

F. O. Matthiessen's New College Notebook

A distinguished career in the criticism of American literature came to an end on April 2 when Francis Otto Matthiessen (*Connecticut and New College*, '25) threw himself from the twelfth story window of a Boston hotel. He was born in Tarrytown, N. Y., in 1902 and went to Yale. In 1925 he took a B.Litt. in English at Oxford, where he lived at New College in rooms at the top of a hundred-step-tower. Though the university is full of inconvenient retreats, the high isolation of Matthiessen's (which now seems prophetic) helped to shut him off from garrulous undergraduate gatherings below. In 1926 he took his Ph.D. in English at Harvard, then taught for two years at Yale.

In 1929 he joined the English department at Harvard, where he stayed, except for absences to lecture at Toronto and Prague.¹

To his fellow Rhodes scholars in the pages of their association magazine, this was how F. O. Matthiessen was remembered after his death in April 1950. Best known for his monumental 700-page study of 19th-century literature, *American Renaissance* (1941), as well as influential books on Henry James, T. S. Eliot, and Elizabethan translators, his two years as a student at New College in the 1920s were defined by a reported desire to sequester himself in his tower, away from the hustle and bustle of the college below.²

Matthiessen's American friends agreed that his time at New College was far from happy. According to his Harvard colleague, Harry Levin, they were 'lonely and anticlimactic' years, while Louis Hyde implied that 'Matty' could not wait to leave, a fact seemingly confirmed by his decision to abandon Oxford a year early.³ Things were off to a poor start when his beloved mother, Lucy Orne Matthiessen (*née* Pratt), died of pernicious anaemia in September 1923, just as Matthiessen had arrived in England. To make matters worse, the grieving student's welcome from the locals was far from warm. He felt at 'first rebuffed and then angered by the Oxford boys' ignorant scorn of America', later publishing a story of 'the day when I had moored a canoe under the bank of the Isis and was reading, while two English acquaintances from New College had decided to strip and have a naked swim. Just then a punt with some other English undergraduates and their girls and gramophone came unexpectedly around the bend, and the boy managing the pole cried out instinctively, "How disgusting! They must be Americans!"'⁴ So far as the published record stands, Matthiessen—whose work has been considered instrumental in the foundation of American Studies as a discipline—may have been better off staying away from Oxford.⁵

Dig a little deeper, however, and archival material gives a very different impression of the young scholar's time at New College. A record of his academic interests over the course of those two years, Matthiessen's so-called 'New College Notebook', survives at the Beinecke Library at

¹ A. Hyatt Mayor, 'Francis Otto Matthiessen (1902–1950)', *The American Oxonian* 37 (July 1950), 142: <www.americanrhodes.org/assets/attachments/784.pdf>.

² In a letter to Cheney on 15 October 1924, Matthiessen wrote of his 'tower' as 'A nice room when you reach it panting after your hundred and four steps. A sweeping view over the Balliol playing fields, brightly green, and dotted with vivid red and blue jerseys of an afternoon'. This room is likely to be 8NB10 in the Robinson Tower above the Porters' Lodge. See Matthiessen, Francis (matr 1923), copy letters, 1924–1925, New College Archives, Oxford, NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/7/1.

³ Harry Levin, *Matty at Eliot House* (Cambridge, Mass.: Eliot House, 1982), p. 2. In a gloss to a letter from Matthiessen to Cheney on 30 May 1925, which reads 'it tears my heart to think of leaving for good', George Abbott White has written the following: '[some change from what LKH [Louis Hyde] gave me to believe]'. See Matthiessen, Francis (matr 1923), copy letters, 1924–1925, NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/8/5.

⁴ F. O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 27.

⁵ See, for instance, *Literature in Revolution*, ed. George Abbott White and Charles Newman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972); *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, ed. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Giles B. Gunn, *F. O. Matthiessen: The Critical Achievement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975).

Yale.⁶ By cross-referencing its contents with other unpublished material at Yale and New College, the Notebook takes on special importance, bringing together the different threads of his life at Oxford: academic, social, psychological, and romantic.



Matthiessen's passport, issued in 1923, which he used to travel to Oxford
F. O. Matthiessen Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, YCAL MSS 495, b. 11

⁶ New College Notebook 2, F. O. Matthiessen Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, YCAL MSS 495, Box 6 F. In the folder designated 'New College Notebook', there are two notebooks. The first contains notes relating to 17th-century poet and clergyman, Michael Wigglesworth, about whom Matthiessen would write an article in *The New England Quarterly* (October 1928). As well as being inscribed with the address '10 Farwell, Place', Matthiessen's Cambridge address, this notebook seems to pertain to the period after Matthiessen had returned to the United States.

