

HISTORICIZING F. O. MATTHIESSEN'S METHOD AND SCOPE, OR WHAT
LITERATURE DOES AND HOW IT DOES IT IN 1930s AMERICA

By

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To Virginia, always

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The Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression led to a period of cultural and ideological collapse comparable to the crisis of national identity during the Civil War. As such, literature during the 1930s is commonly viewed as a key site of resistance to the discourses of homogenous nationalism and corporate capitalism. Moreover, many American authors and literary critics during the 1930s worked to formulate a critical methodology that used art to unify the emerging Popular Front and enact a radical cultural change. This essay analyzes F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941) by rereading the text as a response to this moment of ideological upheaval. Ultimately, I argue that when considered as a product of the cultural nexus of the 1930s the text emerges as a radical cultural critique of Interwar America that, since its publication, has been captured by the discourse of nationalism.

I begin by reconstructing the critiques of *American Renaissance* from the 1980s and 1990s that situate Matthiessen firmly in the cultural logic of the Cold War. Next, I argue for a different periodization, which (re)places the text in the decade preceding World War II. Moreover, I claim that when read as a product of the 1930s, *American*

Renaissance works to create an American literary tradition that endorses a labor-based economic revolution. This goal unites Matthiessen with the field of American Marxist literary historians.

Next, I reevaluate Matthiessen's relationship these literary histories by focusing on methodology, specifically, on the ways in which both camps believe how literature should enact this economic revolt. Though Matthiessen is often seen as making a formative break from Marxism in terms of methodology, I interpret his method as a meditation on a new kind of criticism, one that incorporates metaphysics into traditional Marxist theory. Moreover, such a desire to augment Marxism aligns Matthiessen with Georg Lukács, who worked to integrate Hegelianism and the dialectic into the standard conception of Marxism.

Having provided an outline for reinterpreting *American Renaissance* as a text mired in the tensions of the 1930s, I offer two brief readings of the work. First, I reassess Matthiessen's reading of *Moby Dick* in light of the threat of totalitarian fascism in Europe, a common anxiety among the Popular Front intellectuals. Second, I offer a dialectical reading of Matthiessen's section on Walt Whitman in which I argue that the form of Matthiessen's interpretation parallels Hegel's Master/Slave narrative. I conclude this essay by returning to current criticisms of *American Renaissance* and address the implications that my reading brings to the critical discourse surrounding the text.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In the preface to *The Political Unconscious* (1981) Fredric Jameson explains, “we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations” (9). Within the ideological battleground of American Studies, F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941) is perhaps the finest example of such a text. Since its publication, the work has been interpreted and reinterpreted to the extent that it is nearly impossible to clear through the entanglement of criticism to see the text as historically mediated. The purpose of this essay is to move toward a historicization of *American Renaissance* in which I argue that when considered as a product of the cultural logic of the 1930s, the text emerges as a radical cultural critique of Interwar America.

To achieve this reading, I first examine *American Renaissance* as it is generally understood today, as an ideological whipping post for the sins of American Studies. In the following sections, I (re)place Matthiessen in the cultural nexus in which he was writing by focusing my discussion on two general problematics: first, what Matthiessen and his contemporaries believe literature does, or to use Matthiessen’s term, its scope; second, how literature enacts this revolution, or, its method. I conclude this essay by returning to current criticisms of *American Renaissance* and address the implications that my reading brings to the critical discourse surrounding the text.

CHAPTER 2 PERIODIZING *AMERICAN RENAISSANCE*

Soon after its publication, *American Renaissance* (1941) solidified the movement that brought Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman out of relative obscurity, and placed them at the top of the newly formed American canon. Moreover, from the mid-1940s to the late 1970s, countless Americanists praised *American Renaissance* claiming, “it reset the terms for the study of American history; it gave us a new canon of classic texts; and it inspired the growth of American Studies in the United States and abroad” (Berkovitch 631). Matthiessen’s text is arguably the most important scholarship in establishing American literature as a field separate from English literature, as well as a cornerstone of American Studies.

However, the debate surrounding *American Renaissance* took a definitive turn in the 1980s with the emergence of the New Americanists, a phrase that derives from Frederick Crews’ 1988 article “Whose American Renaissance?” According to Crews, the New Americanists share the single purpose of “spurning the unified schemes and hierarchies of every kind” (68). Unsurprisingly, Matthiessen became a key target and has been, according to Caren Irr, “blamed for the sins of American Studies almost as often as he is credited with the field’s foundation” (25). However, as I will argue, the figure that the New Americanists construct in their critique of Matthiessen generally obscures his historical and cultural context, (mis)placing *American Renaissance* in the binary cultural logic of Cold War totalitarianism.

Many of the New Americanists’ arguments are collected in *American Renaissance Reconsidered* (1985), and can be divided into two interconnected

categories: an evaluation of the effects of *American Renaissance's* consensus formation, which, they argue, is Matthiessen's true purpose or his *scope*; and a critique of the ways in which Matthiessen utilizes literary criticism, or his *method*.

The arguments in *American Renaissance Reconsidered* are summarized in "Moby Dick and the Cold War," by Donald Pease, editor of the collection. He claims, "Acting as a means of consensus-formation as well as canon-definition, Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* displaced the need to acknowledge dissenting opinions onto the power to discover un-recognized masterworks" (118). Moreover, as Eric Cheyfitz¹ argues, the consensus that Matthiessen creates is not for the purpose of national unity but instead to consolidate the already "growing consensus of this largely white, male, middle-class, and Protestant-oriented audience" (349). When viewed as such, Matthiessen begins to embody an authoritarian voice which, in effect, silences not only dissident, but marginalized voices as well.

According to the New Americanists, the effect of this consensus-formation is most obvious in the canonization of certain American authors, and it has been their primary goal to reinstate other voices into the canon. As Jane Tompkins and Louis A. Renza argue, the looming presence of Matthiessen and *American Renaissance* served as justification to exclude certain works and methodologies. In "Poe's Secret Autobiography," Renza claims that Poe was omitted from *American Renaissance* – and, in turn, excluded from the first American canon – because his presence would have diminished the elite status of Matthiessen's writers as well as complicate Matthiessen's

¹ While Cheyfitz's article "Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*: Circumscribing the Revolution" (1989) is not included in *American Renaissance Reconsidered*, Cheyfitz's immanent argument closely aligns him with the scholars collected in *American Renaissance Reconsidered*.

sweeping aesthetic and moral vision. This leads Renza to argue, “These de facto diminishments of Poe's importance in American literary history tend to confirm Claude Richard's judgment that ‘to American critics, Poe has been relegated to relative obscurity’ or hardly exists ‘because he didn't fit into the picture’” (59).

Moreover, the consensus formation that takes place in the wake of *American Renaissance* has largely impacted the American Studies’ critical methodology. Matthiessen’s dominant form of critical inquiry, according to the New Americanists, created an evaluative framework in which only certain authors could belong. In the article “The Other American Renaissance” Tompkins states the critical tradition born out of *American Renaissance* relegates the sentimental novel to a position in which it can only be seen as “literature of ‘reassurance,’ calculated to soothe the anxieties of an economically troubled age.” As such, Tompkins realizes that to argue for the inclusion of the sentimental novel in the American canon, she must work in a critical discourse that is wholly removed from the shadow of *American Renaissance*, by measuring the novels in terms of “the problems these writers were trying to solve . . . given the social circumstances in which they were obliged to work” (35). Ultimately, this representation of *American Renaissance* creates a symbol of a unified, hierarchical schematic that the New Americanists are working to deconstruct in the name of literary – and social – equality.

