**A Brief History of the English Institute**

By Michael Hardy

The first meeting of the English Institute convened at Columbia University on August 28, 1939, four days before Nazi Germany invaded Poland and touched off World War II. The timing was not a coincidence. Announcing the new conference in the journal *School and Society*, Rudolf Kirk, a 41-year-old scholar of American literature at Rutgers University, declared his intention to “bring together a notable group of scholars from widely separated sections of the country, many of whom cross the ocean to spend their summers in the great libraries of England.” Noting that “the existing uncertainties of the international situation. . . have increased the difficulties of transatlantic voyages,” and that the improving collections of American universities were making these overseas trips less essential, he proposed to take advantage of the restrictions on travel to assemble American scholars at the end of the summer, right before the new academic year, for two intense weeks of papers and discussions.

Swarthmore Americanist Robert Spiller laid out the Institute's raison d'etre in his opening address, “Recent Trends in Literary Scholarship." “The Institute is an effort to examine and to appraise some of the ways, means, and ends of scholarship in English literature rather than to report on specific research in progress," he told the Institute's 63 charter members. "We have been too narrowly concerned with ‘what’ and ‘who’ questions and too little with ‘why’ and ‘how.’” This early address, with its focus on foundational questions like the nature of interpretation, and the relationship of literature to history, philosophy, and psychology, helped establish the theoretical focus of many of the Institute's best sessions, then and now.

America’s entrance into World War II in December 1941 brought the Institute's activities to an abrupt halt; after a much smaller, three-day conference in 1942, it would not meet again until 1946, when it emerged from its enforced hiatus as vital as ever, drawing 169 members to the first post-war meeting. The following year, the Supervising Committee found itself forced to limit attendance to 125 members, all that Columbia’s facilities could accommodate. Even reduced to one week, the Institute was still capacious enough to regularly include, in addition to more traditional scholars, non-academic critics such as Edmund Wilson and Lewis Mumford, as well as academics who wrote for a public audience, such as Lionel Trilling and Bernard De Voto. Nor was Auden the only poet to speak at the Institute; in 1948, Wallace Stevens took the occasion of addressing the members to read “Imagination and Value.”

Over the ensuing decades, the Institute became an institution in fact as well as name, establishing itself as a less harried, more exclusive alternative to the Modern Language Association conference. To form an idea of the Institute’s centrality within the discipline it suffices to list a small selection of the books that emerged from ideas that had been presented and debated at the Institute: Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*; M.H. Abrams’s *Natural Supernaturalism*; Harold Bloom’s *The Visionary Company* and *The Anxiety of Influence*; Paul de Man’s *Blindness and Insight*; Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*; and Stanley Fish’s *Is There a Text in This Class?* The Institute also exerted influence through its own publication series, now known as *Selected Essays from the English Institute*.

For the Institute, as for the discipline as a whole, the 1970s was the decade of Theory. With a focus on methodological questions going back to Spiller's 1939 plenary address, the Institute proved a natural venue for the reception, discussion, and dissemination of the strange new ideas making their way across the Atlantic. Towards the end of the decade the Institute began coming under regular challenge from historically marginalized groups, who criticized the conference's focus on the Western canon and its dominance by white men.

Efforts to democratize the Institute began to slowly bear fruit in the 1980s, as older supervisors and trustees retired and were replaced by a younger, more diverse group of scholars. Marjorie Garber, who gave her first talk at the Institute in 1971, when she was a junior faculty member at Yale, moved in 1981 to Harvard, where she would serve for the next three decades as the primary liaison between the university and the Institute, first as a member of the Supervising Committee and later as a trustee. Under Garber's leadership, the Institute began pivoting towards issues of race, class, and gender. In the 1970s and '80s the Institute also played a key role in the rise of New Historicism, beginning with a landmark session on Marlowe at the 1976 meeting, featuring papers by Stephen Greenblatt and Marjorie Garber that were published the following year in the volume *Two Renaissance Mythmakers: Marlowe and Jonson*.

In 1992, Routledge, under the leadership of acquisitions editor William Germano, took over the publication of Institute volumes from the Johns Hopkins Press, which had itself taken over from CUP in 1977. The two best-selling volumes from the Routledge era were 1993's *Performativity and Performance* (edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Andrew Parker) and *What's Left of Theory?* (edited by Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas), both of which made important critical interventions and were widely read across the discipline. In 1996 the annual Institute meeting was cut from four days to three, followed two years later by a radical change in format. Instead of four sessions on four distinct topics, each meeting would now be devoted to a single, broad theme—1998's was "Cosmopolitan Geographies"—which the speakers would be invited to approach from their own perspectives.

Routledge published its final Institute volume, *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, in 2004. After a six-year hiatus, the series resumed in 2010 with the e-publication of *On Periodization*, a collection of essays from the 2008 conference. A collaboration between the Institute and the American Council of Learned Societies, the e-book series produced two more volumes, 2009's *The Work of Genre* and 2010's *Taking Liberties with the Author*. For the past two years, the journal English Literary History has devoted an annual issue to the Institute's papers.

The enduring significance of the Institute was perhaps most eloquently captured by Robert Spiller in a letter to Rudolf Kirk written a few weeks after the Institute's second meeting, in 1940, and preserved in the Institute's archive: "I am still in a sort of glow from the Institute," Spiller told Kirk. "It was a unique experience with a quality which I have never found in any other learned gathering. The key to the mystery, I think, is that people really thought while they were there. Usually they do their thinking before and after, but spend their time making contacts and rushing around."

As the Institute celebrates its 75th meeting, the task facing the Supervising Committee and Trustees, Garber said, is to carry the organization into the future in the same spirit of intellectual adventure and rigorous scholarship with which it was founded. "It has changed, and it will continue to change," she said. "The decision to make it a conference that moves from place to place was one that the board considered very carefully, and we're just in the beginning of that migration process. But the fact that people are present and are thinking and are sharing ideas is why we went into this business to begin with, I think. It's wonderful to be reminded that intellectual excitement can happen not only in a classroom, or in writing, or in reading, but in a conference as well."