

Discussing Poetry with Albert Murray

an interview by Paul Devlin

Introduction

On several afternoons in January, 2003, Mr. Murray, who impressed Duke Ellington as being "the unsquarrest person I know", discussed his book of poetry with me at his elegant Harlem apartment, which is (neatly) filled with thousands of books. Paintings and sketches by his close friend Romare Bearden line the walls, in addition a large Norman Lewis painting, which looms over what has to be one of the world's most extensive private collections (on record and compact disc) of fully-orchestrated blues idiom music, as Murray defines jazz. He has lived here for the past 41 years with his wife of nearly 62 years, Mozelle, and their daughter Michelle.

After reading his poetry collection consistently for over a year, and hearing Mr. Murray read selections of it to me, with great skill and theatricality, on several occasions for at least six months before it was published, I was eager to discuss the book with him in depth. While we had discussed the book informally on numerous occasions (en route to pick up, say, fresh baked seven-grain bread from Citarella's supermarket, or a Benny Carter arrangement from the Tower Records near Lincoln Center, or a rare book from The Gotham Book Mart or The Strand) I had never asked him any questions about his poems with the text in front of me and a pen and pad ready to take notes, until now. (General interviews talking about more subjects can be found in *Conversations with Albert Murray*, edited by Roberta Maguire of the University of Wisconsin, and published in hardcover and paperback by The University Press of Mississippi, 1997.)

Some Background Information

Albert Murray was born in Nokomis, Alabama in 1916 and grew up on the outskirts of Mobile. He graduated from Tuskegee Institute with a B.S. in Education in 1939. He went on to teach English and American literature and direct the theatre at Tuskegee in the early 1940's, in addition to studying at Northwestern University and The University of Michigan, before entering the Army Air Corps during World War II. Mr. Murray was released from active duty in the Air Corps as a First Lieutenant in 1946 and entered the reserve. He earned an M.A. in literature from New York University in 1948. He then returned to teach at Tuskegee. After some post-graduate study at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1950, he was recalled to active duty in the U.S. Air Force in 1951, and proceeded to serve on assignments throughout the U.S. and in Morocco. He retired from the Air Force with the rank of Major in 1962 and moved to New York to start a literary career as a full time writer. Since 1970 he has published twelve influential, widely and well reviewed books. These include *The Omni-Americans* ("alternatives to the folklore of white supremacy and the fakelore of black pathology"), *South to a Very Old Place* (memoir), *The Hero and the Blues* (literary criticism) *Train Whistle Guitar* (novel, continued in *The Spyglass Tree*, and *The Seven League Boots*), *Stomping the Blues* (an anthropology and poetics of jazz), *Good Morning Blues* (Count Basie's autobiography) *The Blue Devils of Nada* (analysis of twentieth century American fine art), and *Trading Twelves* (correspondence with Ralph Ellison), all ten of which are currently in print in paperback editions from either Vintage or Da Capo. (*South to a Very Old Place* and *Trading Twelves* are also available in Modern Library hardcover editions, and *Stomping the Blues*, which is available in a new edition [2001] from Da Capo with an introduction by Rob Gibson, has also recently been translated into Italian and published in paperback by the University of Bologna [1999].) His two most recent books (*Conjugations and Reiterations*, and an essay collection, *From the Briarpatch File*, also 2001) are available in their original hardcover editions from Pantheon. Between 1970 and 1994 Mr. Murray has been O'Connor Professor of Literature as well as Colgate Professor of Humanities at Colgate University, Du Pont Visiting Professor at Washington and Lee University, Paul Anthony Brick Lecturer at The University of Missouri, writer-in-residence at Emory University, Woodrow Wilson Fellow at Drew University, and Visiting Professor at The University of Massachusetts, in addition to several years of teaching at Barnard College and The New School for Social Research. His papers were recently purchased by the Houghton Library of Harvard University. He is one of the original founders of Jazz@Lincoln Center, and is currently a board member there. Among many other awards, he is recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Book Critics Circle, and the Director's Emeriti Award from Lincoln Center, as well as honorary doctorates from school as different from one another as Colgate, Tuskegee, Hamilton College, and SUNY

Stony Brook. He is also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

General Questions about Poetry

I wondered how after so many years of writing and publishing in prose (although poetic prose) how did he come to publish, at age 85, a volume of formal poetry? Albert Murray was involved with contemporary poetry ever since he was a freshman in college in 1935. He knew how important Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot were to twentieth century expression, and said he was influenced by Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." He was also greatly influenced by Morton Zabel's 1937 *Literary Opinion in America*, and Louis Untermeyer's anthologies of

British and American poetry. Previously, in high school, his main focus was drama, and he knew about the Abbey Theatre and had been reading Yeats and Synge, not to mention Shakespeare. He was always concerned with how things sounded, and had an appreciation for tone, rhythm, and vocabulary. After college, W.H. Auden was one of the main poets he was reading. He admired Auden's combination of serious scholarship and nonchalance. In addition to Auden, in the early 1940's he was also reading Stephen Spender, and C. Day-Lewis. Those two, plus Auden, he said, were like a follow-up to Pound and Eliot. So Murray was always involved with poetry, and would try his hand at it from time to time, writing a poem every now and then.

