

Allowing for the *Transcendent* in Postmodernism

By Rebecca Parker

Ms. Parker is a 2001 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran College, earning her bachelor of arts degree in English, cum laude. She is currently a doctoral student at Marquette University pursuing a degree in English Literature.

A position in academia should exist in which tenets of Postmodern thought can be posited on a foundation of faith—a camp in which apologetics is used to test theory, not simply to dispel it. The seeming Postmodern tendency to eschew any sort of unified experience asks necessary questions of conventions that seem antiquated—conventions of social codes regarding gender and race, of social etiquette and expectations, of religion, and how the self is perceived (this list is far from exhaustive). Finding gaps in convention leads to finding gaps in consistency and, therefore, in the logic behind convention and in the performance (and the ensuing experience) of it. Thus, identifying these gaps can result in heightened awareness and subsequent bridging of them. However, in an attempt to expose very legitimate issues, acceptance (or even recognition) of the transcendent seems to have been discounted (completely for some, nominally for others). In general, theorists seem to perceive persons of faith as unthinking conventionalists who refuse to muddy the waters with probing questions. Those who have rejected faith seem to be respected because they have shed convention and allowed themselves to absorb life and render opinions based on their own [limited] experience. In the confines of academia, recognition of the transcendent elicits surprise because the intelligentsia tends to assume that its own have moved beyond religion (i.e., convention), apparently into the much more enlightened realm of skepticism. The *transcendent* can be defined as that which defies human explanation or even experience, for human experience cannot define meaning for all time. Only that which transcends all time can define experience—i.e., that which transcends is the Divine, God. Clearly, in academia, there exists the widespread assumption that one progresses *beyond* the confines of religious convention; one does not bury oneself further

into it. However, I would like to promote a faith-based look at autobiographical Postmodern theory—a look that allows theory to penetrate assumptions without sacrificing doctrine’s divine experience, a look that might, in the end, conclude that the end result of Postmodern thought is a realization of the Divine.

Because belief in the transcendent (specifically Christianity since it has dominated Western culture and convention) connotes to many a blind adherence to centuries of hypocrisy and convention, there exists a need not for reinterpretation *per se* but for explanation. Reinterpretation implies a redefining or shifting of terms, whereas explanation would include not a defense of the Church’s hypocritical conventions and actions but a differentiation between the Church as the ideal (that which only can be realized transcendentally, in the afterlife) and the Church as the real (man’s attempt to realize the Church on earth). In “Autobiography, Ethnography, and History: A Model for Reading,” Anne E. Goldman discusses the complexity of reinterpreting culture. The traditions of marginalized cultures “have been appropriated by others—and therefore need to be reinterpreted by themselves” (290). Religion, in this paper’s case, Christianity, is a culture itself and has been appropriated by others, or unbelievers (*unbelievers* classified as those disbelieving the tenets of Christianity, whether secular or a differing religion). Goldman’s *reinterpretation* can function as *explanation* when applied to Christian culture, as its tenets remain timeless but are often misinterpreted by both believers and unbelievers. Thus, in actuality, a true explanation of Christianity, or the transcendent, would function as reinterpretation to others. Religion should be afforded its own credible voice in academia instead of others positing their own perceptions

and experiences on it. Certainly, unbelievers have a rightful stage to express their voices regarding religious culture. However, those within the given religious community should be given an equal stage as well as equal credibility in academia to share their respective experiences with the transcendent.

These experiences mold identity, not merely identification. In short, *identity* can be defined as the sum-total of an individual's various and changing identifications, while *identification* functions as multiple but subsidiary to one's identity. Goldman references theorist John Brenkman's discussion of social identity. Because individuals possess "interlaced collectivities," identity can be dependent upon "several potentially conflicting cultural practices/traditions at once" (Goldman 291).ⁱ The coherence and unity upon which Christianity is based places one's position in relation to God as the pivotal identification of one's existence. If one accepts grace, then the relationship to God as a child of God transcends further cultural and societal positions. This in no way voids the importance of mortal blood and affiliations. However, when spirituality claims one's existence and affects one's experience, it dominates identity and transcends other identifications. Additionally, possible conflicts in practice and tradition are superseded by theology, which promotes unity of experience and meaning. Ideally, conflicts would be eliminated, but, in the realm of the real, conflicts are reduced so that one's identifications are a reflection of one's spiritual identity. Clearly, using this paradigm, religion is the privileged factor. However, by its very nature (or lack thereof), the transcendent maintains this right—a right to be timeless, to be Truth. In "Experience," Joan W. Scott discusses, but does not necessarily promote, the privileging of vision, or the visual. Knowledge through visual experience as well as writing itself often has been privileged (58). Using this paradigm of transcendence, there should exist a privileging of both the visible and invisible, of things seen and unseen. God transcends human experience and, thus, is invisible. However, He manifests Himself (his Body) in the Sacraments as well as represents Himself in the written Word (i.e., Scripture). Allowing the transcendent to enter academic discussion actually widens the parameters of the *conversation* instead of closing it,

