

Robert B. Heilman: His Life in Letters, edited by Edward Alexander, Richard Dunn, and Paul Jaussen. Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2009, 796 pp., \$60.00 hardbound.

Letters of an Old School New Critic

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Published online: 23 December 2009

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Robert B. Heilman was appointed chairman of the University of Washington (UW) English department in 1947 and oversaw its growth to national stature during the next two decades. His long career as critic, scholar, professor, and administrator brought him into contact with key literary and intellectual figures and embroiled him in controversies that are still with us today. The six hundred-plus letters selected by Edward Alexander, Richard Dunn, and Paul Jaussen for inclusion in *Robert B. Heilman: His Life in Letters*

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represent letter writing (almost a lost art in today's world of electronic communication) at its finest, not merely because of the articulation and use of language, but more so because of the educational issues they address and the ethical and gentlemanly manner in which Heilman responded to them. The selection includes letters to Heilman as well those by him, and extend over six decades, 1941–2001, covering both his active career and the years of his retirement. Alexander's hefty introduction provides a perceptive overview of the prominent issues, concerns, and events by decade, while Dunn's section introductions give focus to each decade individually. Also included at the back of the book are a brief chronology of Heilman's life and a list of the 102 major correspondents accompanied by brief biographical sketches for easy reference.

Alexander's introduction offers readers a clear view of Heilman's relationship with and life-long support of humanistic education. Heilman's most evocative statement about the obligations of the university is in his powerful September 18, 1952, letter to the new University of Washington president Henry Schmitz about bringing the well-known author, critic,

and translator Kenneth Burke to campus. In a time of fear and tension over communism and leftist leanings, the role of the university was being challenged—as were the UW English department’s efforts to improve the quality of teaching and scholarship, to keep open and in balance an unusual breadth of point of view, to revitalize the pursuit of knowledge on campus, and to hold liberal education’s focus on the human condition in order to prepare students to live intelligent and responsible lives. How Heilman’s essays and books evolved from his life and career becomes clearer when viewed through these carefully selected letters.

Changes in education were already in the air when Heilman joined the Louisiana State University (LSU) English faculty in 1935. Two young faculty members, Cleanth Brooks, who would be celebrated for his contributions to the New Criticism, and Robert Penn Warren, poet and Pulitzer prizewinning author of *All the King’s Men* (1946), edited the first issue of the *Southern Review* in July. Former Louisiana governor Huey P. Long, who was allocating significant funds to expand “his” university, was assassinated in the state capitol on September 9. And “The Biographical Fashion in Literary Criticism,” written after 1934 by professor of classical Greek philosophy Harold

Cherniss, “might well be taken to provide a kind of philosophical foundation for some of the procedures for the New Criticism,” as Heilman speculates in retrospect in a July 11, 1988, letter to LSU academic provost Solomon Katz.

Brooks and Warren were also working on a textbook, *Understanding Poetry* (Henry Holt, 1938), to help students learn how to read poetry. The book is said to have changed the way poetry (and subsequently literature) was taught in college classrooms for the next two decades. During his stint at LSU, Heilman also made friends with the Austrian political philosopher Eric Voegelin, whose anti-Nazi views forced him to leave his homeland in 1942. Voegelin joined the LSU faculty, and Heilman assisted him in adapting to the finer points of the English language.

In the words of Charles Embry in *The Philosopher and the Storyteller: Eric Voegelin and Twentieth-Century Literature* (University of Missouri Press, 2008), Voegelin searched historical order “in response to the political and moral disorder of his age.” It was a life-long search best documented in his five-volume series, *Order and History*, a prelude to which is in his best-known work, *The New Science of Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1952). Their friendship extended for sixty years, during which

time Voegelin and Heilman shared thoughts about literary criticism in their correspondence. Those LSU colleagues remained important to Heilman throughout his life and shared his dedication to the traditions of humanism and intellectual freedom.

After accepting Dean E.R. Guthrie's July 28, 1947, invitation for a job interview for the chairmanship at UW, Heilman expressed the following concerns to Brooks: the lack of diversity of the faculty, an over-commitment to contemporary literature, over-concern with political matters, bringing changes to the English department with a minimum of opposition, the impact of stress on one's personality (and scholarly pursuits), the perception of the West Coast locale within the discipline, and the profession's attitude toward administrators. What becomes clear in their exchange of correspondence is Heilman's vision about education and his sense of ethical standards concerning the treatment of faculty, adherence to rules, and observance of his own beliefs about fairness, honesty, and responsibility. In 1948 the Heilmans moved to Seattle.

