

In Praise of Overreading

In the course of a discussion of a poem by Stefan George, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger pauses in a moment of uncharacteristic self-doubt. ‘The danger exists,’ he says, ‘that we overstrain such a poem, that is, we think too much into it [*zuviel hineindenken*] and block ourselves off from being moved by the poetic’ (Heidegger 1959: 173). Our search to make sense of things might get in the way of our ability to experience them in their true power. Heidegger, though, quickly recovers his composure: ‘But to tell the truth there is the even greater danger – unwillingly admitted today – that we think too little and struggle against the thought that the authentic experience with language can only be the thinking experience, the more so as the high poetry [*Dichten*] of every great poem [*Dichtung*] always soars in a thinking’. (Heidegger 1959: 173) So, in a way, overstraining the poem turns out to be the only way of reading it properly, the only way of responding authentically to the thought of the poem which, in Heidegger’s peculiar resolution of the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry, is its inner truth.

What Heidegger calls ‘overstraining the poem’ is what I am calling here overreading or overinterpretation. It is always open to the charge that it distorts or falsifies what it purports to describe, or that it privileges the act of interpretation over due fidelity to what we are supposed to be interpreting. It puts the cart before the horse, as it were. To stay with Heidegger for a moment longer, this danger is well illustrated by an interesting exchange which took place after the first edition of his *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry* was published in 1951. In his discussion of Hölderlin’s ‘As When on a Holiday...’, Heidegger makes the following statement: ‘The text [of Hölderlin’s poem] which shall serve here as the basis for the present lecture, and which has been repeatedly checked against the original

manuscripts, rests upon the following attempt at an interpretation' (Heidegger 2000: 74). In 1953 a doctoral student named Detlev Lüders wrote to Heidegger querying this sentence. Heidegger seems to be claiming that the poem, which is the subject of his lecture, is in fact grounded in his interpretation of it rather than the other way around. Surely an interpretation should be based on a text, not a text based on an interpretation. Heidegger wrote back immediately, entirely conceding the point in his opening sentence: 'You are right. The cited sentence is impossible in its present version. If there should be a new version I will strike it' (Heidegger 2000: 237). As he continues, though, it seems that Heidegger is a little less wholehearted in accepting that he was in error. Merely to reverse the sentence, so that it would read 'The following attempt at an interpretation is based upon the text', makes it banal and superfluous; and anyway, Heidegger insists, 'The question, what a "text" is, how one should read it and *when* it is completely established as a text, of course still remains' (Heidegger 2000: 237; emphasis in original). Having begun with a blunt confession that his correspondent was right, he ends with a question which implies that the student might be wrong after all: 'Is there a text in itself?' (Heidegger 2000: 237). Two more editions of *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry* appeared in Heidegger's lifetime, and in neither does Heidegger make good his undertaking to delete the offending sentence. We have no way of knowing whether he forgot or whether he decided after all that he wanted to retain the suggestion that the interpretation has priority over the poem.

What is at issue here is the extent to which the thinker more or less wilfully appropriates the poem for his own purposes rather than attending earnestly to its distant, barely audible otherness. Although Heidegger wants 'to let the poem sing out of its own peace' (Heidegger 1959: 39), he is fully aware that the commentary might in fact disturb

what it is the poem has to say. It somehow feels outrageous, shocking, that for whatever reason he failed to honour his undertaking to revise the claim that the interpretation grounds the poem; and yet, and yet he also insists that he and the poet are saying the same thing, one 'poetically' and the other 'thoughtfully' (Heidegger 2000: 216).

