The Humanities in Crisis

The Times Literary Supplement has provided a forum over recent months about the crisis in research funding for the humanities in British universities. The most notable recent statements have come in lengthy commentaries by Martha Nussbaum (April 30) and Keith Thomas (May 7), followed by numerous letters endorsing or denigrating their arguments. The source of the crisis in scholarship and education is—no surprise here—financial. At a time of severe budgetary constraints, the government bureaucrats who dole out the money have established a set of quantitative, utilitarian criteria for determining which programs and departments will receive such “resources” as remain available. It will, again, come as no surprise that the criteria are heavily biased toward scientific and—especially—technological research initiatives, which can at least make a show of providing concrete practical benefits to the general public. After all, knowledge of classical metrics or Kantian epistemology is hardly going to offer a cure for cancer or furnish a clean, renewable source of energy. Somewhere the beatific countenance of Cardinal Newman must be graced with a wry smile.

We shall consider this issue more specifically in a later issue of Modern Age, but at this point it is sufficient to note that the role of humanities in our modern, highly technical culture has been a principal concern of the journal since its founding, and the current number is particularly rich in articles that vindicate the intellectual power of humane discourse in dealing with the most troubling and controversial issues that confront our society. Thomas Patrick Burke and Jude Dougherty bring their considerable skills in historical and philosophical reflection to bear on the origins of many of the political dilemmas that vex contemporary society. Michael Henry reminds us that when science and technology are cut loose from the bonds of human nature—that is, from a realistic sense of the limitation of actual men and women that emerges from philosophical, historical, literary, and theological reflection—then the result is likely to be a Frankenstein’s monster. Finally, Thaddeus Kozinski’s observations about education under a regime of democratic, secular liberalism suggest that the crisis of the humanities is as much a result of betrayal from within as assault from without.

I close on a sad note by remarking the passing away in March of my predecessor as editor of Modern Age, George A. Panichas. The departure of such a man is a far
greater loss to the humanities than any cut in funding; but, conversely, as long as the academic departments can attract scholars of his caliber, then humane letters will continue to flourish. This issue is rounded out with a tribute to Dr. Panichas’ memory by his former pupil, colleague, and friend of long standing, Robert Champ. May George Panichas rest in peace, and may his surviving friends and family find consolation.

—RVY