WYATT’S PROSODY REVISITED

JOOST DAALDER

Prosody is becoming a much-discussed subject these days. Linguists, notably, are uncertain about the meaning of the term meter; some, indeed, have questioned the existence of such a notion, or appear to confuse it with what I shall call speech rhythm. This confusion, as I shall point out, is also found among some literary critics. Under these circumstances, it is necessary for the discussion to continue. In this paper I shall offer an entirely new view of Wyatt’s prosody. However, the approach adopted and the conclusions derived from it should prove pertinent to the study of prosody generally.

It is neither possible nor desirable to give here an exhaustive survey of all the comments on Wyatt’s prosody,¹ but we may distinguish two basic approaches. One is to treat Wyatt’s verse as iambic, the other to refer it more or less directly to the tradition of alliterative verse. The pro-iambic case has had to be argued on the basis of a series of assumptions hardly necessary when one thinks of many other supposedly iambic poets, including, for instance, Surrey, who was nearly contemporary with Wyatt. Attempts have been made to square Wyatt’s pronunciation with a regular iambic base, or irregularities have been conceived of as “regular” in the sense that they would have been admitted as irregular into a regular system with a tradition behind it. Of course we must remember that sixteenth-century pronunciation of English, notably in verse, was not identical to ours; also, that the so-called “trochaic first foot,” at least, was frequent in verse which could otherwise quite easily be read as iambic. But one can well understand why the Foxwell-Padelford argument, the most extreme example of the pro-iambic case, is rejected by readers like D. W. Harding and Raymond Southall.² In Southall’s view, it would appear, Wyatt did not write iambic pentameter verse at all; nor does Southall’s account suggest that he sees sixteenth-century accentuation and syllabification as different from ours.

Such a case as that put forward by Harding and Southall (but they are not the only critics to think along these lines) certainly has its merits. Scholars had probably been too ready to wrench Wyatt’s pronunciation to get it to fit the meter, and too much inclined to accept a number of exceptions to iambic regularity which would not leave much of the regularity which they were claimed to be exceptions to. A number of Wyatt’s poems are very easily and

Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au
satisfactorily read as not iambic at all, e.g., poem CCXLIV in the Muir-Thomson edition:

Syghes ar my foode, drynke are my teares;
Clynkinge of fetters suche musycke wolde crave;
Stynke and close ayer away my lyf wears;
Innocencie is all the hope I have.
Rayne, wynde, or wether I judge by myne eares.
Mallice assaulted that rightousnes should have.
Sure I am, Brian, this wounde shall heale agayne,
But yet, alas, the scarre shall styl remayne.

It would be very difficult, no matter the theoretical possibility of
"Romance accentuation," elision, etc., to force this poem into an iambic mold. Nor does it seem at all probable that the poem somehow remains essentially iambic despite all the actual deviations from the pattern. Yet in my experience readers who accentuate the words as they would in normal speech find the stresses pleasantly and functionally distributed. Those who do not know and are not told that the poem is Wyatt's are not inclined to read it iambically except here and there, and interpret the verse as though it has rhythmically more in common with Piers Plowman than with The Rape of the Lock.

Nor does the anti-iambic case rest only on such observations. Southall points out that there are manuscript marks, such as the virgule, which suggest that we have to do with "phrasal," not iambic, verse. He draws attention to many internal rhymes which tend to break up apparent "lines" into half-lines or phrases, and indeed a poem like CCXXVI ("Now all of chaunghe") exists in two versions, i.e., in the Arundel MS as "Now all of Chaunghe, must be my songe / and from my bownd, no must I breake / . . . " and in the earlier Devonshire MS as "now all of chaunghe /must be my songe / and from mye bonde / nowe must I breke / . . . " (I use the virgules here to mark line-endings; they are not in the MSS) (p. 143). Professor Harding has correctly shown that Wyatt in his revisions sometimes changes lines away from iambic regularity (p. 94).

