Confessions of an Anacoluthon: Avital Ronell on Writing, Technology, Pedagogy, Politics

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In the introduction to a special issue of *diacritics* devoted to the work of Avital Ronell, Jonathan Culler writes that “her books are like no others”; that her sentences “startle, irritate, illuminate”; and that her work constitutes “one of the most remarkable critical oeuvres of our era.” Ronell’s writing is remarkable, in part, because of the unusual connections it makes, its determination to blur the distinctions between big thought and small talk, philosophy and rumor, literature and headline news—to blur, that is, the very divisions through which academia sustains itself. But Ronell’s work is also remarkable in its style: her writing is characteristically tough, double entendre intended. It’s difficult (because of its enormous scope and depth), and it’s also gutsy, rough, edgy, and pushy, with a sort of streetwise candor. Indeed, Ronell herself identifies a kind of “class struggle” going down in her texts, a struggle involving her own various compulsions, denials, and voices—including the “little hoodlum,” the “high philosophical graduate student,” and the “more sophisticated Parisian.” Ronell notes, however, that the most discernible and continuous voice in her texts belongs to the “wise-ass girl,” an ancestor of the “buffo” and every bit an anacoluthon out to disrupt the “smooth logic of accepted meaning or signification.” This interruptive force—inasmuch as it does indeed “startle, irritate, illuminate”—takes a certain swipe at certitude, prompting rigorous hesitations that open the conditions of possibility for what Ronell’s works are always after: an ethics of decision in a postfoundational whirl(d).

Ronell’s rigorously deconstructive rereadings of everything—from the telephone, the television, and virtual reality to the Gulf War, AIDS, and *Madame Bovary*—take up that which has been “marginalized, minoritized, evicted, persecuted, left out of the picture . . . feminized.” Operating in the mode of “irreverent reverence” and in the service of a posthumanist ethical imperative, Ronell sets out to “secure the space of academe as a sheltering place of unconditional hospitality for dissidence."
and insurrection, refutation and un-domesticatable explosions of thought.” That is, she takes on the role of gracious host to anything that must be evicted/evacuated for a discourse of mastery and certitude to sustain itself. And why host such a radical party/text? Because it’s within the space of certitude’s withdrawal that the possibility for what she calls “responsible responsiveness” becomes available: the possibility, that is, for an ethics of decision after the so-called “death” of the humanist subject.¹

If the intentionality and autonomy that define egological forms of subjectivity were ever adequate grounds for conceiving of responsibility, they certainly are inadequate now. What could be more irresponsible today than a “responsibility” that bases itself on a self-conscious subject in complete control of itself? Ronell’s work attempts therefore to re-describe responsibility from a postfoundational, posthumanist perspective that recognizes that the subject who acts is always, in advance, under the influence of something/someone, that there is a fundamental structure of dependency that precedes both desire and will. This view, of course, in no way releases the subject from the imperative to respond responsibly; if anything, it ups the ante of this imperative. Inasmuch as all transcendental navigation systems are down and one can no longer presume simply to be guided (by Truth, by the Word), “decisions have to be made.” No decision, strictly speaking, is possible, as Ronell reminds us in Crack Wars, “without the experience of the undecidable.” So Ronell’s work—whatever the topic/issue under discussion—functions simultaneously as an interruption of certitude and as an attempt to trace out an ethics of decision for a postfoundational age.

Significantly, Ronell suggests that there is no way to separate questions of responsibility from questions about the subject’s affiliation with language. She therefore frequently addresses writing and rhetoric directly and ends up complicating, among other things, the relations among rhetoric’s fundamental elements: the writer, the reader, the message. Indeed, Ronell suggests that the “message” (the work, the writing) “murmurs incessantly” and has a tendency to take off on its own, quite oblivious to the conscious intentions or desires of the one who writes and the one who reads. And this implies, she says, the necessity to rethink the place, which is never stable, of both the writer and the reader.

For Ronell, writing is never simply a vehicle for ideas; nor is it, as some expressivists say, a manifestation of one’s inner Self. Rather, Ronell compares the activity/passivity of writing to drugging, inasmuch as both involve a kind of dispossession, a mode of departing that’s never quite
sure where it’s headed. To a certain degree, she says, to write is to be “body snatched”; and, in fact, Ronell’s work is packed with images of “somatic abjection,” with images of the writer’s body being taken over by writing, “overwritten,” “hijacked,” used and even abused by writing’s expropriating force. According to Ronell—who on this point is very much in the tradition of Heidegger, Derrida, and Lyotard—the writer is in the position of responding to an ethical summons and not the reverse: the writer, first of all, receives, writing only inasmuch as she or he already has been written. And this reception, which is neither strictly passive nor strictly active, is often debilitating, abjectifying, alienating—that is, it does not occur without a (physical) price. In stark contrast to romantic images of the writer as an autonomous and heroic thinker or creator, Ronell suggests that the writer is always caught up in a network of other voices and is, in fact, a little monstrous and shameful, “fragilized” in some ways and akin to the likes of Gregor Samsa, Kafka’s enigmatic little nonfigure who is a “fright for his family and workplace” and who must remain locked in his room “under house arrest.”

Such is the scene of writing, which necessarily involves an extreme surrender, an abandonment to one’s own abandonment. According to Ronell, this is also the scene of reading: inasmuch as the reader accompanies the writer to the “nonplace of writing,” he or she experiences the “infiniteness” of his or her own abandonment. When really reading, Ronell insists, “you will set aside your work, ignore the empirical accidents that harass your being like imperatives of life. You will not answer your phone; this other call will summon you, softly and deliberately” (Finitude’s Score). In reading, as in writing, you respond to this page, you surrender, you allow yourself to be hijacked—not by the author but by the writing, which transports you into an “ectopia of all ‘proper’ places” and hurls you into an encounter with your own nonidentity. The ek-stasy of reading, like that of writing, very often involves an element of bodily abjection, and this prompts Ronell, in the introduction to Finitude’s Score, to offer the reader some cautionary advice: “don’t hesitate to interrupt your reading (don’t forget to eat).”

Of course, this caution would seem a bit ridiculous, inappropriate, and unnecessary to anyone still harboring a residual allegiance to another sort of writing, one that gestures toward “true manifestation or disclosure,” one that masquerades as the product of an Author-in-charge. But, according to Ronell, this writing—writing as the harnessing of language for the making-manifest of reality—can be safely declared dead. What remains interesting about it now is that it was never not dead and that it has never
stopped dying, which implies a “complicated itinerary of finitude,” one that leads her, in *Finitude’s Score*, to state that she is “writing for writing because it died.” Writing, Ronell says, like the Father in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, is even more powerful, even more alive in its death. The writer, the one “convoked” by writing, collaborates with writing’s lively remains, putting into play another, non-referential sort of inscription—what Ronell, in *Crack Wars*, calls a “writing on the loose”—which consistently points up its own mirage-effect, exposing the catachrestic “nature” of each element in the “rhetorical situation.” In Ronell’s thoroughly postfoundational work, the writer is not the “author” or the “thinker” or the “poet” but merely a singular voice ventriloquizing, taking dictation from language itself.

And yet, the fact that one is taken hostage, abducted by writing’s force, Ronell insists, does not release one from the responsibility that writing entails. The one who writes, who is called by writing, must respond responsibly to the work that one “transcribes”—that one is “assigned to, haunted by.” One must, that is, assume responsibility for it as a signator—with a signature—but without presuming to take credit for the work itself. This is the politics of writing that Ronell enacts: to assume responsibility for her work and yet perpetually to acknowledge her debt to the Other and to others, to the “circuit that speaks through [her].” The extent to which she embraces this ethic is evidenced in her responses to several of the questions in this interview, most notably to the last question, which offered her the opportunity to address any misunderstandings about her work. Though she was touched by the gesture and appreciated the kind of “rescue mission” it entailed, she declined to assume a posture of authority about her texts, declined to step into the “control tower” that would presume to “land the right reading,” noting only that it’s not “her place” to do so. She insists that it is not she who takes risks but that “language is risk-taking and risk-making.” So, in writing, Ronell surrenders to these risks, signs her name to them, and then refrains from trying to control their effects. As she puts it: “A text’s got to do what a text’s got to do.”

This unsettling of the author(ity) function is one manifestation of Ronell’s larger ethic, which has to do with a general “humbling and destabilizing” of the *sujet supposé savoir*, of the subject who is supposed to know. If the typical presumption is that there is a subject who decides, an “action hero” in control of technology, of writing, even of the possibility of slipping into addiction or stupidity, Ronell’s work points out the ways in which the subject is always already a function of other
functions—always already a product of technology, of writing, of an
originarily addictive structuring, and, yes, of a kind of transcendental
stupidity. Although philosophy has slammed the door on a thinking of
stupidity by containing it within the epistemology of “error,” Ronell
locates all “knowing” within an originary arena of not being able to know,
all “intelligence” within an overarching dome of stupidity. Proposing the
sujet ne supposé pas savoir (the subject not supposed to know and who
doesn’t suppose it knows), Ronell explores the possibility of a mode of
ethics and activism that begins with “I’m not sure I know,” that begins, in
fact, with the humbling utterance: “I am stupid before the other.”

To begin by affirming the irony of understanding—which says that
“the only knowledge we could have is that we have not understood
[fully]”—implies an/other kind of political commitment. This move is
important. For Ronell, it does not imply the end of politics but rather an/other (ethico-)politics altogether. This other politics would not, of course,
pretend that horrific acts of violence and terror cannot be understood in
a certain way; but it would, nevertheless, recognize that “such decisions
as ethnocide, genocide, murder” are based on the presumption that one
has understood fully—are based, that is, on the tyranny of an “understanding
that does not doubt or question itself.” So the stakes of this other
politics are high; they involve the possibility for community itself, for
being-together-in-the-world. “A true ethics of community,” Ronell writes
in “Activist Supplement,” “would have to locate a passivity beyond
passivity—a space of repose and reflection, a space that would let the
other come.” Ronell suggests that rather than presuming, arrogantly, that
we know what community is and that it is ours to build, we might instead
affirm a mode of “radical passivity” that would allow it to come; we might,
that is, embrace a mode of “absolute and unconditional hospitality,” a
mode that would “allow and allow and allow. . . .”

