

REVIEWS

John Matthias, *Kedging: New Poems*. Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2007. 177pp. \$17.95

John Matthias's big *New Selected Poems* of 2004 had an unfortunate air of closure, ending as it did with the wistful "Swell," a poem every bit as redolent of mortality as E.B. White's parallel essay "Once More to the Lake." The hushed finality of "Swell" made melancholy reading, particularly in light of the vein of high-tech, sometimes zany late modernism Matthias had begun to mine in his previous book, *Working Progress, Working Title* (2002). The melancholy and sense of mortality are still in evidence in *Kedging: New Poems*—sometimes overwhelmingly so—but this new collection, in particular the sequence "The Memoirists" and the two long poems "Laundry Lists and Manifestoes" and "Kedging in Time," makes it abundantly clear that Matthias, though never an immensely prolific poet, is by no means shutting up shop. On the contrary, he has entered a period of renewed invention and high-spirited exploration.

Matthias, as has often been noted, belongs to a group of poets who studied at Stanford under Yvor Winters (others include Robert Hass, Robert Pinsky, James McMichael, and John Peck). Winters was famous for his bracing criticism of modernist writers, but his tutelage seems to have had unexpected consequences in the cases of Peck and Matthias, who have proved themselves more or less intransigently wedded to high modernist modes of juxtaposition and literary and historical allusion. In the process, they have fallen between the stools of laureateship-ready apprehensibility (Hass and Pinsky) and postmodern textuality (the Language Poets). Peck's language is an astonishingly taut and intricately wrought weave that incorporates both complex formal and metrical patterns and flights of "poetic" diction that would make most workshop leaders blush. Matthias, in contrast, tends towards a Midwestern flatness, a plainspoken idiom that only occasionally rises to lyrical heights, and which is liable to achieve its most impressive effects through patient accrual rather than vatic leaps.

The first section of *Kedging*, "Post-Anecdotal," includes a number of farewells to Matthias's friends and fellow-workers in the field of letters, including the translator Anthony Kerrigan and the polymathic Guy Davenport. There are many personal poems here, memories of childhood and of youthful

brushes with the great, and there are some definite notes of sadness—“Missing Cynouai” and “For My Last Reader” (the latter leavened with wryness). There is also some hilarity: the delicious shaggy dog tale of “Junior Brawler,” and the pitch-perfect parody of recent Geoffrey Hill in the second section of “Hoosier Horloge.”

The middle section of the book, “The Cotranslator’s Dilemma,” presents twenty or so pages of the Swedish poets on whose English versions Matthias has collaborated: Jesper Svenbro, Göran Printz-Påhlson, Tomas Tranströmer, and Göran Sonnevi. All of these poems have previously appeared in book form, but one is glad to see them again, especially the poems of Svenbro, a renowned classicist whose poetry performs a dazzling mediation between twentieth-century Scandinavia and the classical Mediterranean (*Three-Toed Gull*, a full collection of Matthias’s versions of Svenbro, was published by Northwestern University Press in 2003: it is a very rich book indeed).

The heart of *Kedging*, however, lies in the book’s three long projects. “The Memoirists” is the most straightforward of these, a sequence of five poems based on the lives and writings of five celebrated memoirists: Lorenzo Da Ponte, the librettist of Mozart’s Italian operas, who later emigrated to the United States where he was among other things a grocer in Philadelphia; Edward John Trelawney, the friend and biographer of Shelley and Byron, whose own autobiography is a tissue of fantasy-projections of a piratical youth; Frederick Rolfe, Baron Corvo, the fin-de-siècle eccentric whose life and self-mystifications fuel A. J. A. Symons’s *The Quest for Corvo*; Céleste Albaret, Marcel Proust’s devoted housekeeper; and the songwriter Vernon Duke, born Vladimir Dukelsky, whose career moved between the “high” art of Diaghilev and Prokofiev and Tin Pan Alley. Each memoirist’s life story is recounted in quotation and narrative fragments formed into eight-line stanzas, and each separate poem is cunningly joined to its neighbors through thematic or lexical repetition. Like Davenport in his stories and essays, Matthias has a clear relish for the glimmering detail, the anecdote that encapsulates his subject’s sensibility. Indeed, Matthias is the closest thing we have to a Davenport in verse.

