

## COURTLY LOVE AS CAMOUFLAGE IN THE POEMS OF SIR THOMAS WYATT

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In spite of the Wyatt renaissance among specialists, this poet seems to be still in need of defence in the general public, especially against the reproach that he is dull — dull because he represents nothing but variations on the theme of courtly love<sup>1</sup>. One has to admit, of course, that the theme of courtly love is indeed somewhat obsolete today, and if Wyatt had nothing else to offer, one should rather leave him in the mausoleum of dead poets. But the label “courtly love poetry” is quite insufficient for the range of Wyatt’s poetic production. Not only does a great part of his poems present strong anti-Petrarchan sentiments<sup>2</sup>, but many of his poems are not concerned with love at all. They express the problems and frustrations of Wyatt’s life as a courtier and diplomat in the service of Henry VIII. Some of these poems are quite outspoken, e.g.

TAGUS, fare well, that westward with thy streames  
Torns vp the grayns off gold already tryd:  
With spurr and sayle for I go seke the Tems  
Gaynward the sonne that showth her welthi pryde  
And to the town which Brutus sowght by drems  
Like bendyd mono doth lend her lusty syd.  
My Kyng, my Country alone for whome I lyve,  
Of myghty love the winges for this me gyve.

(Muir 1949: no. 97)

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lewis “When we read him in bulk, some of us find in him an atmosphere which is from the first oppressive and finally suffocating. Poor Wyatt seems to be always in love with women he dislikes” (1954: 229).

<sup>2</sup> The anti-Petrarchan tendencies in Wyatt’s poetry have frequently been noticed. Cf. Watson (1979: 387). Watson, however, exaggerates when he says that “Half a century and more before Donne wrote his *Songs and sonnets*, or Shakespeare his sonnets, the English poetic rejection (of Petrarch) was already total”.

It is an expression of Wyatt's relief that he can return to England after having, not very successfully, served as an ambassador in Spain. Moreover it is certainly also a declaration of loyalty to the monarch with the hope of allaying his anger at the unsuccessful mission. A document of the poet's bitter disillusionment with life at court is the following poem:

LUCKES, ma faire falcon, and your fellowes all,  
 How well pleasaunt yt were your libertie!  
 Ye not forsake me that faire might ye befall.  
 But they that somtyme lykt my companye,  
 Like lyse awaye from ded bodies their crall;  
 Loe, what a profe in light adversytie!  
 But ye, my birdes, I swear by all your belles,  
 Ye be my fryndes, and so be but few elles.

(Muir 1949: no. 170)

Here Wyatt expresses his disgust at the behaviour of his friends who anxiously turned away from him when he had lost the king's favour. Very effective is the apostrophe to the 'fair falcon' Luckes (= Lux; light) and his fellows as the only friends left to him in his adversity, whereas his former "friends" are compared to lice crawling away from a dead body. Another utterance of the courtier's disillusionment is

STOND who so list vpon the Slipper toppe  
 Of courtes estates, and lett me heare reioyce;  
 And vse me quyete without lett or stoppe,  
 Vnknowne in courte, that hath suche brackish ioyes:  
 In hidden place, so lett my dayes forthe passe,  
 That when my yeares be done, withouten noyse,  
 I may dye aged after the common trace.  
 For hym death greep the right hard by the croppes  
 That is moche knowne of other; and of him self [alas,  
 Doth dye vnknowne, dazed with dreadfull face.

(Muir 1949: no. 197).

It is a very radical criticism of the courtier's lot who is continually in danger of dying an unnatural death, and, moreover, is never able to reach the classical ideal of maturity and selfknowledge ('Nosce te ipsum'), because of his constant preoccupation with the dangers surrounding him.

