



# THE WOMAN ARTIST

ESSAYS IN MEMORY OF DOROTA FILIPCZAK

*edited by Tomasz Dobrogoszcz, Agata Handley  
Krzysztof Majer and Tomasz Fisiak*

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[Kup książkę](#)

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Kup książkę

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Prof. Dorota Filipczak (1963–2021)

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*Tomasz Dobrogoszcz, Agata Handley,  
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## Preface

The purpose of the present volume is twofold. Firstly, we aim to honor Professor Dorota Filipczak, whose untimely passing after more than thirty years of an energetic and fruitful academic career at the University of Lodz has left us in shock and sorrow. Secondly, we aspire to produce a valuable contribution to literary criticism and culture studies, the areas on which her own scholarly endeavors centered. From among the many possible themes we have selected that of the *woman artist* because of its special importance for Filipczak's research, as well as the connection to her own work as a poet. Importantly, all of the contributors—representing various fields of academia—are Dorota's friends, colleagues and collaborators, and the essays eloquently testify to her intellectual influence.

Dorota Filipczak's output firmly demonstrates that she succeeded in combining two roles: that of a female scholar and that of the eponymous *woman artist*. Although she devoted a large part of her research to male writers—including Malcolm Lowry and Brian Moore—an academic focus on women appears more central to her career. A quick glance at the titles of her scholarly publications demonstrates her genuine interest in the cultural role of female figures. Filipczak analyzed the oeuvre of such writers as Alice Munro, Jane Urquhart, Michèle Roberts and Margaret Laurence; she also wrote extensively on female biblical figures, Eve and Mary Magdalene. In addition, her choice of theoretical tools emphasizes her investment in the female cause—Filipczak frequently referred to other female scholars, thinkers and philosophers, including Mieke Bal, Alison Jasper and Pamela Sue Anderson. Anderson's feminist philosophy of religion turned out to be particularly significant for Filipczak's academic input; she was friendly with all three scholars, and these relationships were based on mutual academic respect.



However, Dorota Filipczak's discussion of the female experience was not limited to scholarly texts, lectures or seminars on literature (it must be remembered that she was an active academic teacher and a guest scholar who delivered lectures at universities around the world—at Oxford, Durham, Glasgow, Sheffield, Winnipeg, Barcelona, to name just a few). It was also discernible in her translations of numerous short stories and novels by female writers (e.g., Nadine Gordimer's 1998 *The House Gun*). Most of all, though, it showed in her deeply personal poetry, where she would address issues around the female body and sexuality, as well as female empowerment and the desire for knowledge. It comes as no surprise that the first issue of *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture* (2011), the interdisciplinary journal which Filipczak founded and developed, sought to "primarily engage in the relationship between women and authority, vested in literary and philosophical texts" (6), as she expressed it in the first editorial. Undoubtedly, the relation between womanhood and notions of power and desire remained recurrent subjects in her pursuits, both academic and poetic.

Scholar, writer, teacher, poet, translator—the list unequivocally proves Dorota Filipczak's versatility. A volume comparable in length to the present one could easily have been devoted exclusively to her achievements in these various fields. The intention, however, is different: the following texts go beyond remembrance and the honoring of an established scholar's remarkable achievements. Despite their undeniable commemorative function, the chapters included here attempt to carry Filipczak's academic endeavors forward, into the future.

The first section ("Creativity and Memory") contains more personal reflections and ruminations inspired by Filipczak's life and work. True to form, Aritha van Herk's text ("Aesthetic Modes of Attack: The Woman Critic-Artist, *Caractère unique*") bubbles with provocation, both stylistic and ideological, refusing to settle in rigidly prescribed academic boundaries: in more ways than one, van Herk attests to the uniqueness and transgressive potential of women's critical-artistic practice. The cultural theorist and video artist Mieke Bal, who was interviewed by Filipczak on a number of occasions, argues in "Untimeliness, Inter-ship, Mutuality" that Filipczak's interest in the work of woman artists was "a mode of being, thinking, and doing her academic work" (p. 27) and that her approach was "dialogic" (pp. 27–28): an ongoing engagement with, and unlimited curiosity about, "otherness" (p. 28). In this spirit, Bal has sought to make her own contribution as "dialogic" as possible, responding to Filipczak's ideas, as if she were interviewing her, continuing the mutually enriching conversation that had been cut short. David Jasper recognizes that "professionalism" tends to confine academics within the narrow boundaries of their own discipline and fields of research. Jasper argues that Filipczak,

on the other hand, pursued a rigorous interdisciplinarity—summed up, perhaps, by the title of a conference organized by her in 1998: *Dissolving the Boundaries*. Jasper focuses on two journals (*Literature and Theology* and *Text Matters*), as well as Filipczak's early research on Canadian literature, to show how "disciplined interdisciplinarity"—addressed directly in his title—becomes for her an important method of investigation.

