

AN INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW HITTINGER'S WORK

by Donovan Hohn

It is, I have found, impossible to resist comparing Matthew Hittinger's poetry to other art forms—dance, music, photography, painting, film, urban planning, Euclidean geometry. (If you don't think geometry is an art form, think again.) So forgive me if in introducing him, I mix my metaphors as liberally as, though less artfully than, Matthew mixes his media. The speakers of Matthew's poems haunt the corridors of museums, the stacks of libraries, the beaches of Cape Cod, the streets of Philadelphia, Bethlehem, and New York, with hidden cameras rolling and hidden microphones on. But they do not merely record voices and images. They dance with them. They are balletic cinematographers, balletic, but also erotic. Eros is the force, the surreptitious music, that his poems interpret and embody.

What may be less obvious listening to Matthew's poems than reading them is the mathematical, Euclidean intricacy of the choreography. His stanzas, often written in syllabics, fold their lines and meanings into complex, origami-like patterns. As suggested by "Euclidean City," his grand poetic sequence about New York, his stanzas are like buildings and streets through which the traffic of images and voices jostles and flows. To borrow another metaphor from another one of Matthew's landscapes, his stanzas are like the breakwater against which the waves of language roll.

This image—of the ocean as "trapped form"—appears in "Letter to Mexico," a poem, comprising 42 rhymed syllabic couplets, that exhibits Matthew's craftsmanship particularly well. Anyone whose ever attempted to write in either rhymed couplets or in syllabics will appreciate the technical virtuosity required to combine them as gracefully and (here's the really hard part) as *meaningfully* as Matthew does. Listen. And look.

From "LETTER TO MEXICO" section III:

Shoreline a home for shattered beauty shell
shards scattered across pitted sand the swells

stop, breakwater protective of its bay
trapped form slammed against its wall, bodies flayed

and displayed in this tangle of debris.
At the water edge kelp mixes with seaweed

a free-fall of associations caught in its knots :
bottle caps, candy wrappers, clear glass dot

the foul mass a mosaic on tea-stained sand
where the crumpled latex of condoms land

inches from a cellophane body, a horse-
shoe crab on its back, its bent tail-spine forced

perpendicular into granular stones
worn smooth, an abrasion of slap and foam

lapping, smacking behind me as I walk
alone, conjure your image and start to talk

Like the wrestlers, swans, and lovers you will hear about tonight, these couplets grapple as they dance, tangoing and tangling down the page, the syntax of desire overwhelming the line and stanza breaks. (All but eight of the poem's 84 lines are enjambed.) Though the poem takes the form of a love letter, the partners in this dance are, finally, the solitary speaker and the world through which he walks. Where self and world meet, where the tides of desire slap and foam, the poem, that fringe of shattered beauty, that mosaic of erotic debris, forms, gathering a free-fall of associations into its knots. I give you painter, cinematographer, dancer, city planner, mathematician, M.C.-extraordinaire, poet, my dear friend, Matthew Hittinger.

[Donovan Hohn](#) is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine and a 2008 winner of a Whiting Writer's Award. This introduction was written on the occasion of my Webster Reading at the University of Michigan, April 2, 2004. You can hear Donovan discuss plastic bath toys on the [Leonard Lopate Show](#).