

Gifts from a Foreign Land:
Lost in Translation and the Understanding of Other Cultures

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WHERE DO we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none.... Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience”¹

You sleep one third your life.

— Bob, *Lost in Translation*

INTRODUCTION

The term “internationalization” has become a catchphrase in higher education. In educational policy statements, the phrase is oftentimes colored by the busy, even aggressive, discourse of global markets and of the bold crossing of borders between different countries and different cultures. Behind this sanguine confidence, however, the actual experience of those who find themselves estranged in a foreign culture tends to get obliterated. There is no sense of alienation — of getting lost, of losing one’s way (literally, in the street), of losing one’s bearings in unknown places. One can also be at a loss for words where one’s capacity in a foreign language is challenged. The criteria of judgment to which one is accustomed and on which one relies are severely tested in a foreign environment, and they can be shattered. John Dewey says fear is a “function of the environment.”² When we encounter radical difference, however, our sense of identity can be disturbed. Then the evasion of fear is a reasonable reaction. We can easily close our hearts, insulate ourselves from the outside world. This is especially so when we *happen to* go abroad, without any wish to learn from a different culture. How can we convert a negative sense of fear, anxiety, and closed-mindedness into a more hopeful state? This is a question that underlies education for cross-cultural understanding, foreign language education, and education for the “global citizen”: it is a question that concerns the inner transformation of the self through a cross-cultural encounter; and this is a question that must be remembered for the internationalization of young people.

In destabilizing the typical call for learning from difference, from mutual understanding and sympathetic imagination, this essay thematizes the sense of *loss* we undergo in cross-cultural settings and examines how such experience can unsettle our conventional conception of *translation*. Here, the film, *Lost in Translation*,³ will serve as a medium to rethink the intersection of culture, language, and human transformation. As an alternative lens through which to see the film, I shall draw on Stanley Cavell’s idea of *philosophy as translation*. By rereading Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, Cavell shows us that translation is not simply a matter involving two different language systems but rather that it permeates our lives as a matter of human *transformation* — a path from loss to rebirth. The perspective of translation elucidates the idea of *transcendence in the ordinary* as Cavell’s response to skepti-

cism. I shall conclude that a perfectionist reading of the film bestows upon us a gift from a foreign land, opening a door to different cultures as *other* cultures. Such an opening can reorient education for cross-cultural understanding, reconceptualizing the task of internationalizing higher education.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Lost in Translation, directed by Sofia Coppola, is a film about two Americans who come to Japan — Bob and Charlotte. Bob is a film star who comes to Japan to make a commercial for Suntory whisky. Charlotte is a young woman who comes to Japan with her husband, John, a photographer. They happen to stay in the same hotel in Shinjuku, in the center of Tokyo. With the exception Charlotte's short visit to Kyoto, the action takes place in and around this hotel. They gradually get to know each other, sharing — though in an oblique and inexplicit way — their respective problems in marriage and life as a whole. While Bob's activities in Japan center on his work with Japanese people, Charlotte's experience is mostly solitary. But one night they enjoy dancing and karaoke with Charlotte's Japanese friends, and this has the effect of opening them to one another. On the day when Bob is in the taxi to the airport, ready to go home, he happens to see Charlotte in the street. He stops the taxi and runs after her. We see them hug, say a few words, and then leave each other.

There are multiple entrances into this film. At the most superficial level, there is a permeating sense of estrangement: this is a culture that is alien to both Bob and Charlotte. As the title suggests, they are literally lost in translation. Bob says to his wife about his experiences in Japan: "It is not fun. It is very different." The most obviously funny scenes are those in which miscommunication takes place between Bob and the Japanese director of the commercial, who, in an impassioned flow of Japanese, urges Bob to adopt a particular posture holding a glass of expensive whisky (that is, a brand, "Hibiki," a high quality Suntory whisky), while a translator briefly and inadequately translates the director's order, "with intensity"; and between Bob and a Japanese prostitute, asking him to "lip my stockings," by which she means "rip my stockings." Charlotte is often seen in her hotel room, looking out across the skyscrapers of Tokyo; and, otherwise, we see her wandering around these foreign places, in Tokyo and Kyoto, the silence showing that Charlotte is at a loss, lost for words, losing her sense of location in this alien place. In the intercut scenes between their respective hotel rooms, Bob and Charlotte are seen to be channel-hopping through the same Japanese television programs — with the Japanese language reduced to a mere sound, to gabble. Here, there is not even the space for *mis*understanding.