However, if applied to Wyatt's verse as a whole, and without modification, the anti-iambic case is surely mistaken. It is in some ways as vulnerable as the pro-iambic case. Professor Harding's point is the most difficult to dispose of; because of it, we may feel certain that there are poems in which some or all of the lines are not meant to be subjected to iambic scansion. But the other arguments of the preceding paragraph, though very suggestive, should not be too readily accepted. Internal rhymes may suggest a non-iambic structure, but they need not. Similarly with manuscript punctuation. For instance, in a different context Professor Muir copies out the following poem, of which I quote only eight lines as sufficient to show my point:

But Lorde how straunge is this / that to the iust befall,
To end with shame lyke synfull folke / and lyue to slaunter thrall!
Theise Impps lyke wyse of death / as maskers weare for synne,
Disguysed walke in vertues Cloke / and hyde their measlid skynne.
Such frutelous traveyls then / vnto my thought commend
Their nature mylde and harmles hart / that gladsome life entend;
That myngle drinke with sporte, / and sawce their food with myrth[h]
Convert their sower into sweete, / what wold they more on earthe?

(p. xvi)

In this example of poulters measure the virgule is plainly used as an aid to the meter. With systematic regularity, it appears after the first six syllables in every “short” line and after the first eight in every “long” one. Far from being a guide to the poem’s “rhythm” or “phrases,” its simple function is to act as a mechanical marker of the poem’s syllabic-metric structure. The least that can be said is that the virgule’s function is in no way incompatible with or opposed to the practice of syllable-counting and iambic accentuation.

We need to investigate the function of medieval and Renaissance punctuation more thoroughly than we have done; what we have done suggests that the punctuation is important but that it is prudent not to jump to premature conclusions about its significance. We can see, at any rate, that the virgule cannot be safely assumed to be a sign that we are facing phrasal, non-iambic verse.

In any case, several poems by Wyatt are iambically regular. It is unfortunate that the need should even arise to point this out. Consider for instance LXXXVI:

O goodely hand,
Wherin doeth stand
My hert distraint in payne,
Faire hand, Alas,
In little spas
My liff that doeth restrayne.

It is hardly necessary to quote the remaining stanzas. We surely cannot doubt that the stanza has the syllabic structure 4-4-6-4-4-6. It is equally clear that Wyatt had an iambic pattern in mind when he wrote the lines. By this I do not mean to suggest that we must in an oral performance read the lines in a stiff, mechanical way. However, if we read them naturally we observe not only that the stresses fall into an iambic pattern quite easily but also that if we do choose we can bring out the iambic base underlying the lines by reading them mechanically while yet we are not forced to distort the language before us. This surely is what we mean when we call verse “iambic.” Unfortunately, there is now a tendency for prosodic discussions, including those on Wyatt and Chaucer,4 to confuse speech rhythm and meter. A clear understanding of the difference and the relation between these two is a first necessity.

If we call verse iambic when it is capable of being read “weak-strong-weak-strong,” etc., not a little of Wyatt’s verse is iambic. However, we are obviously well advised to extend our notion of iambic verse somewhat further than this, or else we allow for a very limited number of stress variations. If we claim that there
are, say, four stresses in English (linguists debate this issue, but the exact number is metrically quite irrelevant), then we would for instance admit 1-4-1-2 (in which “4” indicates maximum and “1” minimum stress) as iambic, but not 4-1-1-2, or 2-1-1-2, or any pattern in which the linguistic stresses are so distributed that the first stress must be read as stronger than the second (e.g., in “Hardly . . .”). Yet a limited degree of such variation has always been a feature of iambic verse. We must carefully distinguish between a line in which the natural speech rhythm is 1-4-1-2 and one in which it is 4-1-1-2 without allowing the reader the option of making the second stress stronger than the first. In what follows the 1-4-1-2 type of line will without hesitation be regarded as iambic, and this category will include any line in which the stresses may be seen as belonging to a metrical “weak-strong-weak-strong” pattern. It is the second type about which, under certain circumstances, doubt may arise. In a predominantly iambic context, 2-1-1-2-1-2-1-2 would easily be accepted as an exception. Indeed, if nine out of ten lines could be read as metrically regular, a passage would be regarded as iambic even if the tenth line were 2-1-2-1-1-2-1-2-1-2; the line itself, though perhaps odd, would be duly classified as an “exception” which must nevertheless be seen as part of an iambic system.

