



L-Università
ta' Malta



Doctoral School Annual Lecture 2019

The PhD, Tal-Qroqq and Campus Fiction

Ivan Callus

Doctoral School
University of Malta



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1 March 2019

at the Valletta Campus,
University of Malta

Foreword

It is a great pleasure for me to write the foreword to the publication of the Doctoral School's first annual lecture delivered by Professor Ivan Callus on the occasion of the School's Doctoral Symposium held for the first time at the University of Malta's Valletta Campus on 1 March 2019.

The Doctoral School's Annual Lecture is intended to invite discussion and reflection on doctoral education. The changes brought about by the signing of the Bologna Declaration twenty years ago have seen the implementation right across Europe of a series of reforms that affect the role of the type of training that is given to PhD students over and above producing research to the highest standards, presented as a thesis and defended in front of peers. In addition to preparing for an academic career, graduates are increasingly following non-academic career paths in a knowledge-based society that relies on highly qualified staff. Doctoral schools and similar structures have been set up with the intent of developing programmes that can provide ancillary training in transversal skills and competences, besides addressing strategic priorities including gender equality, open access/open science, research integrity, and the health/wellbeing of doctoral researchers. These European reforms were never enforced by law or imposed top down but emerged and evolved from introspection at the institutional level and the exchange of practices between universities at fora such as the EUA's Council for Doctoral Education. It is this type of introspection that is argued for in the keynote address being published in this booklet. >

With his masterly and engaging presentation, Prof. Callus has set a high standard for those who will follow him, bringing to bear on the subject his experience in doctoral supervision, examination and, not least, administration having served on the Faculty of Art's Doctoral Committee for many years.

As the University looks towards the future with great confidence, this being the 250th anniversary of its re-foundation, it is hoped that this annual event becomes a cherished tradition of the University of Malta.

Nicholas Vella

Director, Doctoral School

Doctoral School Annual Lecture Series

1 March 2019

Ivan Callus (Department of English,
Faculty of Arts, University of Malta)

The PhD, Tal-Qroqq and Campus Fiction

The PhD, Tal-Qroqq and Campus Fiction

A talk at an occasion like this, the University of Malta's first Doctoral School Symposium, feels like it must belong to a distinct kind of genre. It is a genre for which, I am afraid, I do not have the name or the term. What I have is a sense that it carries with it some distinct expectations. I guess a tone of encouragement must be part of those expectations. If I am addressing PhD students then by the time I stop speaking it's the done thing to have made them feel better, not worse, about the whole business of doctoral study. Unless I'm misreading both the genre and the brief, I suppose I'm also expected to break a lance on the students' behalf. And am I wrong in thinking that critique is a further expectation? Some level of critical reflection on the institution, of the constructive rather than corrosive kind, might be considered apt and correct. Another thing: am I optimistic to assume that some connections with the speaker's research is allowed? This is tricky, because any such linking must be suited to the occasion. It cannot be contrived or self-serving. So there we more or less have it: we know the broad rules of this genre and now I must deliver within them. To the extent that I feel like observing them, I have fashioned my title to reflect the sequence of considerations I have outlined; hence, 'The PhD, Tal-Qroqq and Campus Fiction'. But the truth is that these presumed conventions for this genre-without-a-name are boring already, and I want to mix them up a little. Which is why I start with the end-term of my title. A dangerous genre, as you know.

I refer you to *Stoner*. This is a novel by the American writer John Williams that was first published in 1965 to scant notice

or acclaim but that just short of five decades later became the publishing – or rather, the *re*-publishing sensation – of 2013, after writers like Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes spoke about it on BBC Radio 4 and in the broadsheets. The urging was that that this is a ‘must-read’ book and newly relevant, its rediscovery vital. As it happens, *Stoner* is by now a bestseller in the English-speaking world but also in its multiple translations. This is unusual. It is unusual not only because critical and popular success don’t coincide (even if belatedly) as often as they might, but because *Stoner* is a campus novel. The prevailing impression within literary criticism had been that this was a genre whose vigour has dimmed. If Williams’s novel marks a resurgence of interest in the genre and its possibilities, then something about *Stoner* must clearly be resonating with and possibly prefiguring present-day academic realities and what is going on – or isn’t – in universities. I’d therefore like to use this novel to guide what I’d like to say today about the institution of the PhD, life at Tal-Qroqq, the genre of campus fiction, and what we might learn from the connections.

