CRITICAL EXCESS

Overreading in Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Žižek and Cavell

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion: In Praise of Overreading

> Reading works of literature forces on us an exercise of fidelity and respect, albeit within a certain freedom of interpretation. There is a dangerous critical heresy, typical of our time, according to which we can do anything we like with a work of literature, reading into it whatever our most uncontrolled impulses dictate to us. This is not true.
>
> —ECO 2006: 4

The Avoidance of Error

This book began by quoting Johann Martin Chladenius, according to whom hermeneutics teaches us "to avoid misunderstandings and misrepresentations" (Chladenius 1985: 64). Contrary to how it is sometimes depicted, hermeneutics certainly does not claim that texts have only one, unambiguous meaning, but it insists that some interpretations are better and more valid than others. It is necessary to avoid the sense that we can say anything we like. As Eco says in the epigraph to this chapter, it is "a dangerous critical heresy, typical of our time" to assume that we can read whatever we want into a literary work. There is nothing new in the discovery that texts have multiple meanings; the issue is to avoid interpretive anarchy. Early Christian commentators, for example, distinguished between four senses of Holy Scripture (literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical) and thereby provided a code for its proper understanding which could be overseen and sanctioned by the authority of the Church (see Eco 1984: 147–53). From its origins, the role of hermeneutics was to combat the

"Babel of Interpretations"[1] by striving to establish ways to assess what is sound and what is aberrant by way of interpretation.

Peter Szondi observes that the focus of hermeneutics has changed in recent times; once it was, he says, "exclusively a system of rules, while today it is exclusively a theory of understanding" (Szondi 1995: 2). The difference, though, is not as stark as it might seem. If modern theorists tend not to draw up rules for assessing the plausibility of interpretations, this does not mean that they give up on the regulative function of hermeneutics. The most prominent twentieth-century exponents of hermeneutic thought in Germany and France, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur respectively, both oppose arbitrariness in interpretation or what Gadamer calls "hermeneutic nihilism" (Gadamer 1986: 100). Their theories of understanding are also theories of what it means to understand *correctly*, without error. Interpretation may be, as Paul de Man glumly put it, "nothing but the possibility of error" (De Man 1983: 141). If that is the case, however, hermeneutics is its necessary corrective: the promise that with due caution we might avoid error and perhaps even attain the truth.

Is truth, though, to be discovered by exercising due caution, or by abandoning it? Perhaps, as Alain Badiou has suggested, real thinking has to be *reckless* if it is to exist at all (Badiou 2009: 84). Perhaps the possibility of error is so inherent to human existence that we should learn to live with it rather than trying to eliminate it. Perhaps it is only when we take risks and court outrageousness that we discover anything worth saying. These are in part the lessons of the overreaders presented in this book.

From a hermeneutic point of view, one of the questions underlying the book has been whether any regulative constraints can be applied to the readers discussed here, starting with Heidegger. Is "overreading" governed by principles and susceptible to validation, or is it merely the idiosyncratic and inimitable practice of prestigious, charismatic readers? Derrida rejects "the hermeneutic project postulating the true sense of a text" (Derrida 1978: 86); Deleuze denies that what he does should be called interpretation, and disdains any debate aiming at correction and consensus; Žižek recommends a "ruthless" use of artistic pretexts (Žižek 2001: 9); Levinas endorses an "audacious hermeneutics" (Levinas 1987: 10), at least when dealing with Jewish sacred texts; and Heidegger and Cavell both argue that the potential gains of overinterpretation outweigh the risks. The positions and practices of these thinkers are all different from one

another. Levinas typically begins his talmudic commentaries with a statement of modesty in respect of the text; Derrida and Cavell are patiently respectful toward the objects of their study; Heidegger, Deleuze and Žižek present themselves more as heroic adventurers setting out on unmarked paths, blustering through the dry protocols of scholarship. Each of them, though, positions himself outside the disciplinary boundaries of literary or film criticism in order to increase the philosophical yield of reading.

This final chapter returns to some of the debates concerning interpretation in order to spell out how the overreaders discussed here change the terms of the discussion. The chapter contrasts the hermeneutic aim of avoiding error with the apparent assault on truth and interpretation implied in some treatments of art. It then considers whether there are shared and shareable traits in the very disparate practices of the overreaders; and it analyses what I call the hermeneutics of overreading, which follows from the overreaders' unshakeable faith that the text *knows something* that it will reveal to us if only we ask it in the right way. The title of this final chapter, "In Praise of Overreading," alludes to Jonathan Culler's response to Eco published as "In Defence of Overinterpretation." Here, though, my aim is to express admiration for the work of the overreaders rather than to defend them. They do not stand in need of my defence. The other source of my title is of course Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly*, and perhaps what I am asking for is indeed a little more folly in our academic undertakings.

If hermeneutics is the avoidance of error, it requires a *theoretical* justification which will permit the *practical* discrimination amongst competing possibilities of reading. From its origins in the exegesis of Christian and Jewish sacred texts and Christianising allegorical interpretations of Homer, through its re-orientation as a general science of understanding during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the work of German thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey and up until the twentieth-century contributions of Gadamer and Ricoeur, the history of hermeneutics has been a quest to safeguard interpretation against bewilderment in the face of proliferating meanings.[2] Opinions may differ over how or whether this is achieved, but the ambition remains the same. To take an issue which for a period was hotly debated in literary critical circles, authorial intention has been sometimes embraced, sometimes rejected as a suitable regulative principle for interpretation.

For Enlightenment hermeneutic theorists such as Christian Wolff and Chladenius, an author's intention is a necessary reference point in interpretation (see Mueller-Vollmer 1985: 4–9). In their classic essay "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) Wimsatt and Beardsley reject authorial intention not because it constrains interpretation too much, but because it is not sufficiently reliable or accessible to act as an effective constraint; only analysis and exegesis of the literary work itself can provide "the true and objective way of criticism" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1972: 344). In *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) E. D. Hirsch retorted that the author is "the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation" (Hirsch 1967: 5). The disagreement is not about whether or not there should be normative principles; it concerns the question of whether authorial intention can serve as such a principle, or whether the regulative function is best served by the text in isolation from the uncertainties and obscurities of its author's intentions. In his infamous essay "La Mort de l'auteur" (The Death of the Author) (1968) Roland Barthes may have more radically entertained the possibility of discarding any notion of interpretive correctness underpinned by authorial intention, but in the process—as is indicated in some of his later work on literature such as *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973)—he risked excluding his practice from anything recognisable in conventional terms as literary criticism. In the critical and hermeneutic mainstream, something must serve to control the proliferation of meaning, be it the text (Wimsatt and Beardsley), the author (Hirsch), tradition (Gadamer), or the pressure of interpretive communities (Fish).[3] The answers may differ, but the purpose remains the same.

