

“Huck Finn at King Arthur’s Court”

F. O. Matthiessen, the Salzburg Seminar, and American Studies

 Ralph J. Poole

Abstract

F. O. Matthiessen was a key player in an event which took place at Schloss Leopoldskron in Salzburg in the summer of 1947 and which launched the legendary Salzburg Seminar and which may be considered the birth of American studies in Europe. Matthiessen’s reflections on this remarkable session, *From the Heart of Europe*, remains outstanding in its conjuring of a humanist vision amidst ruins. This travelogue, his last major—if largely forgotten—work published shortly before his suicide, has been variously reassessed as an elegiac document of his tragic failure as a politically deluded scholar and as a groundbreaking foray into sketching out a radically alternate transnational understanding of American studies *avant la lettre*. These highly diverging perspectives on Matthiessen’s final book, in particular, and on the professional and personal troubles during his last years, more generally, account for the lasting myth-making fascination with Matthiessen, which has left its mark not only on academic discourses ranging from socialist criticism to queer theory but may also be found in the novels of May Sarton (*Faithful Are the Wounds*) and Mark Merlis (*American Studies*). Hence, this article reflects on Matthiessen’s impact on the 1947 seminar and traces the legacy of this controversial founding father of American studies.

Suggested Citation: Poole, Ralph J. “Huck Finn at King Arthur’s Court”: F. O. Matthiessen, the Salzburg Seminar, and American Studies.” *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* 1, no. 1 (2019): 1–26, DOI: [10.47060/jaaas.v1i1.70](https://doi.org/10.47060/jaaas.v1i1.70).

Keywords: Salzburg Seminar; transnational American studies; queer theory; transatlantic cultural history; F. O. Matthiessen

Peer Review: This invited article was reviewed by the issue’s guest editors.

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“Huck Finn at King Arthur’s Court”

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Ralph J. Poole

It was seventy years ago when in the summer of 1947 a trio of Harvard graduate students, Scott Elledge, Richard Campbell and the Vienna-born Clemens Heller, organized a scholarly workshop at Schloss Leopoldskron in Austria. This summer school has since become famous as the “Salzburg Seminar.” The group gathering in Salzburg consisted of ninety European students and scholars as well as thirty American students and scholars, and it was announced as an introduction to “American Civilization.” To be sure, from today’s standpoint, this six-week-session was an inaugural event in the development of American studies in post-war Europe. One just has to consider the historical situation—the war having ended only two years before, Austria being a country occupied by the Allied Forces, and Salzburg as the center of the American occupation. At the Schloss, besides the rather desolate state of the building itself, the provision of food was not guaranteed at all times: “We had been living on a diet mostly of bread and potatoes, with always the question of what might happen if our next food car from Switzerland did not arrive on schedule. But most of us had managed to disregard even the *ersatz* coffee and the dwindling rations of cigarettes.”¹ Indeed, bringing together people from Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Sweden, and Spain as well as seven displaced persons was no small feat and would not be repeated until the 1960s with regards to Eastern European participants.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead was among the illustrious faculty. In her report to the Harvard Student Council, which in parts funded the session, she comments on the encounter of students from former enemy countries at a location that is so laden with history, and she suggests that it was precisely the castle itself that facilitated an environment of productive and peaceful otherworldliness:



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From a Europe where no one will ever live again the kind of life for which the Leopoldskron is an appropriate setting, the European students walked, as it were, upon a stage where some of the insistent difficulties of their real life could be forgotten. The first shock as they found themselves sitting side by side with men whom two short years ago they might have killed was softened as they saw themselves reflected back, in the dim lights, from the great mirrors. Throughout the Seminar, the loveliness and unreality of the setting consistently muted stridencies which might have developed.²

Besides the evocation of the seminar as a stage transcending reality—the first ghost of my essay—what is of interest for a literary scholar as myself is Mead’s emphasis on the importance of literature in negotiating a transatlantic alliance. There were sessions and lectures on history, politics, sociology, anthropology, economics and arts, and yet Mead—herself an anthropologist—felt “it is impossible to emphasize the importance to the Seminar of lectures on American Literature because they communicated the sense of a living literature, and of a culture to which self-criticism is a necessary condition of life.”³ Thus, Mead chose literature as the field most valuable to the communication between America and Europe.⁴ F. O. Matthiessen, Alfred Kazin, Vida Ginsberg, and the Italian scholar Mario Praz were the faculty members responsible for literature, and arguably it was Matthiessen who had the strongest and most lasting impact. In what follows, I want to sketch out his specific approach to the session as outlined especially in his welcome address, then move on to the political ramifications of this first session for Matthiessen, and finally stake out some unresolved discrepancies in Matthiessen’s legacy as a major but controversial founding father of American studies, ultimately leading to the question: In what ways does Matthiessen still matter for us?

**“[H]ere was our Brook Farm”; Or,
“Isn’t there a ghost in this romantic old castle?”
Matthiessen’s “Communitic” Vision
for a Future of American Studies in Europe**

They are always *there*, specters, even if they do not exist,
even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet.

Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (1993)

Matthiessen was chosen to give the welcome address to the first Salzburg seminar.⁵ In the by now legendary speech, he outlined what he thought the agenda of the seminar should be. The address was delivered on the castle’s terrace and Matthiessen believed he could sense Max Reinhardt’s spirit (who is my second ghost appearing) being rekindled in an atmosphere that Matthiessen likened to Hollywood’s opulent

glamour:

I kept wondering when the Hollywood floodlights would be turned on. How else can you feel when you eat your meals in a forty-foot-high marble hall beneath an immense allegorical representation of the mid-eighteenth-century Bishop of Salzburg building Schloss Leopoldskron for his nephew, and beneath yards and yards more of flamboyant wall and ceiling painting in a style which, unfortunately, Hollywood could imitate almost as successfully from the Venetian school as the derivative painters here had done? . . . The one public room which shows a fully mastered style is a charming example of eighteenth-century chinoiserie, with brightly lacquered walls, a little faint now through exposure to damp before the window panes were replaced this spring, and with terra-cotta figurines over the two doors seeming to represent, quite appropriately, the spirit of tragedy and of comedy. Here in this corner room above the terrace Reinhardt and his guests must have passed many animated evenings. And since this is the room set aside for our discussion groups, here—though Reinhardt died in America while his castle was occupied by the Nazis—thought can again spring free.⁶

Right at the beginning, Matthiessen stresses the promising “luxury of an historical awareness” of this very special occasion, where people “from many countries and across the gulf of war” have come together “to enact anew the chief function of culture and humanism, to bring man again into communication with man.” Being fully aware of “questions, doubts, even suspicions” that lie “beneath the pleasant surfaces,” he takes it for granted that with differing political leanings, a common denominator is that all are “strong anti-Fascists.” What is at stake is “to probe again to the nature of man.” To do so, he refers to the American democratic legacy as yardstick, calling Americans “the Romans of the modern world.” But, he continues, “none of our group come as imperialists of the pax Americana to impose our values upon you.” Instead, similar to Margaret Mead, he asserts the “sharp critical sense” of the excesses and limitations of the American system as “saving characteristic of American civilization.”⁷

The self-critical nod allows Matthiessen to perform a double move toward reversal and inclusion: referring to the “continuing involvement in Europe,” he reminds his audience that Americans have come to Europe as students before—as “passionate pilgrims” such as Henry James or as “innocents abroad” such as Mark Twain. But these are times past, now is the time to reverse the trajectory and bring something to Europe, namely American civilization as savior of the here and now. In an inclusive gesture, he specifies this Americanness by referring to the names of the Americans, which are “no longer predominantly Anglo-Saxon” but originating from various other parts of Europe, pointing out that the “mingling suggested by our names is America at its best” and the “completely equal rights” at the core of this mingling serves as

“the only solid basis for any truly united peoples or United Nations of the present or future.”⁸ This gesture not only emphasizes the diversity of Americans, but more importantly the communality of all kinds of people across national borders.

