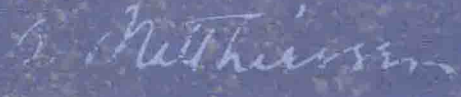

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CRITIC

Essays and Reviews by F. O. MATTHIESSEN

SELECTED BY JOHN RACKLIFFE

NEW YORK · OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS · 1952

The true function of scholarship as of society is not to stake out claims on which others must not trespass, but to provide a community of knowledge in which others may share.

'AMERICAN RENAISSANCE'

It is the moral qualities of its leading personalities that are perhaps of even greater significance for a generation and for the course of history than purely intellectual accomplishments. Even these latter are, to a far greater degree than is commonly credited, dependent on the stature of character.

EINSTEIN, 'MADAME CURIE'

Foreword

THE work of F. O. Matthiessen as teacher, scholar, and critic began in the late nineteen-twenties and continued until his death in April 1950. His first book, a treatment of Sarah Orne Jewett, appeared in 1929. His last, a study of the life and writing of Theodore Dreiser, was published posthumously in 1951. During a span of more than twenty years he wrote and edited some dozen volumes. (A full list of these is given opposite the title page.) At the same time he was steadily producing book reviews and critical essays for a variety of magazines, journals, and collective volumes. He also wrote an occasional piece of commentary in the fields of education and politics. This book brings together somewhat more than half of these uncollected articles.

The process of selection has not consisted simply of gathering the best of this work. For, with the exception of a few rather conventional apprentice pieces in the nineteen-twenties, Matthiessen's writing in periodicals was from the very start unusually consistent. His first reviews and articles lack the richness of his later work, but even these seldom fall below an assured level of accomplishment. My chief aim, therefore, has been to choose pieces which would most closely reflect his dominant interests throughout his career. The articles fall into a pattern which in its variety and its coherence parallels the full arc of Matthiessen's working life.

The book is arranged in six sections, of which the first and last are in the nature of prologue and epilogue. The opening selection, 'The Responsibilities of the Critic,' is a lecture delivered at the University of Michigan in the spring of 1949. Here Matthiessen gave perhaps the ripest formulation of some of his

fundamental values and aims as a critic. The Hopwood Lecture, though broadly inclusive in its range, is clear in its explicit challenges. The standards it sets forth, earned and put to the test through twenty years of wholehearted commitment, he applied to his own work as rigorously as to the work of fellow critics and cultural historians. They provide an exacting gauge by which his own performance can be measured. To Matthiessen, criticism was not a form of personal expression or personal display, nor a substitute for 'creative' activity. It was the fulfillment of a social duty, confined within the healthy limits of a craft. This book can thus be regarded as an illustration in practice of its opening selection.

The Hopwood Lecture is the only long piece in the book which was originally designed to be spoken before an audience. Informal in organization and in tone, it evokes the flavor of Matthiessen's teaching. The mode of exposition, dictated by an anxiety to achieve full and truthful statement, may on first reading seem jerky or loose-jointed. Some of its broadest statements are immediately followed by a suggestion of counter-statement, a halting qualification, a quick pulling back to avoid partiality, to attain completeness. This particular movement of thought was not only a habit of the mind, it was a trait of character. It reflected Matthiessen's determination to 'see the object as it really is,' clearly, but in all its complexity, with all its ambiguities. The same rhythm determined the structure of *American Renaissance,* it gives body to the lucidity of *Henry James: The Major Phase.* Within the smaller framework of the articles and reviews given here, the mental process has in most cases been trimmed and cleared. The thought has not been oversimplified, but it has reached simplicity. In the Hopwood Lecture an attentive ear, hearing the speaking voice, can still detect the brief hesitations which give to the final affirmation its full solid strength.

The second and third sections consist largely of critical appraisals of the work of the artist. Many of these deal with contemporaries in the art to which Matthiessen gave his most concentrated attention, poetry. The division between 'the awakening function of art' and 'the artist at work' is intended to re-

veal a slight shift in the angle of approach rather than to establish any clear-cut distinction. The articles in the second section weigh the completed product, the whole career. They constitute in a sense a welcoming of the artist's achievement—a welcome which loses none of its critical balance by being grounded in generosity and sympathy. The articles in the third section are directed more closely to the fallible creative process. Some examine the difficulties and obstacles which beset the artist in his effort to dominate his material. Others consider the personal restrictions which narrow his field of action. And here again the critic's tools lose none of their precision by being handled with generosity and sympathy.

The grouping in the fourth and fifth sections reveals two slightly different vantage points from which the work of the critic and the cultural historian can be viewed. The fourth section, 'The Awareness of the Critic,' treats certain critics and observers who, surmounting their limitations, have made an authentic and serious contribution. The section ends with a consideration of Paul Rosenfeld, whose selfless devotion to the arts is invoked also in the Hopwood Lecture.

