Jill Scott's *A Poetics of Forgiveness:* A Review

Alice MacLachlan
York University

100 Scott, Jill. *A Poetics of Forgiveness: Creative Responses to Loss and Wrongdoing.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

I want to thank Jill Scott for writing such a thoughtful and provocative book and Susan Ingram for inviting me to participate in a conversation about it. I'm delighted to have the opportunity to reflect and engage with others on these themes.

As is only appropriate to the topic, I'd like to begin with—if not an outright request for forgiveness—then a plea for leniency. Engaging with Scott's writing on poetic forgiveness has been a wonderful opportunity to stretch and challenge my thinking on a now-familiar topic, fitting into new grooves and exploring new modes of making connection and finding meaning. While I have been writing and thinking about the topic of forgiveness for almost a decade, I am a philosopher trained primarily in the analytic tradition, which finds itself at some distance from other fields in the humanities, and I have little to no background in Comparative Literature, psychoanalytic theory or Cultural Studies. As I reflected on Jill's work, it occurred to me that among the book's many accomplishments are the challenges it offers to *philosophers* of forgiveness, several of which I take to be both deep and very compelling. In my remarks, I will highlight those challenges and their import for contemporary philosophical discussions of forgiveness, and then—in return—invite her to push the framework that houses them further in certain respects.

A Poetics of Forgiveness explores the many relationships between forgiveness and creative human expression. This exploration takes several forms: first, as Scott tells us, "creative responses to conflict can provide fresh insight into processes of resolution and reconciliation"—and the varied works that she draws upon (ranging from ancient epics and Quentin Tarantino films, to novels, letters, photographs and

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL MARCH 2012 MARS RCLC
0319–051x/12/39.1/100

poems) demonstrate a number of these insights nicely. But merely to look for themes and of forgiveness in various texts, or even to cite parallels and overlaps of interest between practices of forgiveness and poetic practice, would be to miss the deeper point at which Scott aims. In fact, she claims, a kind of forgiveness itself can emerge in acts of creativity: photography, letters, novels, and even legal transcripts; "all human communication potentially elicits forgiveness" (147). Drawing on the theoretical work of Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Kelly Oliver, and to a lesser extent, Hannah Arendt, Scott develops a model of "poetic forgiveness." Poetic forgiveness—as distinct from its prosaic cousin—is a gift of meaning produced by (and in) creative communication, that goes beyond single, interpersonal acts of forgiveness to become of condition for agency and subjectivity, and is best situated in an ethics of radical responsibility. I take Scott's account of poetic forgiveness to be her first significant challenge to philosophers.

As I understand it, Scott does not think *all* experiences of forgiveness are best understood in terms of poetic forgiveness. Her aim is to expand, rather than redefine, our understanding of the concept. Thus, her analysis leaves room for familiar experiences, wherein one person (the victim of a wrongful harm) overcomes attitudes of anger and resentment or sincerely directs the familiar utterance, "I forgive you," to another (the perpetrator of that harm).

It was not entirely clear to me what Scott took the relationship between what we might call 'prosaic' forgiveness and poetic forgiveness to be—that is, whether the former is a manifestation or perhaps an extension of the latter, whether it is our status as subjects formed partly by processes of poetic forgiveness that allows us to engage in acts of ordinary forgiveness for everyday transgressions. The reader might well take the two to share central or significant features, or to bear a Wittgensteinian family resemblance to one another. Both forms of forgiveness are capable of giving new meaning to wrongs, and—Scott argues—both offer ways for coping with, responding to, and perhaps moving beyond destructive conflict and harm. But there are significant differences between the two phenomena, as Scott understands them: prosaic forgiveness is a discrete event or process and depends upon the forgiver's *standing* to forgive.[1] Practices of prosaic forgiveness are enacted in response to perceived *wrongdoings*[2] and thus depend upon moral frameworks of right and wrong (or, at least, on therapeutic notions of offense and harm—along with some claim about the wrongfulness of these phenomena). Scott also defines prosaic forgiveness in terms of intentional effort by the person doing the forgiving to overcome or mitigate attitudes of resentment. Poetic forgiveness, on the other hand, is a continuous practice that takes place both consciously and unconsciously—and not only for victims of wrong. It is *not* granted through a sovereign authority or a given individual's standing, but rather (at least as I understood it) emerges in and through the creative act, making it a 'gift' of meaning for both the creator and the audience. The gift of poetic forgiveness is not limited to contexts of wrongdoing, either, but is also at home in practices of mourning, resolution, and other ways of responding to loss and finitude.