Q. You’ve had a great deal to say about “the writer” and “writing,” and
because what you’ve said problematizes both concepts, it’ll be impor
tant for us to tease them through very carefully. Do you consider
yourself a “writer”?
A. In a certain way that question might be too masculinist for me because
it suggests some kind of volition, agency, control at the wheel of
fortuna or destiny. I would say that I have figured myself as a kind of
secretary of the phantom. I take dictation. I would say also that one
doesn’t call oneself a writer: one is called, or one is convoked to writing in a way that remains mysterious and enigmatic for me. There was nothing that was going to determine this kind of activity or passivity—we still have to determine what writing is, of course. But sometimes I can, in a way, identify with the figures of “writing being” (Schriftstellersein) that Kafka threw up. For example, that of Gregor Samsa, who is this little unfigurable, monstrous fright for his family and workplace, and who has to stay in his room, kind of locked up, flying on the ceiling and attached to the desk. There is a figure with which I have repeatedly identified—which is to say, there’s something monstrous and a little shameful involved in writing, at least in terms of social pragmatics. This sort of logic of the parasite is probably eventually why I wrote about the drug addict and the writer as figures, often paradoxically, of social unreliability, even where their greatest detachment produces minor insurrections, political stalls, and stammers in any apparatus of social justice.

Q. In the introductory remarks to the interview you did with Andrea Juno in Research: Angry Women, you are referred to as an “ivory-tower terrorist.” Are you comfortable with that label? Does it seem accurate?

A. These are questions about naming and location, and in this regard neither term is acceptable. The ivory tower is something that I have never been embraced by, or possibly even seen; it is a phantasm. And “terrorist” would imply a kind of being that is single-minded and fanatically set on a goal. By contrast, I would be too dispersed, self-retracting, and self-annulling in the way I work to be considered a terrorist as such. If anything, I would say that I am a counterterrorist. It is true that I have called for something like an extremist writing. And also I have made hyperbolic attempts to secure the space of academe as a sheltering place of unconditional hospitality for dissidence and insurrection, refutation and un-domesticatable explosions of thought. To the extent that the academy is a mausoleum, it tends to expect the reverence due the dead, and my irreverent type of reverence seems to set off, in those describing what I do, some explosive language. But I would also say, in a more general and gendered sense, that very often women who have a somewhat original bent are institutionally psychoticized and isolated. They tend to be structurally positioned as dangerous creatures, so there is always a SWAT team of academic proprietors closing in on them. In this sense, I can see how the “terrorist” appellation might have grown on me or been pinned on me. But it comes from the institutional space and not from me. I was tagged.
There’s also this: While I was at Berkeley, I was close friends with Kathy Acker and Andrea Juno. *Mondo 2000* declared us the “deviant boss girls of a new scene,” models of subversion, and so on. That little community may have provoked some politicized assertions, marking the way the three of us would stage ourselves publicly and kick ass in a certain way. In this regard, I think one would want to look more closely at the possibility or impossibility of friendship in academia, and what it implies. Who are your friends? How does friendship set up (or subvert) a transmission system for the kind of work you do and read? One is often judged by one’s public friendships. I was friends with Kathy and Andrea. And I think there was something scary about this little girl gang of troublemaker writers. Certainly, publishing with *Angry Women* did do momentary damage; it dented my career a bit—though it is laughable to offer up an imago of my career as a smooth surface to be dented. It was never not dented: one originary dent.

Q. What kind of damage did it do?
A. Well, I think colleagues were a little shocked to see me involved with performance artists, recontextualized and reformatted in the space of very angry, very outrageous, shit-covered, dildo-wielding, multi-sexual women. I think there was a gender-genre crossing that probably seemed a little excessive.

Q. Did you have tenure yet?
A. Yes I did.

Q. It's not unusual for you to refer to rhetorical operations in your work or to slip into your own rigorous rhetorical analysis. “Support Our Tropes,” for example, offers a clever analysis of the rhetoric surrounding the Gulf War. Do you consider yourself, in any sense, a rhetorician?
A. First of all, I recognize that this is not a stable appellation; to the extent that rhetoric is a feature of language, one is kind of overwritten by it. I don’t see how one could not be inscribed in the rhetorical scene. But, of course, on a more technical and thematic level, I am very attentive to rhetorical maneuvers on different registers of articulation. I tend to try and track something like a rhetorical unconscious in a text. I am very drawn in by that which withdraws from immediate promises of transparency or meaning. For example, I am interested in “anasemia,” which is a linguistic force, elaborated by post-Freudian psychoanalysis, that works against normative semantics. I am interested in tracking repressed signifiers, including the relationships between syntactical breakdowns and political decisions. I wrote an essay, for instance, about George Bush’s inability to produce rhetorically stable utter-
rances, an essay in which I tried to read his rhetorical machine as inexorably linked to the specific kinds of decisions he made and to the reactionary and reactive effects of his administration. Of course, every utterance is susceptible to destabilization, making the itinerary of the question considerably more complicated.

I have been heavily influenced by Paul de Man’s work in this area, which leads me to say that one can never be detached from the rhetorical question or from the necessity of a whole politics and history of rhetorical thought, which has been largely repressed, or expelled, or embraced, depending on where you are looking and to whom you are listening. So, indeed, if one is trying to be a rigorous and attentive reader, one has to consider oneself a rhetorician in those senses.

Q. When it first appeared in 1989, the layout and design of *The Telephone Book* were, as far as I can tell, unprecedented in academe. The design of Jacques Derrida’s *Glas* is also staggeringly unconventional, of course; but whereas the simultaneous, multivoiced columns of *Glas* challenge print’s linear imperative, *The Telephone Book* seems to break more rules and to be more playfully performative on the whole. An incredibly dense theoretical work that addresses some quite somber issues (for example, Heidegger’s Nazism), it also seems gleefully irreverent, taking Nietzsche’s merry hammer to all kinds of conventional expectations associated with the technology of “the book.” What prompted this performative text? That is, why write what wanted to be said in this particular way? What did you hope its performance would accomplish?

A. It’s important to note that *Glas* appeared much earlier and has another history of rupture and invention that still calls for analysis. We are all indebted to Derrida’s exegetical energy for boosting the desire for the book and for making us interrogate the placid materiality of acts of reading. On another level of your questioning, I would like to recall that all texts are performative. But what I was trying to get at with *The Telephone Book* was the possibility of destroying the book in the Heideggerian sense of accomplishing a certain destruction of its metaphysical folds, enclosures, and assumptions. On the sheerly material level, it provided the first computer virtuoso performance in design. Every page was different, an interpretation of the text. And often I did argue with Richard Eckersley, the marvelous designer, because I felt that he was pulling away from the telephonic logic that I wanted his work to reflect and that he was becoming too autonomous—becoming a computer virtuoso. I didn’t want the computer to
overtake the telephonic markings that I felt needed to be continually asserted and reasserted. In a sense, we had a war of technologies—of course, over the telephone (I have never met Richard). What I wanted to effect by producing this telephonic logic that would supplant or subvert the book was to displace authorial sovereignty, to mark my place as taking calls or enacting the Heideggerian structure of the call. In other words, I wanted to recede into the place of a switchboard operator, and in that sense emphatically to mark the feminine problematic of receptivity and the place of reception. I was at the reception desk of that which we still call a book, taking the call of the other.

What I wanted to do as well by breaking up the serene, sovereign space of an unperturbed book was to invite static and disruption and noise. I wanted to show—to the extent that one can show this—that the text emerges in a kind of violence of originary interference, a kind of primal buzz. I wanted to inscribe the kinds of wreckage to signification that aren’t usually accounted for. And this could be seen as belonging to a kind of post-feminist ethics, too. There is a great logic of disturbance that rattles the text. It doesn’t offer the illusion of being from that professorial space of quiet and support and cocooned sheltering. The great male professor seems to me to be served by anything from the wife function to the institutional function. But I wanted this text to be somehow reflective of women’s position, of the attempt to write in an institutional war zone, and this included being rattled and taking calls that are not predictable in their arrival, that jam the master codes and jam the switchboard, ever expelling you from the safe precincts of the imagined contemplative life.

When I was at Berkeley and writing this book, whenever someone would ask me what I was working on, I endured a lot of mockery, so I stopped trying to present it. This book was the first theoretical or deconstructive work on technology, and the telephone seemed like an aberrant, abjected object. Why would anyone write on anything so common, absurd, banal, unliterary, or anti-philosophical? Even my colleagues who were historians thought it a preposterous project. Obviously, literary critics didn’t see any point to it at all, and the philosophers I hung out with didn’t necessarily get it either. There was something that had to remain stealthy and unannounceable about writing on the telephone.

What prompted the project was the surprise that I experienced when I read the interview in which Heidegger was asked to describe the nature of his relationship with National Socialism, and he said he didn’t
really have a relationship, all he did was take a call from the SA storm trooper. This response appeared to me to be an improbable statement—one, in fact, that might offer an access code, since Heidegger is the thinker par excellence of the call, of the difficult and necessary status of calling. And he is also the one to have pointed to the dangers of technology. He is the one—no matter what one thinks of him, and no matter how one thinks one can evaluate him, his lapses and the ways he has been disappointing (but which philosopher finally hasn’t been?). Heidegger certainly is a redneck in many ways and highly problematic as mortals go, but what interested me was this response, which is a very compelling response and non-response at once. If I had been the thinker of the call and had made the call on technology, warning that we live under its dominion in yet undecipherable ways, then I would be clearly codifying my response. I thought he was providing an access code to a truer reading. I went after it.

