



Compass of Affection: Poems New and Selected

Scott Cairns

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In this provocative collection, rich with expression and dense with meaning, Scott Cairns expresses an immediate, incarnate theology of God's power and presence in the world. Spanning thirty years and including selections from four of his previous collections, *Compass of Affection* illuminates the poet's longstanding engagement with language as revelation, and with poetry as way of discovery.

For those who already admire the poetry of Scott Cairns and for those who have yet to be introduced, this essential volume presents the best of his work – the holy made tangible, love made flesh, and theology performed rather than discussed.

Praise for Scott Cairns' work

“Scott Cairns [is] perhaps the most important and promising religious poet of his generation.”—*Prairie Schooner*

“The voice of Cairns is conversational and coaxing—confiding in us secrets that seem to be our own.”—*Publishers Weekly*

Compass of Affection: Poems New and Selected Details

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From Reader Review Compass of Affection: Poems New and Selected for online ebook

Marilyn McEntyre says

Cairns' poems are stirring, challenging, surprising, rich with spiritual awareness, edgy, enlivening. He's one of a kind. He links the life of the spirit to the physicality of the body, the appetites, memory, and daily life in fresh ways that defy simple classification.

Volkert says

Disclosure: I have known the poet for many years.

So, how does one review a collection of poems by a friend; an anthology spanning 21 years, from 1985 to 2006? To put it simply, it's like mining for gold.

I found some of these poems hard work, in my case too much work, to fully digest and comprehend. I would've benefited with an introduction, a guide, to explain the subtleties of language and context, but such a guide was not available on these pages.

But it was worth mining through these works to find the gold, those pieces that shimmer and shine and are worth every ounce of their weight.

The author was one of my guides into the Orthodox Christian faith in the late 1990s. And many of these poems continue to elucidate the richness of this faith, this spirituality, this life that I continue to embrace, more fully, as he does himself.

One poem, one that I posted by my desk for many years, is indicative of the spiritual depth found here:

Setting Out

Pilgrim: What is it that you do here?

Monk: We fall, and we get up again.

In time, even the slowest pilgrim might articulate a turn. Given time enough,

the slowest pilgrim--even he--might register some small measure of belated

progress. The road was, more or less, less compelling than the hut, but as the benefit

of time allowed the hut's distractions to attain a vaguely musty scent, and all the novel

knickknacks to acquire a fine veneer of bone-white dust, the road became then somewhat more

attractive, and as the weather made a timely if quite brief concession, the pilgrim took this all

to be an open invitation to set out.

--Scott Cairns

Not all of these poems are about Scott's spiritual pilgrimage. Another poem ("A Prior Despair") that resonated particularly with me was about the loss of love, and his search for finding it again. I guess that's a journey of a different kind, but one that I could relate to.

So, if you pick up this volume, be prepared to do some mining. You'll be rewarded for the effort!

dthaase says

Cairns is a fantastic poet -- a very worthwhile collection.

Stephen Case says

I often don't "get" modern poetry, and I'd like to think it's not from lack of trying. I miss the rhyme and the rhythm that makes poetry fun to read aloud, or I simply don't pick up on the deeper or more subtle rhythms of contemporary poetry. But I heard that Cairns was supposed to be the greatest Christian poet alive, and that he was Orthodox to boot, so I thought I'd give this a chance. This volume collects poems from several of his previous volumes with some new poetry as well. It wasn't until the poems from PHILOKALIA (2006) that I started to really enjoy it, to pick up on the symbolism and the meanings, and this likely had to do with the fact that his poems from that point get distinctly religious and distinctly Orthodox. So I had a leg up on deciphering the metaphors, understanding his language. And he does indeed speak the language very well. He has a gift for distilling the mythos and praxis of much of Orthodox spirituality into half a dozen spare lines. As for example when he discusses repentance, in "Adventures in New Testament Greek: Metanoia", here the last stanza:

as if the slow pilgrim
has been surprised to find
that sin is not so bad
as it is a waste of time.

"Possible Answers to Prayer" was another favorite and illustrates what Cairns is able to often do when discussing prayer: convict the shallowness of so much contemporary prayer while simultaneously giving a call to the sea depths of true prayer:

Your intermittent concern for the sick,
the suffering, the needy poor is sometimes
recognizable to me, if not to them.

There was much here I did not understand. There was the frustration I often run into when reading poetry of trying to extract some meaning from a handful of lovely metaphors. But there's obviously a great deal of wisdom as well.

This passage, from "Late Apocalypse" struck me as well

... I turned and saw before me
seven bright convenience stores, each laden with a hoard
of sugars and of oils, fuels devised by economics to obtain
the most satisfaction with the least actual good . . .

His poetry is not perfectly happy, because the world is broken (and what poet, ever, is perfectly happy?). And yet behind so many of the poems there is a hint of that golden glow in Orthodox icons (which he writes about as well), the light of the world to come, or of this world if we can train the eyes of the heart to see.

