

*Conjugations and Reiterations*

By Albert Murray  
 Pantheon, 2001.  
 \$20.00, hardcover

*Reviewed by Paul Devlin*

In a review of this book in the Summer 2002 issue of *The Antioch Review*, it was said that Albert Murray "writes as the direct heir to the Harlem Renaissance" While this statement was meant as a complement in an enthusiastic and positive review, it is not accurate. Murray's stylistic precedents are closer to W.H. Auden, Marianne Moore, e.e. cummings, and Wallace Stevens than to Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer. It would probably be more accurate to associate Murray's book with the elite post-Auden/post-Stevens poets of today.

Murray's poetry employs a wide variety of techniques, ranging from free verse, to pure syllabic, to twelve-bar blues ballad. They are unselfconscious about praising Louis Armstrong and pull no punches while "swinging" at Sigmund Freud. The book is divided into five sections: I. *Aubades*, II. *Landscape with Figures*, III. *Fable in the Fabric*, IV. *Profiles*, V. *Gospel Reverberations*.

*Section I: Aubades: Epic Exits and Other Twelve Bar Riffs* is a collection of twelve-bar blues stanzas, which deal with the problems of contemporary humanity with wit and resilience. An aubade [pronounced Ø-bahd] is a "morning song". These blues stanzas are much like the ones Murray would have heard as a kid growing up on the outskirts of Mobile, Alabama, around the saw mill-district and the railroad bottoms where trains criss-crossing the country would intersect. Murray grew up looking up to freight train-hopping blues players, whom he immortalized in the character of Luzana Cholly ("Louisiana Charley") in his first novel, *Train Whistle Guitar* (McGraw Hill 1974, Vintage 1998). Here we are treated to thirteen poems which deal with railroad imagery (Underground, and otherwise) and hopping freight trains, memories of elementary school, intellectual identity ("*they used to call me school boy / and I never did deny my name*"\*), frontier resilience ("*I can drink muddy water / sleep in a hollow log*") dating, ("*I said what I said / and her smile said we shall see*") the civil rights movement, ("*takes more than huffing and puffing / to blow them Jim Crow blues away*") place of us as organic carbon based life forms in this mostly inorganic cosmos ("*the world ain't promised me nothing / so it don't owe me nothing at all*").

*Section II: Landscape with Figures*, is one poem in several parts with an implied narrative structure. It is journey through Murray's twentieth century using the fragmented imagery found in the work of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Many parts of the poem can be read as riffs on Eliot's *The Wasteland*. Indeed, the last lines of *Landscape with Figures*, "one must measure one's own pluralities these days" are also riffs on *The Wasteland*'s "one must be so careful these days". The second and fourth stanzas of the poem offer profound meditations on fairy tale themes. He discusses "mug ugly frogs" in which princes are hidden and through whom the future queen's sense of ambiguity is tested. The theme of the fourth stanza is "the truth of fairy tales" and goes on to discuss their lessons for every day existence and real life heroic action. Insights such as this prompted Joseph Campbell (in the 1970's) to call Murray "my favorite contemporary American author".

*Landscape with Figures* contains dozens of references to the greatest works of the twentieth century ("three quarks for Mr. Marx", for example, is an allusion to the phrase "three quarks for Muster Mark" at the beginning to Chapter IV of Book II of *Finnegans Wake*), and when Murray says "to New York then I came", he is of course alluding to line 307 from *The Wasteland*, "To Carthage then I came". Eliot is of course, as he says in *Notes on The Wasteland* quoting from *The Confessions* of Saint Augustine, where Augustine says "to Carthage then I came, where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about my ears". Murray riffs on this and adapts it, pragmatically, to his own experience:

to new york then I came / and found picasso's demoiselles uptown / in cotton club honey  
brown / projecting black and tan / (expense account) fantasy figures / replacing the can  
can / with the shuffle, the shimmy / and the birmingham breakdown.

*Section III: Fable in the Fabric* includes a fun poem using Louis Armstrong's famous quote, "if you got to ass [ask] what it is honey, you ain't with it yet" as a point of departure and theme. This section also includes "KC 4/4" a two-part ode to the tempo of Kansas City jazz which Murray has described in the past as "infinitely flexible", much like the philosophy of William James. It is then very appropriate that the poem begins: "said the nothing if not pragmatic / william james basie", which was indeed Count Basie's real name. How coincidental is it that a musician known for his pragmatic tempo should be named after one of pragmatism's founders? Basie was a great innovator of the Kansas City 4/4 jazz style. Part two of the poem is about Charlie Parker, who also developed his widely imitated and highly influential saxophone style in Kansas City. (If Charlie Parker's full name were Charles Sanders Peirce Parker, then that would just be too eerily uncanny for words.) This section also includes the superb *Pas De Deux*, where Murray outlines his poetic theory: "yes as jamesjoyce came to know / and kennethburke came to say / poetry is symbolic action / and symbolic action, madam / is the dancing of an attitude / and dance madam, don't mean a thing / minus that insouciant element of swing." It should be pointed out that Murray is riffing on *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* by Wallace Stevens. Murray's riffing on Wallace Stevens is reminiscent of Charlie Parker riffing on Cole Porter tunes. Of course, we should think of the Stevens poem *A High-Toned Old Christian Woman*, as well as Stevens's trope of dance, when Murray writes:

so it is swing,  
that is the supreme fiction,  
madam,  
for  
(given the concreteness  
of physical experience *per se*)  
our primary concern  
is the quality of our consciousness  
(how we *feel* about it all)  
and swing, which is movement  
and countermovement  
which is life itself,  
is that elegant resilience  
that poetry would reenact,  
its verbalization being  
aesthetic kinetics!

*Section IV: Profiles*, includes several illuminating profiles, including one of "thelonus, the syncopating monk" (in *Private Stock*, where the introverted piano player is compared to a cloistered monk offering a visitor tastes of vintage wine). William Faulkner is profiled in the long and profoundly moving poem, *William Faulkner: Noun Place and Verb*, which previously appeared in *The New Republic* on December 11, 2000 and in *Faulkner at 100: Prospect and Retrospect* (University Press of Mississippi, 2000). To experience the full, pensive, haunting power of this poem, it must be read start to finish; but for an example of style, here are the first and last stanzas:

memory he said believes he said  
and himself did who was himself  
memory and did himself believe  
and then remember to recollect,  
whose name was william faulkner  
whose place was mississippi  
and whose verb was tell.  
*nigger? the sheriff said in hot pursuit  
of the inherently illusive mississippi*

*christmas,  
nigger? he said. maybe nigger, maybe not  
they told him then  
whose memory like theirs believed in  
shadows  
as much as men*

There is also a debunking of a "wannabe femme fatale" entitled *Miss Hot Stuff* and a powerful and very funny critique of Sigmund Freud. We learn that "dear doctor freud", along with "dear doctor marx" in Murray's poem, is, hilariously, among other things: "master of machine age medicine patents". A sample of *Inside Dopester* is as follows:

herr doktor (which is to say wish doctor)  
freud was the  
father matriarch not of ancient greek  
but of modern viennese mythology  
he now rests, however, not in that city of  
elegant dressage  
(tho minus the syncopating sidewalks)  
but in london the anglo-saxon citadel of  
stiff upper lips  
a refugee from the nastiness  
of teutonic gas holes but not always  
consistently pro-semitic himself  
resenting (somewhat) his own mostly nice  
paterfamilias  
rationalizing it away with a cock and bull formula:  
*parental regard is to greek incest as filial  
disobedience  
is to murder*  
and then charging his confused and  
scandalized patients  
with (and for) hating (or loving) theirs  
revealing in the process his other  
psychosis  
as occupational: *the fee he said  
was part of the therapy*

Finally, *Section V: Gospel Reverberations* are three short religion-themed poems with a fourth, long crown jewel of a poem, *Jawbone Sermon*, in which Murray preaches and swings at the pulpit, bringing an end to this lively volume. *Jawbone Sermon* might remind some people of James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, but it probably is of closer relation to Louis Armstrong's character of "Elder Eatmore", Armstrong's alter-ego as his playful-preacher person, as it is a bit more irreverent than Johnson's poems. At the end of the sermon, the preacher confuses the story of Gideon with that of Sampson. But this is not mocking the preacher, just pointing out that way back when, many preachers did not really know the text of the Bible all that well.

Murray brings great energy and humor to his work which makes it exciting and makes the words come to life. These poems are at times laugh-out-loud hilarious (but not silly), at times poignant, touching but never sentimental, tough but not hard-boiled, and at times employing a razor sharp wit. Above all, these poems celebrate and accept life with all its imperfections and unpredictability.

For a small volume, it is conceivable that one may be discouraged by the price of \$20, I can imagine many people saying "\$20 for this little book?!". Certainly Pantheon, Knopf, or Random House (or whoever actually decides these things) could have charged \$15 or even \$10 and still recouped their money, because

perhaps more people and libraries would have bought it.. But this swinging collection must really be considered a bargain at any price. *Conjugations and Reiterations* is a necessity for students or fans of contemporary poetry, and of the blues and jazz, and American culture in general.