youths addressed by Carey are admonished to 'Learn to be manly, learn to be sincere' in order to counteract the corrupting influences that they have apparently encountered on their trips abroad (the author is implicitly talking about the *grand tour*, the finishing-off journey to Italy and Greece via France undertaken by young aristocrats and wealthy members of the middle class).

[105] Henry Carey, *Poems on Several Occasions*, 3rd enlarged edition (London: E. Say, 1729), pp. 28–30.

The values of this innate Britishness that is so hard to acquire are clearly defined as honesty, simplicity, and manliness – as opposed to the decadent habits prevalent in countries such as Italy and France. As happens so often with abstract values, such as wisdom and truthfulness, they lead a rather pale existence besides the colourful manifestations of foreign excess that even Carey's pamphlet cannot help but outline in garish colours and gleeful detail. The main targets of his attack are the superficialities that characterise those who have succumbed to foppish Continental habits. They seem to pay more attention to their dress than to their education, even wear make-up, and practice the art of polite entertainment (including drinking tea and using fans) rather than those of commerce and war.

What is telling in Carey's diatribe is not only his constant linking of decadence with gender and sexuality (the decadent fops look more like women than men; their unrestrained forms of engagement with one another are seen as a first step towards sodomy), but the admission that is concealed in this link that decadence, far from being a domestic import, begins at home. Apparently, women (whose role is crucial in discourses on decadence and eccentricity) have always displayed the features that are attacked in fops. Sodomy must also be something that is already known in native noble Britain. More than that: the behaviour that is attacked as foppish in the young men of mode in the poem is that which not only begins to be the norm of aristocratic, but also bourgeois behaviour at the time – to the degree that some of its features, such as tea-drinking, eventually become stereotypes of Britishness.

This decadent behaviour is also the basis of much of that which is supposedly its cultural opposite. Attention to commercial values, for example, cannot be disentangled from the consumption that is necessary for a market economy – but is decried by exactly the voice that claims to speak for this economy. In the same way, the complaint that contemporary society is more interested in the fortune of opera singers than the rise and fall of stocks or the fortunes of Britain as a military power is contradictory. The development of a functioning entertainment industry is closely linked with a society's economic success. On the other hand, the idea that a country's greatness can be determined and sustained by military exploits alone was as untenable then as it is now.

What is important for the arguments concerning eccentricity in the present study is that Carey's pamphlet fits the definition of eccentricity as dialogic and relational. The individuals attacked in it are not meant to be excluded, but re-educated. This is even evident in the traditional shape of their caricatures: asses and monkeys are the emblems of foolishness in traditional fables, often dating back to Antiquity, and even Hans Holbein's illustrations of the 1515 edition of Erasmus' *Moriae Encomium* shows folly wearing asses' ears. Yet they are emblems used for

didactic purposes, and it is education, in its supposedly wrong form as the picking up of bad continental habits, and in its correct form as the acquisition of simple British values, with which the poem is ultimately concerned. Even inside its extreme imagery it concedes that society forms a whole – including also its marginalised and denounced elements. Frenchmen and Italians might be doomed to damnation (the anti-Catholicism prevalent in Britain until at least the late nineteenth century is clearly evident here), but young Englishmen are too valuable to be lost. Again, the contradictory myth of an innate nobleness might come in handy here to prevent a call for more drastic forms of sanctions. It is moderation that is the new norm here, not something radical and extreme. Yet moderation requires a centric model of culture with varying degrees of marginality, of which eccentricity is one. We shall see below how this model of centres and eccentric margins becomes the device that shapes the period usually called the Enlightenment.

2.5 Eccentricity in the age of reason

While wit is rarely associated with eccentricity – despite its important ordering function in cultural discourses from the seventeenth century onwards, 'spleen' still forms a synonym of eccentricity to the present day. It has become so successful that it has even, in its original English form, entered the German and French languages (in the latter, famously, in Charles Baudelaire's poem 'Spleen' in *Les Fleurs du Mal* of 1857), where it cements the stereotypical view of the English as eccentric. Yet 'spleen' originates in similar debates as those of melancholy – and together with melancholy it features both in serious and humorous texts. In exactly this way, Congreve's play *The Way of the World* first introduces the character of Mrs Millamant as having 'some humours that would tempt the patience of a stoic' (Act I, scene 1, p. 497) and then describes the strategy of several women when they wish to be left alone by the men: 'Seeing me, they all put on their grave faces, whispered one another, then complained aloud of the vapours, and after fell into a profound silence' (Act I, scene 1, p. 497).

The 'vapours' is another common expression for melancholy, supposed to arise from an overheated brain to temporarily cloud its functioning.[106] In Congreve the interesting contradiction emerges that, on the one hand, humours are believed to be genuine marks and determinants of character, yet, on the other hand, they (and especially their melancholy variant) are also seen as

[106] Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy*, p. 168.

strategies employed in certain social situations, here by women in order to gain privacy. A similar discussion surrounds the most famous English text on spleen, Anne Finch's eponymous poem, first published in her *Miscellany of Poems Written by a Lady* in 1701. Finch was the daughter of a Baronet from the county so maligned by Restoration Comedy, Hampshire. She rose even further in rank by marrying the 'gentleman of the bedchamber' to the Duke of York during the reign of James II, Heneage Finch, who was later promoted to fourth Earl of Winchilsea. After the Glorious Revolution, Finch and her husband fled to their country estate, where they remained for the rest of their days. Contemporaries claim that Finch wrote 'The Spleen' out of her frequent personal experience of depression, which could apparently only be lifted by being in nature or engaged in artistic activity (an interesting alternative) or in the company of her husband. It is arguable, though, that the depressions she depicts also arose from frustrated ambition and enforced isolation.

Yet, child of a time that would gain for itself the label Enlightenment, she also tried many alternative remedies, such as the new luxuries tea and coffee, and the waters of then fashionable Tunbridge Wells.[107] For, ultimately, and this makes Finch an 'enlightened' thinker rather than an eclectic one like Burton, she at least partly believed in a natural cause of this eccentric state of mind – in the same way that 'spleen' was considered to be related to a real bodily organ. Located centrally in the human chest, behind the sternum, the spleen indeed mirrors many features that eccentricity possesses in culture: despite its centrality, it fulfils no clearly identifiable function. Even its removal (often after accidents in which it is ruptured) brings about no obvious negative consequences. What had long been known was that it grows during adolescence and puberty and then seems to remain unchanged. Only quite recently has it been established that the spleen fulfils an important function in conditioning the immune system.

Finch's spleen poem, however, is not a purely rational treatise on the subject.[108] The genre itself, and the choice of the Pindaric ode, a loose form traditionally employed for passionate and enthusiastic verses, already partly subverts any systematic inquiry that it contains. Similar to Burton, spleen for Finch can be everything, or rather, it can imitate everything:

[107] Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy*, p. 168.
[108] Compare Katharine M. Rogers, 'Finch's "Candid Account" vs. Eighteenth-Century Theories of the Spleen', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 22:1 (Winter 1989), pp. 17–27.

> What art thou, SPLEEN, which ev'ry thing dost ape?
> Thou *Proteus* to abus'd Mankind,
> Who never yet thy real Cause cou'd find,
> Or fix thee to remain in one continued Shape.

Possessing no substance, only surface, and irritating people in the same way as apes (also a common term for fools and fops), spleen perfectly matches the contours of eccentricity outlined above. The fact that the poem chooses spleen as the addressee of its ode and its equation with Proteus, the classical god of shapeshifting, however, adds a dimension to it that was touched on, though not yet properly elaborated, in Erasmus and Burton: creativity. The creative potential of spleen might only reside in imitation (here the intertextuality that has been observed as a recurrent mode of cultural (re-)production raises its head again as well as Erasmus' *copia*). Yet its effect on 'abus'd Mankind' is both investigative and creative: it provokes them to inquire into its causes (in the best Enlightenment tradition of experiment) and it triggers attempts at its representation – such as Finch's poem. At the same time, it also dulls this imagination again, thereby acting as a stimulant as well as a corrective to flights of fancy.[109]

Finch's poem then lists a range of images attempting exactly such representations. These can both claim to be inspired by classical models as well as providing a treasure store for the literature that was to follow, especially Gothic romances and Romanticism (it is no coincidence that Wordsworth admired Finch's poems). Dull calm seas as well as storm-beaten rocks, shadows creeping around the bed of a sleeper at midnight and causing 'gloomy Terrours', but also visions of 'airy Phantoms' and 'antick Spectres' are named among its manifestations. In keeping with the new ambivalence concerning the imagination, Finch's poem talks about 'fond Delusions', but also 'monstrous *Vision*' (her emphasis), thereby leaving it open whether the imagination brought about by spleen is to be trusted or not.

Important for the argument of the present study is the obvious link between spleen and individuality. Spleen not only possesses a Protean quality, it also lends it to those possessed by it: 'In ev'ry One thou dost possess, / New are thy Motions, and thy Dress.' This is not very far from the play-acting characteristic of Restoration Comedy with its many men and women of mode. Also in keeping with ostentation and surface, characteristics of eccentricity since its

[109] Rainer Emig, 'Enlightenment Struggles over Gender and Creativity: The Debates on Spleen', in: *Gender and Creation: Surveying Gendered Myths of Creativity, Authority, and Authorship*, ed. Anne Julia Zwierlein, Regensburger Beiträge zur Gender Forschung, 4 (Heidelberg: Winter, 2010), pp. 97–114.

emergence as a cultural concept in the seventeenth-century, is the difficulty or impossibility of determining its genuineness. Finch's poem makes the complicated claim that fools often pretend to suffer from the spleen, because they know that some great men are really affected by it.[110] Yet these great men, in turn, are also 'inclin'd' towards the spleen as a reaction to their frequent frustrations – and therefore appear to use it rather than genuinely suffer from it:

> The Fool, to imitate the Wits,
> Complains of thy pretended Fits,
> And Dulness, born with him, wou'd lay
> Upon thy accidental Sway;
> Because, sometime, thou dost presume
> Into the ablest Heads to come:
> That, often, Men of Thoughts refin'd,
> Impatient of unequal Sence,
> Such slow Returns, where they so much dispense,
> Retiring from the Croud, are to thy Shades inclin'd.

The last three lines of the excerpt once again reiterate the theme of culture as a complex mechanism without simple equations. They also consciously use an economic metaphor of investment and returns and thereby show that culture (and eccentricity within it) are thoroughly tainted by notions of cultural and real capital. Thirdly, as already observed for pre-historic eccentrics, withdrawal from the crowd is a common mechanism, and yet it remains a paradoxical one, since the crowd retains an awareness of these marginal figures who have opted for temporary isolation – and fulfil an important symbolic cultural function as a consequence. It is no coincidence, for instance, that, after the success of the English Reformation and the firm establishment of Protestantism, when the persecution of Catholic priests and nuns (who had often been hidden in secret rooms in stately homes) ceased, a fashion for ornamental hermits became established and fake grottoes were created that housed paid impersonators. Impersonation, as we have seen in Finch's poem, is the lifeblood of spleen and eccentricity.

At the same time, the spleen, despite its prohibitive and destructive impact, also makes the appreciation of art possible, a form of cultural self-negotiation connected to the new social

[110] On the gender aspects of Finch's poem, see Desiree Hellegers, "'The Threatening Angel and the Speaking Ass": The Masculine Mismeasure of Madness in Anne Finch's "The Spleen"', *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture*, 26:2–3 (Summer–Autumn 1993), pp. 199–217.

mobility – which also found its expression in collecting and displaying objects, paintings, and sculptures, together with practicing amateur art forms in middle-class homes, such as drawing, playing musical instruments, and singing. Finch's poem seems to indicate that one can only appreciate art fully through the awareness that its enjoyment can be spoiled by the spleen. In fact, what it describes in passing as deviating 'from the known, and common way' (ostensibly in connection with drawing) is also an echo of the power of spleen. Finch opens up the same paradox as Burton by making spleen ubiquitous as illness and its cure. Like an echo of Burton's *Anatomy*, Finch's poem then lists a number of possible cures, including alcohol, Indian leaf, or Eastern berry. Yet none of these is really shown to remove spleen's power – which affects the 'Coquette' as much as the religious person, thus dangerously equating low and high forms of performance and veneration again. What it does equally to them is something familiar to us: 'To Deserts banish'd, or in Cells reclused', it turns them into eccentrics.

It is no coincidence that Alexander Pope, an acute critic of the superficialities of his age, took up the strategic and theatrical potential of spleen, in which the melancholy and carnivalesque manifestations of eccentricity enter a strategic alliance. In his famous mock-heroic poem *The Rape of the Lock* of 1712 there is a symbolic excursion to the Cave of Spleen in canto IV (modelled on Edmund Spenser's more serious allegorical excursion to the caves of Mammon, Despair and Night in *The Faerie Queene*).[111] It is triggered by the loss of the lock of hair that gives the poem its title, i.e. by a thoroughly trivial cause. Yet the detailed description of the cave not only ironically belies the triviality behind it; it shows how familiar Pope was with spleen and melancholy as dominant cultural discourses of his day. In fact, his description reads like an ironic rejoinder to Finch's often ambivalent, yet more serious depiction. The cave as the symbolic space in which the emerging modern individual manifests itself is here only seemingly returned to its earlier allegorical occupants.

Spleen, now identified as specifically feminine, sighs there on a bed – just like any woman of Pope's time with sufficient leisure to do so.[112] Plagued by 'Megrim' (vi, ln. 24) (migraine) and the East wind, a commonly accepted cause of spleen and melancholy, she is attended by two allegorical servants: Ill Nature and Affectation. Here Pope's criticism is most evident. Yet it is

[111] All references to Alexander Pope's texts refer to *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) and are given parenthetically in the text.

[112] Compare Katherine M. Quinsey, 'From Moving Toyshop to Cave of Spleen: The Depth of Satire in *The Rape of the Lock*', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 11:2 (1980), pp. 3–22.

also instantly shown to be contradictory: if the affectation of melancholy and spleen is exactly that, then it cannot simultaneously be someone's nature. Or is the affectation of spleen here the symptom of an even deeper individual degeneracy, perhaps one that characterises the depravity of an entire culture? Pope's biting irony somewhat loses its grip here, when he calls the theatrical display of spleen 'for sickness, and for show' (ln. 36). At the same time, one should not forget that sickness as display was common in the eighteenth century, as is attested by the frequent trips to hospitals and mental asylums as part of genteel entertainment.[113]

Luxury, and with it excess, is located at the heart of this (self-)deception, when 'each new night-dress gives a new disease' (ln. 38). As in Carey's anti-fop poem, luxury is condemned by a voice that owes its plane of utterance, its object of ridicule, and the means to utter it, to exactly this luxury. Pope's ironic poem is generated by a culture deeply soaked in imagery deriving from spleen, the same 'hermit's dreams in haunted shades' and 'visions of expiring maids' (ln. 41, 42) that haunted romances and would fill Gothic novels soon after, but also the 'bodies chang'd to various forms' (ln. 48) that peopled contemporaneous pornographic writings and would later give psychoanalysis food for thought.

Pope is thoroughly aware of the proximity of spleen and creativity when he writes of the afflicted that 'some take physic, others scribble plays' (ln. 62). His evident misogyny in the canto (which, however, also indicates an awareness that spleen, when affected, was also a specific feminine form of self-assertion) is therefore undercut to some extent, even when one assumes that the plays deriving from the affliction are not meant to be regarded highly. That Pope is concerned with utterance, with the ability and licence to manifest oneself in language and signs, becomes clear when he uses an image from Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus' use of the god Aeolus's gift of a bag filled with winds for his return journey, and translates it into a bag filled with feminine utterances. The catalogue he gives is derogatory: 'Sighs, sobs, and passions, and the war of tongues' (ln. 84). Yet we have to see it in line with the generally little respected manifestations of eccentric individuality, which are also commonly reduced to triviality and superficiality. We should also notice that it is this use of superficial 'feminine' conceits, to which is soon added that of tears, that enables Belinda, the protagonist of Pope's poem, to protest against her treatment,

[113] 'As late as 1815, if a report presented in the House of Commons is to be believed, the hospital of Bethlehem exhibited lunatics for a penny, every Sunday. Now the annual revenue from these exhibitions amounted to almost four hundred pounds; which suggests the astonishingly high number of 96 000 visits a year', Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, p. 68.

albeit to little effect. Soon he traps her again – and tellingly in the wit with which social standing has been negotiated since the seventeenth century. When accusing her attacker of insult and injury and using terms deriving from both the aesthetic and the religious realm, her apparent transgression into discourses with which she is only superficially familiar lead her to unwittingly uttering a double entendre that draws attention to the tabooed zone of her pubic hair.

Once again, hegemonic power (here represented by Belinda's male attacker who believes it his prerogative to 'pluck' beauty) and dissidence do not meet on a level playing field. Yet the oblique dissident gaze back towards hegemonic centrality can subtly uncover the latter's intentions – here even in the act of self-ridiculing, in which Belinda uncovers the charade as what it is: sexual aggression.

Pope himself is an interesting case in point here. At pains to inscribe himself into the culture and literature of his time as a central figure, he was nonetheless perceived as eccentric. Undersized and a hunchback, he even had to reside in the periphery of the cultural centre of his day, inner London, due to his Catholicism. It is all the more telling that he proved so insistent in pointing out the mechanisms of the society and culture of his day – and that he chose the weapon of irony and sarcasm for doing so. The bosom of Ill Nature who attends Spleen is filled with lampoons, with the ill-tempered satires or caricatures for which none other than Pope was most famous. Like Burton, he describes himself at least as a servant of spleen. It is ironic that, despite the eccentricity of his writings and person, he has helped to concoct the very centric myth of the eighteenth century as the Age of Enlightenment.

Pope indeed not only attempts to position himself in the centre of his culture, he also tries hard to establish criticism as an authoritative art form, while outlining prescriptive rules (which are, of course, designed to simultaneously turn Pope himself into the master-critic).[114] In *An Essay on Criticism*, written when Pope himself came of age at 21 and published in 1711, he is keen on positioning this new form of writing, which was gaining ground through the proliferation of periodicals and newspapers, alongside established forms of writing. The poet is still the literary norm, as can be seen in a derogatory statement on critics: 'Now one in verse makes many more in prose' (ln. 8). In fact, criticism appears in Pope's 'Horatian essay', a discursive poem in heroic couplets modelled on Horace's *Ars Poetica*, as a force eccentric to established forms of cultural production. It not only comes after art in terms of production, it also depends on it and logically

[114] Compare Ripley Hotch, 'Pope Surveys His Kingdom: *An Essay on Criticism*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 13:3 (Summer 1973), pp. 474–487.

occupies a lower position. Yet by using exactly an astronomical image (just like early definitions of eccentricity), Pope cleverly tries to show established literature and upstart criticism as feeding from the same celestial, i.e. divine, sources: 'Both must alike from Heav'n derive their light, / These born to judge, as well as those to write' (ln. 13–14).

In fact, he has already reversed the logical order in these verses – and made writing and criticism equally 'orbital' vis-à-vis the light of Nature. Nature in Pope, however, is not a wild and uncontrollably Hobbesian one, but one that is fully reasonable and self-controlling ('Unerring NATURE, still divinely bright, / one clear, unchang'd, and universal light' (ln. 70–71) and 'like liberty, […] but restrain'd / By the same Laws which first herself ordain'd'; ln. 90–91).[115]

Wit is once again the measure with which to distinguish good from bad criticism. Yet wit turns out to be a tricky thing. Once again it is Pope's typically Enlightenment conglomerate of reason and nature that is meant to provide norms and control: 'Nature to all things fix'd the limits fit, / And wisely curb'd proud man's pretending wit' (ln. 52–53). Still Pope's *Essay on Criticism* finds it hard to say when wit is true (and therefore natural, reasonable, and ultimately divine) and when it is pretentious. When things go wrong, this turns would-wits, very much in the tradition of seventeenth-century Restoration Comedy, into fops: 'Some are bewilder'd in the maze of schools, / And some made coxcombs Nature meant but fools. / In search of wit these lose their common sense, / And then turn Critics in their own defence' (ln. 26–30). A very interesting contradiction emerges here: wit, which ideally ought to be based on common sense, in being in conformity with cultural conventions and reason, here leads to a loss of common sense. The contradiction only disappears when wit is seen as an inbuilt and not a learned feature, and indeed Pope uses the term 'genius' for those who combine both ('In Poets as true Genius is but rare'; ln. 11), since, in Pope's much-quoted phrase, 'True wit is Nature to advantage dress'd, / What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd' (ln. 297–298). Yet learning is equally held to be necessary for true wit, since much of it consists of the copying and improvement of already existing cultural material and capital ('Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem; / To copy nature is to copy them'; ln. 139–140).

Only occasionally does wit (and by extension good criticism, and perhaps even art) emerge by a happy coincidence ('Some beauties yet no Precepts can declare, / For there's a happiness [felicity] as well as care'; ln. 141–142). Yet being a truly witty genius simultaneously allows one

[115] Compare Douglas B. Park, '"At Once the Source, and End": Nature's Defining Pattern in an *Essay on Criticism*, *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 90:5 (October 1975), pp. 861–873.

to dispense with the above rules, as a coyly bracketed aside admits: '(As Kings dispense with laws themselves have made)' (ln. 162). This aside, which also bears some political weight as a statement on absolutism, is quickly checked, however: 'Moderns, beware! or if you must offend / Against the precept, ne'er transgress its End; / Let it be seldom, and compell'd by need, / And have, at least, their precedent to plead' (ln. 163–166).

Pope's statements are obviously contradictory: either one transgresses against established rules; then there is no precedent in it. If one transgresses wilfully, like absolutist monarchs, then the only need that can be in one's actions is egotistical. Pope's model only works in a culture of consensus, in which it is possible to demand that works of literature be criticised in the same spirit in which they are intended. That matters might not work so smoothly is indicated by the almost fetishistic invocation of the distorted mask of the eccentric as fool, fop, coxcomb, even ape, to show what happens when the consensus based on a common understanding of reason, Nature, and need is violated. 'A vile conceit in pompous words express'd, / Is like a clown in regal purple dress'd' (ln. 320–321); 'These sparks with aukward vanity display / What the fine gentleman wore yesterday; / And but so mimic ancient wits at best, / As apes our grandsires, in their doublets drest' (ln. 329–332). Tellingly, at other points of the text, 'spark' is not a fop, but divine inspiration (ln. 195), in the same way that the seemingly ordering wit becomes counterproductive – exactly when it becomes excessive – and then turns into 'One glaring Chaos and wild heap of wit' (ln. 292).

Copying, which was recommended earlier, can become an imitation of mistakes ('The Vulgar thus through Imitation err'; ln. 424; the élitism is evident), and conformity, praised at one point, can lead to dullness when 'Some ne'er advance a Judgment of their own, / But catch the spreading notion of the town' (ln. 408–409). Wit and common sense, or originality and consensus, are in an antagonistic relationship, one of strife. Pope's poem expresses this in images of a marriage, political and religious struggle, and even war (ln. 83, 456, 442, 64). Wit is also not stable, but subject to fashion – and therefore just as potentially eccentric as men of mode: 'What wonder modes in Wit should take their turn?' (ln. 447). The recourse to eccentricity permits Pope to maintain a model of criticism that is also one of literature, art, and ultimately culture as a whole, despite the logical flaws at its foundations. That Pope fails to create a binary model in which true wit and genius are on one side, and false eccentric foppish lack of it on the other, is evident, and perhaps it is indeed part of the plan and further reason why the concept works. 'Some have at first for wits, then poets past, / Turned critics next, and proved plain fools at last' (ln. 36–37) seems to draw a sliding scale of cultural value. Yet it is a scale whose stages are by no means steps, but gradations.

That the direction of the movement can be reversed is clearly demonstrated by Pope's text itself. Where would it (and with it its author) be located on its own scale? As a text on criticism written in a classical poetic form, it strives for nothing but acceptance as wit. The flexibility that it requires, a flexibility not least due to the demands of its age, in which learning and skill increasingly replaced inherited rank, yet also a flexibility that enables it to make potentially dangerous statements on political power and even religion, is guaranteed by an ambivalent recourse to eccentricity. It is sometimes seen as essential and even the prerogative of true wit, great art, and good criticism (as in the aside on the privileges of genius), yet even more frequently as a warning not to stray too far from culture's consensual precepts, even though straying is simultaneously regarded as necessary for the progress of exactly this culture: 'Avoid *Extremes*' (ln. 384; emphasis in the original).

It is interesting to compare the attempt to situate the marginal (criticism) in the centre of culture to Pope's much later attempt to outline a complete philosophy of that which had become the centre of culture since the Renaissance: man. *Essay on Man* was originally a comprehensive philosophical project, partly inspired by the occasional writings of Pope's friend Henry St John, Lord Bolingbroke, to whom it was also dedicated. It ended up on a much smaller scale in four epistles, the first three (on man's nature and his position in the universe, on man's role in society, and on his individuality) published anonymously in 1733, the fourth (on man's pursuit of happiness) under Pope's name in 1734.

Here, then, appears to be the centric counterpart to the (at least initial) eccentricity of *An Essay on Criticism*. Yet despite the conventionality of much of the thought expressed in it, it still finds that it can only define man by negativity and exactly by his refusal to fit into established categories, such as God or Nature. Thus, Epistle II states:

> Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
> The proper study of Mankind is Man.
> Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state,
> A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
> With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
> With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,
> He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest,
> In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast; (ii, ln. 1–8)

Sceptics and Stoics have been encountered in the present study as examples of prehistoric eccentricity, yet also as lasting forces in the Western cultural tradition. Pope's man is in the

centre, because he is neither of these eccentricities. Yet his position is by no means defined or stabilised through this clever act of double negation: an isthmus is a small part of land connecting two larger ones, frequently fought or trampled over and also subject to wind and the sea.

Epistle III continues in this contradictory vein. It is at pains to describe culture as emanating from Nature. Yet it runs into difficulties not only when it has to include war in its model (in fact, it does not discuss its origins, only recommends a common eighteenth-century remedy in 'What War could ravish, Commerce could bestow'; iii, ln. 205). It also becomes shaky when it has to maintain both the need for rulers and that for individuality. It finds an odd image for this desired balance in ants and bees:

> The Ant's republic, and the realm of Bees;
> How those [ants] in common all their wealth bestow,
> And Anarchy without confusion know;
> And these [bees] for ever, tho' a Monarch reign,
> Their sep'rate cells and properties maintain. (iii, ln. 184–188)

Once again, Pope resorts to an eccentric and illogical example even in his own time, when ant and bee nests had long been understood, in order to combine the contradictions of his own era in a model that appears both reasonable and natural: anarchy as the most extreme expression of individual liberty can coexist with wealth for all; having a monarch (as in a constitutional monarchy) does not infringe the rights of individuals, especially that to property, which was gaining more and more in status, also in British legislation.[116] Eccentricity is once again an enabling device for the now established individual with its claim to rights and position, and a means of negotiating the remaining contradictions of society – without the need to solve them by force.

Indeed, Epistle III ends with an image of 'the World's great harmony, that springs / From Order, Union, full Consent of things!' (iii, ln. 295–296). It goes even further and presents self-love and communal charity as planets rotating simultaneously around their individual axes, yet also moving concentrically around one sun (iii, ln. 313–314), a centric image indeed. Yet this harmonious consensual order is produced by the 'jarring int'rests' (iii, ln. 293) of the 'less, or

[116] Compare Mark E. Wildermuth, '"An Anarchy without Confusion Know": The Dynamics of Chaos in Pope's *An Essay on Man*', *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 39:1 (Spring 1998), pp. 85–103.

greater' (iii, ln. 291) and is therefore, in a much less hyperbolic phrase, 'Th' according music of a well-mix'd state' (iii, ln. 294). Difference, deviance, and eccentricity are acknowledged – yet only in order to be ideally subsumed again under a higher goal.[117] That such a goal was an ideal rather than a reality is demonstrated by the continuing struggles in eighteenth-century England: remaining animosity against Catholics and the emerging Dissenters, wars with Scotland (the two combined in the Jacobite Rebellions of 1715 – whose legal consequences led to the Catholic Pope's banishment from residence in central London – and again 1745 and 1746) and on and off against various European powers, both on the Continent and in colonial outposts in the New World and in India. It is no coincidence that what is commonly known as the Age of Reason can also, as Dervla Murphy suggests, be called the Age of Savagery.[118]

Lampoons, as encountered in Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, are such expressions of individuality interacting often problematically with cultural consensus. They form and organise groups as in-jokes; yet they can also damage and even lead to the exclusion of individuals.[119] They are closely related to anecdotes, the form in which eccentricity so frequently finds a textual manifestation, yet they are more artful in form (in Pope's era they were generally in verse) and much more public in their exchange. Pope's misfired friendship with Lady Mary Wortley Montague, which occasioned Murphy's remark, was conducted on exactly such a public stage with the aid of lampoons. In her introduction to a selection from Montague's so-called Turkish Embassy Letters, Anita Desai writes:

> The friendship proved less steadfast, and by September [of 1722] had degenerated into a vituperative battle. Lady Mary hinted that Pope had made her a passionate declaration of love at which she had laughed, infuriating him. In 'The Lady's Rescue' she wrote, 'Too near he has approached, who is denied.' It is also suggested that Pope grew jealous of the attention paid her by the Duke of Wharton, while some named Lord Hervey as coming between them. It was the custom of their circle to circulate squibs, epigrams and lampoons, and these took an ugly turn when Pope and Lady Mary used them as vehicles for vilification. In a ballad 'The Capon's Tale' Pope made an obscene and libellous attack on her, and in 'The Use of Riches' called Wortley

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[117] Compare Kurt Otten, '"A Well-Mix'd State": Die Ordnung der Welt und der Gesellschaft in Popes Lehrgedicht *An Essay on Man*', in: *Europäische Lehrdichtung*, ed. Hans Gerd Rotzer and Herbert Walz (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981), pp. 174–195.

[118] *Embassy to Constantinople: The Travels of Lady Mary Wortley Montague*, intr. Dervla Murphy, ed. Christopher Pick (London: Century, 1988), p. 27.

[119] Compare Michael Seidel, 'Satire, Lampoon, Libel, Slander', in: *English Literature 1650–1740*, ed. Steven N. Zwicker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 33–57.

> 'Worldly' and Lady Mary 'Lewd Lesbia', thereby making insinuations about her close friendship with Maria Skerrit, first mistress and later second wife of Sir Robert Walpole. In 1773, in 'In Imitation of the First Satire of the Second Book of Horace', he called her 'furious Sappho' and Lord Hervey 'Lord Fanny'. The two retaliated in 'Verses Addressed to the Imitator of Horace, by a Lady', published in *The Daily Post*:
>
> And with the emblem of thy crooked mind
> Marked on thy back, like Cain, by God's sure hand,
> Wander like him, accursed through the land.
> Pope's rejoinder was equally cruel:
> How oft from Sappho have I fear'd that fate:
> Poxed by her love or poison'd by her hate.[120]

It is noteworthy that even Desai employs terms such as circle and circulation to describe the way in which these social and cultural networks functioned in the eighteenth century. Lady Mary herself, although histrionically, employs the biblical analogy of Cain, forever excluded from decent mankind, to poke cruel fun at Pope's marginality.[121] Such vicious games would not have been possible without a strong awareness of the interrelation of centres and margins.

Indeed Mary Wortley Montague herself can be said to represent such an eccentric position vis-à-vis the contested centric matrix of her times.[122] Although not unique as a female traveller to foreign places (she accompanied her husband on a not very successful diplomatic mission through central Europe to Turkey), she is eccentric in the sense of not only publishing her views on them, but also by using them as a measure with which to judge the normality of eighteenth-century England.[123] Marginalised as a woman's and reporting from an exotic country, her views correspond to the model of the uneven eccentric exchange of gazes. That this eccentric view

[120] Anita Desai, 'Introduction', in: Lady Mary Wortley Montague, *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, ed. Malcolm Jack (London: Virago, 1994), pp. xix–xx. See also James McLaverty, '"Of Which Being Publick the Publick Judge": Pope and the Publication of "Verses Address'd to the Imitator of Horace"', *Studies in Bibliography: Papers of the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia*, 51 (1998), pp. 183–204.

[121] Compare also Geoffrey Tillotson, 'Lady Mary Wortley Montague and Pope's *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*', *Review of English Studies*, 12:48 (October 1936), pp. 401–412.

[122] On the problem of canonicity with regard to Montague, see Laurence Lerner, 'Subverting the Canon', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 32:4 (October 1992), pp. 347–358.

[123] See Malcolm D. Allen, 'The New Path: English Women Travelers in the Middle East', *West Virginia University Philological Papers*, 40 (1994), pp. 1–5.

leads to potentially very serious insights can be judged, for example, by her letter concerning the Viennese custom of allowing each married woman an established lover besides her husband:

> one that bears the name and another that performs the duties, and these engagements are so well known that it would be a downright affront and publicly resented if you invited a woman of quality to dinner without at the same time inviting her two attendants of lover and husband, between whom she always sits in state with great gravity.[124]

Her conclusions are instructive: 'Thus you see, my dear, gallantry and good breeding are as different in different climates as morality and religion. Who have the rightest notions of both we shall never know till the day of judgement […].'[125]

Though flippant, the radicalism of her remarks is evident, since it concerns a question, that of marital fidelity, which affects not only a person's name (i.e. her or his cultural capital), but also issues of inheritance, and therefore continues to create great anxiety until today. Only Lady Mary's eccentric position allowed her this risqué piece of cultural and moral relativism concerning a subject that the seventeenth century had exercised, but not exorcised in endless charades of cuckoldry.

That eccentricity is by no means the same as deviance, and that eccentrics are no more tolerant of difference than those occupying a centric position, can be seen in the same letters, when Lady Mary describes her views on the fashion to keep dwarfs for entertainment in aristocratic circles (her view of course also touches on Pope again, whose spinal deformity rendered him dwarf-like):

> I can assign no reason for their fondness for these pieces of deformity, but the opinion that all the absolute princes have, that it is below them to converse with the rest of mankind, and not to be quite alone they are forced to seek their companions among the refuse of human nature, these creatures being the only part of their courts privileged to talk freely to them.[126]

Eccentricity has been described as a negotiation of social, but also political contradictions, and in the above quotation Lady Mary indeed makes pronouncements on dwarfs which are shocking to our modern politically correct sensibility. Yet she also quite explicitly criticises absolutism, a

[124] Montague, *Turkish Embassy Letters*, p. 22.
[125] Montague, *Turkish Embassy Letters*, p. 23.
[126] Montague, *Turkish Embassy Letters*, p. 42.

form of government that Britain had narrowly avoided through the Glorious Revolution and the introduction of a constitutional monarchy. She first implicitly criticises the separation of the absolute rulers from the rest of mankind (thereby reiterating one of the first rules of eccentricity: never lose touch with the centre). Then, by making these isolated rulers seek out their companions among 'the refuse of human nature', she makes them align themselves to this 'refuse'. The eccentric view (here undoubtedly sanctioned by a privileged English perspective) is once again capable of attacking even the highest representatives of power, something we observed already in the prehistory of the concept in the likes of Diogenes or Hildegard of Bingen.

Once again, though, eccentricity is no guarantee of tolerance, though it is often a means to spot hidden or alternative agendas. When talking about the Muslim views on women – which, according to Montague are centred around their duty to procreate – she uses this supposed view, which regards virginity and celibate widowhood as sinful, not only to criticise the Catholic cult of sainthood (which had found a Protestant English successor in that of feminine 'virtue'), but also to introduce a term that was generally applied to men, even though it apparently offered a great attraction for women too:

> What will become of your saint Catherines, your saint Theresas, your saint Claras and the whole bead roll of your holy virgins and widows, who, if they are to be judged by this system of virtue will be found to have been infamous creatures that passed their whole lives in the most abominable libertinism.[127]

We will re-encounter the libertine in Romanticism, where he will offer another prototype of the eccentric. Yet Lady Mary, too, is aware of the dangers of libertinism to herself. When she praises what she perceives as the Turkish preference of sensual pleasure over abstract values (which she associates with Englishness), she dares to conclude, 'I allow you to laugh at me for the sensual declaration that I had rather be a rich effendi with all his ignorance than Sir Isaac Newton with all his knowledge'.[128] The fact that she perceives laughter as a possible reaction to this declaration in favour of sensuality shows very clearly that she still knows the rules. The playful permission she grants this carnivalesque laughter adds a double edge: of course women were generally perceived to be inclined to pleasure rather than knowledge, but they were not usually asked for permission before they were thus judged.

[127] Montague, *Turkish Embassy Letters*, p. 110.
[128] Montague, *Turkish Embassy Letters*, p. 142.

More critical, though more submerged, is another fear in Montague's letters, which can also be linked with the characteristic manifestation of eccentricity in surfaces and asides, in anecdotes and various kinds of digressions. Although doubtlessly part of a convention, it is noticeable how often her letters close with a deprecation of their length and a critique of the writer's verbosity.[129] A telling example is 'My letter is insensibly grown so long, I am ashamed of it. This is a very bad symptom. 'Tis well if I don't degenerate into a downright story teller. It may be our proverb that knowledge is no burden may be true to oneself, but knowing too much is very apt to make us troublesome to other people.'[130] At the same time, in the typical oblique look back towards 'other people' likely to judge her, Montague's statement also claims the knowledge that she later offers to give up in favour of sensuality – or it implicitly claims a different knowledge and a different form of expressing it.[131] Within the many discourses that formed the so-called Age of Reason, eccentricity indeed acted as a strong and insistent corrective, yet without necessarily claiming dominance.

2.6 Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* and the birth of modern biography

When talking about canonical figures associated with the English Enlightenment in the world of literature, the name mentioned next to Alexander Pope is commonly that of Samuel Johnson. 'Eccentric' is a label that is also commonly applied to him.[132] Yet this section does not wish to describe primarily his personal habits and foibles, but his role in the development of two crucial literary and cultural forms that emerged in the eighteenth century and without which modernity

[129] Compare Robert Halsband, 'Lady Mary Wortley Montagu as Letter-Writer', *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 80:3 (June 1965), pp. 155–163. See also Patricia Meyer Spacks, 'Borderlands: Letters and Gossip', *Georgia Review*, 37:4 (Winter 1983), pp. 791–813.

[130] Montague, *Turkish Embassy Letters*, p. 120.

[131] Compare Michèle Plaisant, 'Lady Mary Wortley Montagu : Paradoxes et strategies du savoir', in : *Savoir et violence en Angleterre du XVIe au XIXe siècle*, ed. Alain Morvan (Lille: Université de Lille III, 1987), pp. 29–43.

[132] This has spawned many studies like George Irwin, *Samuel Johnson: A Personality in Conflict* (New York et al.: Oxford University Press, 1971).

would be a different concept.[133] These are the dictionary or encyclopaedia and the biography. Both of them will be shown to be intrinsically connected with eccentricity.

Johnson was not alone in trying to arrange the manifestations of the culture that surrounded him in the shape of an encyclopaedic work. The French encyclopaedists had already set a trend in this respect. Yet while their work consisted of a pronouncedly 'neutral' and objective collection of available and accepted knowledge (the *idées reçues* later ironised by Flaubert), Johnson's work assumed a very different shape. His *Dictionary of the English Language* of 1775 also aimed at completeness, yet not so much of ideas, knowledge, and learning, but of existing words. In the rationalist thinking prevalent in Johnson's time, words as the building blocks of language assumed a central role, and ordering and thereby supposedly 'taming' them became part of a larger project of defining and improving culture.[134]

However, Johnson's *Dictionary* is clearly light years away from fulfilling such a centric task. It is a paradoxical work, since it is on the one hand utterly convinced of its authority (an authority that our present-day linguists with their awareness of linguistic change and variability would loath to assume), and on the other hand announces its problems and shortcomings in such a way as to undermine its aim from the start. In fact, not only the corpus of the dictionary itself, but already Johnson's preface to it strike the reader as eccentric. His definitions are frequently circular and tautological. His explanations are more complex than what they describe. His choice of words is idiosyncratic. His selection of comments is by no means neutral, but frequently characterised by the same, often personal, vilifications that we observed in the lampoons of Pope and his circle.

If Johnson plans to regulate what to him appears to be a 'perplexity to be disentangled and confusion to be regulated' (p. 277), he is far from a faithful executor of centric ratiocination. Although he claims to be working on strict principles, such as selection, analogy, rules of deviation, structures and relations, all of them seemingly objective and impersonal, he manages to infuse

[133] That Johnson himself had very clear ideas about the difference between author and work is outlined in Robert Folkenflik, *Samuel Johnson: Biographer* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978); see especially chapter 6, 'Art and Life: Discriminations', pp. 118–140.

[134] Compare Rüdiger Schreyer, 'Illustrations of Authority: Quotations in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755)', *Lexicographica: International Annual for Lexicography*, 16 (2000) 58–103. Also Robert DeMaria, Jr., 'The Politics of Johnson's *Dictionary*', *PMLA: Papers of the Modern Language Association of America*, 104 (January 1989), 64–74. Also Anne McDermott, 'Johnson's *Dictionary* and the Canon: Authors and Authority', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 28 (1998), pp. 44–65.

them with a subjectivity that also colours the 'Preface' in which these principles are elaborated. Daniel P. Gunn, among others, has pointed out how much this 'Preface' assumes the shape of a genre that ought to be diametrically opposed to the dictionary, that of autobiography.[135] In a telling passage, Johnson not only compares his project with that of the French encyclopaedists, he even relativises theirs through the eccentric lens of his work, a work that he consistently defines (and perhaps defiles) through its shortcomings:

> If the embodied critics of France, when fifty years had been spent upon their work, were obliged to change its economy and give their second edition another form, I may surely be contented without the praise of perfection, which, if I could obtain, in this gloom of solitude, what would it avail me? I have protracted my work till most of those whom I wished to please have sunk into the grave, and success and miscarriage are empty sounds: I therefore dismiss it with frigid tranquility, having little to fear or hope from censure or praise. (pp. 297–298)

Johnson presents himself as a melancholy eccentric here, typically 'in the gloom of solitude', yet also – and this is the individual's gain from eccentricity – at least seemingly immune to the censure or praise of the normality that surrounds him. That this detachment is an illusory one is attested by the public and published nature of Johnson's declaration. Yet it is far from dubious that he takes the foundations of his intellectual position partly at least from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. There is evidence, in the typical anecdotal form, that Johnson cherished Burton's treatise so much that he claimed it was the only book that ever made him get out of bed two hours before his usual time.[136]

A project that ought to be an impersonal centric one, summarising and organising the entirety of a culture – here in its important linguistic manifestations – thereby becomes an individual perspective, and an eccentric one to boot. Yet this is not in itself a failure or oddity. Inside Johnson's readily acknowledged 'shortcomings' resides a critical truth that has only in the course of the twentieth century been articulated by Critical Theory as part of its revision of the so-called Enlightenment. Theorists like Adorno and Horkheimer have questioned the universality and neutrality of the Enlightenment project and outlined its residual blind spots, blind spots that

[135] Daniel P. Gunn, 'The Lexicographer's Task: Language, Reason, and Idealism in Johnson's *Dictionary* Preface', *The Age of Johnson*, 11 (2000), 105–124 (pp. 119–121).

[136] Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy*, p. 129.

have a tendency to become despotic and authoritarian when they are not recognised as such.[137] Despotic is surely the tone of many of Johnson's entries in his *Dictionary* and moreover that of many utterances either ascribed to him or indeed published under his name. Yet the fact of bringing such contradictions out into the open, at the cost of making himself and his work appear eccentric, relativises the problematic cultural power inherent in a project such as a dictionary. Once again, eccentricity develops a critical potential, here against monolithic cultural dominance, hegemony in short.

It is also not surprising that Johnson's project remains blind to its own eccentric potential. As we have noticed, eccentricity results from an exchange of gazes between a centric normality and a deviation that is located at the borderlines of this normality. Thus, there is no self-declared eccentricity without a necessary recourse to the norm; nor is there a completely self-aware eccentricity. In fact, when defining eccentricity for his dictionary, Johnson remains staunchly anachronistic (another typical feature of eccentricity) by listing almost exclusively its old geometrical and astronomical meaning:

> Eccentrick: 1. Deviating from the centre.
> 2. Not having the same centre with another circle: such circles were supposed by the Ptolemaick philosophy.
> 3. Not terminating on the same point: not directed by the same principle.
> 4. Irregular; anomalous; deviating from stated and constant methods.
>
> Eccentricity: 1. Deviation from a centre.
> 2. The state of having a different centre from another circle.
> 3. Excursion from the proper orb.
> 4. *Eccentricity* of the earth is the distance between the focus and the centre of the earth's elliptick orbit.[138]

Even his seemingly open definition starting with 'Irregular' ultimately ties the concept to rationality and science through the emphasis on 'methods'. A method also exists in the shift from encyclopaedic to biographical writing, one that is supplied once again by intertextuality. A modern biography is indeed an encyclopaedic attempt at gathering information about a person's life.

[137] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cummings (London: Verso, 1979).

[138] Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Westley and Davis, 1836), p. 382.

Yet what it combines is not so much facts (which are often hard to come by and frequently not very informative), but rather anecdotes. A surprising connection emerges between the supposedly impersonal project of a dictionary and the most personal one of a biography. Apart from his many essayistic contributions to English literature and culture, the second best-known fact concerning Johnson is indeed that he is the object of what became known as the greatest biography in the English language, James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*.[139] Boswell's biography of his friend was not the first modern biography, nor was it the first to be devoted to Johnson (in fact, six others had preceded it). Yet in its comprehensiveness and skill in reconstructing Johnson's character, Boswell, who was a lawyer by trade and familiar with interpreting evidence, has remained unsurpassed.

In connection with eccentricity the literary biography occupies a productive position. Today, it is almost a prerequisite of a good biography to point out in which respects its objects displays traits of eccentricity. In the eighteenth century, when biographies of middle-class persons were a novelty, eccentricity cleared a space for them – in very much the same way as melancholy cleared a space for the early modern subject and eccentric seclusion from the world had opened a space for the first spiritual biographies of not only ordinary men, but women in the cases of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, for example.[140] Until then, biographies were devoted to worldly rulers and saints in the stylised form of kings' lives and hagiographies. In the Early Modern period autobiography by women was indeed introduced by the likes of Margaret Cavendish.

Yet eccentricity as the enabling device for laying out the life of a middle-ranking character as a text also brought with it some characteristic 'deformations'. Boswell's biography of Johnson is well-known for constructing Johnson as a persona more than Johnson could (or would have wished) himself.[141] Once again, a theatrical process is at work that stages a persona for an audience, and the means that are employed are a mixture of melancholy and carnival, as the following excerpts from *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* of 1791 clearly show:

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[139] In this respect, it is ironic and interesting that Johnson himself did not believe in autobiography. Compare Philip Davis, 'Extraordinarily Ordinary: The Life of Samuel Johnson', in: *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 4–17 (p. 11).

[140] Compare Felicity A. Nussbaum, 'Biography and Autobiography', in: *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. IV: *The Eighteenth Century*, ed. H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 302–315.

[141] Compare Jean Vivies, 'Changing Places, or: Johnson Boswellised', in: *Mapping the Self: Space, Identity, Discourse in British Auto/Biography*, ed. Frederic Regard and Geoffrey Wall (Saint-Etienne: Université de Saint-Etienne, 2003), pp. 157–170.

