Conclusion: The Humanities and the Public Sphere in the Age of the Internet

Throughout this book I have been arguing that if the humanities are in a state of crisis the way out is forward, not backward. The last thing that will save the humanities is a return to some traditional core humanities practice. Why? Because there has never been a traditional core humanities practice. For the humanities to remain vital in the twenty-first century they need to do what they have always done best: change. The question now is not should the humanities change, but how should they change? Returning to some traditional notion of the humanities will not do the trick, because such a return would require reverting to a narrow, outdated, and arbitrarily truncated version of humanism, as well as to an outmoded set of methodologies with which to study things such as literature, history, philosophy, and theology. Nor will it do to blame professionalization for the challenges now faced by disciplines like my own or by the humanities in general. Indeed, the humanities need more professionalization, not less. The argument that humanities professors ought to leave their specializations outside the door of their undergraduate classrooms—along with the theories and methodologies that inform their scholarly practice—is antithetical to the whole aim of higher education. Indeed, as I have been arguing throughout this book, specialization and the increased theoretical and methodological rigor of college and university classes is precisely what put the higher in higher education in the first place. That is the case in the natural and social sciences, and it ought to be the case in the humanities as well. Like the sciences, the humanities must continue to find a balance between a general and a specialized education for its students. To argue that the humanities ought to eschew specialization and professional rigor and stick to making sure students simply read great books and talk about the meaning of life threatens to impoverish the humanities for both students and faculty. We don’t need a two-tiered system in which
specialization and methodological rigor are a hallmark of the natural and social sciences while the humanities provide a kind of service function, a space where students can simply talk loosely about big ideas and great books.

For the disciplines of the humanities to remain central to higher education they need to sustain the kind of theoretical and methodological rigor they have developed over the last four decades, not turn away from those theories and methods. But they must also find better, more effective ways to explain to the general public what they are and why they matter. This means pushing back against critics who argue professionalization is a problem in the humanities, insisting on the link between professing and professionalization in the undergraduate as well as the graduate classroom. To profess, of course, is to make a set of claims, claims not only about the importance and value of what you are saying, but to make claims as well about the skills you use in the production and the critique of knowledge. As we have seen, the skills humanists utilize in their professional scholarship directly intersect with the skills they teach their students. The practical expertise I’ve argued students gain in the humanities, the ones that are of keen interest to employers in both the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors of our economy, are directly related to the professional expertise research scholars hone as they work to produce specialized knowledge. This is certainly the case, as we have seen, in literary studies. Calls for a return to literature itself, linked as they often are to fears that professionalization, theory, and criticism have spoiled literary studies too often ignore the fact that when we teach students “literature” we are teaching them to think theoretically and write critically, which means they need more, not less theory, more, not less training in critical approaches to contextualizing and writing about literature.

In addition to defending professionalization and theory, I have also been arguing that attention to political issues in the humanities—what critics dismiss as “political correctness”—is something that should be defended, not lamented. We saw earlier that the idea that there is something wrong with thinking about humanism in terms of power and politics is profoundly unhistorical, since humanism has always been about politics and power. From this point of view, paying attention to the social, historical, and political context of literary texts, works of art, or philosophical debates, exploring how they are engaged with questions regarding power and social justice, how they reflect—and reflect on—a complicated set of ideologies, ought to be seen as thoroughly orthodox. The odd thing is to try to remove literature, art, philosophy, or history from their critical, social, political,