

1975

Thomas Müntzer

Jeffrey Wainwright

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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.

ii

I see my brother crawling in the woods
 To gather snails' shells. *This is not*
A vision. Look carefully and you can tell

How he is caught in the roots of a tree
 Whose long branches spread upwards bearing as
 Fruit gardeners and journeymen, merchants

And lawyers, jewellers and bishops,
 Cardinals chamberlains nobles princes
 Branch by branch kings pope and emperor.

iii

I feel the very earth is against me.
 Night after night she turns in my sleep
 And litters my fields with stones.

I lie out all summer spread like a coat
 Over the earth one night after another
 Waiting to catch her. And then

She is mine and the rowan blooms—
 His black roots swim and dive to subdue her—
 His red blood cracks in the air and saves me.

iv

How many days did I search in my books
 For such power, crouched like a bird under
 My roof and lost to the world?

Scholars say God no longer speaks with us
 Men—as though he has grown dumb, lost his tongue
 (Cut out for stealing a hare or a fish).

Now I explode—out of this narrow house,
 My mind lips hands skin my whole body
 Cursing them for their flesh and their learning—

v

dran dran dran we have the sword—the purity
 Of metal—the beauty of blood falling.
 Spilt it is refreshed, it freshens also

The soil which when we turn it will become
 Paradise for us once rid of these maggots
 And their blind issue. They will seek about

And beg you: "Why is this happening to us?
Forgive us Forgive us," pleading now for
Mercy a new sweet thing they've found a taste for.

vi

So you see from this how I am—Müntzer:
"O bloodthirsty man" breathing not air
But fire and slaughter, a true phantasiist—
"A man born for heresy and schism,"
"This most lying of men," "a mad dog."
And all because I speak and say: God made
All men free with His own blood shed.
Hold everything in common. Share evil.
And I find I am a God, like all men.

vii

He teaches the gardener from his trees
And the fisherman from his catch, even
The goldsmith from the testing of his gold.
In the pond the cold thick water clothes me.
I live with the timorous snipe, beetles
And skaters, the pike smiles and moves with me.
We hold it in common without jealousy.
Touch your own work and the simple world.
In these unread creatures sings the real gospel.

viii

I have two guiders for a whole winter.
I ask for company and food from beggars,
The very poorest, those I fancy most
Blessed . . . I am in love with a girl
And dare not tell her so . . . she makes me
Like a boy again—sick and dry-mouthed.
How often have I told you God comes only
In your apparent abandonment. This is
The misery of my exile—I was elected to it.

ix

My son will not sleep. The noise
And every moving part of the world
Shuttles round him, making him regard it,

Giving him—only four years old!—no peace.
He moves quietly in his own purposes
Yet stays joyless. There is no joy to be had,

And he knows that and is resigned to it.
At his baptism we dressed him in white
And gave him salt as a symbol of this wisdom.

x

I am white and broken. I can hardly gasp out
What I want to say, which is: *I believe in God . . .*
At Frankenhausem His promised rainbow

Did bloom in the sky, silky and so bold
No one could mistake it. Seeing it there
I thought I could catch their bullets in my hands.

An article of faith. I was found in bed
And carried here for friendly
Interrogation. They ask me *what I believe*.

xi

Their horsemen ride over our crops kicking
The roots from the ground. They poison wells
And throw fire down the holes where people hide.

An old woman crawls out. She is bleeding
And screaming so now they say they are sorry
And would like to bandage her. She won't

Go with them. She struggles free. *I see it*
I see it—she is bound to die . . .
This is the glittering night we wake in.

xii

I lie here for a few hours yet, clothed still
In my external life, flesh I have tried
To render pure, and a scaffold of bones.

I would resign all interest in it.
To have any love for my own fingered
Body and brain is a luxury.

History, which is Eternal Life, is what
We need to celebrate. Stately tearful
Progress . . . you've seen how I have wept for it.