> The 'morbid melancholy', which was lurking in its constitution, and to which we may ascribe those particularities and that aversion to regular life, which, at a very early period, marked his character, gathered such strength in his twentieth year as to afflict him in a dreadful manner. While he was at Lichfield, in the college vacation of the year 1729, he felt himself overwhelmed with an horrible hypochondria, with perpetual irritation, fretfulness, and impatience; and with a dejection, gloom, and despair, which made existence misery. From this dismal malady he never afterwards was perfectly relieved; and all his labors, and all his enjoyments, were but temporary interruptions of its baleful influence.[142]

Boswell constructs Johnson as the prototypical melancholic whose disease is a lifelong affliction, yet whose talent and productivity cannot be disentangled from a disease that is also the backbone of his personality. That the contradictions which characterise eccentricity become the norm, or at least the justification for writing a biography, can be seen in Boswell's strategically odd move to present his object, his character and figure, after having amply described it through the incidents of his life before:

> The character of Samuel Johnson has, I trust, been so developed in the course of this work, that they who have honoured it with a perusal, may be considered as well acquainted with him. As, however, it may be expected that I should collect into one view that capital and distinguishing features of this extraordinary man, I shall endeavour to acquit myself of that part of my biographical undertaking, however difficult it may be to do that which many of my readers will do better for themselves.
>
> His figure was large and well formed, and his countenance of the cast of an ancient statue; yet his appearance was rendered strange and somewhat uncouth by convulsive cramps, by the scars of that distemper [scrofula] which it was once imagined the royal touch could cure, and by a slovenly mode of dress. He had use only of one eye; yet so much does mind govern and even supply the deficiency of organs that his visual perceptions, as far as they extended, were uncommonly quick and accurate. So morbid was his temperament that he never knew the joy of a free and vigorous use of his limbs: when he walked, it was like the struggling gait of one in fetters; when he rode, he had no command or direction of his horse, but was carried as if in a balloon. (p. 1398)

[142] James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. Robert William Chapman (Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 47.

The passage strikes us as incredibly funny today, and perhaps it had a similar effect on contemporary readers who would not have missed the many hilarious contradictions that turn Johnson into an ideal classical statue that at the same time hovers like a balloon when on horseback. Yet the excerpt contains more serious self-subverting elements, which strikingly resemble the features critical of Enlightenment philosophy inside this very Enlightenment work of Johnson's *Dictionary*. Here is the prototype of a mind that is so strong that it can even outbalance the loss of the use of one eye. Yet at the same time what this extreme rationality produces is the semblance of a man in fetters, a prisoner or a slave. Rationality also fails to lead to a control of nature, as can be seen in Johnson's inability to direct a horse, and makes its famous exponent as unpredictable as the course of a balloon. In terms of the cultural capital manifest in exterior features, this ideal is a visibly diseased and sick man. Furthermore, he does nothing to hide or improve on his deficiencies through the means then prevalent: make-up and dress.

In short, Johnson is a contradiction, not merely within himself, but in the discursive contexts of his time. It is this contradictory state that the present study calls eccentric that makes him for Boswell the equivalent of the traditional objects of biographies and turns his biography of Johnson into an analogy of saints' and kings' lives – as an *exemplum*. 'Man is, in general, made up of contradictory qualities', he writes, and in the passage quoted above he implicitly alludes to the consequence that drawing moral conclusions from such *exempla*, a task traditionally performed by the biographer, must needs become tricky and left to the reader: 'do that which many of my readers will do better for themselves'. The oblique look that the eccentric casts in the direction of normality, here the readers, is enabling for both sides. It permits the eccentric to live out his or her contradictions. Indeed, as has been shown throughout this chapter, it enables such a thing as a modern individual to manifest itself.

Secondly, and not less importantly, by allowing us not only to look at eccentricity, which is here called 'extraordinary' and will soon be called 'genius', it permits us centric representatives of normality something that is new, exciting, and liberating: our own interpretation of the possible lessons we can learn from such contradictory individuals and their often puzzling and seemingly irreverent manifestations. The subsequent chapter will show how the eccentric experiment continues from the Enlightenment through the cult of Sentimentality to its epitome in Romanticism, before the nineteenth century uneasily accommodates it at the core of its culture.

3 Eccentricity's heyday

3.1 Eccentric transitions: from sense to sensibility

The attempt at a comprehensive ordering and overview of contemporary culture that is at work in projects such as Johnson's *Dictionary*, but equally its necessary eccentric correctives, also manifests itself in the literature of the late eighteenth century. These correctives should not be regarded as such merely from an anachronistic modern perspective. From such a point of view, they would be attempts to limit Enlightenment's excessive and potentially despotic powers. Horkheimer and Adorno have written about the limits of the Enlightenment, but only considered structures such as myth to be among those ambivalent markers of its borderline, never manifestations such as eccentricity.[143] From the perspective of the present study, the corrective rather ensures the survival of the modern individual – which had only just managed to carve out a niche for itself through a contradictory strategy of simultaneous empowerment and disempowerment, as a rational melancholic, a serious ape, an ascetic worshipper of luxury, in short, a contradictory eccentric.

It is no coincidence that this corrective strategy features in so many travel narratives, since travel enables the fictional subject to leave the centre of his or her accustomed normality and to reflect back on it from a marginal position. Travel was indeed prescribed as a remedy against melancholy and madness, tellingly because it disciplines (through enforced attention to objective reality) the imagination. It therefore leads to a rearrangement of associations, an important ingredient, as will be outlined below, in the new definitions of creativity, and a concept closely linked with eccentricity. Thus, Foucault writes: 'Travel has the additional interest of acting directly

[143] 'Myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology'; *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvi.

upon the flow of ideas, or at least by a more direct means, since it passes only through the sensations.'[144]

It is also in keeping with this strategy that we find so many picaresque tales in the late eighteenth century, with characters that resemble Samuel Johnson as constructed in Boswell's biography as a classically-minded rational buffoon drifting helplessly through the world. Tobias Smollett's novels are perfect combinations of these related tendencies. Even their titles and the names of their protagonists hint at this ambivalence. Telling examples are his earliest novels *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748) and *Peregrine Pickle* (1751).[145] Smollett incidentally also translated one of the master-texts of eccentricity, *Don Quixote*, in 1755.

Cervantes' novel, whose first part appeared in 1605 and was already translated into English by Thomas Shelton in 1612, proved immensely influential and successful as a model for an emerging concept of eccentricity, since it mingled established ideas of chivalry with comedy, yet also paid homage to the growing awareness (and suspicions) concerning the power of literature, especially in the shape of romances. Parallels between Don Quixote's melancholy, his uncontrolled collecting and trust in stories, i.e. his intertextual self-fashioning so characteristic of Early Modern subjectivity, are evident.[146]

After Shelton, John Philipps, a nephew of John Milton, produced another translation in 1687, while the eighteenth century saw translations by John Stevens and a more successful one by Peter Anthony (Pierre Antoine) Motteux (reprinted until recently) in 1700. Charles Jervas (or Jarvis) produced what he intended to be a more accurate version in 1742, which became the most popular eighteenth-century translation of Cervantes' picaresque novel. Smollett's engagement with the text, despite his alleged lack of Spanish, is important in so far as he clearly perceived the pivotal role of Cervantes' equally comic and melancholy protagonist for the novelists of his own time, for instance Henry Fielding. In his *Continuation of the Complete History of England* of 1761, Smollett indeed writes: 'The genius of Cervantes was transfused into the novels of Fielding,

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144 Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, p. 174.

145 Compare David K. Jeffrey, 'Smollett's Irony in *Peregrine Pickle*', *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 6 (1976), pp. 137–146. Also Alain Morvan, 'From Oddities to Extravagance: Smollett's Eccentrics in *Roderick Random*,' in: *In and Out: Eccentricity in Britain*, ed. by Sophie Aymes-Stokes and Laurent Mellet (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 141–149.

146 Lobsien, 'Burtons *Anatomy of Melancholy – Cervantes' Don Quijote: Wahn und Ingenium*', in: *Skeptische Phantasie*, pp. 136–157. Lobsien also links Cervantes' text with Erasmus' concept of abundance and variation, *copia* (pp. 141–144). Yet there is no evidence in Burton's text of familiarity with Cervantes.

who painted the characters, and ridiculed the follies of life with equal strength, humour and propriety.'[147] Smollett not only perceives the workings of intertextuality clearly. He also positions 'genius' in a tensional zone between 'humour' and 'propriety', i.e. the carnivalesque and the norm, exactly where eccentricity is located and provides 'strength', i.e. flexibility and tolerance, to a culture.

When opting for the picaresque mode, most novels of the period, like Fielding's famous *History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* (1749), tellingly opt for an eventual circular return to normality. But even *Tom Jones* only does so after making its initially socially free-floating foundling-hero encounter various forms of eccentricity and deviance. And one should not forget that even the happy end of Fielding's picaresque tale firmly implants deviance at the heart of normality – by identifying the unmarried sister of Tom's adoptive father as Tom's mother.

Fielding's interest in Cervantes can be dated to the time around 1727 when he was writing a play entitled *Don Quixote in England*. Its epilogue tells the audience, 'Since your madness is so plain / Each spectator / Of good nature / With applause will entertain / His brother of La Mancha.'[148] The lines cleverly undermine the usual boundary between normality and madness and indeed not only call their audiences just as mad as Quixote, but indeed implicitly make Quixote's madness, which the present study identifies as eccentricity, a benchmark of a very precious Enlightenment attribute: good nature. Already Motteux had declared Quixote to be a kind of Everyman (and therefore neither foreign nor mad) when he wrote: 'Every man has something of Don Quixote in his Humor, some darling Dulcenea of his Thoughts, that sets him very often upon mad Adventures. What Quixotes dos [*sic!*] not every Age produce in Politics and Religion, who fancying themselves to be in the right of something, which all the World tells 'em is wrong […]?'[149] Motteux is clearly aware that eccentricity is by no means confined to the private sphere, but important, especially in a British context, in those areas requiring flexibility and progress as much as stability and conservatism, and thus tolerance: politics and religion. *Don Quixote* also had an impact on, among many others, Richard Steele, Joseph Addison, Jonathan Swift, and Charlotte Lennox, who indeed produced *The Female Quixote* in 1752, thereby once again claiming eccentricity also for women, for better or worse (hers is a critical position towards

147 Tobias Smollett, *Continuation of the Complete History of England*, revised edition (London: Richard Baldwin, 1762–1765), 5 vols, vol. 4, p. 127.
148 Henry Fielding, *Don Quixote in England* (London: J. Watts, 1734), p. 64.
149 Peter Motteux, 'Translator's Preface', in: Miguel de Cervantes, *The History of the Renown'd Don Quixote de la Mancha*, trans. Peter Motteux, 4 vols (London: Samuel Buckley, 1700), vol. 1, A5r–A8v (sig. A5r).

escapes into fiction). Samuel Johnson was also reported to have enjoyed romances of chivalry when a boy and retained a fondness for them throughout his life, and he also commented approvingly on *Don Quixote*.

Another contemporary reader of Cervantes' novel was Laurence Sterne. His *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* of 1760 is indeed the fictional work that in the eighteenth century utilises almost in text-book fashion the features that the present study has marked as those of eccentricity. *Tristram Shandy* poses in its title as a standard version of the new middle-class biography. Yet its structure is both a radical subversion and a radical over-fulfilment of the rules of the new genre. Famously, *Tristram Shandy* refuses to follow the linear time scheme commonly adopted for biographies. It further violates the rules of the newly emerging realist conventions by making its first-person narrator tell of events before his birth – and then losing him in volume VI. The core text, which conventionally ought to be what the title promises, life and opinions, preferably neatly ordered and categorised, falls victim to the same digressive strategies that have been highlighted as those typical of eccentric manifestations. Paratext, in the very radical shape of black pages, wiggly lines, etc., becomes the main text, centre and margin change places.

Yet the text never forgets that it has stories to tell, though they hardly amount to the unified monological life story of one individual. Instead, its vignettes of Tristram's parents, his uncle Toby and his friend Trim, male midwife Dr Slop, Parson Yorick, and the Widow Wadman surround the incomplete centre with very lively portraits of eccentric characters, their designs and hobby-horses. In addition, there are also carnivalesque excursions on noses as well as one that arbitrarily leaves the novel's English setting behind for a travelogue. Its narrator and eponymous hero is also clearly marked as eccentric – not merely by his mode of narration, but by his introduction as prone to melancholy. The text indeed has the narrator describe his own embryonic self, called, in accordance with by then already outdated physiological beliefs, 'homunculus', as follows: 'his muscular strength and virility worn down to a thread;his own animal spirits ruffled beyond description,and that in this sad disorder'd state of nerves, he had laid down a prey to sudden starts, or a series of melancholy dreams and fancies for nine long, long months together'.[150]

Later we learn that his hero is none other than Cervantes' Don Quixote, the intertextual reference point and patron saint of so many eccentrics: 'I have the highest idea of the spiritual and refined sentiments of this reverend gentleman, from this single stroke in his character, which

[150] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 6. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

I think comes up to any of the honest refinements of the peerless knight of *La Mancha*, whom, by the bye, with all his follies, I love more, and would actually have gone further to have paid a visit to, than the greatest hero of antiquity' (p. 19).

That he has a penchant for eccentricity has in fact been given an airing even earlier in a long excursion on so-called 'hobby-horses', a very peculiar English expression which unites the eccentricities of adult characters with the supposedly innocent, but in fact highly loaded children's toy (it represents an echo of chivalric values and thus a harkening back to outmoded notions of masculinity, but also a clear link with military realities): 'Nay, if you come to that, Sir, have not the wisest of men in all ages, not excepting *Solomon* himself, – have they not had their HOBBY-HORSES; – their running horses, – their coins and their cockle-shells, their drums and their trumpets, their fiddles, their pallets, – their maggots and their butterflies?' (p. 12). The passage cunningly unites cultural greatness with the many small manifestations of culture that are tainted with eccentricity, such as collecting, but which can easily be connected with cultural advancement once again, as is evident in the maggots and butterflies of naturalists – who would come to dominate the nineteenth century.

Tristram's ramblings also embrace artists ('their pallets') as well as musicians, even though, as with the hobby-horse, a telling ambivalence emerges here that makes the reference to music also potentially one to political leaders, kings, parliaments, despotic or democratic (drums, trumpets and fiddles being the preferred musical accompaniment to marching soldiers). The need to integrate such forms of eccentricity into the existing political status quo becomes instantly visible when the narrator continues: '– and so long as a man rides his HOBBY-HORSE peaceably and quietly along the King's highway, and neither compels you or me to get up behind him, – pray, Sir, what have either you or I to do with it? (p. 12). The question is indeed a pressing one, since Tristram, at least, has a lot to do with it. Thus, it is little surprising that the novel continues by dedicating its entire chapter eight to a further discussion of hobby-horses, always ensuring that it couches any potentially challenging ideas into consensus with phrases such as '*De gustibus non est disputandum*' (p. 12) or frequent references to the moon, the presumed cause of lunacy, but also a preferred location of utopias.

It is well-known that the stylistic tricks played by Sterne's novel are a critique of the conventions of the new genre of the novel, by then firmly established through authors such as Fielding or Samuel Richardson. Yet there is also a 'positive' aim behind its strategies, pointing towards a different understanding of realism altogether, one that follows theories of association outlined by, among others, John Locke. Locke famously distinguishes between simple and complex ideas in his influential *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Simple ideas either result from

the passive transmission of experience through the senses or from simple reflection. Complex ideas, on the other hand, result from the arrangement and connection of simple ones.[151] The way in which this 'association' of ideas happens, however, is only elaborated in the fourth edition of Locke's treatise in 1700. As Eckhard Lobsien has observed, from the start this association is troubled.[152] It appears in one of two additional chapters. The second one is, interestingly enough, on enthusiasm. Yet even in the association of ideas without explicit enthusiasm, i.e. excess and departure from the norm, there are clear dangers. Not necessarily do associations happen along the lines of what is governed 'by the Authority of Reason' (p. 164). Often, they follow 'something that […] is in it self [*sic!*] really Extravagant in the Opinions, Reasonings, and Actions' (p. 164). In § 2 of the new section, Locke indeed uses terms such as 'Self-Love' and 'Self-Flattery' to describe the reasons for such a departure, but also the term 'Madness' (§ 3).[153]

Incorrect reasoning leads to an odd joining together of ideas, which are then, however, often wrongly perceived to be true. Yet what is even more worrying is the fact that there is no way of telling from where the faculty of reasoning might get its proper structure – other than by postulating its essential foundation in Nature and Reason. In this essentialist conviction, there are therefore only orderly associations that are natural and reasonable – and others 'wholly owing to Chance or Custom' (§ 5). Yet such associations, which deviate from nature and reason, have ways of erecting their rule as a secondary reality, nature, and truth. Locke is here clearly aware of the conventionality behind truths and the consensual nature of ideology, though insistent on retaining the dominance of the typical Enlightenment conglomerate of Nature and Reason. Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which, as Lobsien points out, quotes passages from these sections of Locke's treatise directly, sees no need to retain such an order.[154] Indeed it shows mad associations to be the normality (and nature) of its protagonists – and therefore by extension of the culture of its time. Once again, an eccentric manifestation looks critically towards an established centre,

[151] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 163–164 (Book II, ch. xii, § 1).

[152] Eckhard Lobsien, *Kunst der Assoziation: Phänomenologie eines ästhetischen Grundbegriffs vor und nach der Romantik* (Munich: Fink, 1999), pp. 14–15.

[153] The Augustan dichotomy of madness and reason is also the starting point for Brian Thomas Cowlishaw, 'A Genealogy of Eccentricity', unpublished PhD thesis (University of Oklahoma, 1998). Although this appears too limited from the perspective of the present study, Cowlishaw also notices some of the intertextual connections traced here, such as that to Cervantes, Sterne, and Dickens.

[154] Lobsien, *Kunst der Assoziation*, p. 15. Lobsien elaborates in great detail how Sterne's novel can be read as an application, but also an eccentric radicalisation of Locke's ideas (pp. 44–56).

here both the new novelistic norm and established philosophical thought, but also opens up alternative modes through its subversive marginal position.[155]

A similar strategy also influences the fictional model that poses a strong challenge to the rationalism and empiricism underlying even the humorous tales of Fielding and Smollett: the emerging cult of Sentimentality.[156] It still manages to enter a conventional and highly successful union with linearity and plausibility in Richardson's famous epistolary novel *Clarissa* of 1747. This is certainly also due to its focus on a female heroine. Femininity, as was observed in the section on Mary Wortley Montague, was regarded as a borderline of Enlightenment rationalism. Yet even there, Clarissa's insistence on emotions as a moral measure – against the conventional demands of a social morality based on pragmatic thinking – eventually leads to the heroine's isolation and death after her rape by the man to whom she entrusted herself against her parents' wishes. Similarly, in two related texts featuring male protagonists, Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) and Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771), sentimentality as an attempt at an alternative to Enlightenment reasoning only manages to produce impossible heroes and equally implausible narratives, eccentric characters and matching tales, that is. Yet in and as tales, the impractical protagonists of sentimental novels survive. This is already evident in *Clarissa*, which ostensibly consists of the protagonist's letters edited by John Belford, the libertine correspondent of her seducer, who has been changed into a better person by reading of her sufferings. Comical in Sterne, in the excess to which the protagonist of *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy, by Mr Yorick* (a character recycled from *Tristram Shandy*) is led by the mere observation of the foibles of his fellow human beings, more serious in Mackenzie, where the protagonist's superlative capacity for compassion is not matched by an equal ability to act for himself and eventually leads to an early death, sentimentality is from the start an uneven match for the dominant norms of conventional morality and conventional writing. And still, it produced literally hundreds of

[155] See also Duke Maskell, 'Locke and Sterne, or Can Philosophy Influence Literature?', *Essays in Criticism*, 23 (1973) pp. 22–4, and Ernest Tuveson, 'Locke and Sterne', in: Stanford Patrick Rosenbaum, ed., *English Literature and British Philosophy: A Collection of Essays* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 86–108.

[156] For a critical assessment, see Robert W. Jones, 'Ruled Passions: Re-Reading the Culture of Sensibility', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 32:3 (Spring 1999), pp. 395–402. See also Claudia L. Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s – Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen*, Women in Culture and Society (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

literary manifestations, yet without ever achieving canonicity.[157] Indeed, already towards the end of the eighteenth century, the sentimental novel was viewed with suspicion and ridicule, and Sterne's novel, as well as another potential example, Oliver Goldsmith's immensely successful *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), can be seen as representatives as well as parodies of the genre.[158] Eventually Jane Austen summarises the dichotomy neatly in her novel *Sense and Sensibility* of 1811.

Yet what exactly goes on in a form that enables a libertine to become a moral force, a female protagonist to run away with a man and nonetheless become an epitome of violated innocence, and supposedly down-to-earth English parsons to travel in the uncertain moral climates of France and Italy, and still derive moral and emotional enjoyment from it? The following two excerpts from Sterne's tale illustrate many of the benchmarks of the sentimental hero or heroine, while simultaneously demonstrating the brittle boundary between seriousness and ridicule that makes them eccentric protagonists in eccentric tales:

> I am apt to be taken with all kinds of people at first sight, but never more so, than when a poor devil comes to offer his services to so poor a devil as myself; and as I know this weakness, I always suffer my judgment to draw back something on that very account – and this more or less, according to the mood I am in, and the case – and I may add the gender too, of the person I am to govern.[159]

The passage is, of course, perfectly contradictory: a habitual openness and credulity is contradicted by experience and mood, and the declared naivety more than outbalanced by hints at potential sexism. Similar contradictions and exaggerations manifest themselves in the seemingly sad conclusion to a little vignette in which the protagonist meets a begging Franciscan friar in Calais, refuses him alms, then regrets the refusal and gives him some snuff out of his cherished snuff-box, which leads to an exchange of snuff-boxes as reconciliatory gifts.

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[157] See George A. Starr, 'Sentimental Novels of the Later Eighteenth Century', in: John Richetti et al., eds, *The Columbia History of the British Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 181–198.

[158] Compare David Durant, '*The Vicar of Wakefield* and the Sentimental Novel', *Studies in English Literature*, 1500–1900, 17:3 (Summer 1977), pp. 477–91.

[159] Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy by Mr. Yorick* with *The Journal of Eliza* and *A Political Romance*, ed. Ian Jack (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 31. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.

> I feel a damp upon my spirits, as I am going to add, that in my last return through Calais, upon inquiring after Father Lorenzo, I heard he had been dead near three months, and was buried, not in his convent, but according to his desire, in a little cimetiery belonging to it, about two leagues off: I had a strong desire to see where they had laid him, – when, upon pulling out his little horn-box, as I sat by the grave, and plucking up a nettle or two at the head of it, which had no business to grow there, they all struck together so forcibly upon my affectations, that I burst into a flood of tears – but I am as weak as a woman; and I beg the world not to smile, but pity me. (p. 21)

That Sterne's narrator knows that he is part of the eccentric convention of melancholia is not merely implicitly alluded to, but made explicit when, only a few pages later, seemingly disconnectedly, a self-declared 'Fragment' interrupts the text, an anecdote in the tradition of the digressions so frequent in eccentric writings, and here one that explicitly alludes to one of the 'patron saints' of eccentricity, Democritus, whose name Burton borrowed for the narrator of his *Anatomy of Melancholy*: 'The town of Abdera, notwithstanding Democritus lived there trying all the powers of irony and laughter to reclaim it, was the vilest and most profligate town in all Thrace' (p. 34). The fragment continues to talk about the temporary conversion of the Abderites through an ode to Cupid supposedly deriving from a play by Euripides. Yet what they are cured from is apparently not vice, but melancholy, since 'No pharmacopolist could sell one grain of helebore' (p. 35), a conventional antidote to it. All the same, laughter may have been Democritus' strategy, but not irony. Sterne thus refers to the designs of his own text, but simultaneously also includes himself by means of intertextuality in the eccentric melancholy tradition. That the digressive structure of the text shows its indebtedness to another philosopher of assocationism, David Hartley (1705–1757), and his *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty and His Expectations* (1749), in which he develops a theory of association based on contingency, has been observed, among others, by Jonathan Lamb.[160] Sterne's Tristram Shandy is furthermore a striking proof that eccentricity works through intertextuality: besides direct references to Locke (for instance on p. 288), it mentions Rabelais and Cervantes (p. 151), Erasmus and again Democritus (p. 272), Theophrastus (p. 281), the famous hermit Hilarion (p. 471), and Diogenes (p. 538). In short: it contains an almost complete catalogue of those eccentrics who form continual

[160] Jonathan Lamb, 'Language and Hartleian Associationism in *A Sentimental Journey*', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 13 (1980), pp. 285–312.

reference points in the history and development of the concept. It also does not fail to address 'spleen' either (p. 402).

Mackenzie's man of feeling is introduced posthumously, and tellingly again by fragments he has left behind.[161] These have been preserved by a country parson, yet not out of reverence, but to make wadding for his gun. *The Man of Feeling* thus manages to combine all the by now familiar elements of eccentric manifestations. Its 'Introduction' starts with 'An air of melancholy',[162] its already deceased protagonist is instantly introduced as 'whimsical' (p. 4), and his textual representation is a 'medley', 'a bundle of little episodes, put together without art, and of no importance on the whole, with something of nature, and little else in them' (pp. 4–5). Yet the reader and fictional editor is as affected by them in a similar way as Mackenzie's protagonist Harley is touched by almost everything he encounters, and their possible reactions are only checked by knowing references to the sentimental tradition (Jean-François Marmontel and Samuel Richardson are acknowledged in the text, while Mackenzie's novel initially appeared anonymously). *The Man of Feeling* proves once more that eccentricity uses intertextuality for its (re-) production: 'I was a good deal affected with some very trifling passages in it; and had the name of a Marmontel, or a Richardson, been on the title page—'tis odds that I should have wept: But' (p. 5). Towards the close of the tale, the novel calls its protagonist explicitly 'eccentric' and sets the term against pragmatic behaviour and conformity to conventions:

> He did few things without a motive, but his motives were rather eccentric; and the useful and expedient were terms which he held to be very indefinite, and which therefore he did not always apply to the sense in which they are commonly understood. (p. 63)

An alternative logic is hinted at, and even a deviation from an accepted social semantics of meaning, a way of existence that attaches its own meanings to actions – in a way that opens up an interesting, though also frightening flexibility in the networks of signification (the 'indefinite') that make a society and a culture function.[163]

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[161] Compare Maureen Harkin, 'Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling*: Embalming Sensibility', *English Literary History*, 61:2 (Summer 1994), pp. 317–340.

[162] Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. Brian Vickers, new ed. (Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 3. All further references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.

[163] Compare Mark E. Wildermuth, 'The Rhetoric of Common Sense and Uncommon Sensibility in Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*', *Lamar Journal of the Humanities*, 23:2 (Autumn 1997), pp. 35–47.

Interestingly, for the distinction between eccentricity and deviance outlined in the introductory chapter of the present study, Harley makes a visit to Bedlam, the famous London mental asylum, with some of his companions. After being shown a mathematician, an investor in the stock-market, and a schoolmaster, whose common 'madness' consists in their inability to detach themselves from their respective trades, he is informed by his guide that 'delusive ideas, Sir, are the motives of the greatest part of mankind, and a heated imagination the power by which their actions are incited: the world, in the eye of the philosopher, may be said to be a large madhouse' (p. 25). Harley agrees. The philosopher in question, as it turns out, is very likely our old acquaintance Diogenes, for – after further inspecting a young girl whose madness was triggered by the loss of her lover – Harley is shown on the subsequent day no longer one of 'the mad', but 'one of the wise: but you must not look for any thing of the Socratic pleasantry about him; on the contrary, I warn you to expect the spirit of a Diogenes' (p. 27).

The misanthrope whom he then encounters, after initially ignoring his visitors, gives them a lecture on honour and politeness, which he denounces as superficial ornaments and the very opposite of virtue and truth (p. 30). He continues in a manner that is not very dissimilar to Carey with an attack on decadence and luxury among the young, yet also recognises that luxury is inextricably connected with the power and wealth of a nation. Here, then, is an eccentric outside a mental asylum, whose main difference from the scientist, economist, and scholar within its confines is that he unites their perspectives and is capable of transcending them. It is telling that the male inhabitants of the madhouse represent all that is most important in eighteenth century culture: the advancement of learning, the creation of wealth, and the education of the young.

The female adds the element of emotion in the acceptable form of faithfulness and self-sacrifice, an element that sentimental heroes also possess in abundance, even the male ones, which has made many critics observe that they are feminised in their depictions. In Mackenzie's novel, this famously applies to Harley's susceptibility to cry – which has led to indexing the frequency of his tears in the short novel (pp. 110–111): it runs to less than one hundred pages, but contains nearly fifty scenes of crying or allusions to it. Sterne's sentimental traveller also calls himself 'as weak as a woman'.

The misanthropic eccentric is an expert on the dominant discourses of his culture exactly because he is inside it, yet at its margins. A similar sermon is delivered by an old acquaintance, Ben Silton, a simple farmer, who, in unlikely diction, sums up his verdict on his times: 'The Frivolous and the Interested (might a satyrist say) are the characteristic features of the age' (p. 62). We noticed above how aware eccentricity is of surfaces and superficialities, yet also how

much attention it pays to the mechanisms that determine cultural and real capital. Although frequently characterised as frivolous by normality, eccentricity is rarely blind towards realities.

This also becomes visible in the misanthrope who develops a complete analysis of his culture outlined above. Before Harley encounters him, his friend tells him the story behind his rejection of human society, a rejection that is, however, as incomplete as that of all the eccentrics we have encountered in this study. It boils down to the common tale of an older son and intended heir of a considerable fortune. Yes, as the friend points out, while his younger brother was installed in a profession chosen for him by his father, that of an attorney, the elder was allowed to let his natural dispositions run free. The description of the two brothers reiterates an important concept that we encountered for the first time as an ordering mechanism of cultural status and capital in the seventeenth century: wit. It then continues with a term that would become crucial at the turn of the eighteenth into the nineteenth in Romanticism: genius. Both taken together are to blame for the misanthrope's decline into his present state – which was occasioned by an unhappy love affair and the loss of his fortune, both through the same untrustworthy friend: 'both were remarkable at school for quickness of parts, and extent of genius' (p. 28). 'Quickness of parts' is another expression for wit; yet wit without conformity leads to a behaviour that is censured as 'impetuous, decisive, and overbearing' – in short, to eccentricity, and, in this case, outsiderhood. In fact, the fiction of the eighteenth century stresses again and again that wit alone does not guarantee morality. Thus, Richardson's Pamela fondly recalls a maxim of her dear departed mistress: '"That any body might have a character for wit, who could give themselves the liberty to *say* what would shock others to *think*"'.[164]

Most radically, Mackenzie's hero, as a typical privileged protagonist from the gentry, yet without the wealth to make him an instant success in the world, is fascinating in so far as he becomes a fictional model exactly by representing a complete social and individual failure. He does not commit suicide, but refuses to struggle against the nondescript illness that leads to his early death. Indeed, he welcomes this death, and thereby conforms to the stereotype of the melancholy (and frequently suicidal) Englishman that by Mackenzie's time was firmly established – to the degree that the condition was known on the Continent as *la maladie anglaise*. Foucault writes:

[164] Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, ed. Peter Sabor (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 83. The passage appears in the final version Richardson produced of his text, on which the Penguin edition is based. It does not appear in the first edition.

> For a long time, certain forms of melancholia were considered specifically English; this was a fact in medicine and a constant in literature. Montesquieu contrasted Roman suicide, which was a form of moral and political behaviour, the desired effect of a concerned education, with English suicide, which had to be considered an illness, since 'the English kill themselves without any apparent reason for doing so; they kill themselves in the very lap of happiness.' It is here that the milieu plays its role, for if happiness in the eighteenth century is part of the order of nature and reason, unhappiness, or at least whatever deters from happiness without reason, must be part of another order. This order was sought first in the excesses of the climate, in nature's deviation from its equilibrium and its happy mean (temperate climates are caused by nature; intemperate climates by the milieu). But this was not sufficient to explain *la maladie anglaise*; already Cheyne had declared that wealth, refined food, the abundance all inhabitants enjoyed, the life of pleasure and ease the richest society led, were at the origin of such nervous disorders. Increasingly, a political and economic explanation was sought, in which wealth, progress, institutions appear as the determining elements of madness. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Spurzheim made a synthesis of all these analyses [...]. Madness, 'more frequent in England than anywhere else,' is merely the penalty of the liberty that reigns there, and of the wealth universally enjoyed. Freedom of conscience entails more dangers than authority and despotism. [...] 'Everything meets with opposition, and opposition excites the feelings; in religion, in politics, in science, as in everything, each man is permitted to form an opinion; but he must expect to meet with opposition.'[165]

Eccentricity becomes part of the English autostereotype, the national self-image, as well as a heterostereotype of Englishness, a cliché of the English current abroad. As a typical Englishman and a radical, but nonetheless adorable, failure, Mackenzie's hero also paves the way for the outsiders that a few decades later populated Romantic writings and art.[166]

[165] Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, pp. 212–213. Foucault's reference is to Johann Christoph (Kaspar or Gaspar) Spurzheim, *Observations sur la folie ou Sur les dérangements des fonctions morales et intellectuelles de l'homme* (Paris : Treuttel et Würtz, 1818). Spurzheim is the founding father of phrenology, a pseudo-science that attempted to determine 'character' (an important term in the discourse of eccentricity and of increasing importance in the nineteenth century, as we will see) from the shape of the skull.

[166] For a comprehensive analysis, see my 'Madness, Eccentricity, Sociability: Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771) and the Trials of Modernising the British Subject', in: *Einsamkeit und Geselligkeit um 1800*, ed. Susanne Schmid, Regensburger Beiträge zur Gender Forschung, 3 (Heidelberg: Winter, 2008), pp. 163–175.

3.2 Eccentricity as norm: the Romantic concept of genius

Romanticism presents a sitting duck for a study of eccentricity. There is hardly a Romantic author who is not conventionally supplied with the label by critics. It is regularly applied to the canonical set of the 'two generations', William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, George Gordon Lord Byron, and John Keats. William Blake, when added as a 'Proto-Romantic' to this assorted élite, is indeed often called 'mad'. Yet also lesser-known Romantics or those who have only recently been re-established as part of the Romanticism that is studied and taught at schools and universities (authors such as Dorothy Wordsworth, John Clare, Thomas de Quincey, Charles and Mary Ann Lamb, Walter Savage Landor; the list can be continued) appear to fit the bill. Yet again, the aim of the present study is not to retrace the potential biographical eccentricities of the respective personalities. Instead it must be concerned with the reasons why eccentricity becomes such a prevalent, useful, perhaps even convenient concept in a period of history and culture that was itself a transitional one (English Romanticism is frequently dated between the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 and Keats's death in 1821 – and is thus given a lifespan of only twenty-three years, very much in accordance with the myth of the Romantic hero, author, or artist, whose fate it is to die young.) Since Romanticism will emerge as a point in history when eccentricity achieves the rank of not only a cultural norm, but also an aesthetic doctrine, this section will spend more time than others in the present study on tracing its manifestation in literary texts.

Once a cultural norm with a centre and margins is established, and the present study argues that this is the case for Britain in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, new cultural movements or fashions automatically acquire the suspect aura of eccentricity. This has been shown for the cult of Sentimentality above. Romanticism has also been defined as a departure from the Neoclassical emphasis on form, decorum, and artificiality and as an attempt to 'return' to simplicity and nature. This aim is indeed made explicit in Wordsworth and Coleridge's influential Preface to the second edition of their *Lyrical Ballads* and indeed in the poems comprising the volume. Yet what kind of 'culture' were Romantic artists rejecting, and what kind of 'nature' were they embracing? Certainly not objective nature 'out there', despite Wordsworth and Coleridge's cult of the Lake District. When Romantic writers such as John Clare indeed hailed from a rural background (he, like his father, was an agricultural labourer), this in turn made them eccentric within eccentric Romanticism. The constructions appear more complex and do

not permit a simple dichotomy between Neoclassical Augustan artificiality and 'natural' Romantic simplicity.

In fact, it appears that what we now call Romanticism emerged as a revision of Enlightenment ideas – much in the manner that Pope outlined in his ambivalence of order and its disruption.[167] It takes over central ideas of Enlightenment thought, such as those of nature and the individual, yet transforms them into often very different or indeed contradictory ones. In the case of nature, the rational compound with reason and order is dissolved, and through the sublime – as outlined by, among others, Edmund Burke – its majesty is sought exactly in its non-conformity with (human) order, in its excess that often threatens, but generally impresses an individual who is thereby reminded of his or her only relative importance in the universe. At the same time, however, this individual is also elevated – from a mere element in the world and in society whose egotism is ultimately seen in the service of a common goal (which, through its rationality and 'naturalness' can be integrated into religious schemes). Now it becomes an untameable force, for better or worse, as can be seen in the shift of the significance of the crucial Romantic concept of 'genius'.

Philosophically, the shift from wit to genius was prepared by the writings of Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713). Wit was originally a social and aesthetic category without any claim to moral authority. This still rested predominantly in religion. Shaftesbury's decisive move was to discredit religion exactly on the grounds of eccentricity: he aligns at least its enthusiastic form with melancholy and ridicules it by claiming that 'vapours naturally rise'[168] – yet need to be dispelled, or else tragedy results (the warning of course harks back to the religious disputes which had so markedly coloured British politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). He not only makes the hitherto most authoritative cultural discourse of religion eccentric and foppish. He also shifts that which was dangerously close to foppish eccentricity, common sense, in its position, by recommending pleasantry and mirth as paths towards wisdom and virtue by and by calling 'good-humour […] not only the best security against enthusiasm, but the best foundation of piety and true religion'.[169]

[167] Compare Peter Jimack, 'England and France in 1798: The Enlightenment, the Revolution and the Romantics', in: *1798: The Year of the Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Richard Cronin (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 151–169.

[168] Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 10.

[169] Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, p. 13.

Of course, this is a very Protestant position, directed against many of the excesses of the counter-Reformation taking place on the European continent (any Baroque church in Central and Southern Europe still bears testimony to it). However, he by no means disqualifies enthusiasm for good, a term that would pave the way for a new concept of genius later.[170] Only when in the service of the wrong ideology does it become dangerous and procures tragic consequences in Shaftesbury. When in the service of his ideal, the 'Sensus Communis' or common sense, it is not only perfectly acceptable, but indeed 'natural'. While Shaftesbury's teacher John Locke had held many qualities of human beings to be innate, Shaftesbury makes them 'connatural', an interesting term vis-à-vis eccentricity: not against or in opposition to nature, yet not passively determined by it, but in accord with it while retaining its (human and cultural) characteristics. It is evident that this connatural common sense aims to be firmly on the side of centric ideals and truths, and yet it requires for its conceptualization a departure from the centre, in fact from two imaginary centres: nature's laws and unthinking human consensus.

It is in keeping with this philosophy of compromise that it refrains from absolutes. It has in fact tainted British philosophical history with the label 'pragmatism' – in contrast to the idealism frequently preached in German philosophy, but also to the rationalism characteristic of much French philosophy.[171] Thus, for example, Shaftesbury rejects Descartes's rationalist tenet 'I think therefore I am' as untenable and instead states: 'for my own part, I take my being upon trust'.[172] Far from constituting a flippant aside, his statement strongly echoes a firm assumption of individuality and privilege ('for my own part') as well as a trust in consensus, even though it remains unclear in whom or what Shaftesbury places his trust.[173]

That in a liberal tradition of thought there is no unbridgeable rift or conflict between individual interest and that of the community becomes clear when he describes self-interest as limited and partly dangerous, but also 'natural', yet also finds ways of also postulating that there are natural impulses driving humans towards the common good. [174] Private ones are self-regarding

[170] He indeed calls enthusiasm the 'sublime in human passions', *Characteristics*, p. 27.
[171] This is the main argument of Easthope's *Englishness and National Culture*.
[172] Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, p. 421.
[173] For Shaftesbury's position among British and Continental philosophers of his time, see Ernest Tuveson, 'Shaftesbury and the Not So Simple Plan of Human Nature', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 5:1 (Winter 1965), pp. 403–434.
[174] '[…] if the affectation towards private or self-good, however selfish it may be esteemed, is in reality not only consistent with public good, but in some measure contributing to it […]'; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, p. 170.

affectations. In other words: they are eccentricities. As such they need not be outlawed, penalised, or worse exterminated. A centric system of networks of relations to our fellow human beings is capable of integrating them, so that nothing is supernumerary or unnecessary (no excess or waste here) and that, as in Pope, 'the whole is harmony, the numbers entire, the music perfect':

> But, I believe, whoever looks narrowly into the affairs of it will find that passion, humour, caprice, zeal, faction and a thousand other springs, which are counter to self-interest, have as considerable a part in the movement of this machine. There are more wheels and counterpoises in this engine than are easily imagined.[175]

It is no coincidence that Shaftesbury uses the image of a machine, the emblem of the Industrial Revolution, to indicate that its mechanisms might appear as contradictory as that of the culture and society that it affects. Ultimately, his position is one of acceptance; put in more critical terms, obfuscation. Eccentricity here clearly becomes a means with which to brush dissent and contradictions under the carpet.

Yet Shaftesbury's consensual ideas also require a direction in order not to lead to anarchy or complete liberalism. After having banned enthusiastic religion, he finds this orientation in the proposition of a 'moral sense'. This moral sense (very similar to 'simple Englishness' a few decades before) is natural, and yet it has to be learned. Or rather, its appreciation has to be learned. How? Through the senses, i.e. through aesthetic experience. Here, Shaftesbury follows a very different path from the abstract German idealists later (who believe what is necessary) or the rationalist French thinkers of his time (who believe what is logical). The moral sense of the mind, according to Shaftesbury,

> feels the soft and harsh, the agreeable and disagreeable in the affections, and finds a foul and fair, a harmonious and a dissonant, as really and truly here, as in any musical numbers or in the outward forms or representations of sensible things. Nor can it withhold its admiration and ecstasy, its aversion and scorn, any more in what relates to one than to the other of these subjects.[176]

[175] Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, pp. 53–54.
[176] Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, pp. 172–173.

Shaftesbury is here not far away from Sentimentality with its claims to feel morality, to see it in glances, blushes, and gestures, and to display it likewise. Moral sense thereby becomes sensory; indeed it appears as a collaboration of two sense organs in Shaftesbury, the external and the internal sense. From the latter, our perceptions emerge according to him. This internal sense is the province of two joined senses: the sense of beauty and the moral sense:

No sooner the eye opens upon figures, the ear to sounds, than straight the beautiful results and grace and harmony are known and acknowledged. No sooner are actions viewed, no sooner the human affections and passions discerned (and they are most of them as soon discerned as felt) than straight an inward eye distinguishes and sees the fair and shapely, the amiable and admirable, apart from the deformed, the foul, the odious or the despicable.[177]

It is once again evident that this philosophy and its attendant aesthetics are based on consensus, on a pre-existing agreement as to what is beautiful, moral, and virtuous and what is not. As a centric hegemonic ideology, however, it can and must posture as a 'natural' faculty, not a cultural one. It will become noticeable in Romanticism that this consensus is often more fragile than one thinks. In the experiments of Modernism, if not already in the attempts at literary Realism in the Victorian age, it will be shattered completely. The Romantics used Shaftesbury selectively. They shared his dislike of established religion and embraced his alternative enthusiasm, that for the elevating perception of divinely ordered nature. Yet their interpretation of enthusiasm did not take the path Shaftesbury envisaged, as a means of the individual to join the common social and cultural project, no matter which eccentricities it brought with it.

The Romantics took the older meaning of enthusiasm, whose Greek roots imply inspiration or indeed possession by a god, to combine it with their strongly individualistic and self-centred doctrines. For them, enthusiasm for nature did not lead to a recognition of common sense and community, but to another classical term that was originally linked with god-like spirits and their impact on humans: genius. Originally an external force to human actions and creativity, in the course of the Modern Period (indeed from the Renaissance via the Early Modern age all the way to the Modernity of the nineteenth century) it was successively turned into an interior feature

[177] Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, p. 326.

of human beings, sometimes innate, more frequently generated by interaction, for instance with sublime natural features.[178]

Genius was already encountered in Pope, where it was the benchmark and justification of true wit, whom it permitted to transgress rules, because of his superior understanding of them. The contradictions in this simultaneously consensual and hegemonic, but equally transgressive and potentially anarchic position were pointed out in the preceding chapter, as were the functions of eccentricity in making these contradictions palatable and seemingly 'orderly' again. Yet the social and cultural consensus that enabled Pope to uphold a sometimes contradictory and sometimes tautological model of individuality as the rational pursuit of a common goal increasingly experienced challenges.

'External' ones were the upheavals caused by the Industrial Revolution, which did not only change Britain's landscape – and thereby brought the idea of 'nature' to the fore while simultaneously undoing much of it. It also led to the dominance of a class that had hitherto frequently dared to criticise the ruling one, yet without ever perceiving itself in the position to replace it: the bourgeoisie. As with criticism, the bourgeoisie could indeed claim to possess common sense in the eighteenth century, because although it might occupy an increasingly centric social position, it retained an eccentric one vis-à-vis political power and also cultural norms. When the bourgeoisie had become the rulers in terms of economic clout and cultural monopolies (the latter through the equally industrialised production of books, periodicals, and the now firmly established newspapers), it was now at pains to define itself as a centric power.

As we saw in Pope's painful definition of man as the middle ground between eccentricities and as has become obvious throughout the present study: centres generally fail to define themselves positively. They instead rely on a definition through a negation of that which has been rejected and abjected: eccentricity. In connection with art and literature, one can regard Romanticism both positively as the attempt to distinguish oneself and one's artistic production from the empty centre of hegemonic bourgeois consensus, yet also as that which enables this centre to retain at least a vague notion of its existence and position – exactly by providing it with a dissident foil.

This is all the more understandable as the position of the artist had reached a precarious limbo: art was no longer the province of the upper-class amateur as in the seventeenth- and

[178] Compare Jürgen Klein, 'Genius, Ingenium, Imagination: Aesthetic Theories of Production from the Renaissance to Romanticism', in: *The Romantic Imagination: Literature and Art in England and Germany*, ed. Frederick Burwick and Jürgen Klein (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 19–62.

eighteenth century. Yet patronage (important since the Renaissance) had largely disappeared together with the freely disposable wealth of the upper class. At the same time a proper 'market' for artistic and literary productions was yet to emerge. Copyright reforms were slowly taking place (the so-called 'Statute of Anne' of 1709–1719 gave writers control of their works for the first time – for fourteen years with an option of renewal, but a 'modern' copyright law with lifetime rights of authors had to wait until 1842). It still was almost impossible to earn one's living as a writer. Criticism and journalism offered some scope in this respect, but they were (even in their own view) regarded as inferior. It is no coincidence that Romantic writers in particular were frequently middle-class figures struggling with their middle-class positions.[179]

William Blake appears to be an exception at first glance, since as an engraver he hails from the artisan ranks of society. Even his main influences, the Bible and Milton, seem to place him closer to seventeenth-century religious authors such as Bunyan than to the Romantics. Yet although his contemporaneous reputation rested almost exclusively on his illustrations, he did develop models of thought that saw him engaging with dominant hegemonic Enlightenment ideals. Genius, originally perceived as an external inspiration by gods or spirits, and in Pope still a gift from Nature to privileged individuals, becomes for Blake an inherent quality of art and the true artist in Romanticism. Imagination is the new reason, which is that of the artist, and it is no longer constrained by external norms and forces, which are now denounced as temporal, limited, and ultimately doomed. In a short poem entitled 'To the Muses', written between 1769 and 1777, Blake paints a vivid image of the loss of faith in traditional ideas of external inspiration:

> How have you left the antient love
> That bards of old enjoyed in you!
> The languid strings do scarcely move,
> The sound is forced, the notes are few.[180]

[179] Compare Martha Woodmansee, 'The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the "Author"', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 17:4 (Summer 1984), pp. 425–448. See also Jacqueline Rhodes, 'Copyright, Authorship, and the Professional Writer: The Case of William Wordsworth', *Cardiff-Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text*, 8 (June 2002), <https://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/romtextv2/files/2013/02/cc08_n01.pdf> (accessed 17 July 2022).