Such clear references to matters political or social are, however, rare, and we understand why this had to be so when we study the list of Wyatt's contemporaries who lost their lives because they incurred the disfavour of Henry VIII (to mention only a few: John Fisher, Sir Thomas More, Thomas Cromwell, Anne Boleyn, Henry Howard). But we find among Wyatt's poems specimens where he quite obviously uses the pose of the courtly lover as a mask under which he expresses his more topical sorrows. The following example belongs to this type:

YOU that in love finde lucke and habundance  
 And live in lust and joyful jolitic!  
 Arrise for shame! Do away your sluggardie!  
 Arrise, I say, do May some observaunce!  
 Let me in bed lye dreming in mischaunce;  
 Let me remembre the happs most vnhappy  
 That me betide in May most comonly,  
 As oon whome love list litil to avaunce.  
 Sephame saide true that my natiuitie  
 Mischaunced was with the ruler of the May:  
 He gest, I prove, of that the veritie.  
 In May my welth and eke my liff, I say,  
 Have stonde so oft in such perplexitie:  
 Reioyse! Let me dreme of your felicitie.  
 (Muir 1949: no. 92).

On the surface this is a typical Petrarchan sonnet, contrasting the joy and highspiritedness of other successful lovers (first quatrain) with the poet's unhappiness and dejection (second quatrain). The occasion is the arrival of May, the month of love, pleasure and merrymaking<sup>3</sup>. The sestet reveals that this mood of depression is not due to a momentary whim, a present case of unhappy love, but something more general. It is a doom which was cast on him, at the moment of his birth, by the constellation of the stars, where, according to the astrologer Sephame, Venus, the "ruler of the May", was afflicted by some negative power (cf. Thomson 1964 : 275). Thus the month of May has frequently brought the poet great unhappiness so that now he is already discouraged and wants to dream only of others' happiness. At first reading nothing betrays that this poem refers to anything but to habitually bad luck in love. Lines 12 and 13 do not contradict this, because "wealth" in Wyatt's time meant also "the condition of being happy and prosperous; well-being" (cf. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*: wealth, s. v. 1), and the threat to the lover's life is an old topos in love poetry. But when we study Wyatt's biography, we find that his frequent troubles in May were of quite a different nature. In May 1534 he was arrested and imprisoned after having killed a sergeant in a quarrel; in May 1536 he was imprisoned in the tower (we do not know under what charge) and most probably witnessed the execution of Anne Boleyn and his courtly companions who had been accused of having been lovers of the unfortunate queen; May 1540 showed Wyatt the fall of Sir Thomas Cromwell, his protector, who was executed at the end of July. This event is the occasion for another political poem under the camouflage of a traditional pose:

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, book II, stanza 16: "ryse up, and let us daunce, /And let us do to May some observaunce" (quoted from Warrington 1953:51).

THE pillar pearisht is whearto I lent,  
 The strongest staye of myne vnquyet mynde;  
 The lyke of it no man agayne can fynde,  
 Ffrom East to West, still seking throughe he went.  
 To myne vnhappe! for happe away hath rent  
 Of all my ioye the vearyo bark and rynde;  
 And I (alas) by chaunce am thus assynde  
 Dearlye to moorne till death do it relent.  
 But syns that thus it is by destenye,  
 What can I more but have a wofull hart,  
 My penne in playnt, my voyce in carefull crye,  
 My mynde in woe, my bodye full of smart,  
 And I my self, my self alwayes to hate,  
 Till dreadfull death do ease my dolefull state?  
 (Muir 1949: no. 173)

Wyatt adapts here Petrarch's sonnet *Rotta e l'alta colonna e'l verde lauro*, a lament about the death of Cardinal Colonna and his adored Laura (Ital. *colonna* = pillar; *lauro* = laurel) to a complaint on the fall and death of Thomas Cromwell, the "pillar" which had supported his position as courtier and diplomat, the collapse of which endangered also Wyatt's own status. In fact he was a few months later himself out of favour, arrested, and all his possessions were confiscated. Again we see a poem which on the surface seems to be nothing but a conventional complaint authorized by the time-honoured Petrarch, and only external evidence allows us to understand the poem's deeper meaning.

