In and Out
In and Out: Eccentricity in Britain,
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The aim of this book is to address key issues raised by eccentricity and to bring out interdisciplinary links between history, science, politics, literature and the visual arts. The title suggests defining sets of opposites generating or generated by discourses of eccentricity, and expressed by binaries such as the norm and the periphery, the general and the particular, tolerance and exclusion, performance and the gaze, or expansion and contraction. The latter was suggested by Patrick Parrinder’s contention that in 20th-century English fiction “there are novelists of expansion and novelists of contraction” (Parrinder 2006, 341), a dynamic vision that informs much of this work. A narrow definition relates eccentricity to the English national character as a historical and ideological construct, and more generally to Englishness as a defining feature of national identity. On the other hand eccentricity in Britain requires a wider outlook, especially when tackling imperial eccentricity. This is why the different chapters steer a course between aspects of eccentricity as a contextualised historical and social notion, and the critical inflection that emerged in the wake of colonial discourse theory and postcolonial studies, which results in the need to address the demise of empire as a historical and critical turn.

A wealth of academic studies have explored Englishness, Britishness, national identity and the national character. They have dealt more or less indirectly with the notion of eccentricity. With the exception of Paul Langford’s Englishness Identified: Manners and Character 1650-1850 (2000), in which eccentricity is presented as one of the defining labels of Englishness, little recent research has taken eccentricity as a main focus, and the attempts to conceptualise the notion and put it in historical perspective are rare. Yet groundbreaking studies have been carried out by Victoria Carroll in Science and Eccentricity: Collecting, Writing and Performing Science for Early Nineteenth-Century Audiences (2008) and by historian James Gregory, a contributor to this volume. Other works
mentioned in this book such as Miranda Gill’s *Eccentricity and the Cultural Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (2009) and David Weeks and Jamie James’s clinical study *Eccentrics: A Study of Sanity and Strangeness* (1995) are significant sources but the latter does not explore the British discourse of eccentricity. It is however refracted in Gill’s illuminating work, which has proved an invaluable source for ours. Other noteworthy sources include Patricia Eichel-Lojkine’s *Excentricité et humanisme* (2002), a study of eccentricity in the early modern period, and amongst less recent titles, Daniel Sangsue’s classic *Le Récit excentrique* (1987) which deals with 19th-century French literature, and *L’Excentricité en Grande-Bretagne au 18ème siècle* (1876), a collection of essays edited by Paul-Gabriel Boucé and Michèle Plaisant.

Primary material however is abundant, especially in the form of eccentric biographies, a sub-genre that has thrived in a niche defined over 200 years ago, and statements about eccentricity are pervasive. More often than not, they bring us back to definitions of Englishness and pertain to what Peter Mandler has identified as “fit[s] of self-inspection” linked to anxieties about the nature of the national character (Mandler 2006, 176). Peter Ackroyd, for instance, is a famous advocate of English eccentricity: “A general delight in eccentricity, in all its forms, in fact animates the English genius” (Ackroyd 2004, 336). The English tradition and norm, we are led to believe—and often happily so as foreign observers lured by such promising self-advertisement—is to be eccentric, as claimed in *The Guardian*’s review of William Donaldson’s *Brewer’s Rogues, Villains, Eccentrics*:

> The English are meant to be eccentric. To be removed from the centre, quirkily brave in opinion, individualistically creative in behaviour, is a proud English boast in both the republic of letters and in the parliamentary monarchy of daily governed reality. Nobody does eccentricity better. (Williams 2003)

The same reviewer throws light on the significance of a specifically English temperament, and on the literary echoes of eccentricity:

> By the end of the 17th century it was accepted that there was such a thing as a unique English temperament. Its eccentricities involved a “sense of humour” as opposed to the continental aristocratic wit. . . . This temperament liked to tease people rather than to play with ideas. And it was markedly anti-heroic in both substance of behaviour and literary style.
At once anti-heroic and extraordinarily individual, eccentricity relies on a number of paradoxes that will be addressed in the course of this introduction.

Exploring eccentricity as a “signifier of identity” (Gregory 2006b, 45) in the context of Englishness is a doubly arduous task insofar as both are shifting and problematic notions (Gregory 2006a, 91). Any oddity hunter runs the risk of losing their conceptual way in the hunt for an elusive Snark, or of reinforcing stereotypical views. Eccentricity seems to defy analysis, if we are to consider statements by such writers as Ernest Barker, the author of *The Character of England* (1947): “most of us are mixtures, unreconciled mixtures, and that element of freakishness, disconcertingly mixed with the element of form, can make disconcerting appearances” (quoted in Conekin 2003, 97); or Priestley’s self-deprecating view that “the English seem so odd, eccentric, unsatisfactory, not only abroad, but to many persons at home” (Priestley 1973, 241). Miranda Gill has rightly pointed out that “the very synonyms used to define [eccentricity]—bizarre, singular, original, peculiar, odd—suggest the frustration of rationality and the failure of the codes by which social and mental life is interpreted” (Gill 2009, 3).

Perhaps we should find comfort in Langford’s remark that in the 18th century “there was a large measure of agreement between outsiders and insiders about the particular traits that constituted English character” (Langford 2000, 26). And yet, the development of autostereotypes, Mandler warns us, “tends to proceed rather differently from foreign stereotypes” (Mandler 2006, 53). We also have to be aware of the fact that expectations have been shaped by pre-existing discourses, as for instance by the novel. Literary echoes of eccentricity are usually deciphered in Sterne, Smollett, Dickens, or Wodehouse, whose works are praised for their eccentric characters, plots and narratives. William Hazlitt, for one, played a crucial role in the identification of 18th-century fiction with individual character (Saville 2002, 783-4; Parrinder 2006, 27). Angus Wilson suggests that novelists such as Ivy Compton-Burnett, Henry Green, John Berger, David Storey and Christine Brooke-Rose are “great eccentrics” that represent the essence of English literature:

The best contribution we make (and we have one very great contribution to make in England towards the future of the novel) is our eccentricity. We have most gloriously in England a country where culture has not been respected, and this has been our salvation. Artists throughout time have been persecuted or neglected, disregarded, laughed at. The Anglo-Saxon tradition is a philistine one, and long may it continue to be so, even if it is very unfortunate for the man of talent. The man of talent in France will be
Built up by academy honours and prizes until he is rather more than he could ever be in England. But the man of genius can easily be reduced to a kind of academic level. This has happened often in France, where eccentric movements have begun and have been swallowed up in schools of thought, in groups of writers. I can think only of one writer at the present moment in France who seems cordially detested by all his brother writers, and that is Montherlant. And it is a mark of his extraordinariness that he is so rejected by all schools of thought in French writing.

