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Self-Identity and Reading

Jesus, it seems, was an educated man. From the gospel of Luke's suggestion that Jesus began his ministry by reading in the Nazareth synagogue, we gather that he was literate. Since the introduction of chapter and verse to the Hebrew scriptures, the passage he read has been known to us as Isaiah 61:1-2: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' Having read these words, which have since been interpreted as a manifesto for his ministry, Jesus sat down and applied the passage to himself, saying, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' He became what he had read. Luke is more likely to have regarded this event as one stage in a process of self-awareness than as a sudden dawning of self-revelation. It follows several scenes in which Luke has disclosed Jesus's special identity – the boy Jesus in the temple teaching scribes, the Baptist's identification of Jesus as one who would be more powerful than he was, the voice from heaven when Jesus was baptised, and the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness wrestling with his sense of vocation – so the words Jesus read from Isaiah serve to confirm what Luke has already shown. The scene in the synagogue and the words Jesus applied to himself prompt me to ask: when Jesus read this text, did he find himself in the reading or lose himself in it, a question that leads me to consider how modern-day readers approach their reading of a book.

Reading the scriptures of any religion in any of its sacred places is probably the most reverential form of reading there can ever be. Both the reader and hearers in a temple, mosque or church usually show utmost respect for the text, even more so than either Erasmus of Rotterdam, who reverently kissed his copy of Cicero before reading it, or Machiavelli, who dressed in his best clothes to read his favourite authors.[1] Alan Jacobs calls such submissive approaches to texts 'kenotic' reading. *Kenosis* is the theological concept of self-emptying encapsulated in Philippians 2:5-11 where St Paul expressed his understanding of the incarnation as Christ emptying himself and taking the form of a servant to be born as a man. I previously referred to Iris Murdoch's *The Unicorn*, in which Max Effingham confronts death when he slips into boggy quicksand. In immediate danger of drowning, he finds himself staring at a black globe of nothingness which is mystically filled with light. He concludes that this is 'love, to look and look until one exists no more, *this* was the love which was the same as death'.[2] As we saw in Chapter Two, Jacobs suggests that full attentiveness to a text requires prior self-annihilation of a similar order to Effingham's near-death experience. Unless as readers we empty ourselves before texts, we are not ready to become fully engaged with them.

The early nineteenth-century philosopher Schopenhauer wrote that there are two natural phases of human life, the first being to strive after existence, fighting for life and preserving oneself at all costs, and the second being to become free from the burden of existence. The first of these is, for most people, more or less accepted as a normal instinct but Schopenhauer argued that the second phase is less obvious. In this second phase, we strive to seek meaning in life rather than merely struggle for life itself.[3] Reading can be part of this search for meaning and full self-immersion in what we read demonstrates a desire to break free from the burden of living a meaningless existence. In his 'Reading for Life' project, Philip Davis discovered that realist novels, in particular, can immerse readers in the mundane secular lives they portray so effectively that questions assisting their actual living in the real world are brought to the surface. Troubles experienced by fictional characters in realist novels can help readers facing

1. Fischer, *A History of Reading*, p. 218.
2. Murdoch, *The Unicorn*, p. 198.
3. Davis, *Reading for Life*, p. 15.

comparable troubles to make sense of their actual experiences. Thus, reading such novels can become a form of 'implicit psychotherapy'.[4] This therapy is the potential reward for perfect attentiveness to, and perfect love for, whatever one reads selflessly.

I suggest that this attentiveness to the text and love for it begins with a form of lostness. During the coronavirus pandemic of the early 2020s I found myself watching more television dramas than usual and I was less selective in advance about my television viewing than previously. I realised, however, that, unless I lost myself in either the characters or the situation early in the programme, I soon gave up watching: the plot had not hooked me in and I did not empathise with the characters. So it is with novels. To enter a novel's world, I must first dislocate myself from my world, lose where I am and find my way into the time and place where the novel is located. I must leave behind current cares and concerns, empty my mind and open myself to the new world the novel offers. Reverence for the text may be too strong a word, but I must certainly have sufficient respect or regard for a book to submit myself to it. Opening a book requires an open mind.

Mark Edmundson's argument for high-quality literary teaching reminds us that, according to both Plato and Aristotle, philosophy begins with a sense of wonder and, according to Wittgenstein, it begins with confusion.[5] In other words, marvelling at the world we live in can cause us to think more deeply about it and serious thinking can result from a sense of being lost. We read best when we become ignorant again, lost, for example, with Dickens's Pip in the overgrown churchyard where he meets the fearful Magwitch and where his expectations and adventures begin. We read *Great Expectations* best when, having made ourselves ignorant again at the first page, we open minds and hearts to discover Pip's world and explore it with him. In such ignorance there lies the beginning of potential change as we become more knowing. We first lose ourselves so that we may find ourselves.

We begin reading by emptying ourselves but we soon rediscover ourselves.

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4. Ibid., p. 16.
5. Edmundson, *Why Read?*, p. 33.

