

Me and Lindsay Lohan

Three decades ago, Jeffrey Wainwright was a poet to watch. *Heart's Desire* (1978) may have been in the shade of Geoffrey Hill, but in that shade grew historical poems and sequences of ambition, strong images and strenuous phrase-making. Likewise, many who bought *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982) will have found in "1815" or "Thomas Müntzer" poems of considerable promise. However, with *The Red-Headed Pupil* (1994) and, even more so, its successor *Out of the Air* (1999) Wainwright's poetry took a left turn into more abstract, disjunctive sequences, a left turn that winds up with *Clarity or Death!*

Not content to borrow their subjects, Wainwright has taken on board some of the philosopher and scientist's way of putting things, as in "the visible universe can only be of the kind that permits us":

Although, unclassically, this has been only a possibility for there were many paths from A, and few or none would have happened through this B where the fox flickers into darkness

Reclaiming language which common opinion deems unpoetical may make a change from the "Thought Fox", nevertheless, it soon becomes clear that common opinion has a point. Such language is fairly unpoetic, and,

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Jeffrey Wainwright

CLARITY OR DEATH!
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without considerable authorial alchemy, will remain so: unsensuous, unmoving, unpleasing and abstract, capable of consigning flickers from more conventional poetic imagery and language into darkness. Wainwright struggles hard and elsewhere will invite us to smile at the awkwardness, but he doesn't turn the leaden into gold.

At the other extreme, there are moments where Wainwright tires of the drabness and splurges every colour in the box:

as in *we do* [smell the mint] –
who does? me and Lindsay Lohan? –
we think [if lintily];
but I do know –
we do know this don't we? –
that I AM WRITING A POEM
[some of us like to be reminded
of this at regular intervals]:

While this way of writing is deliberately loud, the way Wainwright grabs at film star and tabloid favourite Lindsay Lohan merely

to seem with it, the tired reflexivity, the sheer willed quality of it all massively overpower any interest the discussion of writing and consciousness could hold. To judge by the rash of mannerisms caught from Geoffrey Hill's *Speech! Speech!*, I assume that Wainwright, following Hill, is trying to disconcert the reader by giving each pronoun a different pitch from the last. But, though Hill has the brilliance and bite to make this and other idiosyncrasies of style appear as if exemplary, the spell of Hill's example has led to Wainwright coming across as merely annoying and self-congratulatory.

To be fair, most of *Clarity or Death!* is better than this. But that willed quality, that desire to press important-looking buttons for no very good reason, is pervasive. Outside a sprinkle of pentameters, nearly all the poems are in a stilted free verse, which, in the absence of much discernable relation to music, syllable, cadence or breath, leaves one always searching for an elusive algorithm that could in some way explain the line. Likewise, Wainwright's orthography often seems to have no greater rationale than caprice.

Force yourself to concentrate on the ideas, and these can be truly interesting. Wainwright's title refers to a letter in which Wittgenstein declares "I wish to God that I

were more intelligent and everything would become clear to me – or else that I didn't live much longer!" Wainwright uses scientific and philosophical material not merely for metaphor and ornament but to clarify the world and his comprehension of it. These are reasoned meditations in which reader and poet are dislocated from, and forced to reassess their habitual responses to, such standard poetic scenarios as a school lesson recalled or wildlife and a beach.

Still, if those seeking alienation through the perspective of science will find Wainwright's version easier going than that of a writer like J. H. Prynne, they will also find it less full-blooded. And, though Wainwright makes for an intelligent companion, he hasn't, so far as I can judge, much to add to philosophy or science. So, once you've followed up the helpful notes, which indicate that Wainwright's scientific research is confined to books comprehensible to the layman, and have begun to read the lucid expositions of Jerry Fodor or Richard Feynman, there can seem few reasons to soldier on with Wainwright.

There are odd flashes which catch the mind's ear or eye, traces of the skill that first brought Wainwright to attention. And these make one wish for the book Wainwright might have produced had he not been so distracted from poetry's more traditional delights and duties. For the most part though, a fair talent and its poems have been hopelessly buried under fine notions and good intentions.

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