The Italian theorist and author Umberto Eco, whose views were touched upon in the Preface, comes out clearly in favour of reining in the freedom of interpretation. From his early writings, Eco is still associated with the notion of the "open work," according to which the reader collaborates with the text to ensure that its meaning is never settled once and for all. Eco insists, though, that this does not imply that in matters of interpretation anything goes. It may be hard to say what makes for a good interpretation, but we can more easily recognise some as bad or just plain wrong. Rather than the author's or the reader's intention, Eco proposes as a regulating principle what he calls the *intentio operis*, the intention of the work. This notion aims to avoid interpretive free play without recourse

to the intentions of an empirical author. It acts as a constraint on the reader and attempts to construct him or her as the text's model addressee, who makes conjectures about meaning and tests them against the work without exceeding the bounds of what might reasonably be said. Eco argues that sometimes, when the author's intention is unattainable and the reader's intention is arguable, we may nevertheless discover "the transparent intention of the text, which disproves an untenable interpretation" (Eco 1992: 78).

Giving the *intentio operis* a Latin name might endow it with an element of intellectual glamour, but its usefulness is limited. It is not clear, for example, that it represents an advance on Wimsatt and Beardsley's account of how meaning is to be established by close reading of the literary work rather than by appealing to authorial intention. The strategic point of Eco's notion is to support his claim that the rights of interpreters have been overstressed by providing what he calls a "parameter" (Eco 1992: 141) for acceptable interpretations. This does not in itself solve the problem of how to tell a good interpretation from a bad one. Eco argues that the way to identify a bad interpretation or overinterpretation is not to begin by defining criteria for a good reading: "I think, on the contrary, that we can accept a sort of Popperian principle according to which if there are no rules that help to ascertain which interpretations are the 'best' ones, there is a least a rule for ascertaining which ones are 'bad'" (Eco 1992: 52). At this point Eco is not far from the conservative hermeneutics of E. D. Hirsch. Like Eco, Hirsch refers to Karl Popper to support his view that "there cannot be any method or model of correct interpretation," but that there can be "a ruthlessly critical process of validation" (Hirsch 1967: 206). If hermeneutics cannot tell us how to construct a good interpretation, it can at least give us the tools to help spot readings which are improbable. We may never know with absolute certainty that a given reading is correct, but we can be pretty sure that some are wrong. Eco suggests, for example, that if Jack the Ripper claimed that he did what he did on the grounds of his interpretation of the Gospel according to Saint Luke, we would be inclined to think that his reading was preposterous; and for Eco this "proves that there is at least one case in which it is possible to say that a given interpretation is a bad one" (Eco 1992: 24–25).

All this seems reasonable enough. Perhaps it is even a little too reasonable, and in any case it is not clear how far it actually helps us in assessing the plausibility of competing readings. Whereas Hirsch offers some criteria by which we might assess the validity of an interpretation, Eco goes little further than suggesting that we will recognise a bad reading when we see one. His position becomes more awkward, and more theoretically interesting, in the third and last of his lectures in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* when he turns to discussing interpretations of his own novels *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* (originally published in Italian in 1980 and 1988, respectively). Eco signals that he is moving into theoretically difficult territory by his slightly embarrassed, jocular introduction to this section of his lecture. He calls his procedure "risky" and describes it as "a laboratory experiment," urging his listeners to keep what they hear to themselves: "Please do not tell anyone about what happens today: we are irresponsibly playing, like atomic scientists trying dangerous scenarios and unmentionable war games" (Eco 1992: 73). Faithful to his argument that the work's intention matters more than the author's, Eco does not try to refute what he regards as wrong interpretations by reference to his aims whilst writing his novels; rather, he puts himself in the position of a reader, assessing the claims of other readers by considering how persuasively they elucidate his novels. As his own reader, he may be persuaded of the validity of an interpretation which does not correspond to any intention he may have had as an author. So he insists that when he gave the name Casaubon to one of the characters in *Foucault's Pendulum,* he did not intend it as a reference to the character of the same name in George Eliot's *Middlemarch,* and indeed he included a passage in his novel which aimed to discourage readers from making any such connection. Subsequently, however, a critic pointed out that Eliot's Casaubon was writing *A Key to All Mythologies,* a fact which makes a strong link to Eco's novel. Eco is obliged to accept the validity of this observation: "Text plus standard encyclopedia knowledge entitle any cultivated reader to make that connection. It makes sense. Too bad for the empirical author who was not as smart as his reader" (Eco 1992: 82). Here, the reader wins out over the author, and the interpretation stands.

On other occasions there is no such internal conflict between Eco's position as both author and reader of his own work. He refers to an essay written in Russian by Helena Costiucovich which points to four similari-

ties between his *The Name of the Rose* and a novel by the French writer Emile Henriot entitled *La Rose de Bratislava*: the hunting of a mysterious manuscript, a final fire in a library, reference to Prague, and the fact that Henriot's book contains a librarian called Berngard and Eco's contains a librarian called Berengar (Eco 1992: 75). From the standpoint of the author, Eco insists that he had never read Henriot's novel and did not know of its existence. As a reader also, he does not find anything compelling in the connection: the search for a mysterious manuscript and fires in libraries are common literary *topoi*; the reference to Prague does not play an important role in *The Name of the Rose*; and the similarity of Berengar and Berngard could be a coincidence. Fundamentally, Eco does not dismiss the connection because it is inherently implausible. He concedes that a reader might find the presence of four coincidences to be "interesting" (Eco 1992: 76), but for his own part he remains unmoved by it: "As an uncommitted reader of *The Name of the Rose*, I think that the argument of Helena Costiucovich does not prove anything interesting" (Eco 1992: 75). Eco is equally unpersuaded by a further suggestion made by Costiucovich that there is a link between Casanova, the author of the coveted manuscript in Henriot's novel, and Eco's character Hugh of Newcastle, who in the original Italian is called Ugo de Novocastro. Eco insists that reference to Casanova leads nowhere: "Obviously I am ready to change my mind if some other interpreter demonstrates that the Casanova connection can lead to some interesting interpretive path, but for the moment—as a model Reader of my own novel—I feel entitled to say that such a hypothesis is scarcely rewarding" (Eco 1992: 77).