[180] William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (London: Longman, 1971), p. 14. All further references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.

In 'The Divine Image' from *Songs of Innocence* of 1789, the projection of hitherto divine propensities into the human being is explicit:

> And all must love the human form,
> In heathen, turk, or jew.
> Where mercy, love and pity dwell
> There God is dwelling too. (p. 70)

It is evident that this projection also enables Blake to undertake an (at his time, and perhaps still today) scandalous integration of religious diversity.[181] Yet integration easily turns into homogenisation – which then provokes renewed dissent. On a material, but also ideological level, differentiation is required to retain notions of the individual, but also of an ordered (i.e. hierarchical) society. Blake links this contradiction with the traditional Christian notion of the 'fortunate fall', which once more defines transgression and dissidence as necessary (here: the biblical Fall as the necessary prerequisite of God's redemptive plan for mankind). Yet Blake not only retains the paradox, he also clothes it in pagan form by invoking the Germanic myth of the tree of life, Yggdrasil in his counter-poem to 'The Divine Image', from *Songs of Experience* of 1793, 'The Human Abstract':[182]

> Pity would be no more,
> If we did not make somebody poor;
> And mercy no more could be,
> If all were as happy as we;
>
> And mutual fear brings peace,
> Till the selfish loves increase.
> Then cruelty knits a snare,
> And spreads his baits with care.

[181] See Robert Ryan, 'Blake and Religion', in: *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 150–168.

[182] Compare Albert J. Kuhn, 'Blake on the Nature and Origins of Pagan Gods and Myths', *Modern Language Notes*, 72:8 (December 1972), pp. 563–572. See also Thomas J. J. Altizer, 'William Blake and the Role of Myth in the Radical Christian Vision', *The Centennial Review*, 9 (1965), pp. 461–482.

> He sits down with holy fears
> And waters the ground with tears;
> Then Humility takes its root
> Underneath his foot.
>
> Soon spreads the dismal shade
> Of mystery over his head;
> And the caterpillar and fly,
> Feed on the mystery.
>
> And it bears the fruit of deceit,
> Ruddy and sweet to eat,
> And the raven his nest has made
> In its thickest shade.
>
> The gods of the earth and sea,
> Sought through nature to find this tree
> But their search was all in vain –
> There grows one in the human brain. (p. 216)

The poem once more stresses that all norms and rules now have to be sought inside the human being. Yet this places new obligations on humans, for example to define themselves out of themselves. Many of Blake's extended poetic visions indeed deal with the failure to do so. Thus, the epyllion or short epic *The Book of Thel* of 1789–1791 deals with the protagonist's failure of will and desire ('Thel' is a Greek word signifying 'will' or 'wish'). The result is that she refuses to even be born. The poem's images of languor, passivity, virginity, sleep and ultimately death form a drastic warning to the newly autonomous human subject. Yet when arriving at what would eventually become her grave, if she decided to start living, Thel hears what would be her own 'voice of sorrow' from the ground. Inside the monadic closure of the self in Blake's poem emerges an eccentric split within space and time. It doubles the subject and returns it to itself – yet only as a lost one. This absence at the core of the self-mirroring that becomes characteristic of eccentricity will be re-encountered when the present study will ask for the possible secret of culture at which eccentricity permits a glance.

If one extreme of the newly autonomous subject is passivity and regression, the other is the unbridled submission to libidinous impulses, i.e. an excess of will and desire. This Blake embodies in the figure of the eternal rebel he calls 'Orc' or 'Luvah' in *The Four Zoas*. Yet his undirected rebellion against anything and its impulses without goals also lead nowhere; Blake indeed uses the word 'consume' to describe the ensuing activities and their effect in 'Night

the Ninth Being the Last Judgement' (page 121, ln. 23). Yet a stable middle ground between withholding and withdrawal (the mystic position) and expenditure and excess (the revolutionary one) is not available and indeed not acceptable for Blake. His is not a philosophy of consensus and harmony, as in Pope's 'isthmus'. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in itself a highly eccentric text, since it is never very clear which side (heaven's or hell's) its arguments are on, there are statements insisting on the agonal structure that Pope reluctantly acknowledged and then tried to integrate, such as '*Opposition is true Friendship*' (end of Plate 16; emphasis in the original), or the ambiguous 'One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression' (end of Plate 21).

This radicalism, even of ambivalence, distinguishes Blake from the so-called first-generation Romantics William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Although strongly influenced by the French Revolution (which Wordsworth experienced first-hand during extended visits to France) and by the writings of radical British thinkers such as William Godwin, their radicalism soon turned into a private one. It is significant in this respect that, strongly in contrast to the writers of the eighteenth century, they sought isolation in remote rural locations. They thereby placed themselves already spatially in an eccentric position vis-à-vis the cultural centre London.

Another typical trait of Romanticism, both in terms of the biographies of Romantic artists and their fictional protagonists, is rambling.[183] Wordsworth's famous long walk from Salisbury to North Wales undertaken in 1793 is instructive. While the tours of Britain of eighteenth-century fictional heroes took them through and eventually back into society, Romantic ramblings try to escape from it. Thus, Wordsworth visited Tintern Abbey, the ruin of a grand Cistercian abbey on the Welsh border, but not the ironworks of the Industrial Revolution only a few miles west. In terms of literary models, too, Wordsworth and Coleridge's first initially anonymous collaboration *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798 consciously looked back to by then outmoded and disqualified forms, such as the folk ballad, and rejected explicitly, in the preface to the second edition of 1801, the artifice of Neoclassical verse in favour of a simplicity it found hard to define and even harder to achieve. In fact, Wordsworth (and to a lesser extent Coleridge) remained in the bourgeois sphere from which they came even or especially in their literary productions. Their 'simplicity' can only be understood with a bourgeois readership in mind which valued the most important tenet they upheld, one that is made explicit, for example, in 'Home at Grasmere': 'On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life, / Musing in solitude' and 'Of the individual Mind that keeps her

[183] A comprehensive study of the phenomenon is Jeffrey C. Robinson, *The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989).

own / Inviolate retirement, subject there / To Conscience only, and the law supreme / Of that Intelligence which governs all, I sing—"fit audience let me find though few!'"[184] The emphasis is now clearly on the autonomous self (in a very Protestant manner, conscience by far precedes the rather indirect and conventional reference to a higher Being). Yet it is an individual mind that still remains aware that it needs an audience, although the Milton quotation that concludes the lines imagines them as an élitist few. The bourgeois world that is shunned in biographical and poetic practice forms the addressee of this practice. Romantic detachment is not divorce or rebellion, but eccentric dissent.

The same holds true for the new vogue for largely imagined Celtic traditions. James Macpherson's internationally successful forgery *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland and Translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language* of 1760 triggered a cult of British culture's Celtic margins that was utterly fictional, since it bore no correlation to an actual political or social respect paid to the populations of Scotland, or Wales and Ireland for that matter.[185] It merely demonstrates that as soon as a culture perceives that it has become thoroughly centric, it yearns for the flexibility that the reference to eccentric margins provides.[186] This trend continued into the nineteenth century, when, for example, domesticated forms of the Scottish kilt (whose original version had been banned) became fashionable in London through the intervention of Walter Scott, or Queen Victoria undertook picturesque journeys to Scotland, keeping a kilted Scotsman as a servant, and constructing in Balmoral a mock-Gothic version of a medieval castle in Scotland.[187] Even today, Scotland and especially Ireland provide a largely fictional alternative

[184] William Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, ed. Beth Darlington, The Cornell Wordsworth (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 101.

[185] See John Dolan, 'Poetry, "Fiction" and Prose in Found Texts of the 1760s', *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture*, 28:1–2 (Spring-Summer 1995), pp. 35–50.

[186] Raymond Williams (in 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', *The New Left Review*, 1:82 (November–December 1973), p. 9) calls this the 'selective tradition' and sees it as one of the crucial mechanisms of hegemonic ideology:

Moreover, at a philosophical level, at the true level of theory and at the level of the history of various practices, there is a process which I call the *selective tradition*: that which, within the terms of an effective dominant culture, is always passed off as 'the tradition', '*the* significant past'. But always the selectivity is the point; the way in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded. Even more crucially, some of these meanings and practices are reinterpreted, diluted, or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture.

[187] Hugh Cheape, 'Researching Tartan', *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society*, 27 (1993), pp. 35–46.

to hegemonic culture not only for foreign tourists. That this is not a specifically British phenomenon can be seen in the impact of Macpherson's poems, which were officially attributed to a fictional bard called Ossian, on German writers such as Johann Wolfgang Goethe.[188] German Romanticism also knows the rambler, for instance in Eichendorff's famous novella *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts* [From the life of a good-for-nothing] from 1826.[189] It duplicated the Wordsworthian pattern by displaying a protagonist whose departure from hegemonic norms is his own choice, whose ostensible waste of time (now a valuable bourgeois commodity) makes him eccentric and not deviant, since his reintegration into normality is guaranteed from the start.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the writer and critic William Hazlitt describes his first encounter with Wordsworth in 1798, in which the latter offers a reading during a church service, as follows in *My First Acquaintance with Poets* of 1823:

> When I got there, the organ was playing the hundredth psalm, and, when it was done, Mr. Coleridge rose and gave out his text, 'And he went up into the mountains to pray, HIMSELF, ALONE.' As he gave out his text, 'his voice rose like a steam of rich distilled perfumes,' and when he came to the last two words, which he pronounced loud, deep, and distinct, it seemed to me, who was then young, as if the sounds had echoed from the bottom of the human heart, and as if that prayer might have floated in solemn silence through the universe. The idea of St. John came into mind, 'of one crying in the wilderness, who had his loins girt about, and whose food was locusts and wild honey.' (emphasis in the original)[190]

The emphasis on elevated individual isolation is here, but it is a performed isolation in front of an audience (God in the sermon, the audience during the sermon). The association of Wordsworth with John the Baptist is therefore not coincidental, since he sets up his ideal as the analogue of a well-known example of 'prehistoric' eccentricity. That it is unlikely that the Romantics would run

[188] See Howard Gaskill, "'Ossian hat in meinem Herzen den Humor verdrängt": Goethe and Ossian Reconsidered", in: *Goethe and the English-Speaking World: Essays from the Cambridge Symposium for His 250th Anniversary*, ed. Nicholas Boyle and John Guthrie (Woodbridge: Camden House, 2002), pp. 47–59. See also Kathryn Edmunds, "'der Gesang soll deinen Namen erhalten": Ossian, Werther, and Texts of/for Mourning', *Goethe Yearbook: Publications of the Goethe Society of North-America*, 8 (1996), pp. 45–65.

[189] An English translation is Joseph von Eichendorff, *Life of a Good-for-Nothing*, trans. John Gordon Nichols (London: Hesperus, 2002).

[190] William Hazlitt, *The Complete* Works, ed. Percival Presland Howe, 21 vols, (London and Toronto: Dent, 1993), vol. 17, p. 108. All further references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.

around with loincloths eating locusts is clear. What is more important is that, unlike John the Baptist, they are keen on establishing their position as normative. This is what Hazlitt unwittingly underlines when he describes a later meeting with Wordsworth in Coleridge's cottage in Nether Stowey in the same text:

> He [Wordsworth] had been to see the *Castle Spectre* by Monk Lewis, while at Bristol, and described it very well. He said 'it fitted the taste of the audience like a glove.' This *ad captandum* [device to capture the imagination, here of the audience] merit was however by no means a recommendation of it, according to the severe principles of the new school, which reject rather than court popular effect. Wordsworth, looking out of the low, latticed window, said, 'How beautiful the sun sets on that yellow bank!' I thought within myself, 'With what eyes these poets see nature!' and ever after, when I saw the sunset stream upon objects facing it, conceived I had made a discovery, or thanked Mr. Wordsworth for having made one for me! (p. 118)

The contradiction between the rejection of successful popular culture (here in the shape of a play by the famous author of the Gothic novel *The Monk*, Matthew Lewis) and the attempt to form a 'new school', which then in turn shapes the popular imagination, is evident. That Wordsworth succeeded is demonstrated by Hazlitt's admission that from this moment on he saw sunsets through the Wordsworthian lens. Anyone who has ever taught poetry at schools or universities will be well aware how dominant this Romantic model still is, one that Jerome McGann calls 'the Romantic Ideology'.[191]

Hazlitt occupies an interesting position in English Romantic thought. Located between the subjectivism of Wordsworth and Coleridge's system-building, he struggled to maintain a position of his own, initially in philosophy, later in literary criticism and journalism. His ideas on creativity are particularly important for his assessment as an eccentric within eccentric Romanticism, a tension that eventually led to his rift with Wordsworth and Coleridge.[192] In 'On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth' of 1827, Hazlitt describes the impact of nature on the perceiving self in terms that borrow as much from Shaftesbury as they are recognisably an echo of Romantic creativity à la Wordsworth and Coleridge. And yet Hazlitt's description of Romantic

[191] Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

[192] Compare Uttara Natarajan, 'Power and Capability: Hazlitt, Keats and the Discrimination of Poetic Self', *Romanticism: The Journal of Romantic Culture and Criticism*, 2:1 (1996), pp. 54–67.

artistic tendencies, written with hindsight six years after Keats's death, is far from unambiguously favourable:

> Our first and strongest impressions are taken from the mighty scene that is opened to us, and we very innocently transfer its durability as well as magnificence to ourselves. So newly found, we cannot make up our minds to parting with it yet and at least put off that consideration to an indefinite term. Like a clown at a fair, we are full of amazement and rapture, and have no thought of going home, or that it will soon be night. We know our existence only from external objects, and measure it by them. (p. 192)

'Clown' is here used in the sense of peasant or naive person, yet nonetheless the associations of immaturity and self-deception are there, as are those of ridicule, since the person who is supposed to enjoy a spectacle turns into a spectacle himself. That this is not dissimilar from the fop of Restoration Comedy becomes clear exactly when Hazlitt takes the argument to its serious conclusion, one that places art in the service of fighting fears of mortality:

> Since the future was barred to my progress, I have turned for consolation to the past, gathering up the fragments of my early recollections, and putting them into a form that might live. It is thus, when we find our personal and substantial identity vanishing from us, we strive to gain a reflected and substituted one in our thoughts: we do not like to perish wholly, and wish to bequeath our names at least to posterity. As long as we can keep alive our cherished thoughts and nearest interests in the minds of others, we do not appear to have retired altogether from the stage, and we still occupy a place in the estimation of mankind, [and] exercise a powerful influence over them, and it is only our bodies that are trampled into the dust or dispersed to air. Our darling speculations still find favour and encouragement, and we make as good a figure in the eyes of our descendants, nay, perhaps, a better than we did in our lifetime. (pp. 197–198)

The passage significantly hovers between serious artistic and philosophical generalisations, of a very Classicist kind, one might add, with no traces of the Romantic cult of early death. Lasting fame and influence are indeed classical (and not merely Classicist) aims. Yet the way of achieving them is Romantic and eccentric: gathering fragments has been shown to be a preferred mode of eccentric artistic production. The past, especially childhood, is, of course, a dominant source of Romantic imagery à la Wordsworth. Yet it also brings with it nostalgia and melancholy (the *memento mori* motif of bodies to dust is explicit). Yet there are also images that are related to the ostentation, theatricality, and superficial excess that was shown to be benchmarks of eccentricity from its 'inception' in the seventeenth century. Greatness is performed on stage; one cuts a fine figure in exactly the same way as Restoration fops.

At first glance, there is nothing foppish in Wordsworth's protagonists. Yet he, too, carves out in his thinking a position that is as wishfully detached from normality as it appears eccentric when viewed from it. Wordsworth indeed takes the by then firmly established notion of individuality together with that of enthusiasm and turns it into an idea of genius that finds its location in a sceptical position vis-à-vis his own culture. In the early poem 'Lines Written in Early Spring', the speaker is shown surrounded by birdsong in nature. Yet the 'thousand blended notes' do not add up to the harmony advocated by Shaftesbury and Pope, a harmony that thrives on dissonance and dissent, yet integrates it. Using the eccentric mode of melancholy, Wordsworth's speaker makes the paradoxical claim that he is 'In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts / Bring sad thoughts to the mind'. His vision is a negative inversion of Shaftesbury's natural common sense, and it makes him see social and political injustice, and not cultural harmony:

> To her fair works did nature link
> The human soul that through me ran;
> And much it griev'd my heart to think
> What man has made of man.[193]

Nonetheless, the lamenting self has much to gain from its scepticism towards its own culture. Its eccentric position as an onlooker strangely exempts it from the damages it suspects. How can one remain unaffected when nature's works are also available to the violated existences he alludes to? Only if there is not merely an autonomy of the subject thus described, but a privileged access to Nature and Truth. The combination adds up to the formula of the Romantic self – as an eccentric one. Here eccentricity, in contrast to Shaftesbury, is enabling to the individual self, not in the service of the community. What is a necessary postulation for Wordsworth's sceptical criticism, however, frequently becomes an aestheticisation of outsiderhood. In 'To My Sister', also from *Lyrical Ballads*, the speaker simply declares that he will break out of the demands of society: 'No joyless forms shall regulate / Our living Calendar' (p. 63). And in 'The Ruined Cottage' 'Other lot was mine' becomes the *cri de coeur* of Romanticism's eccentric subjective ideal. Yet the poem does not for a second really forget from what it distances itself. The cottage of its title is a vivid reminder of normality.

[193] William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green, The Cornell Wordsworth (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 76. All further references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.

Although it is not visible to the lyrical I directly because of its individualistic perspective, it speaks to it through a melancholy friend, the old and venerable Armytage who states: 'I see around me here / Things which you cannot see' (ln. 67–68). It speaks ultimately of death, the issue that according to Hazlitt remained ungraspable for a juvenile (and therefore a Romantic) mind.[194] Yet inside this death, life as toil and life as tragedy are contained, though not on a scale that immediately transforms itself into grandiose works of art. Margaret, the girl whose happy but ordinary existence with her husband ('an industrious man, / Sober and steady'; ln. 120–121) and tragic untimely death caused by two bad harvests, a war, her husband's invalidity and eventual desertion is recalled by Armytage, merely leaves behind 'The useless fragment of a wooden bowl' (ln. 91). The speaker calls the story a 'homely tale' (ln. 209). Yet while the narrator Armytage is obviously affected by it ('Why should a tear be in an old man's eye?' ln. 192), the lyrical I concludes the poem by mentioning that they both eventually 'attained / A rustic inn, our evening resting place'. There might be sly echoes of death in 'resting place' in the same way that the husband's possible desertion to join the army finds an echo in 'Armytage'. Yet what starts in homely normality also ends there.

Romantic ramblers might encounter desperate individuals and tragic stories, but they are generally safe from harm themselves. The very fact that they have leisure to stroll aimlessly collecting nature impressions as well as other people's stories turns them into eccentrics in the context of an age that increasingly demanded practicality and efficiency. Clocks and calendars (like the one mentioned in 'To My Sister', which also contains an allusion to 'the hour of feeling') are increasingly the new gods. The Romantic self is a luxurious waster of time, energy, and money. Yet this does not grant it outsider status, since there is a, sometimes tenuous, but constantly available, financial basis behind its acts of dissent.

In 'Home at Grasmere', which was originally planned to form part of an epic significantly entitled *The Recluse*, i.e. the equivalent of a hermit or anchorite, there is a passage towards the end of the poem that sums up this superior position of risk-free autonomy:

> On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life,
> Musing in solitude, I oft perceive
> Fair trains of imagery before me rise,
> Accompanied by feelings of delight

[194] See Kurt Fosso, 'Community and Mourning in William Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage", 1797–1798', *Studies in Philology*, 92:3 (Summer 1995), pp. 329–345.

> Pure, or with no unpleasing sadness mixed;
> And I am conscious of affecting thoughts
> And dear remembrances, whose presence soothes
> Or elevates the Mind, intend to weigh
> The good and evil of our mortal state. (p. 101)

The autonomous self has nearly managed to become monadic. It muses on man, nature, and human life, yet has detached itself into solitude. It also, not quite convincingly, disclaims any impact of this external world, since it calls its feelings pure – or at least not unpleasant. Yet the external world is there, albeit filtered through 'affecting thoughts / And dear remembrances'. Yet why, one feels compelled to ask, does this superior autonomous mind need soothing or elevating? Apparently, there is something not quite reassuring in autonomy. What it is has been described in the preceding chapters as the inevitable link of eccentric detachment with centric normality, here the normality of a life before it sought temporary detachment, the 'affecting thoughts' that are not entirely generated by the mind itself, but are introduced by others, and are therefore intertextual as quotations, translations, and revisions.

The balance between the idea of an elevated autonomous artistic individuality and the awareness of its affectedness by the reality surrounding it is brought to the point in Wordsworth's famous and frequently parodied 'Resolution and Independence', whose title already contains the dilemma.[195] It is meant to describe an exalted moment (in life and creativity), something that Wordsworth called 'spots of time' and which would later resurface in Aestheticism as Walter Pater's 'privileged moment' and then again in Modernism as James Joyce's 'epiphany' and Virginia Woolf's 'moment'.[196] Yet exaltation is only possible by running the whole gamut outlined above: separation, melancholy, affectation, etc. The poem begins with an image of a pastoral idyll in its first two stanzas. Stanza three then insists that this idyll is not generalisable, but specific to the lyrical I: 'I was a Traveller then upon the moor; / I saw the hare that rac'd about with joy'

[195] On the most famous parody by Lewis Carroll, see Simon Malpas, '"I Cried 'Come, Tell Me How You Live!' / And Thumped Him on the Head": Wordsworth, Carroll and the "Aged, Aged Man"', *Romanticism on the Net: An Electronic Journal Devoted to Romantic Studies*, 5 (February 1997) <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/ron/1997-n5-ron417/005733ar/> (accessed 17 July 2022).

[196] Compare Jonathan Bishop, 'Wordsworth and the "Spots of Time"', *English Literary History*, 26:2 (March 1959), pp. 45–65.

(ln. 15–16).[197] Individuality has to be asserted, also by recourse to separateness. We do not learn why the lyrical I travels across the moor, and the poem leaves any aim of the journey in luxurious darkness. What it does not leave out is the effect of the idyll on the self. It is an already split one, since it is simultaneously 'happy as a Boy' and plagued by 'My old remembrances', which, however, go from him 'wholly; / And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy' (ln. 18–21).

Already the fourth stanza then takes back what stanza three claimed: the split subject is still prone to extreme mood swings: 'As high as we have mounted in delight / In our dejection do we sink as low, / To me that morning did it happen so' (ln. 24–26). Of course, classical models (the fall of Icarus or that of Lucifer) play into the text here; but the movement it outlines also resembles the cave of spleen of Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, especially since at this point the reader is completely in the dark as to what serious causes might lie behind the speaker's feelings. Even a renewed recourse to the hare-image in stanza five does not help. The self now feels 'Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty' even or exactly as he is now 'Far from the world' (ln. 33–35). Once again, the eccentric detachment is not complete, and it cannot overcome either the sceptical look of the self towards the self or the sceptical look of the centre towards the eccentric, which declares him poor. As we observed in eighteenth-century examples of eccentricity and in those taking the concept from the Enlightenment into the nineteenth century via Sentimentality, there is always also a materialist aspect to it. Hence here the odd element of 'poverty' in an otherwise purely subjective and idealist row of attributes.

In fact, the depression that the speaker falls into seems to be occasioned by exactly a backlash from this apparently repressed awareness of his role inside the normal run of things. Stanza six is instructive in this respect:

> My whole life have I liv'd in pleasant thought,
> As if life's business were a summer mood;
> As if all needful things would come unsought
> To genial faith, still rich in genial good;
> But how can He [the speaker] expect that others should
> Build for him, sow for him, and at his call
> Love him, who for himself will take no heed at all. (ln. 36–42)

[197] William Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes, and other Poems 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis, The Cornell Wordsworth (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 123–129. All further references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.

A little genius apparently does not go a long way. It might be sufficient for a summery ramble, both literal and metaphorical. In the end, the necessities of economy, and that includes the economy of literary fame, have to be faced. The next stanza, which is concerned with the prototype of the Romantic hero as the artist dying young, Chatterton, contains the defiant line 'By our own spirits are we deified' (ln. 47), recalling again enthusiasm and genius, and 'But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness' (ln. 49). The ridge on which Romantic eccentrics balance is a precarious one, and on each side lurk the deviations that turn them from self-determined (and temporary) outsiders into permanent outcasts, here bankruptcy and madness.

The speaker's encounter with the leech-gatherer (which is apparently based on a real encounter Wordsworth had in 1802) is clearly an encounter with the Romantic alter-ego. '[N]ot all alive nor dead, / Nor all asleep' (ln. 71–72), he is 'extreme' not only in his age, but also in the occupation he professes to pursue. No wonder, Wordsworth's speaker perceives him 'Like one whom I had met with in a dream' (ln. 128). The encounter is that with his doppelganger, and the question the speaker addresses to the old man, 'How is it that you live, and what is it you do?' (ln. 126), is also a question to himself, one that seeks to outline the position of the eccentric Romantic artistic self in the tension between assumed elevated autonomy and dependence on the world and its norms and rules. However, the encounter is ultimately not unsettling, but rather stabilising. Once the eccentric has found a mirror in an even greater eccentric, or even his more extreme version as an outcast, his own position appears less precarious. '"God," said I, "be my help and stay secure; / I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor"' (ln. 146–147), is the poem's conclusion.

The eccentric position of the self-styled outsider, however, proves too attractive to ever be abandoned completely. In 'The World Too Much with Us' (p. 150), Wordsworth summarises its challenges as well as its attractions:

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
> Little we see in nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
> This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
> The Winds that will be howling at all hours,
> And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
> For this, for ev'rything, we are out of tune;
> It moves us not, Great God! I'd rather be
> A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
> So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
> Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;

> Have sight of Proteus coming from the sea;
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn. (ln. 1–14)

What is significant here is the eventual divorce from Nature as the origin and guarantee of selfhood and inspiration. The self has ultimately become so autonomous as to perceive its alienation from its mythical source.[198] How it perceives its isolation is also interesting. While the sea is attracted by the moon in the shape of tides (an image that recalls the orbital ones familiar from early definitions of eccentricity), the Romantic self has now left even this orbital relation and become free-floating, yet also outside any possible order and harmony. It is no coincidence that it now sees formlessness, that of the sea, its herald Triton, and that of the shape-shifting sea-god Proteus. Yet the poem retains its own life-jacket, so to speak, vis-à-vis all this oceanic formlessness: it chooses to personify it in mythological and therefore symbolic shape. Coleridge and especially the second-generation Romantics would continue this trend to recast outsiderhood and its attendant challenges in established and therefore safe symbolic protagonists.

Wordsworth's posthumously published biographical poem *The Prelude, or, Growth of a Poet's Mind* (completed in 1805, published first in 1850) summarises the concept of eccentric Romantic subjectivity while furthermore acting as another symbolic extension of it.[199] The title *Prelude* was in fact chosen by Wordsworth's widow Mary for the long poem in blank verse that during Wordsworth's lifetime was known among his friends as 'the Poem to Coleridge'. Thus, it stands either as an opening (Wordsworth intended it as a 'sort of portico' to his unfinished epic *The Recluse* –as the ornate access or marker of a fiction of eccentric isolation) or as a communication from self-declared outsider to fellow outsider. Its main theme, the elevation of the Imagination even above Reason, is in keeping with the increasing claim of autonomy of the subject, and its attendant problems outlined above. Yet we should not forget that the Imagination was from the start a by-product of the emerging modern subject, produced by the same manoeuvres that created this subject as eccentric and posited it in the productive margins of culture.

'My own voice cheered me, and, far more, the mind's / Internal echo of the imperfect sound' (Book I, ln. 55–56) describes the speaker's juvenile narcissism, but also the celebration of an

[198] Compare Edward Proffitt, "'This Pleasant Lea": Waning Vision in "The World Is Too Much with Us"', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 11 (1980), pp. 75–77.

[199] William Wordsworth, *The Fourteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Warwick Jack Burgoyne Owen, The Cornell Wordsworth (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985).

autonomous subject that rejoices not least in its new-found detachment from external rules and order.[200] Yet the same mood swings and uncertainties that were observed in 'Resolution and Independence' return in Book I and are only temporarily laid to rest when the self achieves monadic closure and self-elevation: 'The calm existence that is mine when I / Am worthy of myself! Praise to the end!' (Book I, ln. 349–350).

Nature is only an ambivalent help at best. Still in Book I it leads the speaker toward recognition (in the episode involving a boat trip that has many masturbatory connotations), yet what he recognises is the sublime greatness and inaccessibility of Truth in Nature in the shape of an oppressively overwhelming 'huge peak, black and huge' (book I, ln. 378). The experience confirms the speaker in his splendid isolation: 'homeward I went / In solitude, such intercourse was mine' (Book I, ln. 421–422). One should note, though, that in contrast to an actual outcast, Wordsworth's speaker continues to have a home to return to.

In Book II, which is concerned with the self during its school days, the confrontation is with culture in the shape of established learning. Once again, the self perceives itself as a dissident: 'But who shall parcel out / His intellect, by geometric rules, / Split like a province into round and square?' (Book II, ln. 203–205). This leads to a complete questioning of all limits: 'we multiply distinctions, then / Deem that our puny boundaries are things / That we perceive, and not that we have made' (Book II, ln. 217–219). What emerges early on in consequence is a vision of a difficult eccentric life: 'Yet is a path / More difficult before me, and I fear / That, in its broken windings we shall need / The chamois' sinews, and the eagle's wing' (Book II, ln. 272–275). In contrast to the ramblings seen so far, which always led back to a safe abode, here Wordsworth's speaker outlines that the quest might be an endless one: 'feeling still / That, whatsoever point they gain, they yet / Have something to pursue' (Book II, ln. 320–322). Read on a psychological level, this points towards lacking fulfilment, perhaps even damage (of an Oedipal kind or its attendant repressions and sublimations).[201] Viewed on a cultural scale through the lens of eccentricity, it is the typical movement of readjustment vis-à-vis whatever is perceived as centric. Since this can ultimately even subsume eccentric positions (as we saw in Hazlitt's anecdote of Wordsworth as part of a school, and as we can glimpse in the odd shift to the plural 'we' in the quotation

200 Compare Stuart Allen, 'Wordsworth's Ear and the Politics of Aesthetic Autonomy', *Romanticism: The Journal of Romantic Culture and Criticism*, 9:1 (2003), pp. 37–54.

201 Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr., 'Oedipus in the Stolen Boat: Psychoanalysis and Subjectivity in *The Prelude*', *Studies in Philology*, 86:1 (Winter 1889), pp. 96–115.

above), there is no safe position in eccentricity. There are only ever transitions. No wonder that the eccentric self can never fully accept the parcelling out of its intellect, that it will resist having its marginality turned into a safe haven (safe for whom?) or into a zoo.

That the otherwise so splendidly isolated self can dare to envisage a 'we' at times is due to the common way in which eccentricity reproduces itself: through intertextuality. In Book V, we find the speaker in an odd location, the preferred theatrical space of hermits and early modern melancholics, a cave, even one by the sea-side, thereby exposed to the formless challenge of the sublime. Yet he is not merely melancholic ('listlessly' is how his actions are described; book V, ln. 63). He is reading Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, one of the master-texts of eccentricity.[202] Falling asleep over the picaresque tale, he then experiences a dream that is a further intertextual manifestation, this time based on a dream by the French philosopher Descartes. It features a prophetic Arab and two symbolic objects, a stone and a shell. The former represents the established physical laws governing the objective world as laid out by Euclid. The second, which the Arab declares to be 'of more worth' (Book V, ln. 89), contains, in the sea-sounds associated with shells, a prophecy of the destruction of mankind by a deluge.

Wordsworth's speaker is deeply impressed by this exposure to the two extremes of existence, absolute knowledge through an absolute reduction to empirical truth, and absolute uncertainty due to knowledge of the immaterial, the future. Yet the attraction lies in gaining at least a temporary insight into both of them, not in opting for one or the other. Thus, it is no coincidence that the speaker in his dream wishes to accompany the Arab on his quest. After waking up he indeed claims to 'have given / A substance' (Book V, ln. 143–144) to him in the first place, making him a personal emblem of the wish exactly to attain superiority by remaining unattached either to empiricism and to idealism, i.e. an eccentric. This is what he learns from books, he claims in the section that concludes the episode:

> Nor have I pitied him [the Arab]; but rather felt
> Reverence was due to a Being thus employed;
> And thought that, in the blind and awful lair
> Of such a madness, reason did lie couched.
> Enow there are on earth to take in charge
> Their Wives, their Children, and their virgin Loves,

[202] Glenn W. Most, 'Wordsworth's "Dream of the Arab" and Cervantes', *English Language Notes*, 22:3 (March 1985), pp. 52–58.

> Or whatsoever else the heart holds dear;
> Enow to stir for these;yea, will I say,
> Contemplating in soberness the approach
> Of an event so dire, by signs, in earth
> Or heaven, made manifest, that I could share
> That maniac's fond anxiety, and go
> Upon like errand. Oftentimes, at least,
> Me hath such strong entrancement overcome,
> When I have held a volume in my hand,
> Poor earthly casket of immortal verse,
> Shakespeare, or Milton, Labourers divine! (Book V, ln. 151–167)

The lines contain not only a reason that is perhaps not asleep, but rests on the melancholic's couch with a migraine. They also contain the enthusiasm so essential for linking wit and genius, though here precariously close to madness in the 'maniac's fond anxiety'. They furthermore feature the ambivalence encountered in Hazlitt as a reminder that the new Romantic definition of art contains a simultaneous awareness of its entanglement in materiality (the 'poor earthly casket') and claim to divinity and immortality. The result is a proper witches' brew leading to 'strong entrancement', an effect of books already mentioned in Burton's *Anatomy* and now due to become the benchmark of literary greatness. Great literature transports you from your safe position in normality into the realm of genius or madness, yet only for a time, and without ultimately challenging the material conditions upon which text and one's status as reader depend. Even divine Shakespeare and Milton are but 'labourers'. The conclusion of Book V reiterates the intertextual entanglement characteristic of eccentric existence by outlining how tales, romances, legends, and adventures 'spread like day' (an interesting counter-argument to Enlightenment arguments that accused fiction of obfuscating reason) and 'will live till man shall be no more' (Book VI, ln. 507). Only in this entanglement is existence worthwhile for an eccentric, no matter if normality views it condescendingly:

> The time of trial, ere we learn to live
> In reconcilement with our stinted powers,
> To endure this state of meagre vassalage;
> Unwilling to forego, confess, submit,
> Uneasy and unsettled; yoke-fellows
> To custom, mettlesome, and not yet tamed
> And humbled down,Oh! then we feel, we feel,
> We know where we have friends.Ye dreamers, then,

> Forgers of daring Tales! we bless you then,
> Impostors, drivellers, dotards, as the Ape
> Philosophy will call you: *then* we feel
> With what, and how great might ye are in league,
> Who make our wish, our power, our thought a deed,
> An empire, a possession; and ye whom time
> And seasons serve; all faculties; – to whom
> Earth crouches, the elements are potter's clay,
> Space like a heaven filled up with Northern lights,
> Here, no where, there, and every where at once. (Book V, ln. 516–533)

Here we find in a nutshell what the start of the present chapter claimed: Romanticism reverses the usual hierarchy of centre and margin and turns eccentricity into the norm. A clear indication of this is that it is now philosophy which is downgraded with the derogatory label 'ape' – hitherto reserved for fops. Yet like all inversions of hierarchies, what Wordsworth's speaker's dream outlines is but the old order in new clothes: empires and possessions are exactly what the Enlightenment and its attendant developments of Imperialism and commercial capitalism held dear (Book VII outlines its consequences in its description of London). Now these are the province of the dreamers and inventors of fiction, since no longer the empiricist attachment to the elements and their use counts, but the newly dominant power of an unbridled Imagination. That this new power finds itself in a utopian nowhere due to its wish to be at the same time eccentric and centric is made clear in the impressive, but also highly transient image of the northern lights.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge has already been called a system-creator in contrast to Wordsworth's subjectivist visionary. He was also, at least in his youth, a more pragmatic mind, which led to his joint plan with the poet Robert Southey to found a communist settlement on the banks of the Susquehanna river in Pennsylvania. This 'Pantisocracy' was meant to be based jointly on agriculture and literature. The idealistic plan failed, though, and all that remained was Coleridge's unhappy marriage to Sara Fricker, who had been part of the project.[203] This was part of a series of failures which characterised his life. Yet he cannot be overestimated as an influence and indeed a model for Wordsworth, while his own poetic creations (large parts of *Lyrical Ballads* among them) show a philosophical zeal that by far outstrips Wordsworth. Especially Coleridge's continuing fascination with evil is of interest to a study of eccentricity, since it struggles to define

[203] See Virginia M. Swartz, 'Xanadu on the Susquehanna-Almost: The Pantisocracy of Coleridge and Southey', *Pennsylvania English*, 12:2 (Spring 1986), pp. 19–29.

outsiderhood vis-à-vis normative culture and thereby provides an alternative vision of Romantic genius.

The most famous of these dark characters is the Mariner of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, first published as part of *Lyrical Ballads*, then in a revised edition with margin glosses in 1816. The text contains multiple eccentricities and not merely an eccentric protagonist. In the shape of a ballad with wilfully archaic language (and equally anachronistic glosses in the revised edition), it introduces an unknown ancient Mariner at a wedding feast, i.e. into the emblem of successful cultural normality it makes intrude a prototypical peripatetic outsider. This outsider tells a wedding-guest, whom he picks out of a group of 'three Gallants', an even more eccentric tale of his ship blown from the equator close to the South Pole,[204] then back to the tropical zone of the Pacific Ocean. Its course is an undirected meandering between established marks of geographic orientation. During this enforced detour the crucial event of the journey takes place, and it is once again an eccentric one: the Mariner kills an albatross that has become the mascot of the crew. The consequences of the unmotivated act are equally eccentric. Incessant heat leads to lack of water, so that the men start to see monsters in the sea and assume that they are cursed. Their idea of a remedy consists of turning the Mariner into their scapegoat, i.e. of creating an outsider inside their own abject and cursed position. In order to express this symbolically, they hang the dead albatross around his neck. The Mariner himself alludes to this as a mockery of the Christian cross, a travesty that is extended when a ghost ship approaches that harbours two symbolic figures: Death and Life-in-Death, the latter personified in the form of another traditional outsider, the harlot. Instead of the choice between death and eternal life that good Christians have, the Mariner has no choice between death and eternal life-in-death, since the two gamble over his person and Life-in-Death wins. His crew then die one by one (that he is to be held responsible is indicated by the fact that 'every soul, it passed me by, / Like the whizz of my cross-bow'; ln. 222–223),[205] but he cannot. Neither can he forget his guilt, since the dead men remain with him without decaying, nor can he atone for his sins by praying. He remains stuck in the most existential outsiderdom, outside society, outside the normal cycle of

[204] As Gerald Siegmund pointed out to me, the South Pole, in contrast to the North Pole, does not represent an actual place, but rather a geometrical abstraction. The Mariner's involuntary journey towards it might therefore in itself be an echo of eccentricity's (re-)positionings vis-à-vis an empty fictional centre.

[205] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works*, ed. James C. C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), Vol. 16, pp. 365–426. All further references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.

life and death, and outside the religious realms of salvation or damnation, since he is neither in heaven nor hell nor indeed purgatory.[206]

The Mariner only breaks the spell when the beauty of Nature makes him bless it spontaneously.[207] In the same way as in Wordsworth, Nature acts as an instinctive guide. And yet it remains an unusual nature, very unlike the mountains, lakes, and sea in Wordsworth. It is watersnakes that impress him, and they are turned beautiful, but also otherworldly in 'the elfish light' (ln. 275) of the moon. His crew return to life again, yet only through being possessed by benevolent heavenly spirits. Yet the evil spirit who felt offended by the killing of the bird is still present and calls on other evil spirits to support his revenge. This continues until the ship reaches the Mariner's home. There, the good spirits materialise and leave the dead bodies of the crew, and – more importantly – the Mariner can hope for redemption through the figure of another traditional eccentric, a hermit.

For no clear reason he accompanies the Pilot and the Pilot's boy in their boat to the ship. Indeed, the hermit relieves him of his sins, yet not of his duty to continue wandering. Now, as a reformed eccentric who has gone the whole way from eccentric to outcast back to outsider, he spreads his wisdom, which is one of universal love and piety, by transmitting his story. Intertextually, his eccentricity also reaches the wedding-guest who listens to it. It has been pointed out that the wedding represents the centric norm, indeed everything the Mariner does not: it symbolises community, friendship and love, and the natural cycle of life with procreation and death. Yet it already contains its potential eccentrics, and it is no coincidence that the Mariner picks his listener carefully. Indeed, after having listened to the Mariner's tale, he is turned into a melancholic eccentric himself:[208]

> He went like one that hath been stunned,
> And is of sense forlorn:
> A sadder and a wiser man,
> He rose the morrow morn. (ln. 622–625)

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[206] Compare David S. Miall, 'Guilt and Death: The Predicament of *The Ancient Mariner*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 24:4 (Autumn 1984), pp. 633–653.

[207] See Rodger Wilson, 'Alienation and Redemption: The Sufferings of the Selfhood in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*', *Publications of the Mississippi Philological Association* (1988), pp. 182–188.

[208] That this might apply to the poem's reader, too, is argued in Scott Hess, 'The Wedding Guest as Reader: The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere as a Dramatization of Print Circulation and the Construction of the Authorial Self', *Nineteenth Century Studies*, 15 (2001), pp. 19–36.

Negative eccentricity is not only visible in Coleridge's protagonists, but also in his forms and modes of composition. His famous poem 'Kubla Khan' is not merely a fragment in the tradition of eccentric texts as fragments and bricolages. It is a doubly eccentric text in that it is subtitled 'Or, a Vision in a Dream. A Fragment' (pp. 509–514). It is moreover prefaced by an explanatory note that by far exceeds the 54-line poem in length. Like most eccentric explanations, it explains little, at least about the poem. Instead, it rambles on the background of its publication (undertaken at Byron's request) and of its composition (during an opium-induced slumber, after having read a section on Xanadu and Kubla Khan's palace there in Samuel Purchas' *Purchas His Pilgrimage* of 1613). The poem then confronts the reader with an assortment of seemingly disconnected images, of the palace, but also an underground river, its caves, and a sunless sea, then once again fertile grounds, walls, towers, gardens, and forests. Culture and nature, light and darkness, beauty and potential terror are thereby juxtaposed. It is no coincidence that the poem contains images of a chasm (ln. 12; it even calls it 'deep romantic'; and ln. 17), 'fragments' (ln. 21), 'tumult' (ln. 29 and 30), even 'war' (ln. 30). It is based on contradictions, and even the supposed harmony of its final image, that of an Abyssinian maid playing a dulcimer and singing of the paradisal Mount Abora, cannot restore lasting harmony. Like the northern lights in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, 'Kubla Khan''s vision of 'Paradise' (ln. 54) is that of an imagined 'dome in air, / That sunny dome! those caves of ice!' (ln. 46–47). The products of the Imagination are now clearly contradictory and indeed self-destructive, and it is no coincidence that 'all who heard should see them there, / And all should cry, Beware! Beware!' (ln. 48–49). Normality clearly recognises the dangers inherent in an eccentric Imagination.[209]

These dangers are often embodied in women in Coleridge. Women, it has been repeatedly shown in the present study, occupy a precarious position vis-à-vis eccentricity: commonly associated with normality, and often denied the status of creators or indeed geniuses, they nonetheless form the dark realm of patriarchal projections. Real women also frequently rebel against patriarchal gender roles, not least by employing strategies that are regarded as eccentric. 'Kubla Khan' contains a 'woman wailing for her demon-lover' (ln. 16) among its incongruous images. *Christabel*, another unfinished poem, not only introduced a new poetic form, rhymed four-stress lines with varying syllables (pp. 477–504). It also features an explicit female embodiment of evil in

[209] That Coleridge's poem thereby responds to Enlightenment philosophy, such as that of association, is argued in Kathleen Wheeler, '"Kubla Khan" and Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theories', in: *Coleridge, Keats and Shelley*, ed. Peter J. Kitson (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996), pp. 25–44.

the enchantress Geraldine. She works her way into the trust of Sir Leoline's daughter Christabel by claiming to be a damsel in distress. What then follows is a vision of a seduction, as sexual as it is ostensibly magical. The end of part one of the poem once again sees Christabel praying, yet also reminiscing over the events of the night. As in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* an outsider turns another person into an eccentric. Once again, the outsider's tools are intertextual, here the conventions of the romance genre. Yet equally important is that outsiders pick potential eccentrics carefully.

Already in the opening of the poem's first part, Christabel is seen outside at night. The subsequent explanation, that she was troubled by dreams of her beloved knight and went into the forest to pray for him, is not really convincing, since there are safer and more orthodox places for prayer. The end of part one returns to her 'praying at the old oak tree' (ln. 281), more like a female druid than a Christian. Indeed she is not praying but dreaming – or experiencing visions which are more real than reality, 'Dreaming that alone, which is –' (ln. 295), even though it is linked with 'Sorrow and Shame' (ln. 296) and will change her: 'Can this be She, / The lady, who knelt at the old Oak Tree?' (ln. 296–297). Not surprisingly, the end of part one then turns her into another established emblem of eccentricity, when it makes her appear 'Like a youthful Hermitess'. (ln. 320). Like a proper Romantic eccentric, 'she doth smile, and she doth weep' (ln. 319).

The poem's unfinished second part, in which Christabel is eventually capable of asking her father to send Geraldine away, is structured by repeated visions of the enchantress as a malevolent snake (Christabel has them twice, and even Sir Leoline's Bard Bracy reports a dream in which he sees Christabel as a dove strangled by a snake). Yet it is Christabel who displays snake-like attributes by drawing 'in her Breath with a hissing Sound' (ln. 459) and later 'Shudder'd aloud with a hissing Sound' (ln. 591). She is not only metaphorically turned into an eccentric outsider by adopting the symptoms of evil. Her final request to refuse Geraldine hospitality (who has declared herself the daughter of Sir Leoline's former friend, a break from which Christabel's father has never quite recovered), she literally becomes one in her own house by violating the rules of hospitality and dishonouring her father.[210] Eccentricity once again proves contagious. It even spreads to the child of the conclusion of the second part, often associated with Hartley Coleridge, who is shown as an 'elf' (ln. 656). He, too, is a charmer, though less dangerous than

[210] Compare Lou Thompson, 'Liminality, Ritual, Communitas, and Patriarchy in *Christabel*', *Coleridge Bulletin*, 16 (Winter 2000), pp. 109–114.

Geraldine. His charms consist once again in what characterises eccentricity: mixing excessive emotions and contradictory words in fragmented forms, in a 'broken charm' (ln. 668).

