While Derrida first mentioned the ‘deconstruction of the pedagogical institution and all that it implies’ in Deconstruction and Criticism (1979), his involvement with GREPH (Groupe de recherches sur l’enseignement philosophique) and the place of philosophy in French state schools and universities predates this by a decade. Latterly seen as a distancing gesture with regard to the institutional success of deconstructive literary criticism in the American academy, Derrida’s thinking vis-à-vis pedagogical institutions presents another source of his ethico-political notion of responsibility. Though work on GREPH, the États Généraux de la Philosophie, and the International College of Philosophy have been brought up to date, a number of other contextualising sources of Derrida’s thinking in this area have been marginalised. This article explores two such essays: “Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties” (1992) and “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils” (1983). Such a repositioning of Derrida’s earlier research is crucial to the enterprise of narrating its cross-cultural reception history.

Derrida’s interest in the relationship between philosophy and the university has been evident since the mid-1970s, particularly as a result of his work with the ‘Group for the Research of the Teaching of Philosophy’ [GREPH, Groupe de recherches sur l’enseignement philosophique] founded in 1975. Subsequent research with the États Généraux de la Philosophie in 1979, and the International College of Philosophy, which was officially opened in Paris in 1983, confirm this concern. This particular side of Derrida’s work was largely ignored by his reception in Anglo-American universities prior to the early 1990s, where deconstruction was assimilated as a form of ‘aggressive relativism’ or ‘textual free-play’ (Judd, 1992, 300). Derrida’s contribution to these groups and movements expresses his resistance to the much touted ‘death of philosophy’, and was particularly apposite at a time when the ‘use-value’ of humanistic, as opposed to scientific or ‘ends oriented’ research, was being questioned by educational managers.1

GREPH was formed by a group of prominent intellectuals (predominantly professors and teachers in the state sector) in response to what they viewed as a threat to the teaching of philosophy in French secondary schools. ‘The Haby Reform’, as this legislation was known, attempted to reduce the number of hours allocated to philosophy in the curriculum and to limit final year students’ access to the subject. The Haby Reform was interpreted as a major piece of post-1968 educational legislation, and even as a direct response to the events of May-June 1968. For some of the key figures on the French left, the Haby Reform was interpreted as an attempt on behalf of the right to challenge the critical function of philosophy within the curriculum. Indeed the founding members of GREPH viewed the Haby Reform as a way of advancing a physiologically correct age for the study of philosophy. In 1979 GREPH’s opposition to this aspect of the new educational reforms led to the formation of États Généraux de la Philosophie, a larger
national forum for the debate of these issues. With the exception of “Sendoffs” (1990) none of the texts produced by GREPH have been published in full English translation. These significant elisions have strengthened, rather than questioned the misreading of Derrida’s work, and contributed to its initial de-politicisation in the Anglo-American academy.

Brunette and Wills (1989) provide some interesting translations of GREPH’s proceedings, largely confirming the impact they would have had they been available earlier in Derrida’s reception history. These translations indicate that Derrida’s contribution to GREPH was concerned above all with philosophy’s ability to encourage the development of students’ critical skills. This capacity, as Derrida outlined, can act as an ‘arm of resistance (for example against all forms of violations of human rights, abuse of police power, and injustice)’ (12).

Correspondingly, the published transcript of the ‘Political Seminar’ in Cerisy in the early 1980s, sheds some further light on Derrida’s feelings at the time of the Haby Reform. According to Fraser (1984), in her summary of the proceedings, Derrida referred to this pedagogical revisionism as a direct attack on Marxism, though he stressed that this association should not be used to indicate a simple form of political affiliation on his part (133). On the contrary, GREPH’s intervention stemmed from the requirement to defend the freedom of critical enquiry in a way which questioned, rather than endorsed, the intervention of the state’s political agenda into university life. As this GREPH text illustrates, Derrida believed, ‘that in a given historical, political situation of the University, it is necessary to fight so that something like philosophy remains possible’ (Brunette and Wills, 1989, 141). Derrida’s subsequent work on the relationship between pedagogical practices and the power of the state to delimit the production and dissemination of knowledge can be viewed as a long-term commitment, rather than as a passing fad to counter the American deconstructionists.

In France, on the other hand, Derrida has continued to be concerned with pedagogical questions, most notably, through his involvement with the development of the International College of Philosophy following the election of the Mitterrand government in the early 1980s. This project has been concerned with the future of the university, combining Derrida’s interest in the Kantian concern with the architectonics of the university with that of the metaphysical structures of western philosophy.

