

## *The Point of Poetry*

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IN 1527 Thomas Wyatt was sent on a diplomatic mission by the court of Henry VIII. Returning from Venice, he was captured by Spanish troops, who demanded three thousand ducats as ransom. Wyatt escaped, coming home with something more valuable: the Italian poems of the polymath Francesco Petrarca.

What did Italian poetry sound like to speakers of English who knew no Italian?

My galley charged with forgetfulness  
Thorough sharp seas in winter nights doth pass  
Twene rock and rock; and eke mine enemy, alas,  
That is my lord, steereth with cruelness;  
And every oar a thought in readiness  
As though that death were light in such a case.  
An endless wind doeth 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.

This, in R. A. Rebholz's modernized edition, is Wyatt's English version of the 189th poem in Petrarch's *Rime sparse*. Petrarch, as we call him, had been known to Chaucer, and he was also translated by Wyatt's contemporaries, notably Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey. But Wyatt's versions of Petrarch's sonnets are stranger, their diction at once more concrete and more mysterious, their rhythms more variable and more inevitable.

In anybody's version, this sonnet figures a lover's emotional turmoil as a perilous voyage through wintry darkness. But while Petrarch's galley passes between Scylla and Charybdis, the treacherous whirlpool and rock from the *Odyssey*, Wyatt reduces the mythological resonance of the journey: his galley passes "Twene rock and rock." Similarly, the sonnet's lover bemoans in any version that he can no longer steer by looking at the stars, which have been occluded by the storm. But while Petrarch's lover says that his "two usual sweet signs" (*i duo mei dolci usati segni*) are hidden, suggesting that he is accustomed to steering by way of particular constituents of the zodiac, Wyatt's lover says more directly that "The stars be hid that led me to this pain."

The diction of this line makes the poem's emotional turmoil feel more personal, less allegorical, than it does in Petrarch. Working from Florentine Italian, in which the vocabulary is derived almost exclusively from Latin, Wyatt also takes advantage of the mongrel nature of his English, moving from a line dominated by Latinate words (error, ignorance) to a pentameter made exclusively of Germanic monosyllables: "The stars be hid that led me to this pain." At the same time, Wyatt moves from one of the more irregular pentameters for which he is famous ("**W**reathed with **e**rror and **e**ke with **i**gnorance") to an effortlessly regular monosyllabic pentameter: "The **s**tars be **h**id that **l**ed me **t**o this **p**ain." The shifts in rhythm and diction, through which we're delivered to this line, make the poem's personal resonance feel like an achievement, not something assumed from the start but something made from the language of the poem.

Reading Wyatt, we're in the nascent presence of what already becomes full-blown in the poetry of Shakespeare, not to mention what comes after: the illusion of a mind creating itself in language. Translating Petrarch, Wyatt expanded the possibilities of English-language poetry, though he mostly circulated his poems in manuscript, and for years they were known in metrically regularized versions published after his death in a 1557 book known as *Tottel's Miscellany*. In the next year, Andreas Divus's Latin translation of Homer, commemorated by Pound in canto 1, would be published in Paris, bound

together with a short poem translated by Aldus Manutius, the great Venetian printer, whose first printed book in a vernacular language was by Petrarch. *Divus* would also be used by John Chapman, making possible John Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." Modernism, Pound insisted, was a renaissance of the renaissance.

Wyatt's translations of Petrarch's sonnets today feel intimate, not only literary, which may be why we continue to entertain the enticing (and factually tenuous) story of Wyatt's affair with Anne Boleyn, the second wife of Henry VIII. These lines from Wyatt's adaptation of the 190th poem in Petrarch's *Rime sparse* are often read as an intimate reflection on Wyatt's personal life.

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  
Since in a net I seek to hold the wind.

Again Wyatt has made crucial changes to Petrarch, changes that are responsible for what we now recognize as interiority in poems and novels. Petrarch's poem is a dream vision: at the beginning, a deer with golden antlers "appears" to him (*m'apparve*) between two rivers, and, at the end of the poem, she just as mysteriously disappears. The deer remains a figure for the beloved in Wyatt's poem, but here the lover's search for the deer feels again less allegorical; the lover's anguish feels like a particular love.

