Virtue and the quiet art of scholarship: Reclaiming the university

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The title of Pirrie’s (2019) book implies that the seizure of the university by the forces of neoliberalism might be thwarted through the employment of a subtle art of resistance. She wastes no time delineating the problems faced by researchers, lecturers and students in higher education: they are simply too well known to be worth reiterating. Instead, she uses language that calls to mind fairy tales, such as ‘Rumour has it that virtue has slipped in through the back door’ (p. 1), to imply that the marketization of higher education (HE) is being subverted in dark corners. She stimulates the desire to join this shadowy opposition through appeals to our imagination and the suspension of disbelief we experience when immersed in art. To this end, her writing is punctuated by an eclectic mix of references: to lyrics by Leonard Cohen, dialogue from a novel by Ali Smith and the description of ‘a painting attributed to Bruegel’ (p. 45). Her claim that ‘this book has a soundtrack’ (p. x) cleverly captures how we may be humming a song of resistance in our head while navigating the corridors of power in HE. Indeed, the strength that she discerns in the heroes is not loud or bombastic: it seems that in order to rescue higher education from neoliberalism we must, like Leonard Cohen, embody ‘the “quieter” virtues of modesty and diffidence’ (p. 11).

Pirrie’s analysis of this ‘quiet art’ draws on Tim Ingold’s distinction between travelling (moving) and wayfaring (attending), and their respective forms of knowledge: those of the occupant and inhabitant. Whereas the occupant seeks ‘mastery’ of the world by ordering it (p. 35), the wayfarer acts modestly, acknowledging the role played in our lives by ‘minor errors’ (p. 48) and the ‘entanglement of things’ (p. 56). This opposition is at the crux of her argument: ‘It seems that it is precisely the qualities that are prized in academia that stand in the way of submitting, of giving oneself over to others that serve us well when living with defeat’ (p. 57). One might reply that such diffidence is the job of the artist, not the academic, but Pirrie puts her faith in the virtue of ‘informed doubt’ (p. 57) fundamental not only to engagement with fiction but also genuinely open academic enquiry. By way of an example, she describes her involvement in a three-year research project commissioned and funded by the UK government on the issue of school exclusion. In this project, the research skills of the team blocked the kind of ‘ethical imagination’ (p. 61) routinely displayed by writers of fiction and prevented the researchers from ‘becoming aware’ (ibid.) of the young people’s experiences. It was the pursuit of occupant (researcher) knowledge that undermined their ability to connect with the inhabitant (pupil) knowledge of ‘living with defeat’ (p. 57).

Pirrie borrows the motif of ‘living with defeat’ from a song by Cohen for her ‘manual for living with defeat’ (p. 77). At the mid-point of the book, she states her theme in full:

[To find] a way of living with defeat, as it were, without succumbing to despair or living one’s life according to terms dictated by those who appear wholeheartedly to have embraced managerialism. (p. 65)

Of course, not everyone will agree that failure to conform to the standards of commodified academia looks like defeat but feels like victory: indeed, many readers of the book who recognise their own misalignment with the managerial values of HE may feel they have little to celebrate about their supposed defeat. But Pirrie seeks to provide a means for each of us to salvage a sense of victory from the possible wreckage of our careers by reference to Richard Smith’s...
concept of unknowingness. Unknowingness, she says, ‘invites us to lay down our arms and wait’ (p. 65), to ‘surrender ourselves to the uncertainty of the elements and to open ourselves to the perceived mystery’ (ibid.). It defines her title:

Virtue and the quiet art of scholarship implies far greater attention to the embodied, situated, affective, sensuous and creative dimensions of our being in the world than to the abstract values of ‘intellectual carefulness, intellectual courage, intellectual rigour and intellectual honesty’ (Baehr, 2013, p. 250). (p. 70)

Not everyone will be comfortable with the idea that academics might choose to distance themselves from the realm of the intellect. Indeed, some might argue that managerialism is an anti-intellectual attempt to make academics focus on the ‘embodied, situated, affective’ (p. 70) aspects of our work in HE so as to capitalise on our intellectual and emotional labour. However, while these academics may well conceptualise their retreat into ‘the world of abstract values’ as a retreat from managerialism, it constitutes, for Pirrie, surrender on the wrong terms: it is the ‘wrong sort of defeat’ (ibid.). As she puts it, ‘I am interested in living well and in knowing well’ (p. 73, emphasis given).

To illustrate how she understands unknowingness, Pirrie considers research ethics in the light of Nan Shepherd’s book, *The Living Mountain*. Shepherd is described by Pirrie as a ‘good knower’ (p. 90): someone ‘committed to the pursuit of knowledge, truth and understanding’ (ibid.); someone who has come to understand the ‘universal’ through her patient and persistent wayfaring through a particular mountain environment. By treading familiar mountain paths, sometimes accompanied by her students, rather than scaling mountain peaks for the sake of conquest, Shepherd, we are told, experienced wayfaring between the outward landscape and the inward soul, led by her belief that ‘living in one sense at a time is to live all the way through’ (p. 95). Most academics would likely agree that, in this spirit, we should shun the sterility of academic conquest in favour of a more satisfying and ethical engagement with research. What, perhaps, is harder to figure out is how they might emulate Shepherd’s integration of inward soul and outward landscape: if her success was the result of regular wayfaring in a spectacular landscape, what hope is there for those dwelling in the ruins of the university?

Although Pirrie does not tell us outright how to satisfy our appetite for living ‘all the way through,’ she does explore in some detail the state of vacillation between what might be described as ‘quasi-existence’ and a full life. In a chapter entitled ‘Pulling strings,’ she invites us to ask whether it is preferable for academics to dance as if lightly to the rhythm of the neoliberal puppet master or cut their strings and fall to earth, where we risk career stagnation and redundancy. Again, though, it is of little comfort to them to declare that the puppet master can no longer manipulate a broken marionette – and it is unclear how they might emulate Petrushka, the puppet who can ‘leap off the stage’ (p. 102), defying the puppeteer and gravity.

In summary, Pirrie’s ‘manual for living with defeat’ (p. 77) consists of illustrative examples, rather than clear instructions for how to do so. It guides academics towards solutions while offering them consolation for their inability to find solutions, and indeed advocates a curious form of contentment with being bereft of solutions. In her conclusion, she states that ‘[t]here is evidence all around us to suggest that we are incapable of resolving anything’ (p. 118), but her message is romantic, rather than despondent. She urges us to emulate the ‘traffic of love’ (p. 122) between Shepherd and the mountains and thus transcend managerialism and all such doctrines tethered to ideas not grounded in love. And although the word ‘love’ does not appear frequently in the book, it is palpable throughout: from the lyrics of Cohen to Shepherd’s description of a mountain flower. This, perhaps, explains why this ‘manual’ contains no instructions, but instead seeks to stimulate the reader’s love by evoking poetry, paintings, the smell of mountain wood after rain, and the whole entanglement of ideas so tenderly presented by Pirrie to her reader. Not for nothing does she prefer writing that ‘embraces lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility and multiplicity’ (p. 123) and reject the idea that the university will be won back through ‘trench warfare’ (p. 130). At the start of the book, she quotes Cohen: ‘there’s a crack in
everything, that’s where the light gets in’ (p. 14). At its close, she returns to this idea that resistance is not a battle against darkness but a patient search for slivers of light. And, indeed, that sliver of light may mark a portal for the quiet virtues to enter in. Her book ends with the sentence, ‘Perhaps the best way of reclaiming the university is to find an unguarded back door and walk straight back in’ (p. 132). It may well be as simple as that.

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