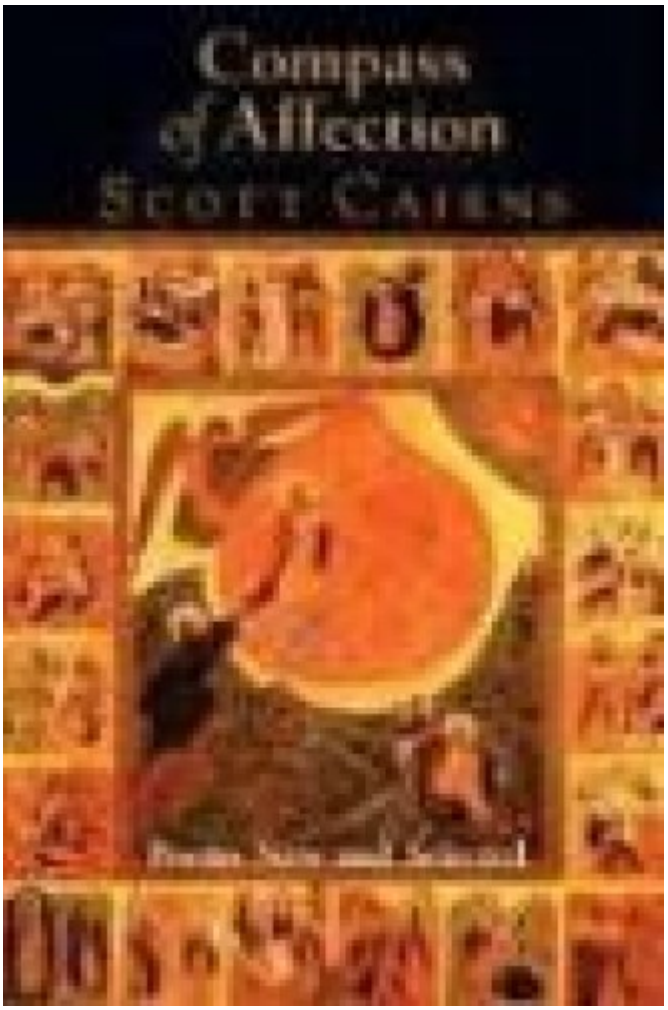
Compass of Affection/Short Trip to the Edge/Love's Immensity

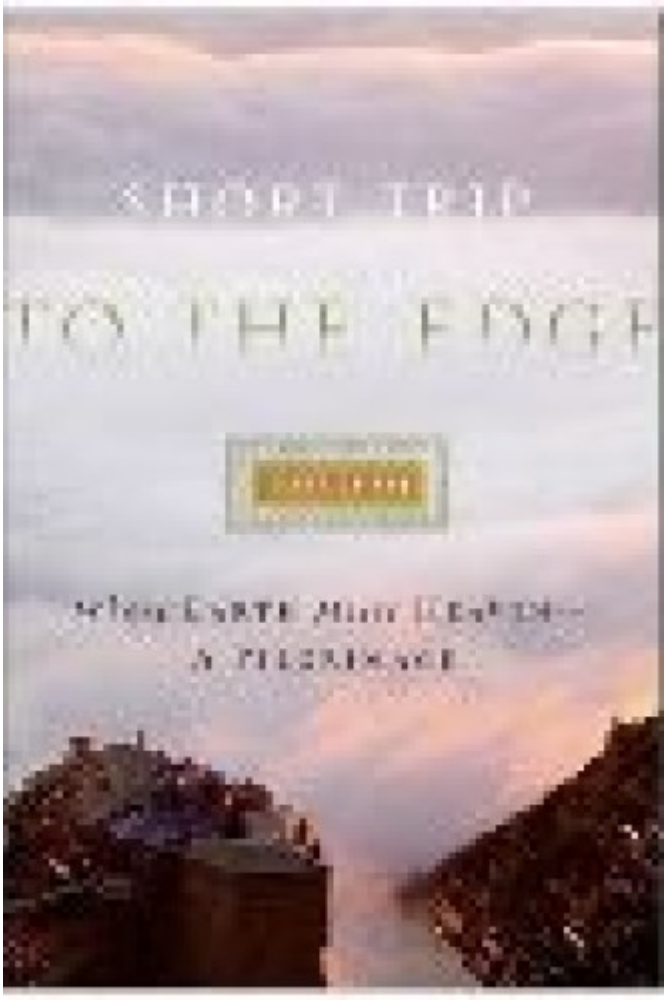
reviewed by Brian Volck in the October 16, 2007 issue

