Wyatt and 'Liberty': A Postscript

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IN 1973, I argued in these pages that the word 'liberty' in Wyatt

... indicates a psychological freedom from nervous tension which I believe he saw as part of the quietude of mind, security and satisfaction which he so consistently and insistently longed for, as is confirmed by one of the most important discussions of Wyatt to have yet appeared: Donald M. Friedman's 'The "Thing" in Wyatt's Mind' (E in C, Vol. 16, 1966, pp. 375 – 81).1

I then argued my case wholly on critical grounds, deriving all conclusions directly from the text. While there is nothing wrong about that in principle, I am a Batesonian who holds that 'scholarship' and 'criticism' should work together. I now believe that I have scholarly material to support my critical views. I suggest that Wyatt's concept of 'liberty' is one which he derives substantially from Seneca.

Evidence of Renaissance indebtedness to Seneca is tangible and pervasive. G. K. Hunter appears to me to be mistaken in his belief that the mental world of dramatists like Shakespeare is incompatible with Seneca's; I do not think, as he does, that Shakespeare's outlook can accurately be described as 'Christian', and I do think that in any case Renaissance writers could find a great deal that was congenial to them in the 'pagan' Roman author.2 Renaissance authors felt, like Seneca, that they were living in a harsh, unstable universe, and, whether or not they could find comfort in Christian faith, Seneca, giving them counsel in adversity, taught them how to seek internal peace by disregard of external vicissitudes.

Wyatt is the first major Senecan among Renaissance writers in England. In a general way, his debt to Seneca has not gone unrecognized. It would, indeed, be difficult not to acknowledge it at all. 'Stand whoso list upon the slipper top'

is a translation from Seneca, and Wyatt's borrowing can also be quite specifically identified in 'Who list his wealth and ease retain'.; Wyatt's enthusiasm is explicit in 'Farewell Love, and all thy laws for ever!', in which he announces that 'Senec and Plato call me from thy lore'. And in a letter to his son, written from Spain in 1537, Wyatt advocates 'the good opinion of moral philosophers, among whom I would Senec were your study and Epictetus, because it is little to be ever in your bosom'.4 But despite such known facts, critics write in a curiously distant way about the relationship between Seneca and Wyatt.

For example, both Friedman and Patricia Thomson misinterpret the statement in the letter to mean that Wyatt thinks of Seneca's writings as only brief.5 But the fact is that they are not brief, and if we take Wyatt's interest at all seriously, he cannot have thought of them as brief either. If, moreover, we pay any close attention to what Wyatt actually writes, the question of brevity is a red herring. Wyatt means that he not only wants his son to study Seneca, but also Epictetus – because 'it', i.e. Epictetus's Enchiridion, is only a short work. Wyatt must have known Seneca's tragedies, from which both 'Stand whoso list upon the slipper top' and 'Who list his wealth and ease retain' are derived, but when he thinks of Seneca as one of the important moral philosophers it is likely that he has in mind Seneca's prose writings, and notably those which in the Loeb Classical Library are referred to as Moral Essays and Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales.6

Modern readers of English literature on the whole have little interest in Seneca's writings (which is their loss), and if they read any Seneca at all, they usually confine themselves to the tragedies, ignoring the moral works which were at least as important to Renaissance intellectuals. In Wyatt's case, some clear debts to the Epistulae Morales, especially, can readily be identified, and we do have to concentrate on the Epistulae Morales if we are to get a notion of the framework of thought from which Wyatt's concept of 'liberty' was derived. Our point of departure – as well as the central point of our investigation – has to be Wyatt's Satire 2, on which Friedman was so right to focus in 1966.7

Although readers have shown no awareness of it, the
moral of this poem is substantially Senecan. We become conscious of this (if we have the Epistulae Morales in mind) in much of lines 70 –112, but especially in lines 92 –102:

Make plain thine heart, that it be not knotted
With hope or dread, and see thy will be bare
From all affects whom vice hath ever spotted;
Thyself content with that is thee assigned,
And use it well that is to thee allotted;
Then seek no more out of thyself to find
The thing that thou hast sought so long before,
For thou shalt feel it sitting in thy mind
Mad if ye list to continue your sore,
Let present pass, and gape on time to come,
And deep yourself in travail more and more.