Turning to the specific event of the seminar and underlining its uniqueness, Matthiessen’s poetic streak comes to the fore when he goes into raptures about “our island of peace in a storm-crowded sea” and about living “in a castle out of a baroque past,” which makes him feel “as though I was Huck Finn at King Arthur’s Court,”⁹ the hyperbolic quote I chose for my essay’s title. Having already evoked Twain and his humorous pilgrim’s travelogue *Innocents Abroad* (1869), he fuses two more famous texts by Twain into an ambiguous composite. Substituting the magician Yankee from Connecticut at King Arthur’s Court for Huck Finn, he seems to emphasize the innocence of experience once again, even though this can only be taken figuratively considering Matthiessen’s own worldly middle-age in contrast to Huck’s solely youthful American adventures that take him nowhere near any European abode but toward the American deep south instead. Although Matthiessen is more a “Connecticut Yankee” than a “Huck Finn,” he embraces Huck’s quixotic adventures and endows Schloss Leopoldskron—as King Arthur’s Court—with a curiously ironic twist: The Schloss is out of time and place, a fantastic idea of the past that can only be approached through mocking distancing. The island metaphor evoked earlier gains added prominence, as the eighteenth-century Schloss is transported even further into a distant past and a remote location, King Arthur’s Court. Clearly, Matthiessen here emphasizes a feeling of estrangement, albeit delivered with an ironic pose, of being out of his safe terrain performing an impossible feat. The reference to Max Reinhardt immediately afterwards and his theatrical endeavors at Schloss Leopoldskron support Matthiessen’s feelings of being on a stage in a role that doesn’t quite fit.

This mood of spatiotemporal misfit continues during the remainder of the welcome speech and leads me to the evocation of ghosts (much like Derrida’s suggestion quoted in the epigraph to this section¹⁰) that permeate Matthiessen’s memoir-travelogue *From the Heart of Europe*, which includes this welcome address in full length—although perhaps edited in hindsight.¹¹ Constantly referring to the past as reflection of the present, Matthiessen, for example, links the Salzburg experiment to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s call “that thought can be action” and praises the results at the Schloss as realization of “our Brook Farm, here was our ideal communistic experiment.”¹² Matthiessen thus makes a bold pledge for the power of the mind to transcend the limitations of the here and now.¹³ This agenda is in line with his Christian socialist belief in the lasting power of democratic community as attested in the American literary tradition. It is also a promise for a transformative convergence of politics and aesthetics based on an internationalization of American studies, which

makes Matthiessen an early thinker and bridge builder leading to the identity politics of the much-hailed transnational turn in American studies in the 1990s:

My argument is that what we today call identity emerged as a lyrical expression of exclusion before it was filled with specific ethnic content, and this can be traced back—via Matthiessen—to the need to find a replacement for avant-garde provocations and national traditions in a postwar landscape that seemed increasingly transnational in its destruction and reorganization. Identity emerges at the margins of history, tradition, or ideology as that which cannot be reduced to the national, the avant-garde, or the “official opposites” of the Cold War.¹⁴

Andrew Gross is one of a number of Americanists who have recently reevaluated Matthiessen, and I will return to some other such reappraisals below. But staying with the 1947 seminar for a while longer, the reader may find it surprising that of the writers Matthiessen selected, Henry James stands out for me because he seems to be the most unlikely candidate to discuss in the given situation in Salzburg. My perhaps somewhat compulsive interest in this particular ghost Matthiessen was conjuring up rests in his fashioning James as apt moral guide to current affairs—against all plausible odds.¹⁵ Matthiessen chose *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) for his students, partly because it was “the James novel most available,” but also because “it was very suitable to the occasion, since, through Isabel Archer, James made one of his freshest studies of the American’s discovery of Europe.”¹⁶ Unlike Hawthorne or Melville, whose works did not correspond to a nineteenth-century European tradition, James, for Matthiessen, related to Europeans who “could draw immediate analogies with their own heritage.”¹⁷ The “peculiar poignancy” was in reading this novel “in a Europe so different from the undisturbed world of his [i.e., James’s] prime.”¹⁸

Two related images stand out in Matthiessen’s assessment of that moment: the ruin and the ghost. Matthiessen reads and remembers James in a fresh light while in Schloss Leopoldskron, with a new sensibility to James’s evocation of ghosts. In his recollection of the seminar, he quotes Isabel (albeit in an abridged manner), who upon seeing Gardencourt for the first time asks, “Please tell me—isn’t there a ghost... in this romantic old house?” The invalid cousin Ralph responds:

I might show it to you, but you’d never see it. The privilege isn’t given to every one; it’s not enviable. It has never been seen by a young, happy, innocent person like you. You must have suffered first, have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable knowledge. In that way your eyes are opened to it. I saw it long ago.¹⁹

Matthiessen points out that the theme of the ghost reappears at the very end, “when Isabel, alone in her room, has a sure premonition of the very instant of Ralph’s death. At last, with the fullest intensity of suffering, she recognizes that ghost.”²⁰



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Matthiessen does not, however, mention Isabel's exact reaction to the ghost. She feels summoned by "a vague, hovering figure in the vagueness of the room" and sees "his white face—his kind eyes; then she saw there was nothing. She was not afraid; she was only sure."²¹ What Matthiessen calls Isabel's "fullest intensity of suffering" is accompanied by a kind, ghostly figure and her unafraid surety of an announced death.

Notably, Matthiessen would focus on Ralph instead of Isabel, even though the novel is not about Ralph at all. But Matthiessen singles out Ralph as the character that survived James for a contemporary audience, providing "release" for "young American soldiers" as well as to his European students in Salzburg.²² According to Matthiessen, James's "inwardness" and sense of "order" serves as "bulwark against disorder" and "the unrelenting outwardness" of war sufferings. Matthiessen concludes: "In a world of breakdown such as [James] never conceived, we can now find in his work, not an escape, but a renewed sense of the dignity of the human spirit, however precarious this may be in our own overwhelming sense of imminent ruin."²³

Now, we may want to conclude that Matthiessen is simply delusional and ridiculous. But then, it may suit Matthiessen especially well to pull the strange, odd—not to say queer—character of Ralph to the forefront declaring him the emotional center of the novel. As much as Ralph harbors a queer kinship to his cousin Isabel, one could say Matthiessen feels such a kinship to Ralph.²⁴ He quotes James's eccentric appraisal of Ralph: "His serenity was but the array of wild flowers niched in his ruin."²⁵ Through James, Matthiessen confronts us with a duplicitous and highly paradoxical ascription: Ralph's ruinous state of mind offers an impression of calmness, but what would otherwise be most likely called apathetic resignation to fate here harbors the opposite of desolation and death, namely the eccentric beauty and uncontrolled energy of wild flowers, however much hidden they may flourish.

Some queerly interested James critics have suggested reading Ralph's ghostly appearance not as a marker of uncanniness, as a repressed specter of the past haunting the present, but as having a presence that provides an immediate and immanent meaning. Such an understanding of the ghost leads to the possibility of recognition and to the "desire for recognition from a loved one."²⁶ If we are willing to see Ralph not within a hermeneutics of suspicion, the suspicion here being that his lingering ailment is a sign of his failed masculinity, but as a figure surpassing the limiting effects of heteronormative ascriptions, then his ghostly appearance may be read as a liberating experience transferring life onto Isabel and setting her free to decide on her future. This ghost wants to reach out and connect, not to haunt but to communicate with those who understand.²⁷

One has to remember that Matthiessen, "rejected by the Marine Corps for being

too short,”²⁸ chose to write a book on Henry James during the war instead, declaring it “my overaged contribution to the war effort” when it was published in 1944.²⁹ He specifically acknowledged the role of his Harvard undergraduate students “who, during the tense winters of ’42 and ’43, kept insisting that until they were needed by the Army, they meant to continue to get the best education they could.” The students felt the need to stress the importance of literature in times of war and urged him to be serious about his book on James, believing “that in a total war the preservation of art and thought should be a leading aim. They persuaded me to continue to believe it.”³⁰ Matthiessen’s interest in the ghostly, ruinous figure of Ralph in the “city of ghosts” that is post-war Salzburg and in a castle that harbors so many ghostly memories is therefore highly significant.³¹ It is not the inexperienced Isabel, but rather Ralph, who has seen and suffered all, that Matthiessen believes to be speaking to his students as herald of “the dignity of the human spirit” amidst ruins.