as typically perceived by the stigma surrounding religious convention.

However, the stigma often prevails in that it seemingly prevents a balanced forum for theoretical conversation. Many believers (in Christianity, which will be assumed throughout this paper) within the confines of academia resist what should be an impulse to relate theory to belief. No doubt, many are reeled into the intelligentsia's penchant toward relativism. There also exists a fear of misrepresenting the whole, i.e., the entire body of Christendom. Goldman makes a similar assertion, except in regard to women who may or may not be speaking for social change for a given body of women (294). This burdens the individual who is speaking or writing because the weight of the whole body of individuals in that given community is being represented. This affects what is included and omitted as well as whether that community's individuals choose to accept this burden and voice their respective experiences and perceptions. In this vein, believers distinctly feel this burden and fear that they may misspeak of the transcendent, thereby worsening the gap between academia's perceptions of religion and the reality of God instead of further explaining correct doctrine. Because quaint and often patronizing values are typically posited on believers, Christians in academia often choose to remain silent—ultimately increasing the space between theory and the transcendent.

This space is a result of bias, something that cannot be avoided. In Scott's discussion of experience and history, she criticizes author Raymond Williams' view of history by asserting that Williams does not take into account subject construction in the subject's perspective on experience and history.ⁱⁱ The subjects' various identifications and respective identities need to be taken into account as the filters through which experience and history is viewed by them, respectively (Scott 61). Similarly, academics possess filters through which they view experience and history—these filters may be secular or religious. However, the bias of the secular academic often is ignored because *secular* typically is viewed as objective instead of biased. True objectivity is illusive, but an attempt at it should include acknowledgement of secular bias and

religious bias as well as places for both in the conversation.

In addition to allowing placement for secular and religious bias in academia, tenets from Foundational and Anti-Foundational theory, as discussed in Scott's aforementioned article, can be mingled for an inclusion of the transcendent without eschewing Postmodern theory. Foundational theory defines experience as the origin of knowledge, while Anti-Foundational theory defines it as that which we seek to explain. Indeed, experience can be viewed as foundational evidence; however, this evidence is viewed through earthly experience, which, by nature, is not transcendent. Thus, this seemingly incomplete experience should be questioned. In Foundational theory, words are equivalent to their respective objects, while Anti-Foundational theory constructs and deconstructs these meanings—finding gaps between the signified and the signifier. Taking the transcendent into account, one could argue that words and their object equivalents contain as much meaning as earthly experience allows. Thus, Foundationally, word meanings possess as much intimacy with their objects as possible. Anti-Foundationally, the absence of ideal (unearthly) meanings forces analysis and subsequent deconstruction so that users of language are aware that they may never, in earthly experience, lessen the gap between the signifier and the signified. Foundationally, the transcendent would claim position as the objective knower, or as objective reality. However, since humanity itself (i.e., the experiencers of experience) is not transcendent, acknowledgement of a subject's location does not negate the location or the experience. In regard to religion, a subject's location in belief of the transcendent does not erase the objectivity of the transcendent itself (assuming that God is Truth, of course). Foundationalism's focus on content can be combined with Anti-Foundationalism's focus on processes, for the processes by which content is realized is the framework of apologetics. The main split that would separate these two theoretical camps concerns principles being changeable or unchangeable. Belief in the transcendent promotes unchanging principles (Foundational) versus situational or contextual principles that may shift interpretations (Anti-Foundational). Including an accounting for the

transcendent adds complexity to these theoretical and binary camps, allowing for a widening and deepening of discussion.

