

A black and white photograph of a man sitting on a wooden crate in a flooded tent. The man is shirtless, wearing glasses and shorts, and is reading a book. The tent is filled with water, and various items like a helmet and a rifle are visible on the ground. The title 'RUMBA UNDER FIRE' is written in white capital letters on a black diagonal banner across the top of the image.

RUMBA UNDER FIRE

THE ARTS OF SURVIVAL
FROM WEST POINT TO DELHI

EDITED BY IRINA DUMITRESCU

RUMBA UNDER FIRE

The background of the image is white, overlaid with a dense, chaotic pattern of thick, black, straight lines. These lines intersect at various angles, creating a complex web of geometric shapes and negative space. The lines vary in length and orientation, some running diagonally, others more horizontally or vertically.

RUMBA



UNDER FIRE

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FROM WEST POINT TO DELHI

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PUNCTUM BOOKS  EARTH



RUMBA UNDER FIRE:
THE ARTS OF SURVIVAL FROM WEST POINT TO DELHI
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Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch,
Ship of Fools (detail; 1490-1500).

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*for Mircea Trifu
who fought with a rapier wit*

INTRODUCTION

Irina Dumitrescu

Death could drop from the dark
As easily as song—
But song only dropped,
Like a blind man's dreams on the sand
By dangerous tides
—Isaac Rosenberg, "Returning, We Hear the Larks"

It is popular these days to bemoan the "crisis in the humanities," or even triumphantly to declare their death.¹ Enrollments in liberal arts majors have fallen dramatically, students having realized that studying art history or philosophy will consign them to a lifetime of flipping burgers and pouring coffee.² The humanities have lost their way: in abandoning the

1 Tamar Lewin, "As Interest Fades in the Humanities, Colleges Worry," *New York Times*, October 31, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/31/education/as-interest-fades-in-the-humanities-colleges-worry.html>; Ella Delany, "Humanities Studies Under Strain Around the Globe," *New York Times*, December 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/02/us/humanities-studies-under-strain-around-the-globe.html>.

2 Jennifer Levitz and Douglas Belkin, "Humanities Fall From Favor," *Wall Street Journal*, June 6, 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324069104578527642373232184>.

tried-and-true classics of the Western canon, they have also abandoned any claim to authority, tradition, or lasting and objective values.³ The humanities have lost their edge: by failing to reflect the experiences of increasingly diverse student bodies, they have become at best irrelevant, at worst oppressive.⁴ The humanities take place in the wrong media: print is outmoded, and the failure of scholars to adopt the new modes of thought and communication offered by the digital age will leave them behind. But the Internet is rendering universities obsolete anyway, as online courses offer a more flexible and democratic educational format. Besides which, nobody reads long books anymore. The post-digital world simply does not have the attention span for traditional humanistic work.

It has, naturally, become just as popular to argue against any crisis in the humanities. Enrollments are not really falling—rather, more students are studying more subjects, thus rendering the humanities less dominant in universities.⁵ The perceived “crisis in the humanities” is nothing new, having been around since the 1970s, or the 1930s, or the 1620s, depending on your perspective.⁶ Employers still value the

- 3 Diana E. Sheets, “The Crisis in the Humanities: Why Today’s Educational and Cultural Experts Can’t and Won’t Resolve the Failings of the Liberal Arts,” *Huffington Post*, July 15, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-diana-e-sheets/the-crisis-in-the-humanit_b_3588171.html.
- 4 Chad Orzel, “This Is Not What I Want As a Defense of ‘The Humanities,’” *ScienceBlogs*, February 27, 2015, <http://scienceblogs.com/principles/2015/02/27/this-is-not-what-i-want-as-a-defense-of-the-humanities/>.
- 5 David Silbey, “A Crisis in the Humanities?,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 10, 2013, <http://chronicle.com/blognetwork/edgeofthewest/2013/06/10/the-humanities-crisis/>.
- 6 Gideon Rosen, “Notes on a Crisis,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, July 9, 2014, <http://paw.princeton.edu/issues/2014/07/09/pages/0635/index.xml>; Blaine Greteman, “It’s the End of the Humanities as We Know It: And I Feel Fine,” *New Republic*, June 13, 2014, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118139/crisis-humanities-has-long-history>; Alan Ryan, “Humanities Crisis? Which Humanities Crisis?,” *Times Higher Education*, August 1, 2013, <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/opinion/humanities-crisis-which-humanities-crisis/2006072.article>; Heidi Tworek, “The Real Reason the

critical thinking and communication skills honed by the liberal arts. Digital humanists have changed the way scholarship is done and disseminated, making it fairer, more accessible, and intellectually innovative.⁷ If there is a crisis in the humanities, it is wholly the result of neoliberal austerity policies that promote their anti-intellectual agenda by defunding higher education.⁸