And that is what prompted me to look to the telephone and to think about its place (or nonplace) or repressed functions in thinking. My question was how you would write the history of a non-relation, which is what Heidegger was asserting. There was a crucial non-relation. It has a history. It's called the telephone. It appeared to require a kind of inclination toward a subterranean history. I asked: What is this place of non-disclosure that doesn’t allow for delusions of transparency or immediacy? This non-disclosure in part is why I felt that the book needed to bear the burden of that which resists signification, resists the serene certitudes of reportage or information gathering or knowledge naming that a good many academic books rely upon. I wanted it to come out with a university press because I felt that frame would rattle some cages. There are presumably many advantages to going with a trade or commercial press, but I thought that it had to reside within the university structure, that it actually would do more damage or stir up more trouble if it were to be contained by a university press. By the way, one of my motivating slogans is that a woman should be

Q. Your work seems consciously to muck with genre boundaries, to operate in the face of inherited borders of thought. Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania, for instance, falls into the genre of literary criticism: it is an analysis of Madame Bovary. But Crack Wars also operates very explicitly as a piece of fiction and, simultaneously, as a history and critique of drug culture and the “war on drugs.” Do you set out to break up genres, to force them to collide? Or is it more that
you ignore genre boundaries because they don’t work for you?
A. I’m keenly aware of the histories and presumptions of that with which I am breaking. Above all, I am a scholar working the German side of things. As for the stability of genres, their boundaries are not as secure as one would think. I am working within a lineage that these genres already prescribe. There is a great insecurity about their limits, and I do try to work at those limits. The history of genre is highly domesticated and meant to suppress anxiety about possible contamination and violation. I am negotiating with what genres know about themselves, which is to say that they can easily collapse, that the border patrol might be dozing off, taking a cigarette break, and then something else occurs that could not have been predicted. I will use a given genre’s pretexts and inroads and histories voraciously, but then I’ll also invite, in a mood of great hospitality, certain marginalized genres to participate in the “literary critical” move on a text. I work with crime story and drama, and also poetry at some point. In this sense, I am Deleuzean since Gilles Deleuze has called for writing philosophical works in the form of a crime story, zooming in on a local presence and resolving a case. In this connection, I’ve been very interested in the difference Freud asserts between police work and detective work. (He says sometimes you have to arrest a symptom arbitrarily just to get the analysand to advance in a certain way.) As we know from thematic reflections on the latter, very often the detective has to turn in the badge and assume a different rapport with the truth. This involves solitary tracking. Often one is outcast. Certainly, the figure of the detective is something that fascinates me. Nowadays, of course, we have lesbian detectives on the prowl, looking for some kind of disclosure or going after traces and clues—which is, after all, the position one necessarily finds oneself in when one is engaged in reading.

Q. In the preface to Finitude’s Score, you suggest that “electronic culture” signals for you a kind of “prosthetic écriture” that puts “writing under erasure”; and a few lines later, you make the rather startling statement that you’re “writing for writing because it died.” Would you elaborate on that a bit? Are you suggesting two different senses of “writing”?
A. That is a very astute observation on your part. Obviously, since Plato all writing has been linked to techné, so what I am getting at is a regional difference. Writing was always prosthetic and consistently viewed as a dangerous supplement, as Derrida says. But you’re right because there are boundaries and differences to be accounted for. And the kind of writing, I would say, that is associated with imminence and transcen-
dence can no longer be affirmed innocently, as if writing could be capable of true manifestation or disclosure, linked at this point to a kind of transcendental being. Writing is no longer in that kind of association with a privileged locus. The demotion of writing's claims has been thematized by so many writers and observed by so many critics that this project is not, in itself, new. What interests me, though, is the way in which writing has been, in a sense, obsolesced and divested. Of course, one has to be Nietzschean and produce at least two evaluations of that observation because there is something that, despite it all, liberates writing to another realm once its more church- and state-like responsibilities have been suspended. Something else is happening and something else is going on. There is a kind of freedom that writing still says, or tries to say, or can refuse to say. This writing is political, but according to another logic of politics that escapes simple codifications. Nonetheless, writing, in the sense that I have been outlining, with its privilege of transcendence and disclosure, I think can be safely said to have perished, died.

At the same time, what does this mean? Writing never stops dying. There is an endless ending of writing. Psychoanalysis has been declared dead, too, and so has deconstruction, but, as we know, the dead can be very powerful. Freud illustrates or throws this power switch in Totem and Taboo: when the little resentful hordes of brothers get together and kill this powerful father, what they discover is that they are left with remorse and unmanageable haunting and sadness, such that the dead father turns out to be more powerful dead than he ever was alive. He is more alive when he is dead. Thus, to declare writing dead can also, in fact, make it more haunting, more difficult and commanding. It can imply a more pressurized zone of being and a much more intense rapport with that which has died. In making this statement, I'm also aligning myself in some ways with Hölderlin's Diotima: when the philosopher Empedocles commits suicide, Diotima is left behind to read his sandals, which are all that's left of him; they are his remainder. Diotima becomes the reader of this lost foundation or footing that philosophy might have had. Diotima is one exemplary instance of the feminine figure who is left behind as the mourner par excellence and who needs to read the traces and somehow honor them commemorative. We have this figure also, of course, in the crucifixion of one of our gods. To observe that something has died implies a complicated itinerary of finitude, and it can be an infinite finitude that becomes more and more powerful in its withdrawal, precisely because it withdraws.
Q. In *Crack Wars*, you discuss what you call a “genuine writing,” which you hook up with a “‘feminine’ writing in the sense that it is neither phallically aimed nor referentially anchored, but scattered like cinders.” This genuine writer is like the addict, you suggest, inasmuch as neither is capable “of producing real value or stabilizing the truth of a real world,” and inasmuch as both writing and drugging are “linked to a mode of departing, to desocialization . . . without the assurance of arriving anywhere.” In your 1994 *Alt X* interview with Andrew Laurence, you suggest that this section is, to a large degree, a tribute to the work of Hélène Cixous. To what extent can this “genuine” writing be conflated with what goes by the name *écriture féminine*?

A. When I use the word “genuine,” I am already pointing toward a kind of etymological net that involves “genius” or suggests that there is something that can’t be proper or genuine. After all, the code of genius is usually reserved for the metaphysical male subject. So I want to bear in mind the irony of “genuine,” or the genitality of “genuine,” because genuine has to undo itself and dismantle its premises. But what I wanted to underscore when citing this term “genuine” is akin to what I’m underscoring when I use the term “feminine” (and I put them both in quotation marks): that it is not about some recognizably feminine trait. I also use this strategy to rewrite Emma Bovary’s name, “femmanine,” with Emma enacting the femme, and of course with Flaubert being identifiable as Emma, as he himself notes in the famous utterance “Madame Bovary c’est moi.” I wanted to show that the predicament of a woman who wants to write but who has nowhere to go and little to do, and who’s writing for no one, *counts* for something. I say it is the writer’s common lot. The “femmanine” is already there in any kind of writing—lurking, latent, showing that all writing is exposed, unsure of its destination, unable to chart its course, unable to know if it is going anywhere but down. Deleuze has said that writing minoritizes the writer and also sets him or her into the condition, or the flow, of becoming-woman. On some level, this phasing out of oneself is what happens to all who write, or to all who are inclined toward writing or who are written up by writing—even written off by writing. There is no way for you to think, really, that you know to whom you are writing, or that you are going anywhere, or that you are doing anything, in the classical sense of those terms. Emma’s housewifely psychosis, her loser’s sense of having no one to write to, no audience, is to be honored for its particular scenography of abjection, for its critically depressive qualities and properties.
At the same time, doesn't writing turn us all into little housewives who are sitting home all day? Maybe not with rollers on our heads, but in our little house robes and immobilizations. There is something about being under house arrest, about the solitude, the not knowing what the hell you are talking about. . . . There are such moments (I hope I am not the only one outing myself here) that occur when you think, in the most expropriated sense, "what am I doing?" At just that moment, when there is nothing holding you up or bolstering your sense of who you are or what you are doing, right then you can maybe say that you are a "genuine" writer. So, it is according to that kind of paradoxical itinerary, or in that kind of aporetic rapport with writing, that I was trying to place Emma Bovary, who was kind of my girlfriend for awhile because I really dwelled on and with her. And I got very anxious and upset that all these guys—rather prominent lit crit types—that controlled her or understood her and could detach from her general abjection, as though she were simply dismissible and a trash body. Of course, I tried to show to what extent she is a trash body. Through her, Flaubert invents the body of the addict. Nevertheless, there was something I wanted to show about her humbling and alienated domesticity that reflects the writer's common lot. And no matter how objectionable or easily judgeable she might appear to be, Emma Bovary represents what you become one day when you are a so-called "genuine" writer.

Q. Your description of this "genuine" writing in *Finitude's Score* strikes me as very close to certain depictions of hypertext, itself an acclaimed offspring of electronic culture. George Landow, for example, sees hypertext as explicitly performing a kind of postfoundational writing that embraces its own value after the "death" of the author and the crisis in representation. Do you think the medium of hypertext might invite, more explicitly than print, the kind of "genuine" writing you discuss?

A. I am not certain that it does, especially since it is so, I dare say, *masculinist*, in its glee about overcoming masculinist premises about writing. So I have to view it with some suspicion. I think hypertext and many of its theories offer an over-literalized interpretation of its promise and boundaries. At some level one has to deal with the fact it is a mere device that isn't often rigorously deployed. I don't think that what I am trying to work with is dependent on some kind of mechanical shift—and a rather minor mechanical shift, since one could probably demonstrate that the Pre-Socratics, for example, used hypertext. I have never thought positive technologies initiate new modalities of Being or
reflection. Very often these technologies, I have tried to show, respond to some sort of rupture that itself isn’t even entirely new—there isn’t the epistemic, clean-cut or clear new beginning. So I think I would like to propose a far more complicated itinerary, one that couldn’t be reducible to one discovery. Hypertext is more like the Wizard of Oz, right? The figure behind the special effects is hidden behind the curtains, and when we see its ascesis and poverty, we’re a little disappointed. But it is there, and someone manages its presumed arbitrariness. One could certainly complicate what I just said, but essentially it is not so new. Of course, I am very open to discussion on this.

