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Edited by Ronald Dworkin, Karl Miller and Richard Sennett

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HUMANITIES IN REVIEW

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Foreword

This book represents work commissioned from 1978 to 1980 by the New York Institute for the Humanities, founded in 1976 as a college without students. New York and its environs contain many universities; the city is a thriving literary and artistic center. But these two worlds within the city, rather surprisingly, seldom meet. The Institute was to be a place, therefore, where academics and nonacademics could have a chance to talk with each other. In its first years the Institute's activities were, for the most part, informal seminar groups, meeting once or twice a month, each seminar organized by a Fellow of the Institute. One seminar, for example, explored the place of metaphorical thought in science and in the arts; the seminar consisted of a mathematician, a physicist, a poet, a painter, an art historian, and an anthropologist. Another seminar on the culture of New York City mixed historians of the city with critics, artists, and administrators of the city's cultural institutions.

When the Institute began, it had no program. It consisted of several rooms in a basement on Washington Square, donated by New York University - a place where people could hold meetings or simply gather for lunch or drinks. The staff consisted of one harassed secretary. The occasions the Institute created proved attractive enough that it began to expand as an organization. As it expanded, some semblance of a program became necessary. My colleagues Aryeh Neier and Thomas Bender and I (all three of us have served as the Institute's director at one time or another) decided the Institute should focus on three immediate problems and one long-term issue in the humanities.

The first of the immediate problems had to do with the state of American culture in the wake of the Vietnam War. The disaster of the war had turned American culture isolationist; the internationalism of the Kennedy era had gone sour or seemed politically suspect. Given the

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hand-to-mouth finances of our Institute, there was obviously nothing we could do about this in any major way. But New York City is an international city, both because of its long history of foreign immigration and its present status as an international diplomatic and economic center. We thought, therefore, that we might create an audience in New York for the writing of distinguished foreign scholars and artists, an audience composed not of specialists but of a more general mix of academics and nonacademics, in the way the Institute's seminars had been mixed. With the help of John Sawhill, then president of New York University, we founded the James lectures, a series of five to seven lectures each year that bring writers from abroad to New York to talk about their work. We also decided to invite foreign writers – such as Alberto Moravia, Nadine Gordimer, Vladimir Voinovich, and Leszak Kolakowski – to come talk to smaller groups on more specialized topics.

The second immediate problem we decided to address was what has been called “the new diaspora,” the exiling of writers and intellectuals from Eastern Europe and Latin America in the last decade by repressive political regimes. The Institute is not a political organization. But it did seem to us that we could at least provide a home for distinguished exiled writers in New York City and (not incidentally) enrich the culture of the city by their presence. The Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, the Cuban poet Heriberto Padilla, and the Argentinian novelist Luisa Valenzuela are now Fellows of the Institute as part of this effort. The Institute has also sponsored an international conference on writing and censorship to explore, with a group of writers from around the world, the consequences of repression on the act of writing, and we shall continue such efforts in the future.

The third practical matter the Institute seeks to address unfortunately knows no national boundaries. It is the perennial lack of money for artists and intellectuals who do not have teaching jobs. The problem is always bad, but in the last decade it has become worse, as universities, after a period of expansion, are now cutting back. In these retrenchments the first to be fired are often “marginal people” – that is, writers or researchers doing exploratory work that does not fit neatly into academic categories and departments. Thanks to grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Exxon Education Foundation, we have supported some of these “marginal” intellectuals.

The reader of this volume will find, however, that it is not a kind of sample case of the activities I have described. We have chosen to focus

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this volume on the larger and less practical question that hangs over many of the particular discussions in our seminars and conferences: What constitutes “humanistic understanding” of a subject? This volume is about the role history and historical thinking plays in answering that question.

Richard Sennett