Opinion
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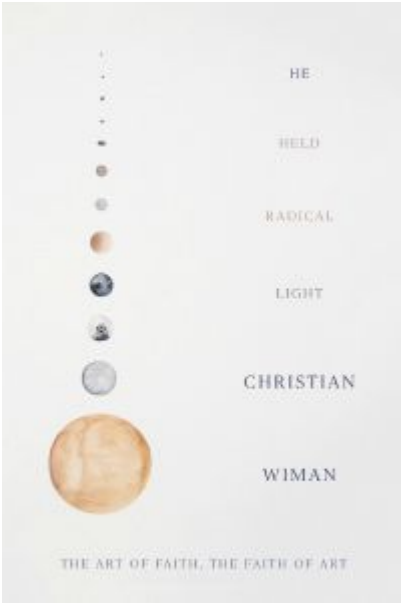
by Paul Lakeland

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HE HELD RADICAL LIGHT: THE ART OF FAITH, THE FAITH OF ART
Christian Wiman
128 pages; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2018
$23.00

Christian Wiman is renowned as a gifted poet and prized as the author of the important memoir *My Bright Abyss*, in which he interspersed the story of his struggle with cancer with profound reflections on life and death. In this latest book, he has done neither of these things, or both, depending on how you look at it.

He Held Radical Light: The Art of Faith, the Faith of Art is still a work in which the author is sufficiently present that it can be classified as memoirish, but sufficiently concerned with Wiman's encounters with a whole series of interesting individuals as not to qualify as simple autobiography. But since the interesting individuals are poets, it is certainly a book *about* poetry but not — aside from generous extracts — a book *of* poetry.

The heart of the book is neither memoir nor poems, but rather an exploration of the possible relationships between poetry and faith. Poetry, says Wiman, is a spiritual hunger that thrives on longing and dies when the longings have been fulfilled. But does poetry lead us to God, or is it the opposite?

"Can there even be aesthetic truth," he muses, "without some other, more ultimate truth as precedent?" Conversely, "these moments of grace and inspiration, of nature and art, are they enough to hang faith on?"

In fact, the clue to the conclusions of the quest for an answer, ambiguous though it might be, lies in Wiman's insistence on paying attention in the poet's art to form rather than content. Non-poets like the present writer tend to home in on content, but "all arts are concerned only with form in the end," words that Wiman quotes from Basil Bunting. "An overstatement," he comments, and yet in his reminiscences on Denise Levertov, he can say that she "was obsessed with form when I knew her, as was I, as is every serious artist I have known."

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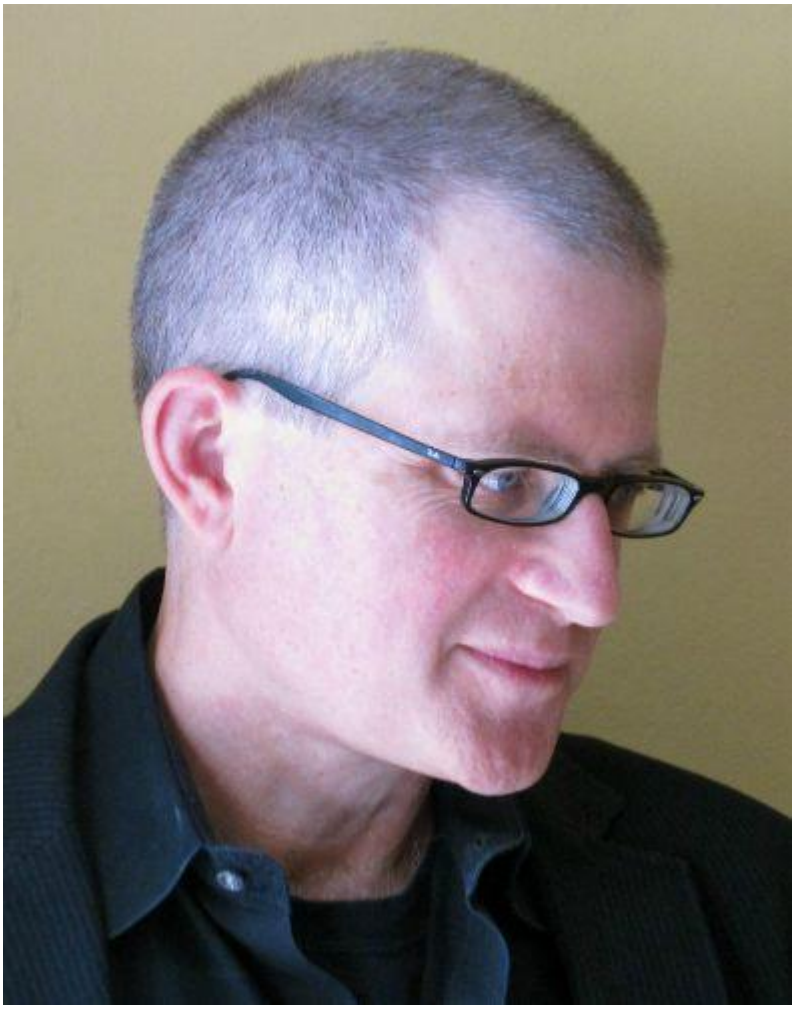
Poetry and faith, each in its own way, is shaped as an open-ended and never fully satisfactory embrace of truth, whether aesthetic or "more ultimate." What makes poetry so mysterious, even mystical, and so important is that the poet is grasping after command of emotion and insight that he or she knows will never entirely succeed.