That this eccentric mode of literary and cultural production is considered the benchmark of a 'true' life – in opposition to a reality of convention that is mere empiricist delusion, once again finds expression in 'Dejection: An Ode'. It shows the Imagination of the true, i.e. Romantic, genius, project itself into the orbit of the globe, into an orbital eccentric position. However, rather than remaining marginal, it thereby manages to envelop the entire world:

> Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth,
> A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
> Enveloping the Earth – (ln. 53–55)[211]

That Coleridge conceptualised genius in the geometrical terms that are familiar to us as benchmarks of eccentricity can be seen in his essay 'Theory of Life'. There, he writes:

> In Man the centripetal and individualizing tendency of all Nature is itself concentrated and individualized – he is a revelation of Nature! Henceforward he is referred to himself, delivered up to his own charge; and he who stands the most on himself, and stands the firmest, is the truest, because the most individual, Man. In social and political life this acme is interdependence; in moral life it is independence; in intellectual life it is genius.[212]

The passage is intended to proclaim human autonomy. Yet the vocabulary employed betrays the effort and highlights the tensional character of self and reality – with man in some way becoming the microcosmic equivalent of a macrocosm, Nature, that pulls everything towards its (empty?) centre.[213] How such an autonomy can coexist with a notion of interdependence, which is essential for community, culture, and politics, is questionable. How it can go together with independence is difficult to imagine. How genius can subscribe to all of it is even harder to envisage. What we are confronted with is the attempt to link a now fully-fledged notion of individuality and its realms of intellectual and aesthetic expression with a continuing belief in

[211] A comprehensive study taking this as its approach is Beverly Fields, *Reality's Dark Dream: Dejection in Coleridge* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1967).
[212] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Theory of Life (Hints Towards a More Comprehensive Theory of Life)', *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Stauffer (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 601.
[213] See Nicholas Halmi, 'Mind as Microcosm', *European Romantic Review*, 12:1 (Winter 2000), pp. 43–52.

society and culture. The Romantic genius also wants to be an enlightened thinker, and at the same time a useful member of society. The contradictions between these desired positions turn him into an eccentric.

With *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge takes up the challenge of linking fictional ideals and literary biography set by Boswell and turns it, very much like Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, though in prose, into a particularly Romantic endeavour. Published in 1817, the project was originally, again like *The Prelude*, meant to act as an introduction to another text, *Sibylline Leaves*, which combined the Romantic visionariness with the fragmentation characteristic of eccentric projects. In the end *Biographia Literaria* expanded (like *The Prelude*, but also Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*) into two volumes, which now dealt with biographical material as much as with contemporary philosophy. Especially the associationist tradition that runs from Aristotle to Hartley is crucial here, since it offers room both for Romantic notions of genius and Imagination as well as retaining the open, incomplete form so typical of eccentric writings.[214] Indeed Coleridge's project is not only incomplete; it also jumps between points and lets important debates, such as the challenge to associationism by Kant and the German Romantic thinkers, peter out *in medias res*. Digressions, such as pieces of advice to budding writers, are frequent in it, as are pragmatic asides on the difficulties of publishing and editing. Nonetheless, again like Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, the obliqueness and chaos of Coleridge's project led to a highly influential text, one that still colours debates in cultural theory and one that has had a lasting influence on the way in which students of literature view the creative process.

These ideas are developed in the second volume with an outline of the many tensions, political, but also artistic, in the transition from a revolutionary era (with France as the main, though highly ambivalent model) to a post-revolutionary one. It is then not followed, but abruptly superseded by an in itself eccentric jump into literary criticism, more precisely a criticism of Wordsworth, but also essays on Shakespeare or metre. This jump is eccentric, but not mad and meaningless. It represents a move that is characteristic of Romanticism and frequently requires eccentricity for its success: the shift from irreconcilable tensions in the outside world to their seeming resolution in the mind, the creative process, and the works of the artist. Eccentricity here again acts as a safety valve as well as an enabling device that permits art to be continued

[214] See Jerome Christensen, 'Philosophy/Literature: The Associationist Precedent for Coleridge's Late Poems', in: *Philosophical Approaches to Literature: New Essays on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Texts*, ed. William E. Cain (Lewisburg and London: Bucknell University Press, 1984), pp. 27–50.

even when external circumstances have made it problematic or impossible, and it enables the exalted individual, the Romantic artist, to retain a position of supposed autonomy.

When the Romantics transform the eccentric via the related concept of the genius from the marginal into the norm of cultural production, it is George Gordon, Lord Byron who not only develops this idea into an individualistic programme in his writings, but also applies it to his own person, which thereby becomes a persona, that of the Byronic hero – in an extension that is also a partial reversion of the now established literary biography into a biography in literature. The characteristics of the Byronic hero are outlined in Byron's poem *Lara* of 1814:

> 17
> In him inexplicably mix'd appeared
> Much to be loved and hated, sought and feared;
> […]
>
> 18
> There was in him a vital scorn of all:
> As if the worst had fall'n which could befall,
> He stood a stranger in this breathing world,
> An erring spirit from another hurled;[215]

He reiterates the same model in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* of 1818:

> Canto III, 43
>
> This makes the madmen who have made men mad
> By their contagion; Conquerors and Kings,
> Founders of sects and systems, to whom add
> Sophists, Bards, Statesmen, all unquiet things
> Which stir too strongly the soul's secret springs,
> And are themselves the fools to those they fool;[216]

[215] George Gordon Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–1991), vol. 3.
[216] Byron, *Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 2.

The Byronic hero is no mere extreme case of Wordsworth and Coleridge's outsider, but simultaneously deeply immersed in the dominant culture of his days. Byron in fact only uses the first-generation Romantic outsider as one of the sources of his (self-)construction. Others are the dandy, who had developed in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth century into a model for fashionable men and was no longer simply ridiculed, but much admired and copied.[217] Emerging victoriously from the luxury debates which had vilified overly fashionable men until the mid-eighteenth century, he now served as an ideal to the social and cultural élite. This shift goes hand in hand with a change of control. While all eccentric models of creation remain indebted to the notion of copying, no matter how strongly they emphasise originality, there is a telling difference in the location of social ideals between the seventeenth-century fop and the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dandy. While the fop seemed driven by fashion that he usually picked up outside his own cultural sphere (in Paris, for instance), the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dandy took the driver's seat. In much the same way as the Romantic genius shifted the locus of his Imagination from external Nature into his own 'soul', the dandy became his own blueprint. As in the case of the most famous of all dandies, Beau Brummel, this frequently led to sheer fashion tyranny.

One can partly interpret this shift as a further assertion of middle-class values: while the fop aspired to aristocratic models, often imported from the absolutist French court, the dandy imposed rarefied bourgeois norms, such as simplicity, even on the old aristocracy. The famous anecdote of Byron torturing himself for an entire night in order to get his cravat as creaseless as Beau Brummell's is an illustration of this.[218] The idea that real wealth does not make a spectacle of itself has remained with us to the present day as a reminder how luxury can enter an allegiance with originally Protestant values of self-denial.

The eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century dandy also exemplifies how cultural values can happily co-exist with economic contradictions: most dandies of the period were heavily in debt. Here they followed upper-class patterns to which their middle-class backgrounds did

[217] Compare Leonard S. Goldberg, 'Center and Circumference in Byron's *Lara*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 26:4 (Autumn 1986), pp. 655–673. See also Wim Tigges, 'A Glorious Thing: The Byronic Hero as Pirate Chief', in: *Configuring Romanticism: Essays Offered to C. C. Barfoot*, ed. Theo D'Haen, Peter Liebregts and Wim Tigges (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2003), pp. 153–172.

[218] Hans J. Schickedanz, *Der Dandy: Texte und Bilder aus dem 19. Jahrhundert* (Dortmund: Harenberg, 1980), p. 12.

not entitle them (Brummel's grandfather, for example, had been a valet[219]). Yet through their ostensible display of luxury coupled with their popularity, they acted as advertising boards for the innumerable dress-, hat-, glove-makers and jewellers that they frequented, in the same way as today's female Hollywood stars are covered in expensive dresses and jewellery on Oscar nights by designers wishing to cash in on their celebrity status. What Rachel Bowlby argues in connection with Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, that advertising merges with identity in life-style,[220] already has its origins at least a century, if not two earlier.

In addition to the dandy, the morally shocking but universally admired rake of Restoration culture formed a further ingredient in the creation of the Byronic hero. A privileged bender of rules, he acts as a foil that 'normal' men envy, yet rarely dare to emulate, since the consequences would be too severe. Related to the rake is another by then established eccentric figure, the Gothic villain. Gothic romances have a history that relates them closely to the various revisions of Enlightenment ideals encountered in the course of the present study. They partake in sentimental discourses, but also in Romantic notions of outsiderhood. In figures as ground-breaking as the arch-villain Montoni of Ann Radcliffe's seminal Gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* of 1794, they combine moral abjectness with an appeal that is clearly erotic. It has been shown how discourses of eccentricity are linked with eroticism from their inception. Yet this link is traditionally realised in a negative way, so to speak: the eccentric is suspected of harbouring deviant desires, as in the hints towards sodomy in Carey's anti-fop poem. However, this blatant projection is double-edged. The eccentric also embodies the possibility of exciting transgression. In the case of Montoni, he is (wrongly) suspected of having murdered a woman, (wrongly) associated with necrophiliac rites, and (wrongly) held to be capable of rape. It is not difficult to see how these features resurface in the chequered reputation of Lord Byron. A telling and common view of his career is that of Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling, who write in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*:

> Celebrated as the highest of High Romantics (the only one to attain a European reputation, in part because he does not lose too much in translation, but primarily because of his life), he despised Romanticism, and insisted that English poetry all but died with the death of Pope. A virtual synonym for the greatest of lovers, he was passive towards women, sodomistic, sado-masochistic, fundamentally homosexual, and early disgusted with all sexual experience anyway.

[219] Magnus Magnusson, ed., *Chamber's Biographical Dictionary* (London: Chambers, 1990), p. 219.
[220] Rachel Bowlby, 'Promoting Dorian Gray', *Shopping with Freud* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 7–25.

> Outcast for his incest with his half-sister, he nevertheless seems to have gotten beyond narcissistic self-regard only in relation to her, yet she was in no way remarkable. A radical by the English standards of his day, and an active revolutionary in Italy, he was wholly sceptical as to the benefits of either reform or revolution. Acclaimed to this day as the martyr-hero of the Greek Revolution against the Turks, he despised the modern Greeks even when he financed, trained, and led them in rebellion. Apparently emancipated in religion, he was shocked by his closest friend Shelley's polemic toward Catholicism. A superb athlete and champion swimmer, he had to compel his reluctant, sluggish body to keep up with his restless spirit. To sum up: he was the most antithetical of men, and one of the most self-divided of poets.[221]

Bloom and Trilling's assessment is of interest exactly because it now appears embarrassingly dated in many of its blatant value-judgements, especially those regarding Byron's sexual proclivities. It represents a twentieth-century echo of the ambivalent cult of Byron, and shows the tension between eccentric self-fashioning and hegemonic attempts to locate eccentricity, including the urge to exclude it as deviant. Its choice of terms is instructive. To start with, there is the attribution of a position by the acclaim of the onlookers. Yet this position remains ambivalent, since apparently Byron neither wanted to be a Romantic, nor believed that English poetry was still alive in his day. All his poetic production thereby becomes a melancholy one in the terms outlined by Freud as keeping that alive which one knows is irretrievably lost, while making doubly sure it is dead in the process. Even the 'European reputation' fits the eccentric pattern of departure from the homely norm (simple solid Englishness, perhaps à la Wordsworth). The word 'outcast' needs no comment, although the attributed features of his sexuality indeed add up to the most contradictory of brews. In terms of politics, 'sceptical' relates him to the 'prehistoric' philosophers refusing to take a stand in any of the established positions. His supposed dislike of the modern Greeks even while being their champion is further reminiscent of the ambivalent position of hermits, desert saints and anchorites as searching for solitude while acting as teachers. 'Apparently emancipated' with regard to religion reiterates the tension between eccentric dissent and centric norm: neither can exist without the other; while, finally, the postulated tension between spirit and body once again brings into the light the profoundly theatrical nature of eccentricity as caught between the interior melodrama of melancholy and the external comedy of carnival.

[221] Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling, eds, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, The Oxford Anthology of English Literature (New York, London and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 285.

It is also no coincidence that Byron's appearance on the stage of English literature happened through a resort to negative criticism. 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers' of 1809 was originally intended as an attack on Scott, Southey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, by then the successful and firmly established Romantic voices. As such it was already an odd intervention by an aspiring young writer. When, however, Byron's volume of poetry *Hours of Idleness* was savaged in *The Edinburgh Review* in January 1808, Byron added attacks on reviewers. A double eccentricity therefore accompanies his first well-known piece of poetry: it is poetry on others' poetry and prose, a hybrid of criticism and poetry, and it reverses the still established hierarchy according to which criticism responds to poetry, not the other way round. The arrogance of the gesture is as evident as is its desperate daring: if Byron's poem denounces especially Southey's, but also Scott's epics as inferior to Camões, Milton, and Tasso, he of course raises expectations concerning epics of his own to come. Byron founds his reputation on a challenge and a gamble, on an agonal dissent from the by then established norm, not on a solid production of his own.

The already quoted poem 'Lara' contains several images relating directly to eccentricity. The following section describes its protagonist's attempts to escape normality and its norms and rules. It culminates in what appears like a more extreme variation of the image of light enveloping the earth in Coleridge's 'Dejection':

> Too high for common selfishness, he could
> At times resign his own for others' good;
> But not in pity, not because he ought,
> But in some strange perversity of thought,
> That swayed him onward with a secret pride
> To do what few or none would do beside;
> And this same impulse would, in tempting time,
> Mislead his spirit equally to crime;
> So much he soared beyond, or sunk beneath,
> The men with whom he felt condemned to breathe,
> And longed by good or ill to separate
> Himself from all who shared his mortal state;
> His mind abhorring this had fixed her throne
> Far from the world, in regions of her own;
> Thus coldly passing all that passed below,
> His blood in temperate seeming now would flow: (ln. 337–352)

Lara indeed takes eccentricity all the way towards deviance, when the text alludes to perversity and crime. Yet his impulse is born from the same source that Hazlitt postulates for all Romantic

poetic creation: the refusal to accept mortality. Here it merges with the refusal to be a man among other human beings and clearly insists on its own rules. The outcome, however, is suspiciously close to the integrative function of eccentricity as observed in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: it leads to moderation. The temperate blood indeed harks back to the old humour theories and here seems to indicate that it is mainly excessive sanguineness, i.e. passion, that is to blame. However, 'Lara' cautions the reader against viewing this moderation as real by adding 'seeming' to its claim. No matter whether Lara succeeds in his self-imposed mission; the poem claims that 'He had (if 'twere not Nature's boon) an art / Of fixing memory on another heart' (ln. 363–364). In other words: he stays in others' memories – in the same way that eccentricity has maintained its grasp on the cultural imagination, sometimes to the extent of appearing – as in Coleridge's 'Christabel' or Byron's verses – contagious.

In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the reader finds an odd internal dialogue of the speaker with himself in Canto III reiterating once again the tension between Romantic self-centredness (which ultimately leads via the emphasis on the powers of the Imagination to a paradoxical creation *sui generis*, out of itself). This dialogue itself occupies the eccentric position of an aside, a digression typical of eccentric manifestations:

> 6
> 'Tis to create, and in creating live
> A being more intense, that we endow
> With form our fancy, gaining as we give
> The life we image, even as I do now.
> What am I? Nothing; but not so art thou,
> Soul of my thought! with whom I traverse earth,
> Invisible but gazing, as I glow
> Mix'd with thy spirit, blended with thy birth,
> And feeling still with thee in my crush'd feeling's dearth.
>
> 7
> Yet must I think less wildly—I *have* thought
> Too long and darkly, till my brain became,
> In its own eddy boiling and o'erwrought,
> A whirling gulf of phantasy and flame:
> And thus, untaught in youth my heart to tame,
> My springs of life were poison'd. 'Tis too late!
> Yet am I chang'd; though still enough the same
> In strength to bear what time can not abate,
> And feed on bitter fruits without accusing Fate. (canto iii, ln. 46–63)

The stanzas outline not only a hubristic claim to self-creation and the creation of the self's universe through his Imagination.[222] They also downgrade this self in contrast to this Imagination and make it the unhappy fellow-traveller accompanying his superior genius. That he is 'Invisible but gazing' is reminiscent of the irritating gaze of traditional eccentrics, who were generally visible, even though what they possibly saw remained obscure. This paradox is then acted out theatrically in the staged self-accusation of stanza seven. It once again refers to melancholy, but leads this to passion, a passion that evokes the destructive creativity of a volcano.

Childe Harold, the epic's protagonist, is in only a marginally better position, having 'mix'd / Again in fancied safety with his kind' (canto iii, ln. 82–83). In fact, he, too, is soon 'once more within the vortex, roll'd / On with the giddy circle, chasing Time' (canto iii, ln. 97–98). The vortex represents the contested margins of normality which Harold traverses, always in danger of being ejected from it completely, but gaining his life's energy and motivation from this undirected ('giddy') though always relational ('circle') attitude towards the centric norm. This eccentricity however, ultimately makes him unfit for human society:

> 12
> But soon he knew himself the most unfit
> Of men to herd with Man; with who he held
> Little in common; untaught to submit
> His thoughts to others, though his soul was quell'd
> In youth by his own thoughts; still uncompell'd,
> He would not yield dominion of his mind
> To spirits against whom his own rebell'd;
> Proud though in desolation; which could find
> A life within itself, to breathe without mankind.

Absolute individualism leads to absolute arrogance and can ultimately only be realised in self-centred isolation. 'Self-exiled' is the formula that stanza xvii in Canto III (ln. 136) finds for it.[223]

[222] Compare Vincent Newey, 'Authoring the Self: *Childe Harold* III and IV, in: *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, ed. Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), pp. 148–190. See also Sheila Emerson, 'Byron's "one word": The Language of Self-Expression in *Childe Harold* III', *Studies in Romanticism*, 20:3 (Autumn 1981), pp. 363–382. And Robert Lance Snyder, 'Byron's Ontology of the Creating Self in *Childe Harold* 3', *Bucknell Review*, 25:2 (1980), pp. 19–39.

[223] Its basis in class is outlined in J. Michael Robertson, 'Aristocratic Individualism in Byron's *Don Juan*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 17 (1977), pp. 639–655.

Yet, despite the rejection of other human beings as cattle, there are mournful associations in these lines as well. They talk of failed education and discipline. By doing so, however, they also indicate that the controlled normality of society is by no means its natural state, but the result of structures and institutions, that which Foucault calls *dispositifs* of power. This also becomes evident when the self-exiled protagonist of Byron's epic then continues to wander across the stages of contemporary European history, i.e. the Napoleonic Wars. The self-staging eccentric individual then has the privilege of detachment, of viewing history as if it, too, was staged as a spectacle. This is absurd, but also provides him with a critical potential, a sceptical one once again, to be precise, that is liberating. It is no coincidence that he takes recourse to one of the patron saints of eccentricity to justify his position when he compares Napoleon's power-base in the admiration of men to the cynic's rejection of such approval in stanza 41 of the third canto: 'The part of Philip's son [Alexander the Great] was thine, not then / […] / Like stern Diogenes to mock at men' (canto iii, ln. 366, 368).[224] The self-consuming power of such eccentricity, which is described a little further below in images of 'a flame unfed, which runs to waste' (canto iii, ln. 394) will be re-encountered in late nineteenth-century Aestheticism.

Once again, though, self-exile does not ultimately lead to a lasting and successful autonomy. As for the first-generation Romantics Wordsworth and Coleridge, and for eccentricity in general, the interaction with normality remains crucial for the self-definition of their ideal: 'I live not in myself, but I become / Portion of that around me' (canto iii, ln. 680–681); 'And thus I am absorb'd, and this is life' (canto iii, ln. 689). Canto four then indeed attacks the narcissistic self-absorption of the Romantic genius as a disease (once again prefiguring the aesthetics of decadence): 'Of its own beauty is the mind diseased, / And fevers into false creation' (canto iv, ln. 1090–1091). In a complete reversal of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's attempt to postulate a oneness of self and nature in the Imagination (something that even Shelley and Keats still cling to, although increasingly pessimistically), Byron's epic then returns to the traditional emphasis of eccentric texts on disharmony and the idea of the copy rather than the original: 'Our life is a false nature – 'tis not in / The harmony of things' (canto iv, ln. 1226–1227). The soul, for the first-generation Romantics the locus of this union, is labelled 'immedicable' (canto iv, ln. 1234) in Byron's epic and interesting eccentric fusion of immediate, irremediable, and intermediate.

[224] Compare James Hogg, 'Byron's Vacillating Attitude towards Napoleon', in: *Byron: Poetry and Politics: Seventh International Byron Symposium*, ed. Erwin A. Sturzl and James Hogg (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1981), pp. 380–427.

It is no coincidence either that Byron (like Coleridge) eventually finds in established mythology an intertextual equivalent of his contradictory persona. Prometheus is the reference here (canto iv, ln. 1459), and a fertile model he is, since he represents the emergence of individuality against the norm, here embodied by the Greek gods. He becomes a tragic rebel and the new model of an autonomous subject. His tragedy is translated from the eccentric act of an outsider to the common myth of human emancipation. Once again, eccentricity is turned into norm. Byron would take up the Promethean model in an eponymous poem of 1816 in which he is called 'a symbol and a sign' (ln. 45) to mankind, and his fate is merely the extreme expression of that of all human beings when viewed through the lens of eccentricity: 'wretchedness', 'resistance', 'and his sad unallied existence' (ln. 51–52).[225]

Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* continues by staging the by now well-known roles of traditional eccentrics: the hermit in the desert (canto iv, ln. 1584) and once again the Mariner (canto 4, stanza 179). It also returns to the mask of the pilgrim already evident in the title of the epic and even identifies him through the 'scallop-shell' as a Catholic one on his way to Santiago de Compostela. Nonetheless, spiritual as well as individual salvation remain vague hopes in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The poem concludes hopefully by claiming 'My task is done' (canto 4, ln 1657). That this task is that of the eccentric, which reproduces itself intertextually, becomes clear when the stanza adds: 'my theme / Has died into an echo' (canto iv, ln. 1657–1658).

'Promethean' is the label that critics consequently attach to much of Byron's poetic output. *Manfred* of 1816–1817 presents such a borderline figure, outcast as a consequence of incest with his sister. Unwilling to be rescued even by divine intervention, since this would run counter to his self-centredness, he opts for a Faustian end. *Don Juan*, published between 1819 and 1824, Byron's second great epic, despite its frequently frivolous themes also presents an ultimately unfinished and perhaps unfinishable protagonist, not so much a rake or libertine, but an innocent who tumbles through a series of international adventures usually involving doomed love-affairs. The form of the text also makes it a prototypically eccentric one. As an 'epic satire' in the tradition of Butler, Swift, and Sterne, it is already a subversion of its genre. Its continual digressions align it with the typical character of eccentric writings. All the same, the text was taken seriously by Byron's contemporaries. Hazlitt, for example, famously commented that he regarded it as the record of 'a mind preying upon itself', thereby reiterating the split that was observed in the otherwise autonomous selves of Romantic writing. One can easily guess that this paradox is the

[225] Byron, *Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 4.

result of the oblique gaze of the eccentric on normality as observed in depictions of melancholy. Yet now that everything has been integrated into the genius of the autonomous Romantic self, even this outside of normality is inside, and the exchange of gazes turns into self-observation.

Don Juan starts, much like Byron's early poem 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers', with an extended invective against the first-generation Romantics, especially the new Poet Laureate Robert Southey. Yet the attack also tries to stake a claim to a poetic position of its own, which, ironically, mimics that of the first-generation Romantics, who have now apparently descended on Pegasus' wings from a classicist heaven. Byron's speaker instead views himself 'wandering with pedestrian Muses' (Dedication, ln. 57).[226]

Already the opening of Canto I moves the reader into territory occupied by texts like *Tristram Shandy*, since it openly declares its constructedness: 'I want a hero: an uncommon want, / When every year and month sends forth a new one' (canto 1, ln. 1–2). The individuality of genius is relativised by an awareness that it is a prototype, easily commodified by the 'gazettes' mentioned in the stanza's third line. Byron's choice of Don Juan is then presented as a spontaneous *ad hoc* decision ('I'll take my friend Don Juan'; canto i, ln. 40), in the same way that the text itself is presented as merely one of many ('Fit for my poem (that is, for my new one)'; canto 1, ln. 39). The poem then continues to elaborate the conventions of epic poetry (such as the beginning in medias res) – only to declare that it will not follow them: 'My way is to begin with the beginning; / The regularity of my design / Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning' (canto 1, ln. 50–52). The irony is directed as much against Romantic rambling as against the text itself, since wandering is what it will contain and do.

Don Juan's first amorous adventure aged sixteen continues the observed pattern of eccentricity of content and form. It involves Donna Julia, a married woman of twenty-three, whose background is partly Arab ('Her blood was not all Spanish, by the by; / In Spain, you know, this is a sort of sin.)'; canto 1, ln. 443–444). Byron's satire here, of course, reflects back on England, where racist prejudices were just as rife. Once again, the foreign perspective permits this critique. Yet Byron's narrator not only implicitly intrudes with covert value-judgements; he also does so explicitly and irritatingly. During Donna Julia's description, he continually interrupts himself with asides: '(I'm very fond of handsome eyes)' (canto 1, ln. 473) or 'I hate a dumpy woman' (canto 1, ln. 488) are typical examples.

[226] Byron, *Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 5.

This self-undermining strategy also applies to the by then established guises of eccentricity itself. Byron's *Don Juan* therefore participates as much in the structures of eccentricity as it makes them part of its satire. This is most evident in two stanzas in Canto I in which learning, speculation and inventiveness – all of which summarise the eighteenth-century Enlightenment eccentric – are merged with the yearning Romantic lover, only to be downgraded pragmatically to an outflow of adolescence:

> 92
> He thought about himself, and the whole earth,
> Of man the wonderful, and of the stars,
> And how the deuce they ever could have birth;
> And then he thought of earthquakes, and of wars,
> How many miles the moon might have in girth,
> Of air-balloons, and of the many bars
> To perfect knowledge of the boundless skies;
> And then he thought of Donna Julia's eyes.
>
> 93
> In thoughts like these true wisdom may discern
> Longings sublime, and aspirations high,
> Which some are born with, but the most part learn
> To plague themselves withal, they know not why:
> 'Twas strange that one so young should thus concern
> His brain about the action of the sky;
> If *you* think 'twas philosophy that this did,
> I can't help thinking puberty assisted. (canto 1, ln. 729–744)

Read on a grand scale, the stanzas ridicule the manifestations of newly modern individuality in the guises of eccentric philosopher and scientist or sublime Romantic emotionalist as equally immature. They also insist that these attitudes are neither the product of divine inspiration nor innate greatness. Instead, they are learned, part of a cultural transmission that works via intertextuality.[227] What is ironic, therefore, though perfectly in keeping with the tendency of the self to split from itself in the paradoxical moments observed in several Romantic authors, is that this newly aware subject (intellectually and/or emotionally, or both – when the philosophy

[227] See Paul Elledge, 'Re-Reading (in) Byron: Intertextuality in *Don Juan*', in: *Approaches to Teaching Byron's Poetry*, ed. Frederick W. Shilstone (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1991), pp. 158–165.

of associationism is concerned) lacks awareness of how it comes about ('they know not why'). The blind spots affect the Enlightened and the Romantic subject, and they are now no longer flaws that can be remedied, but constitutive. Eccentricity is their origin as well as their mode of expression.

Byron's satire also extends to the second transformation to which eccentricity is increasingly subjected in the nineteenth century. The use of its transgressiveness to create especially erotic frisson has already been mentioned in connection with Gothic villains, rakes, libertines, all the way to dangerous females – who would a few decades later become *femme fatales*. This is in line with another transformation, which is equally a commodification: that into the quaintness of a 'character'. Once again in Canto I, *Don Juan* mocks this tendency (after having introduced it through the typical figure of Prometheus, whom Percy Bysshe Shelley granted a lyrical drama in four acts entitled *Prometheus Unbound* in 1820):

> 128
> Man's a strange animal, and makes strange use
> Of his own nature, and the various arts,
> And likes particularly to produce
> Some new experiment to show his parts;
> This is the age of oddities let loose,
> Where different talents find their different marts;
> You'd best begin with truth, and when you've lost your
> Labour, there's sure a market for imposture.
>
> 129
> What opposite discoveries we have seen!
> (Signs of true genius, and of empty pockets.)
> One makes new noses, one a guillotine,
> One breaks our bones, one sets them in their sockets;
> But vaccination certainly has been
> A kind antithesis to Congreve's rockets [a new kind of shell],
> With which the Doctor paid off an old pox,
> By borrowing a new one from an ox.

The stanzas not only affirm the findings of the present study in relating eccentricity to cultural development, to its flexibility which demands experiments, but also a control of their results. That eccentricity is not only part of, but required by ages of tension is clearly outlined in stanza 129, where destruction and reconstruction, injury and remedy, are mentioned, but also the fascinating discovery – introduced into Britain by none other than Lady Mary Wortley Montague – that

vaccination uses a harmless variant of a serious disease (in her case smallpox) to strengthen individuals against this very disease. This concept can be fruitfully applied to eccentricity, too: it employs harmless variants of what would otherwise be deviant behaviour to produce in a culture the flexibility and tolerance required not only to cope with moral, social, and political tensions, but to make them enriching, for instance in the shape of cultural production.[228]

3.3 Victorianism: eccentricity begins (and ends) at home[229]

Victorianism, like Romanticism, is a firmly established concept in British culture. Although often reduced to a monolithic and superficial cliché of conservatism, repression, and patriarchy, it remains a crucial reference point in university syllabuses and examinations, in publishers' programmes, but also in the minds of non-academics. Yet it is also generally assumed that the Victorian age is a golden age of eccentricity, that it not only produced an immense number of eccentric manifestations and personalities, but also culminated in a *fin de siècle* whose assumed decadence pinpoints many features of eccentricity.

Yet when it comes to outlining the shifts from Romanticism to Victorianism, one easily gets into trouble. Of course, again, certain reductive clichés are at hand, such as the now different emphasis on society rather than the individual, domesticity rather than exclusion, normality rather than outsiderhood. The latter leads one to reflect on the strange circumstance that an era so much associated with norms and normality should also be the one in which eccentricity finds such a fertile environment. In fact, as will be demonstrated below, the seeming monolith of Victorian Britain is another period of (often suppressed, but sometimes hotly debated) tensions, and these are visible – in eccentric shape – even where this culture sees itself at its most centric. This will be demonstrated for the case of a writer who is at the core of Victorian self-definitions, but who also shows a clear indebtedness to Romantic traditions, not only that of British Romantic writers, but to Continental Romantic philosophy: Thomas Carlyle. It will be shown that eccentricity begins

[228] Compare Sheila J. McDonald, 'The Impact of Libertinism on Byron's *Don Juan*', *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 86:3 (1983–1985), pp. 291–318.

[229] An earlier version of the subsequent section has appeared as 'Eccentricity Begins at Home: Carlyle's Centrality in Victorian Thought', *Textual Practice*, 17:2 (2003), pp. 379–390.

at home, that the cultural norm is not only modified but indeed constructed by that which it locates in its margins.

Thomas Carlyle hardly uses the term 'eccentric' in his writings, and although we find it easy in the twenty-first century to see him as a typical Victorian eccentric,[230] his age generally referred to him as a 'sage'. More than that, it regarded his ideas as the cornerstones of its culture, as can be seen in George Eliot's review of Carlyle's writings in 1855:

> It is an idle question to ask whether his books will be read a century hence: if they were all burnt as the grandest of Suttees on his funeral pile, it would be only like cutting down an oak after its acorns have sown a forest. For there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings; there has hardly been an English book of the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived.[231]

Three related aspects of Carlyle's writings and nineteenth-century thought are crucial for an evaluation of Carlyle's centric eccentricity: the concepts of individual, society, and nation. They all contribute to the term 'home' of the title of the present section, to the self-image, the auto-stereotype of the English of Carlyle's time.

Carlyle's background makes him a strange expert on English culture. Born in Ecclefechan in Dumfriesshire in Scotland in 1795, his stone-mason father and his equally Puritanical mother moved every mountain to support the intellectual curiosity of their son. They first sent him to Annan Grammar School, then, from the age of fifteen until he was nineteen, to Edinburgh University. Carlyle later presented the teaching at Edinburgh in a negative light as 'vain jargon of controversial Metaphysic, Etymology and mechanical Manipulation, falsely named Science.'[232] Yet it seems to have contributed greatly to his eclectic interests: Carlyle read German, Greek, French, Italian, and Spanish, and taught himself history; and although he was registered as a

[230] See, as one of many examples, Georg Bernhard Tennyson, 'Carlyle Today', in: *Carlyle Past and Present: A Collection of New Essays*, ed. Kenneth J. Fielding and Rodger L. Tarr (London: Vision Press, 1976), pp. 27–50 (p. 31).

[231] Unsigned Review in *Leader* (27 October 1955), vi, 1034–1035; reprinted in *Thomas Carlyle: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Jules Paul Seigel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 409–411 (pp. 409–410).

[232] The words spoken by Teufelsdröckh are generally taken to express Carlyle's own views; Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 88. See, for instance, Douglas Jerrold, 'Introduction', in: Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, ed. Douglas Jerrold (London and New York: Dent, 1960), p. vi.

student for the ministry, i.e. the Church of Scotland, he eventually left to teach mathematics at Annan.

Unsystematic knowledge and uneasy compromises between abstract philosophy and theology and the increasingly dominant sciences are not untypical for Victorian thinkers. Yet Carlyle is unusual in his radical amateurism coupled with a Germanophilia that is extreme even in an age when the Germans were still seen as 'cousins'. He venerated Jean Paul and Goethe, while he abhorred the cult of his fellow Scot Robert Burns. His first publications include an essay on Goethe's *Faust* (1822), a *Life of Schiller* (1823–1824), a translation of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1824) and a monograph entitled *German Romance* (1827).

After thus making his name as what we would now call an *Auslandsgermanist*, he published the challenging novel *Sartor Resartus* (literally: The Tailor Re-patched) in 1833–1834, a philosophical treatise on clothes with heavy references to German thinkers, which will be of interest as an eccentric (inter-)text. After that, however, he soon embarked on seemingly less eccentric endeavours, two of which will also be focused on below.

On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History of 1841 and *Past and Present* of 1843 contain Carlyle's philosophy of the self, society, and nation, a philosophy that he had begun to unfold in writings such as *Signs of the Times* (1829), *Characteristics* (1831) and *The French Revolution* (1837). The very titles of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* and *Past and Present* lay claim to universal significance and authority and conform to the cliché of Victorian thought as normative and essentially conservative (there is no explicit 'future' in the titles of these works, and very little in their content). Carlyle links their inquiry in an introductory passage in *Past and Present* where he writes:

> With Nations it is as with individuals: Can they rede the riddle of Destiny? This English Nation, will it get to know the meaning of its strange new Today? Is there sense enough extant, discoverable anywhere or anyhow, in our united twenty-seven million heads to discern the same; valour enough in our twenty-seven million hearts to dare and do the bidding thereof? It will be seen! –[233]

Yet how do they construct their ostensibly centric visions of the self in history? *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, originally a series of lectures, categorises exceptional historical personalities along two lines: theology and politics. This has led his contemporaries

[233] Carlyle, *Past and Present*, p. 7.

and present-day critics to characterise Carlyle's concept of society as a theocratic one. His god-like heroes, however, are Scandinavian; his prophetic example is Mohammed.[234] Only in his "Hero as Priest" chapter and that on "Hero as King" can one discern attempts to construct a teleology of Western culture culminating in the British one: Luther paves the way for Knox and his Scottish Presbyterianism, but also for Puritanism; Cromwell prefigures Napoleon, and he is somehow, as the colon indicates, connected with modern 'Revolutionism' (note the derogatory expression).

Carlyle's logic is flawed from the start: neither is Cromwell a king nor is Napoleon an expression of modern revolutionary spirit, visible to Carlyle in the Chartist movement for electoral reform in the 1840s. His insertion of literature at strategic points is equally illogical, unless one sees in it an attempt to link poetry with prophecy and essayism with preaching. Here, too, the genealogies are selective: Dante spawns Shakespeare; and Johnson, Rousseau, and Robert Burns form an uneasy triad. What is happening? Carlyle's book is obviously an attempt to come to terms with an overwhelming complexity: how did British literature, religion, and politics come about in their complex and contradictory shape that simultaneously tolerates kingship and parliament, an increasing veneration of the young Queen Victoria and that of the king-murderer Cromwell, a state church and increasingly powerful dissent? How can one simultaneously appreciate the Catholic Italian Renaissance and the Protestant English eighteenth century, French and English Enlightenment writers and Scottish Romantics?

A logical, consequential and therefore truly centric historiography would not be able to cope with these contradictions. It would be obliged to exclude, to take a defining yet limiting stand. Carlyle's model can be all-embracing since it is eccentric; its deviation from traditional logic enables it to contain a remarkable tolerance, often indeed against its own explicit intentions.

Stylistically, this eccentricity is embodied once again in the rhetorical form of digression. This unites Carlyle's writings with several in a genealogy of key eccentric thinkers, such as Robert Burton and his *Anatomy of Melancholy* of 1621, but also Edith Sitwell and her *English Eccentrics* of 1933. Together with Carlyle's love of Latin and German quotations and archaic terms and his grammatical inversions, this led some of his frustrated contemporaries to label his style

[234] Further problems of Carlyle's heroes are elaborated in Michael Timko, 'Thomas Carlyle: Chaotic Man, Inarticulate Hero', *Carlyle Studies Annual*, 14 (1994), pp. 55–69.

'Carlylese'.[235] Carlyle's *Past and Present* is a typical example that works by projecting past onto present with surprising conclusions. Its subtext is itself already eccentric – the Latin chronicle of the Bury St Edmunds monk Jocelin of Brakelond from the late twelfth century, published for the first time in 1840. Yet even within this distant subtext, Carlyle digresses further – to the reign of the saintly Anglo-Saxon king Edmund whose encounter with the heathen Danes he takes to be a parallel of the politics of the 1840s:

> Certain Heathen Physical-Force Ultra-Chartists, 'Danes' as they were then called, coming into his territory with their 'five points', or rather with their five-and-twenty thousand *points* and edges too, of pikes namely and battle axes; and proposing mere Heathenism, confiscation, spoliation, and fire and sword, – Edmund answered that he would oppose to the utmost such savagery. They took him prisoner; again required his sanction to said proposals. Edmund again refused. Cannot we kill you? cried they. – Cannot I die? answered he. My life, I think, is my own to do what I like with! And he died, under barbarous tortures, refusing to the last breath; and the Ultra-Chartist Danes *lost* their propositions; – and went with their 'points' and other apparatus, as is supposed, to the Devil, the father of them.[236]

The passage reads at first glance like a piece of anti-Chartist propaganda using arbitrary and unfair historical parallels (the Chartists were neither unchristian, nor did they pursue their tactics violently; although there were Chartist riots, their main strategy was repeatedly petitioning a reluctant parliament).[237] What is interesting in the passage, though, is the more implicit positive parallel: who or what does king Edmund represent? Parliament (in which case it would be autocratic and not democratic)? Or the good ordinary non-Chartist citizens of Britain (in which case they would be suicidal fatalists)? Both readings are equally problematic. As if to increase the confusion, Carlyle adds a further digression: 'Some say, indeed, these Danes were not Ultra-Chartists, but Ultra-Tories, demanding to reap where they had not sown, and live in this world without working, though all the world should starve for it; which likewise seems a possible

[235] The controversy around Carlyle's style (which was also called 'barbarous' and/or Germanic or a 'Babylonian dialect') can be traced in Seigel, *Thomas Carlyle: The Critical Heritage*. Discussions of 'Carlylese' can be found, for example, in Francis X. Roellinger, 'The Early Development of Carlyle's Style', *PMLA*, 72 (1957), pp. 936–951, and George Levine, 'The Uses and Abuses of Carlylese', in: *The Art of Victorian Prose*, ed. William Madden (New York et al.: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 101–126.

[236] Carlyle, *Past and Present*, p. 52.

[237] See Michael Levin, *The Condition of England Question: Carlyle, Mill, Engels* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. x–xi.

hypothesis.'[238] A complete reversal of the argument takes place when the enemies are now the conservative forces, more specifically the industrialists and capitalists whom already the introductory chapter of the book had chastised under the heading 'Midas'. In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* Carlyle indeed claims: 'Indeed our English blood too in good part is Danish; Norse; or rather, at bottom, Danish and Norse and Saxon have no distinction, except a superficial one, – as of Heathen and Christian, or the like. But all over our Island we are mingled largely with Danes proper […].'[239]

Carlyle performs a typical move of historiographers and novelists of his time, the recourse to a supposedly Anglo-Saxon origin of England into whose stability Danes as well as Normans intruded. A similar strategy is visible in Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or, The Two Nations* of 1845, a crucial 'Condition of England' novel. As in Disraeli, Carlyle's Anglo-Saxon past derives as much from legend and dubious documents as from the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott (Gurth, the swineheard from *Ivanhoe*, even makes an explicit appearance in *Past and Present*[240]).

Yet, unlike Scott and the political novelist Disraeli, Carlyle spoils the argument by reversing and extending it, until anything can mean anything. Yet this digressive eccentric argument expressed in matching style is indeed the recipe that makes Carlyle immensely attractive to contemporaneous readers, since they can find themselves in it no matter which side they are one. History in Carlyle has a vast stomach, and while it masquerades in seemingly authoritative and often unjustly narrow pronouncements, it in fact embodies the overarching Victorian demand to accommodate dissent and plurality. The eccentric once again acts as a testing ground as well as a safety valve.

The same applies to the crucial concept of heroism itself. In the introductory sections of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* Carlyle presents its case in words that are a slap in the face of proponents of the social and cultural constructedness of individuals, and this includes modern-day Cultural Studies scholars: 'He was a "creature of the Time", they say, the Time called him forth, the Time did everything, he nothing – but what we the little critic

[238] Carlyle, *Past and Present*, p. 52.

[239] Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, ed. Michael K. Goldberg et al, The Norman and Charlotte Strouse Edition of the Writings of Thomas Carlyle (Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 1993), p. 18.

[240] Carlyle, *Past and Present*, p. 21.

could have done too! This seems to me but melancholy work. The time call forth? Alas, we have known Times *call* loudly enough for their great man; but not find him when they called!'[241]

Here we have evidence of Carlyle's radical individualism and élitism, something that according to many critics explains his popularity in his time and his rapid decline into a neglected nineteenth-century voice later. Yet when one reads on, the suspicion nourished in the last sentence of the above quotation increases: 'no Time need have gone to ruin, could it have *found* a man great enough, a man wise and good enough: wisdom to discern truly what the Time wanted, wisdom to lead it on the right road thither; these are the salvation of any Time.'[242]

Great men are not made by their time, yet they know what their time demands of them and are capable of bringing it about, even by leading time to its pre-ordained goal. This is once again highly contradictory, yet also highly attractive to a time that wishes to accommodate traditional values as well as a strong ethos of individualism. Carlyle's argumentative and stylistic eccentricity is here clearly in the service of a very centric (though fuzzy) concept of individual and society.

Carlyle's strategy is that of Historicism, a crucial and centric nineteenth-century discipline which functions by strategically building ontologies and teleologies, by making diverse and contradictory pieces fit the great puzzle whose solution is already hermeneutically given before the endeavour starts. What makes Carlyle special is the self-undermining tendency constantly present in his constructive attempts, which lends his writings a quality that one would today call 'deconstructive'. This also becomes clear in his outspoken attempts to 'define' Englishness and to assess the backbone of British culture, its class structure, in *Past and Present*. This seems surprising, since the book talks about nothing but the English, and very much the English of the first half of the nineteenth-century – albeit through the dubious lens of a twelfth-century monastery. In this monastery Carlyle wishes to find traces of democracy (but also the veneration of the authority of practical leaders), a 'natural' piety (but also resistance against the dictates of Rome), and a naivety of style (yet also the origins of an English essayistic tradition that leads him to call Jocelin 'a kind of born Boswell'; p. 40).

In Book III, however, which counterpoints 'The Ancient Monk' of Book II with 'The Modern Worker' (an interesting genealogy, if ever there was one), one suddenly comes across a section entitled 'The English'. There Carlyle continues and indeed pinpoints his deconstructionist historicist strategy, something that is centric and eccentric at the same time. He praises the English for their

[241] Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, p. 12.
[242] Loc. cit.

'depth of sense, of justice, of courage; in which, under all emergencies and world-bewilderments, and under this most complex of emergencies we now live in, there is still hope, there is still assurance!' (p. 151). Then he goes on to state immediately: 'The English are a dumb people. They can do great acts, but not describe them' (p. 151). What the contrast initiates is, on the one hand, a praise of English pragmatism (in its epitome, 'this thick-skinned, seemingly opaque, perhaps sulky, almost stupid Man of Practice'; p. 153), yet on the other hand a downright condemnation of English art, music, and literature. In an extended rant that concludes in another praise of conservatism ('[John] Bull is a born Conservative; for this too I inexpressibly honour him. All great Peoples are conservative; slow to believe in novelties; patient of much error in actualities'; pp. 156–157), Carlyle, however, once again undermines his own endeavour. If the English are unable to express their greatness, if even Carlyle has to include the qualifying term 'inexpressibly' in his adulation, what status can Carlyle's study itself assume? Not surprisingly, in this thoroughly ambivalent deconstructive text, Carlyle's praise of the conservatives then becomes an identification with the Conservative Party ('If I were the Conservative Party of England'; p. 159), only to conclude that he would then reverse its policies at the time, the Corn Laws, which artificially increased the price of flour and bread, and the Sliding Scale, which enabled employers to lower wages in times of declining business.[243]

It would be facile to point out the surprising topicality of Carlyle's ideas on the role of industrialists in a time of world economic crisis, the labour market, and trade unions in society. What is more important is a general feature that transcends Carlyle's consciously confused positions into a more general principle, that of acting as a cultural spokesman who is simultaneously positioned in the centre yet also able to invoke ideas that challenge this centre – exactly by making himself eccentric. In his lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, he explicitly outlines this position – which is ultimately also that of himself as the acknowledged Victorian 'sage':

> A great soul, any sincere soul, knows not what *he* is, – alternates between the highest height and the lowest depth; can, of all things, the least measure – Himself! What others take him for, and what he guesses that he may be; these two items strangely act on one another, help to determine one another. (p. 23)

[243] The Tories had been in power since 1841, and would remain so until 1846.

The reason for Carlyle's success as a Victorian thinker lies in his consciously adopted position as centric eccentric, in his pronouncements of normative truths coupled with a simultaneous airing of deepest contradictions and even suppressed fears, which turns his writings into a reservoir of the Victorian unconscious, while being consciously structured by the complex rhetoric of digression and daring analogy. This strategy is in fact already evident in his early novel *Sartor Resartus*. There, through the eccentric mouthpiece of Herr Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, an erudite German professor of 'Allerley-Wissenschaft' at the University of Weissnichtwo and his colossal work *Die Kleider, ihr Werden und Wirken*, we are granted philosophical speculations on surfaces, symbols, and depth. These display many similarities to Pater's, Wilde's, and Arthurs Symons' much later aestheticist doctrines. More important for the present argument is that in the very centre of Carlyle's novel, in book II out of three, there is an arrangement that mirrors once again the dialectic around an empty centre that has been shown to be so productive as the cultural model of eccentricity. It is embodied in three sections entitled 'The Everlasting No', 'Centre of Indifference', and 'The Everlasting Yea'. It very appropriately contains a discussion of power, cultural as well as political.

