

Openness to Transcendence as a Focal Point for the Curriculum

by Michael C. Jordan
Department of English

"The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there."

– Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim At Tinker Creek*

Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a book about learning to see, as she tells us eloquently. In our quest for vision, we are drawn by the power of beauty and grace, and we discover through the quest that our senses do not mold and determine the world we encounter; the truth of our experience is that we and our senses are shaped by the beauty and grace that are given to us as a gift, a gift we must allow to penetrate our being so that by our reception of the gift we are raised up to its level of worth. When at our best, we are open, vulnerable, longing for fulfillment. But we do not reach our best self easily, and we are always in danger of closing ourselves off, becoming impassive, and stifling ourselves with shallow satisfactions that mimic fulfillment without allowing the transformations of fulfillment.

Learning to see in this sense means opening ourselves to transcendence. Openness to transcendence is an essential part of our nature as human persons, but we blossom in such openness only through cultivation. One important goal of the curriculum in a Catholic university is to foster an openness to transcendence that makes us capable of a passionate, imaginative, responsive and responsible encounter with the world. It is useful to concentrate on the quality of our openness to transcendence rather than on transcendence itself because such openness strongly pertains to the domain of pedagogy and of the curriculum.

John Paul II in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* identifies "openness to the transcendent" as an essential element of the human person and therefore as a quality that enters into human culture:

Among the criteria that characterize the values of a culture are, above all, the meaning of the human person, his or her liberty, dignity, sense of responsibility, and openness to the transcendent. (section 45)

It is this openness to transcendence, rooted in the nature of the human person and then manifested in human cultures, that provides the basis for the dialogue between faith and culture essential to the mission of a Catholic university.

Here, however, we reach a problem in serious need of our careful attention. The concept of transcendence is deeply problematic in contemporary academic life, and for many

good reasons. The concept is most at home in a context of ontological pluralism that recognizes multiple modes of existence, for instance in a context that recognizes one mode of existence in which timelessness is an ontological moment and another mode of existence in which temporality is an ontological moment.¹ But our usual contemporary intellectual repertoire, for reasons that cannot be adequately explored within the scope of this essay, emphasizes the primacy of epistemology over ontology and projects a view of the world as ontologically flat, for instance as fully determined on the plane of material causality alone. Later in this essay, I will give a brief account of some of the intellectual sources for the reductive world-view that seems embedded in our habitual language and modes of conceptualization.

The primary meaning of the word "transcendence" can be found in the verbal form "to transcend," meaning the movement across or beyond one mode of existence to another more comprehensive mode of existence. This movement, at its heart, is the movement from difference to identity, in which we move from the separateness and uniqueness of an object to its participation in general, recognizable features that give it its familiarity. Now, the philosophical and cultural problems surrounding the concepts of difference and identity turn out to be key controversies in contemporary intellectual life. We will first consider the meaning of the term "transcendence" more closely before turning to an account of such controversies.

The movement of transcendence asserts itself on the simplest level in almost every act of perception we perform. When we recognize a creature approaching us on the street as a "dog," even though we may never have seen this individual creature before, our perceptual act reaches across and beyond (transcends) the individual and unique sensory elements we encounter at this moment and grasps those sensory elements in the form of an individual creature perceived in the light of the species in which the creature participates. At that moment, we recognize the creature as a dog, that is, we "re-cognize" — we think again — (instantaneously in this example) and connect the unique, particular features seen by us for the first time in this creature with the familiar features — the features carrying a "family resemblance" — of the species we somehow have learned to identify. We reach across and beyond the individual differences that mark this creature as a unique, separate being and we identify the creature as a dog, we grasp the mysterious sameness through which this creature participates in its kind. We can easily spin out numerous borderline cases where such perceptual acts of identification go wrong, betray us, or encounter frustration, and such examples demonstrate that our perceptual acts are indeed actions we perform that can result in error or are subject to illusion. Nevertheless, every waking moment of our lives — and perhaps most significantly the act of awakening itself² — demonstrates the irresistibility and irrepressibility of perceptual acts of transcendence through which we grasp identity present in the whirl of difference all around us.

We usually use the term on a higher level, as when we say that human dignity transcends the particular, personal traits manifested by each individual person; when we recognize another as a human person, we transcend the innumerable variables of appearance and

personality manifested by that person to see the person in the light of a quality that transcends all of those variable features.

