**Conclusion:**

**Eccentricity and the Horizon of Expectations**

*Nothing odd will do long.*

—Dr. Johnson to Boswell on *Tristram Shandy*

The most informed of critics seem, in some instances, the least prepared to judge the value of "odd" works. Even though Dr. Johnson is justly regarded as the most knowledgeable and articulate of eighteenth-century critics, he was dead wrong about *Tristram Shandy*, for his strong sense of literary canon and his neoclassical distaste for eccentricity blinded him to the value of Sterne's work. Taste or distaste for a work of literature is, of course, largely dependent on the tension between personal and cultural values, but, as an adherent to and preserver of cultural heritage, Dr. Johnson felt little of this tension and rejected what he probably considered a deformed and grotesque offspring of the novel, itself a bastard form to his mind. We can blink at Johnson's conservative literary politics, living as we do in an iconoclastic age, but we should not dismiss his example, for to do so is to condescend and feel self-important about our own place in literary history; rather, we should take his example as an interesting entrance into the current reevaluation of canon and canonicity.

Most of the heretical texts that have been studied in this book are now part of the established literary canon, and they also constitute a recognizable tradition of their own, distinct from those works of literature that reflect the Christian mythos of the cultural episteme. As such, they are original and eccentric works which, in their time, presented the reader with a defamiliarized vision of the world that was anything but easy to accept. They challenged what Jauss has called the "horizon of
expectations” that a reader brings to an initial encounter with a literary text. Seeming either incomprehensible, indecorous, immoral, or all three, these texts disjoin the epistemological codes of culture on linguistic, imagistic, and archetypal levels. But their assimilation into a traditional canon—the way in which they become intelligible and aesthetically valued—is a process as various as the expectations readers bring to the texts.

The idea of canon and its relation to cultural value can be understood by examining the representative responses of selected, well-informed readers (distinct from a more general reading public), who embraced or rejected the eccentric texts in this study on the basis of iconoclastic or cultural values. Although such a selective examination cannot provide a definitive pattern of response, it can suggest how we canonize literature, why some texts become central while others remain eccentric, and why some heretical texts remain eccentric within the heretical tradition they help to form.

The most typical response to an eccentric text is the kind of baffled outrage expressed in Charles Burney’s review of Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner”:

*The author’s first piece, the “Rime of the ancyent Mari­nere,” in imitation of the style as well as the spirit of the elder poets, is the strangest story of a cock and a bull that were ever saw on paper: a rhapsody of unin­telligible wildness and incoherence.* (Lipking 614)

Burney’s observations in the *Monthly Review* (June 1799) reflect his unquestioned adherence to cultural values. His only praise is the implied compliment that Coleridge attempts to imitate the style and spirit of the ancient poets. After this concession, Burney’s comments reveal his distaste for the “unintelligible wildness and incoherence” of Coleridge’s poem. Such an assessment is ironically appropriate, for Coleridge’s poem is meant to be a journey into a supernatural landscape that, foreign to the cultural eye, must be incomprehensible. Coleridge’s poetic landscape, which lies beyond the shadow-line, is also beyond the horizon of Burney’s expectations. His criticism of
“The Ancient Mariner” is similar to Johnson’s assessment of Sterne’s novel. Valuing only that which reinforces cultural taste, he is impatient with the eccentricity of the work and cannot appreciate its originality.

