Stupidity for Everyone. In Praise of the Latest Book by Avital Ronell.[1] *A Review Essay.*

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The parts of a machine are elastic, indeed, flexible. But does this mean that there really isn't any mechanism at all, since the parts of the machine function as if made of butter? (And now think of a mechanism, say clock-works, made of materials which are far more flexible still than ours, so that the movements would be strangely irregular—would a mechanism like that have to be useless, or couldn't it actually be used?)

—Wittgenstein, *Last Writings*[2]

I

Framed by the pink of the dust jacket, there is a photograph on the cover of the book. Two men, "as alike in appearance as possible," sit at a table, in long black coats, with long white hair. One of them, facing front, bowed head, face hidden, closely stares into a very big book in front of him. The other, in profile, with bowed head and face hidden, stares closely in front of him, on the table, into an even bigger nothing. Beckett, from whose *Ohio Impromptu* the scene is taken, is Ronell's inquiry's authority, and he sets the scene: "Through the single window dawn shed no light. From the street no sound of reawakening. Or was it that buried in who knows what thoughts they paid no heed? . . . What thoughts who knows. Thoughts, no, not thoughts. Profounds of mind. Buried in who knows what profounds of mind. Of mindlessness."[3]

The theme of Ronell's latest book is stupidity, and there are various types of stupidity cited and examined in the book—Nietzsche's notorious example of "Russian nihilism": "to deal or not with an overwhelming problem you just lie face down in the snow" (p. 43); the type that Rosa Luxemburg called *Volksverdummung*, a "national dumbing down" (55); modern and postmodern "techno-ecstatic" stupidity (56); "artificial" and "artful" stupidities (59, 292); "panic-generated stupidity" (91); and "sheer stupidity," so "peerlessly" treated by

[1] Avital Ronell. 2002. *Stupidity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press).

[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein. 1990. *Last Writings of the Philosophy of Psychology. Vol. I. Preliminary Studies for Part II of Philosophical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), I, §878:112–13.

[3] Samuel Beckett. 1984. *Ohio Impromptu.* In *Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove Press): 287–88.

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Gogol (217). Most significantly, there is learned stupidity in the book (46), and narcissist stupidity of systems "that close in upon themselves as truth" (43), stupidity as "an opinion's established right" (57).

As the stupidities are defined, against each other and indifferent to each other, the theme is loosened and the reader is propelled to the point of hallucination. Correctly so. Because this turns out to be the most efficient method of grasping the theme: to flow with the stream of stupidity. We are led to learn that stupidity is overwhelming: intelligence is finite but stupidity, infinite (43, quoting Brecht), and that stupidity is profound; quoting Kant's idea of inner illusion, Ronell emphasizes that stupidity is internal to reason (20).

The truth of stupidity is in "obsession with (it)" (11). This is namely—and it is why the book was written—how academia is fashioned and how it qualifies: by strenuously protecting itself "from going too far in the direction of stupidity" (37). The language of academia is equally constituted by the constant fear that language tells upon itself, loses control of itself, "outruns the user" (122, quoting Schlegel)—that an act of speaking, writing, or listening makes the user appear "shallow," "airhead(ed)," "brain-dead," or, even a "bimbo" (39).

This book is simultaneously hilarious and scary. Since the Enlightenment, Ronell argues, thought has been "trained" to "detach" itself from stupidity (23); it has been coached in the most combative tricks and schemes to reduce stupidity "to the figure of error" (20). The Age of Reason, "targeted its adversary with a steady clarity of aim. The pedagogy of the Enlightenment stages stupidity, repeatedly casting brutality, prejudice, superstition, and violence as so many manifestations of the eclipse of reason" (44).

