"Our Education Is Sadly Neglected": Reading, Translating, and the Politics of Interpretation

Naoko Saito
Kyoto University

Education Sadly Neglected: The Crisis of Philosophical Reading

> The chapter on "Reading" identifies his readers as students — and himself, consequently, as teacher. Eventually, students will be anyone whose "education is sadly neglected" (III, 12); and one day we might all "become essentially students" (III, 1) — that is, one day we might find out what essential studying is.[1]

So says Stanley Cavell in referring to Henry Thoreau's *Walden*. The theme implied here prompts questioning of the general culture of "reading" in the age of globalization — particularly concerning what should be read and taught in the curriculum for the philosophy of education in higher education. In the global network created by technology, knowledge becomes information, and literacy a matter of its access and transmission. The philosophical reading of a text, a key element in a liberal education, is endangered. Students in general do not show interest in reading difficult philosophical texts; they tend to be skeptical of philosophical language unless it provides them with concrete clues to effecting visible changes in education. In lifelong education, this practical orientation seems to be accentuated. Student-centered education is proclaimed but students become no more than customers. In this general culture, the value of philosophical reading is judged in the light of how far it is useful; reading and writing reduced to the least complex and most accessible terms are considered measures of success in teaching and learning. Language in philosophical reading is now required to submit to the terms of the "accountable" and assigned market value; its burden of thought is lessened to make it more efficiently transmittable in the global network. It is against this background that this essay tries to elucidate a value in philosophical reading that is covered over in the culture of accountability; it seeks to recount what is "sadly neglected" in education. In doing this I shall reconsider the distinctively practical use of the philosophy of education in higher education, and its significant role in resuscitating a reading culture in the age of globalization.

To achieve this general task, I take up a specific question: What does it mean to *read philosophically* as a distinctive mode of reading? I respond to this question through the lens of Cavell's politics of interpretation, adumbrated in his *The Senses of Walden*. I propose to reread the meaning of reading philosophically through the way he rereads Thoreau's *Walden*. His "reading in a high sense" points us to a third way of reading beyond essentialist and contingent readings. The theme of reading philosophically is then developed into the idea of *reading as translating* — translation in a broader sense of transaction between the "native" and the "foreign." In conclusion, I reclaim the role of the philosophy of education in terms of philosophy as "the education of grownups," in Cavell's formulation. Reading philosophically is the very process of education, not only for children and the young who are growing up, but also for adults who still need to grow up.

The Dichotomy Between Essentialist Reading and Contingent Reading

The crisis of the culture of reading is reinforced by some assumptions within the academy about what it means to read a philosophical text. A typical assumption is that the purpose of reading a philosophical text is to identify the correct meaning or truth in the text. Let us take the case of how to read John Dewey. In criticizing the way of reading Dewey's text that is prevalent amongst his "faithful" readers, Richard Rorty identifies a tendency to "maintain purity of doctrine at the price of having to explain disagreement with Dewey, or refusal to take Dewey seriously."[2] In challenging this trend, Rorty proclaims the "hypothetical reading" of Dewey.[3] In response to this charge, Deweyan scholars criticize Rorty's hypothetical reading as deforming the original Dewey. The debate here exemplifies the question of the locus of authorship as well as the adequate reading of a great philosopher.

Take another example: Thomas S. Popkewitz, in his project of "historicizing" and contextualizing Dewey in different cultural practices around the world, criticizes the general pattern of philosophical readings of Dewey: "*The Educational Researcher* continually runs essays and commentaries about who has been the most faithful to Dewey in an ostensible search to find the final, and correct reading."[4] Popkewitz is skeptical of the idea of a "correct reading" of a philosophical text and of the illusion that there must be an original author who offers truth to the text's readers. In contrast his project takes the position that "Dewey enunciates particular solutions and plans for action in social, cultural, and educational arenas that go beyond its philosophical ideas"; and that there is no single identity to Dewey as an author, as the "originator of thought whose texts exist 'independent of their textual use and the cultural practices that produce them.'"[5] In line with this position Rosa N. Buenfil Burgos insists that their project is not that of an "essentialist reading."[6] As the price of its anti-essentialist reading, however, Popkewitz's project as a whole points to the direction of assimilating the "original" authorship at the hands of the reader in the recipient culture and language — a tendency to submerge the voice of the original author in the contingency of particular contexts, insinuating a relativistic abrogation of the possibility of finding any common ground between the original author and its readers of different cultures.