The practicing artist, on the other hand, unlike the critic, may have a broader horizon of expectations, a taste for more exotic works. Poe, for example, embraced in De Quincey’s Confessions the very qualities which Burney objected to in Coleridge. The iconoclastic Poe praises De Quincey’s “glorious imagination—deep philosophy—acute speculation” and admires his style which displays “plenty of fire and fury, and a good spicing of the decidedly unintelligible.” Poe’s savoring of the unintelligible suggests not only that he favors the eccentric but that he finds palatable what De Quincey calls the “literature of Power.” Distinguished from the “literature of Knowledge,” which engages the reader in discursive thought, the literature of Power offers the reader a blissful escape from the confines of the cultural episteme. While De Quincey admits that most literature is really a blend of the two, a fabric of knowledge and power (Proctor 115), the rare literary work of power—the Confessions, for example—appeals to human passions through a blend of imagination, philosophy, fury, and the unintelligible. Despite the eccentricity and, at times, the incomprehensibility of De Quincey’s work, Poe’s attraction to it is not surprising; what is surprising is that De Quincey’s work was so enthusiastically received by a reading public used to literary works of the ordinary blend. The reason for the public’s tolerance of eccentricity in De Quincey’s first major work may lie in its title. The implication that the Confessions was a sort of public act of penance for immoral or socially incomprehensible behavior allowed readers of De Quincey’s work to feel morally superior to the author. In the eyes of the contemporary reading public, De Quincey was a repentant, and thus acceptable, eccentric.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Poe’s taste for De Quincey’s “spicing of the decidedly unintelligible” was due simply to his sensibility as an artist, who by temperament is supposedly more capable of embracing the unusual than is the
lay public. Many writers, even experimental and highly regarded ones, often find eccentricity strangely unpalatable. A well-known example is Woolf’s response to *Ulysses*, a response in keeping with the general English and American view of the work as obscene. Though Woolf, in her essay on “Modern Fiction,” praises Joyce’s spirituality in *Portrait*, her assessment of *Ulysses* is more ambivalent. In private, she is said to have complained that the book was “underbred” (Ellmann 528), and in a public lecture to the Heretics at Cambridge (a lecture that would become her essay “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown”), Woolf lamented that the experimental writers of her day had “no code of manners” that would serve, in fiction and in life, as a structure of social grace. Such experimental writers, she argued, violate grammar and disintegrate syntax. In particular, she criticized Joyce, saying he did not know when to use a fork or his fingers. Continuing her criticism of Joyce’s literary manners, she charged

> Mr. Joyce’s indecency in *Ulysses* seems to me the conscious and calculated indecency of a desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows. At moments, when the window is broken, he is magnificent. But what a waste of energy! (1:334)

It is tempting, perhaps, to dismiss Woolf’s criticism as a kind of rationalized jealousy. And yet the conflict of sensibility is real. Admiring Joyce, Woolf nonetheless finds his work distasteful when he violates the decorum that is the hallmark of her mature style. Woolf’s concession that Joyce’s iconoclasm is magnificent is a significant one, for it is strikingly similar to Burney’s admission that Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner” is rhapsodic even if it is unintelligible. In admitting the power of texts they find distasteful, Burney and Woolf suggest that these eccentric works are, in Barthes’s terminology, texts of bliss which undercut the reader’s assumptions about social and literary conventions. While experiencing the blissful quality of the text, neither Burney nor Woolf wishes to embrace a work whose literary manners are all wrong.
Woolf felt no such aversion to the dignified prose of Joseph Conrad. In her essay on Conrad, she praises Conrad’s “perfect manners” in life and “his beauty” (1:302) as an artist. His fiction, she writes, tells “us something very old and perfectly true; [something] very chaste and very beautiful” (1:308). Though during his lifetime Conrad was not a truly popular writer, in comparison with other writers in this study, he quickly became central to the literary tradition; and, though his reputation has suffered some periods of decline, he has remained part of the canon. His relative popularity might be attributed to the fact that his portrayals of heretical characters who stray from their homeland and cultural values emphasize the danger of such ventures. Conrad’s fascination with the incomprehensible ironically culminates in a rejection of the eccentricity and estrangement of so many of his heroes. If Conrad appeals to a broader reading public than Joyce, for instance, this may be because his novels offer a more satisfying, if reductive, resolution of the complex questions of psychology and human perception that they raise. When a cultural heretic like Kurtz dies, the culture itself, at least according to a simplistic reading, is vindicated.

