

Review of R. T. Smith's *The Cardinal Heart*

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The Cardinal Heart. R. T. Smith. Livingston, AL: Livingston University Press, 1991. 59 pages.

In his tenth published collection of poems, Southern poet R. T. Smith continues his exploration of man and nature through fifty-one poems, some new and some previously published. Smith, who is alumni writer-in-residence at Auburn University and an editor of *Southern Humanities Review*, continues a path in American writing forged by Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, and more recently Annie Dillard, one where nature provides man the medium for learning about the world and himself.

Unlike the rough, rural picture of Southern life from inside the pickup or on a deer stand which Smith has done so well in earlier collections like *Rural Route* (1981) and *The Hollow Log Lounge* (1985), subjects one would expect in a Larry Brown story, this collection of poetry is more quiet, more probing, and contains a greater shadowing of religious overtones. The poet who coldly hunted the owl in *From the High Dive* (1983), now returns to a song of "simplicity, the grace of handmade things, / things that return and belong" he tells us in "The Bird Carver." The honesty of the emotions and incidents he so gracefully shapes in his poems captures the hearts of his readers as Smith describes moments of memory, of searching, and of revelation.

The poems in the first of four divisions in the collection establish a pattern that Smith has followed in many of his earlier works. He is a poet of moments. Whether it be gazing at the landscape from a window as in "Kitchen Window" or discovering a dead cardinal at the end of winter as in "The Cardinal Heart," the incidents he describes are filled with times of gaining knowledge or self-awareness. The lightning-struck oak with "gnarled arms" in "Kitchen Window" which stretches for

"one more chance to writhe / and blaze like an angel" and the sacrificial cardinal heart in the title poem of the collection become symbols or amulets which offer to the poet and the reader greater self-knowledge.

Sometimes this knowledge may be an acceptance of aging as in "Cardinal Directions." Or in "Back Porch" where the poet, ineptly building a porch, compares his constructing to a bird fashioning his nest, this realization is an acceptance of order wherever we can find it in this chaotic world. In many of these poems the knowledge comes through contemplating a cardinal, but just as often it might be a bluejay, sparrow, grackle, bobwhite, or even a rusting rooster weathervane as in "Weathercock." These are the signs in nature he seeks when in a "blue mood," he tells us in "Shaker," which can provide moments of insight and inspiration.

The poems in section two of *The Cardinal Heart* arise from Smith's literary and ancestral heritage. Poems about Pip and Father Mapple draw on characters from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and link them with the biblical Jonah and Ishmael, alienated characters seeking refuge. "Bread Cradle," "Her Armistice," and "Susan Gilbert Dickinson, 1887" focus on Emily Dickinson's ability to turn away from the cataclysms of her social and political world and to find in the natural world inside and outside her kitchen a sense of wholeness in the face of religious doubt.

The strongest poems of this section draw from Smith's Indian ancestry and his memories of his grandmother. The Indian spirit in "Beneath the Mound" achieved in his culture a spiritual wholeness that he would communicate to us if only he could summon his decayed body to regain its physical wholeness. And the Tuscarora grandmother in "Yonosa House" who sang "the myths of the race" on her "heart-carved maple dulcimer" and performed the simple chores of churning butter, frying cornbread, and brewing sassafras tea in the hearth conveyed to the young poet a wholeness from her culture. The oneness she had with nature returns to the poet "when the maples turn" because he can "hear her chants in the thrush's song."

Section three's poems deal more with the act of writing and the power of words and symbols on the printed page. The illuminations in "Brieves from *The Book of Kells*" help keep "any

intruder whose heart / is not nourished in the right / church . . ." from gaining the message in the old Irish manuscript. "Scribe" ponders how a writer, who may be a medieval scribe or even the poet, can be assured that an audience centuries in the future will be able to decipher the message of his work. And "Signifiers" compares a reader's difficulty in interpreting the meaning of words, which "cast a small spell / on things that exist outside us," with a dog's preference to focus only on one's hand rather than follow the implied direction of one's pointed finger. Words pose that same problem for the poet. How can he command his audience to pierce through the literalness of the words on a page to the thoughts and ideas which lie behind them?

In section four Smith includes poems which return to the setting of nature populated with birds which provide the poet with moments of insight. The "Bird Carver" who fashions bird figures all winter searches through his window and listens to his blade's "rasp" on the grindstone in imitation of the songs of the birds he carves, a song of simplicity and continuity with the past. "Can a Flower?" echoes the sentiments of William Cullen Bryant's "To A Waterfowl." Here the poet's contemplation of a solitary blue heron at the pond's edge is similar to Bryant's sighting of a lone bird flying at sunset. This helps him perceive in the next night's dreams that "a man / is never wholly alone."

In "Sloe Gin" the poet again echoes a literary ancestor, Henry David Thoreau, who spent two years studying the nature around Walden Pond as a path to a deeper understanding of his own human nature. Alone in the moonlight with his glass of liquor, the poet wishes winter to disappear and spring to return. Like Thoreau who finds in a living green sprig beneath the icy depths of Walden Pond the assurance that life continues and that spring will return, the poet here raises

my empty tumbler
as a lens to discover
on one twisted limb

a bird-shape stirring,
then on the eastern rim
of my private horizon

and misty as sloe gin,
something to believe in,
a holy unfolding, a tremor,

a far cardinal lifting

the red wing of dawn.

The image of the cardinal becomes his assurance that day will return, that life will continue, that a spirit endures in which he can have faith. Like the dying bird's heart in "The Cardinal Heart" which was sacrificed in order for spring to return, this living cardinal becomes the symbol upon which he can place his hope amidst the chaos and uncertainty of the alcohol and the night, the provider of the moment of insight.

In praising *Birch-Light*, Smith's 1986 collection of verse, Southern poet James Applewhite wrote that the work "demonstrates once again that the best of Southern poetry is no more limited in its appeal by location and subject than humanity is finally divided by racial origins and dialects." What R. T. Smith continues to show each of us here is the personal struggle all face in attempting to make sense of this world. Like we find in Robert Frost's poetry, Smith's poems can provide us with that "momentary stay against confusion," with a way of seeing in the natural world a wholeness to counter chaos, and with a connection among past, present, and future. ❧