The debate over how to read Dewey reiterates the dichotomy generally observed regarding the question of how one should read a philosophical text, that is, a dichotomy between foundationalist and anti-foundationalist reading. If we adopt the former position, the author is taken to be the locus of authority, and the task of the reader is to represent the literal meaning of the text. This requires a kind of objectivism in the reading of the text, with teacher and students as passive readers. In turn the latter mode of reading can be associated with student-centered education. A philosophical text should serve the needs of students and should be incorporated, in easy and clear terms, into concrete implications for practice. The authority, or the final judge of the value of the text, then is shifted to the side of the readers. This dichotomous pattern in itself seems to reinforce a division between theory and practice in teaching and thinking in philosophy of education. The pressure is increased on university teachers and the humanities publishing industry to write and speak in easy-to-understand terms, to make thought marketable.

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Philosophers of education need to reconsider and re-vision what it means for something to be a philosophical text so that they can realize in their reading values of a different order. Is not there a more fruitful way of reading through which adequate distance can be allowed between text, author, and reader, or between text, teacher, and student?

Reading in a High Sense: Rereading Cavell's Rereading of *Walden*

Cavell, in both his ideas about and his practice of reading, helps us shift our attention to an alternative mode of reading, beyond the dichotomy of foundationalist and anti-foundationalist reading. To illustrate how he accomplishes this, I, as a reader of Cavell's text, shall reread his *The Senses of Walden* (hereafter abbreviated as *Senses*), a book in which he rereads Thoreau's *Walden*. To read Cavell's text, however, is challenging, as Hilary Putnam reminds us. "To read Cavell as he should be read is to enter into a conversation with him, one in which your entire sensibility and his are involved, and not only your mind and his mind"; Putnam notes further that "what Cavell says" is entangled with his "way of speaking, a 'style.'"[7] To be true to a Cavellian way of reading and to his view of language, reading *Senses* should not be seen as a task of verifying whether his rereading of Thoreau is correct or wrong; neither should it be understood as a matter of assessing the originality of Cavell's reinterpretation of Thoreau's text. Rather a Cavellian reading requires us to learn, by immersing ourselves in his text and by our experiencing his mode of rereading, how Cavell recounts Thoreau's words without superseding them.

Cavell says that he wrote *Senses* to make *Walden* more difficult.[8] By reading Cavell's text, a reader's original reading of *Walden* is destabilized. This causes irritation on the part of the reader. A commentator on the Japanese translation of *Senses* says that the Japanese text is difficult to follow; sometimes the meanings of words cannot be clarified even through checking with the original (English) text. This, he thinks, is caused by "the lack of fluency in the original author's [Cavell's] use of words."[9] He implies that a philosopher should write in clear terms. Another commentator says in passing that *Senses* is "merely" a linguistic analysis of *Walden*, implying that there should be more than "mere words" in *Walden*.

In reading Cavell's *Senses*, an initial experience that a reader undergoes is the sense of *bottomlessness* — the sense that the bearings offered by the writer of the text are constantly being lost.[10] The writer challenges the apparently stable ground of language on which the reader stands and challenges the attitude of reading that relies on the authority given by the text. Cavell says, however, that "[t]here is a solid bottom everywhere" (*SW*, 76).[11] He implies that the secure ground of reading is in the hands *both* of the reader and of the writer, while, at the same time, always being *beyond* their full grasp. How should we interpret this paradoxical sense of the absence and ubiquity of a bottom?

It is the responsibility of the reader to weigh the words of a text and find where to stand. This does not mean, however, a complete shift of authority to the side of the reader, as if reading were simply a matter of "guesswork" (*SW*, 29). Instead reading is the process of the reader and the writer being engaged in a cooperative task of "conjecturing" (*SW*, 28). It is a testing of the criteria of words and culture, keeping

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alive the search for their truth. The reader is "convicted" by the text in that he or she is caught in a position of responsibility not only of reading, but also of destabilizing and rebuilding the foundation of his or her native language (*SW*, 48). Cavell's position on reading is neither foundationalist nor anti-foundationalist, but evokes a third way of "finding as founding"— an Emersonian perfectionist search for foundation.[12] Founding is not to be understood in terms of a once-and-for-all foundationalism (which would be a kind of fixation for Ralph Waldo Emerson); it is to be understood in terms of a recurrent finding.

