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## **“Flirting with International Socialism”: Love, Politics and Intertextuality in the Poetry of Gerry Murphy**

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**Abstract.** After almost three decades writing poetry, Gerry Murphy has attained a place as one of the most popular, idiosyncratic and unconventional contemporary Irish poets. His voice is certainly unique in Irish poetry, as regards the content, form and sarcastic tone of his poems. This “extraordinary juggler of conflicts”, as poet Thomas McCarthy (2010) defines him, has indeed provoked controversy in some circles. One funny anecdote of his many literary performances includes his reading of “A Note on the Demise of Communism” in front of the Dean and 600 Chinese students in Fudan University (Shanghai), and the troubling expectancy this event arose before finding out that it was just a love poem after all. The purpose of this paper is to provide an introductory critical perspective on Gerry Murphy. First, I will discuss the cluster of themes which dominate his work, by particularly focusing on the predominant sensual eroticism and the awkward, almost uneasy, interplay of love and politics observed in much of his poetry. Other elements of analysis will include Murphy’s frequent use of dramatic monologue, his literary influences, the stylistic variety of his work, and the use of sarcasm as a very powerful means of exerting criticism.

**Key Words.** Gerry Murphy, contemporary Irish poetry, eroticism, love and politics, sarcasm.

**Resumen.** Tras casi tres décadas de una incesante actividad literaria, Gerry Murphy es considerado hoy en día como una de las voces más populares, peculiares y controvertidas de la poesía irlandesa contemporánea. Sin lugar a dudas, su poesía es única en el panorama literario de Irlanda, tanto por el contenido de la misma, como por la forma y el tono sarcástico de sus poemas. Este “acróbata extraordinario de conflictos” (McCarthy 2010) ha provocado más de una controversia. Una de sus numerosas anécdotas, a modo de ejemplo, es la expectación y consecuente preocupación que Murphy causó al leer “A Note on the Demise of Communism” ante el Rector y 600 alumnos de la Universidad de Fundan (Shanghai), y el alivio posterior cuando la audiencia descubrió que se trataba tan sólo de un poema de amor. El presente artículo pretende ofrecer un análisis introductorio a la obra de Murphy. En primer lugar, se analizarán los temas fundamentales que dominan su obra, centrándose fundamentalmente en su combinación, a veces inesperada, de amor y política. Otros elementos de análisis son el uso que Murphy hace del monólogo dramático, sus influencias literarias, y la utilización del sarcasmo como método eficaz para llevar a cabo cualquier tipo de crítica ideológica.

**Palabras clave.** Gerry Murphy, poesía irlandesa contemporánea, erotismo literario, amor y política, sarcasmo.

Gerry Murphy was born in Cork in 1952. He studied English literature at University College Cork under the tutoring presence of John Montague and Professor Seán Lucy. Under the inspiration of Montague, there was a resurgence of literary activity in Cork. Murphy belongs to this thriving community of artists which emerged around Montague, a community defined by Thomas Dillon Redshaw (2000: 7) as “that remarkable generation” of writers which also includes Gregory O’Donoghue, Theo Dorgan, Maurice Riordan, Thomas McCarthy, Greg Delanty and Seán Dunne, among others.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in his memoir *The Pear is Ripe* (2007: 217), Montague acknowledges the artistic vibrancy he experienced with all these poets he met soon after he settled in Cork in the early 1970s.

Murphy’s first collection of poetry, *A Small Fat Boy Walking Backwards*, appeared in 1985 (The Commons Press) and this was followed by an incessant literary activity: *Rio de la Plata and All That* (1993), *The Empty Quarter* (1995), *Extracts from the Lost Log Book of Christopher Columbus* (1999), *Torso of an Ex-Girlfriend* (2002), and *My Flirtation with International Socialism* (2010), all published by Dedalus Press. His poetry frequently appears in literary journals and anthologies.<sup>2</sup> In 2005, Murphy published his own translations of the Polish poet Katarzyna Borun-Jagodzinska, a book that “remains one of the star volumes of that Capital of Culture series from the Munster Literary Centre” (McCarthy 2010). *End of Part One: New and Selected Poems* received critical acclaim when it was released in 2006. In 2008,

1. As William Wall (2009) claims, “[i]t would be impossible to underestimate [Montague’s] influence on the young writers who went to UCC at that time”.

