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Forum Prompt

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Forum Prompt

Faith at the Crisis Point:

Exploring the Intersection of Religion and Literature

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Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
Hebrews 11.1

Religion and literature frequently intersect, whether a scripture is scrutinized as a literary text or a seemingly secular work suddenly reveals religious undertones or currents coursing through it. In either case, the connections can be profound and consequential for the interpretation of the work. In consideration of the second instance, let us look at three examples from contemporary short fiction in which a character's turn to faith at the story's climax inflects the story's meaning.

First, we look at Philip Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews": "Ozzie made everybody say it. And then he made them all say they believed in Jesus Christ—first one at a time, then all together" (204). What is astonishing about this event, coming very near the end of this story, is that Ozzie is an adolescent Jew, speaking from a rooftop to a largely Jewish crowd assembled several stories beneath

him. Ozzie has fled to the roof of a synagogue after he and the rabbi have had one too many quarrels in Hebrew class concerning the divine. On the ground below, firemen, the rabbi, Ozzie's mother, and his friends try desperately to persuade the boy to jump safely into a net rather than directly to the pavement. Ozzie makes his demands, and the largely Jewish assembly beneath him complies.

Second, we compare the experience in Roth's story to this extract from Wendell Berry's "Pray without Ceasing": A woman, inexplicably widowed as a result of a murder in broad daylight in the middle of a busy village street, suddenly says to someone who does not know what to say to her, "It'll come by surprise, . . . It's a time appointed, but we'll not be notified. . . . So we must always be ready, . . . Pray without ceasing" (69). Her grief, if not assuaged, is nonetheless on some level subsumed into a powerful faith, which the author then assigns as the title of the story, in the same way that the singular event at the close of Roth's story provides its designation.

And last, for now at least, we can add to the mix a passage from "God's World" by Egyptian Nobel laureate Najib Mahfuz in which a fifty-five-year-old messenger, Ibrahim, absconds from his dismal life and job with the monthly payroll and heads for the beach and a sultry mistress. She tries to steal from him. In despair and without forethought, he enters a mosque and prays, "The world is after me merely because I love you; does that please you? Among millions of people, I feel so alone, it almost kills me; does that please you?" Interrupted by a detective who demands the reason for his actions: "God. . . ' he muttered with a smile and then raised his finger up to the sky" (160). God has not been an evident actor in this story up until now. However, Ibrahim's call to God seems to transform everything—Ibrahim himself, his world, and his story. We shall return to this point.

What do these three short stories share? In the second and third examples, there have been no issues, motifs, discussions, or topics of religion until the stories' conclusions. In the first, the talk in the Hebrew School has been purely intellectual without emotional content up until the rooftop experience. Thus, in all three stories, at moments of crisis or points of climax driven by violence, death, or judgment, in three different religious cultures, the characters claim faith as they find themselves poised on a brink.

The Letter to the Hebrews in the Christian New Testament is the only book of the Judeo-Christian canon that defines faith. But that definition, quoted as the epigraph above, takes away as much as it gives with its language of assurance

and conviction yoked to concepts of anticipation and absence, rather than evidence and presence. It challenges belief in what is not at hand while literature, generally understood, depends upon the tangible, the substantial, and the extant. Literature may stray into fantasy, approach the supernatural, or enter the future, but readers will stay with it, suspending their native disbelief, as long as the anchors to their worlds have been established and can be returned to. So what is it in literary presentations that might enable, might underpin, might warrant what has come to be called a leap of faith? What explains this jump across the abyss of nothingness to find meaning via a belief, an acceptance in the divine, which these three stories so unexpectedly reveal? And if the literature does make that leap, then what does that do to the text? Finding faith and discovering belief in secular texts has become an increasingly topical enterprise in contemporary scholarship. For instance, a reviewer in *Christianity and Literature* made this comment about a newly published book called *The Gospel According to Shakespeare* (U of Notre Dame P, 2013) by Piero Boitani: “Boitani . . . sees in Lear’s story a resurrection when he wakes from a healing sleep and realizes he has been reunited with Cordelia; Shakespeare has brought ‘Lear back to life, purified and accepting his newfound existence’” (289). Here, as with the short fiction, the end of the play proves a religious turning point for the protagonist and suddenly becomes redemptive.

Similarly, with respect to *Region, Religion and English Renaissance Literature* (Ashgate, 2013), edited by David Coleman, another *Christianity and Literature* reviewer observes that “what emerges is a view of culture that does not overlook the simultaneously binding and separating influences of geology, and presents to our understanding an archipelago of identities held centripetally together by lines of continuity between cultures, religions, and histories, even as differences threaten to whirl them centrifugally apart” (136). Here, authors such as Spenser, Middleton, Webster, and others illustrate crises following religious conflicts between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Ireland, Calvinists and Anglicans in England. And, once again, faith follows these challenges.

Finally, let me bring forth another recent example of this trend: *William Wordsworth and the Theology of Poverty*, which I reviewed for *Christianity and Literature*. In this book, Heidi Snow illuminates Wordsworth’s poetry through lenses tinted by contemporary Evangelical, Methodist, and Quaker beliefs not previously identified in the poems under consideration but for which Snow argues that indigence becomes the crucible of faith. Via destitution, the

meaning of the poetry, according to Snow, is made clear in ways influenced by one of these dissenting Protestant denominations of the poet's time.

The redemption and the transformation that I noted above is what these conversions or acknowledgments of faith do to the characters and to the texts, by this line of interpretation. That is, according to this way of reading literature, a religious epiphany changes the seemingly secular drift of the narrative. In other words, Roth's, Berry's, and Mahfuz's stories, like the works of Wordsworth, Shakespeare, and other Early Modern writers, find and show their meanings from a religious angle which suddenly becomes the hinge of the narrative. Thus, it may be possible to go back to the opening of the texts and read closely throughout to find anticipations and foreshadowings of this motif of transformation that we might have largely overlooked in our first readings.

We invite readers of *Criterion* to submit papers to this forum that deal with literature and religion in a broad and in a specific sense. That is, considering this topic broadly, writers might reflect the ways that scriptural texts can be considered as literature; how does religion therefore become literary? What does looking at a religious text as literature tell readers about its meaning? Are there specific points in the chosen text of scripture that function according to literary principles—theme, characterization, plot, setting, and so on—that significantly affect the way the text is read religiously? Or, more specifically, readers might also locate similar watershed moments in works of literature that are not necessarily religiously oriented, at least to begin with, and consider what it means for the characters and for the works themselves when a character experiences a crisis that becomes a moment of faith. How does that change the nature of the work? How does that become its meaning? How does the writer accomplish these transactions? Are they unexpected? Are they credible? What do they mean? How do they differ with different varieties of religion? And if these characters find belief, then their worlds find their meaning. Do readers of *Criterion* agree?

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