In this sense, individual responses to a work of art can be based on a kind of patriotic aesthetic that confirms a national literature or literary figure. The reception of a work in England and America, for instance, is often different, with critics on one side of the Atlantic singing in unison the praises of a work that is universally condemned on the other side. Barnes’s first attempts to have Nightwood published in America were met with unanimous resistance. Her biographer notes that Nightwood “did not even suffer the usual agonizing delays but shot in and out of publishers’ offices as though it were being ejected from a greased revolving door” (Field 207). And after its publication American reviewers attacked the novel as being incomprehensible and even morally reprehensible. Writing in New Masses, Philip Rahv titled his review of Nightwood “The Taste of Nothing” and described the novel as a “trickle of literarious despair” and “a minute shudder of decadence.” He concluded the review
lamenting that Barnes's visions of "social decay and sexual perversion have destroyed all response to genuine values and actual things" (34). The novel's reception in England, however, was almost uniformly positive. Edwin Muir, in *The Listener*, praised the "strangeness and the extraordinary verbal beauty of this book. The story itself is simple and comprehensible enough, and is concerned chiefly with the relations between two women" (832). Peter Quennell of *The New Statesman and Nation* praised the "wealth of grotesque and lively imagery" and asserted that "Nightwood is not only a strangely original, but an extremely moral work." Quennell continues that he is "not surprised to learn that it appears under the aegis of the most eminent Anglo-Catholic poet of the present day" (592). One wonders to what extent Quennell's admiration and the American distaste for *Nightwood* were influenced by Eliot's favorable introduction to the novel, since his approbation may have suggested to some the book's worthiness for inclusion in the canon. Since there was a good deal of criticism in America of Eliot's introduction—Rahv called *Nightwood* "all T. S. Eliot poetry translated into prose" (33)—the initial American distaste for Barnes may have been more political than aesthetic, since both Barnes and Eliot were estranged from their native land.

Putting aside issues of national taste, the question remains why *Nightwood*, unlike the other eccentric texts examined here, has remained an outsider. The answer may be found by comparing Barnes's work with the work of Malcolm Lowry and considering the intended audiences of their works. If, as Jauss argues, "there are works which at the moment of their publication are not directed at any specific audience, but which break through the familiar horizon of literary expectations so completely that an audience can only gradually develop for them" (16), then the long-standing eccentricity of *Nightwood* and *Under the Volcano* may be understood as a problem of timeliness. Both novels have been recognized as masterful works of genius and yet have remained outside the canon of modern fiction because their most sympathetic readers belong to groups that have tended to lie outside the mainstream of society: lesbians
and transsexuals in the case of *Nightwood*, and alcoholics in the case of *Under the Volcano*. While these works are regularly read and appreciated by other reading audiences, each is often said to be too special a case for inclusion in the literary canon. In addition to the “special” subject matter of both books, another reason for their long-term marginality may be that both Barnes and Lowry are often considered one-book authors. A writer with one masterpiece and a series of less perfect works is frequently perceived by the professional reader of literature as having an artistic base too narrow to warrant sustained critical study.

If this book has an implicit critical agenda, it is to question notions of canonicity: to place “central” and “eccentric” works side by side to show that canonized works may themselves be eccentric in their origins and part of a heretical tradition; and, to show that the heretical tradition has its own “central” works, works like Barnes’s *Nightwood* and Lowry’s *Under the Volcano*. These works, however, which are initially rejected as too eccentric may actually be in the first stage of entering the canon. As Jauss argues, “If the artistic character of a work is to be measured by the aesthetic distance with which it confronts the expectations of its first readers, it follows that this distance, which at first is experienced as a happy or distasteful new perspective, can disappear for later readers” (15). In this way, the work becomes part of and contributes to the culture’s expanding horizon of expectations. When an individual reader moves, with a poet or novelist, beyond what the reader has formerly seen only as the horizon, he or she has effectively crossed a personal shadow-line and entered a realm of knowledge previously unimaginable. When many readers move beyond these shadow-lines, cultural belief itself is changed and new shadow-lines, continually moving out to mark the boundary of the known, appear on an ever-expanding horizon.