The relevant locus in the Epistulae occurs quite early on, in Epistle V, where Seneca explains that the limiting of desires helps also to cure fears: 'though they do seem at variance, yet they are really united. Just as the same chain fastens the prisoner and the soldier who guards him, so hope and fear, dissimilar as they are, keep step together; fear follows hope. I am not surprised that they proceed in this way; each alike belongs to a mind that is in suspense, a mind that is fretted by looking forward to the future. But the chief cause of both these ills is that we do not adapt ourselves to the present, but send our thoughts a long way ahead' (pp. 23 – 5).

Thus we learn how to gain our liberty by freeing ourselves from both hope and fear. In Seneca, these are fastened by the same chain, and this is what Wyatt remembered when he saw the threat of either (and therefore both) of them as causing the 'heart' to be 'knotted'.

Seneca defines the notion of 'liberty' quite precisely in several places:

But what a rich reward awaits us if only we break off the affairs which forestall us and the evils that cling to us with utter tenacity! Then neither desire nor fear shall rout us. Undisturbed by fears, unspoiled by pleasures, we shall be afraid neither of death nor of the gods; we shall know that death is no evil and that the gods are not powers of evil. That which harms has no greater power than that which receives harm, and things which are utterly good have no power at all to harm. There await us, if ever we escape from these low dregs to that sublime and lofty height, peace of mind and, when all error has been driven out, perfect liberty. You ask what this freedom is? It means not fearing either men or gods; it means not craving wickedness or excess; it means possessing supreme power over oneself. And it is a priceless good to be master of oneself.

(Vol. II, Epistle LXXV, pp. 145 – 7)

Liberty cannot be bought. It is therefore useless to enter in your ledger the item of 'Freedom', for freedom is possessed neither by those who have bought it nor by those who have sold it. You must give this good to yourself, and seek it from yourself.

(Vol. II, Epistle LXXX, p. 215)

Above all, Wyatt adopts Seneca's concept of liberty as something mental and internal. Both authors make us aware that liberty does not depend on external circumstances, but on having the right state of mind – which one can only have if one rejects whatever is external, and controls one's inclination towards harbouring vices as well as hope and fear. There is no point in looking outside the self for peace of mind and liberty, as it is only within the self that such a state can be found. Indeed, a preoccupation with the outside world is positively harmful, as a concern with externals can only inspire us with exactly those feelings which we wish to be without.

It is this way of thinking, I believe, which lies behind such a poem as the following:

In court to serve, decked with fresh array,
Of sugared meats feeling the sweet repast, The life in banquets and sundry kinds of play Amid the press of lordly looks to waste, Hath with it joined oftentimes such bitter taste, 5 That whoso joys such kind of life to hold In prison joys, fettered with chains of gold.
The very 'gold' which attracts one if one allows the passions to reach towards it will imprison one because one has surrendered one's liberty of one's own accord. (The poem should obviously be related to Wyatt's translation from a passage in Seneca's *Thyestes*, 'Stand whoso list upon the slipper top', which it resembles in some respects.) Without knowledge of what Seneca means by liberty, we shall have some difficulty comprehending why and how Wyatt's courtier dooms himself to be in prison, or how he should try to get out of it. Much of the meaning centres around 'joys' in 'whoso joys such kind of life to hold'. A Senecan sage knows that it is the choice to 'joy' the wrong life which counts for more than the physical environment which one happens to be in'. That is what the country mouse found, to her cost, in Satire 2. It is the wish to indulge in the sensual life (rather than that life as such) which leads to one's imprisonment.