2. See, for instance, the anthologies edited by Delanty and Ní Dhomhnaill (1995) and Pat Boran (2011). The former volume is exclusively dedicated to the work of both English and Irish language poets who studied at UCC; Murphy’s Irish-language poem “Ten Words in Irish” appears alongside poems by Paul Durcan, Michael Davitt and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. Murphy is also one of the poets included in *The Great Book of Ireland*, an ambitious anthology of modern Irish art and poetry published in 1991 and recently acquired by University College Cork in order to be publicly displayed in its premises.

Murphy’s poetry was adapted for musicians and actors by Crazy Dog Audio Theatre. This stage adaptation by American playwright Roger Gregg, entitled *The People’s Republic of Gerry Murphy*, met popular success and run for several consecutive evenings at the Cork Guinness Jazz Festival.

After almost three decades writing poetry, Gerry Murphy has attained a place as one of the most popular, idiosyncratic and unconventional contemporary Irish poets. His voice is certainly unique in Irish poetry, as regards the content, form and tone of his poems. There is sarcasm and a defiant rebellion in his work, which distinguishes it from the poetry by most of his contemporaries in Ireland. This “extraordinary juggler of conflicts”, as poet Thomas McCarthy (2010) defines him, has indeed provoked controversy in some circles. One funny anecdote of his many literary performances includes his reading of “A Note on the Demise of Communism” in front of the Dean and 600 Chinese students in Fudan University (Shanghai), and the troubling expectancy this event arose before finding out that it was just a love poem after all. As John Montague (2006: i) puts it in the foreword of his *Selected Works*, “what makes Murphy unique [...] is his curious integrity, the way he has created an aesthetic out of nearly nothing, ex nihilo”.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an introductory critical perspective on Gerry Murphy, a poet “inexplicably under-rated” in contemporary discussions of Irish poetry (Dorgan 2010), in spite of his status as “[i]ndisputably the doyen of the post-Galvin Cork generations” (McCarthy 2010). First, I discuss the cluster of themes which dominate his work, by particularly focusing on the predominant sensual eroticism and the awkward, almost uneasy, interplay of love and politics observed in much of his poetry. Other elements of analysis include Murphy’s frequent use of dramatic monologue, his literary influences, the stylistic variety of his work, and the use of sarcasm as a very powerful means of exerting criticism. This paper is followed by a translation into Spanish of some of his most representative poems, in the hope of contributing to the increasing international visibility of a poetry which, in recent years, has also been translated into French, Italian, Flemish,

Hindi and Chinese.<sup>3</sup>

Murphy's collections of poetry tend to move and rotate around a common axis: love. His love poems trace a man's emotional upheaval in the aftermath of failed romance, and thus they alternate between the different phases of early despair, uncomfortable nostalgia and final resignation. Some of the most evocative love poems are found in his fourth collection *Extracts from the Lost Log Book of Christopher Columbus* (1999). Lyrics such as "Under the Dog Star" exhibit a softness rarely found in his more openly political work. There is no sarcasm or cynicism here; simply a moving lyricism voiced by a raw, exposed heart damaged by unrequited love:

This is where  
I peel your name  
from that battered, much travelled suitcase –  
the heart,  
where I dissolve whole reels of memories  
which played and played  
in that obsessive, all hours cinema –  
the head.  
This is where  
I switch off the individually lit photographs  
and burn down the dreary warehouse of regret,  
where I walk out  
into the sweet empty air;  
into the desert of myself. (Murphy 1999: 31-2)

