

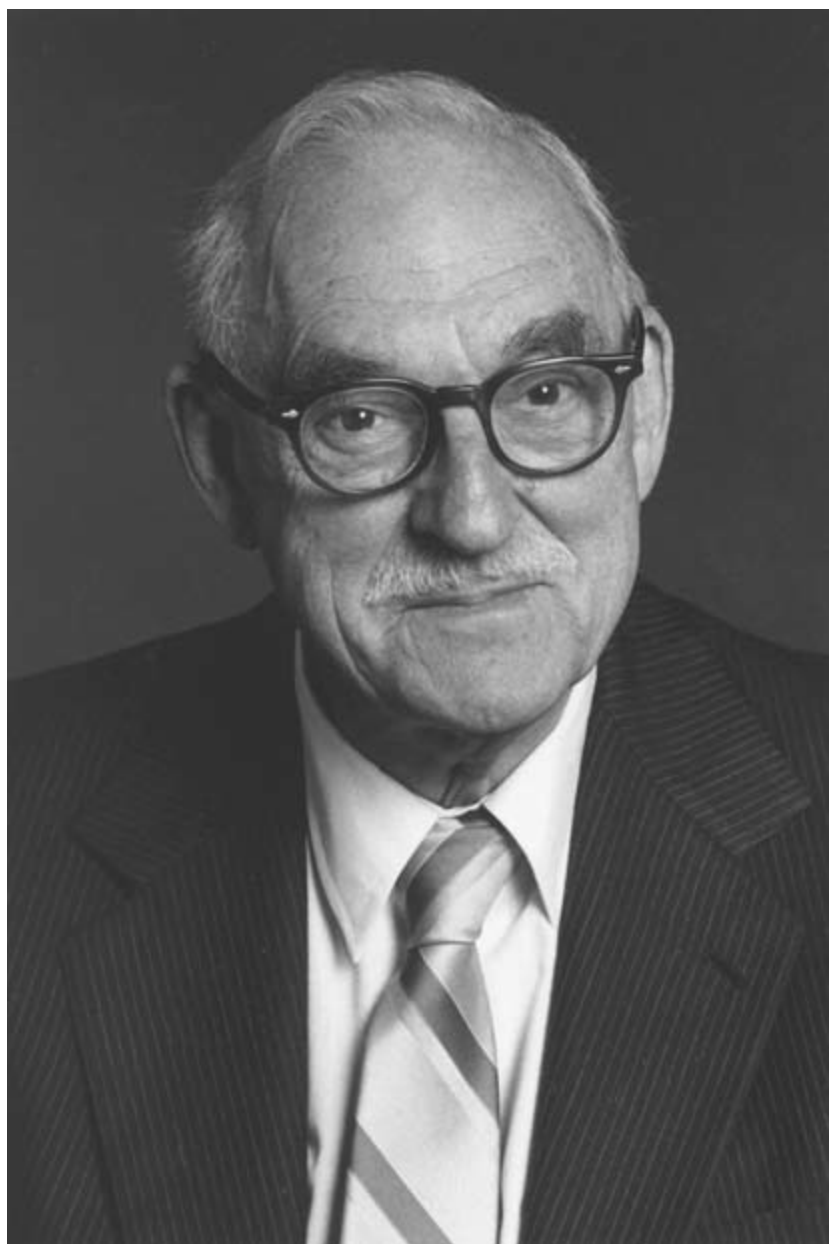
His Life in Letters

ROBERT B. HEILMAN

Edited by EDWARD ALEXANDER, RICHARD J. DUNN, and PAUL JAUSSEN

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Introduction by Edward Alexander

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Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Editorial Practices xi

Introduction by Edward Alexander 3

1. Reading Minds and Intentions: *The 1940s* 54
2. Categories of Existence: *The 1950s* 211
3. A Mind Grappling in a New Way: *The 1960s* 353
4. The Kultur-Kampf over Literary Studies: *The 1970s* 463
5. Gains and Losses: *The 1980s* 568
6. Cast Me Not Off in Old Age: *The 1990s and Beyond* 696

Chronology 777

Heilman's Correspondents 780

Permissions 789

Index 790

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Editorial Practices



The letters in this selection, whether printed in their entirety or abridged, have adhered as closely to the original as possible. Major deletions are indicated by a full line of ellipsis; minor deletions are marked by a bracketed ellipsis ([. . .]). Minor spelling errors have been silently corrected, but obviously intentional misspellings, usually in the case of jokes or puns, have been left as they were written. Underlined words in the text have been italicized in accordance with general printing practices.

Occasionally, words have been inserted for continuity and clarity. These are designated with brackets ([]). Handwritten marginalia are contained by angle brackets (<>), with abbreviations indicating their location in the original letter (TM: Top Margin, BM: Bottom Margin, LM: Left Margin, RM: Right Margin). Asterisks are those of the original authors and usually indicate marginalia. Postscripts, typed or handwritten, have been transcribed without editorial markings. Mailing addresses are reproduced in the top right-hand corner. Where the address is known but does not appear in the archived document, such as on a carbon copy, it has been inserted with brackets. Estimated dates are indicated with a question mark; in cases where this cannot be done with any degree of accuracy, the letter has simply been left undated. In some instances, the response to a letter or series of letters from one of Heilman's correspondents is missing. This does not mean that Heilman did not reply, but simply that his replies have not been located. Thus, no particular significance should be attached to their absence.

Because more than eight hundred individuals are mentioned in these letters, footnotes have been used sparingly, and only in the service of clarifying the meaning of the letter. For those readers interested in further research, a large amount of secondary material is available on many of the figures, movements, and events mentioned in this volume. To reduce footnotes, an index of major correspondents has been included, with brief biographical data for the years of the correspondence. In some cases, individuals

are identified by the letter writer, making further annotation unnecessary. For others, a brief note has sufficed. Since some persons are mentioned several times, occasionally with large gaps between references, individuals are identified with a footnote only once. But in subsequent letters, bracketed full names have been inserted where necessary, allowing the curious reader to consult the index for more information. Well-known literary and political figures (i.e., T. S. Eliot, Winston Churchill) have not been noted. Publications are typically identified by full bibliographic information when first mentioned; subsequent notes simply give the titles.

PAUL JAUSSEN

ROBERT B. HEILMAN

His Life in Letters

Introduction



Oddly, the other day I was cleaning a desk top at home—throwing away 38 unanswered letters, filing 3 others as having literary merit and deserving to be embalmed in the Correspondence of Heilman, 8 vols., edited by Members of the Parrington School. . .

—Robert B. Heilman to Solomon Katz, July 6, 1955

The only great man I came to know during my forty-four years in the academic profession was Robert B. Heilman. I say this not because he had the good judgment to offer me a job in 1960 and to recommend my promotion at regular intervals during his long tenure (1948–71) as chairman of the University of Washington’s Department of English but because he was a man of tremendous moral poise, the embodiment of conscience in intellectual and professional life, whose character informed his work as scholar, critic, essayist, educator, and administrator. He combined strong convictions with tolerance and generosity in dealing with the convictions of others; self-respect with self-criticism; force with dignity; enormous learning with elegance of mind; theoretical abilities with practical ones; a style pervasively metaphorical with the readiness (rare among contemporary critics) to take the risk of intelligibility. A tall and well-built man who resembled the actor Louis Calhern, Heilman did not need to insist on his authority because his very bearing and stature exuded authority and commanded respect. Despite a self-depreciatory habit of alluding to his own principles as “prejudices,” no one could doubt his attachment to them.

The present work attempts to provide a portrait of Heilman—the man, the writer, the department chairman, the consummate professional¹—through his correspondence from 1941, when he was a thirty-five year old member of Louisiana State University’s English department, through 2001, a few years before his death in August 2004 at the age of ninety-eight. In addition to selecting letters that convey Heilman’s very self and voice, Richard

Dunn and I have attempted to provide some sense of the changes that have taken place in American letters, in American universities, in literary criticism, in what might be called the politics of literature, during that sixty-year period. During this time Heilman corresponded with many of the leading literary and intellectual figures in America and other countries, and their voices also resonate through this book. They include his friends from LSU days, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and Eric Voegelin; his comrades and (on occasion) adversaries in the literary-critical wars like Malcolm Cowley, Kenneth Burke, Allen Tate, Eliseo Vivas, Dorothea Krook, Irving Howe, and Joseph Epstein; his closest friends at University of Washington, Theodore Roethke, Solomon Katz, Arnold Stein, and Andrew Hilen; and the novelists and poets who discussed their work with him, among them Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, William Carlos Williams, Richard Eberhart, and Charles Johnson.

I should also note that the majority of the letters have been selected for their intrinsic as well as extrinsic value, for what Heilman, in the epigraph above, calls “their literary merit,” their wit, erudition, and style—which may come as a welcome shock to readers grown accustomed to the “keyboarded” scribble of e-mails. To read the epistolary prose of Heilman and his closest friends is to understand that Samuel Johnson’s observation that “We shall receive no letters in the grave” was not a sigh of expected relief from nuisance and obligation but an anticipatory lament over the loss of a great pleasure.



Robert Heilman was born in Philadelphia in 1906, the son of Edgar James Heilman, a Lutheran minister, and Mary Alice Bechtold Heilman. Edgar Heilman held pastorates in Wyndmoor (a Philadelphia suburb), Elizabethtown, a rural town thirty miles north of Harrisburg, and then Easton. Heilman lived in Wyndmoor from ages one to three, in Elizabethtown from ages three to twelve, and in Easton from ages twelve to twenty-one. Throughout his life he would refer to himself as a “pk,” i.e., a preacher’s kid, and show a keen interest in how other “pk’s” had, in their professional careers, continued or rejected or modified their fathers’ religious vocation. His own career, he believed, constituted a secularized version of his father’s. “The key word was *Bible* . . . an Anglicized form of a Greek plural, *biblia*, which means, of course, ‘books.’ . . . It struck me that I had taken *Bible*, or *bib-*

lia, 'the books,' to be the standard components of English literature." With the passage of years Heilman came to view his own career in letters, in books, his passage "from parsonage to podium," as a secularization of his ecclesiastical heritage, "an alternative biblical life."² Moreover, his father, prior to being ordained, had taught Greek and Latin in a normal school, so that Heilman's lifelong criticism of the linguistic imprisonment of Americans who knew no languages other than English also had a family precedent.

Heilman was not, in his maturity, a religious man. His voluminous writings on comedy as rational accommodation to "the ways of the world" implicitly deny the Christian definition of the unspiritual life as the realm of "the world, the flesh, and the devil." But perhaps his extraordinary scrupulousness as scholar, teacher, and administrator illustrates the truth that religious creeds abandoned can have a more imperious hold over a man, especially a writer, than new secular creeds adopted. Take, for example, Heilman's remembrance of special church services:

I have a very clear recollection of the daybreak services at both Christmas and Easter, and the week of special services on both occasions; they had values which I came to understand—primarily a sense of great events of profound and mysterious significance—a sense which I think useful to humanity generally and indeed essential to the study and teaching of literature.³

Unlike many people who live off their religious inheritance without crediting its source, Heilman did not turn savagely against Christianity; on the contrary, as he grew older and became more familiar with the orthodoxies of liberal dogmatism and the way in which—as he frequently observed—atheism had itself become a kind of religion, he came to feel that practicing Christians (a group to which he did not formally belong) were often discriminated against at the more "progressive" universities. Even his language was permeated by that religious background, though rarely in solemn form: "Academe," he once wrote, "is a prism that breaks original sin down into a spectrum of egotisms, from purple passion to green envy to red rabble-rousing."⁴ One of his distinctions between melodrama and tragedy held that "melodrama has affinities with politics, tragedy with religion"; tragedy, like religion, expressed the view of man as a divided being, a "dual creature with equal possibilities of coming to salvation or to damnation."⁵ Still more

crucially, Heilman looked upon the nonhistorical and integrative habit of the New Criticism, with its sense of the organic and of the reality that transcends time, as a form of the religious sensibility.⁶



Heilman attended high school in Easton. The school afforded only three options, “commercial” for those who were going straight to work after graduation, and “classical” or “scientific” for those aspiring to college. If you took the classical option, as Heilman did, you had no other choices to make; you had contracted for four years of Latin, four of English, three of French, two of math, and one of science. This, of course, obviated the need for academic counseling, the only instance of which Heilman could later recall was “a warning against the evils of masturbation, which in those pre-Portnoy days was still causing blindness, muscular dystrophy, and premature senility.”⁷ When he moved on to Lafayette College (also in Easton), Heilman was again denied “choice.” Majoring in English meant taking everything the department offered: six one-year courses, which combined to give a coherent and nearly complete picture of English literature.

After receiving his B.A. from Lafayette in 1927 Heilman became a teaching fellow at Tufts for a year. The new program in Medford had four appointees, two men and two women. The other man was Wylie Sypher, later to become an important scholar-critic of the relations between art and literature. Sypher married one of the women fellows, Heilman (in 1935, after his divorce of the previous year⁸) the other, Ruth Delavan Champlin. “The Tufts program,” Heilman would later observe privately, “seems to have been more successful as a marriage bureau than as an educational venture.” Their marriage produced a son, Champlin Bechtold (“Pete”) Heilman in 1937.

After taking an M.A. at Ohio State in 1930, Heilman entered the graduate program at Harvard, from which he received another master’s degree in 1931 and the doctorate in 1935. He was less happy with the educational regimen there than he had been at Lafayette. The reigning orthodoxy at Harvard (as at most graduate schools then) was literary history, conceived according to the ponderous Germanic manner, and with a heavy emphasis upon medieval studies, so that Shakespeare, in the hands of G. L. Kittredge, for example, “seemed pretty much a descendant of medieval forebears.” Most of Heilman’s Harvard professors lectured on classical models, rules, sources, influences, editions, theaters, acting companies, biography. If the historical information had been delivered before the hour was over, the professor

might venture a “nonprofessional” remark such as “sheer lyric beauty” or “I like Ben Jonson. Don’t you?”⁹ Heilman began to have doubts about the old historical approach and hoped he was not alone when he began to feel that it was hard for grown men at Harvard to take seriously the topics announced for graduate seminars.

A notable exception to the rule at Harvard was Irving Babbitt, a spokesman for the “new humanism,” whose “immensely erudite, aggressive, and witty lectures” taught that the history of ideas was a larger, more significant domain than the history of texts.¹⁰ Babbitt and the other “new humanists,” like P. E. More at Princeton and Stuart P. Sherman at Illinois, prepared the ground for the New Criticism, the movement which would gain Heilman’s (qualified) allegiance. They encouraged students to find meaning in literary works that could not be encompassed by a search for their “origins,” and introduced them to formal analysis, especially the relation between form and content.

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

The positive influence (which included his antiromanticism) of Babbitt along with the negative one of a sense that the old historicism had reached a dead end prepared Heilman and others like him for the lessons of *An Approach to Literature* (1936) and *Understanding Poetry* (1938), the foundational works of the New Criticism, published jointly by two professors at Louisiana State University, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. These textbooks—aimed at teachers as much as their students—promoted the idea of a unified domain of literary excellence; they stressed the work itself, not divorced from various genetic influences, but transcending them through formal properties, not bound by time, that determined its quality. They also undermined the utilitarian conception of poetry as a servile instrument of morality, religion, or ideology. Heilman was instinctively hospitable to the new method, although he had “difficulty with some of the new tools and with some judgments that were not congenial.”¹¹

Heilman had joined the LSU faculty, as an instructor (in those days the lowest academic rank), in autumn of 1935. In the midst of the Depression, academic jobs were very few, and Heilman’s Harvard degree “opened only one door for me—the door to LSU. At the time I did not know what a fortunate door it was.” While most universities were contracting, LSU, thanks in large part to Huey Long, was expanding. Heilman arrived in Baton Rouge with a bang, a literal one. On his seventh day there, he and his wife went to

the Capitol to look in on a meeting of the state legislature which U. S. Senator Huey Long (formerly Governor) was scheduled to attend. The visit would prove to be Heilman's "one experience of seeing a single political leader wholly in command," but it was a very brief experience. Long's exit from the chamber that day was instantly followed by his assassination. "We wondered," Heilman later recalled, "Is this the way they always settle political differences in Louisiana? How would it be in higher education?"¹²

Huey Long, a populist picaro and (in the eyes of many) a Machiavellian scoundrel, had brought to an obscure university in a poor southern town such extraordinary talents as Warren and Brooks, who joined the English department shortly before Heilman did (Brooks in 1932, Warren in 1934), and, starting in July 1935, a remarkable journal called the *Southern Review*. According to one rumor, Brooks and Warren, who ran the journal as its associate editors, had "taken Huey for \$100,000."¹³ Heilman, the transplanted northerner, was intrigued by the puzzling relation between Louisiana's populist revolution and the very highbrow literary and intellectual flowering of its state university. Only after he had returned, at the end of 1947, to the North, where liberal virtue and the conformity of dissent pressed harder upon free spirits, did he begin to understand the paradox. "May there have been," he asked from the perspective of decades, "a subterranean kinship between the freedom conducive to art and thought, and a statewide socio-political easygoingness with its obvious built-in risks of messes, rackets, and worse?"¹⁴

Among the southern paradoxes that Heilman quickly recognized was the combination of a greater illiteracy than existed in any other part of the country with a highly disciplined literacy that had produced a literary flowering unequalled by any other region in twentieth-century America. Within this paradox he detected another. This was the way in which the type of literary analysis developed by southern critics—Brooks, Warren, Allen Tate (all richly represented in this book)—who were often scorned as "reactionaries" or even "fascists" by their cruder liberal detractors had the effect of democratizing literary study. By stressing the analysis of concrete texts in their search for the relation between form and content, the New Critics created a far more competent "general reader" than the older, historical critics had envisioned or desired.

