Foreword by PAUL A. KOTTMAN

“Which words should we remember, and which words should we forget?”

Peter Murphy poses this first-order question about midway through the book. By the time it arrives, the reader has been taught to hear that the emphasis falls on the word *should*. Murphy is not just asking *which* words we remember or why; he asks whether our remembrance—shot through with contingency, fragility, and loss—connotes anything of value.

As the title of this book confesses, the following pages offer many words about a few words: Wyatt’s 1530s poem “They Flee from Me.” Although this confession might be taken to admit an ill-fittingness between the central concern of Murphy’s book and its form, I think that in fact the reverse is true. I see this book as—among other things—a meditation on a form that literary criticism might take in response to the needs of a five-hundred-year-old poem. Indeed, one of the remarkable things that comes to light in Murphy’s book is that Wyatt’s readers and critics, editors and students turn out not to be the only ones with needs. The poem itself emerges as an object of shared concern, something that has been cared for and valued in different ways over the past five centuries.

Poems are not only imaginative creations, writes Murphy—they “lead full physical lives, subject to the winds and the weather, exerting their own force on the world.” Unlike most things made by human beings, “They Flee from Me” has not been used up, discarded, or thrown away. Given the length of time that has passed, it seems implausible to attribute the poem’s survival wholly to a “projection” of value on the part of different audiences or consumers—as if the poem’s canonization reflected nothing more than engrained, stubborn cultural preferences. And it seems equally implausible to think of Wyatt’s poem as simply

standing the test of time, like a sturdy monument resisting the ravages of decay. Rather, one is tempted to say with Murphy, the poem has *matured* over time, revealing to us its potential to surprise or delight or provoke, far downstream from its historical context of origin.

In this sense, at least, Murphy is a materialist critic—but of a very special kind. Whereas a conventional literary history of Wyatt's poem and its reception might tell a developmental story, about how the poem's meaning and worth have become clearer, more revelatory, Murphy instead follows the historical contingencies and shifts to which critical judgments about Wyatt could never do justice, but to which they are nevertheless bound. While there is, Murphy suggests, something redemptive in the uncorking of Wyatt's poem, the reception of Wyatt's poem is not only a redemption story but also a reaction to the poem as a kind of disturbance—as if the history of the poem's reception were the slow, unpredictable ripening of the poem itself, as it makes its way toward our shared judgment of it.

If my uncorking analogy is apt—that is, if the promise of redemption that adheres in the maturation of Wyatt's poem, and its material disruption of idealized historical “progress,” is not unlike the anticipation of enjoying of an aged wine—then this is not because certain objects manage to stand the test of time. It is because they stand the test of their own maturation, in our judgment.

Murphy never forgets that none of this could have been foreordained or foreseen by Wyatt and his contemporaries. The poem *could* have been lost forever, like the countless other words that have fallen into oblivion. But the period of time during which the poem has been preserved, with increased intensity over the past two and half centuries, also suggests a special connection between the fate of Wyatt's poem and the concerns of modern aesthetics—in particular, of modern literary studies. Murphy's attention to this is one of the most suggestive aspects of his book, because in this way he manages to connect the fate of this single poem to issues of broad, shared concern.

“In a universe that seems always to be accelerating toward chaos,” writes Murphy, “little islands of order like this poem are a consolation to the spirit, and so we love them.” From this, a further observation might follow: appreciation of Wyatt's achievement has risen alongside our appreciation, after Kant, that judgments of taste do not simply descend from cognitive criteria but rather arise from our senses. Much in our current situation, in literary studies, too—as Murphy's account of Wyatt's poem shows—follows from our inability to leave behind the sensuous, irredeemably idiosyncratic aspects of our taste. Which is to say: A key

task of modern literary criticism—and modern aesthetics, and of Wyatt's poem, too—is to respond to the failure of transcendence, the finitude of sensuous life, with whatever validity our judgments of taste achieve.

Thanks to the all-preserving amber of the Internet, words nowadays risk becoming forgettable, not by being paid insufficient attention, but by being undeletable. Perhaps Murphy's book, like Wyatt's poem, can begin to be read as an elegy for the poem itself.

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