A skeptical reader might take the differences between prosaic and poetic forgiveness to preclude any useful extension of the term from the former to the latter, at least if familiar or commonplace experiences of prosaic forgiveness are assumed to be our starting place for what 'forgiveness' means. This skeptic might argue: yes, poetry and other creative pursuits assist us in responding to loss, finitude, and betrayal by creating meaning, much as forgiveness helps us respond to wrongdoing by repairing relationships or relieving guilt. But does this mean we should understand the former *as* forgiveness, rather than *like* or similar to it? What is to be gained by doing so? Scott takes on this skeptical challenge early on in the monograph, but her entire discussion can be read as a response to the second question. We gain a great deal when we read cultural and creative works through the lens of forgiveness. Indeed, if I understand it correctly, part of her aim is to demonstrate acts of prosaic forgiveness would lose their power to bestow moral meaning, were it not for equally familiar, if hitherto unrecognized, experiences of poetic forgiveness through creative practice. Thus, Scott invites us to rethink both the primacy and the singularity of familiar experiences of forgiveness, and to see these in new light by considering other, less obvious cases. Nevertheless, the co-existence of these two forms of forgiveness in Scott's text left me, at times, with unanswered questions about their relationship. For example, when Scott says "and yet forgiveness is not about reason" (161) or again, "as soon as we think that forgiveness is something concrete and tangible, it has lost its value and potential" (163)—is it poetic or prosaic forgiveness to which she refers, or —as it seems at points—do the two represent moments on an even wider spectrum of human experiences of forgiveness?

To understand my preoccupation with what might seem a matter of mere semantics (which, among a range of experiences, is appropriately labeled forgiveness), Scott's book must be positioned alongside mainstream philosophical discussions of forgiveness. Those possessing even a passing familiarity with contemporary philosophical literature on the topic will know that here, especially, we have failed to heed Wittgenstein's warnings about the dangers of making fine distinctions. Philosophers of forgiveness, faced with the conflict between the intuition that forgiveness is, or should be, something paradigmatically *good* and the observation that actual acts of forgiveness vary widely in nature and value, have concentrated their efforts on coming up with normative theories of forgiveness, by limiting what 'counts' as an act of forgiveness well beyond ordinary usages of the term or by bolstering that definition with a series of moral conditions. They then call the result 'legitimate,' 'genuine,' 'full,' 'perfect,' 'paradigmatic'—or 'forgiveness at its best'—and employ it as a regulative ideal for identifying, analyzing and assessing 'real life' acts of [prosaic] forgiveness, in all their messiness and imperfection. The result is an almost quixotic search for a single notion of forgiveness that can do all the work we want it to do, in determining how best to respond to painful and often devastating acts of violence, cruelty, and oppression.

Thus, the idea of "forgiving [as] an ethics of everyday life"—one that includes

everything from familiar, prosaic performative utterances ('I forgive you') to poetic "practices of reading and writing"—as a workable model for engaging with situations of conflict and repair, is both refreshing and reassuring. We might describe Scott as prioritizing connection over distinction, looking for resonances between various practices of mourning and forgiveness, creative responses and relational negotiations rather than highlighting their differences. This is an approach to which I am unaccustomed, but as I took stock of it, I realized it reflected her subject matter particularly well. Further, if I am right in my reading of Scott, then I am sympathetic to her general approach. While my own interest is in prosaic and not poetic forgiveness, I too see it as a family resemblance concept, and I think that the puzzling questions surrounding forgiveness become easier to understand if we approach it not as a singular normative ideal, but as a set of overlapping, related practices, each of which may, in the appropriate circumstances, express a number of different and important moral values. As Scott notes, quoting Mark Sanders, "Dealing with real world conflict is messy and risky, but it confirms that 'forgiveness is never pure, that it is never even just *one* thing'" (20).[3] What Scott's *Poetics of Forgiveness* does is to *show* rather than *argue* for this intuition: revealing forgiveness in multiple dimensions rather than insisting upon it.

