

# The New Criterion

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## An interview with Christian Wiman

by David Yezzi

*The New Criterion's poetry editor interviews the poet, editor, and teacher.*

*Editor's note: This past February, David Yezzi, the poetry editor of The New Criterion, spoke by telephone with the poet Christian Wiman at his home in New Haven, where he teaches at the Institute of Sacred Music, part of the Divinity School of Yale University. The editor of Poetry magazine from 2003–2013, Wiman's most recent books are *Once in the West: Selected Poems* and *He Held Radical Light: The Art of Faith, the Faith of Art*.*

the new criterion: Your latest book of prose, *He Held Radical Light*, weighs questions similar to those you raise in *My Bright Abyss*, which carries the subtitle “Meditation of a Modern Believer,” though this book seems to be consciously elegiac in tone.

christian wiman: I guess it is to some extent. I definitely had a sense that there were poets I had encountered who were just slipping away, and I wanted to remember them. So it's elegiac in that sense, though I think of it as projecting forward, wresting a kind of futurity out of memory, particularly at the end.

tnc: A futurity that describes what?

cw: Eternity. Life after death. Or maybe life *in* death is a better way of putting it? I realize it sounds baldly ridiculous when you say it like that, but it's a feeling that I've gotten from some poems. I think it's part of what led me into poetry—that sense of another life that the poems seem to open up. What's the Emily Dickinson line? “Memory is a strange Bell—Jubilee, and Knell.” Maybe the book is an attempt to sound that bell.

tnc: And yet the book is clear-eyed about the unlikelihood that poems will last.

cw: Oh yeah, I don't think I'm too confident about things surviving in that sense, in human terms. But I think something of the *inspiration* of art survives. Something of the mystery of it. And I'm amazed and fortified by the examples of some of these poets, like Donald Hall. As I say in the book, he told me that he was thirty-eight when he realized that not a word he wrote was going to

last. *[laughs]* And then he kept on writing for another fifty years.

tnc: Yet starting out you had a very fixed idea, a kind of singular desire to write something that would last, to write what you call “an immortal poem.”

cw: Yes, I definitely had that very concretely. It’s a very literary idea, of course. I mean, it came out of reading Keats and Walter Jackson Bate’s great biography of Keats, and then other English poets, especially Wordsworth and Milton.

tnc: So if we acknowledge, as Donald Hall did, that nothing we write is going to last in that way, then what does the project of writing become? What is the purpose of the writing life?

cw: I’m moved by a quote from Julia Randall that I use in the book: “Lord, that I am a moment of your turnings.” As if that’s all she expected, not only of a poem but also of her entire existence—that both could be a moment in the mind of God. I find that moving.

I also find that the notion of the poem as an iconic thing, this rock in the river of time, is not one that I’m as drawn to anymore. There’s a poem by Yehuda Amichai—who in the past few years has become as important to me as any poet I’ve ever read—in which he says, “Not like a cypress,/ not all at once, not all of me,/ but like the grass, in thousands of cautious green exits.” It’s obvious that he’s talking about his own work. He doesn’t want to write a poem that’s towering over everything. He wants it to be like the grass, everywhere. That sounds more modest, but I’m not sure it is, as he also means for his poetry to be available in people’s lives, to help them live their lives. It’s a different idea of poetry. And Amichai seems to me a very great poet.

tnc: Hall, who died last year, also seems to have been a decisive influence.

cw: I wouldn’t say he was decisive in terms of my writing life. I was pretty well set in my ways by the time I met Don. He meant a great deal to my life, though, and I certainly loved him. It was weird how our lives were entwined. He had grown up here in Hamden, Connecticut, where we moved in 2013. The first house we lived in was two houses down from the one where he’d been born. He went to the same school that my kids now go to, Spring Glen Elementary. There’s a plaque outside the Hamden public library dedicated to Don, and my kids notice it every time they go by there. So he became very much a part of our lives. He was also an emblem for me of a life in poetry, a life well spent. He never wavered, not in his dedication to poetry and not in his appetite for life. I admired him tremendously.

