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Where the humanities live

In 1964, the historian J. H. Plumb announced a crisis in the humanities: “Alas, the rising tide of scientific and industrial societies, combined with the battering of two World Wars, has shattered the confidence of humanists in their capacity to lead or to instruct.”¹ Plumb’s lament would not be the last; indeed, in every decade since 1964, in addresses to professional organizations and in op-ed pieces, on blogs and in commencement speeches, humanists and their critics have warned of one crisis after another. Sometimes challengers from outside – scientists, social scientists, administrators, politicians, or advocates of corporate or utilitarian values – threaten. At other times, humanists themselves come off as the culprits, trafficking in obscurity, reaction, or political correctness. Whatever the cause, those who worry have

no trouble finding signs of crisis: declining proportions of students and faculty positions, low funding inside the university, a diminished audience beyond the academy, disorienting shifts in the demography of students and faculty, and dislocating theoretical importations and innovations.²

Surprisingly, however, today the humanities in the United States are holding their own in an intensely competitive jostling of universities, departments, and faculty for students and resources. As the Humanities Indicators

1 J. H. Plumb, ed., *Crisis in the Humanities* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964). The humanities are generally considered to include English language and literature; foreign languages and literatures; history; philosophy; religion; ethnic, gender, and cultural studies; area and interdisciplinary studies; archaeology; art history; the history of music; and the study of drama and cinema. Some parts of political science, government, geography, anthropology, and sociology – the “humanistic social sciences” – are more closely identified with the humanities than with other more quantitative aspects of the disciplines.

2 A special issue of *New Literary History*, 36 (2005), built around responses to Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s essay “Beneath and Beyond the ‘Crisis in the Humanities,’” is extremely helpful. Harpham analyzes the perennial nature of the crisis.

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Prototype sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences reveals, humanities disciplines show signs of regained balance, integration, and growth, even if other fields, often vocational, are growing faster. Humanities faculty and what they teach retain authority and respect in public and private institutions, large and small. Many thoughtful and articulate students in the best schools in the country emerge with degrees in the humanities. Faculty and students from around the world come to the United States to share in its broad and robust tradition of humanistic research and teaching.³

To understand why the tradition of crisis shapes our thinking and self-perception, even while some of the reasons for worry have abated, we need to understand the many contexts in which the humanities live. They live in departments and disciplines, of course; but they also live in new places, in new forms, and in new combinations.

Though the phrase “the humanities” bears the patina of an ancient Western tradition, just as its creators intended, the aggregation of disciplines bearing that name is only about a hundred years old, taking form in the United States early in the twentieth century. The humanities played a critical integrative role as American universities moved away from training in the classical lan-

guages, the teaching of moral philosophy, and prescribed curricula. The humanities emerged as a sort of secular glue to hold together the disparate components of a higher education system assembled from elements of German research universities, Oxbridge tutelage, and French training for civil service. Humanities disciplines evolved alongside the sciences and social sciences, each new cluster of disciplines fostering, challenging, and defining the other. The idea of the humanities developed simultaneously with the machinery of the humanities.

Despite its utility, the concept of the humanities grew slowly and uncertainly until, in the 1930s, it became established in the curricula of elite institutions from the Ivy League to Chicago to Berkeley. Soon thereafter, the humanities began to anchor general education requirements across an ever-expanding range of institutions. World War II galvanized the concept of the humanities in the United States, demonstrating the need for humane understanding in a world descending into chaos. The ideological, institutional, and demographic environment of the postwar United States fueled remarkable growth in universities and in the humanities departments established there. Over the thirty years after the end of World War II, the number of undergraduates in American higher education expanded by almost 500 percent and the number of graduate students by almost 900 percent. The baby boom produced an apparently endless supply of students, better educated than any generation before. And two-thirds of them – a larger portion than today – went to college.⁴

3 The Humanities Indicators Prototype is sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and can be found at <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/humanitiesData.aspx>. In 2004, about 16 percent of humanities doctorates in this country went to students from abroad. For a useful perspective, see Steven Brint, “The Rise of the ‘Practical Arts,’” in *The Future of the City of Intellect: The Changing American University*, ed. Brint (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 231 – 259.

