

JILL SCOTT'S *A POETICS OF FORGIVENESS*:

A REVIEW

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

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I would like to begin by thanking Susan Ingram for inviting me to contribute to this discussion, and Jill Scott for compelling me to revisit the profound intersections between forgiveness and literature. *A Poetics of Forgiveness* has pushed me to challenge, refine, and reinvigorate my own work in this area, forcing me to wrestle further with the paradox and contradiction of forgiveness, and to engage with complex questions about the role of artistic expression and literary criticism in imagining peace and social justice. I offer my remarks in what follows in the spirit of collaboration, in the hope of thinking collectively with Scott, and other literary scholars, about the meaning and significance of aesthetic models of forgiveness for global discourses of redress and reconciliation. While Scott and I are situated in different fields—she specializes in German Modernism, while my research lies in postcolonial literature and theory—we share in common a wider interest in the literary expression of forgiveness. Many of the questions I ask in response to Scott's provocative ideas are, then, questions I have asked—and continue to ask—of myself in my own research, and which I articulate in this context out of a commitment to learning through dialogue and collaboration. These are questions having to do with the aesthetic qualities of what Scott calls poetic forgiveness, and with the role of the literary critic in mediating creative expressions of forgiveness.

As Scott notes in her Introduction to *A Poetics of Forgiveness*, it would seem that we are, in our preoccupation with forgiveness and the literary, relatively alone. As yet, there has been no conversation among literary scholars about the implications of a larger cultural shift to forgiveness for literature, nor has there been—with the

exception of my work and now Scott's—any sustained engagement on the part of such scholars with the growing research on forgiveness in disciplines as diverse of philosophy, political science, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and theology, despite increased interdisciplinarity. One of the tremendous contributions Scott's book makes, then, lies in the claims it stakes for literature and other cultural activity in not only representing but also producing what she loosely calls "poetic forgiveness." The poetic aspect of forgiveness, if I understand her correctly, privileges ambiguity and metaphor over singularity and closure; it is not spoken or measured or conscious, but unspoken, immeasurable and unconscious. Scott develops and refines "poetic forgiveness" over the course of her analysis, but grounds her working definition in an awareness of the ways in which it is "a function of writing, reading, and reflection, arising out of the form and medium of texts and in the melodies and rhythms of language itself" (199). This indispensable concept is put to work as a methodological framework through which to contemplate the metaphoric shifts and displacements of language as it shapes and reshapes forgiveness. It is a vital tool, Scott demonstrates, for reading for themes and subtexts of forgiveness in literary and cultural texts.

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Despite what one might assume on the basis of its title and introductory remarks, Scott's *A Poetics of Forgiveness* is not concerned exclusively—or even predominantly—with poetry per se but with all forms of cultural communication. The book surveys a remarkably wide-ranging and eclectic assortment of texts, among them Homer's *The Iliad*, Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, H.D.'s *The Gift*, Kafka's *Letter to His Father*, Ingeborg Bachmann's *The Book of Franz*, Robert Fleming's anti-war photographs of postwar Germany, the Amnesty Committee Hearings transcripts of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and finally a cluster of post-9/11 novels: Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, Katharina Hacker's *The Have-Nots*, and Pia Frankenberg's *Nora*. Works of poetry are occasionally referred to, but not extensively treated. This is because, for Scott, all language is poetry in as much as it contains an element of the poetic. According to this elastic definition, the poetic is less a matter of form or genre and more a matter of the metaphoric ambiguity present in all language. I am sympathetic to Scott's desire to liberate poetry from dogmatic restrictions and prescriptive definitions, a strategic move that allows her to stretch her analytic muscle and the boundaries of her subject matter, as well as aligns her with the recent trend in cultural studies away from hierarchic distinctions that dissociate poetry from popular culture. But I was ultimately left wondering how the poetic forgiveness she finds in the texts she analyzes is different from the forms of prosaic forgiveness of which we are, all of us, the givers and recipients in our everyday lives. Perhaps more than that, however, I wondered about the subtle nuances of distinction in affect and responsibility that shape our encounter with different kinds of texts. Put simply, how does one experience and produce poetic forgiveness differently as a reader of novels or poetry, for example, as distinct, say, from a consumer of visual culture in the form of photography or film, or, to complicate matters further, as an interpreter of political documents of the kind produced

by various truth commissions the world over? Can the kind of sanitized bureaucratic discourse gleaned in South Africa's TRC transcripts accurately be categorized as poetic forgiveness of the kind expressed in Ingrid de Kok's moving poetry? I am not sure, and Scott does not wade into these debates. But one wishes that she did, especially given that she makes two TRC testimonies the subject of a detailed analysis in Chapter 5, while giving the last word to de Kok's "Parts of Speech"—a set of verses that ironically triumphs the possibilities of poetic language amid the bureaucratic babble of political reconciliation, and which she refrains from discussing. Again, it is not that I disagree with Scott's desire to offer a more inclusive definition of poetry: it is only that I wanted her to say something about how different kinds of cultural mediums variously refract our experiences of forgiveness. I realize that such distinctions will always feel clumsy and elusive—and yet it is incumbent on us as literary scholars to make the attempt.

