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# Aesthetic Modes of Attack: The Woman Critic-Artist, Caractère unique

Being an excursion into the disorderly and digressive tendencies within literary discord.

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; Am an attendant lord, one that will do To swell a progress, start a scene or two, Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool, Deferential, glad to be of use, Politic, cautious, and meticulous; Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse; At times, indeed, almost ridiculous— Almost, at times, the Fool. (Eliot)

In a world inclined to hierarchies of aesthetic value, with inevitable homage to the lofty and exalted, it is doubtless unwise to open this meditation on women artist-critics with a reference to Eliot, that grim and gray-faced titan so beloved of the twentieth century. However parodic his portrait of Prufrock, it measures what is generally expected of women in the field of intellectual thought; we are expected to "swell a progress," deferential and cautious; but step beyond that arena and we become inevitably subject to supercilious scrutiny. Samuel Johnson's pronouncement that "a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all" may have been made in 1763, but the dismissive observation has lasted rather longer than time's duty. And incredulity is no excuse.

Women critic-artists, whom I choose in this exploration to identify as *Caractères uniques*, are themselves immersive exhibitions of aesthetic eccentricity, and so challenge the categories that would demarcate their

I am a householder, a ratepayer, a good plain cook, and a deliverer of typescripts well before the deadline; I sign anything that is put in front of me; I never telephone my publisher; and I make no claims for my particular sort of writing, although I understand that it is doing quite well. I have held this rather dim and trusting personality together for a considerable length of time, and although I have certainly bored others I was not to be allowed to bore myself. My profile was deemed to be low and it was agreed by those who thought they knew me that it should stay that way. (8–9)

How convenient a summary of an obedient woman-artist. And how very much it begs to be exploded.

The challenge becomes how to sift the quandary of the *caractère unique* writing through the splicings of poetry and fiction and non-fiction and fictor-criticism without lapsing into turgid intellectualism. This requires finding the fissure that can glue the broken plate together, leaving a slightly less-than-visible hair-line fracture. It demands dexterity: ensuring that the research does not stink of research or swallow itself whole in the process and practice of the writing. And it compels playful investigation of those multiple aesthetics that surprise themselves, that refuse to costume archetypal critique.

Can an eccentric anatomy of criticism (that indubitable and Phrygian determination insisting on structure, system, coherence) intervene? Or do hombre taxonomies block the woman artist and her aesthetic, disable her mode of attack, and reduce her to a "womanly" niche, glacéed with the refusal to furnace muscular brawn and all its formidable formalisms? The caractère unique may be enjoined to hark to other anatomies and dissections: Nashe's Anatomy of Absurdity, Lyly's Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit, and not least, Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy. Alongside anatomies of murder, deception, metaphysics, love, and not least, the much-consulted cadaver of Gray, the body compacted by the page. Forgive the missing references at the end of this reflection: they are ubiquitously easy to obtain. But—

The artistic woman The womanly artist The woman artist Woman as artist Artist as woman

for whom no conclusion, no punctuation is possible, are far less readily apparent.

These designations stagger against one another, try to glimpse the shape of an aesthetic less easily consumed by what is "objective," and

17

more deliberately interested in what Canadian poet Nicole Brossard identifies as "productive uncertainty" ("Interview" 247). Nothing so readily summarized as in this domicile:

Seeking out new poetic dimensions of sound and word as well as time, space, and speed, Brossard's aesthetic practice inhabits multiple dimensions: spirals of language, image and sound; frames within frames of dialogues in locations that warp from the Caribbean to Canada; spheres that flex histories of women and women's writing. (248)

The flexion of histories, spheres of influence and their dissuasions become a means by which the *caractère unique* may buckle and contort expectations.

Does the pivot of "academic" throw the engraved narrative akimbo? Is academic poet a tilted balance? Does it contaminate professorial gravitas, arouse suspicion? What does the poet/writer want in that corner office with her books and her paper shredder and her uncomfortable chair? Is that where she seeks "intoxicating death?" Or where she finds the refuge and re/fuse of self-referentiality, can erase the division between what is accorded "academic" pursuit and "creative" practice, drawn by some arbitrary lexicographer coding a creaky platform of difference? The woman critic-artist is always already haunted by the specter and question of dubious "autobiography," the fictionality and poesis of self-referentiality and its presumed narcissism. Although none are so self-absorbed as the porters and the beadles and the gatekeepers and their decreed categories, augmented by their "women write out of their viscera" dismissals and taunts.