In England, we have many people who belong to no school and to no body, and they are our great people. I would just like to name a few of them because they are the great eccentrics and they are worth thinking about if we are worrying about whether the novel will survive. The English novel, if it is going to survive, will do so because of this extraordinary power that the English climate has to nourish eccentricity. . . . I offer you these eccentrics because I think this is the way in which we, as English writers, are perhaps going to help to continue the novel. (Wilson 1983, 248-9)

Wilson significantly blends formal considerations with praise of the English character and aspects of domestic social history. More particularly he describes formal experimentation as a move away from the canon and from stifling institutions, a view that has to be contextualised within the framework of empiricism and the liberal discourse on individual rights. On Compton-Burnett and Green, he adds: “And these are the great experimenters, but they are also the least sort of coterie writers, they are the great eccentrics” (249). However such definitive statements must be treated with caution for a number of reasons. First of all we must be wary of retrospective and potentially anachronistic assessments: what is perceived as eccentric today may have been perfectly acceptable, say, in the 18th or 19th century, when it related to normal forms of sociability (Levier 1976, 16-7). Furthermore eccentricity was by no means confined to England or Britain, or to one particular social class. It was a European phenomenon and was shaped by cross-cultural influence (Gill 2009, 288). It also cut across the whole social spectrum, a point made by Carroll (Carroll 2008, 42-3) and by Gregory (2006a, 2006b) who has explored the “demotic side” of eccentricity and the role played by local characters in regional communities. In what is a snapshot of shifting conceptual sands, the brief overview below delineates the evolution of eccentricity as cultural representation in the field of English studies, and as a general concept that has formal and aesthetic relevance.
The Rise of Eccentricity

If, from our observatory on eccentricity, we gaze back in time onto a well-known eccentric aristocrat, P. G. Wodehouse’s Earl of Emsworth, we see that the opening page of *Blandings Castle* aptly features Lord Emsworth and his butler “standing on the turret above the west wing, the former with his eye to a powerful telescope” (Wodehouse 2008, 11). This brings us to consider the original meaning of the word.

The literal geometrical meaning of the word “eccentric” refers to two circles that are not concentric, and its astronomical meaning to an orbit that does not have the earth or the sun as its centre, and whose path is not circular, as in the Medieval Latin “excentricus”—“out of the centre” (Eichel-Lojkine 2002, 12). Its figurative sense derives from the image of the non-circular orbit of comets (Carroll 2008, 12-3). The word was used metaphorically from the 17th century to celebrate heroic individuals, characters out of the ordinary and following no predictable law, and it was more generally applied to men, as a form of individual genius (40-1). Nevertheless its use remained rare until the mid-18th century (Gill 2009, 20).

The trope of the erratic “star” was initially based on the pre-modern model of the geocentrical cosmos, the immutability of the divine sphere and the circular orbits of sublunar bodies (Koyré 1961). Its heuristic value was affected by the epistemological shifts enacted from Copernicus’s conceptualisation of the heliocentric system to the scientific revolution of the 17th century. Renaissance writers, argues Eichel-Lojkine, could safely stray away from a motionless centre whose fixity precluded any risk of dissolution (Eichel-Lojkine 2002, 44), as deviance was inscribed within imitative deference to Antiquity. However the temporal decentring of the Renaissance from the models of the classical age already contained the premises of relativism (39), as deviation also became inscribed within the new cosmological system being defined from Copernicus to Galileo, Kepler and Newton, which contained ellipses—initially seen as imperfect circles.

Arguably the growing complexity of scientific models increasingly blurred the difference between the centre as norm and deviance, all the more as comets came under the compass of scientific law from the mid-17th century. Therefore figurative eccentricity is underpinned by the scientific discourse that lends it its normative force, while its flexibility derives from the fact that it is inherently relative (Levier 1976, 17). Like anamorphosis (Baltrusaitis 1996, 290-306), eccentricity is a notion that accommodates evolving meanings and shifts in representations, and which
has become a tool of criticism and a “keyword”—a point made by Carroll after Raymond Williams (Carroll 2008, 13-4)—which is relevant to social history as well as to formal, aesthetic and metalinguistic analysis. The trope of the comet encapsulates defining features of eccentricity: its course leads it to interact with the body of the sun—with gravity pulling the errant orb to annihilation and assimilation with the whole, until it proves to have the velocity to escape. It is also an ephemeral phenomenon. Eccentricity is thus a historical construct that is relevant within a particular cultural environment, and it can thrive within complex systems that accommodate as well as threaten outsiders, a point that we will come back to.

The Copernican revolution may have entailed the loss of the earth’s central position in the universe, but this was compensated for by the growing awareness that the human mind could encompass nature’s variety, a process Georges Poulet describes as the “ex-centric” motion of human thought within a now unbounded universe in his classic study *Métamorphoses du cercle* (Poulet 1979, 57). This he illustrates by quoting Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* (Part I, I.2, ll. 133-4): “Glory is like a circle in the water / Which never ceaseth to enlarge itself” (58). By the end of the 17th century the model of divine dilatation had shrunk to human secular dimensions. Man’s central position was firmly established and his point of view was consecrated in aesthetic and relativistic terms: “the sight being at the center that collects and gathers into it the lines of the whole circumference”.¹ In the course of the 18th century the sinuous, serpentine line of variety, fancy, and ever-renewed sensory experience and associations of ideas accommodated human idiosyncrasy while threatening to become a “meaningless hieroglyphic” (121), inflecting eccentricity towards the wayward and the erratic. Sterne’s novels were instrumental in disseminating eccentricity as spatial and paratextual diversion in Britain and across Europe, as *The Sentimental Journey* was emulated by travel book writers on the mode of the digressive excursion away from a fixed centre (Pickford 2011, 295-6). Moreover the deferential form of imitation prevalent in the early modern period had given way to a “cultural revalorization of originality” as individualism grew (Gill 2009, 21). Gill has shown that the link between eccentricity, originality and genius derives from the “shift from a neo-classical model of impersonal imitation to a Romantic model of self-expression, and . . . new currents of Gothic sensibility” (24).

