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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “unclarity is idealistic, and clarifying.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

CHOICE WORDS

Poet Peter Cole carefully navigates the abstract and timeless.

By Daisy Fried

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Things on Which I’ve Stumbled, by Peter Cole. New Directions. \$14.95.

Peter Cole, an American MacArthur Fellow who lives in Jerusalem, deals in matters that come with capital letters. Truth, Morality, Jewishness, Art and Art’s Responsibility, Love, Zionism v. Palestinian Nationhood. On the last of these, a subject that dominates this book, Cole is not easy to pin down. Certainly if poets were the acknowledged legislators of the world, AIPAC would have sicced itself on him long since. He told one interviewer he lives in Jerusalem not for religious reasons but because “I had a sense that my own poetry was going to come out of a Hebrew tradition, and that, in order to really explore that fully and properly, I had to learn Hebrew, and to learn Hebrew I had to come here.” Cole, also a translator of Hebrew and Arabic poetry, founded Ibis Editions, which publishes both Hebrew and Arabic literature in translation with the express intention of having the two literatures considered side by side. And he’s clearly deeply disturbed by Israel’s aggression against Palestine. Here are all four lines of “Israel Is,” which first appeared earlier this year in the *Nation*:

Israel is he, or she, who wrestles
with God—call him what you will,

not some goon (with a rabbi and gun)
in a pre-fab home on a biblical hill.

Cole’s “Palestine: A Sestina” begins with a reference to the late left-wing Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said’s book *The Question of Palestine*, and two of its end-

words are “Palestine” and “pain.” Most modern sestinas read like workshop exercises and go on about five stanzas too long. Not Cole’s. His music is too strange. The sestina begins in the passive voice, and relies mostly, though not exclusively, on abstractions:

Hackles are raised at the mere mention of Palestine,
let alone The Question of—who owns the pain?
Often it seems the real victims here are the hills—
those pulsing ridges, whose folds and tender fuzz of green
kill with softness. On earth, it’s true, we’re only guests,
but people live in places, and stake out claims to land.

The itchy diction, working its way through the repetitive, circular, interweaving form, comes rather triumphantly to mirror the tortuous, intractable, complex nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Cole’s interest in Israel and things Hebraic is not limited to contemporary politics. Quotations from Hebrew texts—sacred, poetic, philosophical, profane—interspersed with Cole’s own commentary, make up much of the title poem, “Things on Which I’ve Stumbled.” “Poetry and all that garbage,” the poem begins, and proceeds through a magpie’s nest of textual scraps through which we see glimmers of humanity’s urges and longings and wonderings. “Tell me, what is man / if not dirt and a worm,” goes one scrap; “the gold brocade is very pretty / but not what I wanted exactly,” goes another. The material “Things on Which I’ve Stumbled” is based on comes from the Genizah Research Unit in Cambridge, England. A geniza, Cole explains in a fascinating footnote, is a storeroom for old and discarded sacred Hebrew texts; according to Jewish law, these cannot be thrown out, but must be given ritual burial. The Cambridge geniza contains not only sacred texts but poems, personal letters, contracts, and shopping lists, and was almost burned as being “nothing of any interest or value.” Cole ends his expansive collage/retrieval project of a poem with the words “These are things on which I’ve stumbled.” In a further footnote he adds a quote from the Bahir, an ancient, anonymous, mystical work of Midrash: “This refers to things that a person cannot grasp unless they cause him to stumble.”

Stumbling to get steady, misunderstanding as a way toward understanding: these themes underlie the austere and rigorously pleasurable “Notes on Bewilderment,” fifty semi-aphoristic speculations which add up to a kind of moral, literary, and political mindscape. The “Notes” are five more-or-less tetrameter lines each, with a regular rhyme scheme. Ranging in his references (Spinoza, Rothko, Machado, dead Jews, dead Palestinians) and dealing with Big Questions, Cole’s mind is continually not made up:

The bereaved speakers droned on and on about
“humanity,” entitled by their grief.
Not having to suspend anything in
the way of disbelief, I sat listening
but left with the faint hope I’d brought in doubt.
—“xxv”

There's a lot of close-reading fun to be had here, but what's particularly striking is the last line's deliberate fuzzing of whether hope or doubt wins out. Did he leave with the same faint hope he brought, doubtfully, with him? Did he leave doubting even that faint hope? Did he leave hoping that he'd introduced doubt to the speakers? Cole, determinedly unfunny, is very witty.

There's something admirable, and oddly charming, in Cole's old-fashioned impulse toward synthesis. Yet for Cole, everything is always also falling apart. This isn't poetry that makes you go "ahhh." It makes you think, and think hard. Cole's immersion in unclarity is idealistic, and clarifying.

Guggenheim Fellow Daisy Fried lives in Philadelphia; her latest book, *My Brother Is Getting Arrested Again*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. This article originally appeared in Poetry magazine. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at poetryfoundation.org.

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