

FORUM

JILL SCOTT'S *A POETICS OF FORGIVENESS*

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After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities... Think
Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.
These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree...
What will the spider do,
Suspend its operations, will the weevil
Delay?
T.S. Eliot, "Gerontion" (1920)

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SCOTT, JILL. *A Poetics of Forgiveness: Creative Responses to Loss and Wrongdoing*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Forgiveness has got to be one of the most quintessentially comparative of topics, and one, moreover, of increasing contemporary relevance. Yet until the publication of the book under review, there had been remarkably little discussion of forgiveness among Comparatists. Why should forgiveness remain the realm of theology, religion, philosophy, political science, psychology, law, and women's studies? In setting out to demonstrate what a Comparatist can add to academic discussions of forgiveness, Jill

Scott implicitly points to the benefits of her own work being reviewed in a comparative framework. To that end, I took advantage of my position as Program Chair of the 2011 CCLA Congress in Fredericton to invite a literary scholar interested in postcolonial approaches to forgiveness (Julie McGonegal, who teaches in the Department of English at Laurentian University's Barrie campus and whose *Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation* appeared in 2009) and a philosopher working in the area of ethical theory, focusing especially on feminist ethics and the work of Hannah Arendt (Alice MacLachlan, who teaches in York's Philosophy Department and is on the executive of the Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy) to discuss Scott's book with her. I was particularly interested in seeing how McGonegal and MacLachlan would react to *A Poetics of Forgiveness* being, at the end of the day, a poetics of *reading*, that is, a theoretical reassertion of a deconstructive, almost Barthesian reader-response type of criticism. I was also curious how they would react to the book's "provocatively positive" tone of self-confessed utopian optimism, which I myself very much admire. What could such a dialogue reveal about Comparative Literature and its place in our globalizing academy?

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In what follows, we see what it means to engage a topic comparatively, which is, at least for me, a key component of what I take Scott's call for "radical responsibility" to entail. Academics are not always willing to acknowledge knowledge production as a processual activity involving the ongoing interrogation of both one's own views on a topic as well as those of others who can help one better understand those positions by creating a kind of constellation whose momentary positioning reveals in greater clarity the attributes of all of its components, thus allowing for them to be worked on and refined. In the ongoing dialogue generated by the "Meet the Author" session, however, we see how admirably open all the contributors are to interrogating the most nuanced argumentative aspects called forth by the topic of forgiveness. We also see the great care with which the contributors have gone about their interrogating, and the way that all of the contributors allowed themselves to be moved by the questions and positions of the others. Scott, for example, in contemplating the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission on residential schooling, has become notably less positive, somewhat to my disappointment, but only somewhat, as I agree that forgiveness does not seem an appropriate framework for the matter.

These two critical responses to Scott's book and Scott's response to them thus reveal what Comparative Literature in its institutionalized form of the CCLA is capable of: namely, providing space for respectful, informed, interdisciplinary engagement in areas calling out for a comparative perspective. Like the roundtable held two years ago to mark the association's 40th anniversary, the results of which can be found in the June 2009 volume (vol. 36.2, ff. 171) of the *CRCL*, this "Meet the Author" discussion marks an important moment in the association's development.