Reading in a High Sense: Beautiful Knowledge and Uncommon Schooling

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In July 2023, Academy Award director Hayao Miyazaki's new anime film, *The Boy and the Heron*, was released.[1] The inspiration for the film came from the best-selling Japanese novel by Genzaburo Yoshino in 1937. I went to the cinema expecting the film to be a concretization in visual images of the teaching of the novel. My expectation, however, was wonderfully betrayed! It undid my assumptions about the relationship between the film and the book, and between understanding visual images and understanding language; and more philosophically, what it means to *read* a book. The experience of watching the film, as opposed to reading the book, also gave me a concrete sense of the cinema as a place for education out of school. Both the book and the film are a story about the growth of a boy in his relationship with others, human beings and living things, the world, and even the universe. The film is mind-boggling in destabilizing the borders between life and death, adults and children, between this world and the otherworld, and between animals and human beings. It expands the historical and geographical horizons—both of the boy at the heart of the story and of the audience of the film itself. The beautiful and sometimes grotesque visual images expand the horizon of the imagination. After leaving the cinema, the world around me looked different.

In terms of the plot, there is something that is different from the conventional sense of teaching morals—moral lessons as bits of information which the viewer is expected to acquire. Both the novel and the film point to questions such as: How do we become a human being sensitive to the pain of others? How do we gain release from the narrow ego and become open to broader horizons of humanity? How do we muster the courage to live forward despite the uncertainties in life and death? The contrast, as much as the connection, between the book and the film raises the questions: How can a book we learn from become a part of our lives—not as bits of information, but as living

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knowledge? What kind of reading would it be if we acquired such knowledge?

Triggered by such questions raised by the experience of seeing Miyazaki's film, this paper is an attempt to untangle what lies behind this uncommon process of education. As exemplified in the culture of the *Jiko-Keihatsu* (therapeutic self-enlightenment) boom in Japanese society, knowledge has been increasingly treated as bits of information—to be acquired and accumulated. This is considered to be the mark of growth! In the face of narrowing down of meaning and scope of human growth, there is a need for an alternative approach to knowledge and understanding, in service to holistic growth. I invoke what Stanley Cavell and Henry David Thoreau call the "uncommon school"—a place and occasions in which one undergoes the encounter with what is uncommon or strange. Then, I present a holistic approach to reading, where seeing and sensing through body is key in creating the moment of human transformation. This is an implication of what Cavell and Thoreau call "reading in the high sense." As a concrete vision of the uncommon school, I shall present Miyazaki's "anime museum." Knowledge acquired through such a holistic approach is, I shall conclude, what Thoreau calls "beautiful knowledge."

JIKO-KEIHATSU AND KNOWLEDGE-AS-INFORMATION

Culture and knowledge today tend to be identified with information. In the Japanese journal, *Spectator*, a special issue entitled "The Secret of *Jiko Keihatsu*" has recently been published.[2] *Jiko Keihatsu* carries the distinctive connotation of self-enlightenment, and is fairly close to the idea of "self-help" that is seen across North America and Europe. Beneath the trend lies the desire to be (and simultaneously the anxiety about being) acknowledged by others, fear of isolation (the atomization of the self), and an inward turn to the self.[3] Outwardly, the self has been driven to acquire more knowledge and competencies in a process of upskilling or brushing-up, where useful knowledge is sought in aid of success in life. This whole trend, the editor of the journal points out, is tied up with consumer consciousness.[4] Taro Hanamura, one of the critics in the special issue, identifies that *Jiko Keihatsu* is a means to acquire social recognition with the aim of living out this story of the growth of the self—a process that continues till the end of one's life.[5] And this self, according

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to the general critique in *Jiko Keihatsu*, has thus far been trapped in a negative loop—a vicious cycle in which the self is driven to raise itself, in the process of which it loses self-confidence through failure (the very opposite of success) and as a result of which any positive self-evaluation has to be scaled down.[6] In this general trend, Ayako Osawa, another critic, states that while making the effort to raise oneself up in one's life seems to be a forward-looking, cheerful manifestation of healthy desire, we should question again whether the self is the kind of thing that should exactly be raised up.[7] In response, the editor of the journal poses the question: "What does it mean to grow?"[8] As these writers point out, growth in the culture of *Jiko Keihatsu* is driven by fear and anxiety. Living in the shadow of the "fear of failure," society as a whole is not willing to "take a chance."[9] This is a phenomenon, to borrow William Deresiewicz's words, of "panicked perfectionism"—the pursuit of perfection as the mania of making everything perfect, without loss or failure.[10] Thus, the *Jiko Keihatsu* boom is a manifestation of the phenomenon of identifying knowledge with information, as what Ragy calls, "fast knowledge," where the accumulation of knowledge is a mark of growth.[11]