Universities were already feeling the impact of the G.I. Bill in 1946, when classrooms were overflowing—at LSU about three thousand G.I.'s registered for spring classes, with some freshman sections skyrocketing

to ninety students. Demand was greater than the supply for a while. Consequently, hiring quality faculty members was among Heilman's first challenges and a test of the UW administration. In 1947 at LSU Heilman had observed the negative attitude toward "any kind of light, literacy, and decency" regarding an applicant's moral quality, traits in which Heilman believed. Under UW president Raymond B. Allen, he found support. After Heilman had been on campus only four months, Allen wrote a marginal note to Dean Guthrie on Heilman's letter addressing the competition among English departments for quality faculty: "I like this man's philosophy very much.... Would he not make an excellent Dean of A. & S.?" It was an offer with which Heilman had to grapple more than once.

The poet Theodore Roethke, who joined the department the year before Heilman arrived, presented a continual challenge. Heilman defended Roethke against administrators' criticism and helped him during his spells of depression. What Heilman did for Roethke and for other members of the English department is summarized well in a June 17, 1969, letter from Brents Stirling confirming his own retirement: "[Y]our professional standards and, above all, your ability and willingness to set an example,

have led most of us to do far better work than we otherwise would have done.”

Within a year after his arrival, Heilman began inviting distinguished scholars and writers as visiting faculty. An early experience with an academic freedom controversy involved Lost Generation writer Malcolm Cowley, and Heilman had to deal with an obstacle that became known as “McCarthyism,” a term coined by Herbert Block in a cartoon in the March 20, 1950, *Washington Post*. Heilman had received an understanding response from President Allen about his questioning the affirmation of loyalty oath that he was asked to sign as part of his contract in 1947. This time, however, Heilman had to persuade the UW board of regents, the local American Legion, and the press that Cowley’s radical Marxist past did not reflect his current beliefs. Heilman’s forthrightness with Cowley and Cowley’s honesty with Heilman enabled them to overcome together the opposition ethically and without public rancor.

In 1955, the year after Senator Joseph McCarthy’s committee was appointed and the hunt for disloyal citizens raged, Heilman became embroiled in yet another UW battle over a prominent lecturer’s invitation to speak on campus. President Schmitz’s rejection of the physics

department’s invitation to theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, “Father of the Atomic Bomb,” led to seven national scientists’ boycott of a scheduled campus conference. Disappointed but not discouraged, Heilman remained an advocate for academic freedom and for liberal education throughout his career.

The 1960s presented other challenges, among them civil rights actions. What eventually followed was pressure on universities by black students to start black studies programs, to hire more black faculty, and to host black speakers. Though Heilman was able to hire several black faculty members, notwithstanding black militant demand to control such appointments, he encountered the difficulty schools across the country were facing, i.e., competition with one another. Other changes beginning to affect English departments included the politicization of the Modern Language Association, anti-intellectualism in graduate programs, demands for women’s studies programs, the reduction in foreign language requirements, and the breakdown of traditional education. Early on, in a letter to Faulkner scholar William Van O’Connor, Heilman paraphrased Voegelin, who had said that “the substance of history...is the rise and decline of mystical insight; when

civilization is in a bad way, the bad way is signified by the loss of the insight, by the undermining of the spirit, and the consequent elevation of material values.” A similar comment could be made about education. By the 1970s, the substance of education had lost its insight, denigrated the spirit of the curriculum, and elevated the appeal of job-related studies at the expense of “liberal education” to meet the requirements for a degree.

But the ongoing trend Heilman dealt with his entire career was the opposition to the New Criticism. Basically a counter to classical models that focuses on the text through formal analysis (form and content)—hence, the synonym “formalism”—the “New Criticism” began as a response to students’ inability to read poetry. In the 1920s I. A. Richards, one of the primary founders of the New Criticism, had observed his students’ lack of ability to read literature, particularly poetry, due to the traditional method of teaching “around” a poem—the poet’s life, milieu of the times, political influences—rather than the context of the poem itself. In the 1930s Brooks and Warren noticed the same problem at LSU; and in an April 26, 1950, letter to Heilman, Malcolm Cowley wrote of an improvement when he shifted from

the traditional to the more formalistic approach with his students.

