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## **“Weariness” of Fiction (from the History of the Literocentrism Crisis in the Russian Silver Age)**

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*The article discusses some trends in changing the artistic thinking in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a synthesis of the documentary and the artistic in the genre system, as well as literary and critical discussions about the crisis of literature.*

*Keywords: literocentrism, crisis, fiction, document, literary criticism.*

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The fact that Russian literature has lost the dominant role in culture gives rise to a number of consequences, including a status (social status) of a writer, a changed ratio of “high” and popular literature, magazine culture, reading practices, an impact of means of communication on the role of literature in the field of culture (Grübel, 2004). This phenomenon, which has been talked about a lot for the last two decades, is unlikely to be associated with the socio-political consequences of recent times. It is more correct to speak of the global trend conditioned by a change of functions of literature. As said by Wolfgang Iser, “the place of literature in modern society is something that can no longer be taken for granted” (Iser, 2004, 22). At the same time, the internal processes are equally important: in literature itself, as well as in literary criticism certain attempts to overcome this crisis can be noticed. >>>>

For example, in a situation of the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in literary criticism there is a “metacriticism activation and understanding of the problem of survival in the socio-cultural conditions in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as an existential issue associated with the search for identity and a successful communication strategy” (Govorukhina, 2012, 58-59). In this article we will focus on the Russian Silver Age. The Silver Age in modern science is seen as the second stage (in the history of modern literature) of the Russian literocentrism testing. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century “weariness of words, disappointment in them and even distrust of them” can be easily noticed (Khrenov, 2002, 52). The hegemony of literature was thoroughly undermined by non-verbal arts (Kondakov, 2008, 27-31). However, during this era, there were very interesting and promising theoretical and practical (artistic) searches for new ways to achieve authenticity.

Problems of the document and its role in literature, an issue of the boundaries of literature, ways to overcome the crisis of literature along with other issues became the subject of thorough theoretical reflections in the Silver Age. Let us discuss some of them.

V. Rozanov said: "A strange feeling of disgust and, at the same time, connectivity with literature has never left me, and still does not leave me, especially in recent years. I write as if I carry a heavy burden to the end. There are seeds in my soul and they grow. It is not clear to me whether they are kind or evil, I do not even ask myself. A wise reader will definitely separate the wheat from the chaff; there is no doubt that not only certain expressions, words, demands, thoughts, but even the whole range of ideas expressed by me seem to be or actually are evil. There is only one thing that can serve as an excuse for me: firstly, perfect and sincere ignorance of what is the truth and what is evil; perfect involuntariness of writing: I would write evil just like good, so the question could only be about printing. Literature took everything I loved and respected – a spontaneous life; and engaged me in what I have never respected and loved – an external objective life. Therefore, I always wrote with hostility to the very writing and the subjects of writing. Hence the feeling of my literary disgust. Literature has always been my prison that covered the sunlight, people I loved and nature. It is a green surface of my desk that is nature to me, a circle of my friends" (Rozanov, 1990, 33). In "Fallen leaves" Rozanov says: "Not literature, but literariness is terrible – literariness of soul, literariness of life < ... >. That is why, in fact, there is no need in literature... It is not great literature we need, but a great, beautiful and healthy life. Literature can be of any quality, in the background. <...> Maybe we live during the great ending of literature" (Rozanov, 2010,

79). Rozanov is the extreme expression of anti-literariness, anti-literariness attacks, which has been written a lot in the studies about him.

But if we refer to the statements of other less radical contemporaries, it turns out that this is a general feeling, a general trend of the era. It is characteristic of such subtle and refined artists as Z. Gippius, D. Filosofov (criticism of the Silver Age has a lot of such words as "literature", "literariness" expressing an ironic attitude to literature in its opposition to a true and real life). In the Silver Age people debated a lot on what is dominant (what is more important for the reader now) – a document or literature? Here, for example, is a Z. Gippius's argument that is very indicative of the post-revolutionary situation (in 1908 she wrote a column titled "From a journalist's diary" in "The Russian Thought" Magazine): "My subject is wider than literature. Right now I am engaged in the spiritual life of young people, but not just its reflection in art, not the art works of talented representatives of the younger generation. Most of them do not write, do not publish and have no particular talent – and yet somehow they live, and there is a commonality of issues between them, which they seek to resolve somehow; perhaps, they face these issues with equally new acuteness and feel the same need to resolve them all over again, differently, not paternally, but in their own way. <...> Literature is just one of the areas for research. It helps the study, but ... we should select the *least literary* things from it: they are more valuable. They are closer to life. They are *almost human documents*, and that, in this case, is what important to us. Blok and even Gorodetsky, their collections of poems are characteristic in their way, but we do not need them right now. Apart from talent, Gorodetsky has so much pure literariness that no one could get to it in the first place. It is covered with all the soot of Petersburg literary environment. Even Leonid Andreyev

