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

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

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

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

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

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

Foot-off-the-ground Beginnings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Telling stories and inventing identities

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Differently Queer

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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