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WYATT AND CHAUCER: A RE-APPRAISAL

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The outlines of almost all future Wyatt criticism were laid down in the sixteenth century. Surrey, in his famous epitaph on Wyatt, declared that he "Reft Chaucer the glorie of his wytte". Another contemporary admirer, John Leland, wrote a series of Latin elegies celebrating Wyatt's achievements in refining the English language to the point where his poetry could bear comparison with that of the Italians. In 1589, in the *Arte of English Poesie*, Puttenham described the descent of the Chaucerian tradition through Lydgate to Skelton, and contrasted the poets of that tradition with the "new company of courtly makers"

> who hauing trauailed into Italie, and there tasted
> the sweete and stately measures and stile of the
> Italian Poesie as nouices newly crept out of the
> schooles of *Dante Arioste* and *Petrarch*, they greatly
> pollished our rude & homely maner of vulgar Poesie,
> from that it had bene before, and for that cause may
> iustly be sayd the first reformers of our English
> meetre and stile.[1]

Those first generations of critics, in other words, were concerned with placing Wyatt in the context of poetic traditions and influences, especially Chaucer and the Italians, and they saw his achievement in that context as one which gave a new direction to English poetry. These concerns have remained central to studies of Wyatt, and the leading names of the last two or three decades of Wyatt criticism – H.A. Mason, John Stevens, Kenneth Muir, Patricia Thomson, Raymond Southall and others – have been above all occupied with establishing Wyatt's place in a historical, social and literary context.[2] His debts to Chaucer and the Italians, especially Petrarch, have been emphasised, questioned and re-examined, and his close affinities with the English courtly lyric of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries have been stressed to a degree that calls into doubt the earliest critics' estimates of the new direction he gave English poetry.

What this discussion has not always achieved, excellent and stimulating as so much of it is, is an estimate of Wyatt's qualities in themselves.[3] The very difficulty of defining these perhaps points to certain distinctive characteristics of Wyatt's poetry that are not found in the works that make up his literary context – pro-fundity that is expressed through an at times extreme linguistic simplicity, and simplicity that is never naïve. For all the

extensive resemblances to courtly lyric in general - resemblances
that at times amount to near-identity, so that disentangling Wyatt's
own poems from the work of his contemporaries can sometimes be
impossible - most of Wyatt's work is completely amenable to the
techniques of critical appreciation in a way that earlier poetry of
an apparently similar kind is not. Only one of his poems, the
superb "They fle from me that sometyme did me seke" (XXXVII), is
consistently read with such direct poetic commitment; but it is
possible to do it for a great many more. It may be the very lack
of any known source or obvious relatives[4] that encourages this
approach to "They fle from me", but that lack is true too of a good
many of the poems of Wyatt that have received the most general
critical acclaim, as well as of a large number of minor lyrics.
Wyatt is generally no more - if no less - dependent on sources and
influences than any other significant English writer before the
eighteenth-century invention of originality. Source studies alone
can no more get to the heart of Wyatt's achievement than to Chaucer's
or Shakespeare's. My own aim now is not to establish more, or less,
evidence of influence, but to use Chaucer as a foil for Wyatt, to
define Wyatt's poetic by comparison with Chaucer's, for the similar-
ities and differences between the two are often very strikingly
precise.

The comparison holds good for both style and theme. That Wyatt
is the first English poet who can bear comparison with Chaucer - or
even, as Surrey suggests, on his own ground surpass Chaucer - emerges
from any reading of fifteenth and early sixteenth century poetry.
To find again the racy colloquialism of

          "Wel bourded," quod the doke, "by myn hat!"

or the aphoristic succinctness of

          Trouthe is the hyest thyng that man may kepe,

or the sharp use of apothegm,

          Stryve not, as doth the crokke with the wal,[5]

then one has to turn straight from Chaucer to Wyatt: to

          Ye old mule that thinck your self so fayre,   (XXXV.1)
or

          Content the then with honest pouertie,   (CVII.86)
or

          A chippe of chaunce more then a pownde of witt. (CV.79)

Wyatt is not necessarily deliberately following in Chaucer's tracks
here: analogous lines could be found in almost any later good writer.
It is rather that he rediscovers the power of directness of language
for a multiplicity of effects, a use of language for which Chaucer
then provided the best model. Intervening generations of Chaucerians

had largely ignored this directness, preferring the linguistic
indirectness of aureate language, also learnt from Chaucer but used
with none of his balance and discretion. Even the verse form with
the most distinctively Chaucerian hallmark, rhyme royal, recovers
its immediacy and flexibility in Wyatt's hands,[6] and when Wyatt is
using it for purposes similar to Chaucer's their poetic is strikingly
close. A stanza from Hawes set beside one from Chaucer and another
from Wyatt exemplifies the major poets' common grasp of powerful
language against the ugly rhythms, obese vocabulary and clumsy
syntax of the post-Lydgate tradition. Here is Hawes, the most
directly "Chaucerian" of the poets at court when Wyatt made his
entry there, writing in the *Pastime of Pleasure* of 1509, on the
degeneration of the present as against "olde antyquyte":

> So do they now, for they nothynge prepence
> How cruell dethe dothe them sore ensue:
> They are so blynded in worldly neclygence
> That to theyr meryte they wyll nothynge renewe
> The seuen scyences, theyr slouthe to eschewe.
> To an oders profyte they take now no kepe,
> But to theyr owne, for to ete, drynke and slepe.[7]

Here is Chaucer in the *balade* of *Gentilesse*, writing with a similar
moral and didactic purpose:

> Vyce may wel be heir to old richesse;
> But ther may no man, as men may wel see,
> Bequethe his heir his vertuous noblesse
> (That is appropred unto no degree
> But to the firste fader in magestee,
> That maketh hem his heyres that him queme),
> Al were he mytre, croune or diademe.   (15-21)

The same poetic authority and rhythmic sureness is to be heard in
this verse from Wyatt's "If thou wilt mighty be", a reworking of
part of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*:

> If to be noble and high thy minde be meued
> Consider well thy grounde and thy beginnyng,
> For he that hath eche starre in heauen fixed,
> And geues the Moone her hornes and her eclipsyng:
> Alike hath made the noble in his workyng,
> So that wretched no way thou may bee
> Except foule lust and vice do conquere thee.[8]

Wyatt and Chaucer make the verse form work for them in a smoothly
integrated syntactic unit with a climax of meaning clearly marked
by the grammatical and rhythmic structure of the stanza; Hawes is
struggling with a language and rhyme scheme that always get the
better of him. Hawes sticks at the level of platitude; Chaucer
and Wyatt can turn truism into truth.