This issue takes us to the heart of the problem of how we should interpret literary texts or films or the deceptively banal incidents of our everyday lives. How do we distinguish between what is really there, in the work or the world, from what we add to it? How do we curb our limitless desire for meaning and put a brake on what can easily veer into the madness of interpretation? In a series of lectures on the relations between texts and readers published in the volume *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* Umberto Eco proposes what appear to be unobjectionable conditions for interpretation to occur: 'If there is something to be interpreted, the interpretation must speak of something which must be found somewhere, and in some way respected' (Eco 1992: 43). So first of all there must be something which is 'out there' in the world, available to be interpreted; we must then find it, and respect it, in the sense that our interpretation must be appropriate to it and not arbitrarily imposed on it. This provides limits to the range of possible interpretations, but does not unduly restrain it. Eco's use of 'something', 'somewhere' and 'in some way' refrains from pinning down the object of interpretation and the means of interpreting it to specific identities and rules. In this account there is some freedom in interpretation, some scope for imagination and dispute, even if the range of possible meanings is not entirely open. Eco hints here at what he elaborates in the rest of his lectures: a sensible hermeneutic which allows for multiple readings but does not endorse interpretative

anarchy. How could anyone possibly object to this in theory or justify departing from it in practice?

And yet, Eco's views do not command universal assent; indeed, if they did I would have nothing to say to you today. In the exchange following Eco's lectures, the philosopher Richard Rorty and the literary theorist Jonathan Culler immediately take him to task, albeit for quite different reasons. Rorty suggests that Eco's view requires there to be something 'in' the text, some meaning and internal coherence, which pre-exists and moulds its subsequent deciphering. However, Rorty insists that 'the coherence of the text is not something it has before it is described' (Rorty 1992: 97). It is not possible to separate the text and its meaning from our interpretation and use of it. The notion of overinterpretation is redundant for Rorty because it falsely implies that we have a reliable distinction between what is in the text and what is merely supplied by a wilful interpreter, and therefore that we have a measure for ascertaining which interpretation(s) may be correct. In the absence of such a distinction there is no essential difference between reading and overreading, there are just more or less interesting and useful acts of interpretation. (In parenthesis I should say that the title of Rorty's essay, 'In Defense of Overinterpretation', is one of the sources of my title, 'In Praise of Overreading'. I decided, though, that I wanted to praise rather than to defend. To my mind 'defence' concedes too much too quickly by accepting that overinterpretation may be in need of justification. 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 and risk in our academic undertakings).

Culler, unlike Rorty, accepts that there may be such a practice as overinterpretation, and he sets out to defend it. Moderate interpretation, guided by widely-accepted principles

and yielding widely-accepted results, articulates a consensus which is of little interest. Culler insists that 'interpretation is interesting only when it is extreme' (Culler 1992: 110). Extreme interpretation may of course turn out to be as dull and ineffective as its moderate counterpart; but if successful it pushes thinking into new domains; it puts pressure on its objects in order to uncover things which might have remained hidden, and it gives fresh insight into language, literature and ourselves. Whereas for Rorty there is no such thing as overinterpretation, for Culler the notion remains valuable because it is through overinterpretation that new questions are asked, new answers discovered and new paradigms created. Eco describes as an 'excess of wonder' the inclination to treat as significant what might simply be fortuitous; Culler argues that this excess is 'a quality to be cultivated rather than shunned' (Culler 1992: 123). Without it we will only incessantly rediscover what we already know. And today's overinterpretation may turn out to be tomorrow's consensus.

So overreading involves pressing the meaning of a text to the very limits of surface plausibility, and then further still. My list of preferred overreaders includes Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Emmanuel Levinas, Slavoj Žižek and Stanley Cavell. I can't of course talk about all of them in any detail today. Instead, to give a flavour of what overreading looks like in practice, I'll take a short example from Derrida, and then a more extended one from Cavell. The example from Derrida is his virtuoso display in 'J'ai oublié mon parapluie' (I have forgotten my umbrella), the section which closes the discussion of Nietzsche in *Eperons*. This text certainly shows Derrida at his most playful; indeed he adds a postscript dated the 1st April, suggesting the whole thing may be an April Fool's joke. But the joke is also entirely serious. Derrida notes that the sentence 'J'ai oublié mon parapluie', contained in quotation

marks, has been found in Nietzsche's papers and published. Derrida wonders whether it was a quotation, something Nietzsche had heard somewhere, or something he intended to elaborate on. In any case, there is no way of knowing for certain what he meant by it, or even whether he meant anything by it. Perhaps it wasn't even written by Nietzsche. The phrase is entirely legible, we all know what it means, and yet it remains secretive. It is open to interpretation, for example in psychoanalytical terms, and yet no interpretation will ever be certain to have finally settled its meaning.

