Introduction

What mystic meanderings the term transcendence connotes! How contain it, bring it to earth, understand it? It is the stuff of philosophy and theology. Can it also be the stuff of everyday life? Can it have anything to do with peoples like the Algonquians and Hurons who did not cultivate the professions of philosophy and theology?

The spatial metaphors which the term transcendence evokes is an operable one both for indigenous and for European and post-European minds. Transcendence can harbour a movement in four metaphorical directions which are symbolic indicators of feelings and searchings. These directions in correlative pairs are upward and downward, and inward and outward. The obvious native components of the upward are the sky and sun; the less obvious of the downward, the earthy and sensory embodied in the positive fulfilling actions of eating and drinking, and in the negative ravages of epidemics; of the inward, exemplified in dreams, and of the outward, demonstrated in assemblies and actions of peace and war.

Transcendence is not just any movement, however, but one which embodies more than the ordinary, a surcharge, a bursting of commonplace boundaries and imaginings, a reaching to the outermost heavens, to "the other" which transgresses totally even expanded horizons.

The European missionaries in the 17th century judged that the highest activity and goal of life was contemplation of the divine. In The Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius of Loyola (1964:76–66), the founder of the Jesuits, urges a contempt for worldly honour and advancement, a rather medieval monastic attitude to the world and self. Because of his emphasis on practical action, however, Ignatius mitigates the attitude of contempt and substitutes that of indifference to the world during apostolic service. While the missionary overtly disdained worldly success, he was urged not to withdraw from the world but to find God in everyday happenings and even in serving the poor savages! (Martin 1988:231).
For the Jesuits, indifference to the world and a focus on the transcendent reality went hand in hand. Their attitude of indifference to the world provided a backdrop for their focus on a higher reality, captured in their motto, *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, ‘For the greater glory of God’ (Pomedli 1987:280–281).

For the 17th-century European, the focus on transcendence emphasizes the vastly superior and objective nature of one being, with this being’s correspondingly distant and discontinuous relationship with the cosmos. God, the preeminent other, and the saints in glory, are reached not preeminently through the material and experiential, but by bypassing it, transcending it through visions, mystical union, the heavenly, and transphenomenal. Daily events are trials and purifications so that one can merit and be in a proper disposition to be receptive to divine grace and eternal bliss.

From the limited Algonquian and Huron experiences selected, can we assert that they move beyond the sensory and material? A major avenue for ascertaining an initial answer to that question lies contextually in the missionary reports, sermons, grammars and dictionaries.

*Missionary Responses to Native Transcendence*

The first response that the missionaries give regarding the possibility of native transcendence is a resounding No! The very disposition of the natives is inimical to a speculative and meditative approach. To argue that point, Paul Le Jeune refers to Aristotle’s outline of three stages through which human beings have evolved. On the lowest rung are those who are merely content with life, and what is necessary and useful for its preservation. In Le Jeune’s judgment, “the wandering Montagnais savages” are on this level (Thwaites 1959:7:7). They are mired in fulfilling elementary human needs such as eating and drinking and do not understand anything about reflection, “the arts, natural sciences, and much less supernatural truths . . .” (Thwaites 1959:7:9). One cannot reasonably expect them to have the language for any type of transcendent beings. If the Hurons do any philosophy at all, Jean de Brebeuf pens, it is with their feet and not with their heads! (Thwaites 1959:10:141).

In Brebeuf’s estimation, Huron admiration, stupendous as it might be, does not go beyond the limited wonders concerning human ingenuity and the beauties of nature. It is obvious that these people are not able to move beyond immanent characteristics to the conception of a truly transcendent being: “It would be impossible to describe the astonishment of these good people, and how much they admire the intelligence of the French,” Brebeuf writes.
But they have said all when they have said they are ondaki, that is, demons; and indeed we make profitable use of this word when we talk to them: “Now, my brothers, you have seen that and admired it, and you think you are right, when you see something extraordinary [such as a mill or a clock], in saying ondaki, to declare that those who make so many marvels must be demons. And what is there so wonderful as the beauty of the sky and the sun? What is there so wonderful as to see every year the trees almost dead during the winter, all bare and disfigured, resume without fail, every spring, a new life and a new dress? The corn that you plant rots, and from its decay spring up such beautiful stalks and better ears. And yet you do not say, ‘He who made so many beauties, and who every year displays before our eyes so many marvels, must be some beneficent oki, and some supereminent intelligence’, etc.” (Thwaites 1959:8:109–111)

If the Hurons are aware of anything at all, it is a finite transcendence, an expansive awareness that goes beyond the commonplace, but does not move beyond the sensory.