Eco's reluctance to endorse these connections requires no further justification. Whilst the links made by Costiucovich are, to my mind, certainly not outlandish, neither are they compelling. The criteria Eco invokes are, however, more surprising, and they potentially unsettle the views he expresses in other parts of *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Elsewhere, as we have seen, Eco says that the text is the "parameter" for an acceptable interpretation (Eco 1992: 141), and he argues that "the transparent intention of the text . . . disproves an untenable interpretation" (Eco 1992: 78). Here, in reference to the interpretation of *The Name of the Rose* he suggests a rather different position, as he implies that the key terms for assessing validity are *interesting* and *rewarding*. These criteria cannot be

established on grounds which are purely internal to the text. Eco does not dismiss Costiucovich's suggestions because they falsify his work; he explicitly keeps an open mind on that issue, undertaking to revise his rejection if the same observations can be made to serve a more interesting interpretation. Here at least, Eco allows his own assessment of what is interesting to decide the validity of a reading rather than its degree of concordance to the *intentio operis*. At the same time, he allows for the possibility that other readers might disagree by finding the comments interesting, and even that those comments might be made interesting to him if presented in a different interpretive context. It becomes hard to maintain the distinction between interpretation and overinterpretation, which is nevertheless the cornerstone of Eco's argument, if so vague and fluid a notion as *interestingness* is granted authority in matters of adjudication. Moreover, it is possible that all along this has been the hidden criterion guiding what is judged to be acceptable or unacceptable. Eco judges it interesting, and therefore valid, to observe that Eliot's Casaubon was writing *A Key to All Mythologies*; he does not find interest, and therefore validity, in the similarity of the names Berengar and Berngard. But we might disagree, and the notion of *intentio operis* will do nothing to help us out of this dilemma. Interestingness is only a secure means of settling the conflict of interpretations if we *also* have some secure means of deciding what is and isn't interesting. So long as we do not, we are no further advanced than we were if our aim is to distinguish between valid and false interpretations.

A further surprising consequence of invoking interestingness as a criterion of validation is that Eco begins to look more like his respondents Richard Rorty and Jonathan Culler than he seems willing to accept. In his reply to Eco, as we saw in the Preface, Jonathan Culler defends overinterpretation on the grounds that it provokes new questions. Moderate interpretation, which articulates a consensus, "is of little interest" (Culler 1992: 110); and Culler insists that Eco agrees with him, even if he doesn't know it (Culler 1992: 110–11). Rorty rejects the distinction between interpretation and overinterpretation, arguing that there are no solid grounds for keeping them separate. For Rorty, the value of descriptions or interpretations can never be gauged by their fidelity to the object to which they refer, because there is no stable object that can be independently known; rather, descriptions are evaluated "according to their efficacy as instru-

ments for purposes" (Rorty 1992: 92). The key criteria, then, are efficacy or usefulness, not truth or adequacy. Reading Eco or Derrida, Rorty argues, might give you "something interesting to say about a text which you could not otherwise have said" (Rorty 1992: 105). *Interesting* replaces *true* because there is simply no non-tautological, grounded method for measuring a text against an interpretation and therefore of assessing the truth of the latter. For Rorty, the role of intellectuals is to say interesting things; and like Culler, Rorty suggests that Eco agrees with him even if he does not know (or admit) that he does so. Provocatively assimilating Eco's position to his own, Rorty is now able to describe the Italian author as a congenial fellow-pragmatist (Rorty 1992: 93).[4]

Eco opens the door which makes it possible for Culler and Rorty to enlist him to their own, rather different, arguments when he begins to assess interpretations by their interest rather than solely by their appropriateness to their object texts. His rejection of overinterpretation can be (over)interpreted as in fact endorsing precisely the critical excess it seems to exclude. His account allies itself with the hermeneutic tradition which seeks to eliminate error and misunderstanding; but it sits uneasily with that tradition once it allows the fluid category of the interesting to play a role in the evaluation of critical acts. He may still insist on the regulating principle of the *intentio operis*, but he risks undermining its normative power. His elaboration of his ideas, then, is shadowed by an opposing movement in which the possibility of error is positively embraced, or—more radically—truth is discarded altogether. The next section looks at more skeptical approaches to interpretation which form part of the background to the hermeneutics of overreading.

The Assault on Interpretation

In her essay "Against Interpretation" (1964) Susan Sontag described interpretation as "largely reactionary, stifling," and "the revenge of the intellect upon art" (Sontag 1972: 655). It tames the unnerving power of art by making it manageable and comfortable. Rather than the obsessive quest for meaning, Sontag calls for a more passionate, sensual form of commentary which would enable us to experience again "the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are" (Sontag 1972: 659). As a theory of understanding, hermeneutics disputes the premises underlying Sontag's position: from a hermeneutic perspective, interpretation is not something which we choose to do, and therefore could equally choose not to do; nor is there any "thing in itself" which could be experienced without the mediation of interpretation.[5] In a general sense, all experience involves interpretation, so to be "against interpretation" is an untenable position; in a more restricted sense, though, Sontag attacked what she perceived as the dominant assumption that the role of art criticism is to uncover the meaning of individual works. For different reasons, others concurred with some of her conclusions. As I suggested in Chapter 2, despite the important and well-respected work of Paul Ricoeur, in France hermeneutics has often been understood reductively as the mystified quest for the single correct interpretation of a literary work. Characterising their endeavour as an alternative to hermeneutics, the structuralists renounced interpretation in favour of a poetics which understood each particular work as one possible realisation of abstract, general structures.[6] Chapter 3 showed how Deleuze rejected the term *interpretation* altogether, on the grounds quite simply that "there is nothing to interpret" (Deleuze and Parnet 1977: 10; Deleuze 1990: 17). To some extent endorsing the structuralist project and some of its poststructuralist developments, Culler gave the opening chapter of his *Pursuit of Signs* (1981) the title "Beyond Interpretation." He argued that "one thing we do not need is more interpretations of literary works" (Culler 1981: 6), and he supported instead projects such as the systematic study of how literature signifies, or the uncanny logics of textuality explored by Derrida. Sontag was against interpretation; Culler wanted to go beyond it; and Deleuze denied that there was anything to interpret in any case. Despite the huge differences between their views, they converge at least in their conclusion: we should give up on interpretation.