Q. I agree with all you’ve just said, but I think that the conjunction of “writing” and the “device” is a complicated one. Inasmuch as all texts are hypertextual, inasmuch as every word is implicitly a “hot word,” I think hypertext, when rigorously deployed as a medium, more explicitly than print technology exposes one to language’s inherent hypertextuality. Your printed texts seem particularly hypertextual to me; they seem to engage strategies designed to expose their hypertextuality. But print requests that the reader move in a linear fashion from one word to the next word planted there on the page. I think hypertext invites a reader, at the very least, to notice that any word could be—and so, at some level, already operates as—a hot word.

A. I like what you’re saying. It’s inviting and compelling. And I do have to read my own resistance. I had a similar resistance to television, too, until I finally broke down and wrote about television. So I do feel there is a level of resistance that I need to interrogate. And that means I haven’t closed the book on it, so to speak, but that there is something that is not allowing passage for me yet. I am provoked by what you said.

Q. In “Activist Supplement: Papers on the Gulf War,” you warn that the most influential proponents of virtual reality seem invested in propping up “his majesty the ego” and, to that end, describe virtual space as somehow making up for the lack of control we feel in “real life.” Jaron Lanier, as you note, would like to have called virtual reality “intentional reality,” since the latter indicates the sense of mastery over one’s world that VR simulates. But your approach to technology—from the telephone to the television to VR—seems more interested in the way that it makes us, in the way that our technological creations in turn recreate who we humans are and what we can be—a process that ends up challenging the very notion of an ego in charge. Would you, then, characterize your approach to technology as posthumanist?
A. Yes, I certainly would, though I might have to pause and explicate the meaning of “post.” Still, I look to technology to affirm those aspects of posthumanism that are more liberatory and politically challenging to us. As I said, one of my concerns has been with television. Beyond the thematizations of crime, murder, and the production of corpses that don’t need to be mourned, I am very interested in the way television stages and absorbs trauma, the way it puts in crisis our understanding of history and the relation of memory to experience. All of these aspects of the televisual that I have tried to read, as you indicate, presuppose a posthumanist incursion into these fields or presume that a posthumanist incursion has been made by these technological innovations (or philosophemes, as I like to call them). On a terribly somber note, I don’t see how, after Auschwitz, one can be a humanist.

My work has concerned itself with the Nazi state as the first technologically constellated polity as well as with the fact that technology is irremissible. Mary Shelley projected this view of technology with her massive, monumental, commemorative work on the technobody, which was the nameless monster. The problem with (or opening for) technology is that no one is or can stay behind the wheel, finally, and no one is in charge. And the way I have tried to route and circuit the thinking of technology—indeed, in a posthumanist frame—exposes the extent to which it belongs to the domain of testing. This view has little to do with hubristic humanist assumptions. I am interested in the difference between the real and the test, which collapses in a technological field. Every technology will be tested. Moreover, and paradoxically, that means it will not merely be a test. The Gulf War was a major field test; after the war there were trade shows that announced that every weapon had been proven and tested. And so for the military, the Gulf War was a field test—and, as we know, that test cost real lives. But still you can’t say someone decided this or that. There is something about the perpetuation of the technological that involves the figure of testing.

In any case, technology has produced different registers of being, or is reflective of different registers of being, and even our rhetoric of desire has been steadily technologized. We say we’re “turned on,” we’re “turned off,” and so on. We also say we “had a blast,” which indicates a nuclear desire in desire. Nonetheless, there are different protocols of marking experience, and to arrive at some sensible reading of those protocols, one should no longer be tethered irrevocably to humanist delusions—delusions for which I have the greatest respect, of
course. But humanism often functions like a drug that one really ought to get off of in order to be politically responsible. I think it is irresponsible not to be Nietzschean in this sense of risking the greatest indecency, of crossing certain boundaries that have seemed safe and comfortable and are managed at best by general consensus. Posthumanism is not necessarily popular with those who hold the moral scepter at this point. But I think it would be regressive and cowardly to proceed without rigorously interrogating humanist projections and propositions. It would be irresponsible not to go with these irreversible movements, or “revelations of being,” so to speak. That sounds a little irresponsible, too, since it’s a citation of Heidegger. But that’s just it: one is precisely prone to stuttering and stammering as one tries to release oneself from the captivity of very comfortable and accepted types of assignments and speech. An incalculable mix of prudence and daring is called for.

Q. Your approach to writing seems posthumanist, too. Your first book *Dictations: On Haunted Writing* explicitly examines (via the Conversations between Eckermann and Goethe) the possibility of writing after the “death” of the author. You redescribe writing from the angle of the possessed and suggest—let me quote you from the preface—that it “never occurs simply by our own initiative: rather, it sends us. Whether one understands oneself to be lifted by inspiration or dashed by melancholia, quietly moved, controlled by muses or possessed by demons, one has responded to remoter regions of being in that circumstance of nearly transcendental passivity.” To a large extent, then, to write is to be a lip-syncher, to take dictation, as you put it earlier. Writing here seems to require a kind of passivity that is not inactive but that is also not, strictly speaking, active. In *Crack Wars*, you note that when one writes “there are certain things that force [one’s] hand,” a “historical compulsion” that “co-pilots [one’s] every move.” 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?

A. To a very limited extent. As I am speaking, I don’t feel contemporaneous with the one who writes because, as we discussed earlier, writing is a depropriative act; it always comes from elsewhere. 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. I don’t know how to locate its necessity. And one doesn’t know where the imperative comes from. Nevertheless, one is
assigned to it, so that one is always writing at the behest of the Other. 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 of another articulation and therefore that I am in bondage absolutely. There is some of that, of course, but 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. And that, perhaps, is the politics of writing to which I subscribe—which is not to say that I take credit for it. 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. That is the configuration in which I try at once to name my dispossession, or my possession (I am possessed by the Other), and at the same time to assume responsibility—and yet not suddenly, in absolute, irresponsible contradiction to what I have been trying to say, to take credit for that which traverses me in the work.

Q. Let me quote from the introduction of your forthcoming book, *Stupidity*: “To write is to take a retest every day (even if, brooding, stuck, anguished, you are not empirically writing), to prepare a body, adjust your drive, check in (out of respect) with superego, put ego on sedation, unless you are a total memoir-writing-I-know-myself-and-want-to-share-my-singularity idiot.” I take it that you would not call yourself an “expressivist” in the strictest sense of that term. That is, I take it that you do not think writing expresses a pre-existing inner self?

A. Only in the Bataillean sense, where there is an inner experience that somehow gets “exscribed,” as Jean-Luc Nancy says. Indeed, writing has something to do with a constitutive outside, an exteriority, and cannot express but only invents and produces the fiction, if necessary and if called for, of the inside. You are outside yourself when it happens; you are beside yourself; you are pumped up as a different kind of being—or else you are deflated and defeated. In any case, it’s not a constitutive thing but a performative act.

Q. How, then, would you characterize the relationship among rhetoric’s fundamental elements: the writer, the reader, and the message?

A. Well, understanding the message as the work, I would assume that these fundamental elements are in themselves unstable, sometimes exchangeable or erasable by one another. And I would say that writing
alters these elements, doesn’t leave them in their place, leaves them expropriated and disfigured, unrecognizable. The work—what you are calling the message—in any case seems to let go of the reader and the writer. In other words, I see the work as solitary, inexhaustible, sovereign—it murmurs incessantly. But, of course, according to other hermeneutic appropriations, the reader can also produce, or be productive of the work and is inscribed in the work as its codependent, as that on which the work relies in order to be brought into being. This is one type of reading of Hölderlin: the gods—let’s call them the message or the work or the writing—are dependent on mortals, on the poetic word, in order to be brought into time and existence. So these are different configurations in the fundamental triangulation that you set into motion. But in each case, I would say that the writing, the work, produces a type of disfigurement and distortion that requires us to rethink the place, which is never secured, of writer and reader.

Q. Stupidity traces the question or problem of a kind of transcendental stupidity. Would you talk a bit about this project, both its content and its structure?
A. It was Deleuze who named the future necessity of reading stupidity, and a transcendental stupidity, asking, What are the conditions for the possibility of stupidity? And he said that philosophy hasn’t been able to think stupidity. First of all, because philosophy has been hijacked by epistemological considerations of error, error has derailed the thought of stupidity. As he says, literature has always brought the question of stupidity to the door of philosophy, who slammed that door shut, finding the theme (it is a paraconcept) somehow unworthy. Deleuze suggests that philosophy is haunted by stupidity, which, nonetheless, it won’t consider. There is something about stupidity that is violently resisted by philosophy. That is where I come in: where something has been marginalized, minoritized, evicted, persecuted, left out of the picture, and of course feminized. Certainly, one of the impetuses for reading stupidity is promoted by a kind of post-feminist passion, protesting the way women have been called “stupid bitches” and noting what this might involve, how stupidity became an accusatory force, a devastating demolition of the other. Minorities are considered stupid, women are considered stupid, and so forth. To return to Difference and Repetition, Deleuze says that even the trashiest literature concerns itself with questions of stupidity. And even the most sublime literature is aware of it. In an inverted form, Henry James is very compelled by questions of stupidity and intelligence and of how one can tell them
apart. Stupidity is a very slippery signifier and often turns into its other. It is not the other of thought; it is sometimes, literally, the figure of sheer reflection, proffering something like pure thought. But what interested me above all was located in the poetic act, the passivity of the poet in the extreme inclination toward surrender, the near stupor that characterizes the poetic disposition—the structure of exposure, something that poetry knows about, the extreme and secret experiences of stupidity. In this work, what I am doing, essentially, is appealing to the debilitated subject, the stupid idiot, the puerile, slow-burn destruction of ethical being, which, to my mind, can never be grounded in certitude or education or prescriptive obéissance. There is something about placing the question of responsibility close to the extinction of consciousness that interests me. Against the background of the ethical anxiety that has been expressed in recent years, my question tries to invoke a parallel track that is thematized in so many ways—the platitudes of dumbing down, the dumb and dumber and dumbest. What does a generalized dimwittedness, a diminished sensibility, imply for ethics?

