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# BREAKING THE FRAME: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDY WAINWRIGHT

ANDY WAINWRIGHT was born in Toronto in 1946 and is McCulloch Professor Emeritus in English at Dalhousie University. Andy has been writing and publishing poetry and fiction since the 1960s and has an impressive body of work to his name. He has published five volumes of poetry: *Moving Outward* (1970), *The Requiem Journals* (1976), *After the War* (1981), *Flight of the Falcon: Scott's Journey to the South Pole, 1910-1912* (1987), and *Landscape and Desire: Poems Selected and New* (1992). He has also published five novels: *A Deathful Ridge* (1997), *A Far Time* (2001), *The Confluence* (2007), *Long before the Stars Were Torn Down* (2015), and *The Last Artist* (2016). In addition, he has written the biographies *World Enough and Time: Charles Bruce* (1988) and *Blazing Figures* (2010), about the painter Robert Markle, as well as a play, *Feathers and Loam* (2009), and an opera libretto, *I Will Fly like a Bird* (2012). The following conversation took place in 2016, first on June 23rd at Andy's house in Halifax and then on July 26th at his cottage on the North Shore of Nova Scotia.

**Luo**: Could we begin with your opera *I Will Fly like a Bird*? I am curious to know how it came about and how the writing process was different from writing fiction and poetry, as this would have been a collaborative project.

**Wainwright**: The writing process remained the same as in the other genres: I went into my study, sat down in front of the computer and wrote the pieces, which does not sound very inspired. But I realized all along that I was writing for a different kind of audience, an audience that would not read the work but see it and hear it. I also realized that I would have to collaborate with others and enter into a community of creative artists: actors, directors, set designers, and the composer. I wrote the Robert Dziekanski libretto because I felt that it was an important Canadian story and a vital

part of the Canadian experience. His fatal welcome to Canada was treated as tabloid news and sensationalized, as his death by Taser was shown again and again on the screen. I felt that he and his final moments deserved more than that, and I tried to say something about who he was and what he went through, and about his mother as well, who is the female figure in the opera. The way I put words on the page was also musically informed, and I had to draw upon my classical music listening experience.

**Luo**: The duet between mother and son conveys not only a contrast of voices, but also a juxtaposition of landscapes—evoking bridges and the meeting of waters, of time—the remembrance of childhood and the promise of the future, and of emotions—between hope and longing and fear and anxiety, culminating in disappointment and misunderstanding, trauma and tragic death.

**Wainwright**: The duet aspect was in my mind from the beginning. I was looking for a composer and was fortunate to find John Plant, who took away the libretto and emailed me a few days later saying that the piece was written for music and he would compose for it. John deserves a lot of credit for the final result: what took me a couple of months to write took him over a year to bring to fruition. It is a wonderful classical piece for piano, string quartet, and clarinet. The first time I heard it my partner and I were invited to John's house: John played it on the piano, and his wife, who is a retired opera singer, sang the parts of both Robert and his mother. It was deeply moving.

**Luo**: I know you are an opera aficionado. Still, why opera? There seems to be an incantatory quality to the operatic lines, with pure, simple language, and repetitions in the chorus. It came through in the live performance very effectively and was emotionally incredibly powerful.

**Wainwright**: I felt from the very beginning that opera was the only form that could contain and articulate the story the way I wanted it done. The lyrics needed to be augmented by something even more powerful to involve the audience and underscore the tragedy, because it is a tragic story, and that is what opera does best, to me anyway. It is a highly poetic piece, but had to be sung, to be spoken aloud, and there had to be a vocal flow to it, so it was different in that way. It was first produced at the Scotia Festival of Music, and two years later at Dalhousie University, directed by David Overton from the

Theatre Department. I was fortunate to be able to participate in the rehearsals and to have some input. It was a fascinating process to watch other artists at work, dealing with and interpreting my work, and in important ways transcending my own contribution. A significant aspect of the whole experience was that we were able to raise money to bring Dziekanski's mother to the first performance. She sat in the audience, and it was a privilege to have her there.

**Luo**: Were you willing to let others inhabit your work, or were you possessive of your material during the rehearsals? Did others' interpretations and imagination of your work reveal any surprises or new aspects of the work? Did you demand that actors do certain things in ways that you had intended?

**Wainwright**: No, it was not my role to make such demands. Sometimes they would ask if I felt that they had interpreted certain lines properly, but David Overton, who directed both the play and the opera, was in charge. I was there as a kind of informed extra, but hearing people speak the lines that I had written was a new and exciting experience to me. And when the actors or singers would say/sing the lines it would often be different from what I imagined, and I would have to deal with that and recognize that once the voices are embodied by others they have a validity all their own. I wrote the play and the opera to be produced, to be lifted from the page, and the results did expand my expectations. Ultimately, as with any written piece, you have to let the work out into the world, as the whole idea is to have others respond to it.

