

TIMOTHY MURPHY IN CONVERSATION

Timothy Murphy was born in 1951. His first book, The Deed of Gift, containing poems written over 20 years, appeared from Story Line Press in 1998, when Murphy was 47. Forthcoming is his prose and verse memoir, Set the Ploughshare Deep, and a version of Beowulf, translated with Alan Sullivan. Murphy is a farmer and venture capitalist based in Fargo, North Dakota, where he lives with his partner Sullivan, also a poet, and Murphy's editor and sometime collaborator. This interview was conducted by e-mail between 17 and 26 April 2000.

Gerry Cambridge: Compared to many contemporary poets, your background seems unusual. For the sake of readers, can you give a brief account of it?

Timothy Murphy: I am a small town entrepreneur who has founded and directed perhaps fifteen companies. Their combined debts exceed \$100 million. So I probably owe more money than any poet since Henry VIII.

GC: \$100 million? You're kidding me. But can you pay it back?

TM: I'm not kidding. Yes, we can pay it all off if Scotland buys enough bangers to bail us out.

GC: How do you find peace of mind to write poems?

TM: I don't think I write in a state of peace of mind. I recently saw a kid in an orange tee-shirt with red lettering which read "Contents Under Pressure." That's me.

GC: Was Henry VIII a poet?

TM: Henry VIII was a gifted amateur. His daughter Elizabeth I wrote the first limerick.

GC: What is your impression of the contemporary poetry scene, perhaps especially in the U.S.?

TM: I think the free verse establishment is moribund, the creative writing industry, appalling. But I've been just delighted to learn that I have so many contemporaries writing forcefully in form. Put all of us together, and you have

half a Robert Frost. Our challenge is to find an audience.

GC: Presumably the creative writing industry isn't appalling to those who earn a living by it. Why do you consider it so?

TM: In 1955 Harvard proposed a creative writing program. The real writers on staff, Wilbur and Updike, deep-sixed the proposal, arguing that young writers should be studying geography, geology, astronomy, etc. We have 18-year-olds in this country taking courses in the art of writing their memoirs! Sam [R.S.] Gwynn has presciently observed that if we extrapolate present rates of growth, by 2100 every man, woman and child in America will have a degree in creative writing.

GC: Are you a New Formalist?

TM: I'm an old formalist. By the time I was thirteen I could sing the border ballads from cock crow to sundown, and on Burns Day I still do.

GC: Is Burns an important figure to you?

TM: If you go to New England, most folks will tell you that Frost is the greatest poet of our century. Go to Ireland, and I suspect the common man will say the same of Yeats. But surely no poet was ever dearer to his countrymen than Burns. No greater writer of song lyrics ever lived, and I love his songs more than any book I ever read. People put up with my reedy tenor because I sing Burns with some echo of the passion he brought to his writing. The tunes he wrote to are so devastatingly beautiful that I rank him not among the poets but the angels:

Oh woman, lovely woman fair!
An angel form's faun to thy share;
Twad been o'er meikle to gien thee mair,
I mean an angel's mind.

GC: Burns speaks to a huge audience. You're an entrepreneur. Any ideas on how finding an audience for contemporary poetry might be accomplished?

TM: Dana Gioia's famous essay has some very good suggestions for reaching them. The best venue may be radio, and surely Wendy Cope is a model for us all.

GC: Who do you see as the ideal reader of / listener to your poetry?

TM: A masterful metrist who lives close to the land: R.S. Gwynn or Willie Neill.

GC: As you'd therefore have very few ideal readers, who do you think of as the audience for your poetry?

TM: The U.S. has a million farmers, 30 million hunters, and 50 million fisherman. That's plenty of audience.

GC: Do you regard your background, and what may be called its remoteness from much contemporary, that is to say urban, experience, as an advantage or disadvantage to you as a poet?

TM: Definitely an advantage. I live surrounded by a desolate beauty which Richard Wilbur calls non-Arcadian. I am in love with the horizontal grandeur of the prairie, and even entering a great city is claustrophobic for me.

GC: Could you describe the North Dakotan landscape in terms which might help bring it alive for Scottish/British readers? In Scotland, as Norman MacCaig pointed out, in much of the landscape one walks a hundred yards and the topography changes.

TM: From the banks of the Ohio to Great Falls, Montana lie 1800 miles of prairie. Imagine the North Atlantic planted to wheat. You can sail your prairie schooner forever, and the topography doesn't change. The farms just get bigger and drier.

GC: Could you also give readers some idea of climate in North Dakota?

TM: Our climate is extreme. The record low is -48F and the high, 106F.

GC: You have tended to portray yourself as a 'farmer poet' like Frost, say, or Burns. But Frost was well known among the local farmers for not rising until around 9am, and Burns worked farms which, by U.S. standards, are tiny. Are you really a farmer poet? What does this mean, by North Dakotan standards?

TM: We farm on a scale inconceivable in Europe. The Millers, who farmed my land, farm 22,000 hectares. Bell Farms, which I chair, produces 840,000 pigs

a year. I wrecked my back lifting irrigation pipe in beet fields as a boy, so now I do the dirtiest, most difficult job on the farm.

