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Diary Marina Warner

Marina Warner is a contributing editor at the *LRB*. *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* will be published this autumn.

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The professor from the West Coast stepped out of the taxi and looked around, head tilted back and swivelling from one looming grey tower to another as she assessed the flint-studded concrete ramparts of the library. 'Oh, wowww!' she cried, ecstasy lifting her voice above the wind whipping off the marshes. 'New brutalism! Rarely seen any so pure. First pressing. Cold pressing. Purrrfect!'

That was last summer, and new brutalism in academia was taking on another meaning. I took my Californian friend inside, to get a feel of the hessian-clad walls; the cloth is a little frayed by now, but the décor still gave off aromas of patchouli, Nesquik, joss sticks, Players No. 6, beanbags, and this and that kind of grass. The University of Essex opened to its first students in September 1964. They were part of a utopian experiment in modern education, a big university – the plan was eventually to take as many as twenty thousand students, a huge number at the time – purpose-built, as Albert Sloman, the first vice-chancellor, declared in his Reith Lectures of 1963, to sustain 'the pressures not only of expanding numbers but also of rapidly expanding knowledge'. The challenge could be met, he believed, 'only by radical innovation'. Essex was organised co-operatively between students and teachers: no more dons, high table, senior common room, colleges or houses, gowns. An end to deference. The walls between subjects were to be taken down: Sloman was a Hispanist, and an advocate of comparative studies; English literature would be read alongside Russian and American, North and South, all in their original languages (he hoped to extend to the Far East, too). He insisted on the importance and independence of academia: 'A professor can speak out on national issues of science and scholarship,' Sloman said, 'as a scientist in a government research centre cannot. So universities must go on being places of scholarly investigation.'

When Derek Walcott accepted an invitation to become professor of poetry in 2009, he had a trace memory of this experimental, cosmopolitan place, so surprisingly based in Essex. The political disturbances there in 1968 were notorious, but the novelty of the university's ideas about teaching was known to him too, its innovations in comparative studies, its sympathy with poets, translators, excitable theorists, its egalitarianism. Robin Blackburn on slavery, Angela Livingstone on Tsvetaeva, Ernesto Laclau's charismatic mystifications. Dawn Ades's work on Latin America inspired artists from all over the continent to donate paintings and sculpture, so it has a collection unrivalled by any other UK institution. Sloman spurred on the building of a tremendous library (now named after him) and pictured a future that would bring students from all over the world to rural Essex, a place with a long history of boat-building and Dionysiac boho revels: Francis Bacon, John Deakin and 'Dicky' Chopping, who made a fortune designing the dust jackets for James Bond books, all drank in the Rose & Crown on the quayside at Wivenhoe. Constable condensed the dominant myth of the English countryside in his painting of a haywain standing in a cattle pond a little way to the north.

When I arrived at Essex ten years ago to teach in the department of literature, film and theatre studies, a wholly unexpected rise in the teaching of creative writing was just beginning, and it was led by students who, as 'customers', could dictate terms in the new market. (In some universities, such as Bath Spa, hundreds of undergraduates enrol on creative writing courses every year.) The trend was reinforced by the goals set for universities by government ('outputs', 'impact'), which stirred up a brisk traffic in writers. Where previously we had scraped by on the odd payment from the BBC, we were suddenly valuable for our publications, and for our public activities: radio, telly, public appearances, newspapers, national and international influence.

Creative writing is a controversial subject, and many who teach it don't defend it as a proper discipline. I am not one of them, but I can see the problems. How would you mark *Wuthering Heights*? ('Emily, I think you need to reorganise the chronology.') Or assess Gertrude Stein? ('Have you heard of commas?') I try to bring in Renaissance