A similar method is applied in "The flamyng sighes", but with a difference. The poem consists of two stanzas, which are two sonnets:

THE flamyng sighes that boile within my brest  
 Somtyme breake forth, and they can well declare  
 The hartes vnrest and how that it doth fare,  
 The payne tharof, the greef, and all the rest.  
 The watrid eyes from whence the teares do fall  
 Do feele some force or ells they wolde be drye;  
 The wasted flesshe of cowlour dead can trye,  
 And Something tell what Sweetnes is in gall.  
 And ho that list to see and to discerne  
 How care can force within a worried mynd,  
 Come hee to me! I am that place assynd.  
 But for all this no force, it dothe no harme;  
 The wound, alas, happ in some other place,  
 Ffrom whence no toole away the skarr can race.  
 But you that of suche like have had your part  
 Can best be iudge; whearfore, my frend so deare,  
 I thought it good my stage should now appeare  
 To you, and that there is no great desert.  
 And whoar as you in weightie matters great  
 Of ffortune saw the shadow that you know,

Ffor trifling thinges I now am stryken soo  
 That though I feele my hart doth wound and beat,  
 I sitt alone, save on the second day  
 My ffearer comes with whome I spend the tyme  
 In burning heat whyle that she list assigne;  
 And whoe hath health and libertie alwaye,  
 Lett hym thanek god and lett hym not provoke  
 To have the lyke of this my paynefull stroke.  
 (Muir 1949: no. 175)

The first stanza/sonnet is again, as it seems, nothing but a conventional expression of the unsuccessful lover's grief. "Flamyng sighes", "watrid eyes", "wasted flesshe", "wried mynd" are all symptoms of the courtly love fever, and although the word "love" is not mentioned, one cannot but interpret the poem as a love sonnet. The second stanza/sonnet suggests, however, a different reading, although very cautiously. It still does not quite cast off the mask of the courtly lover: the "frend so deare" might also be the counsellor and comforter frequently to be found in love poetry. But when Wyatt says of himself that "there is no great desert", this seems to be a strange way for a courtly lover to speak of his state. When he refers to his friend's troubles with the carefully guarded expression "wheras you in weightie matters great/. Of ffortune saw the shadow that you know", one becomes suspicious. The statement that the poet himself suffers his pains "for trifling thinges" makes it clear that he cannot be speaking of love. So the symptoms of physical and spirtual suffering in the first stanza are to be taken literally, not as courtly love metaphors, just as the "ffearer" (line 24) which reminds us of the fact that about a year after the probable date of composition of this poem Wyatt died of a fever. Thus we can say that Wyatt writes a poem about his real suffering, his physical exhaustion and depression after months of imprisonment, his isolation when only his feaver keeps him company. Still he is very guarded in his expression and does not refer openly to his imprisonment or the confiscation of this property, but the "frend so deare" knows the facts, after all, and nobody who was not a friend would have been shown this poem at Wyatt's lifetime.

"The flamyng sighes" is an especially interesting poem because here, quite at the end of his career as a courtier and poet, when he has not much to lose, Wyatt uses the courtly love convention as a mask, but also shows that it is only camouflage under which he hides more serious matters. In the examples mentioned earlier the mask character of the poems could only be penetrated with the help of external evidence, which means that at Wyatt's lifetime only close friends would possess the "key" and understand the real meaning, whereas the company of the court would not see anything unusual in these Petrarchan creations. Wyatt was clearly in need of self-expression, of an outlet for his pent-up cares and troubles, and as it was impossible to speak