Perhaps more important to the New Americanists than the effects of Matthiessen's consensus formation are ways in which *American Renaissance* accomplishes this silencing, which is contingent on Matthiessen's circumvention of the true revolutionary ethos surrounding the Civil War. To accomplish

this, Matthiessen ignores the political and historical discourse of the 1850s and instead focuses on aesthetics. Jonathan Arac argues in “Matthiessen: Authorizing an American Renaissance” that Matthiessen makes little attempt to address political issues in a politically turbulent time. In fact, as Arac points out, the Civil War was not indexed. Therefore, because the war was not integrated into an understanding of the time period, “Matthiessen demonstrated that his object of study, the literary, functioned for writers as an evasion. . . from a political life of which they did not approve” (97). Pease clarifies Matthiessen’s political impotence:

[Matthiessen’s writers] silence the conflicting claims by replacing the politicians’ forensic motives with motives open to the more rarefied concerns of aesthetics. Seeming, then, to distinguish Emerson and Whitman from politicians, *American Renaissance* in fact locates in their writings an organicist aesthetic justification for the rhetoric of national individualism at precisely the moment when politicians seem to be losing the divine justification for that rhetoric. (“*Moby Dick*” 127)

Therefore, Matthiessen glosses over a number of contradictions and problematics including, as we have seen above, an exclusionary, representative canon. Moreover, Matthiessen’s methodology ultimately justified the espousal of revolution in the name of internationalism while in actuality validating nationalist imperialism.

Though *American Renaissance* claims to be an international, comparative project, Cheyfitz argues, “*American Renaissance* embraces the nationalistic project at the institutional center of its academic discipline” (346). Moreover, Matthiessen’s nationalism could be further codified as narrowly provincial, ultimately “appear[ing] at times as no more than a cosmopolitanism with a decidedly Western European orientation, [and calling] to make American literature ‘worldly’ or ‘sophisticated’ in relation to a particular paradigm of culture” (343). Cheyfitz continues, ‘We are reminded here by the always possible synonymy of circles and revolutions when what is

apparently radical, whatever its innovations . . . if it does not work for the empowerment of the disempowered . . . will turn out to have been another form of reaction” (346).

Such a narrow conception of nationalism, according to Cheyfitz and other New Americanists, removes America from the rest of the world, the majority of Americans from the concept of nation, and mutes any revolutionary potential that may have existed during the historical American Renaissance.

Pease echoes Cheyfitz's argument claiming that Matthiessen's proclaimed internationalism is actually locked into the double bind of the Cold War. This argument is built on his historicization of *American Renaissance*, in which he argues,

We shall find Matthiessen writing at a time – 1941 – as distant from the present as was the Second World War, destined to eventuate in the Cold War . . . at a time America needed consciousness of the great tradition threatened by a totalitarian power different from the present one. (“*Moby Dick*” 118)

Contextualizing Matthiessen at the eve of the Cold War is crucial to Pease's argument, as well as the other New Americanists. For example, Renza also places *American Renaissance* “in the context of the post-World War II institutionalization of American criticism” (59). According to Pease, “In totalizing the globe into a super opposition between the two superpowers the United States and the Soviet Union, the Cold War economizes on any opposition to it by relocating all opinions within its frame” (“*Moby Dick*” 144). Therefore, Matthiessen's nationalism, disguised as internationalism, is not simply exclusionary, but imperialistic and authoritarian: locked into the either/or logic of the Cold War paradigm there is only the choice between two authoritarian superpowers.

As such *American Renaissance* can only be seen as a perpetuation of the hegemony, which, as Pease explains, is “one in which all the arguments have been premeditated if not quite settled, [in which] the only work left [is] that of being the

'national character' through whom the paradigm can speak" (*Moby Dick* 117). By this logic, it becomes clear why Pease and the New Americanists are working to deconstruct *American Renaissance*: the New Americanists' construction of *American Renaissance*, growing ever larger in its ideology, eventually represents and perpetuates Cold War era American authoritarianism. Therefore a critique of *American Renaissance* is dually a critique of imperialism and authoritarianism.

What Pease and the New Americanists do not take into account, however, is that while *American Renaissance* was published in 1941, it was a work that took almost ten years to complete. In fact, what was to eventually become *American Renaissance* was first commissioned in the early '30s by W.W. Norton who asked Matthiessen for a "small" book on American literature (White 431). This small, yet crucial, detail shifts the historical period in which Matthiessen was writing. Therefore, if we see *American Renaissance* as influenced by the objective history of the '30s, then Matthiessen becomes a very different figure. In *Suburb of Dissent* (1998), Caren Irr states,

It is important to understand that someone like Matthiessen was positioned between '30s radicalism and Cold War consensus. He was not simply articulating a repressed master-narrative, he was struggling to understand how a radical cultural politics could correspond to the nation transforming around him. (26)

If we read Matthiessen as a figure of '30s radicalism, then a number of new questions emerge: What was Matthiessen's relationship with the critical and cultural nexus of the 1930s? How can we best understand the revolution that Matthiessen and his contemporaries were attempting to create? What did Matthiessen conceive as the purpose and methodology in *American Renaissance* in relation to his contemporaries?

In reference to the first question, it is essential that we, in the words of Irr, "clear our way through the morass of Cold War polemics" (26). To accomplish this, it is

important to first realize that since Matthiessen is portrayed as the “founding father” of American Studies, *American Renaissance* is commonly viewed as written in an ideological vacuum. Such a construction occurs on both sides of the Cold War. Early Americanists, such as Henry Nash Smith, commented on the “pioneer effort” of *American Renaissance*, and Richard Ruland in *The Rediscovery of American Literature* (1967), writes, “or *American Renaissance*, tightly knit and massive as it is must be taken as a whole. It not only represents – with a few exceptions – [Matthiessen’s] American literary tradition. It is also an articulation of the total man; it *is* F. O. Matthiessen” (qtd. in Cheyfitz 231). The New Americanists are not immune to this conceptualization of Matthiessen either. Pease echoes Ruland’s statement, though with less reverie stating, “The ‘great tradition’ of American literature founded by *American Renaissance* silenced these contradictory relationships” (“Moby Dick” 141). Ultimately, treating *American Renaissance* as an autonomous text precludes Matthiessen’s intellectual involvement with other critics: at best his relationship is considered as hostile to, or removed from, his contemporaries.

However, Irr suggests that Matthiessen had a much more congenial relationship with his fellow scholars:

[Matthiessen’s] response to [earlier literary histories] was not nearly as hostile as subsequent literary historiography have implied. On the contrary, Matthiessen had a relatively friendly, or, to use his own terminology, “organic” relation with the 30s writers. Furthermore, as William E. Cain has pointed out, the structure of *American Renaissance* ‘attests to his kinship’ with other critics, scholars, and intellectuals of the 1930s. (28)

Therefore, to better understand *American Renaissance* as historically mediated, we must consider the rich critical work occurring in the ‘30s with which Matthiessen was conversation.

In reference to my second question, it is helpful to turn to a handful of recent intellectual histories of the '30s, because, like the New Americanists' critics evaluation of *American Renaissance*, many historical studies of the period are locked into the a Cold War logic. Of this one-sided vision, Michael Denning explains:

The post-war Red scare and the anti-communist purge combined with the Cold War to eradicate much of the radical culture of the Popular Front. The 'thirties' became an icon, the brief moment when 'politics' captured the arts, when writers went left, Hollywood turned Red, and painters, musicians, and photographers were 'social-minded.' The left turn of the depression is usually seen as a detour if not a wrong turn. (*CF* xvi)

Since the end of the Cold War, however, many more intellectual histories – including Denning's *The Cultural Front* (1997) and Irr's *Suburb of Dissent* (1998) – have been willing to explore the socialisms and Marxism of the time. According to these histories, the Crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression brought about widespread ideological disestablishment. As Americans became increasingly wary of capitalism as an economic structure and the role of the worker/consumer within it, many '30s activists comprising the Popular Front saw an opportunity for ideological revolution, or, as Michael Gold claimed, a "second American Renaissance" (qtd. in *CF* xvi).