7 JULY 1983

Robert Morley
Demob

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ideas of imitatio, and teach by example, of past masters and mistresses. Creative writing can be a way of reading, and it fires up students who, used to browsing Wikipedia, can be reluctant to read a whole book. It's a direct, though unforeseen, consequence of those radical 1960s ideas of valuing individuals and encouraging self-expression and confidence. But, as Seamus Heaney put it, striving to write well helps tune the ear to the hum of a writer. It can illuminate how language works and how stories carry meaning. Digging into the archaeology of a story, into the structure of a passage, these students are like musicians being taught to listen to different ways of playing a piece. To re-read something entirely familiar in class refreshes it for me; a new reader is more sensitive to the shocks of recognition and alienation that a writer delivers, as well as to the violence, the spleen, the pain. Creative writing becomes more like a manual skill – tailoring, silversmithery. But like other such skills – playing the piano, dancing, lacemaking or mathematics – the teacher has to have done it, and be doing it still. Teachers of creative writing need to live in at least two worlds – at the university and in a room of their own. The situation is even more pronounced for dramatists or screenwriters or journalists: they have to practise their craft in order to pass it on.

In December 2012 I was asked to chair the Man Booker International Prize for 2015. I was torn. Did I want to swerve away from my own writing to read hundreds of books from all over the world? Was I really 'interested in canon-formation', as a friend put to me? At the same time I was invited to give a series of seminars at All Souls in Oxford. That was a different kind of thing: a chance to do some new research, which could lead to a book. Besides, when I was an undergraduate, the beautiful dramatic Hawksmoor buildings were a locked enclave of male power and privilege, and I'd never imagined that one day I would be invited in.

I went to my head of department, the playwright Jonathan Lichtenstein, to ask what to do, as both posts would disrupt my ordinary schedule. He was pleased. Word came back from on high: prestige, publicity, glory, *impact* – I must do it. My teaching – I had seven PhD students, and undergraduate and postgraduate classes – would be arranged to fit around the prize. A letter arrived from the vice-chancellor's office congratulating me on the All Souls fellowship, and an interview about my role on the prize committee was filmed for the university website.

Then, last November, I attended an academic staffing committee meeting presided over by the vice-chancellor. Anthony Forster has a military background and retains the jutting bearing and combed-down hair of the profession, though he left the army aged 26 to do political and social science. Colchester is a garrison town and he must have seemed a friendly fit. (The joke on campus is that Forster was too tough for the army. His talents needed a boot camp: a university was just the thing.) Soon after he was appointed, Forster declared in an interview with the *Times Higher*: 'I would struggle with the idea of vice-chancellors who descend from on high, impose their will on a university and set a character and direction. My own leadership style is very different to that – it's one of galvanising, of partnership, of setting goals that are ambitious and then supporting people in delivering them.'

At the meeting, Forster was galvanising the deputy vice-chancellor, and his leadership style was making a colleague's chin wobble in her eagerness to meet his requests. Others round the table hung their heads, staring sullenly at their laptops. The Senate had just approved new criteria for promotion. Most of the candidates under review had written their submissions before the new criteria were drawn up, yet these were invoked as reasons for rejection. As in Kafka's famous fable, the rules were being (re-)made just for you and me. I had been led to think we were convened to discuss cases for promotion, but it seemed to me we were being asked to restructure by the back door. Why these particular individuals should be for the chop wasn't clear from their records. Cuts, no doubt, were the underlying cause, though they weren't discussed as such. At one point Forster remarked aloud but to nobody in particular: 'These REF stars – they don't earn their keep.'

At that stage, everyone in the university was still obsessively focused on meeting the demands of this year's REF. By the end of 2013, all the evidence had been gathered, and the inventory of our publications fought over, recast and finally sent off to be assessed by panels of peers. Everyone in academia had come to learn that the REF is the currency of value. A scholar whose works are left out of the tally is marked for assisted dying. So I thought Forster's remark odd at the time, but let it go. It is now widely known – but I did not know it then – that the rankings of research, even if much improved, will bring universities less money this time round than last. So the tactics to bring in money are changing. Students, especially foreign students who pay higher fees, offer a glittering solution.

Suddenly, the watchword from management was 'Teaching, Teaching, Teaching.' We would all have to teach more. Personal arrangements, flexible and part-time contracts were no longer in force. My agreement with the university was for 70 per cent research, 30 per cent teaching. But that was the past. A Tariff of Expectations would be imposed

across the university, with 17 targets to be met, and success in doing so assessed twice a year. I received mine from the executive dean for humanities. (I met her only once. She was appointed last year, a young lawyer specialising in housing. When I tried to talk to her about the history of the university, its hopes, its 'radical innovation', she didn't want to know. I told her why I admired the place, why I felt in tune with Essex and its founding ideas. 'That is all changing now,' she said quickly. 'That is over.') My 'workload allocation', which she would 'instruct' my head of department to implement, was impossible to reconcile with the commitments which I had been encouraged – urged – to accept.