Moreover, by adhering to Tate's precept, as Irving Howe recalled it to Heilman in a letter of March 21, 1991, that "criticism should be as plain as the nose on your face," they not only rescued criticism from the dry-as-dust manner of the historical school but also retarded its infection by the opaque

pseudo-jargon of the later “theorists.” Tate, Brooks, Warren, John Crowe Ransom, and Heilman himself wrote with a clarity and force that convinced young teachers that these men had found an objective method of distinguishing better and worse in literary works. “It was fortunate,” Heilman would write in later years, “for the new criticism that it was born in the classrooms rather than in arcane journals where dark prose is essential to a sense of belonging and of vanguard authenticity.”¹⁵ The fact that it *was* born in the classroom was itself of crucial importance to Heilman, for—as he recognized more and more profoundly as the decades passed, especially after he became a department chairman—the problem of teaching, with which the New Critics had begun, became the problem of civilization itself, with which the best of them ended.

The virtues that made a work “successful” for the New Critics were, in Heilman’s own encapsulation of the creed, “Horace’s *concordia discors* [discordant harmony], . . . bringing sharply discordant elements into play . . . the dramatic presence of clashing perspectives that prevent the simplistic solution natural to ideology, cliché, stock view-points, and hand-me-down sentiments.”¹⁶ The virtues of poems embodying Horace’s (and Cleanth Brooks’) principle were wit, paradox, irony, contradiction, qualification, symbol. These were traits most readily found in lyric poetry, and especially the metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century. But in *Understanding Drama*, first published in 1945, Brooks and Heilman, who had replaced Warren as Brooks’ co-author,¹⁷ tried to extend the reach of New Criticism to drama. (Heilman’s extensive writing about novels was also in a “New Critical” mode.) In their “Letter to Teacher and Students,” we come upon the admonition “to teach the student to deal with drama not merely as literary history or the history of ideas or the expression of the author’s personality, but as *drama*, a special form with methods and characteristics of its own.”¹⁸ The textbook, with its formalist emphasis, foreshadowed Heilman’s voluminous writing about drama in the decades to follow.

The Influence of Eric Voegelin

In 1940 or 1941 Heilman met Eric Voegelin, the Austrian political philosopher whose expression of strongly anti-Nazi views would soon force him to flee his native land and take up a position in LSU’s department of government. Once Voegelin joined the faculty, he and Heilman became good friends and influenced each other in matters political, religious, and liter-

ary. “In me,” Heilman later recalled, “Eric excited a respect bordering on veneration, for I recognized in him the most extraordinary intellect I had ever encountered, one I could in no way keep up with, especially in the abstruse philosophical matters that could come up spontaneously in any conversation.”¹⁹

If one reads their correspondence in Charles Embry’s excellent edition, it is not always easy to disentangle the influence from the influenced. It is clear enough that Voegelin sought out Heilman’s help in trying to move from Germanic ponderosities in his English prose to a more graceful and idiomatic style; but in the realm of ideas matters are more complicated. Heilman, who thought himself philosophically deficient, picked up individual ideas from Voegelin’s printed or spoken words and used them to shed light on works of art. Thus Voegelin’s frequent allusions to “the atheist religion” struck a responsive chord in Heilman, who used it to work out the implications of (among other works) Thomas Mann’s *Felix Krull*. They could never be fully in accord in their readings of literature because Heilman looked for the springs of human conduct—motives, “drives,” needs—in analyzing characters, whereas Voegelin looked for the clash of philosophical and spiritual symbols and scorned psychological criticism.

Certain tendencies that probably already existed in Heilman were confirmed and strengthened by watching, hearing, and reading Voegelin. When Voegelin, whose sharp attacks on Nazi “rightists” had endangered his life in Europe, had his first encounters with LSU faculty, they were shocked. Argument immediately broke out “between him and several of my colleagues. The latter were depending, as faculties often do, on the fundamental rightness of the current beliefs of social and political liberalism, and . . . Eric challenged one or more of these.” Unlike them, he viewed Nazism less as a violation of American democratic ideas than as the reemergence of a primordial philosophical and theological disorder. His new colleagues had apparently never met such a creature as Voegelin, an anti-Nazi political philosopher who “dared to question long-held secular faiths.”²⁰

Voegelin also powerfully encouraged Heilman’s skeptical attitude about the prevailing conception of “humanism,” an attitude that would permeate his writing. In December 1958 he wrote to his former colleague (who had recently returned to teach in Munich):

I have long wanted to ask you about an idea of mine that hangs on something you once said . . . : “There are no gods, but we must believe in them.” . . . I have

long toyed with the idea of a strategy for taking the term *humanism* away from the professional humanists. What strikes me is that the creation of gods (which I take to be another term for Voegelin's awareness of or openness to transcendent being) might be defined as the ultimate achievement of humanity, and that humanity is incomplete unless it has taken this step. Hence for the humanists to take their stand on the opposition to and the denial of a superhuman order of existence is a contradiction in terms: that is, no superhuman, no human.²¹

If Voegelin did not initiate Heilman's distaste for the clichés of dogmatic liberalism and dogmatic naturalism, he certainly helped to strengthen it.

Battles of the Books

During his LSU years Heilman championed the New Criticism and the New Critics against their numerous enemies—the old-fashioned historians, the neo-Aristotelians of the “Chicago” school, the liberal-left social critics and also what he called the patriotic “God-Bless-America school of literature,” both pursuing political agendas. Once the Second World War began, literary disputes could easily turn into disputes about culture and politics, old order versus new. Ironically, the “new” critics thought of themselves as defending the old order of humanistic civilization. In April of 1944, for example, Brooks told Allen Tate that he and Heilman were toying with the idea of doing “a modern ‘Battle of the [Books]’ on the Swift model, with the Ancients and the Moderns in battle array. John Dewey is the obvious generalissimo of the forces of the moderns, and Barzun, Howard Mumford Jones, and Kazin are obvious leaders.”²² This oversimplified the position of their adversaries. After all, someone like Douglas Bush, an Anglo-Catholic who (absurdly) called Brooks “a modern liberal,” could hardly be defined as a “modern” ranged against the ancients. In December 1948, addressing the MLA General Meeting in New York, he framed his objections to the New Criticism as “Some Old-Fashioned Queries” and also complained (in a letter to *Sewanee*) that if Cleanth Brooks were to write a critical essay about the Sermon on the Mount he would take notice only of the author's use of paradox.²³

In these formative years Heilman espoused not so much a political posture as a defense of the autonomy of art against assaults from both right and left. In 1943, for example, he insisted, in a decidedly anti-nationalistic (some would say anti-American) piece in *Sewanee Review* called “Artist and *Patria*,” on the urgency of “the distinction between the artist as artist and

the artist as citizen.” He warned that “to nationalize the poet is to deprive him of detachment, to confuse artist with propagandist.”²⁴ Art had to speak for all mankind, not for America. Like Samuel Johnson, Heilman took the position—both then and in all his later books on drama—that mankind is everywhere the same, “from China to Peru,” as Dr. Johnson said in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*.

Two years later, again in *Sewanee*, Heilman, writing as a kind of honorary Southerner, defended both Southern agrarians and New Critics in a very polemical piece entitled “Mr. Bentley’s Bad Boys: ‘Reactionaries.’” It was written in response to the drama critic (and, at that time, English professor at Black Mountain College) Eric Bentley’s political assault on *Sewanee*’s editor Allen Tate, on T. S. Eliot, on Heilman’s old teacher Irving Babbitt, and on a host of other disparagers of Romantic poetry and (alleged) haters of Romanticism as the precursor of modern decadence. In his essay in the *Antioch Review* of spring 1944 Bentley had attacked Tate and Eliot not for their poetry but for their social criticism and political views, labeling them “reactionaries of a very familiar pattern.” Bentley’s hostility to the classicism and “elitism” of Eliot and to the alleged nostalgia of Tate and his fellow Southern Agrarians for a society based on slavery led him to link them with the forces of fascism and Nazism that were bent on the violent destruction of modern European civilization. To be sure, Heilman conceded, Bentley was “too civil . . . to call the bad boys fascists outright” but he “plants his victims in contexts which must brownshirt them.”²⁵

The position Heilman stakes out in this essay is not exactly an endorsement of the sociopolitical views of the anti-liberals, as set forth in Eliot’s “Notes on Culture” or in Tate’s discussions of the old confederacy. Rather, he insists that “pointing to the inadequacies of liberalism is [not] tantamount to attempting to inaugurate social and political tyranny.” Although his argument with Bentley is ostensibly political, it is rooted in Heilman’s conception of the timelessness and universality of literature, perhaps his most deeply held conviction, and one often to be reiterated in the decades to come. Bentley’s willingness to concede that Eliot and Tate, though sinister and reactionary as critics of society, are nevertheless poets of the first rank, reveals to Heilman the brittleness of his argument: “Between the extremes of poetry-as-meringue and poetry-as-propaganda there is a central poetry which by its constant reassertion of human truth, its insight *sub specie aeternitatis*, provides the measure for all men, the perspective from which men of any given historical moment must be seen.”

Heilman was embracing Matthew Arnold's idea that poetry is a criticism of life, not because it espouses or rejects certain doctrines but because it possesses in a high degree those qualities of energy, brightness, and coherence which life itself might but rarely does possess. Nevertheless, one may admire Heilman's affirmation of literature's unique way of "criticizing" life and yet remain skeptical (especially given the particulars of Eliot's polemical misadventures on behalf of royalism, classicism, Anglo-Catholicism—and antisemitism) about his conclusion that "If Mr. Bentley really believes that Eliot and Tate are poets of the first rank, he should be intently heeding their criticisms of society."²⁶

The whole issue of poetry and politics would soon be brought sharply into focus by the Ezra Pound affair. In 1949 the jury for the prestigious Bollingen Award for excellence in poetry, a jury that included Tate, Eliot, and Warren, among others, voted to give its coveted prize to Ezra Pound for his *Pisan Cantos* (1948), a work permeated by fascist and antisemitic sentiment and idea.²⁷ Indeed, insofar as the *Cantos* had an organizing idea, it was Pound's belief in fascism. Even Tate, who staunchly defended the jury's decision, candidly admitted that "the disagreeable opinions are right in the middle of the poetry."²⁸ The Pound controversy revealed the rift between the two wings of modernism: the New York critics (mostly Jewish) and the (mostly Southern) New Critics. Still more, it brought literary and moral values into sharp conflict. It was one thing to acknowledge Pound as the chief poet of the right wing of modernist culture, quite another to give him public honor a few years after the political leaders he adored and worked for during the war had destroyed European Jewry and much of European civilization.

One can only guess at Heilman's view of the Pound controversy. He praised Malcolm Cowley for his *New Republic* essay on "The Battle over Ezra Pound," but Cowley's essay is itself "even-handed" to the point of ambivalence. In any case, by 1949 Heilman was chairman of the University of Washington English department and embroiled in very different kinds of political controversy, in which he would appear (to untrained eyes) to be espousing the "liberal" side.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

The tremendous concentration of talent in LSU's English department began to dissolve in 1942 when Warren left for the University of Minnesota; in September 1947 Brooks left for Yale; and at the end of 1947 Heilman

himself left for the University of Washington. Although he had good relations with Thomas Kirby, chairman of the English department, Heilman thought LSU was now under the control of incompetent deans who had allowed the faculty to be depleted by low salaries. In June of 1947 Joseph Harrison, acting Executive Officer of Washington's English department, had written to ask Brooks about Heilman as a candidate for chairman who would have, in addition to an aptitude for administration, "distinction in scholarship and teaching." He consulted Brooks, so he wrote in a second letter, not only because Brooks had been Heilman's colleague at LSU but because Harrison was "inclined to go a long way in trusting the judgment of one of [the] authors" of *Understanding Poetry*.²⁹

After his visit to Seattle in August of 1947 Heilman reported his impressions of the university and especially of the English department to Brooks in a letter of August 19. The former head had been dismissed for general incompetence, for assuming Washington's Ph.D.s were the country's best job candidates (two-thirds of the regular English faculty held one or more Washington degrees), and also for flouting the established democratic machinery, which a new head would be expected to respect. More importantly, he would be expected to rebuild the department, via new appointments, to where it had been in "the great days of [Vernon Louis] Parrington and [Frederick Morgan] Padelford."

Indeed, Harrison—in his capacity as interim chairman—encouraged by the university's president (Raymond Allen) and executive officer in charge of academic personnel (Edwin Guthrie), devoted much of 1947 to making five new appointments (in addition to Heilman himself) from outside the university. Among them were Theodore Roethke, who would become one of the first professional poets with a long university career, as associate professor, and Porter Perrin, nationally known in the field of rhetoric, as professor. The incoming chairman would also be expected to keep himself in the public eye by writing and to encourage his faculty to do likewise.

Heilman came away from his August visit to Seattle with a very favorable impression of the university's administration, but the unofficial situation struck him as much more problematic than the official one. "The place is lousy," he further told Brooks, "with Am. Lit. people—spawned by Parrington's real ability, but themselves second-rate and philosophically limited." There was also "a vast teaching of contemp. lit." and a corresponding weakness in English literature prior to the nineteenth century. "In the midst of this there is apparently a high degree of active concern

with political matters—ranging from stern Republicanism to aggressive communism. How possible it would be to get on with a total situation of this kind I don't know. The technique would obviously have to be one, not of opposition, but of amicable envelopment by new appointments." It should be noted that the department already had, prior to 1947, such talented (and later to be prominent) members as the Shakespearean Brents Stirling and the Romanticist Edward Bostetter, both associate professors, and the Americanist Andrew Hilen.

Heilman's decision on whether to accept the position, if offered, as department head and tenured full professor, hinged on a number of personal questions. The first was: "Can I attract, and then put over on the local boys, the kind of men I would feel essential to giving the dept. at least potential distinction?" How would the job affect his own personality? Would "rustication to the West Coast" strike those in "the more central academic world" (i.e., the East Coast) as a resignation of one's pretensions there? Would the "inevitable reduction of writing mean a gradual settling into a local limbo?"³⁰ And what if he failed as a chairman? Heilman posed all of these questions to the more experienced Brooks, but knew he had to answer them himself. Even late in November, after he had accepted Washington's offer, Heilman kept asking himself: "What have I done?"³¹

In mid-December, as he was packing his bags for the move to Seattle, Heilman wrote the Foreword to his first book on Shakespeare, *This Great Stage: Image and Structure in "King Lear."* He announced at the outset that the imperial intellect of the New Critics was about to conquer Shakespeare's greatest tragedy. "The methods upon which the present essay fundamentally relies will not seem strange to anyone who has some acquaintance with the techniques of poetic analysis that have come into general use during the last two decades."³² Heilman approached the play through a study of its patterns of imagery, which, he showed, developed different aspects of a complex tragic outlook. The patterns, centered on the play's central events—the blinding of Gloucester, the storm, the nakedness of Edgar, the madness of Lear—led directly to ultimate questions of good and evil, the relationship of reason and madness. Thus the blinding of Gloucester, imbedded in a field of vision centered in the concept of *seeing*, implied problems of moral vision as well as external sight. The violence of the storm, upsetting the natural order, led to a consideration of the meaning of justice. The book, which incorporated the most fruitful work that had been done on Shakespeare in the previous quarter-century, was hailed as the first successful major

study of a Shakespeare play through analysis of its structural imagery. “Mr. Heilman,” wrote a British reviewer, “passes from one ‘pattern’ to another and gradually elaborates his account of their interrelation; but as he proceeds he wins the reader’s confidence more and more, and the play comes to make better sense—sense at once complex and lucid—than it ever did before. Starting with the most obvious examples of recurrent imagery, what he calls the ‘sight pattern’ and the ‘clothes pattern,’ the author works up to the delicately balanced statement Shakespeare has to make on the central paradoxes—Nature, Reason, Justice.”³³ Cleanth Brooks presciently declared *This Great Stage* “the one book on Lear (and on Shakespeare’s poetry) that people are going to have to reckon with and be referring to for the next ten years.”³⁴

Having just successfully “New Criticized” Shakespeare’s greatest play, did Heilman also try to do the same to Washington’s English department? Could he practice neutrality between New Criticism and its adversaries as a department chairman in Seattle while he remained embattled on the national stage, in print and also at professional meetings? In April of 1950, for example, he was busy organizing the MLA program in Contemporary Literature, pitting a Leavisite against René Wellek, and asking Allen Tate to champion the New Criticism against its manifold adversaries, which included not only the “philistines” of the *Saturday Review* and the *New York Times* but the Chicago “Aristotelians,” George Sherburn (“that ass”), Douglas Bush, Howard Mumford Jones, John Berryman, and nearly all writers for the *Partisan Review*. Heilman’s own work had been the particular target for Robert Gorham Davis and also William Empson.³⁵

In later years Heilman would vigorously dispute the charge that he had, in his capacity as department chairman, imposed New Criticism. He noted, for example, that when curricular “reform” was periodically undertaken, he would usually argue for a tightening of the historical requirements for degrees. Yet he did believe that making faculty appointments rather than establishing programs was the most important (and interesting) task of a chairman, and that appointments made policy rather than the other way around.³⁶

For this reason he began his administrative task by turning to Cleanth Brooks for recommendations of new faculty (in seventeenth-century, eighteenth-century, and contemporary literature). “I need not tell you,” wrote Heilman in February 1948, “that the field does not prescribe the man so much as it names a general center with respect to which the man should

have some sort of relationship. . . . [or] of my preference for someone whose primary interest is critical. With reference to the seventeenth century, the ideal appointee would be one who could combine your own mastery of the field with a recognition of the relationship between it and modern literature, and who could use it intellectually as a source of critical criteria for application to our own times.”³⁷ This request to Brooks elicited a strong recommendation (from Warren) of Arnold Stein, the formidable critic of seventeenth-century poetry and regular contributor to *Sewanee Review*, who became Heilman’s first major appointment (as associate professor) and a mainstay of the department.