In spite of the genuine sincerity which emerges in these poems, Murphy's love poems stand in-between the lyric and the dramatic monologue. The poetic voice is both autobiographical and invented, surpassing the boundaries of the real and the imaginary, the logical and the absurd. In the poem "After Goethe" (1999: 26), the persona, like the lovelorn hero in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, is driven to self-destruction, although in an unexpected move typical of Murphy's poetry, he is eventually "saved" by the tediousness of his own life:

I looked about  
for a knife or a rope,  
anything lethal and to hand  
but I was saved by boredom.  
Boredom, mother of the Muses. (Murphy 1999:26)

One of Murphy's most celebrated love poems

3. See, for instance, former translations of his poetry into French (Ní Ríodáin 2011: 80-99) and Spanish (Liddy, Ortega and Liddy, 1991: 65).

is "Rush Hour", a poem that was used as part of the Irish Leaving Certificate Examination in 2003. Here, the ephemeral vulnerability of love is mirrored by the hectic nature of cosmopolitan lives:

I know the pedestrian lights  
is in your favour  
and you must go and go now  
but I want to linger  
just a little longer in your embrace  
at the corner of Washington Street  
and South Main Street. (Murphy 2002: 27)

In an attempt to immortalize such physical encounter, the poet invokes the city to "grind[...] to a shuddering halt", as he imaginatively kisses "each individual hair of [his beloved's] head/ from root to tip/ while the lights change and change again". Nevertheless, the relief that such vision renders is only temporary, and the poem finishes with the image of the sky tilting over "to reveal/ teeming constellations/ utterly silent, unbearably distant" (*ibid.*). Personal grief acquires here a universal scale; the Cork-based local images of the previous lines ("the corner of Washington Street/ and South Main Street") are replaced by grand-scale, inaccessible constellations. Like those "teeming" starts in the sky, the speaker's muse shines brightly but she appears as irremediably distant from the speaker both in time and space.<sup>4</sup>

The metaphorical, romantic lyricism of these love poems contrasts explicitly with the uninhibited, graphic descriptions of a sexualized female body in "Last Surrealist Litany of the Twentieth Century" (Murphy 1985: 32), "Too Lovely for Words" (1999: 56-7), "Ode 32" or "Into the Small Hours" (2002: 23-4). In his sexual reification and quasi-religious invocation of a corporal muse, Murphy might be charged by some sectors with adopting the objectification and idealization of the female body so prevalent in male art, a tendency that Irish women poets have earnestly challenged in their work. In one of his earliest poems, "Part of a Poem to Celebrate your Next

4. Many of these love poems are written in the form of letters addressed to the silent beloved. See for instance "Still Blue Ronde a la Turk" (1993: 67-8) and "Letters to Michaela" (1995: 44-5). This epistolary style attests to the stylistic variety of Murphy's work, which I comment upon later on.

“Birthday” (1985: 41-3), the muse’s body becomes a geographical territory for the poet-traveller to explore freely and unrelentingly:

if you search carefully  
 along the edge of this poem  
 or, if you will, along  
 the edge of the Arctic Circle,  
 you will find references to  
 your exquisite face,  
 the smooth delight  
 of your breasts,  
 the lovely slow curve  
 of your hips, the southern tip  
 of South America,  
 that sort of thing.

Another example of Murphy’s literary idealization (some may even call it ‘appropriation’) of the female body is found in the title poem of his second collection, *Rio de la Plata and all that...*:

I miss you a little  
 I dream of you nightly  
 I crave your breasts  
 your warm mouth  
 your smooth vulva  
 opening into slick cave of delight  
 the perfect fit of your buttocks:  
 tight,  
 tight,  
 tight. (1993: 23)

Nevertheless, such a simplistic assessment of Murphy’s love poems is debunked in numerous ways. His work defies all nomenclatures, and thus it cannot be labelled misogynist inasmuch as it can be taken to be in favour of the feminist cause.<sup>5</sup> Although Murphy’s poems are not unproblematic from a gendered point of view, and some even run the risk of offending some sensitive minds,<sup>6</sup> the poet cannot be charged

5. In “Requiem for a Patriarch”, translated into Spanish below, Murphy ironically dismantles patriarchy from within by having Santa Claus “strangled/ by an escalator” (1993: 27). The title amusingly points towards some recent considerations of Santa Claus as the embodiment of capitalist patriarchy.