openly, he used the courtly love lament as a vehicle. One can therefore conclude that also other poems by Wyatt which are traditionally ranged under the label "courtly love poems" carry a hidden meaning and express, in the conventional pose of the unhappy or disillusioned lover, Wyatt's dissatisfaction with his position at court<sup>4</sup>. This impression is supported by the fact that Wyatt's translations of Petrarchan poems show many deviations from the original which have a tendency to emphasize the poet's stoicism in the adversities of fate (cf. Guss 1965/66). Thus he replaces in the sonnet "The longe love" (Muir 1949: no. 4) Petrarch's last line *Che' bel fin fa chi ben amando more* ("What a beautiful end makes he who dies loving well.") by the maxim "For goode is the liff, ending faithfully". Furthermore it has been noticed that Wyatt's poems are very poor in references to the lady's beauty; they concentrate nearly exclusively on the poet's emotions, avoid, however, a precise classification of these emotions as love. Even such early translations of Petrarchan sonnets as "I fynd no peace" (Muir 1949: no. 26) and "My galley charged with forgetfulnes" (Muir 1949: no. 28), although in the context of Petrarch's *cyclus* clearly love poems, may well have been selected by Wyatt because they served as a suitable expression of his own frustration due to his unsuccessful diplomatic mission in France and Spain and his fear to lose the King's favour. We have to remember that the titles of these poems "Description of the Contrarious Passions in a Lover" and "The Lover Compareth his State to a Ship" under which they appear in many anthologies were added later in *Tottel's miscellanies*. Wyatt's poems without those titles are much more general in meaning, especially as in "I fynd no peace" references to *amor* and *donna* contained in Petrarch are omitted by Wyatt (cf. Heine 1978: 415-6).

Probably one does not go too far if one assumes that also Wyatt's insolent anti-Petrarchan poems are not only a protest against the already lifeless convention of courtly love, but as well against the stifling atmosphere of courtly life. Take for example

FAREWELL. Love and all thy lawes for ever:  
 Thy bayted hookes shall tangill me no more;  
 Senec and Plato call me from thy lore,  
 To perfaict welth my wit for to endever.  
 In blynde error when I did perseuer,  
 Thy sharpe repulse that prieketh ay so sore  
 Hath taught me to sett in tryfels no store  
 And scape fourth, syns libertie is lever.  
 Therefore farewell: goo trouble yonger hertes  
 And in me clayme no more authoritie;

<sup>4</sup> This had already been suggested by Chadburn (1935:145ff.) and again by Harding (1954:205).

With idill youth goo vse thy propertie  
 And thereon spend thy many brittil dertes;  
 For betherto though I have lost all my tyme  
 Me lusteth no longer rotten boughes to clymbe.  
 (Muir 1949: no. 13)

The relation of the courtly lover to his lady had always been a reflection of the liegeman's subjection to his sovereign: the subjects of the king, bound by "divine right" to love and honour even an unjust and tyrannical monarch, would not dream of criticizing him in public. Even in a situation where a wronged subject had nothing to lose he would express his sentiments against the king very guardedly, if at all, as in the case of Sir Thomas More on the scaffold before he was executed:

I am much bounden to the King for the benefits and honours he has bestowed upon me; and so help me God, most of all am I bounden to him that it pleaseth his Majesty to rid me so shortly out of the miseries of this present world  
 (Froude 1870: 274).

In the same way a courtly lover had to be faithful and loyal to his "cruel" and "unkind" lady; the fact that she did not return his feelings and would certainly not dream of satisfying his sexual demands did not free him from the obligation to serve his mistress until death. Therefore a courtly love poem could easily be used as a ready formula to pay homage to the monarch, as it was done to excess in the reign of queen Elizabeth. Here of course the situation was rendered more natural by the fact that the monarch was a woman who was not averse to flattery. Whereas the Elizabethan courtly love poem celebrates the beauty of the sovereign lady in all its aspects, we find in the poetry of Wyatt only a blank when we try to focus on the source of his agitation. "And my delite is causer of this stryff" (Muir 1949: no. 26) — this is about all the information we get, and this may refer to a capricious woman as well as to an incalculable king on whose favour one's career and life depended.

