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# Introduction



In the early chapters of *David Copperfield*, the young boy found consolation in 'reading as if for life'. His recently widowed mother had married Mr Murdstone, who brought with him his over-indulged daughter, and introduced such cruel changes to the household that the young David was increasingly alienated from his beloved mother. In a chapter entitled 'I Fall into Disgrace', David is in no doubt that he would have been driven mad by his new family situation were it not for the fact that Murdstone had left undisturbed a small room at the top of the house, next to David's bedroom. David had the key to this room, which housed a small collection of books his biological father had kept. It was as if no one except for David even remembered the room was there. The books he read in the room he escaped to were mainly, but not exclusively, eighteenth-century novels. These filled the imagination of one of the best-known, nineteenth-century, fictional characters. He tells us that they were his coping mechanism in hard times:

> From that blessed little room, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, the Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe, came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time, – they, and the Arabian Nights, and the Tales of the Genii, – and did me no harm; for whatever harm was in some of them was not there for me; I knew nothing of

> it. It is astonishing to me now, how I found time, in the midst of my porings and blunderings over heavier themes, to read those books as I did. It is curious to me how I could ever have consoled myself under my small troubles (which were great troubles to me), by impersonating my favourite characters in them – as I did – and by putting Mr and Miss Murdstone into all the bad ones – which I did too. …
>
> This was my only and constant comfort. When I think of it, the picture always rises in my mind, of a summer evening, the boys at play in the churchyard, and I sitting on my bed, reading as if for life.[1]

This is one short, sad scene depicting a period of loneliness within a childhood of mixed fortunes and yet, within it, we see Dickens's faith in literature's ability to keep alive a hope of something beyond the here and now. Reading was no guilty pleasure for the young reader, but a lifesaver. For the boy David, reading was not escapism, but something that permitted him the flights of fancy and imagination that kept him sane. He was weighed down with great sadness and loneliness, yet he found new friends in the people he met in his father's books. The little room he called 'blessed' was like a sanctuary for the boy. This was 'reading as if for life'.

In a later novel, Dickens gives reading as if for life another expression. In *Hard Times*, the brutal Thomas Gradgrind enforces intolerable working conditions on his factory employees. After long hours of hard labour, the workers go to libraries to read. There:

> [t]hey wondered about human nature, human passions, human hopes and fears, the struggles, triumphs and defeats, the cares and joys and sorrows, the lives and deaths of common men and women! They sometimes, after fifteen hours' work, sat down to read mere fables about men and women, more or less like themselves, and about children, more or less like their own. They took De Foe to their bosoms, instead of Euclid, and seemed to be on the whole … comforted by Goldsmith.[2]

1. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1992), Chapter IV.
2. Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), Book 1, Chapter VIII.

This was not an escape from life's hardships, nor an avoidance of reality, but the means by which these badly-done-to workers learnt to cope with their unfortunate lot. The workers read to have a life other than work. They read in order to make sense of their hard lives.

What Dickens suggests in *David Copperfield* and *Hard Times* is only the beginning of what reading as if for life can mean. Reading as if for life, as a tool in the practice of spirituality, can mean making a journey towards the enlightenment that results from an encounter with God, by either emptying oneself before the text, or finding oneself through the text, or engaging in a silent conversation with the absent Other, or paying holy attention to the arts through close reading, or appreciating the beauty of reading for pleasure, and thus apprehending the God who is Beauty. In this way, reading is capable of making us better, more moral, people and liberates us from our restricted selves into the pure air of thankfulness, like David Copperfield, dreaming ourselves into the world beyond. Note, please, that I say 'is capable of' because these are not inevitable results of reading.

The reading of which I write here is the reading of serious secular literature other than the scriptures and other than intentionally spiritual texts. In other words, this book is primarily about reading novels and poetry as a spiritual exercise. In some chapters, poetry will be the focus when poems are more accessible for discussion. The Dominican writer, Chris McVey reminds us that in the book of Exodus anyone who wished to consult God went to the meeting tent outside the camp (Exodus 33:7) and suggests that we continue to meet God outside the camp, outside the institution of church, outside the formality of church documents. 'It is', he said, 'outside the camp that we meet the Other who is different – and discover who we are. And where our "home" really is.'[3] The Hebrew Scriptures' allusion to a meeting place 'outside the camp' is especially significant for Christian spirituality when we remember that Jesus died outside Jerusalem, on a waste tip known as Golgotha, feeling abandoned by God. There, 'outside the camp', heaven met earth perhaps as never before. The spirituality of reading described in this book takes us beyond the sacred literature to which Christian believers customarily turn when they want to meet God; it takes us outside that camp to secular literary fiction. I am convinced that we shall find that God is also there.

3. Quoted in Timothy Radcliffe, *Alive in God: A Christian Imagination* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 274.

I am sometimes teased that my academic interest in religion and literature is little more than an excuse to read novels. Perhaps it is, on occasions! Those who tease me in this way may well be people who regard reading novels as a guilty pleasure. I resist the suggestion that reading fiction is a form of escapism, but I do acknowledge that it takes us to other places. As Emily Dickinson said in a poem I remember, 'There is no Frigate like a book / To take us Lands away.' My aim, therefore, is that this spirituality of reading will provide and explain a number of reasons for reading secular literature which are more noble than simply to while away a few pleasurable hours, not the least of these reasons being that reading literature can lift us into godly realms. Outside the camp there is a meeting place where we meet God.