Between Truth and Trust

Forgiveness as a Literary and Cultural Challenge

By

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This book first published 2024

Ethics International Press Ltd, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Print Book ISBN: 978-1-80441-290-9

eBook ISBN: 978-1-80441-291-6

This thing called reconciliation … if I am understanding it correctly … if it means this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back … then I agree, then I support it all.

(Cynthia Ngewu in Antjie Krog: *Country of My Skull,* 1999: 164)

To my beloved and forgiving family

Anne and Rasmus
Peter and Pia

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Introduction

"… transforming words into oxygen"

"In the name of our love, forgive me!" [Tess] whispered with a dry mouth. "I have forgiven you for the same [= infidelity]!"
And as he did not answer, she said again –
"Forgive me as you are forgiven! *I* forgive *you*, Angel."
"You – yes, you."
"But you do not forgive me?"
"O Tess, forgiveness does not apply to the case! You were one person; now you are another. My God – how can forgiveness meet such a grotesque – prestidigitation as that!"

(Thomas Hardy: *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 1919/1902: 294)

Forgiveness beyond disciplines

Forgiveness is the easy way out, a mere glossing over of the traces of serious wrongdoing. That was my contention for several years, during which the idea of studying forgiveness never entered my mind, let alone writing a book about it. As a reconciliatory gesture it was too rooted in theology and religion for my agnostic mind, too embedded in individualized psychology and therapy for my aesthetic sensitivity, too associated with soft moral philosophy for my intellectual priorities, and too marginalized within formal judicial systems for my interest in cultural values.

However, my perspective changed after discussions in the early and mid-1990s with friends and colleagues in Croatia before, during, and after the war that brought down the Yugoslavian state, as well as after my first visit to South Africa in 1997 when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission lead by Desmond Tutu was still in session with its hearings on Apartheid atrocities. Here, the eruptions of violence exploded in two highly complex political and cultural contexts in which all sides, local and international, tried to construct a dichotomous black-and-white picture of the conflicts. Each party in the conflicts made up their own bipolar mapping of the situation and used it to rally international support for their own interpretation, almost deliberately defining the situation in a way that hampered any possibility for a shared everyday life together with their opponents. Under

such conditions the attempts to fence in enmity and atrocities produced more unsolvable questions than unquestioned solutions.

The experience of these impasses forced me into a long period of reflection on cultural reconciliation, on shared cultural values and sense of justice, on individual visions of life, on the role of the profound human capacity manifested in literature and the arts for imagining possibilities beyond one's own ways and views of life, and for questioning the limits of humanity itself. The outrageous cruelties that wreaked havoc in these two and many other places before and after the 1990s by adverse ethnic, political, and religious groups disrupted the shared cultural ramifications of local ways of living across cultural dividing lines. This cultural and social break-up challenged the capacity of religion, psychology, moral philosophy, and law to provide sustainable frameworks with a future perspective. Such disciplinary platforms of ideas, concepts, cultural and institutionalized practices, which are often activated to channel mental and physical coping strategies both on an individual and a collective level, had come to a dead-end, and the discursive registers they offered to formulate the necessary questions and suggest answers had by and large lost their persuasive powers.

An important reason for this predicament is that the comparative quantitative calibration of the size of radical wrongdoing, necessary for a judicial decision to be made in the first place and then to be accepted by a general sense of justice, was suspended: how would a verdict be able to measure the killing of 10,000 compared to the killing 100,000 or more? What sense does it make that Eugene de Kock, a leading South African Apartheid perpetrator, was sentenced to 212 years in prison even when the verdict followed the law? Moreover, how can ethical reasoning and conceptual clarifications of moral philosophy compete with all-absorbing emotions of resentment and hatred, often embedded in old traditions of blood feud and revenge dressed up as values of honor and shame, and still surviving waves of migration and local changes in societal structures and religions? In addition, the universalizing theological categorizations of sin, guilt, and divine teleology can be hard to use as handles to turn around the politically motivated destruction of lives, particularly in the frequent cases when religious institutions and some of their leaders are themselves part of the conflict, and some of them willingly have justified ideas that offer an ethical underpinning for human mischief. At times, blatant racism has

been legitimized with reference to the order of nature as created by various deities. However, in places like the Balkans and South Africa there was no need of a divine supplement to explain how a deranged political culture indulged in transgressions of justice on a scale beyond human proportions. Human agency and culpability were clear as daylight. Finally, how can psychological therapy, targeting the individual person, be the main restorative instrument in cultural contexts where individuals, family, community, ethnicity, tribe, religion, and language are all inextricably bundled together in the conflicts?

The basic questions with which people then are forced to grapple, contain a complexity that stifles human apprehension and imagination behind the apparent simplicity of the relevant questions: how could anybody do it? Could I have done it? Or worse: why did I do it? In such cases, our very conceptions of humanity are challenged, individually and collectively, their boundaries are destabilized, and new clarifications are called for. In her gripping novelistic docufiction on the mass rape of a Palestinian woman by Israeli soldiers in 1949, *Minor Detail* (2017), Adania Shibli turns victims and perpetrators alike into nameless and faceless bodies, even including the woman who later digs into the then buried case. Dehumanization exceeds the level of individuals involved and contaminates the very foundation of human interaction and communality. We are faced with "A humanity that has lost its continuity with humanity," as Milan Kundera aptly says in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978) (Kundera 1996: 216) and with the question of how to get our humanity back.

