

Do We Really Live in a Period of Literary Crisis?

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Abstract: *The paper overviews the crisis currently affecting literature and its study. The author selectively surveys professional points of view on the crisis of Russian literature. Opinions of critics, writers, literary historians, publishers and sociologists are all taken into consideration. The author focuses on the most discussed problems facing literature today: the poor quality of recent literature, its lack of social prestige, the futility of literature, as well as that of writers, literary critics and theorists.*

Keywords: *Russian literature, literary crisis, literary criticism, literary history*

Résumé : *Cet article fournit une présentation de la crise qui affecte de nos jours la littérature et son étude. L'auteure surveille d'une manière sélective les points de vue professionnels sur la crise de la littérature russe. Des opinions avancées par des critiques, des écrivains, des historiens de la littérature, des éditeurs et sociologues sont toutes prises en considération. L'auteure se concentre sur les problèmes les plus débattus dans la littérature d'aujourd'hui : la maigre qualité de la littérature récente, son manque de prestige social, la futilité de la littérature, comme celle aussi des auteurs, des critiques littéraires et des théoriciens.*

Mots-clés : *littérature russe, crise littéraire, critique littéraire, histoire littéraire*

As it would be impossible to discuss all the controversial aspects of the topic at hand, along with the multitude of attitudes it gave rise to, in the span of one article, I have decided to limit the scope of this paper to a general overview of the Russian literary critics' opinions about the crisis of literature. To this end, I visited the online versions of literary magazines such as *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, *Jurnaliniy Zal*, *Russkiy Zhurnal*, *Zhurnal Samizdat*, *Fotozhurnal*, *Russkiy Pereple*, *library.ru*, *diary.ru*, *inopressa.ru*, *magazines.russ.ru*, *archives.colta.ru*, etc. in search of articles, interviews, surveys, and discussions on the topic. This overview of the literary press has enabled me to identify some of the most discussed problems which literature faces nowadays. Briefly put, the debate foregrounds the poor quality of contemporary literary production, its ever more fragile social function, as well as the futility of literature, writers, literary critics and theorists. In what follows, I will focus on the opinions of leading Russian writers, critics, publishers, and sociologists, such as Konstantin Frumkin, Aleksandr Melikhov, Igor N. Sukhikh, G.F. Daineko, Natalia Ivanova, Rome Arbitman, Aleksandr Zhitenev, Kirill Korchagin, Lev Oborin, Denis Larionov, Anna Golubkova, and Lev Anninsky.

In a 2010 issue of *L'Express* magazine, André Clavel described post-Soviet Russian literature in the following terms:

Russian literature is undergoing a crisis. After a period when it glowed like a polished samovar, Russian prose is facing today the demons of a society demolished by the cynicism of Power. Confusion reigns among writers, they feel hostages in their own country (spiritually destroyed, in its turn). Everything changed with the death of the “Soviet Golem”: former cultural institutions disappeared; the new literary production ceased to feel responsible towards history; the age of subversive, dissident literature came to an end, the internet took the place of the samizdat; literary magazines lost their former power and greatness; the West winds swayed the old habits, bringing along new sources of inspiration to the Russian soil. [...] Shocked by the collapse of the canon, writers have to re-invent the rules of writing. [...] This restoration is particularly painful, as it takes place on the ruins of a society which is still haunted by the Bolshevik hydra, as well as by the new satraps of Kremlin.¹

Most young writers, continues André Clavel, express this anguish in their texts, criticizing their country. Contemporary authors such as Vladimir Makanin, Arkady Babchenko, Andrei Gelasimov, Yury Buida, Natalia Klyuchareva, Anatoly Korolyov, Zakhar Prilepin, Irina Denezhkina insist on

intoning a requiem for the lost time, clinging to the cold hyper-realistic style. Mafia and drug traffickers, murderers, drunkards and the children of chaos are the themes and favorite characters of current Russian literature, of this ship floating adrift in the ocean of counterfeit vodka. [...]

