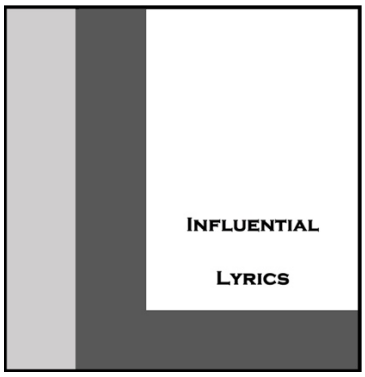

Series 1, Number 2

Sir Thomas Wyatt
1503-1542

The Long Love...

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.
Wherewithall 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.

Chronology

- **1503** Wyatt born at Allington Castle, Maidstone, Kent
- **1516** Serves as "sewer" at christening of Princess Mary (first record of court service)
- **1520** Marries Elizabeth Brooke (whom he later repudiates for adultery)
- **1521** Son Thomas born
- **1524** Begins service as esquire to Henry VIII; named as clerk of the king's jewels (until 1530)
- **1526-1539** Numerous diplomatic embassies in France, Italy, Spain; frequently tasked with representing Henry VIII in negotiations with royal and papal courts
- **1534** Briefly imprisoned after London brawl
- **1535** Knighted on 18 March
- **1536** Arrested and imprisoned in the Tower, charged with adultery with Queen Anne.
- **1541** Arrested for treason; charges dismissed without trial after confession
- **1542** Dies at Sherborne, Dorset, 11 October.
- **1557** Publication of *Songs and Sonnets* ("Tottel's Miscellany") with many of Wyatt's poems.

Podcast (https://influential lyrics, etc.).

Topics

- Italian (a.k.a. Petrarchan) Sonnet
- Courtly love
- Conceit

Lines to remember...

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.

Podcast Script

In 1557, at a time when printed books were only just becoming generally available, a volume of poems called *Songes and Sonettes* was published in London by the printer Richard Tottel. More commonly known as *Tottel's Miscellany*, the book made public several poems that had previously only circulated in manuscript among a few persons. One of the poets represented in the Miscellany was Sir Thomas Wyatt—a courtier, envoy, and diplomat in the court of Henry VIII. The sonnet entitled "The Long Love that in my Thought doth Harbour" will give us a sense of Wyatt's style and will help us to understand just why his work marks such an influential moment in the history of English poetry.

For this podcast, I'll begin as usual with a reading of the poem, but let me warn you that it will likely seem very strange and obscure to a twenty-first century listener. Not to worry…we'll sort out the meaning in the explication and commentary that will follow. So here's the poem…

[poem]

There you have it -- "The Long Love," by Sir Thomas Wyatt. I suspect at the moment you are baffled by this short poem, so let me offer a little background terminology that will enable us to make sense of—and maybe even come to appreciate—the poem.

Here are a couple of the defining elements of 16th-century poetry: the **conceit** and the **courtly love** theme.

First, the Conceit. A conceit is essentially an extended metaphor with many parts. So, for example, in one of Wyatt's poems, the speaker describes a sailing ship being tossed at sea between rocky shoals – but this is really a metaphor for his own lovelorn emotional condition. In "The long love…" sonnet, as we'll see, Wyatt's speaker describes what appears to be a failed military expedition—but the poem is really about the psychological and emotional trauma of being rejected in love. The term "conceit" refers to these clever, often very witty extended metaphors that were characteristic of 16th and 17th century poetry.

The second key term that will help us unlock this obscure poem is called "Courtly Love" or "the courtly love tradition." Courtly Love is not so much a poetic technique as a poetic theme that was pervasive in much late-medieval, early renaissance writing. Let's say we have one female character who is beautiful, innocent, almost angelic (or even divine) in her appearance and her manner. The male character is absolutely and unwaveringly devoted to this female ideal, though this devotion can never be consummated in an actual physical relationship. "Courtly Love," then, refers to the emotional, perhaps even spiritual attachment of the male character to this unattainable, untouchable female ideal. As one might imagine, this can be a difficult emotional paradox for the male character—longing always for an ideal that he can never realize.

Now, with these two concepts in mind, let's work our way through the poem. Here again are the first four lines:

> 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.