Associated with this assault on interpretation is the sense that the interpreter's desire for truth is deluded. Harold Bloom conveys something of this when he bluntly insists that "There are no interpretations but only misinterpretations, and so all criticism is prose poetry" (Bloom 1973: 95). Any act of interpretation misses its object. In the context of Bloom's theory of poetry, this does not mean that all misreadings are equally valueless; on the contrary, some are better than others, just as some poems are better than others. Bloom replaces the normative distinction between right and

wrong interpretations by a no less normative distinction between strong and weak acts of reading. Strong poets establish themselves as great artists by creatively misreading their precursors; and strong critics impose themselves by their powerful critical appropriations of the literary tradition. In principle the regulative criterion of correctness seems to have vanished, and Bloom opens up the prospect of infinite regress: one poet misreads another, Bloom misreads that misreading, we misread Bloom's misreading, and so on for ever. In practice, though, there is no such regress. As the title of one of his books indicates, Bloom offers us a "map of misreading," that is, a way of charting the errors of others according to fixed, repeated and describable patterns. When he speculates that "perhaps there are only more or less creative or interesting mis-readings" (Bloom 1973: 43), he adopts the criterion of interestingness which we also saw in Eco, Rorty and Culler, and he apparently evacuates any possibility of correct interpretation. However, he establishes his own speaking position as authoritative. In order to recognise a strong poet's misreading of a precursor's work, Bloom needs to be able to gauge its divergence from its source, and therefore to be able to read it accurately. To tell us what one poet changed in the work of another, Bloom must know what was there in the first place. In other words, the claim that reading is misreading does not, despite appearances, undercut the possibility that something like correct reading can be achieved.

The case of Bloom suggests that a theory of misreading does not inevitably entail either the abandonment of any hermeneutic project or the consequence that all aspiration to interpretive correctness should be relinquished. At its best, the assault on interpretation is an intelligent questioning rather than an out-and-out repudiation. The reconstruction of the viability of reading needs to pass through its radical critique. The final section of this chapter outlines some of the principles of overreading as suggested by the authors studied in this book. Before getting to that point, I want to look at reasons for problematising two of the foundation stones of successful interpretation. Overreading, I suggest, is driven by skepticism towards the key notions of context and coherence. Context roots the work in the external world; a presumption of coherence ensures that its vision is unified and self-consistent. A reading which ignores or falsifies the context of a work, or which violates its internal coherence, can

usually be taken as erroneous. Overreaders, however, are not so sure what constitutes a context, or how to recognise a work's self-consistency.

Context. Context stabilises a work. If we did not know whether the Iliad was composed in the eighth century before the common era in Greece or in twenty-first century Seattle, we would be at a loss how to make sense of it. Knowing that Proust was a male homosexual of independent means writing in early twentieth-century France helps us to situate his work, giving at least some clues for understanding what and how he wrote. It does not of course tell us everything. As Sartre observed, Paul Valéry was a petit-bourgeois intellectual, but not every petit-bourgeois intellectual was Paul Valéry (Sartre 1960: 44).[7] Nevertheless, some knowledge of the historical, social and biographical context in which art works emerge surely helps us to understand them better. It allows us to reduce the polysemy of a text to manageable proportions (see Ricoeur 1986: 77).

But what is a context, and how many contexts does a given work have? In relation to the individual words of a text, Hirsch comments that "the context is not a fixed given" (Hirsch 1967: 201). It is a construction based on always questionable interpretive decisions. To construe the context of a literary text, for example, might involve examining some or all of the following: the sentence in which a word appears, or the paragraph, chapter or book in which the sentence appears, or the entire corpus of the author, and other works in the same genre by different authors in the same language or in others; the author's idiolect as well as the entire language in which the text is written, including its grammar and history, and its relations with other languages; the author's social and family background, education, sexuality and politics; the great historical events and movements of the period, including those which the work mentions and reflects upon, and those of which it may be unaware but by which it is silently structured; and doubtless much more besides. Moreover, one would also need a persuasive account of the reciprocal influence of work and context: how does the context produce the work, and how does the work transform the context and our perception of it (see Žižek 2004: 15)?

Derrida's reading of Nietzsche's "I have forgotten my umbrella," discussed in Chapter 2, is a brilliant and infuriating demonstration of how interpretive speculation is unleashed once the proper context for an utterance is missing. If we do not know whether a sentence constitutes a

factual statement, an overheard quotation, a poem or a coded message, then—depending on your point of view—we are either floundering or liberated. The question that Derrida entertains is whether, to some extent, the context is *always* missing. In his discussion of J. L. Austin in "Signature événement contexte," Derrida insists that the context of an utterance can never be fully saturated or exhausted (Derrida 1972a: 389). The reassuring side of this is that context can be known *to some extent.* We can know some things about it. We might even know quite a lot about it, which for many purposes will make interpretation and understanding reasonably secure. Our knowledge of a context, and the knowledge of an utterance or work of art which that context permits, is not necessarily wrong merely because it is not complete. The other side of Derrida's point, however, is that our knowledge of the context is always partial, which means that new contexts may be introduced to transform any provisional understanding we have arrived at. Something more remains to be said, and our means of policing what can and cannot plausibly be maintained are neither practically nor theoretically up to the task.

Coherence. A second criterion for regulating interpretation is the assumption of the work's coherence. Invoking this criterion in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation,* Eco traces it back to St. Augustine:

> How to prove a conjecture about the *intentio operis*? The only way is to check it upon the text as a coherent whole. This idea, too, is an old one and comes from Augustine (*De doctrina christiana*): any interpretation given of a certain portion of a text can be accepted if it is confirmed by, and must be rejected if it is challenged by, another portion of the same text. In this sense the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader. (Eco 1992: 65; see also Eco 1990: 59)

In similar vein, Gadamer suggests that all understanding is led by what he calls a "Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit" (anticipation of perfection), that is, the assumption "that only that is intelligible which truly represents a perfect unity of sense" (Gadamer 1986: 299).[8] If this assumption is frustrated by the apparent incoherence of a work, we doubt the accuracy of the text as it has been passed on to us and seek to know "how it is to be healed" (Gadamer 1986: 299). The belief that the work is a perfect unity of sense is presented as unshakeable; if the evidence does not support it, rather than

revising this fundamental belief, Gadamer would prefer to question the reliability of the version of the text that has been handed down to us.

Hirsch concurs that coherence is the key criterion in the validation of interpretation. In his account three preliminary criteria must be fulfilled: legitimacy, correspondence and generic appropriateness; that is, the interpretation must be permissible within the norms of the language in which the text was composed, it must account for all linguistic components of the text, and it must respect the conventions of the genre to which the text belongs. Several competing readings might meet these demands, so a fourth, overriding principle is invoked: "When these three preliminary criteria have been satisfied, there remains a fourth criterion which gives significance to all the rest, the criterion of plausibility or *coherence.* . . . Faced with alternatives, the interpreter chooses the reading which best meets the criterion of coherence" (Hirsch 1967: 236; emphasis in original).

The criterion of coherence requires both that the text is inherently, essentially self-consistent, and that interpreters should be able to recognise and to describe it as such. Coherent texts permit and produce coherent interpretations. Of course, this criterion does not provide a simple solution to all interpretive problems. Hirsch concedes that coherence-building gets entangled in a version of the hermeneutic circle: "The procedure is thoroughly circular; the context is derived from the submeanings and the submeanings are specified and rendered coherent with reference to the context" (Hirsch 1967: 237). Competing interpretations may be equally coherent, in which case we should choose the one which is most probably right by the best possible assessment of the context of the work. In this instance, by *context* Hirsch means primarily the author's typical outlook, and the typical associations and expectations which inform his texts. Context and coherence reinforce one another. As we test the coherence of a reading against our best understanding of its context, we avoid, according to Hirsch, "pure circularity in making sense of the text" (Hirsch 1967: 238).