To this point Derrida's musings seem reasonable enough, and we might be led to think merely that Nietzsche's editors were over-zealous or naïve to publish the phrase at all. But Derrida then makes two moves which significantly extend the scope of his discussion. First, he suggests that all of Nietzsche's writing may be like 'J'ai oublié mon parapluie': apparently readable, but also parodic, undecidable, providing us with no secure context or code for its deciphering, and therefore unreadable at the same time as it gives itself to be read. Then, Derrida takes this suggestion still further: what if his *own* text were also like 'J'ai oublié mon parapluie'? His essay on Nietzsche might be governed by a code which only he knew, or which he himself did not properly understand; even if he explained it to us we would never know whether or not to believe him. There might be more, or less, going on in the text than we could ever suspect. So the text would remain 'indefinitely open, cryptic and parodic, that is to say closed, open and closed at the same time or in turn' (Derrida 1978: 117). In the course of a few pages Derrida has dramatically raised the stakes of interpretation. He has gone from illustrating the problems of making sense out of one of Nietzsche's apparently trivial posthumous fragments to suggesting the inherent

secretiveness of Nietzsche's and his own writing, and by implication everyone else's as well. Derrida's wild hermeneutic ends by undoing the hermeneutic project as such.

The second example I want to take is from Stanley Cavell's essay on Frank Capra's film *It Happened One Night*, published in Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. According to Cavell, *It Happened One Night* has in common with other examples of what he calls the comedy of remarriage that it concerns the education of a woman, a woman who is willing to learn, and who through the acknowledgement of her desire can emerge as an autonomous human being. This claim in itself may be relatively uncontroversial; what marks out Cavell's reading, though, is his treatment of the film and its themes in the context of the thought of Immanuel Kant. The chapter on the film in *Pursuits of Happiness* begins with an exposition (actually a very clear, succinct exposition) of Kant's theory of knowledge.

Cavell's first important interpretative move consists in establishing a link between the concerns of philosophy and the themes of comedy or melodrama. Early in the essay on *It Happened One Night* Cavell achieves this by relating the problem of knowledge to that of marriage: 'Two of the fundamental human properties that human societies have been most anxious to limit are the capacity to relate oneself to the world by knowledge and the capacity to relate oneself to others by marriage' (Cavell 1981: 74). In one sentence Cavell collides epistemology with Hollywood romance: what can we know, and whom should we marry? This also brings together the two aspects of scepticism which have been Cavell's career-long concern, namely the knowledge we can have of the external world and the knowledge we can have of other selves. These issues are in turn related to divisions between the public and the private, that which is intimate and untouchable and that which

is open and available to all. This then leads into the discussion of Kant, the philosopher most associated with the limitation of human knowledge. In Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* the limitation of knowledge is envisaged as both a loss and a gain. According to Kant the world of things in themselves is forever closed to us; we can know things only as they appear, not as they are essentially and absolutely. In the terms used by Kant, the phenomenal is knowable to us whilst the noumenal remains forever outside our grasp. But in understanding the impenetrability of the noumenal we have also learned something of the greatest importance: we have acquired a knowledge of the very conditions of knowledge insofar as it is available to us. Cavell calls this 'a traumatic increase of human knowledge' (Cavell 1981: 76). There is an unmoveable limit to what we can know, a barrier for ever separating the knowable from the unknowable. We can survey that barrier from the standpoint of our human finitude, but we can never step beyond it.