Let me turn directly to the original inspiration of Miyazaki's film, which was Yoshio's book, *How Do You Live*?[12] This is the story of a junior high school boy, Copper, who learned lessons about life from his uncle. The book is a prime example of a text for philosophy for children. In the aforementioned special issue of *Spectator*, the book is listed as one of the classic *Jiko Keithatsu* books in Japan. Originally published as a children's book, it was a call for humanism in the face of the surge of militarism at the time, but it turned out to be read by readers across all generations.[13] Each chapter is an episode relating to the problems in life that Copper encounters, and the uncle draws a moral lesson at the end. It might easily be considered to be a source of "fast knowledge," knowledge-as-information, but this would depend on how it is read. In fact, Miyazaki's film uses this book as a source of inspiration—the book appears only once, in the scene where Mahito finds a book in a drawer as a gift from his dead mother for Mahito to read when he grows up. The way the film was produced implicitly indicates a way of reading the book not as moral knowledge-as-infor-

mation but as *living knowledge*—the kind of knowledge that impacts how we live. How is such a reading different from that of the *Jiko Keihatsu* book, and how might the former help us become released from the negative loop of growth?

READING IN A HIGH SENSE

As a lens through which to rethink ways of reading in service to knowledge for living, the idea of "reading in a high sense," proposed by Thoreau and Cavell, offers a guide. This idea is crucially related to holistic approaches to reading.

PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE AND READING THOREAU'S *WALDEN*

> Philosophy was a way of life, both in its exercise and effort to achieve wisdom, and in its goal, wisdom itself. For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us "be" in a different way.[14]

Pierre Hadot provides us with an entrance into the realm of philosophy that is to be distinguished from *Jiko Keihatsu*. In his view, philosophy as a way of life is a kind of "spiritual exercise"—"the transformation of our vision of the world" and "a metamorphosis of our personality."[15] He uses the term "conversion" as well.[16] In the Classical Greek and Hellenistic periods, Greek philosophy took the form of "a way of life, an art of living, and way of being."[17] The task of philosophy was not to present a systematic theory of truth but to initiate people, through dialogue, into a process of self-transformation.[18]

It is within this idea of philosophy as a way of life that Hadot appreciates anew the contemporary significance of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*.[19] Hadot pays attention to the common ground between, on the one hand, Epicurean philosophy and certain aspects of Stoicism and, on the other, Thoreau's *Walden*. Both the Greek philosophy in question and Thoreau, share the view that we have to return to "the essential act of life, to the pleasure of feeling and existing."[20] Hadot also finds "cosmic consciousness" in *Walden*.

Interestingly, however, Hadot ends up in this book with a certain frus-

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tration with—though not necessarily criticism of—Thoreau. This is manifested in Hadot's view that Thoreau's actual experience of living in the woods exceeds what can be expressed in words. In other words, Thoreau's "philosophic discourse" falls short of his philosophical achievement, which must include his *experience*, his experiment, of living in the woods; "the philosophical act transcends the literary work that expresses it; and this literary work cannot totally express what Thoreau has lived."[21] In other words, the *actual, real* experience in the woods seems to be the locus of practice, and hence, ironically, Hadot seems to fall into a dichotomy of language and experience (mind and body). Such a dichotomization makes philosophy as a way of life vulnerable to being assimilated into the dominant discourse of *Jiko Keihatsu*, with all the problems of the latter's tendency to simplify the language of philosophy and to eulogize experience *per se*. Is there not an alternative way of reading *Walden* that is not to be drawn into the tide of *Jiko Keihatsu* that would holistically include the role of language, and that would make the book a worthy stimulus for living knowledge?