In one of his recollections of the seminar, Alfred Kazin emphasizes Matthiessen’s “sympathetic reading of *The Portrait of a Lady*” and the “extraordinary resonance” this reading had on the European audience.³² Matthiessen reading James in Salzburg makes Kazin think about how places speak to persons and how one has to realign “dreamy” pictures with dreary realities. According to Kazin, it was largely thanks to Matthiessen that the Salzburg endeavor was a success with respect to building a bridge between Americans and Europeans. But Kazin also sheds a more critical light on the driving motives of his colleague, seeing a tormented soul behind Matthiessen’s engaging lecturing. He describes his colleague as someone “who fascinates the European students, holds them in his grip, through an astonishing personal intensity, a positively violent caringness about everything he believes in and is concerned with that he cannot suppress in public. What drives the man and torments him so?”³³

“The Pieces of This Death”: The First Martyr of the Cold War; Or, Matthiessen’s Halo

Why didn’t the American critic F. O. Matthiessen write a history of gay American writing?

Colm Tóibín, *Love in a Dark Time and Other Explanations of Gay Lives and Literature* (2002)

In her novel *Faithful Are the Wounds* (1955), May Sarton tried to provide an answer to Kazin’s question. The book was published five years after Matthiessen committed suicide by jumping off the twelfth floor of the Hotel Manger in Boston. Speculations about his suicide certainly helped to propel Matthiessen to a mythicized, if disputed, celebrity in the academic world, and Sarton’s novel participated in this myth-making, as did an astounding volume published in the year of Matthiessen’s



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death in which friends, colleagues, and students such as Henry Nash Smith and Kazin gave their impressions of the late Matthiessen.

One portraitist was Sarton, who wrote a poem, “The Pieces of This Death (for F. O. M.),” which opens with these lines:

Bitter the loneliness,
His who has died of it,
Ours who still live within
The torn world, each a part
Of the huge beating heart.³⁴

The poem goes on to ask “Who speaks or could have spoken / To that implacable no?” presumably meaning Matthiessen’s choice of death. There are references to his “anger,” to his seeming cruelty, to his “tortured dream,” and to the wounds caused “when angered flared.”³⁵ Ultimately, she forecasts the longevity of his legacy:

The pieces of this death
We shall be picking up;
The anguish in his cup
We drink and long shall drink.³⁶

Her elegiac call admits to guilt in the repeated verse “He died of the world, of us.”

With her novel *Faithful Are the Wounds*, Sarton was perhaps the first to try and piece together Matthiessen’s death. Picking up on her reference to wounds in her poem, the admission of a collective guilt serves as major message of the novel, as well. The novel’s title draws on a passage in Proverbs, which reads in full, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend. But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.”³⁷ While there are barely any kisses in the novel, by enemies or lovers, the images of wounding abound. The novel largely downgrades the Matthiessen character, named Edward Cavan, who kills himself by jumping in front of a train, to a secondary role. Sarton focuses on the story of those who try to make sense of his death. In other words, this is a novel about Matthiessen without Matthiessen, a ghost story of sorts with Matthiessen-as-specter *seemingly* haunting those who have outlived him.³⁸ It turns out, though, that he is a figure like James’s Ralph in that he revisits his friends, family, and adversaries through their guilty memories and his ghostly visits ultimately bring about recognition, appeasement, and potentiality. One of his close friends claims that “[h]e shut us all out” and that “he was a living wound at the end,” while a student of his sees it differently, opining, “The world had broken in two, not Edward Cavan. Edward Cavan was intact. He had let himself be savaged by an elevated train to remain intact, leaving the world all breaking to pieces, leaving the loneliness inside everyone else, the awful, bitter sense of failure and guilt inside everyone else.” His

major adversary evokes another image pervading the novel, that of an imprisoned visionary: “Quite a few pilots got killed trying to break the sound barrier, you know—and you might call it suicide, in a way . . . Edward was trying to break through a much more difficult barrier, a human barrier, to unite the intellect and life, to make man whole.”³⁹

In one of the rare moments in which Cavan does appear, a friend remembers him saying, “I feel locked in, locked up, stifled.” His friend responds that it must have been different in Europe, reminding him of the fighting conviction and energetic warmth he had brought back from that summer at the Salzburg Seminar. In contrast to his energizing European experience, he sees himself as impotent helpmate of an emasculating system:

Good God, yes. In Europe the intellectual is still part of life itself. I’m tired of being a kind of governess without real responsibility, without dignity, someone who may be turned out . . . at any moment at the whim of the employer—and who is only considered responsible as long as he is not responsible. They’re making eunuchs of us.⁴⁰

Astonishingly, the word “queer” frequently appears in the novel (at least twenty-four times by my count). Although there are several hints about Cavan being odd, not interested in women, and visiting strange bars at night, nowhere is his homosexuality explicitly stated. One of Cavan’s closest friends perhaps recognizes his growing depression. Unable to really reach him, she comes to the realization that ultimately “[a]ll real lives are secret . . . , frightfully secret. No one knows anyone else. Friendship, even love, fails. We are alone.”⁴¹ Notably, Sarton, a lesbian herself, had no idea of Matthiessen being queer.⁴² Nevertheless, I claim *Faithful Are the Wounds* to be a creative act of remembering, a memory narrative in Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed’s terminology. Through its collective voice remembering a dissident outcast, the novel tries not only to make sense of past events but also to act in a socially transformative way:

Beyond the need to remember something specific, however, we claim that memory is an act of resistance, regardless of its content. By “memory” we mean a process at once disruptive and inventive. . . . memories are not retrievals of an archived past but something more imaginative and more driven by present needs. . . . It is the creative aspect of memory that makes it valuable as a socially transformative medium. . . . memory is produced from need: singly or collectively, we remember what we need to know.⁴³

All the voices of Sarton’s novel come to terms with their respective pasts in relation to Cavan, realizing that the process of remembering allows them to envision different futures. I have already alluded to the notion of “hermeneutics of suspicion,” a



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phrase attributed to Paul Ricœur but taken up by Eve Sedgwick in her distinction of paranoid from reparative readings. Sedgwick writes that in a post-Freudian mindset, paranoia has become “less a diagnosis than a prescription. In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant.” Part of the lure of the paranoid impulse lies, Sedgwick quips, “in a property of paranoia itself: simply put, paranoia tends to be contagious.”⁴⁴

In this sense, Sarton’s novel addresses *and* distances itself from continuing the contagiousness of the witch hunt that her character Cavan, and by extension Matthiessen, suffered through, opting for a precarious experiment in following a reparative impulse instead that is “additive and accretive” rather than addictive and contagious: “At a textual level, it seems to me that related practices of reparative knowing may lie, barely recognized and little explored, at the heart of many histories of gay, lesbian, and queer intertextuality.”⁴⁵ Reparative readings try to do justice in Sedgwick’s theory; they provide hope for a different future but also imagine pasts that could have happened differently. While Sarton does not envision different pasts, she conjures up ethical possibilities that question moral orders of the present, which are taken for ontological absolutes. According to Giorgio Agamben, “The just person does not reside in another world. . . . What changes are not the things but their limits. It is as if there hovered over them something like a halo, a glory.”⁴⁶ Sarton, writing in the midst of McCarthyism’s poisonous—paranoid—cultural climate of suspicions, anticipates what Agamben, referring to the Catholic tradition, calls a halo which the dead obtain upon entering heaven as “a zone in which possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality, become indistinguishable. The being that has reached its end, that has consumed all of its possibilities, thus receives as a gift a supplemental possibility.”⁴⁷ To the point of a quasi-sanctification of a sacrificed hero, there is also a worldly playfulness in Agamben’s metaphysics, a hope for change in the face of darkness, and the creative act of remembering reaches back to the dead “to offer them a supplemental possibility in the minds of those who remember. Memory, in this sense, is the halo of the living.”⁴⁸ I understand Sarton’s novel exactly in this sense when Cavan’s estranged sister says, “You see, in a queer way it’s as if Edward had died for me a long time ago. And now every moment he’s becoming more alive.”⁴⁹