However, in a poem in which lines of this type appeared to be dominant, even an otherwise iambic line with a compulsory “trochaic first foot” would not be considered iambic. In connection with this last point, we must bear in mind that a perfectly regular iambic pentameter can in isolation almost invariably be interpreted as not having five equally strong stresses. In speech rhythm such a line is far more likely to have four, or even three, prominent stresses than five (but cf. Paradise Lost 2.950). It follows that in a text in which about half the lines appear to be clearly non-iambic, the remainder, which could perhaps be regarded as perfectly regular iambic pentameters in a regular context, can easily be explained as “four-stress” lines.

Although critics have been apt to generalize about Wyatt’s prosody, it is not difficult to see that some of his poems clearly are iambic and that others as clearly are not. It is when facing ambiguous evidence, poems that some have found iambic and others have not, that we ought to remember the considerations of the previous two paragraphs. Our difficulty is to decide, in such cases, whether a poem belongs to the one mode or to the other, or whether it in fact shows a mixture of the two.

I doubt whether we shall ever be able to reach definite conclusions about all individual instances. But an examination of the “Penitential Psalms” (CVIII) leads to some interesting conclusions, which I think will hold for most of the supposedly “rough” yet seemingly iambic poems about which critical controversy has arisen.

The Penitential Psalms are a very useful object for prosodic study, apart from their value as literature. They give us an extended stretch of text (775 lines) to work on. Moreover, they are in Wyatt’s hand, which enables us to study some of the finer points with confidence.

It is somewhat surprising that no one yet seems to have paid much
attention to what Wyatt’s orthography, or at least his choice of “syllabic variants,” might tell us about his pronunciation and his prosodic practice. R. O. Evans, it is true, like other readers, notes that some of the lines can be made regular by elision. But this approach does not take us very far, and instead we need to consider to what extent Wyatt’s own use of a short form (e.g., *provokt*) as opposed to a longer one (*provokyd*, etc.) might indicate both his pronunciation and his prosody. I have attempted to settle this question for the Penitential Psalms. It will be impossible to list all the evidence; the examples below will have to serve as representative. I first table fifteen examples of past participles and preterite forms ending in non-syllabic -d or -t.

Table 1

| First dasyd his Iyes and forder forth he stertes (5). |
| With venemd breth as softly as he myght (6). |
| Off thi furour, *provokt* by my ofence (89). |
| Off lust restrynd, afore it went at large (226). |
| Fild with ofence, that new and new begyn (285). |
| Carrf in the rokk wth Iyes and handes on hygh (307). |
| That it hath forst my hart to crye and rore (357). |
| FFor in my fiall they shewd such plesant chere (379). |
| Just I ame jugd by justice off thy grace (455). |
| Fforme in ofence, conceyv in like case (457). |
| As who myght say who hath express this thing (513). |
| This while my foes conspryd continually (567). |
| Provokt by ryght had off my pride disdayne (574). |
| His knee, his arme, his hand, susteind his chyn (662). |
| That vext my sowle, thou shalt also confound (773). |

Wyatt’s spelling is careful, and the first point we may observe is that he uses -t after a voiceless sound, and -d after a voiced one. Prosodically, the choice between -d, -t on the one hand and -id, -yd (which Wyatt prefers to -ed) on the other, is significant. It is evident what governs the choice between the short and the long forms, particularly if we compare *provokt* in lines 89 and 574 with the use of *provokyd* below:

*Provokyd* by the aerd of goddes furour (227).
Fayntyng for hete, *provokyd* by some wind (396).

