No American intellectual has offered more steadfast resistance over many decades to the decline of our civilization than George A. Panichas. As literary critic, book reviewer and editor of the most distinguished conservative journal, Modern Age, Panichas has contributed uniquely to our national life. The recent reissuing of Dostoevsky’s Spiritual Art: The Burden of Vision (2005) reminds us that his thought is impelled by the urgency of a penetrating eschatological vision. Panichas believes that the “harrowing dimensions” of the “deadening of the American soul” are the consequence of a loss of “its point of orientation.” In Panichas’s view modern warfare is a significant instrument in the destabilization of the social order.

During the past hundred and fifty years the expanding and mechanical lethality of war has contributed markedly to the sense of futility and betrayal permeating Western culture; it is a phenomenon that “...inflicts death with a kind of measured, passionless intensity.” The last phrase is taken from a remarkable essay Panichas wrote to introduce a volume of essays on World War I, Promise of Greatness: The War of 1914-1918 (1968). The volume represents a timely witness in a moment of national controversy over the wisdom of another war. It is also the outgrowth of an interest originating in stories Panichas heard in childhood, told by his father, who served on the Mexican-American border, but also by his father’s friends and fellow soldiers, some of whom were gas-victims at the Western front.

Panichas also drew on boyhood memories of hearing stories from men and women of his parents’ generation and ethnic background about the savage conflicts between the Muslim Turks and the Christian Greeks in captivity and revolt, as military action went on into the 1920s. This memorable but frightening heritage deeply impressed the child and continues to concern the adult. In Panichas’s earliest book, Adventure in Consciousness: The Meaning of D. H. Lawrence’s Religious Quest (1964), he explores the impact of the war upon society through the lens of Lawrence’s novel, Women in Love. Later essays such as “D. H. Lawrence’s War Letters,” which appeared in The Courage of Judgment (1982), clearly show his life-long engagement with what he has called “The Great War for Civilization.” It is, at the same time, not just as a very personal constituent of his past that the war looms so large, for he sees it at the epicenter of the crisis of modernity, as he has

T. H. Pickett is Professor of German and Director of the Critical Languages and German Literature Programs at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama.
recently written in a letter:

This “murderous war” thus remains for me, even more so in our present juncture of history, as an epochal happening that changed the world forever, destroyed the foundations of order, and afflicted the life of the soul lastingly. For European civilization the war had, I believe, infinite consequentiality, which Henry James summed up in one word: Discivilization. (22 January 2005)

Included in the volume are essays by several of Panichas’s English mentors, men like V. de Sola Pinto and G. Wilson Knight who had experienced the war as combatants and for whom it had long-lasting implications. If, as Sir Herbert Read writes in the foreword to that volume, “[t]he sense of doom varied in intensity according to the quality of one’s experience of the war,” it is nevertheless true, as Panichas asserts, that no normal human sensibility could escape the consequences of this monumental spectacle of obliteration and despair. Worst of all, the Great War signaled more than just an end to the vibrancy of European humanism. It was the opening of a century of practical nihilism in which the lethal zone was extended continually until it has, in the first decade of yet another century, encompassed society itself.

Eighty-seven years later we gaze across the desolation of a murderous age that began with the combat deaths of nine million men in uniform, the wounding of twenty-one million more, including incalculable collateral damage, not the least of which was a pervasive spiritual despair that infected and corrupted Western civilization. Panichas most recently explores this despair beyond words or explanation in the character of the combat veteran Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf’s novel Mrs. Dalloway, a narrative that, “in a metaphysical sense...transports us into the kingdom of enmity and that, simultaneously, contemplates the horror of evil.” Septimus’ psychological and then, finally, literal annihilation figures at the heart of Panichas’s deepest concern for “the human condition in crisis in an epochal context of debasement and deterioration.”

