III. 3

FORGIVENESS IN LITERATURE

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Literature testifies to the transformation in the rhetoric of forgiveness from a Christian to a secular discourse starting around the end of the 19th century, which also marks a shift from its conceptualization as a godly attribute to a human quality. Replacing theological forgiveness, the more contemporary philosophical and psychoanalytical approaches to forgiveness see it as an encounter with an *other* as well as a relation to one's self, problematize its conditions of possibility, and explore its potential for personal and communal healing. Likewise, contemporary literature frequently turns toward forgiveness as a literary trope conceiving it aesthetically as a necessary ground for subjectivity and ethical practice where forgiveness is not a possibility for unresolvable real life personal and social contradictions. The aim in what follows is to trace the history of this epistemic shift as seen through selective works of literature over the centuries with reference to the basic tenets of the philosophical and psychoanalytical discourses on forgiveness.

In its most general sense, forgiveness can be defined as the cessation of resentment against an offender. The concept raises questions such as which offenses, if any, can be forgiven, who can grant forgiveness and whether forgiving the self is possible or legitimate. In *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt (1998) discusses forgiveness as an encounter between two parties, a transgressor who offended an *other* and the offended in relation to whom forgiveness is denied or granted. Arendt insists that "nobody can forgive himself …; forgiving and promising enacted in solitude or isolation remain without reality and can signify no more than a role played before one's self"

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(237), and thus forgiving becomes the basis of a moral code. Her discussion of forgiveness aims to accentuate the importance of the concept in a secular sense, as an ethical responsibility, and not as deriving from God or love, divine or human.

Contrary to Arendt's compelling discussion which counters the Christian proposition that "only God has the power to forgive" (239) with reference to specific passages in The Bible by mid-20th century, this had been the common contention in Christianity perhaps since its beginnings. When Alexander Pope famously wrote "To err is human, to forgive divine" (l. 526) in his *Essay on Criticism* (1711) in early 18th century, he was gesturing towards this rhetoric of forgiveness in Christianity which had also informed Western Literature with its conceptualization of God's grace for the longest time. While there has been no singular undifferentiated understanding of forgiveness in Christian theology throughout its long history, the pervasive perspective was that, as evident in Pope's statement, it is God who forgives, and any possible human forgiveness is rooted in and derives its authority from divine power. The basis of the Christian notion of divine forgiveness is, as is well known, God's forgiving humanity for the Original Sin. God's mercy was not, however, without its conditions and price. The passage from Book III of Milton's *Paradise Lost* offers a succinct explanation as to why there could be no gratuitous divine mercy. In the conversation between the Father and the Son, the Father announces his intention to grant his grace to humanity out of love and mercy although they deserve their just punishment due to their free act of defiance. Yet, his forgiveness will be "To Prayer, repentance, and obedience due,/ Though but endevord with sincere intent" (l.191-3) and the compensation: "But to destruction sacred and devote, / He with his whole posteritie must dye, / Dye hee or Justice must; unless for him / Som other able, and as willing, pay / The rigid satisfaction, death for death." (l.208-12). Consequently, the Son volunteers to "die for Mans offence" (l.410) to "end the strife / of mercy and justice" (l.406-7). That is to say, there is a condition to receive God's forgiveness: praying, repenting and obeying with sincere intentions; and the price is a retribution: to be saved from eternal death, someone worthy must offer to die to pay for man's sin so that God's justice is not compromised with his mercy. From a Derridean perspective, forgiveness granted in this manner cannot be considered forgiveness at all for reasons that will be explained below, but there is another equally important implication in this proclamation: forgiveness is intertwined with the notion of justice. Mercy and justice is conceived to be in strife unless there is a retribution for the

offense to justify mercy. This convolution of justice with retribution which even predates Christianity, coupled with the attribution of forgiveness to divinity, seem to account for the conspicuous scarcity of human forgiveness narratives up until modern times.