Murray has said that people re-enact basic survival techniques through ritual. I wondered what he made of the connections between survival, ritual, and poetry. Rituals make the culture, he said, and the survival techniques create the human social configuration. Art is the ultimate extension, elaboration and refinement of the survival technique. Plato, he said, says that art is the "imitation" of life, for Murray, it's more of a re-enactment, or more accurately "re-presentation". The difference between Plato's definition and Murray's is that Plato's is not anthropological – with Plato there is no ritual, just mimicry, for Murray the re-presentation is ritual and actual. Then there are individual options within the re-presentation that will produce your own personal satisfaction, that is where the aesthetic dimension enters the procedure.

So now I wondered, is poetry closer to ritual than prose? His answer was an enthusiastic "yeah!" followed by the explanation that best prose *is* poetry. Everything else is just stage direction and instructions. He reminded me of how he once read me the prologue to Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*, and how he read it like it was a poem; theatrically, with great feeling – better than any audio book reader I've ever heard.

He went on to discuss how Susanne K. Langer says that art "represents the life of human feeling". All art, he said, has to do with how it feels to be human, and poetry is the verbal encapsulation of that. But art is primordial. He gave the example of black people in the United States, from antebellum to now, refining the motions of everyday life into the direction of dance. This resulted from having a percussion-oriented background. They might not have had much freedom or any rights during slavery, he explained, but they had the *idea* of freedom, which did not exist in African tribal life, and a strong aesthetic sense, despite the lack of political rights.

Murray wrote in his simultaneously published essay collection *From the Briarpatch File*, "the primary concern of art is not with beauty per se, as many people seem to think, but with the quality of human consciousness". I wanted to know how this could undermine *a priori* ideas about beauty and undermine *a priori* theories in general, like those of Marx or Freud.

The difference between art and system of thought such as Freud's, Murray explained, is the difference between an adequate metaphor and a rigid concept. Clarifying that, he said that careful constructs trying to explain away everything do not take into account the inevitability of entropy (the tendency of things to become random), and thus might be ignoring some important aspects of actuality. The rituals behind the myths reveal the pragmatic dimensions of human experience. Murray emphasized that the *poetic image* is more flexible than the ideological concept. Think of poetry as a song and dance, he said. He quoted the

great British classicist Gilbert Murray as defining the Greek poetic tradition of the *molpê* as "dance-and-song".

Questions about Specific Poems

At this point I was finished with my general questions and figured I would move on to questions about the specific poems in his book. I started by asking about the first section of poems in the book *Aubades: Epic Exits and Other Twelve Bar Riffs*. The first thing I wanted to be absolutely sure of was the definition of the form of these poems: they are twelve-bar blues stanzas, right? I asked. He nodded that they were. Then I wondered why are they specifically, "Aubades": "morning songs"? An Aubade, he explained, is an "ode to dawn", like people have been composing since the dawn of time, like Grieg does in his "Peer Gynt" suite, for example. Waking up in the morning, he said, is as good a starting point for the blues as any: the lyrics "woke up this morning / blues all around my bed" are the recognition of life's complexities.

Mr. Murray's writing often distinguishes folk art and pop art from fine art. Why then, I wondered, did he decide to use this form of folk blues for this section? What his work represents, he explained, is a cosmopolitan, universal approach to art. That's the difference between him and Langston Hughes; Murray is not trying to be folk. He said he utilizes the *form* the same way Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Charlie Parker use it, and he is not an intellectual or college teacher being pseudo-folk. The use of the blues stanza is a matter of using a basic structural device to express different levels of literary and philosophical insight. It was similar, he said, to Alexander Pope's use of the heroic couplet, and Auden's use of it in *The Double Man*.