Some of them find refuge in nostalgia, like Boris Akunin, who feels nostalgic about the tsarist era; others prefer sarcasm, in the vein of Gogol's grotesque. Among them we can mention some of the most scandalous and widely commented Russian authors, like Vladimir Sorokin and Victor Pelevin. [...] They have chosen the path of dissidents, following the words of Eduard Limonov: “Our society has nothing else to offer to young people but the grim obligations of policemen and soldiers, or the pitiful merriment of young workers dazed by the vapors of alcohol, or the bleak life of the prisoners.” And Zakhar Prilepin adds: “in Russia there are not many things one can believe in anymore [...]. Russia feeds on the souls of its sons—it is living with them, not with the righteous ones, but with the damned.” A sad outcome. A bleak future. (Clavel)

André Clavel's words may serve as a good starting point for an attempt to understand the meanings that Russians attribute to the “crisis of literature,” in the context of an intense debate on this topic. More often than not, the responsibility for the general lack of interest in literary products has been imputed to postmodernist writers. Obviously, those who cast the blame are usually writers and critics of the older generation. However,

the works of postmodernist writers the likes of Andrei Bitov, Venedikt Yerofeyev and Sasha Sokolov have enjoyed considerable success both among Russian readers and among foreign readers—owing to the numerous translations of their works. Some of the no less famous representatives of post-Soviet postmodernism are Victor Pelevin, Tatyana Tolstaya, Yury Buida, Boris Akunin, Vladimir Sorokin, Dmitri Prigov, Vladimir Makanin, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, and Lyudmila Ulitskaya.

The idea of crisis is usually related to the fact that literature is no longer read. Some critics postulate a direct link between the poor quality of recent literature and the readers' indifference. Aleksandr Ivanov, an editor with Ad Marginem publishing house, considers that the current landscape of Russian literature looks miserable. The fall of censorship has not caused the appearance of valuable works. The underground cultural opposition has exhausted its ideological and artistic potential; the critique of the political regime failed to find a place in literature: "Writers the likes of Pelevin-Prigov and Sorokin make a sort of literature for the poor, a kind of baby blubbers on the meadow. [...] But there is no reason to worry about that, since nobody reads their texts anyway" (Ivanov). According to Aleksandr Ivanov, Russians no longer experience the same pleasure of reading which the readers of dissident Soviet literature experienced. "Censorship is dead, and so is literature," says the editor (Ivanov).

Most people, however, seem more optimistic. The sources I consulted indicate that most readers are not frightened by this bleak forecast. Russians still consider themselves a well-read nation. People in the Moscow subway still read as much as before, although another kind of literature captivates their attention.

According to culturologist Konstantin Frumkin, the assertion that literature is going through a crisis today invites at least two different approaches. The first one is that there is no crisis at all, since literature is still being written, edited and read. It is true that the circulation of books has diminished over the years and that people have less and less time for reading, much less than the critics would like, but it is equally true that no one has ever quantified the number of passionate readers. The second possible claim, in Frumkin's opinion, is that literature has always been in crisis. The general public's disregard for literature and writers has always been deplored. Consequently, crisis would be the normal state of literature, a sign of the changes taking place within the literary field, and therefore it shouldn't be perceived as a catastrophe. Moreover, it wouldn't be appropriate to talk about "crisis" in general, but rather about the particularities defining the crisis of contemporary literature and about all the obstacles literature has to face in order to find its proper way of functioning in society (Frumkin).

According to Frumkin, contemporary literature is going through three different types of crisis, corresponding to literature's main social functions: *aesthetic*, *socio-communicative* and *informational*. Concerned with the phenomenon of cultural massification (a phenomenon widely spread in the age of mass media), the scholar chooses these three functions in order to highlight the obstacles that generate debates about the impasse of Russian literature.

The Aesthetic Function and Entertainment

Today, more than ever, literature providing *aesthetic pleasure* is challenged by a literature which qualifies as *leisure activity*. A sociological survey from 2010 shows that the so-called “fun books” currently represent 97% of the whole Russian literary production (Daineko). Although canonical books (the great Russian classics) preserve their “official” status as “catalysts” of the aesthetic taste, nowadays their readership has significantly diminished compared to that of lower-shelf books. Statistically speaking, in recent years the so-called “commercial fiction,” “light fiction” or “paraliterature” has gained momentum in Russia. But even this literature has suffered a severe narrowing of the market under the pressure of modern entertainment: computer games, television, and internet communication. However, the challenge posed by the internet might not be such a menace to literature, according to Frumkin. Admittedly, no well-established form of entertainment has ever been eliminated by the discovery of new technologies. Theater has not been destroyed by the cinema; the cinema has not been destroyed by television. Even street theater has survived in some form or another. Actually, technology generates new conditions for the existence of literature (Fromkin). The internet competes with the editorial production but, at the same time, it is a powerful channel for book distribution. Statistical data provided by a survey conducted by Galina Daineko in 2010 show that young Russian readers prefer books circulating on the internet. Granted, there are many literary critics who lament the poor quality of this literature, but they equally deplore the quality of the editorial book production over recent years.