We, of course, still speak, write, and listen, in the Age of Reason. Illustriousness as measured by speed, in particular, is still essential. In the best Taylorist logic, to read, write, and listen in academia still means first of all—Ronell speaks from her and our experience—to "form part of a paramedics of thinking, arriving on the scene within minutes of an announced crime or enigma," to aid one's discipline in its "mopping-up operation" (64). In order not to reduce the speed, one is well advised not to ask Ronell's question: "What makes us think that those who posit the universal achieve intelligibility without collapsing merely into tautology?" (116)

F. W. Taylor came to my mind as I read Ronell. She rather recalls Marx. To work "like that," she writes, to be engrossed in this kind of work, "makes people stupid depriving them of essential types of non-production, leisure, meditation, play . . . rest, laziness, lolling around." She clearly has the same students as I do, the candidates asked to read like horses eat hay: scientifically measured, and to fill themselves up to the limit. This speed and smoothness of work, Ronell writes, is a "production of stupidity" (56).

Ronell argues, and I agree, that we, the "overreaders" (295, using Kant's term), the busy citizens of academia, are like Abraham in Kafka's parable. That Abraham "was prepared to answer the call with the promptness of a waiter but

was unable to bring it off 'because he was unable to get away, being indispensable; the household needed him, there was perpetually something or other to put in order, the house was never ready'" (288).

Some of us make it to the mountain, but then, like Abraham again, we act clever—"You want my son, I'll give you a ram." Cleverly, we remain part of "a structure that perpetuates sacrifice and substitutions" (310). Saved from being stupid, of course, "[we] could not tell, [we] simply could not decide [if this is] a blessing or a curse" (310).

Anxiety about being stupid, since the time of Rousseau at least, Ronell argues, makes authors "spectacular." "The movement traced by Rousseau from confusion to lucidity hinges, rather surprisingly, on a rhetoric of spectacle and representation" (49). This being true, how true may an author remain to her subject and to herself?

Rousseau makes it clear that there can be no immediacy of perception, indicating that where it is mimed, immediacy is error. "I can only see clearly in retrospect, it is only in my memory that my mind can work . . . [Only] afterwards it all comes back to me, I remember the place and the time, the tone of voice and look, the gesture and situation; nothing escapes me."

This is how the powerful and steady limelights of reason have been working, so that, Ronell comments, "stupidity is firmly placed on the side of life, of living presence and perceptible if unstable happening, of flashing immediacy" (51).

II

Ronell wrote her latest book—like she wrote *The Telephone Book* and *Crack Wars*—to help herself and her readers get "off the thought drug." Here, she offers a stupidity for everyone. Because I happen to be a historian, I find in her book, most of all, a stupidity for historians. If we, "pressed into service" (267), can still partake in some.

Thus, to the historian in me, this book is first of all about how to handle sources. Ronell warns me, and encourages me: refusing academic transcendence (abstraction, rationalization, comparison, even dialectics), I may end in a direct encounter, crashing against a body of documents, martyred, "mangled and breakable" (176), smeared and catered; hardly ever to be meaningfully put back together again. Following Ronell, and being a historian, one may easily be left quite lonely—uncomfortable at least—with witnesses who merely "mouth the words without necessarily intending them" (119). One may find oneself facing, for a flashing moment, "the totality of a story that cannot be told but elicits a mimetic tumble down the cold path of a missing [sense]" (276).

The historical time that our profession is based upon may tumble as well. Or so it appears: "Nietzsche and then Levinas have said that no one can be contemporaneous with the other, not really" (32). A large, if not essential, part of the forces that have built up Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment communities and histories, Ronell argues, appears to be an element of the obsession that

her book is about. Stupidity, as she writes, is "the ur-curse, the renunciation of which primes socialization in this culture" (10).

Smoothness (in flow of time namely) is another sweet temptation to historians that Ronell addresses. She finds the smoothness—discomfortingly for herself (and me)—even in authors so beloved as Robert Musil (through his "strenuous politeness," sometimes, "the world-historical space of brutality fades into a salon" [80–81]), or Walter Benjamin: "even the superior lucidity of Benjamin is compromised . . . when all seems lost, . . . the radical destruction that is broached turns out to be safely harbored by a moment in the dialectics . . . in the progression toward the absolute" (123).