tnc: Regarding a life in poetry, I was struck by your suggestion that “it is dangerous to think of art or anything, actually, as a personally redemptive activity.”

cw: I don’t think that art is something that’s going to save you or that it’s the single most important thing in life. I find the writing of poetry a kind of torment ultimately, though it’s also a great elation. I just don’t think it’s going to save me.

tnc: Towards the end of *He Held Radical Light*, you write, “I have long thought—because I have long felt—that the perfections of art implied or even anticipated some ultimate order one need not call God, but could call out to nonetheless; that a feeling that found its true form could align the heart with the stars.” That sounds like it has the potential for being redemptive.

cw: Well, it’s a . . . how shall I put it? It’s a kind of severe salvation. I’m teaching the Book of Job now, and Job keeps asking, “What is justice? What is justice?” And God’s answer is, essentially: beauty. Justice is the whale and the horse. It’s “look at these fantastic things that I made. Look how beautiful they are.” There’s your justice. It’s not a kind of consciousness that feels tenderly towards you, exactly. Your only consolation is to reconcile your will to it, to necessity.

tnc: But there’s something elevating about perceiving that order.

cw: Yes, and grace can happen, I do believe that. The chain of necessity can be broken, though usually not in ways we expect or would even think to want. And I don’t want to downplay the importance of poetry in all of this. It has saved me again and again. I don’t feel much consolation in my own poems (after they’re written, I mean), and I don’t like to read them. It’s unpleasant to even talk about them. But I am saved by other people’s work. That’s one thing I miss about editing, actually. You could make a big deal about things that you discovered. You could broadcast it.

tnc: You make a melancholy observation about Philip Larkin, whom you clearly revere, that he was a poet unable to be consoled by the creation of poetic order. He created poems that others relished, but he himself was unable to take the benefit from it.

cw: This seems a common phenomenon. Geoffrey Hill points it out very beautifully in an essay called something like “Menace and Atonement.” It’s quite possible for people to be given moments of grace in their art that they are unable to translate into their lives. That’s not how he says it, but that’s the gist. I think that’s true of Larkin. He couldn’t allow himself to love in any kind of whole-hearted or full way, and it obviously cost him. But I don’t know: art does have its necessary deformities, great art at any rate. I guess the trick is learning to tell which suffering is inevitable and which is willed.

At any rate, I do find “Aubade,” for all of its despair, a greatly courageous poem. It seems to me stark and uncompromising and an example of real courage that he could have risen to that level of utterance at that point in his life. It’s also an example of exactly what I’m saying, that art can’t save you. It can give you glimpses of something beautiful, maybe even something redemptive, but there’s nothing there to hold onto. Art is a means, not an end.

tnc: It’s hard to articulate what one gets from poems. Can you say a little bit more about that?

cw: If there’s a poem that works for me, it’s showing me something of reality. It’s more than that, actually: it’s enabling me to *participate* in reality again. John Berger has a wonderful essay about looking at the paintings of Van Gogh when he’s in despair and saying that suddenly reality had

been *salvaged*. That's the word he uses. That's often what I feel when I come across poetry that I love, that reality's been salvaged for me. And reality does have to be salvaged for us, all of us, again and again.

tnc: Your recent *Selected Poems* includes poems from your first collection, *The Long Home*, up through your most recent collection, *Hammer Is the Prayer*. Do you see a progression when you look back at your earliest work?

cw: Oh yeah, I almost didn't include anything from my first book. I was encouraged to by some friends. I spent four years on [the title poem] "The Long Home" but included only a single page of it in my selected. I don't regret all that work, exactly. It's just that I recognize the mistakes, the derivativeness. The later poems become much more my own, although there's a sense in which I have had exactly the same obsessions for over thirty years. I just wasn't confronting them as directly.

tnc: What are some of those obsessions?

