

Reader Response



On the Merge of Writing and Theory

Linda Brodkey

I read interviews with writers because I love writers. Having said that, I don't so much expect to learn about writing from these interviews as to find out what writers talk about when they talk about writing. Of course, what writers mainly talk about is being writers. They have learned to talk the talk, so to speak, and those who write long enough (and are read widely enough) effectively become the talk on writers. Judging by Diane Davis' recent *JAC* interview with Avital Ronell, who is by my account a writer's writer, a postmodernist writer can talk about herself in terms that accept what modernist writers deny—namely, that while writers may be chosen, they also audition for the part. In other words, writers, like actors, work at being discovered.

It is the harrowing merger of modernist and postmodernist talk about writers that fascinates me, for like the merger of two crowded freeways, the danger of the treacherous stretch known colloquially—and inaccurately—in California as a “merge” is that drivers are on neither one highway nor the other. They are on a merge. A merge is far from harmonious for merging drivers; they must perilously insert themselves into the flow of traffic composed of other drivers who are insensible to the problems of merging—at least that's how it's done in California. To make matters worse, even as we curse those studiously oblivious drivers, we cannot but realize that the enemy we see is (or soon will be) us.

But once on the freeway, we will forget. I think driving a merge is very like the intellectual negotiation of the terms *modernism* and *postmodernism*, or *structuralism* and *poststructuralism*, or *humanism* and *posthumanism*. “Post” terms are not meant to mark temporal progress; they are not, that is, analogues of before and after pictures of elective surgery. They are,

instead, efforts to track changing intellectual locations in the same frame.

Among other things, Ronell gives many answers to Davis' question, "So who is writing when something gets written? Or, more specifically, to what extent are you the author of the books published under the name Avital Ronell?" In the first instance, Ronell responds with the same cunning as many a high modernist before her: "One is body-snatched, in a trance, haunted. Or, one is on assignment. I use that sense of being on assignment or assigned something to emphasize how I am 'called' to writing" (259). What could be more modernist than insisting—along with the great writers of the tradition such as Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka—that one does not choose but is chosen to write. Yet, in the next moment, unlike a modernist (high or low) she insists: "At the same time, I am not trying to unload my responsibility here. It is not as though I can say that it comes from elsewhere or that I am merely a zombie for another articulation and therefore that I am in bondage absolutely." And since writing does not have her in a choke hold, the postmodern, poststructuralist, posthumanist writer that is Ronell can then go on to say, "I must still assume the position of a signator because I become responsible to respond to this thing that I am transcribing, assigned to, haunted by. So we're talking about assuming responsibility as a signator, with a signature, but without taking credit." As it turns out, she does and doesn't mean by "credit" all that she might. She doesn't mean, for instance, that she returns her royalty checks. What she does mean is this: "I am always indebted to others. I am always part of a circuitry that speaks through me, writes on me, uses me, and certainly uses my body, which has been 'fragilized' and has had to endure quite a bit of suffering in order to allow me to respond to my debt: a matter of my allowance" (260).

This is a postmodernist, poststructuralist writer in the throes of the concurrent forces of what both Ronell and Davis prefer to call "posthumanism." To some extent, however, Ronell is speaking of the practical concerns of a writer who has also been changed by theory. Not all theorists are as plagued by writing as Ronell is, for theorists need not concern themselves with whether they are also writers. In fact, Ronell reminds us that Kant renounces good writing in favor of what she calls "butch" writing (263). Theory is theory; writing is writing. But Ronell is on the merge of writing and theory. She refers to herself in humanist terms as the amanuensis of her writing, the "secretary of the phantom" who transcribes the familiar "solitary, inexhaustible, sovereign" text of literary modernism. At the same time, she presents her writer-self as a posthumanist "switchboard operator" who is presumably both in

and out of control (as is Lily Tomlin's Ernestine?) (251). I think it fair to say that she is on a perpetual merge.

More important than any figure invoked in the interview, however, is the postmodern, poststructural, posthuman notion of stupidity. In addition to being the title of her forthcoming book, stupidity is one of the concepts that Ronell works hardest to explain, and that effort is what kept me enthralled while reading the interview. Since first realizing that Foucault literally meant to forgo the "knowing subject" of the Enlightenment, I have attempted to construct some viable place for myself as a scholar and teacher. That composition is a field of study rather than one of the nineteenth-century human sciences—such as anthropology or psychology or even medicine—that Foucault singles out for criticism has made it both easier and harder than I had imagined to see myself as an expert. On the one hand, what I "know" about writing and writing pedagogy is (excuse the pun) always subject to change. There is always the hope that the next time I'll do it better, not worse. On the other hand, it would be considerably easier to defend against the common sense certainty with which some of my colleagues make pronouncements on the abysmal state of undergraduate writing were I able to assume the posture, if not the authority, of an expert.

