

Suturing the Wound: Derrida's "On Forgiveness" and Schlink's *The Reader*

Must forgiveness saturate the abyss? Must it suture the wound in a process of reconciliation? Or rather must it give place to another peace, without forgetting, without amnesty, fusion or confusion?

—Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness" 50¹

It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you, even if it be by your forgetfulness or silence.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* 301

WHILE THE INITIAL REVIEWS of Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader* tended to be laudatory, later criticism has for the most part been far less favorable.² Without seeking to collapse the important distinctions among such nuanced terms as guilt, responsibility, shame, blame, judgment, atonement, expiation and forgiveness, this essay urges a reconsideration of Schlink's novel and the familiar, if far from transparent, moral terminology of his admirers and detractors

¹ "Le pardon doit-il alors saturer l'abîme? Doit-il suturer la blessure dans un processus de réconciliation? Ou bien donner lieu à une autre paix, sans oubli, sans amnistie, fusion ou confusion?" (Jacques Derrida, "Le Siècle et le Pardon" 124). In what follows, page references to "On Forgiveness" are preceded by *OF*. The essay, which appears in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (Routledge, 2001), derives from an interview with Derrida, "Le Siècle et le Pardon," published in *Le Monde des débats* 9 (Dec. 1999). The interview was appended to the paperback edition of *Foi et Savoir suivi de le Siècle et le Pardon*, from which quotations in my essay are taken, with page references prefixed by *SP*. The Routledge English translation omits (for some, problematically) the questions posed by the original interviewer, Michel Wieviorka (see Kaposy, 223 n. 3). This is not the only text in which Derrida explores the concept of forgiveness. See also "To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible" and "On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida (moderated by Richard Kearney)," both published in Caputo et al. *Questioning God* (1–21 and 22–52, respectively); "An Interview"; and "Hospitality" (in *Acts of Religion*). Forgiveness is also treated in *The Gift of Death* and *Spectres of Marx*, among other writings.

² References are to the first English translation (Phoenix, 1997). The book was initially published in German as *der Vorleser* (1995). Responses to the 2008 film version were similarly divided along lines that echoed criticism of the novel. Despite many accolades and awards, a growing number of critics voiced outrage at the film. For an early negative review of the film, see Ron Rosenbaum's "Don't give an Oscar to *The Reader*" (subtitled, "We don't need another 'redemptive' Holocaust movie"). See also Bradshaw.

alike.³ Such a consideration is made even more pressing given the politics of apology and reconciliation that proliferate on the contemporary world stage and recent sustained meditations on the concept of forgiveness, notably in the work of Jacques Derrida.

In a problematic statement, replicated without irony on the jacket of the 1997 Phoenix paperback edition, Sir Peter Hall claims that “[*The Reader*] objectifies the Holocaust and legitimately makes all mankind responsible.” If Hall’s choice of the verb “objectifies” suggests that Schlink represents the Holocaust (or its perpetrators) as open to objective evaluation and even to understanding, then he strays—if not flippantly then perhaps naively—into debates about the ways in which Holocaust representation might normalize or domesticate unthinkable horror. Moreover, the assertion that “all mankind” is “legitimately . . . responsible” for the Holocaust implies that individual agents are absolved of responsibility for their roles in the atrocity. It seems a small step from such a recognition to forgiving the perpetrators—or, at the very least, absolving them.⁴

However, for Hannah Arendt, conceding that there is an “Eichmann in every one of us” is reprehensible, because the only thing we can then judge is “*mankind as a whole*” (qtd. in Mackinnon 198 n. 45). Such generalizations, she argues, “make judgment superfluous” (qtd. in Mackinnon 198 n. 47). Similarly, Daniel Stern asserts that emphasizing the inclusive humanity of Holocaust agents such as Hanna, Schlink’s Nazi protagonist, is a “classic argument in bad faith” that results in an “understandable but glib position. ‘Well any of us could have been the perpetrators . . . given this or that circumstance . . .’” (205; ellipses original). Such reasoning invites us to understand (and so excuse) Hanna as a victim of circumstance rather than an agent of horror.

The conceptual linkage of forgiveness with comprehension or understanding is central to the discussion of *The Reader* that follows. But the adage “to understand all is to forgive all” is not merely a popular truism. It applies also, albeit in inverted form, to Arendt’s writings on the Holocaust. In *Responsibility and Judgment*, Arendt writes: “At the time, the horror itself, in its naked monstrosity, seemed not only to me but to many others, to transcend all moral categories and explode all standards of jurisdiction; it was something men could neither punish adequately nor forgive” (23). In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* she applies the same reasoning to Adolf Eichmann, suggesting that some actions are unforgivable precisely because they mark the offender as incomprehensible and, as such, inhuman. That the Holocaust signifies

³ William Collins Donahue suggests George Steiner’s “rave review [of *The Reader*] in the *London Observer* . . . inaugurated (and then authorised) the proliferation of the language of morality so rife in subsequent criticism” (75). Early praise of the English translation is typical: “Readers of this book . . . will understand the nature of atonement when they have finished it,” declared a reviewer for the *Daily Telegraph*; “[Schlink] examines the nature of understanding and tests the limits of forgiveness” was the verdict of *The New York Times* (both comments are taken from promotional blurb reproduced on the cover and prefatory pages of the 1997 Phoenix paperback edition) (cf. Bernstein). Public acclaim in the USA reached its height when the novel was selected for Oprah Winfrey’s book club in 1999. (Among her key interests in the book were issues of child sex abuse and illiteracy.)

⁴ See, for example, Pedro Alexis Tabensky, who argues that “What Hanna did was deplorable, but that does not mean she should have been condemned for her deeds. She was, as we all are, destined to go on as we do by the circumstances surrounding our tragic or blessed lives and also by the unique and irreducible ‘mental circumstances’ that define us as agents” (226). As a result, Tabensky continues, judgment “never sits comfortably with the deep understanding of [individual] circumstances” (211). In order to “judge individuals and their actions without holding them to account” (212) one must eliminate “an ethics of desert from moral discourse” (207).

that which is incomprehensible or "extralogical" (cf. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer)—beyond the limits of the human and so of understanding—is a common claim (see, for example, Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 444; and Weisel 223–24). Theodor Adorno extends this idea by insisting that the aesthetic imposition of meaning on the Holocaust, or its perpetrators, is both reprehensible and unjust: "The aesthetic principle of stylisation . . . make[s] an unthinkable fate *appear to have some meaning*; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims" (my emphasis).⁵ "Objectifying" (in Hall's term) such evil not only renders the unthinkable meaningful, but also invites "voyeuristic sadomasochism" on the part of a spectator/reader "enthralled precisely as, or perhaps even because, he is appalled" (Howe 290). Indeed, if "explanations are exculpations" and "attempts to comprehend Nazi deeds are tantamount to attempts to excuse them" (Garrard and Scarre x), then there is, with respect to the Holocaust, "a prohibition on the question *why*" (La Capra, *History and Memory* 100).⁶

For Derrida, in contrast, incomprehensibility marks the aporetic site of true forgiveness. Not only does he question the meaning of forgiveness, but he also fundamentally challenges the assumption that forgiveness must have meaning. Derrida's argument turns on the distinction between what he terms "ordinary forgiveness" ("le pardon courant") and "true forgiveness" ("le pur pardon"). Ordinary forgiveness is a human exchange, enmired in conditionality, granted or withheld to serve any number of ends, however noble or reconciliatory; true forgiveness, paradoxically, is extended only in the face of the "unforgiveable" (*OF* 32; "l'impardonnable," *SP* 108) and in the absence of meaning.⁷ As Derrida willingly