The experience of lostness on entering a novel's world could be compared to walking into a hall of mirrors, not like a hall of mirrors as at Versailles but a hall of amusement arcade mirrors of manifold distorting shapes and sizes. In each mirror the onlooker is reflected differently: in one a distended body, in another a shrunken body, in one a swollen head, in another, a pin head and so on. Here, the hall represents the book in its entirety, and the range of mirrors the range of pluriform insights a single book can offer. According to Jacobs, this can be thought of as quixotic, after Cervantes's Don Quixote who was capable of interpreting every experience within the context of his own imagined chivalric world.[6] A reader's comparable ability to interpret what he or she sees in fictional characters' experiences, in such a way that they give insights into the reader's actual lived experiences, is informative and life enhancing. Jacobs writes of books becoming mirrors where readers see reflections of their own imperfections and struggles, as well as their potentialities. Some of the mirrors are dangerous because they can deceive readers and feed arrogant behaviour. Others generously reflect kinder images that encourage both a better understanding of oneself and a better disposition towards other people. Jacobs warns, therefore, that quixotic reading must always be highly attentive, so that readers carefully avoid misleading delusion and open up the possibility of improved self-awareness.

You might find that another image that helps you understand this process of self-discovery in a novel is the one I described in the previous chapter, that of Teresa of Avila's interior journey through seven stages. Here the soul is seen as a complex dwelling, a castle of transparent crystal in which one room after another leads towards the centre where the king lives. We need a map of ourselves to make this journey and, when we complete the journey, we have found our true self. We find the king (of the castle!). Our journey through stages of interiority brings us to the place where we find both God and ourselves. Perhaps, like Christian in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the journey is full of distractions, including a vanity fair of mirrored halls, but diversions like these make interesting reading, to say the least. Having successfully navigated all distractions, we then reach the place of knowing ourselves. Perhaps for the first time.

6. Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading*, p. 91.

Josie Billington observes that what is going on when we come to know ourselves in what we read is 'two-way' reading. I am outside the book reading it from my external location, while the book simultaneously reads me from within.[7] Perhaps this is what a somewhat puzzling verse in the book of Psalms is alluding to in saying: 'Once God has spoken, twice have I heard this' (Psalm 62:11). Reading texts is two-directional in that, when we examine words, we examine ourselves and we examine ourselves using words. Billington illustrates this with an account of a participant in a read-aloud group who found that engaging with Ebeneezer Scrooge's encounter with Christmas Past in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* returned him to his childhood school. In the story Scrooge reverted to his former self as a lonely boy reading by a feeble fire and wept at his memory of the experience. The reading group participant comments that Scrooge, who when he was a boy was incapable of feeling lonely, only now weeps for his loneliness. As the boy was forgotten by others, so the man has forgotten himself. Billington observes that, in this scene, Scrooge, as a hardened adult, sees himself as an innocent child in a way that reanimates the older man. Billington calls this the story's 'second voice' and its 'deep structure'. On this point, she is aligned with the novelist Marilynne Robinson whom she cites as having spoken of texts having 'inner voices'.[8] This inner thinking is unlimited and the inner voice is uninhibited.

Readers are simultaneously outside and inside the text. Billington says, 'The reader is still … audience and witness to the text, which exists *outside*; but at the same time, the mind is the realizer of its own sudden inner message'.[9] The hall of mirrors we enter when we open the pages of a novel triggers echoes that we recognise within ourselves. We see, hear and feel ourselves afresh in our reading to such an extent that fiction helps us navigate our actual social world by offering simulated opportunities for us to discover new knowledge and fresh understanding of self and others, thus sharpening our social awareness and ethical behaviour. I stress the word 'offering' in the previous statement, because I do not want it to be thought that I assume that readers are necessarily better people than non-readers.

7. Josie Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 125.
8. Ibid., p.126.
9. Ibid. (Billington's italics).

This is clearly not so. Reading does *not* necessarily make us better people. It has the *potential* to do so but not all readers accept what reading offers. Some people responsible for evil acts have been avid readers and keen appreciators of the other arts! If reading is to be self-improving, we must be open to triggers in the text that teach us more of ourselves.

Do we need, though, to learn different lessons about ourselves at different stages of life? Helen Taylor launched into writing a book about why women read novels to find out how important fiction was to her and to what extent it had become incorporated into her own life story and journey. The research she conducted amongst women readers shows that many had reading lives that were divided into several chapters. One, for instance, read Émile Zola as a self-confessed morose teenager, Isabelle Allende and Angela Carter as a young adult, trapped in a job she did not enjoy, and crime fiction in later life at the point when she had come to realise how finite life is.[10] Many of her respondents described variations on this theme. Taylor compares this with what she calls the cliché that people have a soundtrack to their lives made up of their significant musical choices. This, indeed, is the basis for one of the longest running programmes on British radio, *Desert Island Discs*, introduced on the BBC Forces Programme (part of BBC Home Service) in 1942 by Roy Plumley and still going today on BBC Radio 4. Guests are invited to imagine that they have been cast away on an uninhabited island and to select eight pieces of music they would want to take with them. Almost always the guests choose music associated with their past lives or with a person with whom they have shared some part of their lives. I guess I am not the only listener who wonders how I would make my choices if I ever needed to.

