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Introduction and advance praise

"What the world needs now is a defense of the humanities that puts the past thirty or forty years of literary criticism and theory front and center. *The Humanities "Crisis" and the Future of Literary Studies* reminds me (and will remind you) how our understanding of the humanities has been enriched by interpretive theories and new social movements— and why their varieties of critical thinking are valuable in and out of the classroom. Any humanist hoping to engage with a skeptical or curious public should read this book." Michael Bérubé, Director, Institute for the Arts and Humanities, Pennsylvania State University

"Anyone seeking arguments in support of the humanities will find a rich resource in the materials that Paul Jay has put together in this book. He combines a thorough synthesis of debates across the field with well-reasoned and persuasive arguments that go beyond the tired bromides and platitudes too often hauled out in support of the study of literature, philosophy, and other humanistic disciplines. In the process, he lays to rest some of the myths and misunderstandings that have created a rhetoric of 'crisis,' and offers his readers solid evidence that the humanities are as vital today as in any other moment." - Johanna Drucker, Breslauer Professor of Bibliographical Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

"The word on the street today is that the humanities are in crisis, partly because of shrinking budgets and job-conscious students, partly because 'theory' has allegedly turned those students off. In this sharply argued book, Paul Jay convincingly refutes both these popular views, demonstrating that humanities education and its theoretical inquiries teach students the very analytical and communicative skills employers are looking for in many fields." - Gerald Graff, Professor of English and Education, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA; Author of *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*

This is a book about how to defend the humanities in general—and literary studies, in particular—at a time when there are shrinking resources to support them, and growing skepticism about their worth. The humanities today seem the victim of a perfect storm. Budget cuts stemming from a persistent recession, accompanied by the defunding of public institutions of higher education through shrinking tax revenue, have threatened humanities programs everywhere. The corporatization of higher education has increasingly turned university presidents into CEOs, and academic administrators into upper management. The decisions they make regarding academic programs are increasingly driven by boards of trustees dominated by businessmen, bankers, and financial consultants whose bottom-line methods of operation are taking precedence over the traditional role faculty have played in determining academic and curricular

programs. In this context, higher education is increasingly seen in sheerly instrumental terms, with courses and programs judged in terms of their pragmatic and vocational value. Education that ends in credentializing seems to be trumping education as an end in itself. For many, the teaching of practical skills is becoming more important than making sure students have a basic knowledge of history, philosophy, literature, and the arts. With the value of education being measured more and more by the economic payoff that comes after graduation, it is becoming difficult for many to understand the value of a humanities education.

While this book takes the current “crisis” of the humanities as its point of departure, it places that crisis in a larger historical context and questions whether the term “crisis” is even appropriate for characterizing the historical stresses and strains that have characterized their place in higher education. Indeed, I argue that what many commentators see as a perpetual humanities crisis is fueled in part by the rhetoric of crisis itself. Toward this end, I identify a set of recurring issues that seem to always come up in debates about the nature and value of the humanities. They include arguments about the practical utility of a humanities education, about the value of knowledge for its own sake versus knowledge that has a clear utilitarian value, debates about the role of professionalized theories and methodologies in the undergraduate classroom, and arguments about the right balance between traditional knowledge and a healthy critique of tradition. One of the problems with the perpetual rhetoric of crisis surrounding these issues is that the term “crisis” suggests a dramatic turning point at the brink of catastrophe, a decisive moment of instability portending collapse, yet the humanities have gotten along just fine in US higher education for nearly a hundred years. While concerned critics in the 1920s, 1940s, 1960s, and, increasingly, in the 1980s, 1990s, and in our own time have invoked the rhetoric of crisis to characterize

The state of the humanities, what they are in fact talking about are largely structural issues about pedagogy and the production of knowledge that are inherent to the questions humanities students and their professors explore together in the first place.