Arguably eccentricity was shaped into a concept from the 1770s onwards, aggregating what was previously described as “humorous”, “odd”, “whimsical”, or “nonsensical” (Gury 1976, 192), gradually displaying milder and more amiable connotations than “folly” and “lunacy”, and the only one of these terms to imply the sense of norm and deviation from it (Langford 2000, 301). In the age of Enlightenment eccentricity was politically and socially desirable for its liberal values. The shift occurred more precisely at the time of the French Revolution as national identity and the English character were asserted in the face of European radicalism. Eccentricity was a way of simultaneously asserting and taming what was perceived as forms of potentially threatening deviance or dissent. Gill has shown that the term “eccentric” could apply to revolutionaries when judged to be monstrous and aberrant (Gill 2009, 38). Alternatively, as underlined by Henry Hemming, “eccentric personalities came to be seen as talismans of . . . liberalism” (Hemming 2008, 206), in and out of Britain. In France the Anglomania emerging in the 1660-1770s had been fostered by admiration for the political institutions of the parliamentary monarchy among the younger generation of aristocrats who were to support the American republic (Gury 1976, 201), and in Britain the domestic “cult of eccentricity” was strengthened from 1790 to 1820 by counter-revolutionary propaganda (Levier 1976, 21). Levier has argued that the political aspect of eccentricity took shape with the consolidation of the new regime after 1688, which was increasingly regarded as a model across Europe (19). By the early 19th century, the link between eccentricity, the national character and individual freedom was taken for granted and asserted for instance in eccentric biographies, a genre that developed from the late 18th century, as shown by Gregory who quotes from G. H. Wilson’s *The Eccentric Mirror* (1806-7): “no country in the world produces so many humorists and eccentric characters . . . [E]ach individual is suffered to gratify every whim, fancy, and caprice, provided it be not prejudicial to his fellow-creatures” (Gregory 2006a, 89).

A related pattern associates eccentricity and the focus on individualism, temperament, real and fictional characters, a cluster which Ackroyd has emphasised in *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination*. Elaborating on satire, portraiture and biography as typically English forms of eccentric art, he concludes: “The true emphasis rests upon the qualities of individual experience, which are manifest in the English art of portraiture and in the English novel of character. The English imagination is also syncretic and additive—one episode leading to another episode—rather than formal or theoretical” (Ackroyd 2004, 448).
Eccentric biographies must be construed within the more general framework that led to the rise of “the individual” in the 19th century and the delineation of traits which, Mandler points out, are “so deeply embedded in the concept [of national character] that they are almost impossible to dislodge” (Mandler 2006, 2). As Peter Ackroyd claims, eccentricity “is related to the habits of individualism and defensive privacy which the English have adopted; eccentricity then becomes the natural, if unacknowledged, issue of a native virtue” (Ackroyd 2004, 336). This so-called “natural” propensity is rooted in the refusal of revolutionary principles in favour of an “organic” view of social and political evolution, whereby the purported value of individual experience and character is based on notions of diversity and originality, and as a corollary, the struggle to retain individuality against increasing standardization, commoditisation and channelling within the normative discourse of normality. The crux of the modern notion of eccentricity is evoked by John Stuart Mill in his famous credo in *On Liberty*:

> In this age, the mere example of nonconformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric. Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage it contained. That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time.
> (Mill 1975, 58)

### The Norm and the Canon

An obvious starting point for our work is the abnormality displayed by eccentrics, whether it be physical or behavioural, whether it be a transgression of social or gender norms. To quote James Gregory: “A fascination with physical and behavioural abnormality, which came to be expressed in eccentric biographies, dates from the earliest popular printing and drew on oral culture’s interest in the strange, violent and dreadful” (Gregory 2006a, 73). In the course of the 19th century boundaries between eccentricity and normality were redrawn as the “drive to normalise” grew (Cotton 2006, 126); for instance, defining features such as anomalous behavioural, physical traits and deformity were still relevant but they were gradually inflected by the discourse on abnormality. In the early 19th century, explains Carroll, eccentricity was gradually distinguished from insanity: “eccentricity,” she writes, “occupied a contested space at the
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The juncture of madness and sanity, functioning as a foil against which both madness and ‘normality’ could be defined” (Carroll 2008, 35). Hemming insists that changing attitudes were epitomised by the effect of King George III’s illness from the late 1780s. He sees him as “an eccentric at the heart of the establishment” at a time when the political power of the monarch started declining and, conversely, the “ceremonial attached to his position” increased (Hemming 2008, 76-8, 211).

From the second half of the nineteenth century the development of psychiatry entailed a narrowing of the definition of eccentricity, as shown by the fact that eccentric biographies became more “sanitized” (Carroll 2008, 43). Their range was progressively reduced and standardised, and physical deformity gradually disappeared from their pages (Gregory 2006a, 85). Alternatively, when eccentricity came within the compass of medical and legal discourse, it was treated with increasing intolerance in the latter part of the 19th century when “pessimistic attitudes to eccentricity prevailed in Victorian medicine and across many aspects of Victorian culture” (Gill 2009, 278-81, 283). As Gregory has argued, one of the ways eccentricity has moved forward in time and might be central today, together with fascination, exhibition and voyeurism, monstrosity and narration, is in its continuation in the tabloid press and in how it relies on sensationalism—another obvious link, too, between eccentricity and Englishness. Eccentricity shares frontiers with caricature and the grotesque as a form of exhibition and a spectacle based on excess. Eccentric discourses are embedded in visual culture and Gregory reminds us that, historically: “In the eccentric biography, where the subjects’ abnormal appearance justified their presence, there was an interest, indeed requirement, for an accompanying image to prove or reinforce difference” (Gregory 2006a, 81).

