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Taylor - Refusing Theory - JCRT 4.2
 Victor Taylor
 York College of Pennsylvania

WARNING: *The Telephone Book* is going to resist you.

—Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book*

Remember: When you're on the telephone, there is always an electronic flow, even when that flow is unmarked.

—Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book*

Can Schlegel's kick in the ass be read allegorically?

—Avital Ronell, *Stupidity*

Date: Tue, 01 April 2003 5:67:08'0700 From: Avital Ronell ar3@nyu.edu To:"

"Victor Taylor" taylorve@gmail.com Subject: Essay

MIME-CONTENT: text/html 8.01 KB

Dear Mr. Taylor,

I am terribly sorry for my prolonged e/absence'I have been out of the country and find myself besieged by deadlines and political activities.' I hope you are well and deeply apologize for the rude appearance of my silence: I am truly swamped.

Very warm greetings,

Avital Ronell

I

Refusal, especially of theory and thinking, takes on many forms, visceral, fantastic, and linguistic. The first two are easily traced as "refusal" manifests itself as "strong reaction," either in tossing or in the fantasy of tossing a theory book or colleague out of a window—the complement to Wittgenstein's "poker." The third form of refusal is much more difficult to locate since it appears or seems to appear as something *not there* or *not understood* or *not gotten*. These "refusals" are "performative contradictions" in speech. Not understanding¹ or, too simply, stupidity follows in this direction insofar as it expresses itself by its incapacity to properly express itself linguistically. "Duh," "er," "um," are instances of this refusal, a refusal of meaning. But is it altogether wrong to refuse meaning? Let's examine "duh." "Duh."² It is generally understood to be an extra or para-linguistic symptom of discourse's pause or failure'something akin to Aristotle's "mere voice" or an animal *phone*³. It is not a word *per se* since it references the "unavailability" of discourse proper, but it is the title of

¹See Jacques Rancière's *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, pp. 43-60.

²In *Stupidity*, Avital Ronell refers to literary, philosophical, and cultural "stupidity." "Duh" falls within the literary, Charles Bovary Bouvard, and P'cuchet stand as examples of literature's "interminable duh": "Whether in the precincts of the literary or the psychological, stupidity offers a whirligig of imponderables: as irreducible obstinacy, tenacity, compactness, the infissurable, it is at once dense and empty, cracked, the interminable "duh!" of contemporary usage. A total loser, stupidity is also that which rules, reproducing itself in clich's, in innocence and the abundance of world. It is at once unassailable and the object of terrific violence" (38).

³Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 1253b 8-12: ". . . man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals."

a book, a website, and, now, included in an academic essay, perhaps not the first. “Duh” evokes presence through a feeling of absence, marking that which is unavailable to discourse or that which is obvious. For example, “‘Duh’ evokes presence through a feeling of absence, marking that which is unavailable to discourse or that which is obvious, duh (or ‘no duh’).” Since “duh” or even “no duh” is an extra or para-linguistic phenomenon expressing or performing an unavailability of or obviousness within discourse, it has theoretical consequences and, more precisely, consequences for the future of theory. “Duh,” as a pause or failure or refusal, has been and remains the response to theory. This is easily testable by saying “*diff’rance*” in a departmental meeting. The testable “duh” transforms into the detestable “duh” as the pause or failure turns to “duh” as the expression or performance of the obvious—“duh (or duuuh), that’s theory,” a revving up or a coming to realization of some awareness, however minimal or previously unavailable discourse. “Duh” is not all bad, however. “Duh” has a significant place in the discursive practices surrounding academic, sometimes intellectual, discourse. “Duh” is evocative, calling up, as it were, stupidity’s rich tradition and within this tradition “duh” stands the ground of refusal. Refusing “duh” means resisting stupidity and its double, a “refusing duh,” conjures up a break between discourse and world. This duality of “duh,” the evocation of stupidity and its refusal, also elicits a response from knowing, stupidity’s reciprocal and necessary condition.