⁵ Qtd. in Parry 249. See also Adorno's famous (and sometimes misquoted or misunderstood) claim, "Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch" (*Prismen* 30), a phrase often translated as "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric." Although I cannot in this essay consider the far-reaching debates this statement has generated, not least in the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, I think it is important to remember that Adorno later argued that "In the post-Holocaust world art might be the place where the enormity of the suffering, that was one of the true marks of the caesura, could be truly adumbrated and recognized" (Parry 250). On the issue of Holocaust representation generally, see Lang, Bartov, Ezrahi, Hartman, Rothberg, LaCapra (*Representing the Holocaust*), and Young. On both the value and ethical responsibility of Holocaust representation, see, for example, Bernard-Donals and Glejzer; Bathrick, Prager, and Richardson; and Kaplan. For a discussion that relates directly to *The Reader*, see Parry. I take it as a given that Bernhard Schlink, a law professor and practicing judge, is deeply familiar with the work of Adorno and the debates that surround his famous assertion. As Bill Niven, among others, has noted, *The Reader* contains several pointed allusions to Adorno's writing (386–88); and throughout, in extended passages, the narrator grapples with issues of Holocaust representation.

⁶ LaCapra here discusses Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1985) as an example of the "absolute refusal of the why question and of understanding" (*History and Memory* 111). I am not, of course, suggesting that understanding is a sufficient, or even necessary, condition for forgiveness (see Pettigrew and Garrard 231, 235). I may understand the motivations, justifications and excuses for certain acts and yet be unable to forgive them. Moreover, it is conceivable, and perhaps not uncommon, that in some cases where official or judicial pardon or amnesty is granted for a crime, forgiveness is nonetheless withheld by the victims or their supporters/survivors. Notwithstanding, in many accounts of the Holocaust the notion of comprehensibility remains closely bound to that of forgiveness; in other words, incomprehensibility is that which prevents the granting of forgiveness. Gillian Rose refers to this stance as "Holocaust Piety"—the shrouding in mystery "of something we dare not understand" (43). Robert Eaglestone similarly comments on what he sees as the "rather oppressive and inauthentic silence of Holocaust piety" (29).

⁷ Derrida further elaborates these ideas in "Hostipitality": "The impossibility of forgiveness offers itself to thought, in truth, as its sole possibility. Why is forgiveness impossible? Not merely difficult for a thousand psychological reasons but absolutely impossible? Simply because what there is to forgive must be, and must remain, unforgiveable—such is the logical aporia" (385).

concedes, his is a “hyperbolic” (OF 39; “hyperbolique,” SP 114) and “mad” (OF 39; “folle,” SP 114) conception of forgiveness: “forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself” (OF 33; “le pardon doit s’annoncer comme l’impossible meme,” SP 108). Forgiveness not only forgives the incomprehensibly unforgivable, it is itself incomprehensible. This excessive, ethical concept, he maintains, must be retained alongside the conditional logic of “ordinary” forgiveness; only as such can the latter have ethical meaning, only as such can we prevent its devaluation to the point of meaninglessness.⁸ Losing sight of the impossible absolute—forgiveness that forgives the unforgivable—would open the (ordinary) discourse of forgiveness to (personal and political) abuse: “Forgiveness is not, it *should not be*, normal, normative, normalizing” (OF 32; “Le pardon n’est, il ne *devrait être* ni normal, ni normatif, ni normalisant,” SP 108).⁹ True forgiveness operates in the realm of the abnormal, of the extra- (if not in-) human. How this “madness” might be read into *The Reader* and critical accounts of it (both replete with the “ordinary” vocabulary of forgiveness, shame, guilt, atonement, and condemnation), or rather how *The Reader* might point us towards some understanding of Derrida’s conception of “pure” forgiveness, possible (only) as impossible, is what I want to begin to consider here.

I

The Reader, as Bill Niven pithily asserts, is “a biography of shame told from the perspective of an autobiography of shame” (390). Writing in the first person, the fifty-something narrator, Michael Berg, recalls his seduction at the age of 15 by a 36-year-old woman tram-conductor, Hanna Schmitz, in postwar Germany. The exploitative—or, perhaps more correctly, transactional—nature of their brief relationship is both captured and modified in the act that precedes their love-making: Hanna demands that Michael read to her. He is, then, at least on the simplest level, the eponymous “reader.” Some years after the affair, which ends suddenly when Hanna leaves town without explanation, Michael, now a 22-year-old law student, attends as part of a summer research project the war-crimes trial of some female SS camp guards. He is shocked to learn that Hanna is one of those on trial, the purpose of which is to determine the culpability of the guards, who allowed hundreds of women inmates to die on a forced march westward from a concentration camp during the final weeks of the war. Although some of the women died on the march itself, most (except two survivors, a mother and daughter) burned to death when the guards refused to unlock the doors of the

⁸ Any instance of conditional forgiveness, suggests Derrida, “refers to a certain idea of pure and unconditional forgiveness without which this discourse would not have the least meaning” (OF 45; “tout cela se réfère à une certaine idée du pardon pur et inconditionnel sans laquelle ce discours n’aurait pas le moindre sens,” SP 119). This idea “must have no ‘meaning’, no finality, even no intelligibility” (OF 45; “doit n’avoir aucun ‘sens’, aucune finalité, aucune intelligibilité meme,” SP 119–20). See Kaposy for a pointedly “analytical” challenge to Derrida’s argument.

⁹ Kaposy suggests that Derrida “mixes up his arguments about the semantic content of the concept of forgiveness with his moral and political arguments” (223). However, I contend that Derrida struggles to juggle two different concepts of forgiveness in his essay (and does not always distinguish them by the prefixes “pure” or “ordinary”): an impossible one, realized as impossibility, that *is not* normalizing, and a conditional concept that *is* normalizing (but *should not be*).

church in which they were incarcerated after it was set on fire during an Allied bombing raid.¹⁰

Michael realizes during the trial that Hanna is illiterate, and this provides him with a possible explanation for what had seemed to be her cruelly selfish and self-destructive behavior. She became an SS guard, he reasons, so that her civilian employer, who wished to promote her to a more senior position, would not realize she was illiterate; after the war, she left town—or so he believes—for the same reason. She demanded that Michael (and, as he learns, her prisoners) read to her in order to address her shameful lack, and she admits in court to things she cannot have done (not least the writing of a damning report after the prisoners' deaths by fire) in order to hide her illiteracy, even though doing so incriminates her in the far more serious crime of multiple murders.

