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## **An anaesthetised life in a smoothly toxic machine**

**Maria Tumarkin**

To an outsider, Australian campuses can seem bland, suffocating beneath a dead language and largely unruffled by original thought, writes Maria Tumarkin

WE have not clicked, have not really gelled, Australia and I. There are things I have learned about myself since coming here, things that are eventually bound to take me away.

I am more comfortable with people who do not smile readily, who are incontinent in their speech and behaviour; people who, having lived through injustice, grief and their own powerlessness, know of things in this world and within themselves that cannot be corrupted or taken away. I am at home with tribes who customarily hang skeletons outside their closets.

I do not like tanned, wholesome good looks. I much prefer the faces of people shaken up and taken for rides. I am scared of innocence, even if it is manufactured. I do not care for the Australian dream, much less if it is fiction, which is why being in the land of plenty is sometimes like walking on nails.

One of these days I will have to go. Meanwhile, it is the University of Melbourne from Monday to Thursday. Everywhere on earth, places with a high concentration of people who take themselves seriously emit a particular kind of toxicity. Melbourne Uni is like a toxic dump. An aesthetically pleasing kind of dump, it must be said, buttressed by history and, of course, extra rich in the success stories of its graduates. It is not Cambridge or Columbia but graduating from it has not hurt anyone yet.

In my considerable naivety I thought that at least in the beginning all new students would feel equally out of their element, that for most of us the first year would be like a large fire, in which our old ways of doing and being would swiftly turn to ash. The place around me, however, is a triumph of the familiar. So many people, it seems, have managed to bypass completely the conflagration I imagined as a kind of compulsory initiation rite, smuggling in their entire friendship circles, their arrogance and their parents' connections, their social know-how and ideological grooming. No wonder the university so often looks like a logical extension of their pub crawls and dinner parties, their school debating societies and student newspapers. They have not been here before but it is unmistakably their place. And therefore, never, not for a moment, mine.

I spent the grand total of one year in Melbourne schools, not even finishing Year 11 because of the advanced state of my schoolophobia. Then, at 19, after six months in Europe and an associate diploma in broadcast journalism, I completed the adult Victorian Certificate of Education at TAFE, hardly a glamorous achievement. This is to say that I got to university via an obscure, zigzagging goat trail, not a four-lane highway. Of course, as befits a person

following a goat trail, I arrived with zero social capital: quintessential first-generation pauper.

As time goes by, my lack of status is compounded by the fact that I speak badly and write only a little better. Yet I have no desire to imitate most of the native speakers. There is a stage in learning any foreign language when one needs to turn for a while into an ape or a parrot, to become a proud and unreconstructed mimicker. But the house language adopted by the academic world is deeply unattractive, at least to a foreign ear. It is defiantly prosaic and drier than Jesuit tears. Unless you are interested in a scholarship or a tenure, it is hardly worth parroting. Even more crucially, the default academic language is itself built on the premise of mimicry, so that most lecturers and students speak and write in a voice so painfully not their own, so insincere and thin, there is nothing really left to copy. Years later I would come across a precise description of this language:

It struggles to express the human. Buzz words abound in it. Platitudes iron it flat. The language is hostile to communion, which is the purpose of language. It cannot touch provenance. It stifles reason, imagination and the promise of truth.

This is from Don Watson's *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language*. Precisely the kind of language in which so many lectures I attend are delivered, so many undergraduate essays and scholarly articles for peer-reviewed journals I come across are hammered out in. More than a half century ago George Orwell had just the right word for this type of language: anaesthetic.

"You cannot read it," Watson writes, "without losing some degree of consciousness. You come to, and read it again, and still your brain will not reveal the meaning, will not even try. You are getting sleepy again. When read aloud, as it is in lectures, the impression is of a plane passing overhead or a television in another room."

