

Philosophical Reading In/Sight

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Naoko Saito invites us all to read her as she rereads Stanley Cavell as he rereads Henry Thoreau's *Walden*. I am responding to her invitation recognizing the inherent danger of falling prey to the consequences of the old telephone game where a whispered message is passed on from one person to the next until it is unrecognizable. In Miss Hentges's second grade classroom we knew that the originator of that message would lose the game if the precise phrase did not make it all the way through the process. Saito proposes that such a result is not losing at all, but is, instead a potentially desirable outcome. In the telephone game the original message is "translated" through a series of stages that the listener and the speaker co-construct, but each translation is linked inextricably to both the originating phrase and to its listeners/speakers. So, considering the dangers of the interstices, I would like to offer some comments about my rereadings of Saito's rereadings of Cavell's rereadings of *Walden*. Saito twice uses the word *entanglements* to describe aspects of her proposal. I will address briefly four "tangles" that, if explored a bit further could, I believe, sharpen her useful work in pedagogy of philosophy of education (dare I, though, given the tone of her essay, seek to find the applicable here?).

The first tangle lies in the fuzzy distinction between a philosophical reading (that is, a text) and a philosophical reading (a process of reading that philosophic text). It took me a number of rereadings to figure out what part of her work described philosophical reading (the text itself) and what part described philosophical reading (the process of gaining meaning from the text). As I tried to tease the distinctions apart, it occurred to me that maybe she had purposefully used the term in both senses simultaneously. Did she deliberately lay out her essay so that it could be approached through minimally three lenses? Is this an essay about philosophical readings, about the reading of those philosophical readings, *and* about the entanglements of both? Since I agree with Saito as she seems to imply that discussion of one interpretation of "philosophical reading" actually embraces the other, I am using the phrase "philosophical reading" primarily to mean the act of philosophical reading with the other meaning subsumed as a subtext. But I admit to being disoriented.

The second tangle involves the very nature of the disorientation she speaks of seeing in Cavell at the initial stages of a reader's encounter with a philosophical reading. There is a potential richness in this disequilibrium that has much in common with the anthropological concept of liminality. In a liminal state there is disruption, then substantive engagement and re-engagement during a period ripe with potential for integrating the new (the unfamiliar), and then subsequently the emergence of a revised self. Saito points out the productivity of this state when readers enter it, recognize it, and embrace it as they approach philosophical reading. Because she has spoken in her introduction about the need for those of us who teach philosophy of

education to rethink our roles, I wonder, what can we learn about how to invite students into this liminal state for the potential she says lives there?

The third tangle is wound around her use of the terms *translation* and *transaction* as synonyms. There is a richness in the work on transactional theory of literature that would further inform Saito's development of this theme. Literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt, in work heavily influenced by John Dewey, explores the role of a transaction between text and reader in the space Saito seeks to explicate beyond essentialist and contingent reading. In *Literature as Exploration*¹ and *Reader, the Text, the Poem*,² Rosenblatt lays out the transactional theory in details about the generative place where aesthetic reading lives; this transactional theory of literature carries a rich texture beyond equating transaction with translation. Saito describes students as disinterested in reading difficult material, skeptical of anything not immediately applicable to their lives, distanced by complex language, and directed by consumerist predispositions. In the face of such readers and readings, the notion of translation seems too simplistic, too mechanical. At the same time, the notion of transaction — often a source of misinterpretation of Rosenblatt's reader-response work — seems too contingent, too challenging. Pulling apart these two processes will, I believe, more productively speak to Saito's conception. The last entanglement comes within the pedagogical implications of the five dimensions of reading in a "high sense." Armed with questions raised initially in the state of disorientation, Saito describes the reader as proceeding with five (not necessarily linear) dimensions of philosophical reading: reading with an encompassing sense of "labor" (a wholehearted involvement), a pointed sense of rigor (for turning over the soil and looking for roots), a willing stance of both distance and detachment, and an embracing sense of receptivity. The reader thus approaches the text by leaning into, then away from it, and then re-entering both the text and self — scrutinized and changed by each. There is choreography here, with both the text and the reader leading at different times in the dance. I value the careful way Saito lays out the moves within "high sense" reading; it is as demanding as it is overlooked by contemporary students and, by implication, those teaching them. And what of those of us teaching them? I hope, given more time and space, she explores how teaching for high sense reading can be undertaken, how high sense reading can be fostered.

In Toni Morrison's Nobel Lecture she tells a story of an old blind woman who is asked by a small group of seemingly impertinent children whether the bird in their hands is alive or dead. The old woman understands the bird as a metaphor for language and uses the occasion to scrutinize the simultaneous forces that enable that language to flourish and flounder; she implores the children to accept their responsibility for language's vigorous life. At the end of the story, after the old woman and the children wrangle through stages reminiscent of the dimensions of reading in a "high sense," she says, "Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done — together."³ As I reread Saito rereading Cavell's rereading *Walden*, I think she is imploring us to take philosophical readings (in both senses of this phrase) as invitations into a liminal space where the writer and the reader — and where the

teacher and the student in rereading the text — can labor together in just such wonder. I appreciate the careful way she has laid out the dimensions of high sense reading and its possibilities. Attention to these few tangles could, I believe, augment the work and move it to reclaim, as she proposes, “the role of philosophy of education as the ‘education of grownups.’”

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1. Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (New York: Noble and Noble, 1976).
 2. Louise Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).
 3. Toni Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture in Literature: 1993* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 30.