On the basis of this, Cavell's rereading of Thoreau teaches us to *read in a high sense* (*SW*, 5). It implies diverse modes of reading. First, it is to "laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line" — a labor and "experiment" symbolized by Thoreau's experiment in living in Walden (*SW*, 4 and 8). The labor of recounting words is not simply a speculative process in the mind. As the analogy of Thoreau's hoeing in the bean field in *Walden* suggests, reading and writing involves a physical labor involving a coordination of our senses as a whole. Words are not mere words but are inseparable from the labor of "*placing* ourselves in the world" (*SW*, 53). Second, a reader who is convicted by the text is inevitably required to read rigorously. Rigor does not reside in finding a truth intrinsic to the text. In contrast to the conventional mode of philosophical reading where finding the truth in secure knowledge is the measure of philosophical rigor, Cavell's sense of rigor is measured by the degree in which a reader succeeds in releasing the dynamic movements of words while transcending his or her own framework of thinking. "To read the text accurately is to assess its computations, to check its sentences against our convictions, to prove the derivation of its words" (*SW*, 65). This requires an attentive mode of reading, "to stand on tiptoe to read and devote our most alert and wakeful hours to" it (*WR*, III, 7; *SW*, 4-5).

Third, a reader is required to read indirectly — that is, to keep distance from and to be distanced by a writer, the author of a text. Cavell suggests that in *Walden* "the reader's position has been specified as that of the stranger," epitomized by a reader's position "at a bent arm's length" from the text and being "alone with the book" (*SW*, 62). The notion of indirectness is replayed in Cavell's invocation of Thoreau's idea of the "father tongue" — "a reserved and select expression, too significant to be heard by the ear, which we must be born again in order to speak" (*WR*, III, 3; *SW*, 15). In contrast to the immediacy of the mother tongue associated with spoken language, the indirectness of the written word gives us the time to think, deliberate, and readjust our relationship with the world. This is anything but to deny the mother; rather it is to "keep faith at once with the mother and the father, to unite them, and to have the word born in us" (*SW*, 16). Reading in a high sense involves this moment of rebirth, the moment when "the word and the reader can only be awakened together" (*SW*, 59).

This guides us to the fourth mode of reading — reading in detachment. Cavell suggests the mode of leaving in reading as follows: "The conditions of meeting upon the word are that we — writer and reader — learn how to depart from them, leave

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them where they are; and then return to them to find ourselves there again" (*SW*, 63). The goal of the reader's encounter with the writer is to "free us from our attachment to the person of the one who brings the message," namely, "freedom from the person of the author."[13] The reader, being put on trial in the relationship with the writer, learns to detach herself from her old self, from her framework of thinking and perception of words. Hence, one can see "a text as therapeutic."[14] Cavell associates this with Freud's idea of "the work of mourning" — that is, of "undergoing severing" from "attachment."[15] The task of Thoreau as an author and Cavell as a second author are to leave a reader alone, to let her recognize the singularity of her self. Their paradoxical teaching is that our kinship "is an endless realization of our separateness" (*WR*, I, 2; *SW*, 54). Detachment as an entanglement of intimacy and distance is different from the objectified distance presumed in essentialist reading. It is a distance necessary to the resistance of assimilation of the text and author to the mind of a reader, while at the same time resisting being assimilation to the illusory authority of the text and author.

Consequently, as the fifth dimension of reading, Cavell's text requires us to read receptively. Unlike the assertive, and perhaps even aggressive, mode of language in its transactional functionality, Cavell's and Thoreau's father tongue is characterized by the receptivity, silence, and patience that are modes of a reader's relation to a text. Cavell cites the words of *Walden*: "You only need sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns" (*WR*, XII, 11; *SW*, 48). The receptive element here indicates a feminine aspect to the father tongue — an unexpected combination or fusion, suggestive of the father's femininity. Being tried by the text, a reader learns to be exposed to the voice of the text, the life of words — to be read by a difficult text. Receptivity here is distinguished from passive reading. Cavellian reading is composed of a strange mixture of active and receptive reading, to sustain the position of finding as founding.

With these diverse modes of reading in a high sense, Cavell presents us with his idea of the politics of interpretation: Emerson's and Thoreau's "interpretation of what you might call the politics of philosophical interpretation as a withdrawal or rejection of politics, even of society, as such."[16] Its foremost task is to regain the autonomy of language and of ourselves, by returning ourselves and language back to the ordinary, to let them rediscover their place in the world. Finding "my voice" involves asking where this "I" stands in the world, and it is this question of standing that emerges as the essential condition for political participation.

Reading as Translating

Cavell's invocation of reading in a high sense also has its implication in a cross-cultural dimension — making us reconsider the very meaning of *cross-cultural* understanding. In this context, Cavell suggests an inseparable relationship between reading and translating language. Translation here is not simply a mechanical process of switching from one language to another, nor a stage in the development from the first language (the mother tongue) to the second language. Rather it has the broader implication of translating the native to the foreign, by destabilizing the

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dichotomy of the native as the original (or given) culture and the foreign as the culture outside.