I am nobody. Most of the time I cannot even string a decent sentence together. But maybe because my organ of speech is so publicly crippled, my other senses are intensified. I can hear Watson's planes flying to and fro across the campus, TV sets going on and on in nearby classrooms. I can feel myself losing a degree of consciousness every day I make it to the university. My legs are warm, my eyelids are heavy, I am sleeeeeeeepy. Sometimes, however, a lecturer will abandon notes and outlines and speak passionately and directly, her thoughts and images passing through the class like a series of electric currents. Sometimes a fellow student will reveal unexpected depth or individuality. Sometimes an academic book that looked indistinguishable from all the others will succeed entirely in expressing the human. Those moments are like vaccine injections, building my resistance to the viral cultures surrounding me. But there are not enough of them and after a while I feel myself getting sleepy again, sliding back into a state of diluted consciousness, thinking someone else's borrowed thoughts.

A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, George Orwell wrote in 1946, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. Language and thought corrupt each other. This is of course if you, like Orwell, see language as an instrument for expressing, not for concealing or preventing, thought. I do, and because I am scared to talk, I express my thoughts in writing.

But simply writing is not enough either. I submit my essays on triangular and multicoloured pieces of paper, as pictorial or audio assignments, as open letters to broadcaster Andrew Denton or war-worshipping Italian futurist Marinetti, the man who at the start of the 20th century was dying to bring aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the punch and the slap to the arts.

University life in the early 1990s, the little fragment I get to see, seems to me starkly devoid of real friction, of the punch and the slap, to say nothing of a feverish insomnia that the right kind of learning and thinking should have no difficulty inducing. The university's pockets of disquiet -- a sexual harassment suit here, a student protest there -- only strengthen my overall impression of a well-oiled, well-managed mechanism. Sometimes, as I walk past the lush, silky lawns where undergraduates recline at all hours of the day, my surroundings feel like a sanatorium, a place that propels one towards being, in the yet to be uttered words of John Howard, relaxed and comfortable. Where are all the tense and uncomfortable people remains an unanswered question in my first few years at the university, during which I make no real, or even imagined, friends.

People's stories of their university days usually feature promiscuity -- sexual, intellectual, ideological -- as one of their leitmotifs. Too many boyfriends who did not know of each other or, even better, were all brothers or close friends. Too many intellectual or ideological heroes who would have been amused or mortified by the company they were made to keep. Student theatre, protests, overdoses, a shared inner-city household buzzing with Australia's future personalities and identities. All in all, a frenzied couple of years with a cast of thousands. And on my stage for ages there is just one chair and a microphone (like in Bjork's song: It's oh so quiet, It's oh so still), and then suddenly out of nowhere, a romantic entanglement, as intricate as Kinbaku, the inimitable Japanese art of bondage (you blow a fuse, the devil cuts loose, so what's the use, of falling in love).

He is an ethnic boy. I am an ethnic girl. We come from different worlds, yet they are much closer to each other than we are to the university twilight zone. We walk out of a lecture together. It is insufferable, this history lecture, we will die if we get to the end of it, we need to save our souls and run. The rest of the day we talk, we pour shit on all the privileged, private school kids, their straight, white teeth and Country Road clothes, their legendary vacuousness, the flatness of their vast ambitions. We talk derisively of pompous, lifeless lecturers who dare not lift their eyes off their notes, who hide behind

PowerPoint presentations as if at least half of their students were somehow deranged or hideously deformed.

He and I are homespun philosophers. It is in our blood to take the piss. Both of us are relieved to speak for hours about the university ideals being thrown to the dogs, about being bitterly disappointed, about trying to learn despite, not thanks to, where we are. We are at our best with each other, when we can turn into a little walking ghetto, a private consortium of aggrieved minorities.

Being young is about never having to say "on the other hand".