In short, Michael understands Hanna's shame—or seeks to do so. For the novel's detractors, the portrayal of Hanna's disability encourages understanding, fosters sympathy, and so lessens her culpability—not simply because she is compromised by her inability to read but, more importantly, because she is *ashamed*—and cripplingly so—of that inability. Much turns, then, on Schlink's choice to portray Hanna as what Cynthia Ozick calls "an anomalous case of illiteracy," a portrayal that Ozick believes to be damning evidence of "a desire to divert from the culpability of a normally educated population in a nation famed for *Kultur*" (27; cf. Schlant and Hoffman). And if shame mitigates blame with respect to Schlink's Nazi protagonist, then for some it also invites mitigation for Nazi Germany, of which she is often taken to be representative (see Niven 384). For others, Schlink's writing is also suspect because of what Hanna's illiteracy ostensibly symbolizes: a moral deficit or ethical obtuseness on the part of the German generation that, despite its veneer of civility, enacted, or at least condoned, the vilest brutality: "Germany is the real referent here . . . Like Hanna's violence, Germany's stemmed from functional illiteracy" (Weisberg 232).¹¹

It follows that if the barbarism of cultural (moral) deficiency, symbolized by the inability to read, can be understood and even viewed sympathetically, it can also be corrected. Ergo: Germany needs to learn to read (better). And Hanna does just that, while in prison serving a life sentence for war crimes. Schlink has been criticized by some and praised by others for apparently showing Hanna's induction into the traditional humanist literary canon as the means of attaining a moral education and so a degree of self-awareness that leads her finally to acknowledge culpability for her past actions. Hanna's belated moral education is made clear, it has been suggested, by the fact that she commits suicide on the day before her

¹⁰ Some critics have argued that Schlink's choice to implicate both the Allied forces and the Church in the deadly conflagration is an attempt to diminish Nazi culpability, while also implicating "the role of the Church in the destruction of the Jews" (Finn 316; cf. Donahue 61 and Alison 170). For a discussion of the Catholic Church's "immoral role" in the Holocaust and its subsequent "begging . . . for forgiveness" in the Bishops of France's 1997 Declaration of Repentance, see Thomas (215). See also Niven's discussion of "a new trend in German culture, where Germans are presented as victims, of circumstance, of Nazism, and last but not least the Allies" (381).

¹¹ In interviews, Schlink has suggested that Hanna's illiteracy can be read as a symptom of those who had "forgotten their moral alphabet during the war" (qtd. in Niven 384). Alternatively, it "might be read as a cultural metaphor apologetically alluding to Germans who were presumably not 'in the know' about what was happening to Jews under the Nazis" (LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* 202).

eventual release from prison and apparently seeks to make amends with her surviving victim via a posthumous monetary donation. By extension, learning to read, or rather to read *rightly*, will redeem postwar Germany (see, for example, Swales 14 and Finn 317). It goes without saying that such an idea is anathema to those who hold Nazi Germany as perhaps the inevitable consequence of the Enlightenment European ideal of a “cultured” rationality, epitomized by “poetry”—and so we return once again to Adorno (see Weisberg 232; Lacoue-Labarthe 35; and, on Adorno, Hofmann and Leaman).

The titular emphasis on reading suggests another parallel: between Hanna’s use of Michael as her reader and her similar use of prisoners in the camp. We learn during her trial that she selected prisoners who were condemned to be sent from the work camp to the death camp, housed them in her own room before they were transported, and made them read to her during that time. It is open to question whether this was an act of clemency (offering those who were destined to die some small space of relative comfort before the inevitable) or the vicious exploitation of those whose pending deaths would prevent knowledge of her illiteracy from spreading. (Michael of course chooses to believe the former [116].) Either way, we seem to be encouraged to equate Hanna’s demands of camp inmates with her subsequent demands of Michael. It is perhaps worth noting that Hanna’s illiteracy is not the only characteristic that marks her as anomalous. As Joseph Metz remarks, the number of German female concentration camp guards during the war was “statistically irrelevant” (305). Schlink, then, might be seeking not only to exonerate Hanna (via her illiteracy or the moral lack it implies), but also Michael (as the hapless victim of a specifically gendered sexual predator): the text may in turn “map . . . Nazism as seduction . . . onto the figure of a dangerous, deceptive sexually predatory woman: a *femme fatale* who unites proverbial patriarchal fears of female deadliness and falsehood” (305).

However, the novel does not simply pose the individual moral question of how one might deal with what Michael calls the guilt of “loving a criminal” (133) or how one might condemn her abuse of others while absolving her on the grounds of intimate knowledge and love. The generational gap between the pair, which is insisted on throughout, is surely not there just to add the frisson of the illicit to their affair. Because he was born in 1944, Michael has no blood on his hands. Thus, for Omer Bartov, Hanna and Michael stand respectively for Nazi perpetrator and second-generation inheritor of the Holocaust legacy of guilt and condemnation—with *both* portrayed as victims.¹² Moreover, because his lover—who calls him “kid” (40)—is old enough to be his mother, Michael portrays himself in retrospect as a “child” (38) seduced—abused, even—by a sometimes-violent older sexual predator, “an incestuous mother substitute” (Metz 305). From this perspective, Michael, no less than Hanna, becomes the “victim of Nazi seduction” (Metz 305). As a result, both Michael and the perpetrator generation

¹² Jane Alison even suggests we are invited to read Michael as a classic tragic hero: “The central figure (Michael, Oedipus) is punished psychologically, guilty for having loved what is taboo, yet still innocent—because how can one be guilty if ignorant? As Sophocles’ characters are both guilty and victims, so are Schlink’s: Hanna is guilty of joining the SS yet a victim of circumstances and disability; Michael is a victim of Hanna himself and, like Oedipus, of a fate decided at birth, in that he was born in Germany in 1944” (164).

experience profound libidinal investment in an overpowering Nazi 'love object' (in the perpetrators' case, Hitler), increased self-confidence due to this investment, masochistic pleasure in submission, abrupt loss of the cathected object, and failure to work through or mourn this loss . . . Here Michael's path—his capitulation to an overpowering, erotically charged force whose signs of violence he fails to 'read'—is a second allegory of the perpetrator generation's relation to Nazism and one that seems as exculpatory as the more direct *Tätergeneration* allegory as illiterate. (304–05)

Furthermore, if in the scene in which Hanna strikes him in the face with her belt (54–55) "Michael's split lip evokes the bloodletting of the millions" (Weisberg 232), the equivalence suggested between his status as victim and that of the slaughtered millions is indeed shocking.

In fact, the moral concerns posed by the novel appear to have less to do with the brutality meted out by Nazi Germany than with the complexity and difficulty of second generation Germans' relationships with the generation that came before: How can those who were born or have matured postwar love their criminal and abusive "parents"? Does loving them entail accepting or condoning what they've done? Does it require or encourage forgiveness? How does one balance deep emotional ties with the demands of justice? Michael, writing of Hanna's trial, asserts that a "generation . . . was in the dock, and we explored it, subjected it to trial by daylight, and condemned it to shame. . . . We all condemned our parents to shame" (90). Even after he later acknowledges embarrassment at the "zeal" with which he had condemned his (fundamentally innocent) father, Michael still struggles to come to terms with his love for Hanna. Was it akin to "the state of innocence in which children love their parents . . . the only love for which we are not responsible" (168)? Or are we "responsible even for the love we feel for our parents" (168–69)? He admits envying other students who "had dissociated themselves from their parents and thus from the entire generation of perpetrators, voyeurs, and the willfully blind," yet he also questions their "swaggering self-righteousness": "How could one feel guilt and shame, and at the same time parade one's self-righteousness? Was their dissociation of themselves from their parents mere rhetoric: sounds and noise that were supposed to drown out the fact that their love for their parents made them irrevocably complicit in their crimes?" (169).

