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On Information and the Chance of Teaching

Abstract: Through an engagement with Jacques Derrida's essay "The Principle of Reason, The University in the Eyes of its Pupils", this paper mounts a critique of the current information model of education dominating contemporary universities. In the name of reason, it argues for an account of things which are inform, *informé*.

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Keywords: Deconstruction. Jacques Derrida. Literary Theory. Eductional Theory. Cultural Theory.

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According to Bataille, the informé or formless is what 'academic men' repress (Bataille 31). For Bataille's 'academic men' only one thing counts and that is shape, or form. This vision of the university and of those who inhabit it is thoroughly modern of course. It would be anachronistic to criticize Bataille's vision of academia on this count. Writing in the late-1920s, the university Bataille refers to is fundamentally modern, dominated by an Enlightenment ideal in which the role of academic men is to give a name and a form to all things. Bataille's modern academic men are in the Enlightenment business of accumulating, counting, assessing and cataloguing things. To imagine the relevance of Bataille's informé to the university today, however, we have to shift our focus.[1]

[1] . This paper is not about Bataille (for which I apologize to my editors), it simply takes off from the idea of the informé and attempts to use it in the context in which Bataille presents it. I am using here the translation to be found in Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Alan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr., Minneapolis: University

It is a common complaint of liberal and conservative writers within the current academy that what we might call the giving of form has been highjacked. An unholy convergence has occurred, such voices complain, between the legitimate search for form within the university disciplines and a bureaucratic, state-sponsored formation which is now, in all its multifaceted appearances, impossible to avoid or even negotiate. A sentence from Ronald Barnett's 'A Knowledge Strategy for Universities' should suffice here:

> The university is not free to determine the nature of the knowledge projects in which it is engaged. In both teaching and research, and indirectly through new evaulation systems, the knowledge projects are encouraged in the direction of competence in the most general sense. Likely effectiveness in a dual context of a global economy and of a problematic welfare state are the order of the day rather than a contribution to human understanding. Knowledge becomes reduced to information; wisdom (a now archaic term) becomes reduced and altered into mere competence.[2]

There is an implicit figure of invasion, even vampirism, in such accounts of the current state of the university. The imperative (rights) of reason ('contribution to human understanding') have been taken over, inhabited, possessed by a performative, wholly commercial force which goes by many names, but none more devastatingly than that of *information*. Information, rather than wisdom, reason and human understanding, now dominates the giving of form in the post-modern university. A legitimate internal formation has been body-snatched by an illegimate, externalized formation which replaces propositional knowledge with operational knowledge, reason with competence, critical thought with consumerism, understanding with information. Anne Griffin, in the same collection, *The End of Knowledge in*

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of Minnesota Press, 1985, p.31. I would like here to cite as an influence the extraordinarily stimulating papers I was lucky enough to chair at this year's International Association for Philosophy and Literature conference at the University of Leeds, *Writing Aesthetics*, May 26-31, 2003: John William Philips 'Destined to Disappear: The University's Address;' Sarah Wood, 'Hidden Terror;' Roy Sellars, 'Educational Remains: Back to School with Hegel' and Mark Currie 'The University and the Universal.'

[2] . Ronald Barnett, 'A Knowledge Strategy for Universities' in Ronald Barnett and Anne Griffin, eds. *The End of Knowledge in Higher Education*, London: Cassell, 1997, p.169.

Education, puts the case in an alarmingly stark manner and, like Barnett, finds the root of the 'current crisis' in the rise to dominance of a criteria of 'competence,' or information:

> The utilitarian ethos of competency has . . . begun to find a grip on higher education, with its emphasis on skills, performance criteria and measurable outcomes. This threatens the achievement by the learner of broader intellectual qualities, knowledge and understanding which has some potential for use in a variety of contexts.
>
> This learner is not the reasoning individual of the Enlightenment: he or she is a consuming individual, consuming education as one product among others in the market economy. Just as the consumer can accept or reject goods available on the market, secure in the rule that the customer is always right, so the 'consuming' student can reject the knowledge and expertise higher education has to offer at will, without a need to justify such choice . . . . Conceptualization is downgraded in favour of information gathering: the consumer is free to reject the demand to think.[3]

The idea of the market taking over from a pure realm of Enlightenment values within the university is, of course, a rather crass myth. What concerns me here is how Bataille's idea of the formless might help us think about the current shibboleth of all liberal and conservative responses to the state of the university, namely information.