If *provokt* is read as disyllabic, and *provokyd* as trisyllabic, all four lines are decasyllabic, as are all the lines quoted in Table 1. In line 567, it is true, continually would in that case have to be trisyllabic, but so it can easily be. In the sample this is the only adjustment needed; otherwise the lines are easily and naturally read, and probably should be read, as decasyllabic. However, if Wyatt instead of *provokt* had written *provokyd* (and similarly elsewhere), a contemporary reader might have failed to read *provokyd* as disyllabic, and hence would have felt himself confronted with an endecasyllabic line. Forms like *provokt*
should therefore almost certainly be regarded as a spelling indicating elision rather than Wyatt's normally preferred pronunciation. He does seem to use the short forms more often than the long ones in the Psalms as a whole, but the very fact that he uses them as alternatives shows that he did not assume that *provokyd* would normally seem disyllabic to his reader (or scribe).

In fact, his use of forms like *provokyd* shows that he thought of them as trisyllabic. I list below fifteen examples (including, for clarity, the two just quoted) of this type:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Dressyd* vpyght, sekyng to counterpese (70).

Acordyng to thy just *conceyvid* Ire (82).

Amonge the *Dampnyd*, nor yet no mencion (132).

*Shamid* be thei all that so ly in whaite (178).

*Pausid* his plaint, and laid adown his harp (191).

*Provokyd* by the dred of goddes furour (227).

As adder freshe new *stryppid* from his skin (235).

By secrete wound *concelid* from the charmre (241).

As whilow plant *haled* by vyolence (344).

Faynting for hete, *provokyd* by some wind (396).

And in my syght my synn is *fixid* fast (443).

When David had *perceyvid* in his brest (632).

Manne *redemid*, deth hath her distructione (708).

Then wyll I crave with *suryd* confidence (725).

Ffor thou my god, thy *blyssyd* spryte vp right (767).

All these lines are decasyllabic if we give the inflectional ending syllabic weight, and this appears to be the rule throughout the Psalms. We do not feel inclined to expand *provokt*, and where we need *provokyd*, as a trisyllable, we find it. On the other hand, we hardly feel tempted to read forms like *provokyd* disyllabically. There are one or two such instances, e.g.,

That all *amasid* this agid woofull man (40);

but they would seem to be exceptional. In the lines

I would have *offerd* vnto the sacrfycce (497),

And remes bene *gaderd* to serve, to lawd, to pray (610),

*offerd* and *gaderd* are presumably monosyllabic. Again, the spelling helps us understand the pronunciation, and at any rate these examples do not suggest that the general principle that *provokt* suggests a word of one syllable less than *provokyd* was not in Wyatt's mind.

Wyatt's consistent practice proves, contrary to the opinion of some critics, that he meant to write decasyllabic lines. Not that he did this with iron regularity throughout the Psalms, but he certainly did it very often. His
intention is confirmed, too, by his choice of third person singular present indicative tense forms. It has been suggested that we can sometimes elide -eth. In fact, however, Wyatt’s own spelling indicates elision where needed, and his choice of one variant rather than another seems to depend on the total number of syllables in a line. The correlation can hardly be accidental. Perhaps there are more cases when -eth is elided than -ed; nevertheless, it is regular for -eth to be pronounced and for Wyatt to use a shorter form (-s, -es, -th) where he needs one syllable less than -eth would have suggested. Compare Tables 3 and 4:

Table 3

Towch[ht] his sensis and ouer ronnis his bonis (7).
He blyndyd thinkes this trayne so blynd and closse (31).
His purpurill pall, his sceptre he lettes fall (47).
Falleth on his knees, and with his harp, I say (67).
His great offence, it turns anon to dust (125).
Off hert contrite, and coverth the grettines (223).
As he that feels his helth to be hinderd (240).
Glad teris distills, as gladsome recompence (304).
Sure hope of helth, and harpe agayne takth he (322).
Lyk one that heris not, nor hath to replye (373).
His voyce he strains, and from his hert owt brynges (425).
And from my synn that thus makth me affrayd (437).
The marcy that hydes off justice the sowourd (521).
He fyndes hys hope muche therewith revivd (536).
And thus begynns the suyt off his pretence (726).