Drawing on Sedgwick’s argument that intertextuality is at the core of many queer reparative texts, it may not be too far-fetched to mention that the name “Cavan” conjures up the Irish count name of the James family’s ancestral home. In addition, there is a moment in Cavan’s memorial service when his ghost seems to appear and the reading of John Donne’s “No man is an Island” sermon triggering the “separate individuals” of the mourners to “become one, lifted like a wave toward the presence of the dead, suddenly alive among them in that communion which he had not been

able to find in life.” Cavan’s sister Isabel (again: is the name a coincidence?) has a Jamesian epiphany when feeling being lifted up “beyond herself, like a release from bondage,” both presumably her own and that of the brother: “Tenderness for her brother filled her like a blessing. He’s at peace now, she thought. He doesn’t have to be torn to pieces any longer.”⁵⁰ In view of Matthiessen’s Christian belief, Sarton may have been “fully aware of the religious dimension of Matthiessen’s unhappy life and tragic death,” as Mark Walhout suggests in an article titled “F. O. Matthiessen and the Future of American Studies”:

[W]e need to learn how our literature can help us renew democratic community for a new millennium. This is a subject on which Matthiessen still has something to teach us . . . , because he understood that democratic community cannot be achieved by politics alone. . . . It was Matthiessen’s conviction that the American literary tradition constituted a resource for such an effort. . . . By understanding him the goal of American Studies becomes more clear: the renewal of democratic community in the post-Cold War era.⁵¹

Walhout’s essay is noteworthy for its claim to reconsider Matthiessen’s particular religiosity in conjunction with his reliance on the democratic streak in American literature as relevant for continuing American studies in the future. Leo Marx, a former student of Matthiessen, wrote in 1983 that “[i]t comes as something of a shock, if also an encouraging index of cultural change, to realize that as recently as 1950 Matthiessen’s friends considered his homosexuality unmentionable—at least in print.” The inhibiting silence in the collective portrait as well as in Sarton’s novel has led, Marx suggests, to a distorting effect and “is discernible in just about everything that has been written about Matthiessen.”⁵² Indeed, Marx was one of the first to not only publicly acknowledge Matthiessen’s homosexuality but to relate it to his work as an essential element of understanding. In the essay called “‘Double Consciousness’ and the Cultural Politics of F. O. Matthiessen,” to which I have been referring, Marx writes about the “debilitating sense of disunity” which attracted Matthiessen to the five writers of “his” American Renaissance—Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman—but the “special resonance” of the double consciousness can be perceived in Matthiessen’s own life: “to be a Harvard professor and a homosexual.”⁵³

Up until Marx’s revaluation, Matthiessen’s legacy had habitually been connected to failure: failure to live up to his vision of Christian socialism, failure to publicly admit his homosexuality, and a failure to face life. More often than not, his suicide was perceived as a self-sacrificing act due to all those failures in his political judgements, his scholarly ambitions, and his personal longings.⁵⁴ In fact, you can repeatedly read that Matthiessen was the first martyr of the Cold War, which brings us right back to Salzburg.



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Matthiessen's account of the 1947 Salzburg seminar was published a year later as *From the Heart of Europe*, his final and still largely neglected book, from which I have extensively been quoting. Part memoir, part travelogue, part educational program, and part political pamphlet, the book met with mixed reception, some of which was outright damning. The dual claim among his critics was that the book was of gross naivety and that it refused to condemn Stalinism. Irving Howe, for example, accused Matthiessen of an eagerness "to sidle up to 'the people,'" of being a relic, seduced by "comrades' marching 'arm in arm'" by "the pulpy *schwärmerei* of progressivist festivity," and of writing in "that falsely-charged prose style of the fellow-traveler atremble before the glories of the 'new world'—a style that might be called *vibrato intime*."⁵⁵ An anonymous *Time's* reviewer noted that "Harvard Professor Francis Otto Matthiessen is a bald, mild-mannered little bachelor who thinks the job of U.S. intellectuals is to 'rediscover and rearticulate' the needs for Socialism. . . . Seldom has the gullibility and wishful thinking of pinkish academic intellectuals been so perfectly exposed as in this little book."⁵⁶ Matthiessen, who was known to ignore reviews, had left this particular one on his desk together with a suicide note:

I am exhausted. I have been subject to so many severe depressions during the past few years that I can no longer believe that I can continue to be of use to my profession and my friends. I hope that my friends will be able to believe that I still love them in spite of this desperate act. . . . How much the state of the world has to do with my state of mind I do not know. But as a Christian and a socialist believing in international peace, I find myself terribly oppressed by the present tensions.⁵⁷

Later comments would connect the failure of his last book to Matthiessen's suicide two years later, alongside his other matching "failures" such as "foolishly" supporting the candidate of the Progressive Party, Henry Wallace, in the 1948 presidential campaign, his commitment to the radical Harvard Teachers Union, his clash with the university's President Conant for not interfering with the firing of colleagues thought to be linked to Communism, and ultimately for refusing to name—i.e., denounce—other purported communist "fellow-travelers."⁵⁸

In this context, it is important to debunk some of the mythic accounts of the first Salzburg Seminar that prevent us from recognizing the lapses that occurred in the overall success story, and one of the major breaks in that story concerns Matthiessen.⁵⁹ There were critical voices from the start, and they became vociferous after the session. The seminar was not solely funded by the Harvard Student Council, but also by private donors and above all by the World Student Relief organization in Geneva, "an international student organization founded after World War I with the purpose of aiding needy students."⁶⁰ While the Harvard group, including Matthiessen, suggested the title "American Civilization," the World Student Relief was skep-

tical, fearing U.S. propaganda, and suggested the bilateral title “Civilization: Europe and America” and also “proposed to invite an equal number of European and American scholars to teach at the summer school.”⁶¹ Although the Harvard group succeeded in their plans, other and more lasting criticism came from the Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC), the early Cold War intelligence agency within the United States Army, who monitored the session due to suspicions pertaining to certain subversive participants. Already in July 1947, a secret report identified “Communist activity at Harvard University Seminar at Salzburg.”⁶² Matthiessen was the first victim of these “un-American” activities, denied visa permits, and thus barred from rejoining the Seminar the following year. When the Education Division of the American Military authorities in Austria reviewed the program proposal for the 1948 session, it attested “a great improvement over last year’s program” because “Prof. Matthiessen of Harvard who conducted some rather questionable discussions last summer had been eliminated from the forthcoming Seminar.”⁶³ Matthiessen was replaced by Henry Nash Smith, ironically a student of Matthiessen.⁶⁴ Furthermore, while 1950 marked the official consolidation of the Salzburg Seminar, as secured funding allowed the launch of the “Salzburg Seminar for American Studies,” Matthiessen again had applied for and was rejected a visa to attend. In fact, he was not “allowed back into the American zones of occupation [after] he published *From the Heart of Europe* in 1948.”⁶⁵

The Whitmanesque Hard-On; Or, Matthiessen as Companionable Ghost

Going into the cathedral this morning we passed a workman—husky broad-shouldered, 40, the perfect Chaucerian yeoman. . . . Afterwards while I was standing alone in the choir he came up and said: “Fine old building, sir.” His voice was unusually gentle, his eye a dark full brown. We stood there talking a quarter of a minute, and as he went on I deliberately let my elbow rub against his belly. That was all: there couldn’t have been anything more. I didn’t want anything more. I was simply attracted by him as a simple open-hearted feller, and wanted to feel the touch of his body as a passing gesture. I had a hard on but there was no question of not wanting to keep myself for you.⁶⁶

Yes, this is Matthiessen, writing as “Devil” to his “Rat,” Russell Cheney. Those were the pet names Matthiessen and his partner used in their private correspondence, published by their friend Louis Hyde in 1978. I want to use this perhaps inappropriate quote to look into the future of American studies. To do so, I am taking my first cue from the 1924 entry in Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors’s *New Literary History of America* (2009). The entry, written by Robert Polito, is marked as “1924: F. O. Matthiessen meets Russell Cheney on the ocean liner Paris, and American literary his-

tory emerges from *Skull and Bones*.⁶⁷ Accordingly, Matthiessen's contribution to this particular history of American literature is not the 1941 publication of *American Renaissance* (the 1941 entry is Werner Sollors's article on "The Word 'Multicultural'"), but his meeting his future life companion as well as his admission of having attained "complete harmony" with Cheney.⁶⁸ Polito reads *American Renaissance* under its originally intended Whitmanesque title, *Man in the Open Air*, as a "vast, tangled, serpentine conversation among the dead and the living," but ultimately a "scholarly valentine to Cheney, for it was the painter who introduced his companion to American literature, particularly to Whitman."⁶⁹

