Towards a Theory of Eccentricity

By Moritz Hildt, University of Tübingen, Germany

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. The use of "eccentric" in everyday language

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. The realm of the eccentric

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

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

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

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

3. Philosophical Anthropology 1: eccentric positionality

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. The eccentric person

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

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

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

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

6. The eccentric text

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(1) Eccentric texts have as their only valid point of reference themselves.

(2) They remain indifferent with regard to all kinds of relations to others; they do not adopt the topics and writing-styles which are considered to be of a certain value in their time.

(3) Although eccentric texts might allude to other texts, it remains – as a consequence of their indifference – impossible to tell for what purpose they do this.

(4) Eccentric texts also remain indifferent with regard to the reader: in this respect, they do not comply with basic rules of communication or the transmission of a message.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eccentric text

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Works cited

Anderson, Howard. "Preface," in: Sterne 1980, vii-ix.

Booth, Wayne. “Did Sterne Complete *Tristram Shandy*?” [1951]. Reprinted in Sterne 1980, 532-548.

Bowman Piper, William. “Tristram’s Digressive Artistry.” [1966]. Reprinted in Sterne 1980, 548-562.

Dinesen, Isak. *Seven Gothic Tales*. [1931]. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

Frankfurt, Harry G. *The Importance of What We Care About*. Cambridge: CUP. 1988.

Hartly, Lodwick. *Laurence Sterne in the Twentieth Century: An Essay and a Bibliography of Sternean Studies 1900-1965*. Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press. 1966.

Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, comps. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Rev. and aug. throughout by Henry Stuart Jones. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1953.

Lindgren, Astrid. *The Adventures of Pippi Longstocking*. Transl. by Michael Chesworth. [1950-1959]. New York: Viking Books 1997.

Nagel, Thomas. *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford: OUP. 1986.

Olshin, Toby A. “Genre and Tristram Shandy: The Novel of Quickness.” [1971]. Reprinted in Sterne 1980, 521-532.

Plessner, Helmuth. *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*. Gesammelte Schriften Vol. 4, Ed. by Günter Dux et. al. [1928]. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1981.

Sitwell, Edith. *English Eccentrics*. [1933]. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958.

Smith, Stevie. *Novel on Yellow Paper*. [1936]. London: Virago Press, 1980.

Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Ed. Howard Anderson. [1760-1767]. New York / London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980.

Townsend-Warner, Sylvia. *Lolly Willowes*. [1926]. London: Virago Press, 2000.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Werkausgabe Vol. 1, [1921]. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1984.

Procter, Paul et als. Eds. *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*. Cambridge: CUP, 1995.