Moreover, nascent American Studies was an integral part of this second renaissance. According to Irr:

In the 1930s, well before the institutionalization of American Studies and in an era when the study of American literature was in its infancy, there was a concept of national culture based not on an opposition between national and insurgent subjects but on an alliance between the two; during the 1930s, left-wing cultural critics understood U.S. national culture as a radical – or revolutionary – tradition. (26)

Denning echoes Irr's claim in "Special American Conditions" (1986), specifically positioning Matthiessen between "the cultural criticisms which sought an American 'usable past' – that of Brooks, Mumford, Kenneth Burke, Waldo Frank – and the cultural

politics of the popular front Communism of the late 1930s and 1940s" (359). More specifically, the "national subjects" are the writers who worked to construct a "usable past" in the form of literary histories – including V. L. Parrington's *Main Currents of American Thought* (1927-30), V. F. Calverton's *the Liberation of American Literature* (1932), and Van Wyck Brooks' *The Flowering of New England* (1937) – while the "insurgent subjects" can be better classified as the self-proclaimed Marxists such as Granville Hicks, Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, and Mike Gold.

I address my final question in the following sections, by reinterpreting *American Renaissance* in relation to a number of other 1930s American literary texts.

CHAPTER 3 SCOPE

In the introduction to *American Renaissance* titled “Method and Scope”

Matthiessen explains his goal:

You might be primarily concerned with *what* these books were in as works of art, with evaluating the fusion of form and content. By choosing [this alternative] my main subject has become the conceptions held by five of our major writers concerning the function and nature of literature, and the degree to which their practice bore out their theories. (vii)

The assessment of literature’s purpose, or scope, is one of the crucial problematics through which Matthiessen works. Moreover, when considered historically, we find that *American Renaissance*, like many of American literary histories of the ‘30s, was conceived as a means of radical cultural critique. By focusing on the question of scope, we can not only tease out some of the radical politics embedded in the text, but also explore Matthiessen’s relationship with many ‘30s radicals, especially the Marxist literary historians.

Before fully assessing *American Renaissance*’s scope in relation to Matthiessen’s contemporaries, there are two methodological issues that should be addressed. First, Matthiessen judges the literary merit of the selected works “in light of its authors’ purposes [as well as in] our own developing conception of literature.” His “double aim, therefore, has been to place these works both in their age and [his own]” (*AR* vii-viii). As such, Matthiessen collapses the historical distinction between the Civil War and the Great Depression. Such a conflation was not uncommon in the ‘30s. In *Shores of Light* (1932), for example, Edmund Wilson states, “I want to suggest that the present depression may be nothing less than one of the turning-points in our history, our first real crisis since the Civil War” (524-525).

Though Matthiessen is not as explicit in his rhetoric, there are a number of instances in *American Renaissance* where Matthiessen makes the same sort of comparison. For example, in his discussion of Henry David Thoreau, Matthiessen reminds the reader that when Thoreau objected to the division of labor, he was writing from an agrarian and craft economy where the forces of industrialism were still encroaching. However, Matthiessen writes, “his human values were so clear that they remain substantially unaltered by our changed conditions” (AR 77). Matthiessen begins his statement by separating Thoreau’s agrarian and craft economy from that of the ‘30s’ own industrial economy. As such, we can read Matthiessen’s commentary on the effects of burgeoning capitalism in the 1850s as a critique of the fully realized capitalistic state of modernized interwar America. Ultimately, Matthiessen’s choice of discussing authors from the 1850s is not a retreat. Instead, like many of his contemporaries, Matthiessen captures the revolutionary desire that emerged in ideological crisis of the Civil War and reproduces it in the contemporary ideological crisis of the Great Depression.

Secondly, when viewing the text with this historical bifocality, Matthiessen’s discussion of democracy becomes paramount: in both moments American democracy was felt to be deeply imperiled.¹ In “Method and Scope,” Matthiessen states that his goal in assessing the writers in *American Renaissance* is to explore how each of his writers conceived of democracy. However, democracy is more than a unifying factor. He continues,

¹ Special thanks to Susan Hegeman for this insight

Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville all wrote literature for democracy in a double sense. They felt that it was incumbent upon their generation to give fulfillment to the potentialities freed by the Revolution, to provide a culture commensurate with America's political opportunity. . . what emerges from the total pattern of their achievement – if we make the effort to repossess it – is literature for our democracy. (AR xv)

Democracy is the most important ideological motif in the text. Matthiessen explains, the “common denominator of [his] five writers, uniting even Hawthorne and Whitman was their devotion to democracy” (AR ix). Therefore, Matthiessen's goal is not only to assert that his writers are inherently democratic or that they wrote for the good of their own democratic project, but also to present a model of democracy that can be used in '30s American culture. He believes a critic's work “must so reflect his scholarship as to prove that it has drawn him toward his people, not away from them; that his scholarship has been used as a means toward attaining their end, hence his” (AR xv). Ultimately, Matthiessen's goal is to be an exponent of democracy, to understand not only his role in relation to the population but each individual's connection with the whole. Moreover, his use of the terms “democracy,” and “individualism,” which today smack of American exceptionalism, carried very different meaning during the '30s. Arac explains, “throughout the 1930s. . . ‘individualism’ and. . . ‘community’ or the ‘people’ figured in the discourse of widely different American intellectuals” (98).

Because Matthiessen seems to extol individualism while many of his contemporaries utilize the discourse of community, it is tempting to read Matthiessen's criticism of his contemporaries as a formative split. However, his association with writers such as Granville Hicks, V. F. Calverton, Van Wyck Brooks, V. L. Parrington, and others is, in fact, more complex. While Matthiessen held a number of reservations about '30s Marxism, he also saw its revolutionary potential, not only as a social

philosophy but also in the literary critics who associated themselves with Marxism.

Such a sentiment is made explicit in “Responsibilities of the Critic” (1949), a

retrospective proclamation of his critical influences and philosophies:

Despite all of the excesses and exaggerated claims of the Marxists of the ‘thirties, I still believe that the principles of Marxism – so much under fire now – can have an immense value in helping us to see and comprehend our literature. Marx and Engels were revolutionary in many senses of the word. They were pioneers in grasping the fact that the industrial revolution had brought about – and would continue bringing about – revolutionary changes in the whole structure of society. The principles of Marxism remain at the base of much of the best social and cultural thought of our century. (RC 11)

Matthiessen expresses Marxism’s value in literary criticism most fully in a review of Granville Hicks’ *The Great Tradition*, which, according to Matthiessen, makes “the challenge which criticism should be.” This challenge, “one of the great services of Marxian criticism,” is the realization that “literature is inevitably a form of action. . . the principle that ‘art not only expresses something, but does something’”(RC 192).