What both of these positions have in common is an unquestioned belief in two basic propositions: first, that “crisis” is a state of exception for the humanities, and second, that the definition of “crisis” is a weakening or failure of the university. This book takes a radically different starting point, suggesting we think differently about what it means for the humanities to be “in crisis.” To begin with, the liberal arts have a history beyond the university, whether that is in other institutions (schools, churches, courts, monasteries) or in the private sphere. We also need to consider a broader variety of crises: while decreasing liberal arts majors and the adjunctification of the university are deeply threatening to humanistic study, so are war, incarceration, censorship, exile, and oppression. Intellectuals have been at the mercy of direct persecution or general political turmoil at least since Socrates was executed in 399 BC for his impiety, considered a corruption of the young men of Athens.⁹

Humanities Are ‘in Crisis’,” *The Atlantic*, December 18, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/12/the-real-reason-the-humanities-are-in-crisis/282441/>.

- 7 Carl Straumsheim, “Digital Humanities Bubble,” *Inside Higher Ed*, May 8, 2014, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/05/08/digital-humanities-wont-save-humanities-digital-humanists-say>.
- 8 Andrew Hartman, “How Austerity Killed the Humanities,” *In These Times*, May 19, 2015, <http://inthesetimes.com/article/17962/how-austerity-killed-the-humanities>. For another perspective, see Gary Gutting, “The Real Humanities Crisis,” *New York Times*, November 30, 2013, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/30/the-real-humanities-crisis/>.
- 9 Debra Nails, “The Trial and Death of Socrates,” in *A Companion to Socrates*, ed. Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006): 5–20, at 5.

Nor is the relationship of crisis to the work of the mind a straightforward one. The liberal arts—and more broadly, the arts—are at the mercy of political turmoil, economic collapse, and religious persecution, but they also respond to these calamities. If they survive, scholars and artists can continue their work *within* crisis, perhaps even *because* of crisis. Political trouble can be a boon for intellectual and artistic creation in those cases where rulers or governments attempt to gain prestige through patronage. To take one example, it has been argued that literary and scientific production in medieval Spain, or Al-Andalus, reached its peak not during the “golden age” under a unified Umayyad caliphate, but during the subsequent, politically unstable period of the Taifas, petty kingdoms whose rulers competed with each other by funding poets and scholars.¹⁰ To turn to another case, during the Cold War, the CIA used the Congress for Cultural Freedom to fund cultural programs that would improve the image of the United States among writers and intellectuals around the world and serve as a bulwark against communism; Eric Bennett has argued that among the beneficiaries of this strategic largesse was the Iowa Writers’ Workshop.¹¹

In these comparatively happy situations, general political turmoil and the threat of war led to remarkably comfortable working conditions for artists and scholars. The list of intellectuals who continued their work despite great personal danger and physical discomfort is, unfortunately, longer. A variety

10 “A century of political stability provided the economic and cultural framework for a literary golden era during the Taifa period. Ironically, it can be argued that the sudden political disintegration and process of governmental decentralization of that period sparked cultural efflorescence.” Peter Heath, “Knowledge,” in *The Literature of Al-Andalus*, ed. María Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin, and Michael Sells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 96–125, at 113–14.

11 Eric Bennett, “How Iowa Flattened Literature,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 10, 2014, <http://chronicle.com/article/How-Iowa-Flattened-Literature/144531/>. Bennett’s book, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War*, is forthcoming from the University of Iowa Press.

of stories can be told here, most of them familiar. There are the exiles: Ovid, who composed the *Tristia* and the *Epistulae ex Ponto* while banished to Tomis; Dante, who penned both the *Commedia* and his essay *De vulgari eloquentia* while exiled from Florence;¹² Voltaire, whose expulsion to England resulted in his *Letters Concerning the English Nation*;¹³ Erich Auerbach, who wrote *Mimesis* while living in Istanbul, having been forced to leave Germany. Along with him, the entire body of German-language *Exilliteratur* that resulted from the oppression of dissident or Jewish writers in Nazi Germany and occupied territories.¹⁴ Then there are the prisoners: Saint Perpetua, a Christian martyr who seems to have written an account of her captivity;¹⁵ Boethius, whose masterwork *The Consolation of Philosophy* was a result of his imprisonment by Theodoric the Great; the *Travels of Marco Polo* was, according to its prologue, written by Rustichello da Pisa based on accounts Polo related to him while both were in a Genovese prison;¹⁶ Miguel de Cervantes' five-year imprisonment in Algiers and his later jail term in Seville served as inspiration for two plays and, if we are to believe him, for *Don Quixote*.¹⁷ The series could continue through Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, and through a host of other creative and intellectual texts either written in

12 Steven Botterill, ed. *Dante. De vulgari eloquentia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xiv.

13 Nicholas Cronk, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Voltaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xi.