Moreover, Schlink articulates Michael's (and his generation's) agonizing moral dilemma—"the pain I went through because of my love for Hanna was, in a way, the fate of my generation, a German fate" (169)—in terms explicitly relevant to my concern with the (ethical) problematics of *understanding* the Holocaust and the apparent imperative to condemn its perpetrators as (or because) they are beyond understanding:

I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and to condemn it. But it was too terrible for that. When I tried to understand it, I had the feeling I was failing to condemn it as it must be condemned. When I condemned it as it must be condemned, there was no room for understanding. . . . I could not resolve this. I wanted to pose myself both tasks—understanding and condemnation. But it was impossible to do both. (156)

II

I have discussed at some length critical arguments that the novel is ultimately exculpatory because explanatory. As I suggested above, the negative thrust of such interpretations seems to be rooted in an inescapable injunction: we *must*

not understand (the Holocaust) because we *must* condemn it. Both Schlink and Michael fail “to condemn it as it must be condemned” because they seek to render (Hanna’s, Germany’s) “crime” understandable—to provide a *why*. However passionate such readings may be, they are often marred by the assumption that Michael’s shame and excuses (for his own and Hanna’s actions) are transferable to the author. For example, although Alison rightly claims that the portrayal of Hanna in the novel is far more sympathetic than that of the daughter (an actual victim of the Holocaust) who survives the fire (and this is surely true in the film version as well), she completely overlooks the possibility that the difference may be the result of Michael’s guilt-ridden libidinal investment in Hanna, not Schlink’s. Indeed, one might argue that Schlink exposes, rather than condones, the exculpatory drive behind Michael’s narrative. If Michael “repeatedly merges—and thereby literally con-fuses—the guilt of the second generation with that of the first” (Donahue 65), there is surely no reason automatically to assume that Schlink does so. Can we absolve Schlink, then, by insisting that we maintain the distance between author and narrator?

Some critics give a nod in this direction only to dismiss it (see, for example, Donahue 74 and Alison 166), and even those who would defend Schlink against (greater or lesser) endorsement of Michael’s evaluations do so based on an uncritical assertion of authorial intention. To his own question as to “whether the author *intentionally* set out to create a character [Hanna] who would elicit our pity and if so, why,” Roth, for example, answers: “In my reading, Hanna is not a sympathetic character and *was not intended* to be one” (171; my emphasis). Similarly, when Roth asserts that, because the surviving daughter’s account of Hanna as “truly brutal” (213) “is our only credible description of Hanna from an eye-witness who knew her in the camp,” we must accept “the truth” about her (Roth 170), some of us might ask *why*? After all, the survivor’s comments are not objectively reported but filtered through Michael’s narrating consciousness (see Alison). Nor is it unproblematic that Michael’s imaginings of Hanna as sadistic “Nazi bitch” are more than a little erotically charged.¹³ Any attempt to divine intentionality in *The Reader*—whether Hanna’s, Michael’s, or Schlink’s—is thus doomed to fail. On one level that is a truism that keeps the machinery of literary critical output well oiled. On another, as vigorously and passionately as we assert conscious intention for characters, narrator, or author, or even seek to uncover the compulsions of their unconscious desire, there remains at the heart of this text a gap, blankness, or silence that as readers we seek to fill, with more or less candor, subtlety, or skill. Or, following J.M Coetzee’s suggestive metaphor in *Foe* (a novel fundamentally about those who cannot speak and those who would speak for them), there remains a (button) hole around which each reader carefully stitches to prevent unraveling (121). It is somewhat surprising, then, that, given the motivated interpretative agendas discussed so far—whether on the part of the novel’s characters,

¹³ Alvin Rosenfeld first coined the phrase “an Erotics of Auschwitz” in his discussions of William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* (“The Holocaust According to William Styron” 48; *A Double Dying* 164), and it could be argued that Schlink follows Styron’s lead by emphasizing the sexual relationship between Hanna and Michael throughout the lengthy first part of his book. The extensive focus on sex and nudity in the film version of *The Reader* has also incensed many commentators. For a discussion of “Nazi porn” in relation to *The Reader*, see Reynolds. For a discussion of the “pornography of violence” in Holocaust representations, see Dean.

its author, or its readers—there have been so few critical evaluations of the novel that seriously consider the metafictional resonances suggested by its title (Metz and Reynolds are two exceptions). This much seems evident: if Hanna literally cannot read, Michael is, at best, a poor reader. Try as he may critically to assess and reassess motive and desire (his, Hanna's, his generation's), his interpretive failures surface again and again. His clumsy button-hole stitching continually unravels to reveal the incomprehensible hole at the center of his narrative. Moreover, in addition to a young Michael who innocently reads to and misreads Hanna (but *is* his (mis)reading innocent or motivated by the gratification of sexual desire?) and an older Michael who is presumably an enlightened reader of Hanna (or does he continue to misread her?), we encounter concentration-camp inmates who are compelled to read to Hanna, and Hanna, herself, as a non-reader or mis-reader who becomes an "improved" reader and finally chooses to stop reading altogether. There is also the judge in the central trial scene, who, Michael insists, misreads so egregiously the subjectively motivated narratives of witnesses and defendants that Michael feels compelled to "prevent a miscarriage of justice" (157) by revealing Hanna's illiteracy (he doesn't).

Writing—which can, of course, be understood as an act of reading—is no less open to scrutiny: Michael's (motivated) autobiographical writing (as self-reading), Schlink's (no less motivated and possibly autobiographical) writing of Michael, and the surviving daughter's disturbingly unemotive ("numb" [100]) text within a text. How do these representations of (mis)reading/motivated writing-as-reading implicate Schlink's readers? Surely we are encouraged to question our own interpretations and moral assumptions, our own inclinations to condemn (or forgive) on the basis of an understanding that can never be more than conditional?

Is Schlink urging his readers to *read* Michael's narrative critically, to be (or become) better readers ourselves, to interpret beyond the limits of stereotypical moral absolutes? Conversely, is he exercising a manipulative, rhetorical authorial power that refuses, or at least attempts to undermine, alternative readings? Or is he, most problematically, undermining the possibility of "right" reading—of understanding, of moral certainty—itself? Such questions are admirably worked through in Joseph Metz's reading of the novel, one of only a handful to rigorously follow through the implications of *The Reader's* metafictionality and what Metz calls "the novel's proximity to a certain kind of postmodern discourse" (315). As such, the novel "announces the difficulties it poses to reading and resists its own transparency and closure" (315). There are real problems here, however, as Metz himself notes. If truth (whether the Court's, or Michael's, or Hanna's, or Schlink's) "turns out to be a sort of rhetorical game" (316) or, worse, absent altogether, we are left with a potential nihilism that might be seen as an "accomplice to fascism itself" (316). Metz thus declares *The Reader* a "text in crisis," a "traumatized" text, and remains undecided as to whether it "is a narrative that includes its own self-deconstruction or is simply a narrative *capable* of being deconstructed" (317). "We would do well," he concludes, "to resist closing this discussion and this text" and remain open to the "exceedingly dangerous double games" (318) it plays. Indeed.

But what of the hole(s) that remain open in this text? Despite the many claims that Schlink's reader, like his narrator, is seduced into a sympathetic understanding of Hanna, we in fact learn very little about her or what she did or didn't do as

a camp guard or during the fatal fire. At no time does Schlink give us access to Hanna's interiority. Rather, because the portrayal of Hanna is mediated by Michael's voice, we know nothing, finally, of her motivations, or even the exact nature of her crime(s). She offers no self-justifications and, for the most part, does "not speak of her own accord" (116) throughout the book. This is *Michael's* narrative, his attempt to understand, perhaps to excuse, but also to condemn. The surviving mother and daughter's testimony, although presented to the Court, is largely missing from Michael's account. Michael elaborates on events before, during, and after the church fire not because Hanna has confessed (to him or the Court) but because he has read a book published by the daughter. But even here survivor testimony is displaced by Michael's retrospective summation of a book that he struggled to read in "alien" (118) English and that he characterizes as "numb," "detached" (100), and lacking in particularity.