Power, in Teufelsdröckh's view, and here he is a very modern, almost Foucauldian thinker indeed, does not rest on material institutions: 'Where are the LAWS; where is the GOVERNMENT? In vain wilt thou go to Schönbrunn, to Downing Street, to the Palais Bourbon: thou findest nothing there but brick or stone houses, and some bundles of Papers tied with tape.'[244] His subsequent explanation that it is 'Everywhere, yet nowhere: seen only in its works, this too is a thing aeriform, invisible; or if you will, mystic and miraculous' strikes us as convincing in its first assertion as it sounds mad in its second. What the text is driving at becomes clear in its list of the 'Visible and tangible products of the Past', as which it lists cities, tilled fields, and thirdly books. That it is primarily interested in the latter is evident when it continues:

> In which third, truly, the last-invented, lies a worth far surpassing that of the two others. Wondrous indeed is the virtue of a true Book. Not like a dead City of stones, yearly crumbling, yearly needing repair; more like a tilled Field, but then a spiritual Field: like a spiritual Tree, let me rather say, it stands from year to year, and from age to age (we have Books that already number some hundred-and-fifty human ages); and yearly comes its new produce of leaves (Commentaries,

[244] Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus and On Heroes,* ed. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 1987) p. 131.

> Deductions, Philosophical, Political Systems; or were it only Sermons, Pamphlets, Journalistic Essays), every one of which is talismanic and thaumaturgic, for it can persuade men. (p. 132)

After a long pacifist digression on the evil of warfare, great men are then called 'the inspired (speaking and acting) Texts of that divine BOOK OF REVELATIONS, whereof a Chapter is completed from epoch to epoch, and by some named HISTORY' (p. 135). Carlyle's eccentric system of culture and its resident power is a textual one. It is also an intertextual one in which texts spawn, but also modify other texts, and in which even individual lives feature as texts.[245] To make such a radical model palatable, much rhetoric is needed. Neither is such a system free from narrow authoritative pronouncements; indeed, it needs them, not only to assure its readers, but also to position itself securely on the inside of centric hegemonic ideology. To achieve this, exclusions marking an 'outside' are required, and Carlyle has become infamous for some of them. His essay 'Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question' (published in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* in 1850) calls demands to enfranchise Jamaican Negroes before economically and politically liberating English workers misguided. Carlyle was as harsh on so-called 'colonials' as he was on the Irish in *Sartor Resartus* and in his essay 'Chartism' of 1839. Women are the second most noticeable excluded in his thought. While it is probably understandable that he was reluctant to include a still juvenile queen in his list of heroes, the absence of Elizabeth I is more striking.[246] Yet, as usual, Carlyle's strategy proves self-subverting when in the just mentioned

[245] *Sartor Resartus* abounds with very modern, almost Nietzschean images of languages, especially its metaphoricity. See, for example, the sections 'Prospective' and 'Symbols'. A similar idea is expressed in Verena Lobsien, 'Sinnreich und melancholisch, oder: Die Alterität des Ideals. Zwei frühneuzeitliche Bibliomane – Democritus Junior und Don Quijote', in: *Sammler – Bibliophile – Exzentriker*, ed. Aleida Assmann, Monika Gomille and Gabriele Rippl, Literatur und Anthropologie (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1998), pp. 347–373.

[246] Two noticeable exceptions to this are Carlyle's annotated edition of the letters of his late wife, *The Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle* of 1883, as well as three early and unsettling sections in *The French Revolution* of 1837. These are entitled 'The Insurrection of Women', with a subsection called 'The Menads' (pp. 189–228) and 'Charlotte Corday' (the latter is granted the telling labels 'cruel-lovely, with half-angelic, half-daemonic splendour' (p. 605), and 'Marie-Antoinette' (pp. 626–628), the latter two perhaps not unintentionally in Book IV entitled 'Terror'. All page references are to Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (New York: Random House, 1949).

'Nigger Question' essay the examples of those needing political rights and economic support are supplied by 'distressed needlewomen' and Irish paupers.[247]

This consequential inconsequence, this authoritative eclecticism and deconstructive historiography, in other words Carlyle's centric eccentricity, have granted him the status of prophet and sage and turned him into a spokesman of an age of contradictions that wanted so much to be an age of stability. His effect on other Victorian thinkers, such as Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin, but also the American philosopher Emerson, is immense. His ideas visibly influenced the British education system, its colonial administration, and the literature that accompanies their developments, not only the élitist writers that George Eliot has in mind, but also colonial adventure stories and school stories all the way to today's *Harry Potter* novels.

Yet Carlyle's exclusions and inconsistencies, these necessary elements of his eccentric system, also produced criticism and ironic detachment.[248] This is visible even in George Eliot's ostensible praise for Carlyle that was quoted at the start of this section. While taking up his tree image from *Sartor Resartus* (a favourite organicist model of Historicism), she pinpoints the irregular and unpredictable nature of intertextuality in her image of oaks (these long-lasting and very English trees) sowing their acorns randomly. More pointedly with reference to a writer who has little space for women and colonials in his visions of cultural and individual greatness, she decides, almost with cruel pleasure, to use as her vision of the possible destruction and loss of Carlyle's writings that of a 'suttee', the Indian practice of widow burning. She thereby turns Carlyle's books into women, mistreated women at that, but also into the 'colonials' that Carlyle regarded with such distrust. Eccentricity begins at home, but it does not necessarily make this home a very safe place.

The re-definition of this home, partly also as a reaction to the transformation of Romanticism into Victorianism, is at stake in *Sartor Resartus*, too. It has been pointed out that this is a text that ostensibly deals with a German protagonist in a German setting. Yet what it debates are aesthetic, philosophical and ideological problems of early nineteenth-century Britain. It is correct, though short-sighted, to pinpoint the manifold ways in which Carlyle finds Germanic guises for his own

[247] See Albert J. LaValley, *Carlyle and the Idea of the Modern: Studies in Carlyle's Prophetic Literature and Its Relation to Blake, Nietzsche, Marx, and Others* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 280.

[248] Two parodies of Carlyle's writings published in *Punch*, xviii (January–June 1850), pp. 107 and 110 are reprinted in Seigel, *Thomas Carlyle: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 318–321. Max Beerbohm (1872–1956) was one of the most prominent later critics.

biography and background (turning, for instance, Ecclefechan into 'Entepfuhl', duck pond). More important is the mock-serious debate undertaken in the book, which concerns appearances and realities, people's dress and its relation to character.

'Character' is in itself a crucial term for understanding the transitions of eccentricity in the nineteenth century. Already Coleridge called himself a character, and it is evident that this represents a drastic reduction from the genius outsiders of Romanticism to a more palatable, i.e. more easily socially integrated variant of dissent. What goes on in *Sartor Resartus* in this respect is no different from, for instance, Dickens novels, in which eccentricity frequently assumes the character(s) of quaintness. As such, it no longer threatens the norm, but acts like an ornament providing variety without a challenge to structure. Yet *Sartor Resartus* also manages to undermine the conventions of biography, so crucially related to both eccentricity and the modern notion of the self.[249]

Teufelsdröckh in *Sartor Resartus* represents quaintness prototypically. His foreignness makes him a safe representative of strange attitudes and opinions. As a German professor he represents one of the traditional stereotypes of 'Germanness', which emphasises fussiness, oddness, but also harmlessness. He is also shown as remarkably inefficient in his private life, be it his abortive love-affair or his professional development. Were these eccentric masks removed from the text, it could be read as a critique of both idealist religion and materialism, as a radical doubt concerning innate personalities, thus as a radical critique of early nineteenth-century values – albeit in the typical eccentric form of fragments, (mock) quotations, and digressions.

A very similar strategy was employed in Charles Dickens' first novel, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, published serially in 1836 and 1837. This text still displays many of the formal features of eccentric writings that were outlined in the context of late eighteenth-century texts above: it is in part a travelogue reporting the journeys of Samuel Pickwick and three fellow members of the Pickwick Club, Tracy Tupman, Augustus Snodgrass, and Nathaniel Winkle, to Ipswich, Rochester, Bath, and other locations that are of significance in the early nineteenth century (Bath as the fashionable spa town, for example), but all have a provincial air by not being the centre, London. On these journeys, picaresque adventures take place, all of them well within the norm of established eccentric moulds and never departing from the safe areas of

[249] See Vanessa L. Ryan, 'The Unreliable Editor: Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* and the Art of Biography', *Review of English Studies*, 54:215 (June 2003), pp. 287–307. Compare also James Gregory, 'Eccentric Biography and the Victorians', *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 30:3 (2007), pp. 342–376.

domesticity.[250] Thus, Pickwick's struggle with his horse in one episode is an echo of Samuel Johnson's infamous riding skills as described by his biographer Boswell. Other elements, such as entering the wrong hotel bedroom by mistake, or unwittingly making his landlady assume that he is proposing marriage, are also well within the scope of earlier eighteenth-century fiction.

What is more significant is the digressive mode that is only partially prescribed by the episodic form of instalment publications. *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* also abound with added adventures that are merely told by the protagonists, as well as moral and melodramatic stories without a clear logical role in the plot (if the novel can be said to possess one). On the one hand, Dickens's first novel reiterates features associated, for instance, with Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, a doubly eccentric text, as we recall, since it on the one hand capitalised on the dissident potential of sentimental fiction, while on the other hand assuming yet another dissident position within dissidence by criticising sentimental conventions through satire. A further marker of eccentricity is the (clearly funny) 'posthumous' character attributed to the text, as well as its status as fragments, 'papers'. Lost, at least temporarily, and potentially fragmented, the text aligns itself with others such as Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling*.

At the same time, moralising and melodrama hint towards a transformation of eccentricity that was to become characteristic of the nineteenth century and Victorian culture. While the eccentrics of the eighteenth century and Romanticism possessed disturbing potential and not infrequently ended as more of less heroic failures, Dickens's eccentrics have a tendency to become ornaments. They are types rather than individuals, such as the witty Cockney servant Sam Weller and the medical student Bob Sawyer with a penchant for dissections. Their speaking names already mark them as funny – and therefore non-threatening (this is true also for Pickwick himself and his fellow club members). Rather than unsettling, eccentrics become reassuring. They still provide variety to a culture more and more insistent on normative values, but they do so as ornaments decorating its fringes, not as challenges to the status quo.

This is evident in the well-known eccentrics from Dickens's more famous novels. The famous 'Artful Dodger' in *Oliver Twist* (1837–1839), although also an emblem of poverty and corruption, never really threatens to reverse social order – or the eponymous protagonist's orientation

[250] See Angus Easson, 'Don Pickwick: Dickens and the Transformation of Cervantes', in: *Rereading Victorian Fiction*, ed. Alice Jenkins, Juliet John and John Sutherland (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 173–188.

towards cultural norms and centrality.[251] In the same way that Dickens's plots become linear and teleological and leave behind digression and episodic character, his heroes inevitably make their way towards cultural integration, towards the centre, that is. Eccentrics may pave their way, but they are there to temporarily put them to the test in the most extreme case, but more often to offer them scope for their own orientation away from their eccentricity, towards an eventual centric success as adapted personalities inside an ordered society. Lowly clerks and their modest ambitions, such as John Wemmick in *Great Expectations* who lives with his aged parent and eventually slily marries Miss Skiffins, are such eccentrics. Such figures then, in turn, become national autostereotypes again – whose success is still visible in the period costume dramas that continue to be popular both in Britain and abroad.[252]

On the darker side of the spectrum these ornamental moralising eccentrics often assume the shape of women. The eccentric spinster is an age-old *topos* in Western culture. Already in Jane Austen's *Emma* a figure like Miss Bates not only acts as an entertaining feature, but also as a warning of what happens to women who fail to or refuse to succeed on the marriage market (a fate that temporarily seems to hang over Emma herself, though never quite credibly). In Dickens's *Great Expectations* Miss Havisham, the eternal bride living in her own fantasy world of pain and revenge, is such a character, although she appears to be more dangerous through her ability to manipulate others. Such dark eccentrics in Dickens, especially when they are associated with guilt (as is, for instance, Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*), often pay for their outsiderhood with death.[253]

Bleak House (1852–1853) can in itself be regarded as an elaborate model of normality and eccentricity in mid-Victorian England. Domesticity is a vital theme in literature and culture of that period, yet *Bleak House* is also a model of society, a society that works through norms, though these norms bring with them opportunities for some, but also dehumanisation, ruin,

[251] Compare Michal Peled Ginsburg, 'Truth and Persuasion: The Language of Realism and of Ideology in *Oliver Twist*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 20:3 (Spring 1987), pp. 220–236.

[252] Compare Julia Saville, 'Eccentricity as Englishness in *David Copperfield*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 42:4 (Autumn 2002), pp. 781–797.

[253] An attempt at categorisation, which includes the category of 'eccentric', is Catherine J. Golden, 'Late-Twentieth-Century Readers in Search of a Dickensian Heroine: Angels, Fallen Sisters, and Eccentric Women', Modern Language Studies, 30:2 (2000), pp. 5–19. Golden rather one-sidedly regards 'eccentricity' as empowering for these female characters.

madness, and death for others.[254] It is no coincidence that the text uses the legal system as its central mode of operation, the cultural model that works in binaries of right and wrong. Yet it is shown to coexist (and perhaps require) as its shadow a different model, that of centres and margins, marginalising others, while also pulling others closer to its centre, a centre, however, that remains empty. The central lawsuit in *Bleak House*, that of Jarndyce v. Jarndyce, is clearly a vacuous one which will result in nothing. Yet whoever permits him- or herself to become entangled in it, while thereby ostensibly gaining the established position of a legal party, also departs from cultural and social centrality. Richard Carstone, the hopeful young protagonist, is eventually destroyed by it. He might have avoided this had he heeded the warning embodied in one of Dickens's typical eccentrics, Miss Flite. A prototypical elderly spinster, she has internalised the lawsuit so much that she keeps emblematically named birds as symbols of her enslavement to it.

While eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century eccentrics were frequently measured against religion, philosophy, but also rank, the mid-nineteenth-century version is held against the workings of the by then firmly established capitalist economy. It demands investment, of resources, time, and selves, into its machinery. This machinery is in itself frequently obscure, but equally reliant on unrestricted trust (it is certainly no coincidence that the moral term 'trust' also became the name of a type of investment). It produces victims, but also a vast array of people who manage to exist in its many rooms, as in a vast house, maintained by their individual distances to it. Thus, the novel's true heroine and partial narrator, Esther Summerson, much like virtuous heroines in eighteenth-century tales, retains her moral high ground (even against her illegitimate background) by steadfastly refusing to exchange wealth and status for her middle-class morality. Mrs Jelliby, on the other hand, a ridiculous philanthropist, has carved out another niche for herself as a goody two shoes and busybody who might make her own family unhappy, but keeps herself fulfilled by her many schemes. Her investment is partial, her philanthropy egotism in disguise, and her risks are minimal. Miss Flite, however, invests and loses everything. She becomes a prototype of the eccentric ghosts hovering in the corners of early capitalism, such as the 'Bank Nun' Sarah Whitehead, who features in countless portraits of eccentrics and even made her way into Edith Sitwell's *English Eccentrics*.

[254] See Edgar Johnson, '*Bleak House*: The Anatomy of Society', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 7:2 (September 1952), pp. 73–89.

In the same way that eccentricity is involved in the birth of the modern subject, it attends its transformations. This has been shown in connection with wit and genius above. In the nineteenth century, the transformation turns individuals into 'characters'. The ambivalence that the term has retained until today is indicative of this. Character is something that is even considered in legal proceedings (the binary pattern of right and wrong), yet 'a character' is also an odd person, an eccentric. Characters people fiction, and in Victorian fiction, and Dickens is here merely one of many examples, they indeed frequently assume the status of clichés and so-called 'stock characters'. As such, they offer orientation by showing the possible effects of departure from the norms. Yet, like eccentricity throughout its history, they also act as both warnings and as reassurance: as long as one can spot the 'characters' and identity them, one is fairly certain not to be a character oneself. The model is once again that of the unequal exchange of gazes: characters are stared at, literally and metaphorically, by society as well as readers of novels. They occasionally stare back, but only ever as part of their role, as which their challenge is temporary and does not affect the foundations of society and culture. It is no coincidence that Foucault relates the anecdote of a nineteenth-century mental asylum that he describes as a theatre of normality, where supposedly insane people prove try their best to 'act' normal – and normality consequently becomes a spectacle structured both by madness and by the surveilling gaze of authority:

> Tuke organised an entire ceremonial around these observations. There were social occasions in the English manner, where everyone was obliged to imitate all the formal requirements of social existence; nothing else circulated except the observation that would spy out any incongruity, any disorder, any awkwardness where madness might betray itself. The directors and staff of the Retreat thus regularly invited several patients to 'tea-parties'; the guests 'dress in their best clothes, and vie with each other in politeness and propriety. The best fare is provided, and the visitors are treated with all the attention of strangers. The evening generally passes with the greatest harmony and enjoyment. It rarely happens that any unpleasant circumstance occurs; the patients control, to a wonderful degree, their different propensities; and the scene is at once curious and affectingly gratifying.'[255]

[255] Foucault, Madness and Civilization, p. 249. The reference in Foucault's description is to the Quaker establishment run and described by Samuel Tuke. Compare Samuel Tuke, *Description of the Retreat, and Institution near York for Insane Persons of the Society of Friends* (York: publisher. Alexander, 1813).

John Stuart Mill, the eminent mid-Victorian philosopher of Utilitarianism, indeed makes the ability to produce and sustain eccentricity (very much in the capitalist vein of investment and return) the benchmark of a successful society when he writes in *On Liberty* (1859):

> Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage it contained. That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time.[256]

The philosopher who laid the foundations of character studies was the classical Greek writer Theophrastus. Already in his works, noteworthy characters were those of exceptional personalities. Theophrastus is a name that, like Diogenes, recurs through the intertextual networks that make up the history of eccentricity. He returns ostensibly, so to speak, in an in itself eccentric text by a writer who might have been among the most eccentric Victorian ones, yet managed to become a central one, George Eliot. Her last work, *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879) is an interesting text, not only in the context of Eliot's oeuvre, but also in the history of eccentricity.[257] Eliot had made her (assumed) name as the writer of historical tableaux, regularly set in provincial England, mostly in the safe, but not too distant past. Inside these safe settings, however, she found room for portraits that not only displayed conformity to the norms of her time, but frequently also indicated critical frictions, especially of women's roles, with centric ideology. *The Mill on the Floss*, a novel of 1860, contains a heroine, Maggie Tulliver, who is very similar to Eliot (Mary Anne Evans) herself in her refusal to conform and trust in her own intellectual and moral views. Nonetheless, the price to be paid for such an eccentricity was still social exclusion and eventual death. In *Silas Marner* of 1861, the eponymous hermit-like eccentric is in fact brought back into society, re-centred that is, through his love and care for an orphaned girl. *Felix Holt the Radical* of 1866 also shows a not really very radical character, whose main eccentricity is trying to live outside the class into which he is born, becoming realigned through love and marriage.

Things are not quite so simple with Eliot's two great late novels, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871–1872) and *Daniel Deronda* (1874–1876). Eliot herself pointed out that the

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[256] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 132.

[257] Compare Hazel Mackenzie, 'A Dialogue of Forms: The Display of Thinking in George Eliot's "Poetry and Prose, from the Notebooks of an Eccentric" and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*', *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* 36:2 (August 2014), pp. 117–129.

name 'Middlemarch' for the fictional location of her plot was chosen with a symbolic purpose in mind, namely to show how the march of time, i.e. the fast development of social, political, and economic life in nineteenth-century Britain, affected a place that very much represented it fictionally. In terms of a study of eccentricity, *Middlemarch* ought to show what goes on when the centre responds to the challenges of the times – in the way that was pinpointed for eccentricity's role in culture as a safety-valve as well as experimental space. Yet who are the eccentrics in *Middlemarch*? Is it only the dry scholar Casaubon, involved in fruitless research? Is it the dying landowner Mr Featherstone, whose family hopes for rich pickings, but in the meantime has to endure his whims? Or is it Dorothea, whose philanthropic schemes are viewed by the novel and its characters as quite ambivalent? Or is it her eventual husband (after her disastrous idealistic match with Casaubon), Will Ladislaw, whose politics are as foreign as his Polish background. There are other contenders as well. It is interesting that a novel that represents an essence of mid-Victorian England has such a hard time identifying its margins. There might be two reasons for this: either the normative centre has become so dominant as to banish dissent altogether (indeed the true dissenters of the novel, who are involved in criminal schemes, are eventually excluded through death and exile). Alternatively, eccentricity might have become more centric – to the extent that it is now 'normal' to be eccentric. This would be a fascinating development, and it might be seen in another positive female character in the novel, Mary Garth. Her moral righteousness is so pronounced that she refuses both a fortune (offered by the dying Featherstone) and that to which all Victorian heroines aspire: marriage. Only when the conditions are right – for her – does she consent to marry the man she has loved all along. This, on the one hand, aligns her with all the Clarissas and Pamelas of eighteenth-century fiction. Yet bringing about decisions actively makes her an unusual woman, yet one who is already part of a tradition set by her mother in the novel.

In the odd essays contained in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, the ambivalence of eccentricity becoming normalised, while the norm becomes more eccentric, can be studied on many levels. The text's episodic form is a departure from the established novelistic mode; yet in its reflections on exceptional personalities it is not unusual. What it uncommon is that these reflections not only concern 'characters', i.e. eccentrics, but that they are also presented by an eccentric narrative voice.[258] The stories contain characters that are by now familiar to us as prototypes of

[258] That these characters are related to physiology is outlined in John A. Fuerst, 'Concepts of Physiology, Reproduction, and Evolution of Machines in Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* and George Eliot's *Impressions of*

eccentricity: Leonardo da Vinci, the original Theophrastus, Locke, Byron, Ossian, Samuel Johnson, Don Quixote, and Carlyle. Yet what it equally noticeably (and has been pointed out by many critics as a failing of the text) is that the mask of its narratorial voice begins to slip in the course of the book. Indeed, many critics suspect that towards its end, its voice is that of its author George Eliot.[259] What this indicates, in the context of the above-mentioned shifts of eccentricity into norm, is that eccentricity, at least as dissent against social and cultural norms, becomes harder to sustain when this norm has achieved a degree of flexibility that makes it thrive on exactly this dissent, too. Two late-Victorian examples will show how eccentricity can be maintained nonetheless, either in the shape of extreme individualism or in the shape of fictional totalitarianism, before we shift our gaze towards the last great cultural debate involving eccentricity, that of the so-called 'decadence' of the *fin de siècle*.

The two late Victorian examples are both related to what is now commonly labelled 'nonsense', although only one of the two authors identified his writings as such: Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson). Lear, originally a painter of birds, and therefore in line with the empiricist tradition of the nineteenth century, made his fame with poems that he himself called 'nonsense' poems and songs. Many of them employ the limerick mode, a short and constrained poetic form that most likely derived from folk tradition, but achieved popularity through Lear's collections *A Book of Nonsense* (1845, and enlarged in 1861, 1863, and 1870), *A Book of Nonsense and More Nonsense* (1862) and more of the same ilk. Although he thereby established his fame as a writer of light verse and children's rhymes (very much in accord with Carroll, who worked a little later), a closer look at his writings reveals that they are neither light nor child-like. Indeed, many of his limericks feature deformed outcast characters, and an alarming degree of violence is prevalent in them. A typical example is:

Theophrastus Such', *Samuel Butler Newsletter*, 4:2 (1981), pp. 31–53. That, in turn, physiognomy is not only related to eccentricity, but also to an exchange of gazes, as argued in the previous chapter, is elaborated with particular reference to the founding father of physiognomy, Johann Caspar Lavater, in Ulrich Stadler, 'Der gedoppelte Blick und die Ambivalenz des Bildes in Lavaters *Physiognomischen Fragmenten zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniß und Menschenliebe*', in: *Der exzentrische Blick: Gespräch über Physiognomik*, ed. Claudia Schmölders (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996), pp. 77–92.

[259] Dennis Joseph Enright writes in his Introduction to the text: 'In the later essays the sense of Theophrastus Such as the speaker fades, while George Eliot comes to address us more directly'; George Eliot, *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, ed. Dennis Joseph Enright (London: Dent, 1995), p. xxii.

> There was an Old Man with a gong,
> Who bumped at it all the day long;
> But they called out, 'Oh, law!
> You're a horrid old bore!'
> So they smashed that Old Man with a gong.[260]

Contained in the seemingly droll form of Lear's limericks and also his longer poems is a disturbing sense of violation of norms (here represented by a hegemonic 'they' and even in a reference to the law), or rather, of the need to rewrite these norms in terms that are radically individualistic and usually transgressive, drastic, and violent. A notion of normality hovers vaguely over the texts, but their 'reality' is rather one of norms that clash. In terms of eccentricity, the dialectic of centre and margin has become disturbed, since the centre has lost its centripetal pulling power, and the individual, endowed with its own 'centripetal' pull since the establishment of the originally eccentric genius as norm by Romanticism, presents itself as a possible alternative. However, since the cult of the individual, as seen in the ambivalent privileging of 'character' in Victorianism, leads to a proliferation of such alternatives, these in turn clash with the equally dominant ideological desire to achieve social harmony.[261] As in Carlyle, individual greatness (or merely distinction) clashes with the only vaguely perceptible, but nonetheless strongly desired notions of a cultural consensus. In the following examples, it does so on the terrain of gender norms:

> There was an Old Man with a poker,
> Who painted his face with red ochre;
> When they said, 'You're a guy!'
> He made no reply,
> But knocked them all down with his poker. (p. 50)

We shall see below that it does not matter if this conflict is taken outside English culture (in the shape of colonial fiction). A conflict remains.[262] Already some of Lear's most popular verses in fact lead their protagonists into colonial territory. 'The Jumblies', for instance, take their eccentricity

[260] Edward Lear, *The Book of Nonsense and Nonsense Songs* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 16. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.

[261] Compare Thomas Dilworth, 'Society and the Self in the Limericks of Lear', *Review of English Studies*, 45:177 (1994), pp. 42–62.

[262] See Ina-Rae Hark, 'Edward Lear: Eccentricity and Victorian Angst', *Victorian Poetry*, 16 (1978), pp. 112–122.

to a fictional colonial space with names reminiscent of South Africa, such as 'Chankly Bore' (pp. 138). Yet there are nostalgic or melancholic remainders of eccentricity's original challenge in Lear. Already the fairy-tale beginning of limericks with the standard formula 'There was' projects their stories back into a (potentially lost) past. A poem like 'The Dong with a Luminous Nose' (pp. 160–165) shows a typical eccentric outcast (here endowed with one of Lear's typically grotesque and phallic noses – a clear echo of Rabelais and his notion of the carnivalesque) who also throws light on a dark world, a light, however that is far from the general and ordered illumination of the Enlightenment. Instead, it shows once again an individualist pattern, of significance only to the bearer of the luminous nose himself. We shall re-encounter a very similar motif in an unexpected place: Modernism's alternative view of cultural history in the shape of circumnavigation or *periplous*.

Children's Literature, among whose major writers Lear and Carroll are frequently counted, is in itself a development of the eighteenth and nineteenth century that can fruitfully be analysed under the paradigms outlined for eccentricity in the present study. Originally texts written for children were designed with clear moral and didactic purposes in mind, both of which were securely tied in with religion (writers like Anna Laetitia Barbauld and her immensely popular collections, among them *Hymns in Prose for Children* of 1781, are telling expressions). In the course of the nineteenth century, these moral, didactic, and religious patterns begin to crumble – to the extent that in Lear and Carroll, as we shall see, there are neither moral messages nor religious references, which are otherwise so unavoidable in writing of the period. In fact, it is hard to tell what children were supposed to learn from Lear's poems or Carroll's poems and tales, since many of the layers on which they work demand a very learned adult readership. In fact, the label 'Children's Literature' seems in their cases a mere disguise for writings that would otherwise find themselves labelled eccentric, and potentially even deviant and mad.

In Carroll, we find a diametrically opposed pattern to Lear's rampant individualism, yet one that still thrives on an imbalance of centre and margin.[263] His universes are centres gone mad, systems that assume universal dominance even though their foundations are the opposite of common sense, namely 'nonsense'. In the two immensely famous *Alice* books *Alice in Wonderland* of 1865 and *Through the Looking-Glass* of 1871, card games and chess assume the status of life-

[263] For a comparison of the two, see Lisa S. Ede, 'An Introduction to the Nonsense Literature of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll', in: *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense*, ed. Wim Tigges (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1987), pp. 47–60.

ordering (and death-inducing) systems. What is considered trivial in ordinary life now becomes dominant, in the same way as what has hitherto been considered dominant (such as moralising children's rhymes and even seminal Romantic poems) now only appear as parodies. When it was claimed earlier that Carroll's universes are totalitarian (in contrast to Lear's individualist ones), this refers to the fact that they no longer look towards their alternative in a dialectic that would make them eccentric. Instead, they refuse to acknowledge that there is an alternative to them, as can be seen in the turbulent final scenes of the two *Alice* books that derive the origin of their confusion from the inability of the Wonderland and Mirror beings to understand that alternative truths and realities are possible. Although the texts give up an eccentric model by totalizing eccentricity, they nonetheless act as a powerful critique of Victorian ideology and its inability to see alternatives to itself.

The fact that Queen Victoria was an outspoken admirer of Carroll's story is well documented. On the one hand, of course, there is an irony in the symbol of Victorianism admiring that which criticises its monolithic centricity. On the other hand, as was indicated in the section on Carlyle, Victoria herself, especially after becoming widowed, was a rather eccentric symbol of Victorianism: as a female head of state and church in a culture whose 'separate spheres' model confined women to the domestic realm; as a widow in ostensible life-long mourning in an ideology that praised female devotion and piety, but also strongly demanded usefulness and practicality.[264] In fact, what seemed like a permanent withdrawal from her public functions (she even refused to open parliament in successive years) led to a crisis of the British monarchy and to calls for its abandonment. As the melancholy female recluse, however, Victoria embodies many traits of eccentricity in her own person.

Perhaps the most challenging fictional clash of a centricity that is as dominant as it increasingly appears vacuous can be detected in Lewis Carroll's enigmatic poem *The Hunting of the Snark* of 1876. It superficially employs the typical nineteenth-century mould of adventure and exploration stories. Yet the team it accompanies is a nonsensical array of characters held together by the most whimsical logic. Their leader, a lugubrious Bellman, can once again be regarded as an intertextual parody of the Romantic outsider. The aim of their expedition, the Snark, remains nondescript. Or rather, it is – like 'Man' himself in Pope's *Essay on Man* – produced by the eccentric negation

[264] On the nexus of ritual, death, and Victorianism, see Franz Meier, 'Der Tod und die Königin: Viktorianischer Totenkult und Queen Victoria als Witwe', in: *In the Footsteps of Queen Victoria: Wege zum Viktorianischen Zeitalter*, ed. Christa Jansohn (Münster et al.: Lit Verlag, 2003), pp. 113–132.

of eccentricity, by a double eccentricity that is. The Snark is harmless when he is not a Boojum (needless to say, the definition of a Boojum works in the same way reversed). The end of the tale sees the expedition hit on a Boojum – with the effect that its discoverer and the Boojum simultaneously disappear into thin air.[265] The consciously paradoxical form of the text permits an almost unlimited range of possible interpretations of Snark and Boojum. In terms of eccentricity, it represents the ideological centre of norms and truths, around which eccentric positions hover. When they clash, however, the hoped-for essence of the centre is unveiled as an absence, indeed a vacuum, into which even the dissenting positions vanish. Eccentricity, is has become clear, achieves a very exposed, but at the same time highly tenuous position in Victorianism.

At the same time the homogenising effect of a hegemonic culture also affected the exotic. Thus, in Henry Rider Haggard's colonial adventure novel *King Solomon's Mines* of 1885 one finds an English gentleman stumbling through darkest Afrika with a monocle and rubber shirt collars. Eccentric Englishness had by then been firmly established, i.e. eccentricity had shifted from the heterostereotype that it had been in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century to the auto-stereotype, the self-image, of the English that it still is today. It is, however, not difficult to see that underneath the ostensible droll harmlessness that it seems to possess in nineteenth-century colonial fiction, there lurks a steely determination to assert individuality (albeit in strictly defined terms) even in the strangest environment. 'We have ways of being English gentlemen', one might summarise the attitude that took the norm around the globe with the Empire, but simultaneously made it look eccentric.[266]

3.4 *Fin de siècle*: contested eccentricities

When the term 'eccentricity' is alluded to in connection with British culture, one of the first names mentioned today is usually Oscar Wilde. He indeed fulfils many of the characteristics that

[265] Compare Elizabeth Sewell, '"In the Midst of his Laughter and Glee": Nonsense and Nothingness in Lewis Carroll', *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 82:3–4 (Autumn–Winter 1999), pp. 541–571.

[266] For a detailed reading of the intersection of eccentricity, decadence, and colonialism, see my essay 'Imperial Decadence/Postcolonial Decadence: Excess, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Late Nineteenth-Century and Postcolonial Twentieth-Century Writing', in: *Anglistentag 2000 Berlin: Proceedings, Proceedings of the Conference of the German Association of University Teachers of English*, ed. Peter Lucko and Jürgen Schlaeger (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001), pp. 395–405.

have been outlined in the course of the present study. Ostentation, wit, genius, 'character', but also a strange nostalgia and melancholy affecting not only his persona (which also intertextually derives many elements from the Byronic hero), but also his writings.[267] And yet Wilde is no isolated instance of eccentricity, but part of a development that was viewed as critically by mainstream Victorian culture as it, in turn, tried hard to provoke the guardians of this culture in the shape of reviewers and critics, but also churchmen and judges.

'Decadence' was generally the battle cry of the antagonists of the perceived movement, a term that derived from the by now firmly established evolutionary thinking proposed by Darwin (which had originally been strongly contested by the same forces who now adopted it).[268] The label itself came from a highly influential book by Max Nordau, not uninterestingly a German Jew who responded to the common anti-Semitic prejudices against Jews as a lower life-form not only by taking on board such racist stereotypes, but broadening them to a general critique of cultural decline. He even changed his name from 'Südfeld' to Nordau, replacing the Jewish element by a claim to a Nordic background.[269]

The Decadence debate is in fact a historical echo of a discussion that we have already encountered as part of the development of eccentricity: the luxury debate originating in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. As much as luxury formed part of the desirable economic progress of Britain, its effect on the morality of its population was seen critically, and especially class-transgressing ostentation and loosening sexual mores were seen as undesirable consequences, features that would also be used in connection with the *fin de siècle* dandy. The term 'dandy', though of uncertain origin, was indeed popularised by foreigners as a heterostereotype of the English upper class. Leading writers were the German Hermann Fürst von Pückler-Muskau and

[267] See Susanne Schmid, 'Byron and Wilde: The Dandy and the Public Sphere', in: *The Importance of Reinventing Oscar: Versions of Wilde during the Last 100 Years*, ed. Uwe Böker, Richard Corballis and Julie A. Hibbard (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 81–89.

[268] Compare Julian North, 'Defining Decadence in Nineteenth-Century French and British Criticism', in: *Romancing Decay: Ideas of Decadence in European Culture*, ed. Michael St. John (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 83–94. See also Robert Kelsey Rough Thornton, '"Decadence" in Later Nineteenth-Century England', in: *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. Ian Fletcher and Malcolm Bradbury (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980), pp. 14–29.

[269] Simon Maximilian Südfeld's study of 1892 was translated into English as early as 1895, first under the name ‚Max Simon', but in the quickly following new issues as ‚Max Nordau': Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: W. Heinemann, 1895).

the Frenchmen Jules Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly and Charles Baudelaire.[270] The French novelist Joris Karl Huysmans and his novel *A Rebours* [Against the Grain] of 1884 were regarded as among the most dangerous of the unhealthy foreign fictional influences.

Yet there were also some differences to earlier ambivalences between xenophobia and the worship of foreignness. The late nineteenth-century dandy felt no need to travel to stay up-to-date with foreign fashions any more, as the seventeenth-century fop did. An improved network of trade and communication made the exotic come to him – in the shape of exquisite objects and books. Unfortunately, this efficiency also affected their integration into normality: the hunt for new sensations increased in speed, since everything quickly became common. At the same time, in debates on dandyism and decadence, an increasing class hostility becomes evident. Although upper-class villains had been a staple of English literature for a long time (they featured crucially in Gothic romances, for instance), now their evil influence was generally directed against the supposedly pure, innocent, and straightforward, in short: English, middle class. Bram Stoker's fantastic figure of Dracula from the eponymous novel of 1897 is a prominent example, since he represents xenophobia, fear of disease, anti-aristocratic feelings, and even anti-capitalist sentiments. It is also telling that he is eventually defeated (or is he?) by not only a solid middle-class character, but even more so by a female one, Mina Harker.

Almost as a counter-reaction, in 'Decadent' texts 'common' now assumed the role of the low and despicable, but its antonym was not 'high' (with its moral, religious, and class undertones) or 'genial' with its echoes of the Romantic genius, but 'exquisite'. The term originally meant 'abstruse', but also 'choice', 'intense', and 'highly cultivated'. There were attempts to define the exquisite, and with it a new conception of *fin de siècle* art, often called 'Aestheticism', in idealist terms – to

[270] Pückler-Muskau's descriptions of an English dandy are reprinted in *Pückler's Progress: The Adventures of Prince Pückler-Muskau in England, Wales and Ireland as Told in Letters to his Former Wife, 1826–1829*, trans Flora Brennan (London: Collins, 1987). Charles Baudelaire, 'Le peintre de la vie moderne' (from the significantly titled *Le Spleen de Paris of* 1863) has been reprinted numerous times, for instance in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1995). D'Aurevilly's essay on Beau Brummell as dandy is available in Jules Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Dandyism*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (London: Consortium, 1988). See also Karen Humphreys, 'Barbey, Baudelaire, and the "Imprevu": Strategies in Literary Dandyism', *Modern Language Studies*, 29:1 (Spring 1999), pp. 63–80. Also Philip G. Hadlock, 'The Other Other: Baudelaire, Melancholia, and the Dandy', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 30:1–2 (2002), pp. 58–67.

deflect from the suspicion that is expressed itself through commodities only.[271] Walter Pater is famous for his attempt to come up with a new definition of art for art's sake. In *The Renaissance* we find, so to speak, a radicalisation of the move observed in Shaftesbury, which made morality aesthetic. Yet what is even more radical is that now virtue (be it moral, artistic, or otherwise) is shifted away from the individual and onto the artistic object. In terms of individuality this means its absolute refinement (since Pater still insists that this virtue is brought out in perception) and its end, since it is ultimately the object that dictates now. In terms of eccentricity, this means that neither the centre nor the dissenting eccentric is in charge. Both are rather controlled by the objects that they produce and perceive. This particular end of eccentricity in commodity culture will concern us in the following chapter on the twentieth century. Pater writes:

> 'To see the object as it really is', has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly. The objects with which aesthetic criticism deals – music, poetry, artistic and accomplished forms of human life – are indeed receptacles of so many powers or forces: they possess, like the products of nature, so many virtues or qualities. What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?[272]

What is noteworthy in Pater's argument is that, first of all, criticism is now the established mode of aesthetic reception. Yet a double divorce has taken place: the aesthetic object that is to be perceived is now in a parallel reality to nature. It is not the outcrop of nature, as in the Renaissance, or the link between sensibility and morality in the moral nature of the Enlightenment.[273] Instead, like Lewis Carroll's alternative universes, it hovers in its own reality. This reality, however, is made real only by the onlookers: it lives in and thrives on perception. Yet the onlookers by no means control the aesthetic objects they perceive; in fact, they are affected and indeed transformed and partly created by them. The model is one that is divorced from religious ontologies. It is also divorced from moral ones. It creates objects and selves in a

[271] Compare Roger Kimball, 'Art vs. Aestheticism: The Case of Walter Pater', *The New Criterion*, 13:9 (May 1995), pp. 11–18.
[272] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. viii.
[273] A comprehensive study is Anthony Ward, *Walter Pater: The Idea in Nature* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1966).

universe of exquisite sensations, yet one that finds it hard or impossible to establish links with moral, social, cultural, and political reality. The eccentricity of Aestheticism lies in its bases; not in mere surface manifestations.

This is also evident in Pater's more famous definition of the aestheticist ideal:

> *Philosophiren*, says Novalis, *ist dephlegmatisieren, vivificiren* [to philosophise is to de-phlegmatise, to vivify]. The service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit is to rouse, to startle it into sharp and eager observation. Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood or passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us, – for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?
>
> To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike. While all melts under our feet, we may well catch at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hand, or the face of one's friend. (pp. 236–237)

Pater's theory closely resembles the early twentieth-century concepts of the Russian Formalists, who also held that the function of art is to make strange, to break through the habitualised modes of perception.[274] What was scandalising to Pater's contemporaries was the way in which that which was traditionally regarded as transient, fleeting, fickle, and therefore of little value, such as passions, sentiments, and moods, now gained equal status with knowledge. Moreover, Pater's Aestheticism is one of consumption and not of production; its results are not meant to last – very much in contrast to established Victorian economic ideals of growth and solidity. It is not astonishing that we find many Aestheticist ideas in the emerging culture of advertising and consumerism. The attempt to make eccentricity centric is here not the Romantic one focussing on elevated individual genius, but on exquisite objects and sensations, and its enthralled percipients. That Pater's words are a reaction to a world of increasing norms and normalisation can be glimpsed in the term 'stereotyped'. It originates in printing technology, but soon came to mean

[274] Compare Catherine Gallagher, 'Formalism and Time', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 61:1 (2000), pp. 229–251.

all forms of clichéd identity. An interesting struggle is at work here: Aestheticism presents itself as an eccentric challenge to normalisation; yet normalcy fights back, and with the aid of concepts such as degeneration it tries to turn those who abhor the stereotype into a stereotype themselves.

This is what happened to Oscar Wilde. Starting out as the writer of well-made plays with a satirical edge, there was little that declared him the mastermind of either Decadence or eccentricity in the 1890s. When he, however, picked up on the ambivalent interest of the majority in eccentricity, he adopted not only a dandified costume, but also strove to invent fashions, such as the wearing of green carnations. As we have indicated with reference to Pater's Aestheticism, and as was already evident in the seventeenth-century fops and their dandy successors, fashion increasingly became the territory where eccentricity and the market met and collaborated, but also the sphere where eccentricity was commodified and normalised. Wilde managed to maintain interest in his particular forms of eccentricity by combining a number of subversive elements in his persona. The son of Irish upper-middle-class parents with a revolutionary and libertine air, he also cleverly toyed with suspicions of sexual deviance that surrounded him. From the days of the fops, ostensibly performed eccentricity had been associated with sexual perversion. Yet the late Victorians, perhaps to combat the increasingly noticeable and now newly conceptualised homosexuality in their culture, made sure that the legal environment changed much for the worse. This was the point that eventually made Wilde stumble. Even today many people remain unaware of the manifold ways his texts pun on homosexuality – and the majority's ignorance concerning it.[275] One only has to think of the subtle alternative meanings of the central terms in his most famous play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, where 'bunburying' describes the double life its privileged male upper-class protagonists lead, but also represents an obscene joke about anal sex.

Wilde did not escape the dilemma outlined in Lear and Carroll either: a society based on either an overly dominant norm or on increasing promotion of dissident lifestyle options made the dialectic of centre and margin that had kept both culture's flexibility and eccentricity alive for centuries collapse. This is most evident in his best-known text, one that is frequently, and falsely, as will be argued, identified as an eccentric one or even a text about eccentricity. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is in many ways an odd text. More a novella than a novel, not a short

[275] See Jason Edwards, '"The Generation of the Green Carnation": Sexual Degeneration, the Representation of Male Homosexuality and the Limits of Yeats's Sympathy', in: *Modernist Sexualities*, ed. Hugh Stevens and Caroline Howlett (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 41–55.

story, yet with many melodramatic elements, it can rightly be seen as an experiment designed to put Pater's Aestheticist theories into fictional practice. It indeed contains an object of exquisite beauty – who also happens to be the young man so celebrated by both Pater and the Wilde circle. It contains several moments of exquisite pleasure, as well as some of exquisite guilt. It also features many witty aphorisms, and thereby establishes links with a dominant mode of eccentricity. Its elements of satire are further hints at an eccentric heritage.

Yet the text, when looked at carefully, fails to deliver eccentrics. Dorian, the beautiful naive young man who goes to the bad, is not an eccentric. He is not another version of the sentimental 'Man of Feeling'. In fact, he fails to show much feeling of any sort, if one discounts his overwhelming narcissism. His friend, the painter Basil Hallward, is not an eccentric either, although he is sentimental and in love with his artistic vision of Dorian and pays for his resulting ability to create an ideal portrait of him with his life. Yet, like Dorian, he holds a firmly established place in his culture and society. The same applies to Lord Henry Wotton, the deliverer of aperçus and wit, who does combine elements of the rake and libertine, perhaps even of the Gothic villain and Byronic hero, yet nonetheless remains a stuffy society lion – and not a threat to anyone's morality.[276] Indeed the characters who most closely resemble the by then established stock eccentric characters of Victorian fiction are Sibyl Vane, the naive young actress, and her scheming mother. In the best and worst tradition of eccentrics acting as moral warning signs, Sibyl is made to poison herself – significantly by eating the lead make-up that is the sign of her morally dubious profession.

Indeed, it appears that *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, much like Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*, struggles with a notion of eccentricity that it can no longer maintain, that has become elusive, invisible, and a shadow of itself – yet only because the same can be said for notions of centricity and binding norms. This is why the text is so vague on what Dorian's horrible misdeeds are. Visiting opium dens? Hardly, since opium remained legal until the early twentieth century. Seducing and abandoning a young actress? His class would consider this almost compulsory for a young man. There are darker hints of blackmail and perhaps homosexuality, but these are neither elaborated nor would they have had such drastic consequences in real life as they are

[276] That the text can indeed be read as the equivalent of a traditional morality tale is argued in Felicia Bonaparte, 'The (Fai)Lure of the Aesthetic Ideal and the (Re)Formation of Art: The Medieval Paradigm That Frames *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', in: *Medievalism in the Modern World: Essays in Honour of Leslie J. Workman*, ed. Richard Utz and Tom Shippey (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), pp. 227–254.

made to have in the text. Wilde himself, his biographers inform us, had very pragmatic ways of dealing with blackmail. The text cobbles together a melodramatic Faustian finale, one suspects, because this is the only way it can end, since there are no other ways of stopping Dorian, and there is no way of stopping the boredom that sets in when exquisiteness becomes the order of the day.

This is also the dilemma in which another crucial *fin de siècle* novel finds itself, one that can be read as a counter to Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*. *The Sorrows of Satan* by Marie Corelli, the pen-name of Mary Mackay, of 1895, was one of the most successful novels of its time. Queen Victoria indeed believed that Corelli's fame would be ever-lasting. Yet it turned out that the moralising tendency of her writings went out of fashion very quickly.

Nonetheless, *The Sorrows of Satan* is very interesting as an anti-decadent novel that itself falls prey to the allure of decadence.[277] Similar to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, its plot is based on a Faustian pact, here between a young writer and the devil. This devil turns out to be the equivalent of Wilde's Dorian: incredibly good-looking, seductive to men and women, a master of the superficial styles of his time, he is, in short, the perfect dandy. Yet unlike typical *fin de siècle* dandies of the Lord Henry Wotton ilk, he is also a profound moralist, and therefore more in line with Renaissance devils of the Mephostophilis type of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Corelli's Prince Rimânez (note the foreign name) is primarily bored, the feature we observed also in *Dorian Gray* as a sign of eccentricity having become thoroughly commodified and turned into mere fashion and life-style. His triumphs are too easy: the young writer, a good-looking aristocratic girl; they all fall instantly not only for his personal charms, but rather for the common seductions of his time that merely find a clichéd symbol in him: the striving for popular success and wealth, or the yearning to lead an unrestrained sexual life under the facade of upper-class respectability.