CAVELL'S READING OF THOREAU'S *WALDEN*

What would a reading in service of and enacting philosophy as a way of life be like? In *The Senses of Walden*, Stanley Cavell offers an alternative approach to reading Thoreau's *Walden*.[22] *Walden* begins with the chapter, "Economy." This describes, in a somewhat laborious manner, the accounting of the goods and materials Thoreau purchased, the money he spent. Yet this is a part of a strategy. As Paul Standish describes in detail, this is a book on the "economy of living"—that is, on "ordering (*nomos*) the home (*oikos*)."[23] And as Standish writes, "Walden" is not just the name of a place but the name of a book; hence, it also refers to "the writing of *Walden* - the realizing of a language (or of the possibilities of language) that can provide the conditions for the economy he seeks."[24] Indeed, this is a book in which Thoreau "accounts for himself," presenting us with "a holistic vision of an economy of living."[25] Cavell himself writes as follows:

> To read the text accurately is to assess its computations, to check its sentences against our convictions, to prove the derivation of its words. Since every mark counts, the task is to arrive in

turn at each of them, as at conclusions.[26]

The physical labor of cultivating the field, of building the hut by Walden Pond, is inseparable from the detailed calculation of—recounting of, accounting for—his life and words. Thus, the idea of an economy of living cannot simply be a matter of numerically calculable gains and loss; it has a spiritual connotation, as in the words of the Bible: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"[27] The economy of living also involves the way we use the words. Thus, Standish continues: "there is a responsibility in using words so that they do not devalue, so that you return them with interest."[28] There is an indication of being involved in the practical in a higher sense, as it were, as in the case of "reading in a high sense."[29] There is something holistic about such reading—holistic in a way that involves our whole being and the way we see the world and others.

SEEING ASPECTS

As Cavell with Thoreau indicates, reading in a high sense involves and is involved in changing the way we see the world (and this, in the medium of language). In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein resists the idea of searching for the essence of language, of meaning, or of thought, as if this essence resided somewhere below the surface of what we say and do, and stresses instead the need to survey our practice in a process of seeing connections. It is through the connections in a language game that things have their meaning. He provides illuminating elaboration of this insight in his discussion of "seeing aspects."[30] This helps to show that the way we see things is organized not in an atomistic way, but holistically. The most famous illustration of this is provided by the following image, derived from Joseph Jastrow.[31]

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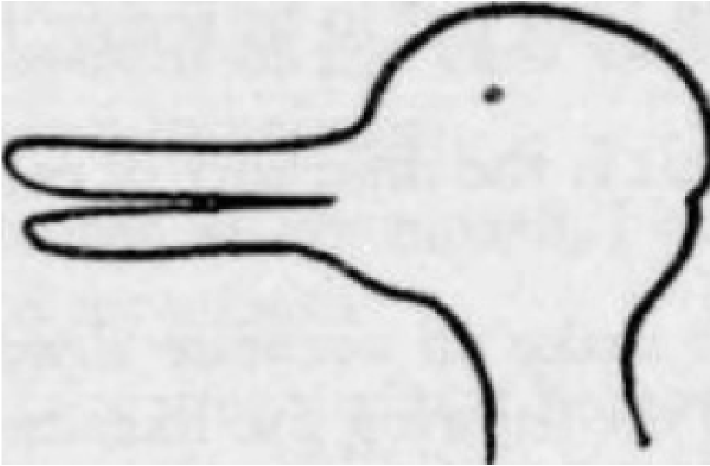

figure 1: *Joseph Jastrow's rabbit–duck illusion*

What this shows is that to see the duck or to see the rabbit is to see the marks *in relationship*, to see them holistically. At the same time, it reveals to us that there cannot be any comprehensive overview here: no one can see the duck and the rabbit *at the same time*.

Wittgenstein extends his discussion into the possibility of "aspect-blindness."[32] Given that any thing, any situation, is generally seen from a certain aspect (that is, in the light of certain priorities, a particular line of enquiry, a point of interest or need), is it not likely that a person might have difficulty in seeing that thing or situation under a different aspect? No doubt, in such cases, it might be possible to lead the person to see and understand, even if not to share, these different points of view. But might some people remain aspect-blind? This begins to reveal the range of significance of the point that Wittgenstein is pressing. The idea of blindness here is related especially to his emphasis on the extent to which our thinking is trapped in images of how things must be: "*A picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably."[33] How can we be released from such a state of captivity?