As pointed out above, eccentrics are outsiders as well as insiders: their supposedly erratic logic can only be understood in relation to the system. And this relation can be construed as being inclusive or exclusive. Fundamentally eccentricity is a normative notion: being ex-centred enables eccentrics to delineate and negotiate boundaries between the margins and the centre, the canon and the norm. The structural need for variation and divergence within accepted social norms accounts for the paradoxical status of the eccentric as outsider—when eccentricity is construed as transgressive and alienating—and as insider—eccentricity being seen as socially acceptable deviation.

On the one hand, eccentricity is a normal deviation. It is part of the normal as it exemplifies a set of variations within the human family, according to Émile Durkheim’s inclusive model (Gregory 2006a, 83-5),
which allows its potentially threatening social role to be diffused, as shown by the consensual smile or laughter eccentrics attract. Dickens provides one of the best fictional instances of this, as shown by Julia Saville who has analysed his “canny ability to indulge difference in the eccentrics of his novels while cultivating the sameness of apparently shared values” (Saville 2002, 795). In the wake of Durkheim, Foucault and Bourdieu, it has been shown that the normalising process emerging in the course of the 18th century found full expression in the 19th century’s reliance on classification, the definition of types and the pursuit of the average man (Ernst 2006), while aberrations such as freaks and physiognomonic variations made “the norm visible” (Cotton 2006, 136). In other words, what is construed as abnormal “calibrates the normal” (Hartley 2006, 116). The “quantifiable” man became an object of medical and anthropological scrutiny in the second half of the century. Abnormality and eccentricity are not fully congruent, as Gregory has pointed out (Gregory 2006a), but the definition of a middle-ground against which every man is seen as an “endless set of deviations from a norm” (Matthews David 2006, 158) calls for a form of relief and free play counteracting taxonomic boundaries—a form of free play that Eichel-Lojkine relates to the liberating power of the Freudian mot d’esprit (Eichel-Lojkine 2002, 38, 310) not seriously threatening conformity.

Peter Ackroyd evokes “the inclusive nature of Englishness” (Ackroyd 2004, 229), based as it is on heterogeneity, assimilation, adaptation, and translation. In this respect eccentrics are stigmatized only to be incorporated into the norm and mainstream culture insofar as they are displayed to be assessed, judged and possibly blamed, or not, by the audience made up of “normal” people. Here too the political and the aesthetic overlap, and the main liberal dimension of eccentricity lies in its reliance upon the liberty of appreciation left to the onlookers—society as a whole, readers of eccentric biographies, spectators of eccentric bodies, and readers of eccentric fiction.

Alternatively eccentricity may be seen as exclusive. It is a form of alienation, as underlined by Jean-Jacques Lecercle for instance, who argues that the discourse of medicine and nascent psychiatry turned eccentrics into objects of scientific and medical observation (Lecercle 1994, 205-6). He insists on their marginal status as voiceless objects of science gazed at and exhibited in the pages of illustrated magazines and eccentric biographies, or pinpointed in texts of nonsense such as limericks. Carroll has pointed out that the rise of eccentric biographies partakes of the taxonomic will of “imposing order upon those individuals who did not fit comfortably within what George Cruikshank called, in 1840, ‘The
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British Beehive’’ (Carroll 2008, 28), and the same applies to the related genre of street cries (Shesgreen 2002, 9-11). It may be added that eccentric women were worse off than their male counterparts, as their condemnation, whether symbolic or not, was reminiscent of the treatment reserved to lunatics or even witches.

But once again, the essential ambivalence of eccentricity must be put in perspective according to scientific paradigms. Victoria Carroll has shown that a specific British discourse of eccentricity emerged in the early 19th century along with the development and specialisation of natural sciences. She focuses on what she calls “boundary figures” working “at the margins of their respective fields” (Carroll 2008, 166), and defined according to a politics of exclusion. In her discussion of John Stuart Mill and William Hazlitt’s commentaries on the “Spirit of the Age”, she also defines them as characters that “seemed out of joint with their time” (14).

Such figures were “perceived to transgress the boundaries which ordered social and cultural life” (5), and/or to negotiate boundaries at a time of growing specialization and of social and economic consolidation: boundaries between developing elite science and non-specialist audiences in the field of natural science for instance; boundaries defining gender, the taxonomy of animal species, or the generic conventions of scientific works. This applies of course to literary productions and to the delineation of the literary canon. Works such as illustrated “eccentric books”, a term applied by Daniel Sangsue to Charles Nodier’s Histoire du Roi de Bohême (1830) in the wake of Laurence Sterne, undermined the conventions of literary narrative and publishing (Pickford 2007), but failed to find a niche on the market and finally waned in the second half of the century, as travel writing became commodified.

The ambivalence of eccentricity can also be defined according to another set of binaries: flexibility as opposed to rigidity. Carroll has defined eccentricity as a form of social and dynamic flexibility involving the ideas of performance and reception, and of constant negotiation of boundaries revealing a degree of creativity. She has shown that “‘eccentric’ public identities were actively constructed through the dynamic interaction of performers and audiences” (Carroll 2008, 44). This flexibility renders potential transgression acceptable, and can even be a factor of social change. But social interaction may be seen as one end of a spectrum whose other end displays an extreme form of individuality—related to the astronomical meaning of the word referring to extraordinary characters. Eccentrics can be seen as adopting the rigidity characteristic of the individual who is able to resist the homogenizing influence of social conventions. This view is epitomised by Edith Sitwell, the author of
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English Eccentrics (1933), who defines eccentricity as “some exaggeration of the attitudes common to Life” that finds its ultimate expression in rigor mortis. She sees rigidity as a defining feature of eccentricity: “This attitude . . . has been called eccentricity by those whose bones are too pliant” (Sitwell 1971, 16).