4 For helpful overviews that inform the narrative that follows, see Steven Marcus, “Humanities from Classics to Cultural Studies: Notes to-

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As the federal government focused on science and engineering in the cold war, the humanities and social sciences flourished as well. Between 1955 and 1970, in fact, the proportion of students receiving degrees in the liberal arts rose for the first time in the twentieth century. Humanities departments expanded, and thousands of faculty members won tenure. In 1965, Congress, with the enthusiastic support of President Lyndon Johnson, endorsed the humanities. The legislation that created the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) declared that “because democracy demands wisdom” the NEH “serves and strengthens our Republic by promoting excellence in the humanities and conveying the lessons of history to all Americans.” Bringing to bear a model and a rationale not unlike those created to foster science and the social sciences in the cold war era, the federal government became a patron to humanities departments already flush with new students, facilities, and faculties. The NEH and humanities foundations in each of the states would, over the coming decades, invest hundreds of millions of dollars in humanists and their work, giving government sanction to the very concept of the humanities and disseminating humanists’ work throughout communities in every corner of the United States.⁵

ward the History of an Idea,” *Dædalus* 135 (2) (Spring 2006): 15–21, and Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas* (American Council of Learned Societies, 2001), available at http://archives.acls.org/op/49_Marketplace_of_Ideas.htm; Menand, “Dangers Within and Without,” *Profession* 8 (2005): 10–17; Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Between Humanity and the Homeland: The Evolution of an Institutional Concept,” *American Literary History* 18 (2006): 245–261.

5 Quoted in Harpham, “Between Humanity and the Homeland,” 251.

The postwar golden age, when jobs, students, raises, and opportunities flowed, would henceforth stand as the benchmark against which future lives in the humanities would be measured. The number of undergraduate students taking degrees in the humanities reached its peak in 1972, but the humanities’ relative position in the university began to deteriorate soon thereafter. A darker age for higher education began around 1975, when the draft ended, the country went into recession, the college-age population leveled off, and the economic value of a college degree began to fall. Funding for higher education decreased, and campuses found themselves with an oversupply of everything from beds to doctorates. The humanities bore the brunt. Departments were unable to hire new colleagues, and graduate students prepared for a job market that hardly existed.⁶

Each of the disciplines in the humanities and humanistic social sciences embarked on a turbulent period of intellectual self-examination in the 1970s and 1980s. To many, the leading disciplinary fashions of the 1950s and 1960s – the New Criticism, functionalist sociology, consensus history, rational choice, behavioralism – seemed hollow, uncritical of themselves and of the purposes they served. Thinkers who offered alternatives to American traditions of hopeful and ameliorative humanities made sense to younger faculty and graduate students. Antifoundationalists, skeptics of disciplinary conventions, and Euro-

6 For an analysis of the crisis of the 1970s, see Roger L. Geiger, “The Humanities in American Higher Education from the 1950s through the 1980s,” in *Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion Since World War II*, ed. David A. Hollinger (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 50–72.

pean intellectuals who denied the very concept of “the human” won large followings. Every humanities discipline, in its own way, struggled to define its central purposes and larger mission.⁷

At the same time, in a confluence of profound consequence, millions of women, people from underrepresented minorities, and individuals born abroad entered the U.S. higher education system while the number of white American male students declined. Faculty demographics slowly began to follow. Multicultural understanding and gender identities became widespread topics of interest. New majors, centers, programs, and institutes, many of them interdisciplinary and demanding of resources, arose across the country.

The combination of intellectual, demographic, and institutional change in the 1970s and 1980s hit the humanities hard. To younger scholars, many established disciplinary and department leaders seemed not only old-fashioned but actually opposed to honest and liberating perspectives. Undergraduates showed little interest in disciplines that seemed splintered and unsure of themselves. Best-selling books, some from within the academy itself, assailed the antitraditional humanities as out of touch with both the Western tradition and the triumph of American ideals against communism. Even the National Endowment for the Humanities, heavily politicized from the right, raged against those it had been created to sustain. If it became morning again in America in the 1980s, it seemed dark enough in the nation’s English and history departments. The language of crisis became engrained in the self-perception of the humanities.

7 See Menand, *Marketplace of Ideas*, 2–4.

And then something surprising – and generally unnoticed – happened. In the late 1980s, at the same time that philosopher Allan Bloom was bemoaning, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, the betrayal of Western civilization by humanities professors, undergraduate degree completions in the humanities began another ascent. The number of humanities degrees mounted for several years, quite vertically, paused briefly in the mid-1990s, and then began another ascent to the present. The proportions were not those of the golden age, and some other fields grew more rapidly, but the numbers hardly suggested an ongoing crisis.⁸

Some challenges to the humanities began, almost invisibly, to work themselves out in the 1990s. As faculty members hired in the 1960s and 1970s began to retire, positions slowly opened for graduate students with new perspectives and new backgrounds. Disciplines incorporated their skeptics, appointing people who specialized in theory or critical studies, cementing their place in the conversation. New programs attracted students by confronting injustices of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and political belief. Service learning and other kinds of engaged scholarship imparted an active cast to courses and bodies of scholarship. The earlier crisis of the humanities, in effect, became internalized and institutionalized.