Matthiessen also relates to the desire for a revolution that is firmly situated in the economic condition. Arguing in *From the Heart of Europe* (1948), “The Marxists mastered long ago a lesson that none of us can ignore: it is worse than futile to try to instill democracy without building concurrently its economic basis” (40). Such an observation helps to elucidate Matthiessen’s anti-capitalism, ultimately complicit with many of his contemporaries. One of the ‘30s left-wing critics’ objectives was a radical critique of capitalism, which argues that greed usurped the individual rights for financial prosperity (Irr 31). An example of such a criticism can be found in Hicks’ *The Great Tradition*:

So the capitalistic enterprise swept ahead. . . On the material level the profit and loss account of that mad advance is not easy to calculate. On the cultural level it can, alas be more easily estimated. In a society that

regarded chaos as natural, that made greed a virtue, that placed financial advancement before personal integrity, culture was not likely to flourish. (3)

This argument that portrays capitalism as a cultural destroyer that divides society for the sake of greed and financial advancement, is a common assessment.

If we look closely to tease out Matthiessen's politics in *American Renaissance*, we will find that the text shares the anti-capitalist sentiment found in *The Great Tradition* and other literary histories. For example, in the opening chapter on Emerson, Matthiessen explains that Emerson's main issue is that he too often deals in contradictions. These contradictions can extend beyond the literary into the realm of the political, and too often, when dealing in generalization about an ideal, Matthiessen argues, "Emerson could commit himself to such remarks as 'Money. . . is, in its effect and laws, as beautiful as roses. Property keeps the accounts of the world, and is always moral.'" Matthiessen continues that such sentiments, "working on temperaments less unworldly than their authors, have provided vicious reinforcements to the most ruthless elements in our economic life" (AR 4). Just as in *The Great Tradition*, Matthiessen asserts the same critique of the "ruthless elements" of capitalism.²

Because Matthiessen, along with a number of other literary historians, believes that any true revolution begins at the economic level, he also agrees with the Marxist tenet that labor reform is, ultimately, the best means to exact societal change. In *From the Heart of Europe*, Matthiessen discusses the infeasibility of the Action Party in

² Since Matthiessen was strongly anti-capitalist, we may be able to discern part of the reason that Matthiessen chose his five authors instead of their more popular contemporaries – namely works by Harriet Beecher Stowe, James Fennimore Cooper, and other sentimental writers. Unlike these commercially successful authors whose works were greatly influenced by, and an influence on, mass culture and consumerism, Matthiessen's writers, due in no small part to their lack of commercial success, focused their work on rebellion.

Austria, “composed mainly of high-principled intellectuals. . . so devoted to their abstract ideas that they are still detached from any mass base.” He continues, “They have not yet learned that no progressive party can carry real weight unless it is solidly rooted in the labor movement (27).

According to Matthiessen, labor is the heart of every revolution. This sentiment is most evident in his activism, and while recounting each of his activities would exceed the range of this essay, Frederick Stern’s brief outline in *F. O. Matthiessen: Christian Socialist as Critic* demonstrates Matthiessen’s commitment to labor-based uprisings:

Matthiessen participated in some of the most important political struggles of the quarter-century that ended with his death. He was involved during the thirties with many labor causes, and he helped to form and then served several times as president of the Harvard Teacher’s Union. He came to the defense of labor leaders and workers under attack, most notably in the case of a group of New Mexican miners, which led to a *New Republic* article by him; in successful efforts to stop the deportation of Harry Bridges, president of the longshoremen’s union on the West Coast; and in opposition to the Smith Act indictments of a group of Minnesota Teamsters Union and Socialist Workers Party leaders, chief among whom was Vincent R. Dunne. (15)

In light of such a rich career in labor-based activism, it is vexing that most recent literary critics find Matthiessen’s politics at odds with his literary methodology that overlooks the ways in which Matthiessen’s politics is embedded within *American Renaissance*, especially in his discussion of Thoreau and Whitman.

Matthiessen explains that unlike Emerson, who is focused on the individual, Thoreau is much more interested in the figure of the “common man.” This awareness is reflected in Thoreau’s language: “Thoreau knew that the farmer’s lingo surpassed the scholar’s labored sentences. He had a relish for old sayings and for rural slang, and set down many fragments of conversation with his friends the woodchoppers and the farmers” (*AR* 86). Thoreau’s concentration on farmer, one whose work in the soil unites

him with society, is perhaps Thoreau's most important rhetorical addition to *American Renaissance*.

Because of his bond, Thoreau acknowledges, "The life of a civilized people is an *institution*, in which the life of the individual is to a great extent absorbed, in order to preserve and perfect that of the race." He is wary of the complete loss of the individual to an increasingly commercial society. Since he was increasingly aware of the possibility of economic oppression, his activism" bound up with the determination to do all he could to prevent the dignity of common labor from being degraded by the idle tastes of the rich" (*AR* 173). As such, Thoreau's main objection is to the division of labor, which "divided the worker, not merely the work, reduced him from a man to an operative, and enriched the few at the expense of the many." According to Matthiessen, Thoreau's "contribution to our social thought lies in his thoroughgoing criticism of the narrow materialism of the day. . . [He] came about as close to the status of proletarian writer as was possible in his simple environment" (*AR* 78). It is the anachronism "proletarian writer" that is especially telling when considering the context of the 1930s radicalism.

Proletarian fiction was a staple of Popular Front literature, which became increasingly popular in the early to mid-1930s. According to David Eldridge in *American Culture in the 1930s* (2008), "At the moment of capitalism's collapse [Mike Gold, Joseph Freeman, Granville Hicks and other Marxist critics] believed in the need for socially-engaged literature that could function as a 'weapon' in the presumed imminent revolution" (34). Proletarian literature emerged as a response to this need. Its authorship was generally comprised of multi-ethnic, working class, men and women,

and the narrative structure is one of self-discovery in which the hero struggles with a mismatch between his or her class awareness and economic roles.³ While the proletarian writers of '30s may not have enacted a widespread revolution, they did achieve "a literary version of a working-class identity as a situated consciousness" (Irr 120). Ultimately, this unified worker-based identity led to a number of the historic union uprisings.

Matthiessen was well aware of these labor movements and includes references to nineteenth century labor strikes in *American Renaissance*. In a move that extends far beyond his 1850-1855 timeline, Matthiessen discusses Whitman's reaction to the railroad strike of 1877 in which federal troops fired on American workers:

[Whitman] now realized that. . . "beneath the whole political world, what most presses and perplexes to-day. . . is not the abstract question of democracy, but of social and economic organization, the treatment of working-people by employers, and all that goes along with it. . . a certain spirit and principle to vivify anew these relations." At the time when most respectable citizens were deploring the violence of the strikers, Whitman asserted the great American revolution of 1776 was simply a great strike successful for its immediate object. (AR 589)

Ultimately, comments such as this one become far more meaningful when considered in the context of all the great worker uprisings of the '30s. Moreover, as a Popular Front figure, Whitman is perhaps the most compelling of Matthiessen's five authors. Irr explains:

[Whitman's] exuberant depiction of the everyday life of the workingman. . . was considered the first, definitive steps toward a distinctively American literature. For the '30s critics, Whitman's realism could only culminate in the class-conscious realism of the proletarian novel. (32)

³ Some of the examples of proletarian fiction include Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930), Edward Dahlberg's *The Bottom Dogs* (1930), Robert Cantwell's *Land of Plenty* (1934), and Leanne Zugsmith's *Time to Remember* (1936).

While Matthiessen's scope runs parallel to the '30s Marxists to the extent that they were all revolutionaries, anti-capitalists, and labor reformers, their similarities begin to diverge when considering their differing methodologies. In the next section, I reevaluate Matthiessen's relationship with these critics with an eye on methodology, though Matthiessen's method does not align him with the '30s Marxists, it does, in fact, closely align him with the Hegelian Marxist Georg Lukács.