The speaker here is the male figure who is devoted to his female ideal, and he is describing the progress of his love. At first, this love is not outwardly expressed—that is, it remains in his thoughts and keeps its "residence" in his heart. But in the next two lines, the "long love" emerges from the speaker's inner thoughts, runs up into his face where he camps and spreads his banner. The conceit here is that the speaker is describing his love as a kind of military campaign going on within his own body. It's as though his love has suddenly charged out of the "heart's forest" and established a camp and spreads his banner in his face. Or, in other words, he sees his beloved and he blushes—what was a completely repressed and unspoken love is now suddenly and outwardly, physically expressed in the speaker's red face.

Then what happens? Well, here are the next four lines:

> 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.

So, his beloved lady sees the speaker's red face, and she doesn't like it—she "taketh displeasure." Why? Well, apparently she insists that this outward, physical display of emotion

is a kind of negligence—"lust's negligence"—and that his emotions should be regulated by "reason, shame, and reverence" and not come spilling out like this in public view.

The woman's "displeasure" is enough to end the military advance, as the next lines make clear:

> Wherewithal unto the heart's forest he fleeth,
> Leaving his enterprise with pain and cry,
> And there him hideth and not appeareth.

So much for this outward expression of the speaker's love! Now, with a "pain and cry," he retreats into the heart and "there him hideth and not appeareth." And finally, this leaves the speaker himself wondering what to do.

> 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.

His "master"—that is his personified "long love," this unshakeable devotion to the female ideal that has taken control of his emotional life—is now running scared and taking the speaker along with him: "What may I do… But in the field with him to live and die?" At least there is some solace in the final line. While this military campaign may not have been successful, he remains steadfast in his devotion, and, as he puts it, "good is the life ending faithfully." I'll leave it to you, dear listeners, to consider whether that last line is to be taken at face value or whether it might be bitterly ironic!

I hope this explication has made the meaning of the poem clear—particularly given the context of the Courtly Love tradition and the technique of the conceit. But, of course, simply understanding the poem and its peculiar figurative language doesn't really explain why a poem like this would be so influential in the history of English verse. To answer that question, we'll have to go back into the history of early modern English.

I mentioned in the introductory comments that Wyatt was himself a prominent figure in the court of Henry VIII, and he spent much of his time on the continent as an envoy of the king of England. While in Italy, Wyatt encountered first-hand the energetic humanism that came to be known as the Renaissance—a transformative cultural revolution in art, science, religion and virtually every other aspect of people's lives. Wyatt was adept enough with European languages to sense this newly emergent social and cultural order, and many of his poems—including "The Long Love"—are actually translations from the 14th-century Italian poet Petrarch. In effect, Wyatt's poems offered a significant conduit through which the humanism

and the wit of the Renaissance were transmitted into an English context. Once made more widely available through the publication of *Tottel's Miscellany* (some 15 years after Wyatt's death), poems like "The Long Love" helped to spark a craze for sonnet writing that produced some of the best short poems from writers like Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, and even William Shakespeare.

I would also suggest that this historical context gives us another clue as to the lasting influence of Wyatt's sonnet. One key aspect of the Renaissance was the rise of humanism: painters began to paint real people in realistic situations; poets like Petrarch began to explore very familiar—and very human—psychological conditions, and so forth. The central conceit in Wyatt's poem dramatizes a strikingly modern psychological dilemma. To a 21st-century reader, the whole Courtly Love theme may seem weirdly contrived, like some antiquated social formation from an era long gone by. Nevertheless, the tension the sonnet develops between desire, constraint, and resignation is all too familiar. After all, who hasn't been torn between an ardent desire and a social or moral environment that forbids the expression of that desire? Not to trivialize the dynamic, but think of a stereotypical teenager who has a crush on a schoolmate but who cannot—for some social or psychological reason—ever express those feelings. It's the basis of a thousand teenage coming-of-age rom coms. I understand, of course, that the language of Wyatt's poem may seem alien and difficult, but what I'd like to suggest is that the poem dramatizes a psychological dilemma that is still very relevant to a modern reader. The sonnet is not merely an historical relic—it has an aesthetic integrity that can still engage a 21st century reader.

So that's my reading of Sir Thomas Wyatt's "The Long Love." I realize that I've left a lot unsaid—the stereotypical gender roles for example. But I hope the podcast has opened up a new understanding and appreciation of Wyatt's project and has shown why his poem is such an influential lyric.

Thanks very much for listening and please don't hesitate to drop me an email or add a comment in your podcast app. As always, I'll follow these closing notes with another reading of the poem. Perhaps you'll hear it differently now that you've attended to this discussion!

Thanks again for listening! Hope to see you again soon.

[poem repeated]

Further Reading

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ETC....

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