The question of barriers now becomes the central concern of Cavell's reading of Capra's *It Happened One Night*. In the key scene for his analysis the runaway heiress played by Claudette Colbert and the reporter played by Clark Gable prepare to spend a night together in a motel room. The Gable character attaches a cord between the twin beds in the room and hangs a blanket over it, thereby dividing the room into two separate spaces. Gable explains that he does not want to be overseen: 'Well I like privacy when I retire. Yes, I'm very delicate in that respect. Prying eyes annoy me.' He describes the blanket as 'the walls of Jericho' and proceeds to undress, at which point Colbert withdraws to her own side of the room. On his side of the blanket, Gable can see signs of her undressing as the blanket moves when she touches against it. She hangs some of her clothes over the blanket, but moves them when asked by Gable. With them both lying in their separate beds, Colbert

realises that she does not even know the name of the man she is spending the night with, and she asks 'Who are you?', as if setting up the barrier between them is the condition by which they might begin to learn each other's identity. The scene ends with a shot of Gable and Colbert in their beds, separated by the blanket which divides the room. The drama of the rest of the film is whether and how the walls of Jericho, that is, the barrier separating private selves, can be breached.

We know full well, of course, that a blanket is only a blanket, and Cavell knows it too. It is 'a comic barrier, hardly more than a prop in a traveling salesman joke' (Cavell 1981: 80). Yet Cavell wants it to be more, as it invokes issues of metaphysical isolation and the possibility of overcoming separateness; indeed, he insists that it '*must* invoke them if this film's comedy is to be understood' (Cavell 1981: 80; emphasis in original). In the ensuing exploration of the senses borne by the blanket, three strands in particular emerge, and are intertwined. The blanket is a limit to knowledge, separating us from what we cannot know; it is the transgressable boundary between selves; and it serves to represent the movie screen onto which are projected our uncertainties and desires.

1. The blanket is a limit to knowledge. It prevents Gable and Colbert from seeing each other, from seeing each other undress and seeing each other naked. So it stands in the way of their (carnal) knowledge of each other. It is the barrier separating subjects from what they cannot or should not see; but as such it is also, picking up the Kantian theme, the very condition of the knowledge a subject can have. By barring access to the unseen world, it also creates and delimits a space that *can* be known. Neither Colbert nor Gable can see beyond the barrier, but each of their separate worlds is fully visible and knowable to them.

2. The blanket is a boundary between selves. Gable insists on his privacy, being delicate and annoyed by prying eyes. He does not wish to be seen as he undresses, though the camera dwells on him as long as it dares; and he accords the same right to Colbert, though again, the camera dwells as long as it dares (and interestingly, although Gable makes no attempt to see her undress, in the sequence he shows a surprisingly comprehensive knowledge of *men's* habits of taking their clothes off). This insistence on privacy is a refusal of intimacy, an unwillingness to see or to be exposed to the too-present other. Even when asked, not unreasonably, what his name is, Gable initially talks around the question before giving it a straight answer, as if to speak his name is already to reveal too much of himself:

- By the way, what's your name?
- What's that?
- Who are you?
- Who, me? I'm the whippoorwill [an American nocturnal bird named after its call] that cries in the night. I'm the soft morning breeze that caresses your lovely face.
- You've got a name haven't you?
- Yeah, I got a name. Peter Warne.
- Peter Warne. I don't like it.

Equally, the arousal of desire may be an unwelcome intrusion into one's privacy. Gable puts up the blanket not just out of politeness or respect for Colbert's modesty, but perhaps because he does not *want* to see her undress. He asks her to remove her clothes from his

sight because they are too distracting; they make him too aware of the disquieting proximity of the other and the risks of losing oneself in desire.

