

***The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain 950-1492*, translated, edited, and introduced by Peter Cole. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 548 pages. \$50.00**

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In the middle of the tenth century, a young Moroccan Jewish poet named Dunash Ben Labrat arrived in the Andalusian city of Cordoba, then ruled by the blue-eyed caliph of Spanish-Basque descent ‘Abd al-Rahmaan III. Dunash had studied in Baghdad, then considered the most spectacular city in the world, with the head of the Babylonian Jewish academy of Sura, Sa’adia Ben Yosef, al-Fayuumi, a man of great learning, who taught him, among other things, a keen appreciation of Arabic and its notion of *fasaaha* (radiance, clarity) as well as its importance **for the understanding of Hebrew Scripture**. Tenth-century Cordoba was a second Baghdad: a sophisticated city, where Jews, Muslims, and Christians **lived** in relative harmony and Arabic was the dominant language. “By the mid-tenth century,” writes Peter Cole, “Jews, Christians, North African Berber Muslims, and Christian converts were competing with the Arabs themselves for mastery of that most beautiful of languages, which became both the lingua franca of al-Andalus and the currency of high culture.” Indeed, conditions for the Jews were so favorable that the conversion rate was low: **They spoke Arabic, adopted native dress**, and worked side by side with their Muslim neighbors. Dunash, settling in Cordoba and adapting the inflections of Arabic poetry to his native Hebrew, declared, “Let Scripture be your Eden, and the Arabs’ books your paradise grove.”

The rapprochement in question produced what appears to have been, on the evidence of Cole's meticulously edited and captivating anthology, a Golden Age for lyric poetry. Not that the Jewish poets had it easy: There was much conflict, discrimination, and banishment throughout the years, increasing after the collapse of the Muslim caliphate in the early thirteenth century. But even as poets took refuge in Mediterranean cities **in what is now France**, like Narbonne and Perpignan, the Judeo-Arabic poetic vein continued to be mined until it was abruptly cut off by the twin events of 1492: the fall of the last Muslim stronghold in Granada and the Edict of Expulsion, banishing all Jews from Spanish soil. It was also, of course, the year Ferdinand and Isabella sent Columbus on his journey to the Indies.

What was the new poetry like? "The adaption of the Arabic quantitative meters," Peter Cole tells us, "based on distinctions between the length of vowels, endowed Hebrew for the first time with precise . . . criteria for measuring the pace and weave of the line." Many of the lyrics were modeled on the monorhymed Arabic *qasida* (ode), along with the shorter lyric and epigrammatic fragment known as the *quita*'. Often sung or recited to musical accompaniment, the verse is highly stylized, heavily accented, and replete with **"biblical inlay" (*shibbutz*): the wings of an ordinary carrier pigeon, for example, are typically described as "scented with myrrh" (Song of Songs 3:6)**. Although primarily a secular poetry, its every line is likely to allude to Genesis or the Prophets or the Song of Solomon. But if the Hebrew Bible provides imagery and rhetoric, the stylistic ideal is that of the *fasaaha* associated with the Quran.

Cole's account of these poetic features, in his introduction, notes, and a glossary, **which** provides us with definitions of forms like the *muwashshah*, ("an Andalusian Arabic strophic form apparently developed from Romance folk poetry," that weaves together two rhyme schemes), represents poetic scholarship at its best. At the same time, it raises expectations that

the actual translations do not—perhaps cannot—meet. Both quantitative meter and monorhyme are quite alien to English, and the elaborately sounded structures of *qasida* or *ge'ula* (a poem of redemption, salvation or deliverance), with their reliance on pun, acrostic, and double entendre, don't quite survive the translation process. Perhaps, then, *The Dream of the Poem* is best understood—as is often the case with poetry translation—as a compendium of black and white reproductions of what are, in the original, evidently gorgeously colorful illuminated plates.

This caveat aside, Cole has given us an anthology that is genuinely ground-breaking in its opening of the poetic field. Drawing on both canonical Hebrew texts as well as material retrieved from libraries and private collections scattered around the globe, **he** introduces us to the work of more than fifty poets, each accorded a biographical introduction and elaborate textual and explanatory notes that often provide the literal reading of a given line as a point of comparison to the freer interpretations and renderings Cole prefers. The hybridization of Arabic and Hebrew, liturgical and secular imagery, Andalusian court culture and folk motif, makes for a highly distinctive verbal texture.