There is little that one can do to resist the smoothness—perhaps, as Ronell suggests, to admit incomprehension. The perceptiveness of great historical texts, she writes—and she cites the great historical text by Marcel Proust—rests upon the writing's repeated and sudden moments of "suspended ignorance" (119). This is much more than just a matter of chronologies. Stupidity, according to Ronell, "functions as the jointure of timeliness, marking the failure to produce incongruence or to respond to the Nietzschean call for untimeliness" (27).

Poetry can express this in an even more scholarly way than fiction. Poetry, in Ronell and of Ronell, is "the tremor in existence that draws a blank—poetry is the idiot boy" (276). Hölderlin is quoted: "poets know from stupidity, the essential dulling or weakening that forms the precondition of utterance" (5). Ronell does not mention (but could have) how Hölderlin the madman was effective in dealing with historical time. In his commentary on *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and in his other poetic texts, he restored *caesura*, "the pure world, the counter-rhythmic rupture . . ."[4]; the abyss of time.

Ronell's *Stupidity* is about (historical) time, and, thus, it is about narrative as well. The big book that the two men surrounded by pink on the dust jacket are reading, we now know, is a grand narrative.

If authors, philosophers, and historians accept Ronell's arguments, they may find themselves deserted by their sources, their sweet sense of time, and their language as well: the language "hounded by referentiality" (111). As I happen to be a historian of colonialism, I read Ronell's book very much as a treatise on stupidity, history, and colonialism. I appreciate Ronell's (reckless?) suggestion that we dispose of that language and look for another. Indeed, there is no choice: "With no language of interiority to vouch for feeling, [we] are more or less stranded, bared to colonializing projection" (272).

I am, at present, in the middle of listening to and transcribing a couple of hundred tapes that I made of old Indonesians talking about their colonial childhood. Amidst this colonial project(ion), Ronell's book came as something of a solace.

[4] Hölderlin quoted and translated in David Constantine's *Hölderlin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 294.

Her examination of stupidity suggests that what I am going through may not be a problem only for me. Her (and Dostoevsky's) Idiot, at least, also "veers into the damaging experience of impossible literality" (203). In our anxiety about stupidity, she writes, "we" (and she indeed writes "we"), "are mortified by language . . . Pumped by language and written over . . . With bodies overwritten, we are weighed down by language, which lives through us. . . . epithetized . . . we are surrounded by the oppressive measure of citationality" (241).

In her chapter on Wordsworth's *Idiot Boy*, she says this in clear voice: "'Mute' and 'mutilation' operate homonymically for Wordsworth . . . As poetic conditions in search of reference, [these two words] point to a . . . constitutive disorder in memory. . . . disfigurement, as the mutilation over which the philosophers tried to write in an attempt to restore the proper, the literal . . ." (253). She helps to dispel the fear (for a short while) that, by just listening, we may become mute.

This is a nice thing about books: we can (if we do not care about academic civility too much) take a book to our bedside, and it is ours. In this way, to me, at my bedside, Ronell's is a book about stupidity, history, colonialism, and orality, as I need it to be.

Both my colonialism and Ronell's book on stupidity are very much about neighbors. The book's prime Idiot, Prince Myshkin, "speaks Russian with a foreign accent" (192). In this, he is part of history. For the classical Athenians, Ronell reminds us, "the stupidest were their immediate neighbors" (40). Then came the stupid "Cynics," "beggars," "tramps," "homeless," and, of course, "immigrants." On the same principle as in academia, "[g]raded and degraded, the little immigrant was from the start left back . . . by the bureaucracy of shaming"; "based on the ideology of scientific testing" (59–60). Intelligent people "brought an ideot upon the Stage, and made a great Something out of Nothing" (270, quoting Defoe). In the logic of academia as well as colonialism, and beyond, stupidity has always been "an indication for childlikeness, for immaturity." The "moros" for the sake of the culture have to be the "stupid-innocents . . . who will eat anything" (40). To say "stupid" "commits barely traceable acts of ethnocide" (27).