In other words, lurking within in Scott's work is a call for analytic philosophers to look deeper (as well as wider) in their investigations. This emerges in two ways. First, Scott's model of poetic forgiveness suggests that what we might ordinarily think of as our basic or paradigmatic experience of forgiveness, i.e. prosaic forgiveness, is not as basic, or primary, as we have assumed. Instead, we can see how this experience echoes—or reproduces—something much more fundamental to our agency: at various points in the text, Scott describes this as an interruption in the ordinary course of events, as a sudden abundance of meaning, as a reaching across, a letting go, or a reframing. Ultimately, she describes an ongoing ethical engagement with a world in which we are finite, and will inevitably face loss and pain (199). While Scott takes forgiveness (both poetic and prosaic) to be paradoxical, this paradox is not peculiar to forgiveness but belongs to our way of being in the world.

The second, equally compelling, version of the challenge to look deeper is methodological. Scott rightly notes that philosophers of forgiveness have fixated on the role of narrative in explaining experiences of forgiveness: describing these in narrative terms, focusing on the human capacity for narrative to explain forgiveness, and employing literary and dramatic narratives to illustrate their analyses. Scott acknowledges a role for narrative reframing (17) but, at the same time, gently chides philosophers for focusing on plot, while "leav[ing] the subtle ambiguities and ironic reversals of narratives untouched." She invites us, instead, to "delv[e] beneath the surface of the text," going beyond plot to attend to the crucial role of linguistic ambiguities, multiplicities of meaning and even *sounds* and *shapes* in "understanding larger issues of conflict and possibilities for resolution" (17).

Thus, it should be clear that I take Scott's book to be a valuable contribution to the

growing, multi-disciplinary, body of literature on forgiveness, and one whose value is not limited to the discipline in which it is at home. And so, I would like to raise a couple of questions for Scott, questions which emerge out of my cross-disciplinary engagement with her writing.

The first is less a challenge than an invitation to push further. Given the emphasis placed on forgiveness as a broad and varied phenomenon, and Scott's willingness to challenge standard accounts of forgiveness (such as those offered by philosophers Jeffrie Murphy and Trudy Govier), I was surprised that at times the text seems to take Murphy and Govier's descriptions of prosaic forgiveness for granted: for example, returning at several points to the claim that ordinary experiences of forgiveness are *essentially* about overcoming resentment. Not only does this sit at odds with the quotations above about forgiveness not being any one thing, but was also surprising, given the attention to forgiveness and metaphor in the final chapter. I was pleased to see this discussion included, but wondered why—given the obvious parallels between the work of metaphor and the work of forgiveness—there was not more discussion of standard metaphors *for* forgiveness, since these play such a crucial role in how we explain and communicate the practice. In the Introduction, there is some discussion of 'gift' understandings of forgiveness, but in the appendix forgiveness is listed as 'canceling a debt.' Moreover, there are several other non-economic images typically employed to account for the work of forgiveness. We speak about turning the other cheek, having a change of heart, wiping the slate clean, releasing the wrongdoer from the burden of her guilt—just as easily as we do 'forgiving' a debt or a bond on the one hand or offering forgiveness as a kind of freely given gift on the other. I would contend that close readings of these metaphors suggests that the moral and meaning-producing work of many (perhaps most) acts of forgiveness cannot be accounted for by the effort to eradicate resentment, suggesting that the former is not essentially experienced in terms of the latter. In other words, close attention to the phenomenon of poetic forgiveness may not merely extend our understanding of the term beyond instances of prosaic forgiveness; it might also change how we see even the most standard or paradigmatic of these.

Second, I wondered—following the fourth chapter, on 'Inappropriate Apology'—whether more might have been said about the potential for acts of forgiveness to function as exercises of power, as impositions (or even acts of violence). If apology can be inappropriate, so too can forgiveness. And as Scott acknowledges, prosaic forgiveness seems to require some kind of standing (what is often called the authority or prerogative to forgive), it seems plausible to infer that exercises of this authority are also, often, exercises of power. For this reason, philosopher Claudia Card describes forgiveness as a 'moral power'—which can, as with all powers, be corrupted and abused.[4] If it sounds strange to speak of victims committing violence by forgiving their perpetrators, we need only think back to the last time someone forgave us for something we didn't do, or didn't think was wrong in the first place, to recall how maddening such an act of 'grace' can be.