By April of 1948 Heilman began his attempt to lure his (and Stein’s) friend Robert Penn Warren himself from Minnesota to Seattle. He assured Warren “that we can very easy and quick get a welcome sign here, and maybe we can raise some pretty good dough.”³⁸ Making good on his promise, Heilman, after extensive negotiations with Warren, extended an extremely generous formal offer on 30 September 1948. They continued to correspond about the matter until January 16, 1949, when Warren finally declined the offer, saying that he had decided to take “an indefinite leave—perhaps a resignation” from teaching altogether.

At the very same time that he was courting Warren for a permanent appointment, Heilman was trying to persuade I. A. Richards, a spiritual ancestor of the New Critics, to come to Washington as a visiting lecturer. Throughout his twenty-three years as chairman Heilman worked diligently to bring “outsiders,” especially during summers, when he would reserve four budget spots for visiting professors. This, like his abolition of inbreeding and his hiring new faculty from thirty-three different graduate schools during his years as chairman, was a system designed to diminish provincialism; it also provided contacts with the outer professional world while enabling that world to get to know the Washington faculty—in short, moving the department toward a wide participation in the literary and scholarly life of the whole country. Over the years the department’s visiting faculty in summer included Maynard Mack, Murray Krieger, Northrop Frye, Irvin Ehrenpreis, Ralph Cohen, Dwight Culler, Robert Hayden, and many other “eminentoes,” as Heilman liked to call them. He also showed his ability to spot remarkable talents at the beginning of their careers, as when he gave Malcolm Cowley and Irving Howe their first experience of college teaching in the early fifties. Decades later Howe recalled how warmly he had been treated at Washington in 1952 by his ideological opponents, Heilman and

Stein, and would even invoke these New Critics in his own battles with New Leftists who thought of literature mainly as an instrument subserving political ends.

For promising young poets Heilman showed an even sharper eye, and he sought them out not merely for their celebrity value but because he believed that “whenever you can, [you should] get writers to teach literature” because they are likely to have an inside grasp of it as art that would counterbalance the emphasis on literary and cultural history that could always be found in English departments.³⁹ He gave a number of poets their first teaching jobs, starting with Richard Eberhart in 1951, followed in later years by Elizabeth Bishop, Louise Bogan, the Englishman Henry Reed, the Welshman Vernon Watkins, and many others. Heilman liked to tell the story about an early class of Bishops, in which her students were to establish themselves by reading their own compositions. One roughneck decided to challenge her by reading a poem full of four-letter words, which had not in those days established themselves as common currency. When he finished and everyone was aghast, Bishop hesitated, yawned, and said, “That’s the most boring poem I ever heard.” By 1956 Heilman was telling Eberhart that “Washington may be able to make a claim as the mother of poet-teachers.”⁴⁰ Watkins even wrote a poem some years later to suggest the at-homeness of Welsh poets in Heilman’s realm: “But what a stir and what a rumpus / Ran from the station round the campus / When [Dylan] Thomas, finger stuck in bottle, / Taxi’d to Roethke in Seattle.”

Not all the tales of professorial poets at Washington were so happy. John Berryman, for example, in 1950, became angry at something someone said at a party and left his post without notice a week before the end of the term. Reed, after being at Washington for a term, was brought back with the expectation of his becoming a permanent department member, as indeed he wished to be. But he proved to be a chronic complainer, who expected to be driven everywhere by others; and his budget spot mysteriously disappeared. Roethke, as the letters in this book amply indicate, would cause Heilman a great deal of trouble over the years. Andrew Hilen, Heilman’s adroit and witty graduate chairman, once said at an Executive Committee meeting: “For God’s sake, Bob, if you want to support poets, just pay them their salaries and keep them off campus.”

One of the first changes Heilman made as department chairman was gradually to phase out the class of people who taught only freshman English and to require that every member of the literature staff teach at least

one section of composition a year. Moreover, he himself practiced what he required of others. "From 1927 to 1948 I taught Freshman English in every term, often three or four sections, occasionally only one or two. Since 1948 I have taught one section every other year. . . . I thought we tenured types ought to keep a hand in the toil and trouble that are often pretenure. At any rate my tour of duty extends from the handbook days when grammar, correctness, propriety, and even elegance . . . were the defining symbols of our faith, to the day when the symbols of communication . . . appear to be the free wheel, the asyntactic rush, the expletive and interjectional props—I mention only 'y'know,' the short *uh* and the long *uhhhh*—and the fecal and genital clichés."⁴¹

As Heilman's magisterial lecture on the subject—"Except He Come to Composition"—would later reveal, this administrative change reflected a philosophy of education, of literature, indeed of civilization. In the making of appointments, Heilman could legitimately claim that he did not "New Criticize" the Washington department: he hired people of quality regardless of their critical "school" and he made Andrew Hilen, who epitomized the "old" historical approach at its best, both a close friend and the first regular head of the graduate program. By 1952, his fourth year as chairman, he was already calling for a compromise between "the historiophiles and the historiophobes [who] threaten a balance of past and present that society needs."⁴²

But Heilman did "New Criticize" the department by vigorously supporting the philosophical position of the New Critics that teaching and criticism are not only inseparable but ultimately linked to the definition of civilization itself. He believed that by offering and indeed requiring freshman English a university engaged in an important kind of symbolic action, with respect to its students and its faculty. It declared to the students that writing means "composition" and not merely effervescent self-expression; it declared to the faculty that they were not employed to satisfy the demands of their own personalities by "doing their own thing" but to satisfy the demands made by an objective body of material. When interviewing prospective faculty or when evaluating junior faculty, Heilman used their attitude towards teaching composition as a litmus test of character. When Lore Metzger, a German-Jewish refugee who taught the Romantics, complained that "I am a scholar, and they want me to teach Freshman English," Heilman "praised her for an opening . . . at Emory."⁴³

As the years passed, Heilman concluded that a profession that voted Democratic about ninety percent of the time was very "Republican" in its com-

mitment, where teaching assignments were concerned, to laissez-faire and the belief that unregulated private enterprise in the domain of pedagogy leads to the public good. Few expressions irritated him more than “my course—that telltale phrase that comes so easily into the professorial mouth” and that “tak[es] us away from the idea of the great communal enterprise and back to a system of private property.”⁴⁴ One of Heilman’s early appointments was John Simon, later to have a brilliant career as a theatrical reviewer in New York. But when, in 1955, a delegation from his class on American prose complained to Heilman that Simon was teaching only American poetry because—so he declared to them—“American prose is no good,” his days in the department were numbered.⁴⁵

Heilman’s flair for efficient, energetic, and imaginative administration quickly became evident to his superiors at Washington, and it did so in large part because of his epistolary powers. On April 13, 1948 he wrote—calmly, respectfully, firmly—to President Raymond Allen and Dean Edwin Guthrie specifying the reasons why his first recommendation of a major addition to the department had failed. Frederick Hoffman, then at Oklahoma, had chosen Wisconsin’s offer over Washington’s because it gave him “better assurances for the future” with respect both to early promotion to professorship and financial aid in research projects. Heilman also mentioned “an unspoken reason” why Hoffman had chosen Wisconsin: namely, that it had a more distinguished faculty than Washington’s. At the top of Heilman’s letter Allen scribbled a note to Guthrie: “I like this man’s philosophy very much. . . . Would he not make an excellent Dean of A & S? R.B.A.”⁴⁶

One year later, in the spring of 1949, Heilman was indeed offered the deanship of Washington’s College of Arts and Sciences, as well as a virtual guarantee of the academic vice presidency of the university to follow.⁴⁷ He declined the offer, telling Allen that he thought it best for him to remain on “the smaller stage” of the English department. The underlying reason for his decision was that he did not want to give up his writing for a career in university administration, one that would almost certainly have led to a university presidency. “As far as jobs are concerned—if one had any administrative interest, it would now be easy to incite offers of deanships, presidencies, etc. One has to be in that sort of thing only a little while to become a possible candidate for damn near everything.”⁴⁸ Heilman would be confirmed in the rightness of his decision in later years by the fact that one of his closest friends at Washington, the erudite and brilliant historian Solomon Katz, essentially left scholarship and writing behind as he moved

from the chairmanship of history (in 1954) to the deanship (after Heilman had declined it—once again—in 1959), and ultimately (in 1965) to the position of Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs that could also have been Heilman's had he wanted it.⁴⁹

Literature and Politics: The Malcolm Cowley Affair and Its Successors

Not long after becoming chairman Heilman became embroiled in a spectacular controversy that would test both his courage and his resourcefulness; and he would be brought to what Lionel Trilling, in his essays of the forties about Vernon Parrington, Theodore Dreiser, and Henry James, had called “the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet.”⁵⁰ On November 1, 1948 Heilman, on behalf of the English department, invited Malcolm Cowley to be a visiting professor. Cowley was widely known and admired as a literary critic and thought of by almost nobody as a political figure—except, that is, for the cadre of Communist hunters in the Canwell Committee (the Washington State legislature's version of the congressional Martin Dies committee and a foreshadowing of the activities of Senator Joseph McCarthy) and, to a lesser extent, the university's Board of Regents.⁵¹

Heilman recommended and pressed the Cowley appointment against the background of a fierce national debate that had raged throughout 1949 between two staunchly anti-Communist socialists—Irving Howe and Sidney Hook—about an incident at the University of Washington early in the year. Three of its professors had been fired and three placed on probation because of alleged membership in the Communist Party; and it was the professors, including members of Heilman's own department,⁵² not the university, who were being charged with violating academic freedom. Hook, in the *New York Times* of February 27, 1949, the *Saturday Evening Post* of September 10, and *Commentary* of October, had argued that the professors were guilty of flouting academic freedom because they belonged to a political party which demanded absolute intellectual discipline of a kind that prevents free and honest functioning in the classroom. Hook maintained that the Communist Party laid down and enforced its line “in every area of thought from art to zoology.” Howe, writing in *Labor Action* in March and then in *New Internationalist* in December, while separating himself from the civil libertarians' outright opposition to all legislation to keep Stalinists from teaching jobs, nevertheless argued that each teacher must be judged by his behavior in class and not by his party membership.

Amplly informed by Cowley (on his own initiative) of his fellow-traveling activities back in the thirties, Heilman made full disclosure of them in his recommendation to the university's Board of Regents, which approved the appointment on May 13, 1949. Nevertheless, one member of the board had managed by December to stir up a storm of public opposition to it, led by veterans' groups and the two local newspapers. After consultation with President Allen, Heilman, a newcomer to the state and only in the second year of his first administrative job, decided to meet and reason with Cowley's accusers rather than assert the university's "right" to do as it pleased, regardless of the public's outcry: "riding white horses was, to mix a metaphor joyously, not my dish of tea."⁵³

Shortly before the scheduled meeting, however, the opposition to Cowley took a new turn: he was now not only a Red-sympathizer but a poet who revelled in filth. In searching his early writings, with little success, for political transgressions, his foes had noticed some "dirty" language. Responding to this charge was at once difficult and welcome for Heilman: difficult because there was by this time such demand for Cowley's works in Seattle that he had to order the writer's long-ago volumes of poetry (1929, 1941) by interlibrary loan; welcome because now Heilman could move his defense from the alien world of politics to the familiar one of literary criticism. And so, exercising not only his ineffable charm and a talent for seeming to suffer fools gladly, but also his knowledge that the single four-letter word used by Cowley—*turd*—was also to be found in Chaucer and Shakespeare, Heilman avoided politics altogether; and he won over his hostile audience of American Legionnaires with New Critical *explication de texte* applied to various Cowley poems. When the department threw a party for Cowley and his wife in January 1950, Stephen Chadwick, head of the Legion's investigatory committee, could be seen sharing drinks—and dirty stories—with Cowley.⁵⁴

The Cowley affair was virtually duplicated, but with a less happy outcome, about two years later, when Heilman's invitation to Kenneth Burke (Cowley's Pittsburgh high school friend) was vetoed by Allen's successor as Washington president, Henry Schmitz, and the Board of Regents because of Burke's past leftist activities. Although Heilman lost this particular struggle, it produced one of his epistolary masterpieces, written to Schmitz on September 18, 1952. In it Heilman powerfully articulated "the role of the university in a time of unusual fear and tension."

In 1954 Heilman extended an offer of a permanent position to the Cana-

dian George Woodcock, who accepted. But Woodcock was unable to get an immigrant's visa because, when he applied and was asked his political beliefs, he was faithful to a distant (and rather mild) past, and put down "Anarchist." Heilman later recalled how "I thought that this was the work of some officious ignoramus at the consulate in Vancouver, and tore off there to set him right. No luck. . . . An immigrant's visa could not be given to a professed Anarchist."⁵⁵ Woodcock, as Heilman would often observe ruefully, went on to become the outstanding non-academic man of letters in Canada (second to Northrop Frye in academe).

A year later Heilman became embroiled in the university (and soon nationwide) controversy over its snub of physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer. In 1953 Oppenheimer's left wing (and probably Communist) past led to withdrawal of his security clearance by the Atomic Energy Commission; his appeal of this decision led to the conclusion that he was indeed a security risk. In the fall of 1954 Oppenheimer's name was broached as the University of Washington physics department's choice to give the Walker-Ames scientific lectures in 1955. President Henry Schmitz rejected the initial recommendation, which was renewed in February with the approval of a faculty selection committee. Schmitz, with the support of the Board of Regents, again rejected it, and this time the press learned of the decision. On February 21 Heilman (who must have known that Oppenheimer, by this point in his career, was a liberal anti-Communist) drafted a letter, subsequently signed by many of the university's department chairmen, urging Schmitz to reconsider. It read (in part) as follows:

We are sorry that you have ruled against the appearance of Dr. Robert Oppenheimer as a visiting lecturer at the University of Washington. This decision appears to us to be not in the best interests of the university, because it is not consistent with the objectives and spirit of a major university. In *Faculty Appointment Policy* (1953) we all agreed on a statement of principles which would seem to justify the appointment of a man as professionally distinguished as Dr. Oppenheimer. We know that this decision will have a bad effect upon the reputation of the University among our professional colleagues throughout the country. . . .⁵⁶

This prediction was soon realized. By March, Washington had become the target of a retaliatory boycott: seven scientists refused to participate in a university conference, which as a result had to be cancelled.

Once again, as in the Cowley and Burke affairs, the defense of the principle of academic freedom at Washington had been led by one of its most conservative faculty members.⁵⁷ Indeed, the complex unity of Heilman's work as writer and administrator is nowhere revealed better than in his time- and energy-consuming struggles through the 1950s against what came to be called McCarthyism—at the very time that he was becoming known in literary circles as a sharp critic of what he used to call “liberal dictatorialness” and its accompanying dogmatic naturalism. One of the aforementioned foes of New Criticism, Robert Gorham Davis, had even accused him of taking the position that “holding liberal-democratic-progressive views with any conviction made one incapable of appreciating imaginative literature at all.”⁵⁸ Within his department Heilman quickly discovered “a singular bond of sociopolitical feeling among [the faculty]: a liberal-democratic feeling probably inherited from Parrington (the two known Republicans in the department were apparently felt to be somewhat odd exceptions to normality, though bearable personally).” He wrote to Voegelin (April 26, 1948) that “No one ever suspects that there could possibly be any imperfection of any kind in liberalism.” Nevertheless, Heilman labored, then as later, to avoid all political coloration and “to remain simply a voice for professional quality.”⁵⁹

While Heilman the ostensibly illiberal chairman was busy battling the American Legion and assorted yahoos and “pre-McCarthy McCarthys,” Heilman the critic and scholar was still producing essays with the efficiency of a well-oiled machine. In 1948–49 alone they included, among others, such literary essays as “The Unity of *King Lear*,” “A Critical Method for Poetic Drama,” “*The Turn of the Screw* as Poem,” “Hawthorne's ‘The Birthmark’: Science as Religion”; and such excursions into large questions of education and culture as “Lowest-Common-Denominator Education” and “An Inquiry into Anti-Highbrowism.” And these were only Heilman's *major* essays; his bibliography shows that in those early years as chairman he was also publishing “review articles and long reviews”—on O'Casey, on Dreiser, on Trilling, on Sartre—as well as “short articles and notes.” In addition, from 1945–55 he was reviewing books on a regular basis for the *U.S. Quarterly Book Review*, just as in later years (1959–90) he would do for Phi Beta Kappa's *Key Reporter*. Before the end of 1953 he had added to his bibliography two major essays on *Othello*, a general commentary on “The Antiquarians and the Up-to-Date,” a discourse on “The Southern Temper,” another on “*Alcestis* and *The Cocktail Party*,” still another on “Impressionistic Literary Criticism.” He was well on the way to establishing himself not only as one of

the country's premier English department chairmen but as a formidable critic of fiction, of modern drama, of the contemporary cultural scene, and, most notably, of Shakespeare.

As early as May 16, 1950 Heilman had written to Stanley Burnshaw about his plan for a book on *Othello*. "The book is not conceived of as an illustration of new-critical tenets. What I hope to show is the way in which the dramatic structure and the poetic structure collaborate in making the total statement which is the play." As he had done in *This Great Stage*, Heilman would show that the verse was not merely a prettification of an "underlying" prose, but the very skeleton and muscle tissue of the play. The book, he said, would be "Chicago-school" in assigning importance to plot, New Critical in its analysis of the verse, and "strictly Heilmanesque in its estimate of the aesthetic collaboration of word and deed."

Magic in the Web: Action and Language in "Othello" appeared in 1956. Heilman drew his title from Othello's speech in Act III, Scene 4 summing up the myth of the handkerchief which was kept by Desdemona: "There's magic in the web of it." From Othello's guiding the reader beyond the literal object into the symbolization of love Heilman infers magic in the web of the drama itself. The magic in the web, as elucidated by him, was the mysterious endowing of many parts, especially Shakespeare's poetic language, with a dramatic value and meaning in excess of the minimal logical requirements of the occasion. As was his wont, Heilman insisted on the "universal" aspects of the play, not the "cultural" ones: "Othello's scope is lost sight of if we can understand him only by racial psychology. *Othello* is not a treatise on mixed marriages, but a drama about Everyman."⁶⁰ *Magic in the Web* received the *Explicator* award for "the best book of critical explication" published in 1956.