That Wyatt translated, adapted, and imitated poems of established fame and reputation not as mere literary exercise but in order to express his own situation is also shown by his three satires modelled on Horace and Alamanni (cf. Thomson 1964: 238-70), written at a time when he, like Horace, was banished from court into the province:

Nor I ame not where Christ is goven in pay  
 For mony, poison and traizon at Rome (= London)  
 A commune practiso used nyght and daie:  
 But here I ame in Kent and Christendome  
 Among the muses where I rode and ryme.  
 (Muir 1949: no. 196, lines 97-101)

At the same time when he wrote "The flamyng sighes" he also translated the Penitential Psalms as an adequate expression of his own mood<sup>5</sup>.

Yet have I had gret cause to dred and fere  
That thou woldst give my ffocs the ouerhand,  
Ffor in my ffal they showed such plesant chere.  
(Muir 1949: no. 205, lines 53-55)

The preceding reflexions might provoke the objection that such an approach to Wyatt's poems will lead back to the "biographical approach" which we have luckily overcome. After all we are not interested in Wyatt as a person, but in his poetry; and the question is, whether his poetry has any attraction for the modern reader. However, the intention of the preceding discussion is not in the first line the discovery of autobiographical elements in Wyatt's poems, although these are also interesting insofar as they convey to us something of the spirit of the age and especially of the life at the court of Henry VIII. Even the fact that direct comments on personal and political matters are so very scarce is revealing — the poet's tongue was tied, and he had to take refuge to the technique of camouflage if he wanted to express himself at all.

Once our suspicion has been awakened that not all of Wyatt's Petrarchan poems are simply poems of courtly love, we become aware of the ambiguity of his poetry. Although on the surface most of it is poetry of unhappy love which could have been sung and recited in any court circle, one notices after closer inspection that the source of unhappiness is in most cases quite undefined, and the poems can be read simply as expressions of grief, unhappiness, frustration, cynicism, bewilderment, despair, or stoicism — themes which are timeless and through Wyatt's poetical craftsmanship become timeless poems.

THE restful place, Revyver of my smarte,  
The labors salvo, inecressyng my sorow,  
The bodys ese and trobler off my hart,  
Quieter of mynd and my vnquyet foo,  
Fforgetter of payn, Remembryng my woo,  
The place of slope, wherein I do but wake  
Be sprent with tores, my bed I the forsake.  
  
The frost the snow, may not redresse my hete,  
Nor yet no heate abate my forwent cold.  
I know nothyng to ese my paynes mete:  
Eche care cawsythe increse by twenty fold.  
Revyvyng carys vpon my sorows old,  
Suche overthwart affectes they do me make,  
By sprent with tores my bed for to forsake.  
  
Yet helpythe yt not: I fynd no better ese

<sup>5</sup> In the chronology of the poems and data of Wyatt's life this essay follows Thomson (1964).

In bed or owt; thys moste cawsythe my payn --  
Where most I seke how beste that I may plesse,  
My lost labor, Alas, ys all in vayn.  
Yet that I gave I cannot call agayn:  
No place fro me my greffe away can take,  
Wherefor with tores my bed I the forsake.  
(Muir 1949: no. 115)

Does not everybody who once in his life spent a sleepless night, trying to find rest in sleep but kept awake by painful thoughts, recognize himself? And yet the poem could pass very well for a picture of the conventional courtly lover or could be, to Wyatt himself, an utterance of his anxiety caused by his precarious position at court. Additionally it is certainly a very good poem in the technical sense, with its skilful handling of rhetorical figures, especially antitheses and parallelism, and the integration of the refrain into the meaning and structure of the sentence.

One may regret that Wyatt's position at court did not allow him to write more openly, but probably the necessity to use a technique of camouflage imposed a useful artistic discipline on him. In order to express at the same time the code of courtly love and his own problems he had to eliminate from his poetry everything which was too narrow and specific in one way or the other. What remained was the exploration of the poet's own mind as a timeless representation of the human mind in conflict.

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