It is perhaps worth emphasising that what Wyatt and Chaucer
have in common is this high quality of poetic, since studies of
the resemblances of phrasing between the two have tended to stress

their common fund of conventions, even clichés[9] - to stress their
similarity in their least characteristically individual and often
their slightest writings, in fact. On that reading, Chaucer could
be presented as a malign influence preventing Wyatt from achieving
his best, just as the earlier poet's elaboration of language could
be held to be a malign influence on the poetry of the fifteenth
century. The sense of poetic continuity between them rarely depends
on specific imitation; only a few of Wyatt's verbal borrowings from
Chaucer are significant, and they do not add up to making Wyatt a
Chaucerian.[10] Although he knows the major works, the most striking
borrowings are from some of Chaucer's short moral poems, the *balades*
Truth and *Fortune*.

     The direct similarities between the two poets are limited by
the very obvious fact that they usually write very different kinds
of poetry. Chaucer's poems are most often long, based on a narrative
structure of sequential event, and his own typical rôle within his
poems is as narrator or spectator, or both. His poems presuppose
an audience, with himself as the medium for bringing his listeners
into contact with his story. Wyatt approaches most nearly to this
kind of poetry when he withdraws altogether from being a first-
person presence within the poem and turns his attention outwards,
as authoritative speaker rather than as actor. This happens in the
Boethian "If thou wilt mighty be, flee from the rage / Of cruell
wyll", where, as in Chaucer's *Truth*, "Flee fro the prees", the
imperatives imply less a narrator than an authoritative voice
addressing an audience; or again in the *Penitential Psalms*, the
linking sections of which are among the most consistently Chaucerian
in style of anything Wyatt ever wrote, though this time the model is
more *Troilus and Criseyde* than the *balades*. The links between the
psalms are partly narrative and partly descriptive of David's state
and circumstances, observed sympathetically but from outside, in
very much the same mixture as Chaucer uses for the presentation of
Troilus and his long love-laments. David's spiritual desolation is
not so far distant from Troilus' emotional desolation, and the fall-
ing together of theme encourages a falling together of style, even
to the imitation of vocabulary and imagery:

          His hete, his lust and plesur all in fere
          Consume and wast . . . .   (CVIII.45-6)

          But who had bene withowt the Cavis mowth,
          And herd the terys and syghes that he did strayne,
          He wold have sworne there had owt off the sowth
          A lewk warme wynd browght forth a smoky rayne.   (411-4)

Wyatt is here setting out, as Chaucer often does, to engage his
readers' sympathy through overt rhetorical devices: it is an engage-
ment that has to be achieved through the emotional appeal of
rhetoric rather than the emotional appeal of a victim because the
poet has withdrawn from being an actor in the narrative of the poem.

     If this is one aspect of Wyatt's poetry, it is certainly not
the most typical. Almost everywhere outside the *Psalms* and a hand-
ful of other poems, Wyatt is not the narrator or the observer but

the protagonist of his own poems, in a dramatic rather than
biographical sense. If Chaucer, as the overt mediator of all he
writes, never lets events speak for themselves, Wyatt never lets
events speak at all: he does all the talking himself. Love-laments
and outbursts against Fortune are not *recorded*, as they are for
Troilus or Palamon and Arcite, but spoken in the first person with
no mitigation or qualification from any context:

> Fortune and you did me avaunce;
> Me thought I swam and could not drowne,
> Happiest of all, but my myschaunce
> Did lyft me vp to throwe me downe.   (LIII.25-8)

The emphasis therefore moves from narrative, external event, to
state of mind, and the structural organization is not that of
sequential action but the movement of mind of the poem's "I". What
the *mind is responding* to is less likely to be another person or
an episode than a moral abstraction: Fortune, "doubleness", truth –
although this last quality, though it echoes throughout Wyatt's
poems, is most often noted for its absence. The experience at the
heart of almost all Wyatt's verse is mutability, and he responds as
both a sufferer and a moral being. The closeness of Wyatt to the
Metaphysical poets has often been remarked; but if Donne does not
dissociate passion and intellect, Wyatt does not dissociate emotion
and deep moral idealism, usually frustrated. Even in his love-
poems, the ultimate object of his desire is not a lady, or her
reciprocated love, but stability, "truth".

The pervasiveness of these qualities in Wyatt shows up the
inadequacy of any response to his poetry in terms of the conventions
of courtly lyric, or even of Petrarchism. It is true that Petrarch
can provide a model for the inwardness of Wyatt's poetry, but
Petrarch in his love-poems is inseparable from Laura; in Wyatt's
poems, the women (and the plural is important) have almost no
physical existence. The lady's looks, which provide the staple of
so many courtly and Petrarchan lyrics, scarcely get a mention in
Wyatt; his one reference to golden hair makes the only bad line in
a gem of a poem contrasting inner and outer beauty.[11] His women
hardly ever speak: the one long speech he gives, in "There was never
nothing more me payned" (XXXVIII), is enclosed structurally and
emotionally by the intensity of his own response to it. Outward
event is disallowed along with other people: if there is any action,
it is hinted at obliquely through reaction alone. One of his few
poems specifically put into the mouth of someone else, the lament of
a betrayed girl, indicates that she is pregnant only through the
lines,

> Now may I karke and care
> To syng lullay by by.   (CLXXXI.3-4)

Even the poems most often read as autobiographical display the same
qualities of abstraction and lack of explicit context, so that
historical reference remains a peripheral speculation.