War, an enterprise once regarded by many as a political craft, a tool of politics, a noble sport, had become sheer hell, the abyss, an absurdity that was, moreover, something very like the unspeakable face of evil. There were no political gains derived from the Great War; not even the victorious powers achieved any ends remotely advantageous, and the stage was set for the triumph of a totalitarian nightmare soon to come. If the value of the late and decisive American engagement continued a matter of partisan debate for the uninformed or merely opportunistic, few serious critics believed that the truce succeeded in any way to satisfy the professed grand purposes that had persuaded the United States to enter the war. The disappointment at home was palpable, and the U.S. Congress refused to endorse any further experiment in Wilson’s messianic internationalism. In the meantime, as Panichas has written, civilization was in retreat:

The debasement of values and the death of beliefs in England and in France led to the imposition of a peace vindictive to Germany. This peace, in turn, gave Hitler his opportunity, which brought on a “Second Darkness” in our century. And it led to the lethal cynicism and madness of Stalin, which spurred him to institute forced labor camps, mass deportations, brainwashings, purges, and liquidations. The Armistice signaled modern man’s retreat into an existential vacuum.

The advent of war as a popular, media-driven event is one of the many tawdry ancillary consequences of the Great War and led to the refinement of a wartime propaganda industry capable of mobilizing entire national populaces in emotion-laden crusades in which the opponent is routinely dehumanized. It is, therefore, another reason it is no longer possible to view war as just
another political tool that can be rationally employed by professionals in the pursuit of national polity.

The enmity generated by nationalist, wartime propaganda heats domestic public opinion to a boiling point beyond reasonable discussion. It continues to affect international relations with its incendiary potential long after the conflict has ended, influencing, as it were, future polity and creating layers of hate-filled fantasy that skew reality and make sober analysis impossible. Indeed, the vulnerability of whole populations to cynical manipulation has led to excesses altogether incompatible with the requirements of civilized behavior. The breakdown of any public resistance to mass indoctrination is not the consequence, however, of the lethality of modern warfare alone. Indeed, in the larger scope of Panichas’s vision, war serves as simply the most effective instrument of a pernicious historical project devoted to the destruction of civilization.

Critics like Panichas, who understand their office as a public charge full of moral import, have already taught us a good deal about the process of intellectual corruption that began in earnest in the early eighteenth century with the revival of pantheism, deism, and other more blatant versions of atheism. These were then served by state operated war machines that have most effectively served to dismantle the great structures of organized society. It is in this process, as it grows more virulent with each decade, that the citizenry of the West has been bereft of moral defense against disorder and chaos. The terrible spectacle of intellectual and spiritual deconstruction taking place was accompanied by a political deterioration in which traditional centers of authority were discredited and new, spurious sanctions erected, frequently promoted by coteries of adventurers whose cynical misanthropy was as profound as their education was sketchy.

From 1914 to this present day technological improvements continue to enable governments to hone and sharpen the tools of war, expanding the field of lethality to envelop the most remote habitation. These machinations are unchecked by the prompting of any higher ethical authority and even the ancient appeal to enlightened self-interest retains hardly the slightest persuasive power against the fictions of hate propagated through the machinery of indoctrination as it cranks out specious justifications for new wars. In the meantime, the tradition of Western humanism has become little more than a shadow of its former self, having lost its authority in the continuing devaluation that began with anti-clericalism and the aggressive process of secularization prompted by the Enlightenment and the age of revolution that followed it. Panichas summarizes the instrumental role of war as a form of progressive barbarism engulfing our world:

The very sordidness of war, the whole demeaning process of its rapacity, had cheated man of any positiveness of a tragic vision, of something valuable and lasting in life and in the universe, some conception of wisdom and regeneration. In short, war once again, but on a more monstrous scale, had not enlarged the meaning of life, had not, in an integrally tragic sense, revealed either humility or enlightenment, or shown man, trapped by conflict, a different shape of his destiny. At the end of the war, man’s apathy, his smallness, and, indeed, his loathomeness informed the prevailing view of events and consequences.  

It is essential to note that Panichas’s critical aim is always restorative. While hostile critics portray conservative thinkers as purveyors of doom and gloom, the truth is that, particularly with an exemplary conservative like Panichas, the aim is to identify the cause of the confusion and to clarify the right and the true. His work is motivated by a moral commitment to the Good, which he insists is discernible. He grapples with the problem of birthing and sustaining a coherent vision of
being by rescuing it from the profligate habits of the modern age, recognizing the antidote in abiding verities infused with the conceptual structures of Christian theism.

