Preface

"Hermeneutics teaches us . . . to discover and to avoid misunderstandings and misrepresentations, for these have caused much evil in the world" (Chladenius 1985: 64). With these words the eighteenth-century thinker Johann Martin Chladenius succinctly and—one might have thought—uncontroversially summarised the mission of hermeneutics. Its role is to help us understand things properly, or at least to prevent us from getting them wrong. Hermeneutics begins with the realisation that meaning is obscure, not immediately accessible, and possibly also multiple or ambiguous; it aims to counter an unregulated semantic free-for-all by delimiting the field of acceptable interpretations.

This book is about practices of reading which appear, on the contrary, to refuse the hermeneutic regulation of interpretation. What I call *overreading* entails a willingness to test or to exceed the constraints which restrict the possibilities of meaning released by a work. Specifically, the book is about five overreaders—Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Emmanuel Levinas, Slavoj Žižek and Stanley Cavell—who in their different ways push the interpretation of literature and cinema beyond the limits of what we might readily expect or accept that a text or film might mean.[1] What is gained in this process, and what is lost? Does it 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, exciting, irritating and frustrating in the first place? 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? These are the questions which resonate throughout the book.

What is at stake here can be illustrated by an exchange about the limits of interpretation between Umberto Eco, Richard Rorty and Jona-

than Culler published in the book *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992).[2] The exchange begins with a series of lectures by Eco on the relations between texts and readers. 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; see also Eco 1990: 7). 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. Eco provides limits to the range of possible interpretations, but does not unduly restrain it. His 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 interpretive 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, this study of critical excess would have no reason to exist. 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 preexists 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, 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 reading.

Culler, on the other hand, 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 be as dull and ineffective as its moderate counterpart; but if successful it pushes thinking as far as it can go, puts pressure on its objects in order to uncover things which might have remained hidden, and 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" (Eco 1992: 50) 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.

This book examines some of the most brilliant and challenging philosophical readers or overreaders of literature and film. The thinkers who feature here bring an exciting vitality to the study of the arts. For many of today's critics, Derridean deconstruction served as a lesson in how to read, even if it was as bitterly repudiated by some as it was eagerly embraced by others. Deleuze wrote powerful studies of Proust, Sacher Masoch and Kafka (the latter with Félix Guattari), as well as articles on numerous other literary authors. Žižek has revitalised the study of popular culture by arguing for its Lacanian resonance. Following Heidegger (whose work is discussed in Chapter 1), these thinkers rank poets and artists alongside or even ahead of philosophers; and filmmakers may enjoy a similar status. Deleuze insists that the essence of cinema is thought (Deleuze 1985: 219), and Cavell argues that film "exists in a state of philosophy" (Cavell 1981: 13). Deleuze wrote two hugely influential volumes on cinema; Žižek has written extensively about popular film as well as the work of directors such as Krzysztof Kieślowski and David Lynch; and Cavell has inspired a new direction in the interpretation of film through the philosophical seriousness with which he reads Hollywood comedy and melodrama.

These approaches may, though, be as bewildering as they are in-

spiring in that they characteristically depend upon what might appear to be bizarre, disorientating interpretive leaps. Does Nietzsche's scribbled note "I have forgotten my umbrella" really instruct us about the nature of textuality, as Derrida suggests (Derrida 1978: 103–19)? Can Hitchcock really tell you "everything you always wanted to know about Lacan," as we are informed in the title of a book edited by Žižek (Žižek 1992b)? Does the blanket hung up in a motel room in Frank Capra's romantic comedy *It Happened One Night* (1934) invoke the Kantian divide between the knowable phenomenal world and the unknowable things in themselves, as Cavell argues (Cavell 1981: 71–109)?[3] The force of these readings depends upon their dual ability to shock and to persuade. The philosophical interpreters court outrageousness whilst also seeking to create a context which will lend plausibility to their claims.

