

Sir Thomas Wyatt

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Selected Poems

of

Sir Thomas Wyatt

**Selected & edited by
Michael Smith**

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Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542)

A Brief Life

Although a fair deal is known of Sir Thomas Wyatt's public life as a courtier and diplomat, details of his personal life are scarce, and Wyatt's biographers frequently resort to speculation to fill out historical ignorance. While some of Wyatt's poems may plausibly yield up personal details, the reader should be aware that most of the poems function within the literary conventions of their time (Petrarch's *Rime* being a great influence on Wyatt and on his friend Sydney, as well as on their Spanish contemporaries, Garcilaso de la Vega and Boscán), and it is therefore not always wise to decode these poems into the poet's personal experience—as, for example, Alice Oswald does in her Faber *Selected Poems*, 2008, to which I refer later—something that has often occurred in the reading of Shakespeare's sonnets. What follows is a brief summary of the basic known facts of Wyatt's life, leaving the reader at liberty to read the poems as he or she wishes. That said, there is no doubt that a good number of Wyatt's poems register his personal life, but, *caveat lector*.

Thomas Wyatt was born in 1503 at the castle of his father, Sir Henry Wyatt, at Allington in Kent. His father suffered torture and incarceration during the reign of Richard III because of his support for Henry Tudor who, on becoming King, retained him as Privy Chancellor in 1509.

At the age of twelve Wyatt enrolled in St. John's College, Cambridge, where he took his master's degree in 1520. In the same year he married Elizabeth Brooke, daughter of Thomas Brooke, Lord Cobham. On entering court life, his first service was as Clerk of the King's Jewels, and a year later he was made 'an esquire to the body of the king', a position once held by Chaucer. In 1527 he also followed Chaucer's experience in becoming attached to the suite of Sir John Russell on a diplomatic mission to Italy to negotiate with the papal court to

secure Rome's backing in enrolling the assistance of Venice in an effort to hinder Charles V's inroads into Italy. That mission proved a failure and Charles V sacked Rome in 1527. In the course of the mission, Wyatt visited Venice, Ferrara, Bologna and Florence, and it has been speculated that Wyatt may have met Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), Ludovico Ariosto (1447–1533) and Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527).

In 1529–30 he became High Marshal of Calais. He was chief ewerer at the marriage of Anne Boleyn in 1533. It may be that this appointment to Calais was a means of keeping him out of the presence of Anne Boleyn. Wyatt's 'interest' in Anne Boleyn resulted in his imprisonment in the Tower in 1536, at the time of Boleyn's execution.

Wyatt became friendly with the powerful Thomas Cromwell. He was knighted in 1535 and dispatched, unwillingly on his part, on another embassy to Charles V. On his second return to England in 1540, Wyatt witnessed Cromwell's execution and, because of his relationship with Cromwell, he was accused of treasonable behaviour during his Spanish mission. Only his frank self-defence secured his acquittal.

Despite all this, Wyatt continued to receive further appointments. He was Sheriff of Kent in 1536–37. His last major mission was to the Emperor Charles V who was visiting Francis I. He travelled through the Low Countries and France, with the aim of discovering whether the Emperor and Francis were conspiring at an invasion of England. When the threat of an invasion ended because of the complex relationship between the two Kings, Wyatt, having returned to England, found himself once more in trouble, accused of involvement with the King Henry's enemies. Summoned to Hampton Court, arrested and handcuffed, he was imprisoned once again in the Tower. He managed, however, to secure his release.

Again concerned that France was intent on war with England, Henry ordered Wyatt to travel to Falmouth to meet the Emperor's envoy, Montmorency de Corrierez, and to escort

him to London. Wyatt rode over-hastily and contracted a fever. Taking a rest at the home of Sir John Horsey at Sherborne in Dorset, he died there on 11 October, 1542, and was buried in Sherborne Abbey (now the Church of St. Mary).

Finally, on a more personal note, in 1525 Wyatt separated from his wife, Elizabeth Brooke, on grounds of adultery. In about 1536 he fell in love with Elizabeth Darrell, a Catholic and maid of honour to Katherine of Aragon, with whom he had a son and to both of whom he bequeathed his estate. Elizabeth Darrell was the great love of the poet's life.