Heilman's immersion in the business of the department and of the university at large from the moment of his arrival in Seattle did not mean that he was at once certain that his future lay there. On November 15, 1949 he told Cleanth Brooks that Pete Dean, the chairman at University of Connecticut, was interested in luring him there as a professor—with no administrative duties. "In the main I would be glad to get out of administration (despite the definite satisfactions that arise when things go right) . . . and I need more time in which to read (I virtually don't read now) and try to write. . . . On the other hand there is a great deal of promise here, the 'future' . . . seems large if ever the dead holdovers die off. I am not sure that

I am not committed to something which it might seem somewhat unfaithful to walk out on, and I suppose the silly part of one's pride is concerned a little about the appearance of professional retreat and demotion which such a move might involve."

The Connecticut offer was among the earliest of many attempts during the next two decades to recruit Heilman, sometimes with the promise of "no administration." In the mid-fifties, for example, two of the University of Minnesota's transplanted southerners, Allen Tate and Samuel Monk, aggressively courted Heilman, but to no avail. As the years passed, those "definite satisfactions" that arose from successful administration became not just more important to him; they defined him. "Perhaps the subtlest satisfaction [of the department chairman] is less in what he measurably does than in what he perceptibly is. He may be an image *for* that department; he is bound to be an image of it. *It* will tend in some degree to become what he is. . . ." ⁶¹ Nowhere did this ambition realize itself more powerfully than in Heilman's handling, for fifteen years, of his department's most famous but also difficult and occasionally pugnacious member: Theodore Roethke.

The Roethke Saga: 1948–63

Arriving in Seattle within a few months of each other, they were at the outset suspicious and even hostile. On March 8, 1948 Heilman asked Brooks: "Do you know or have any impression of Ted Roethke? He is doing a bull in a china shop act around here, and I can't make up my mind, on so slight acquaintance, whether this is the forgivable eccentricity of genius, or the talented man's bid for recognition as genius." Red Warren, who had apparently received a similar inquiry, wrote back on April 22: "As for Roethke . . . I am not mad about his poetry, but he is, to my way of thinking, what you might call 'respectable.' If you are hunting a poet, there are certainly better ones on the market—even better ones with reputations. For instance, it is quite probable that Randall Jarrell, R. T. Lowell, or Karl Shapiro could be had." Roethke, for his part, at first thought Heilman a "time-server" and "political hack." ⁶² But by September 14, 1949, Roethke wrote to Heilman from Saginaw, Michigan, where he had spent the summer with his mother and sister: "Let me say that your last letter left me with more than a sense of pleasure: as if certain barriers had fallen away." He also made a point of adding that his mother thought Heilman "sounds so like a nice human being."

Shortly after his return to Seattle for the new school year Roethke began to show signs of the mental instability that Heilman would have to deal with for the next thirteen years, until the poet's death in 1963. Roethke's friend and departmental colleague James Jackson reported that one day the poet had gone on a wild spending spree, the typical beginning of one of his manic phases. In the evening he turned up at the Heilmans' home and "started throwing things around the Heilmans' kitchen . . . tin pie plates, saucepans, and the like. Heilman was baffled and somewhat frightened." He called a physician, who then called the police, who took Roethke (against his will) to Fairfax Hospital.⁶³

Establishing a pattern that would repeat itself over the years, Heilman, just recovered from the Cowley imbroglio, moved to secure Roethke's university position and salary. In February 1950 he officially informed Roethke that he would be paid for the rest of the quarter in which he had been taken ill and given leave of absence (albeit—to Roethke's great dissatisfaction—without pay) starting on January 1 (and, as it happened, continuing through June). Heilman soon recognized that the turbulence of Roethke's mental illness would be a permanent problem. Writing in June of 1950 to Brooks, he said that one of the manifold strains of his job was "Roethke's blowing up."

In February and March of 1954, for example, he was in touch with Dr. William Horton of the Northwest Clinic of Psychiatry and Neurology about whether Roethke would be able to teach in the coming (spring) quarter. Early in 1955 Heilman himself was asked for his assessment of Roethke's "personal stability" by Francis Young, executive secretary of the "Fulbright" Awards committee, before the committee could decide finally about Roethke's application to teach in Italy. Heilman sent a lengthy, subtle, and honest reply that touched on both the literal and metaphorical applications of the word "stability" to Roethke's condition. "If 'question of personal stability' meant professional irresponsibility, personal flightiness and unpredictability, eccentricities of a sort likely to weaken his professional position, proneness to public or semi-public demonstrations of a sort likely to be embarrassing to others, then I can say most emphatically that you need have no fear on this subject. . . . If by the problem of stability you refer to the fact that Professor Roethke has occasionally had brief periods of nervous illness, that is true, and there is of course no guarantee that there will not be a recurrence. This is something which as a part of the record must be set down. But I find myself quite willing to set it down because . . . it does not constitute

an important bar against his appointment.” After describing the mitigating circumstances—Roethke’s entry into therapy, his marriage, the relative mildness of his illness—Heilman made the positive case: “I think that Roethke is a good enough man—that is, a sufficiently devoted and talented man in his field—to justify the risk.”⁶⁴

In between the crises, however, the two men grew to respect each other and each other’s writing. Roethke, reading Heilman’s *King Lear* book, commended not only its style but “a sense of real conviction of *belief*—rare enough today.” Heilman was appreciative of the way in which—as he wrote in a letter to Bernard Malamud—his colleague was “getting back to a fuller range of language for its own sake.” By 1956 it had come to be understood between them that neither would consider leaving Washington without informing the other. “Now what’s all this,” Roethke wrote Heilman in March 1956, “about Minnesota’s wooing you? Remember you promised me, once, that if you left, you would let me know immediately of your decision. Of course we hope you don’t go. I am deeply serious about this, for selfish and unselfish reasons.”

Roethke’s repeated leaves of absence for illness (and *with* pay) in winter quarter 1953–54, fall and spring quarters 1957–58, and winter quarter 1958–59 led one of his departmental enemies to complain, in late 1958, to a state legislator about special treatment for the poet. The legislator approached the university’s vice-president, Frederick Thieme, about the matter. Thieme, who was at that very moment presenting the university’s budget to the legislature, hastened to ask Heilman for a letter justifying the department’s treatment of Roethke.

That request elicited one of the most remarkable letters ever written by a university administrator, a perfect blend of Heilman’s moral clarity, rhetorical nimbleness, and shrewd pragmatism. Writing in January 1959, he recited the facts about Roethke’s leaves during his 11 1/2 years at Washington and pointed out that a total of four quarters with pay during that time was not an exorbitant number because Roethke had never taken a sabbatical leave. But he hastened to add that he did not want to justify Roethke’s sick leaves with pay in such terms because he would have recommended them in the interests of the university itself. Roethke, Heilman observed, possessed a reputation that would likely make him a permanent figure of American literature, and was “an investment in history such as many a university would be glad to have . . . *he has done more to make us known favorably as a university than any other single person on the*

staff. He is known nationally and internationally, and wherever he is known, we are known." He had established Washington as one of the great centers of poetic study and poetic creativity in America. Finally, Heilman—in the best tradition of the New Critics—stressed that Roethke's contribution to "one of the oldest creative arts" was helping to create a certain type of human being and thereby contributing to the quality of American civilization itself. Roethke's biographer Allan Seager has called Heilman's letter "the finest support of a staff member I have ever heard of any university department making anywhere."⁶⁵

It is a striking tribute to Heilman that the poet Richard Hugo, without even knowing of this letter, nevertheless took it for granted that Heilman had "stood up" for Roethke: "I don't know," he wrote to Heilman in 1962, "if you ever had to stand up for Ted at the University or not. . . . The point is that either you did, or a lot of people think you would have had the occasion required. . . . It's one hell of a good thing to have thought about one." Heilman's unwavering support of Roethke, as if he were a wayward child, was among the reasons why the poet, although just two years younger than Heilman, thought of him as his "old Man," often addressed him as "Pa" and considered him (along with Kenneth Burke and W. C. Williams) "a father-figure to me." He was immensely pleased when students said "that my course and Heilman's were the best in the department."⁶⁶

By mid-1960, however, Heilman felt forced to seek out Solomon Katz, then dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, to discuss some way of dealing—perhaps by means of a dual appointment (as teacher and writer in residence)—with what he called Roethke's incurable "megalomania" and strong "money sense." He admitted to Katz that he was moved in part by a "pretty selfish concern: taking care of myself." By this he meant having to deal with the pressures coming from Mrs. Roethke and "a crafty psychiatrist" whenever a crisis arose and the poet's salary was threatened.

But Heilman's need to support Roethke came suddenly to an end in the summer of 1963: "Midnight, July 31. Camano Island, cold and clear. Taylor and Dorothee Bowie drive up from Seattle to tell us of the death of Ted Roethke several hours before. End of an era."⁶⁷ In his beautiful memoir of Roethke, Heilman wrote that

he was always compelling. It was part of the good luck of my own life to know him well, for fifteen years, this witty and imaginative man, sometimes troublesome but more often troubled, sometimes combative but more often play-

ful, yet always of high earnestness and conscience in his double vocation of teacher and poet—a man in whom I felt something that, I came in time to know, was to be called greatness.”⁶⁸

THE SIXTIES

“There are our young barbarians, all at play!”

—Matthew Arnold⁶⁹

When the poet Tess Gallagher complained to him, in 1997, about a “smart-assed” student harassing her at Whitman College, Heilman replied that such types would always remind him of “the late 1960s (when brats on drugs or drink or both ran up and down the corridors, trying to break up classes, and yelling, no doubt with a sense of fine perception, ‘Don’t give us no more of that shit’ . . . it was the worst [period] in my full 50 years of college teaching” (RBH to Gallagher, July 15, 1997). At Washington as at scores of universities across the country there were violent outbreaks of what Saul Bellow described in the opening chapter of *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970) as “confused sex-excrement-militancy, explosiveness, abusiveness, tooth-showing, Barbary ape howling.” “Motherfucker” was in the air all over campuses, and students were keen to urinate on the rugs of university presidents (or out the windows of deans’ offices).

Although Archibald Cox’s description (in his official report on the Columbia University uprising of April 1968) of American college students of the sixties as “the best informed, the most intelligent, and the most idealistic this country has ever known” would soon become a cliché, it bore little relation to the truth. Lionel Trilling, who had been in the eye of the Columbia storm, said that the sixties students were “much less literate, much less intellectually curious, and much less intelligent” than most of their predecessors at Columbia.⁷⁰ At universities all across the country students rebelled against an institution that they viewed as a training school for capitalist society and wished to turn into a finishing school for revolutionaries. “The late 1960s,” Heilman would later write, “produced the most successful anti-educational putsch that I saw in fifty campus years. In the vanguard of it you had the active ideologues, who were uneducable because they already knew all the answers, which they had learned by rote in various cells . . .; their aim was only to disrupt education and produce a chaos through which they could take over. Their slogans victimized a much larger segment, the

innocent idealists, who were seduced into supposing that they could protest, sit, march, burn, or bomb virtue into the world.”⁷¹

On the level of curriculum, these were also the years in which, as Heilman’s magnificent letter of November 19, 1974 to Thomas Lockwood would later recall, the movement to “imprison” American graduate students in their own language by abolishing foreign language requirements went into high gear and the slogan of “relevance” held sway. In 1968 Heilman asserted that the chief emotional torrent coming closest to “wrecking the dike [of the humanities] is the cry for relevance. It is one of the main question-begging cant words of our day; threatening because undefined, it terrifies some schoolmen into crying *peccavi*’s like defendants at a Stalinist treason trial, as if they had continually, genocidally practiced willful, first-degree irrelevance.” Few had the courage to ask what the evangelists of relevance meant, or just what they wanted. “To make Chaucer speak on Vietnam? . . . Dickens on guaranteed national income?”⁷²

At Washington the most spectacular example of the “putsch” was organized in March of 1969 by Michael Lerner, then a visiting assistant professor in the philosophy department but later to gain national fame as the (Jewish) Rasputin in the Clintons’ White House. Within a few days of being voted down by his colleagues for reappointment in philosophy, Lerner organized a series of campus demonstrations which culminated on March 11 when his followers in the Seattle Liberation Front joined with the Black Student Union to form a combined mob of 1,500–2,000 that invaded six university buildings and brutally beat at least fourteen instructors and students who did not heed their strike order. The “issue” in question was the refusal of the university to cancel an athletic competition with Brigham Young University, which Lerner had labelled a racist institution because the Mormon Church that sponsors it did not admit blacks to its priesthood.

As administrator, Heilman encountered the new radicalism mainly in the form of black student demands, including those for a Black Studies program and appointment of black faculty. English was one of the departments asked by the university’s administration to meet with black students and consider their demands, primary among them the insistence that black faculty be hired—and quickly. And so, as Heilman later recalled, “we went looking like mad for black appointments, [which] was enormously difficult, since all other colleges and universities were doing the same thing. . . . Some places were giving associate professorships to blacks who hadn’t yet finished their Ph.D.’s. . . . [Professor] Roger Sale was sent on some kind of national recruit-

ing tour—for black faculty or black graduate students or both. He . . . had quite a few social contacts with black people, and was deemed to have the right touch. As he once said, at a meeting where he assumed that his ironic quotation marks could be understood by all, ‘I know how to talk to niggers.’”⁷³

One fiasco followed another. In May of 1968—about a month after the assassination of Martin Luther King—several members of the department, in collusion with the Black Student Union, brought to campus one Jimmy Garrett, a Black Panther leader who, flanked by a couple of menacing characters resembling bodyguards, harangued the assembled English faculty on the topic of racism and literature. His remarks prompted a petition signed by a dozen (mostly senior) department members saying “The Department of English should take no action on matters of curriculum or staffing as *response to* the repeated and undisguised threats made by Mr. Garrett at the meeting of the Department on May 20.”

When Heilman did propose a serious black candidate for appointment—a young woman named Arlene Clift, who had a very distinguished record as an Americanist, with honors degrees (and Latin prizes) from Tuskegee and Harvard—she was stridently opposed by the black students (and black faculty) as not being “genuinely” black, i.e., not essentially political in her interests. By the time Heilman succeeded in overcoming the opposition to her, she had a drawerful of offers from other universities. In spite of such misadventures, the department quickly acquired a considerable black staff: in 1968, Jean Hundley, from the Seattle school district; in 1969, Charles Watkins, an Ohio State Ph.D. in medieval literature, and Patricia Fisher, a graduate student in journalism; in 1970, David Llorens, who had no college degree but was an associate editor of the journal *Ebony*, and Joyce Mobley, a Seattle housewife. But later in 1970 came the explosive Robert B. Stepto affair, the only episode of the struggle over black faculty documented in the letters (by Llorens, Watkins, and Hundley) in this book. These letters give a full picture of the fierce opposition of the department’s black faculty to the appointment of this very accomplished and highly recommended Stanford graduate student, who would go on to become professor of African American Studies, American Studies, and English at Yale University.⁷⁴

Although Heilman firmly resisted the attempt of black faculty to wrest control of appointments of new black faculty, he showed a sympathetic understanding of the extraordinary pressures that they endured, especially from militant black students. Watkins, for example, was suspect because he had a white wife, and was once told by the Black Student Union: “Don’t forget

you're a nigger too, Charlie." Heilman went out of his way to befriend both Llorens and Watkins, a task that was by no means easy. Once, when Llorens was jailed for being "uncooperative" with police after being stopped for a traffic offense, and neither his wife nor his brother would put up bail for him, Heilman and his wife Ruth drove to the jail in the middle of the night and put up the \$500 needed to get him out. Heilman thought that he and Watkins were good friends, and was shocked when Watkins came into his office one day and said: "I think I ought to tell you this. We are coming to the day when there will be barricades all around, and you and I will be on opposite sides." Shortly afterwards Watkins died of heart disease (of long standing). Llorens committed suicide by driving into the rear end of a truck at 95 miles an hour. Jean Hundley, who was named to virtually every university committee that dealt with the racial problem, suffered nervous exhaustion.

Ironically, Heilman's most fruitful relationship with a black colleague came when he was no longer a department chairman trying to recruit black faculty. It was with the superbly talented (and essentially philosophical) novelist and essayist Charles Johnson, who joined the department in 1976. As Johnson's letters to him in this volume (from 1977 to 1997) demonstrate, Heilman became the young writer's most attentive and sympathetic departmental reader, whose responses to his work often extended their meaning in the mind of the writer himself.



Impressive as Heilman's performances were in the crises recounted above, perhaps his greatest contribution to his department and university lay in his handling of routine and detail. He made policy partly by the selection of committees, the working out of teaching schedules, the management of parts of the budget that left little room for choice. He attached importance to the way in which hundreds of letters of job application were answered and interviews conducted. Such routine tasks "may do more than the noblest generalizations to create in applicants a sense of [the chairman's] school and to get acceptances from them. . . . Let the chairman be prepared for drudgery, and at the same time find, in the machinery amid which he inevitably lives, the devices by which gradually to move affairs in a desirable direction." He also took a major step towards controlling matters of routine by appointing, in October 1951, Dorothee Bowie as his (non-academic) administrative assistant; this highly skilled and formidably authoritative woman—"Fortinbras as your administrative assistant"⁷⁵—served Heilman for the next twenty years.