6. Murphy, for instance, mocks modern feminism in lyrics such as “Liberation Sequence One” and “Feminist on Beach in Dress-Suit” (1993: 28-31), while in “A Complaint to the Muse” (2006: 192), the persona ironically laments the harassment of “[t]oo many plain women”, “trying to convince me/ that true beauty, like theirs,/ is ultimately internal”

with turning a blind eye on the gendered debates which have dominated the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In early poems such as “Still Point” (1985: 40), Murphy friendly holds out his hand to “the Modern Woman”, with the intention of “easing” the “tension” of her “aching shoulders” and, at least momentarily, “inventing calm/ erasing history”. This solidarity is also reflected in other poems such as “Contributory Negligence” (1985: 58), which addresses the lack of sufficient legal support that many raped women experience; “Close-Up War Photograph” (1993: 32), based on an incident in the Vietnam War concerning a wounded female Viet Cong and her indifferent American captors; and “Division of Labour” (1993: 34), a poem that openly deals with the gendered boundaries that traditionally define housework as ‘feminine’ and art as ‘masculine’. In “A Day out in Sundays Well” (2002: 32), Murphy makes an excursion into the neglected past of Irish women’s lives, in order to pay homage to Catherine Connolly, a woman unjustly accused of murder and publicly executed in Cork in 1851. Thus, Murphy’s fetishist idealization of the female body in his love poems is just one motif of the many mosaic-like approaches he adopts in his work with respect to female characters.<sup>7</sup> In

7. See also Murphy’s interesting approach to women’s presence in Celtic mythology in subtle poems such as “Exit”: “With an eye on Heaven/ the blind girl/ has thrown herself/ into the well” (1999: 48). Although the poem is not based on anything other than Murphy’s imagination, he includes an epigraph attributing it to an Irish legend recorded in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. As the poet claims (in conversation with Villar-Argáiz 2013) this epigraph was intended as a spoof. Nevertheless, it is indeed plausible to read the poem from the perspective of Celtic mythology. The well is traditionally a symbol of wisdom, a sacred place where to receive blessings from Otherworldly entities. Interestingly enough, in Celtic mythology two women, Sinann and Boand, are reported to having been drowned by the waters that suddenly rose from one of these wells (Connla’s Well), what immortalized their names into two rivers named after them, the River Shannon and the River Boyne respectively. Murphy’s poem draws upon this well known female myth by placing a woman similarly drowned by the well. The aspiration, audacity and ambition of the girl in the poem (illustrated in the first line, “an eye in Heaven”) is sharply counteracted by her lack of physical vision, that is, by her real blindness. The

“Still Life with Minefield” (1995: 49-51), the male persona even reverts gender roles as he becomes the victimized figure of his seducer, who feeds upon him in an act of sexual desire and masochistic objectification: “I am always prepared/ for you biting my head off cleanly”; “That little nick/ you gave me/ with the carving knife/ is showing up well/ in this ultra-violet glare/ and though the bleeding has stopped/ the pain lingers delightfully”. The image of the carving knife, recurrent throughout the poem, is deprived of its phallic connotations, becoming the object the female muse uses in her act of sexual domination.

Another feature of Gerry Murphy’s poetry which prevents potential accusations from the gendered point of view is its ventriloquist tendency to adopt the voices of invented personas. In “The Psychopathology of Everyday Life” (2006: 194), the poet clearly makes an experimental move, in his adoption of a psychotic character, no doubt for the challenge of building a sympathetic case for a person who does not deserve one:

The old woman,  
so small, that when I held  
the shop door open for her,  
she passed in easily under my arm.  
Somewhere in that split-second,  
between the chivalrous act  
and the thought  
that the ungrateful cow  
might be treating me  
as a doorman,  
I released the heavy,  
tightly-sprung door.