This recent approach to Matthiessen is significant and has been possible only after the publication of his letters to his partner Cheney, who was twenty years his senior. To be sure, Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* remains one of the founding texts of our field, regardless of how much the older generation may loathe the nearly unreadable book, while younger scholars may have never opened the massive tome. Today, we have come to acknowledge that Matthiessen was far from a formalist and a precursor to New Criticism that many—including Nina Baym, Myra Jehlen, and Donald Pease—for a long time claimed him to be. Nowadays, we may wonder if Matthiessen's study has been used and been appropriated against his intentions in order to authorize a specific era and specific writers to hegemonically nationalize and thus empower the project of American studies.⁷⁰ Knowledge about Matthiessen through the letters exchanged with Cheney has changed our view on an alleged tragic figure of the early days of American studies, and a look at the flurry of revisions—some homophobically negative, but most celebratorily positive and many from former colleagues, friends, and students—prove that Matthiessen has shaped generations of Americanists and continues to do so, by now in a future-oriented way.⁷¹

Rat and the Devil is not only noteworthy as a pre-Stonewall document chronicling the private but largely closeted lives of a male couple over the span of twenty years; it offers much more, such as introducing an alternative reading of Whitman alongside Matthiessen's official one in *American Renaissance*. Indeed, critics such as Jonathan Arac and Michael Cadden go as far as claiming that there are two Matthiessens in print.⁷² Matthiessen, for example, counters Cheney's call for sexual abstinence with a quote from Whitman's "Body Electric," insisting on having a body with needs: "You say that our love is not based on the physical, but on our mutual understanding, and sympathy, and tenderness. And of course that is right. But we both have bodies: 'if the body is not the soul, what then is the soul?'"⁷³ Although an apt follower of sexual theory such as Edward Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex* (1908), Matthiessen was well aware of living outside of sanctioned societal norms and links their lives as sexual pioneers to the American myth of the frontier:

Of course this life of ours is entirely new—neither of us know of a parallel case. We stand in the middle of an unchartered, uninhabited country. That there have been other unions like ours is obvious, but we are unable to draw on their experience. We must create everything for ourselves. And creation is never easy.⁷⁴

He even discusses their “new life” as “marriage,” which remains a subject of debate even today:

Marriage! What a strange word to be applied to two men! Can't you hear the hell-hounds of society baying full pursuit behind us? But that's just the point. We are beyond society. We've said thank you very much, and stepped outside and closed the door. In the eyes of the unknowing world we are a talented artist of wealth and position and a promising young graduate student. In the eyes of the knowing world we would be pariahs, outlaws, degenerates. This is indeed the price we pay for the unforgivable sin of being born different from the great run of mankind.

And so we have a marriage that was never seen on land or sea and surely not in Tennyson's poet's dream! It is a marriage that demands nothing and gives everything. It does not limit the affections of the two parties, it gives their scope greater radiance and depth. Oh it is strange enough. It has no ring, and no vows, ... and no children. ... It has no three hundred and sixty-five breakfasts opposite each other at the same table; and yet it desires frequent companionship, devotion, and laughter. ...

How many, when reading this, would think so? Ah there's the mockery of it: those gates of society are of iron. And when you're outside, you've got to live in yourself alone, unless—o beatissimus—you are privileged to find another wanderer in the waste land.⁷⁵

Indeed, one might claim that Matthiessen infused a queerness into American studies from its very start. At a time when nobody considered Sarah Orne Jewett worthwhile studying, Matthiessen, the seeming guy's guy, wrote his very first study in American literature on her in 1929. In this study, which he wrote in the Maine abode he shared with Cheney, he focusses on Jewett's intimate relation with Annie Fields.⁷⁶ And, obviously, of the “Gang of Five,” as Polito calls Matthiessen's pantheon of white male writers constituting “his American Renaissance,”⁷⁷ three—Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman—are known today to have had homosexual leanings in whatever terminology one wants to apply to those feelings, for example Whitman's adhesiveness.

But then, many critics found the erotic focus in *American Renaissance* so troubling because it seemed to suggest a hidden agenda, starting with Matthiessen's announcement that the book was concerned chiefly with “the secret” of the life of the texts it discusses.⁷⁸ One also could think of Matthiessen's extraordinary analysis of Thomas Eakins's painting of naked young men, *The Swimming Hole* (1884–1885), whose reproduction is integrated into the Melville chapter, while the dis-

cussion follows two hundred pages later in his Whitman chapter. Clearly not part of the essential half-decade that comprises the book's overall scope, Matthiessen obviously considered the painting indispensable as a corollary to his textual analyses.⁷⁹ Capitalizing on the play of inside and outside, secretly closeted and out to the public, Henry Abelove relates part of such gossip to Matthiessen's openness about his sexuality to his fellow Skull and Bonesmen, that secret society at Yale where secrets were being kept for life—in contrast to his closetedness with regard to family, colleagues, and students.⁸⁰ “American Studies as a discipline,” according to Abelove, “is a well-received and much-validated set of reaction-formations to questions like Matthiessen's, questions framed at the start of the discipline's development but immediately and thoroughly deflected, sacrificed, and repressed as were the questioners themselves.”⁸¹ Abelove thus suggests that the acknowledgment of the prompted but unasked question in *American Renaissance* about the meaning of the erotic dynamic of privileged white men for nineteenth-century American democracy should hopefully trigger an unraveling of the repressed impulses to assert queer studies “as present at the start of American Studies, as always part of the unconscious of American Studies. And the future of American Studies would then depend in large measure on whether or not that unconscious is permitted to return.”⁸² And there he appears again, the ghost, clad in therapeutic gear. Abelove's vision relies on deep gossip as “illicit speculation, information, knowledge,” which is an “indispensable resource for those who are in any sense or measure disempowered . . . whenever it circulates in subterranean ways and touches on matters hard to grasp and of crucial concern.”⁸³ Abelove's curiosity about Matthiessen, instilled via gossipy rumors while being a student in Harvard in the early 1960s, brought him pleasure then and now, but it also gave him “a useful perspective on what the discipline of American Studies is, has been, and might yet be.”⁸⁴

One such gossipy speculative perspective is taken up by Mark Merlis in his novel *American Studies* (1994). Like Sarton, Merlis chooses to approach Matthiessen fictitiously and indirectly and as a figure of the past, here a remoter past since the perspective is channeled through Reeve, a former student of Matthiessen and once-upon-a-time lover. In the diegetic now, Reeve is an elderly guy recovering from a violent assault by a hustler. Barely having escaped being killed, he is shamed and humiliated, and his best friend Howard mischievously brings him the one book he was never capable of reading: *The Invincible City* by Tom Slater, the Matthiessen double in Merlis's novel. Lying in bed, an ailing, aging man, Reeve likens his memories of Slater, the tragic closeted figure of his past, to his own present in what might be called a sentimentalizing of the trauma of gay history or even an uncanny repetition of a homophobic narrative that leads to a permanent state of emergency.⁸⁵ However, I would like to include Merlis's *American Studies* as part of the discourse on

reparative thinking, as one of the examples to unearth Matthiessen not as a traumatic incidence but as a dissident spirit kindly reminding Reeve to come to terms with his very own ghosts. The novel—and it would deserve a more extended reading than I can provide here—follows a “perversely presentist model of historical analysis, a model, in other words, that avoids the trap of simply projecting contemporary understandings back in time, but one that can apply insights from the present to conundrums of the past,” to use Judith Halberstam’s phrase,⁸⁶ or imagines “what *might have happened but didn’t*,” to draw on Sedgwick,⁸⁷ when Reeve remarks, “Our might-have-beens are not footnotes to the main text of how-it-was; they are the text.”⁸⁸ The novel blends two characters of different generations (Slater aka Matthiessen as closeted teacher and Reeve as his student, who may not be closeted but experiences homophobia decades later), thereby creating a space of strange temporalities. In a move similar to Polito’s, Merlis radically re-imagines the genealogy of American studies by changing the title of *American Renaissance* to *The Invincible City*, a reference to the Calamus cluster of poems in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman’s most homoerotic sequence yet absent from *American Renaissance*.