The relative position of the humanities within colleges and universities stabilized in the late 1980s and has not changed appreciably in the last twenty years. The share of bachelor’s degree

8 Unless otherwise specified, the analysis of trends and patterns that follows is based on the Humanities Indicators Prototype, <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org>.

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completions in business still floats at least ten percentage points above the proportion of degrees bestowed by each of the other disciplines, and vocational programs still attract growing numbers of students. But the social sciences, life sciences, social services, and humanities each consistently confer about 10–15 percent of undergraduate degrees. The humanities occupy the middle of the pack on most measures of disciplinary health, from the ethnic and gender diversity of faculty and students to the salaries and degree of satisfaction of graduates.⁹

The humanities play an important role at every kind of institution. Approximately 40 percent of all undergraduate humanities degrees come from large research universities, where they account for about 15 percent of all bachelor's degrees. About a third of all degrees are awarded in the humanities in their longtime home, the liberal arts colleges. And the humanities occupy a central position in leading research universities as well, providing academic leadership, large enrollments, and popular majors. As a result of this presence across an array of institutions, the United States stands in the top third of the percentage of degrees awarded in the humanities and the arts internationally, ranking with Germany and Denmark.

Within this period of consolidation over the last two decades, traditional fields within the humanities have retained their strength. Even as new majors and programs have sprung up,

⁹ While the humanities have attracted a growing percentage of traditionally underrepresented ethnic groups (14.4 percent in 2004, compared to 8.8 percent in 1992), more than the physical sciences or the arts, they still trail social science and business.

most students make disciplinary homes in familiar surroundings. English remains the dominant major, producing about a third of all bachelor's degrees in the humanities, followed by general humanities and liberal studies with 26 percent, and history with 18 percent.

Despite the stability implied in aggregate numbers, the humanities in the United States have of course changed deeply. While the proportion of English majors has remained relatively high and relatively constant, what it means to study English today is not what it meant in 1968 or even 1988. An English class now may well explore literature from Africa or India; it may focus on television, film, video games, or comic books; it may look much like a history course – which in turn may look much like an English course. The number of courses in humanities departments, too, has exploded over the last few decades as new subjects and new approaches proliferate.

The early twenty-first century offers an unforeseen opportunity for humanists, one born of crisis and the sudden discovery of large parts of the world by the American government and people in the wake of September 11, 2001. In what one group has called a “second Sputnik moment,” scholars not only of Islam, the Middle East, and Arabic, but of many places once considered exotic – and largely irrelevant – by many Americans now show themselves to be fascinating, complex, and important. Students flock to classes that offer insight into parts of the world that now seem to matter, turning to humanists for training and wisdom. The international component of the humanities, a fundamental and distinguishing feature of practice in the United States for the last half century, suddenly finds it-

self with an eager audience inside and outside the academy.¹⁰

The humanities, in both context and practice, are in a process of fusing and merging, of eclecticism and experimentation; every group, every genre, every period is fair game. Methods old and new cohabit and combine. Texts dismissed as old-fashioned in the heat of the theory wars prove to be interesting after all. Scattered seeds of inquiry, innovation, and collaboration planted in decades past are growing rapidly, their tendrils reaching far beyond the halls of the department, the school, the university, and the country.

New books in the humanities, like the classrooms where they are taught, combine disciplines and theoretical perspectives as a matter of course. Although many academic libraries no longer buy copies of university press publications, and the number of copies of any monograph has grown discouragingly low, university presses are experimenting with new audiences and new media. And the Humanities Indicators Prototype suggests that publications have not slowed in the humanities: the number of new humanities books is on the rise, in fact, and the only humanities category to see a decline in publication in the first five years of the new century was literary criticism, which declined only 2 percent.

Libraries, the laboratories for the humanities, have revolutionized themselves. Card catalogs have been banished, and sophisticated digital tools have taken their place. Scholars have grown accustomed to vast archi-

val and journal resources online, easily searchable and duplicable. Job seekers turn to professional organizations' email discussion groups and electronic advertisements as the resources of choice. Long, complex, and fruitful disciplinary conversations and debates take place online. None of these innovations has led to crisis, even though some humanists warned of the loss of standards and collegiality sure to result from the rise of new media. Librarians and their allies have led a remarkable transformation.

