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Wyatt and the Obstacles to Happiness

JOOST DAALDER

It would hardly seem contentious to say that the personality present in Wyatt's poems is a remarkably unhappy one. Raymond Southall's reference to 'anxiety, doubt and trepidation' is both apt and representative of what many observe.' But what is the cause of such unhappiness? Some would say that no doubt Wyatt was let down by men, women, 'fortune' as often and as badly as he claims. But, although we know of some very painful experiences which he went through, it would be difficult to show that such experiences can fully account for the obsessive, virtually unrelieved sombreness of either Wyatt's utterances or anyone else's. The exact relationship between a poet's life and his work is always difficult to establish, but the more so, in Wyatt's case, because there is no reason to assume that he knew no circumstances which might have made others quite happy or at least reasonably satisfied, and because – if we were to suppose that specific situations were responsible for his unhappiness – the poems would be incapable of being read in any other way. We would either come across many allusions to what are unmistakably real events, or the illusion would be created that the events, even if unidentifiable, did in fact occur and that the attitude adopted by the personality within the poems was the only possible one. In fact, however, no matter what the impact of real events on Wyatt may have been, and despite the fact that the speaker of the poems again and again appears to look outside himself for causes of his distress, the observant reader cannot finally avoid the impression of a mind creating its own internal obstacles to happiness. In theory, we must of course distinguish between Wyatt and his *persona*. In practice, I believe that there is little difference between the two, since there seems to be little indication that Wyatt, as a person writing poems, wants us to see the speaker of those poems as somehow deficient. In other words, much of the importance and interest of Wyatt's human content appears to lie in what are the speaker's – and no doubt Wyatt's own – psychological shortcomings in the pursuit of his well-being.

There are times (though they are not frequent) when the speaker of the poems – whom, in what follows, I shall simply call Wyatt – shows some awareness of the possibility that his attitude spoiled his chances

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of success in a practical sense. An example occurs in the poem 'I have sought long with steadfastness.' In this poem, Wyatt explains that his faithful service to a lady has been of no avail, since love is arbitrary, and not based on reason. Frequently, this leads him to adopt a note of recrimination towards the lady, because – thus he reproaches her – she *should* be reasonable, and reward his suffering. Here, however, he goes on:

Therefore I played the fool in vain,
With pity when I first began
Your cruel heart for to constrain, Since
love regardeth no doleful man.

While Wyatt later in the poem does complain that the lady is unreasonable, this stanza appears to give us the message that there is no point in trying to appeal to such a person's pity. Wyatt admits, it seems, that his failure is partly of his own making, and that his theoretical assumption that affection will and ought to be met with affection is in practice liable to get defeated.

What is remarkable, from any normal point of view, is that such an admission is so unusual in Wyatt. Far more often, he assumes that by 'serving faithfully' he may gain and has a 'right' to someone else's affection. In most cases, we see better than the poet that he is likely to fail in the conquest of happiness; and I do not even primarily mean that his claim that love should be reciprocated must have estranged others (though that may well have happened), but that we can in any case observe, in our reading of the poetry, that anyone making such a claim does not have a proper grasp of the way human relationships work. We need to distinguish between the poems where he complains that the lady is unfaithful after a promise of loyalty and those in which he expects that he will be loved (claims that he should be, fears that he will not be, or is indignant that he is not) when no such promise has been given. Indignation about a breach of promise is, after all, far more normal and sane than any such emotion about a promise which one has no particularly good reason for expecting in the first place. Apart from the fact that one has no moral claim on someone whom one happens to love, it would appear to be a psychological fact that one cannot necessarily expect such a person to love one in return. Yet much of Wyatt's love poetry rests on the assumption that the expectation is reasonable and realistic, and thus much of his inevitable distress about women is in fact self-inflicted.

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Nor is his inadequacy limited to his view of the supposed obligations of women. We see it also in his attitude to what he calls 'fortune', a rather vague power in human affairs on which Wyatt appears to be as absurdly dependent as on his ladies. Of course 'fortune' may well occasionally be in fact a woman, yet Wyatt's use of the word shows that we may be justified in thinking of him as referring to something else, and if he actually has in mind some such concept as chance, his tendency to blame that (leave alone to trust or expect benefit from it) is as psychologically self-destructive as anything one might feel for another person. Indeed, it is in the very nature of chance to be capricious, and thus 'fortune' might justly be seen as by definition more 'treacherous' than a human being whom one has no real cause either to suspect or to trust.

