THE NEED FOR A RELIGIOUS LITERARY CRITICISM

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A great critical need of our time is for ways of discussing religious or spiritual dimensions in works of literature. We live in an age of critical discourses that are expert in discussing the dimensions of class, gender, textuality, and historical context. Yet an important part of the literature we read goes untouched by our discourses, or is deconstructed, historicized, sexualized, or made symptomatic of covert power relationships. The negative hermeneutic of such reductive discourse has been thorough and successful. Attempts at a more positive non-reductive hermeneutic tend to be soft discourses, appealing to general unexamined values and a preconverted audience. There is a need in our time for religious interpretations that are substantial enough to enter into a productive and competitive relation with the reigning critical discourses. The answer to the dilemma of skepticism and softness may simply be a sense of the intricacy of the subject. The need for a religious literary criticism is not only reflective of a present scholarly void, but also comes out of a spiritual hunger, felt by many teachers and students, for a way of discussing the intersections of their own spiritual lives with what they read. These two needs, scholarly and spiritual, reflect the extreme difficulty of the subject which invites intellectual short-circuiting and collapse at a number of points.

To say there is a great vacuum in discussions of spirituality in literature is, of course, unfair to those who have long been working in this field, and whose work might be associated with journals like Religion and Literature, Christianity and Literature, Literature and Theology, Renascence, and others. But even the editors and writers of these journals would probably agree that their discourse is not yet one of the major discourses of the academy.

In this essay, I attempt to point to some examples of moments in literature that cry out for a sophisticated critical treatment that has been lacking in recent decades. I list seven such moments, and with them allude
to some relevant contemporary work that may contain the seeds of the discourses that we seek.

(1) Yeats’s “The Man who dreamed of Faeryland” begins:

He stood among a crowd at Dromahair;  
His heart hung all upon a silken dress,  
And he had known at last some tenderness,  
Before earth took him to her stony care;  
But when a man poured fish into a pile,  
It seemed they raised their little silver heads,  
And sang what gold morning or evening sheds  
Upon a woven world-forgotten isle  
Where people love beside the ravelled seas;  
That Time can never mar a lover’s vows  
Under that woven changeless roof of boughs:  
The singing shook him out of his new ease.

The poem continues through three more stanzas, each of these stanzas representing a stage in the man’s life: young love, prosperous middle age, rancorous old age, and death. And each stage is interrupted by a strange intrusion: a fish singing about a land of faithful love, a lug-worm singing about a gay exulting race, a knot-grass singing about a rich silence where lover next to lover is at peace, a worm proclaiming that God has laid his fingers on the sky. I am not concerned to interpret this interesting and layered poem, but simply to point to some elements we need to find critical languages for. One element is the development of a person’s life. There is an industry of psychological study on development; “character development” used to be a major category in literary criticism, but no longer. Our current discourses can do interesting things with Yeats’s “Man who dreamed of Faeryland.” Feminism can see the distortions of a patriarchal system controlling the man’s life, Marxist analysis can see the bourgeois economic structures, new historicists can see Yeats controlled by a romantic consciousness that displaces the reality of Yeats’s own placement in the power system.

But what is left-over is a nagging spiritual question about the man, about the worth of his life as we see it, and as he sees it. There is the question of where he is going, what stages he arrives at, and what is his life’s meaning, in a sense of “meaning” too intellectually murky to be of much interest to the semioticians. (Ogden and Richards’s treatment of the “meaning of meaning” is typical of that tradition.) Even our current