Forgiveness and the Social Psyche

CARY NELSON

is Jubilee Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois, Urbana. His most recent books include *Academic Keywords: A Devil's Dictionary for Higher Education*, cowritten with Stephen Watt (Routledge, 1999), *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (Routledge, 2001), and two edited collections: *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (Oxford UP, 2000) and *The Wound and the Dream: Sixty Years of American Poems about the Spanish Civil War* (U of Illinois P, forthcoming).

BEGINNING IN 1996, THE SOUTH AFRICAN Truth and Reconciliation Commission sought to substitute public witness for the formal legal procedures of trial, adjudication of guilt, and exoneration or punishment. There is little doubt that it was better to get responsibility for some of the violent history of apartheid on record than to leave it fundamentally unspoken and unsaid. But the very existence of the commission also conceded the continuing failure of the legal system—even after the fall of apartheid—to punish criminal acts. Unable to bring torturers and murderers to trial, the former archbishop Desmond Tutu's commission settled for having them admit their guilt by giving details of their actions. Amnesty followed. So too did public forgiveness theoretically follow, but a full national healing could not be completed unless forgiveness was also installed in the psyches of all South Africa's citizens. That has proved impossible. The religiously based willingness to grant forgiveness without the negotiation of justice through the legal system was not shared by all who underwent years of anguish. My point is not to fault South Africa for settling for public testimony without trials—the political choices there were severely constrained, and people who learned what had happened to friends, family members, or well-known leaders did get a real measure of relief—but rather to suggest that this gives us a clear test case that lets us see whether a pervasive, publicly accepted forgiveness can grow out of a process that protects all perpetrators from punishment. My estimate is that it cannot.

Meanwhile, a still less satisfactory drama was played out across two continents in 1999 as Chile's former dictator General Augusto Pinochet was indicted for crimes against humanity by a courageous Spanish judge, defended by the Chilean state, and finally freed by the British ruling classes. The absence of a full public accounting of the Pinochet government's record of assassination and murder, despite the work of an earlier commission, leaves the Chilean people without satisfactory public warrant for private forgiveness. In Chile there will not even be a full public account of the government's history of violence.

Even if these public processes had developed differently, there is no guarantee that individuals would choose to forgive in their wake. Yet the private decision whether to forgive historical transgressions is nonetheless inescapably relational. The psychic struggle is undertaken in response not only to an original set of events but also to their discontinuous public disclosure and the developing legal status of key perpetrators.

Kristeva's provocative interview may draw too fixed a division between public and private realms, between social and psychic spaces. The public and the private are often interdependent and mutually constitutive. Indeed, a sense of history can lead individuals to decide that consciousness itself is a public responsibility and a symbol of participation in public life. Certainly, it is a precondition to any carefully thought-out public act or public statement. In the South African and Chilean cases cited above, people may choose not to forgive, and they may do so in part because of the failed public process of accounting. Kristeva herself argues that social life requires structures for jurisdiction and punishment, that such procedures cannot simply be waived. To pardon Klaus Barbie or Augusto Pinochet without judgment or punishment, she points out, would be unbearable.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X62088 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Yet often enough individuals may feel the accounting or the punishment provided by the legal system to be inadequate. They may even believe a full public accounting can never be given, either because records have been destroyed and victims and perpetrators have died or because there is finally no satisfactory accounting for exceptional events. As Kristeva realizes, the watershed case—in our century of world wars—is of course the Holocaust. Since there will never be a satisfactory explanation for that level of monstrosity and since the entire list of the guilty will almost surely never be compiled, their actions never chronicled, let alone justice meted out to them all, many now in their graves, we may feel that forgiveness is particularly inappropriate.

To forgive; to let go, if not to forget; to move on; to forgo that time and place and take up alternative futures—all these options may seem obscene in the presence of events that cannot be understood. Kristeva suggests that incomprehensibility is a form of meaning, that it has, in effect, its own productive semiosis. Incomprehensibility surely does signify, but only as a placeholder for more satisfactory forms of meaning. We can make no lasting peace with the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust. In that context the refusal of personal forgiveness can be a form of public witness. It signifies that the German nation-state bears its burden of guilt until the end of time, or at least for so long as individuals refuse forgetfulness and withhold forgiveness.

The guilt of nation-states is in a sense transferable to all subsequent generations of citizens. My family immigrated to the United States in the late nineteenth century, yet I must nonetheless take on a citizen's responsibility for the nation's previous historic crimes, among them the enslavement of African Americans and the extermination of much of the Native American population. No forgiveness for these crimes is acceptable. The denial of forgiveness is not only a refusal of forgetfulness but also a rejection of any ideology of transcendence and any false public fiction of rebirth.

Refusing forgiveness is one of the fundamental ways of placing some acts outside the human community. Though most of the horrors in history were committed by human beings and thus represent forms of human behavior, we can still cast them out of our definitions of acceptable social life. Forgiveness that grants a new beginning to history's worst criminals risks symbolically integrating certain unacceptable acts into our public life. At that point charity toward monsters itself acquires some of the attributes of violence.