Other theorists are less sanguine about the prospects of circumventing the hermeneutic circle. The discovery of a coherent unity of meaning in a work is preceded and programmed by the supposition that it exists. Perhaps we find it only because we are looking for it with such determination, to the point that, as Gadamer implies, if our search is frustrated, we

should correct or "heal" the text until it gives us what we wanted from it. Eco argues that the text's internal coherence puts a brake on the reader's uncontrollable drives; Rorty counters that there is no internal coherence prior to our description of it, and no anchoring of our interpretations in a secure context outside the hermeneutic circle:

> We [pragmatists] like Eco's redescription of what he calls "the old and still valid hermeneutic circle." But, given this picture of texts being made as they are interpreted, I do not see any way to preserve the metaphor of a text's *internal* coherence. I should think that a text just has whatever coherence it happened to acquire during the last roll of the hermeneutic wheel, just as a lump of clay only has whatever coherence it happened to pick up at the last turn of the potter's wheel.
>
> So I should prefer to say that the coherence of the text is not something it has before it is described, any more than the dots had coherence before we connected them. Its coherence is no more than the fact that somebody has found something interesting to say about a group of marks or noises—some way of describing those marks and noises which relates them to some of the other things we are interested in talking about. (Rorty 1992: 97; emphasis in original)

In this view, the coherence of a work is the product of interpretation rather than its source. Stanley Fish makes a similar point with characteristic provocation when he states that "interpreters do not decode poems; they make them" (Fish 1980: 327). The claim that works have inherent, internal qualities independent of their interpretation cannot be proven, since it is only by interpretation that we can point them out. It may be equally unprovable to claim that works *do not* have inherent, internal qualities; but to start from that possibility might at least keep open the prospect of encountering something raw, unanticipated and incongruous in a text or film, without the need to coerce it into a pre-existing, coherent unity of meaning.

The Hermeneutics of Overreading

Rorty's view that a work's coherence is conferred by its reader is not shared by all the overreaders discussed in this book. Some maintain that the work does have ultimate coherence, even if it is mysterious and unspeakable. As Chapter 1 indicated, Heidegger argues that the multiple

meanings of a poet's work could be traced back to a single source; and from a religious perspective Levinas insists that the sacred texts of the Jewish tradition are held together by a powerful unity, albeit a unity which incorporates what might appear to us to be inconsistencies and contradictions. The various thinkers I have discussed nevertheless set out from the position that neither context nor coherence are sufficiently fixed or available to us to function as decisive limitations on interpretation. They attempt to find new possibilities of meaning in works without worrying overly about how and why they came to be there, and how they should be made to fit with some established, coherent kernel of sense which we might assume that it contains.

Problematising context and coherence as regulative constraints on interpretation is not tantamount to endorsing an unfettered relativism which evacuates all truth from the work of art and its interpretation. Quite the contrary is the case. Chapter 1 argued that the rehabilitation of the poets achieved by Heidegger in the wake of his Romantic forebears depended precisely upon the re-alignment of art with truth. Derrida, sometimes portrayed as the prince of relativists, had no compunction in invoking the value of truth when he thought his work had been misrepresented. Repudiating Habermas's attack on him, for example, he insisted that he simply did not hold the views ascribed to him: "That is false. I do indeed say *false* as opposed to *true*" (Derrida 1990: 245; emphasis in original). Derrida is sometimes depicted as dismissing out of hand any notion that texts have determinate meanings or that authors have intentions which their readers should respect. M. H. Abrams, for example, states that "Derrida puts out of play, before the game even begins, every source of norms, controls, or indicators which, in the ordinary use and experience of language, set a limit to what we can mean and what we can be understood to mean" (Abrams 1988: 268). Yet Derrida's outrage at finding his views misrepresented is by no means an inconsistency in his work. His patient attention to the detail of literary and philosophical works derives from the belief that reading entails a responsibility towards the text; and he expects others to act with the same responsibility towards him when they read or purport to read his writings. Only by exposing oneself as fully as one can to what is utterly singular about the work under consideration, only by striving conscientiously to appreciate its difference from oneself, does one earn the

right to criticise it. Underpinning Derrida's commitment to the text is a sense shared by the thinkers discussed in this book, namely, that the work may contain something surprising, shocking, challenging, something unfathomably *other* and alien, which may not be immediately apparent, but which will reward the most patient, most devoted attention.[9]

This does not mean that overreaders always succeed in remaining faithful to the works they are interpreting. The risk of error is ever-present; and no reader is secure against the oldest interpretive trap of them all: that is, the inclination to find in a text only what we are predisposed to see in it. As I have suggested on a number of occasions, the thinkers discussed in this book are certainly not immune to this danger. The endeavour to listen to a voice from elsewhere might easily end up drowning it out. The problem, which cannot be resolved in advance by any all-purpose principle, is to distinguish between legitimate appropriation and downright falsification. Ricoeur observes that appropriation is one of the goals of all interpretation. It is the struggle to overcome distance, which may be historical or cultural, or to surmount the otherness of any person or system of values which is not immediately intelligible to us: "in this sense," Ricoeur argues, "interpretation 'brings closer,' 'equalizes,' makes 'contemporary and similar,' which is truly to make *one's own* what first of all was *alien*" (Ricoeur 1986: 153; emphasis in original). Appropriation, as the overcoming of distance, may be a universal hermeneutic aim, but its pitfalls are substantial. The otherness of the work may go unheard because we assimilate it too brutally to what we can readily conceive. At its best overreading is motivated by a fierce commitment to the singularity of the work of art and to its potential to transform our ways of thinking; but it is as prone to the risks of hasty appropriation as any form of reading.

Ricoeur distinguishes between two modes of interpretation: interpretation as the recollection of meaning, and as the exercise of suspicion. The former entails what he calls "a reasonable faith [*une foi raisonnable*]" (Ricoeur 1965: 37), which aims to restore what sacred texts and signs might have to say to us. The hermeneutics of suspicion, of which the modern masters are Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, suggests on the contrary that the role of interpretation is to demystify its objects because they have something to hide, something that can only be brought to the surface by reading them against the grain. The hermeneutics of overreading does not quite correspond to either the recollection of meaning or the exercise of suspicion. Its faith in the work is exorbitant rather than reasonable—not exactly irrational, but certainly willing to depart from the familiar, well-trodden ways of thought—and it has no definitive confidence that what it finds is really there or not. At the same time it has no sense that the work is mystified in respect of its true significance. On the contrary, there is an excessive trust in the work and something approaching desperation to tease out its complex insights. This is not, then, the hermeneutics of suspicion, but a hermeneutics of conviction, guided by firm and demanding tenets of faith.

