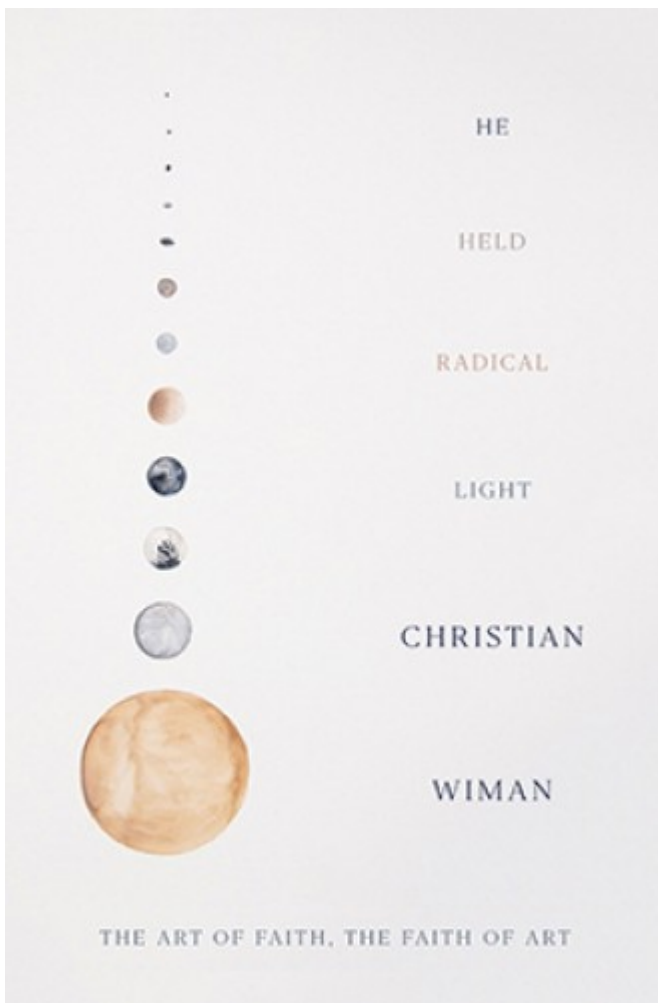


Christian Wiman's stubborn, slippery faith

We need faith, Wiman suggests, because poetry isn't enough.

by [Nick Ripatrazone](#) in the [October 24, 2018](#) issue

In Review



He Held Radical Light

The Art of Faith, the Faith of Art

By Christian Wiman
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
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In 2003, Christian Wiman was named editor of *Poetry* magazine. He was 37, a burgeoning critic, and the author of a well-received book of poems, *The Long Home*. Editorial changes at literary magazines don't often garner international fanfare, but this was different. *Poetry* had just received a \$200 million bequest from Ruth Lilly, the pharmaceutical heiress. Such money was unheard of in the world of verse.

"To say that I was not equipped for this task is comically understated," Wiman reflects. He was never comfortable with the significant bureaucratic elements of the position. In 2013 he left the magazine to teach at Yale Divinity School, a position that almost feels like destiny for him. Wiman is a poet, a thinker, a searcher. *He Held Radical Light* is a wonderfully meandering, pensive, and sometimes complex book-length essay on what it means to seek God in poetry and life—and to often end up empty-handed, or even empty-hearted.

Many of Wiman's anecdotes come from his editorial years, including a strange story of Mary Oliver with a dead bird in her jacket pocket. There are a generous number of excerpted poems in the book: lines from Frank Bidart, Denise Levertov, Seamus Heaney, and A. R. Ammons make Wiman's essay less a treatise and more of a spirited jaunt through the world of contemporary poetry. Even Wiman's syntax is sinuous; you can ride sentences—gently corralled with em dashes—along routes that suggest a mind attracted to association.

Yet Wiman, critic that he is, can also be pointed in his prose. In a single sentence he is able to encapsulate the contradictions of poet Philip Larkin: "He was famous for his sourness, yes, but in fact revelation and resistance were excruciatingly calibrated in him: he was a mystic in a bureaucrat's body, one of the greatest lyric poets in the language who also happened to be a nine-to-five librarian." The variety of approaches, the lolling and the precise, make for a pleasant mixture.

Wiman has often written of ambition and poetry, but this book comes from a new perspective. Two years into his tenure at *Poetry*, Wiman was diagnosed with an incurable blood cancer. (It is now in remission.) The intervening years have enabled him to take a long view of what brings writers to the page.

The lives of writers are full of silence and noise. Both are excruciating in their own ways, but writers long for “those moments of mysterious intrusion, that feeling of collusion with eternity, of life and language riled to the one wild charge.” As a poet fresh out of college, Wiman wanted to write “a poem that would live forever. . . . It was, I suppose, a transparent attempt to replace the soul with the self—for all the talk of the ‘extinction of personality,’ I suspect there is no artist who does not cling to the belief that something essential of himself inheres in his art.”

There’s a healthy amount of shame in Wiman’s discussion of ambition. He’s enough of a realist to know that poets need money, and they often crave fame—but he’s enough of an idealist to believe that success can neuter art. “Poetry itself—like life, like love, like any spiritual hunger—thrives on longings that can never be fulfilled, and dies when the poet thinks they have been.” Wiman’s rhetorical method is recursive: poetry is life, life is poetry. It doesn’t hurt that he can be powerful and pithy: “Reluctant writers, reluctant ministers, reluctant teachers—these are the ones whose lives and works can be examples. Nothing kills credibility like excessive enthusiasm.”

This all arises from a belief that poetry matters. We’ve heard that line before, but Wiman has a way of awakening us through metaphor. Poetry is “as natural and necessary as a stand of old-growth trees so far in the Arctic that only an oil company would ever see it; and just like those threatened trees, its reality ramifies into the lives of people for whom it remains utterly irrelevant and/or obscure.” There’s a comfortable languor to that image, which recalls Wiman’s dictum that poetry must not be analyzed away into prose. Here he channels Levertov again; she implored readers to “try an unthinking, sensuous, dreamy, or drowsy rereading of poems you have already admired intellectually.”

For Wiman, that means not allowing the “flashes of insight” that we feel when a poem connects with us ever to harden into knowledge. Poetry, then, is a utilitarian act of beauty. It is “means, not end.” In fact, when “art becomes the latter, it eventually acquires an autonomous hunger of its own.”

The ultimate subject of *He Held Radical Light* is faith. Wiman accepts the practical need for religion, for “communal ritual and meaningful creeds.” Yet he much prefers the amorphous nature of faith, so he fears the trouble of religion is that “to define is to defile. One either lives toward God or not.” We need faith because poetry (and art in general) “is not enough.” Wiman writes,

Those spots of time are not enough to hang a life on. At some point you need a *universally* redemptive activity. You need grace that has nothing to do with your own efforts, for at some point—whether because of disease or despair, exhaustion or loss—you will have no efforts left to make.

For a poet who once wanted to write an eternal poem, that is a nice humility. Wiman returned to faith after his cancer diagnosis, but he has also described the slippery nature of that faith. “It has been my experience,” Wiman testifies, “that faith, like art, is most available when I cease to seek it, cease even to believe in it, perhaps, if by belief one means that busy attentiveness, that purposeful modern consciousness that knows its object.” *He Held Radical Light* captures that dogged, hypnotic stubbornness of faith.