Another part of Heilman's routine was responding to letters from and publications by his own faculty. During the eleven years I served under Chairman Heilman I never sent him a letter on any subject that was not answered within twenty-four hours, unless the answer required him to consult with a dean first. (In thoughtless youth I then supposed that this was how all chairmen behaved.) I never sent him an article of mine that did not elicit a thoughtful response of a kind that could not have been composed by anybody who had not first actually read it. The Heilman archive at Washington is filled with expressions of gratitude—one may note, in addition to the aforementioned ones by Johnson, those by David Fowler, Roger Sale, and Brents Stirling—from English faculty for Heilman's detailed critical responses to their writings. Such letters testify to his strictness of conscience in intellectual affairs, a rare union of Arnold's "Hebraism and Hellenism."⁷⁶

Addressing the audience gathered to honor him upon the occasion of his retirement from the chairmanship on June 8, 1971. Heilman said, in his finest self-depreciatory manner:

As I look back to the beginning of this job, I can remember some friendly adviser saying, "Why can't you try to learn something from the old order?" Toward the end of this job I remember a friendly adviser's saying, "Why can't you try to learn something from the new order?" Now there's a record—two decades of immunity to the wisdom, first of age and then of youth.⁷⁷

But among the letters and telegrams read aloud by Andrew Hilen at this dinner, the one that had the greatest ring of truth to those of us who had witnessed a good part of Heilman's twenty-three years as chairman came from Fredson Bowers of Virginia: "This is the briefest note to congratulate you on outlasting the bastards and bringing your chairmanship to its magnificently successful close."

Still, Heilman's published reflections on his decades as chairman place less stress on the conquest of others than on self-conquest—how administration had influenced his writing and formed his character: "[I]f the chairman writes, he is likely to write more knowingly, perhaps even more wisely. . . . as administrator the academic man has undertaken more, has elected to work harder, and may develop more than he otherwise would have done. He risks more moral pitfalls—those of self-pity, complacency, arrogance, blindness, and even injustice. But the conditions of his life should make him doubly aware of these, and he may undergo more of the disci-

pline which gives form to a life. He may manage a little more of endurance, of the temperate acceptance of reality, of self-containment, of the adjustment to tasks, of an unsentimental charity. It is at least a possibility.”⁷⁸

TRAGEDY, MELODRAMA, COMEDY—
AND HUMANISTIC EDUCATION: 1968–78

Nothing more powerfully demonstrates what I have called the complex unity of Heilman’s many-sided career and the way in which his writings about literature and about education impinge on each other than the convergence of his trilogy of books (from 1968–1978) about the forms of drama with his essays about humanistic education during the same period (many collected in the volume he proposed to entitle *Humanistic Education as Comedy* but which appeared as *The Ghost on the Ramparts*). Much earlier in his career he had extended the principles of New Criticism from lyric poetry to drama, first in his critical anthologies of plays and then in his readings of *King Lear* and *Othello* as difficult poetic structures; but now he made the core principle of New Criticism, the dramatic presence of clashing perspectives, into a philosophy of drama, of education, of civilization itself.

In 1968, at the height of the student turmoil, amidst competing claims for victimhood and victim privilege from a variety of political and ethnic groups, Heilman published *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience*, a book in which the status of victims in dramatic literature played a central role. He had begun work on this book as well as its sequel *The Iceman, the Arsonist, and the Troubled Agent: Tragedy and Melodrama on the Modern Stage* (1973) in 1964–65 while on a Guggenheim Fellowship in London. Both books reiterated the two principles that had guided his literary criticism since at least the early forties: ahistorical timelessness (the assertion of permanences against fashions) and intellectual integration. In his Preface to the first book he wrote that “I have chosen to consider plays from Aeschylus to the present as a timeless family of which all members are amenable to the same treatment.”⁷⁹ Living at a time when, in his view, the sense of historic differences had become obsessive, Heilman thought it fitting “to reaffirm the importance, in intellectual pursuits, of integrating as well as differentiating.” In the second book (which had begun life as a section of the first) he declared his intention “to treat old and new [plays] as “members of a dramatic continuum or community in which historical markings are less significant than persisting common traits.”⁸⁰

In espousing timelessness and universality Heilman was not seeking to detach art or himself from the world around him. On the contrary, although he had derided the cant of “relevance,” his massive two-volume attempt to distinguish between tragedy and melodrama was undertaken precisely because “a sound conception of tragedy may influence social well-being,” because “serious mistakes about literature” are linked to similar mistakes “about the world around us,” and because “we live melodramas and tragedies as well as write them.” In tragedy, he would argue, things go wrong because a divided human being faces conflicts between obligations and passions, whereas in melodrama things go wrong because of external causes that victimize people; and “if we unconsciously think of ourselves as victims, we are the more likely to become victims.”⁸¹ In the book on the modern stage Heilman was clearly glancing in the direction of campus insurrectionaries when he stated that “the real-life melodrama of justice is often taken over and exploited by another real-life melodrama that is truly sinister: the one in which the pursuit of justice is the facade for a pursuit of power, and valid causes are hijacked by political gangsters.” He was surveying all of society when he insisted that “if drama steadily maintains an image of tragic life, there is less likelihood that a culture will slip into an inadequate one-sided view of the evil—or for that matter the good—in the world.”⁸²

If integration was essential to the life of the mind, lack of integration was a distinguishing characteristic of the tragic hero as Heilman defined him. Aristotle’s idea of “the tragic flaw” in a good man is reformulated by Heilman as a pulling apart of personality, “a disturbance, though not a pathological one, of integration.” Throughout *Tragedy and Melodrama* Heilman returns relentlessly to the words *divided*, *dividedness*, *division* in defining the tragic experience, both in art and in life. He proposes a single type of experience as the essentially tragic kind, “that in which the always divided human being faces conflicts, perhaps rationally insoluble, between obligations, and among obligations and passions. . . . He undergoes the consequences of his choice, and in suffering achieves a new or a renewed awareness of his action and himself and the order of life.”⁸³

Anyone who knew Heilman will recall how he used to bristle at the popular, journalistic use of the literary term “tragedy” to refer to, for example, an unprogrammed death on the highway: “Tragedy on I-5.” This nonliterary usage of an ancient literary term ignored what had been considered essential to “tragedy” ever since the Greeks: active choice and com-

ing to a new understanding. In a highway accident or a fire or an earthquake, what one has is *disaster*, not tragedy; a calamity befalls a passive being, who comes to no new understanding because his consciousness is not sharpened but ended. In disaster, misfortune comes from without; in tragedy, from within. "In disaster, we are victims; in tragedy, we make victims, of others or of ourselves." It was characteristic of Heilman's moral outlook as much as of his literary principles that he viewed the tendency to call disaster tragedy as a means of grasping dignity without accepting responsibility, "a sort of moral get-rich-quick scheme." The opposite tendency, treating the genuinely tragic as disaster—as if Othello's decision to murder Desdemona were to be imputed to a brain tumor—seemed to him another evasion of responsibility.⁸⁴

The drama of disaster, according to Heilman, is a substantial part of the vast realm of the nontragic he calls melodrama (just as is the drama of triumph). Although he insists that he uses *melodrama* as a neutral descriptive term, not a pejorative one, intended for purposes of classification and not denigration, Heilman grants that in standard usage the word implies "the simple pleasures of conventional or straightforward conflict" between "the standard brands of villains and heroes." Whereas in tragedy the central conflict is within man, in melodrama, it is between men, or between men and things, including "society." He also concedes that although the terms applied to melodrama—"good guys" versus "bad guys"—are often derisive, they do rest upon a "version of experience" that is not the exclusive preserve of the simple-minded. It is, after all, a version set forth with power and dignity in such plays as *The Trojan Women*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Richard III* or such novels as *Nigger of the Narcissus* and *War and Peace*.⁸⁵

Melodrama, as Heilman views it, has the psychological structure of *monopathy*, a singleness of feeling that gives one the sense (often factitious) of wholeness. The monopathic pleasure conveyed by melodrama is apparent at one end of the emotional spectrum in the mood of victorious triumph, at the other end in disaster and defeat or victimization. Glancing yet again at the claimants of victimhood in the ranks of the New Left of the late sixties, Heilman remarks that "there are actually emotional compensations (even rewards or enticements) in going under, in being . . . victimized. One is saved the troublesome pains of responsibility for evil . . . or actions that may turn out to be misconceived. . . ." In summing up the structure of melodrama, Heilman concludes that it has two contradictory aspects. It does reflect real

experiences that people require; but it also encourages dangerously simple feelings: self-congratulation when the dominant emotion is victory, self-pity where the dominant emotion is defeat and victimization.⁸⁶

Having established his book's theoretical structure in great detail, Heilman proceeded to map out the geography and politics of the relation between melodrama as a whole, and tragedy. He also introduced, as if to qualify his essentially ahistorical approach, a historical perspective by concentrating on the drama of the English Renaissance to see how the two forms can complement each other or even mingle in the works of the major dramatists of a single historical period.

Tragedy and Melodrama was deservedly praised as “among the most important contributions to the critical theory of dramatic literature to appear in our time [and] one which future writers in the field will find it impossible to ignore.”⁸⁷ But it is not without its flaws. Although, as noted above, Heilman takes pains to insist that melodrama is not a pejorative term, the reader sometimes reacts to this claim as many readers have done to Cardinal Newman's claim that, in distinguishing between *liberal* and *servile* education, he meant to imply nothing pejorative about the latter. A related problem is that Heilman deposits nearly all plays about the victims of Hitler and Stalin in the “melodrama” category because they appeal to simple emotions. In consequence, the man long criticized by his detractors for saying (or at least implying) that liberals could not understand tragedy—here falls prey to the quintessentially liberal temptation to explain away absolute evil by resort to the wheedling voice of “common sense.”

Yet Heilman was far from being entirely wrong in proposing that absolute evil and its victims could not be the material of tragedy. The twentieth century, the bloodiest in history (so far), challenged literature with an infinity of murder and torture that really did illustrate the relevance of Heilman's distinctions. The Holocaust, for example, could not be a dramatic subject of any kind because the mass murder of dazed and shattered people, not even capable of responding to their fate, could have little of drama in it. Where could there have been a conflict of wills, inner divisions of belief, in death camps and killing centers? Irving Howe, writing in the *New Republic* in 1986, formulated the problem in distinctly Heilmanesque terms: “In classical tragedy man is defeated; in the Holocaust man is destroyed.” Thus Nazism's Jewish victims died “not because they chose at all costs to remain Jews, but because the Nazis chose to believe that being Jewish was an unchangeable, irredeemable condition.”⁸⁸ This absence of freedom in the

victims of totalitarianism made their deaths more, not less, terrible; but they were not the stuff of tragic drama.

In 1973 Heilman published *The Iceman, the Arsonist, and the Troubled Agent: Tragedy and Melodrama on the Modern Stage*. Several of its chapters originally belonged to the first manuscript of *Tragedy and Melodrama*. But the University of Washington Press found that manuscript too bulky and so proposed, as a remedy, that Heilman put the chapters devoted to modern drama into a separate volume that concentrated on American and European drama of the past century. He would test his theories of tragic and melodramatic form mainly by examining the work of the Americans Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, and the Europeans Bertolt Brecht, Max Frisch, and Friedrich Dürrenmatt. The title alluded to three dominant character types. The Iceman (from O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*) was "a metaphor for a wide range of characters who find it difficult to face the world or themselves and opt out"; the Arsonist comes from Frisch's *The Firebugs* and is "a metaphor for a wide range of strong and aggressive people, fierce competitors, seekers of victory, revengers, destroyers"; the troubled agent is "the vigorous man with moral sensitivity to be troubled by what he does, to inquire into it, and sometimes to judge himself."⁸⁹

The interplay between Heilman's writings about theatrical drama and his commentaries on education, especially in the humanities, can be seen in the appearance of these three types, especially Frisch's Arsonist, in an essay published in 1972 in the *Southern Review* entitled "Humanistic Education as Comedy: A Funambulist's Analogy." Heilman here applies the distinctions he had set forth in *Tragedy and Melodrama* between different kinds of melodrama to disputes in education and the humanities.⁹⁰ To put it another way, he tries to fit humanistic education into his theatrical scheme of "a trinity of interrelated theaters: the inner theatre of our own nature, the theater where plays are enacted, and then, all the world, which as we know only too well, is a stage."⁹¹

Too often, Heilman observes, higher education drifts into patterns of melodrama, innocence lined up against guilt, "relevance" against tradition, world-improvement against complacent acceptance. Enter the Arsonist, the "professorial type in the grip of a single limited perspective, the putsch of the times. In Max Frisch's *Firebugs* a couple of modern destructive types, disguising themselves in a deficiency of privilege and of justice, methodically destroy a civilization by burning down one house after another. We professors appear in the character simply known as 'the Ph.D.'"⁹²

What the humanities *should* be, argued Heilman in this piece of 1972, is comedy; and in making this argument he was already formulating the core idea of what would be the third book of his trilogy on generic form, *The Ways of the World*, which appeared six years later. He had begun regular work on the book in 1971–72, when, a few months after being “superannuated out of administration” (as he put it to Warren on February 13, 1972), he became a Senior Fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities and took his sabbatical leave in London, where he could count on a steady diet of play-going. “Humanistic Education as Comedy” thus looks back upon his twenty-three years in academic administration and forward to the incorporation, into his subsequent literary scholarship, of all that he had learned from teaching.

Humanistic education, Heilman now argued, ideally fitted into his scheme of generic form as comedy. True, in the shape it took in the sixties, it occasionally displayed that “blessed freedom from decent emotion, expected moral awareness, and average capacity for thought” that one expects from farce. But this is an aberration, and the moral indignation to which humanities professors are notoriously susceptible is not farcical at all. Neither is education a tragic process in which a good man gains wisdom after catastrophe.

Elaborating on hints given toward a definition of comedy by Anthony Burgess, Heilman defines its salient characteristic as acceptance of the world, most especially of its fundamental dispartateness. This means the acceptance of “brute fact,” which for humanistic educators must include, first of all, “the biographic fact, the historic fact, the textual fact, the lexicographic fact.” It also means striking a balance between the two contrary expectations that “the world” has of educators: that they support it by training the young to continue it and that they come up with ways to rescue it. The problem, however, is that “as a profession we do not know, and cannot know, any specific routes to salvation.”

Humanistic education, like comedy, should accept the fact that “Everyman” is both saint and devil. He is an assemblage of dualities: in need of freedom but also of limits; liberal and conservative; seeking the chosen as well as the required. “This duality of awareness is a central business of the humanities, and without it our educational procedures will go haywire.” This is not, in Heilman’s view, the duality of tragedy, which represents a dividedness that cannot be healed, but of comedy, in which the complications of actuality can be endured. He then encapsulates, in a tiny autobi-

ography, his argument against “the disastrous folly of going new left or dead right”:

For the first three decades of my academic life we were accused of siding with those who would wholly transform life, would conserve nothing, would radically reorganize the world. In my fourth decade the greatest volume of sound has come from those who accuse us of being only worldlings, servicing the world, holding it together, concealing its obsolescence. The very inconsistency of these outcries suggests that we have persisted, however imperfectly, in our comic acceptance of not altogether congruous realities. Each complainant wants to use education in a single role, to turn it into a melodrama of good guys against bad guys, whether the good guys are the total transformers or the total maintainers.”⁹³

Whatever else had changed in those forty years, Heilman’s attachment to the New Critical principle of *concordia discors* stood firm.

A NEW LIFE

“The days of our years are three-score years and ten,
Or even by reason of strength four-score years . . .”
—Psalm 90

When he was on the verge of retiring from the chairmanship in May 1971, Heilman told Cleanth Brooks that his response to the prospect of a new life was “more complex than I had anticipated: on the one hand . . . enormous relief, but on the other hand, and unforeseen, a considerable discomfort at a change of life, which after twenty-five years and at age sixty-five, involves a strain that one didn’t guess.” By 1974, he had begun to find teaching onerous, even though “I’m better off with daily classtime jitters than with sitting around and wondering what I’m dying of now” (Letter of May 11 to Warren). He found a middle ground between the two undesirable alternatives in pushing ahead with his ambitious book on comedy. (He also held, for just over three years, a “half-assed, half-time administrative job” helping new Ph.D.s to find jobs.) He was extricated from his dilemma by a Guggenheim Fellowship that allowed him to retire from teaching two years “early,” at the end of 1975; and serious illness kept him from completing his very last course at Washington.

In *The Ways of the World: Comedy and Society* (1978) Heilman brought to completion the trilogy that was widely recognized by reviewers to be “as good a book as has ever been written on comedy: taken as a capstone to an edifice erected in a decade, it . . . marks the completion of one of the major critical enterprises of our time.”⁹⁴ The book soon established itself as the consummate achievement of the New Criticism, drawing as it did upon Heilman’s strengths working in perfect combination: a capacity for bold yet careful generalization, scintillating verbal wit, and a loving responsiveness to literature in all its variety and multiplicity. It expressed Heilman’s view of comedy not as satire (a genre he sometimes likened to melodrama) but as a rational accommodation to the world, an essentially conciliatory, affirmative, and accepting genre of drama. This comic embrace of the world was, as Heilman expounded it in his readings of scores of plays, in sharp contrast with “the rejection of it in the Book of Common Prayer, which identifies antispiritual life in familiar trinitarian terms: ‘the world, the flesh, and the devil.’”⁹⁵ The book dealt more with British plays than American ones because “with our strong commitment to change and reform, we are less at home with a genre that views human frailties and habits as more enduring than alterable.”⁹⁶ In 1979 *The Ways of the World* received Phi Beta Kappa’s (then highly esteemed) Christian Gauss Award for literary scholarship and criticism; the Gauss Award Committee called the book “one of the major critical works of our time, a model of meticulous scholarship.”⁹⁷

Although Heilman had become emeritus professor at Washington in 1976, he was by no means through with teaching or lecturing. He was appointed Arnold Professor at Whitman College (from which he also received an honorary degree) in 1977. Freed from compulsory teaching, he would soon be in demand as a speaker in colleges, universities, and professional associations all over the country. He relished a living, responding audience; and audiences loved his deep, resonant voice, his wit, and his respect for them—a respect indicated in the fact (revealed in his letters) that the man who seemed perfectly relaxed and at ease in delivering lectures had rehearsed them by reading aloud for timing, diction, and syntax. “Three weeks in advance you can hardly feel an audience at all; but get down to three days . . . or three hours in advance, and then you can spot the errors on the page” (Letter to Warren, November 5, 1981). By 1982, when he was traveling the country as a Phi Beta Kappa lecturer, Brooks told him: “You have always been a good

speaker and like a good wine or whisky your production has improved further through the years" (Letter from Brooks, July 11, 1982).