cw: What might the word "faith" mean to a modern person? What does it mean to speak in appropriate language of God or godlessness? What does suffering mean, and what does suffering have to do with God? I see those obsessions everywhere in those early poems, though I wasn't fully aware of them.

tnc: You've referred more than once in your work to the Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, who, as you put it, "defined faith as primarily faithfulness to a time when we had faith."

cw: Yes, that's been another obsession, these moments of radical awareness, of joy. It's not simply a discipline of memory. There's a hopefulness; there's something that propels one forward. I feel a real analogy between a life of poetry and a life of faith, because I have often felt that poetry gives me the moments of greatest elation in my life. It's also very true that there have been times, many times, when I wished poetry would just leave me alone.

tnc: Why?

cw: "I might have thrown poor words away and been content to live." That's how Yeats puts it. I might have just been able to live a more direct life. It's a bit of a fool's errand to spend your life trying to write these things and in the back of your mind you keep thinking, "Well, this isn't going to last. And yet here I go again!"

tnc: You include a superb Kafka quote in which he says, "Writing is a sweet and wonderful reward, but for what? In the night it became clear to me, as clear as a child's lesson book, that it is the reward for serving the devil." What do you think he means?

cw: I think he means that inspiration can be diabolical as well as divine. It can be an energy that destroys you. That's what he was sensing in himself. I use the quote because I understand it

intimately. In some of my early poems, there was a love of suffering simply for the intensity it offered, a malign energy that I was turning into art again and again.

tnc: What are you working on now?

cw: I have a book coming out next spring called *Survival Is a Style*, which is a phrase from one of the poems. I'm sure I'll despise it heartily by the time it comes out, but at the moment I'm quite happy with it. Some of the new poems really led me in different directions.

tnc: Do you find that this book is an extension of what you've been working on or more of a departure?

cw: It's definitely the same voice, but it's not quite as sonically locked as I can get sometimes. It lets in a lot of different kinds of speech. Clive James talks about how his favorite poems have equal parts essay and lyric content. I don't know if that's true of mine. I prefer a lot more music, probably, but the new poems do let in more essayistic content.

tnc: Are you working on any other prose?

cw: I'm editing Kay Ryan's prose right now. I need to do an introduction for that. This project has really sort of swallowed me up. I think Kay's a great poet. Her prose is also great, as people will realize when it's all collected together. It's very much of a piece.

tnc: She was a reluctant prose writer at times, and you really encouraged her to write for you at *Poetry* magazine, wouldn't you say?

cw: A number of pieces that she did for *Poetry* magazine are in the book. But she's done some memorable ones for other places too. I'm so glad that I got her to write essays, including one where she went to the Association of Writers & Writing Programs annual conference . . .

tnc: I remember!

cw: I can't believe she did it. I didn't even know her at the time. I just cajoled her into going—or maybe Carol [her partner] did. She wrote a terrific piece, witty and wry and genuinely wise. Now that I really know how inimical something like that is to her nature, I can't believe she did it.

tnc: She stared down some demons to write that.

cw: Yeah, she did!

tnc: You still take pleasure in editing?

cw: Yes. I did an anthology of poems about joy recently, and it looks like I'm about to commit to doing another one if I can decide on the exact form it will take. It's a great way for me to focus my mind and to think about one thing through the lens of poetry. Also, as I was saying, I like being

able to gather all these poems that I love and fling them out there.

tnc: Do you ever think, in terms of a life in poetry, that there's a sort of service component? Clearly, it's important to you to support the work of other people. Are you thinking how these projects fit into your own work?

cw: They're very much combined. I never thought of there being a service element when I was younger, and I do still think that the service ought to be to the work, to work that you feel is great. You should be able to support the work of someone you don't necessarily like. In recent years I have felt a call to save work that has touched me and that seems in danger of vanishing. It's just dropping into the abyss. I know I can't save it; I just want a few people to be as moved by it as I have been.

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**David Yezzi** is former Poetry Editor of *The New Criterion*. His most recent book, *More Things in Heaven: New and Selected Poems*, is forthcoming from Measure Press.

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