The next thing I wondered about the thirteen *Aubades* was if they have a central theme that holds them together. Are they telling a story? I had often read these trying to figure out: is there a coherent architecture to the section, or do they all stand completely on their own as individual poems? Murray explained that they're about the evolution of heroic consciousness, and the development of the sensibility of the hero. The first one goes (and these are to be sung):

*early in the morning
hear the rooster crow
early in the morning
hear the rooster crow
hear the freight train coming
whistle moaning low.*

That sets the scene or mood, like a movie would. It is a blues-setting. Trains, he said, are a part of the idiomatic sensibility in the United States, that's why there developed the styles of the train-whistle guitar and train-whistle harmonica, which were extended, elaborated and refined into jazz compositions such as (for instance) Duke Ellington's "Daybreak Express" and "Loco Madi" and Count Basie's "9:20 Special", all of which use railroad onomatopoeia through different levels of orchestration and musical skill. The poet, he said, reminds you of the elements you live in terms of. Then the next poem in the section says:

*old grandpa stole away
north by freedom train
old grandpa snagged
that underground freedom train
booked his passage through the grape vine
stashed his pack
and prayed for rain, I mean heavy rain.*

The speaker is saying that his grandfather was a slave, Murray said, so now the reader knows it's a black boy. It's historical or epochal, he added. The epic hero defines the culture, right?, he asked. The runaway slave pattern is set, the subject matter of which is *freedom*, he explained. That's the basic metaphor for the United States, he said, everyone who came here was fleeing some kind of slavery. He pointed out that my

ancestors from Ireland were also leaving behind a type of slavery, although it wasn't as formal a type of slavery. Why else would someone come here if they were comfortable back home? So this poem is everyone's story encapsulated, he said, but no storybook heroism exceeds that of the runaway slave. Who are the greatest heroes?: the ones that face the most difficulty. The next poem says:

*once was the north star
then it was the L and N
used to be the north star
then it was the L and N
not talkin about Cincinnati
not tellin nobody where or when.*

This represents the American historical-romance dimension, making reference to the Reconstruction period and the decades afterward. He explained how the North Star used to be the slave's guide to freedom: they used to say "follow the drinking gourd" (the big dipper). But then during and after Reconstruction the L and N line was route to the North. It went from New Orleans, through Mobile, to Cincinnati, from there people would transfer for Chicago or Detroit. So in this poem, the character is catching an *actual train*, but he's still a fugitive of sorts, Murray explained, because often times people would be leaving behind share-cropping contracts which bound them to the land.

That made me wonder about the first lines of second to last poem in the section, "There was no enchanted castle / and there were no magic keys". How did this, I wondered, connect back to the others? He explained that it's like a riff on Kafka's *The Castle*, the second sentence of which, (he reminded me), is the epigraph to his third novel *The Seven League Boots*: "The castle was hidden, veiled in mist and darkness, *nor was there even a glimmer of light to show that a castle was there!*" Kafka's K., he pointed out, never gets to the castle, and nobody really ever gets anywhere, but the point is not to be bitter about it. But, he added, so far as he is concerned, wherever you find your fairy-tale princess, that's the castle! So, by syllogism I inferred that there is more than *one* castle, a castle for everyone, hypothetically. This reminded me of one of the (three) epigraphs to his second book *South to a Very Old Place*, which comes from Thomas Mann's *Joseph in Egypt*: "But lo, the world hath many centers, one for each created being, and about each one it lieth in its own circle".

The next poem in the book, "Landscape With Figures", contains many allusions to "The Wasteland". To what extent, I wanted to know, is Murray riffing on Eliot? He replied that he was swinging the level of rhetoric in the poem, like a jazz musician would. But "Landscape with Figures" is also counter-stating Eliot. He gave an incidental summary of how "The Wasteland" influenced his ideas. Reading "The Wasteland", Murray said, destroyed any notions of what he calls "the folklore of white supremacy and the fakelore of black pathology". Only black intellectuals, he said, bought into the hype about white superiority, which uneducated black people never did: they always thought white people were square, even though they were better educated. But "The Wasteland" prevented him, as an intellectual, from believing in any notions of white supremacy. He mentioned being struck by the irony of all the money spent on surveys about how bad off black people were economically, but what Eliot presents as the condition of *man* was much more serious than unemployment! The rich white folks Eliot was writing about, he explained, were worse off than some of the white folks he knew – and they were in pretty bad shape! White hobos used to come through his brown-skin neighborhood near the railroad bottoms all the time during the Depression looking for odd jobs to do in exchange for some syrup and bread.