Yet, in a poem like 'Once as me thought fortune me kissed', we observe Wyatt relying exactly on the vagaries of 'fortune' for his happiness. He does not present us with a straightforward account or portrayal of happiness, but first tells us that 'fortune' despite an earlier 'promise' seemed to let him down before it made him happy. Unintentionally, he thus reveals that his happiness is entirely dependent on external circumstances which we know may well change again. Such vulnerability is dangerous. Also, there is the striking sixth stanza:

What earthly thing more can I crave?
What would I wish more at my will? No
thing on earth more would I have, Save
that I have to have it still.

This increases the precariousness of his happiness still further. The very fact that he raises the question 'What earthly thing more can I crave?' makes us suspicious of the contentment which the poem as a whole professes to feel. The emphasis is on 'earthly' – 'earth' conveys philosophical questioning rather than joyful emotion. The wish that the happiness may be permanent shows that Wyatt cannot spontaneously immerse himself in the moment while it lasts; it emphasizes his inability to be happy if the moment does not last; it seems spasmodic in the light of the fact that the remainder of the poem has indicated that probably the moment won't last; and it shows fear that the moment will pass while he claims that he is enjoying it.

Fear that things will go wrong is in fact characteristic of Wyatt, and hardly conducive to the mind's happiness. Such fear is a striking

feature of 'It may be good, like it who list', the refrain of which is 'To dread to fall I stand not fast', because fear of emotional betrayal, of inconstancy, makes him terrified in anticipation of an event which need not come to pass. In 'Farewell, the reign of cruelty', there is a stanza highly revealing of his state of mind as he tries to withdraw from emotional involvement:

I fare as one escaped that fleeth, Glad
that is gone, yet still feareth Spied to be
caught, and so dreadeth That he for
nought his pain leseth.

He feels like someone who is fleeing after having escaped, glad that he is gone, but always afraid that he is spied on in order to be caught: it appears that, in this view, the mistress may pursue him, and once again enslave his mind in the neurotic see-saw of hope and fear. The inclination, here and elsewhere, to blame someone else for emotions which are wholly of his own making, has a touch of mental instability. We, as readers, are not likely to share the poet's fear, knowing full well that the mistress – whose cruelty is mentioned in the first line of the poem – will leave him alone.

Of course there are several poems in which Wyatt shows himself aware of the fact that it is his own desire which is responsible for his doting and the disastrous consequences for his mental peace. Indeed, he knows that the lady's cruelty may intensify his desire:

Of love there is a kind
Which kindleth by abuse,
As in a feeble mind
Whom fancy may induce
By love's deceitful use
To follow the fond lust
And proof of a vain trust.

But despite such a stanza (from 'Full well it may be seen'), we should not assume that this unhealthy, masochistic self-intensification of desire which is doomed to lack fulfilment is the only way in which desire upsets his equilibrium. Desire is a difficulty in any case, because it is mutable and unreliable (cf. 'Desire, alas, my master and my foe'), and, in general, because of its strong sway over the mind. As far as

this last point is concerned, I think that the poem 'Greeting to you both in hearty wise', for all its artistic defects, indicates better than any other the nature of Wyatt's particular problem. The quality of the writing is perhaps suggestive of something like a draft for a verse-epistle rather than a finished poem; but, although some have on stylistic ground refused to accept the poem as Wyatt's, there is so much in it that is characteristic of his way of thinking and feeling that it is quite likely to be his.

The anxiety expressed in this poem is not caused merely by other people, though their unreliability is attacked in typical fashion. What we should particularly concentrate on are the poet's comments on the body and the soul. He first mentions these in his second stanza:

The body and the soul to hold together, It
is but right, and reason will the same, And
friendly for the one to love the other, It
increaseth your bruit and also your fame.

The first two lines seem the most significant. It is morally right, and a dictate of reason, that in a man the body and the soul should fruitfully cooperate. He acknowledges the desirability of this harmony, goes on to explain that other people have behaved treacherously, and then, at the end of stanza 5, comes back to the body and the soul, to which he says he 'commends' himself. Again, he must surely mean that he wants a harmony of the body and the soul. But then, quite surprisingly, we come to a terribly neurotic stanza, the last:

Written lifeless at the manner place
Of him that hath no chaff, nor nowhere doth dwell,
But wandering in the wild world, wanting that he has,
And neither hopes nor fears heaven nor hell,
But liveth at adventure, ye know him full well: The
twenty day of March he wrote it in his house, And
hath him recommended to the cat and the mouse.