In a series of works published since the mid-1970s, then, Derrida has sought to ‘initiate discussion’ about what he refers to as the ‘implacably political typography’ of the university (Derrida, 1983, 18). In these texts Derrida recognises that ‘existing conventions of the university cannot be left out ... or withdrawn from the scene’ of academic discussion (Derrida, 1985, 4). Deconstruction itself is intimately associated with engendering new forms of rationality. In “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils” above all, Derrida situates this ‘new responsibility’ in relation to the requirement to rethink the university’s model of community in terms of différance. While a number of scholars have suggested that Derrida’s work resists the ideal of community altogether, principally as an attempt to protect an ideal of singularity from the encroachment of totalitarianism, “The Principle of Reason” challenges this assertion outright. Derrida’s understanding of community would speak of the ‘responsibility of a community of thought’ (Derrida, 1983, 16).

On the one hand, Derrida attempts to found a new form of community which is based on his understanding of différance rather than metaphysics. At a deeper level, he is concerned with rethinking the very ground of community itself. Evidently a series of threads run throughout the following sections on Derrida’s engagement with the Kantian model of the university:

1. the harmful incursion of the state into the decision making processes of the university,
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principally related to questions of censorship
2. Derrida’s critique of the Kantian model of the university that underpinned the foundation of the University of Berlin in 1810
3. the significant place Derrida reserves for philosophy in the philosophical community, once again an important theme of Kant’s thought
4. the university as a model of a community based on respect and tolerance for the Other, and
5. Derrida’s belief in an a priori form of radical questioning as opposed to the calculative logic of ‘applied’ research

KANT AND THE LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHY

Published in 1798, The Conflict of The Faculties was Kant’s last major work. Kant positions the philosopher in an intermediary position between the state and the public in the role of an educator who protects the principle of reason. This autonomous role frees philosophers from the influence and control of the state, and allows them to pursue the search for knowledge as an unquestionable end in itself. ‘It is absolutely essential’, Kant writes, ‘that the learned community at the university also contain a faculty that is independent of the government’s command with regard to its teachings, one that, having no commands to give, is free to evaluate everything, and concerns itself with the interests of the sciences, that is, with truth: one in which reason is authorized to speak out publicly’ (Kant, 1979, 27-29). It is this understanding of philosophy, allied to the principle of reason, that founds the institution of the university; without it there can be no university in the Kantian sense. Philosophy, Kant writes, ‘must be established at a university; in other words, a university must have a faculty of philosophy. Its function in relation to the three higher faculties is to control them and, in this way, be useful to them, since truth (the essential and first condition of learning in general) is the main thing, whereas the utility the higher faculties promise the government is of secondary importance’ (45). Within the university one would treat knowledge a little like an ‘industry’; the professors would be ‘trustees of knowledge’ and together they would form a collective scholarly entity which would be entirely autonomous. The ‘philosophy faculty’, Kant writes, ‘because it must answer for the truth of the teachings it is to adopt or even allow, must be conceived as free and subject only to laws given by reason, not by government’ (43).

The word conflict in Kant’s title relates to his discussion of the distinctions between the designated ‘higher faculties’ (medicine, law, and theology) and the ‘lower faculty’ (philosophy). Insofar as the higher faculties are subject to the rule of law, they are bound by the power of government. Kant’s underlying irony, however, is obvious – the ‘higher faculties’ are concerned with the ‘real’ work of inculcating vocational skills, while the ‘academic freedom’, enjoyed by the ‘lower faculty’ of philosophy, marks a questionable concession by government. Kant therefore advocates a careful separation of the faculties that nevertheless attributes a special place to philosophy: ‘The higher faculties must, therefore, take great care not to enter into a misalliance with the lower faculty, but must keep it at a respectful distance, so that the dignity of their statutes will not be damaged by the free play of reason’ (35).

The teaching of philosophy should be founded on the recognition that its main duty is toward the pursuit of truth, and its advocates should be allowed to ‘speak the truth to the power of government’ without inhibition or loss of tenure. Ironically, as Kant points out, the philosophers do not speak directly to the people, but to the ministers of the state itself. However, the state is in place to act on behalf of the people and to disregard the counsel of philosophy, if and when it decides to do so. As he is aware of the power of the state, Kant recommends a strategy of caution,
arguing that the philosophers should not become the state’s politicians as the possession of power inevitably corrupts the free judgement of reason and the pursuit of truth. Philosophy cannot directly take a political position then – it can only advise, or risk losing its right to immunity from the charge of interested enquiry. The power of the university, for Kant, is strategically confined to a power to think and to say, though not necessarily in the public sphere, as this step would involve direct action, a form of power that he denies to the members of the university.

