Reviews

Work of Theory," Steven Mailloux sees that rhetoric and interpretation involve politics. In "Writing and Truth: Philosophy’s Role in Rhetorical Practice," Barbara Couture says that phenomenological epistemology, philosophies of rhetoric, and moral theories of truth combine an abstract concept of “truth” with the human application or realization of that concept. In "Seeing in Third Sophistic Ways," Victor Vitanza calls himself a theorist/writer of ways of seeing that he refers to as “misrepresentative antidotes,” “Dissoi-paralogoı,” and “theatricks.” In “Body Studies in Rhetoric and Composition,” Sharon Crowley finds that body studies contributes to rhetorical theory “because of its habit of pointing up the interestedness of boundary drawing and distinction making.” In “The Intellectual Work of Computers and Composition Studies,” Cynthia Selfe and Richard Selfe argue that technology, power, and literacy practices are linked in fundamental ways.

To insist on the importance of rhetoric and composition as intellectual work, then, is to insist on the continued development of the field as a political agent for change. This process necessitates acknowledgment that an uncritical embrace of perspectives worked out by other academic fields does not necessarily lead to the development of intellectual perspectives; it could instead result in academicism and a conservative political agenda. The essays in Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work themselves offer strong models of intellectual work and, taken together, work as a political agent for change.


Reviewed by Diane Davis, University of Texas at Austin

Avital Ronell has an amazing gift for de-familiarizing the most familiar concepts, for shattering any sense of complacency or certainty, for setting thinking back in motion. Her works have sprung from conceptual confinement the telephone, the television, the drug addict, and the writer, for example, reintroducing them to us in their infinite strangeness, their radical singularity. And in the latest addition to her remarkable oeuvre, she continues this bold (counter)tradition, prompting the release of another “hostage of the concept”: stupidity. However, as Ronell demon-
strates, stupidity is a slippery signifier that has proven fairly oblivious to its conceptual shackles all along. There has never been a “proven detection system” or a secure lockup facility for stupidity; and though it is related to madness, even reason’s “twin towers of penitentiary and asylum” can’t pin it down or contain it. When Ronell zooms in on stupidity in all its slipperiness, it no longer seems knowable, leaving one feeling utterly stupid about stupidity—and, consequently, about knowledge, too: “as long as I don’t know what stupidity is, what I know about knowing remains uncertain, even forbidding.” So Stupidity interrupts what Ronell tags as the “dominant form of stupidity”: an unflinching certitude that “doesn’t allow for questions about the world,” or language, or the relations between the two.

Stupidity is vintage Ronell: it’s edgy, witty, bold, and rigorous, and it’s full of dazzling re readings of seemingly familiar works of fiction, philosophy, and policy. It is perhaps Ronell’s most disclosive work, evidencing a level of humility that is touching and extremely rare in academe (“I have done a great deal of field work in this area,” she writes, “and have felt stupid most of my life”); nonetheless, this tone is cut constantly with the jaw-dropping deconstructive analyses and wise-ass, interruptive humor that are her trademarks. I wish this book could be required reading for everyone who votes, does jury duty, makes policy or law decisions, and/or is licensed to carry a weapon. Barring that, however, I wholeheartedly recommend this work to everyone in rhetoric and writing studies—particularly if you hesitated even for a nano-second over what it has to do with rhetoric and writing. This field puts a premium on knowing—on writing what you know, on rhetoric as epistemic and/or hermeneutic—but “in an age when transcendence has to be abandoned and immanence suspended,” all claims to knowledge become suspect, and knowing is exposed as an inappropriate ground for writing and speaking. As Ronell demonstrates throughout this work (in fact, throughout several of her works), writing, rhetoricity, and stupidity are intricately intertwined. I’ll come back to this.

Tracing stupidity through its various encounters—with writers, literary theorists, philosophers, psychoanalysts, and preschoolers—Ronell demonstrates that it gets around, that it’s “everywhere,” but also that it remains elusive, evading conceptual arrest. Under her magnifying glass, stupidity exceeds itself, overflows itself as a concept, leaving a radical and inassimilable singularity in its tracks. And as she tails it through its endless proliferations, she loosens our grip on it, on it and on its entire network of associations, thereby releasing it all from knowledge and
delivering it (back) over to thought. In more Levinasian terms, she performs an ethical Saying that unsays or disrupts the themes and concepts congealed in the Said, touching off tiny explosions in inherited meaning and exposing the limits of understanding. This is Ronell’s signature approach: Whereas scholarly tradition posits and propagates a causal link between rigor and certitude, the former leading to the latter, Ronell’s work takes what Levinas might call the “fine risk” of offering instead an exceptionally rigorous interruption of certitude.