In addition to addressing this kind of transcendental stupidity, which, of course, one needs to ponder and reflect on, I also consider other questions: for instance, “Who are the secret beneficiaries of stupidity’s hegemony?” and “What are the somatizations that occur in stupidity?” For Marx, for instance, stupidity is third in terms of what determines historical world power. In other words, the world is motored by economy, violence, and then stupidity. So these are some of the points I wanted to engage by mobilizing the question and problem of stupidity. In terms of micromanaging one’s own history, I am also very interested in the idiot body and in our relation to our bodies when they are ill, when they collapse. How do we heal them? What do we know? Why is it that the scanners, charts, and medicalizations of the body tend to disappoint us? The rapport with the body is already something mechanical and stupid. I focus on the monthly period, which is a kind of stupid repetition to which women are routinely subjected. So there are different levels and registers of stupidity, a lot of them highly political, beginning with the only time Heidegger used the term stupidity: when he said his relationship to Nazism was his dumbest mistake. There I read what it means for Heidegger to say that he made a stupid mistake or I read the status of such an “excuse” for any justificatory discourse.
Q. What about the structure? I noticed that there was a Wordsworth satellite. Are there more satellites?

A. Yes, there is a Kant satellite, too, which is called “The Figure of the Ridiculous Philosopher; Or, Why I am so Popular.” I include in the book every mainstream “boss,” including Christ, who is depicted by Dostoevsky as being an emanation of sacred stupidity in the figure of the idiot. I also look at the new and improved figure of stupidity sanctified by Christianity in the notion of simplicitas. But the Kant satellite traces or picks up signals from Kant's tortured relation to writing. Kant wrote like a pig, and he talks about it all the time. He is the first philosopher to have wanted to be an author, which is something Jean-Luc Nancy writes about in “Logodaedalus.” What interested me is the way Kant does end up prescribing that a true and good philosopher will be more or less a bad writer and will not indulge in certain forms of wordplay and joyous resignification. For Kant, this decision was an agony and a renunciation. He had to renounce being a beautiful writer, a femme writer, and he becomes totally butch. He is very clear about this: he says I can’t run around in pink ballet slippers, and I can’t have honey—the kind you give to children to get them to drink something that they don’t want to drink, like medicine or aesthetics. Real philosophy has to dispense with and renounce writing, being a beautiful writer, a true author. Of course, he also wanted to be this author that he says he renounced. So he feels he’s in control of it. To the extent that he had to renounce it, it was something that he initiated. In any case, it is a tortured and charming itinerary of anxiety about not being a good writer. Henceforth, philosophy required it; it is the writing requirement for philosophy; that you be a bad writer. Anyone who writes “beautifully,” so to speak, then as now, is stoned, ridiculed, and feminized. This requirement is a Kantian legacy; it’s his bequest. French theory, which writes beautifully—Derrida, Barthes, Foucault are writers—finds itself judged across this legacy. Even in one of the JAC interviews, Chantal Mouffe responds charmingly to the first question, noting that before she got into philosophy and became a bad writer, she had wanted to be a writer. That is a citation of Kant about how ridiculous the philosopher has to make himself or herself in regard to writing. But this pernicious history, which I try to trace, leads to certain dismissive gestures that aren’t fully contextualizable in the necessity of producing a ridiculous philosopher. This history cuts two ways: when someone says Derrida’s work is ridiculous, this accusation is in itself distressing and crazy (and the person probably hasn’t really
read him); nonetheless, this accusation already belongs to a proud history spun out by the Kantian writing imperative.

Q. It struck me as I read the chapters you sent me from this text that you also take a posthumanist approach to stupidity, suggesting, in fact, alongside Roland Barthes, that stupidity is "prior to the formation of the subject"—which would imply that we are a function of it—and that "writing is always an immersion in stupidity." If this is the case, how would you respond to the question, "Why write?" Is there, even still, a connection between writing and responsibility?

A. I warn my students never to ask this kind of question. It's one of those fundamental abyss-openers: Why am I writing? Why do this? Still, as we discussed earlier, there is something that forces your hand. You write maybe even because it is impossible. Or, maybe you write for or because of some other force that is leading you to regions you need to explore, and you don't know what kind of mapping would justify it. But, in this case, we would want to think, with Walter Benjamin, the notion of the task: Aufgabe in German, which includes the word Gabe, or gift—you are gifted—but in the double sense of poison, since in German "gift" is also poison. Essentially, Aufgabe is your task, and within it is aufgeben, to give up. So the task itself, your task, also enjoins you to give up the impossibility, the sublimity, and the inappropriability of it, of the task itself. It's impossible, and yet something about it is so stirring that you nonetheless find yourself moving toward it. There is always a double imperative, and I think we must all feel it when we're writing: the mania and melancholia mix, the cocktail of the extreme, inexplicable joy, and the equal sense of being demolished by its hopelessness.

One of my writing slogans has been, "Who cares?" There you are, struggling in your little space of writing, and you think you have made a discovery (I am beyond that level of discovering), but nonetheless there is that "Oh, who cares?" Still, there is something about a commitment without the delusions of producing meaning or world-shattering disclosures that moves me—a commitment to writing, despite it all, despite fevers, harassment of daily tasks, the need to do other things, and so on. I also think of Beckett's response to that very question because he was considered to edge on nihilism in some ways, and he said, in French slang, bon qu'a çà, which translates roughly as "that is all I am good for. That is all I can do. There is nothing else to do." And it's precisely because there is nothing else to do that you have to write. We need stories, as Bataille once said, and we need to write.
That would be the provisional response to the question, “Why write?” It’s a question, as I said, that I back away from. I don’t have an answer for it. There are moments when I climb the scales of hopefulness; there are other moments when I am Hölderlinean about it, in the sense that he says writing is the most innocent of all mortal exertions. Initially, my decision to commit to writing—and it is a vow, a vow that needs to be renewed—was connected to my need to be innocent in a certain way. And I don’t mean that in a naive sense. But I really felt that anything we do in our present systems of existence is highly contaminated, corporate, compromising, depressing, and so forth. And, of course, writing and publishing must have their share of this kind of conformism, but I think it is minimal, and I try to resist being a conformist in what I sign. So there was something about my commitment to writing that was not at all natural, so to speak; it was a very athletic decision, a decision to “musculate,” to “work out” every day. There is nothing of a natural writer in me. I still consider it rather unnatural to be writing and desocializing. Writing, after all, is strangely allied to illness, to being an invalid. I don’t know if you experience it that way, but one is cut off, one has a different rapport with time. Nonetheless, writing was the way I felt I could sustain and preserve my need for political activism in a way that wasn’t perhaps as deluded as other ways. Everyone does what she or he can, I’m sure, and writing was the way I felt I could be more problematic and more of a dissident than in other ways that are currently allowed. Yet, I never had the choice, even though I say I made the choice to commit to writing. I really couldn’t find a place outside the holding pen of this kind of writing. I might have wanted to work on radio or in different media or in theater—these are other forms of writing, of inscription. At any rate, precisely where there is no utility or support for writing is when I think it has to happen.

Q. In an essay in *Birth to Presence*, Jean-Luc Nancy says that we write to respond to the call of writing itself, and that there is a constant need to keep doing it, since each time you inscribe, you “exscribe” again. So one writes to attend to the call of the exscribed.

A. Yes, but I do think there are many ways to “write.” In fact, when Jean-Luc and I were in California, I had started this thing called Radio Free Theory, and he was very encouraging. In fact, he said if he could do something besides the more conventional forms of writing, he would. I really was committed to this radio program, but it was snuffed out—too subversive, they said.
Q. I haven’t heard about Radio Free Theory.
A. Basically, we maxed out my credit card to buy equipment, and we did some demos for a radio show that, among other things, featured post-Freudian call-ins, where we would call other people and discuss their issues in a post-Freudian rhetoric. We would call authors and critics who had bashed deconstruction and say, “You’re on the air. Look, you wrote this. Did you even read this or that? What are you talking about?” Then we did little children’s evening programs. They were very sadistic: stories of Dr. Schreber for your child before bedtime. And we did one thing on the Rat Man that was really beautiful and was accompanied by music. We had a correspondent in Paris, who told us what was going on there. We had correspondents all over telling us what Jameson and others were teaching. We had a lot of news—that was Derrida’s idea, that I include news. Of course, it was a brilliant idea that was meant to make us indispensable. We had very creative tracks as well. It was amazing.

But it never got off the ground. It was supposed to be financed by Irvine, but they were horrified when they heard it. I don’t know why. And I’m sure that sounds naive. It would have been the Saturday Night Live of high theory. Everything was high theory. We also had little segments that we thought altogether comforting and normal. For instance, we would offer fifteen minutes of someone giving a lecture—Adorno, Heidegger, Deleuze. You know, why not? There is an entire archive of voices on tape: Artaud, Joyce, Freud. Freud is on tape. We would also do radiophonic cutups that were inventive and hilarious. So, a Deleuze lecture would be playing, and I would cut in as if it were a dialogue. It was very witty. And, of course, there is something very moving about hearing Freud’s voice, or Adorno’s, over the radio.

Q. What time period was this?
A. It was the mid-eighties. I was entirely into it. And I have to say that everyone cooperated. We put funny, S/M kinds of ads in journals asking for “submissions,” and sure enough, country-wide, people were sending us tapes, hoping to be a segment on our show. Even Frank Zappa was going to help out because he thought it was “kewl.”

Q. If it were financed, would you consider doing this kind of “writing” again?
A. I’d love to. That’s what I wanted to do. But we couldn’t get any institutional support, so the show was put out like a cigarette. Anyway, all of that was to say that there are different types of “writing,” and some kinds of very rigorous and political inscriptions do not require
that you work alone. I think I would like not to have to write alone all the time.

Q. The conjunction of writing, stupidity, and politics is an interesting one that I’d like to pursue here a bit more. In the introduction to the book, you write, “For the writer the problem of stupidity occupies a place of deliberate latency; ever on the prowl for your moment of greatest vulnerability, it prepares another sneak attack. Unless you really know what you’re doing, and then it’s in your face, all over you in fact, showing no pity.” What are the implications of this insight for academe and for activism? Or, to use your terminology, for “foolosophy” and for politics?