I dream’d in a dream I saw a city invincible to the
 attacks of the whole of the rest of the earth;
 I dream’d that was the new city of Friends;
 Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust
 love—it led the rest;
 It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of
 that city,
 And in all their looks and words.⁸⁹

Transferring Matthiessen’s youthful Whitmanesque hard-ons, which we read about in his private letters, to the sexually contained scholarly study of his *American Renaissance* re-introduces the absent cause of queer politics back into American studies, thus radically resignifying the primal scene of the field’s imaginary.

Considering that we now know of their partnership, we can uncover traces of Cheney in many of Matthiessen’s texts, from Cheney’s illustrations in Matthiessen’s first study on Jewett to Matthiessen’s study on Cheney’s paintings to the references to Cheney in *From the Heart of Europe*, which brings me back to Salzburg. Besides its relevance as a chronicle of the Salzburg Seminar, Matthiessen’s last book is also a very private book, his only autobiographical work. In view of Matthiessen’s understandable reticence to mix his private and public personae, this turn toward the autobiographical is truly astounding. Gross, who attests to the book’s relevance as “an American studies ‘quo vadis?’” also points out its quality as a “personal testimony that is, after all, the travelogue’s dominant trope.”⁹⁰ And, indeed, here Matthiessen discloses his relation to Cheney, who died two years earlier and left Mat-

thiessen deeply distressed:

Salzburg is for me, in a special sense, a city of ghosts. Both the friends [i.e., Cheney and Hanns Kollar] I was here with last are now dead. At every turn that gives a vista of the medieval Festung on the hill or through the poplars to the swiftly rushing gray river, or, more particularly, at every intimate sight that requires an alert eye to pick it out at all: a half-hidden baroque crest over a door or an unexpectedly bright splash of color from a window box of geraniums and petunias at the end of an alley—at any delight of the eye in any place I ever was with Russel Cheney I am pierced with the realization of how much he taught me to see, of how life shared with him took on more vividness than I have ever felt in any other company.⁹¹

And it is here that ghosts take on a different shade. Clothed in a Jamesian rambling paratactic construction, this paragraph starts out with the presence of ghosts and ends with affectionately remembering the distinctness of a life shared with his late lover. This play of absence and presence continues, as Matthiessen finds himself speaking to Cheney whenever he sees something that is new or has changed and culminates in an admission of a community of the dead and the living:

This is the only sense in which immortality has a meaning which I have experienced: these friends are as present to me now as when we were here together. And the evocation of their spirits by so many concrete reminders is, for the most part, not painful, since they bring with them many of the best hours I have known.⁹²

Similar to Isabel, whose suffering allows her to see Ralph's ghost, facing him without fear, Matthiessen here remembers the past as being visited by kind, companionable ghosts.

In a daring leap from these otherworldly thoughts, Matthiessen in the next two paragraphs evokes two memories, not only connected to Cheney but also to physicality. He remembers a moment at Oxford that made him realize his earthy Americanness in contrast to the "cool" English upper-class fellow students. In a scenario that "might be lifted from an Eakins painting,"⁹³ he witnesses a scene of two English—not American—students stripping and having a naked swim when another boat with more English students appears and they cry out, "How disgusting! They must be Americans!" The irony is not lost on Matthiessen, so that even though he was not among the naked party, he still "became in reaction something of a chip-on-the-shoulder patriot" and turned to reading "American writers for the first time. Literature at Yale had still meant English literature. Whitman was my first big experience, particularly *The Children of Adam* and *Calamus* poems, which helped me begin to trust the body." Matthiessen here stresses two facts: the physicality of this—Amer-

ican—literature and his discovery of it in Europe, which, in turn, leads him to his third and perhaps most important memory: sharing them with Cheney. “In subsequent trips abroad in the nineteen-twenties and ’thirties it was *naturally* Europe and not America I was seeking. In that summer of 1931 Russell Cheney and I started out with some days in Holland . . ., and then went on through Germany towards Austria.”⁹⁴ It was Cheney, as we know from the letters, who made Matthiessen cherish Whitman. Critics such as William Cain have suggested that

Matthiessen tapped his passionate reading of Whitman to voice his love for Cheney. He communicated, and indeed sought to embody, the sexual and emotional vibrancies of the poet’s words. As a sign of the manner in which institutions encroach on the personal, it is worth noting that the authorities at Harvard denied Matthiessen permission to write his dissertation on Whitman. There was nothing more to be said about Whitman, he was told.⁹⁵

In his 1949 lecture “The Responsibilities of the Critic,” Matthiessen confesses and proposes “an ever widening range of interests for the ideal critic[,] I have moved from his central responsibility to the text before him out to an awareness of some of the world-wide struggles of our age.”⁹⁶ This ideal critic has to experience everything, here and now, and relate it to artists of the past: “This double quality of experiencing our own time to the full and yet being able to weigh it in relation to other times is what the critic must strive for, if he is to be able to discern and demand the works of art that we need most.”⁹⁷ It is with such a responsibility that Matthiessen came to Salzburg in 1947, with a mission of hope but also to stir things up. Matthiessen, as the various portraits of this father figure of American studies in scholarly works and fiction writings demonstrate, continues to be a fascinatingly ambiguous figure. We don’t need Freud to tell us that fathers are meant to “haunt” us, but I like to see “father Matthiessen” as a companionable, revenant ghost that continues to tease us to dare and venture into dark but luring closets, hidden but kinky secrets, and shattered but marvelous ruins. Huck Finn causing havoc at King Arthur’s court. I take his legacy as a challenge to continuously question ourselves as Americanists but also as precarious individuals with our very own ghosts.

Notes

- 1 F. O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 65–6.
- 2 Margaret Mead, “The Salzburg Seminar on American Civilization 1947: Report to the Harvard Student Council,” *Salzburg Global Seminar*, 1947, accessed August 3, 2016, https://www.salzburgglobal.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Documents/General_SGS_Documents/1947_MeadArticle.pdf.
- 3 Ibid.

- 4 Both Oliver Matthias Arnold Schmidt and George Holt Blaustein stress the important role of literature during the first few years of the Salzburg Seminar as crucial instigator of postwar cultural diplomacy in their respective Ph.D. dissertations. “American literature remained part of the core curriculum but lost the seminal role it had during the first three years,” argues Schmidt, and Blaustein adds that it was the “ascendance of social science [that] matched a decline in the importance of literature and other humanities—on which, after all, the utopianness of the first years in many ways depended.” Oliver Matthias Arnold Schmidt, “Civil-Empire by Co-optation: German-American Exchange Programs as Cultural Diplomacy, 1945–1961” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1999), 395; George Holt Blaustein, Jr., “To the Heart of Europe: Americanism, the Salzburg Seminar, and Cultural Diplomacy” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2010), 217. I want to thank Guenter Bischof for bringing Schmidt’s dissertation to my attention.
- 5 The first session on “American Civilization” took place from mid-July to August 1947. Richard Campbell, one of the young organizers from Harvard, articulated his aim for the seminar earlier that year: “We hope to create at least one small center in which Europeans from all countries, and of all political convictions, could meet for a month in concrete work under favorable living conditions . . . and to lay the foundations for a possible permanent center of intellectual discussion in Europe.” In his historical account of the event, Christian Thomsen—like Margaret Mead—describes the seminar as “meeting place of cultures,” where the great task “was not only to get previous enemies to sit at the same table but also to overcome the abyss of distrust that was opening up between former Eastern and Western allies.” It took, as Thomson asserts, “great tact, empathy and personal stamina,” and he specifically praises Matthiessen for being self-critical in his attitude towards the learning effects of American democracy. Richard Campbell quoted in Thomas H. Eliot and Lois J. Eliot, *The Salzburg Seminar: The First Forty Years* (Ipswich, MA: Ipswich Press, 1987), n. pag.; Christian W. Thomsen, *Leopoldskron: Early History, the Reinhardt Era, the Salzburg Seminar* (Siegen: Verlag Vorländer, 1983), 110–1. For further accounts of the early history of the Salzburg Seminar, see “1947: The Beginnings of Salzburg Global Seminar,” *Salzburg Global Seminar*, accessed on August 2, 2016, <http://www.salzburgglobal.org/about/history/foundation-of-the-salzburg-seminar.html>; Marty Gecek, “Salzburg Global Seminar: 1947–2015,” in *Austria and America: 20th-Century Cross-Cultural Encounters*, ed. Joshua Parker and Ralph J. Poole (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2017), 137–48; Johannes Hofinger, *Die Akte Leopoldskron: Max Reinhardt, das Schloss, Arisierung und Restitution* (Salzburg: Verlag Anton Pustet, 2005); Walter Hölbling, “Coming into View: European Re-Visions of ‘America’ after 1945,” *American Studies International* 37, no. 2 (1999): 24–42; Timothy W. Ryback, *The Salzburg Seminar: The First Fifty Years* (Salzburg: The Salzburg Seminar, 1997).
- 6 Matthiessen, *From the Heart*, 12.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 13–4.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 14. In the Prague section of *From the Heart*, Matthiessen pleads for the inclusion of more ethnically diverse and immigrant writers. “Until now,” he writes, “our immigrant groups have been studied too exclusively in terms of the problem presented by their assimilation into the dominant Anglo-Saxon society.” He argues instead for “the kind of history that will trace in detail what these peoples brought with them to the new world, . . . to what extent they have contributed some of those values to America.” Ultimately,

