

Review of Colin Davis, *Critical Excess: Overreading in Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Žižek and Cavell*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.

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Colin Davis may be known to the readers of this journal as the author of *After Poststructuralism: Reading, Stories and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2004). In *Critical Excess* he continues to argue for the ongoing relevance of poststructuralist thinkers to the project of literary criticism. Specifically he addresses the concept and practice of overinterpretation, or what he terms "overreading." Taking as his starting point the debate between Umberto Eco, Jonathan Culler and Richard Rorty (Umberto Eco, et al., *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992]), Davis sets out to explore the philosophical bases for the practice of overreading. He argues that overreading "is driven by scepticism towards the key notions of content and coherence. Context roots the work in the external world; a resumption of coherence ensures that its vision is unified and self-consistent" (p. 174). Thus the philosophical stalemate between interpretation-with-limits (Eco), overinterpretation-is-good (Culler), and no-such-thing-as-overinterpretation (Rorty) is resolved by recognizing that the limiting concepts of context and coherence are problematic. The five writers discussed in *Critical Excess* all problematise context and coherence through their literary readings. Contrary to typical criticism of poststructuralist readings, Davis argues that problematising these limits does not lead to "an unfettered relativism" (p. 179). Instead, overreading leads to ethical encounters with the text and the text's transformative possibilities. In fact, Davis uses the language of faith to describe the work of overreading, e.g., "faith in the hermeneutics of overreading" (p. 184), "faith in the text" (p. 186), "willingness to submit to the text" (p. 186). Those who oppose overreading wish to know what is already known, rather than to push at the boundaries of what can be known.

Davis writes clearly and engagingly. His discussions of Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Žižek and Cavell, many of whom are famously difficult authors, are clear without being oversimplified. As such, this book would be an excellent textbook for graduate students studying the theory of reading or hermeneutics. It does presuppose some knowledge of the basic theoretical positions, but enough is explained that I, having no knowledge of the writings of Cavell, could follow the argument. Indeed, while I am familiar with the work of Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas and Žižek, I found that Davis provided new insights into how those authors read; Cavell, primarily a film critic, was unfamiliar to me.

Perhaps one of the best aspects of this book is the manner in which Davis describes and analyzes the theory of reading/interpretation espoused by each of the five authors, and then analyzes how their own writing exemplifies or contradicts the theory espoused. Some of these authors (perhaps most clearly Deleuze) have a "do as I say, not as I do" approach, while others (perhaps most clearly Derrida) do their work in a way consistent with their theoretical position. Davis's analysis, while critical, is always generous: itself a model of good scholarship.

The book begins with a brief Preface (pp. ix-xiv), which is actually an important introductory piece. In this preface, Davis describes the positions of Eco, Culler and Rorty as represented in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. The positions (outlined above) are used by Davis to demonstrate the range of possibilities for critical practice. These positions continue to resonate

throughout the book, so the Preface should not be skipped. The Preface also outlines the main question of the book – “whether there is any way out of this argumentative deadlock” – and the main argument: that overreaders provide “a way forward” through “inciting us, usually implicitly, not to worry about those limits” (p. xiii).

In the first chapter, “The Ancient Quarrel: Philosophy and Literature,” Davis provides a brief history of the uneasy relationship between philosophers and literature. He begins with Plato and continues with Heidegger (through Hegel and Kant). He both describes the arguments philosophy has made about literature’s ability to describe or show Truth, and indicates the importance of the debate. Because most of the authors he goes on to discuss in the book are known as philosophers, he seeks to set the background for their encounters with literature (and film).

Davis discusses Derrida as interpreter of texts in the second chapter. The debate between Derrida and Gadamer on hermeneutics is one of the main topics under discussion. Where Gadamer perhaps provocatively argued that the interpreter merely listens to the texts, Derrida replied by asking about “good will”: Derrida’s response to Gadamer, by finding an unassailable concept and then assailing it, was completely consonant with his own philosophy. Davis aptly describes Derrida’s approach to Gadamer as having a “tense mixture of respect and infidelity which characterises his relations with all the thinkers he most admires” (p. 49). In his reading and writing practices Derrida exemplifies his own philosophy of deconstruction – the endless act of interpretation that probes the utter strangeness and uniqueness of the textual event.

In the third chapter, on Deleuze, Davis makes the point, rather subtly, that Deleuze’s writing/actions did not match his philosophy. If Deleuze’s key concept was creativity and if he was interested in what texts *do* and not what they mean (p. 57), and that therefore interpretation *per se* is problematic, then Deleuze did not follow his own strictures. Deleuze shut down dialogue. His “texts fail to match the call to inventive singularity which they proclaim” (p. 59). He proposes powerful interpretations ... and he disallows any critical dissent” (p. 60). Deleuze’s interpretive acts are prescriptive rather than descriptive: for him, philosophy knows more about art than art knows about philosophy. Yet, Davis argues, “Deleuze’s writing can itself be read as one of the literary machines he describes, more interesting for what it does than what it says” (p. 80).

