

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.

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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,