He feels homeless in a world which he regards as wild, because to him it is a dangerous place, without rhyme or reason to it, and unable to offer protection. These things are important to our understanding of Wyatt's unhappiness, as is the claim that he lives 'at adventure' (i.e. at hazard), without the security of a moral framework in which heaven

and hell have a meaningful place. But even more telling, as regards the morbidity of his soul, is that he wants 'that he has', and that he has 'recommended' himself to 'the cat and the mouse'. In view of the fact that in the previous stanza he 'commends' himself to the body and the soul, the cat is obviously a metaphor for the body, and the mouse for the soul. We may say that Wyatt's thinking here is similar to that of 'My mother's maids, when they did sew and spin', where the cat suddenly catches the poor country mouse who has mistakenly come to town to enjoy the sensual life by which, instead, she gets entrapped.

What Wyatt is saying in this poem, then, is that he has *not* succeeded in welding the body and the soul together; the body has claimed the place of a beast of prey, and is a persistent threat to the safety of the soul. When he says that he wants 'that he has', we can only take it that he desires what he has in fact already got, that is, 'that he suffers from an excess of desire, so that, even when his desire is seemingly stilled, he in fact wants more.

His comments about other people are probably indirectly related to what he says about the body and the soul. There is some suggestion that theoretically they could satisfy the demands of the body, but have deceived him. However, his emphasis is on his own internal predicament, in the solving of which other people actually can only play a very minor role. His predicament is that the demands of the body have run away with him. The menace of lust is something terrifying to Wyatt not only in the previously mentioned 'My mother's maids, when they did sew and spin', to which this poem must be compared, but also in, for example, 'If thou wilt mighty be, flee from the rage', where he states frankly and generally, 'If thy desire have over thee the power, / Subject then art thou, and no governor.' In this age of sexual permissiveness, it may seem that such comments are those of a prude, but prudery is not what is at issue: Wyatt is frightened of the power of lust because it destroys his mental peace.

Clearly, excess of desire is another obstacle to happiness in Wyatt. Interestingly enough, there are also poems in which the source of his distress must be considered obscure. The poem 'All heavy minds' is a striking example. Much of it seems characteristically and aggressively aimed at a cruel lady, but stanzas 7 and 9 show musings quite divorced from concrete circumstances, and might even be accused of irrelevance. In stanza 7 he wonders:

Where is my thought?
Where wanders my desire?
Where may the thing be sought
That I require?

and in stanza 9:

Who shall me give
Feathered wings for to flee,
The thing that doth me grieve
That I may see?

He does not clearly see from where his grief springs, what its nature is, and how it could be remedied. This very vagueness suggests an inborn penchant toward melancholy. The poem 'To wish and want and not obtain' seems to confirm this. Even if everyone, including the 'causer' of his grief (stanza 6), took pity, he would continue to suffer. He seems like a man, on such occasions, whom no one can help.

His passion for stability — so obvious in many poems — springs from the fact that unless the outside world treats him in a stable fashion, he himself is insecure. Again it is, for us, Wyatt's own mind (not the outside world) which becomes the focus of our attention and which we come to see *as* the cause of his malaise. For example, 'Each man me telleth I change most my device' claims that his 'diverseness' is the result of changeability in others: his reaction to that changeability is nevertheless remarkable for its own instability. In 'The pillar perished is whereto I leant', lack of external support leads him to hate himself. Admittedly — assuming the poem refers to Thomas Cromwell's death — one needs strong nerves to live through such a blow as he describes, but there is no reason why the death of a supporter should lead one to hate oneself, and it does not normally do so.

Actually, the wish for stable support is so neurotically intense in Wyatt that he would rather have the certainty that he will not get the security which he wants than wait in uncertainty. To how I seek and sue to have' shows this:

I shall essay by secret suit
To show the mind of mine intent,
And my deserts shall give such fruit
As with my heart my words be meant.

So by the proof of this consent
 Soon out of doubt I shall be sure,
 For to rejoice or to repent,
 In joy or pain for to endure.

Such a person destroys his happiness by suffering while waiting, but also by his willingness to replace such suffering with what may well turn out to be further suffering. A tendency towards self-destruction is by no means absent in Wyatt. I do not think we should take the frequently expressed death-wish too seriously, but we should not disregard it either. And we remember such poems as 'Like as the wind with raging blast':

. . . as the flame by force doth quench the fire
 And running streams consume the rain,
 Even so do I myself desire
 To augment my grief and deadly pain.