The humanities remain largely a solitary craft, inexpensive and undemanding in the larger institutional context. Scholars neither expect nor receive much funding, internal or external, though the digital humanities¹¹ have been quite successful in attracting institutional and foundation support. The humanities' lack of reliance on outside funding is not necessarily a weakness. The sciences, where faculty salaries as well as postdoctoral fellowships, graduate funding, and lab equipment depend on external funds, have seen steep drops in the rate of grants from proposals. The sciences live with a kind of pressure and precariousness most humanities disciplines cannot imagine.

The problems the humanities face stem, to some degree, from internal dynamics. Too many universities admit more doctoral candidates than they can support with fellowships, partly to provide teaching assistants for large classes of undergraduates. Hobbled by the burdens of teaching too much too soon, those graduate

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10 On the Sputnik allusion, see "A Call to Action for National Foreign Language Capabilities," The National Language Conference, February 1, 2005, 1.

11 For more on the digital humanities, see James J. O'Donnell's essay in this issue of *Dædalus*.

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students often take nearly a decade to finish dissertations that have little chance of being published. The oversupply of PhDs in the humanities, in turn, creates a surplus labor pool that drives down salaries and encourages schools to hire adjunct faculty. A growing number of humanists support themselves by working at several jobs simultaneously, making far too little money for their hard work. These patterns, hard to break yet undeniably destructive, have become addictive for many schools.

Recent decades have demonstrated that the humanities, whatever their objective situation, will always feel ill at ease in the world, always in some degree of crisis. By their very nature, the humanities are revisionist, unsettled. They have no choice but to challenge the knowledge, even wisdom, they inherit. No interpretation, however brilliant or apparently authoritative, can be the last word or the humanities die. This constant revolution means that the humanities can never rest. It means, too, that the humanities cannot provide what many people outside the academy crave: conclusive answers to complex questions, fixed lists of approved knowledge.¹²

The humanities are intrinsically inefficient. Humanists take so long to write their books and articles not because they are lazy, but because there are few economies of scale in the work of a solitary scholar. New technologies do not speed scholarly work appreciably, and may even slow it, offering an apparently endless supply of texts and interpretations

12 See Dominick La Capra, "What Is Essential to the Humanities," in *Do the Humanities Have to Be Useful?* ed. G. Peter Lepage, Carolyn (Biddy) Martin, and Mohsen Mostafavi (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2006), 76–77.

to consider. Dissertations in the humanities are not generated in laboratories or with senior coauthors who have access to leading journals and organizations; they are the hard-won products of isolated, often lonely, apprentice scholars, suddenly confronted with the task of writing an original book. It is hardly surprising that almost half never finishes.

For all of their eloquence, commitment, and passion, moreover, humanists will always have a difficult time explaining their value to skeptics. Everyone can imagine what one learns in business school, but what one learns in most humanities disciplines is less tangible. Even the most accurate accounting of what the humanities offer can sound abstract and distant to students and their parents. Sociologist Steven Brint's description of what universities value in the humanities is exactly right, but does not obviously translate into the requirements for a first job: "the capacities to understand logical relations and abstract languages, to make meaningful discriminations, to develop empathy, to appreciate the interplay between the particular and the general, to understand the rhetoric and structure of arguments, to perceive and evaluate context, and to develop skills in building evidence in support of a position."¹³

Accurate explanations of the humanities tell students and their parents things that seem counterintuitive: that there is no necessary connection between what one studies in college and what kind of professional school one attends or what work one may do over the course of life; that there is no a correlation between a college GPA and earnings afterward.

13 Brint, "The Rise of the 'Practical Arts,'" 242.

Even claims for general-skill acquisition turn out to be complicated. “There is no consistent evidence for a substantial net effect (say a 20 percent or more positive effect) of college instruction on oral communication skills, written communication skills, general reflective judgment, or intellectual flexibility,” Andrew Abbott, a sociologist of higher education, explained to an incoming class at the University of Chicago. An honest survey of the situation, Abbott emphasized, shows that “you were smart people when you got in here and you’re going to be smart people when you get out, as long as you use that intelligence for something – it doesn’t really matter what – while you are here.” Yet Abbott assured his young listeners that they would indeed get something out of studying the liberal arts at the University of Chicago: “the ability to make more and more complex, more and more profound and extensive, the meanings that we attach to events and phenomena.” Educated people are able to see their life’s experience in the broadest terms. They can draw on perspectives and comparisons that enrich understanding and provide larger bases for judgment.¹⁴