To unpack its meaning let us revisit the senses of reading *Senses*. The act of rereading *Senses* reveals diverse actors involved with the original text, *Walden*. There is an original writer, the author, Thoreau. A second writer, Cavell, comes in, as an interpreter of the text. Through the eyes of Cavell who rereads Thoreau, we, the readers, transform our original reading of *Walden*. The reader is forced to translate the text again by following the trace of language left by the original and the second author. In these multiple layers, the translation (or transaction) of meanings takes place. The relationship here is not merely between the writer and the reader. Thoreau, Cavell, and readers all play the role of translator. The locus of authorship shifts its ground. Cavell quotes from Thoreau: "The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is *translated*; its literal monument alone remains" (*WR*, XVII, 6; *SW*, 27). In this broader sense, translation does not come after the acquisition of the first language: it already starts in one's initiation into the language community, in the relationship with the mother tongue.

At a much deeper level, the very process of Cavell's engagement with America as culture and nation already in itself entails the origin of cross-cultural encounter — en-*counter* as the confrontation with another culture within one's own. Cavell says: "Such visions [as Thoreau's] prepare for the self-criticism of one's culture, preparing us for a change of our lives, to become deliberately not blindly strange to our conceptions of ourselves."[17] Such internal criticism is made possible by the teachings of other cultures. A mere incorporation of those "outside" sources into the native, however, does not create the moment of that teaching: neither does a simple juxtaposition or comparison of the foreign to the native. In its most intense form of encounter, the native is destabilized by the foreign. Cavell's attempt to overturn the relationship between the inner and the outer through the conversion of the familiar to the strange makes possible the moment of this intense cross-cultural encounter. His writing suggests the intricacy of the relationship between the *inter-* and *intra-*cultural dimensions.

This brings forth a further cross-cultural implication of Cavell's rereading, and indeed, *translating*, of Thoreau's *Walden*: "*Walden* can be taken as a whole to be precisely about the problem of translation, call it the transfiguration from one form of life to another."[18] By transfiguring and broadening the concept of translation, Cavell presents us with the idea of *philosophy as translation*: "philosophy to make human existence, or show it to be, strange to itself."[19] Even when the text does not directly speak about cross-cultural dialogue, the reader is as a foreigner who experiences the process of translating the native to the foreign — through the writer's internal criticism of his own culture and native language. This can be understood as an occasion for mutual reflection between different cultures, where the mirror's value is not just in the image of clarity but in its clouding, a clouding that is a sign of life. The relationship here is indirect — symbolized by the father tongue, by written words. In observing the way the other confronts his or her own

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culture and language, one is turned back upon that culture and language, as a stranger. The idea of mutual reflection suggests that "mutual understanding" can be blocked not only by difference in an inter-cultural dimension, but also by blindness to difference in an intra-cultural dimension — the reader's and the translator's inability to confront their naïve trust in understanding the familiar.

Cavell's philosophy as translation, as an implication of reading in a high sense, in a cross-cultural dimension, cautions us against an understanding of translation as a one-way transferring of messages; such a process is described by Sabiha Bilgi and Seçkin Özsoy, with reference to the reading of Dewey's work in Turkey, as "selective translation," a process of "extraction," distortion, and worse, "transmogrifications."[20] Against both the universal transmission of the original thought in a homogenized global market and the assimilation of an original philosophy in multicultural contexts, Cavell makes us aware that there is a third "use" of a foreign philosophy: to use it as an occasion for a dialogical process of mutual critical reflection on one's own language and culture, which, hopefully and eventually, will lead to a transformation of one's own identity from within. This is not to assimilate the original author into the recipient culture's needs, but rather to be open to the voice of the original author — how the author has produced his or her philosophy in struggle with his or her own culture and native language. Such a dialogical mode of reading requires the art of translation, one that requires self-transcendence of a kind. Philosophy as translation here again exemplifies the process of education — education as the turning or conversion of one's way of seeing the world.

Philosophy as the Education of Grownups

Thus Cavell presents an alternative mode of reading philosophically. This is not, however, simply a matter of language. Reading philosophically already involves an inseparable relationship between the self, language, and culture. Emersonian moral perfectionism, he says, involves one's participation in "a city of words," the language community.[21] The moral force of perfection hinges not on judgment (as in conventional moral theories), but on "every word." A strong focus on language is not merely a linguistic project or private literary activity. Rather participation in the language community is a crucial condition for the realization of authentic political, public action — in Emerson's words, from the inmost to the outmost.[22] Cavellian reading offers an alternative route to political participation, one that is distinguished from the politics of recognition in which the same and the different are juxtaposed and the political relationship is a matter of "cognition." Cavell's approach is thoroughly educational, involving an invisible and internal process of human transformation with moments of rebirth.