True, the 'pain' may well be closely linked with hope that his love will be returned; even so, he seems to find some relish in suffering itself.

Most typically, we see Wyatt caught up in a neurotic involvement with the outside world, from which he expects a security which he rarely gets. To combat his suffering, he serves faithfully, in the expectation that 'truth' (or 'troth') will win the day, appeals to pity, grows angry with the outside world – and none of these things is psychologically likely to promote his happiness. Or he tries to get out of his involvement altogether, by longing for death (hardly a helpful approach, whether serious or not), or by a withdrawal into the self of indifference, abstractions divorced from the senses, contentment with the 'surety and rest' of the poor country mouse in 'My mother's maids, when they did sew and spin' (cf. line 68).

His failure to find satisfaction through this last basic way, the attempt at withdrawal from neurotic involvement into a kind of invulnerable Stoic self-sufficiency, warrants some separate discussion. To get a reasonably precise view of his failure in this matter we should – as always, in Wyatt – turn to a poem in which we see the *inward* workings of his mind, so that his (or our own) interest in the world of the court etc. does not unduly distract us. The most interesting, and probably the most telling, example that I can think of is the curiously underrated 'Most wretched heart, most miserable'. In

this, we see him in an internal dialogue. One part of his being, called the heart, argues that he who 'hath himself' (stanza 6) will be able to resist onslaughts, because unhappiness can only be felt by those who allow themselves to feel it ('he is wretched that weens him so'). The other part of his being, which does allow itself to feel unhappiness, argues that the difficulties are formidable – so much so, in fact, that one might as well be dead. Stanzas 1 and 2 set the inner debate in motion:

Most wretched heart, most miserable,
 Since thy comfort is from thee fled,
 Since all thy truth is turned to fable,
 Most wretched heart, why art thou not dead?

'No, no, I live and must do still,
 Whereof I thank God, and no mo.
 For I myself have all my will,
 And he is wretched that weens him so.'

The involvement referred to in the first stanza is almost certainly that with other people, and the word 'will' in the second stanza (spoken by the heart) suggests that the heart can control its desire, and hence need not feel the suffering that women may inflict. Stanzas 3 and 4 add comparatively little to the argument, but stanzas 5 and 6 extend it to the vicissitudes inflicted by the universe:

The sun, the moon doth frown on thee,
 Thou hast darkness in daylight's stead, As
 good in grave as so to be:
 Most wretched heart, why art thou not dead?

'Some pleasant star may show me light,
 But though the heaven would work me woe,
 Who hath himself shall stand up right,
 And he is wretched that weens him so.'

But here, despite its assertion to the contrary, the heart admits that it would be happier if it were shown light by a 'pleasant star', and, subsequently, it has to grant, first, that its attitude is extremely hard to keep up if one is 'not sure' (stanza 7), and, finally, that it *is* unhappy,

but fords consolation in the fact that 'hap doth come again and go' (stanza 12). The last point is particularly significant. The heart (and, through it, Wyatt) is showing some inconsistency of argument. If the heart's initial reasoning, offering Stoic comfort, actually worked, it would not feel unhappy, and the circumstance that 'hap doth come again and go' would be immaterial. Or at least one can say that blood is thicker than water: Wyatt professes to argue that the heart can create its own happiness and therefore does not depend on an upward movement in 'hap', but he also unintentionally reveals that in his case this is simply not true. Other poems can be found, I think, which similarly fail to convince us that he could find happiness in a way like this. For instance, in 'Deem *as* ye list, upon good cause', he claims (stanza 3): 'To how my thought might make me free/ Of that perchance it nedeth not!'; but the whole poem goes to demonstrate, as does his work regularly, that his thought could not make him free.

Of course, this is not to say that *he* was incapable of happiness, nor that he did not meet with nerve-shattering experiences. But my point is that such unhappiness as Wyatt's poems so characteristically exhibit was – insofar as we can determine a *poetic* personality (at least) from them – for a not inconsiderable part due to obstacles in his own mind. I do not say this to deprecate him, but I think it will help us to understand both the importance and the limitations of what he has to say if we see the psychology of the poems for what it is. Sometimes the value and interest of a poet's work lie rather in his problems or indeed his defects than in solutions or explanations which critics look for but which his poems do not offer.

NOTES

¹ Raymond Southall, *The Courtly Maker* (Oxford, 1964).

² I quote from my own edition, *Sir Thomas Wyatt: Collected Poems* (London, 1975), but will mention each poem's first line to enable readers to locate it in other editions.