Most of the suspicion justifiably cast upon the term "transcendence" can already be explained on this level. Socially constructed concepts of "identity" and "difference" have proven to be at the core of social and political oppression. We live in a century — and in a country — in which assertions of racial, class, and gender identity have been used to elevate one group of people over another, resulting in the oppression of those held to manifest differences that separate them from the master race, class, or gender. The assertions of "Aryan" superiority in Nazi Germany, or of "white supremacy" in numerous racist groups were and are an attempt to reorganize human perceptions and judgments so that certain groups are seen as embodying essential features that transcend the individual differences among group members and form the identity of a "race" held to be superior to others. Individual differences (for instance, differences of height) among members of the dominant group in this case hardly count as differences at all or count as differences only marginally in the eyes of the group. The dominant group then defines other differences (for instance, a higher degree of skin pigmentation) as essential differences that separate others from the master race or group, and these differences act as markers of inferiority in the minds of the dominant group and are sometimes "internalized" by members of oppressed groups who are thereby encouraged by the dominant group to accept their own inferiority. In the ultimate cases of such oppression, the dominant group defines itself as truly human and defines those who display the established essential differences as less than human and thus subject to oppression and even extermination through a program of genocide. In other forms of oppression, one group, such as males, deems itself to have recognized a fundamental identity that transcends differences marked as inconsequential among males to form a group supposing itself to be superior in rational power or in some other way, while regarding other differences as marking out an inferior identity (females), and thereby asserts the "natural" right of one group to exercise custodial care (paternalism) or rule (patriarchy) over the other.

Most acts of oppression, then, can be understood as abuses of the claim of transcendence in which one group constructs an identity for itself, asserts that its identity has a transcendent natural or theological foundation, and then constructs and maintains a social, political, and intellectual order in which such superiority serves as the dominant hierarchical principle of order. (We also can detect here a motive for contemporary theories of "anti-foundationalism" and "anti-essentialism." Foundational concepts of social order that have served as a basis of social injustice and oppression bring suspicion upon any claim concerning transcendent foundations or essences.)

The history of such abuses provides ample justification for the concept of transcendence falling under suspicion. Liberation from such oppression requires personal, social, political, and intellectual resistance to falsely constructed concepts of identity and difference. Courageous social activists and thinkers on many fronts have expended enormous effort, often involving personal sacrifice, to overcome abusive claims to transcendence and the socially constructed oppression following from those claims. Resistance to abusive claims of transcendence takes many forms, and includes

contradiction of the claim to superiority of one form of identity over another (for instance, of male identity over female identity) and more fundamentally a questioning of the construction of the categories of transcendence and identity themselves. Contemporary cultural criticism often draws its force from its ability to demonstrate the function of false concepts of transcendence as supports for the social and cultural practices through which the power of oppression manifests itself in a particular time and place.

The concept of race itself may function primarily as an abuse of the concept of transcendence. Is the concept of race a meaningful category in the light of which certain individuating differences can be transcended to form the identity of particular racial groups in some significant manner? Contemporary scientific and anthropological knowledge states that we can find no significant genetic justification for the claims that groupings of human beings based on features such as skin color, hair type, or physiognomy have any basis in biological reality. The concept of race has proven itself to be a pure construction, and the assertion that the transcendent identity and essential nature of the races have a foundation in nature or theology is false.

The history of the evil performed in the name of false concepts of transcendence, then, explains why all claims to transcendence may strike us with alarm today.

The struggle to overcome oppression exercised on the basis of false claims to transcendence and superiority constructed according to categories of race, gender and class has been one of the most significant and hope-inspiring actions of our century. Such struggles have been waged also on the level of human thought, and thinkers such as Marx and Freud have provided crucial analytical tools that have proven themselves to be valuable in the struggle. Marx showed the way to uncover the implicit motivations of class interests behind social and political programs and modes of thought, and Freud brought to light the ways in which the realm of conscious intentions and of human culture as a whole can conceal deeper purposes that are not themselves rational in nature.

The problem is that the success of the analytical tools produced by their work in overcoming false claims to transcendence can lead to the suspicion that any claim to transcendence must necessarily be false — an approach aptly termed "the rhetoric of suspicion." Marx and Freud themselves were willing to carry out a reductionist program in their view of human culture. Marx in *The German Ideology* presents all human thought as determined by the material life-process:

The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. (118-119)

Marx prepares the way for the reduction of all human thought to the status of "phantoms formed in the human brain" to be explicated by analysis of the material determinants of such phantoms.