Above all, Wyatt is far removed from Petrarchan and courtly

traditions because the situation that provides the staple for those,
the courtship of a resisting lady, is never central to his work.
He is less a love poet than a poet of betrayal; the ladies of his
poems are cruel, not because they will not give in to him, but
because they have given in to someone else. The distance of this
theme from the usual conventions is indicated by the small number
of such poems of his that have any known source.[12] The subjects to
which he always returns are faithlessness, change and mutability.
That is why, given his habit of grappling with abstractions rather
than situations, his political poems and his "love" poems are so
close to each other in subject, phrasing and mood. Sometimes the
two kinds are virtually interchangeable: "Like as the byrde in the
cage enclosed" (CCXLVI) is an attempt to balance up

>   Wyche shuld be best by determination,
>   By losse off liefe libertye, or liefe by preson.   (6-7)

In the last stanza he appeals to "yowe louers" to decide the
question for him, so making the issue of death versus imprisonment
overtly metaphorical; but the strength with which the question has
been debated calls the metaphorical reading into doubt:

>   By leynght off liefe yet shulde I suffer,
>   Adwayting time and fortunes chaunce;
>   Manye thinges happen within an hower;
>   That wyche me oppressed may me avaunce;
>   In time is trust wyche by deathes greuaaunce
>   Is vtterlye lost.   (15-20)

Commonplace as the thoughts may be, these lines have all the inten-
sity one could expect from a writer with Wyatt's bitter experience
of imprisonment and the threat of execution; but the argument
advances on both sides at once - life would bring the suffering of
uncertainty and also the hope of improvement,

>   But deathe were deliueraunce and liefe lengthe off payne.
>   (21)

The poem ends with an appeal for a "playne conclusyon", but it is
very far from reaching one. In form the poem is modelled on the
balade of rhyme royal stanzas, even to the "envoy" verse with its
appeal to the audience; but the refrain line serves as a fixed
point only in the sense that it contains the opposition of con-
traries out of which the poem is constructed:

>   By losse off liefe libertye or liefe by preson.

Where Chaucer's *balade* refrains establish the moral certainty of
his poems - "Trouthe thee shal delivere, it is no drede"[13] - the
repetition of Wyatt's line only serves to emphasise the insolubility
of the problem. As so often in his poetry the uncertain rhythms,
the counterpointing of iambic pentameters with lines that fall apart
in the middle, mirror the instability of the subject - he uses such
rhythms above all for lines about getting lost, falling, stumbling,

wavering, or, as here, hesitating.[14] "Like as the byrde" may be a
poem about the thralldom of love; but that is one of the least
notable things about it. It is a poem about the impossibility of
finding certainty in an uncertain world, whatever the context. Its
modelling on the *balade* form is itself misleading, for in its
relentless re-treading of the same series of questions it finishes
up in some respects closer to Beckett than Chaucer.

     The opposition of contraries is one of Wyatt's recurrent
themes, and perhaps one of the major reasons for his attraction to
Petrarch. Its rhetorical form, the paradox, which Petrarch exploited
so widely, is most commonly used as a means of exciting wonder or
bewilderment, and those are precisely the reactions that Petrarch
is concerned to elicit in response to love. One of the *Rime* that
Wyatt chose to translate consists almost entirely of such paradoxes,
"Pace non trovo e non ho da far guerra", "I fynde no peace and all
my warr is done".[15] Beyond the effect of such rhetoric on the
reader, the opposition of contraries is used to mirror a state of
mind, as in the one poem of the *Rime* that Chaucer translated, in
Troilus and Criseyde, "If no love is, O God, what fele I so?":

                    Thus possed to and fro,
          Al sterelees withinne a boot am I
          Amydde the see, bitwixen wyndes two,
          That in contrarie stonden evere mo.[16]

It is a measure of how far such direct portrayal of emotion is from
most of what Chaucer writes that he gives this song a separate
heading, *Canticus Troili*, as he never does with Troilus' hymns to
love elsewhere in the poem, even when they are inset translations
or adaptations. Everywhere else Troilus is addressing something
outside himself - Criseyde (whether she is physically present or
not), or Fortune, or the breaking day, or Venus; but the "O God"
of the first line of the *Canticus* is more of an exclamation than a
prayer, and the rest of the poem is introspective and self-analytical
- and inconclusive - in a way that Troilus never approaches else-
where. This poem has to be put into Troilus' own mouth, and not
serve the narrator as a disquisition on love, for the "I" is
inseparable from the thoughts and feelings being expressed.
Petrarch's "I", like Wyatt's, is the protagonist, not the observer;
and so there is no fixed point, no possibility for detachment. It
follows for Petrarch, and therefore for Troilus here, that there is
no possibility for irony: Petrarchan love-poetry offers an analysis
of emotion so intense and all-consuming as to forbid the lover to
stand back from his poem. Poet and lover are fused and inseparable;
and the Petrarchan "I" who is the lover is therefore also the poet
straining to find ways of expressing those extremes of emotion.

