

**Avital Ronell. *Test Drive*.**

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Avital Ronell has clearly been preoccupied by the unholy trinity of science, the test, and Nietzsche, particularly the Nietzsche of *The Gay Science*, for some time. In 2003 her intricately woven musings on this three-headed topic were published in two journals.<sup>1</sup> The articles, which can perhaps be seen as test runs, appear in re-worked and expanded form as the central section of *The Test Drive*. Ronell states that these writings issue from “a philosophical need – such needs still exist – to respond to the question of testing” (14). What drives her to take up the question of testing is its non-question status in philosophical circles, she says:

The problem is that the test has not yet become a philosophical question, although it belongs to an ever-mutating form of questioning. As that which legitimates and corroborates or, conversely, as that which carries the considerable burden of delegitimizing assumed forms of knowledge or legal, pharmaceutical, screen, and other decisive claims of an epistemological or projective order, the test at once affirms and deprives the world of confidence; it belongs to a specific sequence of forces that not so much annihilates as it disqualifies ... think of the test as that which advances the technological gaze as if nothing were. (14)

We (post)moderns live out our lives under the sign of the test, observes Ronell. Our relation to “questions of truth, knowledge, and even reality” now hinges on testability (17). The imperative to test pervades “everything from recent warfare (the unending Gulf War being a privileged example here) to urban planning, military strategy and national security, space, medical and

reproductive technologies, the aporias of ethics, drug and polygraph testing, the steroidal tests of the Olympic Games" (18). This battery of tests not only facilitates the 'policing of political sites and bodies'; it affects processes of subjectivity on a deeper level, suspending the individual's authority, pending further investigations, to vouch for the "experienceability and constitution of reality in general" (19). Freud's reality-test has updated and outdated Descartes': in the post-psychoanalytic era, reality, the real deal, real life, or your own favourite term for the existential bottom line "has been submitted to various testing apparatuses whose character and significance still need to be investigated" (19).

So, Ronell resolves to probe this "complicated extravagance of testing" (19). Putting her foot on the accelerator, she drives her investigation "through the backroads of scientific investigation and diverse cartographies of rupture" (16). Her mapmaker-in-chief is none other than "'Fred' Nietzsche," as she playfully calls him. This is because the said Fred opens up scientificity to a myriad of possibilities which some would deny it today: his is a scientificity that "without compromising the rigor of inquiry, would allow for the inventiveness of science fiction, experimental art, social innovation, and, above all, a highly stylized existence" (156). Most of all, Nietzschean science is a research programme for joyousness, and Ronell answers its call, romping ebulliently with some of the key motifs of the work she nicknames "Gay Sci."

*The Test Drive* is, at the very least, an exhilarating ride. Literary types will applaud as Ronell unfurls the 'cunning sails' of her prose, to switch from the road-trip metaphor to Nietzsche's watery one in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Reviews of Ronell's work rarely fail to mention her daredevil prose style with its constant multi-register surprises, although the surprise factor is lessened, it must be said, if one reads her in the plural: she tends to recycle her favourite conceits.

Those test runs paid off: the central, eponymous section of *The Test Drive* is a fascinating engagement with *The Gay Science*. Nietzsche himself once confided to a friend that when reading he would attach his own thoughts to the sentences of the writer in question, instantaneously erecting "a new structure on the existing pillars that presented themselves in this way."<sup>2</sup> Ronell's reading strategy is similarly free-wheeling and productive: she can veer away from an aphorism in *The Gay Science* to an analysis of how Abraham and Job were tested by God and, in the latter case, contested him right back, and then proceed to pole-vault into contemporary American politics by reminding us that George W. Bush, "this little Isaac" bent on replaying the wars of his father, informed his country on 9/11 that what they had just experienced was a test (167).

Although at times *The Gay Science* temporarily disappears beneath this welter of associations, at other times Ronell resuscitates its ability to make its own claims. She points out, for example, that Nietzsche does not anticipate contemporary fears about the dehumanising possibilities of the test. For him, the experimental impulse is predicated on strength of personality and, more suprising still, love:

Nietzschean science scorns cold objectivist observation and limp grapples, requiring instead something on the order of an affective self-deposit and intense commitment. Prompting the encounter of great problems with great love, scientific curiosity and experimental imagination trace their novel routes. Nietzsche appears to envision a mapping of scientific study that is auratically pulled together by the love borne by a strong personality; buoyed by love, such a science could not degenerate in principle to a hate crime against humanity. (177)

The chapters preceding and following Ronell's gay encounter with Nietzschean science are arguably less successful. The later sections of the book contain a ventriloquised meditation by Husserl – a Husserl who quotes Derrida! – and another long examination of Nietzschean themes, this time drawn from a variety of works. The former, although undeniably creative, smacks of gimmickry, and the latter, while rich with insights on Nietzsche, seems to take us away from the problematic Ronell initially assigns herself.

The early chapters cite a vast diversity of references to the test, from ancient Greek writings on the practice of testing the testimony of slaves by torture, to Popper on falsifiability, to the Turing Test, and many, many more. This part of the book comes off as somewhat underargued: it is as though Ronell opens book after book for our edification, piling them one on top of the other and pointing to sundry interesting passages, but doesn't quite get around to putting all this embarrassment of riches to work. This objection could be obtuseness on my part: she is often said to have trademarked a unique methodological gambit by deliberately breaching the conventional rules of engagement between the subject and the object of inquiry, stalking her putative quarry so closely that it fragilises beneath her gaze, and ours. It could be that I'm missing the point about Ronell's tactical evasions of the point. However, it could also be that some parts of the book attest to the strain of the contemporary academic philosopher obliged to submit to the dominant form of institutional testing: perpetual publishing.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Avital Ronell, "Proving Grounds: On Nietzsche and the Test Drive", *MLN* 118 (2003), pp 653-69; Ronell, "The Experimental Disposition: Nietzsche's Discovery of America (Or, Why the Present Administration Sees Everything in Terms of a Test)", *American Literary History* 15.3 (2003), pp 560-74.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Rudiger Safranski, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, trans Shelley Frisch (London: Granta Books, 2002), p. 127.