I still hear the thump  
as it caught her  
in the small of her back. (Murphy 2006: 194)

Following the tradition of dramatic monologues initiated by Robert Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover” and later followed by high modernists such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Murphy adopts the voice of an ostensibly unsavoury, immoral character and forces the reader to

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immortal glorification that women achieve in Celtic myth is in Murphy’s poem simply substituted by the absurd death of this girl. The brevity of the poem testifies to the quick oblivion of the female character, as she “exists” from life and enters a dark “well” of oblivion.

engage on a psychological level in order to become involved in the poem and understand it. In some other poems, Murphy even takes a step further, suggesting that sanity and insanity are, after all, a matter of perspective. “In The Retirement Home”, for instance, the boundaries between lunacy and reason are blurred. Neil Armstrong appears as a comical demented figure, and his boasting of his great feat is subsequently rendered as a manifestation of senile dementia:

Neil Armstrong  
leans back in his rocker  
and points at the moon.  
“I’ve been there!” he declares.  
“Of course you have,” replies the nurse,  
“of course you have...”. (Murphy 2010: 25)

Thus, it seems that nothing should be taken for granted in Murphy’s work. As McCarthy (2010) puts it, “[e]very poem invites the reader onstage, but only to be humiliated. This is the challenge implicit in his work”. Such defiant posture is also observed in the, at times uneasy, mixture of love and politics, one of the most defining features of Murphy’s work. In this respect, Noland (2010) notes that this poet’s “socio-economical [sic] and historical reflections” tend to “sit rather awkwardly alongside [...] poems of heightened erotic intensity”. Indeed, Murphy amusingly *flirts* with politics, paraphrasing the title of his latest collection, *My Flirtation with International Socialism* (2010). In “A Note on the Demise of Communism”, for instance, the poetic voice reveals, by a series of witty images, how all daily interactions, however trivial, are inherently political:

I give the Communist salute  
to my Capitalist ex-girlfriend  
as she takes the corner at a clip  
in her black BMW,  
doles me out an imperious nod  
and leaves me to choke back  
Marxist-Leninist rhetoric  
in a plume of carbon monoxide. (1995: 11)

Poems such as this highlight the inter-connections of private and public life in a world in which the personal is unquestionably the political and vice versa.<sup>8</sup>

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8. For this mixture of love, eroticism and the

Thus, Murphy's poetry is, without any doubt, ideologically charged, in spite of his explicit intention – as he claims – to remain outside serious political demands (in conversation with Villar-Argáiz 2013). His work stands as a powerful exponent of social denunciation. Political conflicts, both contemporary and historical, emerge in poems which sarcastically reveal the fallacies of communism, democracy and international socialism. In these overtly politicized poems, Murphy creates a bizarre world in which Lenin, Hitler, Pinochet, Allende or Thatcher act as mere puppet figures, which help him reveal – through scoffing remarks – the atrocities and dark truths of human nature. As poet Thomas MacCarthy (2010) puts it in a review for *The Irish Examiner*, Murphy is a “master of poetic monologue and social commentary. His habit is to be elliptical in politics, to insert a political jibe or universal truth as adroitly as an assassin's knife”.

In these socio-political poems, Murphy tends to present the world solely from a highly subjective perspective, distorting it radically for refreshing emotional effects. The writer does not attempt to rationalize the atrocities committed by war; he simply exposes them with all their rawness, as in his grotesque, even morbid, description of the death of political prisoners in “The Poet in Paradise” (1993: 55-7). This approach – both provocative and elusive at the same time – is also revealed in “Twenty One Words for the Security Council”, a brief witty poem which shares the Surrealist and Expressionist tendencies of the Modernist movement:

It's a pity  
the Earth  
isn't flat:  
you could line the poor  
along the edges  
and machine-gun them  
into the abyss. (Murphy 1992: 34)