The imprisonment may, of course, be quite literal. Thus in 'Lux, my fair falcon, and your fellows all,/How well pleasant it were your liberty!' the falcon may be Anne Boleyn, who was in prison in May 1536, as was Wyatt himself; presumably, if Wyatt has this incident in mind, he is saying that it would be nice if both of them were free. But such physical freedom is by no means incompatible with the notion of mental 'liberty' which I have been discussing. Indeed, this very poem may also carry quite a different meaning. Wyatt may be addressing a real falcon, of whom he says (line 3), 'Ye not forsake me that fair might ye befall', while by contrast 'they that sometime liked my company,/Like lice away from dead bodies they crawl'. There is a suggestion here that Wyatt is (or will be) in prison, while the falcon (an actual bird) is free — and not only physically, but also mentally, in that the bird apparently chooses not to forsake the poet. We do not, after all, know whether the poem was written in 1536 or in 1540–1, after Thomas Cromwell's fall in July 1540, and our uncertainty in this regard should encourage us not to be too dogmatic about the meaning of words like 'liberty'. Poetically, it seems more likely that Wyatt is struck by a bird free enough (in its mind) to keep its master company than that he would comment on the supposed 'liberty' of a woman who was hardly in a position to 'forsake' him in order that 'fair' would her 'befall'.

Similar considerations hold good if we wonder about the relationship between Senecan 'liberty' and that of the courtly/Petrarchan lover who speaks habitually of himself as longing for it. The lover who would see himself as free if only his love were reciprocated is in any case using a metaphor, as is the one who speaks of liberty as a condition in which he no longer 'serves' his mistress. Again, either situation can inspire one with exactly that freedom of mind which Seneca would have us experience. Consider for example the following passage, translated by Wyatt from Petrarch:

> I find no peace, and all my war is done,  
> I fear and hope, I burn and freeze like ice,  
> I fly above the wind, yet can I not arise,  
> And nought I have, and all the world I season.  
> That losteth nor lock eth, holdeth me in prison,  
> And holdeth me not, yet can I 'scape no wise.

The lover would be free if either he were firmly held by the lady's love or escaped altogether from the neurotic prison of hope and fear. Petrarch and Wyatt appear to be more optimistic than Seneca about the idea that human love might set one free, but all three writers agree that a mind which experiences fear and hope in relation to something which it desires finds itself in prison. In this way, the influence of Seneca and Petrarch on Wyatt, and thus on the English Renaissance, is one of coalescence. We may feel sure that it is in part the Senecan aspect of Petrarch's work which was of interest to Wyatt. There is no doubt that Plutarch's *Quiet of Mind*, which Wyatt translated in 1527 (after abandoning his work on Petrarch's *De Remediis*), also helped to shape his Stoicism, as did Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. But it was from Seneca that Wyatt derived his concept of 'liberty', and it is to Seneca that we must turn if we want to acquire a satisfying understanding of what Wyatt meant by it.

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NOTES

3 I refer to the poems by their first lines as they appear in my edition *Sir Thomas Wyatt: Collected Poems* (London, 1975), and quote from that edition throughout.
4 I quote (with modernization of spelling) from Kenneth Muir, *Life and Letters of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Liverpool, 1963), p. 43
5 Cf. Friedman, p. 381, and Patricia Thomson, *Sir Thomas Wyatt and His Background* (Stanford, 1964), p. 88 and p. 90. Thomson states that 'Seneca provides Wyatt's strongest link with ancient Stoicism', but her treatment of the Roman author is superficial and cursory. She is wrong to speak of Seneca's 'moral epistles and dialogues' as 'little', and spends only about a page on what is in fact a very extensive corpus which includes such long treatises as 'De Beneficiis'.
7 The first line of this poem is 'My mother's maids, when they did sew and spin'. The 'thing' in Wyatt's mind which Friedman correctly identifies (p. 376) as 'satisfaction, stability, steadfastness', and which we may call 'liberty', occurs in the very passage which I go on to quote.