such a history “would enable us to know more about the rest of the world” (125–6). It also is noteworthy that his last, posthumously published, study was on Theodore Dreiser, an outsider in America with his German working-class background who joined the Communist Party in 1945. See Blaustein, “To the Heart of Europe,” 268.

- 9 Matthiessen, *From the Heart*, 14.
- 10 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006), 221.
- 11 In a long passage, Matthiessen speaks about Hanns Caspar Kollar, an Austrian who “taught me most about the possibilities of life in America” (15). With this comment admitting to the strange experience of an Austrian teaching him about American life Matthiessen quotes himself from *American Renaissance*; it is part of the dedication in which he jointly addresses Kollar and Harry Dorman from New Mexico.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 65–6.
- 13 I find remarkable Matthiessen’s educational agenda, as he speaks to the present by evoking the past. Although the seminar program emphasized contemporary rather than historical topics (especially in the social sciences), Matthiessen’s choice of literature to lecture on and teach about seems astonishing: Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, James, Dreiser, and Eliot.
- 14 Andrew S. Gross, “‘Death Is So Permanent. Drive Carefully’: European Ruins and American Studies Circa 1948,” in *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*, ed. Winfried Fluck, Donald E. Pease, and John Carlos Rowe (Hanover, NE: Dartmouth College Press, 2011), 89.
- 15 I want to thank Mark Reinhardt for encouraging me to follow the traces of this particular ghost.
- 16 Matthiessen, *From the Heart*, 44.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 45.
- 18 *Ibid.* This perspective would, of course, change in James’s later life after experiencing World War I. See Dietmar Schloss, *Culture and Criticism in Henry James* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1992), 121–40.
- 19 Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881; New York: Penguin, 1984), 100–1. In Matthiessen, the passage reads as follows: “I had not remembered the delicately effective use that James makes here of his special kind of ghost. When Isabel asks, so lightly, at the moment of her fascinated first glimpse of Gardencourt, ‘Isn’t there a ghost in this romantic old castle?’ Ralph responds, yes, of course there is, but it is seen only by those who have suffered much, and so he hopes that she will never see it” (45). Matthiessen thus elevated James’s “romantic old house” with “no romance [t]here” to a veritable “castle.” James’s original text is more elaborate and verbose, stretching over close to two pages.
- 20 Matthiessen, *From the Heart*, 45.
- 21 James, *Portrait of a Lady*, 624.
- 22 Matthiessen, *From the Heart*, 45.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 24 On queer kinship in *The Portrait of a Lady*, see Dana Luciano, “Invalid Revelations: Queer Kinship in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*,” *The Henry James Review* 23, no. 2

- (2002): 196–217, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hjr.2002.0011>.
- 25 Matthiessen, *From the Heart*, 45.
- 26 Dorin Smith, “Ghosts without Depth: The Recognition of Jamesian Ghosts,” *The Henry James Review* 37, no. 3 (2016): 247, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hjr.2016.0020>.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 252.
- 28 Leo Marx, “The Teacher,” in *The Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 236.
- 29 F. O. Matthiessen, *Henry James: The Major Phase* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944), xvi.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 Matthiessen, *From the Heart*, 22.
- 32 Alfred Kazin, *A Lifetime Burning in Every Moment: From the Journals of Alfred Kazin* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 85.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 83. On Kazin’s further impressions of the 1947 seminar, see Ralph J. Poole, “‘Isn’t there a ghost in this romantic old castle?’ American Studies at Salzburg’s Schloss Leopoldskron,” in *German–American Encounters in Bavaria and Beyond, 1945–2015*, ed. Birgit M. Bauridl, Ingrid Gessner, and Udo Hebel (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018), 103–28.
- 34 May Sarton, “The Pieces of This Death (for F. O. M.),” in *F. O. Matthiessen (1902–1950): A Collective Portrait*, ed. Paul M. Sweezy and Leo Huberman (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950), 134.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 135.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 Prov. 27:6 (NAS).
- 38 The novel starts right after Cavan’s suicide in October 1949 when his sister is summoned to attend to her estranged brother’s affairs. The narrative then moves back, as we follow several characters’ last encounters with, and thoughts about, Cavan.
- 39 May Sarton, *Faithful are the Wounds* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 209, 141, 192.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 121.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 42 See May Sarton, *Conversations with May Sarton*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 96, 101. In 1977, Sarton said that “*Faithful Are the Wounds* has quite a bit about marriage, though it also talks about a singular person who does live alone, the suicide, who was Matthiessen.” Sarton, *Conversations*, 66. Robert K. Martin recalls asking Sarton why she chose to omit Matthiessen’s homosexuality and his relation to Cheney, especially since the couple were living near Sarton in southern Maine. “Sarton’s amazing response to me was,” writes Martin, “that she had no idea about Matthiessen. Either she was lying or Matthiessen lived a very closeted life.” Robert K. Martin, “A Dream Still Invincible? The Matthiessen Tradition,” in *Whitman East and West: New Contexts for Reading Walt Whitman*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 99.
- 43 Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 11.
- 44 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham,

- NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 125–6.
- 45 Ibid., 149.
- 46 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community: Theory Out of Bounds*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 92.
- 47 Ibid., 56.
- 48 Castiglia and Reed, *If Memory Serves*, 28.
- 49 Sarton, *Faithful*, 196–7.
- 50 Ibid., 220.
- 51 Mark D. Walhout, “F. O. Matthiessen and the Future of American Studies,” *Prospects* 22 (1997): 9, 28.
- 52 Leo Marx, “‘Double-Consciousness’ and the Cultural Politics of an American Critic,” in *The Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 242–3.
- 53 Ibid., 249–50.
- 54 Randall Fuller summarizes the way Matthiessen’s suicide in 1950 has been perceived, both immediately after his death and since then: “Matthiessen’s suicide has been variously attributed to the death in 1945 of Cheney; his disappointment in his book on Henry James; the vitriol to which he was increasingly subjected in the local and national press as an unrepentant leftist intellectual during the Cold War; and lurking just below the surface of these attacks, the insinuation of his homosexuality.” Randall Fuller, “Aesthetics, Politics, Homosexuality: F. O. Matthiessen and the Tragedy of the American Scholar,” *American Literature* 79, no. 2 (2007): 385, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-2007-005>.
- 55 Irving Howe, “The Sentimental Fellow-Traveling of F. O. Matthiessen,” *Partisan Review* 15 (1948): 1125.
- 56 “Innocent Abroad,” *Time* (September 20, 1948): 114.
- 57 Quoted in John Rackliffe, “Notes for a Character Study,” in *F. O. Matthiessen (1902–1950): A Collective Portrait*, ed. Paul M. Sweezy and Leo Hubermann (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950), 91–2.
- 58 Matthiessen’s stance on communism is much more complicated than outlined here. An avowed and self-declared Christian socialist, he had strong sympathies for the communist ideal, but was highly critical of Stalinism, which may be gathered from various passages in his European travelogue; for example when he writes about “the conflict between my enduring belief in socialism and some of the grave shortcomings of the present Soviet state” (50).
- 59 From Matthiessen’s account, there is no doubt about how much he enjoyed the session and was keen on returning the next year. Even though he was truly supportive and crucial for making the event happen, his initial incentive was to meet the Czech Secretary of State, Jan Masaryk, in Prague (10). Ironically, while the manuscript was being printed, the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia took place. Matthiessen did not—or could not—change the manuscript, but inserted a long footnote in the form of a letter of a Czech contact informing him about the distressful and alarming state of the “new” Czechoslovakia and about the suicide of Masaryk (187–9).
- 60 Schmidt, “Civil-Empire,” 308.