Inscribed with his name and college, Matthiessen's Notebook is arranged by loose leaves and spear and sheath tags, meaning that the gatherings are not necessarily in chronological order. That possibility is confirmed with reference to Matthiessen's letters, where we observe that the order in which he claims to have read certain books is not reflected in the order of his reading notes. With that in mind, this brief examination of his Notebook is conducted thematically, collecting together the notes which infer similar research intentions, and indicating—where evidence exists—when exactly Matthiessen's reading took place.

Opening the front boards of the Notebook, the first loose leaf to appear is headed in Matthiessen's handwriting as 'Walt Whitman—1902—Putnams'.⁷ Followed by a summary of the contents of each of the ten volumes of the *Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, Matthiessen presumably used the list to track his reading through the work of the poet, before writing the title of another primary source, *Leaves of Grass: Including a Facsimile Autobiography/ Variorum Readings of the Poems and a Department of Gathered Leaves*, at the bottom of the same page. Whitman's name appears throughout the Notebook; over the page, Matthiessen wrote a list of 14 critical studies of his work complete with library shelf-marks, and, a few pages later, he enclosed a copy of Clara Barrus's essay, 'Whitman and Burroughs as Comrades', which he seems to have torn out of the *Yale Review*.⁸ Reading Whitman's name in Matthiessen's handwriting ought not to come as much of a surprise; 16 years later, the poet would later form a pivotal quarter of *American Renaissance*. However, it is surprising to read Whitman's name in the New College Notebook, because while at Oxford Matthiessen was supposed to be working on a different topic, completing his BLitt thesis on 'Oliver Goldsmith as Essayist and Critic'. So why does Whitman appear seemingly out of the blue, when Matthiessen's attention was supposed to be trained on another continent in another century?

Turn to Matthiessen's letters, though, and we discover that Whitman was on Matthiessen's mind for reasons which were largely extracurricular. Setting foot on the boat which was to ferry him from the east coast of the United States to England, Matthiessen had begun the journey which would end with the commencement of his second year at New College. What he found aboard the *Paris*, though, was to change his life forever, when he struck up a conversation with another passenger, the painter Russell Cheney, who was making his way to Italy. After spending four days getting to know each other, not until two o'clock in the morning was it that Matthiessen finally told Cheney what had been on his mind, confessing that he was 'sexually inverted'.⁹ His new friend's answer came immediately; 'My God, feller, you've turned me upside down. I'm that way too'.¹⁰ What followed were two days of growing intimacy, culminating in a kiss in Cheney's cabin; 'I had attained complete harmony with another spirit for the first time in my life', Matthiessen wrote to a friend.¹¹ After parting at Plymouth, Matthiessen and Cheney began exchanging letters, in a correspondence that would last until Cheney's death in 1945, and total more than 3,000 letters. A selection of those letters was published by Louis Hyde in 1978, but many of the details—particularly relating to their sexual experiences—are omitted. However, the complete letters reside at Yale, and a friend of Matthiessen's, George Abbott White, sent unedited copies of the letters Matthiessen had written while at Oxford to the New College Archives.¹²

Matthiessen's first letter to Cheney after arriving at Oxford was giddy, as he referenced the soothing of the inner turmoil concerning his sexuality:

⁷ New College Notebook, f. 1r.

⁸ Clara Barrus, 'Whitman and Burroughs as Comrades', *The Yale Review* 15 (1925), 59–81. There is a pencilled tick next to the following sentence of Burroughs's on pp. 80–81: 'One of my foundation stones is this: that a work of art differs from a didactic or philosophical treatise in this, that it is not a thought, but an act, as Creation is; it is the deed transferred to a higher plane, and implies a like totality of the human being.'

⁹ Matthiessen, quoted from a letter to Russell W. Davenport, March 1925, in *Rat & the Devil: Journal Letters of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1978), p. 17.

¹⁰ Cheney, quoted in *Rat & the Devil*, p. 18.

¹¹ Matthiessen, quoted in *Rat & the Devil*, p. 18.

¹² See Matthiessen, Francis (matr 1923), copy letters, 1924–1925, NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen.

I haven't ever felt towards any one quite the way I do towards you. Other friends have formed with me a coalescence of mind and soul. But you are also flesh of my flesh. My sex battle is for the moment made simple. For any other contact would tarnish the harmony of last night. And so I want no other contact. I still thrill at the memory of my fingers running through your hair. How barbaric would misconstrue the purity of that sentence!¹³

As he basked in the glow of their budding relationship, Matthiessen told Cheney about the reading he had been undertaking since he stepped off the boat:

I carried Walt Whitman in my pocket. That's another thing you've started me doing, reading Whitman. Not solely because it gives me an intellectual kick the way it did last year, but because I'm living it. How about this to characterize our relationship?