     Some of these characteristics are adopted whole by Wyatt, and
not only in his directly Petrarchan poems. "It may be good" (XXI)
has no known source, but the oppositions, and the intensity, are
just as striking:

          Alas! I tred an endles maze
          That seketh to accorde two contraries;

> And hope still, and nothing hase,
> Imprisoned in libertes,
> As oon unhard and still that cries;
> Alwaies thursty and yet nothing I tast:
> For dred to fall I stond not fast.　　　　　(8-14)

The "contraries", for Wyatt, are not only a rhetorical means of
expressing emotion or engaging the reader, but are at the heart of
the instability that provides the central theme of most of his
poetry. Truth, reality, if it exists, exists somewhere between or
beyond the two opposed points, but it is never apprehensible,
whether the "contraries" are in the outside world (as rarely
happens), or are emotional or moral. The only thing one can appar-
ently be sure of is deceit:

> Yet this trust I have of full great aperaunce:
> Syns that decept is ay retourneable
> Of very force it is aggreable;
> That therewithall be done the recompence.
> Then gile begiled plained should be never
> And the reward litle trust for ever.　　　　　(XVI.9-14)

The contrast in the usage of "trust" in the first and last lines of
that quotation is itself used to show up the speciousness of the
security offered at first. Trust in deceit means an everlasting
state of trustlessness.

　　　The very deliberateness with which Wyatt plays off the terms
of his "contraries", however, can lend his poems one quality that
Petrarch notably lacks: irony, a distance between the point of view
from which the poem is written and of the I-protagonist within the
poem. Chaucer is of course supremely skilful at this, but it is
exceptional in his work to find that ironist and victim are one and
the same: the roundel "Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat"[17] is
perhaps the closest instance, but there the process is more one of
the speaker's thumbing his nose at love than the self-irony that
the identity of speaker and victim suggests. Wyatt can brilliantly
convey both the intensity of passion and the ironic detachment of
the onlooker. "In eternum", for instance, describes his progress
into and out of an amorous entanglement, yet eternally repeated
disappointment is not going to stop him making the same fool of
himself all over again: he concludes,

> In eternum than from my hert I keste
> That I had furst determind for the best;
> Now in the place another thought doeth rest
> 　　　In eternum.　　　　　(LXXI.19-24)

The whole action, characteristically, is played out in the speaker's
mind, to the almost total exclusion of the lady. He sets out to
look for "the *thing* that I myght like";[18] and even after he has
found her, that she is other than an object is indicated only
through three possessive adjectives – *her* heart, *her* grace, *her*
heart. This refusal to acknowledge any mutuality in love (quite
apart from the fact that she is herself unfaithful), and the wryness

of that last verse, suggest a flippancy of tone that the poem as a
whole does not quite support. Like so many of Wyatt's poems, it
takes its point of departure from an ideal of integrity and
stability, the ideal at once affirmed and mocked in the refrain
words. It is about how

> as me thought my trowghthe had taken place
> With full assurans to stond in her grace,   (14-15)

and how the search for truth, assurance, faith, is eternally
baffled.

Wyatt rarely breaks the moral abstraction of the terms in
which he writes except to give in simile or metaphor from the
physical world the corollary to this state of trustlessness. Any
reader will notice immediately the consistency of his dominant
imagery: imagery of water, wind and weather, sparks, uncertainty,
changeableness and speciousness of every kind - "the ferme faith
that in the water fleteth", "me lusteth no lenger rotten boughes
to clyme"; even the words of a poem will only "sparkill in the
wynde".[19] This kind of image, when it occurs in a source poem, is
faithfully kept or elaborated: ploughing in the water (XIV.14, from
Serafino), "the slipper toppe / Of courtes estate" (CCXL.1-2, from
Seneca), Petrarch's metaphors of the sea. In one of these the
statutory "rok in the salte floode" promises neither the certainty
of shipwreck nor a refuge from the surge: it is a magnetic rock

> That drawithe the yron from the woode
> And levithe the shippe vnsure.[20]

If his sources do not offer such imagery he will often add it,
whether the poem is a free adaptation - Petrarch's "Una candida
cerva" offers nothing resembling "Sithens in a nett I seke to hold
the wynde" (VII.8)[21] - or whether he is otherwise keeping close to
his original, as in "The longe love". Here a different image of
disorientation makes its appearance: the forest. Love is put to
flight by the lady,

> Wherewithall, vnto the hertes forrest he fleith,
> Leving his enterprise with payne and cry.

The equivalent first line in Petrarch reads simply,

> Onde Amor paventoso fugge al core.[22]

In this poem again the lover is caught between contraries - Love,
presented as a war-lord, and the lady who puts him to flight; and
the lover himself is in the middle, self-divided. That self-
division reveals in Wyatt's poem something more inward, and more
startling, than Petrarch will admit: that image of the "hertes
forrest". The phrase evokes a sense of the dark places of the
spirit such as had rarely been touched on in previous English
poetry: in Chaucer's darkest moments his heroes may find themselves
pitted against Fortune or the gods, but never face to face with that

sense of inner bewilderment and confusion. The image of the forest,
ubiquitous in so much mediaeval poetry, is indeed almost conspicuous
by its absence in Chaucer's. Wyatt's most powerful evocation of
such a, state comes in another addition to a translation, in "Stond
who so list", where the original chorus of Seneca offers nothing
resembling Wyatt's image of inward horror:

> For hym death greep'the right hard by the croppe
> That is moche knowen of other, and of him self alas,
> Doth dye vnknowen, dazed with dreadfull face.
>
> (CCXL.8-10)

The terrible particularity of that is a world away from Seneca's
lines, which have all the sense of commonplace appropriate to their
choric function:

> Illi mors gravis incubat,
> Qui notus nimis omnibus
> Ignotus moritur sibi.[23]

Even the most closely comparable lines from Chaucer, Arcite's
dying speech, have something of the same quality of choric general-
ization:

> What is this world? what asketh men to have?
> Now with his love, now in his colde grave
> Allone, withouten any compaignye.   (KnT 2777-9)

Chaucer is concerned with the position of man in a hostilely
ordered universe; in Wyatt what matters is the possibility - or
impossibility - of self-knowledge, and the inner abyss that death
can reveal with unique and horrible clarity: "dazed, with dreadfull
face".