**Luo**: Sounds like it was a productive and satisfying artistic experience.

**Wainwright**: Very much so. But the Dziekanski story, and I don't say this with any bitterness, deserves more exposure and to be performed more widely, not because it is my work, but because it is an important Canadian story that needs to be on the national stage. It got local attention and was reviewed in Opera Canada. Still, it should be done on the West Coast, perhaps in the Vancouver Airport where Dziekanski died. It has a visceral quality, along with the lyricism, that needs to be accentuated by the space where the events originally took place.

**Luo**: Would you speak more on the question of genre? You have an im-

pressive body of work, starting with poetry and fiction and then going on to the play and the opera. How do you decide that a certain genre works for a certain story? Why does the Icarus story work as drama, while the Dziekanski story is operatic? Why is Scott's journey to the South Pole poetic, while Mallory's ascent up Mount Everest is epic in a novelistic way?

**Wainwright**: I think I have to go back to when I first started to write. I always thought of myself as a poet and wanted to express myself poetically. Not from an early age, although I did do some minor poetry in high school and published in yearbooks and school newspapers. It wasn't until I got to university when I fell in with a crowd of writers who were mainly poets that I decided poetry was the genre I wanted to work in at that time of my life. I was strongly influenced by Irving Layton and Leonard Cohen, who were both larger-than-life figures, and both of them poets (although Cohen did write two novels). Poetry was the way I expressed myself when I was young. I didn't have to sit down for hours at a time. I could write a draft of a poem sitting on the subway, in someone's car, or in a coffee shop, and finish it later. Living the life was demanding; writing the poetry wasn't. It was the intersection of those two things that made the poetic life I attempted to live at that time.

**Luo**: In your novel *A Far Time* you refer to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: "Woolf especially burning into him as Lily Briscoe tried to find the right form and colour…the finished poems tiny reflections of his daily existence, the possibilities of fiction gigantic in comparison." This is interesting, as you published five volumes of poetry before moving to fiction. I know you continued to write poetry, but is this why you started writing fiction as well?

**Wainwright**: I haven't published a book of poetry since 1992, although I continue to write and publish poems in various journals. I haven't felt the need to bring them all together and do another collection, because I have become more interested in writing fiction. It is difficult to say exactly when or how I made that choice, but it occurred sometime before *A Deathful Ridge*, which was published in 1997. The story of George Mallory's climb of Mount Everest seemed a subject too big for fragmentation in poetry. Although not very long, it is a very dense novel. I felt that I had a lot to say, and fiction was the way to proceed. I also felt that it was the way to find Mallory's voice and my own voice intermingled with that. *A Deathful Ridge* was my first novel

and has the writer and the subject of the writing come together. There had to be a dialogue between them more than once, and I didn't think I could pull that off in poetry. I had never written prose of any length before, only a few short stories, but I was very confident when I was writing the novel, probably because I felt extremely close to the subject matter. When I was a boy, twelve or thirteen years old, my very English uncle, who was a mountain climber himself, sent me some first-edition books on Everest as well as books on Robert Falcon Scott and the Antarctic. I devoured and was fascinated by them, but they were put aside until I wrote *Flight of the Falcon* in 1987. When it came to the Mallory story, I never had that kind of confidence in writing before. When I wrote a poem I was always concerned that it might be the last one; it was as if I had no idea where it had come from, so it could be taken away and the next one might never appear. I had never spoken about my work-in-progress in any visible fashion before, but I did tell good writing friends of mine that I was going to write a novel about Mallory and Mount Everest. I didn't know what it was to be yet, but I somehow knew fiction was the only way to do the subject justice.

**Luo**: Would you say that perhaps poetry is a more youthful occupation, about sensory experiences, and a more abstract form?

**Wainwright**: Yes, it is definitely about the senses, but it is also deeply grounded in lived experience. I was always writing about life, my experience of life. One of my particular concerns had always been the issue of mortality. I titled my second collection of poetry *The Requiem Journals*, for example, when I was only in my 20s. It is a subject that has always preoccupied me.

**Luo**: But what began as poetry in *The Requiem Journals*, the sequences on the islands of Ibiza and Lesbos, later became short stories in *After the War*. You wrote in your preface to *After the War* that initially it is the "rush of experience which prevails," but the second time around, in fiction, it is the memory of that experience. You even describe the stories as a "second translation." Ibiza and Lesbos are captured yet again in your novel about the 1960s, *A Far Time*, although framed by Big Sur and Cape Mendicino in California. Why did you feel the need to rewrite those experiences? How does the change in genre change the events?