Conflict between the faculties, Kant writes, is ‘first, inevitable, but second, legal, as well; for the lower faculty has not only the title but also the duty, if not to state the whole truth in public, at least to see to it that everything put forward in public as a principle is true’ (53). Philosophy has the duty to investigate the ‘rational origin’ and the ‘rational basis’ (55) of the proposals of the higher faculties, but the people will always side with the ‘businessmen of the three higher faculties’ (51), who reject the ‘philosophy faculty’s teaching [as] a poor substitute for their inclination to enjoyment’ (49). Kant recognises that the conflict of the faculties ‘can never end’ and moreover that ‘it is the philosophy faculty that must always be prepared to keep it going’ (55). Philosophy must ‘never lay aside its arms in the face of the danger that threatens the truth entrusted to its protection, because the higher faculties will never give up their desire to rule’.

Kant’s own political assessment of the relationship between the faculties is nevertheless strongly in evidence, notably in quasi-apocalyptic tones. It ‘could well happen’, he postulates, ‘that the last would some day be the first (the lower faculty would be the higher) – not, indeed, in authority, but in counselling the authority (the government)’ (59). For the moment, however, philosophy’s indeterminate ‘use-value’ and the conflict of the faculties which ensues is a luxury that enables the state to appear liberal.

“MOCHLOS, OR THE CONFLICT OF THE FACULTIES”

“Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties” was first delivered in 1980 at Columbia University to commemorate the centenary of the founding of its Graduate School. Derrida uses the occasion to describe how Kant’s discussion of the function of the university, the purpose of philosophy, and the nature of academic freedom, served as a ‘pre-inaugural discourse’ (Derrida, 1992, 10) for Willhelm von Humboldt when he founded the University of Berlin in 1810, and thereafter for western pedagogical institutions. Kant’s meditation establishes a natural link between the university, philosophy and the principle of reason as the ‘court of the last resort’. Seventy years after Humboldt’s plan for Berlin, Kant’s model was also particularly influential in the development of Columbia University in 1880; hence the significance of Derrida’s lecture to the Graduate School.

In his discussion of Kant, Derrida reiterates the importance of the essay’s historical and political context. One of the important dimensions of Kant’s text relates to the question of state censorship, a theme which obviously preoccupied the members of GREPH too. An important configuration of themes in Derrida’s discourse, though ones which were overlooked by literary deconstructionists at the time, are academic responsibility and the ‘self-legitimation’ and ‘self-affirmation of the university’ (8). All of these questions are touched on by Kant and it is Derrida’s aim to recontextualise his assumptions in a modern setting. While Derrida does not answer these assumptions in definitive terms, he argues that the ‘most interesting, most novel and strongest responsibility, for someone attached to a research or teaching institution, is perhaps to make this political implication, its system and its aporias as clear and as thematic as possible’ (22). What is ‘hastily called deconstruction’, Derrida writes, should be understood in terms of ‘taking a position
... toward the politico-institutional structures that constitute and regulate our practice, our competences, and our performances’ (22-23). Moreover, in terms which Derrida will later reiterate in ‘The Principle of Reason’, he positions deconstruction in relation to a rethinking of politics and responsibility in the university: ‘Precisely because deconstruction has never been concerned with the contents alone of meaning, it must not be separable from this politico-institutional problematic, and has to require a new questioning about responsibility, an inquiry which should no longer necessarily rely on codes inherited from politics or ethics’ (23).

Derrida’s rethinking of the principle of reason underpinning the classical Kantian idea of the university is linked to a rethinking of all totalizing or global forms of the political, especially the exclusivist logic that opposes ‘left’ and ‘right’. The theme of academic responsibility is strongly allied in Kant to the question of autonomy as we have seen (Kant, 1979, 23). A number of key areas are important for Derrida’s reading: the autonomous status of the university is evident in its authority to create and award titles, and to pass judgement on the work of other scholars; knowledge is to be treated like an industry, the professors acting as ‘trustees’ of knowledge; and the idea that the university is a collective organisation that has autonomy from the state. For Derrida, however, Kant’s understanding of the university’s autonomy is severely undermined by an unseen, non-university agency – the state.