Nothing substantial intervened during the next nine decades after 1918 to remedy the crisis; the Western intelligentsia continued, moreover, to replay the same ideological scenarios with much hand wringing and with a great deal of bathos and hypocrisy, calling it in each generation by another name, most recently Post-Modernism. Panichas’s achievement is an admonishment to those of us who have permitted the ubiquity of the civilizational crisis and its repressive apparatus to stun us into silence. His critical journey is congruent with what Alfred North Whitehead called “the ultimate morality of mind.”

The writers that interest him most are those who possess an imagination that seeks meaning in abiding structures across time, in other words, in the relational substance of human experience. In contrast to these writers Panichas perceives a counter-group, among them the pusillanimous and insouciant, thinkers who can summon only sufficient courage to disparage life. He measures the anatomy of these apostles of chaos in the essay, “Ideologies of Mediocrity”:

The disintegration of standards and discipline in contemporary American culture reflects the irrevocable influence of the ideology of a disintegrated liberalism. It remains that cultural disintegration and educational mediocrity go hand-in-hand, that they are the result of the pragmatic liberal’s unclear and often confused, as well as sentimental, awareness of ethical ideas, borrowing, as Mumford notes, “here a scrap of Kant or Bentham or again a dash of Machiavelli, pacifist Quakers one moment and quaking Nietzscheans the next.”

He concludes his essay with an observation that doubtless harvested a great deal of angry comment: “Meta-barbaric man now dances and fornicates in the streets,” while “the remnant, protesting but ‘very small and feeble’, waits to be called.”

In the face of the pervasive spiritual squalor he documents, Panichas has since 1984 played an important role as editor of the journal Modern Age, a publication dedicated to gathering and publishing the dissident voices that continue to be raised. In his essay, “Keepers of the Flame,” he writes that the journal “can be described as serious, judgmental, moral, prescriptive; it is concerned with the character and conscience of individual man and also of society and culture.” What differentiates it from other journals is “precisely its metaphysical acceptances as these govern its conservative aims and outlook.” It is, furthermore, dedicated to finding “remedies against the disorder of the time through philosophical and critical inquiry....” The importance of Modern Age as a lone sentinel of truly unconventional viewpoints, including metaphysical or moral criticism, cannot be overestimated.

The idea of a criticism that seeks and engages moments of metaphysical or eschatological significance in imaginative literature is at the heart of Panichas’s lifelong quest. He and allied critics have spent a good deal of effort trying to understand why a world-view as self-limiting as that promoted in the Enlightenment and humanitarian tradition has achieved virtual global ascendency. In his essay, “Everything in Disequilibrium,” he addresses this problem with cogent insight:

Our present situation is, of course, the crisis of modernism. And this modernism, over the course of time and in the general consciousness of our age, has been an inclusive and unceasing process of secularization, of profanation and by extension the degradation of anything worthy of being held in reverence. Modernism, in fact, has moved beyond a defiance of men’s moral and spiritual roots to assume a context and character all its own, no longer in reference to what has happened in the past, no longer simply against tradition, but completely cut off from the past, trapped in its own vacuum.... As a consequence, the modern
world has reached its last crisis.\(^8\)

He seeks to find some of the answers to the puzzle of modernity’s dogmatic and insistent philosophical breakdown in the intersection between literature and history, politics and aesthetics. Once again writing of D. H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, Panichas notes that

The whole of modern man’s political consciousness is diagnosed in this masterpiece. All the urgent questions of the modern age are asked in this novel—all the political, educational, religious, economic, sociological, and cultural questions with which modern man is preoccupied but which elicit no final answers or solutions. From beginning to end, from one’s reading of the novel to one’s meditations on the text, the image of a void, of a terrifying chasm, over the edge of which one gazes, presents itself forcefully.... The reader, along with some of Lawrence’s central figures here, wants to escape from a hostile world, wants not to confront its annihilative power yet must go forward to encounter its underworld faces and forms.

In the novel Panichas sees not only the breakdown of the civilization depicted but, even more terrifying, the “death of the heart.”\(^9\) He is a critic seeking “paradigms of the sacred” that effectively counter a profane, modernist world.\(^{10}\)

The connection between literature and politics is the same as between thought and action or imagination and deed, the latter not merely following from the former but exemplified in its texts where it is first conceived, ethically speaking in some pre-temporal or, in other words, eternal state. The idea of such an interchange is anathema to the modernist who eschews anything of the sort, preferring rather to sunder the two, fashioning thereby a schizoid experience designed to confuse rather than to clarify.