A. First of all, I am writing out of an ethical concern that I articulate in the utterance, “I am stupid before the other.” What happens when one humbles oneself and says, “I am stupid before the other”? I raise a question about how it is that in the unwritten history of stupidity there has always been an alterity, a non-appropriable other, that has been trashed and bashed and has received the accusatory sting of being called stupid. So, I am interested in this naming in which executive and executing decisions are made about the status of the other. And this occurs also in the testing apparatus of universities and admission policies. One interesting point in the history of testing is the invention of the word *moron* by American psychologists. This was how they filtered out immigrant children. *Moron* means a little below average. But it allowed the immigrant children to be left back, kind of humiliated and degraded when their admissions tests were graded. These political and activist concerns have motivated and compelled me. There is a displacement, a violence in the question of who gets designated as stupid. I need only mention *The Bell Curve* and other decisions that have been made about minorities. Even decisions that have been made about “clever” minorities—or shrewd or shifty minorities—are part of the same experience of stupidity: it’s mechanical but upgraded to cleverness, so it is not real intelligence. I call for a kind of rewriting—rephrasing in Jean-Francois Lyotard’s sense—according to which one would say, “I am stupid before the other.” I think that would involve a surprising reformatting of what we think we know and how we think we can evaluate and judge.

I also try to show that in testing, the subject who can’t respond to questions often is, so to speak, too stupid or too intelligent to offer the kind of response that is instrumentally demanded. They might be too dialectical or not able to assimilate an accepted grid and so forth. I am
interested in the humbling that occurs when one says, "I am stupid before the other," which is absolutely a taboo. You cannot imagine someone in a university saying, "I am stupid" or "I am stupid before my students." This humbling and destabilizing of the sujet supposé savoir—of the subject who is supposed to know or who is posed as functionary of knowing—creates minor insurrections that interest me. But, of course, one of the most stupid reflexes is to think that you know what stupidity is all about. This situation calls for another type of activism that begins with "I'm not sure I know." And you don't close the book; you don't throw the book at anyone. I fear I am simplifying the trajectory of the book right now. I hope you’ll extend me some credit on this account. Suffice it to say that it would provide for a very different politics to say "I don't know" or "I am stupid before the other," but not in the oppositional sense that stupidity is the opposite of whatever opposes it—let's say, provisionally, intelligence.

Q. In the “Activist Supplement,” you suggest that “the opposition between passive and active proffers a deluded equation. Take a look around you,” you write, haven't we, as a culture, been too active, too action-filled?” And you note that a “true ethics of community... would have to locate a passivity beyond passivity, a space of repose and reflection that would let the other come.” This is not the typical view of community, which is usually posited as a product to be built and which therefore requires the active subject building. Would you elaborate on this ethic of community?

A. I made these remarks on community in the context of the Gulf War with its attendant overestimation of virtual reality. This thought comes from the works of Heidegger, Freud, and Levinas—and, obviously, from Derrida as well. As Heidegger and Freud in their own ways posited, there has been too much action. When Heidegger went off track, it was under the aegis of "acting." The qualities that I am trying to describe are difficult to abbreviate, and I do not want to invite misunderstanding. The action hero, as we know—and there is no quarreling with this valorizing of the action hero—is not the thoughtful subject, though action and thought, activity and passivity, should not be easily opposed. It is much more complicated than that. Thinking is assimilable to acting. Rather than presuming and making predictable what could happen in a community, giving assigned places and determinations, if one opened up a space of radical passivity, one might see what comes, what arrives. Rousseau, for example, called for a mode of being that is in recession—he calls it the far niente, the nondoing that
opens you up to a disclosive dimension of being. From there, one might be able to hear the call; or, the call might be put out in a way that is entirely surprising, perhaps unrecognizable and perhaps irreducible to codified meaning. Something would occur on the level of absolute and unconditional hospitality to being, to the other. These are the kinds of considerations that have prompted me. Rather than think we know in advance what community is, or what we are building, as if it were ours to build, we might allow it to come. To allow and allow and allow is the experiment that I would want to conduct.

Q. In his contribution to the issue of *diacritics* devoted to your work, Eduardo Cadava suggests that your writing compels us to rethink our assumptions about “language and subjectivity, encounter and relation, responsibility and decision.” And he emphasizes the latter, even suggesting that your works “are nothing but the very trial of the concepts of responsibility and decision.” If those concepts tend to be soaked, even marinated, in humanist presumptions about intentionality and autonomy, your work seems consistently invested in tracing out an ethics of decision (of “responsible responsiveness,” as you have called it) that takes off from a posthumanist perspective—from the “presupposition that we are always, in advance, under the influence of others.” But some would ask what this responsibility, this ethics of decision, would be based on if not on the intentionality and autonomy of the subject who acts.

A. This question is a difficult one. Eduardo is discussing here a trial of decision. Everything has to pass through the crucible of undecidability. There is a trial, and, as Derrida has pointed out in “Force of Law,” it is not the subject who makes a decision. In fact, if decision is called for, it has to encounter undecidability. If we knew, then we wouldn’t have to decide, but there is a moment of madness, where a cut, a decision, an incision is made. And that madness shatters the contours of the subject. What I have in mind here is a more Levinasian inflection. In other words, ethical responsibility for the other is prior to subjectivity. It’s only through this ethical relationship that a subject can emerge, according to Levinas. There is something like originary liability: you are liable prior to any empirical evidence of guilt. That is, prior to any subjective coagulation, or sealing process, there is something like a liability that hovers between guilt and owing and innocence. You are already marked by this being-for-the-other—that is, you are indebted, kind of guilty, kind of ready to assume responsibility prior to anything else. And this would be the first moment of being taken hostage in the
experience of radical passivity. The status of “autonomy” cannot be stabilized in this subject who acts. In *Stupidity*, I try to read the Enlightenment values of sovereignty and autonomy and how they are dented and undermined by so many currents and considerations.

One issue that I have tried to grapple with, because it is not clear, is where responsibility begins. In my work on trauma TV, I began by citing a psychoanalyst who made the assertion, concerning World War II, that one was made responsible by dint of having *seen*, having *witnessed*. So there is already a testimonial quality to responsibility. What this means is that the boundaries are really moving in on you because it displaces the categories of doing to *seeing*—you are responsible even for what you have *seen*. Responsibility is monstrous. As Derrida has observed, once you say, “Well, I have acquitted myself; I have acted responsibly,” that is your moment of *ir*responsibility. In the very moment that doubt is removed and you feel you have accomplished your ethical task, you have relinquished it. It is in this context that decision, then, needs to be placed and understood, but not as a preemptive strike or with the assumption that judgment has been made, conclusively, definitively, and in a way that we could consider it to close the case. There is a temporality of decision that has to be scrupulously considered.

Q. In *Finitude’s Score* and in *Stupidity*, you note that writing, for you, is a “nonplace” in which “one can abandon oneself to abandonment” and discover an “ectopia of all ‘proper’ places.” Whereas for Aristotle, “good” writing takes off from common places—topoi—you’re interested instead in a kind of atopical writing. Would you elaborate on that a bit?

A. I am interested in that which obliterates the originariness of site, which is haunted and difficult to condense into material qualities. But I would have to ask you how you are construing Aristotle? Do you want to say something about Aristotle before we continue?

Q. In the most general terms, he lays out the topoi, and in the fields of rhetoric and writing studies, it is generally taken for granted that good writing begins from common places, from conceptual starting places that are familiar to both of us. So we begin together and can then take a new course together or run down an old one. The point is that the connection is made across common places.

A. You know, in this regard, I’m sure I could be taken to task because I do, in fact, begin with common places. I think I remain in many ways Aristotelian. What could be more common than drugs, the telephone,
secretarial relations in writing, stupid mistakes, housewife psychosis, and so forth? In that regard, I think I do follow the prescriptive pad. So the odd thing is that there are moments when you can trace a lineage. Those who might consider my work outrageous, or completely unfathomable in terms of a secured contextual milieu, might consider precisely such moments in which I answer the ancient call to begin with common places. But, of course, when one *philosophizes*, the common place becomes dislocated from its locus. I also situate myself within the German lineage of ironizing, subverting and displacing certain horizons of expectation. After all, to be in a tradition, I feel you also, in this apparent paradox of absolute loyalty, have to show a moment of disidentification and departure. You split. Extreme loyalty to a tradition might force you to be entirely untraditional if you are attuned to the historicity of what you’re doing, where you’re coming from, where you are going. Obviously, you can’t *know* these things absolutely, but you can endeavors to be attuned. It doesn’t mean that one is enslaved by mere replication but that one effects repetition with difference. One could be upholding tradition precisely by masking its many figures and identities.

Q. You suggested in your interview with Andrea Juno that because of your irreverent writing style, your refusal to censor the play of language—in fact, because of the pleasure you take in its play—you “tend to be associated with a writing which is considered ‘morally wanting.’” Why do you think there is such a resistance to wordplay in academe? What investment is bolstered by declaring it irresponsible?

A. Well, in the first place I house an unusually cruel and sadistic superego: there is always censorship and reprisal. I am, however, willing to say that I affirm irresponsibility in the Nietzschean sense. Nietzsche says we have to be rigorously irresponsible—that is, we must be nonconformist; we must not kiss up or suck up to the powers that determine whether or not we get a grant or get approval. With the exception of an early Alexander von Humboldt grant (before I started publishing), my work has not been funded. At this point, one might have expected some support—I don’t know why one would have such an expectation, but perhaps because those working in similar and contiguous areas are supported. What I am saying is that the urge to chastise someone for being irresponsible—which, I assume, is not being said in the Nietzschean spirit of trying to be a free spirit, so to speak, with all the reservations and preambles that he appends to that—is also antifeminist. Women are irresponsible; they are not responsible enough to the phallic hold of the academic ideology, unless they are servants who
accept and name their servitude and who practice the strictly coded politics of gratitude. And that practice could include turning yourself into the authority of women’s studies, or ghettos of feminism, instead of fanning out, disseminating, making trouble, kicking ass in all the “wrong places” and in ways that are barely recognizable according to the determinations that govern what are acceptable and responsible forms of objection. Being “responsible” in this negative sense means, precisely, not inciting highly problematic incursions into the domesticity and peaceful home fronts of the university. There is a lot to be said for this appellation.