The only character who resists Rimânez' seduction is the fictional alter ego of Marie Corelli, the saintly Mavis Clare. Living in a chocolate box cottage surrounded by beautiful flowers, a devoted dog, and – tellingly – birds she has named after her hostile critics, very much as an echo of Miss Flite in Dickens's *Bleak House*, she represents the real eccentric of the novel, since Rimânez as the devil must oscillate between eccentric digression and evil Otherness. Yet she is also clearly a contradictory and ultimately impossible eccentric. She wants to be morally pure,

[277] Compare Kirsten MacLeod, 'Marie Corelli and Fin-de-Siècle Francophobia: The Absinthe Trail of French Art', *English Literature in Transition (1880–1920)*, 43:1 (2000), pp. 66–82.

and apparently writes novels to match. But at the same time, she is not only commercially successful in a world that the novel depicts as depraved (and why would a depraved readership enjoy morally uplifting tales?), but also acutely aware of the importance of criticism. Indeed, in terms of gender, Corelli represents something of an exception, since the nineteenth century had witnessed a slow take-over of the genre of the novel by male authors. More than that, Corelli is important as a moderniser of publishing habits: she abandoned the until then dominant three-decker format, which made novels expensive and restricted them to circulating libraries and owning them to an economic élite. Publishing her works in a cheap one-volume format from the start not only 'democratised' the novel form, it also swept huge amounts of money into Corelli's coffers. Again: eccentricity only exists in a self-defeating tension in the *fin de siècle*, very much like a self-undermining shadow of its former self.

This is also true for Wilde's seminal figure of Dorian Gray. What remains of Dorian at the end of the text is his shrivelled corpse, which can only be identified by an expensive ring and his now once again rejuvenated portrait, the picture of the title of the text. As such a picture, eternally young yet an eternal reminder of a past that is dead and gone, eccentricity enters the twentieth century.

4 Eccentricity's last stand

4.1 Modernity, modernisation, modernism: eccentricity and the avant-garde

We have seen that the nineteenth century brought particular stimulants as well as crucial challenges to eccentricity, since the century had to accommodate the contradictory tendencies of an increasing normalisation and normativity of ideologies while at the same time thriving on increasing diversification – of lifestyles, but also of cultural and economic forces. It is no coincidence, therefore, that two crucial theoretical developments that are of enormous significance for the supposedly 'modern' cultural and artistic tendencies of the early twentieth century owe their development to those contradictions.[278] These are psychoanalysis and sociology.

While psychoanalysis is frequently employed in superficial assessments of eccentricity as a means of explaining the individual dispositions of eccentrics vis-à-vis their personal histories and circumstances, what is regularly overlooked is that the discipline emerged not as a method of underpinning individuality, but as a way of explaining (and explaining away) cultural contradictions and diversity.[279] What were considered taboos in nineteenth-century ideology (infantile sexuality and masturbation, homosexuality, but also female sexual desire, sadism and masochism, and various forms of fetishism) were supposed to be explained as 'natural' manifestations of one unified sex drive, the libido. Although Sigmund Freud today stands for the emergence of psychoanalysis, he in fact based his ideas on already established models, some of them developed

[278] That there are also important connections between so-called 'decadence' and Modernism is argued convincingly by David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

[279] The ideological implications of psychoanalysis are discussed (with different results) in Elizabeth J. Bellamy, 'Discourses of Impossibility: Can Psychoanalysis Be Political?', *Diacritics*, 23:1 (Spring 1993), pp. 24–38, and Christopher Lane, 'Beyond the Social Principle: Psychoanalysis and Radical Democracy', *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, 1:1 (Spring 1996), pp. 105–21.

empirically, yet others blatantly intertextual[280] and often harking back merrily to theories related to the age-old tenets of melancholy or possession, i.e. traditional forms of eccentricity and deviance. In fact, drawing the line between eccentricity and deviance was one of the crucial balancing acts of the new discipline. The actual consequences of the dilemma, as we recall, were visible in cases such as Oscar Wilde's trial and prison sentence.

Freud typically based his ideas on experiences that everyone shared, so that a rejection at least of his empirical bases became difficult. Dreams, slips of the tongue, and jokes, for example, were accepted and largely cherished features of 'normal' everyday culture. Freud's usually sexuality-based explanations for them were not. Yet Freud's radicalism did not lie in what one might critically label a 'pornographication' of everyday life by pointing out the possible links with sexuality of even the seemingly most innocent act or utterance. It also rested on the simultaneous soothing claim that all of this was perfectly 'normal'.[281] The ambivalence observed for eccentricity in the eighteenth and nineteenth century reappears here: Byron's eccentric outsider ill at ease with society and its conventions is at the same time the typical adolescent temporarily rebelling against the norms of society – only to be integrated into them after some time. The same mechanism features in the idea that eccentricity is like an inoculation, and that its temporary upheavals and unease ultimately make a culture more flexible and thereby stronger.

Freud's pronouncements on the so-called 'perversions' (hitherto a clear case of the deviant and by no means acceptable as eccentric) are telling in this respect:

> Everyday experience has shown us that most of these extensions [the perversions], or at any rate the less severe of them, are constituents which are rarely absent from the sexual life of healthy people, and are judged by them no differently from other intimate events. If circumstances favour such an occurrence, normal people can substitute a perversion of this kind for the normal sexual aim for quite a time, or can find place for the one alongside the other. No healthy person, it appears, can fail to make some addition that might be called perverse to the normal sexual

[280] See my essay 'Literary Criticism and Psychoanalytic Positions', in: *The Cambridge History of Literary Theory*, vol. 9: *Twentieth-Century Historical, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Christa Knellwolf and Christopher Norris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 175–189 (p. 175).

[281] Compare Teresa de Lauretis, 'Freud, Sexuality, and Perversion', in: *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS*, ed. Donna C. Stanton (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 216–234. See also Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Perversion and the Social Relation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

> aim; and the universality of this finding is in itself enough to show how inappropriate it is to use the word perversion as a term of reproach.[282]

It is interesting that Freud calls perversion 'extension', thereby underlining what the present study has claimed to be the necessary link between centric and eccentric, the mutual dependence of one on the other. Freud is also keen to emphasise the normality of the supposed exception in terms such 'Everyday experience', 'healthy people', 'no differently', 'normal people', 'healthy person', 'normal sexual aim' – and eventually 'universality'. However, this universality rests exactly on the extension or 'addition' which exists 'alongside' normality 'for quite a time'. The unequal dialectic is in place once again.

Sociology approaches the same dilemma or dialectic from the opposite perspective, not from the position of the individual, but the group, indeed from a formation that only gained prominence in the course of the economic and political upheavals of the nineteenth century, the 'masses'. Once the Industrial Revolution had created the masses as an important economic factor that, in contrast to the residual agricultural population of earlier times, was (supposed to be) mobile, flexible, and to some extent unpredictable, an increasing urgency to understand its motivations, structures, and character grew. This was done first and foremost through recourse to statistics. For the French sociologist Adolphe Quételet, the so-called *homme moyen* or average person was the medium of all available figures.[283] This standardising tendency is still evident in Auguste Comte who translated the medical model according to which all illness is merely a quantitative departure from an ideal statistical norm onto human interaction and organisation.[284] It was Georges Canguilhem who, for the first time, showed an interest in qualitative criteria for the evaluation of human behaviour and communities.[285]

It is evident nonetheless that all these early manifestations of sociology depended for their models on that which is no longer inside the norm, but deviates from it. The differences between

[282] Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York : Basic Books, 1967), p. 26.

[283] Lambert Adolphe Jacques Quételet, *Anthropométrie, ou mesure des différentes facultés de l'homme* (Brussels : C. Muquardt, 1870).

[284] Auguste Comte, *Auguste Comte and Positivism: The Essential Writings*, ed. and intr. Gertrud Lenzer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

[285] Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett (London: Zone Books, 1989).

Quételet, Comte and Canguilhem lie merely in the way in which this departure is regarded. The dialectic observed in Freud is at work here once again, as is the understanding of the deviant or eccentric as unthinkable without continual reference to that which is perceived as normal. Yet be it a statistical average or a qualitative ideal, this norm remains as elusive as its possible symbolic equivalent in Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*. One could even speculate that hitting on the perfect *homme moyen* would have been as scary as encountering the creature of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The absolute norm would represent the absolutely deviant. A Modernist masterpiece that plays with this ambivalence is Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* of 1930 to 1932.

It is therefore understandable that several studies of eccentrics that have appeared hail from a sociological background. It is all the more disappointing, however, that after decades of abstention from an engagement with such supposedly marginal manifestations of society, the existing sociological studies (James and Weeks' has been mentioned) generally fail on a number of important fronts. Firstly, they remain ignorant concerning the historical development of the concept. A German study entitled *Exzentriker: Narren der Moderne* [Eccentrics: Modernity's Fools] neither explains what it means by Modernity nor the problematic equation of eccentrics and fools. Indeed, at one point it even calls them 'irgendwie konservativ im guten und eigentlichen Sinn des Wortes' [somehow conservative in the positive and original sense of the term].[286] Yet since it lacks a genealogy, one remains in the dark against what this conservatism defines itself.

Secondly, they fail to inquire into the intertextual relations that determine eccentricity. By their insistent focus on individuals, they treat eccentricity as something that 'is' rather than as something that is composed, interpreted, and translated. Although they commonly employ established anecdotes about eccentric individuals, they remain blind to the nature of their material and its constitution.

Thirdly, and most critically, they are ignorant towards their own position vis-à-vis normality and exception when they try to utilise eccentricity and provide value-judgements of its usefulness for individuals and society. They fail to see that they themselves participate in an ideological mechanism – rather than analysing and critically presenting it. This blindness goes hand in hand with an underdeveloped concept of 'culture'. Weeks and James do not address this crucial framework for the location of eccentricity at all, while Dörr-Backes' book rather helplessly

[286] Felicitas Dörr-Backes, *Exzentriker: Die Narren der Moderne* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003), p. 43.

compares it to a sparkling soap bubble hovering above the discourse of sociology ('wie eine schillernde Seifenblase über dem soziologischen Diskurs').[287] If this was a reference to the bubbles and baubles current in the eccentricity debates of the seventeenth century, it would make ironic sense. Here, however, it is merely an admission of incompetence. It is clear that art and especially literature have traditionally been much more adept at dealing with eccentricity and its manifestations.

In terms of literature, it was Realism that tried to maintain the precarious balance between a belief in an ordered and understandable objective reality – by turning this reality into a fiction with unproblematic ontologies and usually consensual teleology (leading, for example, to the happy marriages of the heroes and heroines, and to the punishment of those deviating from the norm). At the same time, Realism 'tamed' the by then established notion of the subject by reducing its challenging potential of genius and utilising its individual traces as long as they could be integrated into a notion of normality in the shape of 'character'.[288] Here it is in close alliance with modern biography, which also aims at providing a linear ontology and teleology of a human subject and integrating it into its time and culture. Yet already the end of the nineteenth century had seen this consensual artistic model break up. One need only look towards so-called 'decadent' literature again. There the traditional realms which had so far been covered up by the concept of eccentricity are very clearly visible: class, religion, gender, sexuality, but also cultural Otherness. The areas of tension that British culture had habitually tried to brush under the carpet of consensus are most explicitly addressed there. But also in writings that do not form part of a problematic 'decadent' movement (which was in any case rather a projection from the centre than a self-applied label), the dissolution both of identifiable (and utilisable) subjectivity as well as that of an ordered and sensible exteriority can be observed.

Telling examples are Gerard Manley Hopkins's hard-to-categorise poems. In texts like 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves', for instance, a plural speaking voice is at pains to describe exactly the making of sense, of the world, of the self, and of its position vis-à-vis others in this world. It does so in terms that are clearly textual, i.e. uniting both the melancholy self-searching and the carnivalesque ostentation typical of eccentricity. They further employ the fragmentation and intertextuality characteristic of eccentric manifestations, by depicting their activity as the spelling

[287] Dörr-Backes, *Exzentriker*, p. 15.

[288] Compare once more Ginsburg, 'Truth and Persuasion: The Language of Realism and of Ideology in *Oliver Twist*'.

of a tale from the randomly scattered leaves of a traditional mythical oracle. Moreover, what this tale tells is the end of a simple binary opposition of black and white, right and wrong. Instead, it talks about their intricate entanglement, the unbreakable dialectic of centre and margin, who each tell of the other, i.e. help to define it. Nonetheless, the position gained is by no means stable, and certainly not comfortable. Once let loose from the spool of the mythical goddess of fate (ontology and teleology combined in what easily might be a biography or autobiography, but equally a communal, even national myth), the awareness of the eccentric dialectic leads to an existence in and as tension.[289]

> […] Óur tale, O óur oracle! ‘ Lét life, wáned, ah lét life wind
> Off hér once skéined stained véined varíety ‘ upon, áll on twó spools; párt, pen, pack
> Now her áll in twó flocks, twó folds – black, white; ‘ ríght, wrong; reckon but, reck but, mind
> But thése two; wáre of a wórld where bút these ‘ twó tell, each off the óther; of a rack
> Where, selfwring, selfstrung, sheathe- and shelterless, ‘ thóughts agáinst thoughts in groans grínd.[290]

This tensional model of eccentricity affecting both the concept of self and that of world is further underwritten by Hopkins's own biographical and cultural position: as a Catholic convert and eventually Jesuit priest (Jesuits were only officially readmitted into Britain in 1899), he wrote very much like an eccentric voice in the wilderness against his own background, but also against the mainstream of British culture – not to mention the problems his religious order had with his extraordinary poetic productions.

It is no coincidence that Hopkins's works were published posthumously to coincide with the first wave of Modernist writings in 1918. This tied in his reception with that of a supposedly new artistic trend of avant-garde writers. Indeed, what is commonly summarised under the term ‘Modernism’ in literary histories generally owes its label to a supposed departure from established norms, in a usually self-aware radicalisation of the meaning of ‘modernus’, a late Latin term signifying merely whatever is current. Yet does this automatically make Modernist

[289] For a detailed reading of Hopkins's poem in the context of his other writings and literary Modernism, see my *Modernism in Poetry: Motivations, Structures and Limits*, Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature (London and New York: Longman, 1995), pp. 20–21.

[290] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems*, 4th edition, ed. William Henry Gardner and Norman H. Mackenzie (Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 98.

texts eccentric ones? We noticed in the discussion of *fin de siècle* writings above that they found it increasingly difficult to retain a notion of eccentricity, since both norm and deviation showed signs of commodification, and their relation either resembled congruity or complete divorce too much to retain the dialectic of mutual suspicion and orientation required for eccentricity.

Indeed, in much of what has come to shape our perception of Modernist writing, there is recourse to patterns of eccentricity, yet tellingly this recourse is generally one of nostalgia.[291] At the same time, this nostalgia is elaborated with the 'new' and modern 'knowledges' of the disciplines of sociology and psychoanalysis described above. Thus, Joseph Conrad's seminal tale *Heart of Darkness* of 1899 resembles in its plot the colonial adventure stories of Rider Haggard.[292] At the same time, Conrad's story no longer searches for treasures, but seeks to find and rescue a Western character from the clutches of the West's cultural Other, deepest darkest Africa. At the same time, this Africa, as the title of Conrad's text points out, is also an Africa of the mind, its darkness that of psychology and personal weakness. This weakness affects the object of the text's search, Mr Kurtz, as much as its narrator, Marlow. We encounter the latter for the first time leaving the cultural centre, London, on board ship on the majestic and threatening stream, the Thames. Then we find him drifting towards not so much a centre, but a vacuum, on another majestic and threatening stream which remains unnamed, but resembles the Congo. During this drifting between centre and absence Marlowe goes through waves of positioning and repositioning himself. When he returns, he has only found Kurtz dying, left him behind as dead, and worse, tells Kurtz's fiancée a lie about it. In stark contrast to the morally uplifting tales of Victorian fiction, which would have made Marlow a better person, probably to marry him off to Kurtz's dutiful and devoted fiancée, we are faced with a tale of betrayal and corruption.

Something very similar also goes on in Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), which features a failure of a character as its protagonist, someone who forever re-experiences in Freudian shape an earlier cowardice, yet bases his colonial success on the overcompensation of this failure, for example through the achievement of his 'title', which stands in stark contrast to his name in terms of

[291] See Robert Alter, 'Modernism and Nostalgia', *Partisan Review*, 60:3 (Summer 1993), pp. 388–402.

[292] Murray Pittock, 'Rider Haggard and *Heart of Darkness*', *Conradiana*, 19:3 (Autumn 1987), pp. 206–208. See also Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Rider Haggard's Heart of Darkness', in: *Coordinates: Placing Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. George E. Slusser, Eric S. Rabkin and Robert Scholes (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), pp. 124–138.

class.[293] This represents an eccentric appropriation of obsolete aristocratic norms, a transgression that is punished in Realist fashion at the end of the novel. Jim's eventual death at the hands of the natives he has virtually ruled for years is probably a return to nineteenth-century convention. It is surely also a commentary on the British Empire, which was then ostensibly near its peak.[294]

It is telling that the mode of eccentricity that most Modernist texts reiterate is the spatial one. Protagonists leave the orbit of the cultural centre, London, England, and Britain, and try (usually unsuccessfully) to find themselves in an eccentric margin. The failure of their endeavours is as much caused by the fact that the centre-margin dialectic is no longer working as by the impossibility of piecing together a successfully functioning self. Caught between a continuing appeal of a Romantic genius and its rejection through an emphasis on its commodification and reintegration into cultural consensus and hegemony, they literally have nowhere to go. James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, who features both in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* of 1916 and *Ulysses* of 1922, is shown ready to depart from the stifling normality of his native Ireland at the end of *A Portrait* – only to reappear frustrated in *Ulysses*. There, he represents – in terms of the novel's intricate spatial arrangements, which are based on an almost exaggerated Realism with a map of Dublin at its base – the eccentric corrective to the novel's other hero's, Leopold Bloom's, circular course on Bloomsday, 16 June 1904. Stephen's trail through the city shows him cutting across Bloom's circle, and indeed at the end of the novel we lose him to the night, while we find Bloom safely (though perhaps not entirely so) embedded in his marital and social normality.[295]

If Stephen is a typical Modernist protagonists with eccentric character traits, then he already represents a nostalgic model, that of the nineteenth-century *flâneur* described by Charles Baudelaire and belatedly theorised for the twentieth century by none other than one of the crucial theorists of melancholy, Walter Benjamin.[296] Benjamin's *flâneur* is in some ways the later equivalent of the eighteenth-century traveller: a usually bourgeois male (it has been observed that

[293] Compare William A. Martin, '"To Grapple with Another Man's Intimate Need": Trauma-Shame Interdependency (Masochism) in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900)', *Conradiana*, 33:3 (Autumn 2001), pp. 231–249.

[294] See Padmini Mongia, 'Empire, Narrative, and the Feminine in *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness*', in: *Contexts for Conrad*, ed. Keith Carabine, Owen Knowles and Wieslaw Krajka (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1993), pp. 135–150.

[295] For a discussion of the spatial dimensions of *Ulysses*, see my 'Introduction: *Ulysses*' Small Universes', in: *Ulysses*, New Casebooks: Contemporary Critical Essays, ed. Rainer Emig (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 1–29 (esp. pp. 3–6).

[296] The figure is developed in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press, 1999).

there is no female *flâneuse* – except perhaps the prostitute – which points towards the gendered regulation of social space) wandering aimlessly through the urban environments of Paris, London, and Berlin.[297] The *flâneur* is a man of leisure, yet strangely autonomous from the modes of production which ultimately sustain his privileges.[298] Despite his apparent integration into economic and social patters (he is not a vagrant, criminal, homeless person, or other form of legal outsider), psychologically he feels distinct from the lives and commercial activities that he witnesses through the windows of shops and private dwellings. This again could make him the spatial equivalent of an eccentric – in the manner symbolised by Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, as an onlooker on life and temporary occupant of other people's spaces. It also turns the *flâneur* into the curious complement of Freud's ideal patient, the opposite of the psychoanalytic 'couch potato', forever engaged in his or her inner life and curiously unwilling or unable to participate in external activities and realities.[299]

The two forms are in many ways what the late nineteenth century would have called 'decadent'. Yet in their anachronism in terms of class, economy, and even gender (after all, since the nineteenth century, women were in large number part of the urban workforce and very visible walkers of streets, even when they were not prostitutes), they already represent eccentricity in nostalgic retreat. What had been prefigured by fictional characters such as Arthur Conan Doyle's famous private detective Sherlock Holmes, the refined bourgeois male as culture's true aristocrat,[300] also applied to the male *flâneurs* of the early twentieth century, and it is no coincidence that even down-at-heel characters like Joyce's Stephen do not for a minute doubt their superiority.

[297] See Jim Dameron, 'The Flâneur and Walter Benjamin', *Northwest Review*, 38:3 (2000), pp. 135–145.

[298] Compare Susan Buck Morss, 'Der Flâneur, der Sandwichman und die Hure: Dialektische Bilder und die Politik des Müssiggangs', in: *Passagen: Walter Benjamins Urgeschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, ed. Norbert Bolz and Bernd Witte (Munich: Fink, 1984), pp. 96–113.

[299] I owe this insight to discussions with Peter Buse. Compare also Peter Buse, Ken Hirschkop, Scott McCracken and Bertrand Taithe, Benjamin's *Arcades: An Unguided Tour*, Encounters (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

[300] See Werner von Koppenfels, 'Mysterium und Methode: Sherlock Holmes als Heldenfigur des *Fin de siècle*', in: *Die Nineties: Das englische Fin de siècle zwischen Dekadenz und Sozialkritik*, ed. Manfred Pfister and Bernd Schulte-Middelich (Munich: Francke, 1983), pp. 164–180.

Elitism is an accusation often directed towards Modernist writings, usually in relation to forms which make reading difficult.[301] Yet Modernism's sometimes implicit, yet also frequently explicit excuse for its trickiness is that established forms no longer suffice to adequately portray an increasingly complex and accelerated reality. Both the fragmentation of perspective and linear narrative and the psychological complications depicted by associative techniques now thoroughly depart both from a Lockean order and an eccentric order of its own. Instead, through reference to psychoanalysis, they now find orientation in the condensation and displacements of dreams as stream of consciousness. This points towards the fact that Modernism is not simply averse to traditional Realism. Indeed, it often appears to aim at a refinement of this Realism towards a hyper-Realism that encompasses form as well as content.

In this, however, Modernism frequently finds itself forced to acknowledge that it can no longer force self and world, interior and exterior reality together. Texts like T.S. Eliot's early poems, which display shades of characters that one might superficially label eccentrics, most famously that of the speaker in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', worried about almost everything, including organising his own time and living in the gaze of others, whose intentions he hardly believes to be amiable.[302] He would indeed conform to the eccentric model of the unequal gaze, with normality represented by all the others, especially women. Yet he is also the heir of Dickens' droll and harmless eccentrics as moral ornaments, since his crises amount to little but daydreams and ordinary nightmares.

Temporal displacement is the second feature of Modernism that connects it structurally with eccentricity's residual anachronism. Once again, though, Modernism's experiments with time are partly nostalgic. Again, in Eliot, one finds an almost desperate harkening for relics of cultural greatness (most famously in *The Waste Land*). However, what such relics proclaim is not stability and value, but exactly its loss. In a similar way, Ezra Pound's poems (especially *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and parts of *The Cantos*) employ eccentric positions (such as the Mauberley persona as a failed decadent writer) to complain about the loss of values – without, however, offering convincing alternatives.[303] Once again, this resembles some forms of eccentricity we have encountered even in Antiquity: the sceptical or indeed cynical denunciation of established

[301] Compare Robert Alter, 'Joyce's *Ulysses* and the Common Reader', *Modernism/Modernity*, 5:3 (September 1998), pp. 19–31.
[302] See my *Modernism in Poetry*, pp. 66–69 and 71.
[303] See my *Modernism in Poetry*, pp. 73–79 and 110–112.

consensus. Yet the critique is itself an antique, so to speak: reified and catalogued, or, as *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* calls it in a self-ironic gesture: 'Among the pickled foetuses and bottled bones, / Engaged in perfecting the catalogue'.[304] The reference is to the established natural sciences, but also to the curiosity cabinets of eccentric collectors.[305] Eccentricity itself, it appears, has entered these cabinets as a mere object, and its subversive potential has fallen victim to the unifying powers of the catalogue.

No wonder Modernist writings therefore need to bring their eccentric features and characters closer and closer to those cultural Others that are traditionally marked not as eccentric, but as deviant – simply to rescue some of their disturbing potential. Virginia Woolf, for example, created characters by subtly outlining the thin line between stifling normality, eccentricity, and madness in novels such as *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Its radicalism lies exactly in making its eponymous heroine question her happiness and sanity through her completely settled and integrated position in society, while other characters of importance to her, such as her admirers from bygone days, Peter Walsh and Sally Seton, are shown to negotiate their own normalities.[306] The former does so through a typical colonial exile; the latter through a move from potential lesbian tendencies to an almost overcompensating multiple motherhood. Meanwhile, the shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith fails to establish such a normality and commits suicide. All this, the novel emphasises, happens in the same centric microcosm of London. Even more structured attempts to link diverse versions of normality are Woolf's later novels *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1932).

Yet as soon as Woolf attempts to create a 'truly' eccentric a character who transcends both time and gender in her novel *Orlando* (1928), the impossibility of retaining such an unbroken notion of an eccentricity that can still be firmly symbolised becomes evident. For as much as this signals radicalism and the unsettling of cultural norms, what the reader encounters is surprisingly quaint, a plot resembling in parts Byron's *Don Juan*, in others Lady Mary Wortley Montague's Turkish tales. In the early twentieth century, these set-pieces already come across like

[304] Ezra Pound, *Collected Shorter Poems* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1984), p. 193.

[305] An attitude that found a marvelous Victorian expression in Edmund Fillingham King, ed., *Ten Thousand Wonderful Things: Comprising Whatever is Marvellous and Rare, Curious, Eccentric and Extraodrinary in All Ages and Nations* (London: Routledge, ca. 1855).

[306] Compare Michael Seidel, 'The Pathology of the Everyday: Uses of Madness in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses*', in: *Virginia Woolf: Themes and Variations*, ed. Vara Neverow Turk and Mark Hussey (New York: Pace University Press, 1993), pp. 52–67.

operettas, with gaudy costumes and predictable numbers. Already the novel's opening sequence is an intertextual quotation – showing the young Orlando at a time shortly before eccentricity emerged, toying with a shrunken head as the melancholic's *memento mori*. Yet Woolf's protagonist as well as his/her story no longer stare past us with the melancholic's unsettling gaze on something besides or behind us. They have become our commodified objects, part of our cultural cabinet of curiosities.

It is therefore no coincidence that Modernism's experiments tend to develop into two directions, both of which are attempts to depart from the encroaching power of commodification and normality that are as radical as they are desperate. These are dissolution and reduction.[307] The first is often associated with the term 'avant-garde', a very interesting label since it originally derives from the realm of military operations and signals an exploratory excursion ahead of the rest of the troops. The location of much Modernist experiment between the two World Wars – with the crucial rupture of the First World War, which is still called the Great War in Britain, as a trigger, is related to this. The opposite of the avant-garde's disturbing and unsettling experiments with an uncertain outcome and frequently without a future, is the so-called 'classical Modernism' that signals at least the critical attempt at an integration into the existing literary and cultural canon.[308]

The poetry of the First World War is frequently seen to embody some of these avant-garde principles. Yet when most of its texts are viewed with a strict aesthetic eye, they are often rather traditional in their form and sentiments – especially when compared to the more radical experiments of French and German poets. Only some texts by Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg manage to convey the fragmentation of perception and self in their form.[309] This, however, does not make them 'avant-garde' in the sense of a radical departure from literary norms

[307] For a detailed discussion, see my essay 'Macro-Myths and Micro-Myths: Modernist Poetry and the Problem of Artistic Creation', in: *Myth and the Making of Modernity: The Problem of Grounding in Early Twentieth-Century Literature*, ed. Michael Bell and Peter Poellner, Studies in Contemporary Literature, 16 (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 181–196.

[308] Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avantgarde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) is problematic in declaring an unproblematic historicity of the avant-garde.

[309] Compare Sandra M. Gilbert, '"Rats' Alley": The Great War, Modernism, and the (Anti)Pastoral Elegy', *New Literary History*, 30:1 (Winter 1999), pp. 179–201.

or, more radically even, self-destructive texts.[310] Once again, as with the absence of revolutions on the political terrain, British culture suspiciously lacks revolutionary artistic developments and tendencies. Instead, it displays, even in the otherwise so challenging formation called 'Modernism', recourses to traditional and, as has been pointed out, by then anachronistic eccentricity. The subsequent section will devote itself to the Modernist master-text of eccentricity, Edith Sitwell's *English Eccentrics* of 1933, and argue that it also represents its swansong. For reasons of structural completeness, however, Samuel Beckett's prose and plays will briefly be looked at, since they employ elements of eccentricity for their own reductive end (as in goal and limit) of Modernist writing.

Already Beckett's early collection of short stories *More Pricks than Kicks* of 1934 features a protagonist whose partly self-imposed outsider status, odd hygienic habits, and inconclusive relationships declare his allegiance to the eccentric paradigm. He is called Belacqua Shuah – with reference to a character in Dante's *Divine Comedy*.[311] In *Murphy* (1938), sceptical outsiderhood has become the programme of the text's eponymous anti-hero.[312] His withdrawal from 'normal' social interaction is so extreme as to eventually lead him inside a mental asylum, albeit ostensibly as a male nurse. It is as if Foucault's description of Tuke's 'Retreat' as a model of normality as madness and vice versa has now been realised in literature: the eccentric watches the supposed madmen. Ultimately, Murphy's solipsism leads to his suicide in an act that resembles auto-erotic practices.

Beckett's monadic or autistic selves have often been regarded as radicalisations of Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* philosophy. As such, they would represent extreme forms of individualism, and therefore outcrops of a cultural development that also spawns eccentricity (albeit in historically

[310] An exception is David Jones's complex First World War text *In Parenthesis* of 1937. Compare my essay 'In Parenthesis: The Subject at War', in: *Language and the Subject*, ed. Karl Simms (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997), pp. 217–226, as well as the chapter 'Krieg als Sinnvakuum und Sinnklammer: David Jones' *In Parenthesis*' in my *Krieg als Metapher im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert*, Edition Universität (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001), pp. 177–205.

[311] It is perhaps no coincidence that in Dante the namesake of Beckett's Belacqua is located neither in Heaven nor in Hell, but in the in-between zone of Purgatory, in canto 4. See, despite the slightly misleading title of the essay, Raymond Federman, 'Beckett's Belacqua and the Inferno of Society', *Arizona Quarterly*, 20 (1964), pp. 231–241.

[312] Michael E. Mooney, 'Presocratic Scepticism: Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* Reconsidered', *English Literary History*, 49:1 (Spring 1982), pp. 214–234. A further link to the genealogy of eccentricity is uncovered in Sylvie Debevec Henning, 'The Guffaw of the Abderite: Murphy and the Democritean Universe', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 10 (1985), pp. 5–20.

changing fashions). Yet, as in Eliot's early poetry, though on an even more radical scale, these individuals striving for absolute autonomy have lost connection with any external reality – and this includes other human beings. As a consequence, they lack the corrective of the dialectic between individual dissent and social consensus that characterised earlier eccentrics until the late nineteenth century. Their radicalism also turns them into failures, because they have no way of judging the level of their success. If one indeed wanted to see them as Cartesian protagonists, their motto would be 'I think, therefore I think'.

Beckett's minimal and reduced characters are in the same tradition, though on the opposed end of the spectrum, as those of Conrad, Joyce, and Woolf's. They are indeed examples of Lockean association (and here both of ideas and of individuals) gone awry and 'mad'. They are also, in an ironic twist, inhabitants of a genre not commonly associated with modernism: the modern biography. It is surprising, though logical, how many modernist texts, especially novels, can also be read as fictional biographies, though often with a radical twist. Woolf's first properly experimental novel, *Jacob's Room* of 1922, for instance, has its protagonist die in the trenches of the First World War and disappear as a proper character from the plot – only to be made all the more present by the recollections of others. Others, such as Wyndham Lewis's artist novel *Tarr* of 1918 show central characters construct, deconstruct, and indeed destroy one another.[313]

This play on subjectivity, identity, and their positions vis-à-vis norms both of culture and society and of genre and literature is also evident in Beckett's *Watt* (1953) or his trilogy *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Meurt* (1951) and *L'Innomable* (1953) which, like his later plays, were generally written in French and only translated into English later. This linguistic self-estrangement can be seen as a mirror-image of the exercises undertaken by the heroes of Beckett's texts (Wilde, too, had written his play *Salome* in French first, but the gesture was directed approvingly in the direction of the supposed French dominance in decadent writing as well as against British censorship that banned plays with biblical characters). Beckett's self-translation is also a sign of desperation vis-à-vis the normalising tendencies of a language and its culture. Yet whether it made his texts as autonomous and tragically dislocated as the characters of plays such as *Waiting for Godot* (1951), *Endgame* (1957), or *Happy Days* (1961) is debatable, since they have

[313] For a discussion of the links between modernist writing, subjectivity, gender, and power, see my essay 'Artists, Bad Eggs, and Apparitions: Wyndham Lewis's Modernist Künstlerroman *Tarr*', *New Comparison: A Journal of Comparative and General Literary Studies*, Special Section: The European Künstlerroman, 33:4 (Spring-Autumn, 2002), pp. 93–101.

conveniently entered the canon of English literature under the largely misleading label 'Theatre of the Absurd'.[314] In fact, the vagabonds of *Waiting for Godot*, the handicapped semi-humans living in dustbins in *Endgame*, or the female speaker who is literally buried alive in *Happy Days*, when viewed from the point of view of eccentricity, are mere quotations, clichés, and ornaments signalling eccentricity rather than embodying it. It is only consequential that Beckett's late texts increasingly refuse to employ characters altogether. Already in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), the recorded voice takes over much of the action. In *Not I* (1972), no actor is visible as a complete human being, and not even as a complete human body. We have indeed reached a stage when eccentricity is no longer even conceivable – at least inside the Modernist paradigm.

4.2 Edith Sitwell's *English Eccentrics*

Edith Sitwell's *English Eccentrics* of 1933 is in many ways the epitome of eccentricity. In it, the eccentric biography of its author, eccentrics in anecdotal abundance, but also an eccentric organisation of material and argument merge. While the arrangement of the many anecdotes in Sitwell's book (into categories such as 'Ancient and Ornamental Hermits', 'Some Sportsmen', 'Some Men of Learning' etc.) has since become the common pattern of florilegia of eccentricity, what stands out is the book's odd introduction. It carries the heading 'Goose Weather' and contains a seemingly very private meditation:

> In this strange 'goose-weather', when even the snow and the black-fringed clouds seem like old theatrical properties, dead players' cast-off rags, 'the complexion of a murderer in a bandbox, consisting of a large piece of burnt cork, and a coal-black Peruke', and when the wind is so cold that it seems like an empty theatre's 'Sea, consisting of a dozen large waves, the tenth a little bigger than ordinary, and a little damaged', I thought of those medicines that were advised for Melancholy, in the Anatomy of this disease, of mummies made medicine, and of the profits of Dust-sifting.[315]

[314] It was coined by Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the* Absurd (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1962).

[315] Edith Sitwell, *English Eccentrics*, revised edition (Harmondsworth et al.: Penguin, 1971), p. 13. All further references are given parenthetically in the text.

The ostensibly intimate and personal reflection introduces a scenario of simultaneous doom and theatricality, features that are familiar expressions of eccentricity's borderline position as endangered periphery and constitutional anachronism. The paragraph even manages to include its own little structural eccentricity in the shape of the seemingly random quotation embedded in it, which, as a footnote instructs the reader, derives from a 'List of Theatrical Properties' in the *Tatler* no. 42. Equally significant is the implicit reference to Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, a text that we have encountered as one of the key examples of an apparently marginal cultural text assuming astonishing cultural authority. Sitwell's self-declared eccentric text already mourns the end of eccentricity, and it laments it through recourse to a text that is yet another mirror in the cabinet of defining culture through loss and from the margin. Indeed, in what almost amounts to a 'definition' of eccentricity in Sitwell's book, yet one that is cleverly attributed to some critical 'outsiders', outsiders towards eccentricity that is, i.e. normality, she states:

> […] 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. (p. 16)

Ostentation is there as much as exaggeration and excess, yet also an awareness of theatricality and inauthenticity. At the same time eccentricity as an attitude of Death is merely the exaggerated equivalent of normality as a combination of 'attitudes common to Life'. Normality demands conformity – pliant bones – and therefore stands in opposition to (or perhaps indeed produces) eccentricity's rigidity as a form of protest. 'Explanation' is a curious element in Sitwell's list, yet makes sense when we regard it in connection with the function on the disturbing gaze of the melancholic which featured as an original characteristic of eccentricity's entry into Western culture in the present study. As such, its unsettling gaze forces us supposed inhabitants of normality to question our position continually. As part of the uneven dialectic of gazes between a controlling normality, the consensual ideology of hegemony, and eccentricity's ostensible resistance by looking awry, eccentricity challenges us to reassess what we mean by culture, society, normality, but also individuality. The present study is an outcome of exactly this interplay.

Not surprisingly, when one recognises the foundation of Sitwell's concept of eccentricity in melancholy, the remedy for the disease that the text diagnoses for itself is sought in rather contradictory means: the recourse to the leftovers of culture and individuals in the shape of mummies and dust heaps. Mummification as the ultimate assertion of identity – paradoxically in the very act of preserving its end – as well as the generation of value out of the excluded,

marginalised abject, the waste that only found its theorists in the later twentieth century in the shapes of Georges Batailles and Jean Baudrillard, are both emblems of a tangential approach to a definition of culture from its margins of death and dust.[316] Yet this death and waste also contain the central elements of this culture, in the value that resides in them. In the case of death, it finds expression in the rituals surrounding it, arguably the first manifestations of culture in the history of human beings. The eccentric approach is here a, normally suppressed, memory of culture after its seeming end, and melancholy becomes the paradoxical creator of culture after its demise – as a melancholy memory that is.

Consequently, Sitwell's text continues its meditation with a historical anecdote that encapsulates the seeming disappearance and renewed appearance of history – in the shape of leftovers – when it tells the apocryphal story of 'The Battlebridge Dust and Cinder-Heap':

> Each tenth wave of the wind blew old memories like melting snowflakes in my face. 'The Battlebridge Dust and Cinder-Heap', it is said, existed since the Great Plague and the Great Fire of London. This mountain of filth and cinders afforded food for a hundred of pigs. Russia, hearing in some way of the enormous dust-heap, purchased it for the purpose of rebuilding Moscow after it had been burned. The side of the mountain of dust is now covered by thoroughfares whose names were derived from the popular ministers of that day. And again: 'Descending the hill, you will find yourself at Battlebridge, among a people as characteristic and looking as local as if the spot had been made for them, and they for the spot. At a glance you will perceive what are the distinctions which make the difference between them and the population you have just passed through …' (p. 13)

By allegorically linking the image of the theatrical wave of the first paragraph with the seemingly real wind of the second one, the text prepares the reader for a constant shift between seemingly actual observation and – at first glance rather random – memories or associations. Locke with his idea of the possible 'madness' of complex ideas is not far away. Wind, snowflakes, and memories are linked by their transitoriness. The dust heap that the passage describes appears to have been real; it is given a remarkably precise location and even a historical date. Yet while the function of such a heap as pig food still strikes the reader as fairly convincing, its presumed transport to Moscow, for the even less logical purpose of rebuilding a burned city, is absurd. Its symbolism,

[316] The seminal texts here are Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988) and Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1995).

however, again fits the already analysed concept of creating culture from an eccentric vantage point through the memory of its disappearance. This nostalgia is typical of Modernism and can be found in the works of writers like William Butler Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, or Virginia Woolf. Sitwell's crucial difference is that in her text this nostalgia is presented as self-consciously eccentric, while many Modernist texts display a tendency to promote their cultural nostalgia as a centric truth out of which they frequently try to derive arguments for a reactionary cultural politics.[317]

In Sitwell's image, the dust heap, whose location on a present-day map of London would be approximately King's Cross, contains a further eccentric displacement: anachronism. The end of the paragraph quoted above introduces the phenomenon of time travel: when one approaches the former location of the dust heap (again: absence rather than presence), one finds there people who seem to match the spot (whatever this might imply in detail). They show a perfect congruity with their location and are perfectly centric in relation to their environment. Yet what does this make of the observer, us as readers, who are invited to approach this very spot from the periphery? It turns everyone else into eccentrics who do not fit the place they have come to investigate. In a similar ironic way functions the allusion to neighbouring streets named after 'the popular ministers of that day'. In the same way as dust heaps, in fact usually much faster, popularity vanishes; and more often than not generations to come will regard the naming of streets and public spaces after once popular figures as eccentric – or worse. To add to its irony, Sitwell's passage derives its own dubious authority from the unattributed quotation that forms its conclusion. A writer who speaks through the unnamed – and once again seemingly random – voices of the past is eccentric in the context of a presumedly authoritative study. And yet again, the strategy strikes present-day readers familiar with theories of intertextuality and polylogues as remarkably contemporary.

The next step of Sitwell's meditation once again takes us to the theatre; only now this theatre is filled:

[317] Compare my essay 'Beyond Alterity – Within Alterity: Edith Sitwell's Self-Reflexive Assessments of Modernism': in: *Ethics of Alterity: Confrontation and Responsibility in 19th- to 21st-Century British Literature*, ed. Christine Reynier and Jean-Michel Ganteau, Horizons anglophones : Present Perfect (Montpellier : Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2013), pp. 133–141.

> Here comes another memory, colder still, and melting like the snow. 'The ground on which the Battlebridge Dust-Heap stood, was sold to the Pandemonium Theatre Company. They built a theatre, where that cloud-kissing dust-heap had been. Come, I'll enter. The interior is somewhat fantastic, but light and pretty too; and filled with Battlebridge beaux and belles. There was no trace of any dustman there.' (pp. 13–14)

The fictional Pandemonium Theatre Company is employed by Sitwell to create her very own image of a *theatrum mundi*, only that it is once again not a general one (as, for example in Yeats's poem 'Lapis Lazuli'), but very specific and therefore marginal: that of the Restoration and after, characterised by the superficiality and dandyism, the carnivalesque ostentation and theatricality that mark the emergence of eccentricity as a cultural concept. Sitwell's ironic snide concerning the absence of dustmen in such a place can be regarded as both a moralistic warning in the old *vanitas* tradition and as a social and political comment on forms of culture that do not acknowledge their underlying mechanisms of production and waste, since they are themselves the merger of the two. This phenomenon is by no means historical and has led many cultural critics, especially Marxists, to complain about postmodernity as a culture of commodification and expenditure whose economic bases in the exploitation of individuals, entire classes of people and whole countries is obscured by the surface glamour of its rituals of waste.[318]

That economy finds an unexpected place in Sitwell's reflexions is shown in the subsequent paragraph. It shows economy at work at ground-level, so to speak, but also shows how 'official' culture responds when faced with the invisible laws on which it rests:

> There have, too, been humbler profits from the dust. An old woman named Mary Collins, a dust-sifter, giving evidence before a judge, answered when he expressed surprise that she should possess so much property: 'Oh, your worship, that's nothing … we find them among the dust. It is dustman's law. I have raised houses from my profits made among the dust.' (p. 14)

Raising houses from the dust is, of course, also a surprising reversal of the traditional ritualistic formula 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust' that forms part of the Christian burial sermon. It describes the economics of recycling that form the core of most cultural production and yet remain its excluded Other, the abject that one wishes to deny or ignore in one's attempts to envisage production as unique and *sui generis*, a concept to which Modernism is particularly attached. It is

[318] For a famous attack, see Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', in: *Against the Grain: Essays 1975–1985* (London: Verso, 1986), pp. 131–147.

not coincidental that the representative of this abject cultural economy finds herself defending it before a symbolic representative of 'normal' order, the judge, in Sitwell's anecdote. This anecdote of course also contains self-referential status in relation to the project of *English Eccentrics* and Sitwell's works in general.

It has by now become blatantly evident that *English Eccentrics* envisages itself as a productive sifting through the dust heaps of stories and anecdotes that official history has rejected. At the same time as this strategy invests discarded (and occasionally invented) fragments of an alternative history with new eccentric value, it also shows the eccentricity, marginality and blindness of official 'truths' about culture, the most potent of which can certainly be found in traditional historiography. Showing how dust becomes culture and culture becomes dust, Sitwell also introduces a relativising melancholia into all aspects of this culture. It is no coincidence that her most complex work, the poetry cycle *Façade* of 1922, starts with a poem that once again ironises the transience of cultural power and status by linking the image of a building with that of dust:

> The Drum
> (The Narrative of the Demon of Tedworth)
>
> In his tall senatorial,
> Black and manorial,
> House where decoy-duck
> Dust doth clack –
> Clatter and quack, –
> Said the musty Judge Mompesson,
> 'What is that stark beating drum
> That we hear rolling like the sea?'
> 'It is a beggar with a pass
> Signed by you.' 'I signed not one.'
> They took the ragged drum that we
> Once heard rolling like the sea;
> In the house of the Justice it must lie
> And usher in Eternity.[319]

[319] Edith Sitwell, *Façade and Other Poems*, intr. Jack Lindsay (London: Duckworth, 1950), p. 82. All further references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.

This humbling impetus of Sitwell's thinking is taken to a Darwinian degree when the meditation that introduces *English Eccentrics* swerves to an example of scientific eccentricity, not without taking a detour via the entire history of belief and, more specifically the Metaphysical Poets in the shape of Marvell – and his echo in T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock':

> Whether the inhabitants of those thoroughfares near the dust-heap, from which those who believe in the destiny of mankind were to rebuild Moscow, listened, in the early dawn, to the far-off sounds of what songs the sirens sang, I know not. Perhaps, instead, they listened to the little hopeful articulations rising from the dust – the lip-clicks of the earthworms which are, it may be, amongst the earliest origins of our language. 'The clicking noises made by earthworms recently discovered by the physiologist, O. Mangold, do not concern us,' we are told by Herr Georg Schwidetzky, in a profoundly interesting recent book, 'for though the ancient race of earthworms can claim kinship with us, our own wormlike ancestors were water animals, and at present we know nothing of their noises. Still, there is a possibility that certain lip-clicks were derived from the noises made by worms.' (p. 14)

The book by Schwidetzky is called *Do You Speak Chimpanzee?*, and it was indeed published by the respectably firm Routledge in 1932. Yet it is clear that its debate, at least as it is represented by Sitwell, is as off-kilter as the speculation about Moscow being rebuilt upon the dusty remnants of London. In a typical English euphemism, that of 'profoundly interesting', the text pokes gentle fun at a debate that it obviously considers genuinely mad. (It is a curious coincidence, however, that in recent debates on the genetic decoding of humans the humble worm has once again resurfaced as a symbolic point of comparison.) What the passage really is about is not physiology, and not even evolution. After having taken us through an associative journey involving the important symbolic spaces of culture: the house, streets and thoroughfares, the court-room, the capital city, and linking them in the image of theatre as well as de-realising them through the associative mechanisms of the meditation, Sitwell's text now turns to language, the means with which individuals and cultures communicate and create themselves. It is no coincidence that she places, in the first sentence of this paragraph, abstract belief in destiny and supernatural siren songs next to each other. Both are idealist assumptions, and both are manifested in forms of communication, only that the siren song is commonly assumed to be devoid of words, yet without being less powerful for this lack.