Rather than forgiveness, revenge and retribution narratives abound since ancient times through the Medieval Period well into the Renaissance. *The Iliad* is essentially an epic about revenge: a war instigated to avenge a betrayed king, and a hero who fights more to take revenge for the death of his beloved friend. Some of the best known ancient Greek tragedies such as Sophocles' *Electra*, Euripides' *Medea* and *The Bacchae* revolve around revenge plots. Deriving from well-known Attic works, the tragedies of Roman Seneca would later become the origin for revenge tragedies of the Renaissance. Hence, there are too many revenge myths and tragedies from Ancient times, Greek and Roman, to be able to list here. Forgiveness is hardly an ethical consideration in any of them. There is, indeed, little mention of forgiveness as a virtue in Plato's or Aristotle's writings. Charles Griswold, in his philosophical exploration of the concept of forgiveness, illustrates how the Greek word *sungnômê* which is a cognate for forgiveness connoted different meanings in various Greek texts and discusses why "Aristotle nowhere praises forgiveness (as distinguished from pardoning and excusing) as a virtue" (2007: 7). Consequently, forgiveness does not come up as an ethical principle that informs the characters of epics and tragedies.

Even after Christianity becomes the cultural frame of reference in literature, vengeance continues to be the motivating force behind the protagonists' actions and propel the narrative. In Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, revenge wins over forgiveness, and King Arthur's Round Table is totally ruined because Gawain cannot forgive Lancelot who accidentally killed his brother. The revenge tragedies of the Renaissance bring to stage dignified characters who are burdened with the responsibility to avenge a transgression in the name of justice, and die in the pursuit even after they triumph against the transgressor. Shakespeare's Hamlet, Hieronimo of T*he Spanish Tragedy*, and Vindice of *The Revenger's Tragedy* are among the renowned avengers from the period. In the Christian context, where the rhetoric of love and mercy dominate the religious discourse, individuals are precluded from seeking private justice by violating God's Law through revenge as it conflicts with faith in God's providence. It seems this conflict is resolved aesthetically through poetic justice in the narrative as the proud act of human interference with eternal justice is punished with death:

all avengers invariably die although their acts become instrumental in instituting justice in the grand scheme of things. In other words, revenge causes the character to be caught in the dialectics of transgression as the offended becomes the offender, say by killing the murderer, thereby forming a cycle of potentially endless reversals, which is only perpetuated through revenge and ends only when divine justice is instituted following the elimination of the avenger with death. As Arendt put it, "vengeance … incloses both doer and sufferer in the relentless automatism of the action process, which by itself need never come to an end" whereas "[f]orgiving … is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts a new and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it" (241). Reserved to the divine domain in Christian discourse, which is also the only level at which justice may be instituted, forgiveness mostly remains as an unfulfilled potential in the subtext of the narratives about characters who cannot or will not forgive well into the Enlightenment, when a new genre is born: the novel.

The novel, with its dialogic polyphony in Bakhtinian terms, puts into conversation disparate understandings of forgiveness. Especially during the Victorian period, when the novel was established as a respected genre, forgiveness was an important topic across a variety of genres including novels, autobiographies, dramas, broadsheets, sermons, legal, philosophical, and theological writing, and a widely acknowledged ethical ideal (Gibson, 2015: 1-3). While writers wrestled with the meaning and practice of forgiveness, trying to ascertain its extent and boundaries, and exploring the social and psychological dimensions of the concept, it still remained primarily a religious issue. Scenes of forgiveness in Victorian novels more often than not evoke religion as the necessary ground for forgiveness. In *Great Expectations*, for example, Pip evokes God's mercy when he can find in himself neither the strength nor the authority to forgive Estella for her decision to marry Drummle. Or, when Miss Havisham, in her repentance for her past errors, begs for Pip's forgiveness, he again finds himself too much of a human, marred with errors of his own, to be able to grant forgiveness: "There have been sore mistakes; and my life has been a blind and thankless one; and I want forgiveness and direction far too much, to be bitter with you" (Dickens, 1860-1/2002:393). Similarly, when Mrs. Dale of Trollope's *The Last Chronicle of Barset* says of Mr. Crosbie "I forgive him as far as humanity can forgive" (2002: 230), she hints at the limits of human forgiveness. In both cases, the fallible human nature is posited as a

limit or obstacle before forgiveness in comparison to the boundless divine capacity to forgive.