These rich private school students spit and sneeze privilege, but on the other hand we do not really know what they have had to go through in their lives. Everyone here runs in packs, but on the other hand, would we not do the same given half a chance? These lecturers look like dead meat, but on the other hand, maybe they are bravely determined not to turn their lectures into infotainment shows. (Teaching, after all, should never be a popularity contest.) Being young is about never letting moderate and well-balanced views get a leg up on honesty or truth. Truth is recognisable by its taste. It has to be bitter to swallow. Anything sweet is a truth substitute or a truth look-alike. Truth has to scratch your throat, not slide down effortlessly. It stings, it bites, it draws blood. This is all very black and white, you say; what an impoverished, one-dimensional world. Yes, but how profoundly liberating. If handled wisely, immaturity is a real gift.

English language strikes me and the young man I have fallen in love with as the language of moderation. For every word such as asshole there is a disagreeable, an unpleasant, a troubling, an unsavoury. Oh, what a disagreeable young man ... What an unfortunate turn of events ... do people really think like that?

The two of us are equally suspicious of understatement lest they hide a measure of cowardliness or university best practice (otherwise known as fence-sitting). One day in my Soviet history tutorial, I make an outrageous claim. It is great, I say, that the whole Demidenko saga has happened, that a waspy Helen Darville clad in Ukrainian folk costumes had so many in Australia's literary establishment eating from her hands and purring. And better still, we now have her award-winning literary debut, *The Hand That Signed the Paper*, where under the guise of her manufactured identity as Demidenko she was praised for saying things that would have her as Darville stoned to death, allegorically speaking, in the public square.

The only thing that protects me from instant tutorial-wide vilification is that I am a Soviet Jew from Ukraine, the target of Demidenko's literary loathing. The Demidenko affair, I say, highlights the dangerous dumbing down of Australia's multiculturalism, about claims of authenticity being used to legitimate mediocrity, bigotry and opportunism. Why should things said in a migrant voice, whether fabricated or not, I ask rhetorically, be judged according to a set of starkly different moral and aesthetic criteria? After this tirade, I am seen

as a perverse apologist for Demidenko, a victim of a peculiar intellectual version of the Stockholm syndrome.

In the humanities subjects I have chosen, students are not encouraged to be opinionated. The preferred model emphasises responses that are balanced, comprehensive and well informed. On one hand blue, but on the other green. The approach is meant to teach us to inhabit mentally and imaginatively both sides of the barricade. But in the end it simply schools most students to avoid deep waters, to believe that one should not think with sharp objects, that a good thinking room has padded walls and no corners.

The opinionated students I come across are usually recruits to an existing school of thought. It is not really their own opinions that they breathlessly insist on in pubs and tutorial rooms but those of their church deconstructionists, radical feminists, young Liberals. To meet a thinker of hard-core thoughts not sanctioned by a group is rare. Lone intellectual wolves do not gravitate towards modern-day universities, at least in Melbourne. An arts degree is not the most popular course among first-generation Russian Jewish migrants. Law, medicine, science, computing, commerce, just about any other degree -- except perhaps horticulture -- are well in front. Besides being impractical, the objectives of a BA are vague in the extreme. If you take away all the cliches, it is hard to know what we are learning. To read better, to think more, to write less muck? And on the subject of cliches, all these claims about teaching students how to think ... oh, come on. If by 18 you do not know how, you are in the kind of trouble that no university can fix.

American writer and university teacher David Foster Wallace, a young man described in one Guardian review as being as original and disturbing as a computer worm, has a theory about the purpose of an arts degree that makes far more sense to me than all this stuff about critical thinking, enhanced cultural sensitivity and imaginative understanding. Arts education, he says, is not about developing students capacity to think. Rather, learning how to think in the context of a university really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. Of all the ideas and ideals neglected by the modern university, the indifference towards nurturing consciousness strikes me as one of the most self-destructive. To me the distinction Wallace introduces is crucial. In his view the real value of an arts education has almost nothing to do with knowledge and everything to do with simple awareness. A BA, in other words, should aim to equip students with the taste and techniques for staying aware, to habituate them to a conscious life.

Maria Tumarkin is a writer with a PhD from the University of Melbourne. This is an edited extract from her new book, *Courage* (Melbourne University Press, 2008).