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

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Works Cited


Parallel Lives/Speaking in Tongues

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

Reading this interview made me imagine sitting beside someone else who is also reading the interview, someone who is a writing teacher and maybe a scholar, an intellectually curious professional but one who hasn’t read Heidegger or even much of the deconstructionist writing that has become more accessible to compositionists lately. Or, this imaginary companion is a feminist of the liberal persuasion—someone who uses the word “woman” without quotation marks around it. I want this person to find ... what? a toehold? a point of entry? No, these figures cast “Ronell”
as a mountain to be climbed or a body to be entered. Not understanding the conversation well myself, I nonetheless have a desire to enter into its spirit—to find some way not only to hear but to listen actively to the murmuring of the text—and to translate that desire, if not its realization, to this imaginary reader who occupies the space beside me. Ronell gives me a figure to use in this attempt: the detective on the prowl, looking for traces and clues ("Confessions" 253).

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

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

Ronell describes her work with rhetoric as a tracking of “something like a rhetorical unconscious in a text,” a linguistic force that “works against normative semantics” (249). This project fits well with the aims of those in rhetoric who wish to disturb the easy, commonsensical but dangerous uses of language by students, business executives, media, and politicians—language that seems comforting but covers over a morass of
social differences, economic machinations, power moves, and other languages necessarily silenced by this common sense. In another theoretical language, this process might be termed "ideology critique" or even simply "rhetorical analysis." The effort of the reader/translator is to find a point of reference without obliterating the strangeness of the approach by remapping it entirely within already known territory. "Ronell" might be mapped onto a parallel line that runs next to but never crosses the other more familiar path: a parallel life into which one might will oneself temporarily for the purposes of illumination but never fully inhabit. Such a mapping project would have the virtue of reminding us of the geographical limitations of our rhetorical world at present, and of the limits of its currently known languages.

The Women in the Text
Having come across Ronell in *Angry Women* (one of several visually and culturally outrageous productions by ReSearches), I was delighted by the presence of "one of us"—an academic and writer—among the performance artists, novelists, and musicians (bell hooks was also included). Although Ronell reports that her appearance there may have scandalized her university colleagues, one might note that such an appearance enacts the desire for academics to become public intellectuals who cross the lines between the academy and the public, linking our knowledges and ways with those "outside." This angry woman offers the reader a number of positions for "woman" as writer, teacher, and philosopher.

In *The Telephone Book*, she styles herself as "switchboard" operator. Becoming the Lily Tomlin of continental philosophy, Ronell inhabits a feminized space of reception and receptivity in such a way as to make it impossible to move through that position on one's way to "take the call" without being interrupted in the conduct of a smoothly technologized process of communication ("Confessions" 251). In the more pedestrian world of composition instruction, could we dare to suggest that feminist teachers make similar interventions into the communicative processes of students, breaking connections in the name of calling attention to the workings of gender and language, dislodging students (as Ronell dislodges the "great male professor") from that "space of quiet and support and cocooned sheltering"?

In quite a different mode, Ronell becomes an ancient Greek woman, mourning the lost foundations of philosophy, and then the writer as psychotic housewife. In her tour de force, her one-woman show, she is the Whoopi Goldberg of philosophy. But she writes, poignantly, "I think I
would like not to have to write alone all the time” (267). Her performance raises the question of the relations among performers. The customary style of exchange among most writers in the academic field of rhetoric and composition comes from that language used “off-stage,” the planning or tactics of the staging. We get a glimpse of those moments in the interview when Ronell acknowledges the rigor of her writing, its tactical maneuvers (264). Rather than detailing these maneuvers, Ronell characterizes the stance or ethos of the writer.

The Writer
The strongest persona emerging from this interview is Ronell as writer—"creative writer,” one might say—in another tongue. For readers who are not attuned to or sympathetic with the loss of the humanistic subject, many of her comments about writing might be misinterpreted (although, in Ronell’s view, that very concept comes from a foreign or superseded language). The writer as first of all a receiver, one who is “called” outside oneself, a different kind of being, whose words come from somewhere else, who writes poetry in a kind of stupor, who makes a vow of commitment to writing—all these are descriptions one might find in the most elitist accounts of writing in the humanist/masculinist/expressivist tradition. This is the modernist writer in the garret that Linda Brodkey exposed so powerfully for a composition audience a number of years ago. But that’s not what Ronell means, I struggle to explain to my imaginary interlocutor.

Ronell is inspiring when she speaks with passion and commitment about the joy of writing, and without resignation about the minimality, finally, of writing’s achievement. (To whom do emotions belong—from whom do they issue forth—after the death of the humanist subject?) She confirms what writing teachers have been telling their students about the effort and energy required by writing. These emotions and accounts of the work of writing will be read within a humanist frame, unavoidably. So the task becomes one of tolerating (working within) Babel, without polemic—that is, without the warlike desire to demolish the other position, to silence the other tongue, even if it murmurs incomprehensibly.