Belief systems, on the other hand, are generally associated with terms and concepts. Yet it is evident that they often function as 'unwritten' or 'unspoken' agreements, as ideological mechanisms of the hegemonic type that is. In their power, they can also be compared to siren songs capable of luring those who listen to them to their destruction. From abstract human beliefs

via mythological fairy tales to seemingly basic biological observation, the journey undergoes its own 'Darwinian' reduction of language from its evolutionary climax in absolute concepts (Hegel would be the representative of the attempt here as much as Kant – the former locating absolutes within, the latter outside concepts) to its most primitive forms. At the same time, this central cultural phenomenon is not spared implicit ridicule, when the passage demonstrates gleefully that even the most primitive manifestation of language is quite capable of generating the most refined academic discourse about it. (It is certainly not coincidental that the dispute alluded to here involves the comic names of Mangold and Schwidetzky, the latter even marked as a typical scientific figure of fun – along the lines of Carlyle's Professor Teufelsdröckh – by the emphasis on his German background in 'Herr Georg Schwidetzky'.)

Language, however, is not ridiculed as such in the passage. It is, in fact, of profound importance in Sitwell's aesthetic universe – and also in the argument that structures *English Eccentrics*. Throughout her writing, communication is shown as the key for the functioning of human community, society, and culture – or rather, sadly, the reason for their failure. One of the most intimate and least surreal sections of *Façade* shows the consequences of failed communication on the personal level:

> Bells of Grey Crystal
>
> Bells of grey crystal
> Break on each bough –
> The swans' breath will mist all
> The cold airs now.
> Like tall pagodas
> Two people go,
> Trail their long codas
> Of talk through the snow.
> Lonely are these
> And lonely am I …
> The clouds, grey Chinese geese
> Sleek through the sky. (pp. 96–97)

A biographical analysis would certainly link this repeated emphasis on failed communication and relationships to Sitwell's childhood, especially to her distant and unloving parents. She in fact points out this set-up herself in her autobiography *Taken Care Of*, which, even in its title, stresses the passive object-like role that the only daughter was supposed to play in her family, a part

against which Sitwell rebelled – also artistically – throughout her life.[320] In *English Eccentrics*, the basic success or failure of the individual, relationships, community, society, and culture are consequently condensed in the further development of the seemingly absurd image of the clicking-noises made by worms into a debate that takes the opposite direction from Sitwell's earlier Darwinian reduction of language to physiology. In in her eventual fantastic formula, a remedy to the melancholy that triggered the debate, and therefore a counterbalance to the very eccentricity the book debates, is suspected:

> Shall we find our cure for Melancholy in this thought of the origin of the kiss between loved one and loved one, mother and child, or in that other statement made in the same book: 'The Latin word "Aurora" (dawn) can without difficulty be derived from an earlier "ur-ur", supplemented in two places by A. The changes are, of course, always later editions. Now, phonetically "ur-ur" is the remains of a lemur word, and is a sound characteristic of the whole genus. When we seek information about the lives of these lemurs (who live, today, in the tropics, and especially in Madagascar), we learn to our surprise that they indulge in a kind of morning worship. They sit with raised hands, their bodies in the same position as that of the famous Greek praying boy, warming themselves in the sun …. It is therefore not unwarrantable to assume that Aurora, the Roman goddess of dawn, has her ultimate origin in the morning exercise of a lemur.' (pp. 14–15)

If melancholy is the eccentric departure from the unwritten and unspoken assumptions and norms of a culture, that which leaves an individual in a despair that generally finds no articulation, since it is concerned with an absence at the heart of culture that this culture prefers to ignore, then what is the cure outlined in the above quotation? It is, once again, a relativising and ironising view of human existence, and that includes the seemingly 'natural' – and therefore seemingly non-cultural – mother-child bond as much as the most complex expression of culture, religion. Both are relativised through their eccentric association with the primitive actions of animals. It seems that the melancholy brought about by an eccentric departure from the usual viewpoint can only be cured by enforcing this departure even more and turning its results into farce.

The subsequent discussion in 'Goose-Weather' indeed undertakes this when it speculates that, if human behaviour is so closely linked to that of animals, it must be possible to teach animals human behaviour. Once again, the gesture contains a clear ironic devaluing of cultural achievements, and once again it is their linguistic variety that provides the target: 'We can see, therefore, that if imbued with a few of the doctrines and speeches of civilization, the innocent,

[320] Edith Sitwell, *Taken Care Of* (London: Hutchinson, 1965).

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?' (p. 16).

Sitwell herself, despite her trenchant critique of the culture that surrounded her, did not escape the reifying tendencies observed in the way in which eccentricity enters a cultural curiosity cabinet in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. She reacted to her perceived outsider status – as a woman and an artist – by increasingly unusual outfits, headgear, jewellery, but also the photographs she had taken of herself and distributed. These pictures by the likes of Cecil Beaton frequently showed her in poses imitated from classical paintings (in a manner that was famously repeated in postmodern art by Cindy Sherman), but also in some that resembled a corpse or a sepulchral effigy. She thereby consciously aided attempts by fellow writers and critics to marginalise her; this is what 'eccentric' increasingly meant in debates on twentieth-century literature and art.[321] Even young writers whom she supported with the wealth and contacts she possessed, such as Stephen Spender, considered her an oddity.[322] Sitwell, even more than her brothers Osbert and Sacheverell, therefore stands alone in twentieth-century literature. Although frequently included in studies of twentieth-century writing, she is as impossible to categorise as she has not left behind followers, much less a school of thought or writings. In her persona, eccentricity finds a tragic refinement, one that also signals its closing-off as a living and productive artistic interchange and dialectic.[323] Her ambivalent position vis-à-vis the cultural canon also reminds us that the debate on eccentricity continues to involve a gender struggle: a struggle between men and women over the spaces provided by it for individuality and creativity. This struggle already manifests itself in its early expressions, such as the cave of suffering in Mary Wroth's *Urania*, and continues, for example via the very different fates of male and female eccentrics in Victorian culture, until the demise of eccentricity as a living cultural concept in modern times and into its returns as convention, quotation, and cliché in postmodernity.

[321] For a typical reaction, see Blake Morrison, 'Queen Edith: On Edith Sitwell', *Encounter* 57:5 (November 1981), pp. 88–93.

[322] Stephen Spender, *Journals 1939–1983*, ed. John Goldsmith (New York: Random House, 1986), pp. 248–249.

[323] Thus, the title of Victoria Glendinning's biography, *Edith Sitwell: A Unicorn Among Lions* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1981), which simultaneously asserts the link between eccentricity and national identity in the reference to the heraldic emblem of Britain.

4.3 Eccentricity, mass culture, subculture, youth and popular culture

In connection with the fop and dandy, but also in the discussion of *fin-de-siècle* exquisiteness, the link between eccentricity and commodification in lifestyle or life as style has already been emphasised. Indeed, when fashion became available to the masses, as it increasingly did when the modes of production of the nineteenth and twentieth century made furniture, clothes, but also printed media cheaply available, its inherent eccentricity – easily visible in the term 'trendsetter' – became a regular mechanism in the development, trial, and success and failure of commodities. However, as with the problematic of group membership, eccentricity only uneasily functions in non-individual ways, even though its role within culture exceeds the individual (something that liberal critics of eccentricity generally try to obfuscate by paradoxically claiming a 'unique' eccentricity for their respective candidates). We saw that the Romantics formed schools of thought and poetics, even though their designs for geniuses hardly makes them function as part of a community. It is equally difficult to imagine a group of fops and dandies – other than in hostile competition. Perhaps already the term and concept of association that, in its non-conventional shape, has been shown to be at the root of the development and perception of eccentricity in culture, contains this ambivalence and dilemma: association (even when unusual) always follows a pattern and order. It is also a term that is tellingly applied both to the abstract realms of imagination and intellect and to the practical realm of human community. Dickens' Pickwick Club is such an association of characters – in which another odd association of stories and ideas takes place.

Inside a culture of communities, be they less or more homogenised, youth functions as an inherent position of eccentricity. This should not lead one to the misguided construction of youth as an essential value or position: youth in itself is a cultural construct and varies in its meaning between historical periods. Classically it was considered as one of the (usually seven) ages of men – and attributed with ambivalent value. It has gained almost hegemonic status in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, when even people over forty insist on their youthfulness, and entire cultures, such as the North American one, appear to function as an extended adolescence.[324] It remains to be seen if – with Western culture aging rapidly in terms

[324] Indeed, Graham Murdoch and Robin McCron locate the emergence of 'youth' as a Sociological category as late as the 1920s; see 'Youth and Class: The Career of a Confusion', in: *Working Class Youth Culture*, ed. Geoff Mungham and Geoff Pearson (London et al.: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), pp. 10–26 (pp. 10–11).

of its demographic make-up, we shall see a reversal and a cult of seniority once the majority of the population (and therefore of potential consumers) has become 'old'.

Youth, when recognised as a distinct period in life and when granted visibility or even a voice, is indeed commonly associated with a dissident position towards the mainstream, a dissidence, however, that is also regularly seen as a transitory stage towards adulthood and membership in the cultural mainstream. At the same time, youth is also associated with cultural change, for better or worse. It occupies a position of eccentricity: never outside, yet marginal; albeit with a continual link (through parents, figures of authority, institutions, but also spending power) to the respective ideological, economic, and political 'centres' of culture. The slogan used during the election campaign of President Kennedy (a symbol of youthfulness in the 1960s – despite his well-disguised health problems and his actual physical age of 43) is telling in this respect: 'Old enough to know. Young enough to act'.

This ambivalent separateness of youth finds expression in outward signs, thereby following the externality (and frequently ostentation) observed as characteristic of eccentricity. In the English Restoration, the time of birth of eccentricity, for instance, aristocratic young men competed with one another in ostentation of outfits, including jewellery. They were called 'bucks' after their 'trendsetter', George Villiers, duke of Buckingham (1628–1687), but also with a pun in the direction of uncontrolled and libidinally driven young male deer.[325] How much Beau Brummell became a trendsetter even for likes of Byron (who himself soon took over this role) has been mentioned. In the German-speaking world, but also beyond, Goethe – largely through his creation Werther, the romantic suicide dressed in a trend-setting outfit of canary-yellow jacket and plum-violet trousers – functioned in a similar way.[326] Oscar Wilde and his posse of green carnation-wearing young men is therefore merely the late echo of a historical trend.

It would therefore be misleading to claim that it was the twentieth century that invented media personalities and manufactured trends, although the rampant development of the audio-visual media all the way to the Internet facilitated and accelerated a tendency that had been going on for centuries. Yet, as was pointed out in connection with the development of psychoanalysis and sociology, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were also the first periods in history

[325] Schickedanz, *Dandy*, p. 12.

[326] For a linking of Byron and Goethe, see Lloyd Davies, 'Werther and Harold: The Literary Articulation of the Romantic Subject', in: *Inventing the Individual: Romanticism and the Idea of Individualism*, ed. Larry H. Peer (Provo: International Conference on Romanticism, 2002), pp. 153–175.

in which cultural, economic and political trends would be analysed as well as promoted. In the early twentieth century, mass culture indeed became an object of study for the first time – after the Victorian period in which culture was still understood as 'the best that has been thought and known in the world', in the famous words of Matthew Arnold from *Culture and Anarchy* of 1869.[327] The question this poses for the present study is: does this simultaneous production and critique of cultural manifestations, fashions and trends facilitate eccentricity – or does it not, on the contrary, as has been postulated for its role in art and literature, spell its demise, since whatever is produced as ostensibly eccentric can now be integrated not only in patterns of consumption, but also in mechanisms of critique?

Already the 1920s saw noticeable signs of tiredness with the processes of production and consumption of trends. The terms 'bogus', so prominent for instance in the often cynical early writings of Evelyn Waugh, stood for all the surface attitudes, topics of conversation, fashions, but also economic investments that were seen to be without foundation, lasting value, indeed critical potential. However, has it not been claimed throughout the present study that eccentricity throughout its complex history generally refrained or was excluded from occupying positions of value, depth and essence? Would a 'bogus' period not indeed be a heyday of eccentricity? This is a question that the subsequent section will address in the context of postmodernity. In modernity, and for the sake of historicising the argument, the present study will assume that this lasted until the Second World War, as well as in Modernism, however, 'bogus' formed part of a nostalgic discourse (again, easily visible in Waugh's writings). No matter what eccentric potential 'bogus' might therefore contain (and Waugh's novels and short stories do contain a wealth of clearly marked eccentrics), it was ultimately perceived as negative, very much still in late nineteenth-century fashion as a symptom of cultural decline.

This retrospective orientation is also noticeable in the majority of youth cultures that the twentieth century produced: generally, they followed in their choice of exterior symbols a discourse of appropriation of the historically distanced and frequently doomed – or the culturally marginalised. Young left-wing middle-class males in the 1930s who dressed up as workers committed such a nostalgic appropriation (in metaphorical terms it is still prevalent among British academics who, irrespective of their background and social status, will largely insist on their working-class 'roots'). Christopher Isherwood and Stephen Spender's narratives of their time in

[327] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press,1960, p. 70.

Weimar Germany are telling illustrations of this trend, which is only remarkable in terms of eccentricity since its mode of copying functions from the top down (the upper-middle class imitating the working class), whereas traditionally dandies, for instance, were frequently from a middle-class background, but adopted aristocratic habits and outfits (even when the real aristocracy had already abandoned them).[328] 1960s Mods and Rockers are further illustrations of the pattern, the former choosing impractical 'decadent' outfits harking back to the days of a leisured upper crust, while the latter ostensibly adopted the exaggerated symbols (leather, chains) of a by then obsolete working-class culture. The styles of dress and music of the marginalised and largely oppressed West Indian migrants in post-World War II Britain then became the symbols of discontent of, again, largely white middle-class youths.

What is relevant here is that it is the by now hegemonic middle class that spawns its 'eccentricities' (once again in inverted commas, since the terms is now no longer fully functional). It is the centre, the norm, that needs stimulation by a dissident outside – not merely for flexibility and innovation, but in order to remain the centre, as a mode of self-preservation that is. That such attempts at rebellion are gendered, too, can be seen in the seeming lack of female variants of these trends. Of course, they existed, and documents from the period show them clearly. Yet since fashion and dressing up had been a prerogative of females for centuries, they lacked the means to make their choices significant, even though they were just as visible.

For a long time it was therefore men who could outrage and shock through their outfits and behaviour, especially in public, rather than women. It is no coincidence that, for example, Glam Rock with its penchant for exaggerated clothes and make-up, is almost exclusively represented by men (Suzie Quatro is the telling exception, but she consciously styled herself as and even sung that she wanted to be a man). Yet, in the words of Iain Chambers, Glam Rock appears clearly as an echo of earlier manifestations of eccentricity, such as the seventeenth-century fop, through its combination of theatricality, ostentation, its threat to conventions coupled with an equally noticeable investment in the dominant hegemonic ideology, now of a fully-fledged commercial capitalism – and a firm location inside the heart of ideological normality, here – with reference to its gender issues – called 'a masculine universe':

[328] Compare my essay 'Transgressive Travels: Homosexuality, Class, Politics and the Lure of Germany in 1930s Writing', *Critical Survey*, 10:3 (Autumn 1998), Special Issue Literature of the 1930s, pp. 48–55.

> Around 1970–1, while the main body of progressive rock continued to inflate, glitter or glam rock appeared to propose a flight towards a sensationalist aesthetic of the 'strange'. Behind its disturbing theatrics, the masks, make-up, hair dye, platform heels and changing costumes, glam rock betrayed a wildly contradictory range of cultural motifs. Unashamedly caught up in the commercial meshes of the music industry, it also proved to be a sharp, mocking reply to the illusions of progressive rock. Further, it raised disturbing questions about male sexuality and styles from within a masculine universe. Apparently seduced by its own narcissism, sophisticated glam rock knowingly advertised the artifice and construction of the 'star'.[329]

Boy George, who, a decade later, dared to cross the gender divide in a form that was even more radical than David Bowie's and Mick Jagger's toying with androgyny and bisexuality, since both his audience and some critics indeed had problems identifying him as male or female, was therefore regarded as more outrageous than, for instance, Annie Lennox, who also chose male and female outfits, the latter frequently in the exaggerated shapes normally indicative of (male) transvestites.[330]

Gender is one of the particularly exposed areas where youth culture and popular culture touch on another crucial term for an assessment of cultural normality, and therefore also for the role of eccentricity in its establishment and continual re-negotiation: subculture. It is evident in the term that it relies not only on a hierarchy, but also on hegemony: if there is no dominant culture, it makes little sense. But what exactly is a subculture? Would Catholics in post-Reformation Britain form one? Would secret or closed societies, such as Freemasons, be subcultures?[331] Subcultures are frequently identified with the illicit use of drugs or unacceptable forms of sexuality. Thus, the so-called 'Molly Houses', male brothels in the eighteenth century, or the opium dens of late

[329] Iain Chambers, *Urban Rythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture*, Communications and Culture (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 128. Chambers names early Rod Stewart and David Bowie, Slade, Elton John, Gary Glitter, Alvin Stardust, Marc Bolan and T. Rex, and Roxy Music as the main British exponents of Glam Rock.

[330] See George Piggford, '"Who's That Girl?": Annie Lennox, Woolf's Orlando and Female Camp Androgyny', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 30:3 (September 1997), pp. 39–58.

[331] On the difficulty of defining the term, see Milton M. Gordon, 'The Concept of the Sub-Culture and Its Application' and Albert K. Cohen, 'A General Theory of Subcultures', reprinted in: *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 40–43 and 44–54. The seminal German study is Rolf Schwendter, *Theorie der Subkultur*, revised ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1978).

Victorian England, would be home to them.[332] Still, problems remain: opium dens might be places of ill repute, but they were not illegal. Male brothels were. Dick Hebdige, whose study on subculture (which he links with youth culture and addresses largely through a late twentieth-century lens) has become seminal, links it with both Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Roland Barthes's structural critique of myths when he writes:

> Hegemony can only be maintained as long as the dominant classes 'succeed in framing all competing definitions within their range', so that subordinate groups are, if not controlled, then at least contained within an ideological space which does not seem at all 'ideological': which appears instead to be permanent and 'natural', to lie outside history, to be beyond particular interests […].

In the same way, forms cannot be permanently normalized. They can always be deconstructed, demystified, for instance by a 'mythologist' like Barthes. Moreover commodities can be symbolically 'repossessed' in everyday life, and endowed with implicitly oppositional meanings, by the very groups who originally produced them. The symbiosis in which ideology and social order, production and reproduction, are linked is then neither fixed nor guaranteed.[333]

Hebdige's assessment works well for the dialectic of dissent and (re-)appropriation that eccentricity represents. His choice of 'framing' as a metaphor for the containment of this dissent by the dominant ideology is also in line with the specular model of competing gazes developed in the present study – as is the emphasis on the materiality and commodification of dissent as a symbolic act functioning on surfaces and through signs. However, Hebdige's recourse to some of the founding fathers of British Cultural Studies, among them Stuart Hall, makes his project part of an attempt to inscribe a Marxist pattern of class struggle into his assessment, something that the analysis of the varying forms of eccentricity could not generally proclaim. In Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson's influential study *Resistance through Rituals*, there is a clearly visible attempt to base their findings on a recurring pattern of class struggle, which is generally identified as

[332] See Jeffrey Weeks, 'Inverts, Perverts, and Mary-Annes', in: Gelder and Thornton, *The Subcultures Reader*, pp. 268–280 (p. 272).

[333] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, New Accents (London and New York: Methuen, 1979), p. 16. His first quotation refers to Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds, *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in post-war Britain* (London et al.: Unwin Hyman, 1976), although Hebdige gives a wrong date and no page reference. He further alludes to *Social Trends*, 6 (1975) in his quotation, again without a page reference.

that of the lower or working class against bourgeois hegemony. The introduction to the work, composed by Hall, Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Robert, is entitled 'Subcultures, Cultures and Class' and states:

> Sub-cultures, then, must first be related to the 'parent cultures' of which they are a sub-set. But, sub-cultures must *also* be analysed in terms of their relation to the dominant culture – the overall disposition of cultural power in society as a whole. Thus, we may distinguish respectable, 'rough', delinquent and the criminal sub-cultures *within* working class culture: but we may also say that, though they differ amongst themselves, they *all* derive in the first instance from a 'working class parent culture': hence, they are all subordinate sub-cultures, in relation to the dominant middle-class or bourgeois culture.[334]

Eccentricity, on the other hand, is traditionally linked to the middle- and sometimes upper classes; more specifically, since it is historically concomitant and to a considerable degree linked with the emergence of the middle class as an economic, political and also cultural force, with the establishment of their self-esteem vis-à-vis the traditional ruling classes, the aristocracy and the clergy. This, however, does not disqualify eccentricity for a Marxist analysis, since Marx's concept of class struggle does not in fact start with the working classes (themselves a nineteenth-century development), but exactly with the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth. More problematic is the consistently 'lacking' revolutionary impulse in eccentricity. It has been mentioned above that, in accordance with their unusual take on 'association', both in the semantic and social sense, eccentricity tends to shun groupings, and these are essential for revolutionary movements. Even when viewed through the lenses of the individualists that it generally produces, eccentricity normally steers clear of attempts to impose its rules on its culture – with some notable exceptions, though, such as Stoicism and Christianity. It remains for the present section to state if twentieth- and twenty-first-century youth-, pop-, and subculture can be productively viewed as eccentric any more.

Sex and drugs and rock'n'roll, the old battle cry of 1960s and 1970s youth culture, once more reminds us how closely guarded the borderlines between eccentricity and deviance are throughout cultural history. Sexuality, we do not need Foucault to remind us, has traditionally formed a means of controlling and policing culture in the West and elsewhere.[335] Since its

[334] Hall and Jefferson, *Resistance through Rituals*, p. 13.
[335] If we did, we could look into Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.

production in modern shape coincides with the development of the bourgeois family, and this family provided the cornerstone of cultural debates well into the twentieth century, the seeming suspension of its taboos and rules with the so-called 'Sexual Revolution' of the 1960s was indeed a serious cultural upheaval. Yet whether it produced eccentricity is doubtful: hardly a woman demanding control of her fertility openly or clandestinely by using the 'pill' would have chosen the label eccentric for her choice. Neither did the mainly young males profiting from so-called 'free love' (about which women often have a different tale to tell – at least in retrospect) see themselves as eccentric. They regarded their attitudes as taboo- and groundbreaking, but saw themselves more as trendsetters than as marginal.[336]

The same is true for the changing fashions in pop music. It is always hard to imagine for a succeeding generation that the preceding ones regarded that which they are just about to bin because of its outmodedness and flavour of reaction as the epitome of vice, endangering and threatening culture at its roots. The list of such threatening 'has-beens' is as long as culture itself and contains polyphonic music, close dancing (as in the waltz), Swing, the well-groomed boy bands of the 1960s, Glam Rock, and Punk. The latter is particularly ambivalent, since it proclaimed the end of something that had at least been minimal consensus in popular music before: some talent for singing, playing instruments, or performing on stage, and of course for utilising the commercial potential of acts. Punk apparently did the very opposite. Chambers characterises it in the following terms:

> Like all previous subcultures, punk was inevitably the object of public stares and reproach, but this time the invectives did not move only in one direction. Breaking the cycle of insult and condemnation, punk not only adopted this public curse – 'punks like to be hated' (a punk) – but proceeded to play it back at the media in clothing and musical 'insults', and in the sexual aberrations suggested by its fetishistic closet of pvc, rubber and bondage clothing. The punk universe perversely echoed the official cries of 'crisis', while emphasising a sinister off-beat of wasted urban styles that locked together the highly disruptive themes of sex and violence: the provocative explicitness of the name Sex Pistols really summed it up.[337]

[336] Compare the chapter 'Rock and Sexuality' in Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock'n'Roll*, Communication & Society (London: Constable, 1983), pp. 235–248.
[337] Chambers, *Urban Rhythms*, pp. 183–184.

Chambers' slightly convoluted assessment nonetheless displays striking analogies to the analyses of eccentricity undertaken in the present study. For him, punk is a movement that takes place in the gaze of a hegemonic ideology – and remains fully aware of it, to the degree of using the media for its purpose. It manifests itself in the same ostentatious manner characteristic of traditional eccentrics (Chambers mentions the outrageous clothes, but omits the make-up and hairdos that also became trademarks). Most importantly, in its self-reflexive carnivalesque game with the public gaze, Punk also hovers on the boundaries of deviance – by playing with notions of perversion, violence, and crime. What emerges is not merely resistance (and also not the faintest trace of a revolution), but rather a critical reaction – through copying and variation, one could argue – to the then most prevalent political and social catchword: 'crisis'. At a time when 'crisis' had become the slogan for all and sundry, and at the same time a means of retaining the status quo, Punk's ostentatiously exaggerated aesthetic crisis offered a late echo of the melancholic's questioning gaze towards normality. The melancholia inherent in Punk (as already in Glam Rock) is also, perhaps unwittingly, mentioned by Chambers in his reference to 'wasted urban styles'.

Yet when looked at critically, and in some of the (themselves often partisan and dubious) voices at the core of Punk, Punk emerges in a different light. Films like *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* of 1980 present it as a cleverly staged and marketed enterprise – with figureheads such as Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood (the latter ascending from punk clothes vendor to international design star).[338] The relegation of punk to a by now dated London tourist attraction is further proof of the 'framing' power of hegemonic culture that Hebdige writes about.[339]

Still, both in Glam Rock, Punk, and the movements that followed, some figures emerged who proved harder to 'frame' and categorise. Among the so-called 'New Romantics' or the 'New Pop' that emerged in the early 1980s in Britain and was already a rebellion against Punk's artlessness and rejection of commerciality, such figures as the already mentioned Boy George and Annie Lennox, and even the American superstar Michael Jackson, occupied positions on a borderline

[338] Chambers doubts the sincerity of McLaren's criticism and instead emphasises his links with Dadaism and Situationism (and even Baudelaire!); *Urban Rhythms*, pp. 181–183.

[339] The seminal documentary of the fate of Punk is Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond*, revised ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 2001).

that traditionally marks the area of eccentricity against that of deviance.[340] And indeed, it generally was the prerequisites of deviance that were used for the litmus test of these characters' acceptability into the so-called 'mainstream'. Boy George's transvestite habits made guessing at his sexuality inevitable, yet for a long time he adopted the very British cliché of 'preferring a cup of tea', i.e. the stereotype of the asexual British prig (itself an eccentricity after the 1960s and only coyly and nostalgically celebrated in West End shows such as *No Sex, please. We're British*[341]). Apparently, despite the Sexual Revolution, the world of pop entertainment was by no means ready for an openly homosexual star, at least not when he wanted to be commercial and mainstream, since there existed a niche for politically engaged gay artists such as Tom Robinson in the United States.

'Camp' is here the attribute that is frequently used to describe a transgression that is in itself already conventionalised.[342] Although 'camp' is frequently invoked in discussions of dissidence and resistance, already its first proponents disagree to some degree whether it is to be regarded as serious, self-aware, and subversive, or the opposite. Thus, Christopher Isherwood writes in *The World in the Evening* (1954): 'true High Camp has an underlying seriousness. You can't camp about something you don't take seriously. […] You're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance'.[343] Susan Sontag, who introduced 'camp' into the critical debate with her essay 'Notes on "Camp"' (1964), contradicts Isherwood (and partly herself) when she claims at one point: 'Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation – not judgment', while having declared earlier: 'Thus, the Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken. But this is not the familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference,

[340] For a detailed study of Culture Club and their lead singer Boy George (George O'Dowd) in this context, see Dave Rimmer, *Like Punk Never Happened: Culture Club and the New Pop* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1985). Despite its title, Rimmer's book actually emphasises the relation of New Pop and Punk (pp. 11–19). For a less biographical and more theoretical view, see Simon Frith and Howard Horne, *Art into Pop* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987).

[341] Anthony Marriott and Alistair Foot, *No Sex Please – We're British: A Comedy*, French's Acting Edition (London: French, 1973).

[342] See the essays in Moe Meyer, ed., *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

[343] Reprinted in: Fabio Cleto, ed, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, Triangulations (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 49–52 (p. 51).

rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice'.[344] This ambivalence of meaning of and as surface and its determination by the way of looking (by whom? from which perspective? against which prescribed views?) align 'camp' with eccentricity. Its carnivalesque structure, combined with self-awareness, further underlines the connection. Yet Isherwood's insistence on the seriousness of camp also indicates why eccentric exuberance so frequently finds itself aligned with conservatism – while often being shunned by it at the same time.

Boy George's at least temporal fall from grace occurred when he mixed his problematic sexuality with the wrong type of drugs. Once again, as the above-mentioned slogan proclaimed, drugs have always been part and parcel of entertainment culture. Both the Beatles and the Rolling Stones experienced drug searches and arrests as reminders that an exposed position as world-famous entertainers does not grant immunity from 'the law', which is of course largely the law of hegemonic consensus. Years after the cocaine orgies of stars and starlets had become common knowledge – and an almost accepted feature of the pop business – Boy George entered the headlines through his heroin habit. Heroin, too, had been a pop business drug (already in 1959 Billy Holiday had made news because of it). Yet in the 1980s it was perceived as a drug linked with crime (while cocaine was the designer drug of the day, soon to be eclipsed by ecstasy, while dope was relegated to the 'has-been' status of a drug for students, university lecturers and other old fogeys). Consequently, the combination of eccentric borderline status concerning gender and sexuality and the deviant status of his drug habit propelled Boy George from the status as the nation's favourite eccentric (a role he partly inherited from Quentin Crisp) to criminal outsider.

A similar pattern appears to be at work in the case of Michael Jackson. That in his case something serious went on in terms of self-perception in term of race was clearly visible to everyone through his frequent cosmetic surgery. Nonetheless, he continued to be celebrated as a model of success also by the African-American community in the United States. When, however, allegations emerged that his frequently declared love of children had illegal sexual aspects, his fall from grace was inevitable. Again, it appears that a figure like Jackson was only attributed with an extreme form of something that had been an established feature of the pop business, the sexual exploitation of young fans and groupies. One could therefore claim that the function of pop idols is to present us (as in: us members of hegemonic mainstream culture) with exaggerated and exciting deviations from the norm. Yet, as in the case of eccentricity, their deviation remains

[344] Reprinted in: Cleto, *Camp*, pp. 53–65 (pp. 65 and 57).

closely and jealously guarded and policed, and any transgression into unacceptable territory turns elevated 'stars' into scapegoats for the social anxieties of their times (be they drug or child abuse). Top model Kate Moss and her pop star boyfriend Pete Doherty and their much-reported drug problems or Amy Winehouse's lethal alcohol abuse are more recent variants of the pattern.

Annie Lennox, whose gender bending was at least as radical as Boy George's at the start of her career, and frequently coupled with profound reflections on gender roles in her lyrics and videos, avoided associations with drugs and sexual deviance and steered her personal life into marriage and motherhood. Her career did not experience any of the ruptures Boy George or Michael Jackson had to face. Boy George in fact managed to successfully reinvent himself, and not coincidentally through more harmless, i.e. acceptable, forms of eccentricity: after first claiming to have found his faith as a disciple of the Hare Krishna cult, he then emerged as a gay icon and activist, before settling for a career as a DJ – at a time when DJ culture and its outlets, e.g. Ibiza, were firmly established.

With phenomena such as clubbing and raves, the whole of youth culture seemed to have found a way to channel deviance into structures that were not only acceptably 'frameable' for the mainstream, but offered massive commercial potential. When looking at phenomena such as short trips to Ibiza and Agia Napa in Cyprus for the explicit (and explicitly advertised) purpose of enjoying sex and drugs and getting away from work and responsibilities, one finds all the traditional ingredients of modern taboo-breaking combined in a package tour, firmly commodified, and made acceptable. Leaving one's country, the still painful and uncertain exile of Modernism, is now available in safe forms as weekend trips. Exploring one's sexuality, a hazardous adventure at best and traditionally with unpredictable outcomes in terms of pregnancies, illnesses, etc., is now almost compulsory, and it is the (ideologically equally hijacked) faction who wants 'love to wait' who are more easily recognisable as potential eccentrics. The same has happened to drugs. Ecstasy is now so *de rigeur* in clubland as to be considered tedious, and it is the official suppliers of ever cheaper and ever better disguised alcoholic drinks for youngsters, the so-called 'Alcopops', who have become the cleverest and dominant drug suppliers.

The death knell of pop culture as the commodified realm of cultural experiment and fashion can be heard in the casting shows that proclaim to deliver forever the latest pop star sensations. Again, it would be naive to assume that popular acts were not manufactured in the past. Any history of the music hall tells of enforced groupings, while a look at court musicians, choirs,

and dance and acting companies will proclaim the same.[345] The difference lies in the fact that in set-ups such as the Disney Club or in casting shows, individuals are selected and trained according to the already established notion of what a star looks like. They become clones of an idea of stardom that harks back to established fashions. This breaks the circle of trendsetting and leads to the leaden presence of forever the same. This is not only lamentable with regard to novelty or originality (with which eccentricity had enjoyed a problematic relation since the days of Erasmus of Rotterdam's *De copia* anyway). It is lamentable in terms of the experiments, dismissals and adoptions that characterise the relationship between centre and eccentricity and on which the dialectic of their interchange and with it the dynamic of modern culture rests.

No matter how talented one may consider individuals emerging from such now thoroughly centric patterns, they will only ever be perceived in relation to what is already there. It is no coincidence that Britney Spears was originally hailed as 'the new Madonna' (to the extent that the 'old Madonna' felt compelled to boost her flagging career by means of a duet with Britney). Justin Timberlake (white, blue-eyed, and blond), who is, like Spears (white, blue-eyed and blonde) and Christina Aguileira (white, brown-eyed, and on-and-off blonde), an ex-member of the Disney Club, was even celebrated for a while as 'the new Michael Jackson', recorded with Jackson, and, though clearly white-skinned, won black music awards.

In terms of sexuality, these centric superstars lack any kind of extreme associations (even Aguileira only 'celebrated' her status as a 'dirty' bad girl in outfits that resemble those of Cher decades ago) – and not in personal excesses. Spears and Timberlake, once romantically linked, for a long time appeared to celebrate nothing so much as their ordinariness in this respect, before Spears's private and family life made headlines again.[346] That the entire realm of sexuality could act as a further proof that eccentricity has reached its point of demise will be illustrated in the discussion of eccentricity and postmodernity which completes this chapter.

An escape from commodification would in any case be nonsensical in popular culture – or its attribute 'popular' would not make sense. Yet attempts to at least engage playfully with the commercialisation that is part and parcel of a pop career have been made. Thus, the Pet Shop

[345] This is in fact what critics like Adorno have always accused the culture industry of doing. Compare, for example, Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p. 303. See also Strinati's critique of Adorno in *Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, pp. 64–74.

[346] Even Britney Spears' alleged alcohol problems and marriage breakdown feed into the loop that connects the extraordinariness of a pop star with the normalcy of white trailer trash (something that the rapper Eminem also uses as part of his image).

Boys, a pop duo emerging in the 1980s with a self-consciously titled single 'Opportunities: Let's Make Lots of Money' (first version 1985), became famous for refusing commodifiable attitudes and clothes. In the case of fashion, they either took them to an extreme by highlighting them in their lyrics – such as in 'Armani, Armani, A-A-Armani, Versace' in 'Paninaro' (1986) and by talking about designer labels more than about their music in interviews. Alternatively, they opted for such outlandish outfits in their stage appearances and videos as to make it impossible for them to become trends (traffic cones on their heads, for example). They also either refused to offer any stage 'show' at all (which made critics remark that one of them – Neil Tennant – sang, while the other – composer and keyboard player Chris Lowe – watched TV) or went for full-scale multimedia extravaganzas including specially commissioned films (by avant-garde director Derek Jarman), dancers, and costumes. They even produced an (unsuccessful) film, 'It Couldn't Happen Here' in 1987, and a more successful musical, 'Closer to Heaven' in 2000. One of the characteristics that reviewers and interviewers therefore constantly wanted to attach to the Pet Shop Boys was irony. Yet Tennant and Lowe continually refused to accept such a label, one that would have made them part of a simple reversal of norms, and insisted on the sincerity of their strange antics.[347]

Yet the Pet Shop Boys' anti-rock star behaviour (they initially claimed that they hated rock and wanted to defend pop) was itself at least in part a copy, a feature which aligns it with eccentric manifestation rather than disqualifying it. One reference point is a famous 'double act' from the world of the visual arts, the duo Gilbert and George, who first burst on the scene by exhibiting themselves in outfits that declared them to be 'ordinary' middle-aged men, as a living sculpture on a pedestal. Later, they combined images from their run-down neighbourhood in London with emblems of frustration, violence, excrements, and sexuality (all usually male).[348] The 'double act' in turn has a tradition in British entertainment, such as the Music Hall, where it is frequently

[347] See, for example, Chris Heath, *Pet Shop Boys: Literally* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 115–116. A section on their self-declared outsiderhood is on pp. 126–127.

[348] Wolf Jahn, *Die Kunst von Gilbert & George oder Ästhetik der Existenz* (Munich: Schirmer-Mosel, 1989) reproduces photographs of their 'Living Sculpture' installation of 1970 (pp. 13, 15, and 17) as well as some of their 'shit paintings' (pp. 320, 379) and those featuring urban British youths (for example pp. 318, 381, and 435).

employed by comedians.[349] It is indeed in comedy that both Englishness and eccentricity – and we can now argue: both as nostalgic quotations – have found a refuge or, more critically, an archive. Actors like Rowan Atkinson have perfected the image of an 'eccentric', because hyper-ordinary, British individual so much that he is now employed in American films to signal exactly that (it is no coincidence that a film in which he himself starred is called *Johnny English* – in an interesting play on the expression 'Johnny Foreigner').[350] Even a visually outstanding figure, Eddie Izzard with his transvestite outfits and make-up, which he contrasted for a while with his then professed heterosexuality before he declared himself 'non-binary', combined with surreal storytelling that often resembles stream of consciousness, can unproblematically be 'framed' by hegemonic mainstream culture as a 'typical examples of British humour'.[351] The path of irony and ironic distancing inevitably leads to cliché, and therefore to safe categorisation, reification, and commodification. This was also an experience that other supposedly anti-pop star pop stars of the 1980s had to make, such as The Smiths and their charismatic lead singer and lyricist Morrissey. In pop, it seems, eccentricity eventually comes to a standstill (even when the standstill wears white make-up and contact lenses and calls itself Marilyn Manson – after Marilyn Monroe and the 1960s ritual killer Charles Manson).

The latest return of nostalgic eccentricity can indeed be inspected very much within the mainstream, namely in contemporary British politics. There, the former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson successfully managed to weather any storm caused by his frequent untruths, strategic reversals of positions, and general unreliability by playing the by now proverbial 'English Eccentric'. With carefully tousled hair and forever crumpled suits he managed to garner sympathies by using the cliché of a now tailor-made eccentricity to appear both harmless and – the benchmark of populism – like one of the masses of 'ordinary people'.[352] As with his counterpart in this

[349] This connection is drawn emphatically in Jon Wilde and Michael Bracewell, 'Blues Brothers', *Blitz*, 11 (April 1991), pp. 40–46, where the Pet Shop Boys are called 'one of those perfectly balanced male duos in the tradition of the Ealing comedy duos Charters and Caldicott, or their American counterparts Wheeler and Woolsey, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Hinge and Brackett, Gilbert & George, Morrissey/Marr, and Morecambe and Wise' (p. 42).

[350] *Johnny English*, dir. Peter Howitt (UK, 2003).

[351] Rainer Emig, 'Queer Humour: Gay Comedy between Camp and Diversity', in: *Gender and Humour: Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives*, ed. Delia Chiaro and Raffaella Baccolini, Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies, 63 (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 276–287.

[352] Descriptions of Johnson as eccentric are numerous. A recent one is Tom McTague, 'Who is the real Boris Johnson? What I learnt on the road with the PM', *The Times* (10 July 2021).

charade employing the by now reified characteristics of eccentricity, Jacob Rees-Mogg, whose Catholicism, six children, attachment to his nanny and sense of dress and expression that have earned him the epithet 'the Honourable Member for the 18th century',[353] what hides behind this façade is a typical public school and Oxbridge career background as well as an interest in international financial schemes against which the fortunes of the United Kingdom often appear to play only a very minor part (as can be seen in Johnson's and Rees-Mogg's joint support of Brexit).

4.4 Postmodernity: haven or end of eccentricity?

After the often vigorously fought debates about the existence, position, and consequences of postmodernity that characterised the 1980s and early 1990s, the issue now seems to have settled in a truce. No longer is it an issue whether modernity can reach an end or endlessly questions and transforms itself (as the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas upholds).[354] Neither are we experiencing often embittered declarations by the opponents of the concept claiming that postmodernity is merely a ruse by late capitalism to sell us fragmentation and powerlessness as an achievement. At the same time, however, the energy with which the defenders of the concept tried to project a subversive or even liberating moment into it also seems to have vanished.

What makes postmodernity an important issue for a discussion of eccentricity is exactly its dubious cultural and historical status. It is neither a historical epoch (even though its manifestations seem to increase in the period post World War II). Nor is it an artistic or cultural trend, in the form of a counter to Modernism's aesthetic and intellectual dominance, for instance (although many features of postmodernism are reactions to such Modernist tendencies). In the same way that eccentricity does not present a coherent and closed position, postmodernity is

[353] Adam Lusher, 'Saviour of the Tory party or "reactionary poison"? Will Jacob Rees-Mogg run for Tory leader, and what would he do as PM?', *The Independent* (13 August 2017).

[354] Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project', in: *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), pp. 3–15.

first and foremost a relational concept. This is already evident in its prefix 'post', whose multiple meanings and possible misinterpretations form the core of many postmodernism debates.[355]

The truce mentioned above seems to have crystallised around certain key postulations which the present study will take as measures with which to assess the possible or impossible position of eccentricity vis-à-vis postmodernity. The most prominent one is Jean-François Lyotard's attempted definition of postmodernity as a farewell to master narratives.[356] By these he means the dominant ideological formations of Western culture which shape them in such a powerful measure that (despite their historicity and specificity) they frequently posture as 'truths' or 'nature'. In short, Lyotard views as the characteristic marker of postmodernity a farewell to overarching hegemonic truths – at least in their monolithic and universalising shape. Instead, he declares that postmodernity embraces a wealth of small and localised narratives, which ideally retain an awareness that they come about at a specific historic moment, for specific reasons, and are in the service of specific interests. What is of particular interest to a study of eccentricity in Lyotard's concept is that it sees in postmodernity a farewell to unified centres – against which any form of eccentricity would manifest itself. This would in fact spell the end of eccentricity as a dialogic force. Lyotard's views on hegemony, however, retain a possible moment for eccentricity in the political consequences that the shifts in hegemony in postmodernity engender in terms of power. He writes on hegemony:

> It has two formulations. In the first, consensus is an agreement between men, defined as knowing intellects and free wills, and is obtained through dialogue. This is the form elaborated by Habermas, but his conception is based on the validity of the narrative of emancipation. In the second, consensus is a component of the system, which manipulates it in order to maintain and improve its performance. It is the object of administrative procedures, in Luhmann's sense. In this case, its only validity is as an instrument to be used towards achieving the real goal, which is what legitimates the system – power.[357]

[355] Compare, for example, John Frow, 'What Was Post-Modernism?', in: *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, ed. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (University of Calgary Press, 1990), pp. 139–152.

[356] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Masumi, Theory and History of Literature, 10 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 31–37.

[357] Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition,* pp. 60–61. Habermas is mentioned here in connection with his concept of the communicative community, an idealising model in which participants engage in a power-free discourse. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, 2 vols

One of the recurring implicit and explicit questions in the present study was: where is the centre (of consensus, normality, and therefore ultimately power) towards that which can be called eccentric situates itself? If this centre is nowhere, as liberal ideology all the way to Habermas's notion of freely negotiating enlightened individuals, but also some commodified forms of postmodern ideology with their slogans such as 'Just be yourself' proclaim, then eccentricity has ceased to make sense as a category, since every utterance (and there are only individual ones left – even when they all look the same, like the results of plastic surgery) represents and proudly proclaims its own centricity.

If, on the other hand, Luhmann's systems theory is right and what is at work are not free individuals making free and individual choices and expressing themselves in individual utterances, but instead a largely invisible system of power that only produces utterances and individualities as effects, then there is no space left for eccentricity either, since now everything has become a function of the centre. Such a homogenizing and unifying system does not even require eccentricity for its own dynamic anymore, since it has achieved complete coverage and possession. All dynamic has become internal and feeds an ultimately immobile machine (the German theorist of normality, Jürgen Link, calls this state that of a 'flexible normalism'[358]). It is fascinating and certainly no coincidence that this dilemma, and it is a very real one, since hardly anyone would want to live in either of the two scenarios, has started to spawn investigations into eccentrics, after first giving rise to investigations into supposedly more diametrically opposed counters to such normalities in the shape, for instance, of postcolonial studies, Queer Theory, or a renewed interest in Marxist and other forms of ideological critique.

That even supposedly radical dissidence is by no means immune to co-optation into the system can be seen by the emergence of phenomena such as 'diversity management' in management and consumer culture. Rather than ordering reality (the work force, consumer groups, etc.) by nineteenth-century means of identifying an ideal average, something that political parties are still prone to, usually at their own cost and at the expense of proper politics, and thus by exclusion

(Cambridge: Polity, 1986/1988). It is clearly based on liberal ideas. Niklas Luhmann is the main exponent of systems theory, an anti-humanist concept that rests on systems (re-)producing themselves and only creating notions such as subjectivities etc. as (frequently manipulative) side effects. See Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz, Jr., Writing Science (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[358] For a more recent re-evaluation of the term, see Jürgen Link, 'Zum Anteil des flexiblen Normalismus an der medialen Konsensproduktion', in: S. Habscheid and C. Knobloch, eds., *Einigkeitsdiskurse* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009), pp. 20–32.

of dissent, 'diversity managers' are now employed to spot the dissidents (with regard to gender, race, sexuality, religion, etc.) and make their differences 'work' for the assigned task. Although the present study has consistently claimed that eccentricity does not operate in a power-free individualist nirvana without interaction with economic and political factors, eccentricity has never been put to work in the way that concepts such as 'diversity management' attempt. In fact, one could argue (and it has been argued implicitly above) that what 'diversity managers' engage with is not eccentricity at all, but deviance: what was traditionally excluded from the job market, from promotion, or from a company's consumer profile (people with a different racial or ethnic background, handicapped individuals, people of non-hegemonic genders, sexualities or religions, or simply women) now becomes a target, a target for incorporation.[359]

The opposite scenario opens up when one looks at the surprising revival of some of the most archaic expressions of eccentricity. The present study chose Saint Simeon the Stylite as one of its examples of a 'pre-historic' eccentricity. In 2003 the German avant-garde theatre director and film maker Christoph Schlingensief staged an open air performance in the heart of the financial centre of Germany (and the location of the European Central Bank), Frankfurt am Main, the Zeil, Frankfurt's equivalent of London's Oxford Street. He paid a handful of unemployed men and women to sit on pillars for several days – to watch and be watched by the shoppers heading to one of the many stores there. Schlingensief called the spectacle 'Church of Fear' (he used the English form, probably to latch on to the consumerist trend in Germany to use English to make products and services appear more modern and exciting).[360] It is clear that a performance such as this quotes eccentricity.[361] Whether it is itself eccentric, however, is dubious, since it is of course part of a long tradition of experimental theatre, was announced by the media with Schlingensief's trademark name attached, and was, in fact, largely ignored by passers-by. It felt reminiscent of a much smaller performance held in Oxford in the 1980s when, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, artists raised a golden plastic statue of Lenin opposite a town

[359] Of the by now literally hundreds of manuals, see Office of Public Service and Science, Equal Opportunities Division, *Managing Diversity: A Training Programme on the Effective Selection and Management of Male and Female Staff from Diverse Backgrounds* (London. H.M.S.O., 1992).