Freud also projects a reductionist view of human culture, as when he suggests that poetry and daydreams are not only similar but derived from and determined by the same psychic forces and are to be explicated on the basis of the forces of wish fulfillment as their ultimate source. Freud and Marx both exert great intellectual effort to establish accounts of culture in which reference to spiritual values becomes redundant and illusory as they seek to show that the determining forces for human culture can be found in the dynamics of material determinism as postulated by Marx and Engels or in the mechanism of the human psyche as postulated by Freud. The heroic labor against the concept of transcendence explains the brilliance and vitality of much of the work of Marx and Freud, and explains also their continuing relevance to issues in the area of cultural theory.

Still another factor that makes it hard for us to grasp the concept of transcendence is modern pluralism as manifested, for instance, in American life in which we agree politically that we will not attempt to come to agreement concerning ultimate truths and purposes. Pluralism provides needed protection for freedom of conscience and for the freedom to seek the truth, and gives us incentive to endorse faith freely rather than to perform the words and actions of faith merely to satisfy conventional expectations or because of external pressures to do so. The problem we face is when we fall into indifference or skepticism toward the possibility of ultimate truths and purpose as a degenerate form of the agreement of pluralism to leave questions of ultimate purpose politically open. We tend too frequently to view discussions of transcendent spiritual values as though such discussions threatened the concept of pluralism, and it can indeed be difficult to disentangle the political requirements of pluralism from the intellectual pursuit of the truth. Skepticism toward spiritual values and the possibility of transcendence, however, is not a requirement of political pluralism and may even leave political pluralism defenseless against tyranny and oppression if the philosophical ground of pluralism itself comes under attack.

The Christian tradition concerns itself with questions of transcendence, identity and difference. The Christian claim is that human differences are transcended through the essential identity of all human persons as bearers of the image of Christ. In the words of Paul, "and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). These words do not require us to regard human differences as inconsequential, since it is only through the many differences manifested by humanity as a whole that we can achieve an understanding of the range and fullness of human life. In a similar way, Catholic ecclesiology gives us an understanding of the transcendent unity of the Church throughout the many concrete differences of human history and the countless variations of the human cultures through which the Church comes to appearance. The range of cultural differences through which the Church works out its life manifests the concrete breadth of humanity in its many forms. Our ability to recognize the essential dignity of all human persons neither contradicts nor denies the richness of human diversity; the ability of the Church to maintain its unified life throughout the range of concrete human cultures remains compatible with the rich diversity of human cultures.

The concept of transcendence, in other words, does not require us to disregard or devalue human differences, and instead stands as a guardian of human diversity, since it establishes the essential worthiness of all persons in the midst of their innumerable differences, and shows us that human and cultural differences do not annul the core identity of human beings as bearers of the image of Christ. The concept of transcendence thus protects human difference and shows us why we are called upon to love one another in a manner unlimited by the innumerable differences we display.

Literature has always been about the power of transcendence to overcome separation and achieve community. When Achilles meets Priam at the end of *The Iliad* and sheds tears as he recognizes in the sorrow of his enemy the grief that his own father will soon feel when he learns that his son has died, the moment of recognition breaks through the divisiveness of anger, transcending the distance separating enemies through the communion of identity in their common humanity. Shylock's words in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* — "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" (III i 64) — cry out against the false claim to transcendence of Christian over Jew, according to which the Christian is viewed as bearing a human dignity not accorded to the Jew, and reasserts the fundamental quality of human identity. Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman* examines the power of transcendence in the Yoruba culture to reach across the boundary between life and death and grasp the spiritual identity that links human beings in past, present, and future. Soyinka observes in an "Author's Note" preceding the play:

The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind — the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition. (6)

The experience of transcendence in the Yoruba culture in this play requires a challenge to the false claim to transcendence of a white, European culture that regards itself as fundamentally different from and superior to the cultures of Africans. Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* shows the evil produced when the false claim of fundamental difference and superiority exerted by a white culture over a black culture is internalized by a black child, so that the false claim of racial superiority based on false notions of transcendence must be recognized and overcome if we are to address the power of evil at work in the world.

Openness to Transcendence in the Study of Composition

What are the implications of maintaining an openness to transcendence for the ways in which we teach writing? Remaining open to transcendence means that we regard ourselves as discoverers of meaning and as responsible for the truthfulness and adequacy of meaning to the larger scope of human experience. It is not sufficient to view ourselves as makers of meanings that have significance only for the fulfillment of our immediate rhetorical purposes.