However, insofar as the blanket stands for the walls of Jericho, its fate is to be brought down once Joshua has sounded his horn. The film depicts this transgression of limits as possible even if it is no easy matter. In a later scene from the film set in another motel room, Colbert listens to Gable's dreams of an ideal woman and, wanting to be that woman, steps around the blanket to enter his side of the room. Here, though, real and imaginary lives are too brutally confused, and Gable rejects Colbert as she walks into his dreams. After she has returned to her separate bed, he reflects and changes his mind. He wants to accept her as both a dream figure and a reality, to let her into his dreams and to make of his dreams something real. Yet he continues to withdraw from her even as he longs to accept her. Strangely, rather than telling her that he has changed his mind, he leaves her asleep and goes off to secure some money which will enable them to be together, hoping to return before she awakes. In other words he leaves her temporarily so that they can be together permanently. Cavell notes that his actions here are not adequately explained; and although the film ends happily for the couple, with the walls of Jericho breached, his mysterious abandonment of her is a failure which 'remains an eye of pain, a source of suspicion and compromise haunting the happy end of this drama' (Cavell 1981: 101). In other words the transgression of limits – and in the present context we might include in this the transgression of the limits of polite interpretation – can promise no definitive harmony.

3. The blanket acts as a screen, standing for the movie screen, onto which fantasy is projected. It does not give access to a full vision of the thing itself, but it allows reality to be guessed at even whilst it does not reveal it fully. Gable does not see Colbert undressing, but

the hint of her body as the blanket moves when she brushes against it may be all the more erotic for being largely in the imagination. As the blanket both shows the presence of Colbert and the poignancy of her absence, Gable is in the position of the film's viewers, trying to make out a real woman from her partially visible projected image. What Gable sees, and what we see, is both real and not real enough, the mark of something that it would be nonsensical to deny, but which is presented to us as out of our reach. This can be related to Cavell's complex understanding of film's realism elaborated in his book *The World Viewed*. Cavell argues that film is what he calls 'a moving image of scepticism' (Cavell 1979: 188-9) because it has a particular bearing on sceptical doubt concerning the existence or intelligibility of the world. Looking at the screen, we have an experience of the senses which meets our expectations and requirements of the external world, yet the world is not fully present to us. This presence-absence of the world, and our absence from the world that seems present unto itself, encapsulates the sceptical dilemma insofar as it realises the fear that the world we hope to know is unavailable to us as we are unavailable to it. It projects reality in front of us, but keeps us separate from it.

This is not to say that for Cavell there is no representation of reality in film; such a view is in his opinion a 'fake scepticism' (Cavell 1979: 188), since it is blatant to him that photography, painting or film may represent reality. To deny it is to deny the obvious. But this does not mean either that film refutes scepticism by offering to us a world which is available for us to know and to possess; that would be, as it were, a fake realism as flawed as fake scepticism. Film is a moving image of scepticism precisely because it does not resolve the stand-off between the desire to know the world and a sense of its retreat from

us. It is 'moving' because it presents an image that moves and an image that moves *us*, in that it presents us *movingly* with the sceptical dilemma.

Cavell here pointedly declines to defuse the tension between scepticism (doubt in the existence of the external world) and realism (the confidence in its availability to us). It is what he calls 'a farce of scepticism' to deny 'that it is ever reality which film projects and screens' (Cavell 1979: 189). Both *projects* and *screens* here are (at least) double-edged. Film projects reality by putting it up before us, but *as a projection*: something constructed rather than merely reflected. And reality is *screened*: both presented to us on a screen, and screened from us, made inaccessible even as it is offered to us. This play on *screening* is picked up in the following paragraph in a key sentence which perfectly encapsulates the complexity of Cavell's position. 'In screening reality,' he says, 'film screens its givenness from us; it holds reality from us, it holds reality before us, i.e., withholds reality before us' (Cavell 1979: 189). The screen puts reality before us and bars our way towards it; film 'withholds reality before us' because reality is at the same time held up for our attention and withheld from us. Film gives us a world, but it is a world which we do not possess, and to which we do not belong.