Derrida's approach to the convergence of Enlightenment and politico-commercial forces within the university is encapsulated in the opening, rhetorical sentence of his essay 'Les pupilles de l'Université, Le principe de raison et l'idée de l'Université' translated as 'The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils': 'Comment ne pas parler, aujourd'hui, de l'Université' ('Today, how can we not speak of the university?')[4] Typically, Derrida's opening statement spills out in terms of its potential significance beyond the essay which it prefaces. It is a statement of quite unaccountable irony, and yet it is also one which demands (commands) all our attention, if we desire, that is, to remain, somehow, university men and women.

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[3] . Anne Griffin, 'Knowledge Under Attack: Consumption, Diversity and the Need for Values' in Barnett and Griffin, eds. opp. cit., p.5.

Would one wish not to speak of the university? How could one not speak, when speaking, of the University? The body-snatchers, a phrase I would apply to all academics who would strive to nostalgically preserve a university integrity that never actually existed, might reply that it has become increasingly difficult to speak of the university since the university now speaks of itself incessantly. In all the baroque paraphernalia of the post-modern bureaucratic university (Quality Assessments, Research Exercises, initiatives for the promotion of Excellence and Transparency, institutional assessment procedures for the delivery of modular units, and so on) the university speaks about itself endlessly. In so doing, so the body-snatchers would argue, the reigning commercialized and state-sponsored discourse drowns out, in fact evacuates, any possibility for talking about the university *in its own modern, Enlightenment terms*. To quote another, recent text of the body-snatching school:

> Universities are supposed by the *Charter* [*for Higher Education*, 1993] to 'deliver'" a 'service', namely higher education, to 'customers,' in two divisions, firstly students, and secondly business, which 'buys' both education and the results of commissioned research. The 'delivery' to students is by way of 'teaching' or 'effective management of . . . learning', in 'courses', all of which have 'aims and structures' clearly described in advance, and any of which includes 'transferable skills like problem-solving and effective communication.' The standards of these providers of teaching are guaranteed by 'quality assurance systems' which will be 'regularly audited' and will enable applicants to discover 'how well different universities and colleges are performing.'
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> Each of the phrases within quotation marks, and all of them cumulatively, betray a conception of higher education which is not only not that of the university, but is actively hostile to the university.[5]

Maskell and Robinson's 'not only not that' registers well the body-snatchers' response to Derrida's question. For them the university's speech has been taken from it, transformed into an alien speech, a negative (or 'not') speech, the speech of a body which would, and once could, speak otherwise. For the body-snatcher school the

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[4] . Jacques Derrida, *Du Droit à la philosophie*, Paris: Galilée, 1990, p.461; 'The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils' trans. Catherine Porter and Edward P. Morris, in *Diacritics*, 13.3., 1983, p.3.

question is simply 'how can we any longer speak of and as the university'? The answer can only come in the form of a defiant or pathos-riddled nostalgia. It frequently arrives in the form of a militant strike against information and for the apparently pre-given forms of thought: understanding, wisdom, reason, critical thought.

Derrida, of course, asks his question deconstructively. The university has always failed to speak of itself as the site of the principle of reason, since reason cannot speak of itself without exposing the abyss, the groundlessness, of its speaking. Reason, in other words, cannot itself act as the ground upon which the principle of reason is erected or instituted into a university law. The university, as an institution in which reason is the foundational idea, has irresolvable problems in founding itself *as a university*.[6] In 'The Principle of Reason,' Derrida puts this point in terms of Heideggar's reading of Liebnitz's 'Omnis veritas reddi ratio potest' or 'rationem reddere,' which Derrida translates as "'rendre raison,' or, in English, the rather 'outlandish' sounding phrase, to 'render reason' ("Principle," 7):

> Are we obeying the principle of reason when we ask what grounds this principle which is itself a principle of grounding? We are not – which does not mean that we are disobeying it, either. Are we dealing here with a circle or an abyss? The circle would consist in seeking to account for reason by reason, to render reason to the principle of reason, in appealing to the principle in order to make it speak of itself at the very point where, according to Heideggar, the principle of reason says nothing about reason itself. The abyss, the hole, the *Abrund*, the empty 'gorge' would be the impossibility for a principle of grounding to ground itself. This very grounding, then, like the university, would have to hold itself, suspended above a most peculiar void. Are we to use reason to account for the principle of reason? Is the reason for reason rational? (9)

