

EVERYTHING THAT IS THE CASE

John Matthias. *Living with a Visionary: i.m. Diana Adam Matthias*. Dos Madres Press, 2021.

Peter Robinson



From left to right: Peter Robinson, Diana Adams, and John Matthias, at Morris Inn, Notre Dame University, South Bend, Indiana, early December 2006.

The opening proposition in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* asserts that "Die Welt is alles, was der Fall ist." "The world is everything that is the case," in the C. K. Ogden translation, and those words have prompted poets to take issue with it in a variety of ways. Derek Mahon's "Tractatus," for instance, begins by citing and exemplifying the famous opening, but then turns its second stanza by proposing that "The world, though, is also so much more— / Everything that is the case imaginatively." Along the lines of Edwin Morgan's concrete poem, "Wittgenstein on Edgon Heath," John Matthias plays with the famous sentence by punning on meanings of the word "case" in the first section from "Some of Her Things"—a sequence of seven prose poems, the third part to this elegiac

triptych for his wife, Diana:

I find that Henry James saved nothing. None of Constance Woolson's things. Her middle name, Fenimore, tended to be recognized. She was an independent woman but maybe in love with James. Maybe James knew or maybe not. If it was the case, that is, and the world is everything that is the case.

Later in the section he writes that she “had collected many things during her life. Which had no life of their own and someone had to make a case, execute a plan.” Remembering how James disposed of Woolson's possessions after her suicide, Matthias vividly describes the novelist and her gondolier sinking dresses into the Venetian lagoon: “It seemed that Constance Fenimore Woolson swam beside them now.” When he first met his eventual wife, Diana Adams, at a party in the swinging London of 1966, and was taken to meet some of her relatives in their luxuriously cultured house in Bayswater, the poet describes in the essay, “Kedging in ‘Kedging in Time,’” how he “was twenty-four and felt like an American pilgrim out of Henry James.” Their lifelong romance has shaped much of his writing into a noble re-enactment of such transatlantic literary involvements in the history and fate of Europe.

Back in the academic year 1976-77, all three of us happened to be living in Herschel Road, Cambridge, England, a lateral from Grange Road which runs along behind the University Library, and in those days gave onto playing fields then open country. On a year-long fellowship at Clare Hall were a thirty-five-year-old John Matthias and his English wife, who must have enjoyed being near her distinguished naval family in Suffolk, with their two little daughters, Laura and Cynouai. I would listen to the, for me, thoroughly established poet's stories of meeting other writers whom I knew something of, such as John Berryman or Robert Bly, and would be introduced to ones I didn't know at all, such as Robert Hass, who happened to be passing through: we attended a visiting lecture by John Golding together. As I've said elsewhere, John encouraged me, and it was through him that my first translations made it into print—from Pierre Reverdy. I published “After the Death of Chekhov” in *Perfect Bound* and in that poem too Matthias expresses his feelings, the friendship with Bob Hass, narrating them in other terms, so that they are wholly implied, something Wittgenstein also admired in poetry. *Living with a Visionary* contains an example of the poet's mode back then, in the form of “Rhododendron,” written when his wife was in her thirties, which concludes:

Easily, you tell me, stepping through
 The door: *Look! My rhododendron's*
Flowering... And it is, and it does.

That final sentence pays tribute to her green fingers by catching its making things happen in the performativity of those shifted final verbs. Its compliment compels the poem to embrace a secondary role. Yet in the more recent writings, and notably “Some of her Things,” a desperate playfulness is the primary performance, catching predicaments for Matthias’s writing that the occasion of his wife’s death from COVID-19 after many years of struggling with the impact of Parkinson’s Disease brings into the sharpest and most challenging of focuses. After all, he can’t pay tribute to her by saying nothing directly now, which is one reason why the opening prose poem ends with: *The first thing I’ll save is your magnolia tree*. This happens, I take it, in the imaginative realm of mourning that the writing doesn’t report but performs.