In contemporary culture, institutions offering literary awards have implicitly undertaken the task of selecting the valuable creations from the huge flow of books, according to Igor Sukhikh, professor at the University of St. Petersburg. These institutions should provide both aesthetic validation and book promotion. The juries have to select and recommend the best books for prizes. The awards are meant to stimulate publishing houses to increase the diffusion of books, to arouse the critics’ interest in reviewing them and, above all, to incite readers to buy and read them. It is true that the jury may be biased (all literary prizes are controversial); in any event, a good book promotion has beneficial effects, structuring the literary field and stimulating reading. Unfortunately, we are currently witnessing an inflation of awards, which leads to all sorts of misunderstandings, undermining the very idea of “prize.” Igor Sukhikh comments on the selection criteria for screening valuable literature: “Nowadays, in order to obtain a literary prize, a writer has to publish literary texts every year, regardless of their size or quality; he must participate diligently in all literary events and show loyalty towards a particular theme or political ideology”. Sukhikh suggests an unexpected solution for rehabilitating the institution of literary prizes and the institution of literature as such: books should circulate without the author’s name on the first cover. Only in this case literary quality (and not the author) would come first.

According to Frumkin, another obstacle impeding the circulation of valuable books lies in the conditions ensuring a publishers’ financial survival and in the imperative of switching to large categories of readers. In order to reach a mass audience, most publishers

rely on books that can stimulate the curiosity of thousands of people, with different tastes and concerns. The main obstacle for elite literature, in Frumkin's opinion, isn't the fact that most readers are uneducated or lack aesthetic taste, but rather the fact that "they don't have the opportunity to communicate with one another," since their interests, skills, preferences, aesthetic tastes and cultural backgrounds are different. The problem is that nowadays literature seems to divide, rather than unite readers through a particular message, theme, focus point, etc.; for, as everyone knows, intense communication is possible only within relatively small groups with common interests. Publishers have their own ideas about the topics which attract readers belonging to different subcultures: eccentricities—a focus on sexuality, for instance—sell better. The paradox is that all these so-called "common ground" texts should appeal to the readers less than the hypothetical product that would correspond entirely to their specific tastes and interests. "Whether we like it or not, the law at work here is that an 'ideal' book will correspond to the taste of a smaller group of readers than we would wish. These are the consequences of giving up a centralized aesthetic canon" (Frumkin).

On the other hand, the economic obstacle shouldn't be overlooked either. A writer's readership cannot be smaller than the commercially reasonable runs. The situation is similar to that of schools that cannot function without a certain number of students, or to that of TV channels, which aim for profitable ratings. Even if publishers are tempted to experiment with small runs of books and even though there are several channels of subsidy, ranging from governmental financing programs to the author's willingness to cover the expenses of publishing, they are not always able to solve the problem of economic survival. The success of a publishing house fluctuates. In the context of the accelerated development of the internet, increasing the prices of books wouldn't be a solution either, because turning them into some sort of unaffordable luxury would prevent a large category of people from buying and reading them.

What Obstacles Interfere with the Socio-Communicative Function of Literature?

Frumkin believes that the purpose of the socio-communicative function of literature is to *increase the cohesion of the social group*. If a book is read by a large number of readers, it creates favorable premises for an efficient communication process. The fact that two people who do not know each other are reading the same book and enjoy it means that they will be able to understand each other in the process of communication. Canonical books facilitate communication between community members, offering them topics of conversation. The more books two people have in common, the more readily they can communicate using common words, associative chains, metaphors and symbols. Canonical texts also play a part in defining and strengthening national identity. For example, Romanians consider Eminescu, Sadoveanu and Reboreanu national writers. Things are somewhat different in the case of Russian literature. Frumkin mentions in this context the role Russian classics in shaping the imperial psychology and mentality. Similarly, Aleksandr Ivanov, who expressed his disdain with respect to postmodernist literature, talks about literature as an instrument of geopolitical influence: "When a

country is strong, and its power is taken into account, the influence of its literature increases. This happens because writers perceive themselves as the messengers of a great power. But when a country is peripheral, the interest in its literature is insignificant too.”

Consequently, most critics deplore the excessive fragmentation of the book flow, considered the main obstacle in the way of the socio-communicative function of literature. Books known only by a small number of people cannot provide grounds for commentary and debate, and so they cannot unite large groups of people. With the exception of writers and literary critics, readers do not comment on recently appeared books. Elite literature is practically nonexistent for common readers, as well as for the elite that, although educated and trained, has less and less time for reading.