GC: What's that?

TM: I borrow the money.

GC: You spent 20-odd years developing in comparative isolation as a poet. What did you learn from that? Would you have preferred it otherwise?

TM: I kept good company, poets ranging from Homer to Auden, and am thus free of any later influence. There are young people in this country imitating the likes of Ammons and Ashbery. God forbid!

GC: Surely Ammons and Ashbery have written *some* considerable pieces.

TM: Can you recite anything by either one?

GC: If I could, would that mean it was necessarily better?

TM: If we accept Auden's definition of poetry as memorable speech, certainly.

GC: What would you consider to be the finest fate for your work?

TM: To write a few poems which will be cherished long after I'm gone.

GC: Where do you think modern poetry has gone wrong: if it has?

TM: I think it went horribly wrong with both the turn to free verse and with poets' excessive navel-gazing.

GC: I take it you're not a fan of confessionalism. Do you see no merit in Plath's, Sexton's, or John Berryman's verse, for instance?

TM: You list three suicides. Richard Wilbur has expressed my feeling with great tact in "Cottage Street, 1953."

GC: It's plain that you're opposed to free verse. I take it you never feel inclined to try writing it. If not, why not?

TM: I was a free verse poet, but nothing I wrote sang to me like Yeats or Burns. Therefore I set myself to learn this excruciatingly difficult craft. So to the first question, “No.” To the second, E. A. Robinson said: “I write badly enough as it is.”

GC: Who are the older poets who kept your notion of poetry alive?

TM: For me in isolation, my master, Richard Wilbur. My various friends would list Tony Hecht, Edgar Bowers or Joe Kennedy. For a younger poet in Scotland, an embarrassment of riches: Edwin Morgan, Willie Neill, Kirkpatrick Dobie, etc. They haven’t achieved the notoriety of Pound, but we know their words by heart: “Soft bread born of an iron plough/Is miracle enough for me.” [William Neill.]

GC: Edwin Morgan is a different matter, but Neill and Dobie are probably hardly read by most of the younger Scottish poets, who tend to be urbocentric in vision. That’s more an observation than a criticism How has Wilbur influenced you?

TM: In 1977 he wrote me: “Just because you’re writing about the themes of Constantine Cavafy does not excuse you from the task of sufficiently charging your language.” This was crushing, but I eventually figured out that if I rhymed on every sixth syllable, my lines would sing. Now this despairing farmer is contending with the redemptive power of Wilbur. My poem most influenced by Dick is one you published, “Tessie’s Time.”

GC: I can’t see the Wilbur influence in that poem.

TM: The Wilbur influence in “Tessie’s Time” is that the poem expresses quiet confidence in the face of mortality. It is utterly unlike my typically bleak utterances. I once wanted to write a poem “cold and passionate as the dawn.” Next year I’ll be fifty, and I’d like to write a poem which helps the burdened carry on.

GC: Choose your greatest 20th century poet.

TM: When I was young I would have unhesitatingly said Yeats. Today I only answer with a glorious list: Hardy, Yeats, Frost, Auden, and Wilbur. Recently I’ve read the Mezey/Barnes samizdat translation of the Complete Borges, and it occurs to me that he may surpass our poets. Lacking Spanish, I cannot judge.

GC: Can you frame, briefly, why you consider them the greatest?

TM: John Kennedy said of Frost: "He has bequeathed his nation a body of imperishable verse." The same could be said of any of them. Personally, they all "take the top of my head off."

GC: Which 20th century poet do you consider most over-rated?

TM: T.S. Eliot. Great on cats, but I think his influence has been utterly pernicious.

GC: Surely 'Preludes' and especially a poem like 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is as great in its way as anything by Hardy or Yeats? And Eliot was a terrific critic. Why do you find his influence 'pernicious'?

TM: Prufrock is a great poem for alienated adolescents to outgrow as swiftly as possible. I won a declamation contest at 16 by reciting Prufrock, and I knew the Wasteland too. These days I much prefer Wendy's limerick version. Upon mature consideration I don't think Eliot is worthy to shine Hardy's shoes. Terrific critic? I yield to no man in my love for Tennyson. I used to recite the "Morte D'Arthur" to rapt audiences of boy scouts. But Eliot's assertion of Lord T's vast superiority to Thomas Hardy is pernicious. Hardy invented modern poetry while Tennyson just rode Romanticism into the sunset. Wasn't it Virginia Woolf who said "Tom's problem is he's a fag, and he doesn't know it." Had he been man enough to come to grips with Jean Verdenal, I might feel differently about him. As to his ranking versus Yeats, we know that Eliot held him in awe and Yeats held Eliot in contempt. Both poets were correct. A.D. Hope said "Eliot was a poet with real, but very modest ability."

GC: I agree with you about Hardy. But I think A. D. Hope sounds ridiculous in that essay of his in which he tries to rubbish free verse: not some free verse, but all of it. He simply comes across as utterly close-minded. Magnificent free verse has been written in this century, by Jeffers, Lawrence, and Ted Hughes, among others. But to get back to Eliot: he also said that contemporary poetry, of necessity, had to be difficult. What's your take on that?