AN ATTITUDE TOWARDS A SOUL

[A] person discovers the pleasures of painting, sculpture and

> music only by experiencing them. You will never be able to make someone understand this if they have not encountered great art. And for this subject in particular we need more than our ordinary eyes and ears. To appreciate art, you must use your inner eyes and ears. You must open your heart.[34]

So writes the uncle to Copper in *How Do You Live?* Here, Yoshino suggests that there is a holistic way of seeing, using not only the optical organ of the eye, but inner eyes and ears. In order to change aspects and be released from blindness, one learns to see, as it were, from within. In fact, one of the central tenets of Cavell's ordinary language philosophy touches upon this issue of true seeing. In reference to Wittgenstein's remark: "My attitude to him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul."[35] Cavell says that one needs to acquire a particular *attitude towards the soul*, and this is not something one can acquire as a matter of information or piece of knowledge. To help us understand this point further, Standish quotes Wittgenstein's remark: "There might also be a language in whose use the 'soul' of the words played no part. In which, for example, we had no objection to replacing one word by a new, arbitrarily invented one."[36] And Standish says: "It is in our words that the attitude to a soul is to be found. And it is in words that remorse is to be felt and expressed."[37] This involves seeing what cannot be seen, and hearing what cannot be said. It requires sensibility to the strange, the unfamiliar, what cannot be included in the common. Cavell and Wittgenstein indicate that it requires imagination, destabilizing the distinction between the inner and the outer.

What Cavell calls *acknowledgment* (rather than recognition) is such an alternative vision of knowing—where human knowledge is understood as inseparable from true seeing, from seeing conditioned by correct blindness.[38] Full vision is blocked from the beginning in human life. Then, acknowledgment is a state in which one learns to expose one's vulnerability to the other—relearning what it is to reveal and what it is to conceal.

Acknowledgment requires a certain reciprocity of vision, and yet this is a reciprocity that is not symmetrical. It is not solidarity or individuality or interdependence that are at the heart of Cavell's idea of acknowledgment, but a

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thorough realization of "the pain of individuation" and "the pain of separation."[39] The mode of acknowledgment radically differs from the inward, ego-centered obsession with the self that is found in *Jiko Keihatsu*. In acknowledging the other and the world, one needs to learn to see what exceeds our familiar, common grasp, and what cannot be fully accommodated in the common. This is a mode of knowing that can never be reduced to knowledge-as-information: it is an implication of reading in a high sense.

THE UNCOMMON SCHOOL AND BEAUTIFUL KNOWLEDGE

> [F]or a child to grow he requires family and familiarity, but for a grownup to grow he requires strangeness and transformation, i.e., birth.[40]

Let us go back to the fact that in the production of *The Boy and the Heron*, Miyazaki did not directly use what was written in the original text of *How Do You Live?* Rather, he read the novel in a high sense, in a holistic way—holistic in the sense that the experience of reading was more than acquiring knowledge-as-information. Cavell's idea of reading in a high sense, an attitude towards a soul being a crucial part of such reading, sheds light on a holistic connection between reading a text and seeing the world visually, between words and visual images.

In addition, in 1985, Miyazaki demonstrated a further dimension to his work by co-creating the *experience* of what he calls his "anime museum," Studio Ghibli (hereafter "Ghibli"), in the suburbs of Tokyo. In fact, "museum" is a misnomer for this project as this is not a collection of artefacts but rather a multi-sensory experience, a work of art in itself.[41] This building-experiment is itself an extension of what Cavell is looking for in reading. According to Takahata, this experimental "museum" is meant to go beyond the limits of film.[42] It is a place where a visitor can experience the holistic connection of the senses—using not only our eyes but our hands, feet, body and all our senses, allowing the physical experience of the world in animation.[43] I went to Ghibli: the construction of space itself was mind-boggling. "Finding themselves suddenly lost," Takahata writes, "they will soon discover something else and go and enjoy that."[44] The building structure itself enables visitors to switch aspects. The building is sur-

rounded by a green park, which serves, as it were, as a threshold between the real and the fantastic. The stained-glass windows symbolize the way the inner and the outer fuse. This is a place where the imagination grows, and not only children but adults as well can immerse themselves in this small universe.

figure 2: *Inside Miyazaki's "anime museum"*

Among Miyazaki's guiding philosophy of the museum are:

1. Small children are treated as if they were grown-ups.

2. Visitors are not controlled with predetermined courses

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and fixed directions.