- 61 Ibid., 309.
- 62 Ibid., 337. Matthiessen eventually suffered from the consequences of the report, but the CIC initially primarily targeted Clemens Heller, resulting in him being banned from attending the following year.
- 63 Quoted in Schmidt, “Civil-Empire,” 346.
- 64 Smith’s theme for the seminar was “The Impact of the West and the Westward Movement on American Thought in the 19th Century.” On the surface, this choice seemed more politically appropriate than Matthiessen’s focus on East Coast culture, but Smith viewed his topic as a vehicle to critically discuss American “isolationism” and its companion doctrine of ‘American exceptionalism.’” Quoted in Schmidt, “Civil-Empire,” 362.
- 65 Schmidt, “Civil-Empire,” 394.
- 66 Matthiessen to Russell Cheney, Glastonbury, April 18, 1925, in *Rat and the Devil: Journal Letters of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney*, ed. Louis Hyde (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978), 124.
- 67 Robert Polito, “A Judgment of Art,” in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009), 564.
- 68 Matthiessen to Russel W. Davenport, March, 1925, in *Rat and the Devil: Journal Letters of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney*, ed. Louis Hyde (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978), 18.
- 69 Polito, “Judgment of Art,” 567–8. Likewise, Polito reads *From the Heart of Europe* as a retracing of Matthiessen’s “initial travels with Cheney” (567), and he specifically highlights Mark Merlis’s 1994 novel *American Studies* as an illuminating effort in unearthing how Matthiessen “made a little country of his own” (Merlis quoted in Polito 566). I draw on some of these suggestions.
- 70 Jonathan Arac, “F. O. Matthiessen: Authorizing an American Renaissance,” *New Political Science* 7, no. 1 (1986): 28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148608429610>.
- 71 Some of the revisions not cited above include: Harry Levin, “The Private Life of F. O. Matthiessen,” *The New York Review of Books* (July 12, 1978): 42–6; Eric Cheyfitz, “Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance*: Circumscribing the Revolution,” *American Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1989): 341–61, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2713029>; Michael Cadden, “Engendering F. O. M.: The Private Life of *American Renaissance*,” in *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*, ed. Joseph A. Boon and Michael Cadden (New York: Routledge, 1990), 26–35; David Bergman, *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 85–102; Donald E. Pease, “Negative Interpellations: From Oklahoma City to the Trilling-Matthiessen Transmission,” *boundary 2* 23, no. 1 (1996): 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/303574>; Charles E. Morris, III, “‘The Responsivities of the Critic’: F. O. Matthiessen’s Homosexual Palimpsest,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84, no. 3 (1998): 261–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639809384219>; Jay Grossman, “The Canon in the Closet: Matthiessen’s Whitman, Whitman Matthiessen,” *American Literature* 70, no. 4 (1998): 799–832, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2902392>; Travis M. Foster, “Matthiessen’s Public Privates: Homosexual Expression and the Aesthetics of Sexual Inversion,” *American Literature* 78, no. 2 (2006): 235–62, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-2006-002>; Arthur Redding, “Closet, Camp, and Cold War: F. O. Matthiessen’s *From the Heart of Europe*,” *boundary*

- 2 33, no. 1 (2006): 171–201, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-33-1-171>; Nishant Shahani, “The Politics of Queer Time: Retro-Sexual Returns to the Primal Scene of American Studies,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 54, no. 4 (2008): 791–814, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.1552>.
- 72 Similarly, Colm Tóibín has claimed that Matthiessen lived two lives. In order to join them, “it would have taken heroic courage, and there was something about Matthiessen’s intelligence which was deeply suspicious of the heroic. What we have are his letters and journal and his critical work: the tone of one is clearly gay (and open and loose); the tone of the other is brilliant and academic and discloses nothing, except his fear of homosexuality.” Colm Tóibín, *Love in a Dark Time: Gay Lives from Wilde to Almodóvar* (New York: Picador, 2003), 13.
- 73 Matthiessen to Russell Cheney, Oxford, February 7, 1925, in *Rat and the Devil: Journal Letters of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney*, ed. Louis Hyde (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978), 86.
- 74 Matthiessen to Russell Cheney, Oxford, January 29, 1925, in *Rat and the Devil: Journal Letters of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney*, ed. Louis Hyde (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978), 71.
- 75 Matthiessen to Russell Cheney, London, September 23, 1924, in *Rat and the Devil: Journal Letters of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney*, ed. Louis Hyde (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978), 29–30.
- 76 “There is much to be said about Matthiessen’s interest in writing about women authors decades before much critical attention was focused on them,” argues Joel Pfister. Joel Pfister, *Critique for What? Cultural Studies, American Studies, Left Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 222. Notably, Matthiessen’s book on the James family includes a long chapter on Alice James, and he also wrote on Margaret Fuller, Emily Dickinson, and Katherine Anne Porter.
- 77 Polito, “Judgment of Art,” 564.
- 78 F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), x.
- 79 Matthiessen quotes Whitman who remarked that “Eakins errs just a little, just a little—a little—in the direction of the flesh” (604). Nevertheless, Matthiessen links the two artists later on: “In so far as the effects of one art can approach those of another, Eakins is most like Whitman in ‘The Swimming Hole,’ where one of his favorite relaxations provided the material for this natural arrangement of the naked bodies of some of his students and himself against a summer landscape. . . . What would have appealed most to Whitman was the free flexible movement within the composition, and the rich physical pleasure in the outdoor scene and in the sunlight on the firmly modelled flesh. Whitman’s work, in turn, approaches the powerful construction of Eakins in his sketch, ‘Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,’ in ‘Song of Myself’” (610). In a footnote, Charles E. Morris suggests that this palimpsestic moment of placement and analysis of Eakins’s painting in Matthiessen’s book is a “thinly veiled piece of visual evidence” of Matthiessen’s method: by alluding to the tabooed passions of “his” authors, he “indulges in his own sexually charged reading[s].” Morris, “Homosexual Palimpsest,” 280.
- 80 Henry Abelove, *Deep Gossip* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 57–8, 63. Heide Hoechst argues that “[a]lthough Louis Hyde has edited all mention of Skull

and Bones from the published collection of the couple's letters . . . , a cross-reference of friendships and Skull and Bones membership roster reveals a nearly encompassing overlap. To maintain the secrecy of this Society, Hyde encodes fraternal membership in the collected letters with the phrases, 'close friend' and 'Yale classmate.'" Heidi Hoechst, "Refusable Past: Speculative Democracy, Spectator Citizens, and the Dislocation of Freedom" (PhD diss., University of California at San Diego, 2008), 112.

- 81 Abelove, *Deep Gossip*, 69.
- 82 Ibid.
- 83 Ibid., xii.
- 84 Ibid., xvii.
- 85 See Robert J. Corber, "Sentimentalizing Gay History: Mark Merlis, Alan Hollinghurst, and the Cold War Persecution of Homosexuals," *Arizona Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (1999): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.1999.0005>.
- 86 Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 52–3.
- 87 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 151.
- 88 Mark Merlis, *American Studies* (New York: Alyson Books, 1994), 86.
- 89 Walt Whitman, "I Dreamed in a Dream," 1867, *The Walt Whitman Archive*, ed. Ed Folsom and Kenneth Prince, accessed July 16, 2018, <https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG1867/poems/52>.
- 90 Gross, "European Ruins," 86.
- 91 Matthiessen, *From the Heart*, 22.
- 92 Ibid.
- 93 Redding, "Closet, Camp, and Cold War," 192.
- 94 Matthiessen, *From the Heart*, 23; my emphasis.
- 95 William E. Cain, *F. O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 47.
- 96 F. O. Matthiessen, "The Responsibilities of the Critic," 1949, in *The Responsibilities of the Critic: Essays and Reviews by F. O. Matthiessen*, sel. John Rackliffe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 14.
- 97 Ibid., 18.

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