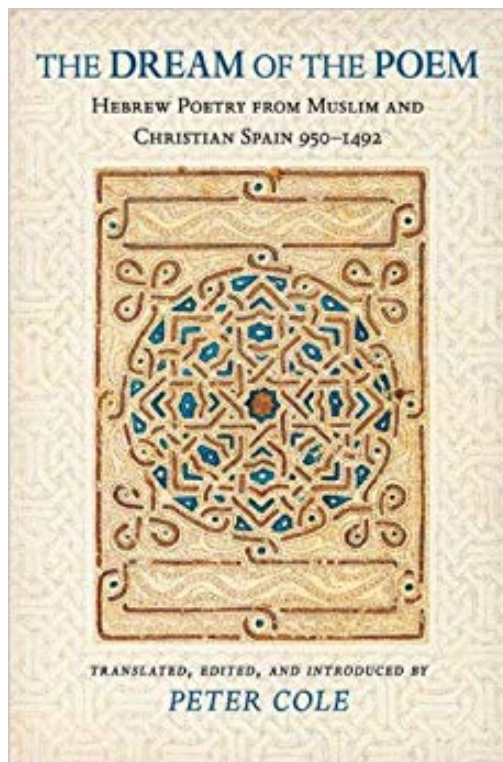


The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950-1492 (Lockert Library of Poetry in Translation) *by* Peter Cole



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Reviews of the **The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950-1492 (Lockert Library of Poetry in Translation)** *by* Peter Cole

Zieryn

Peter Cole has provided the literary world with an astonishing service; he has managed to recuperate an entire poetic tradition and securely place it within the crown of the greatest achievements of the

Western canon prior to Shakespeare. It is humbling to read these poems, many of which were almost lost forever, some of which were not discovered until the 20th century. They are arguably the finest poems written in Hebrew since the Bible and, unlike medieval and Renaissance poetry in English, Cole's remarkable translations allow them to be read fluently with a diction and tone that is uncannily modern. References to religious and cultural borrowings, from the Arabic tradition, from the Torah and from the Psalms, as well as the manner of choosing a particular word, are clearly explained in more than 200 pages of Notes, and do not in any way impede the pleasure of the general reader. Many of the poems feel strictly contemporaneous. Here is "The Apple", an ekphrastic poem by Shmu'el Hanagid (993-1056):

I

I, when you notice,

am cast in gold:

the bite of the ignorant

frightens me.

II

An apple filled with spices:

silver coated with gold.

And others that grow in the orchard

beside it, bright as rubies.

I asked it: Why aren't you like those?

Soft, with your skin exposed?

And it answered in silence: Because

boors and fools have jaws.

Cole's careful attention to half-rhymes and his skill in metrical pacing are evident throughout. Secular poems on many subjects, from the joys of wine and sangria to sexual passion and romantic ambivalence are given the same loving attention as those that are more obviously devotional and pietistic. Cole's general introduction to the volume is exemplary in laying out the method of translation and his rationale for it. In addition to generous selections from the four giants of the period (Hanagid, Shelomo Ibn Gabirol, Moshe Ibn Ezra, and Yehuda HaLevi), many poets here receive their first exposure in English. Among the many felicities of this volume are the brief and touching biographies devoted to each poet as the heading to his selection of work. This is one of the finest examples of the art of poetic translation in modern times; an abridged bilingual edition of just the major poems would be a further gift.

Hudora

Cole's outstanding book spans more than five centuries of Iberian Hebrew poetry from over 50 poets. It is an amazing work of scholarship and literary finesse: 300 pages of text supplemented with

almost 200 pages of notes. But enough with the statistics.

Until their final expulsion in 1492, Jews remained an important minority community in Spain (and neighboring Provence) under both Muslim and Christian rule. The flowering of culture under "La Convivencia" has been well documented, but *The Dream of the Poem* stands out in its historical scope, beautiful translations, and focus on the Jewish community.

Each poet is introduced in a one-to-two page biography followed by a selection of works, sometimes only one or two poems, but many pages for the major figures. To read the biographies alone gives a clear sense of the development of the Jewish community over the years, as it moved from close proximity to power under the Muslims to increasing alienation and ultimately expulsion under the Christians.

But then to read Cole's translations of the poems... It's all here, from divine praise to homoeroticism, from bitter rivalries among poets to a growing sense of betrayal and dread in the last century before the expulsion. As you read, remember that many of these poets were writing Hebrew in Arabic script using Arabic forms and themes in addition to their own.

If you want to be carried off to a distant time and place - or you just want to read some wonderful poetry - this one is hard to beat.

Kazijora

I knew very little about the milieu of these poems. What an amazing and inspiring introduction. I am deeply impressed by the age of tolerance and the cosmopolitan nature of Judaeo-Islamic world in mediaeval Spain.

Celace

Please note that the one star is for the terribly edited Kindle version, not for the book of medieval Iberian poems beautifully and lovingly translated by Peter Cole. ***Do not purchase the Kindle version.*** I am returning mine for a refund, as most of it is quite literally unreadable. The Introduction is OK, just a few words here and there joined together like Siamese twins. It's the poetry that suffers (i.e., most of the book). One of the major problems (there are a great many) is that the font size fluctuates arbitrarily from print that is slightly too large to print that is so minute as to be illegible. And this from Princeton, no less, a major university press! Deep shame on Princeton University Press and Amazon for producing this miserable version! How bad is it? I would not even take the Kindle version were it offered to me free. That's how bad it is. And the Kindle price is only a few dollars less than the print version.

It will be obvious to anyone who has the misfortune to buy the book that no one has edited or even cast a weary eye on the Kindle version. The book is so sloppy as to be either a very bad joke or a tremendous insult. I'm sure Mr. Cole has no idea of what they (the robotic mobi conversion algorithms) have done to what appears (as far as I have read) to be a work of translation of the highest caliber; translation that is, raised to an art. Most Kindle books of verse, even those by major modern poets, appear problematic at best. We have the technology, certainly; we have had it for almost two decades, at least. But there is absolutely no quality control at either Kindle or the publishing houses. Is the work outsourced to distant non-English speaking lands? Are these books converted in yurts in Outer Mongolia by illiterate shepherds in their off hours?

I caution Kindle readers of poetry (or any Kindle book, actually) never to purchase a book unless they have first sampled it, and by "sample," I mean more than a poem or two. However, I do intend to buy the print version of the book and to review it properly after I have read and (I'm sure) enjoyed it.

NiceOne

Great poetry.

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