The title poem, “Kedging in Time,” (first published under the title “Thirty-nine among the Sands, His Steps” in *CR* 51:4 & 52:1) is a more ambitious affair. Over some twenty-five pages, Matthias constructs a palimpsest of late-imperial British naval history from before the Great War, through the debacle of Gallipoli, to the day of the surrender of the Kaiser’s fleet, *der Tag*. This history is refracted through the sensibility and family connections of Pamela Adams, the daughter and wife of British Navy captains (and Matthias’s mother-in-law), and is punctuated and salted with references to various popular fictions of the early twentieth century: Erskine Childers’s

The Riddle of the Sands, Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda*, and John Buchan's *Greenmantle* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (as well as Hitchcock's film adaptation of that novel). Matthias cannily avoids condescension in name-dropping these classics of the "boys' own" genre; indeed, he's able to evoke a sense of what tremendous *reads* these oft-neglected volumes are, much as he did with Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* and Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* in "Northern Summer," an earlier long poem.

To "kedge," an epigraph to the poem explains, is "To warp a ship, or move it from one position to another by winding in a hawser attached to a small anchor dropped at some distance." In the genial and roundabout essay "Kedging in *Kedging in Time*," published in *CR* 52:2/3/4 and included as part of *Kedging's* sixth section, "The Back of the Book," Matthias describes his use of these prior texts (along with various memoirs, histories, and logbooks): they are "secure holds for the kedge-anchor of my reefed verbal craft." This is a bit too diffident, I fear; it gives the impression of the poem as an unwieldy, engineless hulk being dragged from one extra-textual anchor-point to the next. For this reader, "Kedging in Time" seems similar in mode to several of the earlier poems collected in *Beltane at Aphelion: Longer Poems* (1995): a resonant structure of historical, literary, and personal particulars held in uneasy tension, traversed by the poet's own restless, connection-seeking sensibility; and "Kedging in Time" is particularly colored with the bitter-sweet aura of familial associations, touched with the melancholy sense that the poem is in some way a leave-taking of the Britain that has furnished the material for so much of Matthias's earlier work.

Far more sprightly is *Kedging's* other long project, "Laundry Lists and Manifestoes." This twenty-two section poem takes its title from a couple of sentences of A.S. Byatt's, quoted among its epigraphs: "People often leave no record of the most critical or passionate moments of their lives. They leave laundry lists and manifestoes." The biographer and archival researcher know how true this is, how often the emotional center of a subject's life can only be inferred or, worse, speculated upon: the paper trails of even the most famous often consist only of the more rarefied, strategic public pronouncements—"manifestoes"—and the most mundane quotidian records—"laundry lists."

The poem begins with two ur-laundry-scenes: Nausicaa, the Phaeacian princess who encounters the shipwrecked Odysseus while doing the royal family's wash, and Japheth's wife—unnamed, as so many women in the Hebrew Bible are—preparing to do a major clean-up after the Flood (which has lasted well over half a year). The dovetailing of events is typically Matthian. Ham's witnessing of his father Noah's drunken nakedness leads directly to Odysseus's concealing of his genitals with "Just a leafy twig," but both events

are narrated with a lubricious jauntiness quite unlike their ancient originals: “She asked to see his manifest. Alas, he said, I’ve lost it with / My ship and all my men, but you can put this on / Your laundry list – and took away the twig.”

A “manifest,” of course, is a type of list (as well as being related to “manifesto”), and Matthias’s poem derives much of its momentum from playing the scales of such puns and etymological relations: *list* becomes *manifest*, *catalogue*, *account*, all of them proliferating into their related terms—*manifesto*, *manifestation*, *accounting*. Nausicaa’s laundry includes “her thong, her super-low-cut jeans, her black lace / Demi-bra and other things she’d ordered from the *catalogue*.” And *list* becomes *list* (verb, as in Hamlet’s father’s “List, list, O, list!”), *listener*, *listless*, and so forth. The poem veers through a forest of lists and catalogues—“genealogies in Genesis, the Catalogue of Ships,” Don Giovanni’s lovers, famous poems whose first lines begin with “M,” items Robinson Crusoe has managed to salvage from his shipwreck—sparking them off of various manifestoes, particular the aggressive pronouncements of various modernist movements, from Marinetti’s (Italian) Futurism to Khlebnikov’s (Russian) Futurism and Malevich’s Suprematism. Toward the end, “Laundry Lists and Manifestoes” becomes a meditation on creativity, communication, and technology, from the evolution of the human hand to Donna Haraway’s “cyborg theory.”