'I announce the great individual, fluid as nature, chaster, affectionate, compassionate, fully-armed.
I announce a life that shall be copious, vehement, spiritual, bold,
And I announce an old age that shall lightly and joyfully meet its translation.'

Those rich, embracing adjectives may not sum it all up, but they certainly include a great many of the elements.¹⁴

From that point onwards, Whitman would become a touchstone in the couple's correspondence. A few days later, Matthiessen would write in an unpublished letter that 'it's you, you, you who have to keep me in touch with the human, and so in tune with the divine. You who must see to [sic] see to it that I never lose the Walt Whitman fragrance and spontaneity—which I have never really known until you showed it to me'.¹⁵ That 'fragrance' of Whitman could be scented in the background throughout Matthiessen's final year at New College. In September, he wrote to Cheney:

Well, you can't have both serenity and 3½ bottles of stout!
We've agreed with Whitman all right that:

'And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?
And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?'

But we're also agreed that there are other ways of using the body than by making it carry around a few quarts of angry liquor every day.

'Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves?
And if those who defile the living are as they who defile the dead?'¹⁶

There was seemingly a Whitman quotation to speak to any topic that emerged in their correspondence. In December, Cheney wrote from Florence, waiting for Matthiessen's arrival for their winter vacation together:

¹³ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 16 September 1924', NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/1/1.

¹⁴ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 21 September 1924', *Rat & the Devil*, p. 26.

¹⁵ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 26 September 1924', NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/3/1.

¹⁶ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 24 September 1924', *Rat & the Devil*, pp. 31–2.

But oh, god damn, my own own Dev, you are coming and I am happy—just plain fool happy.

The day when I rose at dawn from the bed of perfect health—refreshed, singing, and inhaling the ripe breath of autumn;

When I saw the full moon in the west grow pale and disappear in the morning light,

When I wandered alone over the beach, and undressing bathed, laughing with the cool waters, and saw the sun rise,

And when I thought how my dear friend—my lover was on his way coming—O then I was happy,

O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food nourished me more, and the beautiful day passed well,

And the next came with equal joy, and with the next at evening came my friend,

And that night while all was still I heard the waters roll slowly continually up the shores,

I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me whispering to congratulate me,

For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,

In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,

And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night I was happy.¹⁷

As for Whitman's presence in Matthiessen's New College Notebook, it is not until June 1925, free of the bonds of his thesis on Goldsmith, that Matthiessen's literary-critical mind turns to the poet:

Five hours this morning, mostly in the library getting out every available edition of Whitman to see the extent of what he wrote, and how much of his poetry is included in my Everyman edition of the Leaves of Grass. I found out there is about a volume (in the Collected Works published by Putnam) of poetry that I have never seen before; and of course several volumes of prose. To-day and to-morrow I will read some of that poetry, and also the letters to his friend '[P]ete.' I also come across in the catalogue a book by Edward Carpenter, printed only last year[,] on 'Friends of Walt Whitman: a study in the psychology of Sex.' I shall try to read that too, but am not sure that the paternal library will let me, since it locks up all such 'dangerous' books!! I think an interesting study of the modern spirit could be written about Whitman, Ellis and Carpenter.¹⁸

In the Notebook, Matthiessen writes out three pages of quotations and notes from 'the letters to his friend', Peter Doyle. But, before he does so, he copies a fact about their relationship, 'First letter, Walt 49, Pete 21', an age gap that corresponded with his own; Matthiessen was 23 in 1924, while Cheney was 44.¹⁹ In the Notebook, Matthiessen summarises many of Whitman's letters: 'He remembers how Pete fell asleep on his shoulder while he was telling him about the stars—"an awful compliment to my lecturing powers." He sends him clippings about murders—"Good-night, Pete. Good-night, my darling son—here is a kiss for you, dear boy—on the paper here—a good long one."²⁰ In a letter to Cheney, Matthiessen draws on his reading notes, passing on this new knowledge about Walt and Pete's parallel relationship to his own long-distance partner.²¹

¹⁷ Cheney, 'To Matthiessen, 2 December 1924', *Rat & the Devil*, pp. 63–4.

¹⁸ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 16 June 1925', NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/6/6.

¹⁹ New College Notebook, f. 21r.

²⁰ New College Notebook, f. 22v.

²¹ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 17 June 1925', NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/6/6.