Panichas returns to the theme often, as in an essay on Joseph Conrad’s *Nostromo*, in which he asserts that imaginative literature, in order to have moral import, must convey political truth. In his depiction he believes Conrad “shows how the absolute quest for material advantage defies the law of measure and unleashes those powers of moral darkness that smother the truth of things and the hope of better things.”\(^{11}\) The general scheme in Panichas’s work pits the forces of nihilism, which appear to have the upper-hand, at least for the present, against those fighting “for lost causes and beliefs.” It is that “fight” that “constitutes for the critic as conservator his *sacramentum* and *praxis* and compels unceasing defiance of imperious nihilism and the works of darkness.”\(^{12}\)

Again and again Panichas seeks to expose the preposterous sham of modernity: its denial of common sense, the sadistic cruelty of its naturalistic depiction of the human race as shuffling beasts bereft of noble end. There is laid bare, moreover, the spurious balm of modernity’s promised auto-redemption, and the enormity of the whole farcical project as it washes itself clean in the baptismal waters of a god no more substantial than Jeremy Bentham’s smug ghost. Panichas’s earlier division of writers between those with sufficient courage to affirm and those who appear to deny the meaning of existence or who dwell on its misery changes with time. Here we likely return to Panichas’s classicism and his understanding of the Greek imperative, *mathe pathein* [Learn to suffer]. He begins to impute to the latter a role more worthy of consideration:

Whatever the differences in their artistic visions, novelists as different as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, Hermann Hesse, Nikos Kazantzakis, Ignazio Silone, and William Faulkner...have powerful things to say about such questions as: What kind of universe do we inhabit? What constitutes the relationship of the immediate to the eternal? These novelists are concerned with “the situation of our time” and with “the terrible things of life”: boredom, in-
communicability, loneliness, anxiety, alienation, despair. Consciously or unconsciously, they express in their art the metaphysical tensions that arise on the one hand from a view of the universe which concludes that “there’s no way out,” and on the other hand from a view which, like that of Charles Williams, François Mauriac, Graham Greene, J. F. Powers, and Flannery O’Connor, affirms “salvation with diligence.”

In Panichas’s vision imaginative literature better comprehends and, therefore, more effectively depicts eschatological concerns than either philosophy or theology because it “contains modalities of and insights into human experience, disclosed, presented, in dramatic contexts, furiously and intensely... rather than systematically....” His continuing high estimation of D. H. Lawrence is again evident when he cites his work as important because it “discloses a profound awareness of the mystery of life.” It is Lawrence’s affirmation of life that Panichas believes makes even his letters explications of heroism.

The re-issue of Panichas’s study of Dostoevsky calls attention to the weight he gives the Russian because his “imagination returns to the framework of religious experience...its metaphysics is ordained by a vision of order whose sources are biblical and apostolic, sacramental and eschatological.” It is particularly the relation between the Russian Orthodox tradition and Dostoevsky’s imaginative life that piques Panichas’s interest, for in Dostoevsky “the metaphysic serves as the inspiration itself, without which the artistic imagination diminishes.” The writer “responds to the substance and consequences of moral actions...” examining “[t]he problem of evil, the onus of sin and guilt, the depth of suffering...” in his works in which “[h]is excursions into the realm of the moral life are characterized by a prophetic subtlety.” In short, Dostoevsky creates spiritual art which, in Panichas’s view, requires not merely “analysis, comparison, evaluation...” but “calls for a critical act of reverence and meditation.”

If the best imaginative art is spiritual, then the best criticism is “a long meditation.” In order to understand this one must, according to Panichas, find the work informed by a “broadly Christian metaphysic” but with “peculiarly existentialist and Russian Orthodox implications.” Dostoevsky is emblematic of this symbiosis because his “artistic vision is at one with the metaphysical problems of viewing the universe and man’s place in it, recognizing man’s ultimate relationship to what lies beyond it, to the transcending and the transcendent.” In short, if imaginative literature is the superior vehicle for expressing metaphysical concerns, there is also a deep and important connection between it and religion that is “easily ignored in an age marked by distrust of religious tradition.”