Rigidity is certainly one of the attributes of the characters described in eccentric biographies, judging from different sources that informed the genealogy of the genre, as suggested by Gregory (2006a, 81-2): early depictions of street cries (McTigue 1993; Shesgreen 2002), or Edward Lear’s books of nonsense depicting stiff or cramped figures (Lear 2001). Rigidity also characterises their emphasis on obsessions, collections, and the set habits of old age or childishness. It is noteworthy that constant negotiation of one’s position between the centre and the margin can also be rendered visually in the representation of figures depicted in a state of precarious balance, or trying to achieve a form of equipoise, as in Lear’s drawings for instance.

Preserves of Eccentricity

That Sitwell extolled eccentricity as a preserve of the upper-classes not only reflected or fed the widely-held belief that eccentricity was essentially “genteeel” and aristocratic (Langford 2000, 303; Carroll 2008, 42), but also the social prejudice against what was perceived as the democratic threat—Sitwell’s “pliant crowd”—and the aristocratic nostalgia for the 18th century that grew in the wake of the French Revolution and that was still echoed by biographers such as John Timbs, one of Sitwell’s main sources (Carroll 2008, 43; Levier 1976, 13). In the words of Mr Scogan in Aldous Huxley’s Crome Yellow:

Eccentricity. … It’s the justification of all aristocracies . . . If you’re to do anything reasonable in this world, you must have a class of people who are secure, safe from public opinion, safe from poverty, leisured, not compelled to waste their time in the imbecile routines that go by the name of Honest Work. You must have a class of which the members can think, and, within the obvious limits, do what they please. You must have a class in which people who have eccentricities can indulge them and in which eccentricity in general will be tolerated and understood. . . . It is a sort of Red Indian Reservation planted in the midst of a vast horde of Poor Whites—colonials at that. (Huxley 1977, 57)

Similarly Victorian upper-class eccentricity has been viewed as an extreme manifestation of the class system at a time when the income of the
landowners and entrepreneurs had dramatically expanded and they could afford to indulge themselves, as in A. N. Wilson’s *The Victorians*: “Money enabled eccentricity to flourish on a prodigious scale in the Victorian upper class”, a leisured class rising above the normality defined by the middle-class (Wilson 2003, 381).

There is indeed a conservative and rigid aspect to eccentricity, as it can be seen as being “rooted in conformism” (Levier 1976, 26) and characterised by “adherence to canons no longer approved” (Langford 2000, 305). “The most common form of eccentricity of all,” writes Langford, “was one that could be seen as another exaggeration of Englishness, its innate conservatism” (305). This view is encompassed in the stance that eccentricity is a “safety valve” (303), providing both compensation for and a complement to social conformism. Such a view, argues Gill, relates to Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque (Gill 2009, 28), and it is best exemplified, as we have seen, by Dickens’s fictional eccentrics who “link individual difference to common welfare” (Saville 2002, 783). It also appears in the fact that, as Gill has noted, eccentric biographies display “absolute idiosyncratic difference” but rely on a limited number of types such as the miser and the hermit (Gill 2009, 28). These contentions, moreover, seem to relate eccentricity to a narrative of decline and to preclude its survival.

Burlesque country house novels such as Aldous Huxley’s *Crome Yellow* and Evelyn Waugh’s *Decline and Fall* feature a number of upper-class eccentrics forming constellations or sets of planets revolving erratically around a fictional centre, mere physical bodies appearing and disappearing without any reason and epitomising metaphysical anxiety: “worried about the cosmos, eh? . . . I know the feeling,” he said. “It’s a most distressing symptom. What’s the point of it all? All is vanity. What’s the good of continuing to function if one’s doomed to be snuffed out at last along with everything else?” (Huxley 1977, 166) Departure from the norm and random actions also characterise Waugh’s novels such as *Decline and Fall*. Thus of one of the boys at Llanaba Castle: “Little Lord Tangent has come to us this term, the Earl of Circumference’s son, you know. Such a nice little chap, erratic, of course, like all his family, but he has tone” (Waugh 2001, 18), a statement confirmed on Sports Day at this parody of a public school where the perfect ellipse of the racing circuit comically collides with the erratic orbits of eccentric characters. Bradbury calls Huxley’s “novels of inaction” (Bradbury 1973, 152), and indeed they depict a world “utterly unteleological, without serious purpose or moral evolution”, and where contingency “operates according to whim, chance, or fortune” (156)—a legacy of *Tristram Shandy*. Yet if Sterne’s fictional
world was ruled by the chaos undermining the cosmic order (Montabrut 1976, 87), its hobbyhorsical energy made a virtue of decentring and provided the impetus for its own textual dissemination. On the contrary, one could argue that the fictional preserves of eccentrics of the first half of the 20th century are characterised by self-centredness and stasis.

The public school microcosm and the country house are self-centred fictional worlds that flourished with the demise of the landed classes, whose shrinking preserves are fictionalised as Wodehouse’s Blandings Castle, Mervyn Peake’s Gormenghast, Elizabeth Bowen’s big house, and Waugh’s Brideshead. Bowen underlined that in environments where “life is saturated with character”, living “by one’s own standards” within the demesne “may tend to exaggerate, to the point of absurdity, the family’s individual point of view: there are a thousand legends of eccentricity” (Bowen 1986, 28). Such loci share the same sense of place, self-sufficiency and isolation as in the regional communities where lower- or middle-class eccentricity thrives (Gregory 2006b). However the fictional big house harbouring eccentrics is threatened with ruin and decay. In some cases it may be seen as a shrinking preserve characterised by Sitwellian ossification whose fate is recorded with conservative nostalgia, or as a domestic sphere into which former empire builders and the former ruling elite retreat.