Articles collected in the following section ("Multivocality and Interaction") investigate the tensions between the public persona and the private self as reflected in the work of a range of women artists. Serving as a prologue of sorts, as well as an inspiration, is Filipczak's own text, "'Alternative Selves' and Authority in the Fiction of Jane Urquhart." Filipczak borrows the central concept from Pamela Sue Anderson's call to reinvent ourselves as "other" in the face of dominant beliefs and epistemological frameworks. She focuses on texts by Lucy Maud Montgomery, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro and Jane Urquhart, which explore the clash between female characters' social roles and their "secret" selves. In "What Is In the Picture (and What Is Not): Canada, Women, and Autobiography in the Work of Geraldine Moodie, Eva Hoffman and Alice Munro," Norman Ravvin examines different approaches to autobiography in the work of the three artists. He highlights the importance of place and time in their work, as well as the ambiguities and tensions inherent in their choices regarding that which is revealed and that which remains hidden. Philip Hayward and Matt Hill consider the work of music/video artist Elizabeth Bernholz ("Elizabeth Bernholz's *Gazelle Twin*: Disguise, Persona and Jesterism"). Hayward and Hill demonstrate how Bernholz's adoption of a performative persona—*Gazelle Twin*—offers subversive and parodic reworkings of traditional/folkloric imagery of Britishness in a way acutely relevant at the time of Brexit. In the section's final text, Mark Tardi engages with the work of the American poet Elizabeth Willis ("Vernacular Architecture: Posthumanist Lyric Speakers in Elizabeth Willis's *Address*"). Drawing on posthumanist thinkers such as Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, Tardi examines Willis's moving between different levels—the human and the nonhuman, the self and the world, the private and the political.

The final section ("Spirituality and Embodiment") is an exploration of the interface between the body and religion. Again, a text by Filipczak—"Let me hear Thy voice': Michèle Roberts's Refiguring of Mary Magdalene in the Light of The Song of Songs"—serves as prologue and inspiration. Filipczak examines various scholarly attempts to redeem the figure of Mary Magdalene from her sexist portrayal as a "repentant whore" (p. 135). In Michèle Roberts's novel *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene*—Filipczak claims—the relationship of Christ and Mary Magdalene is reframed through intertextual references to The Song of Songs, connecting with different levels of

female desire (sexual, maternal, spiritual). Jan Jędrzejewski examines two novels by George Moore ("the Irish Balzac"), *Evelyn Innes* and *Sister Teresa*, whose protagonist retreats from opera's worldly success to join a convent, where she sings the offices of the church rather than arias by Verdi or Wagner. Together, the novels constitute an extended meditation on the relationship between artistic and religious experience, sensuality and gender ("A Catholic New Woman Artist: A Contradiction in Terms? Sex, Music and Religion in George Moore's *Evelyn Innes* and *Sister Teresa*"). Another work by Roberts, *Playing Sardines* (2001), is explored by Marta Goszczyńska. Goszczyńska reads Roberts's collection through the work of theorists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Carol Wolkowitz, Elizabeth Grosz and Celine Leboeuf, who affirm the embodied character of human experience. Women in the stories are frequently shown as victims who internalize "objectifying" attitudes towards the body. However, Goszczyńska also highlights moments of liberation, when the characters move beyond the frameworks of discipline and control, as well as scenes depicting positive experiences of intersubjectivity ("Cherishing the Body: Embodiment and the Intersubjective World in Michèle Roberts's *Playing Sardines*").

12 On the cover of her first collection of poetry, *W cieniu doskonałej pomarańczy* [*In the Shadow of a Perfect Orange*] (1994), Filipczak declared: "I'm passionate about the sacred in poetry and prose, and ways of its unconventional interpretation. Writing poetry and literary criticism is like looking at one and the same landscape through two separate windows."<sup>1</sup> In the final article in this collection, entitled "On Spaces Within and Between: Dorota Filipczak's (Embodied) Visions of the Sacred," Monika Kocot considers Filipczak's "unconventional" interpretations of the sacred both in her poetry and in her academic writing, as well as the importance of places and spaces in her geopoetry. The "two windows" of poetry and criticism might, again, be seen as "a mode of being, thinking, and doing," which marks the entirety of Dorota Filipczak's life and work.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Monika Kocot.

# **Section 1**

## **Creativity and Memory**

*Aritha van Herk*



## **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)

15

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

pliability. It is tempting to quote the ironic voice of Edith Hope, the romantic novelist depicted in Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac*:

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 fic-to-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.

16

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

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.

17

“A monograph,” they intone.  
“A slim volume of verse,” they concede.  
“A refereed disquisition,” they decree.  
“A charming tale,” they condescend.

Some determinant 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.



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 “indescribable,” 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.

18 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

order to pursue another line of thought, so that there is both discontinuity and continuity)" (Chambers 63), while still surpassing conjunction or punctuation?

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.

20 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,

21

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.

22 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