Allowing the transcendent to enter academic discourse also would deepen the concept of abject beings in relation to the "norm," as discussed in Judith Butler's "Introduction to *Bodies That Matter*." Butler writes:

The abject designates here precisely those "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject [. . .] [zones] that constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. [. . .] the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection [. . .]. (368)

Thus, what constitutes and what constructs *human* is called into question, and the value of life (i.e., a body) is relative (Butler 371, 377). Belief in the transcendent, specifically Christ, offers worth to every *body*. All sites, external and internal (the abject and the norm), are offered grace. However, with the acceptance of grace comes a willingness to live as God calls humans to live—i.e., a willingness to seek righteousness. However, this may not promote adherence to the norm. Society's construction of what is abject (the acceptable) and what is not (the unacceptable) at times may be constructed along the lines of transcendence. However, this construction may also, at times, fly in the face of the transcendent. There must be a differentiation between the socially-imposed norm and [biblical] righteousness (it is important to note that *righteousness* is defined by biblical guidelines, not *cultural*, since many Postmodern theorists would claim that one's concept of righteousness would be informed by the culture into which one is born). Thus, to draw lines around the norm because it includes experience that is deemed acceptable while rejecting all experience that falls into the realm of abject being is indeed to fall into the trap that Butler illuminates. However, there needs to exist a middle ground between Butler's assertion that all abject experience is acceptable and the position that all abject experience is unacceptable. Belief in

the transcendent does not reject all abject experience. The categories of external and internal sites describe the way in which society classifies experience and bodies—not necessarily the way in which God classifies.

Christianity includes all bodies and separates body from experience in its separation between sinner and sin. Since external and internal sites are man-made, inclusion of the transcendent would render all bodies valuable but would differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable experience in the eyes of God—separate from the body. Butler’s approach to experience is far too relative for Christianity. However, the condemnatory reaction that much of academia posits on believers in relation to unacceptable experience is reductive at best. Clearly, Christianity condemns experiences that are ungodly, but this does not have a relationship necessarily to what society has deemed acceptable. Often believers conflate socially accepted norms with God-approved experience. This conflation misrepresents the God-given grace that is offered to all bodies. This acceptance of all bodies may sound close to relativism. It differs in that relativism accepts all experience, while Christ accepts all bodies. However, if a body identifies itself by its experience in the realm of the biblically unacceptable, it risks being identified as abject—not because it is not adhering to the societal norm but because it is flying in the face of God. Allowing the transcendent to enter Butler’s discussion further complicates experience and the realm of the acceptable. It complicates the norm’s tendency to disidentify with the abject as well as the abject’s tendency to feel ostracized from the norm, resulting in an even greater intersectional relationship between external and internal sites, between body and experience.

This differentiation between body and acceptable experience causes a gap—a gap that contains the forbidden or the unspeakable. In “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance,” Sidonie Smith discusses the gap containing the unspeakable and asserts that the unconscious is the repository for these abject experiences or disidentifications (111). Once again, an inclusion of the transcendent would necessitate a differentiation between concepts of *forbidden*. Experiences forbidden by society may or may not

be forbidden by God and vice versa. Similarly, the unspeakable indeed may be sin but be accepted by society and not God as well as vice versa. Using a paradigm of transcendence includes careful definitions of expressly what is forbidden by God, not by societal norms *per se*. Smith rejects Self-Expression’s unified “I”—that the self is unified, represented in language, and merely waiting to find a proper medium through which to be expressed. Instead, she embraces a Postmodern approach to self, Performativity—that the self is fragmented, is constructed through discursive norms, and (at best) is performed (108). A window into *self* may be found by tapping into the Divine, i.e., God. Intertwined closely with agency, self seems to be a concept after which Postmodern thought chases and escapes. Clearly, Postmodernism offers insights into perceptions of self as well as the ever-changing nature of experience (including unconscious/conscious experience, experiencing through the material body, experiencing through and via social construction, etc.). Examining the varied senders and receivers of experience sheds light (or at least promotes questioning) on how the self is formed and conditioned. Allowing fragmentary notions of self (the real) to mingle with unified notions of self (the ideal) might indeed, in the end, lead one to conclude that mortal experience and perceptions of self can be only fragmentary. While a unified self may/does exist, it may not become manifest in earthly experience. This unity may transcend mortality and not be realized until the afterlife.

Allowing the transcendent to filter how one views theory can be qualified as ideology. However, to use ideology as a term that connotes only dominance and blindness is to apply generalized and purely secular versions of systems of belief and construction onto a framework that supersedes secular power systems and dynamics. In “The Politics of Subjectivity and The Ideology of Genre,” Felicity A. Nussbaum includes Marx’s idea that ideology is imposed on the lower classesⁱⁱⁱ as well as Louis Althusser’s idea that ideology is cast upon unknowing subjects—that these subjects are unaware of the economic and political powers that confine them.^{iv} Nussbaum also discusses the sign systems that are imposed on subjects and the subjects’ absorption and unknowing reproduction of them (162, 163).