The “sacred thread” of criticism’s deepest attitude of meditation is reconciliation. Panichas recognizes the binding sense of purpose that distinguishes the moral critic in Irving Babbitt and his student Austin Warren, both of whom were important influences in the development of his sense of critical mission. While Warren sought to reconcile religion and culture, deeply concerned that, “[w]ithout culture religion can become fanatical, bigoted, obscure,” Babbitt, moved by his Hellenistic humanism, sought through his criticism to re-envision cívitas, rescuing it from the distortions of romantic excess. As a relentless “diagnostician of cultural decay” Babbitt did not shrink from open combat with those who advocated the temper and prejudices of his time, while Warren was a modest, retiring teacher who provides us no “parade of high morality.” What they shared and which allows Panichas
to recognize in them a commonality is their determination to raise criticism to a higher metaphysical level by recovering the ancient precept that the visionary artist is a teacher who can help make men and women better in their cities by overcoming the hubris that destroys the city....

These are writers and critics who, as he wrote of the publisher Henry Regnery, recognize how “the crisis of modernity...stems from a rejection of the law of limitations....” Here is Panichas’s standard: a restraint informed by friendship with the eternal or transcendent and an intimate knowledge of its mandate.

Moral criticism, as Panichas practices and promotes it, requires of its practitioner an intentional discernment of the divine mandate that is possible only when the writer reverences the divine source and recognizes its sacred expression in the very essence of existence, which serious imaginative literature is bound to reflect. Without such discernment both criticism and imaginative literature become exercises in futility and, whether inadvertently or deliberately, encourage further discivilization. His range as critic is, therefore, full of surprises where he discovers unlikely links between writers such as D. H. Lawrence and Henry James, or E. M. Forster and Dostoevsky, where, indeed, he finds deep sympathy for the renegade mystic Simone Weil, whom he calls “a passionate Platonist.”

Panichas recognizes the eschatological focus in the life and work of Weil that is for him the sine qua non of responsible literature. In Weil he finds a writer whose purpose is distilled in an intensity of devotion, whose sole intent is “to show the ultimate truth of the transcendent, the supernatural.” The generous compass of Panichas’s critical sympathy is clear when he can embrace this most unorthodox thinker who declared that “[o]ur existence is made up only of his [God’s] waiting for our acceptance not to exist. He is perpetually begging from us that existence which he gives. He gives it in order to beg it from us.” Having set himself against the “obsession with prescriptive approaches” and, in all his work, seeking to create and to encourage a “sapiential criticism that surmounts ideology and revolution,” Panichas discovers in Weil’s writing the antidote to “a modernity which, emptied of Spirit, ends at the frontier of nothingness.” She epitomizes for him the writer who rejects dogmatic or systematic theology and philosophy, and he believes that

[her] perception of Christ, and of Christianity...is remarkably close to, if not a modern continuation of, Christian Hellenism, particularly that form of it that came with the rise of Eclectic Alexandrine Platonism and that was exemplified in the life and work of Clement of Alexandria..., who maintained that Christianity is the heir of the past and the interpreter of the future: “There is one river of Truth; but many streams fall into it on this side and on that.”

It is in Panichas’s most recent editorial achievement that we have something like a roadmap of American conservatism unfolded before us in the organization of selected essays of Russell Kirk. Dividing the essays of this American magister into categories, Panichas assigns them titles that signal the terrain upon which the great conceptual battles are fought, beginning with the definition, “I. The Idea of Conservatism,” and proceeding to “II. Our Sacred Patrimony,” and then “III. Principles of Order.” In this happy country there will be room for “IX. Conservators of Civilization,” but then there must also be those redoubts where the defenders have warded off the noxious assault, “VI. The Drug of Ideology,” and “VII. Decadence and Renewal in Education.”

