

Scott Cairns

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Scott Cairns is the author of five collections of poetry, *The Theology of Doubt*, *The Translation of Babel*, *Figures for the Ghost*, *Recovered Body*, and, most recently, *Philokalia: New & Selected Poems*. With W. Scott Olsen, he co-edited *The Sacred Place*, a collection of prose and verse celebrating the intersections of landscape and ideas of the holy. His poetry has been included in *Best Spiritual Writing*, 1998 and 2000, *The Pushcart Prize XXVI, Upholding Mystery* (Oxford, 1997), *The Best of Prairie Schooner*, and *Shadow & Light*, among other anthologies. His work has appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Republic*, *Poetry*, *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion*, *Spiritus*, *Western Humanities Review*, and many other journals. He has taught American literature, poetry writing, and poetics courses at Westminster College, University of North Texas, Old Dominion University, and at University of Missouri, where he is currently Professor of English. Since 1993, he has served as series editor for the Vassar Miller Prize in Poetry. His current projects include *Slow Pilgrim*, further poetic studies of the mystical theology of Eastern Christianity, and a collection of essays focussing on sacramental poetics.

Statement on Poetics

Lately (the past decade or so), I've suspected a relationship between my sense of poetic practice and my sense of religious practice. This is not such a new idea, of course; in fact, my thinking has been assisted to a great degree by some relatively old ideas (Coleridge's *natura naturans*, etc.) and by certain ideas that are, frankly, ancient (the mystical theology of the Eastern Church).

Throughout Christendom, both historically and at present, the Church's central sacramental rite, *communion*, has been and continues to be variously apprehended—by those who celebrate it as well as by those who do not. And while I am quite confident that this rite is of a species of phenomena (that is, *Mystery*) never to be actually *understood*, I might offer two examples of how it is *discussed*, trusting that by these examples I might better indicate my sense of what I mean by *the poetic*, and what I mean when I say that I sense a connection between *Sacrament* and the poetic. If, as may happen, such a comparison occasions a glimpse of sacrament that some of us had not previously appreciated, then all the better.

When I was a child attending Temple Baptist Church in Tacoma, Washington, we spoke of the matter, rather simply and, as it were, *King James Biblically*, as "The Lord's Supper." Along with this gesture, we rather pointedly characterized communion as a solemn meal shared, and, I think, deliberately emphasized its primarily *retrospective*, its *commemorative* activity. My own understanding of that communion service was roughly this: once a month, we shared grape juice, which *reminded* us of Christ's shed blood, and we chewed and swallowed tiny squares of hard cracker, which *reminded* us of Christ's broken body.

Neither the juice nor the cracker was, of itself, *mysterious*, though both may have served as signs directing the mind to a very great Mystery. These days, most "poems" I come across in a given week seem to work that way, too. Their words point to an event, or to a stilled moment, or to a

sentiment, which, mysterious as *it* may have been, remains an occasion distinct from the "poem" and its language. In most cases, then, the poem serves as the cracker, prepared so as to be ingested in order that the mind might be thereby directed to another, *more real* event, an event whose import and whose agency are always, necessarily, fixed in the past.

The poetic, however, is something else: it is an occasion of immediate and observed—which is to say, *present—presence*; it is an occasion of ongoing, *generative* agency. And this strikes me as a condition that is far more suggestive of Eucharistic communion as it is understood and performed in the Eastern Church and in those elements of the Western Church that embrace a sacramental theology. The wine becomes the mystical blood of Jesus Christ and the bread becomes His mystical body. One *might* be satisfied to say that the elements *symbolize* those realities, if only one could recover *that* word's ancient sense of mutual participation, if only our word *symbol* hadn't been diminished over the centuries to serving as a synonym for *sign*. At any rate, as we partake of those Mysteries, we are in the *present* presence of *Very God of Very God* dipped into our mouths on a spoon, and we partake, locally, in His Entire and Indivisible Being, which is boundless.

Moreover, we are by that agency changed, made more like Him, bearing—as we now do—His creative and *re-creative* energies in our sanctified persons. This is appalling, and it serves to exemplify what I would call *the poetic: the presence and activity of inexhaustible, indeterminate enormity apprehended in a discreet space*.

Whether a literary work occurs in prose or verse, whether it is also characterized as fiction, as nonfiction, or as drama, whether or not it may also support additional, extra-textual narratives or propositions, it is *poetic* to the extent that it occasions further generation—to the extent, in other words, that it bears fruit.

One can hardly read a passage of Virgil or of Dante (or certain poems of Dickinson, Eliot, Frost, Stevens, or Bishop, etc.) without experiencing a responsive flight of the imagination; if the reader is also a poet, that flight may well result in a *responsive* (or, as George Steiner might say, a therefore critically *responsible*) poem; if the reader is also a scholar, that flight may well result in a similarly co-creative *reading* that provides for rich and enriching readings thereafter.

Like the Holy Mysteries, then, poems—if they are truly poems—*have agency, bear energy*, are concerned more with making something *with* and *of* the observer than they are concerned with referring her to a past event, to a proposition, or to *any* previously discovered, previously circumscribed matter.

Like the Holy Mysteries, then, *the poetic* is involved with *communication—not*, however, in the sense that *that* word has become misunderstood as the uni-directional distribution of information, rather, in the sense that something of each communicant is imparted to the other, and necessarily in the sense that *new creation* is the result.

Like the Holy Mysteries, then, the poetic is utterly involved with presence, not merely its history, but also its *currency*, and its continuing, life-giving current, its *influence*. To the extent that its activity moves at all along the *temporal* plane, that activity will be more accurately understood as moving *forward* than as moving *back*.