In this “blatantly damning” poem, as Johnston (2007: 11) defines it, Murphy treats serious issues with a seeming triviality and irreverence, which has the effect of underscoring even more sharply the brutality of

social inequality and political injustice. The poem is addressed to one of the most important international organizations, the Security Council, a permanent organ of the United Nations which aims to maintain world peace by taking part in the arm conflicts within and between nations. The persona's proposal to “machine-gun” the “poor” ultimately reveals that immunity inevitably leads to violence; in other words in the attempt to protect and guarantee international security, injustices are committed. This poem also suggests the vulnerability of the human condition, particularly the poor, the weakest sector of society. As Murphy shows, we are, once again, mere puppets at the hands of powerful, public institutions.

By approaching the political from the perspective of sarcasm, Murphy avoids taking sides, something difficult in a country in which writing poetry has been – at times inevitably – a highly politicized gesture or at least an art of public dimensions. Like authors such as Goethe, Murphy shares a sense of defiant rebellion against authority. When asked about the relationship between poetry and politics, he replies,

I have become convinced that politics demands too much rhetoric of the poet. Satire has always been my fall-back position, so I would have been shot by whatever side I supported. I would not have been able to resist satirizing even my own side. Love poetry, which I prefer to all other forms, will I hope provide me with readers who outlast me. (In conversation with Villar-Argáiz 2013).

Indeed, the lyric voice seems to emerge more comfortably in Murphy's love poems than in his socio-historical poems, as we saw when commenting on the moving sincerity of poems such as “Under the Dog Star”.

Another topic which recurrently appears in Murphy's poetry, together with love and politics, is the – at times overwhelming – influence of the literary past. One of the most controversial aspects of his work is that there are “too many poems ‘after’ the work of others”, as Nolan (2010) puts it in his review of *My Flirtation with International Socialism*. Indeed, a few literary references in Murphy's work are left unacknowledged, as in his poems “New Arrival's Eighth Circle” and “Canapeus”

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political, see also “A Poem to be Read on a Moonlit Night Outside a Police Station”, “Mmm ... for M.M”, and “Table Talk” (Murphy 1985: 20-1, 35, 48).

(2010: 11, 15), versions of some episodes from Dante's *Commedia*. This deliberate "plagiarism", as Gisa Kratz (2011: 215) puts it,<sup>9</sup> can be attributed to what Thomas McCarthy (2010) defines as Murphy's modernist "definition of art as both discourse and recovered conversation".

Indeed, one of Murphy's most ardent desires in his work is to establish a poetic dialogue with past and present literary figures. This "habit of connectedness", as McCarthy (2010) qualifies it, is captured brilliantly in "Particle Entanglement for Beginners", where the persona declares to be thinking

about the astonishing interconnectedness of things,  
and I mean everything, both before and after  
the Big Bang or should I say the Great Expansion,  
or perhaps even the Sudden Collapse  
of the Steady State Universe,  
and since you are an integral part of this process  
at any given moment since Time kicked-in,  
if only at a fundamental particle level,  
then obviously I'm thinking about you,  
in fact I'm always thinking about you,  
indeed I cannot *not* think about you.

(Murphy 2010: 69)

The voice of the poet resembles here the universal (even transcendental) tone that Walt Whitman acquires in poems such as "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", when evoking the commonality of the human experience and reinforcing the bonds between himself and all readers. Although the silent addressee in Murphy's poem is the persona's beloved, these words could be as well dedicated to the many writers