At this point, it is worthwhile to remember Raskolnikov of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866/2002), who is perhaps the best known repentant in literature and offers one of the most poetic appeals to forgiveness. In the novel's epilogue, having been reading the New Testament, which was Sonya's gift to him, Raskolnikov finally becomes first open to the experience of the other in the steppes of Siberia; and then, overwhelmed with both ecstasy and the weight of his crime, he throws himself at Sonya's feet crying. It is through repentance together with gaining the ability to love an *other* that he can seek forgiveness. Nevertheless, Sonya's love and her non-judgemental witnessing of Raskolnikov's repentance is indispensable to the realization of forgiveness. As such, forgiveness takes place in the interpersonal space, where the transgressor finds the opportunity to be reborn, as Kristeva (1992) argues, without forgetting or cleansing the past action but by changing the Law that once gave meaning to one's existence. The earlier übermann is now humbled. In Kristeva's psychoanalytical reading, the forgiven and the forgiver are now "capable of identifying with a loving father, an imaginary father", who upholds "a new symbolic law", and makes creation of new meaning possible (1992: 207). Still in this example, the loving father that Raskolnikov seeks shelter in and Sonya comes to represent with her loving kindness is no other than Jesus Christ within Dostoevsky's devout Christian discourse.

There is also another significant aspect of forgiveness involved in this instance: Sonya is not the victim of the crime Raskolnikov asks forgiveness for; rather, she acts as a surrogate figure for the victim, and listens to Raskolnikov without judging, like the analyst says Kristeva (1992). She thereby facilitates the formation of a common discursive space, a religious one at that, where forgiveness can take place. While forgiveness once again relies on the presence and authority of God as its condition of possibility in this encounter, Dostoevsky's representation of forgiveness anticipates secular philosophical and psychoanalytical assessments of forgiveness in the 20th century by raising questions as to whether forgiveness can turn inwards, and whether anyone other than the transgressed can grant forgiveness together with accentuating the importance of a sympathetic listener with whom the transgressor shares the same discursive framework.

Already by the end of the 19th century, forgiveness had begun to lose its strictly religious connotation manifesting in the language of characters

as a rhetorical trope. A case in point would be the novels of Thomas Hardy which reflect the Victorian anxiety about having lost God as the supreme being presiding over the ways of man. Obscuring the true religion and real teachings of Jesus, Christian theology has abandoned humanity to its benevolence in the Hardyian universe (Gibson, 2015: 122-3), and Hardy's characters struggle with their own faults and the faults of others in their lives, failing each time to seek or offer sincere or timely forgiveness. In discussing Hardy's novels, Gibson (2015) demonstrates how several characters resort to a hollow discourse of forgiveness that fail to offer any reconciliation because they are yet unable to find a new moral framework for "the ethical concepts and practices that had been anchored in the divine" (123). In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, for example, the lives of Tess and Alec take a tragic turn when on their wedding night, Tess forgives Angel for his past affair but Angel cannot forgive her in the same way because for him the transgressions at stake are not comparable. All Tess can receive is blabber about the rules of forgiveness. When Angel can finally reciprocate with his forgiveness, it is already too late. Likewise, in *Jude the Obscure*, conversations concerning forgiveness between characters fail to reach fruition as either the appeal to forgiveness is only gestural or the parties lack a common discursive ground to negotiate the terms of forgiveness. The several encounters between Sue and Jude, Sue and Phillotson, and even Sue and Father Time can be given as examples. Dismissive of Christian theology but incapable of relying on another frame of reference, Sue's engagement with forgiveness remains only at the rhetorical level. On the one hand, it might be possible to discuss these failures in relation to the deficiency of faith in characters who lack a scripture to fall back on for forgiveness. On the other hand, returning to Kristeva's analysis of forgiveness, it is possible to argue that forgiveness fails to take place in these instances due to the absence of a listener who hears and does not judge. In any case, each of these scenes, where forgiveness is sought, granted or denied, is an exploration into the conditions of possibility for forgiveness in a secular context raising questions as to what crimes, if any, can be forgiven, who can forgive or be forgiven, and whether forgiveness requires or admits conditions.