The two poets show something of the same contrast in their
presentation of virtue and steadfastness. Wyatt stresses inward
integrity and self-sufficiency; Chaucer's ideal is more of a stable
mind in an ordered society. Even when Chaucer seems to be assert-
ing a more individual morality, the movement of his poetry takes it
back from the personal to the universal. The "trouthe" that he
advocates in the *Franklin's Tale* is integrity expressed in a pact,
a social bond; in the *balade* of *Truth*, the quality is not only one
of self-sufficiency and self-mastery - "Suffyce unto thy good",
"Reule wel thyself" - but is guaranteed by God. The poem is an
injunction to turn from the "prees" not just inward, but to God; to
know, not just one's self, but one's "contree" in Heaven as against
the wilderness of earth.[24]

The whole concept of "truth", whether the "sothfastnesse" of
Chaucer's *balade* or the truth of the heart in personal relation-
ships, is crucial to Wyatt. The word echoes through all his poetry
on whatever subject. He stresses its importance discursively in
his famous letters of advice to his son:

> I haue nothing to crye and cal apon you for but honestye,
> honestye . . .

> Here I call not honestye that men comenly cal honestye,
> as reputation for riches, for authoritie, or some like
> thing, but . . . wisdome, gentlenes, sobrenes, disire to
> do good, frendlines to get the love of manye, and trougth
> above all the rest.[25]

Even though the context here refers to social behaviour, Wyatt's
emphasis is still to reject the outward forms in favour of an inner
integrity. That Surrey picks out exactly the same characteristic
in his elegy on Wyatt -

> A hart, where drede was never so imprest
> To hyde the thought that might the trouth avance

- suggests, despite the laudatory nature of obituaries, that it was
an ideal Wyatt achieved in his own life.

In Wyatt's love-poems, "truth" means integrity expressed in
faithfulness - or rather, almost always, lack of truth shown in
disloyalty means an insecurity of identity or integrity:

> For fansy at his lust
> Doeth rule all but by gesse;
> Whereto should I then trust
> In trouth or stedfastnes?   (XLII.17-20)

In his satires or his poems on politics and court life, his usages
of the word or the concept are often strikingly close to Chaucer's
formulation in "Flee fro the prees". His third satire, "A spending
hand", reads like the *balade* turned inside out. Chaucer sees the
"prees" of people thronging for worldly success as opposed to
"sothfastnesse". Wyatt sees the same opposition, but he offers a
satirically cynical solution:

> Thou knowest well first who so can seke to plese
> Shall purchase frendes where trowght shall but offend.
> Fle therefore trueth.   (CVII.32-4)

His second satire, "My mothers maydes", is written without that
distortion of viewpoint, and in it he advocates a Boethian - or
Chaucerian - morality with no intervening irony. The poem works
round, by way of one of the best versions of the fable of the town
mouse and the country mouse ever written, to an advocacy of inner
self-sufficiency. He rejects the pursuit of false felicity, of
unstable, and therefore illusory, earthly happiness, as Arcite does
in the *Knight's Tale*:

> We seken faste after felicitee,
> But we goon wrong ful often, trewely.   (KnT 1266-7)

>   How men do seke the best
> And fynde the wourst by errour as they stray! (CVI.70-1)

Chaucer gives the positive side of this in *Truth* - "suffyce unto
thy good", "savour no more than thee bihove shal"; Wyatt urges the
same principles:

> Thy self content with that is the assigned
> And vse it well that is to the allotted.   (CVI.95-6)

But this is a quiet of mind to be achieved not, as in Chaucer,
through God, but through a more Boethian inner certainty:

> Then seke no more owte of thy self to fynde
> The thing that thou haist sought so long before,
> For thou shalt fele it sitting in thy mynde.   (97-9)

Only in the *Penitential Psalms*, among the most public of Wyatt's
poems, does he give this inner strength an overtly religious
dimension, in his paraphrase of Psalm 51 - the psalm on Wyatt's
favourite topic, the rejection of "the owtward dedes that owtward
men disclose" in favour of the feelings of the heart and spirit.
The Psalmist's prayer, "Benigne fac, Domine, in bona voluntate tua
Sion: ut aedificentur muri Jerusalem" (v.18), becomes in Wyatt an
image the opposite of the heart's forest - an image of inner
blessedness, not disorientation:

> Make Syon, lord, accordyng to thy will,
> Inward Syon, the Syon of the ghost:
> Off hertes Hierusalem strength the walles still.[26]

Wyatt's most fully Boethian poem, "If thou wilt mighty be",
may be taken from the *De Consolatione* itself rather than Chaucer's
Boece, but it is modelled on Chaucer in other more significant ways.
In his choice of rhyme royal for its form, and in the emphatic
imperative "Flee -", where both Boethius and Chaucer use a subjunc-
tive, Wyatt brings it strikingly close to *Truth*:[27]

> If thou wilt mighty be, flee from the rage
> Of cruell wyll . . .   (CCLXI.1-2)

In this poem Wyatt breaks away from the relentless inwardness of
most of his poetry, and a reference to his sources shows why. The
metres he is adapting are spoken not by the victim philosopher but
by Philosophy herself, the figure who has all the answers and is
standing apart from the rolling wheel of Fortune. If Philosophy's
objective moralizing enables Wyatt to come his closest to Chaucer's
poetic, however, it is Boethius as victim, the first-person sufferer
of Fortune's blows, who, along with the suffering lover of
Petrarch's sonnet, brings Chaucer closest to Wyatt. Chaucer's
Fortune ("Balades de Visage sanz Peinture") consists of a dialogue
between "Le Pleintif countre Fortune" and Fortune herself. There
is no narrative context, so there is none of Chaucer's usual
division between narrator and protagonist: the verses stand on
their own as expressions of thought and feeling, like speeches in
a drama, as Wyatt's poems do. *Fortune* is concerned with the same
issues as *Truth*, that Fortune has no power over the man "that over

himself hath the maystrye".[28] The poem asserts the supremacy of
the stable mind over mere event. The Plaintiff starts off in
apparent opposition to Fortune, with the refrain,

> For fynally, Fortune, I thee defye!