Including a contemplation and acknowledgement of the transcendent would counter Nussbaum's definition of ideology. She defines it in terms of class and economy. However, the dominant tropes that accompany this version of ideology often follow ideology into the religious realm. Historical precedents of religious dominance or power have caused ideology to infer both dominance and blind adherence. However, once again, a differentiation must be made between the Church as ideal and the Church as the real. The academic conversation should allow space for and acknowledgement of man's religious error (i.e., the real) versus God's sovereignty (i.e., the ideal). Because of this lack of separation between the ideal and the real, religious ideology carries the taint of historical precedent and is, thus, conflated with various secular (or man-made) ideologies that are imposed on man or that construct man. Religious ideology need not be blind. Believers combine belief in both the visible (the Word) and the invisible (the transcendent). These sign systems need not be absorbed unwittingly by their subjects. Moreover, belief in the Divine calls for aid from It. Instead of Althusser's reliance on the individual, or subject, to absorb sign systems, belief in the transcendent calls for a mingling of the visible and invisible in the absorption of these systems. Divine intervention, specifically the Holy Spirit, aids the subject in absorption and consequent interpretation of religious sign systems. God aids men in the interpretation of His Word just as He comes to man—i.e., is made bodily manifest in the Sacraments. This mysterious mingling of the visible with the invisible well describes the essence of transcendence.

Transcendence allows consistency of meaning across time. Nussbaum includes Michel Pecheux's discounting of any sort of consistency in meaning and language through time.^v Nussbaum herself calls for contradiction and acknowledgement of contradiction in ideology (164). Clearly, meanings shift, especially linguistically. Clearly, various ideologies contain contradictions. However, these assumptions discount any recognition of transcendence in language or ideology. Again, there should exist a middle ground in the academic conversation in which recognition of the fallen state of man, and therefore of language, exists alongside a recognition of the ability of the

Divine to intercede and maintain written concepts as well as the words that express them in order that religious ideology might transcend time. Coherence should not be eschewed as merely blind adherence to conventional ideology. Coherence in meaning is the ideal—an ideal that much of academia, Postmodern theorists specifically, deconstruct for the real. Surely the real can be acknowledged; however, when making a place for the transcendent, the ideal is indeed the real. Adding the transcendent to the academic conversation as well as calling for a mingling of Postmodern theory with the Divine necessitates critical analysis and acceptance of Divine mystery, which in no way must be performed blindly.

Catholic philanthropist Dorothy Day demonstrates belief in the Divine without sacrificing her insight. She exchanges earthly sight for spiritual sight and analyzes many portions of her life and decision-making processes in her writings while allowing others to retain their mysterious nature—that which defies human explanation. Surely, human experience should be analyzed. However, in human experience, there exists a quite obvious notion of limitation—limitation that illustrates mortality's inability to possess a unified self or whole individual. This limitation becomes apparent in any person's inability to perfect himself, in his daily failings in knowledge and memory, in his general ability to achieve perceived potential—i.e., experience itself seems to dictate the presence, power, and extent of human limitation. Human experience can be attributed to the explainable *and* the unexplainable, the unified *and* the fragmented. Just as one can believe in the Divine as well as the greatness of human potential, one could acknowledge human experience in its full range of ability to comprehend experience while also acknowledging the limitations of that ability to comprehend. In "Having a Baby," Day writes, "The very fact that they use glib technical phrases does not make it [seeds growing] any less of a miracle, and a miracle we all accept. Then why not accept God's mysteries?" (583). Day's acceptance of divine mysteries does not promote a blind faith, which allows religious conventions to determine personal belief. Rather, Day's example of the seemingly mundane action of a seed growing illustrates how much more the greater mysteries of life may be

allotted their rightful association with the transcendent.