Reading Wyatt

How personally should Wyatt's poems be read? Alice Oswald in her succinct and interesting Introduction to her Faber & Faber selection expresses the view that Wyatt is essentially what she calls a 'fear poet': that, in a great number of his poems, and particularly in his sonnets, there is an anxiety that he might end up being executed, as had been his patron, Thomas Cromwell. Now, there is no doubt that Wyatt lived in dangerous times under Henry VIII, and there is no doubt that he had justifiable cause for concern for his own safety. But there is also a danger in too close a personalization, even of the sonnets. Oswald does admit this and believes that many of the poems should be read in two registers, the personal and the Petrarchan. This view reminds me of all the books that have been written about Shakespeare's sonnets, which attempt to reconstruct a biography of at least some aspects of Shakespeare's personal life. My own view, although she presses the personalised reading more closely than I would, concurs largely with that of Oswald's, which is that the reader should keep an open mind in reading Wyatt, just as the readers of Lorca's poetry should be wary of reductively reading his poems, especially the love poems, as expressions of Lorca's homosexuality.

Wyatt Englished Petrarch as the Spaniard Garcilaso de la Vega Hispanicised him. Naturally, elements of English and Spanish can be found in the work of both ‘translators’; but the nature of these elements, I think, are a matter for the reader. There is, admittedly, an ambivalence in this approach. That ambivalence, however, can be a part of the reader’s experience of the poems. In the end, it will provide an aesthetically richer and more exploratory response. My selection attempts to accommodate that ambivalence.

Metre in Wyatt

The effects of metre are extremely difficult to calculate. In English, as has frequently been pointed out, it is almost impossible to have any two readers scan a poem in exactly the same way; often, indeed, the differences, even when the scansion is done by so-called-experts, are very great. Little wonder, then, that Hopkins’ metrical experiments are still the subject of debate and various interpretations. The root of the problem seems to be that the metres of classical Greek and Latin, which late European literary culture used as its models, are out of sorts with the modern European languages that had to accommodate them; it is ironic that the Romans sometimes complained that Greek metres were an imposition for them and distorted Latin into syntactic patterns out of keeping with the genius of the language. Hopkins, expert in classical metres, felt deeply the lack of relevance of these metres to the English language, and he devoted his energy and talent to attempting to supply what he considered a more natural or native metrics.

As regards the strategy of reproducing regularity of verse line, to which so much time and effort has been devoted by scholars, some years ago I came upon a few interesting remarks made by Gerald Bullett in his introduction to his fine anthology, *Silver Poets of the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1947). Bullett was considering the charge against Wyatt of crude versification, and he reproduced a scansion (carried out by strict metrical

procedure) of a Wyatt sonnet ('The longe love that in my thought doeth harbar') made by a Professor Padelford, which reduced the sonnet to aural chaos:

Now no one contends that Wyatt's sonnets are models of correct versification; admittedly his rhythms are often awkward and blundering. But Padelford's pointing of this particular specimen is, quite fantastically wrong . . . This talk of trochees and iambs belongs rather to the grammar books than to literary criticism. The jargon of (a classical and so largely irrelevant) prosody is no necessary part of an English poet's equipment, useful though it may be to a student of Greek verse. Many of the loveliest of English lyrics have been written by men to whom such terms were Greek in more senses than one.

The t'rum t'rum method of scanning blank verse is derived presumably from the fundamental error that syllable counting is the basis of English metre. It is a method that can be applied with consistent success only to the worst examples. Surrey [Bullett quotes some lines by Surrey which, like Wyatt's, have been rhythmically mangled by Professor Padelford] may or may not have aimed at strict uniformity of stress in his blank verse, but mercifully he did not achieve it. Either inexpertness or native sense—most probably an alternation of the two—saved him from the flat pedestrianism of the lesser Elizabethans and their undistinguished successors. He can be clumsy and he can be metrically tedious; but he escapes the consistent tedium which must result, in English, from an exact undeviating identity between the basic metre and the actual tempo: in the best blank verse one is conscious or half-conscious of both, and much of the energy of the verse is generated by the tension between them, or, in other words, by the variety of the patterns woven on a basic metrical , structure.

Now this analysis seems generally valid to me. It can be applied to Shakespeare's verse, and it explains how Shakespearian actors can often succeed in eliminating the basic metrical pattern (which is iambic) as they play on the tempo to achieve a conversational rhythm which they believe (fallaciously, I think)

makes Shakespeare more acceptable to a modern audience (i.e. an audience that will hardly notice that they are hearing verse). At any rate, I think it is true that in the best blank verse of the Elizabethans the basic (iambic) metrical beat serves as the regulating, though sometimes barely heard, rhythm for what one might call the interpretative or dramatic rhythm, the language in the mouth of a credible speaking man or woman.