is more interesting in this case. Although he is far behind the most acute experiences of young people, he has an actual connection with them, and his "artistic" works, thanks to their bleakness from literature, their frank and natural maladroitness, are more interesting and documentary than Blok's and Vyacheslav Ivanov's. Scattered fragments of authentic "abstracts" written by young people and feeble "Monday" articles in "the Rus" newspaper that sometimes were clumsily framed in a literary form of the story... are even more interesting (Gippius, 2003, 305) (italics added – V.K.). This argument is connected with two vital and literary issues of the time: 1) a question of young people, deterioration in morals among young people (many wrote about it); and 2) a question of the assessment of literary experiments of the young ("authentic "abstracts" of the youth"), some "texts of life". In the era of the so-called reaction following the first Russian revolution, the level of public morality decreased a lot; murders and robberies became commonplace; thirst for new sensations and spectacles penetrated through the masses. D. Filosofov then wrote (in his review on the novel of B. Savinkov "The Pale Horse" in 1909): "Thanks to Leonid Andreev, Sergeev-Tsensky and many others we are accustomed to the literary horrors. Besides, a modern Russian reality is full of such nightmares that we have lost the measure of a normal, healthy life. Nothing surprises us anymore. A personality is turned into a static unit. Cholera, suicides, murders, death penalties stopped being a reality, they took the form of static plates that we look through indifferently and often do not even pay attention to them in the "boring" newspapers. It is hard to believe that somewhere people laugh, play, have fun and live a normal life. Fate laid a way too heavy burden on the generation that consciously survived external and internal defeat in recent years. This generation may never recover. But

if it does recover, it will still remain crippled, with an aggrieved soul" (Filosofov, 2010, 276-277) (how contemporary these words from 1909 sound!).

Indeed, the press of that time wrote a lot about young people. In 1907-1908 in the "The Russian School" magazine G. Agraev wrote a series of articles devoted to a morbid state of the youth (specifically, they were about the emergence of different societies such as "the Stumps" (Ogarki), "Carpe Diem" (Lovi Moment) and others in the Russian cities).

The intensity of public life in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (especially after 1905) leads to the fact that literary fiction falls by the wayside, the role of the "texts of life" increases, they are often more important than fiction. As noted by a columnist of "the Moskovich" newspaper, "in the most recent, disturbing months full of surprises and huge events, polite literature somehow has been relegated to the background completely. Questions of the day, questions of the burning modernity took over everything, enslaved everything (Moskovich, 1906, 1). This statement echoes with D. Filosofov. Reflecting on the impact of the revolution on literature, he wrote: "The simple facts of life told in any newspaper killed any kind of literature, any kind of the "artistic" image. None of our writers could rise above the events, look at them in a certain perspective" (Filosofov, 2010, 277).

We can say that the trend of "polarization of fiction and the truth that were often so peacefully inseparable in the Balzac-naturalistic time" (S. Velikovskiy, cited by: Mestergazi, 2003, 137) had already started establishing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. With this we associate several features of the literary life of that time:

1. The increase in the weight of documentary texts in periodicals and genuine interest of writers of the first grade in the original texts. This feature has also been noted by D. Filosofov in the article

titled "Decadent peasants": "Thick magazines, and in particular historical ones, cherish correspondence of famous people and gladly publish letters written by Turgenev, Herzen, Dostoevsky and Chernyshevsky. But now there is a new fashion. In their articles famous writers cite extracts from letters of unknown people, from the letters of simple peasants" (further Filosofov cites as an example an article by Alexander Blok "Literary results of 1907" ("Golden Fleece"), which includes extracts from a letter of a young peasant from a far Northern province (Filosofov, 2010, 170).