3. “Duh” is an evocation of the obvious and an instantiation of discourse’s pause or failure, but not the pause or failure of thinking. “Duh” demonstrates the interval between the “constative” and “performative” aspects of language. To this extent, “duh” is a critical, performative figure within the space of theoretical inquiry. “Duh” is para/extra-grammatical, yet it provides meaning through a performance of the *not there* or the *not getting it*. More than a simple phenomenon of speech-act theory, “duh” draws language into deconstructive operations; or, as Paul de Man writes in *Allegories of Readings*, “there can be no text without grammar: the logic of grammar generates texts only in the absence of referential meaning, but every text generates a referent that subverts the grammatical principle to which it owed its constitution.”⁴ He continues that “what remains hidden in the everyday use of language, the fundamental incompatibility between grammar and meaning, becomes explicit when the linguistic structures are stated.”⁵ “Duh” becomes the “subversive duh” as it means *not there* or *not getting it* and performs the possibility of “something” *not there* or “something” *not gotten*. The “subversive duh” enacts and betrays its own stupidity by marking its own allegorical structure and necessary relationship to knowing and not knowing.
4. Avital Ronell’s *Stupidity* is an *unreadable* (see Paul de Man), dense, and comprehensive study of the phenomenon and concept of “stupidity” that at times seems to belong more to the field of epidemiology than to the disciplines of philosophy and literature. Stupidity is a condition, with an array of symptoms, definitions, and contexts within Western literary and philosophical culture. “The temptation,” Ronell writes in her introduction entitled “Slow Learner,” “is to wage war on stupidity as if it were a vanquishable object.”⁶ War on stupidity, as a war on anything else, presumes that some original order can be regained or restored some state of purity achieved. Wars on drugs and disease revolve around the rhetoric of health—bodily, spiritual, and communal. Wars promise to return us to peace and harmony. Wars promise to right wrongs or vanquish “evildoers” or “theorists” or those not considered to be “the

⁴Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, p. 269.

⁵De Man, p. 269.

⁶Avital Ronell, *Stupidity*. Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002, p. 3.

children of God.” Departmental or academic-ideological wars are more complicated, as anyone in higher education has learned, however slowly. These are designer wars, promising nothing other than change or business as usual and delivering on neither. These are wars for and against stupidity’wars that never can be won or lost. This fact of stupidity, to the extent we have facts of stupidity, moves Ronell’s analysis forward: “Stupidity exceeds and undercuts materiality, runs loose, wins a few rounds, recedes, gets carried home in the clutch of denial’and returns.”⁷ Stupidity is not just “bad” thinking or cognitive, calculative error. It isn’t simply mistake: $7+5=13$. It is much more and much less than those banal failures of information retrieval and calculation. Stupidity is “essentially linked to the inexhaustible . . . [it] is that which fatigues knowledge and wears down history.”⁸ Stupidity is heavy, dull, and slow, with no interest other than to have no interest . . . no thinking . . . only to advance procedure and format, ending in the perpetual violence that is the ineluctable status quo. The future of theory, then, will be, like the future of everything else, stupid, but not completely.

5. What is stupidity? Where does one find it? Stupidity is amorphous’sometimes it appears as a pathogen suspended in droplets over the entirety of life. It enters into life, spreading throughout the world. It is there and it is here, which makes stupidity in many ways the ontological condition of all thinking, since all thinking misses something. Ronell charts stupidity’s clinical presentations and records her suspicions of its sub-clinical imperceptibility. The question inevitably arises, Who shall report it? Who can see stupidity’enough to say, there it is?

It is undoubtedly someone’s responsibility to name that which is stupid. In the recent past the task of denouncing stupidity, as if in response to an ethical call, has fallen to the “intellectual” or to someone who manages language beyond the sphere of its private contingencies. At least this is part of the fantasy: consider the tone of French, German, and English writers, not to say certain academics, who ceaselessly expose that which is stupid or has failed in understanding. Locating the space of stupidity has been part of a repertoire binding any intelligent’or, finally, stupid’activity that seeks to establish itself and territorialize its findings. The relatedness of stupidity to intelligence and, of possibly greater consequence, the status of modulations, usages, crimes, and valuations of stupidity itself remain to a large degree absent from the concerns of contemporary inquiry. No ethics or politics has been articulated to act upon its pervasive pull. Yet stupidity is everywhere.⁹ “”””

6. Stupidity is “everywhere,” yet no one sees it in its entirety. Collectively, “we” know it or claim to know it, however. In the “intellectual’s game,” those with whom we disagree are “stupid.” Those who write books we doesn’t like are “stupid.” Those who don’t write at all are considered really “stupid.” In maintaining the omnipresence of stupidity Ronell doesn’t advance a more forgiving and generous attitude toward “stupidity,” far from it. Those writing texts we don’t like and those not writing at all are still stupid or *really* stupid. They are just stupid, like everyone else, in a different, perhaps more rhetorically effective and obvious way. The degrees of stupidity are endless, since no one can ever completely miss something or completely get something. It is Flaubert, for Ronell, who sees not the essence of stupidity, but the *force* of stupidity’its trace: “Stupidity is something unshakeable. Nothing attacks it without

⁷Ronell, p. 3.