Michael's portrayal of Hanna's responses to questions posed during the trial is perhaps intended to suggest her genuine, even exonerating, perplexity: "We didn't have any alternative" (125); "We didn't know what to do" (126). But Hanna's own question to the judge—"What would you have done?" (127)—gives no indication whatsoever of remorse or regret or shame or apology. By asking this question, Hanna may be staking a claim involving *human* moral equivalence, a claim whose implication, of course, is that in similar circumstances, without an alternative and in "confusion and helplessness" (127), the judge/reader would have done the same.

Perhaps this is too harsh. Perhaps Hanna is making a genuine appeal for moral guidance. If so, the inability or refusal of the judge to answer is extremely problematic, for it suggests there was no clearly right way to have acted or, conversely, that Hanna has committed no obvious wrong. Or perhaps his silence suggests that the answer is so overwhelmingly evident that no response is needed (you should have opened the doors and saved the prisoners), in which case Hanna is so incapable of "ordinary" moral comprehension that to try her on these terms is nonsensical. Regardless of how we interpret Hanna's question and the judge's silence, this much is clear: Hanna acknowledges her actions. She did not save the women; she was a Nazi camp guard; she did select prisoners for transportation to their deaths. But she does not admit that she is morally guilty (setting aside the question of her later suicide, to which I will return); she never says, "what I did was wrong." Nor does she atone or show remorse or sympathy for her victims. In this sense, she remains frustratingly incomprehensible, outside of what Derrida calls the "*conditional* logic of the *exchange*" (*OF* 34; "*logique conditionnelle de l'échange*," *SP* 110) that characterizes "ordinary" forgiveness or, for that matter, the processes of institutionalized justice by means of which retribution and punishment are enacted.

III

In "On Forgiveness" Derrida argues against understanding forgiveness as the opposite of retribution and punishment, or as premised on the atonement of the wrongdoer. Doing so, he contends, reduces forgiveness—the asking for it and

the granting of it—to the merely transactional. Derrida begins his essay by noting that “the scene, the figure, the language” (OF 27; “la scène, la figure, le langage,” SP 104) of forgiveness is “on its way to universality” (OF 28; “en voie d’universalisation,” SP 104); it has “become the universal idiom of law, of politics, of the economy, or of diplomacy” (OF 28; “devenu l’idiome universel du droit, de la politique, de l’économie ou de la diplomatie,” SP 104), employed even by those who do not share the Abrahamic religious heritage in which it is rooted. The problem (or one of them) for Derrida is that this heritage embodies two contradictory “poles” that he suggests are “*irreconcilable but indissociable*” (OF 45; “*irréconciliables mais indissociables*,” SP 119). On the one hand, there is the gift of absolute forgiveness: “Sometimes, forgiveness (given by God or inspired by divine prescription) must be a gracious gift, without exchange and without condition” (OF 44; “Tantôt le pardon (accordé par Dieu ou inspiré par la prescription divine) doit être un don gracieux, sans échange et sans condition,” SP 119). On the other hand, forgiveness is conditional: “sometimes it requires, as its minimal condition, the repentance and transformation of the sinner” (OF 44; “tantôt, il requiert, comme sa condition minimale, le repentir et la transformation du pécheur,” SP 119). The tension between these two poles—the “pole of absolute reference” (OF 44; “pôle de référence absolu,” SP 119) and the “order of [human] conditions” (OF 44; “l’ordre des conditions,” SP 119)—is, he argues, irresolvable (but necessarily so for ethics to obtain). For forgiveness “to become effective, concrete, historic” (OF 44–45; “devienne effectif, concret, historique,” SP 119), for it to “happen by changing things” (OF 45; “ait lieu en changeant les choses,” SP 119), its purity must inevitably be compromised by “a series of conditions of all kinds (psycho-sociological, political, etc.)” (OF 45; “sa pureté s’engage dans une série de conditions de toute sorte (psychosociologiques, politiques, etc.),” SP 119).

This conditionality, asserts Derrida, is precisely what makes forgiveness—or rather the conditional rhetoric of forgiveness—so easily abused by hypocritical or unjust political and personal calculation.¹⁴ Even when utilized in the service of a “good” such as reconciliation or healing, it is no longer pure or absolute but “economic” and conditional:

I shall risk this proposition: each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble and spiritual (atonement or redemption, reconciliation, salvation), each time that it aims to re-establish a normality (social, national, political, psychological) by a work of mourning, by some therapy or ecology of memory, then the forgiveness is not pure—nor is its concept. Forgiveness is not, it *should not be*, normal, normative, normalising. It *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality. (OF 31–32)

¹⁴ Derrida returns again and again to the abuse of this rhetoric: it is “always possible to mimic the scene of ‘immediate’ and quasi-automatic forgiveness in order to escape justice” (OF 43; “il est d’ailleurs toujours possible de mimer la scène du pardon ‘immédiat’ et quasi automatique pour échapper à la justice,” SP 117); “there is always a strategical or political calculation in the generous gesture of one who offers reconciliation or amnesty” (OF 40; “Il y a toujours un calcul stratégique et politique dans le geste généreux de qui offre la réconciliation ou l’amnistie,” SP 115); “it [forgiveness] always has to do with negotiations more or less acknowledged, with calculated transactions” (OF 39; “il s’agit toujours de négociations plus ou moins avouées, de transactions calculées,” SP 114); “the simulacra, the automatic ritual, hypocrisy, calculation, or mimicry are often part and invite parasites to this ceremony of culpability” (OF 29; “Mais le simulacre, le rituel automatique, l’hypocrisie, le calcul ou la singerie sont souvent de la partie, et s’invitent en parasites à cette cérémonie de la culpabilité,” SP 105).

Je prendrai alors le risque de cette proposition : à chaque fois que le réconciliation, salut), à chaque fois qu'il tend à rétablir une normalité (sociale, nationale, politique, psychologique) par un travail du deuil, par quelque thérapie pardon est au service d'une finalité, fût-elle noble et spirituelle (rachat ou rédemption, ou écologie de la mémoire, alors le "pardon" n'est pas pur—ni son concept. Le pardon n'est, il ne *devrait être* ni normal, ni normatif, ni normalisant. Il *devrait* rester exceptionnel et extraordinaire, à l'épreuve de l'impossible : comme s'il interrompait le cours ordinaire de la temporalité historique. (SP 108)

What interests me for the purposes of this discussion is the surely carefully chosen last phrase. The unforgivable horror of the Holocaust, the meaning of which we cannot (or, as discussed, perhaps must not) comprehend, is frequently characterized in precisely this way: as a (traumatic) caesura, a hiatus, a gap or rupture (one could multiply the figures used), as that which fractures linear history, interrupting "the ordinary course of historical temporality."