My third and final question takes the opposite tack from the first. While I do want to push a broader understanding of prosaic or everyday acts of forgiveness, I found myself resisting the breadth of phenomena gathered under the umbrella of forgiveness by the end of the book—or at least, wanting more reasons to accept them. In other words, I will confess to sharing some concerns with the hypothetical skeptic I described above. I take Scott's point that there are important resonances between creative practices and practices of forgiveness, between the kinds of meaning-making that allow us to cope with loss, and the way forgiveness of a wrong gives new meaning to the event. And I agree that in even surprising contexts (such as TRC hearings), sometimes the miraculous can occur, leaving "even the harshest critics…. conced[ing] that *something happened*" (Ignatieff, quoted in Scott 140). But why, ultimately, call all such *somethings* forgiveness? Why extend this particular concept —and not others, to join together the totality of human efforts to cope with loss (as well as wrongs)? While Scott beautifully illustrates the insight and connection that arises when we name this 'something' forgiveness, I would have liked more attention to the risks associated with the act of naming, especially when the name in question comes with the kind of cultural, religious and historical baggage possessed by the term 'forgiveness.'[5] Put differently, I might ask, *do we lose any descriptive power when we make all of these things forgiveness—what costs might come with this all-encompassing understanding?*

I am not sure there exist easy or immediate answers to these questions. In raising them, therefore, I am merely inviting Scott to sit with them as I did, as I read and reflected on the rich, fertile and provocative images and narratives she brought together to guide her exploration of forgiveness. And I thank her for giving me the opportunity to do so.

Works Cited

Belicki, Kathryn, Jessica Rourke, and Megan McCarthy. "Potential Dangers of Empathy and Related Conundrums." *Women's Reflections on the Complexities of Forgiveness*. Ed. Wanda Malcolm, Nancy DeCourville, and Kathryn Belicki. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Boss, Judith A. "Throwing Pearls Before Swine: Forgiveness, Women, and the Unrepentant Abuser." *Philosophical Perspectives on Power and Domination*. Ed. L. Kaplan. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997.

Card, Claudia. *The Atrocity Paradigm*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.

Haaken, Janice. "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Psychoanalytic and Cultural Perspectives on Forgiveness. *Before Forgiving: Cautionary Views on Forgiveness in Psychotherapy*. Ed. J. Murphy and S. Lamb. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.

MacLachlan, Alice. "Moral Powers and Forgivable Evils." *Evil, Political Violence and Forgiveness: Reflections on the Work of Claudia Card*. Ed. K. Norlock and A. Veltman. Lexington Books, 2009.

———. "Forgiveness and Moral Solidarity." *Forgiveness: Probing the Boundaries*. Ed. S. Schulman and D. White. Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2008.

Pettigrove, Glen. "The Standing to Forgive." *The Monist* 92.4 (2009).

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida takes this standing to necessarily be a kind of authority, thus arguing that prosaic forgiveness presupposes a problematic sovereignty. But other philosophers, such as Glen Pettigrove, have explored the notion of standing in terms that are significantly less vulnerable to Derrida's objection. I discuss the relationship between forgiveness and authority in "Moral Powers and Forgivable Evils" and in "Forgiveness and Moral Solidarity".

2. Wrongdoings include wrongful harms, violations, infractions of another rights, or unjustified offenses. Philosophers often use the term to distinguish forgiveness from related notions of excuse or justification. While these lessen the agent's responsibility for the act, forgiveness seems rather to depend upon, and thus, reinforce it. Pettigrove (mentioned above) puts it this way: forgiveness thematizes wrongdoing as such.

3. Most psychologists who write on forgiveness also take this position: for example, Belicki, Rourke and McCarthy, who write "Rather than attempt to domesticate forgiveness by tidily trimming out of the definition all the embarrassing and unsafe meanings that can attach to it, we think that we would do better to take seriously and respect these tendencies, for example to "confuse" forgiveness with excusing and reconciling. More generally, we believe that we should dispense with language of "true" forgiveness and instead document the range of differing experiences that are called forgiveness and study each of these in its own right" (2008, 181).

4. Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm*. See also "Moral Powers and Forgivable Evils", cited above, for further discussion of this question.

5. Here, we need think only of its Christian connotations and the role that Christian doctrine played in quelling uprisings by slaves or colonial peoples; equally significant is the gendered history of forgiveness. See Boss and Haaken.