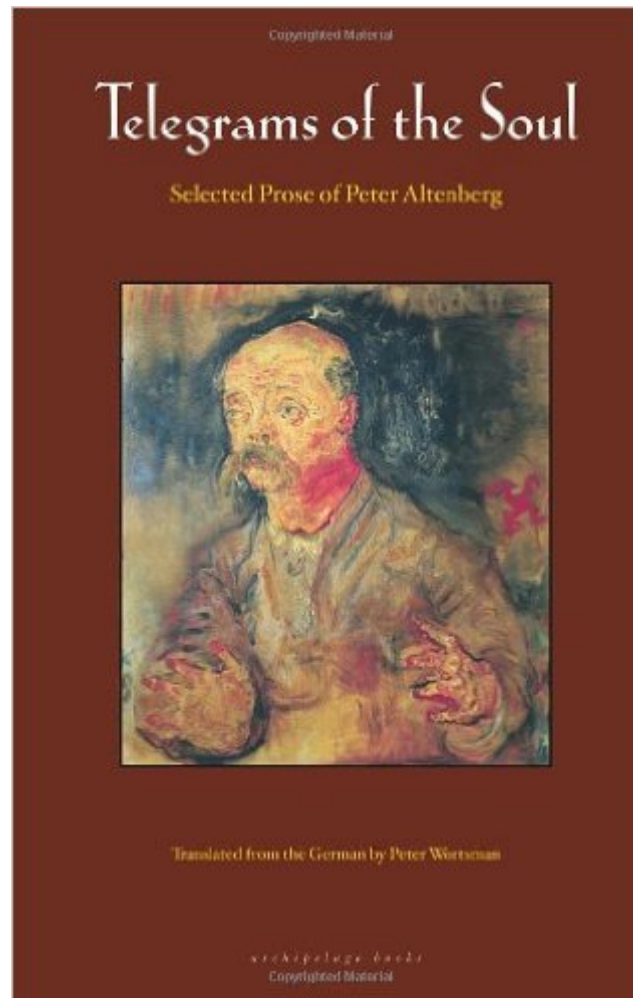


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Telegrams Of The Soul



Synopsis

"If it be permitted to speak of âlove at first sound,â then thatâs what I experienced in my first encounter with this poet of prose." So said Thomas Mann of the work of Peter Altenberg. A virtuoso Fin-de-Si cle Viennese innovator of what he called the "telegram style" of writing, Altenbergâs signature short prose straddles the line between the poetic and the prosaic, fiction and observation, harsh verity and whimsical vignette. Inspired by the prose poems of Charles Baudelaire and the Feuilletonâa light journalistic reflection of his dayâAltenberg carved out a spare, strikingly modern aesthetic that speaks with an eerie prescience to our own impatient time. Peter Wortsmanâs new selection and translation reads like a sly lyrical wink from the turn-of-the-century of the telegram to the turn-of-the-millennium of email.

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Customer Reviews

This is a book designed for the sheer pleasure of reading. Its rough-paper cover is handsome and feels good in the hand, and the stories and vignettes printed within are short and consumable within minutes. In this case the book-buyer is truly a "consumer." There's no plot, no difficulty, no need even to read them in order. You just pick out one after the other and consume it as you please. Each one takes you back to a time when literature was not hype, not "riveting," not "jaw-dropping," and not "a must read." It was a time when you were thrilled by an author's curious point of view, unexpected turn of phrase and strange semblance of form. You had to read his work because it did something to you, maybe went straight to your heart and mind, and you wanted to feel the way he

felt and see the way he saw. It's a different kind of "must read" and a different kind of purpose, so private that you almost hope the book will not find many readers, because the pleasure seems so much your own. Yet one could find a utilitarian purpose in it. Peter Altenberg walks out in the city and sees people every day or on occasion, in the midst of life. He notes something down at his cafe or goes home with an idea in mind. This he commits to paper as fast as he can to capture the moment. He is convinced that "Everything is remarkable if our perspective of it is remarkable! And every little local incident written up in the daily newspaper can sound the depths of life, revealing all the tragic and the comic, the same as Shakespeare's tragedies!" Once the idea is on paper, it is fixed and he does not touch it again. It has crystallized into a prose poem. Writers constipated with the weight of significance and classes in creative writing burdened with technique could find a lesson here.

Peter Altenberg (1859-1919) was one of the literary lions of Vienna around the turn of the last century. His specialty was short prose pieces that were poetic in their economy, turns of phrase, and allusiveness. He was equally known for his carefree, unorthodox lifestyle, which included being a habitu  of the coffeehouses and, though a life-long bachelor, a lover of many women (and, like Lewis Carroll, an ardent admirer of prepubescent girls). In his excellent afterword to this volume, the translator Peter Wortsman summarizes Altenberg as a "turn-of-the-century Viennese raconteur-scribe, * * * a walker and a talker and an inveterate loll-about." Wortsman also passes along Franz Kafka's assessment: "Peter Altenberg is a genius of nullifications, a singular idealist who discovers the splendors of this world like cigarette butts in the ashtrays of coffeehouses." TELEGRAMS OF THE SOUL is a collection of 90 of Altenberg's short prose pieces, none over five pages and many less than a page. They are, in Altenberg's words, "extracts from life", as seen and fancifully embroidered and creatively expressed by a man with a poet's sensibilities. Most deal with everyday bourgeois life in Vienna, circa 1895 to 1915, which included not only the coffeehouses and the Prater, but also the "Puff" (brothel) and such exotica as the village of Africans that for a year was set up as an exhibit at the Vienna Zoo. Many of the pieces are whimsical. Some are cynical. A few are silly but they are offset by a few that are acutely poignant. A fair percentage, however, left me mildly baffled or utterly indifferent; too much time and distance, perhaps, separates Altenberg's aesthetic sensibility from mine. It is difficult to read more than four or five pieces at a time.

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