This is definitely a film about encountering a different culture. One way to look at it is to foreground the enigma of an Asian culture, Japan. This then turns out to be just another example of orientalism — a Western caricature of Japanese culture and people. Alternately, it could be said that the film is primarily a love story. A further possibility is to see the film as dealing with the universal human problems of marriage and relationships — beyond cultural differences. If so, do Bob and Charlotte need to *understand* Japan as a different culture? More cynically viewed, Bob and Charlotte might be said simply to interact with each other, carrying their own native language

(English) and their home culture (American culture). This is then a typical case of an experience abroad where *cross*-cultural encounter does not occur and *mutual* understanding can never succeed. This would be a disappointing conclusion.

Although such interpretation is not impossible, there are aspects to the film to which none of these frameworks of interpretation can adequately respond. First and foremost, if they do not learn from Japanese culture, what is the point of setting the scene in Tokyo? It is amusing for the Western viewer, and it offers the chance for some interesting location shots. But is this all? Second, there is an ambiguity in the relationship between Charlotte and Bob: is this a just tentative friendship or something more like love? Third, there is a puzzle over the closing scene, the scene of their separation. The audience is not given a clear indication of where they are going in their lives. We cannot hear what they whisper to each other. The ambiguity, however, keeps open the space for an alternative interpretation of the film. Can we not, then, shift our attention to the fact that neither has come to Japan with the *intention* to learn something?

PHILOSOPHY AS TRANSLATION

As a reentry into the film, I propose to highlight the sense of loss. Behind the sense of humor and apparent caricature of Japanese culture, the film is permeated by the sense of loss, and even cynicism and despair. Charlotte has majored in philosophy at Yale. She listens to the tape on the search of the soul. Bob says: "I am stuck" and "I'm completely lost." His sense of a void is symbolized by the sample pieces of carpet — which his wife, Lydia, sends to him and which he drops on the floor. The dropping of the carpet samples symbolizes the debased superficiality of the American economy, which is also illustrated by the American Hollywood actress and by a Japanese television industry that imports and redistributes its ethos.

It is here that the way Stanley Cavell's rereads Thoreau's *Walden* helps us to articulate the sense of loss. In contrast to a stereotypical reading *Walden* as a eulogy to nature or an environmentalist manifesto, or as the evocation of some kind of mystic experience in the woods, Cavell reads the book through something more like ordinary language philosophy. The theme of translation is not necessarily explicit, but it permeates Cavell's and Thoreau's texts. Cavell destabilizes our conventional idea of translation. Thoreau expresses this with the phrasing: "The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is instantly *translated*."⁷⁴ His antirepresentationalist and antifoundationalist view of language is characterized by transitivity and volatility. The idea of translation is most distinctively captured by Thoreau's and Cavell'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" (*Walden*, 69; *Senses*, 15). Reengagement with the father tongue is a way of sustaining the space of what Cavell calls "the daily, insistent split in the self that being human cannot ... escape."⁷⁵ While Cavell says that the father and the mother are united (*Senses*, 16), their relationship is neither reciprocal, nor complementary, nor symmetrical. There is no "pure" original state in which they are united in a perfect fit. Rather, it symbolizes our dual relation to language.

Cavell shows a powerful symbolism of image and sense to be at work in *Walden*. First is the sense of *bottomlessness*:

While men believe in the infinite, some ponds will be thought to be bottomless. (*Walden*, 190)

There is a solid bottom every where. (*Walden*, 220; *Senses*, 76)

In the process of translation, it is the responsibility of a reader (or a translator) to weigh towards this bottomlessness and to find where to stand — to “stand on tiptoe” as if alert on a precarious border (*Walden*, 71). In *Walden* and *The Senses of Walden*, words are not mere words but are inseparable from the work of “*placing* ourselves in the world” (*Senses*, 53). In order to have “no particular home, but [to be] equally at home everywhere,” one must acquire the art of *sauntering*, as a “*Sainte-Terre*,” being *sans terre*, without land.⁶ Thoreau is “at home” at Walden Pond, but only in the sense that “he learned there how to sojourn, i.e., spend his day” (*Senses*, 52). “That you do not know beforehand what you will find is the reason the quest is experiment or an exploration” (*Senses*, 53). Thoreau *happens* to find various phenomena in nature, in surprise.