When literary critic and English professor Robert Gorham Davis’s critical review of Warren’s *All the King’s Men* appeared in the August 18, 1946, *New York Times*, Heilman wrote a review to counter it in the *Sewanee Review* in 1947. Heilman had previously published critical articles and collaborated with Brooks on the textbook *Understanding Drama* (Henry Holt, 1945), and his defense of Warren seemed to help kindle the flames against the New Critics (a.k.a. “Nashville critics” due to the affiliation of Brooks, Warren, and poets and critics Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom with Vanderbilt University in Nashville).

Earlier, the most vocal foes of the New Criticism were thought to be the Chicago critics (Neo-Aristotelians), the old-fashioned historians, the liberal-left social critics, and the secular humanists. Drama critic and teacher Eric Bentley and Heilman had already crossed pens in 1945; but at the 1948 Modern Language Association annual meeting, Heilman informed Warren on January 6, 1949, Harvard English professor Douglas Bush delivered a paper in which “on the new critics [he] put on a rabble-rousing performance.” From what Cleanth Brooks reported to Heilman, more attacks on the New Criticism were

launched in 1949 and continued well into the 1950s. For example, R. S. Crane edited a collection of essays, *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern* (University of Chicago Press, 1952), which reprinted book review essays by Irving Howe on Cleanth Brooks, William Keast on Heilman, Elder Olson on Warren, and his own provocative piece, “The Critical Monism of Cleanth Brooks.” This prompted a counterattack by Yale professor William Wimsatt in “The Chicago Critics,” his review of Crane’s book. And so it raged.

Had those critics opposed to the New Criticism not felt the need to “attack” its advocates, literary criticism overall might have fared better. Often Heilman’s comments reflect astonishment at the Chicago critics’ misreading and misinterpretations of the New Criticism; more to his credit, though, is Heilman’s professionalism and lack of *argumentum ad hominem* responses. Specifically, he expresses his concern in a February 6, 1952, letter to Eric Voegelin, in which he describes the opponents as protecting themselves and for making “life comfortable for mediocrities” rather than for “professional excellence.”

Heilman’s use of the formalist approach may be amply seen in his own critical studies, e.g., his extraordinarily insightful essay on Henry James’s *Turn of the Screw* and

his book *Magic in the Web: Action and Language in Othello* (University of Kentucky Press, 1956), which won the Explicator Prize for 1956 “as the best analysis of a literary text.” Voegelin, to whom *Magic in the Web* is dedicated, had written approvingly about the quality of Heilman’s analysis earlier, in a July 24, 1956, letter.

However, Heilman did not embrace the New Criticism at the exclusion of other critical approaches. In a November 5, 1962, letter, his assistant Andrew Hilen reprimands Heilman for stating to Dean Solomon Katz that “a certain impact of the new criticism here has weakened us somewhat on the historical side.” Hilen then lists nine recently taught English department courses with historical content. Heilman’s November 13, 1962, concession to Katz about his “error” is witty and prompted an even wittier response from Katz within the week.

Though these and other issues permeated higher education during his forty-year career, Heilman remained dedicated to doing what was in the best interest of the university and the profession; and he maintained his faith in the timeliness and universality of literature. In this regard, the editors of *Robert B. Heilman: His Life in Letters* have selected correspondence that subtly and prominently display Heilman’s leadership qualities—fairness, courage

to stand up for values, honesty, eloquence. As Louis Menand wrote in September 29, 2008, *New Yorker* about Lionel Trilling, a contemporary of Heilman, it was a time in which literature and English departments were serious, culturally important, and dedicated to values other than the politics and goofiness of recent decades.

To paraphrase Chaucerian scholar R. K. Root in his introduction to

Lord Chesterfield's Letters to His Son and Others (Dutton, 1969): It is for the advice and wise observation that one reads Heilman's letters as well as for their unfailing grace and charm. His letters are, perhaps, evidence for the opening sentence of Edward Alexander's introduction to *His Life in Letters*: "The only great man I came to know during my forty-four years in the academic profession was Robert B. Heilman."