Take, for example, the debates about theory and political correctness that have been at the center of the current humanities crisis since the 1980s. There is nothing new about the core of this debate except its politicization by conservative defenders of a static, traditional version of the humanities. In reality, arguments about the role that professional theories and methodologies ought to play in the undergraduate humanities classroom have taken place over the whole course of the twentieth century, a point I explore at length in chapter 1. There is nothing particularly alarming about these debates. They certainly do not suggest that there is a “crisis” in the humanities. Rather, they suggest that those who teach and do scholarship in the humanities are continually thinking in a productively self-reflexive way about what they do in the classroom and in their own research. What could be better than that? We want coherence across the disciplines, but coherence is a fluid and changing thing, the product of continual debate, innovation, and change. Whenever people are worried that the study of English, history, or philosophy is becoming “fragmented” you can be sure these disciplines are simply Rethinking how they define coherence.

The same is true when it comes to questions about the social, cultural, and political character of a humanities education. As we will see in chapter 4, the humanities core curriculum at Columbia University in fact had its origins in the development of a program of instruction organized not around a study of the classics, but around a study of contemporary social and political problems related to the First World War and its aftermath. People in history, philosophy, and English have perpetually argued about the

extent to which students ought to study great works for their own sake because they contain universal truths, or whether they should study texts for how they reflect, and reflect on, social and political problems that are related to the past or to our own time. These are decidedly healthy debates, and they ought not to be reduced to a simple-minded either/or approach to knowledge. As I point out in chapter 3, humanism itself was a movement connected to defining and insuring human rights, agency, justice, and power for all citizens, so it is difficult to see how the humanities could not be about power, agency, justice, and human rights. The only time that theory or politics cause a crisis in the humanities is when critics argue that theory and politics ought to be banished from the classroom and played down in scholarship. This is what happened, of course, in the heyday of the so-called culture wars in the late 1980s and 1990s, when critics devoted to a conservative political ideology argued that the humanities were in crisis because professors and students with other political ideologies were raising questions they didn't like and using theories they didn't understand. But that is not a crisis. That is innovation, the continuation of a thoroughly humanist tradition of exploring ideals about human rights, human agency, and the nature of social justice that have always been at the center of humanist inquiry. While critics fond of dismissing a focus on such issues as "political correctness" have fought a pitched battle against post-structuralist, new historicist, feminist, queer, and postcolonial theory, and while they have worried over the marginalization of canonical humanist texts by new attention to multicultural and non-Western texts and authors, professors and students in these fields have been busy reinvigorating and expanding the scope of humanism and the forms of knowledge it represents, and doing so in ways that are extraordinarily valuable for twenty-first-century students.

Because I believe the humanities have been significantly enhanced by the theoretical work informing these schools and movements, I stress throughout this book the value for humanities students of studying critical theory. Indeed, I argue that courses teaching critical theories and methodologies provide students with a set of practical skills that are transferable to a wide range of careers outside the academy. This makes such courses extremely relevant to the currently heated debate about the practical value of a humanities education. Critics inside and outside of the academy who bemoan the rise of theory and complain about the professionalization of humanities faculty, who even blame these developments for the crisis in the humanities, are doing a serious disservice to the very institution they are seeking to protect. Why? Because their argument ignores the fact that courses putting a stress on critical theories and disciplinary methodologies are some of the best ones we have for teaching critical thinking, and for training students to think ethically about social justice, both of which nearly everyone agrees are central to any conception of a humanities education. Courses in critical theory teach students to read rigorously, closely, and skeptically, to explore the underlying assumptions behind the positions others take, to understand the larger historical and ideological frameworks in which knowledge is presented and arguments are made, and to develop their own critical perspective on the claims with which they are confronted. Theory is about learning how to question commonsense assumptions and dig down to the foundations—or the absence of foundations—informing claims about value, meaning, and truth. What could be more valuable than that? And what could be more important than developing an ability to track how history, philosophy, literature, and art represent the world of human experience in ways that reflect, perpetuate, or critique uneven forms of power related to gender, sexuality, class, and race?