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"A monograph," they intone.
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Some determinator invests in the hierarchy of solemn over incongruous, umpired arbitration over generous disarray. There is a tinge of the donnish in league with the patronizing in this summary, but although the scholarly writer or the writerly scholar might read herself as "dim and trusting," there lurk, beneath the surface of our capsized solipsism, those old and, it seems, inescapable aspersions.

The woman artist, maligned. The woman artist, discouraged. The woman artist, bespoke. The woman artist, recalcitrant.

<sup>&</sup>quot;A slim volume of verse," they concede.

<sup>&</sup>quot;A refereed disquisition," they decree.

<sup>&</sup>quot;A charming tale," they condescend.

Such anatomies expect poets to serve as stagehands, fill waterglasses, play aproned serving maids to the star actors, swell the progress of those critics who can toss off references to Baudrillard and Schlegel without mispronouncing their names even while they interrogate the narrative stance of the novel or the incessant conversions of Bunyan.

Je refuse: a woman artist, scorned or repudiated. This portmanteau search on the part of all those designated critic-artists is more than complacent self-consciousness, but an "indescriptable," a continuation of "the spaces of possibility" that resist confinement and staging. She has little choice but to become *caractère unique*.

The *caractère unique* then: roaming, an inhabitant of *loiterature* and all that waits to be discovered, between the lines or reading upside down. And not by any stretch witty and graceful, ornate as an over-powdered wig or high-laced shoes with their rhetoric and alliteration. Those anatomists would rusticate us all, women artists, barbarians expelled from the holy halls of canonicity. And yet, they were, those hallowed boys, Shelley and Milton, Dryden and Wilde, rusticated, for dueling or drooling, or other disturbances. In them it is heroic. In us? Unpardonable.

In "This is for you': Emotions, Language and Postcolonialism," a dialogue between Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Dorota Filipczak (2013), I find an aperture through which to enter this aesthetic quandary of the *caractère unique*. Nair refers to the "multiform, multivalent uses of language" (271) and goes on to suggest that language

has to adapt itself to current circumstances, to change subtly, from moment to moment. Use is an itinerant, a beggar, knocking at the door of language. It does not have a "room of one's own," so to speak. This affects our conceptions of the self as well. I think that the hierarchy of the self, predicated on the uses of language, is, in essence, rickety. Even if one intentionally constructs oneself, let's say, first as an academic, then a mother, and then a poet, language simply does not allow one to freeze these identities. So poetry too, like any other use of language, becomes a persistent questioning of identity. (271)

Nair and Filipczak in that conversation puncture how we have crutched on the theoretical, have lost the willed blaze of curiosity, irrefutable as the green flash between sunset and night, elusive as a tendril. Nair exposes the fluidity of usage and hybridity. "Writing, whether as a postcolonial critic or linguist or poet, is all about investigating this calibrated ambiguity. Exploring what you are not is exploring what you are. Ambiguity flowers at the heart of language" (271). Exploring what you are not is exploring what you are (emphasis mine). The conundrum here, a clear refusal of prolixity, a play with transposition, declares the enigma of the

anagram; this assertion gestures toward *pronunciamento*, a writer's tool and power, if also at times diminishment and prison.

With Nair and Filipczak, I embrace a poetics of digression as an effective way to evade those categories and practices that confine the woman artist, her *caractère unique*. In *Loiterature*, Ross Chambers says, "like other practices with which it has some common features—asyndeton (interruption), anacoluthon (inconsistency), parenthesis, description—it [digression] is less an error than a relaxation of what are regarded as the strictest standards, not of relevance or cogency, but of cohesion" (85). Here is the fluid bracket that enables a generatively disruptive perusal of the woman as critic-artist, Provocateur or *Cheiranthus cheiri*, whichever variety suits the genus. Surely side glance and evasion offer the way by which to enter a devil's door, this shuttling of categories to make room for the wayward expressions of a *caractère unique*, one who refuses ready classification. Unexpected swerves demonstrate but do not explain the extent to which drift illuminates. What is important then is not that questions are answered, but that questions are asked.

The writer/academic/artist/poet, that *caractère unique*, hesitates then on the threshold of the language that has left her in the dark if not the cold, the one alienating the other, the writer furious at the academic, the academic contemptuous of the strains of metaphor, the artist hovering just off the edge of nowhere and never at home on the page, even if that page is of her making and she might be component of its many parts. And that fleeting thought, so imperfect and impalpable but containing within it the nexus of the argument, the *mot juste* that shadows our tread on the stairway, that ghost of lush precision or juicy clarity, there and there and there but always elusive, slips past the footfalls that leave behind not even a trace of dust. And so, evading then the jocular mockery that we face in light of our fluctuations and loiterings.