Fortune, however, is as good a counsellor as is Philosophy, and on
much the same principles:

> No man is wrecched, but himself it wene,
> And he that hath himself hath suffisaunce,   (25-6)

lines that provide the meaning of her own refrain:

> And eek thou hast thy beste frend alyve.

By the end of the poem the two speakers share a common refrain that
asserts a providential stability superior to Fortune: "In general,
this reule may nat fayle".

Wyatt's adoption of this poem is as natural as his adoption of
Petrarch: its inwardness caters immediately to his kind of poetic.
"Most wretchid hart most myserable" (XCI) borrows phrasing, the
debate structure with refrain and some of the themes from *Fortune*.
Wyatt's dialogue is in four-line stanzas alternating between the
speakers. One of these is the heart, that here stands apparently
not for irrational passion but for the Boethian faculty of moral
self-sufficiency. The other speaker is not defined: it is perhaps
reason, in its fallible mortal aspect, telling him that despair is
the only logical course, or perhaps passion acting under the guise
of reason – but terminological definition is unnecessary when its
function in the poem is so clear. Wyatt, in fact, takes still
further the inwardness already present in *Fortune*: the opponents in
the debate are now no longer man against an external Fortune, but
both within himself, one principle urging him to give in, the other
maintaining its assured conviction of its own truth.

> Most wretchid hart most myserable,
> Syns the comforte is from the fled,
> Syns all the trouthe is turned to fable,
> Most wretchid harte why arte thou nott ded?
>
> No, no, I lyve and must doo still,
> Whereof I thank God and no mo;
> Ffor I me selff have all my will,
> And he is wretchid that wens hym so.   (XCI.1-8)

The heart's refrain is taken from Chaucer's "No man is wrecched,
but himself it wene"; the "suffisaunce" of the man that "hath him-
self" becomes Wyatt's

> Who hath himself shal stande vp right.   (23)

Both poems have a personal edge to them, though of a very different
nature: Chaucer's turns into a plea for "beter estat", Wyatt

complains in veiled hints of political enemies, who

> whet their teth,
> Which to touche the somtime ded drede.   (33-4)

As always, however, the hint of external action is not there to
supply a narrative interest, but to feed the speaker's emotional
reactions, and provide the mutable context in which the heart must
assert its self-assurance.

Wyatt's lyrics may not have the intellectual weight or serious-
ness of his moral poems or satires, but they do share that concern
to find a fixed point in an unstable world. If the search for
truth remains constant, however, in these poems the ideal is
unattainable. In the Boethian poems the conviction of one's own
integrity may be enough for inner content; once someone else is
involved, things get rather more complicated. Even if his love-
poems give a very one-sided view of things, they are by definition
about relationships, and the existence of the lady, however
obliquely it may be implied, rules out self-sufficiency. This is
further complicated by his principal choice of subject, of the
lady's faithlessness rather than cruelty. A good relationship
involves a committal of self at odds with Boethian self-sufficiency;
and perpetual loss is echoed in a perpetual sense of bereavement.
Moreover, the need to *give* in such a relationship may include the
need to *give up* the lady: the generous and virtuous thing may lie
in a rejection of stability and truth. This sense of loss and the
paradoxical relationship of virtue and faithlessness are at the
heart of Wyatt's greatest poem, "They fle from me".

The sense of loss runs throughout the poem, but it is set up
in that first line: "flee" and its forms are crucial words for
Wyatt. Except in the Boethian poems modelled on Chaucer's *Truth*,
with their "flee from the rage / Of cruell wyll" or the satiric
"fle therefore trueth", Wyatt almost always presents, not the pro-
tagonist fleeing from something - Chaucer's "Flee fro the prees",
which implies again man *versus* the world outside him - but some-
thing fleeing from him, so that the loneliness and isolation of the
individual spirit are emphasised:

> She fleith as fast by gentil crueltie.   (LVI.5)

> > As she fleeth afore
> Faynting I folowe.   (VII.6)

> Light in the wynde
> Doth fle all my delight
> Where trouth and faithfull mynd
> Are put to flyght   (LXXXIV.29-32)

> The comforte is from the fled.   (XCI.2)

> What shulde I saye
> Sins faithe is dede
> And truthe awaye
> From you ys fled?   (CCXV.1-4)

> They fle from me that sometyme did me seke. (XXXVII.1)

A less attractive version of that appears in one of his poems on
political instability:

> They that somtyme lykt my companye
> Like lyse awaye from ded bodies thei crall. (CCXLI.4-5)

One would expect love-poems to be about a coming together: Wyatt's
are about a parting.

     "They fle from me" is in many ways the obverse of Chaucer's
Truth, in a way that emphasises difference rather than complemen-
tariness. Both are in rhyme royal, a form Wyatt reserves for his
more thoughtful or weightier poems. *Truth* is about flight from
earthly values and distrust of Fortune to find a point of stability
in "sothfastnesse". Wyatt looks back on the way worldly pleasures
have abandoned him, sees his happiness as having lain in Fortune's
gift -

> Thancked be fortune, it hath ben othrewise
> Twenty tymes better   (8-9)

- and ends on a curiously muted note of a questioning of the true
nature of stable virtue. Chaucer's poem, like most of his *balades*,
advocates a position of moral and religious absolutism comparable
with the closing verses of *Troilus and Criseyde* - verses that
present a notorious critical problem in that they appear to deny
the human sensitivity and sense of dilemma of the rest of the work.
"They fle from me" makes the dilemma its central concern; and if it
can be paralleled with anything in Chaucer, it is much more with the
main part of *Troilus* than with the moral poems. The combination of
eroticism with insoluble moral and emotional problems never occurs
so clearly outside these two poems in either author, even though the
poems are formally worlds apart: Wyatt compresses the situation and
the dilemma into three stanzas, and the inwardness, the overt
identification of poet and protagonist, is all his own.