Like many people who pass the Biblical "three score and ten," Heilman found himself assaulted (though not conquered) by illness, death, gloom, and memory. His old friends Andrew Hilen and Harold Stoke died in 1982; Ruth Heilman, after years of suffering from osteoporosis, arthritis, and cataracts, died late in 1985; and the world situation seemed to him to grow ever darker. In June 1980 he had written to Brooks:

Amidst all the campaign shoddiness, the Iranian evil (including Ramsey Clark, who mistakes an ego-trip for integrity), the Afghan evil, the Cuban evil, the evil of a world in which . . . we get blamed for everything by everybody, I have found the eruption of Mt St Helens good news. What is good news, you surely ask? Good news is disaster without depravity.

In August 1984, during what he called "the quadrennial sadness" of the presidential election campaign, he told Brooks—in a classic utterance: "My basic feeling is that whatever a million professors do automatically can't be right."

For consolation he now began to look backwards and to produce, throughout the decade, a formidable number of what Brooks, in a letter of March 27, 1983, called "beautifully turned pieces of reminiscence" while putting on a back burner the collection of his essays on the novel that a publisher had urged him to do. Some of these occasional essays, like "Semisentennial Retrospections: The Past as Perspective," returned to Heilman's schooling at Lafayette and Harvard. Others, like "The Rail Way of the World" (probably the greatest essay ever written on the subject of rail travel) harkened back to his boyhood in Pennsylvania. Still others recounted the University of Washington controversies over Cowley and Burke. But by far the largest number were written for southern reunions and symposia: "Baton Rouge and LSU Forty Years After," "Robert Penn Warren at LSU: Some Reminiscences," "Cleath Brooks and *The Well Wrought Urn*," "Spokesman and Seer: The Agrarian Movement and European Culture," "Mr. Tate and the Biographical Idiom."

Eventually, at the suggestion of Brooks, who had praised his "wonderful memory" (March 29, 1988), Heilman, who was once called a "fellow-traveler of the neo-confederate party," brought them together in the volume entitled *The Southern Connection* (1991). This collection of seven-

teen essays about the South, written over four decades, was made up largely of critical discussions of southern writers and their works. The book is permeated by the principle of paradox, starting with that of place. Heilman noted the mass emigration of southern poets and intellectuals to the North, so that it was becoming as difficult to find a southern intellectual or poet at work in the South as to find good peaches in Georgia. Although, metaphorically, the southern Agrarians would die in Dixie, they often lived in the North, whose polyglot, industrial, urban, and capitalist character they loved to denounce. Although he is overwhelmingly sympathetic to the symbolic force of the Agrarian movement's belief in the ennobling influence of soil on soul, Heilman insinuates a criticism of its distance from stubborn actualities. He had, we recall, himself grown up in a farming family in eastern Pennsylvania, and found the agrarian life far from ideal. Could it be that its parallel in the South possessed virtues largely absent in Pennsylvania? Or was it that most of the contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* really knew little of "the sheer difficulty and often hardship of farming life?" Another paradox of the South, according to Heilman, was its combination of "an almost Oriental ancestor-worship" with a love of the "modern"; a constant examination of the southern birthright combined with a yearning after the fleshpots.⁹⁸

Heilman's elucidation of the southern critics' idea of poetry as a means of universalizing, through the instrument of form, emotions and experiences that may originate in the self, or the culture, or the tribe, is of special value in an era like ours, infected by determinisms of race, class, and "gender." That a universal principle of literary excellence should have arisen from so contentiously regional a school of writers was for Heilman the ultimate paradox of the southern temper. If that temper emerges in this book looking rather more sweet and reasonable than it did in its years of trial and combat, that is partly a result of the passage of time, but still more a tribute to the eloquence, urbanity and moral sanity of its author.

In this same year of 1991, which happened to be his eighty-fifth, Heilman also published *The Workings of Fiction*, a collection of essays that he had written between 1947 and 1989. Most of them dealt with British and American novels and novelists; they ranged in subject from such Victorians as Charlotte Brontë, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, to D. H. Lawrence, Thomas Mann, Malcolm Lowry, and Evelyn Waugh. Several of the essays had already achieved "classic" status and had often appeared in anthologies: "Innovations in Gothic: Charlotte Brontë," for example, had been

anthologized no fewer than twelve times.⁹⁹ The essays on *The Turn of the Screw* (a virtual obsession among such Heilman correspondents as Eric Voegelin, Morton Zabel, and Dorothea Krook) and Trollope's *The Warden* as a "comedy of conscience" had also established themselves as indispensable to teachers of fiction. The writer most amply represented in the book was Thomas Hardy; Heilman's ability to distinguish between Hardy the tragedian and Hardy the editorialist had made him the indispensable critical reader of that novelist. The book as a whole, John Aldridge wrote, demonstrated that Heilman was the last survivor of a "distinguished generation of American critics . . . to whom literary criticism was not a profession or an academic necessity but a calling. He is a scrupulous and learned critical reader, and his gift for typological discriminations is extraordinary. He is uncannily sensitive to the nuances of the literary text—at times almost magically so."¹⁰⁰

THE FINAL RECKONING

The man who had often derided "thanatophobia," the [inordinate] fear of death, as "our major incurable disease," could not, well into his ninth decade in this vale of tears, avoid thinking about it. When James Calderwood mistook Heilman's allusion to having reached "the end of the line" as a reference to impending death and wrote him a rather mortuary tribute, he told me: "I am thinking of writing everybody jocosely references to The End which may elicit tributes that are generally attended to only by survivors" (Letter of April 20, 1989). When he contributed a new batch of his (meticulously organized) papers to the University of Washington Archives he jocularly labeled them TSI: Temporary Secular Immortality. By 1992 he felt he had entered "this downhill-all-the-way phase of things"; and in September of 1994 he suffered a stroke that reduced him to doing "nearly all my typing with my right index finger."

Nevertheless, even while lamenting that "Old age is hell," he would continue to think and to write with miraculously undiminished power well into his nineties. His last book, *The Professor and the Profession*, appeared in 1999 when he was ninety-three. It included one essay (the portrait of Voegelin) of 1996 and four that had been written in 1997–98. He also continued to be, as Charles Johnson observed in his letter of January 1997, the closest and most thoughtful reader of his colleagues' writings that anyone could hope for. Most striking of all, he could at age ninety-three acknowledge errors he had made decades earlier, for example in *Tragedy and Melodrama*. In the

essay called “Good Guys and Bad Guys and What the Stage Does with Them” he now conceded:

The bad guy is a reality of life, and so he is going to be a reality of drama. Here you can see me rejecting a prejudice. I once thought any drama of good guys versus bad guys had to be stereotyped and therefore false. I was wrong, for the simple reason that life does sometimes take the form of good guys versus bad guys, and the theater is bound to make use of this human conflict. There are evil people in the world, for example, Stalin and Hitler.¹⁰¹

What was far more immediately painful to Heilman in his last years than his own physical decline was a keener awareness not only of the world’s evil but of the decline of literary studies and of the university as an institution. It was this unraveling, more than his own “slowly coming apart” (February 21, 1995, to John Sisk) that was the burden of his last book. He welcomed Irving Howe’s 1991 defense of the literary canon against the assault on it by the mixture of feminists, black activists, Marxists, and deconstructionists who had banded together to lead the charge against traditional survey courses of world and English literature.¹⁰² But Howe’s enumeration of the “ideas” of the academic insurrectionaries reduced Heilman to despair: “Gad, how much worse things are than I thought. God almighty” (Letter of March 12, 1991 to EA). When he published in *The American Scholar* (Summer 1991) a sharp critique of the movie *Dead Poets Society* for celebrating a teacher who “should have been fired for . . . making himself, instead of the works of literature, the object of adulation,” Heilman was deluged by “a supply of hate mail” such as no previous writing of his had ever incited. (The abusive letters had been forwarded to him by *American Scholar*’s long-time editor Joseph Epstein, in whose appointment in 1974 Heilman had played a large role and who would himself be forced from his job in 1996 by the aforementioned gaggle of anti-canonists.)

The Professor and the Profession constituted Heilman’s three-fold defense of the literary canon and traditional education. First, he invoked the example of his own education—the rigid curriculum in high school and those six (and only six) required courses for English majors at Lafayette. Far from lamenting that controlled regimen as a relic of the academic dark ages, Heilman now used it to establish the perspective from which he viewed the changes of the next half-century and more. “I would not trade those eight years for any other educational track that I have seen in fifty years of col-

lege teaching.”¹⁰³ Those six courses would in his lifetime expand at most universities into a vast bazaar of several hundred unrelated ones and scores of majors. Heilman was not in general a man given to nostalgia over “the good old days,” but he recognized that what drove this “wild curricular centrifugality” was a loss of the old sense of community, the belief that we are members of one another.

Even more egregious than the obsession with “difference” that destroyed the old, controlled college curriculum was the craving for “relevance” and a passionate presentism. Looking back, Heilman tried to imagine what his own English major would have been like if, seventy years earlier, European classics and English literature had been supplanted by the provincialism of the contemporary and the foolish superstition that people living in the twentieth century must be smarter than those who lived in the sixteenth. Instead of Chaucer and Shakespeare, “we would zealously have studied the fiction of Percy Marks, James Branch Cabell . . . Ruth Suckow, and Sinclair Lewis. . . . In poetry we would have been ‘with it’ with Stephen Vincent Benet, Witter Bynner . . . Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Elinor Wylie.” Such lists, he pointed out, show us that “an exclusive attachment to any present means being trapped in a morgue.” The best-known inhabitants of that tomb of “once-upon-a-time up-to-dateness” and “relevance” were, of course, the students of the 1960s, full of the arrogance of ignorance.¹⁰⁴

The Professor and the Profession also challenges the new literary-cultural hegemony in two other ways. It does so implicitly in its portraits of four of Heilman’s exemplary colleagues and friends: Roethke, Voegelin, Cowley, and Warren (whose book *Understanding Poetry* had been slandered in the aforementioned *Dead Poets Society*). It does so explicitly in the book’s crucial essay: “Three Generations of English Studies,” a tour de force that integrates literary history and criticism with moral insight and ripened wisdom in a synthesis that no living literary scholar can match.

We have already seen how Heilman responded to the heavily Germanic historical approach, and how he became a skilled major practitioner of the second wave called the New Criticism. But in the fullness of time—and who better placed than he to view things from that perspective?—the younger converts to the New Criticism, “practitioners of small learning and less discipline,” became esoteric, obscure, and stridently ahistorical. In reaction, so he argues, arose the “theorists,” whose dogmas now dominate virtually every English department. Unlike Howe, who said that his eyes glazed over whenever he tried to penetrate the stupefying opacity of theorist prose, Heil-

man forced himself to examine the doings of this third generation. His conclusions, although stated with typical restraint, are grim: “The repellent vocabulary and style of theorists, who produce quotable passages of marvelous opaqueness and apparent untranslatability . . . , may restrict the boundaries of [their] empire. ‘Theory’ . . . embraces a congeries of dogmatic identifications and skepticisms of identity. The Marxist, Freudian, and feminist ways of doing things seem to derive literary works from causes that are absolute; you identify the psycho-social or socio-politico-economical forces that generated the work, and you know what the work has to be, however different from this it looked to other generations.”

Heilman is especially incisive about the strange mix of dogmatism and skepticism that pervades different modes of “deconstructive” activity: “While skepticism about texts is dogmatic, it rarely includes skepticism about the text that asserts dogmatic skepticism. Skepticism is evidently a faith that deconstructs other faiths. It escapes the self-referentiality that is the fate of all other works.” Just as students may encounter difficulties in solving a mathematical problem without doubting that it admits of an answer, so literary critics may find that classic works can simultaneously sustain differing interpretations without concluding that there is no such thing as an ideal reading demanded by the work. The health of English studies, in Heilman’s view, depends upon whether we think of the literary work “as a challenging labyrinth or as an inviting trampoline. If the former, we accept its complexities, false leads, and culs-de-sac, but count upon ultimate order and design; if the latter, the work invites us to leap, bounce, and spring in critical virtuosity.” Looking back over the changing attitudes of English professors during his six decades in the profession, Heilman concluded that time is the only reliable literary critic, the only begetter of the canon, even though literary insurgents assume they can alter it by declaring the timely timeless and organizing political caucuses to overthrow the dictates of many generations of readers.¹⁰⁵



Robert Heilman died on Sunday, August 8, 2004, five years after the publication of *The Professor and the Profession*. He asked that his ashes be scattered at sea: “I will at last,” commented the ever-ironical non-swimmer, “be comfortable in the water.” Like Jonathan Swift, he had a long time to think about a potential eulogist and, upon the occasion of his retirement from teaching in 1976, offered that conjectural person the following suggestion:

“A former student who now writes from the midst of her happy married life . . . says, ‘Everything that I got from you went into my three children.’ I am going to plant this one in the archives so that, if professors ever had biographers, as they do not, mine would discover this, ponder over its meaning, and perhaps sum up, in Chaucerian terms, ‘He was a manly man.’”¹⁰⁶

But the present “biographer” prefers the unironic eulogy that Solomon Katz composed for the occasion of his friend’s receiving an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree in 1977:

A distinguished scholar for whom publishing is a normal way of life and not an alternative to perishing, a tough-minded but sensitive teacher, an academic administrator who is as gifted in preparing budgets as in writing literary criticism, as capable of meeting a payroll as in meeting a class, as searching and as objective in personnel decisions as in his literary judgments, a devotee of sports of formidable expertise, a raconteur of rare wit and charm, a sensible and sympathetic colleague, Professor Heilman is worthy of that tribute paid to Cardinal Wolsey in *King Henry VIII*:

He was a scholar, and a ripe and good one;
Exceeding wise, fair-spoken, and persuading;
Lofty and sour to them that loved him not,
But to those men that sought him, sweet as summer.¹⁰⁷

EDWARD ALEXANDER
Seattle, Washington
March 2008

Notes

1. Member of Executive Council, American Association of University Professors, 1962–65; Executive Council, Modern Language Association of America, 1966–70; Senator, United Chapters of MLA, 1967–85; President, Philological Association of the Pacific Coast, 1958; Trustee, Shakespeare Association of America, 1978–80; Distinguished Lecturer for National Council of Teachers of English, 1968; Visiting Scholar for Phi Beta Kappa, 1982–83.

2. *The Professor and the Profession* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 3–5.

3. *Ibid.*, 9.

4. *The Ghost on the Ramparts* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1973), 16.

5. *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1968), 91.

6. See *Ghost on the Ramparts*, 125.

7. *The Professor and the Profession*, 291.
8. He had been married to the former Elizabeth Wiltbank since 1927. They had a son, named Robert, born in 1929.
9. *The Professor and the Profession*, 262, 264.
10. *Ibid.*, 265.
11. *The Southern Connection* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 35.
12. *Ibid.*, 3, 5.
13. Lewis P. Simpson, foreword to *Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren: A Literary Correspondence*, ed. James A. Grimshaw, Jr. (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1998), xiii.
14. *Southern Connection*, 39.
15. *The Professor and the Profession*, 267.
16. *Ibid.*, 137.
17. The two had already co-authored an essay for *The American Scholar* in 1944 on W. M. Marston's "Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics."
18. *Understanding Drama* (New York: Henry Holt, 1945), ix.
19. *The Professor and the Profession*, 88.
20. *Ibid.*, 85, 88.
21. *Robert B. Heilman and Eric Voegelin: A Friendship in Letters: 1944–1984*, ed. Charles R. Embry (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 186.
22. *Cleanth Brooks and Allen Tate: Collected Letters, 1933–1976*, ed. Alphonse Vinh (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 109.
23. Bush's address was later published in *PMLA*, 64 (1949), 13–21; see also Bush, "Marvell's 'Horatian Ode,'" in *Sewanee Review*, 60 (1952), 363–76.
24. "Artist and *Patria*," *Sewanee Review*, 51 (1943), 382, 386.
25. "Mr. Bentley's Bad Boys: 'Reactionaries,'" *Sewanee Review*, 53 (1945), 104.
26. *Ibid.*, 106, 107.
27. In his letter to Heilman of December 27, 1949, Roethke intimated that he, not Pound, should have received the Bollingen, although second place in the voting had gone to W. C. Williams, and third to Randall Jarrell. Roethke did win the Bollingen Prize for poetry in 1958.
28. See Tate's remarks in *Partisan Review* (May and June 1948), 16.
29. Letters from Joseph Harrison to Brooks, June 26 and July 8, 1947 (University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections).
30. RBH to Brooks, August 19, 1947 (Yale University Library).
31. Letter of November 30, 1947 to Raymond Havens (Johns Hopkins University Library).
32. *This Great Stage: Image and Structure in "King Lear"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 4. This was not Heilman's first book; he had published his doctoral dissertation, *America in English Fiction, 1760–1800: Influences of the American Revolution* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press) in 1937.
33. J. C. Maxwell, "Shakespeare's Symbolism," *The Spectator*, November 26, 1948.
34. Letter to RBH of May 31, 1949.
35. See RBH letter of April 3, 1950 to Allen Tate (Princeton University Library) and of May 10, 1949 to Brooks (Yale University Library), Davis in *American Scholar*, 19 (1949–50), and Empson's review of *This Great Stage* in *Kenyon Review*, 11 (1949).
36. See *Ghost on the Ramparts*, 13.
37. RBH to Brooks, February 27, 1948 (Yale University Library).
38. RBH to Warren, April 27, 1948 (Yale University Library).

