Book Review and Commentary


Reviewing Thomas Cole’s book, *No Color is My Kind,* was both trying and rewarding. These two experiences alternated from the beginning to the very end. The question as to whose story is told in the book became sufficiently resolved for me when I invoked the work of Wolfgang Iser (1989), a literary theorist, George Steiner (1975), who wrote on the process of translation, and Melanie Klein (1946), who wrote of the psychological process of projective identification. The fact that the book began as an autobiography by Eldrewey Stearns and later changed into a biography of Stearns written by Cole is important. We are told that difficulties in finding an interested publisher led to the change which was suggested by the present publisher, University of Texas Press. This manifest explanation would seem to make the question of whose story is told quite moot but it does not for reasons that will be made clear below. The latent issues surrounding the problem of whose story it is will indeed be of tremendous interest to psychoanalysts.

*No Color is My Kind* is a book in three parts. The first is an account of Stearns’ involvement in the launching of the Civil Rights movement in Houston and the adversity and triumphs he and his collaborators faced; the second is the story of Stearns’ upbringing with poignant issues of loss and attempted repair of important objects in his internal world against the backdrop of external strife and extreme hardship in segregated Texas; and the third is Stearns’ surrender to the law and to the mental illness of manic-depression. In this third part the book ends with Cole’s attempt to recover the separate selves of himself as a subject/author and Stearns as the Other who is simultaneously the object of this biography and the subject whose story made the book worth writing. Cole begins the book in the following way:

This is the story of a man whose soul is not rested. I met Eldrewey Stearns in September 1984. I was teaching at the University of Texas Medical Branch, in
a weekly psychiatry case conference which introduced medical students to the characteristics of major mental disorders. As an historian and faculty member from the Institute for the Medical Humanities, my role was to highlight ethical, cultural, or historical issues in discussions that followed interviews with hospitalized patients.

In the context of Cole’s involvement in teaching, it was important to him that a 52 year old African-American patient who considered his untold story important was thenceforth singularly reduced to a person suffering from a bi-polar illness. For Cole, there was a story here, a multiply woven-story, a story behind a story, as it were. For over a decade, then, Cole would strive to assist Stearns, the patient, to tell his “important” story.

However, the task of telling another person’s story is not a straightforward proposition. Such a story cannot be told without disclosing one’s own, at least not easily. Who, indeed, is the dreamer that dreams and stages his life and who is the dreamer that assists in the telling and staging of a multifaceted life? More to the point, the business of one subject/author, called biographer, writing the story of an Other, is like an act of colonization. Sometimes, however, the colonization goes in both directions so that the Other who is apparently the object of the story gets to colonize the subject/author who writes. There is a peculiar form of doubling here and this is precisely the issue that intrigued me the most as I read Cole’s No Color is My Kind.

As psychoanalysts and other scholars read No Color is My Kind, I think that three forms of doubling will present themselves: selection, combination, and self-disclosure (Iser, 1989). Under the rubric of selection, that is, the relationship between the text of this biography and the racist world from which elements were extracted to tell the story, I found some of the lurid details excessive and not helpful in explicating the elements of his background that contributed to Stearns’ civil rights ambitions or his eventual pathological formations. A good example of such redundancies was the story of bestiality, especially where such an isolated phenomenon could erroneously be received by a reader as commonplace among African-Americans who grew up on farms in the American South. When the book’s project changed from Stearns’ autobiography to Cole’s biography of Stearns and the integration of Houston, more discourse on what is selected and what fits into the world of racism became necessary. Such a discourse was often lacking in the early parts of the book.

Under the rubric of combination, I found Cole at his best when he facilitated the crossing of intertextual boundaries between the contributions of Stearns and those of other civil rights activists. His research, independent of Stearns, paid off. I suspect that here, he did not give Stearns a great deal of authority to affirm his account and did not need to. Cole’s own research ensured that what is said by Stearns ceased to be itself and instead...