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

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MY BRIGHT ABYSS: Meditation of a Modern Believer. By Christian Wiman. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013. 182 pages. Hardcover. \$24.00.

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

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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"

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(Phil 2:12).

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