CHAPTER 4 METHOD

When considering Matthiessen's methodology, we begin to see the ways in which he makes a formative break from his Marxist contemporaries. Moreover, considering Matthiessen's methodology historically elucidates the dynamic history of the '30s and its personal impact on him. In "Aesthetics, Politics, Homosexuality: F. O. Matthiessen and the Tragedy of the American Scholar" (2007), Randall Fuller argues that during the writing of *American Renaissance* history, in effect, passed Matthiessen by:

If he set his sights 'high' for his massive literary history because he had perceived a historic opportunity for sociocultural change, by the time he actually began drafting his book, history had already, perhaps inevitably, begun to trespass on his sense of those possibilities. (377)

Fuller, and other scholars including Frederick Stern and Arthur Redding argue that the key moment of transition in *American Renaissance* took place when Matthiessen checked himself into McClean's Hospital for depression in the winter of 1939. Fuller, Stern, and Redding all proffer hypotheses for Matthiessen's breakdown. Two of the most pertinent reasons to this discussion are the recent outcome of the Walsh-Sweezy Case and Matthiessen's trip to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1939.

The Walsh-Sweezy case, in which two young Harvard professors were fired because of their leftist politics, had a personal and political impact on Matthiessen. In protest of the Harvard President James Conant's decision to oust Professors Walsh and Sweezy, Matthiessen led a group of 131 faculty members in signing a petition forcing the administration to investigate charges of unfair termination. Though the administration recommended that Conant rehire the dismissed professors, he refused. This event, according to Fuller, left Matthiessen embittered and disillusioned (377).

However, the Walsh-Sweezy case was also a political defeat. In *From the Heart of Europe*, Matthiessen writes:

Deans have multiplied greatly since [the Walsh-Sweezy case], a little managerial revolution may have taken place, but the ordinary professor shares little or none of the planning role of a partner. . . The policies have for long now been shaped by the president and deans in conjunction with businessmen and lawyers who make up the typical group of trustees. The individual teacher is scarcely more than a hired hand. (68)

Because Matthiessen considered the ordeal as representative of a larger issue, it was not simply a personal loss but also indicative of the corporatization of the university, which, in effect, rendered the grass-roots activism surrounding the case impotent.

In addition to his disillusionment with Harvard politics, Matthiessen saw the case as a commentary on the Taylorization of intellectual capital in the increasingly corporatized university system, an effect of capitalism that his Marxist contemporaries did not fully address. Instead they focused solely on societal effects. Therefore Matthiessen's methodology should be read as an attempt to augment the revolutionary scope of '30s Marxism so that it addressed subjectivity as well as objectivity.

To better explain '30s Marxism's object-focused positivism, it is important to note that American Marxism in the '30s was quite different from Marxism today. Leo Marx explains "we should remember the incomplete state of the Marxist canon in Matthiessen's time" (46). Current Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson more fully explains the ideological landscape of early American Marxism in his introduction to *Marxism and Form* (1971):

When the American reader thinks of Marxist literary criticism, I imagine that it is still the atmosphere of the 1930's which comes to mind. The burning issues of those days – anti-Nazism, the Popular Front, the relationship between literature and the labor movement, the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky, between Marxism and anarchism. . . The criticism practiced then was of a relatively untheoretical, essentially didactic nature. (ix)

Moreover, Marxism and its relationship to literature, according to Maynard Solomon, “was of a highly polemical and usually negative nature.” Such works of literary criticism in this tradition tended to veer more toward a reductive class analysis. 30’s Marxism, focused closely on “transitory cultural-political issues,” utilizing only aspects of Marx’s political theory. In other words, “their work showed only a faint awareness of the implications of Marxist philosophy” (Solomon 275). As such, it becomes clearer why Matthiessen’s break with his Marxist contemporaries should be seen as a reaction “to the shallow, mechanistic Marxism that prevailed during the 1930s” (49).

Though L. Marx does not go into detail about the ways in which Marxism has changed since Matthiessen’s time, he does point to “the fact that Marxists have recovered and in some sense reinstated the work of the young (Hegelian) Marx that had been dismissed by the 1930s commissars of culture as Utopian and idealistic” (48).

Jameson is more specific about the implications of this recovery:

In recent years. . . a different kind of Marxist criticism has begun to make its presence felt upon the English-language horizon. This is what may be called – as opposed to the Soviet tradition – a relatively Hegelian kind of Marxism, which from the German countries may trace back to the theoretical excitement of Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923, along with the rediscovery of Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. (MF ix)

In other words, what was missing from ‘30s Marxism was Hegelian dialectic, which was integrated most fully by Georg Lukács in his work *History and Class Consciousness*, first published in Central Europe in 1923. However, it is likely that Matthiessen was unfamiliar with Lukács’, who is now a fundamental Marxist theorist. As Denning explains, most American scholars in the 1930s largely ignored the work of the Continental Neomarxists: “Lukács, Gramsci, and the Frankfurt School were exiles and

prisoners, hardly read or known in their own time” (CF 425). In fact, these theorists did not emerge in America until the 1970s.¹

However, this methodological lacuna helps to explain Matthiessen’s incomplete view of Hegelianism in *American Renaissance*. Matthiessen makes only three mentions of Hegel in the text and they are centered on the importance of phenomenology. For example, in his discussion of Emerson, Matthiessen explains that what Emerson called the “age of Swedenborg. . . could be more widely called the ‘age of Hegel’ and though Emerson did not read the philosopher until long after his own thoughts were formed, he was attracted to Hegel’s type of evolution, since its ‘unfolding’ of nature was from the mind” (AR 54). In another instance, Matthiessen explains how after reading the philosopher, Whitman “declared that only Hegel is fit for America,’ since in his system, ‘the human soul stands at the centre, and all universes minister to it,’” (AR 525). Ultimately, Matthiessen sees Hegel primarily as a metaphysic and finds his largest contribution to be more a refutation of the Kantian split between perception and reality. Moreover, what he overlooks in *American Renaissance* is the valuable mediation that the dialectic offers.

This oversight also explains Matthiessen’s clichéd use of the dialectic. In the chapter titled “The Vision of Evil,” Matthiessen comments on the formal structure of *American Renaissance*, stating, “It would be neater to say that we have in Emerson and Thoreau a thesis, in Hawthorne and Melville its antithesis, and in Whitman a synthesis” (AR 179). This recalls the reductive thesis-antithesis-synthesis formula that is often

¹ Such an oversight is especially surprising when considering that Matthiessen, during his time in Budapest in November 1947, met with a number of other Hungarian intellectuals but does not mention Lukács, who would have been the leading literary figure in Hungary during that time (Stern 224).

misinterpreted as Hegelian. Additionally, Matthiessen's clichéd version, which does not erase the preceding negations, and negations of negations, ultimately lacks a means to understand the object as "equally also" the subject.

Returning now to Matthiessen's relationship with '30s American Marxism, we begin to have a clearer view of why Matthiessen finds Marxism lacking. If he was unfamiliar with Hegelian Marxism, then we find that he uses other means, specifically Christian metaphysics, to fill in the conceptual gaps of '30s Marxism.