The fifth section, 'The Effort to Repossess the Past,' comprises work stemming from an effort which impelled and enriched much of Matthiessen's professional and personal life. The section opens with the firm announcement, 'It is time for the history of American literature to be rewritten.' In this review of Norman Foerster, which appeared in 1929, Matthiessen found his full stride. He indeed surveys with assurance the whole territory to be explored in *American Renaissance*. The remaining articles in the section are estimates of work done in the field of American cultural history. Here, on his own ground, Matthiessen's evaluations reach their greatest rigor. Forbearing with experimental beginners, and duly acknowledging new insights and fresh approaches, he is frequently relentless in scrutinizing work which seems to him to soften, distort, or evade the precious vitality of the past. The section ends with a short statement provoked by the discontinued publication in 1942 of *The Southern Review*, 'An Indispensable Resource,' which manifests Matthiessen's

lasting conviction that the duty of the cultural historian is to serve the people of his own day.

The final section opens with a credo written in Matthiessen's senior year at Yale. Printed as a 'leader' editorial, it was his one contribution to the *Lit* during the academic year 1922–1923. The writing is young, frequently clumsy. But it does disclose, fully and with unabashed passion, the dedication that lay at the heart of his lifework. With a fusion of humility and determination, it pleads and insists that the searching mind be balanced by the feeling heart. These beliefs remained Matthiessen's guide. The Yale senior's call for 'self-surrender to an ideal' is put in words that the mature critic outgrew. But the Yale senior's naked honesty survived—toughened, tempered, unshaken. This piece of juvenilia, written at the outset of an energetic and often lonely career, may serve here as a key to that career and as its confirmation.

The final articles are devoted to three friends who died during the last years of Matthiessen's life. The brief pages on Russell Cheney formed the introduction to Matthiessen's book of selections from Cheney's paintings and letters. Even out of context they convey some of that book's prevailing tone.

The essay on Phelps Putnam, one of Matthiessen's most thorough and penetrating studies, is at once an act of criticism and an act of friendship. In essence it is a careful, measured estimate of a minor poet whose career by most standards would be considered largely a failure. Yet the estimate somehow succeeds in being also a tribute to the man, a heavily weighted tribute which in passing gravely questions the society that helped to form him. Matthiessen always maintained that the man is to be sought in his work, a view expressed repeatedly in this book. The approach is at fundamental variance with that which tends to seek first in the private life the key to the work. The essay on Putnam is a demonstration of impersonal critical values being tested under personally arduous conditions. It balances and quietly lays bare some of the unresolved conflicts which for Matthiessen gave life its texture and formed its tragedy.

The book closes with two short pieces on Theodore Spencer,

the colleague to whose memory Matthiessen dedicated the *Oxford Book of American Verse.* The present collection begins with the speaking voice—Matthiessen's voice defining the responsibilities of the critic. It ends with the voice of a friend, talking about that devotion which is 'the chief thing . . . in keeping the arts alive.'

The arrangement of this book, made in the endeavor to represent Matthiessen's dominant interests in their true proportions, inevitably obscures one central factor, his growth. Yet a strictly chronological presentation would have been perhaps even more likely to blur the underlying pattern of his total career. The present arrangement emphasizes one unusual aspect of that career—the fact that all Matthiessen's basic positions were taken early. His religious outlook and his political convictions were firmly established by the mid-twenties. His development as critic and scholar can indeed be measured in the consistency with which his ideas, constant in their main outlines, gain body and weight through the years. One notable index to this development—quite aside from the increase in purely technical mastery—lies in the ripening of emotional tone. This paralleled his perpetually acute response to 'the inexorable history of our time.' Even more fundamentally, it reflects the emergence of that quality which he defined, in reviewing the work of a poet, as more 'convincing' than any mere opinions: 'a deeply matured consistent attitude.' In the interplay between his books and the shorter articles collected here, and among these articles themselves, revealing comparisons can be made: the assurance and clarity in the reviews on Norman Foerster and Edmund Wilson, for example, have been enriched and tempered in the later reviews on Katherine Anne Porter, Paul Rosenfeld, and Wallace Stevens.

Considerations of space and proportion have dictated the omission of many articles which, judged by their quality alone, would have been valuable additions. Since the book is centered around literary criticism and cultural history, I have excluded work dealing chiefly with education and politics—two phases of American life that absorbed Matthiessen's attention and ener-

gies.* Fortunately he himself put on the record, in *From the Heart of Europe,* a candid summation of some of the ideas and actions which grew out of his persistent self-examination as teacher and citizen. Readers whose interest in this side of Matthiessen is aroused or disappointed by the present selection should turn to that book, which he described as 'less a travel book than a journal of opinions.' Further material will be found in the Matthiessen Memorial Issue of *Monthly Review,* October 1950, which consists chiefly of essays and statements by friends and colleagues. The extensive bibliography of Matthiessen's publications, prepared by C. L. Barber, is indispensable for anyone who wishes to gain further acquaintance with his work.†

Of several long reviews which grouped the current output of contemporary poets, I have retained only the major part of one, the last, under the title 'Four American Poets, 1944.' These multiple reviews of verse contain some of Matthiessen's most alert critical writing, but their inclusion would have overweighted this book with material in one field. In the case of many of the poets, Matthiessen gave later a more rounded, if highly condensed, estimate in his introduction to the *Oxford Book of American Verse* and in his chapter on recent poetry in the *Literary History of the United States.*