The Writer as Expert

A third function—pertaining to information or knowledge—refers to the way in which the writer legitimates himself, through his work, as an expert able to give advice in certain life situations. By virtue of his unique life experience, he knows something different than other people and can pass this knowledge to the reader. Traditionally, writers have expressed their opinions on a great number of political, moral, religious or historical topics. Nowadays, the writer seems to have lost this privilege. Lacking time, the contemporary reader does not have the patience to read a novel of thousands of pages in order to get to the core of an existential truth; instead, he would rather look for answers in specialized literature, meant to develop practical skills. The decrease of the interest in the information provided by fiction could be explained by the emergence and development of all kinds of public systems of expertise in various areas, including the humanities. Not only have these systems of expertise developed at a very fast pace, but they have also become very advantageous for the mass audience. Those who read fiction are simultaneously readers of newspaper articles, which contain useful information from all areas. Today, interviews with doctors, economists and sociologists prevail over those with writers. The development of such institutions of experts meant that literary fiction began to lose its social function. If in the nineteenth century it was natural for writers to criticize social phenomena (such as poverty and alcohol abuse, for instance), today any piece of information or opinion on these matters makes an impression of amateurism (compared to scientific data, provided by sociologists and demographers).

As Frumkin points out, social sciences and the systems of expertise had the same negative impact on the development of fiction as photography had on fine arts. In general, fine arts could not recover from this blow, because photography challenged them in one of their essential functions—the representation of the world. Just as in the case of fiction, photography has not taken over the aesthetic quality of fine arts. However, the circumstance that fine arts are aesthetically superior to photography was not enough to preserve the former’s faded greatness. The so-called expertise offered by the writer is superior to others through its aesthetic quality. His privilege is the talent with which he is able to narrate personal experiences in condensed, crystallized phrases. The author

of a Russian forum on fantasy literature quotes an experiment made by American sociologists, who showed that fiction—by way of stimulating emotions—develops human skills much more than self-help literature does (*Культурно-просветительская или развлекательная*).

On the other hand, the literary critic Vasilina Orlova believes that young writers have something to say as observers of the new, post-Soviet age. Denis Gutsko, Arkady Babchenko, Aleksandr Karasev and Zakhar Prilepin have all succeeded in understanding and giving an artistic expression to the tragic experience of the war of their generation. Owing to their writings, readers can imagine how young Russians were dying in Chechnya (Orlova). At the same time, Vasilina Orlova deplores the writers' indifference towards the dismemberment of the Russian empire:

Russia established its borders and fortified its strongholds due to the effort of several generations. The intellectuals, however, did not show any concern to preserve Russian culture, the Russian influence, or at least the Russian language in the former Soviet Republics; the Russians in those territories were left to their own—and at the mercy of what? At the mercy of a historical law or of some tragic accident?

Orlova satirizes several writers' pro-Western views, arguing that "in the '90s and at the turn of the century, there appeared in Russia people who had never experienced the fear of state pressure; people that had never been trained to become slaves and that had never been socially humiliated by the Soviet system." And she goes on to add that "[i]n terms of social, political and state matters, Russians are ignorant. It is no discovery of mine" (Orlova). She considers that writers who disseminate "unpatriotic" messages are useless.

The Useless Writer

Nowadays, the issue of the useless writer is obsessively discussed in Russian newspapers and magazines. Paradoxically, a representative of hard science chooses to defend the writer's status in society: Aleksandr Melikhov thinks that science can never eliminate fiction. Therefore, the main objective of literature at the present time would be to overcome its futility and inconsistency complexes (Melikhov). Publicist Andrei Hrenov considers that the only solution is for the writers to try to regain the prestige and influence they once had. For there is no shortage of talented writers. The problem is that they are read by very few people. Previously, writers used to be aware of their prestige. They enjoyed the readers' attention and were also supported by various institutions. Now they are left to face an indifferent crowd of readers that usually gets bored very fast. The state no longer shapes the audience's background by insistently recommending some writers and banishing others. When this form of control ceased, the writers found themselves thrown into a different world. Many of them have never recovered from this blow. People from other professions have adapted to the conditions of capitalism:

Komsomol members became businessmen, racketeers became bankers, etc. It appears that, rather than complaining, writers should try to adapt to the new realities as quickly as possible and produce other kinds of texts, in the spirit of the age (Hrenov).