Traumatic experiences may also be caused by cataclysmic natural disasters. They are nobody's fault; they just happen and may, as an awe-inspiring sign of transhuman powers, affect many people more seriously than any manmade destruction. In some cases, the interpretation of such sweeping devastation may involve human flaws—directly if lack of proper precaution and timely warning were to blame, indirectly when the faithful of various religious denominations suggest the cause to be human trespass against divine commands. In this book I consider only radical wrongdoing with an unambiguous human agency that raises the issue of retribution, or alternatively, of reconciliation, even when the identity of the individual perpetrators cannot always be established. The question running through the book is not if reconciliation is necessary, but which insights in the

cultural context of wrongdoing are required for it to be possible at all, and how and where to create this understanding.

There are, of course, also other less serious types of wrongdoing in human life. There is the fact of *being* wrong by making errors in judgment and fact-checking which we can adjust, maybe with some embarrassment; or things *going* wrong because of misunderstanding rather than misbehaving or ill will. Many such errors belong to the trivial everyday stepping-on-someone's-toes type of wrongdoing which we may put right by uttering a ritualistic 'I'm sorry,' as all of us have done countless times. Ethics may be involved though, if we lie or make such errors deliberately by *doing* wrong, but most often such instances can be forgotten after a few mumbled apologies. Kathryn Schulz has discussed such everyday cases in her sharp and witty *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error* (2010), but she explicitly leaves out serious iniquities altogether and hence an ethical perspective, unless it is there as a shadowy uneasiness embedded in the frictions of daily life (Schulz 2010: 13) (also Austin 1957; Cherry 2024: 110). This book will have a different focus: error will always rhyme with terror.

For my part, forgiveness beyond the ritual quotidian apologies lubricating our everyday life eventually turned out to be the first of two focal points for my ongoing reflection on reconciling with iniquities, the other being literature in an interconnection with forgiveness, which I will explain and exemplify throughout the book. I do not intend to redefine or reinvent coping or healing practices to make them more efficient in the service of people in serious need. This necessary and invaluable endeavor is pursued by many people showing devotion, resilience, and competence that cannot but attract the greatest admiration. Based on a profound ethical engagement, they transmit the practical resources offered by judicial systems, psychological experiences, moral principles, and religious institutions to prisoners, victims, and their families living with posttraumatic effects, as well as engage in research, like the impressive London-based *The Forgiveness Project*, the *Hawaii Forgiveness Project* based on the Polynesian notion of *aloha* (compassion, love, pity, mercy, peace) and the USA based *Discover Forgiveness*, an activity run by the Templeton Foundation.[1] In such contexts, the term 'coping strategy' is well-known from psychology and therapy as

[1] www.theforgivenessproject.com; www.hawaiiforgivenessproject.org; www.discoverforgiveness.org.

a set of tools and practices to support individuals getting back on track after they, for a variety of reasons, have lost grip on their lives. I do not endeavor to improve or evaluate such concrete coping practices and their protocols, but aim instead to understand the broader coping strategies, their contexts, and their limits embedded in collective approaches to deal with atrocities in their cultural and historical contexts. Such broader coping strategies I will call *reconciliation strategies*. To cope means to cope with something, maybe with singularly negative or even repulsive aspects of a person; to reconcile means to reconcile with people or embodied social situations in their totality. Hence, reconciliation is about interaction, be it with deities and spiritual powers or with fellow humans, and, therefore, embedded in cultural norms, values, and habits. Forgiveness is one such reconciliation strategy.

The attempts to understand the workings of such strategies also open one's eyes to the limits of even the most well-intended and carefully implemented reconciliatory practices. We do no service to reconciliation by forgetting that it is the reality of vengefulness, rather than human benevolence and the mind-blowing reality of atrocities, that make reconciliation a difficult and necessary cultural experiment (French 2001: 97–98). When the effects of egregious wrongdoing block any reconciliatory process, a basic question of the boundaries of humanity itself cannot avoid being addressed, together with the practical attempts to tackle pressing everyday problems in the wake of traumatic experiences. This was and still is the situation today in the Balkans and South Africa, as well as during the early decades of the twenty-first century in many other places around the globe. While I began planning this book, the Russian attack on Ukraine erupted, and while I am now in the process of writing it, the Israeli-Palestinian powder keg has exploded again. Meanwhile, several forgotten warzones around the world that have lost their status as breaking news are still scenes of unimaginable atrocities. To raise awareness of the need for shared reconciliation strategies across cultural dividing lines and to promote a profound reflection on the conditions and limits requires access to experiences and texts beyond what can be contained in individual disciplines, even those with forgiveness at the top of their discipline-specific agendas aiming to help break down justified anger and resentfulness. Of course, it would be wrong to underestimate or, still worse, to discard the potential of particular ideas and practices that are of a legal, religious, and psychological nature, or formulated by moral

philosophy, as they are studied, for example, at the important interdisciplinary *Jena Center for Reconciliation Studies*.[2] However, in this book, I will argue that literature and its imaginative powers deliver an often neglected but essential contribution to keeping alive a necessary sense of the entire cultural complexity of reconciliation across and beyond the particular interests, insights, and arguments of special projects and disciplines.

Sometimes theoretical and practical approaches to reconciliation strategies are enhanced by globalization and migration, and sometimes they are held back by the very same processes. Nevertheless, reconciliation is always clearly determined by a concrete and overly complex local history, reaching beyond the horizon of recent devastating events. Even if these are rooted in conflicts or broader cultural transitions nested in the multileveled processes of modern globalization, the often highly complex and long local history co-determines the reconciliation strategies at hand, the values that guide them, and the constraints that define their limits. In this book, forgiveness is, therefore, taken to be one among several cultural strategies by which people, in specific cultural contexts, try to come to terms with experiences on the scale of world-shattering wrongdoing that transgresses that culture's sense of justice in such a way that established norms and practices reach the point of exhaustion. Forgiveness as a cultural notion addresses a need to reconsider the destabilized boundaries of a shared sense of humanity and the sense of justice it implies. As a cultural strategy, one of its goals is to enable people to live on, even with a shattered understanding of what it means to be human, for those harmed and those who did the harming to learn to live with different degrees of pain, remorse, and anger rather than just letting it go. After serious violence, there is no clean slate, but there is the possibility of empowering people to find ways forward for a shared co-existence in their local environments. That is what forgiveness is about.