Yet individual victims may need to forgive—even partly to forget—in order to get on with their lives. There is reason, indeed, for a public acknowledgment of a special right to forgiveness for history's victims. They can be helped in that regard by a firm commitment to public accounting and public memory. We can take on some of the burden of remembering and thus partly free victims from the endless renewal of their trauma.

The right of perpetrators to forgive themselves is more problematic. For high-ranking Nazis or others involved in administering the death camps to forgive themselves merely adds another level of transgression to their crimes. Charity toward the self in such a context is disingenuous or deceived. Forgiveness amounts to a form of pride in committing an unspeakable crime.

Of course, in daily life we forgive ourselves and others forgive us for minor transgressions and accidents all the time. That kind of forgiveness—with the attendant potential to forget—is necessary for our sanity and our survival. And it helps point to the cost of forgiving far more serious violence. For historical forgiveness is linked to forgetfulness, to absolving ourselves of the responsibility to remember. The potential for that kind of forgiveness—as events recede into the past and lose their purchase on present life—is always there. Humanity eventually always forgives itself, save for historians and others with antiquarian interests, and it does so by abandoning its investments at once in criminals, victims, and the events that tied them together.

For those of us who do historical work with marginalized or disenfranchised subcultures, inculcating a refusal to forgive can be an integral part of our scholarly commitments. I am not in-

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X62088 Published online by Cambridge University Press

clined to forgive Nazi Germany for the Holocaust; if reading Holocaust poetry made me more likely to forgive, I would read less of it than I do. Writing about the history of the American left—and sustaining the will to recover its long-suppressed traditions—entails neither forgiving nor forgetting its history of marginalization. I recently analyzed some of the poetry Alvah Bessie wrote in prison as one of the Hollywood Ten in part because I refuse to forgive the federal government for putting him there. Writing about the Spanish Civil War—and caring enough to continue the research that makes writing about it with some degree of passion possible—means not forgiving Franco for nearly four decades of assaults on his own people. To give detailed readings of Langston Hughes poems now is in part to compensate for years of neglect by the English profession. To forgive the profession for its racism would be to dehistoricize our current efforts toward recovery.

Could one, alternatively, forgive but not forget? Not easily, certainly not without both public and personal practices designed for recurrent commemoration, remembering, and forgiving. Only a provisional, contingent forgiveness requiring continual renewal could seek separation from forgetfulness. One might, to cite the South African context again, institute repeated recitations, not the single allocution sometimes demanded of criminals who plead guilty.

Kristeva allows for the possibility of comprehending an act in its horror, not erasing its memory, and yet granting the person who committed the act the right to begin anew. I am not sure I find this sequence credible. How much of the horror of our century's worst acts of violence can we really know, short of participating in the events themselves? And how much of such horror could we hold in our minds thereafter even then? If the charity she proposes is to earn its extraordinary right to grant forgiveness, it must first live in the bowels of the death camps, take into itself that fear, breathe alike with the victims and the German personnel.

Curiously enough, the therapeutic model Kristeva invokes might provide access to something like legal acknowledgment. Imagine sparing a murderer from the death penalty but requiring a prison therapy regimen aimed at self-understanding and social consciousness. The goal of therapy in part would be to get a perpetrator to understand the full meaning and impact of violent acts. The punishment would be not simply incarceration but also self-knowledge. Time alone would not produce that result. Help would be required, particularly the assistance of individual counseling, which would no doubt ironically install forgiveness of a sort in the counselor. Kristeva is probably right to say that a certain forgiveness—at least in the form of empathy and understanding—is required from the therapist, not an easy or by any means pleasant prospect for those therapists who have true sociopaths for clients. But I would not want to place this very great burden on the rest of us. I have no wish to be Hitler's therapist. Nor can I find grounds for faith in the universal possibility of self-transformation. I am more inclined to take therapeutic forgiveness as a special case rather than as a model for the society as a whole.

Yet it is also true that we are all in more than one categorical sense forgiven in advance for anything we might do. Because we can count on forgetfulness, we can count on historical absolution, though we may well not be around to witness the unfolding of universal amnesia. The existence of the category of forgiveness also guarantees a conceptual counterpart to guilt. Potential acts are symbolically balanced by potential forgiveness. It is in that sense that forgiveness may be said to be always already available. Yet any effort to deploy forgiveness, as Derrida has suggested, also exists in dialogue with the concept of the unforgivable. Forgiveness gets its power from the realization that nothing in personal life is ever fully forgiven, that absolute forgiveness in individual human terms is an impossibility. To forgive everything, to seek dissemination of universal forgiveness within a certain religious regimen, thus also disseminates recognition of the unforgivable. The limit case of the unforgivable haunts every act of forgiveness, no matter how genuine.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X62088 Published online by Cambridge University Press