There is a similar section in *Saturday Live* on BBC Radio 4. It is entitled 'Inheritance Tracks'. Here a guest talks first about a cherished piece of 'inherited' music. It might be a tune learnt from a parent, sung in the childhood home or taught by a teacher. Then the guest turns attention to the track he or she wants to bequeath to others. Again, almost always, both the inherited music and the music to be bequeathed have strong links with the guest's lived experiences – and, again, I wonder what I would choose for my inheritance track. There

10. Helen Taylor, *Why Women Read Fiction: The Stories of Our Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 227-28.

is too much music in my life to reduce to eight desert island discs or one inheritance track.

In actual fact, I am currently facing a similar exercise in the case of books. Sometime, quite soon, I am expecting to move out of a manse with yards of bookshelves after many decades of accumulating books. I shall need to reduce my collection to fit into a more affordable retirement home while leaving room there for us and life's other requisites. How do I choose what to take from the collection that represents a lifetime of reading theology, novels and poetry? What will go into the boxes for the charity shops? Many difficult decisions lie ahead because, without doubt, each book could make a case for going with me because, if I accept the opinions of most of Taylor's respondents, each book could be regarded as a chapter in my life's journey. They map my life.

On the other hand, some of the women who completed Taylor's questionnaire thought that the idea of lives divided into chapters was too neat. Our lives are not linear in that fashion. Several years ago, I decided one summer to reread many of the books I had read during my schooldays. The experiment was revelatory in several ways: some books I remembered fondly had become a chore to read, whilst others about which I had happy memories were rich enough to yield fresh, life-enriching insights. What matters for the fulfilled human being is that we can write the stories of our multi-faceted and multi-layered lives over, across and within our reading-lives whereby what we read illuminates what we experience.

John Cottingham said that 'there is always a story to be told about how I became what I now am, how I learn from my past mistakes, and the destination at which I am now aiming' but this is only possible if we are able to see life as a 'morally integrated whole'.[11] This is a much more robust understanding of the nature of human existence than life as a series of episodic chapters. Cottingham's contention is that integrity of life is essential to secure the health of the soul, the wellbeing of our very selves, making the prayer of Psalm 86:11 – 'Give me, O Lord, an undivided heart' – a prayer that lies at the centre of well-lived and fulfilled spirituality. It is a prayer for psychological and moral unity. The struggle for wholeness, or unity of selfhood, is the goal of spiritual practice. Cottingham notes that this quest for wholeness of being is central to the biblical narrative and to Christian teaching. He reminds us that the Gospels speak of the importance

11. Cottingham, *In Search of the Soul*, p. 20.

of 'securing the health of the precious *soul* or *self*'[12] or 'finding one's *true* self'[13] and that nothing, not even gaining the whole world, is sufficient to compensate for the loss of self. To illustrate his point, he refers to Jesus's parable of the prodigal son who 'comes to himself' in a moment of reawakening after having left home for a distant land and squandering his inheritance. Cottingham comments that the Dominican writer, Timothy Radcliffe, regarded the prodigal's decision to return home as being the same as rediscovering his true self, inasmuch as his exile in a distant land was as much an exile from his true identity as a son and a brother as it was exile from his family. Radcliffe had said that the prodigal could only find himself again when he was with family. This loss of self, said Cottingham, is what Kierkegaard called 'sickness unto death', the loss of one's soul.[14]

Now, in writing this spirituality for booklovers, I am suggesting that we might consider how the books we read map our lifetime quest for wholeness and integrity of being, and our search for fullness of life. We might, therefore, pause and ask: what eight books would I take to a desert island? What novels have been the most-valued and trusted companions on my walk through this life? Which shall I take with me when my home cannot accommodate a large library? I, for instance, have discovered while writing this book that one story I could not live without is the parable of the prodigal son. I have not been able to resist referring to it three or four times in this book and this has made me realise how central Luke's brilliant storytelling is to my understanding of the Christian faith and Christian spirituality. It is perhaps the last story I would want to hear. I might even want to carry a copy of it with me as I approach the pearly gates!

Following the example of John Wesley, whose journals reveal that his claim to be a man of one book (by which he meant the Bible, of course) was far from the truth because they reveal him to be well-read and widely read, I have kept a reading journal since 1988, this being what Methodist ministers call 'my year of travel', the year I began itinerant circuit ministry. Some would think this is a nerdy thing to do. I honestly cannot remember why I began to record the titles and the authors of the books I read, but, whatever the original reason, the benefit of it now is that I have a record of what one of Helen

12. Ibid., p. 20-21 (Cottingham's italics).
13. Ibid., p.109 (Cottingham's italics).
14. Ibid., p.109.