

*Going Scientific:
On Jeffrey Wainwright*

Two or three lyrics can make a poet immortal, but to build a readership during your lifetime—especially these days, when the media-saturated collective memory is so short—it is wise to be steadily productive. The regular appearance of the latest volume by Heaney, Muldoon or Armitage keeps the pot stirred and facilitates reception. Magazine editors recognise the product, know how to place it with reviewers, and readers, too, welcome books as bulletins from an evolving creative life-story. Some well-received figures have, of course, been late starters (e.g. Fergus Allen); others (like Ciaran Carson) have gone quiet for long periods and come back reinvented; a few have managed to make their on-off relationship with the Muse part of the fascination (James Fenton). But these are the exceptions, and they take chances with the way the circuits of publication and reception operate.

Jeffrey Wainwright's gappy record has contributed to his failure to gather the readership he deserves. An early pamphlet called *The Important Man* (1970) was recycled in *Heart's Desire* (1978) and reprinted in a slender *Selected Poems* (1985). Then, after translating a version of Charles Péguy's *Le Mystère de la charité de Jeanne d'Arc* (1986), Wainwright fell silent. Determined twitchers might spot him in *The Independent* reviewing plays put on in Manchester (his home city), but it was not until 1994 that Carcanet published *The Red-Headed Pupil and other Poems*—a delay which made it difficult for even a publisher as respected as Michael Schmidt to rustle up the reviewing space that such complex work demanded. The muted response to the book was the more unfortunate given that, with *Out of the Air* (1999), Wainwright became, if not exactly prolific, then at least a poet of substance. Those willing to think back to the rather different writer of the early 1980s were aware of a corpus of getting on for two hundred pages.

The epigraph to *Heart's Desire* declares: "History, which is Eternal Life, is what we need to celebrate". Unusually for a young poet,

Wainwright began by writing about the past, not himself, and especially about the lives of the exploited and unsung. The opening sequence, "1815", starts with a drowned mill-girl:

Above her face
Dead roach stare vertically
Out of the canal.
Water fills her ears,
Her nose her open mouth.
Surfacing, her bloodless fingers
Nudge the drying gills.

The everyday grotesquerie of this recalls Hardy, but "1815" is if anything closer to E.P. Thompson, as it details the price exacted from the English working class by the industrial revolution and military triumphs of the early nineteenth century.

This historical programme lumbers "1815" with some documentary dead-spots, but its staple lyricism is almost too deliberately alive with implication. Its description of Waterloo, for instance—

The dead on all sides—
The fallen—
The deep-chested rosy ploughboys
Swell out of their uniforms. ...

—bristles with invitations to rethink: "on all sides" (not just two) pointing up the multiple interests engaged in a conflict that patriotism oversimplifies; "The fallen", pitched so bluntly, literalizing the euphemism of war memorials; the "rosy ploughboys" smeared with blood, who now "Swell" not with military pride but bloated decay. With language so minutely suggestive, Wainwright is able to conjure up a society in four short poems, ending at the death-bed of the drowned girl's employer, who is (as the poet sardonically puts it) "Mortified / At what is happening", though he evidently was not mortified by how he made others live.

Heart's Desire ends with the love poems promised by its title, but it is dominated by sequences about war, insurrection, and the brittleness of sensibilities that turn away from suffering. In "Thomas Müntzer" these preoccupations take a visionary form, as the speaker, the sixteenth-century protestant radical, heretically arrives at the doctrine that "History ... is Eternal Life". Unlike the girl of "1815" and the drowning sailors in "Three Poems on the Battle of Jutland 1916", Müntzer need not fear water. A pond is something he can fly across, and not because he is disembodied: "Sometimes on clear nights I spread my arms wide / And can fly, stiff but perfect". The

airy mimesis of that line-break and the placed suspension of the qualifying clause typify Wainwright's rendering Müntzer's corporeality. The poem grounds its metaphysical matter in bodies that crawl, crouch, or explode with rage without becoming historically picturesque.