Stubborn optimists, women artists/scholars must first resist the temptation to become stubborn pessimists. The *caractère unique* is required to marshal the energies of cheerful despair, measured against the aesthetics of the orthodox past which has modelled the academic/poetic or the scholar/writer. We can only wonder if we are trapped on a virtual Raft of the Medusa, starving, while we embody someone else's macabre realism and its stormy dehydration. The woman artist resists the very gaze that would freeze her into the immobility of a dilettante, while the scholar artist must resist a two-way mirror judging her capacity for crime and/or for protocol, decorum paused over well-met or exceeded standards. Can the scholar/artist measure up, discharge expectations? Is she doomed by her very bifurcation? Or can she occupy a category closer to rhetorical asyndeton, "one of the modes of digression (one interrupts oneself in

So many doubtful measures to negotiate in this, the intimate identity of the poet and the writer and the academic and the infernal "roles" that then edit and inhibit, hesitate on the threshold of one another's language and intention. And yes, that multivalent voice, her language, her dance over the hot coals of "what genre does this belong to?" prompts urgency: to escape, break loose, abscond. For the mad constraints of language itself insist on a carved path of usage and its traditional outcomes, when the woman as artist, the *caractère unique*, tries to get it to adapt, change disguises, and work from the margins of the margins, those vanishing sides that refuse all transposition.

Do the "layers of meaning" (Filipczak, "Emotions" 273) deployed by the *caractère unique* only serve to codify the only too-frequent accusations: that we are pastiche merchants consuming the sadness of conflicted characters, artists treading the boards of some pre-arranged drama centered around a hero of certain proportions, the ritual of strewing rushes to soften that champion's homage? Is it even possible to be an efficient purveyor of leisure? Can our cross-corruption be tempered by innocence? The questions posed to the woman critic-artist resonate in multiple spaces. How can we shock ourselves out of passive looking (Filipczak, "Munch" 12) into succulent interaction or "immersive exhibition" (12) as a means of occupying the space between designation or encapsulation? No synonyms for woman artist; no neat designations or encapsulations of that persona. The antonym of artist is scientist. As if the artist were incapable of science, determinedly enclosed by the constraint and construction of capability.

In Nicole Brossard's *Journal Intime*, or *Intimate Journal*, these echoes and hauntings continue to hear themselves, and to bevel framing.

#### 25 March 1983

Everything's a question of framing in the landscape of the real, of montage and dissolve in memory, when a mental frame is transformed into a precise image of a woman in the process of writing. In contrast, you have to expect the real twice because there is no real(ity) except the science of being as an absolute necessity otherwise consciousness does not survive, invisible in the montage. (77)

As *caractères uniques* then, those "invisible in the montage" are compelled to seek frames and mountings. In Dorota Filipczak's 2017 interview with Mieke Bal, framing begins the conversation, the requirement of destination coupled with definition. Filipczak says to Bal,

I would like to hear your comment on the concept of framing as you use it in the book [Emma and Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic], and also as you use it here in the exhibition in order to shock us out of a passive look at Munch [so that] it's no longer a passive or static view. (12)

Bal's amplification of immersive exhibition collapses the division between observer and observed, writer and scholar, regard and regarded.

For us the genre of immersive exhibition means that you get close enough into it that you feel emotions that are around you but at the same time you can be critical of it. The critical aspect of looking is incited by these works. (12)

The observational then, alongside "the critical aspect of looking," must arouse and enable saturation, evading the dubious context of casual attention. At the same time, the "flaneur in petticoats," not taken seriously but nevertheless serious in her mien, is immersed in *looking* as reprisal to the way she has been measured and evaluated by the gaze of others. Caught in the act, she performs scrutiny less heedful or guarded than when she dared to use but a prudent glance to conceal her observational strategies.

And the perspective, the position? Restricted by the requirement that she be sedulous and secretive, the *caractère unique* performs a lateral edging that evades the interactive and its importunity. Athwart, crabwise. Filipczak observes,

The exhibition is actually defined by the phrase "looking sideways" or "the sideways look." Now, your art and your critical works have been consistently concerned with the act of looking and the act of seeing. Could you describe the role of "looking sideways"? (14)

## To which Bal replies,

What I try to convey with "the sideways look" is the refusal to engage with the world, with other people; avoiding the dialogic look. But at some point, it also becomes a form of seeing from the corner of the eye what's happening outside in the world. So, it's not only the avoidance of dialogic looking; it can also be an expression of shyness. (14)

And I would add, elliptical sagacity. *Regard oblique*. Shyness is a luxury *caractères uniques* can ill afford, and yet that intricate diffidence sharpens perspective; the slant enables the power of solitary discernment, and avoidance supports the unusual angle that enables accurate visioning. *Regard oblique* becomes "a form of witnessing. Seeing what you are not supposed to see" (14). And *regard oblique* serves synesthesia, the smell of texture, the touch of sound, the taste of weariness or energy, the theatre of invention.