Table 4

The colour eke drowpith down from his chere (43).
Thynner vyle cloth then clotlyth pouerty (51).
Punish it not, as askyth the grettines (88).
Efeelethe the sensis, with them that assayle (108; cf. 240).
With vapord ives he lokyth here and there (209).
He torns his look; hym semith that the shade (421).
The sacrifice that the lord lykyth most (500).
But in his hert he tornith and paysith (518).
Ffor this frailte that yokyth all manekynyd (581).
My strength saylyth to rech it at the full (613).
Ffor therapon he makyth argument (640; cf. 437).
His owne merytt he fyndyth in deffault (660).
Did put David, it semyth vnto me (696).
And leppeth lyghter from such coruptione (706).
He grauntyth most to them that most do crave (719).

Once again it must be admitted that one or two exceptions are not included among the examples, but the principle of selection is clear. Nor is it
confined to such forms as we have considered. Compare:

_Exit._ Forbearest thou to see my myseraye (113),
Ffeare and not feele that thou forgettest me (115),
But thou thy selfe the selfe remaynist well (625),

and

My lord, I ame, thou knowst well, in what case (391),
Ffor lo thou loves the trowgh off inward hert (461),
Shold so raine large. But thou sekes rather love (680).

Or:

Here hath my hert hope taken by the same (75),

and

That it hath tane agaynste the flesshe, the wretche (120).

Or:

That neuer dyth, I lyve withowten rest (352),

and

And he deleyghtes in suyte withowt respect (720),

and similar examples.

There can be little doubt, then, that in many instances Wyatt strove to make his lines decasyllabic. It is the more noteworthy that critics have for some time agreed that in Wyatt's "decasyllabic" verse there are several lines which no conceivable linguistic or prosodic rule can turn into lines of ten syllables. Yet it is difficult to believe that he finally would have liked to make these lines decasyllabic or that he was unable to do so; we can see how easy it would have been to leave out or add a syllable. We can only conclude that he saw the decasyllabic line as a norm, but one which he was at liberty to depart from.

But the lines also need to be scrutinized from an accentual point of view. I shall now try to group the lines quoted in this paper accordingly, starting with the most regular ones, then proceeding in stages to the most irregular ones. Something similar was done by Alan Swallow in 1950, and again by Evans, reacting to Swallow, in the 1954 article previously mentioned. Yet the discussions by these scholars differed in several respects, notably in that Evans saw less irregularity than Swallow and interpreted it as iambic, albeit irregular, while Swallow regarded irregular lines as "broken-back" verse. We need to examine the lines accentually to correlate the data obtained that way with our conclusions about the syllabic structure of the lines, and we shall arrive at views very different from those held by Swallow, Evans, and other scholars.

It is much harder to agree on what is "regular" than most scholars seem to assume. We shall regard a pentameter as accentually regular if it can be read as such. But this is immediately where the problem comes in: readers disagree about the point where a tolerably normal pronunciation ends and unnatural
wrenching begins. My suggestions as to which lines are accentually regular are therefore quite tentative, but I find that I can read the following lines as “weak-strong-weak-strong,” etc., without feeling that I unduly violate the normal pronunciation of English:

From Table 1: 6, 226, 357, 379, 513, 567, 574, 662.
From Table 2: 82, 235, 241, 443, 632, 767.
From Table 3: 31, 47, 125, 304, 322, 373, 425, 437, 726.
From Table 4: 209, 421, 640, 719.

We should admit that not all of these can equally easily be read as iambic pentameters; for instance, I have accepted the reading

Lyk oone that heris not, nor hath to replye (373).

On the other hand, some lines that I have so far omitted should perhaps be included. The following line seems to me to have a trochaic first foot, but conceivably it is fully iambic:

First dasd his Iyes and forder forth he stertes (5).