14 Dirk Wiemann, *Exilliteratur in Großbritannien 1933–1945* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998); Wolfgang Elfe, James Hardin, and Gunther Holst, eds., *The Fortunes of German Writers in America: Studies in Literary Reception* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1992).

15 Vincent Hunink, "Did Perpetua Write Her Prison Account?," *Listy filologické* 1–2 (2010), 147–155.

16 Peter Jackson, "Marco Polo and his 'Travels'," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 61.1 (1998): 82–101, at 84.

17 Anthony J. Cascardi, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Cervantes*, ed. Anthony J. Cascardi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 1–10, at 5–6.

prison or reflecting on the experience of incarceration. Finally, we might consider the rich body of works composed during war or as a reaction to it. These would include Xenophon's *Anabasis*, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, and the lyrics of Siegfried Sassoon and the other poets of World War I.

To catalogue such successes in the face of hardship or tragedy is to risk romanticizing catastrophe. The immediacy of the work before us threatens to blot out the suffering experienced by its author, real to them if not to us. This suffering they might well have preferred to avoid, even if it did eventually result in transcendent work. There is no way to compose the list of books not written, scholarship not done, and ideas left undeveloped because of poverty, oppression, or slaughter. What might have Marc Bloch or Walter Benjamin or Jean Prévost or Irène Némirovsky or Antal Szerb or Bruno Schulz given the world had they evaded Nazi violence and survived World War II?

We might speak, then, of a tension between the productive and destructive aspects of crisis. It is this tension that the essays and poems of this book explore. The questions we ask include: What does it mean to teach, create, study, and rehearse in situations of political crisis? How do people faced with catastrophe tell stories to sustain themselves? What strength do these stories offer, and when do they fail? What remains untellable, incomprehensible? Can art and intellectual work really function as resistance to power? What relationship do scholars, journalists, or even memoirists have to the crises they describe and explain? How do works created in crisis, especially at the extremes of human endurance, fit into our theories of knowledge and creativity?

I have spoken of the “arts” and the “liberal arts” together, eliding the differences many people now perceive between these categories of human endeavour. This is deliberate. There is, of course, a tendency to think of art as primary, scholarship as secondary; the wild-eyed figure of the Romantic artist seems a fundamentally different creature from the bespectacled professor with patches on the elbows of his tweed jacket. But we treat the two together, and for a number of reasons. The first, and most central to this book, is that people facing crisis have used fine arts and liberal arts to similar ends: to survive, to maintain their humanity and identity, to interpret their own experience, to pass the time. The second is that the lines between these activities have been drawn more boldly in the popular imagination than is warranted.

The liberal arts, or *artes liberales*, were so called because they provided the general training appropriate to a free man. Their roots are to be found in classical education, especially in the Greek ideal of ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία, what one might call “general culture” or a “well-rounded education.”¹⁸ The Romans adopted and developed the Greek school system, and by the early Middle Ages there was a set curriculum: students began with the *trivium*, composed of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and continued on to study the *quadrivium*, comprising music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. However, Roman lists of liberal arts also included other topics. Varro included medicine and architecture in his encyclopedia on the liberal arts; Vitruvius, in his book on architecture, included optics, history, and law as well; Galen, who wrote for doctors, mentioned sculpture and drawing as optional subjects.¹⁹ Moreover, it is worth pointing out that “grammar” included the study and composition of poetry, and “rhetoric,” especially in the medieval period, was also applied to poetics. The

18 Henri-Irénée Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 303.

19 Aubrey Gwynn, *Roman Education from Cicero to Quintilian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), 84–85.

liberal arts curricula from the ancient period to the Middle Ages combined analysis and creativity, and, for that matter, what we might call humanities, sciences, and professional training.

The liberatory potential of the arts lies in their twinned powers of understanding and creation: being free means both understanding how the world functions and shaping some bit of that world to your ends. One can, in fact, do both at the same time. Lucretius versified natural science in his *On the Nature of Things*, while Boethius explained Neoplatonic philosophy in both prose and verse in his *Consolation of Philosophy*. But there is another, less idealized way that art and scholarship resemble each other. They have often been practiced in the same institutions, their work funded by some of the same sponsors. Monasteries, courts, and universities have all taken their turn supporting both those who explain and interpret, and those who create and perform. The teaching of the arts is also often intertwined—a contemporary school of music will have practitioners and theoreticians, a contemporary department of English might offer both a PhD and an MFA.