In Review



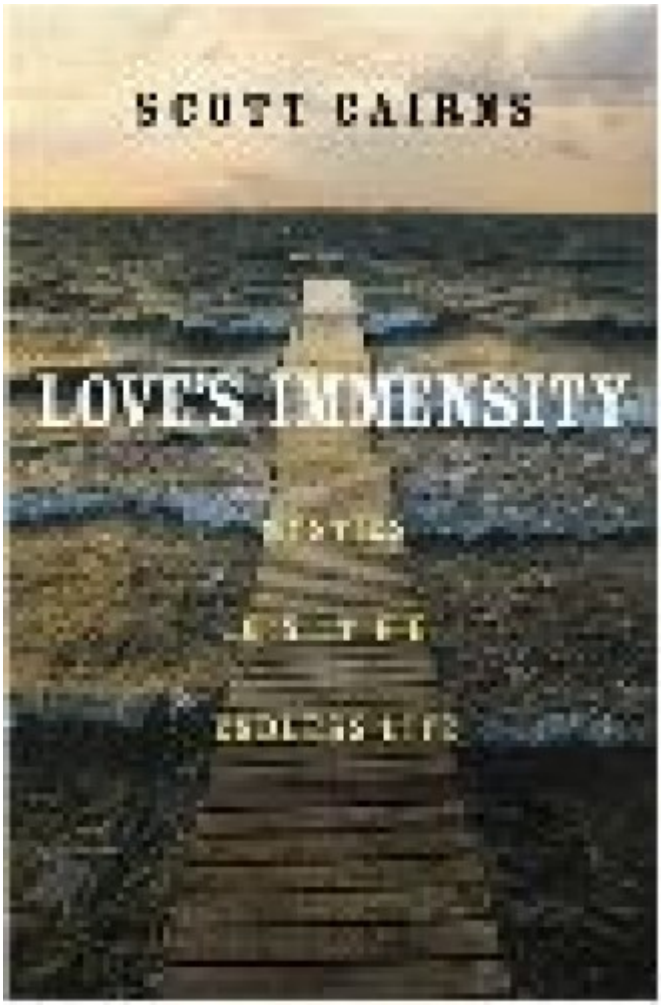
Compass of Affection: Poems New and Selected

Scott Cairns
Paraclete



Short Trip to the Edge: Where Earth Meets Heaven—A Pilgrimage

Scott Cairns
HarperOne



Love's Immensity: Mystics on the Endless Life

Scott Cairns
Paraclete

At a time when some Westerners are rediscovering the theological riches of the Christian East, others scratch their heads at Orthodoxy, bewildered by a tradition laden with monks, Mary and icons, yet free of popes, priestly celibacy and statues. The vertiginous beauty of Orthodox liturgy led Baptist-raised Scott Cairns into the Orthodox Church, and he strives to embody sacramental experience in his poetry.

That’s hardly a common goal among contemporary poets, but Cairns knows he’s hunting exotic quarry that demands a refreshing reevaluation of poetry’s standard tools. “The problem at the heart / of metaphor,” he once observed, “is how neatly it breaks down / to *this* and *that*.” In Cairns’s poetry, in which encounters with suffering and death are laced with droll humor, and the words of ancient desert

ascetics preface assessments of contemporary events, things are never so neat. His verse has the hearty complexity of a tasty bowl of Greek *stifado*, served American style. Three new books, all released in a year's time, are welcome additions to his body of work.

Compass of Affection is a gorgeous book from Paraclete Press, a small publishing house with an eye for beauty and proportion. There's a generous sampling here from previous poetry collections, but a quarter of the volume is new. The later work is fresh and challenging: Cairns plays with forms while expanding on and deepening old themes. One intriguing phrase, "lean into," appears in several recent poems, perhaps too often for some. Still, it's an apt image for what Cairns asks of his readers: an attentive posture that the whole body assumes, a muscular practice of poise and concentration.

Cairns has long demonstrated an affinity for W. H. Auden in his deceptively informal manner, self-deprecating wit and deft explorations of theological immensities, but the new poems also show—sometimes explicitly—the emerging influence of Greek poets Giorgos Seferis and Odysseus Elytis. Nonetheless, Cairns's poetry is accessible to any reader willing to slow down and listen, as one might attend to the words of a wise and good friend.