**Wainwright**: With poetry I was trying to capture and hold in time moments that I didn't want to escape me. In order to hold the experience in

time, I had to write it in time. If I didn't write it down quickly, and I don't mean slovenly or without thought, the moment was gone, the people were gone, the landscape was gone. Writing fiction was a matter of stepping outside of myself. *A Far Time* is an autobiographical novel, but it is also about other people. Obviously *A Deathful Ridge* is about historical figures independent of myself. *The Confluence* is about a period in time of which I had no direct experience, so, relying on historical facts, I had to make up the rest. It was a matter of, I don't want to say maturing, but coming to the point in my life when I didn't feel the need to capture and hold an experience. I had accumulated personal experiences over a long period of time so that I could turn my attention to other aspects of life, not necessarily those that solely belonged to me.

That said, my personal response to the landscape of southern France was profound. I was immersed in the place, the pine forest that I describe in the novel. There were small cairns scattered throughout the countryside in memory of the resistance fighters who had died there during WWII. Then there was an old woman in the village in which we lived, a remarkable woman, who became the figure of Madeleine Serault. We arrived in February when it was cold and damp, and there were sprinkles of snow on the ground. There was a big fireplace in the house and logs, but no way to start a fire. The first night we stayed in the village the old woman showed up with kindling and branches to allow us to start the fire. Along the narrow road into town, lined with trees, the hawks would fly in front of the hood of the car and then veer off into the woods. They would always appear when we went to town, very beautiful and strong. That is where the figure of Serault came from, and I eventually had to imagine her as a young woman as well. I was writing *A Deathful Ridge* at the time, so all these images went into my head and stayed there. It was not until eight years later that I started writing *The Confluence*.

**Luo**: The discussion of landscape leads to the question of European tradition in your poetry and fiction, most of which is set in Spain, Greece, and France, distant from the Canadian landscape. Why is that so, especially given that you were a professor of Canadian literature?

**Wainwright**: I come out of a northern community, as my background is Scandinavian and British. My parents came to Canada from England and I was born here. So much of my boyhood experience was immersed in the woods and lakes of northern Ontario. The physicality of Canada was an ex-

tremely important part of my youth and greatly influenced me. I also focused on the Canadian experience in my first book, *Notes for a Native Land*, which was published when I was a 4th-year undergraduate student at the University of Toronto. A collection edited by the Canadian poet Al Purdy called *The New Romans* (1968) had featured essays by Canadian writers about Canada's relationship to the U.S. It sold well and received a lot of attention, with a review in the *Globe and Mail*. I was concerned that these writers would take time to write about the U.S. and not about Canada, so I decided to put together a collection, not by the same contributors necessarily, but by writers and cultural figures, including painters, sculptors, and so on, who would be asked to express their idea of Canada. I telephoned Michael Macklem at Oberon Press, pitched the idea, got on a train, and went to Ottawa. In the space of an afternoon he agreed to pay every contributor $20, which was worth much more in those days. And it was up to me to decide who contributed. That was how it was back then. There were no guards; you could go through any door. Northrop Frye and Robertson Davies both wrote original pieces for me. Margaret Atwood also gave me a poem that was not yet published, which subsequently came out in one of her collections. There were other lesser-known but talented writers, altogether about forty people. It received strong reviews when it was published in 1969. These were the heady days of Canadian nationalism, and people were interested in someone trying to do this and in what these cultural figures had to say. So I started out in ways embedded in Canadian literature. I was also working on the poems in *Moving Outward*, which were based on my life in Canada, even though I didn't write about Canada explicitly.

In 1970 I received a Canada Council grant that would support me for a year. I had always wanted to go to Greece and the island of Lesbos. Layton told me not to go to Greece in the winter, but to go to Spain instead. (Layton had befriended me and was mentoring me in a number of ways, although not as a poet. I didn't consciously write anything in emulation of Irving, as I did of Cohen.) In 1970, before I went to Europe, I also saw a CBC program about Ibiza—an extremely beautiful pine tree island, where there was a community of expatriates, many of them Canadian. I decided to visit the island, and it was an incredible experience. I wrote poems about Ibiza and subsequently about Lesbos in Greece, and these came together in the second volume of poems, *The Requiem Journals*. When I sent the manuscript to New Press, who had published my first collection of poems, and Oberon Press, who published the Canadian essays, both got back to me and said that these were interesting poems, but questioned why they were not about

Canada. “Where are the poems about Peggy’s Cove near where you live?” they asked. I was upset about it and replied that I was a poet, not simply a recorder of national geography. The elsewhere is what inspired me.

**Luo**: Since you grew up in the Canadian landscape, why did the Mediterranean appeal to you? Was it the light, the warmth?

**Wainwright**: We arrived in Ibiza in the early autumn when it was beautiful and mild, and the light was astonishing. Then winter came. There is a myth that the Mediterranean winter is a pleasant season, but it was cold on Ibiza and it rained all the time. You needed a fireplace to keep warm. We lived in the Morna Valley surrounded by hills with pines and cherry trees that blossomed in the springtime. It was a landscape that lived and breathed—something that took you in and surrounded you; you felt it in every pore of your body. The Canadian landscape usually confronts you with huge mountains, big lakes, expansive skies, and big trees, and summertime is a fleeting and hurried experience, but in the Mediterranean the temperate time lasts for many months—from March until October. The landscape was like a stage set: it did not overwhelm you; you participated in it and were invited to enter it, so to speak. I wrote a lot about it in my poems and short fiction. Later on, we made Greek friends on the island of Lesbos, in particular a fisherman who had a lasting influence on my life as a kind of Zorba figure. I have since been back to Lesbos many times.