But while the extracurricular Whitman reading gave Matthiessen an idealistic idea about gay relationships—something which was later sidelined in his academic study of the poet—he also used his Notebook to understand ‘sexual inversion’ in intellectual terms.²² Notes on *Three Modern Seers* (1910) by Edith Ellis, *The Nineteenth Century: A Dialogue in Utopia* (1900) by Havelock Ellis, and a bibliography of work by Edward Carpenter triangulate a clear interest in contemporary philosophers of sex and gender.²³ In the spring of 1924, before he had met Cheney aboard the *Paris*, Matthiessen had read Havelock Ellis’s *Sexual Inversion* (1900). He was rapt by the book, writing home to his Yale Skull and Bones brothers in a document known as the ‘Oxford Letter’: ‘Until I had read the psychology of sex (Havelock Ellis) I believed that [the birth of my homosexual tendencies] was merely the influence of this older boy that had started me in abnormal channels. Now I am convinced that he merely brought out what was a generic trait’.²⁴ Before Matthiessen met Cheney aboard the *Paris*, then, he had come to conclusions not only about the nature of his homosexuality, but also about its consequences for his future. He wrote that ‘for the first time it was completely brought home to me that I was what I was by *nature*. . . . But reading Ellis last spring was something of a shock. I remember coming face to face with the fact that I could probably never marry, serious and wide-eyed’.²⁵ But meeting Cheney necessitated revision to this conviction. Matthiessen wrote from London in September 1924:

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.²⁶

Matthiessen was clearly becoming interested in the kind of relationship that he might have with Cheney, and particularly how it might compare with a heterosexual relationship. In November 1924, he followed that interest to Edward Carpenter’s *The Intermediate Sex* (1908), which offered a new angle on the possibility of public expressions of homosexual love:

If I had read this Carpenter book last spring I would have been surprised at the beautiful pictures he gives of love between men. Was it possible? I had known only lust. I prided myself that it had never touched the purity of my friendships. Was it possible for love and friendship to be blended into one? But before I had my time to even ask the question it was answered. What is this wistful yearning I feel on these grey foggy mornings? It’s not fog in my throat but an inchoate surge from my heart. What makes this new sensitive tingling in the tips of my fingers, and on my lips? It isn’t the cold. It’s love.²⁷

²² See Jay Grossman, ‘The Canon in the Closet: Matthiessen’s Whitman, Whitman’s Matthiessen’, *American Literature* 70 (1998), 799–832.

²³ See New College Notebook, ff. 5r–7r; 8v; 17r–18v.

²⁴ ‘Oxford Letter’, F. O. Matthiessen Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, YCAL MSS 495, b. 3, p. 6 [23].

²⁵ Matthiessen, ‘To Cheney, 5 November 1924’, *Rat & the Devil*, p. 47.

²⁶ Matthiessen, ‘To Cheney, 23 September 1924’, *Rat & the Devil*, p. 29.

²⁷ Matthiessen, ‘To Cheney, 5 November 1924’, *Rat & the Devil*, p. 48.

Following this discovery, a list of 33 books by and about Edward Carpenter appears in the New College Notebook, including Carpenter's book about Whitman, which Matthiessen was anxious to read: "That damn tea engagement is just about on me, and here I have Edward Carpenter's "Days with Walt Whitman" still unopened".²⁸

For Travis Foster, the combination of Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter in Matthiessen's reading led to an internal struggle over the question of how to navigate a relationship with Cheney. Ultimately, Foster concludes, Matthiessen sided with Ellis, "The inversion we find in Matthiessen's letters is thus more closely allied not with Carpenter but with Carpenter's fellow scholar of inversion, Havelock Ellis, whose text is wary of bringing discussion of sexual inversion even into the semidiscrete public space of a scientific text".²⁹ Over the coming decades, Matthiessen and Cheney would share their relationship with trusted friends, but overt gestures of homosexual feeling were largely kept out of public, and Matthiessen's entry in the *Dictionary of American Biography* suggested that he was 'unusually hostile to homosexual colleagues who mixed their academic and sexual relations'.³⁰

But Havelock Ellis's writing was not just 'personal' reading for Matthiessen, since it also informed his reading on the moral landscape of contemporary Britain. In fact, a quotation from Ellis finds its way into the main project that he was working on at New College, his BLitt thesis on Oliver Goldsmith. In his introductory discussion of the obsession with 'morality' in 18th-century periodical culture, Matthiessen writes prospectively:

Of course this static conception of life could not last. The belief that morals were as fixed and definite as laws was soon to be shattered. How completely different is the attitude of the present day sociologist who declares that morals are neither absolute nor God-given, but the sum total of the race customs or the mores which grow and fluctuate with every generation.

And today when we skim through a book of essays, instead of finding one on 'The Value of Morality', it is on 'The Value of Immorality':

'In our modern life an immense stress is placed on the value of Morality. Very little stress is placed on the value of Immorality. I do not, of course, use the words 'Morality' and 'Immorality' in any question-begging way as synonyms of 'goodness' and of 'badness', but, technically, as names for two different sorts of socially-determined impulses. Morality covers those impulses of a more communal character, which conform to the standards of action openly accepted at a given time and place: Immorality stands for those impulses, of a more individual character, which fail so to conform. Morality is, more concisely, the mores of the moment. Immorality is the mores of some other moment, it may be a better, it may be a worse moment. Every non-conformist action is immoral. But whether it is good, bad, or indifferent remains another question. Jesus was immoral; so also was Barrabas.'

