

Colin Davis

Critical Excess: Overreading in Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Žižek and Cavell.

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Over the last century, reading has become a philosophical method in its own right. In some circles, it has become more and more common for philosophers to advance their views indirectly through their readings of other thinkers. Often, however, these readings are accused of misrepresenting the thinkers being discussed. Heidegger's writings on Plato may be crucial to those who want to understand *Heidegger*, but they tend to baffle those interested in what *Plato* really thought. For their part, Heidegger's defenders counter that he is not trying to represent Plato accurately; he is engaged in a different practice governed by different standards. But which standards? How should we evaluate philosophers who advance their views by reading others, but who arguably do violence to what they read in the process?

Davis' book tries to answer this question. It is a study of *overreading*: reading that pushes 'beyond the limits of what we might readily expect or accept that a text or film might mean' (ix). Davis wants to give a theory of overreading. 'Does it', he asks, 'have rules, principles and protocols which can be formulated and applied by others, or would any fixed guidelines betray the radical impulse that made overreading so fascinating...? Does the overreaders' brilliance as interpreters leave any reason to retain the conviction that some readings are better than others, more or less enlightening, valuable, or true?' (ix). Davis gives a spirited, but not uncritical, defense of overreading. He claims that while it may seem to flout standards of scholarly argumentation, it is justified because 'it may renew our understanding of a text or film in challenging, thrilling ways' (181).

Appropriately enough, Davis makes his case through a series of readings. After a brief introductory chapter, he devotes a chapter to each of five exemplary overreaders. Chapter 2 discusses Jacques Derrida. Derrida is the quintessential overreader: he almost always presents his views through discussions of other writers, and at times he seems to endorse 'an intellectual stance according to which anything could mean anything, so that in effect everything means nothing' (26). Davis focuses on Derrida's abortive 1981 debate with Gadamer. The conventional view is that this debate fizzled because of Derrida's refusal to have a serious discussion with Gadamer. But Davis defends Derrida, suggesting that his contribution to the debate was actually rigorous and astute. Davis further argues that Derrida's 2003 lecture *Béliers* contains a serious engagement with Gadamer's thought—albeit one couched in a reading of a Celan poem on which Gadamer also commented. Davis concludes that hermeneutics and deconstruction have much in

common, but differ in that ‘hermeneutics would like to bring interpretation to a close, at least provisionally, though it knows it may not be able to; deconstruction would like not to stop, though it knows it will have to’ (55).

Chapter 3 turns to Gilles Deleuze, whom Davis sees as an ambivalent figure. Deleuze gives daring and unorthodox readings of Spinoza, Nietzsche, Kafka, and Proust, among many others. He also places a premium on originality and creativity, insisting that ‘sciences, arts, and philosophies are equally creative’ (57). At the same time, Deleuze ‘denies that what he is doing should be called interpretation’ (60), and some of his writings—particularly his work on film—seem to repeat the same conclusions over and over. To Davis, Deleuze embodies a tension between ‘the desire to open a work up to ever new potential...and a tendency to close it down by finding in it endlessly repeated effects’ (80). This tension challenges even the best overreaders.

Chapter 4 deals with Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas may seem out of place here, since he has little to say about literary theory, and less that is positive. But he was also a respected commentator on the Talmud, and in 1947, he published an essay on Proust in which Davis finds a germinal phenomenology of reading. Davis draws an intriguing link between Levinas’ ethical views and his approach to reading. For Levinas, ethics is the attempt to let the other remain other, without treating it as a mere extension of ourselves. Reading also aims at otherness: a good reader wants to find something unexpected in what she reads, not just what her ‘predispositions and prior assumptions allow her to see’ (95-96). Davis argues, however, that Levinas’ own readings often fail to respect the otherness of the text. ‘Levinas turns out to be, to put it bluntly, a bad reader, replicating only what he is disposed to see’ (107).