I think most of this is applicable to Wyatt's poems. Of course there are some awkwardnesses of rhythm in Wyatt, as indeed can be said of almost any poet's work—one has only to think of Hardy—but a poet who can manage so perfectly the iambic beat as, for instance, in 'Forget not yet . . .' can scarcely be considered the inept metricist that some scholars judge him to be. Not enough is known about exactly how English was pronounced in Wyatt's time and it is quite possible that our ignorance of such pronunciation may account for our some of our oral miscasting of a good deal of his verse. Nor should we forget that Wyatt wrote many of his poems for musical accompaniment. To allow for all this, and the essential but not mechanically applied iambic beat, should take us a good way toward a fair reading of the poems.

At one time I considered indicating my own subjective reading of Wyatt's metrical rhythm with acutes and graves but I finally judged this too prescriptive. Better to let the reader make his or her own way using the general guidelines, laid down in this note on Wyatt's prosodic procedures as I understand them. I think there is usually enough guidance in Wyatt's poems to suggest how he wants his poems to be read: the basic iambic beat with multiple variations, especially in the use of the trochee at the beginning of lines.

Wyatt's Text

This is not a scholarly edition of Wyatt's poems. The best such edition is undoubtedly Rebholz's Penguin edition (1997), on which I have based this selection. I am also indebted to the notes

in that scholarly volume. My principal and modest contribution to this present *Selected Poems*, is in the selection of the poems and a few speculative ideas on Wyatt's prosody. As with Garcilaso de la Vega and Boscán in Spanish, Wyatt, along with Surrey, had the distinction of carrying over the prosodic and thematic sophistication of Petrarch. To consider him out of this context, as Ivor Winters tends to do, is to distort his achievement. What Wyatt did, with great success, was to English Petrarch, to give Petrarch a homely rootedness in English; but this could not have been achieved without the example of Petrarch. In selecting the poems, my disposition was to concentrate on the native Englishness of Wyatt, his somehow managing to adapt the bland tropes of Petrarch to his own personal experience, that indomitable English sense of individuality.

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FROM SONNETS

X

The long love that in my thought doth harbour
And in mine heart doth keep his residence
Into my face presseth with bold pretence
And therein campeth, spreading his banner.
She that me learneth to love and suffer
And will that my trust and lust's negligence
Be reined by reason, shame, and reverence,
With his hardiness taketh displeasure.
Wherewithal unto the heart's forest he fleeth,
Leaving his enterprise with pain and cry,
And there him hideth and not appeareth.
What may I do when my master feareth,
But in the field with him to live and die?
For good is the life ending faithfully.

XI

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind,
But as for me, *helas*, I may no more.
The vain travail hath wearied me so sore,
I am of them that farthest cometh behind.
Yet may I by no means my wearied mind
Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore
Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore
Sithens in a net I seek to hold the wind.
Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,
As well as I may spend his time in vain.
And graven with diamonds in letters plain
There is written her fair neck round about:
'*Noli me tangere* for Caesar's I am,
And wild for to hold though I seem tame.'

XVI

Because I have thee still kept from lies and blame
And to my power always have I thee honoured,
Unkind tongue, right ill hast thou me rendered
For such desert to do me wreak and shame.
In need of succour most when that I am
To ask reward, then standest thou like one afeard,
Always most cold; and if thou speak toward,
It is as in dream, unperfect and lame.
Always ye salt tears, again my will each night
That are with me when fain I would be alone,
Then are ye gone when I should make my moan.
And you so ready sighs to make me shrigh, t,
Then are ye slack when that ye should outstart,
And only my look declareth my heart.

XIX

My galley charged with forgetfulness
Thorough sharp seas in winter nights doth pass
'Tween rock and rock; and eke mine enemy, alas,
That is my lord, steereth with cruelty;
And every oar a thought in readiness
As though that death were light in such a case.
An endless wind doth tear the sail apace
Of forced sighs and trusty fearfulness.
A rain of tears, a cloud of dark disdain
Hath done the wearied cords great hindrance,
Wreathed with error and eke with ignorance.
The stars be hid that led me to this pain.
Drowned is reason that should me comfort
And I remain despairing of the port.