In support of this argument, Derrida describes how the publication of Book Two of Kant’s *Religion Within the Limits of Reason* prior to the publication of *The Conflict of the Faculties*, elicited a letter of disapproval from Friedrich Wilhelm II, the King of Prussia. In the letter that Kant quotes at length in the Preface to his discussion of the university, the King questions Kant’s ‘responsibility’ and ‘duty’ as a ‘teacher of the young’ (Kant, 1979, 11). The King’s letter confronts Kant with a breach of his own understanding of a responsible university teacher: ‘You must recognise how irresponsibly you thus act against your duty as a teacher of the young and against our sovereign purposes which you know well’. Though it is to be expected that Derrida highlights the power of state censorship in order to reject it, the purpose behind his quotation of this passage returns us to his opening questions about the responsibility of the university. Derrida finds it difficult to assume that he could be sure of as much in the modern university: ‘For if a code guaranteed a problematic, then we in the university would feel better about ourselves, whatever the discord of the positions held, or the contradictions of the forces present. But we feel bad about ourselves, who would dare to say otherwise?’ Derrida finds the King’s intervention ‘unimaginable today [1980] from the pen of a Carter, Brezhnev, Giscard, or Pinochet, or even, perhaps, from that of an ayatollah’ (6). Whereas for Kant responsibility and reason ‘make an appeal ... to a pure ethico-juridical agency, to pure practical reason, to a pure idea of the law, and correlatively to the decision of a pure egological subject, of a consciousness, of an intention that has to respond, in decidable terms, from and before the law’ (11), Derrida is concerned with interrogating the assumed ‘natural’ status of these categories and questioning the meaning of responsibility as it functions in Kant’s discourse. This is not in order to abandon reason, as so many scholars have argued, but so as to enable him to consider a ‘new type of university responsibility’.

**LANGUAGES AND INSTITUTIONS OF PHILOSOPHY**

In “Languages and Institutions of Philosophy” Derrida returns to Kant’s understanding of censorship in *The Conflict of the Faculties* once again. Kant is important for the modern university *vis-à-vis* the question of censorship precisely because of the emergence of the philosopher teacher at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. Unlike Descartes, Spinoza,
Leibniz and Hume, Kant was concerned with organising the new space of the university. The changes that took place could not, Derrida argues, ‘remain exterior to philosophical discourse itself; to its procedures and its content’. The succession of Friedrich Willhelm II in August 1786 set in motion a train of events that Derrida describes as an ‘offensive ... against the supporters of the Aufklärung’ (124). The King’s attempted censorship of Book Two of Kant’s Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, must be read in the context of the Edict of Religion in July 1788 which prohibited ‘everything that appears opposed to official religion’. This decree was further strengthened in December 1788 following the emergence of the ‘law against the freedom of the press’.

Now, as we saw in the above discussion of “Mochlos”, Kant responds to the King’s letter in the Preface of The Conflict of the Faculties and Derrida’s purpose is to explore Kant’s understanding of censorship in greater depth. In Book One of Kant’s treatise on religion, Derrida describes how he establishes the ‘necessity and legitimacy of censorship’ and that the ‘sanctity of the moral law should be the object of the greatest respect’ (124). At this time ‘experts in theology’ were authorised by the state to act as censors within the university. According to Kant, the theologian must assume two functions: he is appointed as an ‘ecclesiastic, to see the well-being of souls’, or as a ‘scholar’ where his function is the ‘well-being of the sciences’. Even if these roles are overseen by one person the ‘rule of bipartition’ should not be crossed. While such a concern with censorship was overtly evident in the late eighteenth century, Derrida warns against those who seem to believe that it is no longer active in the modern university. Today, Derrida cautions, censorship does not derive in its modern form from a ‘central or specialized body’, but rather from a ‘highly differentiated, indeed contradictory, network’. The fact that the modern university is ‘always censured and censoring’ is evident in the restrictions placed on research projects and research funding. Derrida’s involvement in the International College of Philosophy was as a result directly motivated by the attempt to ‘give priority to research projects not presently considered legitimate or sufficiently developed in other institutions’ (126), and concerned with focusing on those areas that ‘are not allowed to be uttered or done in present-day institutions’. In this sense, the College is committed to a ‘theoretical-cum-institutional analysis (an auto- and hetero-analysis), in order to detect within itself the effects of censorship or of nonlegitimation of all kinds’. By following this course, Derrida returns to the ‘constitution’ of the ‘philosophical concept of censorship in Kant’ (127).