2. General democratization of literature and professionals' advent to literature. This feature is very accurately noted by E. Koltonovskaya in the article titled "Literature and "writers of the people": "The characteristic feature of modern literature is that it is being "democratized" not in a serious, ideological sense of the word, but in the everyday, street one. A reader, once passive and silent, pretends to the role of the writer. A commoner is gradually replacing a literary specialist <...> Magazines are filled with all sorts of amateurish works – diaries, memoirs and personal life stories, etc. Writers by avocation are drowning among them like raindrops in the sea. What a strange time! Everybody writes... But to do them justice, their writing is not bad at all – very "smooth" and entertaining. They write in abundance, vigorously knocking on the literature's door, require that the writers change roles with them and read their works" (long before the Russian Proletarian Writers' Association – V.K.). E. Koltonovskaya believes that "literature does not need all this raw material: it is simple junk! But as a material, as a direct voice of life, amateurish works can be interesting sometimes" (Koltonovskaya 1912, 169). It is simply functioning of clean (primary) genres of everyday life, which may belong to anyone, they "seem to enter the culture through

the back door" (Mestergazi, 2008.18). However, the emergence of such texts resulted in a critical overestimation of the "newcomers" in literature (for example, estimates of B. Savinkov's novel "The Pale Horse" by Z. Gippius, D. Filosofov).

3. The newest research on the specifics of the genre system of the Silver Age reveals two opposing processes: canonization and introduction to literature of common speech genres (diary, letter, etc.) balanced by the desire to create synthetic genres. At the same time, the process of genres decanonization occurs. "On the contrary, compared with the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it gets stronger and leads to the fact that an artist tends to overstep the boundaries of not only traditional genres, but also some forms of art, and even pass the line between art and life, which was impossible before. Hence the influential concept of theurgy as art of forms of life itself, which initiated the relevant search in the field of drama and theater; as well as the increased role of "texts of life" (Z.G. Mintz) that also become a fact of art. In this case, with all the apparent opposition of these trends comes the Tolstoy's "it is a shame to write the artistic" and an attempt to overcome the boundaries between "the literary" and "the nonliterary" in diaries and the late prose of L. Tolstoy and the works of Rozanov" (Broitman, 2009, 13).

4. By the 1910s, the time of summing up the first results of literature of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, criticism clearly captures changes in the functions of Russian literature. Same thoughts were also expressed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the article "On the exaggerated importance attached to the action of literature" a Slavophile I.S. Aksakov wrote: "...due to the abnormal social development, we attach a completely inappropriate importance to literature – it is compelled by circumstances to often play an unusual role that is not legal at all <...> Our literature does not have a single direct action for

not less than seventy million people and limits its value only by our society insignificant in size in relation to the territory size and volume of the population" (Aksakov, 2006, 193). N. Shapir in the article titled "Teaching of Literature" reflects on the reasons for dominance in our culture of literature. Among other things, he points to the "small differentiation of the national psyche", as well as the "passivity and meditateness of the national psyche". According to the critic, it would seem that the modern stage should increase differentiation in culture, but at the turn of the century a general philosophical and moral significance of fiction got more exaggerated. In conclusion, N. Shapir put a general question: "How legal is it for the master of the pen <...> to search for philosophical and evaluation ideas, solutions of the issue of the world outlook and "the meaning of life?" (Shapir, 1913, 31). K. Chukovsky in "Nat Pinkerton and modern literature" notes the emergence in literature of writers who "do not lead anywhere". But what is especially significant is that *the reader*, as it turned out, needed such writers: "our Russian reader needs such a non-teaching writer for the first time" (Chukovsky, 2003, 59). In the article "The Past and the Future of Slavophilism" F. Stepun came to almost the same conclusion: "Now it is clear to all that lately it (the art –

V.K.) seems to have lost the importance it had in previous years: it ceased to be the conscience, confession and conviction of the spiritual Russia. Previously, the writer was required to describe how one should live. Now it is fine that he tells how everybody lives. Previously, art was the method of construction of life, but today the whole world has become a material for the creation of art" (Stepun, 1913, 124).

Thus, the Silver Age demonstrates "weariness" of fiction and the apparent increase in the documentary basis as an attempt to overcome the crisis of literature. This prompts to make adjustments to the picture of the literary process of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Relying on P. Palievsky and fairly making clarifications to his concept (he linked the spread of the fact with the Second World War) E. Mestergazi refers a sharp change in relation to the fact and, according to the modified expression of Yu.N. Tynianov, its reciprocal expansion into the literature not to the critical forties, but to the First World War and revolution (Mestergazi, 2003, 136). However, as evidenced by the facts, these trends are maturing even earlier, in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But at the same time this period became a time of literature's loss of philosophical functions and awareness of this process by a part of the intellectual elite.

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**«Усталость» от вымысла  
(из истории кризиса литературоцентризма  
в русском Серебряном веке)**

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*В статье рассмотрены некоторые тенденции изменения художественного мышления рубежа XIX–XX веков, синтез документального и художественного в жанровой системе, а также литературно-критические дискуссии о кризисе литературы.*

*Ключевые слова: литературоцентризм, кризис, вымысел, документ, литературная критика.*

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