Overreading is imaginative and flexible. It may appear to disdain the standards of evidence and argument which most critics respect; and in the process it may fail to find anything new to say about the works under scrutiny. Sometimes, though, it may renew our understanding of a text or film in challenging, thrilling ways . To conclude this book, I want to sketch some of the maxims which guide overreading in its search to release the unanticipated voice of the textual or filmic Other. At the risk of falsely unifying the thinkers discussed in the book, it is nevertheless possible to see some tendencies, which might even be called principles, underlying their practice. Some of these are relatively uncontroversial, or at least they do not self-evidently run up against common sense; others might be thought bluntly to contradict the norms of ordinary scholarly enquiry.

1. *No form of evidence should be ruled out on principle.* There is no methodical or methodological purity about overreading. No form of evidence is consistently used or consistently excluded, and any information that might add to a work's yield of sense is legitimate. Heidegger sometimes uses textual variants or (sometimes questionable) etymologies, but certainly not in any systematic way. Theoretically informed criticism has often been anti-biographical, but this cannot be a tenet of overreading. Derrida can be biographical and anecdotal when it suits him. In his discussion of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, for example, he uses the fact that the child who plays the *fort/da* game is Freud's grandson, even though that is not made explicit in Freud's original text (see Derrida 1980: 313–40). As Chapter 3 suggested, when Deleuze puts writers and filmmakers (nearly) on a par with great philosophers, he regards them as prestigious individual thinkers with opinions and intentions. In other words

they are *authors* in a quite old-fashioned sense. Barthes's announcement of the death of the author is altogether too dogmatic for a committed overreader because it rules out a valuable source of speculation. The basic principle is: if it helps, use it; if it doesn't help, a discreet veil may be drawn over it.

2. *The potential of context to generate meaning is never exhausted.* The critique of context discussed in the previous section does not imply that contextual interpretation cannot be used. Historical, linguistic or biographical contexts should not be ruled out of order, but neither should they be invoked to close down interpretive endeavour. From a New Historicist perspective, a critic such as Stephen Greenblatt does not dispute the importance of Elizabethan England for understanding Shakespeare, but he opens up fresh ways of viewing that context by reading Shakespeare's plays alongside, for example, contemporary medical manuals; for Cavell the proper context for reading Shakespeare is philosophical skepticism, as it had been developed in the sixteenth century by Montaigne and would be refined a generation after Shakespeare by Descartes.[10] There are always new contexts to be found. The reverse side of this maxim is that reading *out of context* is also always legitimate because there is no fixed, determinate context for a work. As Žižek puts it, "Perhaps the most elementary hermeneutic test of the greatness of a work of art is its ability to survive being torn from its original context" (Žižek 2008: 129–30); we should "*decontextualize* the work, tear it out of the context in which it was originally embedded" (Žižek 2008: 130; emphasis in original). The overreaders release us from the tyranny of context by destabilising its boundaries. New contexts will unlock unexpected possibilities of meaning. To put it another way, contextual reading can never fix the meaning of a prestigious work because we do not have an agreed normative principle for deciding what a context is. Art maintains its hold on us because its significance is still to be discovered in future encounters.

3. *Nothing is only what it seems; anything is interpretable.* One of the interpretive gains of psychoanalysis has been to spread the insight that any apparently insignificant detail might bear unexpected sense, though this had in fact been long understood by the interpreters of sacred texts.[11] Levinas insists that in the Talmud more is always at stake than might

seem to be the case to a casual reader: "It is certain that, when discussing whether it is right to eat or not to eat 'an egg laid on a feast day' or the compensation due for damage caused by a 'mad bull,' the wise men of the Talmud are discussing neither an egg nor a bull but, without seeming to, they are questioning fundamental ideas" (Levinas 1968: 12). Overreaders apply this conviction to secular works. They are perpetually willing to transform a text by finding in it something which speaks to their concerns; so, Lacan could see in Poe's "The Purloined Letter" an allegory of psychoanalysis and Cavell could read it as an allegory of ordinary language philosophy. The overlooked detail, if viewed "awry" (as Žižek puts it in the title of one of his books), might always produce fresh signifying potential.

4. *The boundaries between the inside and the outside of a work are never certain.* In the nineteenth century Schleiermacher warned that it is an error to miss an allusion in a text when there is one, just as it is an error to see an allusion in a text when there isn't one (Schleiermacher 1985: 78–79). In principle we might readily agree with this, but deciding whether or not an allusion is actually present in a work may turn out to be difficult to ascertain. In specific instances it might not be possible to reach agreement on what is in the text and what is not. Does the ram in the Celan poem explored by Derrida in *Béliers* really allude to a battering ram, a sign of the zodiac and the ram sacrificed by Abraham, or not? One of the things that distinguishes cautious readers from speculative overreaders is their degree of certainty over what is "inside" the text or relevant to it. What is really there, and what is merely read in? Overreaders, typically, are unsure or unconcerned, and they prefer the interpretive gain of exploring possible resonances over the relative security of sticking to what is uncontroversially present.

5. *Mistakes don't matter too much.* This point follows on from the previous one. Taking interpretive risks means accepting that they will not always pay off. Cavell stoutly defends mistakes he might make in his account of films: "a few faulty memories will not themselves shake my conviction in what I've said, since I am as interested in how a memory went wrong as in why the memories that are right occur when they do" (Cavell 1979b: xxiv). Žižek approves of Cavell's self-defence: "Stanley Cavell was

right when, in a reply to his critics (who pointed out numerous mistakes in his retelling the story of films), he retorted that he fully stands by his mistakes" (Žižek 2004: 152). Žižek himself is highly mistake-prone,[12] whilst being quick to castigate others for their errors; but perhaps, he suggests, the worst blunders, such as locating Hitchcock's *Vertigo* in Los Angeles rather than San Francisco, should be taken as something positive, since they bear witness to the critic's "excessive subjective engagement" (Žižek 2004: 152) in the work being analysed. It is better to invest oneself without reserve in the work than to stand back from it with Kantian disinterest, even if our commitment risks blinding us to the glaringly obvious. And after all, in matters of cultural interpretation we do not actually risk much. Nobody dies, usually. The worst that is likely to happen to us is that we get ignored.