It is difficult to appreciate the implications of maintaining openness to transcendence in the teaching of writing because our habitual pragmatic approach to language seems already to resemble the attitude of openness to transcendence. This resemblance, however, is deceptive. When we view language pragmatically, we stress its intersubjective character so that we can rely upon writing to help us accomplish particular purposes requiring other people to act in accordance with certain practical states of affairs. If I hope to persuade someone to join me in a particular action, or to purchase something, then I will assume in my writing the transparency of language in relation to the objects described and it is this assumed transparency that resembles what I have been calling an openness to transcendence. However, the resemblance in this case is deceptive, because the predominance of my practical purposes deflects my attention and the attention of the readers from the full sense and implications of the states of affairs conveyed by my writing and toward my practical purpose itself.

True openness to transcendence implies my continuing responsibility to the states of affairs expressed by my writing. I must attend not only to whether my language meets the goals of my immediate purposes but also to how well the language tells the truth of things. Openness to transcendence as I write requires me to assess more than whether my words will accomplish the practical purposes I have in view; such openness also requires me strenuously to reform my understanding of the qualities of human experience I am trying to describe in my language, and thus requires me to reshape my own acts of perception, cognition, and meaning in search of a more comprehensive fulfillment of meaning.³

A contemplative openness to the adequacy and truth-telling capacity of language is a necessary part of preserving our openness to transcendence. As students learn to respect the power and wisdom inherent in language, they discover themselves as makers of meanings that have ultimately mysterious sources of fulfillment. In other words, the openness of language to the richness of meaning and truth is itself a sign of the human openness to transcendence. Students should have the opportunity to discover this as they write.

Openness to Transcendence in the Study of Literature

Openness to transcendence in the teaching of literature implies an emphasis on the artistic quality of literary works of art, that quality through which literature raises us toward contemplation of spiritual values that come to appearance through the work of art. Literature shares this quality with music and the visual arts. The importance of preserving such an openness to transcendence in the study of literature and other forms of art is examined brilliantly in a recent work by George Steiner called *Real Presences*. Steiner's book argues for restoring an openness to the transcendent that in an endless variety of ways presses upon one through the experience of a work of art. Steiner thinks we have reached a phase in our culture in which, for good reasons, the openness to transcendence has become rare. In this passage, he looks at the role of the transcendent in the experience of a work of art:

This essay argues a wager on transcendence. It argues that there is in the art-act and its reception, that there is in the experience of meaningful form, a presumption of presence. Meaningfulness is not an invariant datum. There are indeed vacancies, deliberate or pathological "ruptures" or spaces for "non-sense" in otherwise intelligible modes of enunciation. But these are not of the essence. There are indeed indecipherabilities. But these also are phenomena at the margin. There is, there can be no end to interpretative disagreement and revision. But where it is seriously engaged in, the process of differing is one which cumulatively circumscribes and clarifies the disputed ground. It is, I have argued, the irreducible autonomy of presence, of "otherness," in art and text which denies either adequate paraphrase or unanimity of finding. (214)

Steiner uses the terms "presence" and "otherness" to indicate a source of value and meaning presented for aesthetic contemplation by a text or work of art, but which is not itself determined in its essence by the work of art. Roman Ingarden in *The Literary Work of Art* uses the term "metaphysical qualities" to identify qualities that transcend the work of art but which come to appearance through the work of art, and names qualities such as "the tragic, the sublime, the beautiful, the comic" as examples of metaphysical qualities. It is important to note that the work of art in this view is not a mere vehicle that "transports" us (to use a term from Longinus' essay *On the Sublime*) to a transcendent realm and can then be disregarded. The artist works laboriously throughout the creative process to achieve that artistic form that will most fully permit the aspect of transcendence with which the artist is creatively engaged to come to a particular mode of appearance in the aesthetic experience.

Openness to transcendence in the study of a literary work of art does not then mean the imposition of an external authority to limit or control the interpretations deemed legitimate. Steiner observes that the "transcendent presence" manifested by a work of art is itself a source for the multiplicity of perspectives that are possible in our involvement with a work of art, since the "otherness" coming to appearance cannot be mastered by us and reveals its quality of transcendence through its power to resist being fully mastered by our conceptual and artistic means.

