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About

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Editorial

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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