[360] <http://www.church-of-fear.net/english/index.html> (accessed 17 July 2022).

[361] The reviewers were quick to pick up on the intertextuality of such performances. Thus, a report in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* spots references to pillar saints, the last supper, religious processions, confession, TV casting shows, even Buddhist and Hinduist rituals, Wagner operas, and the German artist Joseph Beuys. See Michael Hierholzer, 'Prozession, Abendmahl, Pfahlsitzen: Christoph Schlingensief mit der "Church of Fear" in Frankfurt', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Rhein-Main-Zeitung, Kultur (14 September 2003).

centre shopping mall. Again, its fate was to be largely ignored. The same appears to be true for a less ironic display of another Lenin statue in the West German industrial city of Gelsenkirchen by a group of Marxists in June 2020.[362] Dissent is facing a hard time in an era where everything is an 'event'.

Strangely contemporaneous with Schlingensief's pillar saints, who were neither saintly nor making a sacrifice, but got paid and certainly did not intend to convert people (to what? understanding that unemployment exists, something that is presented daily in all media?), was David Blaine's one-man hunger artist 'show' in London. Starving himself for sixty days in a transparent cube elevated over London's Embankment, he also took a traditional marker of eccentricity and combined it with modern showmanship. All media were in evidence, regular reports of his state of health circulated, and one need not doubt that talk show appearances and book contracts had already been signed by the time he entered the cube. At the same time, critics even spotted analogies with Beckett's plays.[363] Blaine, more than Schlingensief, also achieved some audience response, and it was mainly hostile and cruel – such as bombarding his cage with hamburgers. Yet perhaps this was indeed an unconscious comment linking one of the strongest icons of normalisation, hegemony, and also globalisation, namely fast food, with something that was not fast and explicitly involved no food at all, but still functioned on the same level as mass products signalling to a mass market (us) that we are 'loving it' (Macdonald's ungrammatical slogan, promoted at that time by none other than Justin Timberlake).

In such a scenario, Terry Eagleton's despairing comments regarding postmodernity appear apt indeed:

> Postmodernism, confronted with this situation, will then take the other way out. If the work of art really is a commodity then it might as well admit it, with all the *sang froid* it can muster. Rather than languish in some intolerable conflict between its material reality and its aesthetic structure, it can always collapse that conflict on one side, becoming aesthetically what it is

[362] <https://www.dw.com/en/controversial-lenin-statue-unveiled-in-germanys-gelsenkirchen/a-53880002> (accessed 17 July 2022).

[363] 'The obvious parallel is Beckett's *Happy Days* where the heroine, buried up to her waist in soil, begins her morning rituals with the cry of "Another Happy Day"'; Michael Billington, 'After 22 days of turning starvation into a stunt, the puzzle of David Blaine's ordeal remains – why?', *The Guardian* (27 September 2003). Billington eventually admits that the performance retained an irritating openness, yet with the glib sweep of the professional reviewer 'framed' this concession again by relating it to a seemingly universal 'unresolvable ambiguity of art.'

> economically. The modernist reification – the art work as isolated fetish – is therefore exchanged for the reification of everyday life in the capitalist marketplace.[364]

Where would resistance still reside if one did not subscribe to Eagleton's strangely unbroken attachment to a Marxist class-struggle ideology, but wanted to look at a feature such as eccentricity? How would a study like the present one defend its own status vis-à-vis its findings? These are questions that even popular studies of postmodernism fail to address.[365] Of course the present investigation would love to claim that it itself presents a slanted look both at normality and at the normality of critical and cultural scholarship. Yet by implicitly or explicitly claiming an eccentric point of view itself and by implying that this perspective is somehow immune against the centralising, normalising, and commodifying tendencies observed in the treatment of eccentricity since the nineteenth century, it would only naively subscribe to the liberal ethos of many positions that see in eccentricity a useful or at least enjoyable and ornamental enrichment of culture. It would indeed, despite its attempts at outlining a history and structure(s) of eccentricity, end up as no more critical than an article on the supposed demise of eccentrics from British academia in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. In it, Adrian Mourby laments the loss of eccentricity at Cambridge University and other British universities. Yet his only explanation for their disappearance is the increasing rationalisation and formalisation of university existence, not any wider cultural shifts:

> If universities have, in the past, been hot-houses for individualism, providing the perfect environment for eccentricity to bloom, then Gilmore [John Gilmore, lecturer in Postcolonial Studies at Warwick University] feels that successive waves of rationalisation have sent a chill breeze through the greenhouse.[366]

If, however, the present study saw no critical value in eccentricity, it might as well align itself with the many florilegia of eccentric characters that were mentioned in the introduction. It would then be little more than entertainment.

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364 Eagleton, ‚Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', pp. 140–141.

365 Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism*, New Accents (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), for instance, misses its chance to address eccentricity twice: in its chapter on 'The Politics of Parody' (pp. 93–117), and in a section on 'The Private and the Public' (pp. 160–168).

366 Adrian Mourby, 'Strange Lack of Old Peculiars', *The Times Higher* (4 April 2003), p. 21.

Yet perhaps there is a 'middle way' (not a good metaphor for eccentricity, unless this middle happens to be located between two centres), a middle ground between a naively liberal and a nostalgically conservative position. This middle way would first of all have to acknowledge that it is impossible and counterproductive to claim eccentricity as a cultural force for all times. It was shown that it emerges at a specific point for specific reasons, is transformed and eventually reaches impasses again as the consequence of particular historical and cultural constellations. Thus, the present study of eccentricity is a study of something that might be in the past, yet whose effects (be they nostalgia, ironic quotation, or cliché) are still with us. What studying eccentricity as an intertextual echo, as a historical formation, or as artefacts enables us to do today is assess cultural change, cultural and ideological normality, but equally the methodological and theoretical blind spots that have hitherto so frequently made it difficult, if not impossible, to see eccentricity. What it has seen is eccentricity as a structure and a network, a network that has identifiable protagonists, texts, and concepts as its elements, even though it is an open and highly complex set-up with many possible extensions and additions. Names such as Diogenes, Theophrastus, Burton, Cervantes, Rabelais, Johnson, and Carlyle feature in it as much as those of Hildegard of Bingen, Margaret Cavendish, Mary Wroth, Mary Wortley Montague, George Eliot, and Edith Sitwell. Concepts such as melancholy and carnival can be used for its definitions, in the same way that intertextuality works well as a way of describing its (re-)production. The concern with eccentricity not surprisingly brings some little known and unexpected names into the equation, yet it also involves names as central as Erasmus of Rotterdam, John Locke, the famous Romantics, Dickens, all the way to today's pop stars and politicians.

In terms of Englishness, for which eccentricity acts as a potent auto-stereotype, a self-applied label, the comprehensive study of eccentricity with its emphasis on the slanted gaze, not simply confrontational, yet potentially looking at things that escape the standard vision, enables us to get an idea why eccentricity, which is not specific or restricted to British culture, nonetheless occupies a stronger position in it than in the comparable cultures of France and Germany. If eccentricity is a way of negotiation dissent while avoiding confrontations and sometimes even firm positionings, and if its historical workings are most evident in connection with the respective status of religion, political power, class, gender, and sexuality, then Britain has indeed particular need of such an outlet, safety valve, or – productively – field of experiment. Historically, it underwent a Reformation that nominally changed the country's official denomination to a Protestant one; yet it was a Protestantism based on an ultimately Catholic theology which merely replaced the head of its church with the nation's ruler. It is no coincidence that following on from there, Britain

faced much stronger fears of a counter-Reformation, since this would inevitable have changed its political power structure as well.

In terms of political power, too, uneasy compromises characterise the British system: after a radical act of regicide and turbulent years as a Commonwealth, the 'Glorious Revolution', as was elaborated above, was neither a revolution nor in any way glorious. In fact, when in other European countries, most notably France, the emerging class system led to an overthrow of political order, Britain remained little more than a concerned onlooker. Its debates did not take place in the streets, but in literature. Similar contradictions, though not as specific as those of politics and faith, also feature in the gender positions of British individuals. It is a country with a long and far-reaching history of important female writers and thinkers, yet also one that still managed to uphold a thoroughly chauvinist ideology until the late nineteenth or even early twentieth century. In the same way, although Britain is proverbially associated with sexual experiments (see expression such as 'the English vice' for flagellation), well into the twentieth century it pretended to confine sexuality to the private heterosexual sphere. Even today the country has pornography laws that make it look hypocritical.

Eccentricity is therefore not merely a marker of achievement (of tolerance, for instance), but also, through its function as a safety-valve or cover, one of reaction. In some ways, as was tentatively done in the section on pop culture, eccentricity and Englishness here join forces in acting as nostalgic clichés.[367] They are clichés, however, that are by no means harmless, since they might (as auto-stereotypes) easily blind those who subscribe to them to the real challenges, opportunities, but also threats of an ever more united Europe and an ever more globalised world. A non-essentialist view of eccentricity, as proposed in the present study, therefore avoids both the tautologies and contradictions inherent in an approach that makes eccentricity a constant of the English or British imagination, its culture and individuals. Peter Ackroyd's *Albion: The Origin of the English Imagination* (2002) is such an essentialist treatise. Even though it understandably touches on many names and periods also featured in the present study (such as the Romantics), it

[367] Antony Myall's humorous *Xenophobe's Guide to the English*, revised ed. (Horsham: Ravette Books, 1994) puts it in an interesting way: 'To the rest of the world the entire English race is eccentric. To the English themselves, the concept of eccentricity is a useful way of coping with the problem of anti-social or un-English behaviour in one of their own kind' (p. 24). Earlier, however, it (unwittingly?) stated that 'The Irish are perceived as being wildly eccentric at best' (p. 6). The dichotomy that appeared between the seventeenth-century view of eccentricity as Otherness and the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century positions of eccentricity as an auto-stereotype still seems to be prevalent to some degree.

does not see the contradiction inherent in its simultaneous attempt to make imagination 'native' and to describe its historical permutations. Whenever it reaches the limits of its argument, it takes recourse to mystification, as in a passage when it tries to view Medieval English composers simultaneously as 'part of a larger Catholic and European civilisation', but also as creators of 'a readily identifiable national art. It is the great perplexity, and mystery, of native consciousness.'[368] Ackroyd mentions eccentricity in passing, yet only once addresses its role in English culture in a one-sided and optimistically liberal way that, however, also illustrates the contradictory status of his overall argument: 'A general delight in eccentricity, in all its forms, in fact animates the English genius. It is related to the habits of individualism and defensive privacy which the English have adopted; eccentricity then becomes the natural, if unacknowledged, issue of a native virtue' (p. 336). The English attitude towards individualism and privacy is adopted, i.e. historical, yet it is also supposed to be the result of an innate virtue, which in turn makes the English appreciate eccentricity. The illogical argument reaches full circle.

The final chapter of the present study will take the debate out of historical realities and back into the ivory tower of intellectual schools and theoretical debates from where it originally emerged – in the shape of melancholy. By asking why eccentricity has hitherto been denied a proper status in Critical and Cultural Theory, it will also try to show how these disciplines must consistently be made fertile for a critical engagement with our own cultural positions – 'our own' here representing the always uneasy bind of supposed individuality and equally supposed collective identities, be they national, ethnic, religious, gendered, sexual or any other way.

[368] Peter Ackroyd, *Albion: The Origin of the English Imagination* (London: Chatto & Wyndus, 2002), p. 444. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

5 Eccentricity as the abject of critical and cultural theory[369]

5.1 Excluding eccentricity

The reason why eccentricity does not have a bad name in Critical Theory and Cultural Studies is that it does not have a name at all. This is rather surprising, since eccentricity regularly features as a stereotypical element of Englishness, and Englishness has become the object of increased critical attention as a historical and ideological construct.[370] Nonetheless, a glance at a whole range of Cultural Studies textbooks confirms that eccentricity does not exist as a theoretical concept.[371] What might be the reasons for this?

The first and foremost reason for ignoring eccentricity is its connotation of quaintness. What is eccentric is harmless; its marginality is already tamed and seemingly non-threatening. In contrast to concepts such as deviance, crime, illness, or perversion, it appears to be devoid of subversive potential. Eccentricity also seems to lack a critical vantage point. Already integrated into normative culture, never more than an isolated and individual challenge to rules and

369 Some sections of this chapter have appeared in different form as 'Right in the Margins: An Eccentric View of Culture', in: *Post/Theory, Culture, Criticism*, ed. Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, Critical Studies, 23 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 93–111.

370 The telling anecdote about a British professor of anthropology in a German investigation into eccentricity has already been mentioned.

371 It merits no mention in the indices of the following studies: Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (London et al.: Sage, 2000); Lawrence Grossberg, Gary Nelson and Paula Treichler, eds, *Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); Mike Storry and Peter Childs, *British Cultural Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading* (London: Routledge, 1994); David Christopher, *British Culture: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Robin Cohen, *Frontiers of Identity: The British and the Others*, Longman Sociological Series (London and New York: Longman, 1994). Although 'eccentric' is used as an adjective in passing in Easthope's *Englishness and National Culture*, the concept is not granted a discussion, very likely because it contradicts Easthope's overall thesis of the dominance of Empiricism and common sense in English culture.

decorum, it fails to provide material for a systematic interrogation of cultural functions.[372] Its complicity with norms also makes its study both odious and vacuous. What is there to study? If normality is the object of inquiry, then why should we approach it from isolated fringe positions? It seems much more sensible to take dogmatic pronouncements and established rules in their generally applicable shapes as our guide for the establishment of concepts than the diverse and unruly manifestations of a motley bunch of individuals.

Secondly, therefore, eccentricity is generally associated with individuals rather than with groups of people or specific works of art. Thus, using eccentricity as a critical term takes us back into the uncomfortable category of biographical criticism, with all its attendant seductions of authorial intentions, the mixing of lives, works, and interpretation. Individuals are also not commonly the object of political and sociological inquiries, which usually focus on groups. Eccentricity generally produces neither groups nor manifestos nor canons. Its expressions often lack the shapes that Critical Theorists or Cultural Historians feel happy with. Although eccentric works of art and eccentric writings are frequently acknowledged as such by all disciplines, much of what happens in eccentricity manifests itself in the intangible practice of individual existences, the messy sphere of actual life – exactly that which so frequently escapes theory because it refuses to live by the rules that interpretation needs to get its hermeneutic machinery to work. Beau Brummell, one of the most influential popularisers of the concept of the 'dandy', is reputed to have left as his legacy not diaries and letters, but clothes bills. Cultural Historians would, of course, be happy to use those to distil an image of consumption and luxury of an era. Yet the fact that Brummell acquired a reputation because his taste and consumption was considered extraordinary, excessive and unusual, taints the enterprise with a questionable representability.

Eccentrics not only refuse to be good yardsticks of their respective eras, they also often emerge from privileged positions, yet without necessarily conforming to the rules of their class. Once again this makes them unfit for sociological studies and dubious for Marxist approaches (in which they sometimes feature as expressions of decadence, as moralistic reminders of the excesses of class domination and the injustice of capitalist exploitation). When sociology tackles

[372] Weeks and James's *Eccentrics*, as mentioned in the introduction to the present study, seems to fall into the gap between anecdotal evidence and empirical social study informed by some vague psychoanalysis: it concocts dubious statistics out of eclectic data and ultimately uses them for little more than questionable individualist (not to say theoretically oxymoronic) claims such as: 'certain types of deviance can be healthy and life-enhancing' (p. 180).

them at all, it merely tries to integrate them again into the many patterns that the discipline, with its reliance on categories and dominantly empirical research, can provide.[373]

Thirdly, and perhaps least obviously, eccentricity – as a concept that has never been one – already seems outdated: it smacks of anachronism, of the good old bad old days when certain privileged individuals were granted the right to behave slightly outside the norm, and society regarded their antics as amusing and perhaps even enriching, without, however, feeling provoked into debating or tempted to copy them. Eccentric manifestations regularly seem to exist outside their time, either because of their orientation towards the past (as in the case of hermits, worshippers of supposedly primitive lifestyles, but also collectors of exquisite antiques[374]), or because of their visionary attitudes. The mad inventors and scientists belong to this category – but also, on a more popular plane, fashion trendsetters. This last example takes us back to the problem of norm and deviance while reminding us of the precarious status of eccentricity in postmodernity. Nowhere is the relationship between eccentricity and norm as tight as in the areas of fashion and so-called lifestyle (a term that is itself a legacy of eccentric late nineteenth-century 'decadence'). The previous chapter has outlined why eccentricity becomes a cliché in the course of the nineteenth and a quotation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Fashion would simply stop existing if it was not propelled by forever new and seemingly eccentric inventions that, however, almost instantly become commonplace – only to be replaced by new fads. Who, for instance, would have thought about forty years ago, when a man wearing an earring provoked public comments and reprimands by employers, that piercings and tattoos would become the playthings of the lower and middle classes – and not only its teenagers? Skirts for men briefly made a comeback, but tellingly only in an office-friendly grey flannel variety. A similar trend concerning kilts is rumoured to be going strong in the American North-West.[375] Of course these two contemporary fashions have historic precedents and were once the norm rather than its transgression (male jewellery in the Elizabethan era, for example; the kilt among

[373] Again, a telling example is Dörr-Backes' *Exzentriker*, which creates ‚Idealtypen', ideal types of eccentrics, in accordance with established sociological theory (pp. 205–296).

[374] The latter are granted some attention in a collection of essays entitled *Sammler – Bibliophile – Exzentriker*, ed. Assmann, Gomille and Rippl. However, the volume largely prefers to do without a theoretical framework (either of collecting or eccentricity) for its case studies.

[375] Kilts can be inspected (and ordered) on the following website: <https://www.utilikilts.com> (accessed 17 July 2022). The picture galleries supplied contain some interesting material concerning attempts to signal that wearing a skirt need not infringe on the wearer's masculinity (which here seems to mean heterosexuality). Thus, kilts are called, for instance, 'The Spartan', 'The Workman', and 'The Survival'.

Highland Scots). How can one be eccentric in a commodified reality that seems to know and thrive on innumerable centres? This question was addressed in connection with postmodernity in the previous chapter.

This conclusion will now address the prejudices of theory concerning eccentricity and argue that their bases could equally well be employed as arguments in favour of granting eccentricity conceptual status in Critical Theory and Cultural Studies. Taking the problematic 'differences' of eccentricity as a starting point, it will eventually argue that eccentricity presents an important addition to our concepts of culture – even or exactly in a postmodern environment that seems to have largely abandoned notions of norms and centres. It will further point out that certain theoretical developments, most notably in the fields of Postcolonial Studies and Queer Theory, have been approaching the territory held by eccentricity, while strategically or ignorantly refusing to associate themselves with the unmentionable. Eventually, eccentricity will be presented as a way of negotiating the transitions that have shaped the Humanities in recent decades, from biographical to textual to contextual studies, but also the many 'turns': from the linguistic to the pictorial to the performative turn. Eccentricity will be used to demonstrate that these shifts should not be regarded as successions with related dismissals, but conceptual connections and transformations – very much in the tradition of eccentricity as a network of intertextuality. Yet there is also an even more important insight that the study of eccentricity provides – much beyond the 'internal' debates of theory: eccentricity in its troubled and problematic position will ultimately be shown to teach us something about the inner workings of culture, the secret, as it will turn out, of its creativity and productivity.

5.2 The abject in critical theory and cultural studies

The last decades have seen a shift away from the study of the marginal as a historic act of redressing balances to a questioning of so-called norms and normalities as a more radical theoretical onslaught on culture and history. This shift was noticeable first of all in Feminism. There, the dutiful digging up of sidelined and unjustly forgotten female artists and writers was followed by sometimes essentialist inquiries into possible cores of femininity.[376] This was then

[376] Three classics of this first-generation Feminism are Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), Sandra Gilbert

queried and replaced by assessments of gender as relational in models of mutual construction and deconstruction governed by ideological frameworks whose constants proved themselves dependent on contingent foundations.[377]

Even more pronounced than in Feminism were those shifts from stressing the existence and rights of the margins to a subversive challenging of the presumed centre in Queer Theory and Postcolonial Studies. If the Gay Rights Movements of the 1960s and 1970s had focussed on making the world aware that gays and lesbians existed and had generally been content to ask for safe spaces and tolerance, the atmosphere changed when so-called Queer activists began to interrogate the meaning of heterosexual dominance, i.e. heteronormativity or even heterosexism.[378] The blasphemous question was: does the norm, i.e. heterosexuality, exist at all? The question eventually also undercut the concept of homosexuality, a nineteenth-century invention, as Michel Foucault argues.[379] The challenge to the centre from the margin indeed eventually does away with both. This is another hint towards the possible subversiveness of eccentricity.

Postcolonial Studies also started from the complaint that imposed colonial identities were generally defined as marginal, exotic, or Oriental by the presumed white and Western centre.[380] Yet very quickly a dialectic opened up in which the dichotomy of inside-outside became replaced by models of dependency in which the supposedly dominating coloniser proved as susceptible to the influence of that which he ruled and in part created as the supposedly oppressed colonised fed on the power structures and ideological and cultural definitions imposed on him. Bhabha's concept of hybridity or Spivak's question regarding the possibility of an utterance by

and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 1979), and Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1976). The second stage, which I would criticise as potentially essentialist, is manifested, for instance, in Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', and Luce Irigaray, 'This Sex which is Not One', both in: *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivon (Brighton: Harvester, 1981).

[377] The seminal text is Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Thinking Gender (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

[378] Two classics of this debate are Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) and Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*.

[379] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, pp. 36–49.

[380] The seminal study is Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

the subaltern demarcate this shift.[381] Especially Bhabha's formulation of a 'third space' within culture (a concept that he takes over and develops from Fredric Jameson's views concerning postmodernism) resembles the model of eccentricity developed in the present study:

> Such fantastic renamings of the subjects of cultural difference do not derive their discursive authority from anterior causes – be it human nature or historical necessity – which, in a secondary move, articulate essential and *expressive* identities between cultural differences in the contemporary world. The problem is not of an ontological cast, where differences are effects of some more totalizing, transcendental identity to be found in the past or the future. Hybrid hyphenations emphasize the incommensurable elements – the stubborn chunks – as the basis of cultural identifications. What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, 'opening out', remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender or race. Such assignations of social differences – where difference is neither One nor the Other but *something else besides*, *in-between* – find their agency in a form of the 'future' where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory. It is, if I may stretch a point, an interstitial future, that emerges *in-between* the claims of the past and the needs of the present.[382]

Bhabha's third space shares with the concept of eccentricity outlined in the present study its anti-essentialism. It does not possess an ontology of its own, but emerges from its contingent position between established ontologies, in short: it exists only when and because it is in-between. It is exactly its stubborn in-betweenness constantly manifesting itself performatively that gives a dynamic to the culture it inhabits. Here Bhabha's model becomes narrower than that of eccentricity when it assumes a cultural difference that the third space then straddles. The present study has located the stubborn elements already at work in all of the cultures and periods it described. Eccentricity does not require a culture that is Other to the culture it affects, because culture is always already Other to itself. Yet this Otherness does not – or does not always – lead to a binary conceptualisation as sameness and difference. Instead, it forms in-between spaces that refuse to be safely relegated to either side of the boundary. Bhabha's model takes this idea into the

[381] Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Commitment to Theory', in: *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 18–28; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Gary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 271–313.

[382] Homi K. Bhabha, 'How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation', in: *The Location of Culture*, pp. 303–337 (p. 313).

realm of temporality, which is also what the present study claims when it shows eccentricity to be a historical dynamic. Yet again, Bhabha is narrower than the ideas of the present study when he only describes his third space as an opening towards the future. The residual anachronism within eccentricity that the present study has uncovered works both ways. It opens a monolithic present towards a dynamic future, as in Bhabha, yet it also cracks open monolithic notions of the past in favour of eccentric re-readings and thereby undermines any linear and monological conception of culture and history. Bhabha implicitly seems to at least suspect such a possibility, since he chooses translation as the *modus operandi* of the third space. Translation is the response to what the present study has consistently described as the intertextual structure of eccentricity at the core of the dynamics of culture and therefore at the heart of culture itself.

Feminism, Gender Studies, Queer Theory and Postcolonial Theory are often regarded as new disciplines. They are even regarded as newfangled by many traditionalists, especially in the field of Literary Studies, but also in popular and populist debates. Yet their development is merely the outcome of the same dialectic that has been shown to be at work within culture ever since culture perceives itself in terms of centres and margins. And, like many other movements that started as marginal, Feminism, Gender Studies, Queer Theory and Postcolonial Theory are occupying very centric territory in the study of literatures and cultures, to the extent that curricula and publishers' programmes (the main means through which cultural trends (re-)produce themselves in academia – means that are thoroughly intertextual) are structured according to them. Yet this neither grants these disciplines an uncontested centric status (as a new canon of theory, for instance), nor does it prove that these disciplines are really new. As any informed look at even the earliest cultural manifestations, again, most explicitly in literature, tells us, concerns for gender have always been prevalent, though not always in the terms that are nowadays familiar to us (the early texts by women authors in the present study provide ample evidence of this). The same applies to sexuality, something that the fop and Sentimentality debates of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries negotiated carefully, even when – according to its modern master-theorist Foucault, the concept had not yet been established. Even Postcolonial Theory, theoretically a product of colonialism, imperialism, in our specific case the British Empire and its eventual demise, can be shown to produce results when applied to earlier material. Thus, it might, for instance, be worthwhile applying its concepts to xenophobic anti-fop and anti-luxury texts of the eighteenth century – or even to epic poems about the defence of the realm of England against the Danes who would soon be its masters in text as old as 'The Battle of Maldon'.

What this shows is that processes of theoretical investigation are as much part and parcel of culture as its supposed primary products: art, literature, philosophy, education, and religion. It

also demonstrates that cultural production and criticism follow a similar pattern of centring and marginalisation. This pattern 'creates', i.e. produces, canons of supposedly 'classical' works as much as their creators as mythological hero figures. Yet it also consistently requires margins: minor works, failures, neglected and forgotten products and their producers. This is the point where Literary and Cultural Studies face their task of becoming continually self-re-fashioning tools, whose task is not determined by mistaken claims to 'completeness', but by an awareness of culture as a dynamic process. This process continually produces hierarchies and exclusions. Indeed, as the present study has argued, it can be defined as exactly this process of marginalisation – and the attendant dialectical challenge that the margins then pose for the fragile and transient and potentially vacuous centre.

Instead of realising this task of addressing mechanisms of centring and decentring, Literary and Cultural Theory have for a long time been entangled in this very process. Thus, the supposed supersession of unreflective canonical thinking about great works and its related biographical and moral dabbling in supposedly great artists by a more formalised approach, which, in literature, was represented by the so-called 'linguistic turn' of Formalism, New Criticism, and Structuralism, is, in the framework of the present study, merely a turn of the dialectic screw of relocating centres and margins.[383] Nonetheless, it is an important turn, for it enables us to see eccentrics not so much as special individuals, but eccentricity as a tradition, a structure, and a pattern made up of texts that are received, criticised, translated, copied, but also neglected, forgotten, banned or destroyed. It enables us to 'read' eccentricity as a text within culture – rather than making more or less random speculations about individuals.

Yet, as New Historicism, for example, demonstrated, all formal approaches to literature and the arts are in danger of removing works of art and any cultural artefact and manifestation from their history and cultural contexts. Contextual criticism and an integration of formalised reading practices into a larger concept of culture (of which literature forms only a part) were advocated to combat this tendency. An attendant development was the so-called 'pictorial turn', inaugurated by an influential study by the Chicago professor of English and Art History W. J. T. Mitchell,

[383] The linguistic turn is generally said to have started in philosophy and the natural sciences with the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and John Austin (1911–1960) in the early twentieth century. Their insistence that the foundation of all our concepts of reality have to be sought in language in turn had precedents in Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), and Ernst Cassirer (1872–1945).

Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation (1994).[384] It no longer regarded as texts only verbal manifestations, but included in its wider semiotic definition of meaning all sign systems, especially visual ones. Again, the present study views this, very much in accordance with the proper meaning of the concept's label, as another 'turn'. It is again a turn that is relevant for the study of eccentricity, because eccentricity indeed frequently manifests itself not in spoken and written verbal texts, but in fashion, i.e. clothes, hairdos, make-up, and rituals, which are only occasionally addressed directly in verbal texts, such as Restoration Comedy, and more frequently documented in unorthodox ways, as in the clothes bills of the dandies.

The pictorial turn was superseded by the 'performative turn'. Now, culture and many of its manifestations, even those previously held to be eternal essences, such as gender, are viewed as produced by performances of individuals and groups inside ideological frameworks of their specific cultures.[385] Again, the study of eccentricity confirms this from the start. Eccentricity knows no essences, only the exchange of gazes in a procedure that is purely theatrical, be it carnivalesque or melancholic. It not only thrives, but (re-) produces itself on surfaces. Yet reading these performances is again a formal procedure that takes us through visual and aural signs to a notion of text, of which the founding father of Deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, claims that it

[384] W. J. Thomas Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994). It is related to a number of analogous studies, among them Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (London: Collins, 1987); Robert M. Levine, *Images of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989); David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Francis Haskell, *History and its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993); and Jay Ruby, *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Its German counterpart is Gottfried Boehm, ed., *Was ist ein Bild?*, 2nd ed., Bild und Text (Munich: Fink, 1995).

[385] The founding fathers of the performative turn are the Sociologist Erving Goffman, with his study of role play in society and culture (Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1959)); the speech-act theorist John Searle with his study *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and the theatre theorist Richard Schechner with *Essays on Performance Theory* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977). Judith Butler has popularised the notion of performance in the fields of gender and sexuality in books such as *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), while Marjorie Garber has added her contribution with *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

stands at the ontological core of all our Western concepts of meaning.[386] This becomes visible when Hayden White famously describes history as a text, a narrative.[387] Thus, the turns are turns, and they are turns of the same screw. In the same way that the present study has shown the futility of separating formal and contextual approaches, it has also consistently argued against any attempt to separate literature and culture. It has also implicitly shown that attempts to reach a hierarchy of the two terms are nothing but a further manifestation of the centring-decentring dialectic. It therefore lets Cultural Studies scholar claim that literature is only a small province of their realm, in the same way that it lets literary scholars state that all of culture's moves and shifts are depicted, negotiated, and sometimes predicted by literature.[388] In the same way that Burton's frontispiece of his *Anatomy of Melancholy* invited the onlooker to see him- or herself as nothing but eccentric, the present study not only calls the disciplines from which it emerges 'eccentric', but is also content to be included in the label. All the same, it does not – and cannot, as we have seen in Samuel Johnson – declare itself eccentric, but must leave the verdict to its potentially equally eccentric audience.

However, before the present study completely loses itself in dialectic turns of screws, it must, as its final duty, address once more the question of the function of this dialectic of centre and eccentricity. It has, in the course of its investigation, procured several advantages that the concept of eccentricity presents, especially with regard to the tensions and unresolved conflicts within British culture. It has named tolerance, in other words: the avoidance of open violent conflict and the exclusion of individuals and groups, despite all its above-mentioned problems of power and hierarchies, one of the key advantages produced by adherence to a concept of eccentricity.[389] It has also pinpointed the flexibility that the concept grants those at the forefront of cultural innovations, be they artists or scientists. Thirdly, and related to the two previous advantages, eccentricity, especially in its quaint and commodified forms, was shown to act as a kind of cultural inoculation. It allows Otherness, be it gendered, racial, ethnic, religious, or political, to

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[386] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 60. See also Peter V. Zima, *Deconstruction and Critical Theory*, trans. Rainer Emig (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 29–38.

[387] For instance, in Hayden White, *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

[388] Compare my survey 'Cultural Studies and Literary Studies: A Troubled Relation', *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*, 20:1 (2013), pp. 27–41.

[389] Compare Barbara Henry, 'Identities of the West: Reason, Myth, Limits of Tolerance', in: *Identities: Time, Difference, and Boundaries*, ed. Heidrun Friese (New York: Berghahn, 2002), pp. 77–106.

be embraced while reducing the attendant fear of the encounter. Yet, as always, there is a price to pay, here the price of normalisation, which is in many ways parallel to eccentricity's 'Englishing', since eccentricity did eventually become a dominant auto-stereotype of the English.

The current dangers of dealing with Otherness are visible in so-called 'identity politics' debates. They emerge from constructivist perspectives like Judith Butler's and from discourse theories like those established by Michael Foucault. But all too often they forget that their emancipation and critical vantage point still places them firmly inside complex power structures, and that replacing one norm by another does not necessarily make the world a better place, even when proponents and activists of this form of identity thereby gain empowerment for themselves. We have seen in the course of the present study how centres and margins shift. If what used to be a margin, i.e. a form of supposed sexual deviancy or an oppressed race, now declares itself the new norm to which everything else has to be subjected, the present study would warn that this is only a stage in an ongoing dialectic, one that it will produce its own echoes and backlashes. If eccentricity can teach us something, then that marginality can be a powerful creative force that cannot be fully controlled by the centre. It also cannot ever fully conquer the centre without losing its very creative and critical power. This is not an argument in favour of accepting injustice or oppression, but one about the dynamics of hierarchies and imbalances, which are generally more complex than a simple binary view can recognise and usually too historically rooted to be cancelled once and for all, even if proponents of a so-called 'decolonisation' like to believe this. For who would have the power and authority and right to act in such a way, and what would be the eventual goal of such actions? A just world, or one in which everyone is equally oppressed?

It is also clear from what has been discussed in the previous chapters – and a further reason why eccentricity cannot align itself with identity politics – that eccentricity has no essence. It is neither a factual entity nor an unchangeable principle. Yet perhaps inside its intertextual dialectic we can locate a trigger, a riddle, or an irritation, that has continued to produce it into the twenty-first century, and continues to create echoes of it as well as investigations into it, such as the present study. The key to the riddle seems to lie in the margins again, here: in theory. We learned how criticism was itself established as a marginal craft and discipline in the eighteenth century. It was not until the twentieth century that the study of literature and culture achieved some sort of theoretical foundation by emancipating itself from established notion of criticism as simply an informed and educated value judgement. The stages in which this theory progressed through a number of significant turns have just been mentioned. It was also mentioned that eccentricity was not an explicit part of any of these turns, despite the fact that it offers rich pickings to all of them. What appears to have happened is a process that theory itself calls 'abjection'. Abjection is

a process of marginalising without excluding, a process that is instrumental in creating identity as exactly an act of pushing to the borders that which a subject or a community, all the way to a culture and a nation, does not want to be, yet without whose example it would not be able to define itself. 'Definition', after all, means the drawing of borderlines. This also applies to theory, which very frequently, in order to present itself as such, needs to abstract, another interesting term that also means 'to take away'.

What is taken away for theory to become theory is commonly practice, the messy realm of what happens, what takes place, what people do. This abstraction poses a particular problem for Cultural Studies. For if Cultural Studies do not talk about practice, they lose their right to talk. What would be their purpose if they gave up looking at culture – culture that cannot only be that of normative rules and generalised attitudes, of quantifiable averages and representative tendencies. We all know that culture is often presented in such a way by the media, by politicians, and by market researchers. But we also know that culture contains more than that. But when it comes to defining this 'more' we quickly enter uneasy territory. Critical Theory, especially in its Frankfurt School variety, has warned us against the nimbus of great works of art or artists.[390] Yet equally dubious, it has been argued, are attempts to commodify supposed difference, in the shape of 'diversity management' or identities, for instance.

This problem also makes us hesitate when emphasising individuality – the value that we nonetheless simultaneously claim for our own daily practice – since we have learned to regard both originality, greatness, and individuality as ideologically constructed. Yet it is exactly the interplay between the normative and representative and that which deviates from it without simply forming a binary Other that gives cultures and historic periods their edge. Christopher Lane, in one of the few theoretical essays that address eccentricity, goes as far as claiming that 'Dandyism represented less a "character" than a recurrent and insoluble oscillation between the personal and the social in which neither category was stable or autonomous.'[391] This gives us all the more reason to talk about eccentricity.

[390] The best-known voice in this debate is Theodor W. Adorno. See his *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973).

[391] Christopher Lane, 'The Drama of the Impostor: Dandyism and Its Double', *Cultural Critique* (Autumn 1994), pp. 29–52 (p. 30).

5.3 Abjection at the core of culture

The most important theorist of abjection also fits into the genealogy of eccentricity as outlined in the present study, for Julia Kristeva is also a theorist of melancholy. In her study *Black Sun* (1989), she extended the Freudian concepts of melancholy and depression to a constitutive state of the subject.[392] What the present analysis is even more concerned with are her works on alterity, on the attempt to draw a borderline between self and Other that is constitutive for the Western concept of individuality. In this respect, her books *Powers of Horror* (1982) and *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991) are crucial.[393] In the former, she offers the following definition of abjection:

> The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. What it abjects is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as a support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me towards the place where meaning collapses. A certain 'ego' that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. […] Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.[394]

Kristeva's complex description contains striking analogies to, but also some differences from the outline of eccentricity proposed by the present study. The important analogies lie, as they already did in Bhabha, in the denial of an essence to abject and eccentricity. It is neither a thing nor a person, yet also not an ideal goal or a feared destination and destiny. Its function is that of an opposition to the self, a self, an identity, that it also helps to create and stabilise. Yet Kristeva,

[392] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

[393] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

[394] The excerpt from *Powers of Horror* is reprinted as 'Approaching Abjection', in: *The Portable Kristeva Reader*, ed. Kelly Oliver, updated edition, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 229–247 (p. 230). All further references given parenthetically in the text are to this edition.

following the tradition of Freud and his successor Lacan in not only identifying the super-ego as the ultimate force in this negative constitution of meaning and identity, ultimately formulates her ideas in terms that are at least superficially those of binaries again, inclusion or exclusion and banishment. These would be the positions that the present study ascribes, with Foucault, to deviance. Yet on closer inspection, Kristeva's definition questions the stability of the limits that mark inside and outside. Meaning collapses, and that which ought to be outside continues to challenge the inside. Why? Not because what is located inside (the super-ego for Kristeva – and Freud and Lacan) has failed, but because it has succeeded. It implicitly needs the challenge in order to be.

A further problem that arises from psychoanalytical positions such as Kristeva's for the present study is their typical attachment to the concept of the individual. This individual, the analysis of the genealogy of eccentricity has highlighted, is itself the product of centring and decentring, and therefore not a stable ground for examinations of eccentricity and normality. Yet Kristeva admits that she is talking about more than individual processes when she eventually (apparently without proper motivation) extends her definition not only to culture, but to the 'primers' of her culture. In doing so, she acknowledges the textual and intertextual nature of these processes of identity creation through abjection. Her descriptions of the manifestation of abjection also show clear parallels to what the survey of eccentricity has procured:

> The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), *situates* (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. Situationist in a sense, and not without laughter – since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection. Necessarily dichotomous, somewhat Manichaean, he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections is not at all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations. (p. 235)

Dejection, even in the shape of Coleridge's 'Dejection' ode, separation, situating, straying (also in the shape of eccentric travels and sentimental journeys) are by now as familiar to us as the carnivalesque temporary undermining of established order through exactly a foregrounding of what has been abjected (excrement, genitals, etc. – about whom Kristeva also has a lot to

say).[395] And again, the tricky issue of self-determination emerges for the individuals experiencing abjection in the same way as for those labelled eccentric: they are not passive victims, yet their only option appears to be to take partial control of the process that labels and positions them – rather than escaping and revolting against it (again: revolutions are avoided and dissent becomes internalised, ritualised and aestheticised). The temporal effect of abjection also corresponds to that of eccentricity. Seemingly such a fleeting and transitory process, it nonetheless creates, in Kristeva's words, 'a *land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered' (p. 235). This is true for anachronistic eccentrics. It is also true for such potent (and nonetheless fragile) notions as Englishness.

Yet Kristeva, exactly in her adherence to psychoanalysis, which otherwise appears to limit the scope of the inquiry to a problematic notion of the individual, might also point towards that which necessitates abjection as well as eccentricity. For Kristeva, this is the primal separation, ultimately of mother and child in her Freudian theory of alienation: 'Even before being *like*, "I" am not but do *separate*, *reject*, *ab-ject*' (p. 239). Mimesis, the self-fashioning that is not really one, since it means an adaptation to an already existing matrix (for Kristeva, the mother), is always already preceded by a separation from and abjection of this matrix. If this was not the case, neither a subject capable of mimesis nor an object towards which the subject can situate itself would exist.

These abstract claims from the realm of personal individuation also have much bearing on a general theory of culture. For one of the crucial impasses, especially of structural, but also of Historicism and even New Historicist views of culture, is an explanation of the creativity that appears to form an inherent principle of all cultures. The present study has claimed in connection with utopias that these remain idealised stillbirths, since they must desist from flexibility and creativity. But how does creativity come about – and how does it coexist with the structures and norms that are also required for cultures? Kristeva formulates her answer to this question as a concept of 'want' at the heart of the enterprise:

[395] Leslie Hill interestingly links Kristeva's abjection with the idea of the avant-garde, in: 'Julia Kristeva: Theorizing the Avant-Garde?', in: *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 137–156.

> The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded. One always passes too quickly over this word, 'want,' and today psychoanalysts are finally taking into account only its more or less fetishized product, 'the object of want.' But if one imagines (and imagine one must, for it is in the workings of imagination whose foundations are being laid here) the experience of *want* itself as logically preliminary to being and object – to the being of the object – that one understands that abjection, and even more so abjection of the self, is its only signified. Its signifier, then, is none but literature. (pp. 232–233)

Kristeva's claims are strong ones. At the heart of the self (and by extension every meaning and identity) rests a lack which produces desire. This want cannot be satisfied by the mere identification and incorporation of objects, but remains a creative and productive force in its own right. What it produces is also that which enables us to see it: imagination. We have seen in the chapter on the emergence of eccentricity as a cultural concept how the missing object of melancholy (in Wroth's Urania, for example) was the guarantee of her identity, in the same way as the supply of an object ultimately sedates, paralyses, and thereby eliminates identity (be it in the shape of an object of revenge for Wroth's Perissus, in the endless parade of consumer goods in capitalist economies, or in the ever-expanding options for sexual identities in LGBT+). At the heart of culture's creativity, which produces the self and its objects, yet only in the form of imagination and fiction ('none but literature' is the self's signifier, according to Kristeva) lies an absence. This is true for melancholy as one of the manifestations of eccentricity. It is equally true for its other expression, carnival. For what is the object of carnival's celebration if not merely the knowledge that carnival will end? In the same way that melancholy stubbornly retains an imaginary object by continually killing it, carnival frantically destroys an imaginary object (decency, frugality, order), yet continually asserts it, too.

Eccentricity therefore not merely reminds us of culture as a process, with power structures, ideologies, and norms, but also of their continual challenge, relocation, refocusing. It moreover tells us that the trigger of these processes is ultimately a lack, a want, and the desire that this want produces. In the same way as no cultural theory (be it that of the associations of Locke or of the psyche of Freud and his followers) can ultimately name the secret of creativity, of meaning, or of desire, culture must continually desire and abject and make eccentric, for on this dynamic rests its existence. It is a dynamic that cannot and must not be contained in simple structural binaries of inclusion and exclusion.

The present study has tried to show that the exclusion of eccentricity from the vocabulary and concepts of Critical and Cultural Theory is partly based on structural grounds, but also on hardly formulated resentments that often resemble prejudices. The structural grounds, if one follows Kristeva, are indeed those that necessitate abjection in order to bring identity, here of theory, into being. Yet in an approach to theory that also reconsiders theory's own historical and theoretical positions and employs the imagination advocated by Kristeva as the only means of assessing the relation of self and Other, eccentricity deserves a place. Such a concept of eccentricity also regards imagination as historically and culturally grounded. This becomes especially useful in current debates that have attempted multiple farewells to clear demarcations and hierarchical binary oppositions.

Eccentricity then appears as a concept that is intrinsically dialogic without forming simple dialectics. (Even Foucault, whose ideas of discursive establishment and control of cultural *dispositifs* have influenced the ideas concerning eccentricity in the present study, ultimately deals with a binary model of inside and outside, norm and deviance.[396]) Eccentricity is furthermore a historic dialogue that does not falsely signal a supposed neutrality and equality of the partners in the debate. Eccentricity can be as privileged as it can be marginalised. Eccentricity can be harmless, but also capable of assuming control. It does not deal in essences, only in appearances and relations. The positionality of eccentricity makes it resemble the nomadic as described by Gilles Deleuze, yet without Deleuze's Romantic and primitivist delusions (those of detachment from norms, for example).[397]

Eccentricity is always in culture, never outside or before it. It is sometimes aligned with progress, sometimes with reaction, sometimes with both. It is what we call others, what we do not want to be called ourselves, yet whose features (in contrast to those of deviance) we also desire for our own ideologically grounded notion of what it means to be an individual. Still, it is by no means a universal or innocent concept: there are reasons why women feature less frequently as eccentrics, and if they do, they often occupy a passive rather than an active

[396] This is most evident in his early writings, especially *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane, 1977), though in the later works on power a more Nietzschean and metaphoric approach to cultural control merely makes its poles less easy to determine. Compare, for examples, the essays in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, trans. and ed. Colin Gordon (Harlow: Prentice Hall, 1980).

[397] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, trans. Brian Masumi (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986).

role. Indeed, one can claim that women are from the start in the eccentric margin of a centric patriarchal model of culture. What is telling, though, is that they are generally only labelled 'eccentric' when they try to approach too closely the supposed centre of their respective cultures, as did Edith Sitwell, for example, not so much by wearing unusual outfits, but by insisting on being considered an important literary voice at a time when this role was exclusively reserved for men.

Eccentricity is also a predominantly white and Western concept whose imposition on other cultures is generally condescending. The supposed alien and stranger generally belong to the realm of the Other, the hetero-stereotype, and cannot normally be contained in the margins of the auto-stereotypical self-image of a culture. Yet despite all these restrictions eccentricity contains a relativising of ourselves and our cultural environment that might be trickier, but at the same time sounder than structuralist views that only ever function in terms of insides and outsides[398] or poststructuralist positions that usually metaphorise the spaces that eccentricity designates – as Postcolonial hybridity (a problematic, because genetic term) or as Deconstructionist *différance* (a philosophical, and perhaps ultimately theological term that wishes to be no concept, but therefore also renounces social relevance).[399]

Since eccentricity applies a cultural category to individual practice, theories that aim at universality feel the need to exclude it.[400] But if we also want to address practice, and if we agree that we also need to address the problematic concepts, delusions, or relics of individuality in our postmodern culture, we can no longer afford to marginalise eccentricity in Critical and Cultural Theory, or worse, make it the deviant Other of concepts such as hybridity and *différance*.

[398] The most refined theory of normality to date, for example, strongly adheres to such a structuralist model. See Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus*.

[399] Its originator is, of course, Jacques Derrida in writings such as *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

[400] An interesting reassessment of the position of theory (especially psychoanalytically informed theory) towards politics, with particular emphasis on questions of hegemony and universality, is Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London and New York: Verso, 2000). See, in particular, Judith Butler, 'Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism' (pp. 11–43); Judith Butler, 'Competing Universalities' (pp. 136–181); and Ernesto Laclau, 'Structure, History and the Political' (pp. 182–212).

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ISBN 978-3 534-45028-2

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