But, again, being “responsible” in that sense—where you are not necessarily courageously pitted as one against the multitude, or doing something that is not recognizable, or not very appreciated—being responsible in this “negative” sense means keeping things clean, bordered, serious, manly. To be irresponsible implies a feminization, the double entendre, the double meaning, so there’s this slippery feminine kind of masking and masquerading and make-up that’s going on: she is “making it up,” she’s “faking” and “making,” and so on. And, in literary history, that kind of notion of wordplay and fooling around with language and sedimented levels of signification always got linked to forms of anality—such as Shakespeare’s Bottom, who is the great punster, an obsessional neurotic, or the Rat Man, who is Freud’s case study of obsessional neurosis. There is always some sort of reversion to anality that is implied in wordplay or word disfigurement and distortion, so that the anal retentive hegemony of the academic stronghold is, I am sure, upset by this kind of thing. But to call someone irresponsible is, in the first place, a gesture that doesn’t read the political implications of undermining monolithic meaning, doesn’t read what it means to refuse to underwrite the notion that there is just the sanctioned dimension of accepted meaning. Language is arbitrary, radically arbitrary, which means that to a certain extent I am being extremely faithful to the rhetorical imperative, the imperative to understand the artifice and affirm the disjunctive nature of linguistic positing.

As I indicated earlier, there are institutional repercussions for this kind of linguistic misbehavior. I have many writing selves, many personae. I’m also the very responsible chair of a department, for instance, and a prudent professor, if I may say so. We have to understand that I am producing effects on different fronts here, and affronts. But if I were to situate one of these “posthumanist” selves, I
would want do so in terms of the buffo in romantic literature—the one that de Man, Schlegel, Hegel, and others discuss. The buffo breaks into fixed narrative structure or theater and performs feats of ironic destruction and performs like the Greek chorus that would interrupt the narrative. The buffo is the interrupter par excellence. You wouldn’t know if it comes from the inside or the outside, whether it’s an invasion of the narrative line or an outburst. The buffo releases an expression of rage. I would want to be seen as a relative of this buffo, who is also related to Nietzsche’s staging of the buffoon—the one who really destabilizes and is unassimilable, carrying with her or him the mark of interruption. Rhetorically speaking, the buffoon is an anacoluthon—or, that which interrupts the smooth logic of accepted meaning or signification.

I take responsibility for those kind of feats of ironic destruction and for producing certain disjunctions within the academic text. For Schlegel, the buffo becomes an important figure leading up to his great essay on unintelligibility. Very often the curse of irresponsibility quickly slides into a demand for intelligibility, which I think is a reactionary demand. And that would be the lie, this intelligibility. Schlegel says we would all collectively freak if intelligibility held sway over our affairs. It would destroy our families; it would destroy everything. He was beginning to trace out and map a notion of the unconscious. There’s something unfathomable, and therefore potentially destructive of smooth and totalizing narratives, when unintelligibility is allowed to surface—unintelligibility being the condition for possible meaning and intelligibility.

Q. Would you say that your dedication to wordplay, textual performance, and genre busting is in any way associated with your devotion to tracing out an/other ethics of responsibility and decision? That is to say, do you consider your writing style political in any sense of that term?

A. To interrogate meaning is a political gesture that forces one to interpret community and sociality in its possibility. In that regard, yes, it has to be viewed as such. Traditionally, communication and community involve gathering around stabilized meanings. So by taking risks—and it is not I who is taking risks but rather language is risk-taking and risk-making—by surrendering to the risks that linguistic positing inevitably demands of one means, at least at some level, to hear and heed the call to break with the oppressive dragnet of reactionary significations. There is a class struggle in my texts: there’s the girl gang speaking, the little gangster, the hoodlum; there’s the high philosophical graduate
student who studied at the Hermeneutics Institute in Berlin; and there’s the more sophisticated Parisian, and so forth. There are different voices, compulsions, denials, and relations that emerge in the texts. But there is the continuity of the more “prolo,” proletariat, and very often wise-ass girl who is watching this stuff happening and commenting on it—again, like the chorus or the buffo—who’s ironic and whose narcissism involves a kind of sarcastic, biting, meta-critique of what is going on but without ever becoming anti-intellectual. That’s important. I never embrace the anti-intellectual tendencies of the American academy. But, then, my boundaries for what is intellectual are very, very generous, I think. A lot belongs to that space.

Indeed, I am always questioning what is proper to meaning and what is propertied by our estates of meaning, of teaching, and so on. It is not that I am playing with meaning but that meaning is playing me, and playing through me, on me, and against me all the time. I am inscribed in that disjunctive flow of meaning’s regimen. Again, I want to note that I don’t sit there as the pilot in the great Star Trek fantasy, with fabulous equipment, and such. Actually, even in Star Trek they got lost in space a lot. I don’t decide; it decides me, it plays me, and I surrender and listen to it or take it down, as would a secretary taking shorthand. I suppose I don’t repress it or call in the police to clean up the scene of the crime.

Q. You don’t censor it. You let it play.
A. To a certain extent, I let it perform itself. Of course, there’s also the part of me that’s impish, a troublemaker, and that kind of dares and counter-bullies what I consider to be these gigantic “bosses.” In a traditional sense, I don’t censor it, and I don’t censor myself. But at the same time, it’s rigorous; it is not stream of consciousness. There are strategic and tactical maneuvers that I do, of course, decide on and work with. It is work.

Q. When you said earlier that you do indeed start with common places—how much more common and comfortable can you get than the telephone?—that made a lot of sense. But I have to say that it just doesn’t jibe with the experience I have when I read your work. Your telephone, after all, turns out to be something completely unfamiliar, not really a “common” place at all. That experience sort of fakes the reader out. Your texts are jarring in this way; they are in no sense comfortable or comforting; they jerk the reader around a bit. It is difficult to name exactly what’s going on, but even at the level of the sentence, or of the phrase, your work delivers a kind of disorienting smack.
That is interesting because it’s familiar. Very long ago, at the beginning of my career, when I wasn’t getting any jobs and I was completely destitute and desperate, I told my friend Larry Rickles, who became the chair of German at the University of California at Santa Barbara, that I didn’t understand why this was happening. And he said, “You are going to have to become aware of the sheer radicality of your work, which is in sum an outrage.” And that was the first I had heard of it. There’s this little girl in me who just doesn’t get it, who thinks she’s really handing in the right assignment. Of course, we know from Freud and then Lacan that everything you hand in is your own caca. And you’re so proud of it. Still, there is this little retarded or naive parasite-being in me who doesn’t know this yet, who doesn’t realize it, who thinks she is so loving, who sees herself opening up to everyone, and who thinks, “Why are they mean?”

I don’t know what this absurd anxiety is about, this desire to be able to say, “Have a nice text.” It could be an effect of having been severely undermined. De Man said that I was a “professionally battered woman” before this term came into the public domain. I was beaten to a pulp by all sorts of institutional experiences; for example, I was fired illegally. There is still that part of me, the abused child of academia, who wants to be accredited and who wants to be told, “This is highly responsible work; we see you in the tradition of the Romantics and Hannah Arendt; you’re in touch with the necessary mutations of your historicity.” That part of me appears to persist.

When the Telephone Book first came out, I was greatly distressed. I felt exposed, that I wasn’t one of “the boys.” When I saw the Telephone Book, it came to me that I had broken with recognizable norms, and this prompted a narcissistic blowout. I really had a very bad depressive reaction because I felt it wasn’t recuperable as typical scholarly work. I guess there is a double compulsion: part of me wants to please and to be institutionally recognized, patted on my back (or ass), but another part of me would feel molested by that kind of recognition. It’s actually kind of a class warfare. There is the little bourgeoisie who thinks, “Well isn’t it time that I got some comfort here?”; and the other street girl who says, “Nah!” So you’re right. When you say that this work jerked you around or was jarring, violent maybe, that surprises me, and yet, of course, I was there when it happened.

Q. Well, it jerked me around in the most wonderful way. In Crack Wars, you cite Flaubert: “The worth of a book can be judged by the strength of the punches it gives and the length of time it takes you to recover from
them." Your books pack major punches. In "The Differends of Man," you discuss Lyotard's notion of the differend but offer another version of it, one that "talks and negotiates"—you call it the "affirmative differend." This version says, "let's talk," and you say this implies listening, a "talking as listening" that strains past oppositional logic. And yet, in Crack Wars, you note that to say "I understand" is to cease "suspending judgment over the chasm of the real." Is this listening and straining not aimed at understanding? Does it perhaps suggest that there are affirmative ways to embrace the withdrawal of understanding that the differend indicates?

A. Yes. In Stupidity, there is a section called "The Rhetoric of Testing," which is on de Man and the irony of understanding. Citing de Man's elaboration of the problematic, I say that there would never be a moment where one could say, "This has been understood." I often appeal to Nietzsche's ever-resonating and recurring utterance, "Have I been understood?" He sends it out in a sci-fi way, and I still hear it signaling to me, "Have I been understood?" It is a big question, a big interrogatory challenge. The irony of understanding is that the only knowledge we could have is that we have not understood, not fully understood. This irony, I think, does produce, in part, the articulation for a kind of political commitment. At the same time, it doesn't mean that we have not understood terror, genocide, misogyny, racism in a certain way. Still, having registered injustice doesn't obliterate the necessity of our incessant reading and questioning. The place from which such decisions as ethnocide, genocide, or murder are made is a place that thinks it has understood and can act on the basis of certain understanding that doesn't doubt or question itself. I think that to presume that one has understood is often murderous.

Q. In your essay "The Sujet Suppositaire," you suggest that "a question regarding the transmission of sexual marks as a condition of knowledge can be posed under the name 'Oedipedagogy.'" Rumor has it that you have also taught a graduate seminar called Oedipedagogy. Would you unpack that term for us and tell us a bit about the seminar?