The calculated density and subject-matter of Wainwright's early verse recall his one-time mentor Geoffrey Hill, and as late as the *Selected*—which extends his range in several ways—that debt can be too obvious. Yet he is protected by a civic conscience from the pedantry and rancour that have crept up on the older poet. In the mid-1980s, he wrote appreciatively about Hill's *Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, but the introduction to his translation of *Jeanne d'arc* counters the blood-and-soil attachments indulged by that poem. His perceptive essay on "Churchill's Funeral" and "De Jure Belli ac Pacis" in the Summer 1999 *Agenda* shows that he admires at least some recent Hill, and knows which parts to praise, but his own work has broken away from that forcefield in favour of new modes of engagement with common life.

Like *Heart's Desire*, *The Red-Headed Pupil* starts with a drowned person. This corpse, however, is not like the Hardyan mill-girl:

In some river, any day of the week,
some figure bumps against the bridge-pile
and is left as the current passes. ...

If "some" at first whets curiosity, its recurrence makes for anonymity. The drowned are bundles of body-stuff hauled in by a fire brigade that is practised in the art of providing matter for pathologists. They, further along the social chain, must establish the cause of death, and in quest of that elusive "last dent that can stand / as this man's very last particular" unravel the brains of their subjects, looking for a suicidal state of mind. By the third of the title-poem's forty-eight douzains we are watching a township pathologist

teasing from the centre-parting of hemispheres
something that looks an impractical pink,
silly, more like an unravelled pullover
splashed with gloss and emulsion than hard-wiring.

The long delay between the *Selected* and this book starts to become explicable. Wainwright has drastically remade his style, not now crystallizing phrases but moving quickly and informally, finding ways of keeping vagueness specific. The easygoing, of course, is not always easy going, and Wainwright's willing-to-be-clumsy new idiom arises

from serious grappling with psycho-philosophical perplexities that go back several centuries. That is why his notes refer the township pathologist to Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Johan Deyman*, and why, although the pupil of his title is his flame-haired daughter, s/he is also the red-headed young man in *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicholas Tulp*. These paintings represent the historical moment when dissectors appeared to vindicate the Cartesian idea of the body as a machine, as a quantity of gristle and piping that could unravel like a pullover.

As one would expect from the author of "Thomas Müntzer", "The Red-Headed Pupil" is not satisfied with lumpen materialism. Wainwright wittily shows the vanity of imagining that the mind can be tracked down in or reduced to the brain. He does not find it prosaic that penetrable bodies are made of the same hard stuff as walls, and wonders what such a truth means, given that no one has ever seen a wall for real (the organs of perception being so limited) and given that bricks and mortar consist of particles in space. What is left of agency when "The brain cranks I out / inadvertently as it feels thirsty / and puts the kettle on"? And how much remains of our cherished interiority if we accept the psychologist's advice to deconstruct the mini-selves that seem to pull the levers of mood:

Forget homunculus, be he Happy,
Grumpy, Bashful, Dopey, Sleepy, Doc;
forget "I spy", forget "Up periscope!",
the earnest youth, the boy of feeling,
forget any soul behind the night-sight.

Light-footed (prosodically too) without being light-minded, Wainwright has, like Holub, a gift for raising questions which edge the reader into difficult subjects instead of hanging in the air.

There have been many calls of late for literature to get up to speed with science. No doubt there is a touch of envy among the poets and novelists who advocate this at the way Richard Dawkins and the rest have shot up the best-seller lists. But the deeper anxiety is that popular science has appropriated the world-transforming role once claimed by imaginative literature, and has done this by bringing readers closer to the truth of things than can be achieved by saying that the wild west wind is the breath of autumn's being. One reason for admiring "The Red-Headed Pupil" is that it takes on these challenges to poetry. It does not make the mistake of relating masses of scientific information, but shows that verse at its best can register the implications for human life of innovative understandings of reality more sensitively and multi-dimensionally than can the prose of the popu-

lar scientists who join Rembrandt in its pages of notes (figures like Daniel C. Dennett and Stephen Jay Gould).

These concerns do not require Wainwright to tear up the fabric of art. He even relishes the way science can half-parodically revive the Romantic lyric. The twentieth douzain, about the “needlepoint” of light passed from eye to brain, mounts to a climax that Wordsworth would recognise:

Mass, shape, motion how mighty you are!
How centreless, featureless, how bleached
innocent of purpose, how little fussed!
You are the lordly nothing that is. You can
deliver us from ourselves. And that is all.

