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Response to Christian Wiman

The Hague, De Zinnen, 13 maart 2019

Christian Wiman's is a tough act to follow. So let us start right in the middle. I agree with Christian Wiman that it is the task of both poetry and theology to recover the terrain of existing reality as a space of meaning. This includes recovering the meaning of words that have all but lost their meaning. Like Love. Like God, or faith. After we have heard Christian Wiman attempting to do that as a poet, I more will try to do more or less the same thing as a theologian. In other words, I will try to join him in his project of finding out where we are, really.

1.

In his lecture Christian Wiman referred to Franz Kafka (1889-1924), the 'German-speaking Bohemian Jewish writer', as Wikipedia tells us. Wiman loosely paraphrases an aphorism of Kafka's: *Ein Käfig ging einen Vogel suchen.*¹ 'A cage went in search of a bird.' No further explanations, no parable or short story, just this one sentence: 'A cage went in search of a bird'. One could see the human tragedy here: we, with our captivating limitations – the cage – are looking for freedom – the bird – but captivating freedom will by necessity mean not freedom, but captivity. One could also see here the paradox of writing and thinking: in order to express something that needs to be expressed, we have to have a form. Here we are close to the classic theological problem of speaking about God: how do capture in our finite language the infinite, that what is by definition uncapturable? But Christian Wiman uses the image of a cage in search for a bird ultimately, I think, to emphasize that in the cage the bird will be free to sing its own song – that in the cage the bird *will* sing its own song. We want to give a home, ultimately we want to make ourselves into a home of what is free and what we cannot capture: this is poetry, this is religion – at least true poetry and true religion. Cages for the infinite as infinite, that by definition cannot be caged.

This brings us to another reference of Christian Wiman's, to Sara Grant (1922-2002), the English religious Sister who wrote *Toward an Alternative Theology: Notes of a non-Dualist Christian* in 1991. The book is both memoir and reflection on the way her enduring contact with Hinduism in India influenced her understanding of Christianity. Sara Grant reports how early in her religious life she was annoyed by the way God was presented in the Neo-Scholastic theology of her days: wholly outside of the world, an object of abstract knowledge, totally independent of what we know, understand or experience in our ordinary lives, but at the same time absolutely clear and logical; my mentor, Edward Schillebeeckx (1914-2009), called this Neo-Scholasticism's 'conceptualism'. Now Sara Grant was comforted, she writes, by reading a sentence by Thomas Aquinas, stating: *in fine nostrae cognitionis (est) Deum tamquam ignotum cognoscere*. In English: 'the end of our knowledge is to know God as something unknown.'² This means for Aquinas that 'the mind is found to be most perfectly in possession of knowledge of God when it recognizes that God's essence is above everything that the mind is capable of apprehending in this life'.

This is claiming much more than the classical phrase, also by Aquinas and repeated by him over and over again, that we do not know what God is, and only know *that* he is and what he *is not*. This can still be taken as suggesting a tragic distance in our cognition: as if we should in principle know God, but fall short because our understanding is only human, and therefore finite.

¹ Franz Kafka, *Die Züräuer Aphorismen*, Hg. R. Calasso, Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp Verlag 2006, no. 16.

² S. Grant, *Toward an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian*, ed. B.J. Malkovsky, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 2002 (or. 1991), 27. See Thomas Aquinas, *In Boetium de Trinitate*, q. 1, a. 2, ad 1.

But the point is that we *do* know God and are intimately connected to him by knowing his incomprehensibility. That God is someone or something that is not to be known in the ordinary way of knowledge, but is known as ultimately unknown and unknowable, that is our deepest possible knowledge of God. This for Aquinas is not something relevant only to mystics or otherwise exceptional religious virtuosos. This for him is the very core of our relationship with reality, and this core *hoc est quod omnes appellant Deum*, in Aquinas words, is that what is universally called God. God presence is not an explanation, but makes clear that life ultimately is not about explanation. It is about incomprehensible meaningfulness.

This, I not only think but I think Christian Wiman thinks, this is what ultimately connects poetry with religious faith: to know reality as ultimately unknowable, but giving itself to be known every single moment by provoking us to a response to it.

2.

Christian Wiman presented in his lecture a revised version of the chapter 'Hive of Nerves' from *My Bright Abyss*, in Willem Jan Otten's Dutch translation of the book: *Zenuwkorf*. It was, like the original version, very much about anxiety, the feeling that something is not quite right in our world, that something is looming behind our everyday existence, threatening not just the way we exist, but putting into question existence itself. In the original version of 'Hive of Nerves' I was very touched by the passage:

It is as if each of us are always hearing some strange, complicated music in the background of our lives, music which, so long as it remains in the background, is not simply distracting but manifestly unpleasant, because it demands the attention we are giving to other things. It is not hard to hear this music, but it is very difficult indeed to learn to hear it as music.³

The suggestion is that it only can be heard as music if we stop treating it as drawing away our attention from what is really important. What is making itself known here, what sings as already a bird captured by us as its cage, is the unknowability of reality that Aquinas connects with God. This means that our anxiety is music, our feelings of looming doom and threat are signs of what ultimately is in a way 'good', in the sense of liberating.

Christian Wiman wrote elsewhere that in his experience '(p)eople who have been away from God tend to come back by one of two ways: destitution or abundance, an overmastering sorrow or a strangely disabling joy.'⁴ Interestingly enough, judging from *My Bright Abyss*, he seems to be an example of both. He started his comeback to God as a response to meeting his future wife – disabling joy – but he wrote *My Bright Abyss* after he had found himself in the process of having to live – and probably even to die – with an extremely painful variety of cancer. What really is impressive for me in *My Bright Abyss*, is the will not to turn away from the pain but to really – no, not to understand the pain, but – to understand life with this pain. In both possible meanings of 'with': 'including', with pain as an integral aspect, and 'with the help of the pain'. To use pain to understand the ununderstandable, to approach pain as the bird captured in the cage, that what is ultimately impossible to capture.

