

**Scott Ward**

## **Review of R. T. Smith. *The Cardinal Heart***

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After reading so many poets with a method, it is a unique and vital pleasure to read a poet with vision. Of course, *vision* has become something of a cliché, something out of fashion in the business of writing poetry; but the genuine poetic vision never fails to surprise, involve, and satisfy, and such is the vision that infuses *The Cardinal Heart*, by R.T. Smith.

The persona as the agent of the poetic vision is important here and stands out as one of the important achievements of the book. And as vision implies unity, we find this is a poetry of connections; one must read with an eye to the collection's last poem, the one all the poems come together to create.

The opening poem is "Kitchen Window," where the speaker looks out with his hands in dishwater — the ordinary is always the locus from which insight and epiphany break — at the "western distances," the classical direction of mystery and adventure, here an image of loss and personal longing; then he focuses his attention on a charred white oak that,

struck last August by lightning  
stretches its gnarled arms and hopes  
for thrown fire, one more chance to writhe  
and blaze like an angel.

Here is an important insight into the nature of the persona, who desires intensity through experience, in the sense of through to the other side, to some metaphysical refinement of the intensity of experience. Another important aspect comes in the word "angel" (a recurrent and unifying image in the book), the poet looking back to the word's Latin and Greek

parents, both having the sense of "messenger." The persona is driven not only by a pursuit of heightened experience which achieves a mystical transcendence, but also by the desire to create it again in story and in that way to capture and consider its significance.

And so the persona finds in story and myth another locus of power. The power of story is closely related to the sense of place, that sense being one of the strong foundations of the whole work. The value of living in a place and the way in which the imagination invests the place with value is central to many poems like "North of Spruce Pine." Here the speaker sees a buck raise his head before a backdrop of granite wall. A number of images overlap here: first, fissures which "antler" in a rock wall:

The small faults jag horns  
into the deepest crack  
like rivers in a delta . . .

then, the speaker sees

. . . crown bones a buck  
raises from laurel sheen

to catch birth-light, dawn  
on a ridge spine . . .

and then

the spiked helmet lifting  
with lightning in black  
granite.

The visual likeness of the metaphors removes the boundaries between the image and the physical place; this way of seeing creates myth, creates in the image the sustenance of the river, the deranging vitality of the lightning, the regeneration of the dawn, as the persona sees "myth break into life" as before him

a creature wakes, is born  
  
against the literal grain.  
Savage that living rock.  
Sweet, that morning storm.

The "creature" is the buck and the persona as well, the ambiguity demonstrating the inextricable relation of myth and reality; and the mythic vision, the ability to see beyond the "literal grain" not only inspires the world with meaning, it also lends a new way of speaking, as the rhythm of the last two lines so clearly illustrates.

Another superb poem which chronicles the relationship of myth and place is "Weathercock." "A blind bird hinged on twin / arrows," he is the guardian spirit and omniscient Over Soul who "wards off bad luck and rust / far from the chicken yard," who knows that,

[the] wife in her kitchen with gloves  
of flour hums 'Stardust' and aches  
for escape . . .

and that

. . . under stripped  
limbs a child shivers and tortures  
her cat.

Myth is the stuff of human longing, "of weather, death and terror," and myth is where meaning is preserved:

The last icon, flat as a hoe blade  
and rampant, sable, I am Chanticleer  
of the Rustic Crux. I cause the dawn.

The cardinal is the central and unifying image in the book as is also the sense of "cardinal" as what is most essential, most important. The image of the bird is a metaphor for the heart and the virtue of taking heart against all human adversities. In "The Cardinal Heart" the speaker discovers a dead bird. He dissects the heart:

cutting past quills  
and the strange mosaic  
  
of life, I  
reached deep under  
the wicker of ribs

for an amulet,  
 a wet tearose  
 more miracle than

flight, art  
 history or religion,

which he buries,

hoping a heart might  
 sweeten the roots  
 toward winter blossoms,

red and remarkable  
 as a cardinal's  
 wing flame or

the cold and shriven  
 sun now dwindling  
 in distant pines

to cinders.

Here is a good example of how the metaphor functions, being at once both the image of the spirit succumbing to loneliness and introversion, and also the power of hope which the human spirit holds out for blossoms in winter. The image occurs again in "Second Waking," coming to the speaker the morning after a storm:

Or was it  
 dawn's cardinal motionless  
 in the stripped willow,  
 that red catch-of-breath,  
 that stillness with no song?

Here the image preserves the ambiguity as the bird or the dawn's first light, turning the metaphor into an image which is suddenly expansive and empowered with the morning's regeneration and the light's insight and spiritual illumination.

Finally, the last poem in the collection, "Sloe Gin," plays off this crucial image in the final lines. The speaker is "One human alone / and

nursing a dark thirst," succumbing to the same faults of spirit, until he holds up his

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 movement of the book reverses itself from west to east, away from longing and escape to the possibilities of new beginnings, from spent cinders to the eternal, life-giving fire, the image of the cardinal embodying what is most essential in the "private horizon," in the myth at home, in the speaker's cardinal heart.