But he can be as effective when he lets psychology frustrate a climax by setting up road-blocks in ordinary language:

out of sight
out of .. ah hah! nothing to believe with
and thus free as .. stop it! ... just free as ...
living as though [] don't exist. Dream on.

That [] might seem the emptier for the absence of the historical and political matter of *Heart's Desire*, but in context (near the end of the sequence) it is coloured by an accumulation of poems about ancient empire, poverty, drainage systems, &c. Reviewing Peter Forbes's recent anthology, *Scanning the Century*, in *Stand*, Wainwright congratulated the editor on being “evangelical ... about ... science and technology in the poetic space” but complained that “he has an uncomplicated view of its rigour which he seems to believe could be readily transferred to every area of human governance”. This is where “The Red-Headed Pupil” makes its most thoughtful contribution, exploring the interpenetration of science, ethics, and history, and resisting, in a common language that is shown to be shot-through with human values, the assumption of neo-Darwinians and others that “scientific” attitudes readily translate into social justice.

Here, for instance, is a poem about visiting a chest clinic:

It would be. Of all those in the queue that day
who came to breathe in and hold it and go off again,
the shadow stole into the glass for me.

We do not die as much as once we did,
25 per thousand, then 15, and lower,
because of what we got to eat, because

Into the cold glass as it is slotted to and fro
as I stand hands on hips and hold my breath steals
not *tubercle bacillus* isolated, but a fear
of deserving, a caution set there forever.
What ails me is what I call a shadow.

Wainwright's appetite for science doesn't always yield happy results. His latest book, *Out of the Air*, begins with an elegy for his father (who died of lung disease) in which there is another visit to a clinic:

This draught takes such a long time to arrive, from arbitrary places and across not always consequential line-breaks (“part of it sustenance / contributed by”), that it seems in every sense far-fetched; and while it’s good to know that the sea wasn’t anciently wine-dark, it lumbers a line to be told that it was not just blue-green with algae but a soup of oxygen-producing bacteria. Poetry isn’t doing here what it can do better than popular science, and so does much worse.

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thus does not (like J.H. Prynne, in *The Oval Window*) work with language rendered exotic and estranged from everyday uses by its specialist applications in science, any more than he spins off into sublimity on the back of scientific possibility in the manner of Jorie Graham. As a result there can be, if not a whiff of didacticism, then a sense that, in going scientific, Wainwright is operating more like a translator than a creator.

But *Out of the Air* is not often congested by science. Less programmatically addressed to the subject than *The Red-Headed Pupil*, it can achieve effects that are the finer for seeming unselfconscious about their inspiration ("The steady tread of light bumping the earth"), and in any case science is only one strand in a book which tries from many angles to make sense of death and deserving. The variety of occasions and tones matches a formal competence that is almost restless. There are loose-modernist, tightly stanzaic, fluently discursive, and spaced-out poems: never the same thing twice. Lines as exotic as "Pellagra and the buboes long since conquered in their name" can be found not far from a "PRELUDE (for mouth organ)" half made up of verses that read "suck blow suck blow suck blow".

I've heard it said that Hill has been doubly bad for Wainwright, in that, over-influenced in his early work, and categorised by reviewers as an acolyte, the younger poet reacted so determinedly against what he had become that reaction became a rationale (hence the miscellaneity of *Out of the Air*) and he lost touch with his "own voice". That analysis can't be squared with what is already distinctive in *Heart's Desire* and developed in the *Selected*—the philosophical sensuality of "The Swimming Body", the emotionally direct domesticity of "As He Found Her"; and it's hard to reconcile with the tonal assurance of *The Red-Headed Pupil*. There are signs, in the interrupted output and locally laboured imperfections, that Wainwright has been almost too self-awarely engaged in what he calls, in his review of Forbes, "an unfinished effort in the toils of received language, which is the lot of every poet who can recognise his vocation". But *Out of the Air* shows, even in its virtuosity, a writer who has found his way, and deserves to build a readership.