⁸Ronell, p. 3.

⁹Ronell, p. 37.

breaking itself against it. It is of the nature of granite, hard and resistant.”¹⁰ The hardness of stupidity is a reference to “Thompson” “the inscription on the Pompey column Flaubert encounters on his travels that generates a meditation of the *b’tise sublime*. In this circumstance stupidity is defacement, a defecation, “answering the call of nature” or eternity within the space of the ancient. “The temple,” Ronell writes, “was not destroyed by Samson or even the winds of God’s wrath but by the stain of stupidity, the excremental trace imperturbably bequeathed to eternity.”¹¹ Thompson is Freud’s “Rat Man” to eternity and this association with the scatological is not accidental, especially considering the range of constructions linking stupidity with “shit” or excess: *shit-for-brains*, *stupid shit*. The point, however, is that this contaminating act is an uncalled for response, an excess to what is expected or, perhaps, not expected. Stupidity is excremental, leaving a trace or stain, an inscription or surplus where no inscription is required or desired:

Now the story of Thompson’s signature, of what happened when Mr. Thompson, on that day, passed into perpetuity, cannot be restricted in range or significance to the status of example or anecdote, a parable in which the column would be left standing. In a rigorous sense, Thompson did pull the column from a context it might have enjoyed without his appropriative signature. It is as though the signing, a synecdoche of stupidity, defacing the memorial, had unstoppable consequences. Henceforth the monument essentially attributes stupidity and, for Flaubert at least, will have always been its attribute: Thompson has effected a substantiation of the attribute, for there is no stupidity without monument. Flagging the ancient, he answered a call that was no put out. The naïve and insolent arrogance that consists in responding where no response is invited is an effect of monumental arrogance.¹²

7. This uncalled for stain or response belongs to a category of symptoms, but the discourse of symptomology fails to render it in any meaningful way. “Thompson” is a symptom of stupidity, yet it exceeds any form of stupidity we can imagine. What can we say about “Thompson” and Thompson? Is “Thompson” a perverse “souvenir? An instance of “leaving” something behind as opposed to taking something away? A “skid-mark” on eternity? Was Thompson simply an ignorant tourist? The stupidity of “Thompson” cannot be quantified or cognitively exhausted or wiped away, which is what makes it fundamentally stupid. The inexhaustibility of stupidity underscores all of *Stupidity*, with Ronell methodically closing down and opening up avenues of philosophical, literary, and theoretical inquiry. The sense we have of stupidity from Flaubert is further complicated by the introduction of Kafka and his trouble with “calling” and “responding” in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Where Flaubert sees “Thompson” as a paradigmatic act of stupidity for its indecorous act, Kafka sees Abraham occupying, as Ronell states, a separate “zone of stupidity,” with “reflexes of stupidity” becoming more and more sporadic and difficult to observe: “Acts of stupidity where no response is called for, whether by carving huge childlike letters into an Alexandrian column or, in the same neighborhood, answering the call of God as if you were the one being summoned (Kafka’s Abraham)’these are reflexes of stupidity.”¹³ “Reflexes of stupidity,” to continue the “bodily” discourse surrounding stupidity, respond “to a call that was not made.”¹⁴ Ronell asks, “but

¹⁰Ronell, p. 14.

¹¹Ronell, p. 14.

¹²Ronell, p. 13.

¹³Ronell, p. 13.

¹⁴Ronell, p. 13.

how, precisely, can we *know*?" This "knowing" is posed in the negative, in the study of the predicament one who responds as if the call were "meant for him." For Ronell, the perverse tourist Thompson finds some resonance with the "primal father," Abraham. The stupidity of Abraham, just as the stupidity of Thompson, appears as a call to be answered or a "cut." Thompson cuts his response to the call of eternity into the Pompey column as Abraham, first, cuts his response to God in himself (circumcision) and, secondly, into Isaac (uncut cut): "Abraham, primal father, turns into a kind of Thompson who has imposed his name in an act of monumental error."¹⁵