What is campus fiction? The term is self-explanatory. It is fiction set in or around university life. Campus fiction was a well-regarded sub-genre in literary narrative across the decades from the 1950s to the 1990s, leading also to critical studies that doubled up as a commentary on the broader challenges surrounding higher education. Elaine Showalter’s book, *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (2005), is a well-known example of this kind of study. Here let me simplify the poetics of the campus novel

to extract, doubtless too reductively, two broad categories. On the one hand, the genre could be a sensitive, if not forgiving, chronicling of existence within academic corridors: the equivalent, up to a point, of Anthony Trollope's depiction in the Barchester novels of life around the close of Barchester Cathedral and across society within the broader county (both the cathedral and the county are of course fictive, but nevertheless indicative of recognizable places and manners). This alone, however, would never have accounted for the popularity of the genre, which is more easily understandable if we recall that other mode of campus fiction which is comically but also savagely satirical of academic life. As you might have noticed, the reading public, indeed the public in general, rather enjoys a good laugh at academics' expense. Indeed, campus fiction is only the most evident example of a truth that many of us here might find cruelly, if deliciously, ironic. It is this one. Literary fiction is rarely kind in its depiction of the figure of the University professor. Literature doesn't necessarily like the very people who would seem to uphold it most assiduously. Its portrayals of them are often mocking, intent on exposing their foibles and worse. And it just so happens that literature is particularly hard on academics engaged in the humanities and particularly literary studies. So if anybody is in the line of fire here it is, ahead of anyone else, people like me.

A number of you will know the fictions I have in view. They include Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins* (1954) and Julia Kristeva's *Les Samouraïs* (1990), both of which are *romans à clef*: in other words, narratives where the characters are recognizable

as portrayals, under different names, of real people – in this case thinkers, writers, academics. They include also stories like Luigi Pirandello's *L'eresia catara* (1905) or Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Invitation to a Beheading* (1957), where the satire is mixed with, even muted by, poignancy and a quietly tragic tone. While these are fine examples of the genre, it is the tradition of campus fiction associated with works like Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975), David Lodge's *Changing Places* (1978), A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) or Charles Palliser's *Betrayals* (1993), casting ridicule on the vanities, cupidities and stupidities of intellectual life, that are best known. A lot of the comedy, but also the savagery of the satire, emerges from these narratives' targeting of the inability of university professors and administrators to rise above mistaking politicking for policy or machination for strategy. For the genre often turns on the ease with which academics can fall into pettiness or, worse, into mean and conniving ways. In other words, such fiction seems driven to suggest that the academic life may enrich the mind and more pragmatic reaches, but it does not necessarily do as much for the spirit.

Incidentally, how am I doing? Not very well, I think. I was supposed to make PhD students feel better about what it is that they are being initiated in, and this does not so far seem very encouraging at all. And it will get worse before it gets better. That's because one episode from *Stoner* to which I'd like to draw your attention really is rather harrowing. For whereas *Stoner* is a novel with some special, indeed sublime, moments that keep the satire

coefficient low, what readers may particularly remember is an episode depicting what comes across as the viva voce examination from hell. For those of you who want to read it after this, the episode occurs in Chapter Ten. It relates how William Stoner, the protagonist of the novel, comes to form part of 'a three-man committee' examining a research student's 'preliminary oral comprehensives' and what it is that transpires there. I shall not describe the examination because you must witness, as readers, the harrowing experience for yourselves. Rather, I hasten to say something else, because I want to steer away from any very dispiriting tonality to all this. There is another episode in the book that the reading memory cannot fail to return to, and it comes at the end. Without risking spoilers, I shall just say that it leaves the novel luminously poised on ambivalence over whether William Stoner, who comes from a hardscrabble farming background and whose circumstancing thereafter is rarely easy, is deluded to believe that his devotion to literature, academia and the promise they hold out has been affirming. So perhaps you will want to go and read that episode too. Indeed, read the whole novel. And if you've already done so, read it again.

If the novel bears rereading it is because it captures the drama of the irresolvable tension between cynicism and hope in University life everywhere. Often enough, cynicism is the readier emotion. It is probably symptomatic that the perceived decline of campus fiction coincides with the consolidation of the so-called neoliberal university, of the corporatization of campuses

and of metrics reductivism, of creeping managerialism, of the overdeterminism of research and scholarship by, well, all of the above and more. Which doubtless accounts for a conversation that I heard *again* only two weeks ago during a visit to a UK university, and which these days could probably happen on campuses the world over. The conversation went like this. 'Why did the campus novel die?', one University professor made a show of asking six others (they had been discussing aspects of contemporary academic life). And the answer came back swiftly. 'Because the reality is worse than the parody.' It was like a rehearsed chorus in a tableau that's gone international. It had the ring of a practised, weary cliché. Somebody who takes this to heart, tempted to write a campus novel themselves, may wonder whether the quickest way to doing so would not be to simply keep a journal of life at their university. Presumably, if the statement rings true, that's the gift that will keep on giving. But to persist in thinking like this is to assert the cynicism over the hope. And my point today, with PhD students at the core of this evening, is that for their sake we, in the institution, have to see what can be done to have the hope prevail over the cynicism. Because while we may laugh along knowingly with the comedy that we find in campus fiction, it is good to remember that the joke's on us. What campus fiction mercilessly satirizes is us and our kinds of goings on. We may be amused by what we recognize, but there is an onus to recognize it in ourselves. We are none of us above it, whatever our role or rank.

If we are to make the hope prevail, to work to justify it,

what can we be inspired by? Quite possibly by campus literature, again. Les Back's *Academic Diary: Or Why Higher Education Still Matters* (2016) is worth referring to here. It is not, in fact, a campus novel, but a book of reflections on life in higher education today. This is a volume marked by hope, not cynicism. It is about placing above all else 'the values of higher education as a place to think together'. What this quotation holds out is disarmingly simple. It cuts through all the ... well, whatever. If the immediate reaction is that in today's universities this seems idealistic, detached – thinking together, *idealistic?* – if you find the very idea (how shall I put it?) all too unreal, then there is some danger that you may have already succumbed to cynicism and resignation. But assuming the hope runs deeper, then we can start to ask – seasoned researchers, early-career academics and PhD scholars together – how *do* we do this? How do we make this value of thinking together, but also its facilitation and the advocacy for it, more immediate, more visible, more buoyant, more of an everyday thing on campus? Indeed, how do we make it irrepressible and systemic to what we do, rather than something that may be diaried (horrible word!) only occasionally and then quite possibly postponed because something else overtakes it?

Well, today's symposium is a fine initiative in itself. The title says it all: 'Sharing Research and Building Networks'. The Doctoral School's efforts to help prompt such sharing and such building can only be lauded. The School is seeking to provide the administrative frame for the thinking that goes on at PhD level and anchor its rigour,

but also to increase and enhance the opportunities for the sharing of that thinking, for configuring scholarly feedback in benign and supportive spaces. All in the name of the University of Malta and its amplified research culture. Let me pause on this. On precisely our name, the University of Malta, L-Università ta' Malta. It's now a brand name. Like practically all names of universities, it is also a bland name. But *Tal-Qroqq*: my word, what a word! I mean, just look at it. Look at it again, if you will and in order to aid defamiliarization, with the eyes of somebody who is not Maltese. How does it look? The hyphen is not the least puzzling element there. And the function of the Tal- will seem inscrutable. But it's the *Qroqq* that steals the show. In which linguistic wonderland does it happen that a five-letter word features three *qs*? The phoneticians will have more technical descriptions for that effect, but you get my meaning. You realize what is operative here. It is a shibboleth. And you will remember what a shibboleth is from your Old Testament, from Judges 12: 5–6.

The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan and held them against Ephraim. When any Ephraimite who had escaped begged leave to cross, the men of Gilead asked him, 'Are you an Ephraimite?', and if he said 'No,' they would retort, 'Say Shibboleth.' He would say, 'Sibboleth', and because he could not pronounce the word properly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. At that time forty-two thousand men of Ephraim lost their lives.

Tal-Qroqq: this name, then, I am using as handy and recognizable shorthand to refer to everything at the University of Malta that can be sensed to be distinguishing and distinctive, which nobody can articulate quite as well, quite as proprietorially, quite as identifyingly,

as us. And by "us", I don't mean only the Maltese who teach and study here, of course, but everyone who studies here, of whatever background, who contributes to the uniqueness of this campus and its signature inflections in its lines of scholarship. What is it that marks us out (in the good sense, of course)? What is it that gives the character to our research: the stamp, the signature, that makes our research assertively ours, that makes us *us*?

Two quick answers come to mind. The first is obvious. It involves the Malta-centred and Malta-referencing research that nobody else might undertake if we don't do so. The second is less obvious. Perhaps it is a little bit fantastical, never mind fictional. It involves bringing to that research which is *not* Malta-specific the traits of schools of thought nonetheless identifiable as having anchoring and *points of reference* here. If we think this improbable, if we don't believe this second dimension can be accessed, then what are we about? In both of these scenarios, the PhD at the University of Malta becomes strategically important in ways that need hardly be spelled out and which help to consolidate, develop and communicate our researching identity and distinctiveness. And if I put *Tal-Qroqq* into my title it is because it can signal this distinctiveness. It's hard not to notice this name, not to see the individuation in it, possibly the idiosyncrasy. Individuation and idiosyncrasy matter if we are not to be overwritten by schools of thought and organizational protocols from elsewhere and if we can be bold enough to think that we can realistically, in our own small way, reorient them. It is what could allow this campus to break free of homogenization even while it

respects harmonization. It is about the University having the nerve of its own difference and about holding that nerve. This place-name that situates us, *Tal-Qroqq*, serves as a prod to remind ourselves to affirm our identity through our research, at doctoral level and beyond.

But how do we do that effectively? Or rather, how do we do it better, since it is hardly the case that we are not doing it at all? You will all have strong thoughts on this. Here, for what they're worth, are a few of my own. Some of them are relatively straightforward and quite easily actionable and I know they're already being energized. I'd like to commend everyone who's working toward those efforts. Others need more time. Fair enough. Others are going to be damnably difficult. Fair enough again. But just remember: hope, belief, over cynicism.

1. The landing page of the University has a link off the Menu tab that says, 'Research'. Click it again at the first opportunity. You will see that we can all do more with it. One obvious point comes to mind. On another page the University lists the journals that are edited here. These are *our* journals, our *Tal-Qroqq* research. We are strongly our own brand in those journals. Let's build them up and show them off more confidently.
2. Our conferences. Ditto. Bring them up more prominently on our own online spaces. Let's see how their pages can be summoned with two clicks, not ten.
3. Our PhD students, both those present here and not, will over the next five years have produced between them 200 doctoral

theses (a staggering number). Some of this research will be published elsewhere as monographs or, in part, as journal papers or book chapters. But some of it can be published here because it is right and apt that it should happen that way. Do we have a strategy, a plan, for bringing the most deserving work at that level to broader academic view through our own publishing platforms? Is it possible to help set up an imprint, or one book series or more as may be appropriate, for that specific purpose within Malta University Press but not necessarily there exclusively, through which to cannily position, to confidently distribute what is singular to us but proudly primed for international outreach?

4. Think of electronic bibliographic databases like FRANCIS, curated by INIST-CNRS between 1984 and 2015. It links to research that other well-known indices and databases don't necessarily capture, particularly in regard to the Francophone humanities (the sciences equivalent is called PASCAL). If that could be done on the scale that FRANCIS and PASCAL exemplify (now available in Open Access, these databases are no longer updated as their mission is taken up by other initiatives, but the principle holds and, indeed, evolves), how much easier and urgent is a Maltese equivalent? Such a resource would be particularly important in those disciplines that we think of as contributing strongly to what we tend to refer to as 'Melitensia'. Who is going to put that resource together? If not us, then who? It would take years, of course. Which is why it's time to get started. And just think of what the possibilities around that undertaking are, if it can be

given a Mediterraneanist dimension with the collaboration of other institutions in the region.

5. A thought-experiment: if the marginal decisions in Departments, Centres, Institutes, Faculties were swung and sealed on the basis of research considerations, how different would things be? Rather more than marginally different, I warrant, and beneficially so.
6. We have to speak of this matter: the culture of precarity for young researchers. Elsewhere it drives many pages of reflection in publications like *Times Higher Education* or the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. We could collectively shrug our shoulders, accepting this as a campus reality the world over. Or we can place the advocacy for early-career academics, for research assistants, for more integral involvement of PhD scholars where that move might be appropriate, as a central part, a codified principle, of our higher education planning. This is where it gets understandably difficult. But again: 'If not us, who?' 'If not now, when?' The next collective agreement can set one marker.
7. For young researchers the prospects are not helped by the fact that as a nation we don't have the para-academic tracks that exist elsewhere in areas like publishing or cultural and scientific curation (to mention just two possibilities). The country's size is the reason often cited for this, but I sometimes think that's too easy an excuse. There are things that also need to be said about the role the University and doubtless the Doctoral School can play in promoting awareness and advocacy of the possibilities. There is, in fact, a lot more that I'd want to say about this but

that will probably be for a different occasion, as I must come to my conclusion.

The conclusion might need to acknowledge that this all not so much campus fiction as campus fantasy. 'Get real.' 'This is *unreal*.' 'This is *naïve*.' 'We can wish, but ...' Let me counter that there is also a different and contiguous unreality, a different and contiguous naiveté. It is the one that trusts in texts of a different sort, in reports or surveys whose kind I'd rather not specify. There is, in fact, one form of campus fiction that can be touching or pernicious, depending on how you look at it. It can believe that because the paper trail is 'ok' then everything else is fine (let's not speak about the paper trail that isn't 'ok'). There is a campus fantasy of a different kind at work there. Even if, as we very much hope, an excellent paper trail is non-fictional about the excellence it reports on, there remains another story that must be told. It can only be told if it goes to meet the non-fictional characters inhabiting the campus, ready to not confuse them for their numerical-value ciphers or their statistics-refracted identities. Those encounters cannot happen off the anonymous, impersonal values committed to surveys. It is not action on forms and boxes dutifully filled in that can secure our next best stages, significant though this can be. It also needs the singular intent on what other kinds of responses, often undocumented, are saying: those for which no ready templates or metrics or interpretive protocols exist but which are very expressive of campus reality and quite authentically so. As with everything else in life, it all depends on which windows onto reality we want to look through and which of our fictions we want to believe.

In anecdotal illustration of what this would need to connect with, I shall leave you with this observation. It recalls a conversation I heard on campus between students two years ago and which stuck in my mind, as it seemed to be coining a term that felt trenchant. 'Qroqqizmu ...,' one student remarked to the other. I walked on (one doesn't want to eavesdrop). I couldn't make out if the inflection was positive or not. But then the word has its own sound-shape, its own evocativeness, which we are able to read. It takes a lot of collective effort over at Tal-Qroqq to bring that word, presumably translatable as *qroqqery*, into the currency of affection and hope, rather than in representation of their travesty. For the sake of all our students, for the sake of all of us, this is the challenging but not impossible effort to recommit to uncynically every day. For the University of Malta, for Tal-Qroqq, for *qroqqery* in its most realistic best version, we have to collectively work on an ever stronger campus fantasy, however unreal it may seem. Pretty much like William Stoner then. A finer fiction for a finer reality.







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