I'll settle, here, on the figure of the caesura, if only because it is such a dominant one in Holocaust scholarship (and trauma studies, its offshoot). The Holocaust caesura marks what cannot be spoken/written or forgiven: "what had happened . . . was irrevocable. Never again could it be cleansed" (Primo Levi, qtd. in Bartov 40). Derrida likewise suggests that for Vladimir Jankélévitch, to whose work *L'imprescriptible: Pardonner? Dans l'honneur et la dignité* (1986) Derrida pays considerable attention in "On Forgiveness," the Holocaust is meaningless and hence unforgivable (or is it unforgivable and so must remain meaningless?). According to Derrida,

the common or dominant axiom of the tradition [the Abrahamic tradition of forgiveness], finally, and to my eyes the most problematic, is that *forgiveness must have a meaning*. And this meaning must determine itself on the ground of salvation, of reconciliation, redemption, atonement, I would say even sacrifice. (OF 36)

l'axiome commun ou dominant de la tradition, finalement, et à mes yeux le plus problématique, c'est que *le pardon doit avoir du sens*. Et ce sens devrait se déterminer sur fond de salut, de réconciliation, de rédemption, d'expiation, je dirais même de sacrifice. (SP 111)

Derrida continues:

For Jankélévitch, as soon as one can no longer punish the criminal with a 'punishment proportionate to his crime' and 'the punishment becomes almost indifferent', it is a matter of the 'inexpiable'—he says also the irreparable. . . . From the inexpiable or the irreparable, Jankélévitch concludes the unforgivable. And one does not forgive, for him, the unforgivable. (OF 36)

Pour Jankélévitch, des lors qu'on ne peut plus punir le criminel d'une 'punition proportionnée à son crime' et que, dès lors, le 'châtiment devient presque indifférent', on a affaire à de 'l'inexpiable'—il dit aussi de 'l'irréparable' . . . De l'inexpiable ou de l'irréparable, Jankélévitch conclut à l'impardonnable. Et l'on ne pardonne pas, selon lui, à de l'impardonnable. (SP 111–12)

This last, it seems, must be a given. And yet for Derrida this is precisely the impossible injunction that underpins any truly ethical exchange:

it is necessary, it seems to me, to begin from the fact that, yes, there is the unforgivable. Is this not, in truth, the only thing to forgive? The only thing that *calls* for forgiveness? . . . Forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable. One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself. (OF 32–33)

il faut, me semble-t-il, partir du fait que, oui, il y a de l'impardonnable. N'est-ce pas en vérité la seule chose à pardonner ? La seule chose qui *appelle* le pardon ? . . . Le pardon pardonne seulement l'impardonnable. On ne peut ou ne devrait pardonner, il n'y a de pardon, s'il y en a, que là où il y a de l'impardonnable. Autant dire que le pardon doit s'annoncer comme l'impossible même. (SP 108)

All other "scenes" of forgiveness are rendered impure by what Derrida terms the "conditional logic of the *exchange*" (OF 34; "logique conditionnelle de l'échange," SP 110), one axiom of which is that "forgiveness can only be considered *on the condition* that it be asked" (OF 34; "on ne pourrait envisager le pardon qu' à la condition qu'il soit demandé," SP 110); another, that it is "proportionate to the recognition of the fault, to repentance, to the transformation of the sinner who then explicitly asks for forgiveness" (OF 35; "proportionné à la reconnaissance de la faute, au repentir et à la transformation du pécheur qui demande alors, explicitement, le pardon," SP 110). The performativity of forgiveness—that it must be asked for and granted in speech acts that immediately compromise the purity of the exchange—is no small part of the problem.

Further, he notes, asking for forgiveness opens up another debt, because it places the other of whom one asks under the obligation to forgive or refuse to forgive, to punish or seek punishment. That under biblical dictate *not* forgiving might itself be sinful is of course significant. From this perspective, one might see Schlink's representation of the surviving (Jewish) daughter's refusal in *The Reader* to posthumously forgive Hanna as incriminating, and perhaps even anti-Semitic.¹⁵ For Derrida, granting forgiveness asserts and affirms the forgiver's sovereignty; it signals the power to name and write the guilt of another, the authority of narrative closure: "If . . . one only forgives where one can judge and punish, therefore evaluate, then . . . the institution of judgment supposes a power, a force, a sovereignty" (OF 59; "Si . . . on ne pardonne que là où l'on pourrait juger et punir, donc évaluer, alors la mise en place, l'institution d'une instance de jugement suppose un pouvoir, une force, une souveraineté," SP 133). It is this affirmation of the self's sovereignty that for Derrida "makes the 'I forgive you' sometimes unbearable or odious, even obscene" (OF 58; "rend le 'je te pardonne' parfois insupportable ou odieux, voire obscene," SP 132). But he also insists that one cannot limit the right to say "I forgive." To do so is an "absolute crime" (OF 59; "crime absolu," SP 133), yet one that "does not only occur in the form of murder" (OF 59; "n'advient pas seulement dans la figure du meurtre," SP 133).

Discussions of forgiveness often note its ultimately self-serving conditionality. It can be understood as a (personal) "good independent of how the person forgiven may be affected" (Thomas 206). It can be granted in the anticipation of reward in the form of admiration from others or in the spirit of a kind of *quid pro quo* advocated in the Bible and encoded in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:14). It can be granted because of the fear that not forgiving is itself sinful or as a kind of insurance against nihilism—"forgiveness keeps in place a vision of the human capacity for doing good"—or because one believes "there is something wrong in

¹⁵ Such questions are raised, although not fully interrogated, by Stephen Finn, who considers responses—largely coded as "Christian" or "Jewish"—to questions raised by Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*: should a Jew, hearing the "last confession" of a Nazi, forgive him or simply remain silent? Do biblical ethics require forgiveness only for the sincerely penitent or for all sinners (and how does one determine sincerity?) Does withholding forgiveness amount to "committing an atrocity" (Finn 311) as sinful as, say, committing Nazi war-crimes? Alternatively, would forgiving the Nazi inflict a "terrible moral violence" on the forgiver (as Primo Levi asserts in response to Wiesenthal's novel; see Finn 313)? Or, as Cynthia Ozick suggests, again in response to Wiesenthal's novel, can forgiveness "brutalize" (Finn 313)?

not forgiving others . . . since committing wrongdoing is a part of the human condition” (Thomas 206). In all of these scenarios, forgiveness has a meaning (and benefit) for the one who forgives; in all, the forgiver seeks closure. Indeed, as Arendt notes, forgiveness and punishment “both have in common the attempt to put an end to something that without its interference could go on endlessly” (qtd. in Perrone-Moisés).

The granting of forgiveness may have other motivations. We may forgive because we love the wrongdoer and/or are invested in their love. Forgiving can also be viewed as “simply the best way to get on with one’s own life” (Thomas 208), the “letting go” that is necessary for psychological well-being, for moving on. This can also apply on a national scale, as is clearly evident in South Africa’s post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which Derrida discusses in “On Forgiveness,” although arguably the TRC has nothing to do with pure forgiveness, only forgiveness as reconciliation or amnesty in the name of national health. The distinction between reconciliation, made possible by (ordinary) forgiveness as the work of mourning, and (pure) forgiveness is repeated again and again by Derrida. Furthermore, his comments in an interview with Michal Ben-Naftali on the generational differences that come into play in relation to questions of forgiveness and reconciliation/mourning are especially pertinent to the pointed generational gap between Michael and Hanna in Schlink’s novel:

I believe there are, in any case, generational differences in the approach to these problems [of forgiveness and reconciliation in the juridical, social and political sphere]. It is certain that those who were adults at the time of the Shoah have a relation to it quite unlike that of subsequent generations. It is not only a question of chronological contemporaneity; the time span from one generation to the next, that is to say, twenty five, thirty years, is also a time of the work of mourning, a time during which the personal, the collective and the political unconscious works, and we know that with such monstrous [sic] traumas time means a great deal. As to the question of forgiveness . . . , without the Shoah having been forgotten, there may be a period of the attenuation of the suffering, a distancing of the suffering which is not a forgetting, but which is nevertheless a sort of weakening of the pain that permits other gestures. . . . I [have] tried to distinguish pure, unconditional forgiveness from all other forms of economy, of excusing, of reconciliation, which are not forgiveness pure and simple. So one may imagine that, while for a generation that witnessed or participated closely in this trauma forgiveness should be impossible, for the following generation, forgiveness remaining still impossible, modes of reconciliation, of re-appropriation, of mourning become somewhat easier. (“An Interview”)

Perhaps *The Reader* evidences the generational differences of which Derrida speaks. Forgiveness (of the perpetrators or by the victims) is impossible for Hanna’s generation, but Michael’s “modes of reconciliation, of re-appropriation, of mourning become somewhat easier.” Suffering is attenuated, pain weakened, and, if this is not yet forgiveness, it ushers in the possibility of forgetting.