I have omitted almost all reviews of books which themselves have lost even a passing topical interest. For its representative value I have given one example, 'An Excited Debater,' a review from the early 'thirties of a book on the 'liberation' of American literature. Its inclusion was suggested in part by Matthiessen's statement outlining his standards for book reviewing, given in

* A full selection of his statements on education might find their focus in a Harvard-Yale section. It could begin with his lively young evocation of 'three Yale worthies'—James Fenimore Cooper, Alphonso Taft, and Oliver Wolcott. It would include several later pieces which witness his abiding loyalty to Yale, his conscientious and independent service to Harvard, and his anxious concern with American education as a whole. The section could conclude with the bequest in his will to the Yale University Library: 'Having given the bulk of my career to Harvard, I should like to leave whatever little money I have, as a token of gratitude, to my own Alma Mater.'

† A supplement to the bibliography appeared in *Monthly Review* in September 1952. The memorial issue was published in book form as *F. O. Matthiessen: A Collective Portrait,* edited by Paul M. Sweezy and Leo Huberman (Henry Schuman, New York, 1950).

the first section under the title 'The Winter Critic.' There he laments the universal overpraise of mediocrity and looks back with qualified approval to the old-style 'cutting and slashing' of the nineteenth-century quarterlies. Matthiessen's own cutting and slashing, showing the controlled anger of the outraged scholarly conscience, should still afford refreshment. A parallel example is his indignant account of the editorial mauling accorded to the poems of Emily Dickinson.

Several articles originally formed part of larger works. Those on Melville, Marshall Schacht, and Russell Cheney were written as introductions. The characterization of the achievement of Sarah Orne Jewett is taken from a chapter on 'New England Stories.' Most of Matthiessen's later contributions to larger volumes are readily available, among them the prefaces to his two selections from Henry James, and his chapters on Edgar Allan Poe and recent American poetry in the collaborative *Literary History of the United States.*

The titles of selections taken from magazines have in many cases been retained unchanged, though I have modified or substituted titles when those originally used by the magazine seemed inadequate or possibly misleading in the context of this book. In the case of untitled book reviews I have appended a title based on the author or the book or taken from the text of the review.

Two pieces which I have already mentioned are printed from manuscripts found among Matthiessen's papers; I have not discovered any record of their previous publication. The first of these, 'The Winter Critic,' immediately follows the Hopwood Lecture. The standards it urges stem from accumulated years of practicing a trade too often shirked or dishonored, that of the book reviewer. Like the Hopwood Lecture it can serve to measure and illuminate much of the work that follows it. The other article here printed from manuscript is 'An Indispensable Resource.' Written at a time of national crisis and world war, it gave clear warning of some of the dangers then threatening American cultural life. Like many of Matthiessen's political statements omitted from this collection, it has gained, not lost, in cogency.

An editor's foreword is clearly not the place to attempt to es-

timate Matthiessen's contribution as scholar and critic, to define his place in our cultural history. This book, though necessarily incomplete, will, I hope, make the task of assessment easier, the need for it more clear. Though we no longer have the man, we do have his work. That work can form part of our usable present—'as we walk into the second half of our menaced century.'

I would like to express my gratitude to those friends of Matthiessen's who have generously given me their help, especially C. L. Barber and Bettie Barber, Leo Marx, Laurette Murdock, and Mary Rackliffe. In this book as in much else my greatest debt is to Paul and Nancy Sweezy.

JOHN RACKLIFFE

Boston, Massachusetts
July 12, 1952

Contents

I. THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CRITIC

The Responsibilities of the Critic

MY deliberately grave title is in the tradition from Matthew Arnold, my first critical enthusiasm as an undergraduate thirty years ago. But at that very time a new critical movement was rising, the critical movement in which we are living today. T. S. Eliot's first important essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' was written in 1917, when he was twenty-nine; and I. A. Richards' first independent and most influential book, *The Principles of Literary Criticism,* came out in 1924, when he was in his early thirties. The talents and principles of those two then young men have been the most pervasive forces upon the criticism of the past quarter-century.

We know now what a revolution they instigated, if one may use such a violent word as revolution in the field of the arts, where all victories fortunately are bloodless, and where what was overthrown remains undestroyed and capable of being rediscovered at the next turn of the wheel of taste. When Eliot was growing up, the tastes and standards of Arnold were still prevailing; and Eliot found himself wholly dissatisfied with Arnold's preoccupation with the spirit of poetry rather than with its form. The form of Eliot's own first poems was deceptively radical, since he was really rejecting the easily flowing forms of the romantics and the Elizabethans for the more intricately weighted forms of the symbolists and the metaphysicals.

When Richards, as a psychologist who believed in the basic importance of the words with which men try to fathom their meanings, began to read Eliot's poems, he encountered the kind of language that proved most compelling to readers just after

This speech was given in May 1949 as the Hopwood Lecture at the University of Michigan.—Ed.