For Kant, then, censorship occurs at the intersection of ‘pure reason’ and the ‘disposition of force, force at the disposal of the state’. It is therefore impossible to ‘construct the concept of the state without inscribing the censoring function within it’. The Kantian understanding of censorship describes ‘a critique which has force (Gewalt) at its disposal’ and Kant’s main example of this is the nexus of theological and state power that had been the official institution of censorship since the seventeenth century; the place of the theologian thus explains his role in the university. Derrida maintains that Kant’s point is to ‘take note of a censoring power and of a legitimacy of state reason as a censoring reason, the power of censorship, but also to delimit this power; not by opposing it with a counter-power, but with a sort of non-power, of heterogeneous reason opposed to power’. Unsurprisingly Kant would like the Faculty of Philosophy to have the right of censorship, but because he defines philosophy in terms of saying rather than doing, he must also deny it the political force that it requires. Derrida precisely summarises the conflict that arises in the following terms: ‘Kant intends to legitimize the reason of the state as a censoring reason, which is supposed to have the right of censorship in certain conditions and within certain limits. But, on the other hand, he wants to protect pure reason itself from all censuring power. Pure reason should, by right,
exercise no censorship and should be exempt from all censorship’ (128).

It is precisely this limit between reason that censors and reason that does not, which interests Derrida – principally because it passes right through the institutional space of the university and through Kant’s division of the faculties. Derrida summarises: ‘No power should have the right of inspection over the Faculty of Philosophy, as long as it is satisfied with saying, not doing; with saying the truth without giving orders, with speaking within the university and not outside of it’. Kant therefore wants to protect reason from censorship. It is only the philosopher, as the guardian of truth and reason, who can determine who and what should be censored. Such power should not reside with the members of the Higher Faculties. As Kant establishes in the Preface to the Second Edition of Book One of Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, the philosopher not the theologian should be the ‘master of pure reason’ (Derrida, 1984, 131). This leads to the unique position of the philosopher: ‘The master of pure reason is simultaneously located in a department, in the outside space of the larger circle, which remains exterior to the circle of biblical theology, for example, and by the same token, is able to comprehend in his vision and his critical inspection the entire field of knowledge’ (132). While the philosopher is the ‘legislator of reason’ (133) he can only teach an ‘action’ not a ‘content’. Coupled with these two aspects – the philosopher as legislator, and the ‘non-place’ of the philosopher in the institution – is Kant’s architectonic description of the university as a living organism. The Kantian university is regulated by its own internal rhythms and laws.

A challenge to this commitment to reason is evident in Kant’s distinction between ‘technique’ and ‘architectonics’. The former applies to what today would be called ‘ends oriented’ research, that is, research that is regulated by industry and business. Kant’s concern with ‘architectonics’ similarly corresponds to the modern notion of ‘pure’ or ‘fundamental’ research. For Kant, the latter should prevail. When Kant argues, as Derrida maintains, that ‘we cannot learn philosophy, we can only learn to philosophize’ (137), he emphasises that the philosopher is above all ‘the legislator of human reason’ (138), not a statement of absolute or dogmatic presence. In the face of state censorship, Derrida describes deconstruction as a ‘principle of disturbance’ or ‘counterforce which permits the utterance and even the deciphering of the forbidden sentence’ (130).

If we now return to “Mochlos”, we can place Derrida’s critique of Kant’s understanding of the university in the context of two recent developments in the ‘politico-epistemological space’ (Derrida, 1992, 14). The first relates to the ‘border-conflicts between non-university centres of research and university faculties claiming at once to be doing research and transmitting knowledge, to be producing and reproducing knowledge’. Whereas for Kant, the ‘outside’ of the university ‘could be confined to the margin’, in the modern university, the ‘state no longer entrusts certain investigations to a university that cannot accept the structures or control the technopolitical stakes’. The relationship between the modern state and modern university, where some universities merely function as teaching or research-based institutions, means that the ‘whole architectonics of The Conflict of the Faculties finds itself menaced, and with it a model regulated by the happy concord between royal power and pure reason’. New technological developments, especially in the retrieval and storage of information, threaten the centrality of the university as the ‘center of knowledge’ (Derrida, 1992, 14-15). The power of trans-national corporations means that it is no longer possible to ‘separate knowledge from power, reason from performativity, metaphysics from technical mastery’ (15). In the modern setting, Derrida writes, ‘It is not ... for reasons involving the structure of knowledge, especially impossible to distinguish rigorously between scholars and technicians of science’ (16). Such ideas mean that the university has to ‘surrender any representation as a “guardian” or “trustee” of knowledge’ (14) that it might have
once possessed.