If we take as joint premises Patrick Parrinder’s contention that “imperialism [is] an extension, or even a quintessence, of the national identity” (Parrinder 2006, 21) and the claim that the height of British eccentricity coincides with the peak of imperial power—a proposition explored by Gregory in this book—then the question of what happens with the demise of Empire has to be addressed. How does eccentricity fare in “a shrinking island”, to borrow Jed Esty’s label (Esty 2004)? Part of the answer is given by Becky Conekin who provides an insight into the postwar repositioning of Britain vis-à-vis Europe and the United States at the time of the Festival of Britain. The recognition that Britain had lost its leading position is epitomised by the statement: “we are too small, too crowded to stand alone”. The lasting imperial aspirations of the New Elizabethans were belied by the shrinking margins of the empire. The Festival aimed to uphold “timeless notions of British tradition and character” (Conekin 2003, 103) and featured for instance the Lion and the Unicorn pavilion, in which the symbolic strength of the imperial lion was balanced by the “fanciful, even whimsical Unicorn” (94), while an

2 Uttered in Humphrey Jennings’s *Family Portrait*, the Festival’s official film, quoted by Conekin (2003, 93).
Eccentrics Corner displayed Lewis Carroll’s White Knight, which may be seen as one of the preserves described above. And yet such a teleological narrative of decline has to be qualified insofar as this process of contraction and decentring cannot be merely defined according to the static opposition between the national core and the imperial periphery, but in a more dynamic way.

Another part of the answer to our question lies with analyses of what Esty has described as cultural recoding. Concentrating on postimperial writing in England, Esty has explored the cultural revival brought about by the “Anglocentric turn” of the 1930s and 1940s. He has shown how the “contracting English centre” became a paradigm of modern European nationalism with the “linked erosion of modernist aesthetics and colonial power” (Esty 2004, 14, 13). He has also described how “postimperial English writing [became] provincial and ex-centric” (1) and more generally how “Englishness [could] no longer be defined against its imperial Outside” (15) and its sense of totality. Therefore the relative roles of the norm and the margins had to be redefined in a process of “reverse colonization and reverse ethnography” (21). Such theoretical move is notably underpinned by colonial discourse theory in the wake of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha’s works, in which eccentricity becomes a structural and critical concept that lends itself to analyses of multicultural and hybrid processes (Bhabha 1990, 4). As Miranda Gill has underlined, the success of the concept of eccentricity lies in “its ability to adapt to new contexts” and it functions “as a barometer sensitive to the slightest traces of cultural change” (Gill 2009, 2-3). Its postimperial shift, one could argue, is rooted in the geo-politics of empire and may partake of a dialectic resolution of the tension between the centre and the margin. In his chapter on eccentricity and Empire, for instance, Gregory unravels the complex relationship between the imperial core and the periphery, the interplay between domestic and native eccentricity, as well as the transplantation and dissemination of types such as street cries. Such a dynamic view of eccentricity may also usefully account for what Ian Baucom has termed “a global beyond that was also the imperial within” (Baucom 1999, 5).

The figurative, post-structural, postcolonial use of the word eccentricity has become commonplace whenever decentring practices are described in narrative or linguistic terms (Études Britanniques Contemporaines, 1998), and when hybridity and revisions of the literary canon are advocated (Hutcheon 1988; Bhabha 1990; Bluemel 2004). Its use as a structural notion can be marked by spelling, as when Linda Hutcheon labels “ex-centric” the parodic mode of those “who are marginalized by a dominant
ideology” (Hutcheon 1988, 35). Gill has noted the irony in the use of the trope of eccentricity in the structuralist and post-structuralist critique of the autonomous self (Gill 2009, 289) as opposed to decentred subjectivity. It is not only anachronistic insofar as it refers to concepts of individual liberty and autonomy, but also problematic, as one of the key values of postmodernity defined by Hutcheon when postmodernism has now become “institutionally mainstream” (289). However, reflecting on the shifting values of eccentricity may contribute to account for the so-called erosion of character which, Parrinder reminds us, is concomitant with rising concern about national identity in the latter part of the 19th century (Parrinder 2006, 23). To return to the field of literary studies, his argument that “the novel has increasingly foregrounded notions of identity rather than character” (24) is a useful qualification of a more static vision of the role of character in fiction. In a way, the “open-ended search for identity” (27) was already inscribed in Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, in which the hobbyhorsical, erratic motion of the decentred self is counteracted by travelling which liberates the ex-centred self from the hobby horse (Montabrut 1976, 87, 89).

Beyond the postimperial context we can understand that eccentricity was also bound to become aesthetic and contaminate the arts. To many art philosophers indeed fiction and representation are political not so much by their content or own ideological stances, but in how they share with politics this strategy of classifying the real and reshuffle it in biased (democratic or not, fair or not) new patterns (Rancière 2000). Hence the coherence of working on both the political and aesthetic forms of eccentricity.

The Demise and Cultivation of Eccentricity

Today’s on-going demand for eccentric biographies is matched by a pervasive concern that eccentrics are a dying breed, as expressed by Hemming who, having charted the development of eccentricity through English history, wraps up his argument in the following way:

[F]rom this point, its zenith, [the nineteenth century] I have followed its slightly depressing slide through the twentieth century as it becomes an anaemic imitation of everything it once was, until the English eccentric arrives in the early twenty-first century out of breath, a little run down and badly in need of its Version 2.0. (Hemming 2008, 206)

As many commentators have pointed out, the erosion of the salient features of eccentricity is due to the contemporary blurring of boundaries
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between the margin and the norm, or rather the increasing integration of the marginal within the norm (Eichel-Lojkine 2002, 44, 305). What was perceived as the “homogenizing threat of modernity” (Carroll 2008, 172) described from the early 19th century by Thomas Carlyle or John Stuart Mill has taken new forms in Britain—and in the other Western countries—such as global blandness and uniformity as opposed to native diversity. Hemming, for instance, indict globalisation, European standardisation (Hemming 2008, 8), the internet (160), modern psychiatry and the pharmaceutical industry (186), and through the voice of an interviewee, immigration (198), while Mill is cited as a mantra of nonconformity in praise of “islomaniacs” (203)—a term coined by Lawrence Durrell. What could be seen as the “autoerotic ma underings about national identity . . . an English vice” (Walden 2004, 48), reveals the striking fact, noted by Gill, that contemporary Western culture promotes both the nonconformist individual and postmodern decentred subjectivity, and is “still grappling with its heritage of individualism” (Gill 2009, 290).