**Luo**: So what is it then? Is it because to be a writer one needs to travel, to go elsewhere, to be away from one’s habitual space, to seek new experiences and write outside of the self?

**Wainwright**: I am sure it is different for everyone. All I can say is that I wouldn’t have been the same writer without the Mediterranean experience. The interesting question for me is whether I consider myself a Canadian writer, and I would say yes, but that a Canadian writer does not necessarily have to write about Canada. In recent years, the definition of a Canadian writer has opened up more widely, particularly in fiction. Writers who have come from elsewhere write about Canadian experiences as well as about the places of their ancestry. Is Rohinton Mistry a Canadian writer though he writes about India? Absolutely.

**Luo**: So there is an unwillingness to be confined to a certain subject mat-

ter or a certain geography. Was this a search for a cultural tradition that Canada didn't have? And was it more idealized and romanticized because it was Greece and Spain—a sort of distant and suspended time and space, in contrast to the closeness of Canada?

**Wainwright**: Beyond that early editing of essays I didn't start to read Canadian literature or think about Canadian literary expression until I was a graduate student. I came to Dalhousie University to write my M.A. thesis on Ernest Hemingway. I was going to go on and write about Hart Crane and American poets of the 1920s and 1930s. Then I met Malcolm Ross, who was a very influential figure in my cultural life. I took his course on Milton, but he was also editor of the New Canadian Library, which made so much Canadian material available in low-cost paperback editions. We started to talk about Canadian literature, and he suggested that if I was going to Greece and writing poetry I could also think about "writing Canadian" as an academic. So I combined the two and wrote a doctoral thesis on the artist figure in Canadian literature.

**Luo**: You were really part of a pioneering effort in establishing a Canadian literary tradition.

**Wainwright**: Those were exciting days, and everyone was concerned about it, although it was much more fragmented than people like to let on. Margaret Laurence had published *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), and *The Fire Dwellers* (1969). She had even won the Governor General's Award for *A Jest of God*, but when she was Writer-in-Residence at the University of Toronto in 1968-1969 I did not hear of her or know about her position there. I was at Victoria College and involved with the literary journal there, for which Northrop Frye was the faculty advisor. Everybody was writing poetry about personal experiences; it was confessional time, and we gave numerous readings. That was an extraordinary group of people. Among them, Greg Hollingshead subsequently won the Governor General's Award for his 1995 short story collection *The Roaring Girl*, John Bemrose became a successful fiction writer, and Marni Jackson became an extremely well-known author of non-fiction and fiction. It was quite a time. We talked a lot about writing, even if not about being Canadian writers.

**Luo**: But in your long writing career you never came back to Canada, so to speak. This may lead to the choices you made, or rather Ben Sand made, in

your most recent novel, *The Last Artist*. The question of choice is anticipated in the novel in terms of which great works of art to paint and preserve on the cave walls. Sand is dying and has limited time, so in the end his choices are arbitrary: "What finally matters was his attempt to put any art up against the vortex alongside the remarkable compositions of all the previous cave-painters." On the other hand, it is also acknowledged that historical and cultural contexts shape such choices: "He was romanticizing France and the European tradition. Well, maybe so, but for better or for worse, it was what he believed in." So Sand and his friends come up with three 19th century European works plus the Rauschenberg and the Colville, which are all male and all Western (with the exception of the Parvati sculpture). Why did you choose these particular works?

**Wainwright**: I deal with gender in the novel this way: many of the stories in the paintings are told by or about women. The story in the Bruegel painting is narrated by the innkeeper's wife; the Monet painting is about a wild girl and her ability to paint and draw; the Colville painting is dealt with in a story with a female protagonist; and the Parvati sculpture is of a vital female goddess figure. And there is An, the female cave painter, and her daughter, to whom she passes on the "tradition." An important issue is our modern assumption that the cave paintings were done by men. I was very conscious of that and made an attempt to offset the male choices that Sand makes, although I want to emphasize that they were legitimate choices on his part. Sand makes the case for Picasso as well. Vermeer was originally there too, but I took that chapter out. In the end what he was dealing with was what art represents, not who does it, though some would say, of course, that these two things cannot be separated. As far as the Canadian element is concerned, I'd remind you that the novel begins and ends with the image of an Algonquin rock-painting.