3. It is not a procession of artwork from past Ghibli films as if it were the museum of the past.

4. It is not a pretentious museum.

5. It is against the idea of a museum that treats its contents as if they were more important than people.

figure 3: *Children visiting Miyazaki's "anime museum"*

In the museum "[t]here are no entrances, no fixed direction."[45] Takahata describes this place as follows:

> The various parts of the building begin to make complex interconnetions, making you frequently stop and marvel at the new interesting angles of view. While walking around the Museum, it often felt bigger than it looks from the outside, and I completely confused the first floor with the second.[46]

Cavell's reading of Thoreau's *Walden* makes us realize that there is no single way into reading the book.[47] Reading in a high sense involves losing oneself and converting familiar views of the world, creating one's own path in the midst of the woods. Miyazaki's experiment at Ghibli is equivalent to what Cavell does in reading *Walden*. Just as both *Walden* and *The Senses of Walden* put "the reader in the position of *having to read*," so the attraction of Ghibli has to be discovered by each visitor.[48] At the same time, immersing oneself in this universe requires a certain kind of receptivity—to immerse yourself in the

objects so that you can enjoy what comes to you.

UNCOMMON SCHOOLING

Thus, Ghibli provides us with a concrete example of education outside the school, giving a hint on how reading in a high sense can be facilitated in this three-dimensional space. A "museum" such as Ghibli can be a space for human transformation where it becomes possible for children and adults to grow together. This chimes with what Thoreau says about the need for "uncommon schools." He writes:

> We have a comparatively decent system of common schools, schools for infants only, excepting the half-starved lyceum in the winter, and latterly the puny beginning of a library suggested by the state, no school for ourselves. We spend more on any article of bodily ailment than on our mental alignment. It is time that we had uncommon schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men and women.[49]

The expression "uncommon schools," which Thoreau proposes, carries various meanings; one of them is that the process of growing up involves the destabilization of one's identities (this is very different from the way that the language of *Jiko Keihatsu* purports to play the role of securing the identity of the self—something that can succeed only on the surface). Thoreau's sense of the estrangement of the self speaks to the self's experiencing *un*common aspects of its being.

Losing yourself, you encounter *the uncommon, the unfamiliar*: aspect change takes place. This might be considered rebirth in the ordinary. It is what Cavell calls "preaching the everyday as the locale of the sublime."[50] Such uncommon experience is the beginning of opening oneself to common humanity, beyond the confines of the narrow ego. And this will prepare a way out of the negative loop of growth.

One of the most important things in uncommon schooling that Thoreau had in mind was the cultivation of the aesthetic imagination—learning to change aspects and to cultivate the attitude towards a soul. To facilitate this,

we can combine reading a book, watching a film, and then undertaking fieldwork in the museum. These forms of educational media cultivate knowledge for inspiration. After watching Miyazaki's film, the audience does not receive a tangible answer to Mahito's quest for the meaning of life. The audience is left with a motive to think further, each to create their own path. The media, to be educational in its true sense of the word, must be media for inspiration. Miyazaki's and Thoreau's envisioning of the uncommon school gives us an alternative form of *the education of grownups*, in Cavell's phrase — one that is different from existing life-long education or philosophy for children.

So, in the end, what is the knowledge that we can acquire through reading *How Do You Live?* in a high sense? At the end of the book, Copper says:

> I think there has to come a time when everyone in the world treats each other as if they were good friends. Since humanity has come so far, I think now we will definitely be able to make it to such a place. So I think I want to become a person who can help that happen.[51]

Then Yoshino closes the book in the following remark: "Copper came to live his life by this thought. And so this long, long story, for now at least, comes to an end. And now I think I want to ask of you a question. How will you live?"[52] The book does not provide us with a clear answer. We, Copper, the uncle, the reader, Yoshino, and the author—everyone needs to keep finding their own answers. There is no closure in reading.[53] The knowledge, if any, that Copper has acquired is knowledge that he does not know the answer to yet. And this is the gist of knowledge for living. Thoreau refers to such knowledge as "beautiful knowledge":

> We have heard of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. It is said that knowledge is power; and the like. Methinks there is equal need of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Ignorance, what we will call Beautiful Knowledge, a knowledge useful in a higher sense.[54]

The kind of knowledge that is said to be beautiful is holistic—tough,

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robust, and grounded on earth: it is oriented outward—being surrounded by everyday objects, instruments, animals, plants, air, light, sound, and more. Such a holistic approach to knowledge helps us cultivate the aesthetic imagination—for example, in geographical and historical learning. Education today, inside and outside the school, awaits such useful knowledge in a higher sense. And this would be an alternative to the conception of knowledge-as-information in *Jiko Keihatsu*, tied up as this is with its usefulness in the global economy.

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