Nothing much hinges on a debate about this. I do not think we can group the lines with absolute scientific accuracy; what matters is whether we can at least roughly agree about the divisions. My next group consists of lines with one inverted foot, otherwise capable of being read regularly:

First dasd his Iyes and forder forth he stertes (5).
Off thi furour, provokt by my offence (89).
Fild with offence, that new and new begyn (285).
Carrfd in the rokk with Iyes and handes on hygh (307).
Just I ame jugd by justice off thy grace (455).
Fformd in offence, concelyvde in like case (457).
Amonge the Dampynd, nor yet no mencion (132).
Pausid his plaint, and laide adown his harp (191).
Provokyd by the dred of goddes furour (227).
As whilow plante hated by vyolence (344).
Fayntynge for hete, provokyd by some wind (396).
Then wol I crave with surdy confidence (725).
As he that feels his helth to be hinderd (240).
Thynner vyle cloth then clothlyth pouerty (51).
Ffor this fraite that yokyth all manekyn (581).
His owne merytt he fyndyth in deffault (660).
Did put David, it semyth vnto me (696).
Ffeare and not feele that thow forgettest me (115).

Some of these could be seen as belonging to the group of quite regular lines if we assume that the words creating the inverted foot are to be pronounced with “Romance accentuation” (furour, mencion, fraite, merytt).
Despite the work done by such scholars as B. Danielson, Helge Kökeritz, and E. J. Dobson, there is still considerable uncertainty about this and other aspects of sixteenth-century pronunciation. Kökeritz unfortunately is much too ready to vary the pronunciation of a word according to the meter. However, Dyche’s Dictionary (1723), to which Kökeritz refers, shows that even in Dyche’s time the accentuation of some words of Romance origin was quite different from ours (which still is not entirely stable or uniform), and if a word like furour could be shown to be consistently stressed on its second syllable, it would be foolhardy to disregard the metrical evidence. Indeed, if the word were so stressed most of the time, we could perhaps assume that this was Wyatt’s normal accentuation and that therefore our pronunciation should be furour even if this results in metrical irregularity, though the possibility that the stress was variable should not be altogether excluded. Distressingly enough, whenever one tries the metrical experiment in Wyatt’s case, one’s path is fraught with difficulties. Often there is no consistency, and we cannot be at all confident that Wyatt wanted his lines to be accentually regular. Moreover, if we read furour in 227, the fact remains that hinderd in 240 is to be considered an inverted foot, or we would, quite arbitrarily, have to stress that on the second syllable also. Therefore, I have not classified a line like 227 as regular, though there is no assurance that it is not.

It must be emphasized that the reader who finds these lines in an iambic context is bound to register them as to some extent irregular, even though he might, like Swallow and Evans, see them as “regular” because they are irregular in one place only. It is true that in several instances the inversion in accent is in the first foot—this occurs fairly frequently. Such lines, however, would not be misfits in native “broken-back” (“phrasal”) verse. The other inversions, as we can see when we compare Wyatt’s practice with, say, Sidney’s, or even Surrey’s, are much less common than Swallow and Evans suppose. Further, some of the lines are so awkwardly read, even as supposedly regular lines with only one inverted foot, that we may well doubt whether Wyatt had such a pattern in mind; we are, for instance, assuming that Wyatt would have found tolerable such readings as

F|formed in off|ence, con|céyvid in like case (457);  
As he that feels his helth to be hinderd (240).

Such lines are more easily and naturally read as four-stress lines, e.g.,

As he that feels / his helth to be hinderd (240),

and the alliteration may well be significant.

In the Penitential Psalms, and in many other poems prosodically like them and critically equally controversial, Wyatt brings two traditions together. Iambic verse was not firmly established as the predominant mode in England, but it existed. Although Wyatt knew Chaucer, either in Pynson’s edition of 1526 or in
Thynne's of 1532 or in both, it is not likely that he would have inferred from these editions how Chaucer is to be scanned. Nevertheless, Chaucer may have provided him with some sort of iambic model. Many lyrics of the kind collected by R. H. Robbins in Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd ed., 1968) or by John Stevens in Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court (London: Methuen, 1961), of which we find plenty of echoes in Wyatt's verse, were iambically as fluent as Wyatt's own. The influence of Wyatt's foreign models on his prosody is not entirely clear; some believe that his very irregularities may be in imitation of Petrarch's (Southall, p. 12). However, it seems difficult to refute the conventional view that such regularity as we find in Wyatt's decasyllabic verse owes not a little to Italian, Latin, or possibly French texts.