Rumba Under Fire traces ways that people have turned to the arts, liberal or fine, for highly personal reasons, reasons often inimical to the workings of power. Anand Taneja considers traditions of local storytelling that run counter to official national histories; Judith Verweijen shows the ways soldiers find their sorrows reflected in song lyrics; Cara De Silva describes the “dream cooking” that allowed starving prisoners and POWs to hold on to their identities; Carla Baricz and I chronicle the efforts of political prisoners to maintain their sanity through writing and teaching; and Denis Ferhatović illuminates the ways the survival of books could signify the survival of a persecuted people. But the stories here are not simply uplifting. There are, after all, limits to the redemptive or even explicatory powers of the arts. Tim Albrecht traces the ways the “periods” of history fail to represent the experiences of individuals caught in the aftermath of war; Greg

Brownderville explores the inability to escape war through art; Sharon Portnoff writes of the exhaustion of art and dreams of silence; and Andrew Crabtree imagines the magical, civilizing potential of books ultimately left unread. Finally, while the arts can counteract powerful ideologies, they often exist in an uncomfortable balance of cooperation and subversion with established structures. William Coker and Susannah Hollister explore the ambivalent experiences of teaching the humanities inside universities dedicated either to neoliberal or to military training, and Prashant Keshavmurthy critiques the failure of defenses of the humanities to take into account postcolonial realities.



There is a danger to describing the productive relationship between crisis, creativity, and scholarship. If intellectuals and artists can produce timeless work when imprisoned or exiled, why should they be funded, supported, given well-appointed offices in air-conditioned institutions of higher learning? If the humanities thrive in crisis, shouldn't politicians seek to destroy them even more completely?

The answer to this is twofold. One of the arguments of this book is that there is, indeed, a life of art and culture outside of schools and universities, and beyond official channels of power and patronage. Many people turn instinctively to art and study in moments of emotional and spiritual need, no matter the level of their formal learning. One does not need a university education to find solace in composing a rhyme, remembering a tune, or writing down a recipe. However, a survey of historical examples and of the stories in this book shows that formal education does make a difference to how individuals live in and with crisis. Education offers the prisoner, the exile, the refugee, the soldier, and the camp survivor greater cultural resources to draw on, more refined skills

of analysis and interpretation, a treasury of texts, and most important of all, a perspective beyond the present. Yes, the arts and liberal arts can survive on their own, but they are better and stronger when institutions nourish and maintain them. Institutions preserve a repertoire of strategies and skills for dealing with crisis—the ancient term would be *wisdom*—and we are all poorer when this repertoire is attenuated.

The word “crisis” can be used in different ways. Sometimes it describes thousands of people fleeing a civil war in their homeland; sometimes it describes a lack of tenure-track jobs for graduates of doctoral programs. Although both conditions are distressing to the people caught up in them, they are, needless to say, not in any way comparable. Our focus on the latter kind of crisis has led us to neglect the former. It has also led us to overlook the relationship between the two. To wit: although one of the signs often cited for the general decline of civilization is that people go to university to improve their chances of a job rather than to widen their minds, formal education has, in fact, always been largely instrumental and career-oriented. The good old days in which learning was universally cherished for its own sake never existed. Over the ages, students have studied the liberal arts to achieve prominence as lawyers and politicians, to pursue careers in monastery or church, to become teachers and physicians and professors and clerks. The point is that their education gave them more than they sought. Those who later faced deep adversity were better equipped to understand, to reflect, and to endure because of their liberal arts training, whether or not they had ever aimed to acquire these inner resources. And herein lies the relationship between upheaval in institutions of higher learning and serious personal or political catastrophes. The tragedy is not that PhDs will be underemployed or that French departments will fold. The tragedy is not that philosophy majors will become baristas. The tragedy is that young people who either cannot afford university or are forced to study strictly vocational topics will be denied the training of

mind and heart that will help them comprehend and survive the greater crises to come. The tragedy is that they may be trapped in the inexorable now.

The contributions to this volume, both poetic and essayistic, have taught me that there is a special relationship between crisis, time, and the arts. Crises name and give shape to time—one does “time” in prison or lives through wartime. Crises mark the points where eras flow into each other—historical periods are defined as post-war or pre-war. Time in crisis is paradoxical: during a catastrophe everything moves quickly, too fast to manage, but disastrous events also make people profoundly aware of the slow-moving, glacier-like movements of history. Crisis often creates a space apart from the regular flow of time, one in which individuals can practice art and scholarship, as when a group of women and men retire to a villa outside Florence to tell stories and sit out the Black Death. Practicing the arts and humanities during crisis means being able to live “out of time”—with a perspective beyond the mere present. Indeed, crises require this understanding of the connections between present and deep past and future, this turn to the *longue durée*. Sometimes art and scholarship done in crisis necessarily emphasize the big picture, because detailed work is not possible; one thinks of Auerbach in Istanbul, lacking a proper research library and thus focusing mainly on primary literature. Crises require us to keep time, and the arts teach us how to do it.

The essays and poems in this book do not propose clear-cut solutions, but do tell stories—analytical, emotional, historical, personal—about arts and humanities in times of crisis. They may be used to comfort or trouble, to reflect upon or fight with.