On the surface, Matthiessen appears to argue that Christianity and Marxism are incompatible. One such example can be found in "Responsibilities of the Critic," in which Matthiessen revisits the time period in which he was writing *American*

Renaissance:

I would like to recall the atmosphere of the early nineteen-thirties, of the first years of the last depression, when the critical pendulum had swung to the opposite pole, from the formalists to the Marxists. I am not a Marxist myself but a Christian, and I have no desire to repeat the absurdities of the moment when literary men, quite oblivious theretofore of economics, were finding sudden salvation in a dogma that became more rigid the less they assimilated it. (RC 10)

That Matthiessen makes a binary out of the two doctrines and seems, at first glance, to insinuate that the acceptance of one doctrine precludes the acceptance of the other. However, as Leo Marx points out in "Double Consciousness," such a contradiction was for Matthiessen instead a "yoking together of separate, not easily combined, religious and political beliefs. . . he recognized a positive, generative value in the embrace of opposed ideas" (42). What L. Marx makes explicit here is that what appears contradictory, was for Matthiessen a "working through" of antimonies. As such, we find that Matthiessen utilizes theology as a means of mediation: by using Christianity as the basis for his methodology, Matthiessen creates ontology out of what would otherwise be

epistemology. Moreover, when analyzing Matthiessen's use of Christianity as a means to "fill in the gaps" of '30s Marxism, we find that he uses theology in much the same manner that Georg Lukács uses the dialectic.²

For Matthiessen one of the major shortfalls of '30s Marxism is that, while it was a revolutionary philosophy it is incapable of supplying an adequate mediation between immediate history and history-as-process. In other words, because '30s Marxism is locked into the material reality, Matthiessen cannot help but criticize Calverton's lack of "historical sense," in both his "solid knowledge of American history and literature, and a resiliency of mind that is not content to warp all materials to fit his theory [of a class-based society using only the language of capitalism]" (RC 185-186).

Moreover, this lack of historical awareness, according to Matthiessen, creates the essential paradox of Marxist teleology, which he addresses in his review of Granville Hicks' *The Great Tradition*. Of Hicks' desire for a classless society, Matthiessen begs the question, "If the day should arrive [when there is 'literature for a classless society'], the tradition of social protest would presumably no longer be very necessary; and without that tradition, art, as Mr. Hicks defines it, would have little function" (RC 198). Because the only Utopia Calverton, Hicks, and the other '30s Marxists can imagine is one of a classless society, then, as Matthiessen points out, their only goal is a class-based revolution. In other words, '30s Marxism is unable to see beyond the immediate contradictions in capitalism, most evident in the double bind of its teleology, to analyze the individual as struggling between good and evil, dually internal and eternal. What

² Such a comparison may seem contradictory because Lukács was attempting to "demystify" Hegel by using Marxism, and Matthiessen is using Christianity to "mystify" Marx. However, I am solely arguing that methodologically speaking there are a number of similarities between the two.

Christianity does as a methodology, then, is acknowledge the historical breadth of this duality, which existed before capitalism and will persist after its dissolution.

In *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen supplements the Marxist problem of immediacy by utilizing Christianity to realize history as a process beyond objective reality. This methodological supposition is apparent in Matthiessen's discussion of Hawthorne's Christianity:

Although no theologian, Hawthorne did not relax his grip on the Christian conception of time. This had been obscured by Thoreau and Whitman no less than Emerson in the exhilaration of the moment. Hawthorne knew that he lived both in time and out of it, that the process of man's history was a deep interaction between eternity and time, an incessant eruption of eternity and time. (AR 652)

What Christianity does here is create a mediation between the "exhilaration of the moment" and eternal time. Christianity is able to mediate between the present and the past, as it does for T. S. Eliot – "He had to rediscover the sources of religion in the vitality of primitive myth and ritual" (AR 356) – as well as between the present and the future, as it does for Melville – "In his narrative of whaling Melville could see how this industry typified man's wresting a livelihood from nature and extending his powers over the globe by peaceful commerce rather than war" (AR 655). Much the same can be said of Lukács' use of the dialectic.

Like Matthiessen, Lukács realizes that reality in its immediate, capitalistic sense is not constitutive of the whole of history. He makes this distinction by describing the difference between particular history and universal history:

The opposition between the description of an aspect of history and the description of history as a unified process is not just a problem of scope, as in the distinction between particular and universal history. It is rather a conflict of method, of approach. . . For it is perfectly possible for someone to describe the essentials of an historical event and yet be in the dark about

the real nature of that event and of its function in the historical totality, i.e., without understanding it as part of a unified historical process. (HCC 12)

As such, history is, in fact, continuously unfolding, and the realization of this process creates an awareness of reality as subjectively mediated and historically contingent. Like Matthiessen, because the range of history is beyond immediate existence both in relation to the past as well as to the future, Lukács stresses the need for the dialectical conception of totality. Because capitalism has blurred the distinction between particular history and universal history, Lukács argues that the only way to universalize history is to understand that “the objective forms of all social phenomena change constantly in the course of their ceaseless dialectical interactions with each other. . . This is why only the dialectical conception of totality can enable us to understand *reality as a social process*” (13).

Because Lukács finds history unfolding dialectically, he realizes, like Matthiessen, that a class-based revolution should not be the goal of the proletariat:

The path taken by [the dialectical advance of the proletariat] leads from utopia to the knowledge of reality; from transcendental goals fixed by the first great leaders of the worker’s commune to the clear perception by the Commune of 1871 that the working-class has ‘no ideas to realize,’ but wishes only ‘to liberate the elements of new society.’ It is the path leading from the ‘class opposed to capitalism.’ To the class ‘for itself.’ (HCC 22)

What both critics’ respective mediation provides is a sense of life outside of the immediate, in relation to the flow of history as a process as well as a realization beyond objective class-based revolution to self-realization. Ultimately, it is this realization, achieved through Christianity as a methodology in *American Renaissance* and the dialectic in *History and Class Consciousness*, that creates a consciousness that is both self-actualizing as well as fully aware of itself as a member of a flawed and contingent capitalist system.

For both Matthiessen and Lukács, this Utopian dilemma is wholly irresolvable through the positivism of '30s Marxism, which finds little importance in the role of art in self-realization. In his review of *The Great Tradition*, Matthiessen explains this limitation:

[Hicks] so underestimates as almost to reject some of the most ripely human elements that have actually come to expression. . . Hick's limitation as a critic are owing to his lack of understanding not only that art is a richer experience, but also that it possesses more varied uses than he perceives. Its role is not only that of revolt, but the counterbalancing one of realization. (RC 198-199)

In other words, Matthiessen cannot agree with the Marxist conception of art that removes the possibility of internal actualization. According to his conception of Christian metaphysics, art creates the link between the internal and external. In a discussion of Hawthorne and Melville's desire to press beyond "human finiteness" to "the infinity of the Absolute," Matthiessen argues, "their shared conviction that art 'should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie.'" This conviction was "in the deepest Christian experience. The essence of Hawthorne's greatness, as Melville saw it, was that he breathed 'that unshackled, democratic spirit of Christianity' into the whole of experience" (AR 270). By utilizing art as an act of internal and – when imbued with the democratic spirit of Christianity – a fully social act, Matthiessen creates a theory of art that brings the individual closer to society through self-realization.

For Lukács, this sort of internal consciousness acts as a means of truly understanding reality. He explicates this paradox by expounding on the phrase "the self-knowledge of reality." To achieve a truly dialectical understanding of totality, Lukács argues that the proletariat must become aware of itself as a commodity, which in turn will lead "us to understand 'the sensuous world,' the object, reality, as human

sensuous activity. This means that man must become conscious of himself as a social being, as simultaneously the subject and object of the socio-historical process” (19).

Although Lukács and Matthiessen utilize similar mediations to enhance Marxism, they begin to diverge when considering their opposing views of tragedy. Because Lukács takes little stock in the metaphysics, he cannot agree with the Greek conception of tragedy in which, “artistic meaning consists in that it confers life and plenitude upon the essence situated outside and beyond all life” (*TN* 42). For Lukács there is no essence outside of life, and therefore tragedy only expresses loneliness. In *Theory of the Novel* (1920) he explains, “Such loneliness is not simply the intoxication of a soul gripped by destiny and so made song; it is also the torment of a creature condemned to solitude and devoured by a longing for community” (45).