Under what conditions do we forgive? For many of us, sincere contrition is the condition for forgiveness. Only the truly repentant can be forgiven (cf. Thomas 217). The problem, then, becomes an interpretative one: how do we distinguish contrition from, say, mere regret? How do we distinguish between “sincere” contrition and contrition whose primary purpose is achieving clemency or social integration (or any other selfish end) for the wrongdoer? Moreover, because repentance always comes (logically) after the event of wrongdoing, when the guilty sinner has become the repentant sinner, “it is no longer the guilty as such who is forgiven; the repentant is no longer guilty through and through, but already another, and better than the guilty one” (Derrida *OF* 35; “ce n’est plus au coupable en tant que tel

qu'on pardonne . . . le pécheur . . . dès lors n'est plus de part en part le coupable mais déjà un autre, et meilleur que le coupable," *SP* 110) (cf. Kaposy 210).

Again, interpretation (and with it temporality) must come into play, even if here it is the retrospective self-interpretation of the changed, *now* repentant, sinner. Finally, all these considerations of conditionality must include the issue of punishment, which is not the same as condemnation; nor, for Derrida, is it the opposite of forgiveness. One can forgive but also condemn or even seek punishment for the wrongdoer; one can (legally) absolve and yet never forgive an action. To insist on forgiveness as a correlate to conceivable punishment (which is, according to Derrida, the position of Jankélévitch and Hannah Arendt; see *OF* 37 and 59, *SP* 112 and 133) is to maintain it firmly in the realm of the *human* and under the order of mediating human law and language: the "words themselves" ("le langage lui-même) are "the first mediating institution" (*OF* 42; "une première institution médiatrice," *SP* 117).

What all of these conditional accounts of forgiveness hold in common is the *attribution of meaning*, the insertion of the concept into an explanatory and authoritative narrative. Against this "ordinary" forgiveness, whose operation he concedes is necessary for personal and national health, Derrida sets the concept of "pure" forgiveness, an impossible concept that occurs only in the absence of mediation (linguistic, judicial, whatever) and (meaningful) closure:

As soon as the victim 'understands' the criminal . . . the scene of reconciliation has commenced, and with it this ordinary forgiveness which is anything but forgiveness. Even if I say 'I do not forgive you' to someone who asks my forgiveness, but whom I understand and who understands me, then a process of reconciliation has begun; the third has intervened. Yet this is the end of pure forgiveness. (*OF* 49)

Dès que la victime 'comprend' le criminel . . . la scène de la réconciliation a commencé, et avec elle ce pardon courant qui est tout sauf un pardon. Même si je dis 'je ne te pardonne pas' à quelqu'un qui me demande pardon, mais que je comprends et qui me comprend, alors un processus de réconciliation a commencé, le tiers est intervenu. Pourtant c'en est fini du pur pardon. (*SP* 123)

Derrida, then, shares the injunction that one must not understand the Holocaust. It must not mean, most especially in the name of normative reconciliation. But if for (early) Adorno, Levi, Arendt, and so many of the writers and theorists discussed above, one must not understand, one must not impose (narrative/aesthetic) meaning, because one must not forgive, on Derrida's account the obverse holds: one must not understand in order truly to forgive. Pure forgiveness is only possible in the absence of imposed, inevitably conditional, meaning. As such, pure forgiveness is thus impossible, yet it remains the ("mad") imagined and infinite concept against which we must measure our everyday acts of human engagement.

Certainly Michael seeks to understand Hanna/the Nazi generation—the "criminal"—and so himself. He imputes potentially exonerating motives, he "reads" intentionality (or the lack of it), he utilizes the inherently temporal (and, in this case, retrospective) dimension of narration. He can thus allow for change—Hanna the lover is not the same as Hanna the guard or Hanna the smelly old woman; the innocent boy is not the damaged legal historian, husband, and father—and with it the possibility of retrospective remorse. He appeals to the particularizing universal of *human* weakness. In all of these ways his narrative enables him to condemn the acts but also forgive (or at least reconcile with) Hanna and himself: I am what I have been made by circumstance; who we were is not what we became or what we will be. But his forgiving is also wholly conditional, thoroughly mediated

by language/interpretation (*reading*) and utterly self-serving for any or even all of the reasons suggested above: to retain investment in the loved criminal/parent/nation, to facilitate “letting go,” to ensure reciprocal forgiveness, or even just to retain a vision of humanity as being capable of redemptive contrition. In the words of Derrida’s interview with Michal Ben-Nafti (cited above), Michael’s is not pure forgiveness but one of the other “forms of economy, of excusing, of reconciliation, which [is] not forgiveness pure and simple.” Michael seeks to excuse and reconcile by stitching around and over the incomprehensible, unforgivable hole at the center of his narrative, at the heart of the Holocaust itself. In Derrida’s phrase, Michael “sutures” the wound (“Forgiveness” 50).

IV

If Michael’s narrative is remedial, suturing, Schlink’s is not. In *The Reader* the potentially self-serving abuse of (ordinary) forgiveness, in and as narrative understanding, is carefully exposed. Michael needs to understand, to render comprehensible, to provide a *why*. He needs to imagine Hanna’s contrition in order to balance the competing demands of understanding and condemnation. Perhaps he wants not only to allay his personal shame, but also to assert his sovereignty in the performative exchange signaled by “I forgive” or the moral superiority of condemnation. But the incomprehensible gaps in the text repeatedly undermine his attempts at explanation or narrative authority. Hanna’s motivations and actions are ultimately obscure; they cannot, they must not be represented; there cannot be—there must not be—an excuse for her unforgivable crime. She does not atone; she does not ask for forgiveness. And yet—at least for Derrida—her unforgivable crime, perhaps the crime of Nazi Germany itself, *calls* for forgiveness.

Michael’s reading/writing of Hanna (as opposed to his reading *to* her) is thus deeply motivated by the desire for psychological and perhaps national “normalization” (to use Derrida’s term). Moreover, even if we understand Michael’s motivations, it is difficult to resist reading Hanna and Michael as characters in either a narrative of confession, contrition, and atonement *or* a narrative of blame and condemnation. Yet if we want to read *The Reader* ethically (in the Derridean sense), this is precisely what we must avoid.

In the third and final section of the novel we learn that Michael, refusing all other forms of contact, continued to read to Hanna after her imprisonment, sending her tapes on which he reads books aloud. By following his words on the tapes in books borrowed from the prison library, Hanna teaches herself to read. That she has learned to read “rightly” can be inferred from the books on her prison cell bookshelf: “Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski, Jean Amery—the literature of the victims, next to the autobiography of Rudolph Hess, Hanna Arendt’s report on Eichmann in Jerusalem, and scholarly literature on the camps” (203). But in the final analysis, this is nothing more than a reading list. We are not told *how* Hanna reads these books or what she learns from them, if she learns anything—that is, unless we *read* her suicide on the morning of her eventual release after 18 years in prison as an act of self-condemnation. But, as with any suicide, we can also read her act in at least two other ways: as an abject expression of victimhood or as a cruel assertion of self-sovereignty.