In his new book, of which the Dutch translation is presented at the end of this evening, titled *He Held Radical Light*, in Dutch simply *Radicaal licht*, Christian Wiman describes how he

³ C. Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013, 92; cf. *Mijn heldere afgrond: Overpeinzingen van een moderne gelovige*, Barneveld: Brandaan 2016, 103.

⁴ See C. Wiman, 'I Will Love You in the Summertime' (29 feb. 2016) <<https://theamericanscholar.org/i-will-love-you-in-the-summertime/#.XIPuWY01uig>>.

was hooked by both God and void, grace and pain, suggesting that in some way they are the same.⁵ Here I *have* to quote what is for me the most impressive poem in *My Bright Abyss*: witnessing to the longing of the poet:

Too many elegies
elevating

sadness
to a kind

of sad
religion:

one wants
in the end

just once
to befriend

one's own
loneliness,

to make
of the ache

of inwardness . . .
something—

music maybe,
or even just believing

in it,
and summer,

and the long room
alone

where the child
chances

on a bee
banging

against one
pane

⁵ C. Wiman, *He Held Radical Light: The Art of Faith, the Faith of Art*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2018, 99-100; cf. *Radicaal licht: De kunst van geloven, geloven in kunst*, Amersfoort: Brandaan 2019, 122.

like an attack
of happiness.⁶

What impressed me at once was the way in which that what at least I spontaneously see as an expression of utter despair, a bee banging against the window trying to get out, is imagined here as 'an attack of happiness'. Not an attack, I think, in the sense of an aggressive and violent attempt to become happy, breaking the window separating one from happiness if necessary. But an attack in the sense of a sudden and overwhelming presence. Like a bird in a cage singing: expressing its longing to be free, thus not only showing freedom but being sustained by this freedom. Longing to be happy and being happy because of this longing, being painfully happy in its longing. Somewhat like it is expressed in Psalm 137 (5-6):

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

The paradoxical celebration of what is absent.

3.

Preparing this small response, I think I retrieved the origin of the image of the bee banging against the windowpane in an attack of happiness. In an article that can be found on internet, Christian Wiman quotes the Polish poet Anna Kamieńska (1920-1986), who became devoutly Catholic after the sudden death of her husband, the poet Jan Śpiewak (1908-1967). The title of the English translation of what Wiman calls 'her best poem (available in English, at any rate)', is: 'A Prayer That Will Be Answered':

Lord let me suffer much
and then die

Let me walk through silence
and leave nothing behind not even fear

Make the world continue
let the ocean kiss the sand just as before

Let the grass stay green
so that the frogs can hide in it

so that someone can bury his face in it
and sob out his love

Make the day rise brightly
as if there were no more pain

⁶ Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 128-130; cf. *Mijn heldere afgrond*, 142-143.

And let my poem stand clear as a windowpane
bumped by a bumblebee's head⁷

Here the poem is prayed to be as transparent 'as a windowpane bumped by a bumblebee's head', not asking for attention itself, but presenting what it has to present. As little cage as possible, so to say, and as much bird as possible.

Christian Wiman is quick to locate behind Kamieńska poem, 'infusing it with an ancient and awful power', what he calls the most wonderful and terrible prayer one can pray: 'Not my will, Lord, but yours.' Jesus in de Garden of Gethsemane. Wiman comments:

It's difficult enough to pray a prayer like this when you're thinking of making some big life decision. It's damn near impossible when your actual life is on the line, or the life of someone you love, when all you want to pray is *help, help, help*. Not my will, Lord, but yours.

Here is someone who knows what he is talking about, one senses, and comes to our assistance in rescuing words like faith and God from trivialization. I am lucky enough not to know that profoundly what I mean when I quote these words, but here again Christian Wiman comes to my assistance. In *He Held Radical Light* he writes:

It is a strange state of affairs (though one certain ancient theologians would have recognized) to be able to speak a thing you cannot conceive, to be in the possession of knowledge that you cannot, in any meaningful sense, know.⁸

This is Aquinas again. Poetry gives us knowledge of reality that we cannot, in any meaningful sense, know. As does religion, faith, theology.

But the crucial thing is that they are not enough. A true poem, according to the poet Christian Wiman, 'enacts and acknowledges its own insufficiency'. As does true religion, according to at least this theologian. Poetry and faith have to spill over into life, have to be shared. In that sense the poet and the theologian are bound together by a similar paradox: we dedicate a large part of our lives to what is insufficient, of what we know is insufficient, and therefore, because we know of its insufficiency and admit to it, is enough to live by. A 'poem is enough because it enacts and acknowledges its own insufficiency', Wiman states.⁹ Faith, religion, theology is enough if and insofar it enacts and acknowledges its own insufficiency, I would say. The question is how to do that and how this is different from endlessly criticizing them for all their obvious shortcomings. As if they will one time or another will somehow be without their shortcomings.

4.

I hardly dare to say it, because it will sound incredibly presumptuous. But it cannot be helped, it is the God's honest truth and Anna Kamieńska gives me the phrase: I ultimately hope my theology to stand clear as a windowpane bumped by a bumblebee's head. My head. In an attack of happiness, in order not to forget where we are.

⁷ The poem is quoted by Wiman 'I Will Love You in the Summertime', and is to be found in: *A Book of Luminous Things*, ed. C. Milosz, New York: Harcourt Brace and Compagny 1996, 290.

⁸ Wiman, *He Held Radical Light*, 108; cf. *Radicaal licht*, 131.

⁹ Wiman, *He Held Radical Light*, 101; cf. *Radicaal licht*, 124.