According to Hrenov, writers can achieve this by establishing a dialogue with the contemporary world, on the one hand, and with the reader, on the other. The writer is supposed to please the reader, otherwise he might lose his audience:

The reader is not a passive consumer. He is a partner. The ideal case would be for the reader and the writer to have read the same books in their childhood and to be equally excited and inspired by them. Does such a reader exist nowadays? I doubt it. The collapse of the Soviet system in the '90s happened so fast, that the former language of the literary tradition soon became superfluous and inappropriate for the authors who now had to survive by embracing a new reality. The fast-paced lifestyles and the new tastes rapidly changed the communication patterns. Some allusions and references are no longer familiar to the readership. There is not enough time for recovering the traditional patterns. (Hrenov)

The question is whether one should bother to establish a dialogue with such a reader: a person with bourgeois tastes, who prefers to download books off the internet and to "devour" them on the subway; who prefers cheap Hollywood scenarios to classic novels; who cannot name one single Nobel laureate in literature. The question is pointless, as Hrenov demonstrates. In the absence of a real dialogue with its reader, literature will surely die. The dialogue should be continued under any circumstance. If the author refuses to respond to his readers' demands, literature will cease to be literature, just like football cannot live without its fans. The exceptional writer, who succeeds in reconciling originality with the requirements of a large audience, will certainly acquire a formidable social force. This is the kind of writer Russia needs today: a talented author, capable of "capturing the spirit of the age."

What Is the Role of Literary Criticism?

Arguments for and against literary criticism are a constant feature of Russian cyberspace. Those who consider there is no need of literary criticism (because, in their opinion, literary criticism is totally compromised) invoke as arguments the burdensome legacy of the times of ideological control, as well as the fact that the literary critic is seen today as a service provider, employed by publishers for the promotion of books. Natalia Ivanova (literary critic) notes that Russian readers perceive literary criticism as an attempt to manipulate them, which is why a negative review has more chances of drawing attention to a book than a positive one. This odd phenomenon, peculiar to the Russian cultural scene, is a consequence of the ideologically-oriented criticism of the Soviet era (Ivanova). In Michael Edelstein's opinion, a successful writer is always a PR product in its purest form nowadays. The only thing that critics do today is "inflate the writers' value"; by doing this, they generate confusion among readers and undermine the

evaluation criteria (qtd. in Ivanova). Not even writers need critics any longer (at least not in their traditional role: they now expect them to be either “prosecutors” or “flunkies”) (Sukhikh). Literary critic Maksim Dalin disagrees with disgruntled writers:

Do you understand me, dear writers? It is the *reader* who needs the critic! The reader needs him as a compass in the ocean of garbage we call contemporary literature. The literature of the past has already been purged of bad works; time makes the selection. But contemporary literature, according to Sturgeon’s Law, contains 99% garbage and only 1% meaningful texts. The reader needs the critic in order to identify that 1% which would help him save time and energy, as well as not lose his temper. This is the only way he can avoid being disappointed by contemporary literature. (author’s emphasis)

Yet there are many voices claiming that the expertise of literary critics will always be cherished and necessary. Roma Arbitman thinks that the literary critic will be compelled either to issue aesthetic value certificates (to the writers who deserve them), or to “play the part of the serial killer,” eradicating imposture. He may also function as a psychotherapist (Arbitman qtd. in Golubkova). In Ana Golubkova’s view, certain literary journals have the merit of preserving critical standards, publishing articles written more or less objectively, in a stylistically decent and emotionally neutral tone. Obviously, such magazines are often attacked because of their inaccessible academic style, but there are also, according to Ana Golubkova, interesting cases when critics employed by PR journals demonstrate genuine skill. As controversial as it may be, literary criticism will always prove useful for writers, as well as for the general public, says Igor Efremov. For writers, it is useful inasmuch as it helps them evolve and improve themselves. The readers, in their turn, learn how to make their choices from the wide array of literary products, while also raising their cultural level. The fact that nowadays literary criticism fails to fulfill its functions as it should does not mean we should give up on it entirely (Efremov). “Literary criticism will live as long as literature,” says, on a more optimistic note, Lev Anninsky (one of the most famous contemporary critics in Russia), “and when literature dies, the role of literary criticism will be to explain the causes of death” (Golubkova).

“The Beginning of the Science of Literature... and Its End?”