For Kant, of course, the management of the ‘outside’ was fundamental. One such area of exclusion is that of the ‘lettered class’, students trained by the universities who go on to become ‘government agents, diplomatic aides, instruments of power’. Kant calls them ‘businessmen’ or ‘technicians of learning’, as they undoubtedly represent the power and interests of the state as opposed to the exercise of ‘responsible’ and ‘free judgement’ that resides with the lower faculty of philosophy. Kant calls on the government to institute a law that will put before the university all statements issuing from the lettered class of clerics, magistrates and doctors, therefore requiring that they submit all ‘statements of a constative type (those claiming to tell the truth), or indeed of a “practical” type’ (16). Kant’s decree embodies his classical understanding of the pure function of the university. No state bureaucrat ‘would have the authority to use his or her knowledge publicly without being subject, by law, to the control of the faculties, “to the censorship of the faculties,” as Kant literally says’. Kant’s understanding of pure philosophy is underpinned by a familiar target of Derrida’s thought: the attempt to distinguish between constative and performative utterances. As is evident in “Declarations of Independence”(1986), this is an attempt to ‘limit the effects of confusion, simulacrum, parasiting, equivocality and undecidability produced by language’ (Derrida, 1992, 18). In order to reduce the inherent instability of language, Kant’s response to the King of Prussia’s letter argues that philosophy is a ‘quasi-private language’ (19) which, by circulating only within the university, diminishes the risk of flaunting its equivocal status. Here the concept of the university is underpinned by a pure concept of philosophy and the separation of constative and performative utterances.

Derrida’s deconstruction of the constative/performative opposition attacks the Kantian idea of pure philosophy. Focusing on the inescapability of equivocation in any speech act, Derrida confronts Kant’s attempt to reconcile or even to disavow the conflicts that inevitably arise between the faculties. Though Kant proposes various ways of interiorising the conflicts within the university, thus protecting the disputes from the ears of the public, whom he castigates as ‘idiots’ (16) and ‘incompetent’ (28), he recognises that such conflicts are ‘interminable and therefore insoluble’. In order to ameliorate such internal strife, however, Kant proposes a parliamentary solution. The higher faculties would be aligned with the state, and therefore according to the traditional conception of parliamentary conflict, occupy a position on the ‘right’. Philosophy, on the other hand, would be aligned with the forces of change, or the ‘left’. Because the higher faculties will never renounce the desire to govern or dominate, Kant argues that philosophy must remain a vigilant protector of reason and truth:

The rank of the higher faculties (as the right side of the parliament of learning) supports the government’s statutes; but in as free a system of government as must exist when it is a question of truth, there must also be an opposition party (the left side), and this is the philosophy faculty’s bench. (Kant, 1979, 57-59)

Like Kant, Derrida does not outline a way of ending the conflict between philosophy as an organ of truth and the faculties of the state. He refuses to align himself with the ‘left’ or the ‘right’ in Kant’s model, and to resist the description of a ‘tireless parasite moving in random agitation, passing over the boundary and back again’ (Derrida, 1992, 29). Derrida is concerned, however, with the transformation of the university and with the attempt to found a modern institution based on a new charter and a new constitution. ‘We live’, he writes, ‘in a world where the foundations of a new law in particular a new university law – is necessary’ (30). This ‘new law’ is connected in Derrida’s mind with ‘a new kind of responsibility’. This ‘new law’ and ‘new responsibility’ finally lead Derrida to outline the meaning of the curious word, mochlos, in his title. Mochlos is a Greek
word meaning the ‘best lever’ (31): ‘A mochlos could be a wooden beam, a lever for displacing a boat, a wedge for opening or closing a door, something, in short, to lean on for forcing and displacing’. By deploying this metaphor, Derrida indicates that he chooses the middle way, thus adopting the law of contamination to describe a strategy that encompasses both left and right. Alluding to another of Kant’s small works, How to be Oriented in Thinking, published in 1786, Derrida writes that Kant tells us that the ‘university will have to go on two feet, left and right, each foot having to support the other as it rises with each step to make a leap’.

Kant’s understanding of philosophy’s role vis-à-vis the state in The Conflict of the Faculties clearly has a number of shortcomings. Philosophy’s access to forums of popular debate is limited by the influence of the state which may or may not take heed of its voice. The marginal position from which Kant attempts to protect the free functioning of reason also limits the scope of its social and political effectiveness. Derrida’s various readings of Kant attempt to bring his discussion up to date and also to clarify the political role that a deconstructive strategy can have in this area. For Derrida, Kant’s position seriously fails to take into account how philosophy’s position outside of the polis is ‘always already’ inside and thus always contaminated by questions of power and authority.