With reference to specific cultural contexts, some of more recent date, others from a more remote past, I want to stress the fact that no matter how we try to define what the sense of justice might be—and I will try to do so later—it is embedded in the local cultural history of smaller or larger regions. Hence, what appears as a transgressive wrongdoing in one culture

[2] www.jcrs.uni-jena.de.

may be evaluated differently in other cultural environments. In the saga world of medieval Iceland, honor killings offered an entirely reasonable and publicly accepted way of dealing with what, in that cultural context, was conceived of as radical wrongdoing, and, hence, acceptable forms of killing were defined and thus condoned by the law. Today, honor killings are condemned as a crime in most places, even a crime against humanity, while in other places this practice is still in accordance with a local sense of justice and, if brought to court, dealt with differently within various judicial systems.

Likewise, killing as self-defense is not regarded in the same way by all judiciaries, and the legal reaction to it may be evaluated differently according to the public sense of justice. In the USA, the prosecution of such cases may end with an acquittal, while in other legal frameworks it will always result in a verdict. Female genital mutilation is practiced in some cultures in accordance with age-old traditions, sometimes performed with the implicit consent of authorities or under the radar of the present law. In others, it is a legal criminal offense according to both present and earlier laws, not to mention now also glaringly against accepted human rights and repulsive to a general sense of justice. In a multicultural society, prosecution of parents submitting their girls to mutilation out of sight of the public eye may not be in accord with the sense of justice for some people in a migrant community who, at the same time, are clearly aware that the parents break the local law of their new home countries. By contrast, the sense of justice of the majority culture in the same place supports the law and the ensuing legal prosecution. Maybe only few girls are victimized, but as the practice touches deeply rooted norms and convictions regarding humanity and gendered identity in separate but co-existing cultures, opposite emotional evocations of right and wrong will affect a culturally mixed society in its entirety.

Such instances make clear that today the distinction between the local and the rest has been irreversibly blurred. The increasing media awareness of what we now generally call crimes against humanity[3] and the waves of migrants and refugees they create, has widened the context of any locally determined sense of justice to a global scale and questioned the universal values that form the basis of international legal bodies. Inspired by the

[3] https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2024-05/Rome-Statute-eng.pdf (Rome Statute §7).

American *Declaration of Independence* (1776) and its sequel in the French *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* (1789), the Human Rights Convention of the United Nations from 1948 also became a support of the International Court of Justice, which was created in 1945 to solve inter-governmental conflicts and located in the Hague. In 1971, the International Criminal Court, inspired by initiatives of The League of Nations after the First World War, was added with a specific focus on crimes against humanity with the possibility of prosecuting individual perpetrators, as happened with the special courts for war crimes in Yugoslavia and Rwanda. The New York-based Human Rights Watch from 1978 is an NGO critically surveying the global compliance with human rights and investigating breaches in view of the possibility of opening a case with an international court.[4] Within the European Union, the European Court of Justice, having already been created in 1952 and located in Luxembourg, oversees compliance among member states with regulations issued by the union, while the European Court of Human Rights, situated in Strasbourg, was established in 1959 by the European Council and is open for applications lodged by individuals, groups, and member states concerning trespasses of the European Convention of Human Rights. Around the world, local tribunals following the principles of the international courts have been established in the aftermath of war, civil war, and dictatorship to deal with crimes committed during social eruption and suppression.

Although all legal bodies are based on universal legal principles with human rights as their backbone, the very complexity of this legal network makes it understandable that the universality of its foundations, as concerns the definition of crimes against humanity, does not square with global acceptance in terms of ratification by local governments and parliaments, let alone with its effect on local varieties of age-old, culturally determined senses of justice and notions of crime. Far from being an argument for doing away with universal human rights and the judiciary that goes with them, this is a way to recognize the limits of their effect. Today forgiveness and other reconciliation strategies relevant for approaching atrocities experienced in present and past warzones cannot be considered outside the globalized multicultural sites, in which the tensions between the local and the global frame the messy cultural reality for most people around the world.

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[4] www.hrw.org/about/get-local/new-york.

This book will investigate how attempts to come to terms with radical wrongdoing in such contexts imply also more than forgiveness, although this notion of predominantly Western origin has dominated the global agenda for the study of reconciliatory strategies. And, for clear historical reasons: this particular kind of reconciliation belongs to the same cultural context that has given birth to the ideas of human rights and the ensuing definition of crimes against humanity which together are used to measure the scale of concrete iniquities around the globe by international courts. The whole package synthesized an understanding of humanity with formal law and ideas of justice which has travelled across the globe together with the European colonization and Western dominance and has blended in with local values and judiciaries, even if contested by local customary and normative principles. This complex and globalized co-existence is the cultural reality in which radical wrongdoing occurs, is evaluated, and has to be coped with, as well as the context in which forgiveness both emerges as a possibility and meets its limits. There is no neutral universalist platform on which to offer a global definition of humanity and justice, radical wrongdoing and reconciliation, only the difficult ongoing negotiations in the gray zone of justice in specific and complex cultural contexts. Here, the tough challenge, especially after radical wrongdoing, is to imagine a livable but unpredictable future and to rework emotionally charged memories in order for them to be an integral part of this future. Such cultural contexts frame my analysis of forgiveness as a challenge in literature and culture.