For something to “be the case” in philosophy is of course not the same as “the case” that Oscar Wilde puns on, namely the large valise such as was supposed to contain the two volumes of Miss Prism’s unusually sentimental novel in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, or, for that matter, the case of a woman suffering from advanced Parkinson’s Disease being taken away from her husband during the opening phases of a global pandemic. For doctors have cases too, and Diana’s confronts Wittgenstein’s with the challenging fact that her worsening condition involved seeing things which, for the poet and those around him such as her students and their neighbours, were not there. Yet for her they most hauntingly were, and advice from professionals suggested that it would not be in the patient’s interests to be subjected to relentless reality testing. Those close to her should play along with the visions. Her condition being “the case” means that the “everything” that is “the world” includes existences which for all but the one experiencing them would not be the case.

William Empson’s “This Last Pain” also plays with an aphoristic assertion of Wittgenstein’s: ““What is conceivable can happen too,” / Said Wittgenstein, who had not dreamt of you.” The vast scope of Matthias’s work suggests an aspiration to embrace as much of the conceivable and the dreamt as he can and pay tribute to the “everything” that the philosopher attempted to capture in his *Tractatus* proposition. The poet employs word-play and verbal coincidence to gesture towards it by means of such puns as those on “case,” or by bringing together from his vast reading such suggestive concepts as those *Acoustic Shadows* in his 2019 collection, or *Kedging* (2007) with an anchor to drag a boat across a sandbank. He frequently puns

on names too, such as in “Hess/Hess,” where the coincidence of Myra Hess performing in the National Gallery on 10 May 1941 when Rudolf Hess parachuted out of his Bf110 into Scotland exercises his verbal imagination, or in “Swell” (2003), itself punning on moderate waves and feeling good in American idiom, where he refers to his wife as “Adams” by her maiden name in the environs of Walloon Lake, connecting their evolving narrative with the character in Hemingway’s early stories.

Yet the more Matthias brings together his vast literary, historical and cultural knowledge with memories of their life together, the more he encounters the paradoxes of writing, and especially in the wake of the mid-west’s most famous novelist, whose style has had such an afterlife in the pedagogy of creative writing, that less is said to be more, and, however much a writer might want to evoke the inclusiveness of Wittgenstein’s aphorism, a ruthless selection of elements, images and details is essential for any of the genres in which Matthias has practised his art. It is precisely this that the poet hones in “Some of her Things,” putting just seven into his case—one of them very much to the point of poetry and imaginative art. For the sixth of these he will “save the secret that you whispered in my ear.” If poetry works through keeping a secret by telling you it’s got one, then it is as well that Matthias should not let on what hers was.

In his commendatory afterword (first published in a longer version in *The Fortnightly Review*, as was “Some of her Things”), Igor Webb correlates Matthias’s work with two writers to whom the poet has paid substantial homage, the Anglo-Welsh modernist David Jones and John Berryman, the American being one of the mentors, as he told me back in 1977, from whom he learned directly when young. Both these very different poets were able to invent for themselves, after long apprenticeships, manneristic means for combining in long poems or sequences scholarly and historical research with much-processed and obliquely treated feeling. Yet the requiem for the dead fellow-combatants at the climax to *In Parenthesis* risks, and at moments succumbs to, a floridly elaborated sentiment, while in *The Dream Songs* the tragi-comic clowning achieves its stylistic triumphs by courting its flops. Matthias’s work can be momentarily touched by the consequences of having emulatively developed and long practised modes for the incorporation of vast tracts of knowledge with the uneasy management of emotions hard to express. Yet his development shows the emergence of a writer who has confronted those problems too.