Jenn Cavanaugh says

I should probably stop reading Scott Cairns. I feel like I inherited his sense of humor and I'm genetically hard-wired to sound more like him over the phone as I grow up. Now if I ever make it as a poet I'll always wonder if it was nepotism. And I can't get this Darth Vader line out of my head.

Meredith says

I love you, Scott Cairns. You are lovely and witty and sensitive and I wish you were my dad (my dad doesn't understand what the internet is, so he'll never read this, don't worry). Therefore I must decline to give you a star-rating...

p.s. for the record, I read this in preparation for an interview I had with Scott, so keep in mind, it was kind of like having to read something for school....and no, I wasn't getting paid for the interview, so that made it even worse. and I'm not good with poetry, most of the time, or anything remotely spiritual. But Scott Cairns the man gets five big motherfuckin' stars

Charity says

After a weak start, the poems improved!

Nate says

Great summary of Scott Cairns' poetry. Gives a great introduction to his work. Usually really deep; sometimes too self-indulgent. C'mon, he's a poet.

Paul says

On the road again, with the incarnate theology of delight and doubt at his disposal, the slowly plodding poet-pilgrim falls into adventures in iconography and "language as revelation" under the burning sky of affection and its compass of stillness: passion, performance, poetry, prayer, and presence...

Joanna Eleftheriou says

AWESOME. SCOTT CAIRNS' POETRY KEEPS MOVING BEYOND THE LIMITS OF BRILIANCE.

Jennifer says

Great book of poetry to read and discuss with friends!!

PJ Wenzel says

The best way to describe this book is "weird." Some of it is just not that good, from a poetic perspective from what I can tell. I have a limited scope of poetic reading, but this was mixed up emotion, and bad writing. A few good lines or interesting raw emotion, and interesting observations. But those things a genius does not make. For all the ravings about Cairns, I found that my 10 year old could make similar observations, and maybe write better poetry. Wish I would have just checked out from the library!

Sarah Elizabeth says

Scott Cairns is a beautiful poet. His style is different, definitely, but his writing is clearly a heartfelt exploration of faith and God. A Greek Orthodox, he is very aware of symbolism and uses metaphor wonderfully.

Philip says

And he told me he was enjoying the poet Scott Cairns, and I told him that I was enjoying the poet Anna Kamienska. Somehow we figured out they were both published by Paraclete Press. (Probably deduced from the *Other Poetry from Paraclete Press* in the back of the books, but I'm no detective.) So I told him he should check out Kamienska from the library, and he told me he'd loan me Cairns for me to peruse. And peruse I did. (Peruse of course in its correct usage.)

So, my neighbor loaned me the book. It looked like it had never been opened. The dust-jacket was flawless. Not even an oily thumb-print-smudge. Not a crease in a page, nor an egg salad stain ...but there was proof in the pages:

That, and all the conversations we'd had. Man, look at that thing! It's perfect! It's immaculate! I'd like to point out that any wrinkles you see in this paper come from me. And that circle-y looking thing at the top is from where *my* pen ran out of ink.

I think it's important to keep notes on what I read, what I like. That's part of the reason I have a goodreads account. I try to keep paper handy when I'm reading – especially if I'm reading poetry. Unfortunately, my notes generally end up on several snippets of paper and old library receipts – as my notes for *Compass of Affection* did:

I even left myself a note to remind me to get paper next time. (Or this time.) I hate not having paper when I read – especially poetry. There's so much there. The damned poets have to cram so much meaning in every line.

I love religiously philosophical poetry – poetry that asks, “What is this God? And what does He demand of me?”

I was particularly drawn to Cairns’ “Adventures in New Testament Greek.”

Such as *Mysterion*: “What our habit has obtained for us appears/ a somewhat meager view of mystery.” Later in the poem: “More familiar, glib, and gnostic bullshit/ aside, the loss the body suffers when/ sacrament is pared into a tidy/ picture postcard of absent circumstance/” And later: “*Mysterion* is of a piece, enormous/ enough to span the reach of what we see and what we don’t.”

Such as *Hairesis*: “*Hairesis* finds its home in *choice*, in having chosen/ one likely story over its more well received counterpart,/ whose form - to the heretic - looks far// less compelling.”

Thoughts on prayer: “Of course the mind is more often a roar,/ within whose din one is hard pressed to hear/ so much as a single word clearly. Prayer?// Not likely. Unless you concede the blur/ of confused, compelled, competing desire/ of the mind brings forth the posture of prayer.”

I loved “Disciplinary Treatises” ”*On the Embarrassment of the Last Things*” I’ll write a short quote out as if it were prose. “Centuries of dire prophecy have taught us all to be, well, unconvinced. And there have been decades, entire scores of years when, to be frank, wholesale destruction didn’t sound so bad, considering. You remember, we were *all* disappointed. That the world never ended meant we had to get out of bed after all...”

There's so much good in here. So much to ponder. It was fun having my neighbor's list so I could see what he liked and compare it to what I liked. ...I don't think I'll give him my notes on the book however.
