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Jeffrey Wainwright on John Drew [with Reply]

Jeffrey Wainwright

John Drew

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I cannot approach you—and expect to be dead
Before I loom in your memory so tangible
You will be shocked to detect in it the distance.
—Many tears make up the smile of a Buddha.

2

That is twice recently something like this has happened,
The child sobbing hard as if for the death of a husband
She could not possibly have. Because I raised my voice.

Her black hair loose on the pillow and like her mother, too,
The way she bewilders me. The other day she missed me
In the house and ran to tell her mother, who assumed

I was gone—like a stray dog, a madman or a unicorn.
I am amazed. I matter to them, not as a child would,
But in a way whereby I am responsible for it—and them.

Jeffrey Wainwright on John Drew

John Drew's poems are predominantly actions within the mind, contemplations, musings, arguments. They take incidents—the meeting with an Indian friend in “Poem for Chandravadan Mehta,” occasions with a daughter in “Two Aspects of Paternity”—or the conjunction of a place and abstract ideas in “Poem for a Cambridge Platonist”—and develop ideas around the experiences. The manner is highly conscious, often fully using the resources of syntax in order to articulate the thought. This degree of articulated argument strikes me as one of the most unusual and interesting things about these three poems.

Further than this the poems are self-consciously aware of the workings of the mind, and at a second level they have this as their central subject. Both “Two Aspects of Paternity” and “Chandravadan Mehta” it seems to me are concerned with the complexities of differing subjective views of the same situation, and of how disparate various “realities” can be. In “Chandravadan Mehta” this has a wide cultural, and eventually I suspect, political aspect, for the difference in the man between his London appearance, “as grey and full of propriety as the city itself,” and his presence in India undermines notions of common assured reality and in particular definitions of reality which we make from our own standpoints and so make imperial. Drew handles a similar theme in a poem not included here, “In the City” (*Stand*, 15/4), where in twelve easily moving lines he travels by associations of the mind from “a picture postcard morning” by the Thames to another unspecified country of colourless brown scrub

Where fear of death is immanent—though
obliterated by thirst.

The movement is made casually through what he happens to see that morning in London, but the difference of realities (the first described initially in terms of a picture rather than the thing itself) is strikingly revealed. In “Chandravadan” the poet’s mind, intellect, that implicitly much prized possession, is changed by “the essence” of the petals showered upon it. Paradoxically it becomes “deflowered,” by which I understand that its original somewhat cocksure efflorescence, as in the patronising tone of “Old man, scholar and endearing rogue,” is now lost.

In “Two Aspects of Paternity” again the exact nature of the “reality” of the situation is called into question. He insists upon the tangibility of the incident in the first part, and the changing nature of his relationship with his daughter is expressed in very tangible terms:

Your prettiest dress becomes a suit of armour.

Yet she will not remember. The contours of *her* experience and memory are altogether different. Similarly in the second part the child, and her mother, read his being missing from the house entirely differently, and out of this arises his realisation of their relationships being quite different than he had thought, “I matter to them . . .” Involved with these differing views of reality are of course matters of behaviour and morality.

The actions of the mind are considered in a formal context in the neatly ironic “Poem for a Cambridge Platonist.” An intellectual scheme (here Platonism) strives to organise and make sense of the world and our experience of it, though reality has a tendency to persist in spilling out—

the mushrooms, crab-apples and blackberries
Keats forgot to mention.

So this organisation, the dominant “Idea,” does not in fact achieve order and instead we experience chaos.

The Mind is a flat landscape, full of ditches to fall in.

The scepticism John Drew shows in his poems for the assured: systems and perceptions of the mind shows a further interesting ramification which I take to be an implicit suspicion of his own expression as embodied in the poem. The poem is a formally organised, carefully meditated statement, a product of the mind. Since these poems inquire into the fluctuating nature of our perceptions, then the integrity of the poems themselves which carry

this inquiry must be called in question. I think that Drew's carefully judged style of very deliberate meditation, minutely followed through in the movement of the syntax, almost parodies the air of definitiveness that a poem will often claim by virtue of its (too) manifestly considered statement. In this way, in "Poem for a Cambridge Platonist" especially, Drew is writing a poem which is a subtle criticism of itself. The studied formality of his work emphasises that the poem is inescapably an artifact and needs to be recognised as such, and with the perspectives upon the information the poem holds that that recognition will mean. It is this highly self-conscious understanding of what he is doing in writing a poem that I find the most interesting element in John Drew's work. For the sake of the anticipated form of this forum I hope that he does too.