8. The difficulty with "stupidity" and *Stupidity* is that the subject of inquiry escapes explanation. Stupidity, inherently, occupies a non or pre-discursive space—a space not under the dictates of cognition. "That's just stupid" points beyond discourse to the nonsensical. In other instances, "that's just stupid" underscores the complete transparency of something. The two nodal points of "stupidity" create a vacuum in the center, an ongoing tension in which stupidity, more than knowing, determines the logic of a series of events or ideas. Stupidity has a brute force AND a philosophical trace that can be associated with the Oedipal Father and the law of mimesis: "Incapable of renewal or overcoming, the stupid subject has low Oedipal energy: he has held onto ideas, the relics and dogmas transmitted in his youth by his father."¹⁶ Ronell, referring to the work of Jean Paul, examines the role of the "*dummkopf* reader," a mimetic reader, one "remain[ing] loyal to the text."¹⁷ More troubling than "loyalty" is the "*dummkopf* reader's" "deadly repetition," a repetition leading to a mechanical reprocessing of the text within rigid cognitive boundaries: "The stupid are unable to make breaks or breakaways; they are hampered even on the rhetorical level, for they cannot run with grammatical leaps or metonymical discontinuities. They are incapable of referring allegorically or embracing deferral."¹⁸ This blindness to texts is also a blindness to others and oneself. "The stupid cannot see themselves."¹⁹ and this invisibility allows stupidity to pass imperceptibly across the world, "avoiding the screening systems of philosophy."²⁰ If stupidity travels unnoticed, then what can be done about it? Capitulating to stupidity betrays our Enlightenment impulse to "wage war" on error and superstition. Are we not historically obligated to fight stupidity, especially the gross stupidity that accompanies the petty dictates of everyday life?
9. Since the essence of stupidity is unapproachable, one must follow the forces or traces or lines of stupidity until they fade imperceptibly into the scene of thinking. In the preface to "The Question of Stupidity: Why We remain in the Provinces," Ronell recounts her encounters with the topic of stupidity. The first is more personal, dealing with experiencing the generic unfamiliar. The second encounter involves a "call" from Gilles Deleuze:

While I was resolutely not learning Tai Chi vocabulary, Deleuze had ended his life. In the memories and papers that remained, Deleuze, it was reported, had called for a thinking of stupidity: no one had ever produced a discourse, he was remembered to have said, that interrogates the transcendental principles of stupidity. I received this call as an assignment—when I write I am always taking a call, I am summoned

¹⁵Ronell, p.14.

¹⁶Ronell, p. 16.

¹⁷Ronell, p. 17.

¹⁸Ronell, p. 17.

¹⁹Ronell, p. 18.

²⁰Ronell, p. 20.

from elsewhere, truly from the dead, even if they are my contemporaries.²¹

And

Date: Mon, 3 2003 09:35:06-0500 From:''' Avital Ronell ar3@nyu.edu To:''' "Victor Taylor" >

' Dear Victor,

I've been going nutz with overwork (I'm chair of my dept. in addition to everything else). Tell me, is it too late to respond to you?

Very best,

AR

Quoting Avital Ronell ar3@nyu.edu:

Professor Ronell,

Thank you for your reply. I have until April 15th. Respond by email?

Victor

This special issue of the JCRT centers on Jean-Michel Rabat's "future of theory"—a "future" that encompasses both the possibility of theory "in" the future and the condition of theory "for" the future. Your many critical essays and books, *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania*, *Dictations: On Haunted Writing*, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, *Finitude's Score: Essays for the End of the Millennium*, and, most recently, *Stupidity*, have not only helped us define "theory" or theoretical inquiry across the humanities, but have extended our understanding of "theory" as a complex engagement with, among other things, the crisis in/for thinking and acting. While many scholars in this age of post-theory have turned or returned to more elaborate forms of historical, political, or aesthetic "explication," you have continued with "theory." That is, your writings resist this easy reductionism in style and content, leaving the reader with increasingly more "difficult" texts. Could you comment on this intellectual "burden"? The burden of theoretical inquiry in an age of born-again criticism?

10. The "transcendental principles of stupidity"? Deleuze's challenging "call" pre-empts the far easier task of delineating various literary, philosophical, and cultural "symptoms" or "acts" of stupidity. The "transcendental principles of stupidity" as an object of inquiry resists the very objectification of stupidity that would be required for such a comprehensive analysis. Deleuze, in *Repetition and Difference*, states this with some apprehension, especially as he considers the shift in the conceptual plane from stupidity understood as error and stupidity recast as "structure of thought":

A tyrant institutionalized stupidity, but he is the first servant of his own system and the first to be installed within it. Slaves are always commanded by another slave. Here too, how could the concept of error account for this unity of stupidity and cruelty, of the grotesque and the terrifying, which doubles the way of the world? Cowardice, cruelty, baseness and stupidity are not simply corporeal capacities or traits of character or society; they are structures of thought as such. The transcendental landscape comes to life: places for the tyrant, the slave and the imbecile must be found within it—without the place resembling the figure who occupies it, and

²¹Ronell, p. 32.