One way to address cross-sectional aesthetic modes is through the *regard oblique* fastened on the *caractère unique*, the digressive accompaniment

of the askance thinker, that loiterage demanding the poetics of digression (Chambers 83). Nicole Brossard asks in *Journal Intime*, "What exactly do you want from me? Literature that won't look like literature? Writing that will not be writing? . . . Memoirs, autobiography, journal, fiction. O! of course, you need to differentiate them, but who is to do that?" (69). And are those categories of importance? Does differentiation differentiate? In their conversation, Filipczak comments to Bal that the "intermedial . . . connects various media, genres and conventions; . . . it dissolves many boundaries" (22). Intermedial seeing facilitates the regard of the *caractère unique*, falling between genres, traversing through and circling around, negotiating time, place, or character without the apologia of categorization. And further, the chance to mix the media, to see the smell of gentian violet, to touch the elusive passage of a shadow, to hear then, the sideways glance, indirect as a signal.

Which circuitously leads to Schlegel's permanente Parekbase, endless digression (Chambers 85) escaping categories and coercive systems. The caractère unique is herself an embodiment of swerve, refusing to collaborate with disciplinary molds, desiring to embrace alternative aesthetic molds. She specters the ghost in the stairway, the forgotten line that evades memory's trace until it returns too late, before introducing another possibility, the unspoken riposte, the buckled idea, never voiced but retorted nevertheless. The *caractère unique* arrives unannounced, tardy but cogent in speculative response, like Denis Diderot's l'esprit d'escalier, staircase wit, that predicament of thinking of the perfect reply too late. The circumstances (framing again) are amplified by the hôtel particulier to which Diderot had been invited for dinner, a dinner where some politician tossed at Diderot an utterance that left him speechless, confused into silence. Until, after leaving the étage noble where the dinner had been, one floor above the ground floor, at the bottom of the stairs after descending, he recovers his wit and percipience too late, alas too late. Mute descending a staircase, only to encounter the mischievous *l'esprit d'escalier*.

The *caractère unique* is less than baffled by the structure of an *hôtel particulier*, which others might find too culturally precise. She has indeed been a guest in such a place, in Toulouse, that ancient city of pilgrimages, manifestations, terracotta bricks, and the asymmetrical sixteenth-century Pont Neuf, which crosses the prone-to-flooding river Garonne. It was a smaller gathering, and she was not the guest of honor, but invited as an exhibit, someone possessing peculiar plumage, an odd North American accent, and a colonial pedigree. This *caractère unique* then, did attend a dinner in a shambling flat on one of the floors renovated inside a *hôtel particulier*. She practices being insensible to French sophistications, and so the remarks, the arguments, the airy inclusion of references to the continental philosophy of Lacan confuse her less than annoy her, until the mightily silencing surprise

that she is a guest in the home of someone who cannot cook and who does not drink wine. A French home. Her host regards the burnt *gratin de potiron* she pulls from the oven with an air of regret and says, "I fear it was not a success," but serves it anyway. To which there is no riposte, only later that *l'esprit d'escalier*, a line more than *l'étage* or harried afterthought, "No, it certainly was not." And no wine to kill the cinder-taste or the tincture of ashes.

Askance more than afterthought. Forgive the *caractère unique*, but she has spared this text a riot of footnotes, themselves detours, tempting as the memory of walking across the Pont Neuf in Toulouse day after day, stopping at the middle arch to survey the Garonne, thick with mud and the potential for destruction. That ghost riposte, always waiting to spring upon her when she expects it least, an impersonation too late for adequate revenge and so inevitably delayed, sidetracked by perplexity, confounded into silence. And only assuaged by the head-shaking moment when wit, that well-bred insolence, returns to her aid. To explore what she is not captures the moment on the staircase, the missed epiphany itself a digression, an indirect path to what she questions when she writes. "Digression, as the seepage of thought that disturbs its linear progression, enacting textual extenuation as a phenomenon that baffles the distinction between continuity and discontinuity" (Chambers 119), is then the essential pleasure of the writing practice, the place where the *caractère unique* curates herself in language.