If eccentricity is still a subject of inquiry and of taxonomic analysis (Hemming 2008, 38), it also eludes classification and assimilation to contiguous notions, as the sheer diversity of empirical cases and anecdotes on which eccentric biographies rely suggests the difficulty of imposing a code to “master the puzzling unreadibility of strange behavior” (Gill 2009, 8) and to subsume individual vagaries within a critical narrative. This brings us to address another paradox at the heart of the collision of eccentricity, creation and performance, namely the tension between the free reign of idiosyncrasy and the self-conscious, self-creative cultivation of eccentricity as something that needs to be acquired, cultivated and perfected. In The Comforters Muriel Spark has two of hers characters say: “Willi always has been eccentric,” Helen remarked. “Part of his cultivated Englishness,” said Laurence.” (Spark 2009, 175). Hywell Williams concurs, “the idea of the English eccentric is a very literary construct. It is what the English have read about in books (such as Edith Sitwell’s study of the subject) and then tried to imitate. And they have also seen it on stage. The English dramatic tradition has provided a model for its audiences—as well as for its own members off-stage” (Williams 2003). And yet fiction can also provide a critical representation of self-conscious eccentricity, as pointed out by Saville who has analysed the Dickensian “capacity to masquerade, the power to don and remove masks that does not depend on some original essence but rather brings that essence into being” (Saville 2002, 785). The performative aspect of eccentricity has also been related to the importance of ritual in Roman Catholicism, a
comparison suggested by a number of critics (Ganteau 2009; Langford 2000, 302; Robert-Nicoud 1994).

Does the cult of eccentricity reveal an inherent nostalgia of the English people? Floriane Reviron-Piégay raises the question and quotes Jeremy Paxman's statement that the English are “marching backwards into the future” (Reviron-Piégay 2009, 4). The perceived survival or demise of eccentricity certainly echoes contemporary anxieties about Englishness and Britishness. Eccentricity is also an aspect of the modern cult of heritage, a conclusion reached by Carroll who stresses the current nostalgia that presides over references to and studies of eccentricity. The interest in eccentrics ties in with the obsession with relics (Carroll 2008, 173-4; Hewison 1987), but also with the cult of celebrities and with the commoditisation and branding of “England” as a land of eccentrics and a tourist destination, a trend satirised in Julian Barnes’s England England (1999). In this regard the cult of eccentricity partakes of what Baucom, using Pierre Nora’s phrase, describes as the “nostalgic recovery of England’s lieux de mémoire” whereby “the past survives as a fetish of itself” (Baucom 1999, 23, 19). But it also shows that eccentricity as a brand has to do with the logic of consumer societies. Joyce Huff has unravelled the link between the visual and textual consumption of eccentrics and freaks in particular from the mid-19th century when the British began to define themselves simultaneously as a nation of eccentrics and of consumers (Huff 2008, 53). She argues convincingly that the taste for tales of wonder is an expression of “capitalist nostalgia”, which frees individuals of their guilt as consumers of freak shows. She quotes from Renato Rosaldo’s Culture and Truth (1989) to explain that such nostalgia allows them “to mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed” (48).

So perhaps the major threat to eccentricity lies in its own fate as object of consumption, and hence in its very pervasiveness and commoditisation which may overcome the centre, erase any form of centre. Such would be the ultimate and definitive triumph of eccentricity—but what of transgression with no norm, what of eccentricity with no centre?

**Part I: Sources and Dissemination**

This opening part concentrates on a dynamic approach of eccentricity which proves a useful concept to unravel the fluidity and porosity of boundaries. It applies to the historical analysis of cultural dissemination which is relevant to the normative constructs in the British Empire as well as to forms of proto-eccentricity in the early modern period.
In the opening chapter James Gregory tackles the eccentricity of the British Empire. He draws from a wide variety of sources and acknowledges a variety of theoretical sources ranging from Michel Foucault to Edward Said, and takes stock of the postcolonial conceptualisation of the notion. He suggests that the balance between the centre and the periphery shifts according to whether the norm is considered from the metropolitan heart of empire or if is transplanted to the colonial margin. The eccentricity behind imperialism is thus analysed at the crossroads of European originality and imperial aboriginality. Gregory first discusses imperialism as an eccentric act on the part of the maverick empire builders, before addressing subaltern eccentricity, a trait arguably recognised as a shared human feature and not only as a sign of colonial condescension, and also partaking of a form of parody enabling the subaltern to reverse the colonial gaze. Transplantation of a British culture of eccentricity is notably examined through the dissemination of eccentric biographies, which partook of a widespread cultivation of diversity, individuality and nonconformity and has partially fed postcolonial nostalgia for the age of strong character. Gregory finally focuses on the examples of Anglo-India and Australia to examine the cultures of British settlers, the specific discourses on oddity and peculiarity that resulted from such transformative experiences, and the back-and-forth process of going native and returning to the metropole.

Leaving the Victorian era to concentrate on the early modern period the next three chapters provide insights into medical practices and forms of political dissidence and marginality that entail the crossing of (professional, political, spatial) boundaries at times of political unrest and instability, when such boundaries were being redefined. Eccentricity applies to what was perceived as lunacy, unacceptable dissent or immorality. Frédérique Fouassier studies the first treatise on syphilis ever published in English by the barber-surgeon William Clowes (1579), and his approach to what she presents as the eccentric disease par excellence. Syphilis was associated to foreign invasive immorality, vagrancy and loose sexual mores, and its victims—women in particular—became social outcasts seen as threatening the fabric of society. The chapter unravels the eccentricity of syphilis, of Clowes and his work, an unprecedented publication in the canon of medical literature which laid the foundations of a pattern thereafter followed by many medical treatises, both in content and in form. Clowes broke new ground because of his ambivalent position—both central and marginal—as a military surgeon who became one of Elizabeth I’s personal surgeons and who published a hybrid work written in the vernacular instead of Latin and challenging the
conventions of the genre. His career exemplifies the crossing of boundaries, at a time when his profession was classified as a trade and not as a medical profession, contrary to physicians.