Action Heroes
The most challenging of translations required by Ronell’s remarks concerns her advocacy of passivity, her renunciation of action. What then, besides action, would one call creating a radio show? Ronell’s Radio Free Theory even included moments of translation: “fifteen minutes of
someone giving a lecture—Adorno, Heidegger, Deleuze. You know, why not?” (266). There was a decision to do something in order to make a change. Money was spent, air waves were filled, people responded. Would she do it again? Yes! And as for passivity: my imaginary reader says that there is already far too much passivity—among students, citizens, workers. Add passivity to television and you get couch potato!

Translation: Ronell works within a philosophical context of reaction to the certainties of eighteenth-century Enlightenment reason and scientific causality. If one applies human reason to a problem, one can be certain of a happy resolution. If one applies democratic principles to autocratic states, one can be certain of an equitable distribution of power. The activity of scientific methods on physical problems is bound to result in outcomes beneficial to humans. The brutal history of twentieth-century warfare overturned all these certainties about “action”—hence, the language of “passivity.” The certainty of political outcomes is being questioned in other registers than the highly philosophical. On the eve of the Million Woman March for gun control (May 12, 2000), USA Today featured a lead story questioning the political efficacy of mass marches, and from a different political persuasion, Katha Pollitt wondered why progressives continue to throw energy and money into doomed third-party bids for the presidency.

If Ronell were to adopt a view of rhetoric that accounted for its political dimension not only in the stance of a writer in a subversive relation to an academic tradition or in the recasting of philosophical ethics but in its gritty day-to-day workings in perpetually shifting negotiations of power, she might accept a meaning of “action” on more provisional terms. Can a kind of activism that begins with “I’m not sure I know” speak productively to one in which someone must assert that they “know” as in, say, lawyers prosecuting cases of rape, child abuse, environmental destruction, or American Indian land disputes? A rhetorical outlook encompasses those spaces and those apparently contradictory epistemological stances. One cannot but act. That outcomes are uncertain has been a powerful contribution of twentieth-century continental philosophy. That there will be outcomes with consequences for persons—their minds and bodies, their ways of living or not living—has been the continuing interest of rhetorical studies. The growth of an intellectual movement such as critical legal studies, along with various intellectual productions (such as Toni Morrison’s essay collection about the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings) occupy the space between the parallels charted here. In
her characterization of the writer as rebel philosopher, Ronell argues in
effect for the compositionist's claim that changing ways of writing can
open new ways of thinking. We might follow her lead in collapsing the
binary opposition between action hero and contemplative philosopher,
imagining in its absence that the writer/rhetorician is active but not heroic.
As Tina Turner assures us, we don't need another hero.

A Rhetorical Figure
Interviewer and interviewee mutually cast "Ronell" as a rhetorical figure:
anacoluthon. The term goes through several mutations to arrive at its
rhetorical destination. Beginning as keleuthos, it means, according to the
Greek lexicon, a road, way, path, or track; or a travelling, journey, or
voyage—an expedition. Or it can suggest a mode of walking or gait, and,
metaphorically, a way or walk of life; a way or course of doing (Liddell).
The prefix a, sometimes a privative (negating) construction, in this case
indicates a joining with or enhancement of the root word to create
akolouthos: following, attending on—as a follower, attendant; camp
followers (masculine plural); following after; agreeing with, suitable to,
like, in accordance with. Packed within the subversive, ironizing trope is
a movement of binding, of being in accord, of going along with. But
Ronell will not be a male camp follower; she will not "walk this way."
Adding the negating prefix an finally completes the figure anacoluthon,
for which Webster's offers a provocative definition: "Gk. an + akolouthos:
not following, wanting sequence; abandonment in the midst of a sentence
of one type of construction in favor of one grammatically different."
The ellipsis of the "not" before the second participle creates the pair
"wanting sequence." The dictionary thus allows the reader both to not follow, not want, and want sequence simultaneously. Only the idiot—the
completely solitary isolate—that Ronell cites in her introduction to
Stupidity does not want connection of any kind. The rhetor who uses
anacoluthon in complicity with her listeners mixes the construction in the
middle of the sentence: she goes off course, but for a reason. Grasping that
reason is essential to the performance of the figure. Ronell does not have
to write alone—not does she.

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Engaging Modernisms, Emerging Posthumanisms, and the Rhetorics of Doing

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Three essays in the previous issue of JAC—Susan Giroux’s “Race, Rhetoric, and the Contest over Civic Education,” John Trimbur’s “Agency and the Death of the Author,” and Ross Winterowd’s “Where the Action Is”—utilize distinctions between, for example, practice and theory, activity and passivity, and production and reception in order to argue for rhetorics that value doing. These “rhetorics of doing” privilege utilitarian and civic forms of discursive production; accordingly, all three authors are concerned with forms of agency that do something. These concerns in turn raise questions about the ways that agency is theorized, practiced, and taught in academic and public arenas. Of particular interest in Giroux and Winterowd is the privileged status of literary studies obtained at the expense of the more utilitarian, practical orientation of rhetoric and composition. Although an overly sharp distinction seems to be made