without the transcendental ever being traced from empirical figures which it makes possible. It is always our belief in the postulates of the *Cogitatio* which prevents us from making stupidity a transcendental problem. Stupidity can then be no more than an empirical determination, referring back to psychology or to the anecdotal—or worse, to polemic and insults—and to the especially atrocious pseudo-literary genre of the *sottiser*.²²

11. The failure in “understanding” or addressing stupidity occurs as one, according to Deleuze, refuses to move stupidity from the space of empirical determination to a plane of transcendental inquiry. This lesson on transcendental thinking in relation to stupidity is relevant to the work of theory—theory as (quasi) transcendental inquiry. The first lessons of theory pre-dates “theory,” with Plato’s *kh’ra*²³ opening a “third” space that negotiates the world of Forms and sensible things. “Stupidity,” then, marks a failure to see theoretically or see the structure of seeing, knowing. The obvious world is one *sans* transgression and difference. Failing to see the obvious as obvious is the blindness of stupidity insofar as the “stupid-reader” mechanically reassembles the dominant logic of the text-world. Why can’t the stupid see themselves? Why does Deleuze “call” for making stupidity a transcendental problem? Why does Ronell answer the call? The answer: theory. The “stupid reader” is a reader without a sense of difference, a sense that the world and text open onto multiplicities, not just “interpretations” of historical, sociological, and biographical data, which are extensions of a primary “*Cogitatio*.” To see oneself entails an awareness of espacement—an interval between sensation and cognition as the early phenomenologists through Merleau-Ponty have contended. More to the point, “theory” resists the neurotic, often times mindless, reproduction of the same as something different. This resistance, as Paul de Man has written, places reading against itself as both a resistance “to” a form of unity and a resistance “from” a form of unity: “There can be no text without grammar.” There can be no stupidity without meaning, since meaning is grammar of stupidity.

II

Why does Avital Ronell answer Deleuze? Here, one must be a “disloyal reader” of *Stupidity* and respond, “because she knows it is impossible to answer and not to answer.” Deleuze’s call is false, already unanswerable; it requests that which is impossible, making visible that which is invisible. However, in accepting the impossibility of the task Ronell resets the parameters, making the (im)possibility and inevitability of stupidity the hiatus to be confronted: “Never hitting home, unable to score, language is engaged in a permanent contest; it tests itself continually in a match that cannot even be said to be even or altogether futile because the fact remains that this match is ongoing, pausing occasionally only to count its loses.”²⁴ This seems to be less a response to Deleuze and more a rejoinder to Paul de Man whose “ghost” is visible (and invisible) throughout the book:

The contestatory structure, yielding no more than a poor score, paradoxically depends upon failure for its strength and empowerment. In this regard it resembles the ironic consciousness and the experience of permanent parabasis, the ‘parabases of the ironic consciousness which has to recover its energy after each failure by reinscribing the failure into the ongoing process of a dialectic. But a dialectic, segmented by repeated negations, can never dance’. We might say, reinvoking the improbable *pas de deux* of

²²Gilles Deleuze. *Repetition and Difference*, trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 151.

²³See Plato’s *Timaeus*.

²⁴Ronell, p. 99.

Nietzsche and Hegel, that a dance, as contestatory match, can never be a dialectic but, being engaged in a fundamental (mis)match, must, in a more Beckettian sense, go on and on, seeking referent and refuge. It is not so much that it casts about for the "right referent," as Paul de Man puts it, but that language as contest posits such a thing in order to fall short of it, to keep itself going.²⁵

13. "Duh" functions as a parabasis insofar as it allows a deviation or transgression from narrative unity. The structure of knowing fails itself, keeps itself in an act of perpetual "reinscription" to disguise its lack of referent. Stupidity, then, appears as a seizure within language, a falling away to a limit, theory: "This epileptic reaction can be recruited into service by the commanding neurosis in order to help the mind-body detox surplus stimulants. It corresponds to something of a cleansing mechanism, having converted an excess that cannot be coped with into a somatic chute."²⁶ This parabasis as seizure also corresponds to the "future of theory" as a future prepared against the deferral of the "right referent." Just as the parabasis/seizure responds to the call of the "commanding neurosis," so too does theory; it eternally attends to stupidity as an anti-method of research. The point to be made here is that throughout *Stupidity* Ronell rewrites "stupidity" as a confrontation with a theory of "refusal"²⁷ either as a refusal of the "commanding neurosis" to see itself or the refusal to accept that which Franz Kafka describes in "The Refusal" as a *status quo* in which "our officials have always remained at their posts."²⁸ The desire for or displacement or refusal of the "right referent" is the space joining stupidity and theory. Stupidity seeks and finds a "right referent" and theory refuses it. Theory seeks the hiatus and stupidity refuses that with even greater force. Ronell's *Stupidity* gives us Kant's, Nietzsche's, Wordsworth's, Heine's, Kafka's, de Man's, Derrida's, Deleuze's, Musil's, Heidegger's, Paul's, Lacan's, Freud's . . . refusal and acquiescence of and to stupidity.