Literature and imagination

Throughout history, cataclysmic events across the globe caused by humans, such as those that took place in the Balkans, in South Africa, and elsewhere, have elicited a vast body of creative products in literature and the arts, and the output continues to proliferate in new genres and media. Actually, past catastrophes continue to stir our minds across centuries as active parts of living cultural memory through ongoing reworkings and reinterpretations in verbal and visual arts. Some of them no longer resonate in local literature and art, like the Danish crusades in the Baltic regions in the twelfth century, wiping out peoples with the blessing of the Pope; others exercise an almost unstoppable and even growing global fascination, like the Trojan Wars. Such texts address basic questions about humanity, together with stories

about the individual fates of people, disruption of traditions and values, uprooting of families, emotional outbursts beyond individual control, radical destruction of sites that were indispensable for identity formation, conflicting memories and interpretations, painful silences and suppressed guilt, obstruction of law, and sense of justice. As Peter Gray and Kendrick Oliver state in *The Memory of Catastrophe* (2004), this process is an "aggregate realisation of a profound sense of cultural disruption across members of the affected community" in which "the radical new knowledge that is the mark of the catastrophic enters into a negotiation with the cultural logic of the past" (Gray and Oliver 2004: 7, 9).

The importance of cultural products that can promote this negotiation does not primarily depend on their historical reliability, but on their capacity to grasp the complexity of the cultural consequences of the core events beyond what can be grasped by the discourses of any single scientific discipline, cultural institution, or ideological platform. The language of imagination is, on the one hand, a way of grasping a past in its overwhelming and at times devastating enormity and locating it within human experience—it actually happened or might have happened—but beyond a comprehension informed by law, psychology, theology, or moral philosophy. Imaginative language may give access to the painful past in collectively understandable forms that, however, do not betray the individuality of past experiences or their local nature. In contrast to a legal investigation digging up sufficient forensic evidence or to a political program for the future, literature never alienates the work of memory from that of emotions; nor does it separate old and informal local habits from an official judicial and political framework. Moreover, in contrast to a verdict, literary works are always an invitation to new interpretations and rewritings. The power of literary imagination comes from its capacity to keep together what is disconnected by other discourses.

This broader imaginative process unfolds by a necessary detour through narratives, symbols, and images which may or may not enable people to imagine a both personal and shared cultural identity (in a European perspective, see for example Dijkhuizen 2018, Gibson 2015; in a postcolonial perspective, for example McGonegal 2009). Thus, artistic inventiveness nurtures the capacity of humans to integrate the indigestible experiences as a genuine part of their culture, their sense of humanity, and their future without reducing its otherwise destructive enormity. Literature keeps alive

the double perspective which is the prerogative of imaginative products: we are confronted with past experiences impersonated by individuals, their bodies, minds, and emotions, but they are inscribed in a collective memory that make them more than individual experiences.

Creative literary imagination articulated in a shared language is also a way of looking into the not yet existing reality of tomorrow and of making experiments with its possibilities for a reconfiguration of human identity. People have "a need for new beginnings and stories that encapsulate and exemplify freedom" (Pagani 2016: 166). In the same spirit, the South African writer Njabulo Ndebele comments on the use of narrative in the post-Apartheid period during the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC):

> And so it is that the stories of the TRC seem poised to result in one major spin-off, among others: the restoration of narrative. In few countries in the contemporary world do we have a living example of people reinventing themselves through narrative. [...] The real challenge is [...] in the capacity for our society to stimulate the imaginations of its peoples through voices that can go beyond the giving of testimony, towards creating new thoughts and new worlds. Only now does our experience resonate with moral import. (Ndebele 1999: 27–28)

Therefore, understanding forgiveness as a cultural challenge is intimately linked to forms of imaginative expression—verbal first of all but not only—that can embrace its entire context of past, present, and future, of suffering and survival, of memory and vision, of doubt and hope (Barenboim and Saïd 2004; Charlton 2011; Larsen 2023). Otherwise, forgiveness would be isolated as a particular concept within a discipline, a therapy, an ethical system, a footnote in the margins of a law, or a particular issue within separate faiths. Literature develops forms to grasp the paradox of Sonja in Richard Flanagan's novel *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1998) dealing with the traumatic experiences of the Balkans in the 1990s: "She was trying to forget as hard as she was trying to remember" (261).

Without neglecting the importance of the clarity of law, psychology, theology, or moral philosophy, literature is always, and on various textual

levels, modifying the focus of the study of forgiveness. In many cases, the singular disciplines construct examples that fit into the disciplinary framework, like 'Let's imagine John has wronged Joan …', 'Assume Brad has suffered child abuse …, or 'Suppose Linda caused a car crash and now meets a victim …' (e.g. Cherry 2021; Cherry 2024; Nussbaum 2016; Pettigrove 2004). Such cases are invented to illustrate an argument made prior to the examples; they support it, but do not challenge it. Literary imagination is different. I have not constructed its cases to fit my purpose. They are all more comprehensive than any individual reader's focus; they enlarge it and challenge it. Focusing on the entire cultural complexity of wrestling with life-shattering experiences beyond an individual level, literature is more preoccupied with the limits of such systems and their mutual conflicts than with their solutions. It keeps the wounds open, reminding us of forgiveness as an ongoing business. Thus, literature exposes the openness and ambiguities which are the reality of the cultural processes of which both literature and forgiveness are part.