39. *Ghost on the Ramparts*, 14.
40. RBH to Eberhart, January 6, 1956 (Dartmouth College Library, Rauner Special Collections).
41. *Ghost on the Ramparts*, 40–41.
42. *Ibid.*, 109.
43. “Jottings Towards a Departmental History,” manuscript, 40.
44. *Ghost on the Ramparts*, 53–54.
45. “Jottings,” 25.
46. Raymond B. Allen Papers (University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections).
47. See RBH letter to Warren of November 24, 1949 (Yale University Library).
48. Letter of June 4, 1950 to Cleanth Brooks (Yale University Library). See also letter of October 31, 1949 from R. P. Warren to Heilman: “Have you been spurning college presidencies yet?”
49. In 1961 Heilman was offered (and declined) the deanship of Claremont College in California.
50. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking, 1950), 8.
51. Albert Canwell was a state senator from Spokane.
52. In a retrospective letter of May 26, 1980 to George Core, Heilman referred to the accused English department members as “innocuous idealists of the 1930s . . . rather silly dummies who . . . would fall for any current utopianism in any period.” See Jane Sanders, *Academic Freedom at the University of Washington During the Cold War Years: 1946–64* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976).
53. *The Professor and the Profession*, 130.
54. *Ibid.*, 136.
55. “Jottings,” 26.
56. Heilman Papers (University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections).
57. Within the English department Heilman received poetic support from a still more conservative colleague, Andrew Hilen, who wrote masterly parodies of Wordsworth sonnets on occasional subjects: “Seattle, 1955”: “Schmitz, thou should’st be living at this hour: / The U. hath need of thee; she is a sea / Of stormy waters: cocktail time or tea, / Fireside, all friendly talk is sour / With thought; we have lost our civil dower / Of inward happiness. Selfish men are we; / Oh! calm us down, return us to degree, / Give us manners and virtue in our ivory tower. / Thy soul was like a Star and dwelt apart; / Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like a chirp / Full of contentment as an after-dinner burp, / So didst thou travel on life’s common way / In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart / The lowliest decisions on herself did lay.”—Wadsworth [sic]
58. See Davis’ essay, “The New Criticism and the Democratic Tradition,” in *American Scholar*, 19 (1949–50), 10–11, and Cowley’s letter of October 26, 1950 to RBH and the reply of October 28. On the other hand, it would be hard to identify any actual political conservatives whom Heilman admired. See, e.g., his letter to Eric Voegelin of December 11, 1955.
59. “Jottings,” 15.
60. *The Magic in the Web: Action and Language in “Othello”* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1956), 139.
61. *Ghost on the Ramparts*, 15.
62. Allan Seager, *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 185.
63. *Ibid.*, 189–90.
64. RBH to Francis Young, January 13, 1955, University of Washington Libraries (Special Collections).

65. *The Glass House*, 256.
66. *Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke*, ed. Ralph J. Mills (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 221, 237, 255.
67. RBH retirement speech (unpublished manuscript), June 8, 1971, 5.
68. *The Professor and the Profession*, 126.
69. Preface to *Essays in Criticism*, 1869. Arnold was (mis)quoting Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV, cxli, 5.
70. Quoted in Norman Podhoretz, *Breaking Ranks* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 277.
71. *The Professor and Profession*, 298.
72. *Ghost on the Ramparts*, 9.
73. "Jottings," 30.
74. Arlene Clift took a job at Brandeis, and is now professor and chair of English at North Carolina Central University.
75. *Ghost on the Ramparts*, 5, 16.
76. "The governing idea of Hellenism is *spontaneity of consciousness*; that of Hebraism, strictness of conscience," *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), chapter IV.
77. Manuscript of Heilman's retirement speech, 6.
78. *Ghost on the Ramparts*, 16.
79. *Tragedy and Melodrama*, ix, x.
80. *The Iceman, the Arsonist, and the Troubled Agent: Tragedy and Melodrama on the Modern Stage* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), xv.
81. *Tragedy and Melodrama*, 4, 6, 25.
82. *Iceman*, xvii,
83. *Tragedy and Melodrama*, 7, 19.
84. *Ibid.*, 28, 29.
85. *Ibid.*, 78–79.
86. *Ibid.*, 85–6.
87. Irving Ribner, *Criticism* (Summer 1969), 11.
88. "Writing and the Holocaust," *New Republic*, October 27, 1986.
89. *Iceman*, xi–xii.
90. As early as 1959 Heilman had published an essay about humanistic education entitled "Versions of Melodrama" in the *Western Humanities Review*. It appears in revised form as "Humanisticism and Melodrama: Styles in Combat" in *Ghost on the Ramparts*.
91. *Ghost on the Ramparts*, 162.
92. *Ibid.*, 170.
93. *Ibid.*, 162, 164, 165, 166–67.
94. Norman Rabkin, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 41 (March 1980), 88–90.
95. *The Ways of the World: Comedy and Society* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1978), 51.
96. *Ibid.*, 9. The statement conceals the fact that by 1976 Heilman had already soured not only on English society and its "rigid egalitarianism that can only be disastrous" but on the English theatre: "As Ruth says, whenever you see a rug downstage in Act I, you know someone is going to get laid on it before the night is over. The shit-fuck dialogue that has become de rigueur . . . is not only tedious but it substitutes for more rigorous effort by the dramatist." Letter from London of April 12, 1976 to Brooks (Yale University Library).
97. *The Key Reporter* (Phi Beta Kappa) (Winter, 1979–80), 45.
98. *Southern Connection*, 117, 120, 246, 248.
99. It had first appeared as "Charlotte Brontë, Reason, and the Moon," in *Nineteenth-Century*

Fiction, 14 (1960). Upon publication it elicited a lengthy letter (September 30, 1960) from Robert Graves. Since Graves was just then working, with Alistair Reid, on a film about his *White Goddess*, he took the simultaneous publication of Heilman's essay as an example of the cosmic coincidence in which he believed.

100. Quoted on dust jacket.

101. *The Professor and the Profession*, 182.

102. "Falling Out of the Canon," *New Republic*, August 17 and 24, 1992, 35–37.

103. *The Professor and the Profession*, 292.

104. *Ibid.*, 296–98.

105. *Ibid.*, 261–76.

106. "Random Goodbyes from Chipville," speech at Heilman retirement dinner, November 18, 1976.

107. This was written by Katz at the request of Robert A. Skotheim, president of Whitman College. Heilman also received honorary degrees from Lafayette (1967), Grinnell (1971), Kenyon (1973), Sewanee (1978).

Reading Minds and Intentions

The 1940s

Pleased by his good friend's detailed response, Robert Penn Warren thanked Robert B. Heilman for his careful and supportive reading of *All the King's Men*: "you have read my mind and intentions." Close reading of each other's work marked the long friendships forged by Heilman, Warren, and Cleanth Brooks during their time as English department colleagues at LSU in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Antithetical as authorial psyche and intentionality were to the New Criticism, Warren's statement reflects the mutual trust and professional respect the colleagues held for one another for more than a half-century to come. The correspondence with Warren, like that with Raymond Havens early in this chapter, indicates Heilman's lifelong interest in questions of literary form and genre, and also the scholarship that would culminate in *This Great Stage: Image and Structure in "King Lear"* (1948).

World War II impinges on the correspondence of the forties in ways that literary people in America today can hardly imagine. In one letter to Warren (November 27, 1942), Heilman notes that LSU's creative writing courses have just been knocked out because the professor teaching them has been drafted. Two months later, Warren, expecting to be drafted himself, reports from Minnesota: "It's rather sad to see a dozen big lads wearing [army, navy, and air force uniforms] sitting with their brows wrinkled over restrictive and non-restrictive clauses." Nevertheless, during the war, when several of Heilman's correspondents were on military assignments or, like Heilman himself, wondering how long it might be before they were called to duty, literary interests were not forgotten, and discussions of reading and writing continued apace. A letter from soldier-cum-scholar William Van O'Connor provided occasion for Heilman to praise highly and yet raise expectations for scholarship as he found "most striking" O'Connor's

“fluency and ease with which you dip into literature and come up with manifold and multifold examples which you proceed to take apart with a most deft casualness.” He recommended, however, that O’Connor write more slowly, because Heilman senses here and there “the cut corner and rapid approximation.” The meticulousness he urges upon the prolific O’Connor would always characterize Heilman’s own writing and speaking (to say nothing of administration).

Whereas O’Connor was deeply suspicious of “leaps” into religion, LSU philosopher Eric Voegelin, who had fled his native Austria to escape Nazism, urged Heilman in quite a different spiritual direction. In 1945 Heilman acknowledged Voegelin’s influence when he wrote that “I’ve felt that any workable organization of life had, to be radical and complete, to be in religious terms, and that assumption meant some sort of material form.” Heilman had some second thoughts about any “sharp distinction between religion and ecclesiasticism” and appreciated Voegelin’s having provided him with a concept of history as the rise and decline of mystical insight. Professorial refugees like Voegelin from war-ravaged Europe would change the face of American colleges and universities, but not so much as the mass entry of war veterans into the colleges and universities after 1945.

As he considered the opportunity to move to the University of Washington in 1947, Heilman recognized the challenge of “building up the place” by improving a faculty he found “second-rate and philosophically limited.” As the introduction to this volume points out, Heilman’s capacity for recognizing both scholarly and creative talent served him well in coming years as he made strong permanent and visiting appointments in literature and creative writing. Initially uncertain that he should undertake administration at all, after two years he was offered appointment as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. He confided to Warren that, rather than aspire to deaning, he “should sooner or later be seeking a graceful way out of the administrative job I have,” and he declined the offer. Despite attractive offers of distinguished faculty or higher administrative appointments, Heilman continued as department chair until 1971 when he was required to leave administration at age sixty-five. As mid-century approached, he met one of the greatest challenges of his career as he heroically defended the academic freedom of Malcolm Cowley, whom he had invited for a visiting professorship. Letters of late 1949 to, from, and about Cowley well document the extent and success of Heilman’s efforts. — RICHARD DUNN

To RAYMOND HAVENS

January 7, 1941

Baton Rouge, La.

Dear Professor Havens:

Thank you very much for letting me use the carbon of "Johnson and the Imagination," which is so complete a collection and analysis of the materials that I have copied most of it verbatim. Your organization of the various points that Johnson makes explains that sense of unresolved contradictions that one has in reading Johnson cursorily and taking in isolation various passages on the imagination.

What prompted my asking you for the paper was an idea which I put rather loosely in talking with you and on which I haven't yet done enough work to be able to state it with precision. The aspect of Johnson's concept of the imagination that I am interested in is that which is manifested by the reader of a book or the spectator at a play [. . .]. These are the points that need investigation:

1. This use of the imagination is implied in his discussion of the unities.

2. What he has to say is less striking in itself than in comparison with the standard neo-classic positions on the unities. That is, he is more liberal (to use the stock phrase) than Castelvetro, Scaliger, Sidney, and the French Academy,¹ etc., etc., who belong more or less to the rationalist tradition. The insistence on unities is essentially denial of the imagination. Johnson, of whom one would hardly expect it, is in this sense one of the first believers—among critics—in imagination.

3. Relationship, if any, with "the willing suspension of disbelief"?

4. Raysor² says Coleridge was first to distinguish delusion and illusion as product of work of art. But did not Johnson in fact make or imply this distinction?

You understand that these are merely the conjectures from which one starts, stated baldly, without necessary qualification or exception.

1. Lodovico Castelvetro (1505–71), Italian critic; Joseph Juste Scaliger (1540–1609), French critic; Sir Phillip Sidney (1554–86), English poet and critic. The *Académie Française*, founded in 1634, is dedicated to the cultivation of French literature and language.

2. Thomas Middleton Raysor, editor of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Investigation may either wreck the whole thing or compel considerable revision.

.....

It was a pleasure to be able to have some conversation with you.

Sincerely yours,

Robert B. Heilman

To ROBERT PENN WARREN

June 8 [1942]

[Baton Rouge, La.]

Dear Red,

I hate like the devil to dun you, but I'm wondering whether you've been able to digest the mass of MS I sent you some time back. Probably it's made you ill. I've got a number of things cleaned up and would like to do a little fooling around on the Lear during the summer—revise, dub in the scholarship, and see what can be done with the results. But I'd rather not work on it before I've heard from you. And I'll be damned grateful for your opinions.

It's good to have Cleanth back again, even though, I'm afraid, on only a sort of probationary status—for us. Things keep popping in that young life. He's just back from a lecture tour to Vassar and now Hutchins wants him and McLuhan to come to Chicago and elaborate in person their epistolary critique of his university.¹ [. . .]

LSU is falling deeper and deeper into the abyss of what is officially called the "personnel problem"—i.e., the quantity of hired hands. By now Texas has imported five full-time hands from here for next year—two of them having already gone West. No one seems to want to teach English here, and at the rates you can't much blame them. [. . .] Voegelin is said to be under the eye of three places [. . .]. The Board has increased medical salaries, and the legislature has increased its own salary scale to \$20 a day, but alas no one wants to increase ours. I happened the

1. Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, 1929–45. At that time, Marshall McLuhan was an instructor of English at St. Louis University.

other night to be introduced to a legislator who said of the proposed inflation increases at LSU, “Why do they want more money? Their salary scale is in line with that of Louisiana Tech.”

John tells me the novel² is now scheduled for fall publication. We look forward to it.

.....

Ruth joins me in regards to both of you.

Bob

To CLEANTH BROOKS

[1942?]

[Baton Rouge, La.?)

Dear Cleanth,

.....

Kirby¹ wrote an exploratory letter to [Katherine Anne] Porter (I saw it, it was unmistakably that), and she promptly accepted an offer that had never been made. This by wire. Wire followed by a more hesitant letter which wanted to know, among other things, whether we’d pay her moving expenses here from N. Y. Kirby is currently trying to make her a bona fide offer. He has apparently had to do (willingly, I take it) considerable selling to WHS and FF,² and incidentally asked me to add a plug or two to the former when I had opportunity.

Aubrey Williams has up and married a little freshman who is bright but very flighty and undisciplined. Her mother tried to have them arrested and is currently endeavoring to exhibit her displeasure by having them kicked out of the university—a novel use of the eleemosynary institution of Louisiana. As the little girl said, “Hell, Aubrey up and made an honest woman of me; what more could the university want?”

A prediction of mine has come true practically to the minute and

2. Robert Penn Warren, *At Heaven’s Gate* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943). John is probably John Palmer, an editor at *Sewanee Review*.

1. Thomas A. Kirby, head of LSU English department.

2. Most likely Wendell Holmes Stephenson, dean of the College of Liberal Arts at LSU, 1941–45 and Fred C. Frey, dean of the university.

to the letter of the alphabet: Dr. [Earl] Bradsher,³ having stomached *Anna Karenina* for English 55, got as far as *Farewell to Arms* (with *Of Human Bondage* coming up), and flatly rebelled, informing Miss Miller that by god he still had honor left and hadn't yet got low enough to teach pornography to sophomore or any other classes. It seems he however wanted to convince her of his essential manliness and so got off a few comments designed to indicate his familiarity with houses of sin, etc.; in view of the two participants in the conversation, all this has a most grotesque air. Whether the sophomore staff will compromise by putting in *The Virginian* (strictly singular)⁴ as the third novel is yet undisclosed.

.....

Regards,

Bob

To ROBERT PENN WARREN

[September 1942]

[Baton Rouge, La.]

Dear Red,

It finally occurred to my slow-moving mind that if I was going to do anything about getting to you a few notes on a history-of-criticism course it was about time to start. Forgive my slowness, though I strongly suspect you of already knowing or having boned up not only all this but a lot more too. At any rate, bowing and scraping aside, I've typed off some rough notes, only bibliographical, on the first half of the course as I give it here and I hasten to get them off without any more of an accompanying letter than this. I hope there's something useful in it.

We are in medio registration, which is messy, as we have more freshmen than for several years, naturally. You should be informed that a number of students are regretting that it is now impossible to take Shakespeare. Probably most of our advanced courses will be just barely

3. LSU English professor, as was Joan Miller. Aubrey Williams was at the time an undergraduate student in the department; he would go on to become a prominent neo-classicist.

4. That is, the 1902 "cowboy" novel by Owen Wister and not Thackeray's *The Virginians* (1857-59).

able to survive, but most of our energy is going into sub-100 stuff, of course. All our “creative” courses are out, as [Harris] Downey¹ just got drafted yesterday and K. A. Porter, as you no doubt know, rather mysteriously left us flat at the last minute. [. . .]

Ruth and I send best wishes to you both and hope that you’ll find things there² as pleasant as possible. The cold you’ve had a little practice for at Iowa, and I envy you the chance to see a little snow. It’s one of the decorations we don’t have here in Sodom.

Bob

From ROBERT PENN WARREN

November 27, 1942

Minneapolis, Minn.

Dear Bob:

Many thanks for the letter, which I truly appreciate. I don’t want us to lose touch, even though I can’t worry you on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at 9:00 A.M., as I used to do. And I appreciated the reprint of your education piece,¹ which I applaud. Not only for the basic views and applications—you would know that anyway from our conversations—but for the skill and force of the presentation. I have not seen your review in the AAUP Bulletin,² but I shall certainly hunt it up. [. . .]