I had also hoped for Scott to further theorize the role of the literary critic in interpreting poetic forgiveness. In her Introduction, she describes her own position as critic as privileging neutrality and objectivity over polemics and partisanship, both with regards to forgiveness as ethics and as aesthetics: "This book neither advocates specifically in favor of forgiveness nor makes moral judgments about resentment and revenge...On the whole, I aim to let the texts and discursive contexts speak for themselves." I admire Scott's desire to leave the morality of forgiveness to religion. But I wondered if such critical detachment and distance—which in its humanist affiliations pairs strangely with the postmodernist impulse to dismantle rigid generic definitions—is really possible after all: for just as forgiveness speaks us—in the sense of shaping our subjectivity—do not we as critics speak forgiveness? Do we not help to construct forgiveness in the sense of hermeneutically locating its presence in the texts about which we write and teach? At the general level, Scott betrays something of her own position when she suggests that "if we embrace the precariousness of forgiveness, we stand to gain so much more" (134). Less explicitly, her in-depth readings of, for example, H.D.'s *The Gift* and Kafka's *Letter to His Father* perform a kind of critical gymnastics, carefully scrutinizing the stylistic, sonic and phonic features of these texts in a sophisticated hermeneutic approach that reads meaning beneath (and beyond) the narrative surface; in this sense, Scott might be said to make these works speak forgiveness. Let me be clear: I am not saying that forgiveness is not actually 'there' in the interstices of the text or that Scott distorts the author's intentions or the text's meaning(s). What I am suggesting is that, insofar as any act of literary interpretation involves interpretations of metaphors—a kind of manifestation of the unconscious—its meanings are produced in the space of dialectic interplay between the author and her critic/reader. The fact that many of the texts Scott undertakes to analyze do not lend themselves readily or obviously to a framework centered on forgiveness reminds us that the critic plays an active role in producing a text's meanings. If the participants in any discourse of forgiveness need to take responsibility for their thoughts and actions, so too with the literary critic: she must assume responsibility

for her position and the interpretations it generates. We must own our readings.

That there is an onus on the critic to take responsibility for her interpretations is a conviction that was reinforced for me in the course of reading Scott's glosses of Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Kelly Oliver. Derrida argues that "pure forgiveness" as he calls it—a hyperbolic, mad forgiveness bereft of conditions—is compromised as soon as a third party intervenes. He cites the sovereign authority or official representative of the state as examples. For Derrida, such mediation deprives forgiveness of meaning. For Kristeva's psychoanalytic model, however, forgiveness is ideally mediated: the analyst stands in for the victim with a view to allowing the offender to take up a new beginning. The analyst, in other words, performs the role of interpretation, the work of transforming the patient's trauma by opening it up to the possibility of renewal. What I wonder is whether the literary critic who reads for forgiveness does not perform a similar kind of work. If so, I wonder if the critic's translation risks potentially compromising or distorting the language of forgiveness.

- 98 As Scott observes, citing Oliver, "When granted by a divine being, a religious leader, or even the victim, the power to forgive can also become a colonizing or oppressive force" (149). Scott then goes on, however, to advocate Oliver's subsequent endorsement of Kristeva's unconscious linguistic forgiveness because it ostensibly dispenses with the sovereign authority to grant forgiveness. In translating Oliver's model to the field of literary criticism, it would seem that Scott sees poetic forgiveness as similarly characterized by unconscious desires, and therefore arguably immune from the dangers of misinterpretation. On the other hand, it seems plausible that poetic forgiveness is potentially more susceptible to 'bad reading'—in the sense of reading that blatantly ignores or deliberately distorts the narrative cues—precisely because of its ambiguity and irresolvability.

I am not merely asking, however, if there is the risk of an abuse of authority in the act of literary interpretation. (I imagine such risk is fairly minimal and that the question risks reducing literary criticism to a kind of black-and-white, right-or-wrong affair.) More generally, I am asking what the role of the literary critic is in the task of interpreting poetic forgiveness. I will be the first to acknowledge that this is an impossible question to answer satisfactorily. I suppose I am not looking for Scott to offer a clear or concise sense of the critic's position in this process, but I would like to invite her to offer some tentative ideas in this direction. I am particularly interested in this question in light of the overwhelming refusal on the part of the survivors of Canada's Indian residential schools to speak or offer forgiveness as a response to this country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Neither is poetic forgiveness much encountered, to my knowledge, in the literary texts that have been produced out of this experience of cultural genocide.

Scott concludes her timely and important book with an inconclusive conclusion, recognizing as she does the impossibility of closure with regards to forgiveness, and the certainty that our study of 'poetic forgiveness' will be similarly marked by an ongoing and relational practice. I am not expecting our dialogue to result in easy

answers or pat solutions either. I do hope, however, that it will help her to stretch her thoughts on poetic forgiveness, as her book has stretched mine.