6. *There is no point in trying to persuade those who disagree with you.* Cavell's recourse to what he calls "a bunch of assertions" (discussed in Chapter 6) entails in part the acknowledgement that sometimes interpreters may be only too aware that they cannot offer watertight arguments in favour of their readings; they seek our assent, but acknowledge the likelihood of dissent. Sometimes, for theoretical or practical reasons, rather than being able to justify *why* we see things in a certain way, we may only be able to say, as Wittgenstein puts it simply, "*This is how it strikes me*" (Wittgenstein 1958: 85; emphasis in original). As noted in Chapter 3, Deleuze is more provocative in refusing to engage in any attempt at persuasion. He could accept that objections to his work might be correct without being willing to dwell on them any further: "Every time someone makes an objection to me, I want to say: 'Okay, okay, let's move on to something else.' Objections have never produced anything positive" (Deleuze and Parnet 1977: 7). (With regard to this and the previous maxim, one might object that it is easy enough for overreaders to be unconcerned about their mistakes and the opinions of others, speaking as they generally do from positions of relative institutional and financial security; it's a completely different matter if you are a student trying to pass an examination or a young academic applying for a job).

The final two maxims are the key items of faith in the hermeneutics of overreading:

7. *The work knows something; perhaps it knows everything.* The work rewards the devoted attention that is paid to it because there is in it a kernel of knowledge which only the most unstinting reader can discover. As the title of the book edited by Žižek suggests, Hitchcock knows everything you always wanted to know about Lacan; or as Žižek also tells us, "vulgar sentimental literature" may know what Kant did not (Žižek 1991: 160). Levinas's reverence for the Talmud comes from the unshakeable faith that in it everything has been thought; all views and positions are given voice within it, so that it speaks to us as much today as it ever did (see Levinas 1968: 16). For Levinas this can be explained by its combination of intellectual rigour and sacred inspiration. In secular contexts it is not so easy to understand how the work of art might come to acquire this commanding authority. Paul de Man describes his belief in the text's knowledge as a sort of enabling self-mystification: "I have a tendency to put upon texts an inherent authority, which is stronger, I think, than Derrida is willing to put on them. I assume, as a working hypothesis (as a working hypothesis, because I know better than that) that the text *knows* in an absolute way what it's doing. I know this is not the case, but it is a necessary working hypothesis that Rousseau knows at any time what he is doing and as such there is no need to deconstruct Rousseau" (De Man 1986: 118; emphasis in original). Cavell expresses a similar tension when proposing that one way to investigate the problem of interpretation is "to say that what you really want to know is what a text knows about itself, because you cannot know more than it does about itself; and then to ask what the fantasy is of the text's knowledge of itself" (Cavell 1984: 53). Cavell suggests that a text knows as much or more about itself than we can know about it; at the same time this conviction is held to be a fantasy. It is, however, no more dispensable for being a fantasy. Cavell's point seems to be that submission to the text is somehow necessary. We have no option but to believe that the work knows itself fully. This excessive belief or fantasy is a counter to the standing threat of skepticism; without it, too little might be knowable or worth knowing. The fundamental inner conviction of the overreaders is that the work knows something. The interpreter's activity consists in finding the appropriate caring attention or pressure or violence that must be applied to the work to persuade it to deliver its insight. The question of where its knowledge comes from leads to the final imperative in the hermeneutics of overreading.

8. *Believe!* Fredric Jameson's imperative, "Always historicize!" (Jameson 1981: 9), is replaced in overreading by "Always believe!" For Levinas, faced with the Talmud, there is evidently a religious aspect to this. Critical audacity is an act of devotion through which is achieved "the indispensable excess of research opening itself precisely onto an infinite reading with unexpected perspectives. A reading which is also, without metaphor, adoration" (Levinas 1987: 9). For others amongst the overreaders discussed here, the faith in the text is not so evidently religious; but it is faith nonetheless, and the acts of reading which it encourages are no less secular forms of adoration. This is why overreading is the precise opposite of the hermeneutics of suspicion. The aim of interpretation is to listen to the work rather than to demystify it. This willingness to submit to the text may be, of course, a further mystification. It is, however, the enabling self-delusion which makes possible the gains of overreading.

The work of what I am calling overreaders seems to me to be important for a number of reasons. It represents not a resolution of the ancient quarrel between philosophy and the arts so much as one of the modern forms of the fraught, loving and suspicious relation between them. For all their expressions of respect for art, the philosophers discussed here are not ready to renounce a distinctive and privileged place for their own discipline; but they are willing to attend with the utmost devotion to works in media and idioms very different from their own. They resist tying prestigious art to its historical epoch, so that they can explore ways in which a work may speak to us even if its originators could not have envisaged the terms in which it is made to resonate. These readers achieve a step beyond suspicion as they place their trust in works to which is now attributed the power to speak of what they know, rather than merely to hide what they could not conceive or openly state. Overreading must accept the risk that its results may be fatuous or silly, laughable or just plain dull. But on this matter Cavell makes what is for me the definitive statement in a passage which I have already quoted and which perfectly summarises the case for overreading. "In my experience," he writes, "people worried about reading in, or overinterpretation, or going too far, are, or were, typically afraid of getting started, or reading as such, as if afraid that texts—like people, like times and places—mean things and moreover mean more than you know. This is accordingly a fear of something real, and it may be a healthy fear,

that is, a fear of something fearful. . . . Still, my experience is that most texts, like most lives, are underread, not overread" (Cavell 1981: 35).

The fear of overreading is a desire for containment, a longing for a stable, shareable world unspoiled by the taint of noumenal unknownness. This would be a world from which the possibility of skepticism had been forever banished. Overreading on the other hand dreams of a Promethean foray into uncharted territory, to steal or to recover some trace of a work's hitherto unspoken knowledge. It pushes at the limits of what can be said about the texts or films or people that matter to us, testing and refining our sensitivity to shards of meaning that risk going unheeded, extending the range of what might be known, heard or felt. In the end it is about learning to abide with the otherness of what is uncannily close, to recognise it as both intimately familiar and dizzyingly strange.

trieves it when he realises that it was in fact hidden in full view of whomever had the guile to see it.

3. On the hostility between Derrida and Lacan, see Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida," 117–18. My account of Lacan and Derrida here is heavily indebted to Johnson's essay.

4. It is to say the least interesting that Derrida's criticism of Lacan can be understood, for example, in the terms provided by E. D. Hirsch, who is usually considered to be one of the most conservative theorists of interpretation. In his *Validity in Interpretation* Hirsch offers four criteria for evaluating a reading: legitimacy, correspondence, generic appropriateness and coherence (Hirsch 1967: 236). Derrida does not dispute the legitimacy of Lacan's reading, but he suggests that it violates the principles of correspondence (details are misread), generic appropriateness (Lacan does not adequately account for the fictional status of the story) and coherence (the reading is unpersuasive).