We ought, then, to be skeptical about the rhetoric of crisis in the humanities when people announcing that crisis blame it on innovation and change. Doing so makes the humanities look static and moribund, trapped in a curatorial mode in which the preservation of a fixed group of authors, texts, philosophical positions, historical events, and works of art are asserted to be their primary concern, where vague pronouncements about timeless value and universal truth trump the expansion of knowledge and critical inquiry. The increasing rigor and sophistication of work in the humanities are not to be blamed for the plight of the humanities. That plight has more to do with economic and institutional changes related to the corporatization of higher education I referred to earlier. I believe humanists and their supporters must take a pragmatic and nuanced approach to articulating the value of the humanities in the context of these changes. For this reason, I will be arguing throughout this book that while the humanities play an important role in maintaining an institutional space for thinking critically about the increasingly pragmatic and utilitarian orientation of our culture, it is a mistake for humanists and their supporters to resist the need to articulate the practical value of a humanities education. In an era of tightening budgets and demands that academic programs articulate their value, I believe it is important that we respond to the questions students, their families, college and university administrators, and the wider public have about why a humanities education matters, and that the response ought to focus not just on the value of humanistic knowledge for its own sake, but also on the value of the skills humanities students develop through exposure to disciplinary (and interdisciplinary) theories and critical methodologies in the courses they take. The questions raised by those who are skeptical about the value of investing in a humanities or liberal arts education are not going to go away because the institutional restructuring of higher education as it streamlines its budgetary and administrative operations in order to fit a new business model in an era of shrinking

resources is going to continue. This means that defending the humanities must be a two-pronged effort, insisting on the important role the humanities play in fostering critical thinking about bottom-line values and the instrumentalization of everyday life, and articulating the value of a humanities education in concrete terms that stress the practical skills humanities students learn.

While this book has much to say about the history and future of the humanities, it is particularly interested in exploring what is at stake here for the future of my own field, literary studies. For this reason, my discussion in chapter 2 regarding debates about professionalization draws heavily on examples of how that debate has played out in the fields of English and comparative literature, and chapter 5 is devoted entirely to a discussion of various proposals regarding the direction literary studies ought to take in the twenty-first century. Similarly, my concluding chapter is concerned with the specific impact the rise of the digital humanities and the movement toward online education will have on the teaching of literature. Thus, as its title indicates, much of this book looks at the future of literary studies through the lens of the so-called humanities “crisis.” Although there clearly are major differences between the disciplines of literature, philosophy, history, theology, and the fine arts, I think the case of literary studies is to some degree paradigmatic, especially with regard to debates about the impact of theory, which is of course a profoundly interdisciplinary field. That is because while much critical theory today has its origins in philosophy, political science, history, and literary criticism, it is fair to say that what we call “theory” has coalesced—and gotten much of its traction—in literary studies. This book grows out of my own experience teaching and writing about theory for over 30 years, a professional life that has spanned the whole era of theory, from its inception through debates about its value to a literary education, through the 1990s culture wars and into our own time when

debates about its coherence and its future continue unabated.

The changes I have witnessed have been dramatic, and salutatory. The protocols of close reading and textual analysis developed by the American New Critics, which dominated literary study for decades, have become much more sophisticated through the incorporation of structuralist and deconstructive modes of reading, and the exploration of narrative and poetic structures has become remarkably more sophisticated with the rise of narratology, poetics, and semiotics. The historical study of literature has been utterly transformed during the years I have been in the profession, under the aegis of the New Historicism and influenced by the rise of African American, Chicano/a, and multicultural studies. What counts as literature has changed dramatically, canon formation has been subjected to much-needed and systematic rethinking, and the scope and range of the texts and authors students read has been dramatically expanded. The canonical works of the Western tradition continue to have a strong presence in the literature curriculum, but students now have the opportunity to read and study a much fuller range of literary expression on a multicultural and global scale that is profoundly inclusive. Given these changes, of course, the topics, issues, and subjects covered in literary studies have also broadened dramatically. The new critical focus on form which required focus on the text itself and the bracketing off of historical, critical, and cultural context has given way to forms of reading that reinsert literary and other texts in those contexts (without, on the whole, sacrificing attention to form and language). Issues central to what it means to be human, related to gender, race, sexuality, class, subjectivity, and the politics of cultural belonging have become central in literary analyses. These developments should not be viewed as a turn away from the traditional interests of the humanities, but rather, as an important expansion and deepening of those interests. As contemporary humanists rise to the challenge of

explaining what gets studied in the humanities and why it is valuable, they need to find a way to stress the value of these changes, to emphasize how they expand and deepen the study of what it means to be human.

To order *The Humanities "Crisis" and the Future of Literary Studies* please visit <http://goo.gl/mZwjrA>