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9. In her analysis of the influence that Dante has exerted upon contemporary Irish poetry, Gisa Kratz (2011) approaches the work of Gerry Murphy alongside poems by Eavan Boland, Ciaran Carson, Seamus Heaney, Thomas Kinsella and Paul Muldoon, among others. Kratz (2011: 215) discusses the "conspicuously hidden use of the *Commedia*" in Murphy's latest collection, and claims that "[g]iven that Dante's Capaneus stands for the blasphemous human arrogance of rebelling against God, this might imply that Murphy is one of the sinners, his sin perhaps being plagiarism". Indeed, the danger implicit in this act of literary appropriation is acknowledged by Murphy himself in his Imagist poem "Translation and its Discontents", where he visualizes the image of the poet as a "brindled cat [...] chewing/ the nightingale's tongue" (2006: 179).

mentioned in his work, ranging from William Wordsworth, T.S. Eliot and Denise Levertov, to the Portuguese playwright and poet Gil Vicente, the Greek poet George Seferis or the French poet Alfred de Musset.

Thus, it is very difficult at first sight to locate Murphy's poems within the Irish tradition. As he claims, "I think Montague's influence is less than he thinks and more than I imagine. I was influenced by the Russians and Americans long before I met him" (in conversation with Villar-Argáiz 2013). Indeed, the poets upon whom Murphy's work feeds are of a tremendous variety. It could be claimed that the strongest influences are exerted by the American poets e.e. cummings and Charles Simic and the Russian writers Alexander Pushkin and Sergei Alexandrovich Yesenin. Some of his poems in *Torso of an Ex-Girlfriend* (2002) are written after the Romanian poet Marin Sorescu and indeed, Sorescu's influence is traceable all along Murphy's work, particularly in its down-to-earth, plainspoken style, often ironic and full of crafty humour. On the other hand, classical references, and in particular Greek mythology, abound in his work: Odysseus, Daedalus and Apollo alternate easily with intimate evocations of real figures such as Cicero and Brutus, or literary authorities such as Virgil and Dante.

This centrality of Greek leitmotifs in his work somehow reflects, as we will see, the veiled influence of literary forefathers in Ireland such as W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney, who also consistently adopted Greek themes in their work with "a desire", in Heaney's words, "to relocate the centre of the universe at the centre of [his] own home ground" (Heaney 2000: 36). Indeed, this universalized, or globalised, approach to locality is central in Murphy's enterprise. Informed by the landscapes of County Cork,<sup>10</sup> where he was born and now lives, Murphy's poetry also surpasses geographical boundaries. His work records the poet's numerous journeys around the world: Austria, Sicily, Greece, and Spain among others.<sup>11</sup> Thus, his literary

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10. See, for instance, nature poems such as "Landscapes" in his *New and Selected Poems* (2006: 185-7). The influence that local places exert in his work leads Johnston (2007: 111) to remark that Murphy's is a "Cork-flavoured" poetry.

influences reflect the wide spectrum of places covered in his poetry. While Lorca's Andalusian nights are revived in moving lyrics such as "The Moon Rising" (2006: 173), Yeats' vivid portraits of Thoor Ballylee and Innisfree become the backdrop of some other pieces.<sup>12</sup>

In this sense, Murphy's work is consciously global but also incisively local at the same time. Many of his poems are dedicated, or written after, contemporary Irish poets such as Seamus Heaney, Paul Durcan, Thomas McCarthy, Patrick Galvin and Desmond O'Grady. In his latest collection, Murphy writes two elegies in memory of Michael Davitt and Gregory O'Donoghue. In this sense, Murphy revisits the past at different levels (historical, mythological, literary, personal), rediscovering new links and threads between his present condition as a Cork Poet and a rich world of literary sources in which to feed his insatiable imagination. While revisiting historical figures in the past such as Michael Collins and heroic episodes such as the Desmond Rebellion, he also feels compelled to convey the social and political pressures of contemporary Ireland. Bill Clinton's visit to Ireland in 1996 is recalled amusingly in "The Light in the Window". This poem is written after a piece Irish journalist Gerry Kerrigan wrote in a newspaper which recounts Clinton's

bemusement, which the then-President Mary Robinson interpreted as support for the idea of "the emigrant's light she keeps/ ever-burning in a window" (1999: 46). In Murphy's latest collection, we may even discern a veiled critique of a Celtic Tiger country dominated by "a permanent bureaucracy" which often conceals the "graft" of "crooked monks" too busy robbing the state (2000: 16-7).