Following Gilles Deleuze's call for "the future necessity of reading stupidity," Ronell tries not only to interrogate what she terms "transcendental stupidity," but also to ask "local" questions. Thus, in addition to wondering "What does a generalized dimwittedness, a diminished sensibility, imply for ethics?" she asks, "Who are the secret beneficiaries of stupidity's hegemony?" At the same time, she reminds readers that in Marx "stupidity is third in terms of what determines historical world power": first economy, then violence, then stupidity (262). Since reading the interview, I've become preoccupied with local questions because the circumstances of my employment have invariably raised stupid questions about the people, who for good reason or bad, claim to be entailed by composition.

Since students are usually required to take composition courses no matter how well or badly taught, they may on first glance be the only group who can't be said to benefit from the hegemony of stupidity. Bearing in mind that the stupid question is about *secret* beneficiaries, however, I include students (who are a group only in our minds) on a long list of suspects that includes as secret beneficiaries those folks who either claim or agree that students can't write, even those who teach and take composition courses. Many students who took Advanced Placement

English classes in high school, for instance, say that college composition courses are stupid. I include these students as secret beneficiaries not because I actually believe they benefit from the kind of institutional stupidity that reduces writing to what a corporation can test, but because many of them have a stake in believing that writing cannot be taught. Furthermore, it is at least arguable that the entire upper middle class has a stake in believing that writing is largely a matter of ability rather than class, for such a belief justifies the continued inequitable distribution of instructional resources along lines of class, race, and gender.

After Susan Miller's *Textual Carnivals*, it is difficult to argue that composition teachers and their immediate colleagues in literary studies are *secret* beneficiaries of stupidity. They are, instead, the known beneficiaries. Even so, I wonder whether composition scholars are not secret legatees of stupidity, particularly the prevalence of common sense about writing among colleagues and other educated folks. What Ronell's position on stupidity suggests is not why people are so stupid but what people get for being stupid. The transvaluation of stupidity is valuable inasmuch as it is at least arguable that everyone who can already write (at least write well enough to survive in their respective fields) benefits, since it really only matters to marginalized people that an institution is stupid about writing and the teaching of writing. It only matters, that is, if you need a good writing teacher.

It is one thing to say that everyone in the field is implicated, and yet another to recognize oneself in a lineup of the usual suspects. Most students at my university probably do well with graduate student teachers. But graduate student teachers are not expected to know much about either writing or pedagogy. If it is not apparent each new school year as we begin again and prepare new instructors to teach composition, the paucity of their knowledge and experience becomes painfully obvious whenever graduate student teachers encounter students with little experience of spoken or written English. It becomes obvious, that is, when a student needs, if not an expert, then someone whose knowledge of writing and language exceeds what a graduate student learns about in program orientations and seminars. In fact, programs such as the one I direct (and there are many such programs in the country) are only prepared to teach college writing to the subset of students who already know how to take and pass writing courses taught by relatively uninformed graduate students at my university.

This is not an indictment of graduate student teachers. It goes without saying (or should), however, that both I myself (someone who is well paid

to direct a writing program) and my graduate students (however paltry their pay) are together secret beneficiaries of the institutional stupidity that insists on staffing required writing courses with unqualified instructors. I am not only better paid but also better qualified than graduate student teachers to address students outside as well as inside the subset, but we all have at least an economic stake—and perhaps an intellectual stake—in remaining stupid. I am reminded of a kind of pedagogical complacency that has beset me over the years whenever a graduate student teacher points out that he or she is overwhelmed—that is, unable to analyze the effect of a first language on a student's written text; unable to design courses that privilege student writing over published writing. I am reminded that there was a time when I too worried less about the students who didn't need teachers and more about those who did—that is, less about those who probably would have learned how to write college-level prose without instruction and more about those who probably would not.