Curation as intervention and tangent, framing and fluctuation, becomes crucial. As Bal points out, "the curation creates a situation in which we are invited to participate" (Filipczak, "Munch" 20). Filipczak asks Bal, "Do you think this intermedial way of seeing can actually feed into literary studies and cultural studies? It is a new method of engaging with the literary work, art and video installation, all combined, with curating as an additional tool" (22). Bal goes on to unpack intervention and interaction as the artist's tools, their bulwark against unreasonable cynicism, that alternate ghost in the staircase. For scholars are likely to insist that the *caractère* unique is not scholarly enough; her tangents and digressions are too wildly excursionist, deflections from exegetical thinking. While writers insist that she is not writerly enough, does not stick to a single close-lipped genre, or revise the same navel novel over and over, does not publish a book of no less than 300 and no more than 400 pages every three years, like a metronome of production. Instead, she veers between poetry and fiction and ficto-criticism, creative criticism and non-fiction, faux history and filles du roi and vivisection and picaras and place-concoction and geografictione and northern clippers and prairie gothic and Bruegelesque allegory and howlers and Wendepunkt and Unanimisme and roman-fleuve. Even worse, she abjures popular topics, current events, the dystopian fashion, tremendismo, espionage tales, or making memoir of misery and its plural.

Here then, is the conundrum of the curious, procrastinating, readerly caractère unique "exempt from destination" (Beckett 36) but willing to practice other bavardage. She returns to the conversation between Nair and Filipczak, echoes the questions asked there. What is her "language strategy" (273)? Is her "grammar of narrative" (274) folded between the manifold decoys of gossip? Filipczak says to Nair,

I'm intrigued by the concept of literature as gossip. This would be one of the phenomena in Canadian literature by women as well, since women are stereotypically connected with gossip. So it is interesting that Rushdie could be read in a gossip mode. (274)

Is gossip the autobiography in which we do not appear? Is the intimacy of gossip one way to inter-textualize dissonance? The *caractère unique* met Rushdie over a table covered with Indian food in Scandinavia, the hostess a beautiful woman unafraid of cooking and unafraid of Rushdie and unafraid of wine. They leapt across their differences toward a shared reading addiction and an appreciation of Chana Masala. The *caractère unique* and Rushdie adapted to the gossip of global sophistication more quickly than any awkward courtesies, danced past writing that refused to fit, words that resisted placement and placating. Such *caractères uniques* cannot simply occupy "a mutinous silence" (276) but must squabble and argue, toss words in a salad spinner, presume to difficulty if not diffidence, and swallow doubts.

Filipczak asks Nair: how can "emotion . . . disrupt the authority of linguistic structure?" (276), to which end articulating the inexplicable (279) through rage and rambling, detour and sortilege, does take on the texture of an outcry (279). This elusive l'esprit d'escalier haunts the uneasy space of English, its muscled freedom in tandem with idiomatic rigidity, and within those two traces discourse that refuses nets and cuts through entanglements. Perhaps this is less the unruly genre of gossip than the inchoate language of rage, rage that has no way to express itself, embattled by language, by patriarchy, by class, and by an obstructive innocence. The caractere unique, beggared by the paucity of her materials, then can only "make do," despite these obstacles making it difficult to imagine her as sui generis, without classification, unfitting, unconforming, a unique who cannot be reduced to category? Including all that is solitary, hermitic, and peculiar, in the strongest and most powerful senses possible. Here, then, the quandary of the caractère unique. Where can she infiltrate the closed room of dissection and dissent, dissertation and disquisition? Is there an open door or a reluctant key to a rusty lock?

Better to undertake a detour where she imagines Górecki's teeth and Maria Jarema's elusive limbs. She relishes Szymborska's ashtray and the sprouting onion she keeps as a memento mori on her shelf, the Skamander coffee served at the Picador Café. And having herself a decided preference for desk drawers, she begins to memorize Wisława Szymborska's poem.

"There Are Those Who"

There are those who conduct life more precisely. They keep order within and around them. A way for everything, and a right answer.

They guess straight off who's with who, who's got who, to what end, in what direction. They set their stamp on single truths, toss unnecessary facts into the shredder and unfamiliar persons into previously designated files.

They think as long as it takes, not a second more, since doubt lies lurking behind that second.

And when they're dismissed from existence, they leave their place of work through the appropriately marked exit.

Sometimes I envy them —it passes, luckily. (421)

It passes, luckily, envy of those who conduct life and the aesthetic process with such absoluteness. The caractère unique heeds only one admonishment: wear flat shoes and be prepared for long distances.

In the poem, "Shadow: Soft and Soif," in her collection entitled Ardour, Nicole Brossard tempers,

i'm careful not to disappear on the other side of my dreams (75)

The *caractère unique* resorts instead to the French *suivez mon regard*, and the reticence it offers, its sheltering ambivalence discontinuous and beguiling.

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