

RESPONSE TO REVIEWS

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I want first of all to thank all the contributors to this project, in particular Susan Ingram, who is currently President of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association, for proposing *A Poetics of Forgiveness* as the topic of the first “Meet the Author” session. I am profoundly grateful for the thoughtful and thought-provoking readings by Julie McGonegal and Alice MacLachlan, whose respective works have been so influential for my own thinking. 107

Before I respond specifically to the reviews, I want to begin with a few words about why the discipline of Comparative Literature matters to me, and how I see my own work situated within the field. As a sub-discipline within Literary Studies, a comparative approach allows me to treat a range of cultural contexts through various genres and media. My training also taught me the importance of identifying and inventing appropriate critical tools to frame any analysis. Comparatists often bring together diverse communicative modes and theoretical discourses, which has both positive and negative effects—as we see from the reviews. In all of this, however, textual interpretation remains central to the comparative project—and (for better or worse) there is no end to the text. Finally, I want to add that one of the highlights of the CCLA “Meet the Author” session was speaking with the newer generation of Comparatists. Their projects were, without exception, fascinating and inspiring.

While Julie McGonegal’s *Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (McGill-Queen’s, 2009) is, to my knowledge, the only other book-length study to provide a sustained discussion of forgiveness framed by analysis of literary texts, she does point to important distinctions in our approaches. In particular, McGonegal brings to her work a self-conscious postcolonial critical perspective, a nuanced attention to political overtones, and an interrogation of her own privileged position. As such, I should not be surprised by McGonegal’s question about the role

of the literary critic in *reading* poetic forgiveness into and out of texts. I have to admit that I was broadsided by this. I am very grateful for the opportunity to wrestle with the implications of poetic forgiveness and the problem of sovereign authority. If I have argued that texts speak forgiveness in poetic ways, then it must also be true that critics are spoken by, and subject to, forgiveness, and that we make the texts speak a very specific kind of forgiveness through our readings. I now see the conundrum that in constructing a poetic forgiveness that is unspoken, unconscious, and immeasurable, I do not adequately account for the position of authority that I occupy as critic. I agree that in eliciting what I call poetic forgiveness from texts, which, on the face of it, are not clearly about forgiving, I potentially distort the language of forgiveness. If I am to be true to the ethics of radical responsibility that I advocate, then I need to at least acknowledge the problematic politics of interpretation, even if there is no way to remove myself from critical authority.

108 McGonegal is right to press me somewhat on the sanitized bureaucratic discourse of forgiveness in South Africa's TRC, and also asks good questions about the function of poetic forgiveness in different media. But, the point I want to address is Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the refusal of Indian Residential School survivors to speak of forgiveness in this context. This very issue has had me back-peddling swiftly from my own optimistic theorization of poetic forgiveness. Curiously, in my current research on Indigenous legal traditions and larger questions of redress regarding Aboriginal peoples in Canada, I find myself unable to speak of forgiveness in any form. This is due in part to the fact that, as a Canadian, I am deeply ashamed of my country's treatment of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples (and critics often judge their own nation more harshly than others). But it is also because this would be an instance of "inappropriate forgiveness." Where there is ongoing and unacknowledged oppression, any talk of forgiveness constitutes a re-victimization. In particular because of unresolved land claims disputes and misunderstood relations of sovereignty and citizenship, we are a long way from fulfilling any of the conditions of forgiveness, whether prosaic or poetic.

Like McGonegal, Alice MacLachlan points to the effort involved in reading across disciplines. She points out that my work presents challenges to analytical philosophers, but I would say that her thoughtful comments invite me to rethink the assumptions of my own discipline. The most jarring difference is that moral philosophers work hard to delimit and refine the conditions for forgiveness, teasing out the fine distinctions of each set of requirements, where literary studies works to open up and tolerate multiple and often contradictory meanings.

MacLachlan is right that, while I am critical of certain philosophical positions, I seem at times to accept their work outright without engaging with it critically. At the "Meet the Author" session, I noticed MacLachlan's searching for vocabulary to talk about what poetic forgiveness is not. While "ordinary" or "everyday" forgiveness didn't seem quite right (forgiveness is always extraordinary), "normative forgiveness" is a philosophical term and so also not a good fit. In the end, she settled on "prosaic

forgiveness,” which seems to work well. What I learned from this was that, in my haste to flesh out the category of poetic forgiveness, I had neglected to say enough about what it is not. Indeed, MacLachlan points out the potential risks of casting such a wide net over material and language that can elicit poetic forgiveness. While I am for myself quite comfortable with this ambiguity, and find it mirrored in the ways in which literary texts invite multiple and overlapping meanings, I can well see that it limits the communicative potential and the future applicability of poetic forgiveness. Like McGonegal, MacLachlan points out that I skirt around the sovereignty question by giving the authority to the text, all the while situating myself within the text or as a third party mediating between the text and the reader.

MacLachlan’s question about the relation between metaphor as it is used in a literary sense and metaphors for forgiveness—figures of speech and proverbs—had not occurred to me. I suspect it would be quite fruitful (and maybe even fun) for the two of us—a literary critic and an analytical philosopher—to take a handful of these phrases and treat them within our disciplines. MacLachlan touches on many other points, but the one I want to address is that of “inappropriate forgiveness.” I spend quite a bit of time discussing inappropriate apology without considering the dangers of forgiving when it is either premature or unwarranted. Forgiveness can be a form of accusation if it pertains to an act the interlocutor did not commit; similarly, forgiveness can be a form of psychic violence when there it is mandatory or the result of coercion, as in some religious contexts or—as critics have argued—a covert precondition for taking part in a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Paradoxically, such cases amount to wrongdoings in themselves. I first encountered Alice MacLachlan’s work through her superb M.A. thesis entitled “The Paradoxes of Forgiveness” (Queen’s 2002), and so I am delighted to be reminded again of this paradox. I wait with anticipation for MacLachlan’s own forthcoming monograph on forgiveness, and will look to it to help me think through her provocative question about the potential costs incurred when forgiveness—poetic or otherwise—loses its descriptive power.

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In closing, I will reiterate my gratitude to Julie McGonegal and Alice MacLachlan for their serious treatment of these important debates, not only of my own work but more generally. My hope is that this exercise has equipped each of us with the capacity to ask better questions and to broaden the scope of inquiry. There is a great deal of important scholarly work to be done in this area, and it is my wish that others take up these questions, stretching and contending the frameworks in whichever ways they see fit.

I eagerly await the next CCLA “Meet the Author” session, and applaud Susan Ingram for her innovative programming, providing Comparatists an opportunity simultaneously to engage with new work in the field and inquire about the ongoing shifts in the conception and practice of our discipline.