This is the kind of argument that students at the best schools across the United States hear at their orientations and their commencements. It is self-consciously modest, persuasive because it avoids hyperbole, soaring rhetoric, or elitist claims. And students get it: the humanities are doing well at the most selective schools. In fact, the more exclusive and expensive the college or university, by and large, the more es-

14 Andrew Abbott, “Welcome [for the class of 2006] to the University of Chicago,” *The Aims of Education Address*, September 26, 2002; available at http://www.ditext.com/abbott/abbott_aims.html.

tablished the relative position of the humanities. Students come to those schools with the expectation that they will succeed no matter what they study, that the ticket for the first part of their journey to professional school or Wall Street has already been punched, that they owe it to themselves to study what they find fascinating and meaningful. And that turns out to be the entire range of the humanities. In all but one of the Ivy League schools and at almost all of the nation’s top liberal arts colleges, no business school even competes for the attention of the students.

If these trends continue, the humanities may become the exclusive property of those with especially large amounts of personal, cultural, or institutional confidence. The humanities bring profoundly useful gifts, but the chance to use those gifts in the course of a day’s work depends on their owner’s position in the world. For first-generation, immigrant, or working-class students, pre-vocational or vocational majors make more immediate sense, even though such majors may limit long-term flexibility and opportunity. To be a classics graduate of an elite school is to see many opportunities ahead; to be a classics major at a college or university where Wall Street firms do not recruit or where graduate schools are wary is to take a large gamble – one that many students, whatever their interests, do not feel they can take. One can hardly blame them. It should not be surprising that African American students, finally given a chance at college, major in business far more often than in the humanities.

Humanities disciplines do exactly what they claim: create a richer life. They open opportunities and equip people to embrace those opportunities. The humanities prepare people

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to be leaders, to see the largest contexts and consequences of things, to make subtle distinctions and create new experiences, to deal with ambiguity, novelty, and complexity. But young people without faith that they will have the opportunity to exercise those skills often avoid, and even resent, the humanities and the time and energy they consume.

Showing skeptical students what the humanities have to offer opens doors for them, professionally as well as intellectually and personally. Yet general distribution requirements, the long-established vehicles for introducing young people to the humanities, may not be the best way to demonstrate the power and beauty of the humanities. Setting up the humanities at the beginning of college like so many obstacles to climb over or around does not seem to instill a love of the humanities in students already dubious of the value of the courses. We may need to rethink how we weave humanities education into the college experience.

Fortunately, many colleagues and students beyond the humanities want what the humanities have to offer and have changed their own practice to make room. Science, Technology, and Society programs, for example, build bridges between engineering studies and the historical and cultural context in which engineers work. Medical humanities, too, have become a rapidly growing field, celebrating the ability of the humanities, as one program puts it, to provide “insight into the human condition, suffering, personhood, our responsibility to each other.” The humanities and the arts help “to develop and nurture skills of observation, analysis, empathy, and self-reflection – skills that are essential for humane medical care.” Courses in the medical humanities draw on cultural studies, women’s studies, and disabil-

ity studies, benefiting from and encouraging work at the boundaries of older disciplines. Medical students look to the humanities to help ground them in a larger understanding of the human.¹⁵

Humanities disciplines, ironically, have collaborated less with schools with which they have more in common: education, business, and law. That is partly because education and business schools have attracted plenty of majors on their own and must sustain focused curricula to meet professional accreditation. The situation is beginning to change in education, however, where funders and leaders emphasize that knowing a subject and knowing how to teach that subject are integrally related. Schools of arts and sciences are now working with schools of education to redefine and strengthen the connections between the two. Many exciting and broadening innovations in humanities scholarship have yet to penetrate high school standards, textbooks, and classrooms, so there is much work to do in the preparation and sustenance of teachers.¹⁶

Business schools and humanities departments, traditional rivals, have long been skeptical of one another. The humanities claim, correctly, that they prepare people for careers in business (where, in fact, a very large percentage go after college) with broad

15 Mission Statement, Medical Humanities Program at NYU, available at <http://medhum.med.nyu.edu/index.html>; Therese Jones and Abraham Verghese, “On Becoming a Humanities Curriculum,” *Academic Medicine* 78 (2003): 1010–1014.