The chapter by Laurent Curelly on the Diggers and the Ranters focuses on the radical sects that sprang up in the heyday of the English Revolution in the late 1640s and early 1650s. He examines the notion of norm at a time when departing from it was not uncommon. Deviant individuals were seen by the ruling elite as a disruptive factor liable to undermine social and political order, in spite of previous religious toleration. In that sense, eccentric political and/or religious theories are construed as centrifugal, although individual behaviour was not literally described as “eccentric” yet but bore the stamp of insanity since the members of these sects were considered as lunatics. The publication of tracts and statements defining strategic sectarian positions set up boundaries between the norm upheld by the government and the sects, and between the sects themselves. From the moment when their positioning began to be seen as rebellious rather than harmlessly lunatic, both sects became the target of repressive legislation and military action. The Diggers’ call for the “levelling” of enclosures became one of the symbols of political trespass, as the fences erected on the land were altering social patterns.

Another example of radical dissidence dismissed as lunacy in the 1650s is provided by Myriam-Isabelle Ducrocq who analyses the eccentricity of the utopian political thinker and founder of the Rota Club, James Harrington. Harrington’s propositions—especially his call for an equal Commonwealth—are seen as eccentric in regard to the norm represented by the Ancient Constitution. He was criticised for borrowing from exogenous political models, and for presenting a utopian project that relied on a complex legislative process, but above all for advocating a written constitution. However Ducrocq argues that one should be wary of adopting a teleological approach to the history of English political thought. In particular a view of Harrington’s marginality must be balanced by an assessment of his political legacy. She insists that eccentricity is a temporary construct, as well as a means of publicising one’s ideas.

**Part II: Eccentricity and Gender**

The next four chapters focus on the social constraints that render gendered eccentricity problematic in the 18th and 19th century. They discuss gendered constructs and the attraction to the normative centre, while
acknowledging the fact that eccentricity may also be a factor of social change.

Marie-Odile Bernez explores the issue of gender and eccentricity in 18th-century British literature. She shows how the distrust of eccentric women stemmed from fear of their innate tendency to deviate from the centre constituted by men and their ordering of society, and to trespass into male preserves—a vision underpinned by Newtonian mechanics which inflected the astronomical meaning of eccentricity. Female deviance was deemed subversive enough to be implicitly compared to witchcraft. On the other hand male eccentricity was seen in a more acceptable light, often associated to genius. However, eccentric men could also be indicted for their eccentricity when it seemed to set into relief the feminine side of their nature. Ultimately, far from being a simple method of attracting attention to oneself, eccentricity may have been a way of introducing tolerance and flexibility into the normative pressures of society.

Alain Morvan’s chapter on Smollett’s eccentrics in Roderick Random offers an analysis of characters who exhibit a whole range of behavioural oddities and idiosyncrasies, stylistic extravagance, and epistemological folly bordering on psychopathology. This study also tackles the specificity of eccentricity in its relation to sexual deviance and satire, and shows how Smollett proves familiar with the emergence of modern psychiatry and exemplifies one of the principles underpinning the history of science, namely viewing pathological phenomena as quantitative variations from the norm. A medical man, Smollett arguably approaches eccentricity from a clinical perspective, while blurring the borderline between rule and transgression in a fairly tolerant way.

The relative flexibility discussed or advocated by a number of writers in the 18th century is often considered to have been stifled by Victorian social constraints. Can one be an eccentric and a woman in the 19th century? asks Marianne Camus who seeks answers in English literature. Her overview of the representation of femininity in Victorian fiction throws light on an essential dimension in any reflexion on eccentricity. Through this display of feminine figures, the chapter explores the way in which male and female writers variously sought to articulate a problematic relation to the norm in an androcentric world. A variety of shades of eccentricity reveals the porous nature of social norms, as fictional characters transgress the gendered norms of acceptable behaviour. A human trait, eccentricity may nevertheless entail severe punishment for women, harking back once again to the fate of witches, and setting clear limits to female sexed and sexual self-construction.
In his study of the figure of the dandy, Gilbert Pham-Thanh addresses the fate reserved to marginal male figures in an androcentric society. Exploring a corpus that confronts literary texts to minor productions such as broadsheets, he provides a historicised overview spanning the late 18th century to the 19th-century fin de siècle. He argues that dandyism is first condemned and excluded because it is seen as transgressing paradigmatic and taxonomic boundaries. However it is progressively recuperated and recentred by dominant ideological discourses and brought within the fold of acceptable masculine behaviour now seen as sophisticated in fashionable society, and ultimately merging with the figure of the gentleman. As its formerly perceived eccentricity fades—along with its connotation of creative originality—the dandy becomes a normative figure that loses its original semantic, subversive and irruptive strength, and a defining feature of British character and genius. An indicator as well as an agent of social changes, dandyism is defined as an art of distinction provoking responses ranging from ostracism to validation.

**Part III: The Uses of Literary Eccentricity**

The following chapters show how fictional eccentricity departs from its traditional association with character to become a narrative and metafictional device. The literary texts under study draw attention to their margins and challenge categorization and/or the literary canon, whilst emphasizing the importance of idiosyncrasy and peripheral outlooks.

Shannon Wells-Lassagne shows how ex-centricity is paradoxically central to Elizabeth Bowen’s work, a novelist who wrote from and about the margins of the story. Eccentricity accounts for her fictional outsiders’ failure or difficulty to conform to social norms. It is also a structural device placing the emphasis on the periphery which proves more attractive than the centre, as underlined by an implicit analogy with the peripheral gaze of marginal figures in Renaissance painting. Such decentring echoes Bowen’s problematic—yet revalued—position in the literary canon, as well as her attempt to revive modes of representation through a change in perspective.

Decentring is also tackled by Adèle Cassigneul in her chapter on eccentricity as motif and strategy in Virginia Woolf’s texts. Her intermedial reading of Woolf’s image/text invites a comparison with the contemporary techniques of film montage and photography. Grounding her analysis on the theoretical works of Georges Didi-Huberman and Liliane Louvel, she examines how the Woolfian unconventional, hybrid