I was asked to take a year's unpaid leave instead, so that my research could still be counted. I felt that would set a bad precedent: other colleagues, younger than me, with more financial responsibilities, could not possibly supervise PhD students, do research, write books, convene conferences, speak in public, accept positions on trusts or professional associations, and all for no pay.

Outside grants are becoming the only way to earn time off to write or to take on a piece of research. The model for higher education mimics supermarkets' competition on the high street; the need for external funding pits one institution against another – and even one colleague against another, and young scholars waste their best energies writing grant proposals.

Eventually, after a protracted rigmarole, I resigned. I felt I had been pushed.

I am told that the tick of the deathwatch beetle is heard only when it is too late. I should have heard the tick tick ticking when plans for a splendid new building for an 'international centre for democracy and conflict resolution' were cancelled last autumn. Daniel Libeskind had been invited to design it – he had done a master's degree at Essex in the early years, and the university's Human Rights Centre has a worldwide reputation. But although Essex had kept its end up in the last Research Assessment Exercise in 2008 (the tagline at the bottom of every official email from Essex proclaims that it was ranked in the top ten research universities), the promised overflowing pot of porridge had turned out watered down and gritty. So no new human rights building, but a big new business school.

I heard the tick again when there was an attempt to close the history of art department and put the Latin American collection up for sale; that plan, thank god, has been staved off – for the time being. I heard it once more when Derek Walcott's visiting post was not renewed, at the express insistence of the vice-chancellor, and against the wishes of Walcott and of the literature department. These Nobel Prize winners – they don't earn their keep. And I heard it when, instead of inviting writers who had studied or taught at Essex to this September's 50th anniversary celebrations (as well as Walcott and Livingstone, the list includes Ben Okri, Michèle Roberts, Elizabeth Cook, Iain Sinclair, Tom Raworth and Irvine Welsh), the administrators told me 'family fun' was to be the mood. So instead, would I give a talk about *The Wobbly Tooth*, a little children's book I wrote thirty years ago when my son Conrad lost his first tooth? I was astonished – pleased – that the anniversary planning team knew about it at all, and I would have agreed if they had shown any interest in writing by anyone else, or even something else by me.

I could go on, about the cases of colleagues and their experience of managers' 'instructions', arrogance and ignorance, and the devices they adopt to impose their will, but individuals like Anthony Forster and the executive dean for humanities are not single spies. They're minor but willing operatives in a larger mechanics of power. Within this structure, they have been allowed to wrest authority for themselves, and neither literary scholars nor long-serving teachers have a say; individual students, once enrolled and committed, are not much attended to either.

What is happening at Essex reflects on the one hand the general distortions required to turn a university into a for-profit business – one advantageous to administrators and punitive to teachers and scholars – and on the other reveals a particular, local interpretation of the national policy. The Senate and councils of a university like Essex, and most of the academics who are elected by colleagues to govern, have been caught unawares by their new masters, their methods and their assertion of power. Perhaps they/we are culpable of dozziness. But there is a central contradiction in the government's business model for higher education: you can't inspire the citizenry, open their eyes and ears, achieve international standing, fill the intellectual granary of the country and replenish it, attract students from this country and beyond, keep up the reputation of the universities, expect your educators and scholars to be public citizens and serve on all kinds of bodies, if you pin them down to one-size-fits-all contracts, inflexible timetables, overflowing workloads, overcrowded classes.

Among the scores of novels I am reading for the Man Booker International are many Chinese novels, and the world of Chinese communist corporatism, as ferociously depicted by their authors, keeps reminding me of higher education here, where

enforcers rush to carry out the latest orders from their chiefs in an ecstasy of obedience to ideological principles which they do not seem to have examined, let alone discussed with the people they order to follow them, whom they cashier when they won't knuckle under.

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