But, in Landscape with Figures, he is not only riffing on Eliot. When he writes about "jack johnson's jokey / demolition of jack london's / ever so bright come back hopes / for jim jefferies", he's also playing a riff on Joyce: "Shem is short for Seamus as Jim is jokey for Jacob", which from *Finnegans Wake*. Murray proceeded to mimic Jack Johnson jabbing at Jim Jefferies, beating him bad, and joking with him at the same time. That's how you can tell; he said (and I knew he was pulling my leg), that Jack Johnson might have been part Irish, because that kind of jive comes right out of blarney. If there hadn't been any blarney, there just might not have been any jive!, he said. That is why when he started reading Joyce, he had to

accept the challenge of blarney. Do you think a *jive artist*, he asked laughing along with me, wouldn't accept the challenges posed by blarney, or by *Finnegans Wake*?

One noticeable feature of the poems in this collection is that they often have a very accessible surface meaning. Is there something to be said, I asked, for a Hemingway-like clarity that readily reveals at least one meaning? He answered that he *tries* for clarity, and *tries* to make it accessible. Kenneth Burke, he explained, calls art "equipment for living": pragmatic devices for dealing with human problems. A work of art according to Murray, should add up to insights that are pragmatic and can be put to everyday use.

Next I asked him how he got the idea to do the *Profiles* section. He answered that it comes out of Eliot, but also Marianne Moore and Robert Frost. He mentioned that he learned from Edwin Arlington Robinson's portraits, and also from e.e. cummings. Within *Profiles*, the poems seem to perfectly express the personality of their subjects. Murray's profile of Ernest Hemingway, "Poeta de Epoca" captures Ernest Hemingway's personality, and can be read in Hemingway's voice and Albert Murray's voice and sound authentic. And *William Faulkner: Noun, Place and Verb* I think captures William Faulkner's voice but can also be read in Murray's voice with the same effect. How, I wanted to know, did he manage to achieve this? It is because he identified with both writers, one is convoluted and the other simplified, but he identifies with both. They capture twentieth century American language. The element of play, in the sense of Johan Huizinga's *homo ludens*, he added, is always involved with the creation of art. If someone is involved with art, they are involved with play. He said that when a poet likes the way something sounds, they try for their own take on it: that's accepting the challenges posed by others. You see a device, he said, and you reinvent it, and have fun with it. He gave the example of his poem "Pas de Deux", a serious poem, but at the same time, he is pulling Wallace Stevens' leg. I'm informed by craftsmanship, he added, a device you use is like a mask for an act.

The first poem in the *Profiles* is "Premier Cru U.S.A." This is not, I asked, a profile of an individual but a people? I asked him if he could give a basic rundown of the poem and he was happy to. He described the poem as a profile of 'The American' utilizing the whole idea of twentieth century poetry. He said it used devices from Stevens, Auden, Moore, and Eliot. First, he talks about sociology, which always has to segregate something or someone, and then talks about the "anecdote that most immigrants find most representative". The "representative anecdote" is a term from Kenneth Burke, a dynamic image which is more flexible than that sociological image. The representative anecdotes in the case of this poem are "horatioalgerisms": rags-to-riches success stories about hard work that most immigrants find most representative. Those are the type of stories that motivate immigration in the first place. The poem, he said, adds up to a story of how many in America, with its diverse demography, reached a higher standard of living and importance than European nobility. Thus, with the growth of American power and influence, the Almanach de Gotha, which is the blue-book of European royalty, became obsolete. The poem ends with an heiress asking:

*who is due at the castle
for dinner and global negotiations
bearing non-Greek appropriations?
(and she is answered by someone, perhaps a butler):
the progeny of all that
mayflower, middle passage and steerage
flotsam and jetsam
your highness
that's who.*

Murray gave the example of Henry Kissinger: a refugee from his own country who went on to represent the most powerful country. When an American Secretary of State, no matter what his or her background may be, shows up for a state dinner in a European capital, *only* the cream of the crop, listed in the Almanach de Gotha, is going to be at *that* dinner, and they have to *scramble* to be at the table when the secretary comes! Of course this poem applies to more people than Henry Kissinger. The same is true of Murray's friend Henry Grunwald, who was a refugee, and then went on to become our ambassador to Austria. Other

eminent diplomats which this poem could apply to are Madeline Albright, Colin Powell, and Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Finally, I asked, what would be a good way to sum up the book? He called it a series of playful exercises in poetry, which add up to a distillation of his views on the nature of art, which also gives readers of his other books insight into his devotion to craftsmanship. It is not propaganda or ideology, it's dealing with universal things. Reviewers keep saying things about him like, "his language sings", and that's what he wants. There's no narrow political message here he added, he's not pro-this or pro-that: he's pro-human. The poems are collectively saying "get yourself together to deal with the complexity of life!"