Amidst the mass of colonial and postcolonial scholarship, this book is a rare feat (and Ronell barely touches the field itself). Ronell's subalterns (would you believe it?) are not mute! Her (and Wordsworth's) *Idiot Boy* is "a creature who dwells prior to language" (254). And, if her idiots, savages, wild children (and natives) are at some moments mute, their muteness turns out to be ours as well. This is a sense in which the pastures of communication expand, and a new kind of understanding may emerge. Ronell's wording, also in this case, is precise: "The relation to understanding begins when you leave home, a migrant worker pressed by the heat and aporias of the commitment to have understood" (124).

Ronell, too, is a citizen of academia. To her also, the theme of stupidity has

been offered as an easy way out; in fact, "temptation" is the first word of her book (3). She might describe stupidity brilliantly, just brightly enough for herself, the author, to remain in the shadows. This is, indeed, why so many of us so happily write about colonialism. If intelligent enough, Ronell says, "one may establish an inner retirement colony" (296). She, too, could produce—as she notes in reference to Gogol—"a literature that flatters the moral [and intellectual] outrage of the reader" (220). Ronell, however, does not permit herself even a tiny space in that kind of brightness. All along the way, she elbows herself into the most uncomfortable positions in which authors can ever find themselves. She definitely is not what she calls "a total memoir-writing-I-know-myself-and-want-to-share-my-singularity idiot" (26). At the same time, and by the same token, out of shyness, all along the way, she makes herself brazenly visible. This is her advice and I take it eagerly: she writes in panic.

Ronell in her examination of the role of author is straightforward; she aims directly at the risky part: "We could even define as autobiographical any textual pattern of interference, interruption, or crossing produced by the confrontation of a narrative of consciousness with effects of order produced in excess of the capacity of totalizing figures to regulate them" (104, quoting E. S. Burt).

Her (and Dostoevsky's) Idiot "suffers indignity with a compassionate smile, almost always siding with the prosecutor" (204). "Precisely. Without the intention or means of dispossessing his addresses, he is in [his tormentors'] place, always, without exception. . . . He slips into the other's anguish. . . . [His] place has been designated from the start as being open to displacement, marked as it is by the apparent contingency of random encounter. . . . When his movements are imbued with sense or function, he keeps himself insistently out of place . . . He crashes every preconstituted party" (205). "Unhoused, he is free to assume other identities, to spot hidden inroads. . . . he finds himself in a concealed space of intimacy usually closed off to those who assume or have place" (215).

"Making himself ridiculous," Ronell writes, may bring about a "moment [that] savagely accelerates the history of the self . . ." (299). Possibly, this moment forcefully accelerates history as a whole. Ronell, at least, gives examples that point to this being the case: "Nietzsche on the streets, apologizing to every passerby for the weather"; "Kafka's man from the country, talking to the flea on his collar . . ." (212); or Kant, with his [stupid?] "desire" to be an "elegant writer," thus, for the philosophers or historians, authors who followed, "opening an experience of a self-doubting writing that proves unable to measure up to its task" (284).

In other words, Ronell's is an optimistic book. Through our very desire to write for and in this world, through our wanting "so badly to be bound by a book," we are exposing ourselves, and "the exposition bec[o]me[s] fragile" (284). Thus—so Ronell (p. 287) concludes a section on "The Popularity Contest of the Faculties"—our writing will always be

". . . . . brouillage permanent scrambling . . . . . ."