Though she observes manifestations of stupidity everywhere, Ronell suggests that stupidity as such “cannot be simply located or evenly scored.” A student of Nietzsche dedicated to keeping the “powerful forces of alternative valences going,” she right away establishes stupidity’s association with the “intricacies of repression, bungled action, error, blindness” and but also with sheer thought, with the near stupor and extreme surrender involved in the poetic act. She exposes stupidity’s indissociable link to “the most dangerous failures of human endeavor,” and but she also establishes its intimate connection (gasp) to love, which is where stupidity “sparkles with life,” naming “one of the few sites where it is permitted publicly to be stupid”; indeed, Ronell notes that love, in opening “the imbecilic effusions of being-with,” evidences “the power to license and unleash” a sort of “shared stupidity” that operates as “a repressed ground of human affectivity.”

So on the one hand, and especially when determined according to “phantasms of calculable intelligence,” stupidity tends to be loaded up and pointed at the feminized and minoritized other. A key player in the “social rigging of intelligence” through IQ tests, for example, it underwrites the loser-labels—idiot, imbecile, moron—“derived to undermine an entire class of pupils,” and in particular to stamp the passports of immigrant children with “cognates of debility.” “Destructive and clear in its aim, stupidity as an act of naming commits barely traceable acts of ethnocide,” Ronell observes, and even preschoolers are hip to its obliterating force. It is the ur-curse: “nothing keeps you down like the mark of stupidity.” But on the other hand, Ronell insists that stupidity cannot be left purely to denunciatory work, noting that Nietzsche at times compellingly associates stupidity with the promotion of “life and growth”; that he and Kathy Acker, respectively, call for “virtuous” and “emancipatory” stupidities; that Baudelaire regards stupidity as a kind of “divine cosmetic,” a wrinkle cream that preserves youth and beauty; and that Friedrich Schlegel insists on stupidity, or more specifically on
“nonunderstanding as the basis for a writing community [Athenäum] as well as for a theory of friendship.” Ronell also reminds us that sometimes, “in some areas of life, it is what lets you get by”—that is, when faced with a ballistic partner or parent or master or superior officer, for example, “sometimes ducking into stupidity offers the most expedient strategy for survival.”

There is no simple opposition between stupidity and thinking, Ronell observes—“stupidity is not so stupid as to oppose thought” but instead consists “in the absence of a relation to knowing.” It is therefore discovered right at thinking’s origin: stupidity prompts the wonder or stupefaction (thaumazein) that Aristotle locates at the beginning of philosophy, the nonunderstanding that inspires thought. And the limitlessness of stupidity (it offers “one of the rare ‘experiences’ of infinity”) also marks the finite limit of all knowing: all bucks stop at it. So stupidity, according to Ronell, “invites at least two different types of evaluation that, inexhaustible and contradictory, can be seen in terms derived from war. There are those who seek to wage war on stupidity or who feel attacked and besieged by it,” she writes, and then there are the poets, who surrender to it, abandoning themselves to “the peculiar experience of an exorbitant peace treaty, a kind of relinquishment that resolves itself into passivity.” So: the fighter versus the writer. But the two efforts aren’t simply opposed, since “the war cry enfolds the poetic solitude of the schreiben/Schrei (inscribing/cry)—the energy of historical inscription that dissolves into combat fatigue” (5).

This may be a good time to recall that in the interview with Ronell that opens JAC’s Spring 2000 issue, she hesitates before its obligatory first question: “Do you consider yourself a writer?” Taking a step back that will look very familiar to readers of her work, she suggests that this question “might be too masculinist” for her because it implies “some kind of volition, agency, control at the wheel of fortuna or destiny” (“Confessions” 247). In a response that questions the potentially humanist implications of the question, she offers that “one doesn’t call oneself a writer: one is called, or one is convoked by writing in a way that remains mysterious and enigmatic for me” (248). For Ronell, writing is less a matter of appropriation than of depropriation, less a matter of ego’s will and skill than of its complete surrender. In the interview and elsewhere, she describes the writer as one who responds to writing’s call by giving oneself over to it, or, in a Levinasian sense, as one who is “on assignment.” Here’s Ronell:
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. (“Confessions” 259–60)

