MY BRIGHT ABYSS: Meditation of a Modern Believer. By Christian Wiman

Travis Scholl
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, schollt@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.csl.edu/cj
Part of the Practical Theology Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol40/iss2/20

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Journal by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.
at the preacher who says, “Jesus died for you and I”? His theology is sound (thank God) and his assertion remains good news, but his atrocious grammar diminishes the quality of what otherwise may be a fabulous sermon as well as the authority of him who preaches it.

I have a handout for my homiletics students titled “In Defense of Literacy,” which I orally subtitle “A Theology of Language.” “In this handout I maintain that God’s choice of language (words) to communicate his Word (Jesus) indicates the inseparableness of message from medium. God harnesses the unique power of his Word to the magic of human language. “In, with, and under” the words of gospel we write and speak, God’s Word is truly present. For the proclamation of his gospel God’s method is not monergistic (God without man). Nor is his method synergistic (God and man). Rather his method is transformative (God through man). It is, therefore, incumbent upon us who proclaim his gospel to master the medium of language in all its correctness and vitality, not with the false assumption that by that mastery we are helping God do his job but with the prayerful hope that through our language skills the word of God “as becometh it, may not be bound, but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people.”

Don Hoeferkamp’s remarkable book can contribute to that end.

Francis C. Rossow

Endnotes

1 Here I follow Pastor Hoeferkamp’s advice (40) to put the expression “for example” at the start of a sentence rather than inside it.
2 Whoops!


Christian Wiman’s My Bright Abyss stands in a long line of spiritual writings that mix memoir with theology with a kind of deep spiritual insight. I would place him alongside some of the recent writers in that line, like Kathleen Norris or Henri Nouwen. I am confident enough to say that I think My Bright Abyss will become a classic in that line, even if Wiman never receives a readership as large.

Christian Wiman also stands among a cloud of poets whose poetries have grappled with faith. Such poets include Gerard Manley Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, and W. H. Auden, and I suspect Wiman would not be ashamed to stand alongside contemporaries like Mary Karr, Franz Wright, and Scott Cairns. But perhaps the root of both these family trees (the spiritual and the poetic) is John Donne. Wiman’s poems (like those in Every Riven Thing) seem to reverberate with the same metaphysicality as Donne’s, and his spiritual writing grapples with the same profundities, often brought on, like Donne’s, by the body’s frailties and illness.

Last summer Wiman completed a decade of leading one of the country’s most prestigious literary journals, Poetry, to take up teaching (and presumably writing) at the Institute of Sacred Music at Yale University Divinity School. Part of me regrets that a person who takes religion seriously has left one of the mainstays of American literary culture. But, if we can expect more writing like My Bright Abyss to be the result, it is worth the sacrifice.
Wiman grew up in West Texas, within a stridently Pentecostal family and community. He even confesses to a prepubescent “experience” of being “filled with the Holy Spirit.” As we might expect, he lost that faith in college, in a second conversion to a “bookish atheism” that he embraced with a “convert’s fervor.” It is not until he is diagnosed with an incurable cancer shortly after getting married that he reawakens to spiritual impulses he can never quite shake. In short, he returns to faith. Or perhaps faith returns to him. He writes: “Faith is not some half-remembered country into which you come like a long-exiled king, dispensing the old wisdom, casting out the radical, insurrectionist aspects of yourself by which you’d been betrayed. No. Life is not an error, even when it is” (7). My Bright Abyss is the result, which takes as its starting point an earlier essay, “Love Bade Me Welcome,” which went viral online.