16 See Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 281–309.

skills in thinking and writing; business schools, their confidence hardly shaken, incorporate what they believe might be useful in the humanities, in courses on ethics or leadership, and seem content to leave the rest to general education requirements. Law sustains its own rich traditions of rhetoric, textual analysis, and scholarship and allows the barrier between undergraduates and professional schools to protect itself. As a result of these cultural and institutional obstacles, the great potential for collaboration among humanists and their colleagues in their own universities is, by and large, untapped.

Around the borders of the university, however, interest in the humanities flourishes. Participation in adult education humanities courses is steadily growing, from 2 million in 2001 to 3.3 million in 2005. Highly motivated adult students fill classes of all kinds, from community colleges to the most elite schools, eager to seize what they only glimpsed, did not understand fully, or missed entirely as nineteen year olds. The Osher Foundation has created over a hundred institutes for lifelong learning, in every state of the country, dedicated to “learning for the joy of learning” for people over fifty-five years of age.

The aptly named Teaching Company, founded in 1990, now offers more than 250 courses, most of them in the humanities and most of them taught by professors prominent in their disciplines. “Whether they’re commuting to work or hammering out miles on the treadmill, people have made these digital professors part of the fabric of their lives,” the *Christian Science Monitor* observes. The courses are bought by “multitasking baby boomers who drive to work wanting to know if Hitler could have been stopped if the world had

acted sooner. They are doctors and accountants who want to stretch themselves to relearn the Greek classics. And they are families at the dinner table, listening together in a tradition that has made the professors, well, part of the family.” Faculty who teach these classes become humanist celebrities.¹⁷

History, the most accessible of the humanities thanks to its narrative tradition, has even generated its own television empire. Beginning in 1995 as a single channel, History, now with a variety of specialized channels, reaches more than 91 million homes in the United States. The offerings have also expanded around the world, available in over 130 countries and more than 230 million TV households. The shows on History, as on public television, the Discovery Channel, and elsewhere, draw liberally from the ranks of academic historians, either as advisers or as on-screen presences, and reflect the broadened range of subjects embraced by professional historians over the last half century.¹⁸

New digital media open opportunities for humanists inconceivable during the golden age. Websites, lectures, and videos on popular humanities subjects attract millions of visitors from all over the world and all kinds of backgrounds. Amazon makes scholarly books visible and available in ways impossible only a decade ago. Humanists enjoy a range of venues and audiences unimaginable to those who wrote for a few small magazines in the celebrated heyday of public intellectuals. Google Research provides

¹⁷ *Christian Science Monitor*, January 28, 2003.

¹⁸ “Making History with History”: <http://www.reveries.com/reverb/media/scheff/index.html>; <http://www.aetninternational.com/news.jsp?id=17679909>.

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popular access to scholarship previously locked away in research libraries. The digital humanities offer the opportunity, even the obligation, to rethink the entire record of the human experience for vastly larger audiences, to invent new forms of scholarship. And we have barely begun that work.

In a sense, then, the humanities have come full circle. They began with hopes and claims of enriching and changing lives and, whatever the challenges they faced, never abandoned that sense of mission. Humanities disciplines are now both more capacious and more modest than they were before the golden age. Neither “cultural literacy,” as a kind of storing up of cultural capital, nor the cultivation of “critical thinking skills,” with the humanities serving as a kind of mental sandbox, are adequate purposes. Both divide substance from method, content from technique. The humanities are fascinating and useful precisely because they are self-aware: they put both the object of analysis and the method of analysis in play.

Vital humanities, it turns out, are not endangered by theory or an expanded canon or political correctness – or by great books, an interest in European culture, or paying attention to sequence, detail, and context. Both sides of the culture wars pursued, in different ways, the same unlikely object: ways to make humanities matter in the world. In their own ways, perhaps somewhat to their surprise, both have succeeded.

The threat to the humanities may not lie where we have been looking for it, in declining possibilities within institutions of higher learning. The humanities are not fading away within the academy. Instead, the humanities should worry about becoming the preserve of an exclusive class. Precisely because the hu-

manities prepare people to lead expansive and thoughtful lives, they must find ways to connect with people of all kinds, of all backgrounds, ages, and aspirations. The humanities cannot afford to be smug or cautious, elitist or timid. They must put themselves in play, at risk, in the world. They must find ways to combine their traditional strengths, tried and even strengthened by decades of trial, with new opportunities.

Despite, or perhaps because of, their relentless self-critique, the humanities remain a crucial part of American higher education and public life. When all is said and done, humanists know things that other people want and need to know. The humanities offer at least a chance of understanding ourselves better – and any such understanding will always be hard-won, precious, and necessary.