I suspect that Matthias regards the high-spirited romp of “Laundry Lists and Manifestoes” as somewhat less *serious*, less ballasted with *gravitas*, than the nostalgically historical “Kedging in Time.” But it’s a lovely thing that he can pull off two such divergent projects in a single volume, and with such assurance and élan. Matthias the wry melancholic may gloom over the prospect of “My Last Reader” replacing his book “On the shelf, where it continues – / *Camerado, this was a man!* – / Moldering and moldering to dust,” but Matthias the poet continues to produce works of delightful freshness and refreshing ambition.

Mark Scroggins

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Katie Degentesh, *The Anger Scale*. Cumberland, RI: ComboArts, 2006. 75pp. \$12

The titles of the poems in Katie Degentesh’s first book come from questions on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, a test widely used by mental health professionals. The MMPI has a fascinating history; after being invented in the early ’40s to assist psychiatrists in evaluating their patients,

it migrated to widespread use in government and business (with predictable, and controversial, results) before being revised in 1989. The test asks its respondents a series of true/false questions, which serve as *The Anger Scale's* remarkably paranoid table of contents: "I feel uneasy indoors"; "I am easily downed in an argument"; "Someone has been trying to poison me"; "I commonly wonder what hidden reason another person may have for doing something nice to me," etc. Degentesh explains in a note at the end of the collection that she plugged questions from the MMPI-2 into Google and then built her poems from the search results.

This bricolage identifies her as a member of the Flarfist collective, a group that exploits Google as an aid to writing. Using technology to assist poetic composition has become something of a tradition in avant-garde circles. The Dadaists had a search engine too: Tristan Tzara wore it on his head. Constraint-based poetics has grown up a bit since that time, purifying itself in the name of arbitrariness and objectivity, though what these words actually mean in practice is often opaque and inconsistent. Jacques Roubaud, for example, used the movement of pieces in a game of Go to write sections of his book *E*. The choice of a game as a compositional aide is more arbitrary than, say, pulling words out of a hat, particularly if you put these words into the hat yourself. But while Roubaud and like-minded members of the Oulipo generally privileged strict adherence to mathematical structures as a way of freeing language from the tyranny of subjectivity, the most accomplished abolitions of that subjectivity, like the novels of Georges Perec and Harry Mathews—not to mention Roubaud's *The Great Fire of London*—were often coy about how they adhered to their constraints or non-committal about just what these constraints were in the first place. Flarf belongs to this heretical trajectory in literary-technological experimentation, and it has the good sense to avoid any pretension about it: Degentesh announces matter-of-factly that she modified both her method and her results in various idiosyncratic ways. These modifications, it needs be said, are not exactly beside the point. Sometimes she would search for "HATED MY FATHER" and sometimes "HATED MY FATHER + pussy." If she had entered "HATED MY FATHER + kittens," *The Anger Scale* might have been a very different book.

Formally, *The Anger Scale* resembles a collection of monologues, insofar as the titles provided by the MMPI imply the assent or dissent of a single respondent. Most of the poems are therefore saturated in the first-person, and they rely heavily on the conventions of a single lyric speaker. But calling these poems monologues is already misleading since there is no guarantee that their subject position is a stable one. In *The Anger Scale*, the subject is spoken by its language, not in a mystical or a psychoanalytic sense but in an empirical one: the contents of its speech have been culled from the

vast reaches of cyberspace, from sources with only the most contingent relationship to one another. If these poems are monologues then they are also travesties of the idea of a monologue. One could call them collages in the modernist tradition, but this doesn't quite capture their tone, which is personal and familiar. Whatever their precise form, these are poems whose contents straddle the border between pathos and parody. Consider this passage, from one of the collection's love poems, "My soul sometimes leaves my body":