From: Avital Ronell ar3@nyu.edu To: "Victor Taylor" Subject: Re
MIME-CONTENT text/html 8.01 KB

Dear Victor,

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity of speaking to this question (if it is a question). I'll be brief. What you are calling the age of post-theory collapses into the age of pre-theory, tending to disavow serious work that has been done which haunts and hounds the works that claim to skim off hard won theoretical insight. This effect of haunting, as well as the consequences of disavowal, are well known. We are also familiar with the syndrome that causes the dead to return. I work for the dead, am under their dictation.

To be less cryptic, and even pragmatic, one material factor that distinguishes me from neighboring theorists or post-theorists, is that I hold a Ph. D. in German. Many scholars who practice theory come from other fields'English, French, Rhetoric. While most of my career unfolded in Comparative Literature at Berkeley, where I was the resident theorist (a resident with a not often subtle eviction notice nailed to her door), my background in German literature and philosophy is probably determinative. I spring from another source than others who are invested in critical thought. I'd like to think that I belong to a lineage of German dissident writing'the

²⁵Ronell, p. 99.

²⁶Ronell, p. 232.

²⁷See Franz Kafka's "The Refusal" collected in *The Complete Works of Franz Kafka*. New York: Schocken, 1971.

²⁸Franz Kafka, "The Refusal," p. 263.

ironists and troublemakers ranging (these are posited ideals not hallucinated identifications) from Schlegel, Heine, Jean Paul, Nietzsche, sometimes Arendt, part Benjamin, definitely Thomas Bernhard, and possibly other historical ass kickers. There is an alternative lineage within the Germano-French registers. That lineage is inconceivable without a strong commitment and addiction to the literary work, to the arduous labor of reading in a way that only literature teaches and practices. So, unlike some other theory-heads, I am irrevocably trained on and by literature, instructed by the poetic word, baffled by its audacities.

As for why I am relentless about pursuing difficult and dense locutions, texts, descriptions, etc.: Believe it or not, I consider this relation to language to be my political and ethical responsibility. Anything else would be, to my way of thinking, slacking or dozing off, giving up and extinguishing the light. As scholars and activists I feel we need to avert the tendency, very American, to accommodate any version of thinking lite. My adherence to so-called difficult works may be a way of resisting American simplicities which, as we now see and know, have murderous consequences and are world-destructive.

Totalizing narratives are firing up war engines; simplistic pre-Nietzschean notions of evil are spiking the death toll, the refusal to grapple with Levinasian passivity beyond passivity or Derridian clashes with the unforgivable or Judith Butler's gender mutations result, in my view, in referential chaos, lazy losses, true aberrations and regressions. I am not trying (anymore) to change the world; just to read it. Nowadays this commitment in itself requires some separation from value-positing positions that have backed off the hard stuff. I am sure that everyone is doing her best. So I do not grade or degrade the efforts of others. For all of us, the work that we do involves renunciation, crashes, doubts, wall to wall rewrites.

Not to mention in my case thankless days of solitude, listening to texts that are barely approachable or have been marked down as unfashionable, off base. I feel responsible to these works; I have a sense of their fragility and finitude. They need me to be there. The others have advocates and cheerleaders and shelters. Or that's what I tell myself.

Quoting "Victor Taylor" < taylorve@gmail.com >

III

Avital Ronell's "high Oedipal energy" study, as it cuts across the various appearances of stupidity in literature and philosophy, makes its own call. It is, in many ways, a call to "refusal" 'a refusal to set aside difficulty and complexity, to set aside the call itself. The future of theory, I'll argue, is intimately related to the place of refusal in the humanities—refusing "duh" and "refusing duh"/refusing theory and "refusing theory." More than Bartleby's "preference" not to, not to live, Ronell's "refusal" is an anticipation of death, death as finality. As one thinks, one must be committed to life with this in mind, much in the same way Deleuze, ironically, championed vitality and creation, which is pure possibility. What, then, is the possibility of theory? Theory's future as it engages, refuses, and loses to stupidity? The answer begins not with a refusal of stupidity, however, but with a refusal of theory. Everyone associated with "theory" has what Ronell terms an "autobiographical ordeal," sometimes more than one, illustrating a resistance to theory. Ronell relates several in *Stupidity*—one early in her career and the other at UC Berkeley where, as she describes it, had an "eviction" notice tacked to her door. The lesson from these "ordeals" and others is that when stupidity refuses theory something complex occurs—stupidity acts contrary to its own stupid impulse. Theory forces stupidity to become "theoretical," to, contrary to what Ronell argues, see itself or part of itself. In other words, stupidity