The literature of the following century, in response to the historical conjuncture of events in the period, would only complicate the matter with representations of human cruelty, oppressions of all sorts, and inconceivable atrocities leading among other things to Adorno's interjection that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric", and rendering forgiveness a near impossibility. As hardly forgivable as the events that span particularly

the first half of the 20th century seemed, ironically "scenes of repentance, confession, forgiveness, or apology … have multiplied on the geopolitical scene since the last war, and in an accelerated fashion" not only by individuals but also entire communities (Derrida, 2005: 28). Observing a theatricality in the globalization of such scenes, hence a degree of insincerity, Derrida defines what he calls "pure" forgiveness as an impossibility since what can be forgiven is already forgivable. In other words, for him, the only thing that calls for forgiveness is the unforgivable, the radical evil. Other forms of forgiveness are predicated upon a conditional logic, requiring the transgressor to ask for forgiveness or repent, which Derrida rejects as an economic transaction as well as acts oriented towards asserting sovereignty, hence a hierarchal power relationship. It is in this sense that Derrida would not see the Miltonic description of God's mercy, conditioned upon prayer, repentance and obedience, and requiring retribution through another's death as forgiveness. According to him, "forgiveness is not, it should not be, normal, normative, normalizing" (2005:32) and must always remain mad (39, 49). Derrida would also contest the scene of forgiveness in *Crime and Punishment* discussed above as he argues that there can be no mediation in forgiveness; no third party can interfere in the scene of forgiveness between the transgressor and the victim. This he states while discussing the capacity of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions to grant forgiveness on behalf of the victim. Although his discussion is based on a political body acting in relation to the history of apartheid, it should not be wrong to assume that he would not see Sonya's surrogacy as a justified substitute for Raskolnikov's victim as forgiveness either. It must also be pointed out that although Derrida posits "pure" forgiveness as an impossibility, he does not, nevertheless, dismiss forgiveness as a necessary discourse that informs ethical stance. He rather insists that for forgiveness "to inscribe itself in history, law, politics, existence itself" without being reductive, all discussions need to refer to this idea of pure and unconditional forgiveness (44).

There are points where Kristeva's analysis of forgiveness coincides with and deviates from Derrida's perspective. Unlike Derrida, and Arendt as well, Kristeva (2010), within her psychanalytical framework, deals more with interpersonal encounters of forgiveness than publicly political. She concurs with Derrida and Arendt in that forgiveness can be neither granted by an authority in place of the offended, nor become a topic of negotiation between individuals or rely on conditions. However, she does not see it as an impossibility but rather potentially arising in and through

interpretation, interpretation as pardon, which enables "a rebirth of the psychical apparatus, with and beyond the hatred that bears desire" (193). At this point, she prefers to use the term "pardon" rather than "forgiveness" to bring in the meanings of *par* (through) and *don* (gift) in French to expand upon the meaning of forgiveness which involves "giving sense to the senselessness of unconscious hate" (193). She sees confrontation with hatred possible only through interpretation, via a listener, often times the analyst, "that neither judges nor calculates, but is content to untangle and reconstruct" (194). Such interpretive reconstruction entails a narration, or better perhaps a renarration, that does not forget the crime but signifies it through forgiveness, as also seen in the case of Raskolnikov's repentance above. Earlier in her *Black Sun*, Kristeva wrote, "There is no beauty outside the forgiveness that remembers abjection and filters it through the destabilized, musicalized, resensualized signs of loving discourse." (1992: 206). Accordingly, she asserted that "*[f]orgiveness is aesthetic*" (206).

Arendt, Derrida and Kristeva are only few of the several important names who write about forgiveness at a background where humanity is guilty of several crimes, and where the encounter with the other devoid of hatred is a necessity. Building upon and in conversation with their assessment of political and personal forgiveness, a whole new field of study has been opened up. Julie McGonegal (2009), in her study on the politics of postcolonial forgiveness and reconciliation, argues that while literary texts may not constitute "the means *par excellence* of expressing forgiveness and effecting reconciliation" (13) they nevertheless mediate on the limits and new possibilities of forgiveness and reconciliation in ways "bureaucratic discourse … [and] official documents alone cannot efficaciously" do (14). In a sense, her suggestion resonates with Fredrick Jameson's view of art as a symbolic act that offers imaginary resolutions to otherwise insoluble problems of real life: "a symbolic act, whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm" (1983: 64). According to McGonegal, "[f]iction supplements the public address (and redress) of grievance and pain with a form of discourse that recognizes the limits of legal remedy and that inhabits an affective register that may well *aid* in the creation of a future in which forgiveness and reconciliation are possible" (14). If the resolution is not to be found in the present, aesthetic exploration of forgiveness as a human capacity is thus seen as a foundation for a potential future resolution.