CHAPTER 6

1. Cavell takes this lesson from Emerson; see *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 95: "So the question Emerson's theory of reading and writing is designed to answer is not 'What does a text mean?' (and one may accordingly not wish to call it a theory of interpretation) but rather 'How is it that a text we care about in a certain way (expressed perhaps as our being drawn to read it with the obedience that masters) invariably says more than its writer knows, so that writers and readers write and read beyond themselves?' This might be summarized as 'What does a text know?' or, in Emerson's term, 'What is the genius of the text?'"

2. For a wide-ranging general study of Cavell's thought, see Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*. Cavell's relevance to literary criticism is usefully examined in Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*. On Cavell's reading of Shakespeare, see Bruns, "Stanley Cavell's Shakespeare," in *Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy*, 181–97. For discussion of Cavell's work on film, see Mulhall, *On Film*; Rothman and Keane, *Reading Cavell's "The World Viewed": A Philosophical Perspective on Film*; Rothman's introduction to *Cavell on Film*; and Read and Goodenough (eds.), *Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema After Wittgenstein and Cavell*.

3. See Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*.

4. On Thoreau, see Cavell's *The Senses of Walden*; Cavell's essays on Emerson have been collected in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*.

5. The first edition of the book had the title *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (1987), the updated edition being augmented by a later essay on *Macbeth*.

6. See also *Cavell on Film* (2005), which collects together many of Cavell's essays on film not contained in these books.

7. For discussion, see Chapter 5.

8. In a conversation with Andrew Klevan, Cavell suggests that he may have used the word *ontology* "in part to be somewhat provocative and mysterious," but also to serve the interest of asking "what makes film the specific thing it is" (Cavell 2005c: 194).

9. The following discussion is based on Cavell's chapter on *It Happened One Night* in *Pursuits of Happiness*. Cavell returns to the film in *Cities of Words*, 145–63.

10. In reference to Cavell's work, Rothman speaks of the "marriage" of film and philosophy; see for example the introduction to *Cavell on Film*, xiii.

11. On the resonance of the word *projection*, see Cavell, *Cavell on Film*, 285–6, commenting on the French translation of *The World Viewed* as *La Projection du monde*.

12. Cavell's "*North by Northwest*" was first published in *Critical Enquiry* (1981) and reprinted in *Themes out of School* and *Cavell on Film*. References here are to *Themes out of School*. Cavell's understanding of Hitchcock is informed by Rothman's *Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze*, a book which is itself enlightened by Cavell's teaching. See also Rothman's essay "*North by Northwest*: Hitchcock's Monument to the Hitchcock Film," in *The "I" of the Camera*, 241–53.

13. Cavell attributes this sense to Hamlet, though in fact the line is spoken by Marcellus.

14. The example is one of Austin's to which Cavell refers on several occasions. See Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 185. Austin comments: "'It was a mistake,' 'It was an accident'—how readily these can *appear* indifferent, and even be used together. Yet, a story or two, and everybody will not merely agree that they are completely different, but even discover for himself what the difference is and what each means" (184–85; emphasis in original).

15. On the Emersonian resonance of "partiality," see for example Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 149. Cavell quotes Emerson's statement that "thinking [not, as in Cavell's version, reading] is a partial act" and comments that "partial" implies both "not whole" and "favoring or biased toward." Cavell is quoting Emerson, "The American Scholar," 45.

16. Thoreau's "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" is frequently cited by Cavell, for example as one of the epigraphs to *Cities of Words*, xiii; the original is from Thoreau's *Walden*, 9.

CHAPTER 7

1. The phrase is taken from Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, heading to chapter 4, section A, 127.

2. For useful accounts of the development of hermeneutics, see Szondi, *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*; Mueller-Vollmer, "Introduction"; Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory*, chapter 1, 1–23.

3. It may seem surprising to include Fish in this characterisation of the critical mainstream. Nevertheless, in *Is There a Text in This Class?* and later work, he provocatively concedes that there is something quite reassuring about what he says. The fact that texts have no inherent meaning or qualities does not mean that we can say anything we want about them. Our responses are constrained in advance by the norms and possibilities of the interpretive communities to which we belong.

4. In his reply to the comments of Rorty, Culler and Christine Brooke-Rose (whose paper is not discussed here because it raises different questions from the ones I am examining), Eco repeats Rorty and Culler's move of suggesting that, despite themselves, they must agree with him: "And I am sure that each of them thinks as I do. Otherwise they would not be here" (Eco 1992: 151). As we saw in Chapter 2, Gadamer does something similar in his debate with Derrida: "Even immoral beings try to understand one another. I cannot believe that Derrida would actually disagree with me about this" (Gadamer 1991: 55). The lesson is clear: when disagreeing with someone, insist that they in fact share your opinion even if they do not realise it.

5. Vattimo writes that "there is no experience of truth that is not interpretative," and that "this thesis is shared by all those who espouse hermeneutics, and is even widely accepted by the greater part of twentieth-century thought" (Vattimo 1997: 4).

6. For this account of the distinction between structuralist poetics and interpretation, see Todorov, *Qu'est-ce que le structuralisme? 2: Poétique*, 15–28.

7. As cited in Chapter 5, Žižek discusses a similar point with reference to Dostoevsky: he may have been an epileptic with an unresolved paternal authority complex, but not every epileptic with an unresolved paternal authority complex was Dostoevsky. As a reproach against the inability of psychoanalysis to explain the specificity of works of art, Žižek describes this argument as a "worn-out commonplace" (Žižek 1994: 176).

8. For criticism and discussion of this aspect of Gadamer's thought, see Hoy, *The Critical Circle*, 107–9.

9. Even Rorty, who seems to deny that there is anything in the text which was not put there by its readers, shares this aspiration for a transforming encounter with the work's otherness: "Unmethodical criticism of the sort which one occasionally wants to call 'inspired' is the result of an encounter with an author, character, plot, stanza, line or archaic torso which has made a difference to the critic's conception of who she is, what she is good for, what she wants to do with herself: an encounter which has rearranged her priorities and purposes" (Rorty 1992: 107).

10. See Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*; Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*.

11. On this aspect of Rabbinic interpretation, see for example Banon, *La Lecture infinie*. In *The Slayers of Moses*, Susan Handelmann makes a strong case for the persistence of Rabbinic modes of interpretation in poststructuralist critical practices.

12. See, for example, *The Plague of Fantasies*, in which Žižek refers to Steven Spielberg's *Star Wars* trilogy and relates the films to other works by the director (Žižek 1997: 75). Žižek seems, however, to be confusing Spielberg with George Lucas. Although Cavell defends his own mistakes in remembering and describing films, he can be highly critical of the mistakes of others; see for example *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 69–70.