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[5] . Duke Maskell and Ian Robinson, *The New Idea of the University*, London: Haven Books, 2001, p.3.
[6] See, for example, 'Privilège. Titre justificatif et Remarques introductives' and '*Mochlos* - ou le conflict des facultés' in *Du Droit*, opp. cit., pp.9-108, 397-438; 'Privilege: Justificatory Title and Introductory Remarks' in *Who's Afraid of Philosophy? Right to Philosophy I*, trans. Jan Plug, Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2002, 1-66 and '*Mochlos*; or, The Conflict of the Faculties,' trans. Richard Rand and Amy Wygant, in *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties*, ed. Richard Rand, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992, 1-34.

Derrida is playing here on the physical site of Cornell University, including its prospect of the Fall Creek suspension bridge and the gorge which it spans, but the question of the rendering of reason, its groundlessness, leads him to an issue which is crucial in any consideration of the current role of the concept of information within the university and university teaching. The issue concerns not so much what he elsewhere calls the fold – 'La figure du pli' (*Du droit* 62) – between constative and perfomative language, but rather the lack of any guarantee in the destination of reason once it has been (or has apparently been) conveyed.[7] There is a lack of guarantee in the destination (the interpretation, the understanding, but particularly the use) of the reason that is conveyed in the university which forms the great part of what Derrida has to say in 'The Principle of Reason.' Presenting this issue in terms of the unworkable opposition between oriented and fundamental research, Derrida is at pains to remind us that there is no guarantee in any form of research (however 'pure,' however useless it might appear), that a technological, transnational economy, increasingly centered on the military, can always potentially (and in reality) find a use for and thus appropriate such research.

The issue of guarantee, a guarantee for reason, and in particular a guarantee for the rendering of reason we call university teaching and research, is a subject of constant university speech today. The 'phrases' cited by Maskell and Robinson above can be said to emanate from the bureaucratic university's obsession with what Derrida calls 'calculation.' Information, Derrida argues, is the medium, the 'operator,' by which oriented and fundamental research are 'integrated':

[7] . One of the results of Derrida's work, of course, is to open to question the verbs by which the content of research and teaching are put in motion. A great deal of work could be done on these verbs, which include the following: convey, transmit, relay, transfer, transport, conduct, profess, confess, communicate, instruct, demonstrate, display, exhibit and, of course, inform. All of these verbs have a problematic, unstable relation to the notion of rendering. They all, when read, question the 'calculation'

> Information ensures the insurance of calculation and the calculation of insurance . . . . 'Information' . . . is the most economic, the most rapid and the clearest (univocal, *eindeutig*) stockpiling, recording and communication of news. It must instruct men about the safeguarding [*Sicherstellung*] of what will meet their needs, *ta khreia*. Computer technology, data banks, artificial intelligences, translating machines, and so forth, all these are constructed on the basis of that instrumental determination of a calculable language.

Derrida's description, informed as it is by Heideggar's *Der Satz von Grund*, makes it quite clear why the bodysnatching school of thought might come to raise information to the central sign of the system of politico-economic and technological reason which has apparently usurped the principle of reason within the university. Such a school of thought will inevitably wish to counter the claims for information (transparency, objectivity, unending opportunities for improvement in the conveyance, transmission and relay of thought, and so on) with the vision of a mindless, dehumanized, technological arena of mere operational competence. Derrida, in his description, however, reminds us that information is not in fact simply passive technological (rather than human) conveyance, transmission, relay, but actively forms the content of the thought which it helps to convey:

> Information does not inform merely by delivering an information content, it gives form, '*in-formiert*,' '*formiert zugleich*.' It installs man in a form that permits him to ensure his mastery on earth and beyond. All this has to be pondered as the effect of the principle of reason, or, put more rigorously, has to be analyzed as the effect of a dominant interpretation of that principle, of a certain emphasis in the way we heed its summons. (13)

Information, the information-based university, might seem to be able to render itself, to ground itself, in the idea of an information (techno-scientific) -based education for an information (techno-scientific) society, and yet it partakes of the same act of concealment, the same hidden abyss or empty gorge, as the principle of reason it appears to replace. We cannot in fact separate reason and information, a fact which reminds us (something we, university men and women, need reminding of at present)