A. "Rumor has it"—this strikes me as funny. I have written on rumorological paranoia and other channels of transmission that occur everywhere—on the job, off the job, on the streets—and how rumor is this parasitical utterance that Rousseau was invested in, of course. But what I mean by "Oedipedagogy," briefly, is the way pedagogy is linked to desire but also to the structures of parricidal writing or overcoming your teachers. This intentional dimension
abides in the teaching relation where all sorts of aberrant transference or countertransference structures can be observed. At the same time, you never entirely overcome the teachers that you are killing. This situation is something I try to read with and against the grain of something like the anxiety of influence, upping the amps on parricidal engagement or on such tropes as jealousy and appropriative rage. In the introduction to *Stupidity*, I speak of graduate students packing heat. When you publish something, you’re putting yourself before this tribunal that is going to judge and evaluate what you’ve done. And there were so many graduate students, especially at Berkeley, who were intensely competitive and jealous with one another or of me. Some were loving and wonderful; but, obviously, the site of learning and teaching is a highly charged atmosphere, and I wanted to bring to the fore the impossibility of teaching *while* I was teaching and also to scan the virginal space of the student body that lets itself be filled by the professorial phallus. Of course, these were quite controversial ways of considering our profession, but they’re also canonical discursive formations around the fact of learning that I don’t want to exclude.

In the seminar, I wanted to explore the more phantasmatic dimensions of acts of teaching, beginning with Socrates and his affairs of the heart and the phallus. We read Lacan on transference, Derrida’s *Carte Postale*, and *Frankenstein*, which is an allegory of teaching and learning, self-education, and the relationship of the master to the creator. (At one point the monster says, “You may be my creator, but I am your master.”) We also read Blanchot on the difference between a teacher and a master teacher, which is very compelling. In the Rat Man, especially, the parameters of the relationship between the analyst and the analysand were very interesting to explore. And with all the difficulty and disjunction of translation, I wanted to see what could be retained of that relationship in the scene of teaching: What are the differences among Lacan as analyst, as teacher, as writer? What’s the relationship between Plato and Socrates, as analyzed by Derrida in *Carte Postale*? What’s the relation between the mentor and student—between Arendt and Heidegger, Goethe and Eckermann, Batman and Robin? We also looked at the new laws legislating against sexual combinations in the classroom or in the university. When they first were proposed, Foucault, who was at the time at Berkeley, said it was absurd to try to legislate desire out of the scene of teaching. But what interested me especially was the hidden phantasm of sodomy as the groundless ground of the transmission of knowledge, and how its
ghostly echoes still sit in on seminars—the etymological roots of seminar, seminal works, and other offshoots of the seed of knowledge.

Q. Pedagogy—pedarasty?
A. Voilà. The relationship reversed, or arse upwards, so to speak. Plato and Socrates, for example, as read by Derrida. And certainly in the case of Freud’s Rat Man, the obsessional neurotic, where the Rat Man is exemplarily coached by Freud. The Rat Man was unable to name his symptom or disease, so Freud, filling precisely the space of learning, decides to guess in order to help him. In German, the word is erraten, for guess, so that’s the first “rat” insertion: he is going to rat him out. Freud says the Rat Man, trying to explain, stammers, “and then . . . and then . . . and then,” which is followed by ellipses and a dash, and then Freud writes, “Into his anus, I helped him out.” This, for me, became the paradigm of learning: let me help you out: “—Into his anus, I helped him out.” There’s this kind of moment of violence, of sticking it to you that true teaching has to enact. Of course, I am symbolizing highly here; no one should think we’re solely pursuing a dildological pedagogy. But the question is where teaching arrives. When? Is it a trauma? Is learning a trauma, as Werner Hamacher once suggested? If so, does it come to us at night? When does the promissory note that you give to each class (you are promising that they will have understood) come due? Will they understand five years from now? In a dream? In the space of the so-called unconscious?

It’s also a question of locating the address of teaching. Whom are we addressing with teaching? What are we addressing? How does the question of address determine the essential quality and possibility of teaching? In the Rat Man case, the patient calls Freud “Captain” after the Captain who scared him with the story of penetrating rats. The analysis starts taking hold when Freud is addressed as the Captain—the sadistic, cruel, inserting, penetrating Captain. Whom are we addressing in the pedagogical scene, or what are we addressing, and how is that structured? These are some of the questions that emerged from the texts we looked to, including the Reveries of the Solitary Walker written by Rousseau, who at the end of his oeuvre names his debt to the woman he lived with, an older woman, and he turns everything around. He reverses the charges. She becomes the origin of all of his work. Turning around, he feminizes himself, so to speak. We also read Nietzsche on higher education; he says that even when we think we are taking notes freely, we are attached like a Bic pen to the paternal belly of the state. We interrogated questions of academic freedom, too, and Samuel
Weber’s text on institution and interruption. The final text was Deleuze’s *Maso­chism: Coldness and Cruelty*, on the kind of contract you sign when you enter the scene of pedagogy. In Deleuze, the sadist abhors instruction, whereas the masochist signs on with a teacher, and instruction takes place. The final phase of the course was on our interrupted relation to law, which constitutes the scene of pedagogy.

Q. Now that you’ve completed *Stupidity*, what’s next for you?

A. I have a few things happening, but I think the title of my next work will be *The Test Drive*, which is about the extent to which we depend on testing in our modernity. It’s connected to what I tried to show in my article on the Gulf War: that, figuratively, our whole country, our national body went through an HIV test and scored HIV negative. The argument was bolstered by the relentless rhetoric of a bloodless and safe war. You could see the collapse of AIDS hysteria with the diction of warfare. *The Test Drive* was motivated as a project by Nietzsche’s thought on the experimental disposition—among other things, an anti-racist position that he took. And another work that I shelved for awhile is called *Politesse*. It involves the intersection of ethics, politics, and aesthetics—and also the question of politeness. I had the privilege of talking to Levinas about it at one point, and he said that *politesse* is the space where God still resides. This project is something that I have worked on for quite a while that I may unfreeze.

A good part of me wants to venture elsewhere, though. I want to do theater or performance. These books are heavy burdens for me. I feel excessively obligated to them, and I don’t entirely understand the nature of that obligation, that call. You caught me in one of the few times in my life when I’m between books. So first of all, I am trying to recover. I’m on a recovery program from writing. I’ve been clean for about a month. Of course, I get very anxious when I am not writing (not writing means I’m not under the command of a book—there are articles, reports, tenure reviews, letters). At the same time, I am kind of drawn to other ways of performing the inscription. And rather than just continue to do as I have, I want to think about what other ways might be possible. But still, these unfinished books are yelling at me, screaming for my attention. There is something very tormenting about unfinished books. And they each take years. I would like to get to the point where I “finish” these unfinished books and then could go elsewhere and do other things. But my health problems have kept me at home, too. So I don’t see myself staying up till four in the morning preparing off-off-Broadway productions of Eckermann’s relation
to Goethe, or whatever. But other types of inscription, nonetheless, would be a real temptation.

Q. Obviously, your work has been enormously controversial. Are there particular misreadings or misunderstandings that you’d like to address or respond to here?

A. You know, I am touched by this question, and I am very sensitive to the kind of rescue mission it entails. At the same time, though, I feel deeply that it is not my place to assume the posture of authority, or to place myself in the control tower that lands the right reading, the right understanding, and sees to it that certain calamities don’t occur. I feel that the work is not mine to correct. When a misunderstanding does come to me in a way that I find intelligible, I try to address it in the next work. Since I question the closure of interpretation, I can’t allow myself to slip into the place that would prescribe how texts are meant to be read. I have to rigorously affirm their having been sent and having gone out to do whatever it is they have to do. A text’s got to do what a text’s got to do. Even if it brings shame upon my name.

The only thing I might signal—and this cannot be corrected, and I can’t provide a correctional facility for such critical behavior—is that often, especially coming from England, there will be reviews of my work, in which the guy will say that I should be beaten for the way I write, or that I should be smacked for this or that. These reviews, that is, involve a supplement of physical abuse. In the early part of my career, I was pushed off podiums and stages; I was interrupted and just largely reviled in the most Ivy Leagued places, the big leagues. Somehow, I provoked violent responses. And this response is just a dimension of my work that probably should not be left out of the picture. These critics and colleagues may want to learn to read their own symptoms, may want to consider why it is that a little girl’s work can provoke such reactionary responses. The level of rage that prescribes physical correction and censorship is interesting to note. That’s all I’ll say. The misunderstandings are probably necessary, and the calls for violence are symptomatic and real. One thread of my narrative entails the continuing saga of a manhandled woman, psychoticized by institutional forms of undermining that do occur. I am fortunate in many ways, though. At times, I feel like a cartoon character. I have survived so many batterings, and I am up again and running—at a slower pace, but after this explosion and that removal of ground, I’m back on the scene. I feel very welcome here in New York, so that’s wonderful. But perhaps some readers/critics would
like to reflect on the recurring shift to violence, the desire to do violence, to violate this textual body.²

Notes

1. But Ronell complicates the easy distinction between life and death. To say that the humanist subject has “died” is not to say that it is no longer operational; nevertheless, Ronell insists that humanism is a drug we desperately need to find a way to get off of.

2. I would like to thank my research assistant, Adam Burke, for transcribing this interview from the original tapes.

Winterowd and Kinneavy Award Winners

The 1999 recipient of the W. Ross Winterowd Award is Wendy S. Hesford for Framing Identities: Autobiography and the Politics of Pedagogy (University of Minnesota Press). The Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition presents the Winterowd Award for the most outstanding book on composition theory published each year. The Award was generously endowed by Professor Winterowd.

The 1999 recipient of the James L. Kinneavy Award is D. Diane Davis for “Addicted to Love”; Or, Toward an Inessential Solidarity (JAC 19). The Kinneavy Award is presented annually for the most outstanding article published that year in JAC. The Award was generously endowed by the late James Kinneavy, Bloomberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas.