

Can we fall in love again?

A testimony

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'Look,' the vice-rector said, pointing to yet another bar chart in his Power Point presentation. A series of slender bars, alternatively yellow and red, appeared before us, climbing, first very slowly, but at the far right end of the chart very rapidly, to spectacular heights. 'This,' he explained, turning towards us, 'is the funding each of you have raised in the past five years. As you notice, we have some colleagues who manage to attract huge sums. But the long tail on the left hand side also shows that many bring in little or nothing.'

It was at that conference for the Association of Antwerp University Professors – in 2008, I guess – that my university for the first time appeared to me in an entirely different light. Of course, there had been a lot of changes in the preceding years. But only at that moment did I fully realize how different my university now was from the institution I had joined, or rather had been ordained into some twenty-five years before.

1. What I saw then clearer than ever before was, that we had now all gone into competition with one another, that we were all doomed now to be perpetually reaching for ever greater, for ever receding heights. In the same line, in an article in the daily *De Morgen* of September 24th 2013 under the unassuming heading 'Our universities can measure up to Harvard', the five Flemish rectors declared in unison that 'the competition and combat for worldwide recognition is very tough.' But when lending our ears to that kind of militant prose, do we not threaten to forget that research is not only a matter of competition, but perhaps even more so of cooperation and solidarity? If I have been able to contribute a little to my own small field, the study of medieval Dutch literature, then that was definitely also due to the generosity of colleagues who had engaged me into their projects and with whom I had had exciting exchanges on our common passion. They were available to read my articles and books before publication, and they sometimes, totally unexpected, drew my attention to an article, a book, a paragraph, a source they thought could be of some use to me. It is no accident that prefaces of books in the humanities, and especially those that are published by the most prestigious University Presses are replete with words of gratitude to colleagues who often are also friends, who – for nothing – made available their knowledge, their time and their attention.

2. 'And we know which bar is yours', the vice-rector grinned while a new chart appeared on the screen. 'Which was mine?' I anxiously wondered while the presentation went on. The years that followed little by little brought the answer. Irrefutable figures advanced on our evaluation and promotion forms. Binding minimum criteria (for projects,

doctorates, publications, citations, student satisfaction) were decreed, lending to evaluations and rankings of all kinds a scent of unshakable objectivity.

One of the most drastic examples was the introduction of the VABB, the Flemish Academic Bibliographic File for the Social Sciences and the Humanities, in which peer reviewed publications are rated according to a scoring system ranging from half a point to four points. The aim was to create a distribution code for the output related distribution of the BOF-funds among the universities, this in addition to the parameters of the Web of Science which mainly covers the natural- and biochemical sciences.

The opinions of my colleagues are divided, but I am a cool lover of this system as it is of necessity stained with the original sin of ambiguity. It is true: the VABB does not purport – and rightfully so – to measure quality, it only indicates the presence of peerreview. The authoritative panel of internationally renowned scholars who direct the VABB, clearly recognized this when it very rightly published the following warning on its website: 'The VABB merely offers an instrument to distribute research funds between universities. It is not fit to compare researchers be it individually, in group or disciplinary and certainly not crossdisciplinary.'¹

These sentences have not been written without reason. Yet this warning is more and more disregarded. In his recent book *Eerlijke wetenschap* 'Honest science', the philosopher Gustaaf Cornelis – honestly... – admits this: ' Thanks to the GPRC-label my book earned *the essential rating necessary to qualify for my job as associate professor at two universities* [italics mine – F.W.]'.² And right he is. It has become a tedious tradition in faculty meetings that I have to request my dean to omit references to the VABB when reports on recruitment procedures, evaluations etc. That's that for the report; it does not change anything to the way decisions came about. In short, the VABB is not simply a measuring instrument, it steers in an improper way the publication conduct of researchers and puts them under pressure.

What is happening to us, scholars in the humanities, that we have let ourselves be infected by the pretended objectivity of the number, that we have come to doubt the value of well-reasoned judgment, which is our core business, isn't it? The answer places us unfortunately in the same inferno circle as where Dante would have put the bankers and sounds: 'Money'. 'Will your contribution to that exhibition catalogue appear in the VABB?' my dean asked me this past spring. When I denied – there is no time for peerreviewing an exhibition catalogue and moreover, just about every specialist in the field had contributed to it – he pointed out that when choosing my publication channels, I should also think about the finances of the faculty. I understand and I share his concern. His is the heavy task to keep his needy faculty afloat. But that the catalogue would reach several thousands of readers whereas that same article in a specialised journal would only be read by a handful of colleagues was no detail to me.

3. And this is what brings me to my third and last argument. Far more than in the natural and biomedical sciences, the larger part of the research in the humanities is only relevant when it gets transferred to education and society. Even though in academic

¹ 'Begeleidende nota VABB-SHW – derde versie', p. 2 te consulteren via <http://www.ecoom.be/sites/ecoom.be/files/Begeleidende%20nota%20VABB-SHW%20december%202012%20FINAAL.pdf> [21.11.2013]

² Gustaaf C. Cornelis, *Eerlijke wetenschap. Waarom hebben wetenschapsmensen een geweten nodig?* Tiel: LannooCampus, 2013, p. 9.

policy texts, education and service are again and again mentioned in one breath with research, it is evident that research weighs heaviest when it comes to practice. Research – or rather: the measurable result of research in doctorates, publications, citations and projects – is the major lever available to universities, faculties and departments to positively influence their finances. As a result we see an increasing tendency to limit the investment in time and people for education. Yet, and paradoxically, the number of students keeps increasing, as are complaints about a weaker or at any rate a more heterogeneous instream, so that in fact more education and more coaching would be justified. Maintaining the quality of education is however also here unjustly being sought after in time consuming and discouraging bureaucracy: voluminous selfevaluation reports in an ever increasing impenetrable and mirthless educational jargon, corrective plans, test matrices, competence matrices and the like, giving cause for more and more administration, the influence of which on what really matters in the professor-student relationship is largely being overestimated. All of this while students are in strong need of dedicated and enthusing coaches.

Let me conclude with a 'cri de cœur'.

Dear rectors, dear politicians, dear administrators and decision makers of all kinds,

What we need most in our universities is trust. What our universities need most is love. Or when you don't like that word, as it may seem to you to be too soft, too naïve, call it passion. Do not allow that our and your alma mater is gradually metamorphosing into a sour, old hag with hanging breasts and an abacus in her hands, her two hideous children Fear and Fraud quarelling on her lap, and her feet mercilessly placed on a professor's throat. Resist the temptation to claim that, because we are number 61, or 85, or 164 on the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, that we can measure up to Harvard. But work up to the day, that a professor from Harvard will visit you and say: 'I see professors here who are so dedicated to their students, young doctors so passionate about their research, students so enthusiastic about their education, in short, a community so proud of its university, that it seemed to me as if I were back in Harvard.'

This is the contribution of the author to the Ethical Forum of the University Foundation on November 21, 2013.