XXIV

Like to these unmeasurable mountains
Is my painful life, the burden of ire:
For of great height be they and high is my desire,
And I of tears and they be full of fountains.
Under craggy rocks they have full barren plains;
Hard thoughts in me my woeful mind doth tire.
Small fruit and many leaves their tops do attire;
Small effect with great trust in me remains.
The boist'rous winds oft their high boughs do blast;
Hot sighs from me continually be shed.
Cattle in them and in me love is fed.
Immovable am I and they are full steadfast.
Of the restless birds they have the tune and note,
And I always plaints that pass thorough my throat.

XXVII

Unstable dream, according to the place,
Be steadfast once or else at least be true.
By tasted sweetness make me not to rue
The sudden loss of thy false feigned grace.
By good respect in such a dangerous case
Thou brought'st not her into this tossing mew
But madest my sprite live my care to renew,
My body in tempest her succour to embrace.
The body dead, the sprite had his desire;
Painless was th'one, th'other in delight.
Why then, alas, did it not keep it right,
Returning to leap into the fire,
And where it was at wish it could not remain?
Such mocks of dreams they turn to deadly pain.

XXXVII

Such is the course that nature's kind hath wrought
That snakes have time to cast away their stings.
Ainst chained prisoners what need defence be sought?
The fierce lion will hurt no yelden things.
Why should such spite be nursed then in thy thought
Sith all these powers are prest under thy wings?
And eke thou seest and reason thee hath taught
What mischief malice many ways it brings.
Consider eke that spite availeth naught.
Therefore this song thy fault to thee it sings.
Displease thee not for saying thus my thought
Nor hate thou him from whom no hate forth springs,
For furies, that in hell be execrable,
For that they hate are made most miserable.

FROM EPIGRAMS

XLII

He is not dead that sometime hath a fall.
The sun returneth that was under the cloud.
And when Fortune hath spit out all her gall
I trust good luck to me shall be allowed.
For I have seen a ship into haven fall
After the storm hath broke both mast and shroud.
And eke the willow that stoopeth with the wind
Doth rise again and greater wood doth bind.

XLIX

Stand whoso list upon the slipper top
Of court's estates, and let me here rejoice
And use me quiet without let or stop,
Unknown in court that hath such brackish joys.
In hidden place so let my days forth pass
That, when my years be done withouten noise,
I may die aged after the common trace.
For him death grip'th right hard by the crop
That is much known of other, and of himself, alas,
Doth die unknown, dazed, with dreadful face.

LII

Right true it is and said full yore ago,
'Take heed of him that by thy back thee claweth,'
For none is worse than is a friendly foe.
Though they seem good, all thing that thee delighteth,
Yet know it well that in thy bosom creepeth:
For many a man such fire oft kindleth
That with the blaze his beard singeth.

LX

Tagus, farewell, that westward with thy streams
Turns up the grains of gold already tried,
With spur and sail for I go seek the Thames,
Gainward the sun that shew'th her wealthy pride
And, to the town which Brutus sought by dreams,
Like bended moon doth lend her lusty side.
My king, my country, alone for whom I live,
Of mighty love the wings for this me give.

LXII

Sighs are my food, drink are my tears;
Clinking of fetters such music would crave.
Stink and close air away my life wears.
Innocency is all the hope I have.
Rain, wind, or weather I judge by mine ears.
Malice assaulted that righteousness should save.
Sure I am, Brian, this wound shall heal again
But yet, alas, the scar shall still remain.

LXVI

Accused though I be without desert,
None can it prove, yet ye believe it true.
Nor never yet, since that ye had my heart,
Entended I to be false or untrue.
Sooner I would of death sustain the smart
Than break one thing of that I promised you.
Accept therefore my service in good part.
None is alive that ill tongues can eschew.
Hold them as false and let not us depart
Our friendship old in hope of any new.
Put not thy trust in such as use to feign
Except thou mind to put thy friends to pain.

LXIX

Within my breast I never thought it gain
Of gentle minds the freedom for to lose.
Nor in my heart sank never such disdain
To be a forger, faults for to disclose.
Nor I cannot endure the truth to gloze,
To set a gloss upon an earnest pain.
Nor am I not in number one of those
That list to blow retreat to every train.

LXXII

Speak thou and speed where will or power aught help'th.
Where power doth want, will must be won by wealth.
For need will speed where will works not his kind,
And gain, thy foes thy friends shall cause thee find.
For suit and gold, what do not they obtain?
Of good and bad the tryers are these twain.