In this context, people may see literature as a stock of artful examples of how individuals or groups confront experiences of heinous violence in words and actions. Literature may satisfy such expectations. Yet, more importantly, literature works across genres and cultures, in translations and adaptations, to create words, images, narrators, and other discursive tools for readers to stimulate their capacity to place themselves in the world of others, and to do so on a level beyond the insight and verbal competence of the characters. Literature empowers readers' ability to imagine other notions of unforgivable acts, other reconciliation strategies, and other religious and normative protocols than those which they subscribe to themselves. Today, such differences co-exist in places where reconciliation is needed to imagine ways to bridge them. As fiction, literature has a firm grasp of reality in all its complexity.

If one goal of this book is to present a notion of forgiveness as a cultural challenge in the larger context of reconciliation strategies across the globe, the other is to show how forgiveness and literature together form one point of gravity in this process: "The first duty of memory is to find words to bear testimony, the second is to try and explain what happened, then it's time for cleansing, and finally for transforming words into oxygen" (Krog 2003: 148). Literature is instrumental in that transformation.

Overview

In three parts, with an introduction and a concluding perspective, the argument of this book evolves in a permanent exchange between conceptual reflections and literary analyses within concrete historical and cultural contexts. Framing the book, this "Introduction" has placed radical wrongdoing and forgiveness at its center and pointed to literature as an essential medium for the understanding of the complexity and the limits of forgiveness, seen as an experimental and precarious reconciliation strategy that both supports and challenges the culture in which it unfolds.

The first part of the book, "The conceptual challenge," may offer more of an uphill read than the rest given that it lays out the conceptual ramifications of the remaining chapters. Nevertheless, substantial and detailed literary examples about life-changing human experiences, will provide abstract argumentation with the power of breathing human life. This framework is presented in two chapters dealing first with the intimate relationship between forgiveness and literature, and then with the necessary involvement of emotions and memory in the unfolding of forgiveness. This take on forgiveness focuses on the comprehensive and diverse cultural processes in which acts of forgiveness are engaged, rather than on the application of a well-established discipline-specific terminology. In the first chapter, "Forgiveness and literature," forgiveness is introduced as a verbal act, a particular kind of speech act, prompting a process that reworks rather than recalls the past. Engaging with a crippled sense of justice and human identity, the speech act of forgiveness aims to carry people beyond past and actual experiences, and hence it has to find imaginative forms that can articulate the emotional engagement in the present in view of the future. Through discussion of a colonial court case in Isak Dinesen's "Kitosch's Story" from *Out of Africa* (1937) the chapter elucidates the precarious role of forgiveness in a complex cultural context and foregrounds four dimensions of literature through which literature connects with forgiveness. Via a reading of Joseph Conrad's novel *Lord Jim* (1900) the second chapter, "Memory and emotion," outlines notions of memory and emotions in a historical perspective. Conceptually, the chapter draws on the more recent idea of remembering that takes it to be an act in the present that activates and selects past experiences, while emotions establish a reciprocal relation between a subject and its surroundings that directs the consciousness

toward the external sensual reality. The chapter argues that, taken together, the speech act of forgiveness and literature reach beyond the moment of the utterance itself by integrating memory and emotions in a way that may expand the limits of forgiveness.

In the second part, "The cultural challenge," the two chapters investigate the historical changes in the notion of forgiveness, not as a fixed concept, but as it evolves and blends with fundamental ideas of unforgivable acts. A turning point in the history of forgiveness and the amalgamation of retribution and reconciliation is the emergence of Christianity as a dominant European and later global religion. Via an analysis of Euripides' *Hippolytus* (fourth century BCE) and a side glance at the genre of confession, the third chapter, "Toward Christianity," takes us from the slaughterhouse of the *Books of Samuel* in the *Old Testament* to the dogmatism of Thomas Aquinas. The fourth chapter, "Beyond Christianity," lays the groundwork for today's discussions of human rights following the European Enlightenment within and beyond Christianity, mainly focusing on Enlightenment philosophy and a few literary texts. As a guiding line through the historical trajectory outlined in these two chapters, I trace the changing ways in which the unforgivable determines the forms and limits of forgiveness when countering the effects of unforgivable trespasses.

During the European Enlightenment, the idea of the unforgivable was transposed from a religious to a secular foundation. The unforgivable, or the 'radical evil,' gradually lost its divine ramifications as well as the ethics that went with it, and became an aspect of social interaction alone; yet, even when transformed into an important notion in a secular ethics, the interpretation was and still is influenced by Christian thinking. Nonetheless, with this transmutation the ground was laid for the first sketches of universal human rights and crimes against humanity, as well as the ensuing secular conceptions of unforgivable acts like mass atrocities, torture, or offenses against women's and children's rights. Since then, such acts have come to set the agenda across the globe for any discussion about forgiveness and its constraints, often in conflict with local norms for revenge, retribution or, alternatively, reconciliation or penance. As a long-lasting effect of European colonization, today this history forms, directly or indirectly, an active part of the lived cultural reality across cultures, also when it comes to the interpretation of transgressions of the law and a sense of justice.

For some readers, it may have seemed logical to devote the first section to the historical survey and then place the more lead-footed conceptual reconfiguration in the following section. I have chosen the reverse order for one reason: most histories of forgiveness tend to concentrate only on the notion itself and on Europeanized history alone and its Christian traditions. I want to break with that bias from the beginning by suggesting a more complete conceptual toolbox to be used for a broader and more relevant understanding of this history. My hope is that this compositional choice will enable readers to open the history of forgiveness not only to the reactions to mass violations on the global agenda, but also to the cultural complexity of places, both in Europe and elsewhere, in which the horizon of Christianity is not the only one nor the most important one.