     The ambivalent metaphor of the first stanza establishes the
sense of insecurity in the poem. The question as to who is the
hunter, who the prey, is never settled: the paradox is set up in
the first line and kept in balance throughout the stanza. The world
of "They fle from me" is the world of mutability, and of change for
the worse:

> Nowe they raunge
> Besely seking with a continuell chaunge.   (6-7)

"Range" is the technical term for hunting-dogs casting about for a
scent:[29] once tame towards him, then wild, "they" are now in pursuit
of something else entirely. In the second stanza he recalls what
he has lost - not an emotion or a state, but an episode, where for
a rare moment we see the lady, even if through his perceptions alone,
and hear her speak. The moment is so surreal and transitory that
his insistence that "it was no dreme" comes as no surprise, though

there has been no explicit suggestion that it might be one. The
effect, oddly, is not of definiteness, as one would expect from
such an assertion, but of unsureness, for this assurance only needs
to be made when reality itself is in question. The unsureness and
the sense of mutability extend throughout the last stanza, though
now their sphere of operation is moral:

> But all is torned thorough my gentilnes
> Into a straunge fasshion of forsaking;
> And I have leve to goo of her goodeness,
> And she also to use new fangilnes.   (16-19)

It is his nobility and generosity, his "gentilnes", that open the
way to their "forsaking"; it is her "goodeness" that releases him,
his that allows her unfaithfulness. Their very virtues are now
agents of change for the worse. The last lines are not, I believe,
sarcastic, though they may be wry. The question Wyatt is asking is
a serious one.

> But syns that I so kyndely ame serued,
> I would fain knowe what she hath deserued.   (20-1)

"Kyndely" is at once ironic - it was not kind of her to leave him -
and paradoxically true, for it is her "goodeness" that has let him
go. It also bears its mediaeval meaning of "according to one's
nature, appropriate": she has given him what was to be expected
from her, and he has got what he asked for. What, then, is her
standing? Is there any distinction left between vice and virtue,
integrity and disloyalty? There is perhaps a rueful sense of
acceptance from him as to the way he has been "serued", almost
Boethian in its readiness to take the bad with the good. But the
point the argument has reached is very far from Boethius. Moral
certainty and self-sufficiency are alike unattainable. The poem
is making, in non-Boethian terms, the same point that Chaucer had
explored through Troilus: that in the context of a love-relationship,
Boethius does not help. The only point of rest is in the transitory
moment of the bedroom, in the stroking of Criseyde's sides, or in

> "Dere hert, how like you this?"   (14)

- and that is a moment that both Chaucer's lovers and Wyatt have to
reassure themselves is not a dream.[30] It looks for a brief instant
as if Wyatt is for once letting an event, an action, a speech, carry
its own weight, but the impression is illusory - the moment exists
only because it is impressed in the mind, with all the intensity
that only the unreality, or ultra-reality, of dream can carry.

     When Chaucer writes a full-scale dream poem, the dream
represents the vehicle of some kind of higher authority: the vision
is revealed to the dreamer from something beyond and outside him.
The world of the mind offers nothing so comforting to Wyatt as
authoritative judgement. At one extreme is the emotional dis-
orientation of the "hertes forrest", at the other a prayer for
"hertes Hierusalem", "the Syon of the ghost". Perhaps it is the
impossibility of reconciling the two, or even of rejecting the one

for the other, that makes Wyatt so tonally different from Chaucer.
Chaucer can always make the committed appeal, beyond the mutability
of the world, to faith:

> He nyl falsen no wight, dar I seye.   (*Tr* V. 1845)

> Trouthe thee shal delivere, it is no drede.
> (*Truth*, refrain)

There is nothing as clear as this in "They fle from me". Even at
the level of syntax, the only words that approach the simplicity of
such aphorisms are "Dere hert, how like you this?", and their
simplicity solves nothing. There are no simple ways out. The
really subversive thing about this poem is its implication that
truth and falsehood may not, after all, be polar opposites.

NOTES

[1] These early references are collected by Patricia Thomson in *Wyatt: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1974): Surrey, *Epitaphium Tho. Wiat* 1.14 (p.30); John Leland, *Naeniae in mortem Thomae Viati* (1542) esp. $A3^V$, $A4^V$ (p.25); Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* I.xxxi (p.34).

[2] The titles of their works are significant of this emphasis on context: H.A. Mason, *Humanism and Poetry in the Early Tudor Period* (London, 1959); John Stevens, *Music and Poetry at the Early Tudor Court* (London, 1961); Patricia Thomson, *Sir Thomas Wyatt and his Background* (London, 1964); Raymond Southall, *The Courtly Maker* (Oxford, 1964). Mason, Stevens and Thomson all stress the common fund of courtly clichés and conventions drawn on by Chaucer, Wyatt and contemporary love-lyric. Thomson gives the fullest discussion of Wyatt's debt to Chaucer and the Italians. Southall argues that Wyatt's debt to the Italians is comparatively superficial, and that the Chaucerian influence is of greatest ultimate significance. Muir and Thomson's *Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Liverpool, 1969) devotes a substantial amount of its commentary to sources and analogues. All quotations are taken from this edition, following Muir and Thomson's numbering.