The four poets whom Cole takes to be the “giants of Hebrew verse”—Shmu'el HaNagid, Shelomo Ibn Gabairol, Moshe Ibn Ezra, Yehuda HaLevi—belong primarily to the eleventh century. HaNagid, known in Arabic circles as Isma'il Ibn Naghrela (from the Latin *niger* meaning “dark”), was prime minister in the Muslim state of Granada, a military commander, a scholar of religious law, biblical exegete and grammarian, as well as poet. But as a young man, confronting the Berber revolt of 1010-13, he also knew exile and poverty (see the moving “On Fleeing his City”); for years, legend has it, he worked in Malaga as a professional scribe, thus mastering Arabic writing.

His oeuvre of nearly two-thousand poems, most of them unpublished until the 1930s, includes an impressive body of satire, elegy, hymns of praise, but his most intriguing poems, to my mind, are the short erotic “gazelle” (*tzvi*) poems, the gazelle (or fawn, deer, doe, or roe), being the pervasive emblem of desire for the Hebrew poets of Spain, following, as they did, the convention of the *ghazal*, the Arabic designation for the erotic poem that is also a cognate of the Hebrew *tzvi*. Consider the following:

In fact, I love that fawn,
Cutting roses in your garden—
which is why I’ve earned your wrath.
If you could see him,
the others would never find you.

“Scrape me some honey
from your hive,” he said.
 “I’ll have mine from your tongue,
I replied. Then he bristled
 and said to me, sullen:

 “And sin before the living God?”
 “The sin’s on me,” I answered, “my lord.”

Here, oddly enough, the tissue of Biblical allusions (lines 6-7, for example, allude to Judges 14: 9—“But he told them not that he had scraped the honey out of the body of the lion”) is used to define homoerotic desire. Or does it? The final couplet, alluding, as it does, to Samuel 25:24 (“And she fell at his feet, and said: “Upon me, my lord upon me be the iniquity”), suggests that the beloved may, after all, be a woman, but the address to “my lord” and the notion of sin imply otherwise. Desire, whether homo- or heterosexual, is, in any case, regularly frustrated, whether or not we take the gazelle as male or female. And the tension between strict verse form (the original has monorhyme and fixed meter), formal Biblical echo, and colloquial speech makes this a unique lyric mode.

Moshe Ibn Ezra, born half a century after NaHagid and exiled from Granada to Northern Spain at the time of the Almoravid invasion from North Africa (1090), has a more graphic *tzvi* poem called “Heart’s Desire,” in which the fawn, after a night of **intimacy** with the poet, turns on his lover:

His anger swelled
and he complained,
rebuking me

and shouting: *Stop!*
Enough now!
You’re forcing me . . .

And Yehuda HaLevi, by Cole’s account the most famous and revered of the medieval Spanish Hebrew poets, has many short erotic *tzvi* poems, this time clearly addressed to women:

A doe washes her clothes
in the stream of my tears
and sets them out to dry
in the glow of her glory—
she doesn’t need the spring’s
water, with my
two eyes, or the sun’s
rays with her splendor.

This poem originally carried the heading “He improvised this when he passed by a stream where laundry was being done,” and indeed “A doe washes her clothes” fuses its courtly love motif with a kind of realism not found in its counterpart in Provençal troubadour lyric. The same naturalistic vein is found in the Hebrew elegies and poems of lament, for example, Ibn Gabirol’s remarkably caustic “On Leaving Saragossa,” whose speaker rails against those “whose fathers were not fit / to be dogs to my flock of sheep,” “grasshoppers,” who must be broken “like dirt or like straw, / my tongue’s pitchfork thrust into their hay.”

Often vindictive and sometimes downright nasty, at once sensual and mystical, graphic in its reliance on the actual Spanish landscape and yet heavily dependent on Scriptural convention, this is a poetry that calls into question all our stereotypes about the inevitable divide between Islam and Judaism, Arab and Jew. Indeed, Cole has produced not only a major translation project but also what might make a perfect teaching anthology—an anthology designed to make university students as well as their instructors think *otherwise*.

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