REFLECTING ON THE PRINCIPLE OF REASON

Derrida’s most sustained and successful attempt to grapple with these issues emerges from his discussion of the raison d’être of philosophy in “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils”. The essay was first presented on the occasion of Derrida’s inaugural address as Andrew Dickson White Professor-at-large at Cornell University. The essay begins with the following imperative to reflect upon the political function of the human sciences – especially the teaching of literature, linguistics, literary theory, and philosophy – in the modern university.

‘Today, how can we not speak of the university?’, Derrida writes: ‘Such a reflection is unavoidable. It is no longer an external complement to teaching and research; it must make its way through the very objects we work with, shaping them as it goes, along with our norms, procedures, and aims. We cannot not speak of such things’ (1983, 3). This opening paragraph announces the urgency of Derrida’s discussion of ‘the politics of knowledge’, which is also concerned with teasing out the limits which impede such a discussion: How can we not speak of the university, Derrida writes, implying that the liberal ideal of ‘academic freedom’ must also entail an understanding of its own internal barriers. In this respect, critics or philosophers ‘always-already’ find themselves within institutions, and therefore there can be no pure or unmediated pursuit of truth as Kant argues in The Conflict of the Faculties.

Having established this understanding of the complicity between pedagogical institutions and the state, the purpose of Derrida’s essay is to question the ‘cause, purpose, direction, necessity, justification, meaning and mission of the University; in a word, its destination’ (3). Derrida’s concern with the twin themes of ‘the principle of reason’ and ‘reflection’ are associated with the idea that deconstruction grapples with ‘turning back upon the very conditions of reflection’ itself. Though Derrida acknowledges that this form of questioning – what he once more describes as a ‘new responsibility’ – is profoundly important to his project, he does not name this process deconstruction, nor, in fact, does he use this word at any point in this important statement on the pedagogical implications of his thinking. This is striking evidence of Barbara Johnson’s understanding of Derrida’s attack on rigid modes of thought, but especially of her argument that the institutionalisation of deconstruction in American literary studies made it ‘more simplistic,
more dogmatic, and ultimately more conservative’ (Johnson, 1995, 11) than it is in Derrida’s hands.

This is not to say, however, that Derrida’s thought is uncritically aligned with the academic ‘left’. “The Principle of Reason” performs a series of familiar movements of Derrida’s thought, evident in that his analysis combines both radical and conservative implications. Derrida challenges fixed conceptualisations of reason and truth, but he is also deeply committed to critically maintaining traditional forms of thought. In response to his own question, ‘what is the raison d’être of the university?’, Derrida responds with a two-pronged analysis of ‘ends-oriented’ (or applied) and ‘pure’ research which challenges the increasing primacy of the former. For Derrida, ‘oriented’ research is ‘organized in an authoritarian fashion in view of its utilization ... whether we are talking about technology, economy, medicine, psychosociology, or military power’ (Derrida, 1983, 11). Derrida describes the deliberate change of terminology that attempts to disguise the change of direction: ‘We speak of “oriented” research where, not so long ago, we spoke ... of “application” ’ (12). Likewise it is growing increasingly obvious, Derrida argues, that ‘without being immediately applied or applicable, research may “pay-off,” be usable, “end-oriented,” in more or less deferred ways’. Research is not merely undertaken in what ‘used to be called the techno-economic, medical, or military’ areas of the university. Other disciplines such as Linguistics and even Literary Studies, Derrida contends, can be appropriated by this technocratic ethic. To reflect these changes a term like ‘orient’ is preferred to ‘applied’, because the word is less ‘utilitarian’, and because it ‘leaves open the possibility that noble aims may be written into the program’ (12). Derrida’s point is confirmed by the term ‘techno-science’, a term which ties together objective knowledge, the principle of reason, and a certain metaphysical determination of the relation to truth that inextricably links the principle of reason with the technology of modernity.