For I’m struck, recalling Robert Lowell’s “Epilogue” and his use of material directly from life, especially in later collections of blank-verse sonnets, how thoroughly Matthias’s elegiac writings on his wife’s struggle

with her terminal condition before succumbing to the virus transcend the older poet's self-critical self-justification. The younger poet inherits from modernism and the mid-century confessionals the conviction that everything—everything that is the case and plenty that was not—may be incorporated into writing, and shaped into art, although the examples of Pound and Lowell, for instance, or Sylvia Plath, illustrate many of the predicaments that were to be encountered in pushing those ambitions beyond their limits. The structure of *Living with a Visionary*, combining poetry and prose, where the prose also divides into memoir-discursive writing and a form of prose poetry, incidentally encounters such predicaments, and shows how his art has negotiated them. This poet's impulse is to express and the adaptation of forms to that primary compulsion reveals him employing what Igor Webb, borrowing the term exercised in "Hess/Hess," calls "muscle memory" so as variously to respond to his expressive needs. It's perhaps worth adding, though, that if you are learning to play a new piece the muscle memory already embedded for other works may impede progress. Matthias's performance here suggests a writer continuing to stretch his techniques even as he exercises them.

Lowell begins his last collected poem by asking why "plot and rhyme" are no use to him now that he wants "to make something imagined, not recalled". Matthias's memoir "Living with a Visionary" is touched by the fact that he, though a poet, is not privy to, and not able to share, his wife's visions, as he enacts here in the clear, simple-present-tense style of his central memoir:

I can't see what she sees. She tells me that this is a great pity. I miss so much of life. I used to have something of an imagination, but I've evidently lost it. Maybe she should start spending time with someone else. Also, she knows about my girlfriend. The one in the red jacket. There is no girlfriend, but there is a red jacket hanging over the back of her walker.

The imagined may be a blessing and a curse, and Matthias's writing cuts through that "imagined, not recalled" contrast by vividly recalling and allowing us to share some of the things that his wife imagined and how he, his family, and friends, lived with someone increasingly inhabiting a predicament besieged by the imaginary. Plot and rhyme are, again, neither embraced nor dispensed with, coming to Matthias's aid when he needs them, as for example at the close of "Good Dream," a poem written in unrhymed, free-verse eight-line stanzas:

The three remaining walls of my house collapsed
 And I was standing in a marble temple, and I
 Was not I. Beside me, Serpent Aesculapius arose
 In flaming cloak. Diana spoke: *I am a linden tree*
 And what I was replied: *I have become an oak.*

Lowell complains that “sometimes everything I write” seems “a snapshot” that is “heightened from life” and “yet paralyzed by fact”. Matthias’s instinctual strategy, it would seem, is to heighten, but not from life, by using the materials of his studies and practised art in such framed contexts as the dream narrative, while similarly not being paralysed by fact, as his memoir most movingly and tellingly exemplifies. “Yet why not say what happened?” Lowell asks, and though it can only be done by radical selection, suggestion, implication, and obliquity, this is precisely what Matthias does, honour-bound to live up to the challenges presented to his writing by the facts of the case. Far from being paralysed by them, it is those facts that compel him to such a self-excelling achievement.

In the aspirational close to “Epilogue,” Lowell calls upon a memory of Vermeer’s “Woman Reading a Letter” (ca. 1663) in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, using the expression “his girl” which adds a momentary hint of imagined confessionalism to the Dutch painter’s representation of a pregnant woman before a map, suggesting her correspondent might be a sailor. Yet just as that reflection is the merest speculation, so is there no knowing that Vermeer’s model was in any sense “his girl”. “We are poor passing facts” Lowell concludes, part of all that is, or was, the case, and this warns us to give “each figure in the photograph / his living name.” But the strain in Lowell’s poem shows in the fact that the name of the woman in the painting is not given or known, and it is by no means to be assumed that people will want to be pinned to the art they inspire by having their living names associated with it. Consider the difficulties Pope had with the dedication of *The Rape of the Lock*. Yet, again, Matthias’s performance earns, and has won over a lifetime of composing poems for Diana, the right to cut through such qualms by giving his girl her living name, and his achievement is indexed here by the long-term fidelity of his techniques.