John Drew Replies

I cannot say whether I was the more amused that poems of mine were to be the subject of critical comment or the more flattered that the comment was to come from Jeffrey Wainwright, whose poem on Münster deserves to be the toast of this symposium. In the event, I am less amused or flattered than fascinated by the persistent accuracy with which, in his prose commentary, Wainwright articulates what I had had to resort to verse to discover. I would only try to qualify—or rather elaborate on—one of his conclusions: as far as I know, the poems are not so deliberate as he supposes, not so exclusively a product of the mind. Early on in the commentary, he says it is the poems which are self-consciously aware. The poet who wrote them was not. "Poem for a Cambridge Platonist," seemingly dry and cerebral, was written in a cold sweat; considerable anguish informs the first part of "Aspects of Paternity." If the intellect is keen, it is only because it is being extended, even threatened with derangement, by one's whole existence.

It is a most acute observation of Wainwright's that distrust of perceived reality has active political ramifications. After writing "Poem for a Cambridge Platonist" I must have sensed its political aspect was too implicit and wrote another poem—"State of the Republic"—which I now see is really contained in the first one:

Fires flare all over the Common,
So much wood brought down the river
By the rains. Guy Fawkes Night
Every night in mid-December. Kids
And the Council workmen dance

Against the flames like cut-outs,
An impression made on the darkness.

Fuel bills have doubled this year.
In the houses along our street
Senior citizens come to the door
In darkness. Light is a luxury.
Sometimes, to keep loneliness at bay
They watch the flickering shadows
On the T.V. set. It is unreal.

The councillor I elected flies
To Greece this week. He is guaranteed
Fifteen days of sunshine.
He will return with a bronzed tan,
A broad smile and illimitable goodwill.
—Brother, do not feel hurt when those
Blinded by darkness tear you apart.

The politics of Platonism are as necessarily anti-Establishment as they are, because non-dualist, anti-Marxist. This being so, the scepticism Wainwright detects is more far-reaching than he suggests, questioning, as it does, whether the poem has powers miraculous enough to achieve reconciliation both within the self and in the world at large. On occasion, it seems hopeless:

A Mrs. Hales, whom I don't know,
Who lives up the alley, and with whose son
I am said to have played football (Hales?
A half-back?), would very much like to see me

My mother reports. Mrs. Hales, whoever you are,
What, in God's name, do I represent to you?
A golden boy with the glamour of wealth upon me?
A grey-haired sage who goes to university? Or just

Someone somehow special? How do I tell you, Mrs. Hales,
Any image you have is a mockery, that I know myself
No more than I know you—and can recall who I am
No more than I can your son, who may have been a half-back.

Since the poem has to live in the world, the composition of the village football team is as necessary to the making of the artifact as is what Wain-

wright, remembering that Pyrrho derived his scepticism from Buddhist sources, puckishly refers to as meditation. The arhat or yogi will not attach much importance to poetry. I am certainly not a yogi but I am perhaps almost as sceptical of being a poet as I am of being young or British. I am fascinated, therefore, that Wainwright so precisely delineates the nature of a difficulty I experience in writing, generously making it the basis for an appreciation where a critic, according to his lights, would make it a basis for criticism.

Thomas Müntzer / Jeffrey Wainwright

For David Spooner

Thomas Müntzer was a Protestant reformer in the early years of the German Reformation. He was a radical and a visionary both in theology and politics for whom religious thought and experience became integrated with ideas and movements towards social revolution. Travelling through Germany, preaching and writing, continually in trouble with the authorities, he came to support and lead struggles by common people against the monopolies of wealth and learning. In 1525, in the Peasant War, he led an army against the princes which was heavily defeated at Frankenhausen. Müntzer was subsequently captured and executed.

Doubt is the Water, the movement to good and evil. Who swims on the water without a saviour is between life and death. —Müntzer

*I have seen in my solitude
very clear things
that are not true.* —Machado

I

Just above where my house sits on the slope
Is a pond, a lodge when the mine was here,
Now motionless, secretive, hung in weeds.

Sometimes on clear nights I spread my arms wide
And can fly, stiff but perfect, down
Over this pond just an inch above the surface.

When I land I have just one, two drops of water
On my beard. I am surprized how quick
I have become a flier, a walker on air.