By Ronell's reckoning, Sharon Crowley has probably asked the stupidest question of anyone in the field: whether we should require composition courses. That her question seems to strike nearly everyone dumb is probably evidence that it's a good question. Moreover, in light of Ronell's position on stupidity, I cannot but ask how it benefits the field of composition for me to staff required courses year after year with teachers who do not even claim to know anything in particular about writing pedagogy. This is not to say that some of these graduate students do not become extraordinary writing teachers; but many do not. Such hiring practices do, however, artificially inflate the number of practitioners and hence the viability of the field locally and nationally. Yet, I am wondering if sooner or later, these hiring practices do not warrant limiting the enrollment of entering students to those who already know or can soon learn how to take courses from teachers who don't know much about teaching writing.

I ask some of these stupid questions in response to the *JAC* interview with Avital Ronell not because she is interested in writing pedagogy. She is not. But I share her interest in writers. The writers that interest her are the modernists, such as Kafka, or those who are in conversation with them. Ronell reminded me, however, that the writers who interest me are increasingly absent not only from my classes but also from my university: they are casualties of anti-affirmative action initiatives in California and a technology boom that has enriched a fraction of Californians at the expense of the many who are expected to serve them. That is, I am

wondering how soon most other institutions will decide that if you can't learn to write college-level prose from a graduate student then you simply don't belong in school.

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Works Cited

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Parallel Lives/Speaking in Tongues

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Diane Davis' interview with Avital Ronell artfully draws out this eccentric philosopher on many subjects of great interest to teachers and scholars in rhetoric and composition, and Ronell's responses use familiar words (*writing* and *pedagogy*) on familiar subjects (telephones, television, and drugs). Yet, while reading the interview, I constantly had to remind myself that Ronell doesn't really use words in the ways that I use them. Recognizing myself as someone operating within a different theoretical paradigm, and at the same time fascinated by Ronell's work, I think of response in terms of translation.

Reading this interview made me imagine sitting beside someone else who is also reading the interview, someone who is a writing teacher and maybe a scholar, an intellectually curious professional but one who hasn't read Heidegger or even much of the deconstructionist writing that has become more accessible to compositionists lately. Or, this imaginary companion is a feminist of the liberal persuasion—someone who uses the word "woman" without quotation marks around it. I want this person to find . . . what? a toehold? a point of entry? No, these figures cast "Ronell"

as a mountain to be climbed or a body to be entered. Not understanding the conversation well myself, I nonetheless have a desire to enter into its spirit—to find some way not only to hear but to listen actively to the murmuring of the text—and to translate that desire, if not its realization, to this imaginary reader who occupies the space beside me. Ronell gives me a figure to use in this attempt: the detective on the prowl, looking for traces and clues ("Confessions" 253).

The demand for intelligibility is a reactionary demand, says Ronell (273). Yes, I agree that this can be the case. We've seen this reaction in composition studies as some berate others for using theoretical language, when the deeper objection is to the demand to look again at the writing class as a place where distributions of power can be observed, a place where language plays its own games behind our backs. The demand for intelligibility is levied in the interest of protecting a world one already understands, of fending off a threatening newness. There is another kind of understanding, though: one strived for in the interest of some common good. This striving would not be conducted in the interest of a community in which everyone has already been given "assigned places and determinations," but a place inhabited by many, by differences—not only by the (abstracted, philosophical) Other (268). Catherine Clément speaks of this kind of rhetoric as democratic transmission, challenging Hélène Cixous on the unintelligibility of new feminine writing. The question could be shaped in these terms: "Who will be allowed into that place of the Other? Who will hear the offer clearly enough to imagine entering?"

Davis' question about commonplaces addresses this phenomenon most directly and productively (270). Davis forges a link between a rhetorical tradition based in Aristotelian *topoi* and Ronell's attempt to wander into a rhetorical ectopia: a place outside, a nonplace. When Ronell replies that she bases her work in the most common of "places," we get a sense of the task of a critical or radical rhetoric, or perhaps of any rhetorical persuasion: to move from the common understanding to a refigured one. I say potáto, you say potato, but let's not call the whole thing off. Let's figure out what's going on in the space between the two pronunciations.

Ronell describes her work with rhetoric as a tracking of "something like a rhetorical unconscious in a text," a linguistic force that "works against normative semantics" (249). This project fits well with the aims of those in rhetoric who wish to disturb the easy, commonsensical but dangerous uses of language by students, business executives, media, and politicians—language that seems comforting but covers over a morass of