The third part of the book, "The literary challenge," contains three chapters. The first two chapters are constructed around temporal and spatial transitions. The first of these, "Forms in transition," focuses on European literary history by proposing an analysis of the changing role of the European genres of tragedy and comedy in the eighteenth century, parallel to the philosophical development described in Chapter 4. Each of the genres carries one dimension of the problem of reconciliation and radical wrongdoing. Traditionally, fatal transgressive acts in the tragedy represent a conflict between humans and gods, while in the comedy they constitute a purely interhuman affair. This clear distinction between a vertical and divine orientation as opposed to a horizontal and secular sense of direction becomes obfuscated in the moment forgiveness depends entirely on an act of individual human volition, yet at the same time is encapsulated in a universal notion of humanity and human rights. William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1597) and *King Lear* (1606) mark a prefiguration of this transition. Transforming the perspective of Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1783) and Molière's *Dom Juan* (1665), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's and Lorenzo da Ponte's *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786) and *Don Giovanni* (1791) explore the early modern forms of forgiveness and, equally important, their limits, which show a disturbing fragility when realized on purely human conditions.

Chapter 6, "Norms in transition," is preoccupied with the cultural challenge of forgiveness in cultures beyond the Christian and European horizon. In such places, people do not know or accept the notion, but, nonetheless,

they are familiar with equivalent yet different reconciliatory cultural practices. With the Indian so-called Nirbhaya rape case, running between 2012 and 2020, and the pre-Christian world of the Icelandic *Njal's Saga* (c. 1270), the chapter discusses texts and values at odds with the universalizing notions of human rights and secular notions of forgiveness that travelled the world by means of European colonial institutions with strong links to Christian ideas. Alternative values are inscribed in various powerful local codes of honor and shame that for centuries have regulated both the horizontal relations between humans and the vertical relations between humans and divinities. Since the late eighteenth century, similar cultural building blocks have gradually lost their importance in Europe as overarching and unquestioned collective norms dictating social behavior at large, and today, such codes are only valid in particular individual, social, and institutional environments.

The seventh and last chapter, "Contexts in transition," analyzes five literary texts dealing with differing views of wrongdoing and forms of forgiveness. Each of them is dominated by one of five basic cultural contexts which have been active in all previous chapters: the ideological, the religious, the multicultural, the colonial, and the post-colonial context. At times, they overlap in various constellations and always co-exist in the sites of wrongdoing and reconciliation focused upon in this book, though with different weight and degree of mutual conflict. To underpin the global perspective, the texts in the final chapter cut across geographical boundaries: the contemporary Korean novel by Yi Mun-Yol, *The Meeting of the Two Brothers* (1994), placed in a divided Korea; the Afghan novel *Earth and Ashes* by Atiq Rahimi (1999) in which Afghanistan under Russian occupation frames the narrative; Christos Tsiolkas's novel *The Slap* (2008), from a contemporary multicultural Australian environment penetrated by discordant views of both the unforgivable and forgiveness; Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1957) located in an Igbo community in Nigeria around 1900 under British colonial rule; and, finally, the last essay, "A Root in Arid Ground," from Rian Malan's autobiographical coming-of-age memoir *My Traitor's Heart* (1990) from the end of Apartheid South Africa.

The Concluding Perspectives, "… so we get our humanity back," explore the collective and individual dimension of forgiveness played out in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission with a special focus

on Winnie Mandela's testimony, including the fiction that surrounds her case. The chapter activates the entire complexity of the South African cultural context, blending black communities' traditional values with Christian ideas, honor and shame with forgiveness, and secular judiciary with spiritual beliefs.

It would not be possible to use literature to explore the fine line between norms and transgressions, forgiveness and its limits, emotions and memories, as well as cultural and personal identity, if the many works of fiction were just illustrations of human life conditions. They are not. First of all, they penetrate into the profound secrets of language and imagination in such a way that the gray zone of justice I set out to explore stops being gray and explodes in colors that paint a picture far richer and more complex, disturbing and encouraging than my own text or any academic account will ever be able to show. Literature stirs emotions and reorganizes the past and enables us to absorb it, in all its dimensions, into a shared human life that will carry forward into the future. It does so, not because it is good or bad, but because literature proves imagination to be at the core of humanity and shows forgiveness to be a difficult challenge, yet worth trying out when people have been thrown out of their orbit. Forgiveness is embedded in stories about events that call for forgiveness, but the stories also exceed the limits of the events. Literature has been my inspiration to enlarge this perspective with cultural and historical details and reflections, not the other way round.

Practicalities

Realizing that readers are an unruly lot who select and follow their own orders and read the number of pages they choose for themselves, I have attempted to make the chapters independently accessible and, hence, I have not completely avoided repetitions. Cross-references will help readers to move between chapters, indicated like this: (Ch. 2 p. 54) or just (Ch. 3). Source references consist of name, year of the edition used, and page number when relevant: (Konstan 2010: 117) or just (Améry 1980), both in the running text and in the footnotes offering bibliographical summaries. In cases where no misunderstanding is possible, merely page numbers are indicated: (135). The first time that titles are mentioned, I add

the year of their first publication where relevant, but thereafter refer to the edition used. If a title is given in the original language followed by my own English translation, I have not been able to find a published English version. Bibliographical entries consist of the editions used, with the year of the first edition added if relevant: (2009/1783). Titles only mentioned in passing are not included in the list of references. All quotations are given in English, either quoted and modified by me from a published translation and checked against the original, or by colleagues in the case of languages beyond my competence. Quotations translated by me are indicated as such. Links have been checked in the final proofs. Quotations from blockquotes in the subsequent running text are placed within single quotation marks.

I have published articles and given lectures on the topic around the world and have benefited from discussions and reactions from known and unknown listeners and readers. None of the articles are integrated as entire chapters, but are cut up, reshaped, rewritten and redistributed across the new and major parts of the book.