Once again Wyatt moves from a line with an equivocal relationship to the poem's iambic base ("Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore") to a line of Germanic monosyllables that scans as a perfect pentameter while at the same time providing a concrete proverb that does not appear in Petrarch: "Since in a net I seek to hold the wind." The poem feels convincingly intimate not because we may be sure that the deer is a figure for Anne Boleyn, but because Wyatt helped

determine our expectations for what the language of a poem does. Other poets are responsible for this change as well, but one has only to read a more conventional translation of Petrarch by Surrey to feel Wyatt's imprint on the medium of English-language poetry.



Change is something we've learned to expect from poetry: conversant with its predecessors, a poem also alters the givens of its medium, asking us to remake our relationship to the past. This is why, reading Wyatt, we can feel as if we're reading poems produced not just by a particular man who took a trip to Italy but poems produced by the language at large. Still, Wyatt was nothing but a man who took a trip. Living before an active print culture, before widespread literacy, he had no way of imagining that a large number of people would ever read his poems.

This is how W. B. Yeats sounded in 1892, when he published *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics*. This poem is called "The Sorrow of Love."

The quarrel of the sparrows in the eaves,  
The full round moon and the star-laden sky,  
And the loud song of the ever-singing leaves  
Had hid away earth's old and weary cry.

And then you came with those red mournful lips,  
And with you came the whole of the world's tears,  
And all the sorrows of her labouring ships,  
And all the burden of her myriad years.

And now the sparrows warring in the eaves,  
And the loud chanting of the unquiet leaves,  
Are shaken with earth's old and weary cry.

The poem is written in *abab* quatrains and in iambic pentameter, the line Wyatt helped establish as the new base of English poetry, but rarely does this poem inhabit the line with Wyatt's strange determination; instead, it sounds dreamily languid. The early Yeats preferred an

incantatory utterance distilled from the larger discursive pool of the dramatic monologue, as Pound would in turn. “The Sorrow of Love” gives us a sense of being spoken, but little sense of the urgency provoking someone to speak.

Now consider the way Yeats sounded thirty-three years later, when he rewrote “The Sorrow of Love” for inclusion in *Early Poems and Stories*, published in 1925. This version of the latter two stanzas appears in his *Collected Poems*, masquerading as lines written in the nineties.

A girl arose that had red mournful lips  
 And seemed the greatness of the world in tears,  
 Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships  
 And proud as Priam murdered with his peers;

Arose, and on the instant clamorous eaves,  
 A climbing moon upon an empty sky,  
 And all that lamentation of the leaves,  
 Could but compose man's image and his cry.

What has changed? The rhyme scheme and the generally iambic meter hasn't changed, but the previously unidentified “you” has become a particular “girl,” and, though she still bears the familiar badges of European love poetry, the “red mournful lips” passed from Petrarch to Wyatt, her once-whispered alliance with mythic grandeur is declared adamantly: “Doomed like Odysseus.”

The poem sounds adamant. In the early version, Yeats coveted the hovering stillness of paratactic syntax, coordinating conjunctions linking a variety of clauses and phrases: “And then you came with those red mournful lips, / And with you came the whole of the world's tears.” In the newer version, Yeats discards his compound sentence, substituting a complex sentence that careens beyond the second stanza to the third. While in the first version we receive a spooky list of the repercussions of the girl's appearance, in the second we inhabit the unfolding of those repercussions in a syntax of cause and effect. The pentameters are determined, for the poem is at least two things at once. “The art of poetry achieves the degree of sophistication that

allows it to recognize its own limitations,” said the literary critic John Thompson of Sir Philip Sidney, Wyatt’s successor, in *The Founding of English Metre*. “For it is seen that speech is one thing and meter another, although the two must meet.” That fruitfully troubled meeting solidified the impression of interiority in poetry of the sixteenth century; Yeats’s long remaking of his poem reminds us that the lesson isn’t learned just once.