In higher education's culture of accountability, this perfectionist dimension of education is sadly obliterated. The significance of reading in a high sense, the assiduous, time-taking work of recounting the words in the text, is lost. Such reading involves a dialogical relationship between writer, reader, teacher, and student, in a transactional process of translation. Cavell calls Thoreau and Emerson "philosophers of direction, orienters, tirelessly prompting us to be on our way, endlessly

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asking us where we stand, what it is we face" (*SW*, 141-142). The education for grownups that philosophical reading implies is not intended as something for adults who have already acquired sophisticated literacy. Rather it implies an eternal process of dialogue between adults who still need to grow by being open to the kinds of questions that children are still ready to ask, or perhaps by being ready for a continuing adolescence.

Finally, a Cavellian politics of interpretation and philosophy as translation have an implication for the role of a university teacher — as the translator of a text in philosophy of education. Her role is not restricted to the transmission of the contents of a philosophical text — to simply conveying to students what a great philosopher says about education. Instead, like Thoreau, who lives as a "visible saint" on the border between the town of Concord and the woods of Walden, she can play the role of a prophet on the edge of her own culture and language, in her *profession* in philosophy of education. This requires that the teacher work in the interstices of the culture without settling down in any fixed space. The teacher plays translator by converting the "native" mother tongue into, as it were, a "foreign" father tongue, by seeking the indirectness and separation that is the means of a common ground still to be achieved. In the very way the teacher is engaged with the text and with her own culture and language, that teacher holds up a mirror to the eyes of the student so that the latter can also be engaged in the criticism of the culture.

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1. Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 48. This work will be cited as *SW* in the text for all subsequent references. The Roman numeral in the quote indicates the chapter and the Arabic indicates the paragraph in Thoreau's *Walden* as quoted by Cavell.

2. Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr., ed., *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), 53.

3. Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Paper 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 292.

4. Thomas S. Popkewitz, ed., *Inventing the Modern Self and John Dewey: Modernities and the Traveling of Pragmatism in Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 8.

5. Ibid., 6 and 8

6. Rosa N. Buenfil Burgos, "Discursive Inscriptions in the Fabrication of a Modern Self: Mexican Educational Appropriations of Dewey's Writings," in Popkewitz, ed., *Inventing the Modern Self and John Dewey*, 198.

7. Hilary Putnam, "Philosophy as the Education of Grownups: Stanley Cavell and Skepticism," in *Reading Cavell*, eds. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (London: Routledge, 2005), 117.

8. Paul Standish and Naoko Saito, "Stanley Cavell to *Woruden* no Sekai: Nihon no Dokusha he no Izanai" [Stanley Cavell's *Walden*: An Introduction for Japanese Readers], in *Sense obu Woruden* (the Japanese translation of *The Senses of Walden*), trans. Naoko Saito (Tokyo: Hosei University Press, 2005), 214.

9. Satoshi Tanaka, "A Commentary on the Japanese Translation of Stanley Cavell's *The Senses of Walden*" [in Japanese], *Research in Philosophy of Education in Japan* 93 (2006), 171.

10. Walter Benn Michaels, "*Walden*'s False Bottom," in *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, ed. William Rossi (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 417.

11. Quoted from Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government,* ed. William Rossi (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), chap. XVIII, paragraph 14. This work will be cited as *WR*, followed

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by Roman numerals indicating chapters and Arabic indicating paragraphs, for all subsequent references (for example, *WR*, XVIII, 14).

12. Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: Living Batch Press, 1989).

13. Stanley Cavell, "The Politics of Interpretation (Politics as Opposed to What?)," in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 53.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 54.

16. Cavell, "The Politics of Interpretation," 49-50.

17. Stanley Cavell, "Walden in Tokyo" (paper presented at Harvard University, Cambridge, October, 28, 2006), 8.

18. Ibid., 17.

19. Ibid., 7.

20. Sabiha Bilgi and Seçkin Özsoy, "John Dewey's Travelings into the Project of Turkish Modernity," in Popkewitz, ed., *Inventing the Modern Self and John Dewey*, 163, 164, and 172.

21. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1990), 8 and 12.

22. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Richard Poirier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 131.

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