TM: Utter nonsense. Your best poems, my best poems are perfectly comprehensible to the man on his tractor. The T'ang master Po Chu-i read his poems to an old toothless peasant woman and rewrote anything she couldn't understand. There's nothing difficult about Auden, and Eliot thought the world of him. According

to Tim Steele's *Missing Measures*, by 1950 even Eliot began to comprehend the extent of the damage he had wrought.

GC: Let me quote something at you: "Rummaging in rubble/critics are scribbling/like fieldmice nibbling/in a farmer's stubble." Do you think your experience of basic hard reality gives you a certain impatience or perhaps insouciance in the face of literary theory?

TM: I'm delighted that someone actually has a Murphy poem by heart! I really don't even know what literary theory is. Robert Penn Warren told me never to waste time reading critical prose (of which he wrote reams), and I never did.

GC: The Scottish poet Don Paterson said in an interview a year or so ago, "The thing to do is to be true to the voice of the poem and, no matter how much you like it, never fall into the trap of thinking it's your voice. You don't have one. You might have favourites, but they aren't you." Personally, I sometimes regard the whole idea of the 'death of the author' as sheer daftness. Do you think of the voice in your poems as your actual voice?

TM: Certainly one must be true to the poem, but a grown poet finds a voice to which he must also be true. In adolescence I longed for a "voice." Much later I found it, and when I belie it, that poem goes in the fire. The contemporaries I most admire have utterly distinctive, unmistakable voices; so I completely disagree with Don Paterson.

GC: Does this mean that you could never see yourself writing a dramatic monologue in which the speaker is not yourself? Or are we talking about 'identifiable style' when we talk of 'voice'?

TM: I wrote many dramatic monologues in my youth, and I'd like to do so again. By 'voice' I mean style and tone and certain choices one comes to expect of that voice.

GC: What's the attitude of the North Dakotan farming community, if such a thing exists, to you as poet?

TM: The few farmers who know my work value it. My memoir in verse and prose, *Set The Ploughshare Deep*, is about to be published. Substantial excerpts will appear in the region's agricultural papers, and then we'll see what farmers think of me.

GC: How have your experiences as a farmer affected your attitude to poetry?

TM: Prior to 1982 I pretty much wrote long, narrative pentameters about homosexuals in ancient Greece and Rome. When I bought my first farm I had my own struggles to deal with and my poetry changed utterly. A concise poet was born.

GC: The great Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean likened poetry to the pearl produced by the grain of sand in the oyster. What's your grain of sand?

TM: Probably being an alcoholic, homosexual altar boy and Eagle Scout.

GC: Isn't that three grains?

TM: The grain of sand is my sexuality, which confounded my own and everyone else's expectations.

GC: You mention alcohol. There is an almost traditional association in Scotland between alcohol and poetry. What do you think of the correlation?

TM: I think drink is an aid to creativity, but one can reach a point where it is mortal poison. I'm there.

GC: You're a 'lapsed' Catholic. Has Catholicism had an influence on your verse? If so, what?

TM: My lapsed faith rarely enters my poems, but it sure as hell irritates the oyster. It's something I need to come to grips with. To realize you're gay at the age of 12, and be told by your church that you'll burn in hell, is goddam painful. The notion of a gay Christian is as inconceivable to me as the notion of a Jewish Nazi. Nonetheless, I was much moved by the images of John Paul in Israel, and I wrote him a sonnet:

Apologia Pro Ecclesia Sua

Holy Father, you slip a folded prayer
between two stone blocks at the Wailing Wall.
What do you pray for? An end to the despair
that holds the land of Palestine in thrall?

Your sermon is an overdue endeavor
to make your peace with women, Muslims, Jews.
But not with homosexuals. No, never.
Ours is the priestly sin you won't excuse.

Crippled by your incurable disease,
you shuffle slowly through the Holy Land
as throngs of sinners praying on their knees
bow to the scepter in your palsied hand.

You preach that God is three and God is one?
If He exists, you are His dying son.

GC: Your gayness in addition to your farming background is an unusual combination one would have thought in a no-doubt conservative farming community. Could you say a little about the difficulties (or their absence) in that situation for yourself as a practising poet.

TM: It makes me an outsider, particularly in a community where every gay boy flees to a gay ghetto in the cities. But it also means that I shall have no progeny, no legacy but my rhymes. And that focuses me on my task.

GC: Do you identify with any tradition of gay writing?

TM: Cavafy showed me a way to write in my twenties, which is why my early poems are way gay. And I certainly identify with gay writers from Classical times: Sappho, Anacreon, Meleagros, Catullus, etc.

GC: Lastly, if you were advising a young poet on how to survive in the current situation, what would you say to him or her?

TM: It would depend on the young poet's aptitudes. I might suggest banking or teaching. Or I might quote Robert Penn Warren: "Go home, boy. Buy a farm. Sink your toes in that rich soil, and grow some roots."