Is the later version of Yeats’s “The Sorrow of Love” better than the earlier? Readers have said so, but that’s like saying that Wyatt’s poems are better than Petrarch’s, Sidney’s better than Wyatt’s. Like the sixteenth century at large, the twentieth century was a time when poetry changed so rapidly that it can be difficult to separate quarrels about taste from other changes. So for a long time, readers invested in taste interpreted the changes Yeats wrought upon his style as an allegory for what happened in poetry between 1892 and 1925: a general movement away from a preference for Victorian dreaminess to an embrace of modernist muscle. Not surprisingly, Wyatt’s stock went up at this time; Petrarch’s went down.

But Yeats was not remaking literary history when he transformed his style, no more than was Wyatt when he translated Petrarch. In the sixteenth century, achievement was not associated with originality, and, like his contemporaries, Wyatt sometimes wrote his own poems by writing versions of other poets’ poems. But by the eighteenth century, prior achievement in poetry had become a burden, as we’ve learned from Harold Bloom; this fear of merely repeating the past meant that, in order to seem authentic, a new poem needed to be different from earlier poems, self-consciously innovative and possibly even disdainful. The assumption that change is automatically a virtue meant that the artist who creates the taste by which he is judged will inevitably be found wanting. Having been applauded for epitomizing the moment, he will be dismissed for the same reason.



I’ve been quoting Wyatt in a modern edition, but this is how the latter stanzas of the poem we now call “They Flee from Me” appeared

in the handwritten Egerton manuscript, carried around by Wyatt himself. Its stanzas of rhyme royal (rhymed *ababbcc*) are run together without breaks, and anyone marking this poem's pentameters by counting ten syllables, rather than five stressed syllables, will be left puzzling, as will a reader of Sidney or Shakespeare. This Egerton version of the poem is transcribed by Richard Harrier, more recently by Peter Murphy, who also reminds us that this poem was originally a very small thing.

Thancked be fortune it hath ben othrewise  
 twenty tymes better but ons in speciall  
 in thyn arraye after a pleasaunt gyse  
 when her lose gowne from her shoulders did fall  
 and she me caught in her armes long & small  
 therewithal swetely did me kysse  
 and softely saide dere hert howe like you this  
 It was no dreame I lay brode waking  
 but all is torned thorough my gentilnes  
 into a straunge fasshion of forsaking  
 and I have leve to goo of her goodenes  
 and she also to vse new fangilnes  
 but syns that I so kyndely am serued  
 I would fain knowe what she hath deserued

This version of the poem's concluding lines contains no punctuation, the version's one mark being a rogue slash or virgule appearing in the first line, where we expect a comma ("They fle from me / that sometyme did me seke"); today Jos Charles, among a few others, employs slashes liberally. But how thrilling to read the already rhythmically thrilling line, appearing at the beginning of the new instantiation of the poem's rhyme royal, in this unpunctuated version: "It was no dreame I lay brode waking." All those monosyllables uninterrupted in a row! They're made especially audible because this line is preceded by a tidy ten-syllable line, set in easily scannable iambs: "and softely saide dere hert howe like you this."

Wyatt's poem also appears in the Devonshire manuscript, but in *Tottel's Miscellany*, where the poem was first set in type, the

stanza beginning with the spondaic line appears not only with corrected punctuation but with the rhythm corrected to conform with the pentameter understood as a ten-syllable line—as if our accented Germanic English were more like Latinate French.

It was no dreame: for I lay broade awaking,  
 But all is turnde now through my gentlenessse,  
 Into a bitter fashion of forsaking:  
 And I have leave to go of her goodnesse,  
 And she also to use new-fanglenessse.  
 But, sins that I unkindly so am served:  
 How like you this, what hath she now deserved?