reveals its own stupidity by drawing a contiguous line of thought from rhetoric to world, either in an “eviction” notice, rejection of a theory manuscript (“the fad of theory is over”), or in a negative tenure ballot (“His/her courses are too theoretical for our students”). In these instances, stupidity seeks refuge in “simplicity,” a simplicity that it unavoidably complicates by its own act of referral to a homogeneous reality that does not exist.

And Avital Ronell from “Kant Satellite: The Figure Of The Ridiculous Philosopher; Or, Why I Am So Popular”:

Notes

Today we will plan our research day around Franz Kafka’s “The Hunger Artist.” “Because,” said the hunger artist, lifting his head a little and speaking, with his lips pursed, as if for a kiss, right into the overseer’s ear, so that no syllable might be lost, “because I couldn’t find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else.” These were his last words, but in his dimming eyes remained the firm though no longer proud persuasion that he was still continuing to fast” (277). Questions: What kind of foods do you like? How often do you eat them? What makes you appreciate your favorite foods? What kind of foods did people in Kafka’s time eat? Can you find images of your favorite? Magazines? Internet? What food do you like that the “hunger artist” may have enjoyed? (Give three (3) examples) * * *

15. The “stupid” line of thought²⁹ forecloses on the possibility that things can be *otherwise*, to reference Deleuze. The refusal of theory by a reduction of theory to a by-gone set of relations or a set of suspect practices and observances symptomatically reveals the process/structure of stupidity, a process that pre-empts or interrupts a creative line of thought. While the content of such a rhetorical move is overtly stupid (for some), it is actually the method that is more indicative of “stupidity.” The frenzied chase of impeaching facts reveals the structure of stupidity as it functions as a general model for research, a motivator for discovering “reality,” ideological or political. The so-called condemning “facts” regarding theory, derived by a list of exclusionary rules, become “important” as information “about” the future of theory—a future that for some should not exit. Rather than risk exposing the “structure” of stupidity, “disciplinary neurosis” rushes in at this precise moment to blind the reader to the dubious nature of the isomorphic relationship between language and world. This methodology, absent any specific data, is consistent with a widely available “mode” of literary and philosophical analysis that “cheats” the inquirer into thinking that no other possibilities exist. To a larger extent, this “mode” is the dogma of the humanities and the obstacle to theory in the past, present, and future. Stupidity obstructs theory with information; and, this gathering of information becomes research, an anti-theoretical endeavor to make the world clear and simple.³⁰
16. Like the inscription “Thompson,” this is observable at many levels of university life. How many times do our students unwittingly reproduce Foucault’s “rules of exclusion” through plot summaries or litanies of “facts” about an author or literary work? “Just the facts” as a cognitive exercise within disciplines trains the brain to be anti-theoretical. “What time does the clock say on the mantel?” “What color is the gazebo?” What color are Madame Bovary’s eyes?”

²⁹In (neo) traditional spaces for the study of literature one must invoke the parodic as a way of introducing theory. Here is a *faux* assignment used to initiate a theoretical analysis of Franz Kafka’s “The Hunger Artist”:

³⁰See Ronell’s discussion of Schlegel’s “On Unintelligibility,” p. 146-161.

“How did people at the time understand Shakespeare’s *Othello*”? “How many innings were played in game four of the 1978 World Series?” Information, retrieval, information, retrieval. The same instrumentalist or mechanical cognitive exercises appear across cognate fields in the humanities with a more direct antagonism to theory manifesting itself as a necessary “instrumentalism.” In the service of institutional monotony and mediocrity instrumentalism rises on stupidity’s tide, leaving theory on the shores of ruin. What would it mean to refuse this? To refuse not only the “facts” of stupidity but also its structure? A refusal would demand the creation of discourses needed to force stupidity to betray its own simplicity, its own place of refuge in thinking. Here one can just as easily refer to Deleuze as Ronell (to be a disloyal reader) for a first discourse that refuses stupidity:

The philosopher, the scientist, and the artist seem to return from the land of the dead. What the philosopher brings back from the chaos are *variations* that are still infinite but that have become inseparable on the absolute surfaces or in the absolute volumes that lay out a secant [*s’cant*] plane of immanence: these are not associations of distinct ideas, but reconnections through a zone of indistinction in a concept. The scientist brings back from the chaos *variables* that have become independent by slowing down, that is to say, by the elimination of whatever other variabilities are liable to interfere, so that the variables that are retained enter into determinable relations in a function: they are no longer links of properties in things, but finite coordinates on a secant plane of reference that go from local probabilities to a global cosmology. The artist brings back from the chaos *varieties* that no longer constitute a reproduction of the sensory in the organ but set up a being of the sensory, a being of sensation, on an anorganic plane of composition that is able to restore the infinite.³¹

*The satellite is set to gather information on the paradoxes and aporias of world-class popularity. As the device that tracks its findings, I can only open the dossier on this problem. A mere copier and data bank attached invisibly to a larger apparatus, I am programmed to situate the problem and respond to its call. Scanning and recording, I regulate the flow and generate further signals. There is something they’re trying to tell me about an ancient complicity among Kant, Kierkegaard, and Kafka, and this consortium, they maintain, is related to the coordinates of what has passed for French theory. A matter of top planetary priority, high maintenance: high as Mount Moriah. Archival anxiety turning the clock back to what it never finished telling.*³²

17. The chaotic, infinite stream of telemetry from the “satellite” sets into motion rules of decoding, with the reader as principal receptor, taking the sounds for “calls” to be equated with something real. The satellite is the “information retriever and sender” *par excellence*, as if technology re-created that which is most limiting, most stupid in humanity and made it its triumph. The overflow of data, however, betrays the “satellite’s” function as the collecting/sending process fails to complete that which is possible. For the future of stupidity, one must reserve this failure as a success, a success to the extent that receiving/sending of data bears no excess. As long as excess is hidden or reabsorbed into the structure of thought stupidity will remain in full force. If, however, excess remains excess, not just more, stupidity will periodically fail itself, expose itself as “complexly simple.” As this occurs “the future of theory” will be possible, not as another code to unravel the data-stream but as other possibilities for thinking.

³¹Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 202-3.

³²Ronell, p. 280.

'These possibilities are not all blessings. The indeterminacy of all possibilities makes for uneasy promises, even from God. The first and final call, then, comes from the divine, but the call is, as Ronell notes, not for "you." In her closing analysis Ronell turns her attention back to Abraham and Isaac to place stupidity alongside the ridiculous:

The biggest bluff, for all that, may have occurred when the delusion was implanted, the hope nurtured, of a chosen people. Isaac, he was and was not called. More radically uncertain than persecution (when you know they're after you, you're already dead meat; you *are* the ram caught in the bushes) is being cheated by the call. Too stupid to know whether your name was called, you are ridiculous. You are ready to go up for the sacrifice, but in the last moment you are benched. They don't need you. An animal will serve the purpose, your purpose. This call, it told you that you were the one, the chosen. You set yourself up to receive it, you were set up. A cheated cheater. It was no longer recognizable whether the call meant to serve as punishment or reward. Your father took the call. You inherited it, with all the expected static; you inherited his burden, which you thought you could lighten. You followed your father in mute complicity. As you were walking, as he was preparing to give you up, you could not tell, you simply could not decide, whether this call that expelled you from your house was a blessing or a curse.³³

18. Isaac, cast from his house (order), must experience the ridiculous, the excess of the world and God in ways different from Abraham. He must experience a "mute complicity" AND the terror of Abraham's intention as he faces not only the ridiculous nature of the call, but the stupidity of the call. Is this a blessing or a curse? To know, which is not to know, the excess of the call? Perhaps it would have been better, more loving for Abraham to turn the blade toward himself—to keep the call to himself and thus leave the possibilities for being ridiculous and stupid open, undetermined. Abraham, were it not for his "duh," could have been "theoretical" if he had thought *otherwise*, accepted all possibilities of an infinite God, even the *otherwise* than God. Isaac, however, is in a different place, a place where stupidity and the ridiculous dominate life. He is the displaced sacrifice who, for Ronell, comes to meaning for those refusing stupidity. In this sense, it is Isaac who answers the call of theory, a call to refusal, but not a refusal of one's own. The refusal, the displacement was forced on him, leaving him with both the awareness and unawareness of stupidity. Isaac, at the end of Ronell's study, seems to be the future of theory as he stands in the middle of something in excess of his own place in God's universe. Is it a blessing or a curse? Are we to live by another law, a law of refusal, or a law of the ridiculous? How would we phrase it without sounding . . . stupid?
19. Show infinite contempt and admiration for all things stupid.

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³³Ronell, p. 310

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