It is in this sense that forgiveness has acquired a new importance in contemporary literature. Exploring encounters between the self and

its others, literature after mid-20th century presents us with scenes of successful and failed attempts at forgiveness, each expanding upon the internal need, ethical responsibility and the limits of forgiveness. Particularly in feminist and postcolonial literature, we find characters who suffer long and mercilessly at the hands of their oppressors but finally find in themselves the strength to forgive them once they have actualized themselves and constituted their independent identity. In Alice Walker's *Color Purple* (1983/2019), for example, Celie finally forgives her husband who had raped and beaten her through years of loveless marriage after she gains her strength and self-confidence, and becomes a business woman. It is also her shared love with her husband for the same woman that makes this forgiveness possible. By the end of the novel not only Celie but the husband is a transformed person. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2005), written a few decades later, Kambili, at the end of the novel, struggles to forgive her father, who was the tormentor of the whole family and the representative of colonial mentality throughout the book. When Kambili's forced attempts to dream herself hugging, and thereby reconciling with her father fail, she seeks solace in remembering their fond memories, few as they are. This somewhat hopeful ending is made possible only by the reclamation of her voice and her identity following a series of painful experiences, hesitations, self-questionings and recognitions. Forgiveness here becomes a reflection of her maturity. Such examples can be multiplied, and they indicate that forgiveness is a capacity realized through acquisition of some degree of agency by these characters as well as the ability to love.

A comparatively more recent novel, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (2015), on the other hand, poses forgetfulness in opposition to forgiveness, constructing it as its negative possibility. Set in the distant past of England, the novel reads as an allegory of all recent and past controversies that had led to political crimes and mass murders. The magical mist that inflicts artificial forgetfulness on the land of Britons and Saxons create only an illusion of peace as it inhibits confrontation with past crimes and any possible forgiveness. As such peace is contingent upon the presence of an external force for its preservation through forgetting. The dreaded slaughter of the dragon responsible for the forgetfulness, on the other hand, does not lead to an outbreak of immediate war but allows the two main characters of the novel, the old couple, remember their past grievances in their marriage and test their love for each other. As both Derrida and Kristeva accentuate, forgiveness need not bury the past for its realization as it can happen, if it is at all possible, only through remembering and assuming responsibility

for it. Although the ending of the novel is somewhat ambivalent, Ishiguro points towards the need for remembrance so that a chance for forgiveness and true love can emerge.

Few and selective as these examples are, it might still not be wrong to suggest that contemporary literature conceives forgiveness as the foundation of subjectivity and an ethical social practice which informs a way of being with others in the world. Referring to discussions of Arendt, Derrida and Kristeva who see forgiveness as a threshold of humanity and gesture towards the equation that "[t]o be human is to forgive", Kelly Oliver suggests that "the absence of forgiveness undermines humanity, subjectivity, and agency" (2004: 180). Building upon this understanding, Oliver develops "a theory of forgiveness, not alienation, as the definitive feature of subjectivity and agency" (180). Thus, the former centuries old understanding of forgiveness as a divine attribute finds its radical reinterpretation in contemporary thought as the precondition of being human, and being with others in the world. Questioning the very category of the human, contemporary literature frequently turns towards forgiveness as a means to confront the past crimes of the human and humanity in general, and explores possibilities of breaking away from the endless reversals of hierarchical dialectics inherent in relationships of power, in which the positions of the transgressor and the transgressed simply keep shifting. However, this does not lead to an idealization of forgiveness, the pure form of which is unattainable, as Derrida cautions us, and which poses the risk of simply perpetuating the victimization of the transgressed where the transgressor hides behind the theatricality of gestural forgiveness. Rather, forgiveness becomes a literary trope, whether attained or failed, through which human error is aesthetically negotiated with agency and ethical practice.

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