Well, lately the Department here has been having a reorganization—new council set-up, new system of election of members, and such. It was just like old times. Any moment I expected to see Cleanth pop in with his derby and cigar. But such things lack color here. People just sat around for hours and corrected the grammar in the document. And there was

1. LSU English professor.

2. Warren had just taken a position at the University of Minnesota, where he would remain until 1950.

1. Likely “Education for Liberty: To What End?” *Southwest Review* 27 (1942).

2. Review of *Education in a Democracy*, ed. Newton Edwards, in *Bulletin of the AAUP* 28 (1942).

nobody to take John Earl's place in debate. The meeting was just like the performance of Hamlet without the prince.

By this time next week I may be in the Army. The Navy has told me that they can't use me, not even to sharpen pencils for crippled vice-admirals. The Army won't have me as a volunteer, but they will have me—at least the Colonel who has charge of Selective Service for this area told me—as a draftee. I'll know my fate definitely next week, it appears. I wonder how you stand with Uncle Sam? Any new developments? To return to my case, if I'm taken it will be for limited service. That means, I presume, that I'll be stuck somewhere at a pine desk adding up columns of figures. It doesn't sound very romantic. [. . .]

I like my work here. I have some very good students in the Criticism course and some good ones in a big mob course on the Twentieth Century (juniors mostly). My freshman section (which I drop next term for the Graduate Writing) is a nondescript lot, but agreeable enough. It's rather sad in the class to see a dozen big lads wearing the Navy Blue or the Army or Air Force uniforms sitting with their brows wrinkled over restrictive and non-restrictive clauses. I drop the Twentieth Century next term—January—for the Sixteenth Century, if there are enough Graduate students to make up the class. The Graduate School is hard hit, and will probably be harder hit after Christmas. The only two men I had in the Criticism didn't last out the first three weeks. [. . .] All of this, of course, if I last out.

.....

I'll end this jabber. Write to me again when you have time. Let me know the news and the news about yourselves. How is the drama book³ coming? For the present give my best regards, and Cinina's,⁴ to your family.

As ever,

Red

3. Likely a reference to *Understanding Drama*, which was published in 1945.

4. Emma "Cinina" Brescia, Warren's first wife.

To ROBERT PENN WARREN

September 23 [1943]

[Baton Rouge, La.]

Dear Red,

.....
I'm returning the poem,¹ which I've just re-read and which I've talked about with Cleanth. The story is fast and clear; you muffle down the jolts to cut the melodrama but keep plenty of jolt there, and convey the parental feelings at the end without any tinge of the sentimental. I'm too diffident about my judgment of smaller units in poetry to venture any criticism there [. . .]. In lieu of more specific comment let me recount the main thing in Cleanth's and my conversation, which may be useful to you insofar as people's interpretations may show how your stresses are coming thru. Cleanth said he would describe the poem as a "study of time" [. . .]; it seems to me as though the problem of personal identity is the central issue. Cleanth remarked, complaisantly as the 18th century would say, that these are doubtless two different ways of saying the same thing. The thing which gave final point to the meaning for me is the final section: your name is the little black mark under your heart. I.e., your name is what people identify you by, but it's an external unrelated thing; Little Billie's parents could recognize a birthmark but had not enough sense of character, etc, even to have any intimations as to who it was until someone else told them. Likewise, Billie had come back, in search of identity so to speak, but a) he got an unexpected fulfillment by denying himself and b) the very denial of himself was a kind of identifying trick but yet didn't work as such. The point seems to me to be the combination of ironies apparent in these circumstances, and the larger point, or the "idea," the way in which people keep fooling both themselves and other people about themselves, so that the intimate reality, whatever it is, gets lost sight of entirely and we get instead the substitute reality of names, birthmarks, etc—the FBI diagnosis of the individual.

If this is dumb throw it in the wastebasket. One minor matter causes me a little difficulty—the old folks as robber-murderers. Maybe

1. "The Ballad of Billie Potts," published in Robert Penn Warren's *Selected Poems: 1923–1943* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944).

I'm off the track in feeling there ought to be a *why* of some sort about this, or maybe I miss a sufficiently evident *why*; or maybe their *modus vivendi* is just to be accepted as a datum. But for the record, and for whatever it may mean, I record a touch of unsatisfied curiosity there. A Pa-Dutch feeling, I suppose, that extreme violence asks some fullness of motivation.

Thanks a lot for letting me look at it; it's been real fun.

The year looks glum: I have 9 hours of army (3 sections of 30 or more each) and 5 hours of a flunk survey section.² At least the army sections seem better than those grouching sonsabitches that had been shanghaied in here for the summer "cycle," as the shirtfronts now call it. [. . .]

Best regards from both of us to Cinina and you.

Bob

From FRANK JONES

September 26 [1943]

Camp Croft, S.C.

Dear Mr. Heilman:

Thank you very much for your letter. May I hazard a suggestion about your intellectual reactions to the army?² At first I think you will not even read the sports pages; you will read nothing. Then you will develop a fierce hunger for the most esoteric reading conceivable. Certainly, speaking for myself, your reprint¹ found me in a mood most appropriate: not that it was esoteric, but I was definitely a vulture for culture.

I am afraid that the guardhouse did not help my clarity of expression. By the neo-regionalists I was 1000000 miles at least from meaning Tate, Warren, and Co. My admiration for their artistic intent is surpassed only by my regrets about their creative defects [. . .]. I meant, now that I come

2. The special courses for "army" were probably a consequence of both World War II and LSU's long military tradition; until 1968, two years of military training were mandatory for all male undergraduates.

1. This reprint has not been identified.

to think of it, no particular writer or school of writers, but the spirit in which things as apparently dissimilar as “John Brown’s Body” and Mr. Brooks’ latest utterances are written: a mere arrogant localism, which may cover the whole of “these States” or a fraction of a county, and is “neo-” only in the sense of being encouraged by recent events, which, as you point out in your article, are of the type that always encourages such localism. “Neo-regionalists” is a very bad and vague term, and it is entirely my fault that you thought it meant something so odd. The new spirit seems to me to be far inferior to Whitman’s, even. He at least conceived “these States” as in the process of becoming, and even, at times, in danger of becoming something wrong.

I quoted [Sherwood] Anderson as a successful regionalist because it seems to me that he is sound on both counts—in intent (though this was often erratic, so that his books are either complete successes or complete failures: the Tate-Warren work always seems to me to be incomplete in this respect) and in creative flow. Your mentioning Paul Engle² helps here. Conceive him, please, as “what the neo-regionalists would stand for,” and, if you read Anderson’s *Memoirs*, as what he (Anderson) would rebel against.

I hope this will remove our apparent disagreement. With the rest of your letter I am in full accord.

You might remember me to Cleanth Brooks; I had the pleasure of meeting him chez M. Tate in Princeton, what seems years ago but was only 1940.

Yours very sincerely,

Frank Jones

To WILLIAM VAN O’CONNOR

November 3 [1943]

Baton Rouge, La.

Dear Bill,

I was glad to hear from you today, though receipt of your letter gave me the agenbit of inwit on account of having two letters from you with

2. Paul Engle, a poet, would go on to co-found the University of Iowa’s writers’ program in 1966.

none from me, and although I was again struck with amazement at the fact that you seem to write so fertile under conditions which I strongly suspect would make me wholly inarticulate. You may accurately describe yourself as a misfit there—and I suppose any good man would have to be and want to be a misfit in the army, but the misfitting is not a hobble-skirting one, at any rate. I'm similarly amazed, I confess, at your having a leave and being able to turn out copy in the course of it. Me, I need uninterrupted quiet and calm over in a library corner where no one can get to me.

Thanks for the comment on the *Sewanee* thing,¹ though I fear that your figure of the irony which has changed from short jabs to long lefts means merely a vast increase in obviousness. Haymakers are amateurish, I believe, in both boxing and letters. I have read, though not yet with adequate digestive care, your long piece in the *Sewanee*;² I think the most striking thing about your writing is the fluency and ease with which you dip into literature and come up with manifold and multifold examples which you then proceed to take apart with a most deft casualness. I'm envious, for I have to dig that sort of thing out with scalpels, haemostats, anestheticians, special lighting effects, and at the expense of many cruxes and crises in the patient. May your energy continue to keep up the good work.

May I, I wonder, as a practically old man and well-intending one, at any rate, make one teeny suggestion? You could, I think, write a little slower and make yourself a little more permanent; I have occasionally just a slight sense of the cut corner and the rapid approximation. This has nothing to do with the quality of your thinking, but with the transference of the products of that thinking into objective form. Ignore it if you don't like it; it certainly is not meant to have great weight.

As part payoff for reading the Hoffman MS Wilkerson gave me, at my request, a copy of your book;³ I haven't got to it yet, but I am damn glad to have it. If I don't lift something out of it for Cleanth's and my forever-forthcoming drama book, I'll be surprised.

1. The "*Sewanee* thing" is a reference to Heilman's "Artist and *Patria*," *Sewanee Review* 51 (1943).

2. William Van O'Connor, "Tension and Structure of Poetry," *Sewanee Review* 51 (1943).

3. Likely *Climates of Tragedy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1943), co-written with wife, Mary Allen O'Connor. Marcus Manley Wilkerson was the director at LSU Press.

[Frederick] Hoffman's MS, I thought, had considerable possibilities; it was the first of various ones I've read for Marcus (I refused to do yours because of the personal angle, but suggested Howard Baker, who came through with a strong plug. Incidentally, I saw a good notice in the *Nation*; Marcus says others have been equally good and that the printing is about sold out) that I thought we ought to use. I wanted Wilson on it because he knows Freud, and I was pleased that in general his critical line was not too far from mine.⁴ I got Marcus to try for Wilson, reassured him about the heavy reading fee asked, had a long conference when the Wilson estimate came in, and in general feel responsible for the Hoffman book, since Marcus is to say the least diffident and definitely wanted me to push him away one way or tother. So the job is on me, morally, and if it turns out lousy, I know Marcus will give me the bleating-lamb look dialed to mild-accusation. Hence your corroboration on Hoffman is not discomforting.

Incidentally, in H's MS I came across a thing I didn't know (many things, of course) that was of especial interest to me—namely that as early as the '20's Waldo Frank had done a book about efforts at reintegration, which you will recall was the burden of my Renaissance piece. Meiklejohn's new book on [education],⁵ on which I've been grinding out a ponderous comment for the Sewanee, has more of the same. Is your text still "under advisement" by the publishers?

.....

Cleanth, by the way, is through the draft mill after a year of dubiety and is safely 4-F'd. I have just been reclassified 1-A and feel pretty low about it, since the deferment situation looks none too good; breaking up a home after 10 years and at 37-plus looks pretty painful, though one knows well enough that everyone survives, of course. [. . .]

Religious note: Father Schexnayder⁶ had quite a rant after the football loss to Texas A&M; from the pulpit he hollered out a merciless

4. Frederick J. Hoffman was a professor at Ohio State University and author of *Freudianism and the Literary Mind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1945). Howard Baker, author and critic, was at the time an instructor of English at Harvard University. "Wilson" is probably Edmund Wilson, the well-known literary critic.

5. Hoffman analyzes a trilogy of Frank's critical works: *Our America* (1919), *The Re-Discovery of America* (1929), and the essay collection *In the American Jungle* (1937). Alexander Meiklejohn's "new book" was *Education Between Two Worlds* (New York: Harper, 1942).

6. Father Maurice Schexnayder, chaplain of the Catholic Student Center at LSU.

scolding to people—players, I suppose, who had failed to attend mass before the game. He shrieked, “Serves you right.” The incident has begot what would have been a broadside in 1590:

Father Schex
Put a hex
Upon the boys that played the Tex-
as A & M.
Amen.

I suspect that your European RC friends, on hearing that, would be even more convinced of something-wrong in the American church. Incidentally, I first heard that suggestion posed by Voegelin, the brilliant U of Vienna refugee in Gov't here; to him, Father Coughlin was the prime index of some inner errancy.⁷ Voegelin is sufficiently sympathetic to religion to eliminate the possibility of a sniping anti-clericalism. . . . Schexnayder's most notable convert to RC, Robert, the last of the Lowells, has just got a year in jail for refusing to report for induction because of the iniquity of our partnership with the godless Russians. Martyr-complex, though the term obviously oversimplifies.

[. . .] I'm rereading *At Heaven's Gate* which despite all I think is pretty good. I think, also, that Red needs to cut down on adjectives, for his striving for concrete versions of things leads him, without his realizing it, into a kind of pictorial quality which is a little on the static side. Even though the descriptiveness is per se very good. And I sense a kind of preoccupation with people who only *feel*—the Inarticulateness Mode of which there has been a lot around—as if intellection itself were untrustworthy; Red's thinking characters turn out to be cynics, overclever sonsabitches, etc. I'd like to see him at work on a Jamesian set of characters, just for the hell of it.

.....

Best wishes,
Bob

7. Father Charles C. Coughlin was famous for his radio sermons, which were characterized by antisemitism, support for Hitler and Mussolini, and attacks on Franklin D. Roosevelt.

To ROBERT PENN WARREN

December 20 [1943]

[Baton Rouge, La.]

Dear Red,

Some time after I last wrote you, our copy of *At Heaven's Gate* arrived, and Ruth and I are both delighted to have it, and especially to have it with the inscription. Ruth has read it, and I have re-read it, both with a great deal of pleasure. The changes from the original MS that I saw seem all to the good, especially the most recognizable ones at beginning and end. In other words, on second reading I found it more effective—and that should read even more effective—than on first, which means that for me it did the primary job of holding me as a story; and that means, in turn, that I tried to stretch the reading of it instead of doing it all in a couple of big gulps. I still find some difficulty with Slim, who in one sense, despite the amount of space he has, seems to me to be still a mite underwritten; and I'm not sure that the recurrent theme of denial of background has the stress, and the linkage of parts, that it might have. Sue, Blake, the hillbillies and the Private all ring the bell beautifully; the Private's German-shooting scene hits hard as hell.

To me a major pleasure was discovering a fairly complete allegory, though you mayn't like the word, which I either hadn't got or else hadn't reconstructed properly the first time. It starts with the contrast between the hillbilly [. . .] and all the rest: his religiosity and their worldliness. He goes off the deep end, of course, but even at that he sets a kind of example, i.e., he exemplifies the experience of conversion. Now the rest are distinguished either by their complete insusceptibility to conversion (which is one way of defining the ill of society) or else by other sorts of approaches to or, so to speak, efforts at conversion [. . .]. But what all this says is that without some sort of inner illumination, be the form what it will, the whole works [sic] is going to hell. Interesting, by the way, how all this tends to express itself in religious metaphor, though this may not have been specifically the intention.

May I venture one suggestion, or rather a question. On p. 313 the last paragraph deals entirely with a period of relative calm, of reduced friction, irascibility etc between Sue and Sweetwater. Why not do completely, dramatize in full one such scene? I know the risk of the sentimental, the wide devotion to such scenes in the slicks, the insistence you must feel to

keep it hard and so on. But you could do it, I know, without any loss of tone, of the essential toughness and dispassionateness. My idea is that it would be a wonderful foil for the various scenes of grating relationship and hostility; it would I think in no way detract from the sense of doom of a competitive rationalistic world, but would put that world in a fuller or more varicolored light. In fact, the foil might make the lesson tougher. I have in mind a method analogous to that which you pointed out is used in *Romeo and Juliet*: the juxtaposition of the nurse and Juliet on sex. I have a slight feeling that as a novelist you take Juliet, as metaphor for an aspect of experience, somewhat for granted.

Well, you know what the poets have always said about the criticism of non-poets. All we want is straight rimes and ten even syllables. . . . I thought Andrew Lytle's review, followed at some distance by Phillips's,¹ showed by far the best sense of what is going on.

Ruth joins me in best wishes to both of you for the season and the year. This will have to do for a card: the ones we bought blind turn out to have American flags in the sky over Bethlehem.

Regards,

Bob

From ALLEN TATE

February 11, 1944

Washington, D.C.

Dear Bob Heilman:

I like your article "We Serve the Community?"¹ very much indeed. (Weren't you sending me two articles?) I agree with you all the way about local-color education. I have never believed in it. My "formula" I believe would not differ much from yours; from the literary point of view, the local material must be disciplined by liberal education, which is universal; and liberal education is renewed in the local experience.—Many years ago

1. Andrew Lytle, "At Heaven's Gate," *Sewanee Review* 51 (1943); William Phillips, "Coils of the Past," *Nation*, August 28, 1943.

1. Published in *Southwest Review* 29 (1944).

I wrote an article for the *New Republic*² in which I tried to say this; but your statement is the best I have seen.

May I suggest that you send a copy of your article to Mark Van Doren—393 Bleecker Street, New York. I am sure Mark would be interested in it.

On July 1st I shall take over the *Sewanee Review*. I hope you will send me articles from time to time. I should certainly have printed this one. And (may I add) we shall pay for contributions.

.....

Sincerely yours,
Allen Tate

To ALLEN TATE
February 15, 1944

Baton Rouge, La.

Dear Allen Tate,

You could hardly have said anything more pleasing to me than that you would have published the education piece and that you would like to have me send you something when you take over the *Sewanee*. I shall certainly try to have something worth sending you.

I'm mailing you my other article, a review of Hutchins' and Meiklejohn's books.¹ It never quite jelled for me, as you will see, though I sweat blood over it. It may pick up a little toward the end, I believe. Sidney Gair, Holt's philosophical traveler, writes me a suggestion, very mildly put, that the metaphysics is in a state of confusion.²

.....

When you first informed Cleanth that you would take over the *Sewanee*, he promptly let me in on the secret. Cleanth has been so thoroughly delighted that he has made constant reference to it, and I'm sure that it's a double pleasure that the cat is now out of the bag (he saw some reference to the appointment in a New Orleans paper)

2. "Poetry and Politics," *New Republic*, August 2, 1933.

1. "Light on a Darkling Plain," *Sewanee Review* 52 (1944). Review of Robert M. Hutchins, *Education for Freedom* and Alexander Meiklejohn, *Education Between Two Worlds*.

2. Sidney R. Gair represented the publisher Henry Holt and Company.