Chapter 5 is concerned with Slavoj Žižek. Žižek is well-known for his Lacanian readings of popular culture, which seem to manifest a ‘sense that anything, no matter how insignificant it might appear, is potentially interpretable’ (125). In Žižek’s hands, shallow Hollywood blockbusters turn out to be profound meditations on philosophical themes. But for Žižek, popular culture does not just illustrate theory; it illuminates theory. As Davis puts it, ‘Lacan elucidates Hitchcock who elucidates Lacan’ (125). Davis does a particularly good job of documenting Žižek’s impish side: his tendency to give readings that he seems to know are preposterous, and to be ‘saddened that we are taken in, but also gratified by this dramatic demonstration of his superior persuasive powers’ (131).

Chapter 6 discusses Stanley Cavell. Like Žižek, Cavell sometimes reads literature and film in ways he seems to know are preposterous. In his reading of *It Happened One Night*, for example, a blanket dividing the sides of a motel room is not just a blanket, but a Kantian reflection on the chasm between phenomena and noumena. In Davis’s view, Cavell knows perfectly well that such claims are ‘willfully outrageous’ (156). Cavell is not exactly endorsing these claims, but is making a ‘wager’ that ‘the gains to be made in courting outrageousness outweigh what is risked in departing from common sense’ (156).

For Cavell, an outrageous reading can be justified on pragmatic grounds, and ‘each viewer should try it out on his or her own’ (161).

The seventh and final chapter draws some tentative conclusions. Davis argues—correctly, I think—that many criticisms of overreading are based on naïve views of what and how texts mean. It is all well and good to say that works should be read ‘in context’, but as Davis points out, ‘we do not have an agreed normative principle for deciding what a context is’ (182). This does not mean that distinctions between text and context are always arbitrary, or that ‘there is no essential difference between reading and overreading’ (x). Davis thinks we can and must ‘distinguish between legitimate appropriation and downright falsification’, though he admits that this problem ‘cannot be resolved in advance by any all-purpose principle’ (180). Instead, he offers eight maxims that the best overreaders usually respect. Some are uncontroversial: for example, that ‘the boundaries between the inside and the outside of a work are never certain’ (183). Others are more contentious, such as the claim that readers should have a near-religious faith that ‘the work knows something; perhaps it knows everything’ (185). Davis does not pretend to have a theoretical defense for these maxims. I suspect that like Cavell’s outrageous readings, they are best seen as wagers. Davis’ position seems to be that we should believe in overreading because of the fruitful results it occasionally brings.

This is an admirable book. Davis writes beautifully, and his readings are models of clarity and precision. They are also narrowly focused, and this is a strength rather than a weakness. Rather than surveying entire bodies of work, Davis examines just a few texts by each thinker—often texts that are not well known. The result is a study which is wide-ranging but not superficial. I do wonder whether the figures discussed are all engaged in the same project. The term *overreading* seems to name a species of reading, one that goes too far but is otherwise like more conventional reading. But some of the figures Davis discusses—Deleuze, for example—deny that what they are doing should be considered a kind of reading or interpretation at all. Davis grants that there is a ‘risk of falsely unifying the thinkers discussed’ (181), but he does not address this worry as explicitly as one might like. Perhaps lumping these thinkers together is another wager, one that is justified, if it is, by the helpful new things it allows us to see.

One of the biggest challenges issued by this book is the question of how to read it. If we agree with Davis that overreading should be taken seriously, then we may hesitate to read his book in a conventional way. We may not want to uncover its real meaning or represent its author’s intentions accurately. We may feel obliged to interpret it in outrageous ways. At times, Davis seems to encourage this response. While discussing Žižek, for example, he notes that one of Žižek’s books presents the same passage twice: first as a description of a view we might or might not hold, and later as a statement of Žižek’s own view. Davis speculates that Žižek has laid ‘a deliberate trap to see whether we will be misled again by [his] preposterous claims’ (132). But Davis later gives a similar repetition of his own. Chapter 6 contains several sentences describing Cavell’s

position on the merits of overreading (140); Chapter 7 repeats this passage almost word for word—this time as a statement of Davis’ own view (187). Has Davis laid a trap of his own? It would be strange if he had, given the overall sobriety of his book. But it would be equally strange if a book on this topic contained no traps. A book on overreading practically begs to be overread.

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