“My” writing doesn’t originate with me but takes place in response to a call that comes from elsewhere, and the “assignation to respond,” Levinas explains in Otherwise than Being, is non-negotiable: prior to every decision, I am exposed to and called by the other, who demands a response that “does not leave any place of refuge, any chance to slip away.” Since the myth of interiority followed transcendence and immanence down the drain, there is nowhere to hide—you are originarily and irreparably exposed to an inassimilable alterity who interrupts your spontaneity and whose demand for a response comes through without reprieve: one writes in response to the other and because there are others. And inasmuch as “my” writing/speech is always already a response, it is made, Levinas says, “despite the ego, or, more exactly despite me.” When I am on assignment, no one can take my place: I am the one called, and to this call, only a “‘here I am’ (me voici) can answer.” However, in this case “the pronoun ‘I’ is in the accusative, declined before any declension, possessed by the other.” So, it doesn’t quite cut it to say that I write, that I respond to the other; strictly speaking, the one who responds is not an ego but “me under assignation,” me deprived of first person status, me without an I—or perhaps: my I sans any ego/ism. Blanchot has put it slightly differently, suggesting that writing effects my passage from the first to the third person, from an “I” to a “one.”

Essentially gutted, denucleated, unable to speak in the first person, the one who writes, Ronell suggests, responds by taking dictation, transcribing, operating as a kind of “secretary of the phantom” (“Confessions” 247). Writing is a function not of ego’s volition but of its dispossession by the other as or via language, which both grants and overwrites your “I,” cutting through you, opening you from the start to an inappropriable exteriority. And the defiguration that the writer undergoes, the interruption that transforms the I into a one, involves a traumatic (non)encounter with the real, as Lacan might say, a stupefying brush with essential nullity. Ronell implies in Stupidity that, in this sense, writing’s call is beyond the pleasure principle: “Writing and trauma; a conjunction
to explore.” And “the poets have in their way avowed [this] secret experience of stupidity,” Ronell says, “the innate experience of writing (henceforth not simply innate since stupidity names a structure of exposure).” This stupidity that operates structurally is “prior to the formation of the subject,” marking its “original humiliation,” and resolving “into the low-energy, everyday life trauma with which we live. It throws us.”

“Holding back the values associated with the intelligence of doing, the bright grasp of what is there,” the poet rides the work of language through to its un-working, where figures defigure, dropping him/her into the abyssal impossibility that precedes and exceeds (found grounds) all possibility. Reading Hölderlin’s “Dichtermut” and “Blödigkeit,” Ronell suggests that “poetic courage consists in embracing the terrible lassitude of mind’s enfeeblement, the ability to endure the near facticity of feeblemindedness.” It consists in yielding totally to “the dispossession that entitles as it enfeebles the writer, disengaging and defaulting the knowing subject who enters into contact with the poetic word.” Inasmuch as cognition is a tropological process and product, the poet’s courage appears to consist in disarm ing all tropological security systems, in dropping even the figural shield of the “I” and taking the step toward “pure exposure,” toward the “pure indifference” that is “the untouchable center of all relations.” From here, “the poet is not a figure,” Ronell writes, “but the principle of figuration,” the sheer potentiality of “world,” of “life.”

Thus, both the poem and the poet begin in “nonlife,” where, as Blanchot says, there is no more world and no world yet (Space of Literature 33). This “encounter” with nullity is not representable and “cannot become a story,” Ronell observes, but the poet still tries to tell of it, to evoke this non-experience “of an ungraspable event, a missing present,” that is the enigmatic “source” of the poem—indeed, of all writing. Whether the writer tries to tell of it or scrambles to cover it over, a submersion in stupidity grants writing’s (im)possibility. So, as Ronell suggests, even the writer who fights it, who struggles to detach from it, to shake it off, ends up kneeling at its feet, writing an ode to it. “For the writer,” Ronell writes, “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.” Writing and stupidity are indissociable, and every writing irrepressibly testifies to this relation, becoming a
(resistant) site where originary stupidity manifests itself in ordinary terms.

So, for example, in response to Thomas Pynchon's anguished apology for something he wrote twenty years ago, Ronell observes that "a blow can be served to the old ego by something written twenty days ago. Even twenty minutes. It is a matter of unrelenting assault and battery on whatever in you thinks it can write and live to tell about it." No matter how thoroughly you have researched and outlined and organized, no matter how certain you think you are when you sit down to write, Ronell observes, stupidity "continues to haunt and heckle, creeping up as the other work in progress and threatening from a vague presentiment of the future." There's no escaping writing's scene of abjection (which is pressing hard on me right now, as I write-delete, write-delete). Whereas ignorance indicates a negative limit of knowledge and so "holds out some hope, you can get to know it, maybe move on," stupidity is a different story: situated at "the very core of your writing being," it comes closer to "Blanchot's sense of nullity—the crushingly useless, that which comes to nothing." However, as Ronell reminds us, "the bright side of nullity is that the œuvre, its essential possibility originates in it." Stupidity is the (non)ground of writing and (so) of world—as well as of love and of friendship.