This critical assessment of Murphy's work would be incomplete without a reference to the rich stylistic variety observed in his work. His poetry is at its best in its shortest expression. The poems which stay in one's mind memorably are haiku-like lyrics such as "Prelude for 30P" (1993: 11) or "Memories of Old Moscow" (1995: 26). In this latter poem dedicated to Paul Durcan, the natural imagery of the conventional haiku craftily conveys political overtones:

Spring it is:  
daffodils  
and leaping squirrels  
in leafing trees,  
the Politburo winding up  
to speak  
of Lenin. (1995: 26)

Indeed, many poems by Murphy are radically Imagist in the directness of presentation, the economy of language and their use of visual effects. These Imagist haiku poems, which prevail all throughout his work, touch themes as varied as death,<sup>13</sup> nature, politics, and of course love. On the other hand, he has a variety of poems in the style of witty, pithy epigrams.<sup>14</sup> These minimalist poems (some of them, unsurprisingly, dedicated to e.e. cummings) counteract with the narrative strand which defines some of his work. Long poems as "Happy Days with the Sendero Luminoso"

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11. Spain features prominently in *The Empty Quarter* (1995) and *Extracts from the Lost Log Book of Christopher Columbus* (1999). See "Aimless in Andalusia", "Holy Week in Granada", "My Dead Father Reading Over my Shoulder" (1995: 15-9, 21), "Boabdil's Moon" and "Paseo" (1999: 68-9).

12. Murphy is particularly drawn to revisit and rewrite W.B. Yeats's work. "For Peace comes Dropping Slow" is written after one of the most popular lines from "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1995: 62). In Murphy's revision, the idyllic rural setting of bees and cabins is substituted by unexpected and shocking images: the explosion of a bomb "drop[ing] softly/ like a Cathedral...". Yeats's "No Second Troy" is recalled in the poem "After Yeats", a love poem in which the poetic voice burns "for the sake" of his beloved's "exquisite face", "[i]f not Troy,/ then at least Thoor Ballylee,/ twice" (2002: 38). In "A Thought from Propertius", Murphy revisits Yeats's mythologically dense poem of the same title, paying homage to the beauty of his poetic muse, who might "have walked to the altar/ through the sacred images/ at Pallas Athena's side" (2010: 72).

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13. Murphy's grotesque approach to death in "Haiku with Cap And Bells" is particularly evocative (1999: 60). Indeed, the afterworld features prominently in his work; this is rarely perceived as comforting, because it usually appears as Dante's Inferno, or as a place "crowded/ by ghosts", "longing/ to feel/ the lovely weight/ of clothes/ once again" (2002: 55).

14. See, for instance, Murphy's droll poem "Oedipus in Harlem": "Yo! Muthafucker" (1999: 41).

(1993: 44) resonate with a particular fluency; there is in most of them a complete absence of punctuation marks, as lines flow smoothly down the page.

The twenty-two poems which have been selected for translation into Spanish, and which are published in the present issue of this journal, reflect this versatile style of Murphy's work, in its mixture of sarcasm and lyricism, an extravagant ventriloquism and the confessional voice. Most of these poems illustrate the Imagist quality of Murphy's poetry, in the sensual and perceptual power of the visual images. Some of these images are delicate and beautiful; others appear as grotesque and irreverent, as putrefied corpses mix with silver

moons rising over tilting constellations. On some other occasions it is the absurd and the utterly unexpected what takes us by surprise, as a seemingly serious political poem ends up with the persona's slipping on the ice and sliding towards the river. In short, these translated poems illustrate the three main concerns commented above: Love, politics, and the necessity of establishing a literary dialogue with other writers, both past and present. They also reveal other subsidiary themes prevalent in Murphy's work, such as death, the act of literary creation itself, and the gendered-debates which dominated the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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