The blanket in *It Happened One Night* becomes, then, a means for Cavell to engage with the dilemmas of scepticism, understood not as a philosophical position to be proven or refuted once and for all but as a standing threat which can never be fully expelled from our relation to the world and others. The final paragraph of the essay on Capra's film in *Pursuits of Happiness* brilliantly brings together the three aspects of the blanket as a restriction of knowledge, a barrier between selves, and a screen on which the world is projected:

I would read the instruction of the barrier along these lines. What it censors is the man's knowledge of the existence of the human being 'on the other side'. The picture is that the existence of others is something of which we are unconscious, a piece of knowledge we repress, about which we draw a blank. This does violence to others, it separates their bodies from their souls, makes monsters of them; and presumably we do it because we feel that others are doing this violence to us. The release from this circle of vengeance is something I call acknowledgement. (Cavell 1981: 109)

The 'picture' of this final paragraph is surely the motion picture Cavell has been discussing. It draws a blank, or draws a blanket, in order for the characters to shield themselves from what they do not wish to know about the existence of the other. Importantly, this is 'a piece of knowledge we repress'. It is not something that cannot be known, but something that we choose not to know. Cavell's implicit departure from Kant here is that for Kant the barrier cannot be overcome since the truth of things in themselves can never be known. For Cavell the barrier can be transgressed, not to acquire knowledge of the noumenal or of unfathomable other minds, but to create a situation where we might *acknowledge* the presence of others, to relate to them in their otherness. The outrageousness of Cavell's essay is not really that he discusses Kant alongside a Hollywood comedy; it is rather that he gives the final word in the debate to the Hollywood comedy, contriving to find in it a critical response to Kant, an insight as profound as Kant's and one which is perhaps more humanly useable.

It is essential to Cavell's stance that, with the right kind of receptive attention, one might learn something from a film like *It Happened One Night* which is every bit as incisive,

persuasive and relevant as what one might learn from Kant about the limitations of knowledge, about scepticism, and about the possibilities of improving the self and creating a human society worth living in. Has Cavell gone too far? Can so much really be at stake in the blanket? I leave that question for you to decide for your selves; but Cavell would wish to argue that we grossly misunderstand the achievement of Hollywood film in the 1930s and 1940s if we do not acknowledge its intellectual seriousness.

Overreading is imaginative and flexible. It may appear to disdain the standards of evidence and argument which most critics respect, but it is not entirely without rules, or at least guiding thoughts. To conclude this talk, I shall list, which only a minimum of comment, some of what I call the maxims of overreading which to some measure unite the practitioners of critical excess:

1. No form of evidence should be ruled out on principle or in practice. Biographical information, for example, was for a long time unfashionable, but is used freely by the overreaders. If it helps, use it; if it doesn't help, draw a discreet veil over it.
2. The potential of context to generate meaning is never exhausted. We might all agree that any interpretation should be appropriate to a work's context, but we might have greater difficulty agreeing precisely what is and isn't a context.
3. The boundaries between the inside and the outside of a work are never certain. Again, we might well agree that a critic shouldn't read into a work something that isn't really in it, but how do we decide what is or isn't there? What is 'in' Nietzsche's 'I have forgotten my umbrella', for example?

4. Nothing is only what it seems; anything is interpretable. A blanket may look as if it is only a blanket, but perhaps it is also the barrier separating the noumenal from the phenomenal world.
5. Don't bother trying to persuade those who don't agree with you. Deleuze, for example, highhandedly rules out discussion: '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). Less provocatively, but no less decisively, Cavell insists that sometimes you just get to the point where you have to say 'This is how I see it' and leave it at that.
6. Mistakes don't matter much. After all, in the practice of interpretation we don't actually risk a great deal. Nobody dies, usually. The worst that is likely to happen to us is that we get ignored.

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 repays the scrutiny to which it is subjected because it contains a kernel of knowledge that only the boldest interpretative pressure can attain. Žižek entitled a collection of essays he edited *Everything you Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*. Hitchcock will tell you about Lacan if only you ask him in the right way.
8. Finally and most importantly, *Believe!* Fredric Jameson's imperative, 'Always historicize!' (Jameson 1981: 9), is replaced in overreading by 'Always believe!'. For most of the overreaders the faith in the text is not evidently religious; but it is faith nonetheless, and the acts of reading which it encourages are 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, such as they are.

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 all 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 confront or conceive. 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 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 scepticism 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.

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