According to Ronell, stupidity names the primary relation upon which all other relations depend: you are with stupidity even before you're with your Self. A pre-originary relation, there is no ditching it, no grounds for separation or divorce; no amount of education or reason can free you from this partner with whom you are destined to share your "life." Whereas the Enlightenment project believed thought could be trained "to detach from stupidity," staging "brutality, prejudice, superstition, and violence as so many manifestations of the eclipse of reason," Ronell locates stupidity "at the very heart of reason and its pernicious institutions, including those of higher learning." So while Robert Musil, who retains the notion of a universal subject, acknowledges that we are occasionally given over to stupidity, Ronell's formulations indicate that one is never not given over to it, not even in moments of path-breaking brilliance. It was Heidegger who taught us that language is the house of Being, but what Ronell demonstrates in this work is that a transcendental stupidity is the house of language.

Now, philosophy tends to freak in the face of such (de)constructions and has, for the most part, assimilated any thinking of stupidity "to error and derivative epistemological concerns." According to Deleuze—whom
Ronell says in part inspired her project, posthumously putting her on assignment—what keeps philosophy from acknowledging stupidity as a "transcendental problem is the continued belief in the cogitatio." However, as Ronell reminds us, the figure of error can't "account for the unity of stupidity and cruelty or for the relation of the tyrant to the imbecile." Exposing a "taste for straightforward cruelty" in Musil's musings on stupidity, if not in his "lady"-smashing anecdotes, Ronell wonders why it is that the "really stupid" can inspire bloodlust. Is it possible that "the stupid make you want to kill them" because they act as mirrors reflecting the stupidity-in-you? That is, could the desire to "make dead meat of the stupid" be a symptom of stupephobia, a terrific struggle against attunement, against an extimacy that would out you, too, as stupid? Throughout *Stupidity* Ronell catalogues various atrocities committed against the bashetted and trashed other in the name of erecting stupidity-shields—in the name, that is, of maintaining a sturdy border/boundary between the cogitating self and the stupid other. However, as she repeatedly demonstrates, every evasive and protective maneuver comes (always already) too late.

"Stupidity, which cannot be examined apart from the subject accredited by the Enlightenment," Ronell writes, "poses a challenge to my sovereignty and autonomy"; it therefore poses a challenge to any notion of ethics based on this sovereign and autonomous subject. And *Stupidity* is nothing less than a post-humanist rethinking of ethics, a sustained interrogation into the possibilities for a responsible responsiveness that *begins* by acknowledging stupidity as a "transcendental problem," that begins by affirming "the irony of understanding." However—and this is important—*Stupidity* simultaneously embraces the never-ending struggle to understand. "There is a hermeneutic imperative," Ronell observes, echoing Friedrich Schlegel, and it is an *imperative* precisely because "understanding does not come but remains lost to us." There can be no past tense to an understanding that endlessly eludes us, so "assuming understanding were to be resurrected without an imperative lording over its provenance," Ronell writes, "this could happen only by turning away from what is incomprehensible."

One can only *have understood* by shooting a U in the face of the other, swerving back around, toward oneSelf, toward what one already knows or is programmed to assimilate. To act with certitude is therefore to be irresponsible, Ronell suggests, because to be certain is already to have turned away from the other for whom one is responsible. Affirming instead the inability finally to know, the perpetual *struggle* to understand,
Ronell embraces a responsibility for the other that exceeds the tiny bounds of the subject's intentions, a responsibility that has therefore grown unfathomably e-n-o-r-m-o-u-s. Putting a Levinasian ethic into play, she makes non-comprehension the "ground" for ethical attunement, suggesting that the only possible ethical position would have to be: "I am stupid before the other." And it's in order to "explore the extreme limit" of a responsibility that exceeds intentionality that she appeals to "the debilitated subject—the stupid, idiotic, puerile, slow-burn destruction of ethical being that, to [her] mind, can never be grounded in certitude or education or lucidity or prescriptive obeisance."

