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Murphy, Peter.

The Long Public Life of a Short Poem: Reading and Remembering Thomas Wyatt.

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. Pp. xvii, 246 + 50 b/w ill. ISBN 978-1-5036-0928-0 (paperback) US\$28.

In a letter to Sir Thomas Wyatt, dated 8 April 1538, Lord Thomas Cromwell, the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal from 1536 to 1540, advised Wyatt, then serving as ambassador of Henry VIII to Emperor Charles V, that “I never saw a man that had so many friends here, leave so few perfect friends behind him.” Absence, dissimulation, and the politics of courtly self-assertion are all captured in the warning from Cromwell, who tells Wyatt to “quicken them [your friends] with your letters.”¹

Peter Murphy’s superb book takes Wyatt’s perhaps most famous poem, “They flee from me,” and turns it into a parable of loss, rediscovery, and the fragility and chance of how the lyric poem’s small proportions generate capacious meaning over time and vastly different cultural contexts. Murphy’s work is admirable in so many ways it is hard to know where to begin. But Cromwell’s advice to “quicken [...] with your letters” is somewhat analogous to what Murphy accomplishes in this book devoted to a single lyric: one that was never published by its author; that was written in a notebook, possibly in prison, possibly abroad; yet that now, some five hundred years later, lives on as one of the most anthologized of early modern English lyrics.

“Quickening” carries the sense of making alive what is dead or dying, giving life to the moribund, the inert, the inanimate; it is an antidote to death and mortality, and it carries regenerative intent as well as an erotics of sensual awakening. Quickening is at the core of poetic discourses as much as it is in seduction and the politics of courtly presence, let alone the trajectory that converts the immediate circumstances under which a private, unpublished lyric becomes a radically different object, in this case, a canonical inclusion associated with early modern English literariness. Murphy’s reading of Wyatt’s famous lyric is rooted in the notion that “learning of the kind this book explores is fundamentally social,” a sociality that expands and contracts over time as the

1. Both excerpts are from Thomas Wyatt and Nicholas Harris Nicholas, *The Poetical Works of Sir Thomas Wyatt: With a Memoir* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1854), xix.

“inkiness of poems allies them with the crumbling material world”—and as the “conceptual space marked out by a poem inevitably [gets] reoccupied as time goes on” (xv). One might well argue that “They flee from me” has at its heart the busy “seeking” after “continual change” to which Wyatt alludes in his first stanza (xvii). Murphy’s book reimagines this seeking in a highly imaginative, idiosyncratic narrative that is a riveting and provocative read with an amplitude of critical insight that is compelling and challenging.

Murphy describes Wyatt’s poem as a “transformation of already existing culture: already existing poems, inherited forms, popular subjects for poems, ways of thinking common in Henry’s court” (8), a reminder of the oddly asymmetrical history that underlies initial contexts feeding into creative expressions before they are overtaken by time’s “strange fashion of forsaking” (xvii), to use Wyatt’s words. Intimacies of encounter turn to flight, then into the arbitrariness of time’s dreamscape and the interrogatives that arise therefrom. The remarkable accomplishment of Murphy’s book is how it takes the solid ink-on-page of Wyatt’s material act of writing and transposes it into “the difficulty of imposing understanding and order on the chaos of experience. [...] The speaker of this poem learns, which [learning] is a kind of antientropic mastery, and what he learns is that entropy is inescapable” (216).

More than this, Wyatt’s poem, as a rare singularity of ordered discourse in a vast universe of lost and chaotic iterations, also asks us “why old poetry?” (217). Murphy’s conclusion reminds us that “old poems show us we have a history of trying”; that “the effort of connecting with vanished worlds is salutary”; that “working out what someone else was thinking is good practice for knowing other people and treating them humanely”; and that “literacy is a [needed] claim against disorder and dissolution” (217). Every poem asks how we know, how far we are prepared to know another, how form and structure meld with affect, how we assert presence in the face of the overwhelming absences that gather around our fleeting mortality. The beauty of a book like Murphy’s is how it unpacks the intimacies of personal expressions and histories in relation to much wider resonances that gather around discrete iterative acts bound to a specific historical moment that is itself only somewhat knowable.