Fancy what Samuel Johnson would have said to that!³¹

²⁸ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 19 November 1924', *Rat & the Devil*, p. 60.

²⁹ Travis M. Foster, 'Matthiessen's Public Privates: Homosexual Expression and the Aesthetics of Sexual Inversion', *American Literature* 78 (2006), 235–62, at p. 245.

³⁰ *Dictionary of American Biography, Supplement Four* (1946–50) (New York: Scribner's, 1974), pp. 559–61; article on Matthiessen by Joseph H. Summers and U. T. Miller Summers, quoted in *Rat & the Devil*, p. 12.

³¹ F. O. Matthiessen, "'Oliver Goldsmith as Essayist and Critic: Thesis submitted for the Degree of Bachelors of Literature, Yale University (1923)," drafts and notes', F. O. Matthiessen Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, YCAL MSS 495, b. 8, pp. 23–4.

Matthiessen had come across the quotation on ‘The Value of Immorality’ by Havelock Ellis in October, having already quoted it in a letter to Cheney, and it had clearly stuck in his mind.³² Similarly, at another point in the thesis, Matthiessen looks to Whitman to elucidate a point about Goldsmith’s prose—not a comparison we might otherwise expect: ‘For the precise quality that has drawn generations of readers to these essays without any need for the learned commentaries of well-intentioned Scaligere and Daciere is one that can not be put into words, simply because it is alive. It is “the sense that words and reason hold not”, the very spirit of the man himself.’³³ Using these quotations from Ellis and Whitman in his thesis on Goldsmith thus demonstrates the ways in which Matthiessen’s extracurricular—supposedly ‘private’—reading was cross-fertilising with his academic interests in his Notebook.

That being said, the New College Notebook does not seem to have been the place where Matthiessen conducted deep reading for his thesis. The material in the Notebook referring to Goldsmith and to 18th-century periodical culture more broadly consist of brief bullet-point notes, many of which (‘Brit Mag: C of W criticism in May 1762? ^No. June^’; ‘Source of slanders on Griffiths (1)’), seem to have been reminders to check references for the Bibliography that features as the appendix to his thesis.³⁴ There are some notes which seem likely to have been used while Matthiessen was putting the thesis together, for instance ‘Cordial for Low Spirits (1751) (1719) Hah Hah Hah’ is expanded upon in a footnote in the thesis: ‘In the previous generation a group of periodical essays had been collected¹ [1. ‘A Cordial for Low Spirits’ by Thomas Gordon (1719). Reprinted by Griffiths (1751)] under the quotation from Milton: “Hah! Hah! Hah!”’³⁵

Nevertheless, the New College Notebook, as the place where Matthiessen kept a record of extracurricular reading, does contain material he read to improve his background knowledge for his thesis. In May 1925, two weeks before the deadline for submission of his BLitt, he wrote to Cheney that ‘what I want to get wright [sic] is the facts of the nineteenth century. So I toss aside my usual method of reading deeply in the few authors that mean most to my spirit, and read largely through significant figures in the century to find out how they looked on life.’³⁶ Seven pages of notes on Lockhart’s memoirs on Walter Scott, 15 pages on John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*, and ten pages on Newman’s *Apologia* subsequently feature in Matthiessen’s Notebook.³⁷ On Newman in particular, Matthiessen writes to Cheney, ‘The more I read of theology, the more I marvel how thinkers like Newman believed it. To me and most of my generation it is a closed book, dead, a thing of the past. Faith has become more and more a personal thing: the simple acceptance of the figure of Christ as a man, the indefinable inner yearning towards the spirit of Love’.³⁸ He makes summary notes on Newman’s life, and takes down significant quotations, which may or may not have resonated with his own struggle to reconcile faith and sexuality: ‘The simple question is, Can I (it is personal, not whether another, but can I) be saved in the English Church? Am I in safety, were I to die to-night? Is it a mortal sin in me, not joining another communion?’³⁹

Given the brevity of the entries concerning Goldsmith in the Notebook, it seems likely that Matthiessen was compiling his thesis notes in some other location. Indeed, at the Beinecke, such notes are archived alongside the thesis itself, including his notes on Leslie Stephen, Samuel Johnson, and 18th-century politics.⁴⁰ As with the reading on Whitman, Ellis, and Carpenter,

³² Matthiessen, ‘To Cheney, 16 October 1924’, NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/7/1–8/1.