Thank you!

Most of the book was researched during a stay as visiting professor in the Department for Scandinavian Studies, University College London, thanks to the Leverhulme Trust and the School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University. I want to express my profound gratitude for their generous support and my colleagues in London for a stimulating environment.

However, the most important support over the years has come from colleagues and students in my home base since 1998, the Section for Comparative Literature at Aarhus University, where I began planning this book. The work was suspended when I took up a visiting professorship at Sichuan University (2016–2019) and during my participation as author and co-editor of the Leverhulme project *Landscapes of Realism: Rethinking literary realism in comparative perspectives* (2015–2021) which has now been published with John Benjamins in two volumes 2021–2022. After retirement and the conclusion of the Realism project, I have returned to meet the challenge of forgiveness, culture, and literature.

Not least, I am immensely grateful to Dr. Jacob Runner, Kanazawa University, for his careful copyediting of the manuscript. My gratitude also goes to Sarah Palmer and Ben Williams from Ethics International Press, who have secured a smooth, efficient and flexible production process.

I dedicate this book to Anne, Peter, Rasmus and Pia, my two children and their spouses. They have given me support, love, fun, and grandchildren—more than I can ever return in one life. I forgive them beforehand for whatever they may come up with in the future and can only hope they will do the same to me. They have enriched my life with an alleviating surplus of happiness.

Copenhagen, October 2024

Part 1

The Conceptual Challenge

Prospero to Antonio:
You, brother mine, that entertain'd ambition,
Expell'd remorse and nature; who, with Sebastian, –
Whose inward pinches therefore are most strong, –
Would here have kill'd your king; I do forgive thee,
Unnatural though thou art. […]
For you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother
Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive
Thy rankest fault, – all of them.

(William Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, 1999/1611: V, i, 75–80)

Chapter 1

Forgiveness and literature

A cultural risk

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt distinguishes between two basic human actions, forgiveness and promise. The former is rooted in a past the irreversibility of which forgiveness attempts to overcome; the latter is oriented toward a future the unpredictability of which promise sets out to map (Arendt 1998: 237). Forgiveness requires historical honesty and truth; promise offers responsible and trustworthy imaginations of future change. When each of the actions works well and works together, only then can they create a dynamic and expanding cultural space for a shared and shareable human existence. But, if neither or only one of them unfolds properly, how are we then to bridge a troubled past and a future of hope with any sense of a common responsibility for both dimensions? Grappling with this question and with the Holocaust as her backdrop, Arendt finds no answer:

> The alternative to forgiveness [...] is punishment, and both have in common that they try to put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly. It is therefore quite significant [...] that men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and that they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable. This is the true hallmark of those offenses which, since Kant, we call 'radical evil' and about whose nature so little is known, even to us who have been exposed to one of their rare outbursts on the public scene. (Arendt 1988: 241)

Unfortunately, large scale horrific wrongdoing is not as rare as Arendt wishfully claims. In fact, all over the world heinous atrocities are experienced which are unmatched by any proportional punishment that could have satisfied a collective sense of justice, and the promised future plunges into an endless reenactment of past suffering. Arendt's point is that something different from a court ruling but with same finite character should be

put in place; given, however, its nonexistence, only random individual acts of forgiveness may be possible (237). Being enacted in solitude, moreover, such acts will have no cultural significance. For Arendt then, legal systems have come to a dead end, as have the known strategies for reconciliation, and the concepts with which she tries to approach events on a par with the magnitude of the Holocaust, as well as their ensuing cultural and ethical consequences (Pagani 2016).

Not everyone accepts this deadlock. Since the Nürnberg and the Tokyo trials following the Second World War (which define Arendt's context), attempts have constantly been made to get out of the legal and ethical impasse produced by crimes against humanity as they have been defined and redefined since 1945. Around the world, collective experiments continue to be undertaken, some provided with a statutory position, to fashion healing processes and facilitate reconciliation in the public arena from which Arendt in her individualistic perspective regretfully excluded forgiveness (Minow 1998; also Gobodo-Madikizela 2008). Parallel to such initiatives, the ongoing search for a legal foundation for the different international courts has also been intensified. These are based on human rights and occasioned by concrete cases of human rights violations, such as the wars in the Balkans and Rwanda, and they have been set up to establish a legal platform to support various types of transitional justice, with the aim of bringing some kind of sustainable social cohesion to places in the process of recovering from dictatorship, Apartheid, revolution, or civil war.[1] Such initiatives happen on a global scale, in many cases initiated by the United Nations, backed by its Human Rights Declaration[2] and the parallel definitions of crimes against humanity, but in many cases they are established by local authorities and anchored in a local judicial and ethical context.[3] So, various collective reconciliation strategies do actually exist which together try out new ways of balancing law, truth, and justice in view of a future

[1] International Center for Transitional Justice: http://ictj.org; The Crimes Against Humanity Initiative at the Whitney R. Harris Law Institute: http://crimesagainsthumanity.wustl.edu; International Criminal Court: http://www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/default.aspx.

[2] https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

[3] See Carty 1995; du Bois and du Bois-Pedain 2008; Douzinas 2000; Levy and Sznaider 2010; Schaack 1998–1999; Schabas 2012; Sriram and Pillay 2010; Stacy 2011; Thompson 2002; Todorov 2009; Turner 1993.

coexistence left in tatters after battering experiences. However, such strategies can only be analyzed, compared, and evaluated precisely as experiments, not as well-defined models with a universal applicability.