In this passage, and generally among the writings of Recollet and Jesuit missionaries, the term oki or its equivalent receives a curious downgrading. On the one hand, Brebeuf notes that the Hurons rightly label the spirit at work in European artifices and artifacts as oki, for they do not acknowledge as present anyone like their all-powerful and providential God. Hurons merely confirm the extraordinary actions of humans and the powers of nature. On the other hand, Brebeuf’s translation of oki as ‘demon’, and the admission of the possibility of a beneficent oki, already acknowledges and bestows a supernatural character to it. In an effort to denigrate the expansive scope of Huron experience, Brebeuf curiously affirms it. To be consistent, he could have translated oki as a ‘dreadful beast’ or ‘serpent’, confirming both its immanent meaning and its despicable nature.


Brebeuf’s restrictive interpretation of oki as possessing non-transcendent characteristics, then, is not the last word. A few years later, Paul Ragueneau states that the Hurons do affirm a deity, albeit unconsciously. They invoke the true divinity, a secret first principle, without knowing him (Thwaites 1959:33:225). The being they describe in experiential terms evokes transcendent characteristics.

In the forests and during the chase, on the waters, and when in danger of shipwreck, they name him Aireskouy Soutanditenr, and call him to their aid. In war, and in the midst of their battles, they give him the name of Ondoutaete and believe that he alone awards the victory. Very frequently, they address
themselves to the sky, paying it homage; and they call upon the sun to be witness of their courage, of their misery, or of their innocence. But, above all, in the treaties of peace and alliance with foreign nations they invoke, as witnesses of their sincerity, the sun and the sky which see into the depth of their hearts, and will wreak vengeance on the treachery of those who betray their trust and do not keep their word. (Thwaites 1959:33:225)

According to his knowledge of Huron culture, Ragueneau affirms the teaching of Tertullian, a second-century Christian apologist, that the natives naturally speak with a Christian voice (exclamant vocem naturaliter Christianam) (Thwaites 1959:33:225–227). Interpreting this in the light of his theological formation in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, human beings have the potential to hear God speaking initially through perception, through historical experience and through experiential concepts and words. Accordingly, Hurons already have a predisposition to receive revelation (Rahner 1968:390–407; 1969:22–23; Aquinas 1952:q. 3, a. 6, corp.). Is it possible to assert more than that the Algonquian and Iroquoian peoples were immersed predominantly in material concerns, and more than that they had an unconscious feeling and an underlying possibility for affirming a transcendent being or beings?

I will examine the following three experiences from Algonquian and Iroquoian culture which exhibit more than a sensory-perceptual account of its contents: eat-all feasts, smallpox, and dreams.

1. Eat-all feasts

The Jesuits' personal and vicarious experience of European folie publique (Thwaites 1959:30:100) forms the contextual background for their latent and often explicit indictment of ritual gorgings. When the Flemish painter Pieter Breugel, a contemporary of the early Jesuits, lampoons the frivolous and burlesque in his canvass, The Battle of Carnival and Lent, he mirrors missionary sentiments. It is the lenten spirit that the Jesuits embody and the Hurons the carnival one, particularly during their ononharaio, the feast of the reversed or addled mind (Thwaites 1959:10:206–209, 17:157, 176–177; Wallace 1958:240–244; Walsh 1982:14–22).

It is not revelling for itself, nor primarily a gluttonous, libertine spirit that the Hurons display in these celebrations, but a transfer of spirits. From ethnolinguistic sources, it is evident that the foods the Hurons consumed gave, in their estimation, not only physical but also spiritual nourishment. In their quest for a Huron term for the pivotal European conception of soul, the missionaries found one approximating theirs, khiondhec8i, “insofar as it animates the body alone and gives it life” (Thwaites 1959:10:140–141, my translation). Khiondhec8i is derived from onnhe which means ‘vivre, to live’. Adding the suffix -c8- to the root gives an instrumental or reflexive
meaning, ‘to live from something either as form or as matter: food, drink which enhances life’ (Potier 1920c:415; also 1920a:63; 1920c:261, 332). The prefix khi- might give the location to the word. Khiondhec8i then means “source of life or life force” (Steckley 1978:97).