Day also provides an intriguing view of agency. In “Love Overflows,” she writes, “Do I prefer the Church to my own will [. . .] And the choice was the Church” (588). Day conveys her choice (her agency) exerted toward the actual sacrificing of that same agency. There is an interesting intertwining of agency with self, as she clearly defines herself by her choice—the sacrificing of her agency. Here Day also might have asserted that her agency was not her own to sacrifice, that she had been called by God. A Postmodern reaction to such a perspective regarding agency might include a rejection of her perception of the Divine, i.e., that it exists and that she is accountable to it. This reaction probably would assert that Day’s agency was constructed and, consequently, controlled in some way by society and experience. It is likely that Day might have responded that she was responsible to God and, thus, to herself. In this vein, self is seen as an outgrowth of one’s identity, not merely an identification, in faith. In this paradigm, many identifications of self would depend upon faith identity—not the reverse. Most of Day’s pre-conversion experiences were constructed by a world lacking in faith—in a world that included her compassion for others as well as the love of a companion. She was not conditioned to rely on church (as further illustrated in her post-conversion criticisms of the church’s lack of social commitment).^{vi} Instead, something interceded in her experience—something divine, something for which human experience and language’s limitations (the linguistic limitations that Postmodernism foregrounds) are apparent.

This entrance of the Divine in human experience promotes an acceptance of mystery. Belief in the transcendent should not connote blind adherence to antiquated ideology, for this belief in transcendence exists outside human experience and linguistic norms. Postmodernism’s emphasis on embracing and giving voice to marginalized experience ironically gives little or no voice to the experience of believers. However, giving an equal stage to all biases would allow a complication and deepening of Postmodern thought, as it indeed can be viewed through the eyes of faith. Mingling Postmodern and faith-based tenets could establish

a middle ground, whereby spiritual identity and experience could be visible through modern sensibility without sacrificing doctrinal coherence. Indeed, there exists a place for acknowledging fragmentation (of self and experience), for humanity is fragmented perpetually in time. However, this recognition of the real need not also define the ideal. In the paradigm of the transcendent—which exists beyond time, the end is not continual chaos.

Endnotes

ⁱ John Brenkman, *Culture and Domination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 24.

ⁱⁱ See Raymond Williams’ *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 126-129.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a further discussion of ideology, Nussbaum refers the reader to Raymond Williams’ *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), especially 55-71.

^{iv} See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation),” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-187.

^v See Michel Pecheux’s *Language, Semantics, and Ideology: Stating the Obvious* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 112.

^{vi} See Dorothy Day’s “Love Overflows,” as listed in the Works Cited, especially 595, 596.

Works Cited

Butler, Judith. “Introduction to *Bodies That Matter*.” *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* New York and London: Routledge, 1993. Rpt. in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1998. 367-379.

Day, Dorothy. “Having a Baby.” *The Long Loneliness*. New York: Harper and Row, 1981. Rpt. in *American Lives: An Anthology of Autobiographical Writing*. Ed. Robert F. Sayre.

Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994. 582-587.

---, "Love Overflows." *The Long Loneliness*. New York: Harper and Row, 1981. Rpt. in *American Lives: An Anthology of Autobiographical Writing*. Ed. Robert F. Sayre. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994. 587-596.

Goldman, Anne E. "Autobiography, Ethnography, and History: A Model for Reading." *Take My Word: Autobiographical Innovations of Ethnic American Women Writers*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. Rpt. in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1998. 288-298.

Nussbaum, Felicity A. "The Politics of Subjectivity and The Ideology of Genre." *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1998. 160-167.

Scott, Joan W. "Experience." *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): 773-797. Rpt. in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1998. 57-71. Smith, Sidonie. "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance." *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1998. 108-115.

Your Gifts Are Needed

The CHARIS Institute, Inc., is a separately incorporated tax exempt organization affiliated with Wisconsin Lutheran College. Its continued operation depends upon gifts, grants, and fees. To ensure its continued service to the church and WLC, your tax deductible charitable gift is encouraged. Please use the enclosed envelope for this purpose.

Your Comments Are Invited

CHARIS invites letters, articles, and other reactions and responses to any of the articles or features published in CHARIS.

Consistent with its stated purposes, CHARIS seeks to promote serious and godly discussion and debate of issues that affect the mission and ministry of the church.

Submissions of letters and articles should be sent to the editor:

Dr. John E. Bauer
The CHARIS Institute
8800 West Bluemound Road
Milwaukee, WI 53226

Phone: 414-443-8730
FAX: 414-443-8510
Email: john.bauer@wlc.edu

PLEASE SHARE THIS JOURNAL WITH A FRIEND

Use the envelope to have a complimentary copy of CHARIS sent to a friend or relative.

Better yet, why not send them a subscription as a gift?