"The hunger that gives rise to art must be greater than that which art can satisfy," thinks Wiman, reflecting on a poem by A.E. Stallings.

And, of course, the act of faith is always in something inevitably beyond our grasp, and to that degree similar to the poet's inevitable dissatisfaction. Wiman is homing in on the essential difference between the two, since faith is always a response to the call of another, while artistic creativity is a fruit of inspiration that perhaps only the romantics among poets would see as the call of the divine.

Yet, the hunger in Wiman's view cannot just be greater than what art can satisfy; it "must be *other* than what art can satisfy." Which may be why, in a discussion of Philip Larkin's matchless poem on mortality, "Aubade," Wiman concludes, "Art is not enough." The personally redemptive activity of writing poetry requires at some point attention to a universally redemptive activity: "You need grace that has nothing to do with your own efforts."

The other and perhaps lighter side of *He Held Radical Light* is the series of encounters with poets through which Wiman finds his way toward a resolution of sorts. In a couple of them, Wiman excoriates his own immaturity or insensitivity, as for example when he attends a conference on Wallace Stevens and is dismissive of much of his later work in front of the redoubtable Stevens scholar Susan Howe. Amid jeering, "the crowd fed her leading questions" and "she fed me to the crowd."



Christian Wiman (Yale University)

When he turned to a friend to ask if he had come across as arrogant, "she said she knew of a wonderful little restaurant we should try."

In the remarkable first meeting with Mary Oliver, he shows up his own naiveté while fortunately falling for her so completely that the thoughts he had had about the disjunction between serious poetry and real fame simply evaporated in her presence. The lessons she taught with half a dead pigeon as her visual aid are quite memorable.

Two other poets, Donald Hall and A.R. Ammons, dominate the encounters, however. If it is Oliver's public reading that leads Wiman to announce that "the self that intones the poem is not the soul that received it," it is Ammons who inspires the weightier thought about a tendency among modern artists, namely that "the art contains and expresses a faith that the artist, in the rest of his waking life, rejects."

Ammons' poem "Hymn" is a celebration of God by an atheist poet.

Which draws us back to an earlier encounter with Ammons, where, wondering if poetry can be enough to hang faith on, Wiman's question is, "Faith in what, exactly?"

Thinking about Craig Arnold's untimely death, Wiman wonders if he was religious or not, then can't really care. He doesn't believe in atheists or in true believers, and in what for me is the heart of the argument, he adds: "One either lives toward God or not."

It is hard to sum up the excellence of this book. Some will read it for insight into poetic creativity, and rightly so. Others will like the ink pictures of eccentric artists, and not a few will enjoy the insights of Wiman's self-deprecating humor.

In a final chapter about a meeting with Hall, Wiman comes close to the Ignatian insight that we must act as if everything depends on us, but pray as if everything depends on God.

All art, all creativity, he writes, requires us to "act as if the act itself were enough," but at the same time recognizing our own insufficiency might lead us to acknowledge the existence of "a healing wholeness, in the way an imperfection can call forth a beauty whose true nature would never have been felt otherwise."

Like faith, poetry scratches at the door of transcendence. But while poetry tries to pick the lock, faith waits patiently for the door to be opened. In Wiman's words, both have much to offer one another.

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