The debilitated subject of choice in Stupidity is Dostoevsky's epileptic Idiot, Prince Myshkin, who debuts in Chapter 4, "The Disappearance and Returns of the Idiot," and who illustrates the assumption of an ethical liability that precedes and exceeds intentional consciousness. Indeed, Ronell's stunning analysis exposes the Prince as an exemplar of ethical substitution, of being for the Other. Demonstrating sacrificial readiness, he answers to anyone—"Here I am"—and apologizes to everyone: "Being an idiot means always having to say you're sorry," Ronell observes. "A sorry being," he apologizes even to those who persecute him, absorbing injury and assuming responsibility, because, "having no understanding," he could not have been responsible. It is precisely because "he cannot take responsibility as a conscious, sufficient subject," that he takes full responsibility for everything and everyone. And as Ronell explains, the entire weight of his liability hinges on his description of himself as almost an idiot, "which modifies the accusers' sentence." "If he had been a total idiot," she observes, "he would have been home free," but this almost "engages the absolute": operating as an "opening that allows for consciousness and decision," it sparks his assumption of "absolute responsibility." It's because he was almost an idiot that "there can be no refuge, no ducking out as concerns the reach and breach of ethicity," Ronell writes. "It is because he posits himself as having been almost an idiot that he can—he must—take total responsibility."

However, lest I proffer the illusion that this punishingly excessive responsibility is specifically the idiot's problem, one from which "we" smarties might comfortably detach, let me note that Ronell's analysis centers on the stupefying and inescapable conditions of embodiment. Myshkin's body, she says, "points to the generality of the human predicament: idiocy has something to do with the nearly existential fact of being stuck with a body." As embodied beings, we are damn near idiots, unable even to know for sure what our "own" bodies are up to or
to what extent they're the ones calling the shots. There is no way to know
the body, not even your body: “there is no epistemological stronghold, no
scientific comfort or medical absolute by which to grasp your body once
and for all, as if it were ever merely itself, once and for all.” The body
“never stays put long enough to form self-identity,” Ronell writes. All we
can really hope to learn about body is “maybe how to feed it, when to fast,
how to soothe, moisturize, let go, heal.” Body never really comes clean.
Utterly uninscribable, it’s “that which exscribes everything, starting with
itself.” Still, as it turns out, body is also a writer: “the sweat, the nausea,
sudden highs, certain crashes, headache, stomach weirdness” and other
somaticizations are the writings of an “inappropriable text” body leaves
“in its tracks.” “A literality that is no longer legible, this body at once
withholds itself and produces resistant signs of itself,” signs that demand
a reading, Ronell insists, even if they disclose nothing but “the exposition
itself”—which, of course, is not nothing. It may be everything: body, in
testifying constantly to the limits of understanding, exposes the limitless-
ness of ethical liability.

I want to end by noting Stupidity’s unconventional layout and
design—another Ronell trademark. Its nocturnal theme is depicted visu-
ally: stars, for example, precede autobiographical snippets throughout
the book, acknowledging that the author remains mostly in the dark, even
when telling her “own” story: “no matter how strongly rooted in reference
a text may be, it still carries the trait of incomprehensibility from which
it emerged.” The book opens with the image of a full solar eclipse, so that
the Introduction proceeds under the sign of completely obscured light,
forecasting the “sheer stupefaction” involved in the poetic act. Images of
the progressively emerging sun separate the four chapters and the
“Satellites,” until finally the Kant Satellite, which closes the book, is
preceded by a double-page spread featuring the full (smug) face of the
sun, the moon fading out of sight. So Stupidity moves steadily from
darkness to light, from the nocturnal communications of courageous
poets toward the “solar systems of cognition” that found Kant’s
obsession with “clarity,” his struggle to protect philosophy from
literature, knowledge from style. What the book exposes, however, is
that the night of stupidity cannot simply be opposed to the light of
“clarity”; the former is the latter’s very condition of (im)possibility.
This is what Stupidity embraces from beginning to end, in content and
in layout.
Reviews

Works Cited


Reviewed by Daniel L. Smith, Pennsylvania State University

Marshall Alcorn’s *Changing the Subject in English Class: Discourse and the Constructions of Desire* poses an intriguing and timely challenge to rhetoricians and compositionists, particularly those committed to promoting social change through their pedagogy. As the book’s title implies, Alcorn argues that facilitating social change through teaching requires effectively changing the subjectivity of students. However, Alcorn claims, while we have changed the subject matter engaged in our classes, most rhetoricians and compositionists have not adopted a sufficiently complex understanding of subjectivity. Without such an understanding, it is claimed, teachers’ attempts to change their students’ subjectivity are unduly impeded. Developing a sufficiently complex conception of subjectivity is the first part of Alcorn’s challenge. The challenge also lies in conceptualizing and enacting pedagogies that take these more complex understandings of subjectivity into consideration. In addition to presenting what’s at stake in this twofold challenge, *Changing the Subject* responds to it boldly.

Drawing heavily on, but also deviating from, a Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity and discourse, Alcorn attempts to provide a