New concepts like 'restorative justice' and reconceptualization of traditional concepts like forgiveness and reconciliation are also being introduced and discussed. Here, Arendt's two implicit presuppositions do not hold: neither that forgiveness is a finite event based on a universal definition, nor that a clearcut distinction on a temporal axis exists between forgiveness and promise. The future-directedness of a promise is also an essential part of forgiveness, yet forgiveness is not necessarily a component of a promise. If forgiveness, as I intend to present in this book, is seen as a cultural practice with the aim of enabling a smaller or larger community to envision a life beyond a traumatic past, its future orientation is more important than its historical reference. This is not because it advocates a forgetting of the past. Quite the contrary: I have found no contribution in the expanding field of studies on forgiveness and reconciliation which subscribes to anything other than a difficult but necessary reworking and reorganizing of the past as an essential feature of any notion of forgiveness and other forms of reconciliation. Forgiveness is empty without digging up the intertwined individual and collective memories of past atrocities, and it cannot be trusted without confronting the whole register of emotions attached to troubled memories as they are reactivated in the present, hand in hand with the reconstruction of the past. Therefore, a study of forgiveness will also have to find or develop concepts of memory and of emotion which, at the same time, support collective confrontation with dark truths of the past and a trustworthy orientation toward the future (Ch. 2).

In this context, punishment is not the only alternative to forgiveness as Arendt surmises, but also repression; forgetting or lying about the past impedes collective reconciliation by breaking from the honesty that Arendt requires in the confrontation with the past. Moreover, the imagination of a future change of perspective on a savage past, which she inscribes in the act of promising, only transcends the emotions released by the savagery and kept alive by memory if they are replaced by a dominant emotional trust in a collective sense of justice as an ethical guide for the future. In the context of Arendt's analysis, Karen Pagani's description of the effect of the practice of forgiveness comes close to what I later will describe in more detail as

'sense of justice' (Ch. 1 p. 13)—an emotional sense of relief from collective pain achieved through acts generally regarded as fair:

> Forgiveness, in its fundamental tie to how we view ourselves in relation to a world of differing perspectives rather than in relation to a single individual, is therefore a necessary performance that resolves the tension between our private and political selves in favor and for the sake of the latter. To practice forgiveness is to respect the spectators' need for new beginnings and stories that encapsulate and exemplify freedom. (Pagani 2016: 166)

To twin truth and trust through acts of forgiveness presupposes, as a minimal requirement, that memory and emotion are conceived of as individually embodied yet still collective processes, not finite events or individual states of mind, established and recognized once and for all. To unearth the truth of a traumatic past takes time, and the enormity of its ignominious details can only be approached step by step in a perhaps infinite process; at the same time, establishing trust in the future is a volatile and precarious process that requires repeated confirmation with the permanent risk of that trust being broken (Ricœur 2006: Epilogue). When forgiveness is enacted in a smaller or larger public space, it will inevitably reach beyond the horizon of individuals working with their memories and emotions encapsulated in the horrifying events addressed by forgiveness, because forgiveness has to be expressed in a shared medium of expression, always involving language. Hence, a study of forgiveness must also take into account the forms and media in which forgiveness, memory, and emotion materialize as one single process which provides the ungraspable past with some kind of comprehensible meaning relevant to present and future generations who will have to come to grips with the agonies of the past.

In this sense, forgiveness is deeply rooted in the workings of imagination that confront an open space before us which we cannot map entirely with the values, identities, and strategies we already know. In *The Principle of Hope* (1954–1959), Ernst Bloch describes in his convoluted prose the future as part of the present but not controlled by the present. The future is not of a different ontological order like a dream or a fantasy; instead, engaging with the future means to look at the present reality from the point of view of historical possibilities not yet being grasped (Bloch 1985: I, 195–248; see Lerner 2015: Ch.

3; Zimmerman 2013: 246–250). This is his definition of hope. However, this engagement requires more than imagination as a mental capacity to speculate about what is not real; also, an emotional trust in hope must be stimulated. I will claim that literature and literary strategies have the potential to be one such privileged medium of expression that may provide forgiveness with a future oriented cultural significance as a thorough reworking and transformation of past experiences beyond individual emotional reactions to memories of profound distress. The imaginary nature of literature points beyond the present, and being grounded in embodied human experience, its effects are profoundly charged with emotions. For forgiveness to operate at all, it must also go beyond the real, even while remaining faithful to the agonizing past and releasing the emotions that stir our sense of justice (Ch. 2). As a cultural strategy therefore, forgiveness needs to be translated and elaborated in imaginative writing to suggest forms, media, and meanings that make it possible to project imaginatively recognizable experiences and visions onto memories of unspeakable wrongs and go beyond standard cultural schemata of interpretation. Without being embedded in a collective medium of expression, such memories cannot be shared and overcome throughout a broader community.

To place forgiveness as the link between truth and trust, I will propose an understanding of forgiveness that satisfies three conditions: (1) although Arendt's reference to the Holocaust is fundamental, we must be able to contextualize forgiveness also outside European history and culture. If not, forgiveness will not have the potential to embrace today's global scenes of atrocities and the attempts to wrestle with them across cultures. (2) In accordance with Arendt, forgiveness must be understood as an action, which means an embodied and dynamic act in the present. Otherwise, forgiveness will not be able to activate and reorganize memories, nor support a present and future sense of justice. (3) Forgiveness must be seen as a particular speech act, that is, an act integrating the past in the present as part of a shared medium, and thus initiating a future-oriented process—or else, forgiveness will not be able to exploit the imaginative power of language, art, and literature. By being intertwined with language, directly or indirectly, forgiveness actively engages with the most important medium of expression that penetrates all aspects of everyday life and identity for people in their particular cultural context where the consequences of atrocities are experienced and reconciliation has to be realized.