**Luo**: There are the paintings, and then there are the stories that go with the paintings. The narratives all seem to involve one kind of artist or another, and there is a sense that all of the paintings are inspired by something divine, what you call a "passing through," as if the artist is a conduit for something spiritual or mystical. In the Bruegel story, Piet's dancing stag comes from a vision when he fell into the ravine; in the Goya story, Manolo is an obsessed shepherd who draws with his left hand; and in the Monet story, the wild girl is completely unschooled, a sort of noble savage. What do you mean by "passing through"?

**Wainwright**: Perhaps it begins with An, the so-called "enfant sauvage." I hope I have succeeded in conveying that she has no self-consciousness, hence the image of the "face in the water," which is her sense of self without being articulated that ends up being painted on the face of the bison. It is true that Piet is not a professional artist; his creative work comes through some kind of visionary memory. Manolo draws in reaction to his father's death, although he is not trained. As for the wild girl, is she a gypsy, is she really feral, and did she see the cave with the paintings? In the Courbet story, the working-class protagonist, although not an artist per se, also tries to leave something behind. Then there is the thought-horse in the Colville, which is neither real nor painted, but a creature that transcends the borders of reality.

**Luo**: Would you say that the invented stories are also a kind of retelling of the original paintings, a kind of layering of artistic creations, or what you call a palimpsest? The question is still why not an original, and what is left behind. This perhaps leads to the most important question on immortality. Your epigraph in *The Last Artist* is from Federico Garcia Lorca: "I laud your longing for eternity with limits." The old gypsy woman sings a song, which is "the story of a man's search for something he can measure against death, not in an afterlife, but here on earth. The song is what he finds, and he lives forever in the song." Sand appears to invent a female artist and gives her a name, An. She transforms the cave paintings by men to include not only animals, but also the sky, grass, water, fish, and birds. Is this act of retelling similar to the act of channelling a spirit, just as Sand channels An, the Paleolithic girl, and the spirit of Annie, his dead daughter, through the process of painting? The writing there is also in the present tense, and there is an incantatory quality to it, like a prayer, chant, or trance. The last chapter also includes a discussion between Sand and the doctor about the importance of leaving behind an individual gesture. What prompted such questions on mortality, the meaning of life, the value of art, and what one leaves behind? I think the novel is about not just an individual legacy, but also human civilization, something universal.

**Wainwright**: Sand has to be interested and concerned finally with all art and not just with his own work or his role as an artist. When he reproduces these paintings by others he steps outside of himself. He doesn't make it a personal matter; it becomes a human matter, and one of larger artistic expression. That is why he paints the works of others rather than his own, or

at least partly why. He is also haunted by the death of his daughter, and he does do that final painting of his own, *The Vortex*, where he runs up against the darkness of mortality. So the personal side of his painting would be bound up with whether there is anything that can overcome that darkness. He decides, or something in him decides, and I don't know how conscious that decision is, that the only way to deal with the darkness is to expand the creative vision, to go beyond the self and deal with art beyond his own.

One of the things I try to emphasize in each of these paintings is that the stories arise from the periphery. In *The Return of the Hunters*, for example, most people who look at the painting don't notice the broken sign on the inn. The question is what happens the second after Bruegel puts down his brush. The hunters don't keep going down the hill; they turn off at the inn, and a whole world opens up there. What happens the moment after each of these famous artists puts down his brush? What's next? There is the painting, which lasts forever, and then there is the lived experience that is behind or within the painting, which transcends the moment and therefore transcends the moment of mortality inherent in any idea or any expression that is framed, contained, analyzed, and fixed.

My attempt is to break out of that fixing, that defined moment, and to suggest that there is always more and that it is endless and large, very large. It is so with the story of Manolo's father in the Goya painting, for example. Most people do not ask who the man in white is and what his ambivalent gesture means, although these questions are undeniably important. My attempt, in my own small way, was to find some manner of expression that would transcend being fixed by mortality and life being over. Bruegel paints *The Return of the Hunters*, and it is done, no matter how brilliant the painting is. It is complete and there for people to see as a resolved moment in time. What I am suggesting is that art is part of something more malleable, more flexible, more ongoing, and more in the vein of 20,000 years than a moment.

**Luo**: There are many allusions and references to art in your work. Your first book of poetry, *Moving Outward*, was illustrated by Robert Markle, whose drawings complement and closely correspond to the poetic lines. Markle also provided cover paintings for two other poetry books, and you have written poems for and about him (such as "Visions of Robert") as well as a biography of him (*Blazing Figures*); it's a collaboration of sorts. Your play *Feathers and Loam* was also based on Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, and the artist was an important character in the play. Do you think

of painting as the consummate art form, and is this because the old masters were "never wrong" about human suffering, and "how well they understood its human position," as W. H. Auden wrote?

**Wainwright**: Human beings see the world in terms of visual expression, their own and that of others, but when they articulate themselves verbally they become silent seers of the world. I use that word expansively, as in the seer as visionary. In *The Last Artist* I made a conscious choice not to describe Sand in the process of painting past a certain point because it is what is in the paintings that demands attention.