Another symbolic image that permeates *Walden* and *The Senses of Walden* is that of the obscure:

You will pardon some obscurities, for there are more secrets in my trade than in most men’s. (*Walden*, 11)

I do not suppose that I have attained to obscurity.... The purity men love is like the mists which envelop the earth, and not like the azure ether beyond. (*Walden*, 217)

Thoreau’s *Walden* is filled with realistic observation of the facts of nature and of daily life. It is permeated by a sense of the body, his feet gravitating towards the ground. His realism, however, is not the exact representation of “reality out there.” Rather, Thoreau’s is what might be called the *realism of the obscure* — of a reality of the world that cannot be fully illuminated under light. It is only by going through the obscure that one can “lay the foundation of true expression” (*Walden*, 216).

The realism of the obscure is inseparable from Cavell’s reinterpretation of *Walden* as a response to the skepticism left unanswered by Immanuel Kant: Thoreau recovers the world as real. “His difference from Kant on this point is that these *a priori* conditions are not themselves knowable *a priori*, but are to be discovered experimentally” (*Senses*, 95). Thoreau’s experimental and scientific spirit seems to foreshadow something of Dewey’s pragmatism; and, yet, what Thoreau has in mind is a matter less of action than of passion — that we suffer what happens to us and simultaneously that the universe answer to our conceptions (*Senses*, 112). Phenomenological reencounter with the world and the objects around us requires us to reword the world (*Senses*, 64), through a “redemption of language,” bringing it back to the ordinary (*Senses*, 92). This is at the heart of Cavell’s idea of the “truth of skepticism” — an idea that “our primary relation to the world is not one of knowing it” (*Senses*, 106–7).

Here comes the third imaginary of translation: transformation and rebirth. With the metaphors of shedding “false skin” (*Walden*, 16) (or, in Cavell’s rephrasing, “cast[ing] off like a skin” [*Senses*, 59]) and of the birds’ molting season, along with

the images of morning and awakening. Cavell and Thoreau elucidate the occasions of rebirth and transformation. Transformation is not something at which one can aim at will: rather, like the animals in the wood, it needs to be *awaited* (*Senses*, 58). Equally, transformation in *Walden*, unlike the experience of religious conversion, is not simply beyond human control: it requires human labor, our conscious reengagement with language as “the father tongue requires rebirth” (*Senses*, 58). Translation is filled with apparent paradoxes. True expression is something both to be awaited and to be sought. The foundation of language, though newly created, is not conceived out of thin air: our words must be “yarded”; and it is only from within such limits that one can become “*extra-vagant*,” that is to say, wander beyond bounds (*Walden*, 216). Rebirth of the self is a matter of repossessing our own words, of “replacing” them where we stand (*Senses*, 92). This is to regain the answerability of the self to the self and to the world (*Senses*, 109). Such “answerability,” however, can never be the complete solution to a problem, for, as Emerson says, “there is always a residuum unknown, unanalyzable” (*Emerson*, 254).

These strains of imagery invoked by translation invite us to a kind of self-transformation. Self-possession requires dispossession, losing of the self. We need to undergo “strangeness” to suffer from what happens to us (*Senses*, 60). Hence, passion, passivity, and receptivity are key terms in Cavell’s recounting of Thoreau’s words in *Walden*. In translation, we learn to be “beside ourselves in a sane sense” (*Walden*, 91; *Senses*, 102). In English, to “be beside oneself” is an idiomatic phrase that means primarily to be crazy, to be mad, or at least to be overcome. But, here, the phrase is qualified almost paradoxically (“in a sane sense”) so that the madness is tempered or balanced. What is emphasized is that we must be taken outside ourselves, which is to say out of any complacent settled view of the world. This doubling, as Cavell puts it, is “the spiritual breakthrough from yearning and patience which releases its writer’s capacity for action” (*Senses*, 102).

LEAVING WALDEN, LEAVING TOKYO: TRANSLATING *LOST IN TRANSLATION*

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.

— Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (153)

Let us try to translate *Lost in Translation* into the language of philosophy as translation. When you sit still in front of the diverse phenomena in the film, paying close attention to the bodily movements of Bob and Charlotte, their subtle changes in facial expressions and the words they utter, a certain thread of the film is elucidated: this is a story of the “soul’s search,” of “a midlife crisis,” bearing in mind that crisis occurs in the midst of life. They are in “quiet desperation” (*Walden*, 5). In order to realize this, the viewer also learns to expose herself patiently to what happens in the film.