If Deleuze can be read as following Derrida in the insistence on the creativity of reading, then Davis’s reading of Levinas picks up Derrida’s question of the ethical encounter with a text. In the fourth chapter, Davis begins with a discussion of reader-response criticism as outlined by Iser and Fish: Iser’s creative reader filling in textual indeterminacies, Fish’s community-bound reader externalizing internal norms. Levinas’s phenomenology deals with the same question: are texts transformative or not? Davis suggests that Levinas is the author (of the five) who comes nearest to a theory of overreading: in his writings on Talmud, Levinas argues that commentary is necessary to text, and that it is never finished, as each reader brings something new to the text. Davis follows those who argue that this insight can be used with secular as well as sacred texts. Yet Davis also agrees that secular texts may not offer the welcome lessons of sacred literature; they may not be trustworthy, which is the key attribute of a text worthy of commentary in the Levinasian vein. The encounter with the Other may not teach what the reader wants to learn. Davis’s analysis of Levinas’s essay on Proust shows that Levinas only sought to interpret texts that could show his own reflection. Levinas was “a bad reader” but only because of his “unshakeable conviction that an encounter is possible, that I might learn from it, and that I will not respond to it by committing murder” (p. 107).

Another aspect of Derrida’s work, *jouissance*, is picked up by Davis in the fifth chapter, on Žižek. In Žižek’s work, Davis argues, we confront again the question of textual versus critical authority, but through the playful readings of popular culture. Žižek, a Lacanian, does not apply Lacan, but rather assumes that textual knowledge is as valuable as theoretical knowledge. By juxtaposing a critical text with a work of art, Žižek asks what they can tell us about each other. Davis argues that Žižek’s

writings exemplify his philosophy: his philosophy is daring and outrageous (e.g., “the critic can only be faithful to the work by accepting to distort it” [p. 113]), and his writing is similarly daring and outrageous; form = content (unlike Deleuze in some respects). For Žižek, the text’s latent or hidden meanings can be exposed and expressed through the unconventional interpreter. The interpreter’s own enjoyment and pleasure in the task makes him the master of the text. Yet, by becoming the master of the text, Davis argues, Žižek ultimately ties textual meaning to one meaning, rather than leaving it playfully open. In that way Žižek is like Deleuze: the effect of his writing is greater than what it says; “Žižek’s writing sometimes warns us of the dangerous power of the delusional Master as sometimes surrenders itself to its own heady exuberance” (p. 134).

The final author Davis discusses is Stanley Cavell. Like Derrida, Cavell sees the strange in the ordinary, both in literary texts and in film. Like Žižek, Cavell suggests that overreading, interpretation in the most outrageous way, is the best way to discover what is new; “[t]he fear of overreading is a desire for containment, a longing for the familiar, the stable and the knowable unspoiled by the taint of uncanniness” (p. 140). Unlike Žižek, who allows theory to have the final word on an artistic work, Cavell allows the artistic work to have the final word on theory. Cavell, Davis argues, truly allows his philosophy to be taught by art. Film is doing philosophy – by interpreting film, one is doing philosophy. Cavell’s mode of argument, argument by the accretion of assertions, is homologous to how a film does philosophy. He takes responsibility, noting that, as Davis says, “there is no arbiter of validity outside oneself” (p. 162). Texts don’t mean, they know, and Cavell’s interpreter appeals for assent to a recognition of that knowledge.

The final chapter draws together the pieces of knowledge gleaned from each of the analyses of the preceding chapters. Davis concludes that, “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” (p. 165). Texts know things – they are waiting for us to ask questions of them. Meanings proliferate – hermeneutics seeks to control that proliferation; it is negative. A hermeneutics of overreading, then, is positive: it assumes that the text can be transformative, that the text’s Otherness is trustworthy, and that we can learn from it.

The importance and usefulness of Davis’s book for biblical scholars is two-fold. First, this is as clear and thoughtful an analysis of these writers as any I have read, and therefore could serve as a refresher on those writers already known to the biblical scholar, as well as an introduction to those previously not known. More importantly, as biblical scholars we are primarily readers of texts. The texts we read are very old, and have a long history of interpretation. Hermeneutics as a discipline arose out of the continued reading and use of biblical texts. And yet, it seems to me that there is a curious lack of reflection on the epistemology of interpretation by biblical scholars. Perhaps some see it as veering dangerously close to the ground of systematic theology. However, Davis’s book demonstrates that reflection on interpretation is hardly the sole domain of theologians. While writers such as Derrida are philosophers, the literary critic can and must learn from philosophy in order to make literary criticism relevant and ongoing. Similarly the biblical scholar, who is a *reader*, can and must learn from the overreaders how to continue to work in a world after positivism.



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