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III

Through the fear of being stupid, or through the pleasure caused by stupidity—against the overreading, the speed, the smoothness, and the academic civility—irony may be produced. "In a sense . . . stupidity is the interruption of the real, of that which is unassimilable . . . the moment of nonsymbolized gaping" (50). Stupidity, on one side, may insist on "a closure that confuses itself with an end" (70). But, on the other side, stupidity can make every conclusion laughable. Language itself acts stupid and makes itself laughable, when it "as contest posits . . . a thing in order to fall short of it, to keep itself going" (99). Thus, also, Ronell writes about herself writing: "I always arrive late to its encounter" (31).

As there is a spectacularity in knowledge, a theater, so there has to be a curtain that can be disregarded by an author. One may cross the line, advance through the curtain, "drop out of a role," "break up the illusion of the fiction" (136, quoting de Man). The more serious the theater of knowledge is, the more this may resemble a "buffo" (135), speaking in a language that plays at "registers of slapstick" (102). This farce, if it should be serious, cannot be merely incidental. This, if true scholarship is involved, has to be "the ironical imperative" (123), a "parabasis" (138), and, also, "permanent self-irony" (124). Only if an author persists in her or his constant proximity to irony, "definitional language seems to be in trouble" (126, quoting de Man).

Stupidity, irony, and writing, like almost all problems of the modern and postmodern world, are best examined in terms of technology. Ronell quotes Heidegger claiming to his friends "that his greatest accomplishment was thinking through the elusive premises of technology." De Man, next and further, "converted the logic of parabasis into a technological insight, marking, among other things, the priority of the values of disruption . . ." In Ronell's reading, de Man's, "persistent interrogation of the unanalyzable, disruptive instance at work in the text," is the new technology, looking for, and even creating "an instance that devolves from the technicity of a power failure" (97).

De Man impresses Ronell (and, in her reading, me) by his repeated and categorical stating of his "bewilderment, his unconcealed dependency on nonknowledge" (111). He even, and inevitably, pointed up "to . . . the 'stony gaze' . . . The stony gaze fixes a moment of 'absolute, radical formalism that entertains no notion of reference or semiosis'" (113).

For Horkheimer and Adorno, stupidity was a "tiny calloused area of insensitivity" (37), a lesion to be "repaired" (268). For Ronell, the moment of stupidity is close to the moment of death, and, thus—if we still believe in life—to the moment of birth and renewal. "The extreme passivity, the near stupor," Ronell writes, "situates [stupidity] dangerously close to the side of depletion and even death . . ." (9) This is "time out," but, "precisely because of the delay and distance that it implies, forms the basis of self-composure" (51). This mo-

ment, Ronell writes, "is possibly as close as I can get to an ontological 'experience'" (93). Indeed, this might be the most intense moment for a writer: "vacuous excess at the beating heart of language" (91–92).

Stupidity, as it is read in this book, comes close to "Blanchot's sense of nullity—the crushingly useless, that which comes to nothing . . . the bright side of nullity is that the oeuvre, its essential possibility, originates in it" (29). Stupidity as Ronell speaks about it (31) resembles the Kristeva/Vedic "remainder . . . residue . . . ashes . . . defilement . . . upon which the world is founded."[5] It is the state to which Deleuze pointed in his last writings: "*bêtise . . . l'indéterminé adéquat de la pensée . . . genitalité de la pensée*" (32).

As one reads Ronell, writing, even writing history, still seems possible: the "dumb yearning, hidden appetites" (263, quoting Shelley). Ronell's is a courageous book. In it—in contrast to, and beyond Foucault (the book we all have read before this)—"there can be no lockout for stupidity, no proven detection system . . . for madness" (197). This is why, in this book, Beckett can be the authority: "In a Beckettian sense, there's not much else to do but numbly go on, you can't go on, you must go on. The imperative doesn't interrupt the wave of stupidity but rides it, relying on stupidity to bring it home" (26).

[5] Julia Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror,* quoted in Robert Jan van Pelt and Carroll William Westfall, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 315.