Each of the thinkers discussed in this book wants to follow a trail of reading as far as it can possibly go in order to reach the most unexpected conclusions. Like Heidegger, they want to accompany literature or film "into the extreme" (Heidegger 1959: 173).[4] But are they good readers? Do they actually tell us anything we might agree is true, or even usefully false, about the works they discuss? In wanting to go as far as possible, do they go *too* far? The key preoccupation of *Critical Excess* is the possibility, the thrill, and perhaps the danger, of overreading. At what point does reading become overreading, and does the distinction help or matter? The judicious respect for the text urged by theorists of interpretation such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Umberto Eco seems to be cast aside by the thinkers who are examined in detail here. They suggest instead that the best way to respect a text is ruthlessly and brazenly to seek out its occluded potential to signify. The results can be exhilarating and unnerving. But the thinkers in question make no apology for taking the risk of overreading. Their practice depends upon the faith or hope that more is to be gained than lost in pushing meaning beyond the boundaries of common sense.

Despite coming from very different intellectual positions, Derrida, Deleuze, Žižek and Cavell are included in this study because they have all made reading a central part of what they do as thinkers, and they have played an important role in the development of literary and film studies. Levinas serves as a discordant voice. Far from embracing literature as an ally in the work of philosophy, he re-ignites the ancient quarrel between

philosophy and literature in strongly Platonic terms. In his account, art promotes a shadow-world of illusion and error, which it is the philosopher's role to combat.[5] In his commentaries on sacred texts, Levinas is often brilliant, inventive and witty; but when it comes to secular works he resists the instruction of literature just as resolutely as others seek to attend to it. Levinas reminds us that philosophy's distrust of the arts has not simply disappeared; and he brings to light what may be implicit in the work of the other thinkers who are discussed here: the ancient quarrel is by no means settled, and the philosophical seriousness which some thinkers now seem eager to accord to literature and film may in fact mask a continuing rivalry.

The exchange discussed above between Eco, Rorty and Culler sketches very effectively the terms of debate about literary meaning which revolves around their conflicting positions: overreading is wrong because it distorts what is actually in the work (Eco); overreading is good because it gives new life to our continuing discussion (Culler); and there is no such thing as overreading (Rorty). This book asks whether there is any way out of this argumentative deadlock. In writing it I have become increasingly convinced that the overreaders I discuss offer a way forward of sorts for the debate about the meaning of art through their practices if not by their arguments. They do not offer decisive ways to resolve the problem of how or whether to police the limits of meaning. If they move the agenda onward it is by inciting us, usually implicitly, not to worry about those limits. The rest of this book examines this claim, first by looking at the key contributions of Plato and Heidegger to defining and redefining the troubled relationship between philosophy and the arts, and then by examining in turn the critical practices of my five overreaders. The final chapter draws together some of their shared characteristics in what I call the hermeneutics of overreading.

This book grew out of my previous study *Scenes of Love and Murder: Renoir, Film and Philosophy* (2009). There, I tried to undertake a philosophical engagement with some of the French director Jean Renoir's great films of the 1930s. To understand what such an engagement might entail, the first chapter of the book examined very rapidly the contributions of Deleuze, Žižek and Cavell to the philosophical interpretation of film. The focus on Renoir did not allow me to develop very far either the general

question of the relation of philosophy to the arts or what has become for me the increasingly alluring topic of overreading. The current project attempts to go at least a little further in addressing those issues. I should confess that in the treatment of overreading there is a conflicted interest on my part: I want to follow (in order to enjoy) the daring, exhilarating moves taken by the various overreaders; at the same time I don't want to abandon the skepticism towards them which characterises me as, and condemns me to be, a more pedestrian critic. Derrida says that there is no deconstruction without *jouissance*, and indeed that deconstruction has the effect of liberating *jouissance* (Derrida 1992: 56). I suppose that writing this book is an endeavour to have a share in the *jouissance* of excess without giving up on the more modest pleasures afforded by following in the wake of others' brilliance.