Matthiessen, on the other hand, accepts the Greek form of tragedy and utilizes it not only as a democratic doctrine, but also to explore the problem of evil. Matthiessen more fully explains the relationship between Christianity and tragedy in “Education of a Socialist:”

I have accepted the doctrine of original sin, in the sense that man is fallible and limited, no matter what his social system. . . I have felt a shallowness in [my radical friends'] psychology wherever they have talked as though man was perfectible, with evil wholly external to his nature, and caused only by the frustrations of the capitalist system. . . Evil is not mere external, but external evils are many, and some social systems are far more productive of them than others. (12)

However pious Matthiessen may seem here, it is important to note that Matthiessen's definition of tragedy was not fully developed until the last years of writing *American Renaissance* and is closely related to Matthiessen's 1939 breakdown.

In addition to the Walsh-Sweezy case, many scholars have speculated that Matthiessen's trip to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1939 was a large contributor to

his depression and eventual hospitalization. Such pilgrimage was standard for many leftist intellectuals in the '30s who saw the rise of Socialism in Eastern Europe as the possible model for an American Socialist Revolution. On 23 August 1939, roughly around the time of Matthiessen's visit, the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact with the Nazis, leading Communists around the world to support Soviet "neutrality" (CF 12). Such an agreement was a strong blow to American anti-fascists, including Matthiessen. Moreover, according to Fuller, "While it is impossible to know for sure, it seems likely that Matthiessen. . . encountered evidence of Stalinist repression impossible to ignore but which he nevertheless felt a need to suppress" (377). This moment signals a shift in the perception of the Soviet Union, one that had been gaining momentum during Stalin's rise in 1935 and the Moscow trials between 1936 and 1938. According to Stern, "In light of the experiences of Trotsky and of the others purged by Stalin" American socialists and radicals found Stalinist Russia "entirely untrustworthy and thought the most important step in any effort to advance socialism's cause in the West was to make a clean break with the Soviet model" (25).

Moreover, as Fuller argues, Matthiessen's breakdown in 1939 not only signals a shift in his political perception, but in *American Renaissance* as well. According to Fuller, "Matthiessen finished his chapter on tragedy – which opens his study of Hawthorne and Melville and would eventually be titled "The Vision of Evil" – just before entering McClean's" (378). Though Matthiessen had briefly considered the topic of tragedy in his book *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (1935), it is not until *American Renaissance* that Matthiessen fully explores its meaning and significance. The inclusion of tragedy carries special resonance in light of the rise of fascism in Europe.

When considering that Matthiessen's section on tragedy has historical and biographical significance, an anti-fascist sentiment becomes evident in the text, especially in the chapters on Hawthorne and Melville.

Matthiessen begins his discussion of tragedy by comparing the optimism of Emerson and Thoreau to the pessimism of Hawthorne and Melville. According to Matthiessen, Emerson and Thoreau believe, "all fragmentary sorrow and suffering would disappear in the radiance of good, like mists before the sun over Concord meadows." Because personal grief vanishes in the light of good, they are "free to go on and declare that 'the soul refuses limits and always affirms an Optimism, never a Pessimism.'" Therefore, the individual is fundamentally good: "No matter how black appearances might be, there could always be found 'a small excess of good, a small balance in brute facts. . . favorable to the side of reason'" (AR 182). Ultimately, this optimism eschews an internal struggle between good and evil. This brings Matthiessen to the discussion of tragedy:

[Tragedy] demands of its author a mature understanding of the relation of the individual to society, and especially, of the nature of good and evil. He must have a coherent grasp of social forces, or, at least, of a man as social being; otherwise he will possess no frame of reference within which to make actual his dramatic conflicts. (AR 179)

Through the form of tragedy the author begins to grasp the nature of man's relationship both to society and to himself. Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman's belief that evil is secondary and subservient to good is, in Matthiessen's words, "ill-founded" (AR 180). In light of the growing possibility of European fascism, which came to be viewed as democracy's "evil twin," his discussion of tragedy expresses a common anxiety of the possibility of fascism in America.

The most revealing illustration of Matthiessen's critique of fascism is in his discussion of *Moby Dick*. He begins with the assertion that Melville, because of his tragic vision, understands the duality of nature, epitomizing this struggle in the White Whale. It "is one of 'interlinked terrors and wonders of God,' majestic in size, portentous in its 'unconscious power.' In many ways he represents the terrifying sublime in nature, primitive and pre-human, but at the same time whaling is necessary to civilization" (AR 437). However, this duality is not simply found in objectivity, or externality, but within each subject as well. According to Matthiessen, Melville "shows again his awareness that he is dealing with primitive human drives far beyond the scope of the cultivated mind. In that kind of image Melville asserts the mystery of the elemental forces in man, the instinct that lie deep below his later consciousness" (AR 438).

This element of human evil is fully portrayed in Captain Ahab. Ahab, monomaniacal in his desire to destroy the beast, encapsulates the antinomy of an "ungodly, godlike man," a representation that recalls the totalitarian authority of many fascist leaders. Matthiessen explains that such a vision is "godly" in that Ahab takes on the god-like task to seek out and annihilate the source of malignity, in this case, the White Whale. However, it is likewise "demonic;" the sanity of a controlled madness, and ultimately, "living in the age of Hitler, even the least religious can know and be terrified by what it means for a man to be possessed" (AR 307). This portrayal reflects Matthiessen's anxiety over a charismatic leader who bends the will of the people for one monomaniacal purpose. Ultimately, Melville offers the solution to the problem of tragedy:

However baffled Melville was to become in his effort to win any final answer to man's relation to the universe, he was always to retain. . . a firm hold on the conception of a balanced society. . . His fervent belief in democracy was the origin of his sense of tragic loss at the distortion or destruction of the unique value of a human being. (AR 442)

In effect, Matthiessen completes his meditation on democracy and tragedy in the discussion of *Moby Dick*. Melville's democratic ideology is similar to Thoreau's in that he, more than Emerson, sees the need for the individual to relate to society instead of the inverse. However, Thoreau misses one crucial point that Hawthorne brings to the fore. By adding his fear of man's internal depravity, the essence of tragedy posited by Hawthorne, Melville creates a fuller depiction of the possibility of democracy. Ahab serves as the personification of a man's driving force, and a symbol for a leader who subverts the will of the people for an individualized purpose. Matthiessen explains, "A concentrated view of Ahab will disclose that he was born from the matrix of Melville's age. He is an embodiment of his author's most profound response to the problem of free will *in extremis*" (AR 447).

Because Melville expresses democracy in its totality in *Moby Dick*, the text, or more specifically Matthiessen's reading of the text, could be very well be considered a handbook for democracy; yet, Matthiessen ends *American Renaissance* with a discussion of poet Walt Whitman, which seems like a full retreat into the realm of aesthetics.³ However, if we consider that Matthiessen's purpose in the Whitman section is to create a representative and self-conscious voice of the people, it becomes clear that Whitman could well be a democratic "symbol of authority," a notion developed by Matthiessen's contemporary Kenneth Burke, as an alternative to fascist symbolism.

³ In fact, the opening chapter of the Walt Whitman section is titled "Only a Language Experiment."