Until the early 2000s, I wasn't paying much attention to visual art. There were individual paintings that I liked and responded to, and I had various reproductions on my walls as a student. I had become close friends with Markle—I have several of his works hanging in our house now, and for many years we talked a lot about art. He was not only a painter, but also an interesting prose writer and essayist. He was killed in a car accident in 1990. About fifteen years later, I decided to write his biography. It took me three or four years of interviewing those who knew him and studying art history. I had to educate myself, read, and think a lot about painting.

As you get older, regardless whether you are a writer, you think more and more about mortality. When you're young you hope that nothing happens to you, as you still have a life to live. I am seventy years old now, and something in me grapples with impending extinction by writing about art. Visual art is something I had to learn about later in life, and I was influenced by the education I put myself through to write about Markle. When I was inspired to write *The Last Artist*, I had a whole ground of learning there to stand upon.

One of the keys or tricks in writing about art is to try not to sound self-conscious or pseudo-profound about it—to try to let it flow as naturally as you can within the confines of the plot and the setting. And one of the ways for me to attempt to break from such self-consciousness was to create An in *The Last Artist*, who is in a territory of mind and body and landscape so wholly beyond anything I had ever experienced that she made demands on me that I couldn't make on her, even if she is an invention of mine. I believe in those inventions taking the artist way beyond the comfort zone, the zone of immediate knowledge. You enter a territory that doesn't belong to you, that you are privileged to enter. Some would reduce it to idealization or romanticization of subject matter, but I think that if the piece of writing is good enough, then it works regardless of categories.

**Luo**: There is certainly something spiritual or even mystical about this character.

**Wainwright**: Especially in chapter eight, the middle chapter, when she paints the bison, all of my attention is given to what she is doing, and all of her attention is given to what she is doing. I could have done the same with Sand, but didn't. Those cave paintings in Font-de-Gaume have been established to be 20,000 years old, and the ones in the Chauvet Cave in the Ardèche district of southern France are 10,000 years older. Yet, as I mention in the novel, there is no qualitative difference in these great paintings from different times—no apparent evolutionary development in creative expression.

**Luo**: I also have a question about spiritual belief, which I hope is not too personal. You write about faith in the Monet painting through the priest character, who was trained to be in a seminary until he saw the girl's drawings. He watches her draw, and there is a spiritual awakening on his part, as he questions how she could be something the church cast out. Does art become a kind of religion or belief?

**Wainwright**: I think that I have moved towards that as I have grown older. For me, there is an expansiveness to human creative expression that transcends planet earth. I can't articulate it or explain it in any direct fashion except to say that it is something that sustains me and my perception of humanity in one form or another. It is difficult to believe that such expression does not matter in some significant fashion—in universal terms, not just in earthly terms. That is why Sand leaves behind what he does; even then, there is no guarantee the paintings will survive, but it is an attempt, and that is all you can do in the end. I would say that if art is a kind of faith, so are certain kinds of human declarations, human actions, and human thoughts that transcend the immediate and the personal. Serault's accomplishment in *The Confluence* and Mallory's gesture in *A Deathful Ridge* also have their lasting qualities, or at least I believe they do. These two figures are artists of a kind, although they would not describe themselves as such.

**Luo**: Art here is obviously not simply an allegory for writing and words; there is a genuine interest in the process of making art in your work. Nonetheless, there is also an analogy between words and colour or light. Your prose is luminous, like an impressionist painting. You write that Sand "liked

the Impressionists generally because they illustrated that memorable de Kooning maxim he had picked up in art school and never abandoned, 'content is just a glimpse.'" Is that what you strive for: an impressionistic kind of writing? There is also great attention to detail in your writing, such as your description of the brush work, the process of making art, and the very concrete work of the stone breakers.

**Wainwright**: Perhaps it is a combination of luminosity and actuality. We were speaking earlier about moving from poetry to fiction. My novels are poetic, and my poetry usually tells a story of one sort or another. I've written very few abstract poems. My poems are grounded in lived experience of one kind or another; such expression has continued for fifty years now, which is amazing to me. There is an attempt to find in words, with words, what is impossible. The only way I can approach that impossibility is to attempt to transcend ordinary expression that serves the quotidian well enough. I do read fiction that uses daily language impressively, like the surprising eloquence in certain crime novels, but most of the time I am more interested in prose like that in Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*.

**Luo**: Is it true that you have read *The Alexandria Quartet* once every decade since the 1960s?

**Wainwright**: There are many writers, books, and films that have had a tremendous impact on me, but Durrell has had the most lasting effect. *The Alexandria Quartet* is fluid with a depth and intensity of language and what language is capable of in recreating the human experience on many levels. Parts of *The Alexandria Quartet* are very political, given that it was set in Egypt in the 1930s just before the war. So you have got the political, the romantic, idealizations, landscape writ large, and history. And there is the whole issue of form: it is really four considerations of the same story from different points of view, which obviously has had an effect on my work.