Is this version correct? *For* I lay? *Unkindly* served? *How like you this* again? By the time T. S. Eliot the Harvard undergraduate read Wyatt, the first line looked like this in Quiller-Couch's widely disseminated *Oxford Book of English Verse*: "It was no dream; for I lay broad waking." "They Flee From Me" would remain crucial for the Eliot who would write "With naked feet passing across the skies" in one poem, "With broken boot heels stained in many gutters" in another, rather than Wyatt's "With naked fote stalking in my chambre," which Quiller-Couch also smoothed out to "With naked foot stalking within my chamber." Was Eliot's ear also removing the "for"?

That smoothing began almost as soon as Wyatt wrote the poem, but several decades after Eliot, George Oppen would remember Wyatt's lines as well, reciting them in a foxhole in which he was trapped: "I wept and wept. This may not be literary criticism, or perhaps, on the other hand, it is." Why did Oppen mix his tears with Wyatt, who wrote in ottava rima? Why did Eliot stay glued to Wyatt, too?

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"In poems the words are all there," wrote the poet John Ashbery to the painter Larry Rivers in the 1950s, "and they refer to each other and back, not to absent chairs tables and sentiments—"They flee



from me who one time did me seek': isn't that emotion itself, not the memory of it?" This Ashbery, this writer of pure emotion (emotion happening for the writer in the time it takes to write the poem down) accounts for our need to imagine that Wyatt provides evidence of Anne Boleyn; this writer helps to account also for Jeff Dolven's recent need to imagine "They Flee for Me" as a poem wishing for a love that is "not a style." The question, therefore, is this: how is Wyatt's poem written to give its readers that impression? How do its little black marks say *this happened*? And why does the Egerton manuscript say this more loudly than the version presented by Quiller-Couch?

"A yak is a prehistoric cabbage," begins Ashbery's "Notes from the Air," "of that, at least, we can be sure." This poem noodles along, as Ashbery makes us aware all poems do, existing in time rather than on a page. Then the poem changes.

No more trivia, please, but music  
in all the spheres leading up to where the master  
wants to talk to you, place his mouth over yours,  
withdraw that human fishhook from the crystalline flesh

where it was melting, give you back your clothes, penknife,  
twine. And where shall we go when we leave? What tree is bigger  
than night that surrounds us, is full of most things,  
fewer paths for the eye and fingers of frost for the mind,  
fruits halved for our despairing instruction, winds  
to suck us up?

These lines seem in contrast to the opening almost uncomfortably intimate—the master gives us back our childhood playthings as he places his mouth over ours—and *seem* is the crucial word, especially regarding little black marks on a page: these words seem more intimate because the diction preceding them ("A yak is a prehistoric cabbage") isn't so recognizable as heartfelt, and this contrast (always implicit in the larger discursive pool from which lyric poetry is distilled) is dramatized by the poem, especially as the poem is lineated, its lines arranged in unrhymed quatrains. As John Thompson

said, speaking of Sidney, the invention of lyric intimacy depends on contrast—on the ongoing collision of two things. “If only the boiler hadn’t exploded,” says Ashbery’s poem next. It matters not only that a “boiler” hasn’t appeared earlier but that the Latinate words “boiler exploded” arouse very different responses in us than the Germanic “his mouth over yours.”

Writing shortly after Wyatt, the poet and composer Thomas Campion said in prose that the pentameter line “The **more** secure, the **more** the **stroke** we **feel**” is tedious because it merely alternates its five stressed syllables with five unstressed syllables. Campion’s own pentameters (“**F**ollow your **S**aint, **f**ollow with **a**ccents **s**weet”—“**F**ollow thy **f**aire sun, un**h**appy **s**haddowe”) are far more various, the meter playing with the stresses inhabiting syntax by necessity. More important, in both Campion and Wyatt moments of metrical regularity are arrived at, not given, and so are moments of near metrical collapse.

Therewithal sweetly did me kiss  
And softly said, ‘Dear heart, how like you this?’

It was no dream: I lay broad waking.