When I'm playing any of the Quake games
I have not had sex, etc.
I have been experiencing some darkness in my soul

that makes me want to spend a considerable amount of time
looking to give Juan Valdez a serious beating.
I remember how I hurt the Turkish saleswoman, Lulu

while running around trying to use the energy cannon
to take pictures of my plant
Despite this I am genuinely bubbly and happy

Strange and funny passages like this one litter the book. Their humor is a product of a careful calibration between plausibility and nonsense. Virtual life collides with physical life—one thinks of the various connotations of "quake"—psychic darkness against the therapy of demolishing a brand name, and Lulu with our speaker, who is using an imaginary weapon as a camera.

There is a lot of violence in *The Anger Scale*, much of it so theatrically mediated by Degentesh's panoply of voices that the effect is not so much aversion as it is curiosity. Brecht is the presiding spirit for this kind of work, and he actually appears in the first poem of the collection as ideologue to an army of crickets. At their best, these poems do achieve something like a scaled-down version of the *Verfremdungseffekt*: they frustrate attempts at readerly passivity. Just when you are tempted into not taking the poems seriously, a sincere (or a sincere-enough sounding) speaker insists you reconsider. And just when you start to take the poems seriously, you can't stand to read them with a straight face. All this discontinuity produces a kind of pleasing bafflement punctuated by uncomfortable intimacy: "I do not hardly know anyone except the mosque crowd / but you can always find a redneck station / for passionate kisses with a semi-conscious Gil Gerard." The intensity—both of the humor and of the discomfort—distinguishes the work. In principle, we've seen this kind of thing before, mostly from the more organic, less constructivist, wings of the avant-garde: the Surrealists, for example, or the Beats. And there are moments when Degentesh's Google-pastiche can

sound a lot like nicely-done period verse: “Finding you, my twin soul, has been the best thing for me. / However I am not sure I’d repeat the process next year.” But *The Anger Scale* couples this jokey melancholy with a tonic unpleasantness that, once repressed, keeps coming back. When it does, the poet doesn’t just collapse the distance between desire and violence. She dares to make light of it. “I want my partner to cut the baby’s umbilical cord,” she writes, “it sounds like a turkey being choked.”

Purists will object for the obvious reasons, but so will the studiously impure, those who want their dodging (however artful) to amount to something more than a critique of first-person poetics by way of the discovery that there’s a lot of crap on the Internet. Because *The Anger Scale* foregrounds its method, and because its poems resist satisfying us in so many of the usual ways, we arrive quickly at a persistent but important question: what is the point of this book? Is *The Anger Scale* proof that one can produce funny and weirdly sad sounding poems by running a personality test through Google and manipulating the results? Or is it a protest against technocracy, a pushing back against the arrogance of psychological testing and other forms of reductionism (including search engines)? One project is aesthetic and the other ethical; it is difficult to say at any given moment which of these the poet would endorse. At times, *The Anger Scale* appears to choose one or the other, occasionally neither and sometimes both. It’s easy to imagine this polyvalence as the result of the poet being fundamentally divided as to the worth of her own raw materials. There is a lot of crap out there.

The best way to justify the book, in keeping with its perversion of the MMPI, is to think of it as diagnostic. The poet holds up a mirror, neither to nature nor ourselves, nor to the technology that has compromised both, but rather to the assumptions about reason and rationality that support our structures of mastery. What we see is us, at the mercy of everything that we cannot control; there’s violence, but also a lot of sex and even more religion. The latter is something of a preoccupation for Degentesh. This is because it can be easily played for laughs — “When the time came for Jesus and the apostles to eat, he said, // ‘Since I began Yoga with Michele...’”—but also because the need for religious faith stubbornly persists in a secular age. It’s easy enough to look at this problem from the outside, and *The Anger Scale* surely does this. Near the end of the poem “Sometimes I feel as if I must injure either myself or someone else,” Degentesh echoes something every young secularist has thought in the past: “I had no idea you were this religious / I must smash my head into a wall.” But then her speaker continues:

I prefer writing about on-base percentages, fielding percentages
and player’s performances, but sometimes
I just wish God would give me answers on issues of life.