According to references in *A French-Huron Dictionary* (FH1697: “vie, vivre”) and Potier (1920c:415), onnhhek8i means physical life and perception. For the Hurons, however, this reference to and use of physical resources implied more extensive origins than the physical alone. “The concept onnhhek8i,” John Steckley (1977:48) states, “touched the very essence of the aboriginal Huron’s corn-growing agriculture, a form of enterprise in which the elements of the spiritual and physical worlds were but threads interwoven into a tightly meshed fabric of long-standing belief.”

Lexical and mythical sources demonstrate both in Huron-Wyandot and in other Iroquoian sources how onnhhek8i embodies this tight interweaving of both physical and spiritual conceptions. According to Potier given above, khiondhec8i is both a life-sustainer and life-bestower. It can be both food/drink and a non-physically reducible substance, life itself.

Let us consider the physical aspect of khiondhec8i first. For many Iroquoians corn, an important part of their culture, trade and history, was their staple food, the source of life or their life force in a nutritional sense. Conrad Heidenreich (1971:158-218) estimates that 65 percent of the Huron food supply was corn, with other vegetables such as beans and squash making up 15 percent. Since corn was so central to life, many religious rituals and traditions centered around it.

As Brebeuf recounts, however, the Hurons regard corn not merely as physical sustenance but also as a gift from the spirit world: “According to their story, it is Iouskeha who gives them the corn (bled) they eat, it is he who makes it grow and brings it to maturity. If they see their fields verdant in the spring, if they reap good and abundant harvests, and if their cabins are crammed with ears of corn, they owe it to Iouskeha” (Thwaites 1959:10:137-139, my translation).

Corn is not only a gift of the spirit world but also an incarnation of the spirit world itself, since it sprang from the breasts of the Earth-Mother and continues to nourish her offspring (Parker 1968a:36). According to Seneca thought, corn’s spirit-nature is one of the three breath-giving and life-sustaining sisters (Parker 1968b:47).

To indicate the kindred relationship between the human spirit and that of corn, the Seneca use the same cognate term both for the human soul and for the spirits of the three damsels in corn, squash and beans, tionnhek8i or khiondhec8i (Huron), meaning, ‘We use it for living, or for our sustenance’, ‘our life’ (Steckley 1977:48–49; Oswalt 1966:427).

Existentially, food and spirit life are reciprocally assimilable kindred
beings. Just as food becomes human flesh and energy, so the spirit of the sisters dwells in and becomes part of all who consume this food. As Wallace Chafe writes in *Seneca Thanksgiving Rituals* (1961:8), the Seneca believed that the “[sisters’] function is to contribute to people’s contentment and to strengthen people’s breath, breath being thought of as a basic manifestation of life”. Through the process of digestion, the physical form, corn, is transformed into the immaterial form, life. The life-strengthening process is, however, not reducible to a physical process, but emanates from the spirits in the corn. In addition, a cooperative effort in producing food demonstrates spirits working together to strengthen and transmit the spirit-breath to fellow tribespeople and to others.

The spirit transfer from corn into a human being occurs in the context of feasts, the heart of Huron life (Thwaites 1959:17:209). In a festive setting, it is possible to effect ritually the transfer of certain spiritual qualities, particularly knowledge and courage, from one being to another.

The Huron dictum seems to be, “through the physical to the spiritual”. The more heightened and demonstrable the physical, the greater the spiritual, and the greater the possibility of benefitting from the spiritual by the ingestion of the physical. Thus an abundant amount of corn, blood and flesh ensure the vigorous powers of strength (breath), knowledge and courage (Thwaites 1959:10:227–229).

The principle of mutually kindred relationships makes the transfer possible. In the process of eating/feasting, the Huron believed that the life-sustaining power in the corn, onnha (Steckley 1977:50; Potier 1920c:421), was transferred to a kindred sister soul in a human being, onnhek8i. On the physical level, the material elements of corn and flesh have corresponding material relationships with the consumer’s physiology. Consequently, the material elements of one can influence the material elements of another. On the spiritual level, courage and knowledge procured directly from vicarious sources enhance the virtues already present in kindred spiritual elements, that is, in other types of souls, that of *eiachi-*-, the emotive-soul, and of *-ndi*, *onr-*-, the intellectual-soul. Thus the spirit or essence of corn empowers the consumer of corn with a like spirit, that of life, power, and breath. What the Jesuits perceived as gluttonous orgies were, at least ideally, attempts through a whole-hearted physical feasting to imbibe the full dimensions of desirable kindred spirits. Later Jesuits adopted the ambivalent Huron term for soul, *onnhek8i*, to indicate both the physical life-sustaining and the spirit-enhancing qualities of bread (Potier 1920b:468).