The first two lines, which I’ve now quoted in a punctuated modern edition, are easier to scan as pentameters than the third, and that’s the lasting brilliance of this poem: it arrives, and it never stops arriving—just as the turn from “Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore” to “Since in a net I seek to hold the wind” never stops turning. The turning is what says *this happened*, and virtually every lyric poem in English since Wyatt employs versions of this strategy to make its immediacy visceral, something that happens to us, rather than being explained. Poets have listened, and prose writers have listened, too; we imagine that Molly’s final unpunctuated monologue in *Ulysses* feels authentic because it leaps, not necessarily because it’s unpunctuated. There’s no Petrarch behind “They flee from me,” and no Anne Boleyn either. There’s a lot of writing ahead of it.



Near the end of the twentieth century, I participated in a panel discussion on the state of poetry. Beginning with brief responses to Randall Jarrell's "Fifty Years of American Poetry," we noted how swiftly tastes had changed. Confessional poetry, New Formalism, even Language poetry seemed like something we used to talk about. But as responses gave way to questions, one audience member asked why American poets write only about personal matters. Why didn't American poets engage the political emergencies of their time, the way Irish or Polish poets inevitably did? C. K. Williams shrugged, and said, "I guess my answer to that question would be *fuck you*."

Williams's outburst was provoked not only by a refusal to acknowledge the engagements of American poets; the supposedly insulated Stevens wrote a book-length poem about the social conditions of the Depression, after all. More troubling was the frequency with which this refusal was reiterated. The American taste for Irish and Polish poetry spoke of a desire for poets to be taken seriously as what Pound once called (playing on Shelley's phrase) acknowledged legislators. "Do not be elected to the Senate of your country," the Irish Yeats wrote publicly to the American Pound, apparently unaware that no poet would be elected to the Senate of the United States.

What we recognize as a political poem changes because our sense of what constitutes the political changes, even if poetry doesn't change as much, and poets writing today might not always have been recognized as political in the past. When Tracy Smith writes that today the lyric speaks "to a large, shifting, contradictory, multivalent body," she's recognizing that American poetry is being enriched by voices it once wouldn't have known how to hear.

"I was at a reading shortly after the election" of 2016, remembers Hanif Abdurraqib, "and the poet (who was black) was reading gorgeous poems, which had some consistent and exciting flower imagery. A woman (who was white) behind me—who thought she was whispering to her neighbor—said 'How can black people write about flowers at a time like this?'" In the first of thirteen poems written in response to this question, poems that range from flowers to funerals, Abdurraqib embraces flowers: "dear reader," he begins, "with our

heels digging into the good / mud at a swamp's edge, you might tell me something // about the dandelion." This weedy plant, it turns out, has been misunderstood.

say: that boy he look like a hollowed-out grandfather  
clock. he look like a million-dollar god with a two-cent

heaven. like all it takes is one kiss & before morning,  
you could scatter his whole mind across a field.

This poem is a poem, not a treatise or a parking ticket, other honorable uses of English, because it moves from "dear reader" to the language of a grandfather clock, heaven, and a kiss. The last line is about dandelions, but the thing has become a metaphor, the same but different. And the last line of this free-verse poem scans as a pentameter. Wyatt taught us to hear these things.

"Is it more important to produce art or to take political action?" asked George Oppen years ago.

Art and political action are in precise opposition in this regard: that it can always be quite easily shown that political action is going to be valuable; it is difficult to ever prove that political action has been valuable. Whereas art is precisely the opposite case; it seems always impossible to prove that it is going to be valuable, and yet it is always quite clear that the art of the past has been of value to humanity.

It isn't possible to predict the efficacy of any poem, which hasn't stopped anyone who wishes to write poetry. But if the five hundred years since Wyatt's delivery of Petrarch has taught us anything, it's taught us that what is prominent in one moment isn't necessarily prominent later, if it's around at all. Yet poetry really hasn't changed much over the last couple of thousand years; it's organized mostly in lines, its syntax employs some form of punctuation, it puts together different kinds of words. To write in the present, we need to know the past. And to know the past, we need to write in the present.