Then I feel as if I must void my bladder—but instead,
this great outpouring of juices happens.

Statistical analysis records the past so as to predict the future; in this way, it resembles a personality test. The poet juxtaposes scientific prediction with the traditional kind: “I just wish God would give me answers on issues of life.” Between empiricism and theology we get humanity, both at its most basic and its most basically idealizing. The natural urge to void one’s bladder becomes “this great outpouring of juices.” Here, Degentesh shows us something we know to be true about our predicament as embodied minds: our tendency to experience embodiment as something greater than itself.

The tension between matter and idealization plays out in the way *The Anger Scale* wrestles with its own prosody. Here is the beginning of “I loved my father”:

I loved my father and I loved Jesus.
What was I to do?
I felt like a canoe
that was being pulled apart by two strong men.

In these lines, Degentesh is funny, but she is also prosodically deft—she builds sonic momentum up only to let it go. On the whole, attention to prosody is vexed in *The Anger Scale*: not just with respect to rhyme and meter but also at the level of syllable counts and line lengths. Occasionally, the poet justifies this metrical dissipation by trying to shock her reader. The technique works fine at first but it gets old fast. Watch what happens, for example, in “Everything is turning out just like the prophets of the Bible said it would”:

Since I just got a haircut today
everything is turning jiggy around me

turning into sequel or prequel
in anticipation of the colder weather

flowers are blooming, gardens growing
water flowing, wildlife is there

but the housing is too expensive
for you to retain your status bar

when it flashes red you’re getting hurt
Yeah! You’re a star fucker, star fucker, star fucker,

so addicted to Wayne Gilchrest, the superhero, that
the heavens have refused to yield their accustomed amount of rain

Far be it from me to take anything away from star fucking or former anti-war Congressman Wayne Gilchrest (R-MD), but what are they adding to this poem besides non-sequitur punchlines? The poet disarms us with the insouciance of her speaker, intrigues us with a gloss on the passage of time, makes us suspicious with clichés, and startles us with materialistic considerations before seducing us with the strange detachment of “when it flashes red you’re getting hurt.” Then, as if she were embarrassed by having sculpted so many fluent lines, she distracts us from the delicate balance in the situations she’s created. No theory of de-familiarization can dissolve the fact that moments like these are as annoying as they are estranging. The problem, to put it more precisely, is that they are estranging *because* they are annoying. Generous readers of *The Anger Scale* will look long and hard at their own expectations and the excrescences of the Internet, but they will also want to know what Degentesh intended for them to make of these moments. It is difficult to say. This is not to deny a *tour de force*—only to suggest that, in this book of borrowed language, questions of why the poet made the choices she did become more, not less, important.

V. Joshua Adams

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August Kleinzahler, *Sleeping It Off in Rapid City: Poems, New and Selected*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008. 234pp. \$26

From the point of view of lyric poetry—poetry that is defined by the concise and musical utterance of personal feeling—the basic environmental question is: *Where are you, and how do you feel about it?* August Kleinzahler’s best poems, nearly all of which are present in his new and selected *Sleeping It Off in Rapid City*, deal with this question directly and well. They reveal him to be a poet of place, a member of a diverse lineage that includes Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, Seamus Heaney, Anne Stevenson, Lorine Niedecker and William Carlos Williams.

The title poem is the most sophisticated in the collection. Within the first twenty lines we get a taste of Kleinzahler’s aesthetic in the form of a neat splice from the first tercet of Dante’s *Inferno*: “*Nel mezzo... / 4a.m.—per una selva oscura*” (thus reading, approximately, “In the middle...4a.m.—of a dark wood”). The dark wood in this case is the national forest in the Black Hills; the poet puts himself in the middle, not of Dante’s allegorical road of life, but of a natural space. He is also situated precisely in diurnal time—the moment, perhaps, where drunkenness turns into hangover. Most of the poem occupies itself with the juxtaposition of tangible facts, from geology (“vast, ponderosa-feathered batholith / You can see it from space”) to history