2. Smallpox

While specifics differed, the reaction of Hurons and Europeans to medicine men, sorcerers and witches had much in common. For the Hurons, the cure
for malevolent sorcery was to discern its nature, locate the afflicted area, and purge the spell. Both cultures had a fear of the evil sorcerer, desired to cast him from their midst, and often killed him without trial or at least without a fair one. That the Jesuits communed with spirits did not escape the notice of the Hurons, and the evaluation they made of the missionaries was based on the same norms they used with their own sorcerers. The Jesuits were accused of being evil sorcerers, for they brought disease into the villages, often were immune themselves, and caused the near extinction of native people (Thwaites 1959:19:91–93; Tooker 1964:117–120).

Beginning in 1633–34, a series of violent smallpox epidemics began which decimated native villages throughout the eastern region of North America, reducing native populations by as much as 50 percent (Thwaites 1959:19:77–79, 89, 123; 21:13; Trigger 1986:230). Many Algonquins and Hurons believed that the blackrobes, despite their care for the sick, deliberately spread these diseases. In their pastoral care, the Jesuits eagerly baptised those about to die, for the prevailing Catholic theology was that there is no salvation without baptism. To the natives it was empirically evident, however, that the missionaries were dealers of death, for at this time almost all of the baptized died (Thwaites 1959:34:33–35). While the Europeans generally had some immunity to these diseases, the natives had little resistance to them, especially when the contagion was accompanied by famine.

The Hurons believed that smallpox probably was not spread primarily by physical contact alone but by spiritual communication. From linguistic evidence, John Steckley argues convincingly that at least some of the Hurons believed that the Jesuits spread the disease through a kind of communication such as that used in sweat lodge sorcery. Thus the items the Jesuits used—religious images (Thwaites 1959:15:19, 35), charms made from corpses (relics) (Thwaites 1959:15:33), baptismal and holy water, French pots (Thwaites 1959:15:211), a poisoned cloak (Thwaites 1959:13:147), and such actions as the celebration of the Mass, making the sign of the cross or the priest blessing the people (Thwaites 1959:31:241–243; 33:19; 39:129–130)—were merely the outward forms of powerful destructive forces (Steckley 1990:17–20).

The missionaries were the carriers of a spiritual contagion. Bressani supports this view stating in 1653 that with the new religion “the scourge of God came into the country; and, in proportion as the one increased, [that is, the faith] the other smote them more severely” (Thwaites 1959:39:141).

The mysterious and secretive life of the Jesuits reinforced the credibility of the assertion that they were the authors of this sorcerous virus (Thwaites 1959:18:13). Being its authors, the Jesuits could avoid the brunt of the contagion since they had prior knowledge of it (Jaenen 1976:102;
Thwaites 1959:20:73; 30:227–229; 39:125–131). But the natives believed that the arcane knowledge that the Jesuits had of Christianity had a potent and destructive possibility. Missionary words, ideas, things, and actions caused them to die, destroyed their corn, and spread diseases (Thwaites 1959:31:121). The natives perceived the contagion as spiritual and not primarily some physical substance. The perceived forces operative in the epidemics were not those within nature or even within the diseases themselves but supernatural and evil ones.

3. Dreams

The Jesuits maintained a reductionist approach to native dreams. They played on words to indicate their generally negative reaction: “Les songes ne sont rien que mensonges.” ‘Dreams are nothing but lies’ (Thwaites 1959:33:197). Judged in terms of renaissance reason, native dreams cannot be the arbiter in spiritual problems, in conflicting epistemological claims or in psychological disputes. Native dreams harbour illusions, demons and insanity.

Jesuit Estienne de Carheil’s theory, while exposing the illusory character of Cayugan dreams, serves to dethrone the mastery that dreams claim in Cayugan lives, and to state the true function of the soul in this process. The dream process involves two mental steps. The first involves the content of dreams: images received through sense experience are retained in the memory, and varied in the imagination. In the second internal step, the representation of both the original and imagined images become present to the mind during sleep (Thwaites 1959:54–69).