In his interpretation of the film, Paul Standish writes, “It is possible to allow the images to work on us, beautiful as they sometimes are, though comic and tinged with sadness.”⁷ Through Charlotte’s eyes especially — albeit that this is indirect, through the lens of the camera — we come to see things again. In the beginning, her

whole body is sealed off from the world: she sits in the window of her hotel room, gazing out at the skyscrapers of Tokyo. When she goes out, she visits a temple and is exposed to the sound of the monks' chanting; but she calls her mother in tears only to say, "I did not feel anything." The nature of her estrangement gradually shifts from despair to a kind of enjoyment. She wanders through the busy nightlife of Shinjuku, with its young people's hangouts and brilliant neon signs all around; she drifts into an *Ikebana* flower-arranging class at the hotel; and, most vividly, when she visits the beautiful *Nanzenji* temple in Kyoto, she chances to see a marriage procession. Charlotte learns how to wander, how to sojourn in foreign places. Their groundless state from which she has been suffering is now transformed into a sense of finding the bottom on which to stand and to stand on tiptoe — for now, here in Japan. She hops across the stepping-stones of the lily-pond in the temple garden. She is at ease with the sensuous surface of signs. This is her remarriage to the world.

The turnings in Bob's and Charlotte's selves are being triggered by their conversation as well — casually at the bar, sometimes seriously in a restaurant, and as they lie on the bed together. Theirs is a mode of perfectionist conversation with no final answers. Through their conversation, testing their words with each other, they become answerable to their own selves, learning how to accept one's estrangement from the world. Bob makes a cynical remark about the subtitle of the compact disc Charlotte is listening to, *Finding Your True Calling*. Charlotte learns to save her self by distancing herself from herself, by becoming a neighbor to herself in the state of the "double." "Spiritual breakthrough" occurs in the film not dramatically but silently, and on multiple occasions. This is the experience of what Standish calls "transcendence that goes *downwards*."⁸

It is through this gradual process of transformation that Bob and Charlotte, and the viewer of the film, arrive at the ending scene — regaining new interest and trust in the world, learning to trust themselves to the world, and celebrating the rebirth of their words. A key to transcendence is *leaving* and *abandoning*. "The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment" (*Emerson*, 262). For Bob and Charlotte, leaving is epitomized in the climactic scene of their farewell: at the time when they are ready to go back home separately. When, after hugging and kissing, they turn their backs on each other, the consummatory moment of the "flying Perfect" (*Emerson*, 252) visits them: their relationship is consummated, but without any perfect fit. What makes this film a perfectionist story is neither that Bob and Charlotte achieve something solid at the end, nor that they learned some substantial lesson from their encounter with Japanese culture. Rather, what they have learned is the very fact that they still, as grownups, have a capacity to leave in "anticipation" (*Sense*, 110), with the conviction that "we can turn" (*Senses*, 97, emphasis in original). The metaphor of melting ice at Walden in the early spring expresses this critical turning point as that of "the learning of resolution" (*Senses*, 99); here, the implicit contrast is with the solution of problems. We might call this their attaining of a "pure" (or purer) state through the obscure. Their "renewed innocence" (*Walden*, 209) is not a pure, original infant state to return. This is, in Cavell's words, the state of the "eventual ordinary," the

“actual ordinary” transformed⁹: where we are remarried with the world as our own and come back home again. Yet, again, this is not the end state: the self is “knotted” to the next, further state.¹⁰

The film embodies the process of a labor of rebirth: we regain our power as “the result of rising,” only *through* and *after*, we expand our circles (*Senses*, 136). Thoreau says, “In view of the future or possible, we should live quite laxly and undefined in front, our outlines dim and misty on that side” (*Walden*, 216). This may be a frightening experience, and yet fear is the source of happiness and hope, the very precondition of regaining our tongue, the father tongue.

GIFTS FROM A FOREIGN LAND:

RETURNING HOME, UNDERSTANDING *OTHER* CULTURES

Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?

— Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (6)

Does mutual profit here really mean hitting a home run rather than simply getting to first base?