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discussed below. None of them, that is to say, aid the 'calculable language' of the techno-scientific

that information, like reason itself, cannot calculate itself (its effects, its destination, its uses, its value). It is not possible for information to account for itself as the new, post-modern principle of reason, and as such, despite the grand claims for transparency and accountability within the new, bureacratic (techno-scientific) universities, the destination of information (like that of reason) is not in any sense guaranteed. There is a formlessness within information, an abyss or hole which derails its promise (its calculation, its insurance) of the arrival of form. In particular, I would suggest, information, as it currently operates within the techno-scientific university, conceals the question of what I have been calling the conveyance, transmission or relay of form. Unable to untie itself from the principle of reason, information retains the radical, unanswerable question of what we might call *in-forming*. This question, of in-forming, is precisely a question of calculation, insurance and guarantee, and it remains available for thought, for a questioning which would precisely respect that call for responsibility Derrida, at the end of 'The Principle of Reason,' articulates in terms of a 'double gesture' to 'keep the memory and keep the chance.' (20)

Information is, of course, a concept inextricably linked to the question of right, the rights of the state and the rights of the citizens or subjects of the state. Tony Blair's government treads a thin line when it begins to water down now long-established promises for greater Freedom of Information, as a recent Leader column in *The Observer* demonstrates:

> New Labour came to office nearly six years ago promising to end the British establishment's fetish for secrecy. When this government's much diluted Freedom of Information Act finally comes into force in 2005, its many opt-outs and loopholes will still enable Ministers to suppress material which is merely inconvenient or embarrassing. Ludicrously, much correspondence with foreign governments which is made freely available in Stockholm, Brussels or Washington will still be withheld in Britain.[8]

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university without opening within that language an abysmal secret of incalculability.

The power of the phrase 'Freedom of Information,' with its attack on the very idea of secrecy, can make it very difficult to question the concept of information as it functions in universities and other teaching institutions. Questioning the concept of information will inevitably appear an act tantamount to a public declaration of concealment. To question the concept of information can and perhaps must appear a wholly irresponsible act, an act of withholding, a refusal to impart or convey (give up) what is already the ethical and legal property of others.[9]

This view of information (as a right), however, is based on a sanitized definition of the term, focussed mainly on the third and fourth senses of the verb (to *inform*) given in the Oxford English Dictionary: 'III. 1. To form (the mind, character, etc.), esp. by imparting learning or instruction; hence, To instruct, teach; to advise. 2. To impart knowledge of some particular fact or occurrence to; to tell (one) of something; to apprise. 3. a. To give information; to report. b. To lay or exhibit an information, bring a charge or complaint. IV. 1. To impart knowledge of; to instruct in, to teach. 2. To make known, report, relate.' These meanings, hygienic in their suggestion of a transparent (objective, calculable, fact- or data-based) conveyance form the basis for the first three senses of the noun: '1. communication of instructive knowledge. An instruction. 2. The action of telling or fact of being told something. 3. That of which one is apprised or told; intelligence, news.' These are the clean senses, before the law and legal recriminations and the naming of names takes the concept over into a gothic world of secrets and lies already signalled in 3.b of the verb ('The action of informing against, charging or accusing (a person) . . . . A complaint of the

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[8]. 'Tell us no secrets, tell us no lies,' *The Observer*, Sunday January 5, 2003.

[9] . The issue of the 'Freedom of Information' is perhaps even more intense in Ireland, since the 'Freedom of Information Act' was established in the same year, 1997, as the 'Universities Act.' Despite the fact that the latter has much to say about another kind of freedom, namely 'Academic Freedom,' the contingent relationship between the two acts creates an impression, within and outside

