



The Invention of Influence

Peter Cole, Harold Bloom (Foreword)

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Peter Cole has been called "an inspired writer" (*The Nation*) and "one of the handful of authentic poets of his own American generation" (Harold Bloom). In this, his fourth book of poems, he presents a ramifying vision of human linkage. At the heart of the collection stands the stunning title poem, which brings us into the world of Victor Tausk, a maverick and tragic early disciple of Freud who wrote about one of his patients' mental inventions — an "influence machine" that controlled his thoughts. In Cole's symphonic poem, this machine becomes a haunting image for the ways in which tradition and the language of others shape so much of what we think and say. The shorter poems in this rich and surprising volume treat the dynamics of coupling, the curiously varied nature of perfection, the delights of the senses, the perils of poetic vocation, and more.

The Invention of Influence Details

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From Reader Review The Invention of Influence for online ebook

Daniel Klawitter says

Sweet angels of literary mercy!...this is one of the best books of contemporary poetry that I've read recently, certainly the best of 2014 so far, and destined to become a classic.

"Words are seeds, like tastes on another's tongue" writes our poet, Peter Cole, and he plants so many wonderful seeds in this engaging and intelligent collection, and the poems he has planted bloom into lovely lyricism as you read them, and they linger in the mind with a delicious aftertaste.

This is from the center piece poem of the book, The Invention of Influence:

Little by little we master our doubts
and begin addressing ourselves as a friend.
Gently fill the bowl to the brim,
or rather, let the bowl fill.
The task is to carry it, full, uphill.

Well, this book is full of accomplished poem after poem from an author well regarded as a translator of Hebrew/Jewish poets. So well regarded, in fact, that he has won the National Jewish Book Award for Poetry, an Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and he was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2007.

This book "took the top of my head off", as Emily Dickenson said great poetry should do.

Philippe says

I've been schlepping this poetry collection with me through the past year but I find it hard to review. Peter Cole is an American/Israeli poet who has built a considerable reputation as a translator of contemporary and ancient Hebrew poetry. *The Invention of Influence* is the fourth collection of his own poetry. It strikes me as a supremely conceptual kind of work that muses on a few key themes that, as far as I am aware of, resonate with the intuitions reflected in ancient Jewish wisdom tradition and Kabbalah. In a very stimulating conversation transcribed for the Paris Review, Cole holds that "a lot of the Kabbalistic poetry I've translated embodies the view that what's beyond language is somehow already in language, that language is revelation, or that it's all we'll ever know of revelation." This grating sensation of being on the cusp, of hovering on the frontier of meaning, of bottomless 'unzulänglichkeit', seems to be at the heart of this poetry. But Cole's tone is remarkably restrained, almost didactic or scholarly at times. I quite like that but amateurs of a more effusive and subjective kind of poetry won't be charmed.

The book falls into three parts. An introductory section and epilogue made up of shorter poems frame the long central poem that gave the collection its title. It's a very complicated affair centring on the tragic relationship between Freud and his maverick disciple Victor Tausk. I have not been able to penetrate it.

But there has been more than enough meat in the outer sections to prompt me to return to this book again and again. I really enjoyed scratching away at these quasi-Kabbalistic riddles. The poem transcribed below is emblematic for Cole's rather deadpan, didactic style.

The Perfect State

1.

*The perfect state of being human isn't perfection,
it's becoming, the Greeks say, every more real
in nearing but never quite reaching a certain ideal,
like translation. It's deficient. A chronic affection.*

2.

*Perfection for the Kabbalist is reached
only when the fortress is breached
to the brokenness, the husks, the Other Side.
So imperfection becomes a guide.*

3.

*Ancient aspirants imagined perfection
as progress up - to palaces on high.
For us the question is can one bring
that heightened vision into an eye?*

4.

*Perfection doesn't entail a return
to a wholeness where one never yearns,
as female is fused to male, back-to-back.
Perfection isn't facing what we lack.*

5.

*Perfection, the feeling philosopher says,
suggests an openness to endless change -
the self in radical revolution
within a self it soon finds strange.*

6.

*The spirit warrior's path to perfection
comprises trials involving great fear -
an allegorical learning to fathom
the power passing through one's ear.*

7.

*The mind's movement toward perfection
is joy, said the Jew who continued to grind
the glass that would kill him - and sorrow is in
our knowing we're leaving perfection behind.*

8.

*A person approaches her perfect nature,
and becomes herself in the truest sense,
by acceding at times to the angel within her-
its flitting presence her only defense*

*against perfection's petrification,
suggests Avicenna's Celestial Ascent
(pun intended), as subtraction
leads her to more than she ever meant.*

(Now that I'm writing up this review I pick up unsuspected resonances with another book recently reviewed, Charles Rosen's *The Frontiers of Meaning: Three Informal Lectures on Music*. Rosen, like Cole, was also a son of Jewish immigrants.)

The Jewish Book Council says

Reviewed by Lucy Biederman for the Jewish Book Council

J. says

Intellectually vigorous poetry with a tendency toward formalism. Read it cold, and you will enjoy the poetry; however, some knowledge of Kabbalah and Pirkei Avot will be beneficial for deeper readings. In particular, I was struck by the title poem (a long poem, comprising the entire second section), which presents a study of Viktor Tausk and Freud that incorporates correspondence, etc. Other standouts: "Of Time and Intensity," "On Coupling," "Paranoia: A Prologue," "Paranoia: A Primer," "Song of the Shattering Vessels" (excellent!!!), and "The Reluctant Kabbalist's Sonnet" (excellent!!!).

Kirsten Adam says

I picked this book at random from the "new arrivals shelf" at the library. As with all goodreads ratings, my rating more reflects my experience reading the book than its level of intellectual merit.

On a strictly academic level, this collection of poems probably merits more of a 4 or 4.5 stars rating. The works are clearly well-researched and interestingly bridge an ancient style of writing with a modern one. If I was well-versed in the nuances of the structure and literary traditions of the poetry of Kabbalah, I'm sure I would have found the poems more fluid and enjoyable. Without such academic scaffolding, however, I found the poems inaccessible and wooden. There were stanzas and a few poems where I forgot the structure and actually became enveloped in the content, but most of the time the structure was a distracting, salient feature. The words often felt forced into, rather than leaping from, the lines.