— Stanley Cavell, “Walden in Tokyo”¹¹

Lost in Translation is a story that tells us something about an alternative route to an encounter with a foreign culture — to suffer its impact in an indirect way. This will necessarily involve one’s reengagement with language — not only with a foreign language, but also, and more significantly perhaps, with one’s native language. We are fated to be challenged by an endless call for articulating what cannot be said. Translation is filled with paradoxes. Bob and Charlotte’s “reunion” at the end is a state of communion that is made possible through leaving: they are “remarried” in separation. In response to what cannot be said in Japan, and with the cinematic effect of the inaudible conversation at the end, their voices are recovered, as it were, in silence. Conversation without the ultimate point of conversion itself inspires further conversation. It is through these multilayered paradoxes that Bob, Charlotte, and the viewer of the film undergo transformation. Such translation already and always operates in the apparently trifling, accidental scenes of the ordinary. Then a miracle happens — the miracle that Bob and Charlotte “look through each other’s eyes.” This is not a matter of the mutual understanding of a “different” culture but, rather, of the understanding of *other* cultures — others not only outside, but also inside ourselves. This requires an endless endeavor of perfecting one’s own culture in encountering the other — to keep moving on to “first base” rather than “hitting a home run.” This implies neither the cosmopolitan fusing of the boundaries of different cultures nor the romanticization of the unknowable other. Our “home base” is continually destabilized and transformed. This is accompanied by an internal transformation, as Emerson says: “the inmost in due times becomes the outmost” (*Emerson*, 132). Such internal transformation is at the heart of Cavell’s idea of the “education of grownups”¹²: “for a grownup to grow he requires strangeness and transformation, i.e., birth” (*Senses*, 60).

Philosophy as translation is crucial in language education in that both adults (teachers) and the young (students) are encouraged to be attuned to the volatile truth of their words: and to doubt and criticize what they have so far believed to be the solid

ground of their native language. We must relinquish any idea that translation is to be taken as a metaphor: rather, it is a “metonym” of our lives.¹³ Teachers and students are encouraged to create something new from within the constraints of their mother tongue and test it in conversation. Philosophy as translation does not drive them to relativism — to the idea that anything goes: rather, Cavell’s antifoundationalist view of language reminds them of the constraints of the language community to which they are fated. Only from within such limits can they learn to acquire the language of “*extra- vagance*,” a risk-taking language, in which bounds can be transcended. It demands a rigor of teachers and students in their constant reconstructing of the criteria of language “to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me.”¹⁴

There is a view that *Lost in Translation* is a film made for the West and that this is a Western caricature of the Japanese. Cannot the Japanese experience this through the foreigner’s eyes? Cannot the Japanese experience the foreign within themselves? The miracle of looking through each other’s eyes is a gift from the foreign. As the text of the life of those who have lost their way and as the site of the transitory phenomena of separation and remarriage, the film invites the viewer to the experiment of translation. This can be a powerful medium of education for understanding other cultures — education that invites youth to be radically awakened, self-transformed, to get out of the state of slumber.

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 307. This work will be cited as *Emerson* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1925) in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981).

3. *Lost in Translation*. Directed by Sofia Coppola (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2003).

4. Henry, D. Thoreau, *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, ed. William Rossi (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 17, cited in Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 27. Thoreau’s work will be cited as *Walden* and Cavell’s work will be cited as *Senses* in the text for all subsequent references.

5. Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 5.

6. Henry D. Thoreau, *Great Short Works of Henry David Thoreau* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 295.

7. Paul Standish, “Sofia Coppola’s ‘Valentine to Tokyo,’” The 14th Biennial Meeting of the International Network of Philosophers of Education (University of Calabria, Cosenza, Italy, August 20, 2014).

8. Paul Standish, “Pure Experience and Transcendence Down,” in *Education and the Kyoto School of Philosophy: Pedagogy for Human Transformation*, eds. Paul Standish and Naoko Saito (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 26 (emphasis in original).

9. Stanley Cavell and Paul Standish, “Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Paul Standish,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 46, no. 2 (2012): 166.

10. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 12.

11. Stanley Cavell, “Walden in Tokyo,” in *Walden in Tokyo: Stanley Cavell and the Thought of Other Cultures* (eds) Paul Standish and Naoko Saito (manuscripts under editing).

12. Naoko Saito and Paul Standish, *Stanley Cavell and the Education of Grownups* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

13. Paul Standish, "Sophie Coppola's 'Valentine to Tokyo,'" at the 7th International Colloquium between the Institute of Education, University of London, and the Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University (March 22, 2014, London).

14. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 125.

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