For Carheil it is logical that the images represented to the mind during waking hours have a greater credibility than those represented to the mind during sleep. It makes sense to an Aristotelian-Thomistic thinker to entrust waking, verifiable and controllable representations, rather than the unconscious, unverifiable and uncontrollable variations of dreams with providing a direction to life (Thwaites 1959:54:71).

For natives, however, there are two major presuppositions in Carheil’s logic: 1) each person has one soul which receives both wakeful and sleeping representations; 2) the wakeful is the most important time for the individual and the group and provides the necessary content for dreaming.

In the Cayugan view each person has at least two souls, a body-soul and another which transcends the corporeal, the ghostly or free one. The body-soul performs the conscious imaging and representing that Carheil notes; the ghostly one leaves the body at dream time to garner its own representations. The soul operative at dream time, then, transcends bodily limitations, has its own powers and can experience in its own way. For Cayugans, a conscious life is not the necessary cause for dreaming; the stuff
of dreams is more than the residue of conscious life. For natives, dreaming is the necessary cause of conscious life. Conscious life is secondary to and derivative of oneiric experiences.

The Cayugan dream-world cannot readily be explained by the consciousness, one-soul cognitive theory. Dreams are transports beyond the physical and conscious; they are "other-worldly" experiences.

For Ragueneau it will not do to describe dreams as transcendent transports. After all, dreams are nothing extraordinary. In a very perceptive analysis, he hints at the ambiguous genesis and direction of all desires and then distinguishes desires manifest in conscious life from those latent in dreams (Thwaites 1959:33:189f). The inborn desires operative in dreams are involuntary, being controlled from within (Thwaites 1959:33:195). This is the animal dimension of man, undetermined and unruly, Ragueneau states. To follow these passions is to follow the path of deceit and folly, for these desires, while part of human nature, are not of its most noble mettle.

Dreams are the mouthpiece through which the latent desires speak, Ragueneau recounts; dreams are the latent desires' language; they are the language of the irrational soul. The language they speak is that of caprice, petulance and the demand for immediate gratification (Thwaites 1959:33:189).

Ragueneau extends the field of the dream beyond conscious representations. Although he distrusts the innate desires, he sees them as part of a human being and disclosive of a dimension of his being. Ragueneau's conception also expands the one-soul approach and harmonizes it with the two-soul theory. Waking time is lived generally on the conscious, one-soul level. Dream time permits another dimension of the self (another soul?) to well up and intermix with images from waking time. The dream images then are a mixture of the residue of conscious images and of the blind innate passions.

For the Cayugans, however, the desires in dreams are disclosive of a power of self which transcends the limitations of the unconscious self in space and time and opens up aspects beyond human conditioning. The dream often exposes a primal, mythical time, and carries cosmic values. The shape and content of dreams reflect ways that life evolved and affected humans, the interrelatedness of life processes, and the very destiny of life and of all matter. The expansiveness of the dream work evokes the foundation of all reality and the holy. Dreams provide a contact with sacrality as does the kindred form of dreams, the freedom evidenced in imagination, which makes possible the narrated story, ritual, myth, and games (Eliade 1963:77). Indeed, the very ability of humans to dream is a symbol of transcendence.

Instead of harboring illusion, demons and insanity exclusively, Cayugan dreams bring a fresh content to human experience, provide an insight into
the reality of things, open up the possibility of access to powers outside of the self, and disclose both the desire for and the necessary object to ensure healing. For Cayugans, dreams depict a reality greater than reason alone can demonstrate and encompass.

Conclusion

For the native there are signs of transcendence within the empirical. The transcendent, whether that of one or many beings or an impersonal power, is immanent in the world but not confined to it. In the three examples examined, that of eat-all feasts, smallpox and dreams, Algonquians and Iroquoian peoples give evidence of powers greater than those found in the perfective organic development of the universe. In the dynamism of the cosmos, outward and inward life flow and reciprocate with one another. Upward and downward movements involve kindred spirits in mutual, continuous relationships. The mundane actions of eating and drinking, the scourge of epidemics and the inward and freewheeling flights of dreams disclose both expansive inner effects and resources, and the interrelatedness and communing with rationally uncontainable spirits represented by the unifying and pervading presence of the sky (Thwaites 1959:27:249).

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