Crown in respect of some civil claim') and before a final theological sense pitches us backwards into a world of animation and anthropomorphic power beyond all apparent calculation or reason ('The action of informing with some active or essential quality; inspiration, animation.'). These last theological senses take us back to the aspects of the verb that a contemporary discourse of rights, and in our case educational rights, would hide, conceal, make secret for the sake of a world without secrets: '*Inform*, v. from Latin, *informare*, shape, form an idea of, describe. I. 1. To put into form or shape; to shape; to arrange, compose. 2. To take shape; to form. II. To give "form"' or formative principle to; hence, to stamp, impress, or imbue *with* some specific quality or attribute; to inspire, animate.' Or rather, these senses of information, which bring to sight the act of in-forming, are clean, hygienic, only if they are read in the transparent, techno-scientific rather than theological, senses (III and IV) of the verb catalogued above. A negation (in Freud's sense) of information makes in-forming as calculable as a neutral reporting of fact, data, atomized content, bytes. The violence of shaping (to stamp, impress, imbue) is concealed, along with the onto-theological categories of creation: inspiration ('a breathing or infusion into the mind or soul') and animation. The university of information[10], like the university of mere reason (*bloße Vernunft*) before it, is uncomfortable with the idea that its in-forming might in fact be an awakening of an inanimate body.[11] Both universities (of reason, of information) strive to conceal the possibility that their *raison d'être*, their destination (see 'Principle,' 3),

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the universities involved, that transperancy (the right to information, in whatever form, for all) is the new, legislative and ethical, principle upon which the newly defined universities stand or fall.

[10] . I would suggest that we revise Bill Readings' 'university of excellence' with the even more Lyotardian nomination, the university of information.

[11]. We might think here of Kant's famous footnote to Ch. 2. 9. of *The Conflict of the Faculties* in which an idea of a complete revolution in the politico-social order, 'Cromwell's abortive monster of a despotic republic excepted,' remains decisively a fiction: 'The same goes for political creations as for the creation of the world; no human being was present there, nor could he have been present at such an event, since he must have been his own creator otherwise.' Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996, p.307.

might be creation (animation, inspiration, in-forming). One should perhaps refine this statement further and speak of an ungrounded, non-originary, foundationless creation or in-forming. One should certainly, I would suggest, consider the possibility of an informé teaching, a teaching which takes seriously the lesson of informé: 'Inform. a. from Latin, *informis*. 1. Having no regular form; unshapen, mis-shapen. 2. Without form; formless; of the nature of matter unendowed with "form".' An informé teaching would, amongst other things, take seriously, as a responsibility, the fact that its teaching, its in-forming, can lead, can always lead, to a lack of shape, or even a mis-shape. An informé teaching would present itself as a teaching which was, not defiantly but logically, beyond calculation, which means beyond any guarantee of form.

Victor Frankenstein, icon today of the academic man let loose from the constraining limits of transparent, hygienic reason, unheeding of the legal and ethical call of a transparent information, comes to learn (or does he?) that secular (scientific, reasoned) animation breeds a monster. The creature itself, with its entreaty 'listen to me,' comes to learn that information (receiving and giving information) leads only to further confirmation of its (the creature's) own illegitimacy. And the reader? The reader learns that there is no *friend*, a friend, throughout the novel, being figured, intertextually, as an Enlightenment, one might say Rousseauistic teacher (preceptor) who can animate a human mind or soul from first principles.[12] Victor (silently alluding to a Shakespearean monster's self-description) says to Walton, in a passage added to the 1831 edition of the novel: 'we are unfashioned creatures, but half made

[12]. In this sense, the phrase which structures Derrida's book on friendship suits the novel perfectly: 'O my friends, there is no friend.' See Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* trans. George Collins, London and New York: Verso, 1997. For a full examination of *Frankenstein* as a text about the limits of Enlightenment education I refer readers to texts forthcoming by the present author.

up, if one wiser, better, dearer than ourselves - such a friend ought to be - do not lend his aid to perfectionate our weak and faulty natures.'[13]

Which leaves the question, what do my students (roughly 150 each year in the course in question) learn when I have informed them of all this, with the additional reflection that 'I am, also, a monster' (a being, like themselves, 'unfashioned . . . but half made up,' in search of a friend who will never arrive)? The friend, in this Rousseauistic, but also Godwinian, sense, is a teacher who can guarantee the results (the form or shape) of their teaching. The friend, in other words, is the teacher who can render reason or, today, information, and in any case can in-form without risk, without secrets, without chance. 'O my friends, there is no friend.' What will my students have learnt when I have taken the chance (a chance offered uniquely by this text, *Frankenstein*) of this teaching, this informé or monstrous teaching? For the answer one would have to wait (maybe one would have to wait for years or interminably) and then one would have to speak to every single one of them.

[13] . *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, Vol. 1., *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, ed. Nora Crook, London: Pickering and Chatto, 1996, p.187. the allusion is to *Richard III*, see editor's comment p.187.

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