The search for encounters with such transcendent qualities that come to appearance through a work of art does not exhaust the modes of interpretation that are possible and worthwhile in our teaching and study of literature. There are many thematic, social, and psychological territories for literary exploration that do not necessarily reach an encounter with transcendent qualities, although it is likely that in great works of art all levels in which interpretation can be pursued fruitfully probably remain in some sense congruent with the deepest artistic goal of bringing a transcendent quality to a particular mode of aesthetic appearance.

Openness to Transcendence and the Catholic University

Openness to the transcendent as a concept can be manifested in many cultural forms and is not strictly identical to the reception of the Christian message itself. That part of the curriculum in which we cultivate openness to transcendence in the way I have tried to

describe that phenomenon belongs to what would be called "pre-evangelization." Pre-evangelization is nevertheless a crucial activity in the Catholic university, because it engages those aspects of personal psychology and social structure that obstruct our receptivity to the call of transcendent values. There is fertile ground for ecumenical work in this territory, since we can establish important points of connection and comparison among a variety of cultures and traditions through the shared emphasis on openness to transcendence manifested by those cultures and traditions.

It is, of course, possible and desirable in some courses to pursue the ways in which certain literary works of art not only foster our human openness to transcendence but also point to the fulfillment of that openness through the beauty emanating from the truths of Christianity. The movement of Dante's *Divine Comedy* provides one paradigm of such fulfillment, as the poem carries us through the movements of repentance, purification, and fulfillment in the beatific vision. This, however, is only one paradigm among many. A great work of art through which the beauty of Christian truth comes to appearance is never merely a scaffold that collapses once we achieve aesthetic contemplation of such beauty. The task of the artist is to discover that path to the transcendent that best meets the new challenges to the possibility of transcendence posed by the artist's age. And so it is that the new musical language of Olivier Messiaen in the 20th century is needed to explore the contemporary possibility of transcendence; so it is that the encounter with the grotesque in the work of Flannery O'Connor is a necessary response to the contemporary problem of experiencing the transcendent. The history of artistic style, from this perspective, is the story of the continuing human search to make sense of the refracted light of the transcendent as it manifests itself through changing cultural atmospheres.

Finally, we should explore the possibility that a focus on the openness to transcendence might offer ground for contact and collaboration among the many academic disciplines in the curriculum. Certainly philosophy, theology, literature, and the fine arts offer distinct but related perspectives on this phenomenon of human nature, but we also should seek connections to psychology, the sciences and social sciences, and mathematics in this regard as well. Students and teachers of all disciplines, when they understand themselves clearly as open to transcendence, experience themselves as lovers of the truth and as joined in community through the pursuits engendered by this love.

Works Cited

Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

Ingarden, Roman. *The Literary Work of Art*, translated by George Grabowicz. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.

– Time and Modes of Being. Springfield, Illinois: Charles G. Thomas, 1964.

John Paul II. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (On Catholic Universities), 1990.

Marx, Karl. The German Ideology, in Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: Norton, 1972.

Steiner, George. *Real Presences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Notes

1. The concept of "ontological moments" (constituent elements of a mode of existence) is presented by Roman Ingarden in *Time and Modes of Being*, a translation of selected parts from volume I of *Der Streit um die Existenz der Welt* (*The Controversy Over the Existence of the World*).

2. Proust, in the "Overture" to *Swann's Way*, provides a literary meditation on the phenomenon of restoring the perceptual identity of familiar objects in the transition from sleeping to waking.

3. It is not true that we can speak of meaning fulfillment today only in a naive manner that has been vanquished by the well-known and masterful challenges to the possibility of meaning fulfillment in the writings of Jacques Derrida and other poststructuralist and postmodern thinkers. Perhaps the most significant philosophical challenge to the concepts of transcendence and identity discussed in this essay is the book *Différence et Repetition* by Gilles Deleuze (English translation, *Difference and Repetition*). Edmund Husserl in his *Logical Investigations* pursues a profound phenomenological analysis of the nature of meaning fulfillment that continues to stand up against the deconstructive turn. Husserl's student Roman Ingarden carried his own investigations forward through critical dialogue with Husserl's work and produced an account of the nature of meaning and of the literary works of art in which word and sentence meanings form a fundamental stratum that offers a rich and coherent account of our experience of literary works of art. Just as the popularity of deconstructive thinking between about 1965 and 1990 does not prove the truth of this thinking, the apparent collapse of that popularity since about 1990 does not invalidate the challenge posed by the deconstructive turn. We are faced here with theoretical issues of enormous complexity and difficulty. The phrase that captures this difficult problem is "the metaphysics of presence."