The debates surrounding the study of literature are similar to those concerning the crisis of literature. The crisis of literary theory, as well as that of its methodology, is basically linked to the disappearance and repudiation of socialist-realism. Generally speaking, contemporary Russian researchers are concerned with the same problems as their colleagues in the West. There are lots of articles, PhD theses, conference proceedings, etc., which confirm the Russians’ interest in new methodologies and approaches to the study of literature. There have been numerous attempts at clarifying the definitions of such concepts as *cultural studies* or *interdisciplinarity*, and many debates on the topic of gender hybridization, on the poetics of transgression, etc. Many

scholars believe that Russia is yet to discover a systematic manner for articulating these innovations. In this context, a contribution I find particularly interesting is Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's article on this topic, "Начала науки о литературе... и ее конец?" ["The Beginnings of the Science of Literature... and Its End?"]. Written by an American Professor and theorist (of German origin), translated into Russian and intensely commented, this article launches a hypothesis that may surprise literary theorists in general (including those from Russia).

According to the American professor, the scholars' increasing interest in the history of literary theory is a clear indication of its imminent end: "The truth is that we are witnessing the beginning of the end" (Gumbrecht). This explains the accelerated disappearance of literary studies departments, both in American and European universities. Literary theory is now under reconsideration and its future is difficult to predict. Whether we opposed this phenomenon or simply ignored it, we would still not be able to stop it. Therefore we must try to foresee the result and predict the consequences of the end of literary theory. In Gumbrecht's view, we should try to estimate the consequences this phenomenon might have for us—researchers, professors, scholars—, as well as for our students and, ultimately, for the entire society.

Gumbrecht believes that the premises for this death have been laid over the last hundred years and can be related to the fact that literature has lost its social and ideological impact. First of all, literature has lost its function of creating social and moral norms, the way it used to do in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Secondly, concepts like "humanity" and "nation," assigning literature to a national culture, have disappeared from the social discourse. This phenomenon has ultimately led to the crisis of disciplines (the crisis of literary theory and comparative literature in particular). "Today," Gumbrecht says, "we have to admit that literary theory and comparative literature have not met the needs for which they had been created. Literary research has never returned to the point where its existence and social functions were considered a given." Its social functions did not even become the object of specialized discussions.

Passing through two crises and several waves of reformation, literary theory recalls very little of the intellectual and institutional structures it was based on in its early days, after 1810. The connection between literary theory and linguistics, for example, was lost, although it could help in commenting old national texts. The attempt to synchronize historic and aesthetic approaches was also abandoned, since contemporary theorists claim they are mostly interested in the study of literary discourse. The split between literary theory and historical linguistics has created the premises for establishing relationships with other disciplines. But interdisciplinarity has its own limits, being developed in an epistemological context so broad and so inaccurate, that it generates serious difficulties; in such circumstances, one might wonder whether the effort is truly legitimate. The crisis of such concepts as "truth," "objectivity" and even "consensus" has consequences for the field of literary theory. Neither political structures, nor society as a whole are nowadays impressed by the subversive force of literary ideas.

What should theorists do in this situation?

Therefore, we must learn to take responsibility for the future of our disciplines (perhaps, paradoxically speaking, for their post-mortem future) instead of deplored the lack of social support for the values we consider important. In the absence of a state-organized “cultural policy” (as in the case of America), the university could preserve its legitimacy only by attempting to fill this vacuum. (Gumbrecht)

Our disciplines will not gain credibility if we continue to blame the alleged hostility of politicians, continues Gumbrecht. On the contrary, sometimes politicians perhaps believe more than we do in the existential value of literature. This implies a serious question:

Do we need to pretend that we are supporting the politicians’ cultural values, or rather take the risk of openly admitting that all that matters to us is defending literature and its study—even when there remains little room for explanations in terms of epistemology and sociology? Either of these two strategies we choose—cynical conservatism or high-priced sincerity—, one thing is certain: we can no longer limit ourselves to domestic reforms and to the critical rethinking of our disciplines; all these have already failed. What literary critics and theorists call “disciplinary crisis” is actually part of a more complex process—that of reforming the humanities as a whole; the result depends on the degree in which we succeed in creating new epistemological, institutional and practical relationships between the humanities and others sciences. Consequently, do we still need to insist on preserving the traditional way of making literary criticism? After all, the main question is this: what shall we do as literary scholars? In what projects or programs can we use our expertise and knowledge, everything we have learned and all we can do? (Gumbrecht)

NOTE

¹ My translation. All subsequent translations are mine.

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