³³ Matthiessen, ‘Oliver Goldsmith as Essayist and Critic’, 100.

³⁴ See New College Notebook, ff. 10v–11r; 13r.

³⁵ New College Notebook, f. 10v; Matthiessen, ‘Oliver Goldsmith as Essayist and Critic’, 15.

³⁶ Matthiessen, ‘To Cheney, 5 May 1925’, NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/1/5.

³⁷ New College Notebook, ff. 79r–80v; 91r–95v; 101r–115r; 81r–90v.

³⁸ Matthiessen, ‘To Cheney, 5 May 1925’, NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/1/5.

³⁹ New College Notebook, f. 88v.

⁴⁰ For instance, Matthiessen’s notes on Leslie Stephen’s books, which he notes were of ‘exceptional value’ in the thesis introduction, are in the folder with the copy of the thesis which Matthiessen had made at The Oxford Copying Office on Broad Street. Also among these papers are tutorial essays on Chaucer, Henryson, Langland, and lists of periodicals in the Bodleian Library. See F. O. Matthiessen, “Oliver Goldsmith as Essayist and Critic: Thesis submitted for the

though, Matthiessen's letters to Cheney give a more personal account of his experience researching his thesis, and we witness a profound tussle between objective and impressionistic methods of criticism from the very start of the project. In October 1924, Matthiessen began by gathering his source material: "Today I stumbled into nine essays printed in an early rare edition of Goldsmith . . . I'll have the busiest kind of final week in London, studying the style, etc, for "internal evidence" and such bunk. But it's damned interesting in that I get closer to the real Goldy by soaking myself in the characteristic tricks of his writing'.⁴¹ That attraction to the 'real Goldy' was what propelled the project, as he wrote ten days later: 'I got started this morning, condensing my notes. It's sort of a discouraging job, for it goes so tediously when what you feel like doing is just chucking all this accurate data aside and writing along out of your head'.⁴² He hoped that the thesis might be able to perform two functions:

adopt the stock frame of the chronological order of his work, and then pour into [it] a stream of comment on the qualities of his mind and personality. So that at the end the Oxford faculty will have an orderly presentation of Goldsmith as Essayist, and I will have given an interpretation of him as a man just the same. If I can accomplish what I am trying to do, you can learn to know certain aspects of Goldy by reading this thesis just as though you were with him. There will be no summarizing: Thus we have seen that Goldsmith was: A, B, C. Instead, an indirect method that aims to give charm through subtlety.⁴³

That the precocious young Matthiessen had come to this 'indirect method' on his own is certainly possible, but on the back board of his New College Notebook, he has written some advice that may have come from his tutor: 'Don't use adjectives. Make your statement so vivid that the reader can only use the implied adjective to describe it. Don't speak of Goldsmith's "whimsical delight". Make the reader feel how whimsical this delight is'.⁴⁴ Matthiessen described his tutor, F. P. Wilson, as a 'shy taciturn Englishman, pleasant enough when you can startle him into being human, but utterly valueless for my purpose since he knows little about the eighteenth century and is a specialist on Elizabethan prose! That's Oxford efficiency'.⁴⁵ Then a Lecturer at the University, teaching at Univ, Exeter, and New College, Wilson was completing his edition of Thomas Dekker's plague prayer pamphlets.⁴⁶ At his first tutorial, Matthiessen relayed how he 'told my tutor that I couldn't write like an English gentleman since I wasn't one, and that I wanted to write like myself. That startled him enough, and he became human. I left the odd twenty-five pages with him, and he said he "hoped to find time to read it." And he's the man who is supposed to be *directing* my work'.⁴⁷

While Matthiessen may have been disappointed with his allocated supervisor—who would become the Merton Professor of English 20 years later—he found his *viva* examiner a formidable figure. Called to defend his thesis on 5 June 1925, he presented Cheney with an account of the examination:

My principal examiner, Mr. Nichol-Smith, Oxford's chief lecturer in the eighteenth century, was talking affably . . . 'substantial, detailed piece of work.' He was kindly and smiling—a white-haired Scotchman of sixty—and I was perfectly at ease. He asked me

Degree of Bachelors of Literature, Yale University (1923)," drafts and notes', F. O. Matthiessen Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, YCAL MSS 495, b. 8.

⁴¹ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 4 October 1924', NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/4/1.

⁴² Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 14 October 1924', NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/6/1.

⁴³ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 20 October 1924', *Rat & the Devil*, p. 39.

⁴⁴ New College Notebook, backboards.

⁴⁵ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 20 October 1924', *Rat & the Devil*, p. 39.

⁴⁶ See *The Plague Pamphlets of Thomas Dekker*, ed. F. P. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925).

⁴⁷ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 20 October 1924', *Rat & the Devil*, p. 39.