**Luo**: Another important theme in your work is the thin line between fact and fiction or myth and reality. You have said that *Long before the Stars Were Torn Down* is about the effects of personal mythologizing and the cost of the heritage we leave behind. Would you say that your work about "larger-than-life" historical figures, such as Scott and Mallory, explores similar themes in addressing masculinity and the question of heroism?

**Wainwright**: In terms of Scott and Mallory, I was very much affected by these stories about people trying to accomplish things that seemed insane on the surface, but that had a kind of glory and undeniable courage to them. Even when I was young, I recognized that Scott had been very foolish in some of the choices he made, which arguably resulted not only in his own death but also the death of others with him. We don't know if Mallory reached the summit of Everest, which was what my novel was about, and we could also argue that he made fatal choices because he was blinded by his desire to be the first one to reach the top. Despite such questionable choices, these were people who tried to leave a trace or mark behind that transcended the ordinary and the quotidian. I have always been fascinated by people living on the edge. The gunfighter in *Long before the Stars Were Torn Down* is another example. The figures in the paintings in *The Last Artist* have something of that quality too. Heroism is an undeniable aspect of some of my work. I have also been fortunate to have known certain very strong and unforgettable individuals, who have lived life in an intense and even dangerous fashion, ranging from Layton and Markle to other less famous but equally memorable individuals, who taught me that it is better to try to move than to sit still.

**Luo**: Let's move on to the question of form in your writing. In *A Deathful Ridge* there are stories within stories, and the storyteller also becomes part of the story. In *Flight of the Falcon* Scott's journal entries are juxtaposed with the poet's own entries, and the poems are interspersed with historical narratives, photographs, and maps.

**Wainwright**: I am always amazed when writers can explain their process of writing in interviews. The actual process for me is more diffuse and mysterious. Forgive me for being evasive, but it has always been that way: I move into a time-space territory where I am not in charge. Only when I go back and edit does the process become directly accessible to me. Then I make changes, but the initial route is not something I consciously control.

**Luo**: Do you find that poetry enables spontaneity and improvisation, while fiction requires more structure? These works seem to be very calculated attempts to provide various versions of events; it comes down to the storyteller as creator.

**Wainwright**: This goes back to my 1960s origins, when I came of age in

my late teens and early 20s. What was happening in the world around me demanded awareness and political, social, and personal commitment. One of the ways I responded was that I didn't want to leave that spirit of activism behind. Most people, as they grow older, move from the left to the right of the political spectrum, but I have always remained left of centre. One of the ways not to lose that was by calling into question the official version of events through the retelling of stories. Through the process of rewriting and revising I was trying to emphasize that mine was not the final version either; it was just another version. And it is not a case of endless relativity, which I am not interested in. Belief in the revision itself, in its lasting quality, leads to an awareness that there will always be more to consider.

**Luo**: That is an important point: it is not just a matter of form and technique, of making the narrative more interesting, but also a political act.

**Wainwright**: I would like to think so. Politics permeates my work, and that comes from the time when I came into my own, beginning in the 1960s. I have written specific poems about political conditions or situations or figures, such as Greece in 1974 when there was a coup that got rid of the fascist dictatorship. A lot of my novel *A Deathful Ridge* was about British imperialism and the resistance to that. Mallory, who was as scion of British manhood and Edwardian values, is changed in that novel to become a resistance figure who refuses to play the expected and predictable role of a national hero. In *A Far Time* I deal with the politics of the 1960s especially through the music of the times. *The Confluence* is a novel grounded in the politics of the French resistance. Political concerns have thus manifested in my work in various ways, but one of the things that frustrates me about the responses to my work over the years is that most people don't read carefully enough to get the politics of and in my work. When I get to the second stage, moving out of the work "passing through" me, and I rewrite and become increasingly aware of what exactly I am doing, there is a lot going on not only between form and content, as you have pointed out, but also between the lone voice and collective experience.

**Luo**: Does this idea also inform your poetry? The "West Coast Poems" are particularly interesting, as they feature a poem on the left page, a prose poem on the right, and italics underneath. The pronouns also switch from I/we to you.

**Wainwright**: The formal poetry on the left side is "mirrored" by pronoun-shifting, prosaic commentary on the right side, which represents a merciless calling into question or deconstruction of what is taken for granted in the primary text. Cohen did this brilliantly in *Death of a Lady's Man* (the book, not the album).

**Luo**: This perhaps leads conveniently to the Icarus story, which is told through various forms in the novel *A Deathful Ridge*, in the play *Feathers and Loam*, and again in *The Last Artist*. It seems to be an important metaphor for you.

