The State of the Humanities

The Initiative for Humanities and Culture promotes the humanities and their importance in American civic and cultural life. The Academy, in collaboration with leading humanities institutions, is developing a comprehensive system for data collection and analysis in the humanities. A new Occasional Paper, *Tracking Changes in the Humanities*, explores some of the complex research issues that have prevented humanities groups from making better use of data and proposes ways of improving and refining existing statistical resources available in the humanities. It provides a foundation for the Academy’s current efforts, led by Norman Bradburn, to produce a comprehensive set of Humanities Indicators. This project was recently funded with a generous grant from the Mellon Foundation.

Another focus of the Initiative is to study the evolution and direction of the humanities. Two recent publications explore the history of the humanities in the twentieth century. Academy President Patricia Meyer Spacks is the editor of a special issue of *Dædalus* “On the Humanities,” which looks at the changes that have shaped key humanities disciplines over the last hundred years. *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II*, edited by Fellow David A. Hollinger and published by Johns Hopkins University Press, examines the role played by the humanities in the half century after World War II when historical determinants presented American higher education with unprecedented challenges and opportunities. Spacks and Hollinger provided the commentaries that follow.

On the Humanities
Patricia Meyer Spacks

Successive revolutions during the past century have energized the sciences in often thrilling ways. The educated public understands that recurrent transformations corroborate the importance of science as an intellectual endeavor, but no comparable understanding appears to apply to the humanities. Here changes prove both less recognizable and less readily acceptable, not only to the public, but even to academics professing the sciences and the social sciences. The group of essays in this issue of *Dædalus*, investigating the processes of growth and change in seven disciplines, reveals revolutions in understanding the humanistic academic enterprise as well as continuities, including links extending from one discipline to another.

The humanities have reimagined and reorganized themselves over the past century, and the stories of individual disciplines – Comparative Literature, American Literature, Art History, African American Studies, Philosophy, Law, and History – suggest some ways in which that process took place. Seven narratives hardly exhaust the permutations of possible change, and many stories yet remain to be told. These accounts by distinguished humanists, however, begin the processes of coming to terms with a tumultuous century of intellectual and social change and of understanding the new concerns, new ways of seeing, and new concepts that have energized the humanities. They demonstrate intellectually powerful trends at work and show the close relation between academic investigations of humanistic fields and large cultural movements.

The disciplines under consideration, although hardly dedicated to “moral uplift,” do in fact concern themselves centrally with our culture’s constitutive convictions: about justice and law; about right and wrong, good and evil, truth and falsehood; about what to value in works of art, both verbal and visual. These convictions vary over time, as do our understandings of them. Always, though, the humanities demand our alert attention to what we as a culture care about and why, to how our assumptions compare to those of earlier or different cultures, to why what we value matters, to how we can and why we must defend it.

The Spring 2006 issue of *Dædalus* “On the Humanities” mailed in late April. If you would like additional copies, please contact the Academy’s Publications Office (telephone: 617-576-5085; email: publications@amacad.org).