[3] A number of articles have approached Wyatt independently of his models, notably those by Donald M. Friedman (in *Essays in Criticism* 16 (1966) 375-81, *Studies in English Literature* 7 (1967) 1-13 and *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 67 (1968) 32-48).

[4] C.E. Nelson's suggestion in "A Note on Wyatt and Ovid" (*Modern Language Review* 58 (1963) 60-3) that Wyatt is drawing on Ovid's *Amores* III.7 and I.5 relies on very tenuous similarities. L.E. Nathan noted a similarity to the Ballade 38 attributed to Charles d'Orleans ("Tradition and Newfangleness in Wyatt's 'They fle from me'", *Journal of English Literary History* 32 (1965), esp. pp.4, 9-10).

[5] All quotations from Chaucer are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* ed. F.N. Robinson (2nd. ed., 1957), using his abbreviations for the separate poems: *PF* 589; *FranklT* 1479; *Truth* (Balade de Bon Conseyl) 12.

[6] Wyatt makes even such a well-tried form his own, however. In "If thou wilt mighty be" (CCLXI) he rhymes on the unstressed syllable of feminine endings in the second verse (quoted below, p.106); in "Myne olde dere En'mye" (VIII) he experiments with half-rhyme in the first verse; in "They fle from me" (XXXVII) he slides the *b* and *c* rhymes into each other in the first verse through the series *remember - daunger - raunge*.

[7] Ed. W.E. Mead, EETS, OS 173 (1928) 11.568-74. To make the comparison fairer I have supplied modern punctuation.

[8] CCLXI.8-14, adapting *De Consolatione* III, metr. 6 (the other verses are from metr. 5 and 3). Any Chaucerian phrasing in the stanza does not necessarily come from a relationship with Chaucer's *Boece*: its dependence on that remains unproven (see Thomson's "Wyatt's Boethian Ballade", *Review of English Studies* 15 (1964) pp.262-7). There are, however, a few verbal similarities that do not seem to depend on a common original.

[9] See esp. Mason pp.159-71 and Stevens ch. 10.

[10] E.g. Wyatt V.2, cf. *KnT* 1566 (though the phrase was proverbial); XCII. 3, 4, 8, cf. *KnT* 1042, *Tr* II.112 and I.518; XCV.8, cf. *PF* 140; CCXII

1-2, cf. *PF* 1-2. Muir and Thomson note these and other similarities to Chaucer, including many of the stock idioms.

11   CXVIII, "A face that shuld content me wonders well".

12   To give two samples: of the first twenty poems in Muir and Thomson's edition, five are explicitly concerned with unfaithfulness (II, V, VI, XVI, XIX; it is perhaps hinted at in others), and none of these has a known source; and of probably the three best known of Wyatt's poems, "They fle from me" (XXXVII), "Blame not my lute" (CCV) and "My lute, awake!" (LXVI), the first two are concerned with unfaithfulness, only the last with the more conventional cruelty, and none has any known source.

13   *Truth* ("Flee fro the prees").

14   For further discussion see Southall pp.72-5.

15   Wyatt XXVI, *Rime* CXXXIV (in Muir and Thomson's commentary; I have also used Piero Cudini's *Petrarca: Canzoniere* [3rd ed., Milan, 1977]).

16   *Tr* I.415-8, translating "S'amor non è", *Rime* LXXXVIII.

17   *Merciles Beaute* III.1.

18   The word "thing" is sometimes used to refer to people, and especially women (see *OED*, s.v. "thing", sense 10), but in contexts that provide a person for the term to refer back to, so that the human reference is clear. Wyatt's use completely lacks this humanizing context.

19   LXXVIII.10, XIII.14, LIII.21.

20   "Wyll ye se what wonders love", CCXXXII.15-16, translating *Rime* CXXXV. The poem is unascribed in the Devonshire MS and is therefore excluded by Joost Daalder from his edition (*Sir Thomas Wyatt: Collected Poems* [London, 1975]), but the "unfixed" imagery of the poem is so characteristic of Wyatt that the case for attribution to him is very strong.

21   The image occurs elsewhere in Petrarch (*Rime* CCXXXIX.37) and was in any case proverbial; the point remains that Wyatt adds it to this poem.

22   IV.9-10, *Rime* CXL.9; Wyatt's usage is strikingly different from Petrarch's own references to woods elsewhere. Southall would read the image as "a touch of the countryside" (p.82n.). Traditionally, however, the forest is a fearsome place (as consistently in folktale), with symbolic implications of disorientation, the undiscovered self or even "psychological chaos" (see Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century* (Princeton, 1972) p.277).

23   From the chorus "Stet quicumque vult" in *Thyestes*, 401-3.

24   The Envoy, which is found in a single MS and none of the early printed editions, and would therefore not have been known to Wyatt, makes this turning outward even clearer in its injunction to

        pray in general
    For thee, and eek for other, hevenlich mede.

It is interesting that *Truth* was probably the best known of the minor poems, having been printed by Pynson (1526) as well as Caxton (c.1478) and Thynne (1532), though in this truncated form.

[25]   Kenneth Muir, *Life and Letters of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Liverpool, 1963) pp.41, 38.

[26]   CVIII.503-5. This emphasis is missing not only in the Psalm itself but in Wyatt's other sources, including the paraphrase of Joannes Campensis (*Psalmorum omnium . . . paraphrastica interpretatio*, Lyons, 1533) or Pietro Aretino's much fuller *I Sette Salmi* (Venice, 1536).

[27]   See Thomson's article cited in n.8 above.

[28]   *Fortune* 14.

[29]   *OED*, s.v. "range", sense 7a.

[30]   *Tr* III.1341-4:

Or elles, lo, this was hir mooste feere,
That al this thyng but nyce dremes were;
For which ful ofte ech of hem seyde, "O swete,
Clippe ich yow thus, or elles I it meete?"