Wyatt’s contrast of service and tameness with the ranging wildness that flees from remembrance is at the affective centre of “They flee from me.” But that contrast is also at the crux of a metapoetics that this dynamic unveils. *Poeisis*, the act of making something out of the nothing that is something, reveals,

however momentarily, order fashioning itself in the face of constant mutability. In the erotics of that interaction is the nub of what poems that matter capture—a form of limbic resonance that affectively ties discrete human interchanges with universal forces of entropy, change, and chaos. Murphy's book shows how affect resonates forward in unexpected permutations; how affect springs from deep histories of transformation whose shapeshifting traces invite fugacious interpretations and overhearings.

George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie*, chapter 3, affirms how poetry preceded civil society and “was th'originall cause and occasion” of human assembly and interaction:

The profession and vse of Poesie is most ancient from the beginning, and not as manie erroneously suppose, after, but before any ciuill society was among men. For it is written, that Poesie was th'originall cause and occasion of their first assemblies, when before the people remained in the woods and mountains, vagarant and dispersed like the wild beasts, lawlesse and naked, or verie ill clad, and of all good and necessarie prouision for harbour or sustenance vtterly vnfurnished: so as they litle diffred for their maner of life, from the very brute beasts of the field.²

Wyatt's reference in “They flee from me” to the “naked foot stalking in my chamber” (xvii), hints at this lost history of making humans human, where vagrant, wild beasts, “lawlesse and naked,” come together through the poet's words. Even as we are drawn to the chaos of “the very brute beasts of the field,” we flee from that history; even as we are drawn to order and civilization, we are haunted by the memory of being “dispersed like the wild beasts.” “They flee from me” artfully brings these synergized realities of human being together under the rubric of the poet's fragile transcription of what would otherwise be lost to time. Murphy's book is a deft exploration of how mutability expands and contracts in the fragile contrivances that lyric makes real, if only for a moment that is certain to take flight. The poet is at the service of constant change: the beloved other(s) the poet invokes deserves the life the poet gives to that which is sure to pass—“since that I so kindly am served / I would fain know what she

2. George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* [1589], intro. Baxter Hathaway (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1970), 22.

hath deserved” (xvii). In this amalgam of continuity and evanescence lies the difficult truths Wyatt’s poem explores even as Murphy’s book provides singular access to the “vse of Poesie” as the original cause for what it means to be human.

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Nelson, Jennifer.

Disharmony of the Spheres: The Europe of Holbein’s Ambassadors.

University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. Pp. xiii, 198 + 43 ill. ISBN 978-0-271-08340-7 (hardcover) US\$99.95.

Jennifer Nelson’s *Disharmony of the Spheres* presents an insightful, new reading of homogeneous space during a period coined by Michael Sauter as the “spatial reformation.” Rather than focus on the unity that often accompanies homogeneous space, Nelson argues that the positive attributes of “sustained difference” are encapsulated in Hans Holbein the Younger’s painting, *The Ambassadors* (1533), which Nelson uses as a point of reference in her analysis of sixteenth-century European literary texts and inventions. Drawing attention to the centrality of the anamorphosed skull, Nelson states her intention to correct a common misreading that the skull is indicative of “the vain desire for correspondence among things” (4). Nelson argues that contemporary readings of the skull by Lacan and Žižek, for example, fail to understand the importance of disharmony to free will. Nelson argues that Holbein’s anamorphosed skull is a perspectival technique used to suggest the existence of spatial unity that extends to the real, only to reveal the opposite—that the painting’s disjunctive space “interrupts” the real (7). Disjunctive space that interrupts the real is the conceptual foundation upon which Nelson constructs an argument in favour of spatial contingency. Nelson’s study examines the ways in which sixteenth-century Europeans engaged with the concept of contingency, using the work of Erasmus and the inventions of Philipp Melanchthon and Georg Hartmann as examples of self-dissimilarity caused by the turbulent religious and political climate of early modern Europe.

Nelson uses an adapted version of the postmodern concept “transrealism” to describe how “an individual or group seeks to preserve difference rather