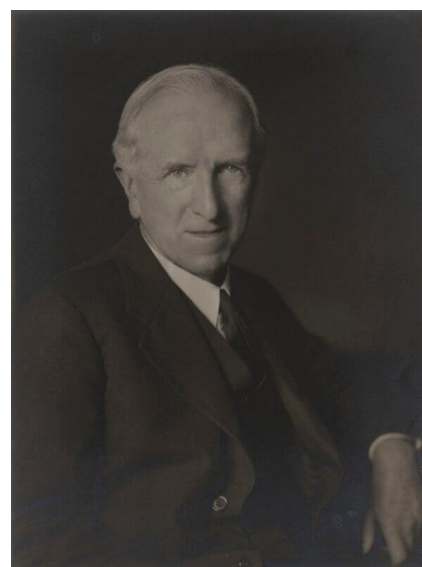
questions and I answered freely, making no bluff and few false pretences, admitting heartily that I didn't really know more than the thinnest surface of the eighteenth century. With the Oxvord [sic] scholar's point of standpoint he confined himself almost entirely to the seventy pages of bibliography at the end, where I had traced the sources of Goldsmith's essays. A few moderately intelligent remarks were startled out of me by the excitement of the situation. He made me look like a fool a couple of times, and I grinned. He is by no means a great teacher, but his mass of knowledge was very stimulating at close range. He found little fault, made several re-assuring and cordial remarks, and I found that an hour had gone by.

He turned me over to the other examiner, an attractive looking little man about thirty-two, who blushed. He hemmed—Mr. Nichol-Smith had really covered all the observations he had to make—he asked me one or two broad questions, why had I chosen Goldsmith? What did I think of his style?, and gave it up. Tell you something, Mr. Keeney, the confident conceited Piccolo could have done a better job examining him.

Mr Nichol-Smith concluded with asking me whether I intended to continue with the eighteenth-century? I didn't know. 'Well at least,' he said, 'you have made a very promising beginning.' And I walized [sic] out. Of course I won't hear definitely whether I have been awarded the degree for another two weeks. But after that I don't see how I could miss it, do you? And so, Pictor, I have cleared a hurdle. (And between you and me it was not a very difficult one.) But in the eyes of barbary, an Oxford B.Litt bears dignity and importance. And so although you may not know it, I am 'a scholar of promise.' And of course, even though you do know that you have just finished a finger exercise—and nothing more—it is gratifying to be told you have done it well. I came back rather walking on air.⁴⁸

With the *viva* completed, Matthiessen's remaining fortnight in Oxford was taken up with reading, socialising, and exploring the city's cultural offerings. He attended performances of *The Winter's Tale* and *As You Like It*, undertook his long-awaited further reading on Whitman, Ellis, and Carpenter, and ploughed through Hazlitt's *On the English Poets* and *Spirit of the Age*—'the fullest, most brilliant book of criticism [I have] ever read'—and on which he made 23 pages of notes in his New College Notebook.⁴⁹ He took tea with his tutor, Frank Wilson, and his wife, and an informal tea with his *viva* examiner, David Nichol-Smith. Also slotted into the Notebook is an invitation card from Dr and Mrs Gillett for 'Saturday June 6 at 8.15 p.m. to meet Elizabeth Fox Howard'.⁵⁰

The notion that Matthiessen had locked himself in his New College tower room, refusing to engage with the social and cultural life of the university city, is easily refuted. Although he was hardly the miscreant, Matthiessen even fell afoul of the dean, when a vacation spent with Cheney in Italy led to a tardy return to New College for Hilary term. Called into the dean's office to explain his absence, he recounted the experience:



Matthiessen's BLitt examiner
David Nichol-Smith (1875–1962)
by Walter Stoneman
bromide print (February 1940)
NPG x185342
© National Portrait Gallery, London

⁴⁸ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 5 June 1925', NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/3/6.

⁴⁹ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 9 June 1925', NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/4/6; New College Notebook, ff. 51r–76v; 97r–100v.

⁵⁰ See New College Notebook.

'Aren't you aware of the rule that states that all undergraduates must be present at the opening of term except in the case of illness or a case equally urgent?' The Dean pointed to this rule with grave thumb. Unfortunately the PM was all too aware of the rule. 'Where have you been? Why didn't you come back?' 'In Cassis. Very contented and serene . . . with my thesis, wanted to finish it . . . could have done it just as well at Oxford, of course, but felt that everything was more satisfactory at Cassis . . .'

'Why didn't you write?' 'It never occurred to me. For while I felt I was acting in the interest of my own fullest development, I knew I could not make the college authorities see the matter from my point of view. I was willing to return late, and take the penalty. I was very happy at Cassis.'

Never in his life has the Dean heard such snapleness [sic], such naivete.