Wiman’s poetic excursions do not always fit neatly into the cognitive-propositional categories of a highly structured systematic theology. Also it occasionally falls into a kind of mid-twentieth-century existentialism that I thought we had finally left behind. Nevertheless, more frequently, we come across passages that shimmer with a luminosity that we could just as easily find in Augustine:

Lord, I can approach you only by means of my consciousness, but consciousness can only approach you as an object, which you are not. I have no hope of experiencing you as I experience the world—directly, immediately—yet I want nothing more. Indeed, so great is my hunger for you—or is this evidence of your hunger for me?—that I seem to see you in the black flower mourners make beside a grave I do not know, in the embers’ innards like a shining hive, in the bare abundance of a winter tree whose every limb is lit and fraught with snow. Lord, Lord, how bright the abyss inside that “seem.” (13)

Of course, the book does not often reach for such Augustinian self-consciousness. But the passage displays Wiman’s gift: how he is able to intertwine deeply theological reflection with a keen eye for an image (“embers’ innards like a shining hive”), culminating in the auditory double entendre he makes of the most inconspicuous word of the whole paragraph (“seem” as both suggestive linking verb and the seam of a garment). This is a poet’s gift.

My Bright Abyss is structured as a patchwork quilt of fragmented reflections that, even though they do not flow into a seamless autobiographical story, gather together with narrative force. The pensées build upon each other. Indeed, the form is reminiscent of Pascal’s Pensées or Dag Hammarskjöld’s Markings. The sign to me that I will return again and again to this book is the way in which I have found myself reading it. I have found it nearly impossible to read more than two or three, perhaps four, pages at a time before I have to stop and take
some time for a deep breath of silence. In the silence, Wiman’s words provoke my own reflection upon a faith that seeks understanding, this faith that comes only as a gift of God in a Word made flesh. In the silence, I am brought closer again to the One who would bid us “to work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12).

Travis Scholl


For at least three reasons critics divide the book of Zechariah between chapters 1–8 and 9–14: (1) the sections exhibit different literary styles, (2) Zechariah’s name does not appear in the book’s last six chapters, and (3) there is a heightened apocalyptic style in Zechariah 9–14. Heiko Wenzel, in his 2006 Wheaton Graduate School Ph.D. dissertation, argues against splitting the book into two parts. His thesis is that Zechariah 1:1–6 is more than an introduction to the prophet’s eight night visions. Rather, these verses provide an interpretive framework for the entire book; the warning of Zechariah 1:3–4 is sounded again and again throughout all fourteen chapters.

Wenzel’s argument is largely based upon the reading strategies of Michael Bakhtin. For instance, Bakhtin urges us to see books as unified coherent pieces of art. We are not to separate the part from the whole. Textual tensions need not signal multiple authors; rather they facilitate interpretation and understanding. Therefore, to interpret Zechariah 1–8 and 9–14 separately is tantamount to interpreting a different work than the book of Zechariah. It is a faulty exegesis to assume that there is no traceable argument that runs throughout the book. Wenzel instead argues that Zechariah presents us with a coherent narrative.

Bakhtin also assumes that a dialogue is going on between textual producers and those who receive them. Defining the receptor community, therefore, greatly assists the interpretive process. For the book of Zechariah, then, it is best to assume that the prophet’s focus is upon how those in Persian Yehud in the late sixth century respond to God’s word. Zechariah frequently uses the messenger formula (e.g., Zec 1:3, 4, 14; 3:7; 7:9; 8:23; 11:4) and announces that he has been sent to the people (Zec 2:13, 15 [EN 2:9, 11]; 4:9; 6:15). Standing in line with other ancient Near Eastern messengers, the prophet’s role was to facilitate dialogue between Yahweh and his people as though they were standing face to face.

Armed with these two reading strategies from Bakhtin, Wenzel’s chief text is Zechariah 1:4. When the prophet challenges his audience in this verse to be different from their forefathers, whose sins brought the Babylonian catastrophe, he implies that they are in grave danger and may end up like their ancestors. To be sure, the surviving post-exilic remnant heeded Haggai’s preaching (Hg 1:1–11) and began to rebuild the temple (Hg 1:14). Yet the book of Haggai describes the community’s discouragement (Hg 2:3–4), their unclean state (Hg 2:14) and the fact that they did not turn to Yahweh.