For the cover of *Living with a Visionary* his publisher has collaged the 1842 *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth* by J. M. W. Turner, and *Diana*, a marble bust by Hiram Powers from 1853. The result is oddly jarring, but only too appropriately evocative of the twin challenges of the book, namely, to report on the storm and to pay tribute, by idealising, unashamedly and admittedly, the person who endured it. Again, he earns that uxorious right thanks to the far from idealising details that he notes about

her visions, such as that she imagined there were “rude people who masturbated into a dresser drawer and had sex on the living room sofa.” The world is all that is the case, and Matthias’s prose, levelling, acknowledges it. One story the memoir tells is thus of a great and unexpected reversal in their relationship. It had seemed as if he was the Turner seascape and she the embodiment of classical poise, and such a sense of dependence on a good woman was articulated in “Swell,” where he suffers from anxieties and insomnia, and “Nights when I’m afraid and cannot sleep, Diana often says / Then shall I read? She means, of course, ‘out loud.’”

In “CPR,” from *Pages* (2000), where Diana has been learning first aid, Matthias imagines her giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation:

If I must die, I’d rather die awake

and staring in amazement while you filled my lungs
with all the air your lungs could gasp
and pounding on my chest

in just and utter outrage over what I’d done.

But now the poet is said to have no imagination, while Diana is beset by it, and it is she who finds herself in the sea of troubles and he who must be her stay, something that his report on their final parting also brings into sharply understated relief. During the March 2020 lockdown, with the Matthias’ support structures in free-fall and Diana’s condition rapidly worsening, both suffer from chronic sleep deprivation: “I begin taking pills myself—sedatives washed down with glasses of Merlot. We are living on cans of beans and prescription drugs.” A few days later a policeman arrives with an ambulance. The poet evokes the chaotic scene, which concludes:

While the medics are conferring with one another, Diana suddenly says, “I think I should go to the hospital.” The ambulance guys seem delighted by this. Diana is put on the stretcher, and the ambulance disappears. No one asks what I think should be done. No one asks me to come along.

This is the last time the poet and his wife will be together in the flesh. Diana has been imagining that a blanket she is holding is a baby. When the ambulance departs, she leaves the blanket behind. This episode is narrated with no more expressions of feeling than those two anaphoric “No one” sentences above, and then: “In the confusion, the blanket has been left on the front porch. When everyone is gone, I take it inside.” But this is by no means the end of their story, whose plot twists include the poet’s own

temporary incarceration, the transfer of Diana to a care home where almost inevitably she contracts the virus, and appears to have survived it, but then relapses and dies, thus becoming the “onlie begetter” of this extraordinary memoir and its set of accompanying works.

In the course of his introductory note on the book, John Matthias describes the unexpected response to his memoir on its first publication:

The title section was published in the *New Yorker* on February 1, 2021. The essay must have touched a nerve among many readers, as I received literally hundreds of responses to the piece—email, old-fashioned mail in envelopes, phone calls, poems, even prayers—and I am not even yet finished answering all of them. I found the experience of hearing from so many readers very strange and utterly overwhelming.

Matthias contrasts the style of the memoir with that of the concluding prose poems:

“Some of Her Things” might be considered a kind of coda to “Living with a Visionary”. It is much more consciously an artefact than is the essay, which was in fact first written simply to tell family members and friends what had happened to us. It is a strange thing that something intended to have very few readers ended up having so many.

Once again, the world that is the case has seemed to turn upside down. The mid-western poet determinedly ploughs his furrow, developing his capacious art from its inspirations in that of the previous couple of poetic generations, and publishing a substantial oeuvre without much access to prominent publishers in the opinion-making centres of power and remark. Suddenly and in such painful circumstances, thanks in part to the mediation of his friend Robert Hass, this poet finds himself deluged with a vast fan-mail. And if the readers who responded so fulsomely and poignantly to his *New Yorker* essay were to explore his poetry and prose some more, as I would hope they will, then one of America’s most varied and expressive poets may find an audience large enough to match the extent of his achievement.

ENDNOTES

1. See “John Matthias: Speaking Personally” in Peter Robinson, *The Personal Art: Essays, Reviews & Memoirs* (Swindon: Shearsman Books, 2021), pp. 187-210.

2. This aspect of “After the Death of Chekhov” is discussed in Peter Robinson, *Poetry, Poets, Readers: Making Things Happen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 11-14.