Panichas relishes reviving the chronicle of Kirk’s undaunted and single-handed campaign, as one who proceeded us in the
struggle against the great bane of “social and personal disintegration” that “mirrors the Evil Spirit.” Modern ideology embodies the terrible drama of discivilization, that “destructive process that abolishes the message of the Hebrew Prophets, the words of Christ and his Disciples, the writings of the Holy Fathers and Angelic Doctors of the Church, the witness of Christian martyrs and Saints, the treatises of the Schoolmen, the discourses of the great divines of Reformation and Counter-Reformation.” He elucidates Kirk’s clarion call to oppose the errors of ideology which otherwise “would not be reversed until a clear-cut willingness was demonstrated, yes, even among conservative thinkers, to defend ‘prudential politics as opposed to ideologized politics’.23

In sum, Panichas sees society being seduced into disorder by a steady assault upon the “idea of human continuity and its ancillary components—faith, tradition, piety, order, decorum, standards.” 24 In actuality discivilization is in its essence no process at all since it is in no way a meaningful and systematic development so much as it is disintegration and corruption, a disruption of reason brought on much like the Tsunami through invisible earthquakes, rising out of hidden depths until its consuming power gathers in a tidal wave that confronts unsuspecting humanity with utter destruction. Before it strikes, there reigns an illusion of benignity. The escalating levels of the sea of violence occur gradually enough, each generation accepting a new level of intensification because it is what they know, until the swell mounts above the dikes to inundate all hope of meaningful human relationship.

Yet, this sea-bound metaphor is flawed because the malevolence of discivilization is not an act of nature but the product of human imagination; it is deliberate and premeditated, empowered by contempt and pride, determined and relentless in the pursuit of its odious objective, and it can only be opposed by a brave remnant who summon the courage necessary to name and oppose it. Among the majority complacency is not the real enemy so much as collusion. Without our consent and active cooperation nothing so foolish as the Enlightenment anthropology (with its humanistic warrant for all authority and, therefore, its rejection of the divine) or its various relativist corollaries could have become the dominant and virtually unchallenged anti-morality of European and American society it is today. Further, without encouragement from the Christian establishment, war could not have become the most important means of creating disorder.25

Panichas is no disenchanted idealist longing for the restoration of a reactionary fantasy. He is rather an essentialist pledged to honor the abiding mystery that encompasses human existence. For him human existence must be informed and directed, however, by transcendent structures of cohesion and meaning. In the final essay of The Critic as Conservator (1992), he writes that “the critic’s ultimate task is that of preserving even the slightest possibility of searching out, a dialectical testing of, the larger cause and effect.” Far from idealism his thought reflects realism, an acute awareness of and belief in the objective basis of human relations that he finds, for instance, embodied in a writer like Solzhenitsyn. In Panichas’s view the Russian shows what it means to stand for something enduring rather than to play hide and seek with the ephemeral.26

Depicting the same determined realism in the Hellenist Gilbert Murray, Panichas writes in “A Tribute to Gilbert Murray” that for him “ethics, morality, and good will—the essential attributes of Hellenism—embodied the inner meaning of Western civilization....” Further, Murray was at pains to show how quickly and how easily a human being can “become, in essence, a witless captive of the
'material present'". Yet, not to forget requires vigilance of a kind Panichas explains in his essay "Metaphors of Violence": "[W]hat best identifies the disorder-pattern of modern society are the increasing number of acts violating the moral order of rule and breaking loose from any measure of restraint or bounds of moderation." Panichas’s moral focus comes through a dual lens: On the one hand there is Hellenism and on the other Christianity.

Panichas sees in the imaginative literature of modernism, however, another sort of barometer of spiritual dislocation. The art of literature is

[in] a large sense, perhaps in the final sense...a meditation between his [the artist's] metaphysic—his cognitive view of life: the life of man and the meaning of the world—and his vision, his revelation, which, in its artifacts—that is, through the organic processes of craftsmanship—helps us to understand the infinite variety of existence.

The imaginative resources of modernism have sought to chronicle the carnival madness of discivilisation. Instead of its depiction having reformatory impact, however, it is filtered through the interpretive machinery of a cultural establishment pledged to celebrate it as the reflection of the meaninglessness of existence. The often brilliant and brutal integrity with which modern imaginative literature captures the destructive character of our times comes to us not as a call to reform, reconsideration, or atonement. The state-subsidized and sanctioned cultural machinery responsible for the propagation of our models of [dis]civilization, the media and the national educational institutions, presents the aggregate artistic portrayal of our age as a validation of nihilism in the many versions of its moral relativism. It is here that Panichas sees himself as a kind of whistle-blower, his work pointing to the public treachery of our elites who are now invested not in a morality of non-injurious relational ethics but in an amorality of autonomous disassociation.