At first glance, Kenneth Burke, an enigma in American Studies, may seem out of place in this discussion. However, like many cultural critiques of the '30s, Burke was more radical than many believe today. Like many of his contemporaries Burke emended the majority of his more radical work including *Permanence and Change* (1935) and *Attitudes Toward History* (1937) after World War II in response to the Red Scare and McCarthyism, and only recently have the original editions been recovered. Therefore, when reconsidering Burke as a cultural radical, we begin to see the parallels between his work and Matthiessen's. The heart of Burke's work lies in the theory of symbolic action, which, according to Denning, is a theory of "society and history [constructed] around the concept of allegiance to the symbols of authority" (CF 438). Like Matthiessen, Burke's theory attempted to go beyond the weaknesses of positivism of the '30s Marxists.⁴

In *Attitudes toward History*, Burke argues, "A fundamental revolution takes place when men shift from magical notions of authority (authority sanctioned by custom, as with kings or parents) to the forensic concept of delegated authority (stemming, we might say, from the 'democratization of peerage')" (322). If we apply this theory to Matthiessen's construction of Whitman in *American Renaissance*, we find that Whitman's goal to subsume humanity into his voice. As a symbol of authority, therefore, Whitman would create a fully self-conscious population. In other words, if everyone accepted Whitman as such a symbol, they would ultimately understand not

⁴ Denning explains, "For Burke, Marxism was the orthodox tradition. . . that stressed the primacy of productive forces" (CF 439).

only Whitman, but by fiat, they would understand themselves as a society thus enacting a self-conscious population that is fundamental to Matthiessen's particular revolution. To more fully explain this reading, it is beneficial to turn to another Hegelian Marxist, Alexandre Kojève, whose reading of the Master/Slave dialectic will allow us a fuller understanding of the symbolic possibilities of *American Renaissance* while maintaining aspects of the metaphysical.

In *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Alexandre Kojève contextualizes *The Phenomenology* within the period of the French Revolution. In this reading, Kojève argues that Napoleon's Battle at Jena brought about the end of history. This is not to say that the French Revolution led to the apocalypse but:

Absolute Knowledge became – *objectively* – possible in and by Napoleon the *real* process of historical evolution, in the course of which man *created* new Worlds and *transformed* himself by creating them, came to its end. To reveal *this* World, therefore is to reveal *the* World – that is, to reveal being in the *completed* totality of its spatial-temporal existence. (Kojève 35)

Because Napoleon, in his very real action, brings about the totality of existence, there is no room for anything new. All that is occurring, or will occur, has occurred before. This totalizing act brings about the end of history. Therefore, because Napoleon completes the course of the historical evolution, he is able to accomplish, though unknowingly, the common cause, the truly universal cause (Kojève 69).

The same can be said for Melville, at least in the context of *American Renaissance*. As I have outlined above, by writing *Moby Dick*, Melville creates a work that represents democracy in its totality. To accentuate the vastness of Melville's accomplishment, Matthiessen writes: "He thus fulfilled what Coleridge held to be the major function of the artist: he brought 'the whole soul of man into activity'" (AR 656). However, it is not simply the existence of *Moby Dick* that completes historical evolution,

but the act of writing the book. In other words, Melville, through his work, brings this process to an end by expressing a fully realized democratic theory. However, like Kojève's Napoleon, Melville is unaware that his actions complete this totality. Melville died poor and in obscurity, unaware that his "endurance is a challenge for later America" (AR 514). Ultimately, Melville, in the story of *American Renaissance*, is analogous to Kojève's Napoleon-figure.

Moreover, if Melville is the Napoleon figure, then Whitman is Kojève's Sage, Hegel himself, the philosopher who is now able to self-consciously reflect on what has been achieved. Kojève continues:

And – *subjectively* – absolute Knowledge became possible because a man named Hegel was able to understand the *World* in which he lived and to understand *himself* as living in and understanding this World. . .Hegel caused the complete whole of the universal real process to penetrate into his individual consciousness, and then he penetrated this consciousness. Thus this consciousness became just as total, as universal, as the process that it revealed by understanding itself, and this fully self-conscious consciousness *is* absolute Knowledge. (34)

While absolute Knowledge is objectively possible through Napoleon's actions, it becomes subjectively possible through Hegel's understanding. Unlike Napoleon, Hegel knows that Napoleon enacted the end of history. Therefore Hegel knows that, because he is living within this totality of existence, by understanding himself, he, in turn, will understand the whole of universal being.

Much of the same can be said about Matthiessen's presentation of Whitman, the end of the dialectical journey. Whitman possesses the breadth of knowledge accumulated throughout the journey of *American Renaissance*. In the section on Whitman, Matthiessen clarifies Whitman's role as a culmination preceding democratic knowledge, stating, "The sympathetic kinship that Emerson felt with Quakerism in his

liberated maturity belonged to Whitman as his birthright" (AR 522). Moreover, like the Sage who subsumes all of being within himself, Whitman serves as the poet of "the people." Matthiessen writes, "Living speech could come to [Whitman] only through his absorption in the life surrounding him" (520). However, language is just a product of Whitman's true ability. By absorbing all of life into himself, Whitman is, through self-conscious reflection, able to capture the totality of existence. Matthiessen writes,

Whitman's ability to make a synthesis in his poems of the contrasting elements that he calls body and soul may serve as a measure of his stature as a poet. When his words adhere to concrete experience and yet are bathed in imagination, his statements become broadly representative of humanity: "I am she who adorn'd herself and folded her hair expectantly/My truant lover has come, and it is dark." (526)

Just as Hegel, through reflexive contemplation, reaches a complete understanding of the human condition by recording it in *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Whitman's *Song of Myself* expresses and subsumes all of humanity and dwells on himself as if he was the democratic whole. Therefore, to understand Whitman as a fully representative symbol of authority is, in turn, to understand the whole of Matthiessen's democratic ideal.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Returning to the New Americanists' critique of *American Renaissance*. As I have argued, (mis)placing Matthiessen in the binary logic of the Cold War misinterprets his purpose. However, I would also add that a historically accurate portrayal of *American Renaissance* was never the New Americanists' intention. Instead, Matthiessen acts as a stand-in for emerging American Studies, a sort of scapegoat for the "sins of the father."

If Matthiessen is indeed used as a figurehead of American Studies by the New Americanists, then a number of other implications ultimately emerge. For one, why do the New Americanists rely on the same nationalistic appropriation of Matthiessen that took place during the Cold War? Jonathan Arc argues:

Matthiessen's figure of 'America' suffered a sobering fate. The war (which, after all, did come) reconstellated American politics and, the figure of 'America' that began as a Depression tactic of harmony became a postwar myth of empire. A mobilization intended as oppositional became incorporated hegemonic ally; American studies gained power by nationalistically appropriating Matthiessen. (98-99)

While it seems that most of the critiques directed against Matthiessen in the 1980s and 1990s deconstruct American Studies from the outside, they are, in fact, reinforcing the same nationalism that they appear to be critiquing.

Moreover, because the New Americanists create a figure in Matthiessen who encompasses the whole of nascent American Studies, they ultimately overlook the critical tradition of the Popular Front including Matthiessen's Marxist contemporaries as well as other works of cultural histories such as the work produced by Carolyn Ware, Cleanth Brooks, Louis Adamic, Constance Rourke, and Alice Felt Tyler and countless

others. In attempting to chastise Matthiessen's canonization, the New Americanists ultimately create their own critical canon.

However, *American Renaissance Reconsidered* also requires its own periodization. Because the essays were written on or before 1985, years before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the New Americanists were unwilling (or unable) to fully appreciate the Communisms of the 1930s. What becomes clear is the dynamic role *American Renaissance* has played and will continue to play as an always-already read text in the field of American Studies.

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