Given Derrida’s understanding of the complicity between the state and research activity, he is led to argue that it is difficult to maintain the boundary between ‘basic’ and ‘oriented’ research. In advanced technological societies the state ‘orients, orders, and finances, directly or indirectly ... the front-line research that is apparently the least “end oriented” of all’ (13). This is particularly evident in relation to the military-industrial complex. ‘At the service of war, of national and international security,’ Derrida continues, ‘research programs have to encompass the entire field of information, the stockpiling of knowledge, the workings and thus also the essence of language and of all semiotic systems, translation, coding and decoding, the play of presence and absence, hermeneutics, semantics, structural and generative linguistics, pragmatics, rhetoric’. Importantly then ‘basic’ or ‘pure’ scientific research has never been so deeply committed to aims that are also ‘military and political’ aims. Correspondingly, ‘oriented research’ also depends on non-scientific disciplines which are normally thought to be excluded from such areas. Literary Theory and Literature, Derrida argues, can also be ‘put to work in communications strategy, the theory of commands, the most refined military pragmatics of jussive utterances’ (13).

At this point, Derrida’s enquiry into the foundations or architectonics of the university takes advantage of a remarkable metaphor. Derrida compares the topography of the Cornell University campus – where the buildings of the humanities are protected from a gorge by protective railings – to the relationship between the eye and its protective diaphragm. The ‘eye’ of the humanities in turn signifies the ideal and unrestricted vision of philosophy (the gorge) negotiating with the ‘ends oriented’ programmes of the state (the protectionist barrier/the eye’s diaphragm). Derrida does not propose that it is possible for the critical function of philosophy – or the humanities in general – to function independently of the state, as Kant wrongly believed in The Conflict of the Faculties. In
his figurative description of Cornell, Derrida draws on the etymology of the word ‘diaphragm’ meaning ‘partitioning fence’ to indicate the motion of opening and closing which divides the university from the ‘outside’, and which would, for a prominent faculty member, literally destroy the ‘essence of the university’ (6). In the context of Derrida’s metaphor of the eye, the community of the university functions by way of the familiar rhythm of a supplementary logic: the continual opening and closing of insides and outsides. In this way, Derrida exploits the metaphor of the ‘Cornell’ (cornea lens: a contact lens covering the transparent part of the eye) campus to suggest that the function of the university, and of philosophy in particular, is to reflect upon reflection itself; hence the potentially infinite regression of the sub-title of the essay which plays on the theme of reflection and vocation, ‘the university in the eyes of its pupils’. With the aid of this complex metaphor, Derrida strategically positions the university at the nodal point - in between, as it were - society and the site of reflection, ‘applied’ and ‘pure’ research, ‘memory’ and ‘critique’. Derrida’s point here concerns the possibility of maintaining, ‘in the same instant the desire for memory and exposure to the future, the fidelity of a guardian faithful enough to want to keep even the chance of a future’ (20). In other words, the university must maintain this dual function, acting as a site of cultural memory and cultural critique. The institutional site of philosophy or what is now called ‘theory’ challenges the values of technocracy, professionalism, and the emerging ethic of ‘excellence’, by subjecting them to the double movement of the ‘principle of reason’. ‘The time for reflection, here signifies’, Derrida writes, ‘not only that the internal rhythm of the university apparatus is relatively independent of social time and relaxes the urgency of command, ensures for it a great and precious freedom of play. An empty place for chance: the invagination of an inside pocket (19). But also a time for critique, for reflecting on reflection itself, and for questioning the role of the state: ‘The time for reflection is also the chance for turning back on the very conditions of reflection, in all the senses of that word, as if with the help of a new optical device one could finally see sight, could not only view the natural landscape, the city, the bridge and the abyss, but could view viewing’.

In addressing Derrida’s marginalised work on pedagogical institutions it is possible to foreground one of his principal themes: the idea that the university is concerned with the relaxation of ‘social time’. This is an important determinant of the temporality of his own work, its resistance to existing political protocols, whether of the “left” or the “right”, and existing modes of political intervention. The politics of Derrida’s thought emerges precisely at this point: Deconstruction is concerned with the abandonment of any global and totalizing notion of the political. Derrida advances the idea that deconstruction, to reiterate Bennington’s point, ‘can name “the political” only improperly or, better, can name the impropriety of the political in its dispersion’ (Bennington, 1994, 97). This article has described how Derrida sought to reinvent the meaning of deconstruction for an American audience, following the marginalisation of his involvement with GREPH and the International College of Philosophy during the mid-1970s and early 1980s. Derrida’s work on pedagogical institutions emerges as deeply implicated in what he refers to in “Mochlos” as the ‘taking of a position, in work itself, toward the politico-institutional structures that constitute and regulate’ the practice, competences, and performances of universities (Derrida, 1992, 23).
References