'How old are you?' he gasped, looking as though he hoped the answer would be twelve. If anything more than fifteen he gave me up as imbecile. 'Twenty-three,' remembering our birthday celebration. He could say no more. He merely tapped his little book of rules. 'Read these and take them to heart,' he murmured. The PM had escaped with no other penalty than that of being thought an idiot. And all he did was tell the truth. . . . I was very happy in Cassis . . .⁵¹

Barely a month later, Matthiessen once again found himself as the mercy of university disciplinarians, when he was 'progged' after being discovered drinking at the Mitre with friends after the curfew: 'Suddenly an impressive figure towered over me: "Are you a member of the university?" . . . I simply stared at him, need I say in pained amazement? He repeated his question, no less abruptly. The light began to dawn. I recognized my questioners. I followed him into the hall. I wearily gave him my name and college. I was told to report at his office this morning'⁵²

Although Matthiessen was hardly the rebel, sitting in the smoking room 'chatting affably about Yale with my classmates', he acquired something of a talent for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Regaling Cheney with the story of a college dinner, he wrote:

Last night? A rough party. If I had been filled with undergraduate enthusiasm, I probably would have thought it magnificent, but as it is I would prefer to take mine easy at mine inn, than to take part in the equivalent of a Beta banquet where my ear stops a flying grapefruit, my dinner coat collar a boiled potato, my back a glass of wine, and where I must hastily gulp champagne to keep it from being upset. The dinner ended in a dance on the tables, and a general smashing of all chinaware. After a few speeches which nobody listened to or could have heard if they had listened, they rushed to the bonfire. Talk about the perils of the trenches! I found myself in the middle of a group of maniacs who were enthusiastically setting off roman candles and skyrockets at each other. By some miracle I am still alive. My casualties were extremely minor: a spluttery fire cracker went up my trouser leg; my face was scratched by a stick that was aimed for the fire; someone spilled a whisky soda down inside my vest; someone else smashed a glass in my hand. Ultimately I retired to Abbott's room which was a sea of broken window panes, and put him to bed . . . the most amusing part of the whole evening was that I was spoken to by more Englishmen—even cordially embraced by some—than I have been during my entire two years here. . . . the total damage to property, including four or five broken pipes which made the 4½ [washroom] a small ocean, and an entire telephone booth which made a splendid rival to the bonfire, was about five hundred dollars. These reserved young Englishmen!⁵³

⁵¹ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 2 February 1925', NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/1/3.

⁵² Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 25 February 1925', NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/4/3.

⁵³ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 4 March 1925', NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/5/3.

For Matthiessen, his time at Oxford provided an opportunity to explore independently, both aspects of literature and aspects of himself. As he wrote in a 'report on life at Oxford' for the *Yale News* in 1924:

If you come to Oxford in the hope of being taught the most advanced of scholarly methods, or of listening to brilliant, inspiring lectures, I am afraid that, in the large, you will be disappointed.

If, on the contrary, you feel that you have already had too much instruction and too little education; if you want to prove the strength and development of your mind by obtaining your intellectual stimulation almost entirely from your books, with no instructor's air or commentary; if you want to immerse yourself in a society where many of your companions are immature, but where you have the quiet and charming atmosphere that is in many ways ideal for work, why then Oxford will truly be your Utopia.⁵⁴

Though these early comments are stalked by a shade of resentment, when it was time to depart for the last time, he confessed to Cheney that 'I haven't known how deeply I love it until I must leave'.⁵⁵ Taking a break from *viva* preparation, he relaxed on the lawn, contemplating the personal journey he had been on over those previous two years:

lying under a beech tree... in the New College Garden. Pink and white May trees against a delicate blue sky. Horsechestnut trees in feathery white bloom. Lilacs and dropping yellow labernaum. I am flanked on one side by the splendid Norman church of St. Peters-in-the-East. On the other, over the battlements of that stern majestic city wall are the delicate peaks of the minarets of Magdalen Tower . . . I saw the young moon last night . . . I have a sense of my kinship with the earth, a warm robust full blooded quality of the body. I no longer have to repress and atrophy one abundant side of my nature. I can see the beauty of my sex, and bathe myself in it.⁵⁶

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⁵⁴ [Four reports on life at Oxford] by F. O. Matthiessen, 1923 Oxford Rhodes Scholar', *The Yale Daily News* 47, no. 36 (6 November 1923), 1; 5; no. 59 (4 December 1923); no. 86 (22 January 1924); no. 106 (18 February 1924). Quotation from 22 January 1924, p. 3.

⁵⁵ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 14 June 1925', NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/5/6.

⁵⁶ Matthiessen, 'To Cheney, 2 June 1925', NCA JCR/R/Matthiessen/1/6.