That said, much of the new material quivers with the edginess of post-9/11 America, and the volume's final poem, simply titled "September 11," offers an intriguing theological gloss to the shock and surprise of that day. A longer poem, "Narration," explores, through a rapid-fire sequence of subordinate clauses, some of the more disturbing American responses to this new unease, concluding:

> The kingdom has come. We appear quite taken with it.
> For the time being, God's will has acquiesced to our own,
> at least
> in this, the kingdom of anxiety, the only realm we care to
> know.

The "we" here is important. Precise in his use of pronouns, Cairns implicates himself in whatever sin he sheds light on. In poems like "Bad Theology: A Quiz," he offers troubling personal questions where others might resort to blanket accusation. Even in angry poems like "Late Apocalypse," an acute awareness of shared folly prevents a collapse into righteous indignation. Cairns is uninterested, it seems, in definitively

separating sheep from goats, preferring to remind his readers that sin, that universal stain, “is not so bad / as it is a waste of time.”

A growing awareness that he was wasting time in desultory and ineffectual attempts at prayer led Cairns to Mount Athos, the Greek peninsula entirely devoted to prayer, home only to monks and male pilgrims. What Cairns hoped above all to find is a *staretz*, a monastic spiritual father to guide him on his way. In *Short Trip to the Edge* , a prose memoir, he offers a relaxed, reverent account of three pilgrimages to the holy mountain’s centuries-old monasteries. Cairns carefully unpacks the world of Orthodox monasticism, explaining much that Protestants may find suspiciously Catholic: the veneration of icons and relics, repetitive prayer and communal ascetic discipline. The definitions in his helpful “pilgrim’s glossary” of Greek words crackle with characteristic humor.

A pilgrimage to Athos is no relaxing weekend retreat but a challenging journey, first by jet, bus and boat, then overland by microbus or on foot, as one crisscrosses the peninsula on sometimes overgrown paths linking the monasteries and hermitages, some in ruins, others in a state of constant restoration. Resident monks take the practice of hospitality quite seriously, some more joyfully than others.

“Even on Mount Athos,” Cairns observes, “there appears to be something of a spectrum. On one end . . . open, embracing, full of joy; on the other end . . . careful, suspicious-seeming, severe.” With measured fairness, Cairns later notes that pilgrims too come in a spectrum, from prayerful to arrogant. On the whole, though, a sense of subdued joy—what Orthodox call *harmolype*, or “bright sadness”—comes through in Cairns’s rendering of the monastic life: the sweetness of life together mingles with the tearful struggle to leave behind anything that distracts from the worship of God, and all this is crowned by a deep awareness of divine mercy.

Some of the most moving of these wonderful, interconnected tales are of the third trip Cairns took to Athos, accompanied by his adolescent son, Benjamin. At one point, Cairns and his son follow an Athonite priest, Father Matthew, to an ossuary undergoing renovation. “Meet my future roommates,” the priest quips, pulling back a tarp covering a row of skulls, then continues: “Sort of makes a point, eh? All that we accomplish pretty much comes down to this.” Hardly the typical father-son road trip.

Cairns's newest volume, *Love's Immensity*, is a verse rendering of selected Christian mystical writers—of the East and West—from the first through the 19th centuries. This is neither a scholarly book nor an encyclopedic collection but an anthology of spiritual treasures, translated and freely adapted to Cairns's wry poetic style. (One excerpt from Gregory of Nazianzus contains the verb *schlepped*; it may be the first time any word of the Cappadocian fathers has been translated into Yiddish.)

Cairns is having serious fun here, imaginatively rendering even familiar passages into something at once immediate and strange, like his creative reinterpretation of Paul's discourse on love:

> . . . I was a child, and spoke like one;
> My thought? Very like a child's.
> I gripped my reason with both
> my little fists. It smelled suspiciously of milk.

Readers familiar with the mystical tradition will find old friends here, though so slim a volume is sure to spawn arguments over criteria for selection. Among the Western mystics, Gertrude of Helfta and Catherine of Siena appear, but Hildegard of Bingen and Teresa of Ávila do not. From the East, there's Syncletica of Alexandria and Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain but nothing from Maximos the Confessor or Symeon the New Theologian. Cairns clearly intends his anthology to gesture toward an immensity rather than to encompass it. Even so, don't plan on reading the collection cover to cover in one sitting. Such rich fare requires frequent, thoughtful samplings, each one leaving the reader hungry for more.

Cairns's poetry has always been filled with surprising conjunctions and startling paradoxes. Having now added memoir and verse translation to his repertoire, he continues to reward his readers. For poets and pilgrims famished for beauty and depth, all three books set quite a feast.