It is not surprising, in the light of these considerations, that the internal evidence indicates that Wyatt was to some extent an iambic poet. But we cannot disregard the irregularity in the controversial poems. It cannot be explained away as normal iambic practice or mere fumbling. While he adopted the iambic pentameter as a remote abstract norm which could at times be actualized in speech rhythms not unlike those of later authors (though some of the regular patterns may be of our making rather than Wyatt's), nevertheless at the level of speech rhythm Wyatt wrote at least as much in the tradition of the "broken-back" verse of his predecessors as he wrote like an iambic poet of a later date. We could hardly expect him to have done otherwise: as far as the attempt to match speech rhythm and meter is concerned there is a gradual transition in the sixteenth century. In Wyatt the two patterns are still much apart, though both are present and sometimes close; in Surrey there is an attempt to bring the patterns together; Todt is after an exact match; Sidney succeeds in making the meter felt in his lines, though never in an automatic or obtrusive way.

In Chaucer's Prosody Mr. Robinson suggests that Chaucer's lines are best seen as "balanced pentameters." However, it is much easier to read Chaucer as a regular iambic poet than Mr. Robinson makes out, and the term seems more appropriate to Wyatt's lines in the Penitential Psalms. In my interpretation the term would mean "a line which may and at times does show that the poet has an abstract iambic pattern in mind, but which is iambic abstractly rather than concretely, because the speech rhythm is apt to show the configurations of the alliterative tradition rather than any marked regularity." The balanced pentameter, as I define it here, has a separate identity. It differs from the characteristic iambic pentameter of the classical type in that its speech rhythm is conditioned, ultimately, by the alliterative tradition, and as such shaped by inherited artistic principles. However, unlike characteristic alliterative verse, balanced pentameter verse uses these artistic principles very loosely, and the speech rhythm also shows the influence of the underlying iambic norm.

Wyatt, then, was a transitional poet prosodically as he was in other matters. We may like or dislike his prosody, but we should not see it as either more or less modern than it is. The point is not merely of historical significance.
If we read the Psalms as though they are purely "phrasal" verse, we miss a dimension. We must try to pronounce, too, as Wyatt did, or the lines will sound wrong. On the other hand, if we see the verse as iambic in the way Sidney's is, we shall either be disappointed or feel inclined to distort the pronunciation—unless we falsely try to explain irregularities away. Provided we admit that some features of pronunciation differ from ours, we find that the verse reads best if read naturally. That way we are not deceived by the notion that some lines can be "scanned" and that others surprisingly cannot be; for the accents take care of themselves, and at the level of speech rhythm the stress patterns of the lines do not appear inconsistent with each other. Nevertheless, some lines will strike us, if we read Wyatt after, say, Skelton, as unmistakably iambic. And so they are; a feature of the Renaissance is being introduced.

Our positions have been too extreme in this matter. We ought to see that Wyatt in his prosody combines the old and the new in his own individual way. This is a general characteristic of his work, and a hallmark of his success.

UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO, NEW ZEALAND


3. Kenneth Muir and Patricia Thomson, eds., Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1969). Poems are quoted from this edition throughout, and referred to by their numbers in it. See my discussions of this edition in AUMLA, 35 (1971), 83-85; N&Q, N. S., 18, 6 (1971), 214-16; and particularly in Essays in Criticism, 23, 3 (1973); 400-14. But despite my reservations, this edition is at present the only one on which an article can defensibly be based.

5. The Penitential Psalms are in Wyatt’s hand in the Egerton MS, and are transcribed (with some errors that do not affect this article) in Muir and Thomson. Unfortunately, lines 100-53 had to be taken from other contemporary sources, because the passage is missing from the Egerton MS. I have taken account of this fact, but it does not influence my conclusions.

6. The term is used by Dorothy L. Sipe in Shakespeare’s Metrics (Yale: Yale Univ. Press, 1968). However, Miss Sipe’s book is not very successful; see my review in AUMIA, 34 (1970), 318-20.