**Wainwright**: Icarus's effort is about trying to fly, to be close to the sun, which is a metaphor for trying to reach beyond the ordinary and do something that shouldn't be done, like attempting to climb Everest in 1924, go to the South Pole in 1912, or paint something as exceptional as *The Return of the Hunters* and *The Third of May 1808*. Everyone gets burned by the sun or some type of experience; Boon in *Long before the Stars Were Torn Down* gets torn down himself, as capable as he is. There are all kinds of flaws in his life, betrayals and failures, but he is very good at what he does, which, early on, is to kill people. There are all sorts of contradictions in being an Icarus figure.

**Luo**: Is the Icarus story optimistic in the end?

**Wainwright**: I'd like to think so. It is the irony of the human experience: you can't transcend being human, but you can sure make an effort to do so. Everything ends in death. We are all potential Icarus figures by virtue of being on this planet for a brief period of time.

**Luo**: The sad situation in the Auden poem is that nobody seems to care. The irony in the Bruegel painting is that the world goes on even if there is something miraculous taking place; the ship sails calmly on.

**Wainwright**: What matters to me is Auden's song about it—that is what lasts. Writing about it takes Icarus out of that supposed ignominy, that loss and apparent failure, and, though he remains human, immortalizes him.

**Luo**: Ultimately, then, it is a metaphor for the value of art and the important role of the artist, as in Percy Bysshe Shelley. Do you see that role diminishing in today's society?

**Wainwright**: It is tremendously sad to me that we live in a world that increasingly forgets about the past. Shelley was an Icarus figure. He went down in the Gulf of Spezia, shaking his fist against the elements and against fate, drowning unnecessarily. What foolishness, but my god, what he did in his twenty-nine years is beyond belief. It is almost as if he couldn't live to be an old man. Bruegel, Shelley, Crane, Lorca, and others wouldn't be called Icarus at first glance, but they deserve the title because the efforts they made to move beyond the ordinary were tremendous. It is still worth listening to that lone voice speaking against the elements, against the odds, against the limitations placed on people crying in the wilderness.

**Luo**: In your 2015 memoir, "Seasons: A Meditation," you write about your memories of people, events, and places; photographs of Hemingway, Wallace Stevens, and family members; books by Durrell, Nikos Kazantzakis, and Patrick White, among many others; and most of all about art, writing, the passing of time, and mortality. Is there a sense of mourning here? And, as you ask in the piece, "do you ever reach a stage of acceptance and accommodation"?

**Wainwright**: This piece involves an effort on my part to open up the writer's solitary space. It is about my study, sitting at my desk, looking out the window to my right and at the screen in front of me, trying to say something about what this experience represents or has represented through time. I have been writing there or in a similar room for fifty years, so the memoir is an attempt to grapple with what it means when you are doing the same thing but not in the same way, or saying what seems to be the same thing but not repeating yourself, although there are continuing themes or echoes that can't help but be there.

There is a sense of sadness and loss to writing, but there is also a depth, a resonance and an articulation of human experience that belies and overcomes that sadness. I have lost several close people over the years, seen, like most of us, a lot of things, and my work reflects that. The best way I can put it is that writing for me is the only way to interfere with the relentless flow of time and the relentless presence of loss. During our time on this planet we leave traces behind—traces of words, memories, feelings—and that is incredibly important. They are always there.

**Luo**: What happens after *The Last Artist*?

**Wainwright**: In this most recent work I have said what I wanted to say about what concerns me most in life, which is creative expression and the creative process. Somehow I found a way, through different kinds of storytelling, to do that. One of the issues in the novel is whether the singer sings until her last breath or whether the painter keeps painting until he dies. I do have another novel in mind, but I'll let it gestate for awhile and see what is there. I'll continue to write poetry in response to dramatic episodes, moments, and people in my life.

Bob Dylan once said that the song is where it is at: you have listened to it; don't ask him to explain it. You give everything you have into putting your subject on the page, in one form or another; it is up to individual readers to do with it what they will. I agreed to participate in this interview, in part, because I have always associated the works that have appealed to me with the figures who wrote them. Their biographies have been important for me to learn about where their experiences developed and what brought them to write what they did. But at the same time, like them, once I let my story go, it belongs to others regardless of my personal identity. In *The Last Artist*, I consider world-famous paintings that have left us something after hundreds of years. Each individual viewer is going to see something different in them. In Bruegel's *The Return of the Hunters*, for example, there are the hunter figures, trees, houses, frozen ponds with skaters, and so on. Even though everyone is looking at the same thing, they are not doing the same thing with what they see. The authorial or painterly intention is different from the authorial or painterly result. Letting go is as important as initial finding or subsequent discovery. If you are any good, of any depth, you have to move on. Everything is about saying goodbye, letting go, and moving on. In *The Last Artist* I am asking if it's the last time, the last breath, or the last gesture with the pen or brush, and I am suggesting that the important thing is the vision or trace left behind. Is Sand's dark vortex swallowing up the bit of light or is his painting of the light standing against the vortex? My belief is that what ultimately matters is the light.