Although Hanna leaves a final note, we, like Michael, are only party to a small section of it (it is addressed to the prison warden, who does not share its full contents). In it Hanna asks Michael to deliver the sum of her small personal savings to the daughter who survived the church fire. This can also be interpreted in several ways: as an act of belated reparation/self-judgment or, as some incensed critics have suggested, as Hanna's final attempt to assert sovereignty by sending to her victim a token apology that demands a response: either forgiveness or condemnation (see, for example, Alison). Both readings once again rely on a familiar narrative structure. Both seek to assert a meaning, a suturing, that I believe the incomprehensible center of Schlink's text resists.

We can, however, read Hanna's act in another way: as the refusal of conditional logic, as a refusal to engage in the realm of "ordinary" forgiveness. Hers is a gesture that cannot be reparatory; quite simply, one cannot repay the dead. Hanna also will never know the daughter's response; she will never hear the daughter's forgiveness or refusal of it. It is a truism, perhaps, that the dead cannot forgive (this is at least one of the meanings we can attribute to Jankélévitz's anguished assertion, "Forgiveness died in the death camps").¹⁶ Nor can a third party forgive in the dead victims' stead: "who would have the right to forgive in the name of the disappeared victims? They are always absent in a certain way" (Derrida, *OF* 44; "qui aurait le droit de pardonner au nom de victimes disparues? Celles-ci sont toujours absentes, d'une certaine manière," *SP* 108). (Derrida also asserts in "An Interview" that "for any offence, one does not have the right to forgive unless one is directly its victim.") Withholding forgiveness in the name of another must be a violation of the same order. Only the trespassed dead can forgive (or refuse forgiveness), and yet they have been deprived of the right and the power to do so. But the obverse holds as well: "Just as it is true that the dead cannot forgive, it is equally true that the dead cannot seek forgiveness" (Laurence 216). Hanna is outside any narrative logic we, or Michael, might seek to impose:

For where is forgiveness more impossible, and therefore possible *as* impossible than beyond the border between one living and one dead? How could the living forgive the dead [*comment un vivant pourrait-il pardonner à un mort*]? What sense and what gift would there be in a forgiveness that can no longer hope to reach its destination, except inside oneself [*sinon au-dedans de soi*], towards the other [*vers l'autre*] that is welcomed or rescued as a narcissistic ghost inside oneself? And reciprocally how can the living hope to be forgiven by the dead or by a specter inside itself? One can follow the consequence and consistency of this logic to the infinite. (Derrida, "Hospitality" 387)¹⁷

It is at the impassable boundary between the dead and the living that (pure) forgiveness is "possible *as* impossible." This boundary marks the limits of human

¹⁶ Qtd. in "Of Forgiveness" 37. In response, Derrida says: "Yes. Unless it only becomes possible from the moment that it appears impossible. Its history would begin, on the contrary, with the unforgivable" (*OF* 37; "Oui. À moins qu'il ne devienne possible qu'à partir du moment où il paraît impossible. Son histoire commencerait au contraire avec l'impardonnable," *SP* 113).

¹⁷ Parenthetical italicized insertions in the original French are provided in the text as shown. For Derrida, we are indebted to remember not only the literal dead but also all those we have "adequated" in our acts of self-narration. And yet, as Nouri Gana suggests, "a recognition of the debt may ultimately neutralize the debt, by purporting to have paid it back in the very act of naming it. Further, to acknowledge the debt in the pursuit of forgiveness is an even greater travesty, for from whom are we asking forgiveness when we ask it from the dead? And in doing so, aren't we lured by the thought that expiation will follow, and in the final analysis aren't we more concerned about the me that has survived the death of the other, rather than the we—the him in me?" (155).

understanding, of narrative, of conditionality, of debt and desert. As Hanna says to Michael in the one brief conversation they have before her death: “you know when no-one understands you, then no one can call you to account. Not even the court could call me to account. But the dead can. They understand” (196).

V

Perhaps, then, Schlink refrains from “speaking for” the victims of the Holocaust (who have no voice at all in the novel) because he recognizes both the dangers of such appropriative representation and the way in which unspeakable horror can become normalized by being articulated (which is surely Adorno’s point, or one of them)—how “the gas chambers and the ovens become ordinary scenery” (101), how they risk being “froze[n] into clichés” (147). (All debates about the politics of representation reach the same impasse: to represent and be accused of appropriation, or to refuse to represent and be accused of ignoring or silencing the voice of the other.) By the same token, it is all too easy for those of us who have come comfortably after the perpetrator-victim divide to reduce Hanna’s evil to an objective moral lesson. Instead of (too easily) appropriating the rhetoric of (ordinary) forgiveness or its (ostensible) opposite, condemnation, in order to suture the wound between past and present, living and dead, *The Reader* exposes that rhetoric’s capacity for abuse (albeit perhaps a necessary abuse in the name of health, personal and collective). The novel reveals just how easily the language of shame and confessional narrative, however sincere that language and narrative may be, is undermined by the sovereignty of the shamed or the forgiving “I.” In Hanna’s refusal to confess or apologize, in the silence of the dead, Schlink resists reducing the unspeakable to cliché or comprehension, both of which would make punishment (and so forgiveness) conceivable—and conditional—and usher in the possibility of reconciliation and so “the attenuation of the suffering, a distancing of the suffering which is not a forgetting but which nevertheless is a sort of weakening of the pain that permits other gestures” (Derrida, “An Interview”). For forgiveness is not, must not be, reducible to explanation or excuse:

If one had to forgive only what is forgivable, even excusable, *venial*, as one says, or insignificant, then one would not forgive. One would excuse, forgive, erase, one would not be granting forgiveness. . . . The forgiveness of the forgivable does not forgive anything: it is not forgiveness. In order to forgive, one must [*il faut*] therefore forgive the unforgivable, but the unforgivable that remains [*demeuré*] unforgivable, the worst of the worst: the unforgivable that resists any process of transformation of me or of the other, that resists any alteration, any historical reconciliation that would change the conditions or the circumstances of the judgment. Whether remorse or repentance, the ulterior purification of the guilty has nothing to do with this. Besides, there is no question of forgiving a guilty one, a subject subject to transformation beyond the fault. Rather, it is a matter of forgiving the fault itself—which must remain unforgivable in order to call for forgiveness on its behalf. (Derrida, “Hospitality” 385)¹⁸

¹⁸ Cf. Garrard: “Certainly, it is wrong of us to excuse or in any way deny the evil which was done [in the Holocaust]. But this is not a reason for withholding forgiveness. For not only is forgiveness compatible with not excusing and not denying; it actually *requires* these things. To excuse an agent is to say that she is not to blame for doing a wrongful action. But if she is not to blame, then she is not a candidate for forgiveness at all—there is nothing to forgive. . . . What makes forgiveness so difficult is precisely that it requires us to recognize the full horror of what was done, and then forgive those very actions” (235).

Against the conditional logic of forgiveness and condemnation—a logic that is in the final analysis a temporal, narrative one—Derrida insists on the need for us to recognize the call of an unimaginable concept of forgiveness “which must remain intact, inaccessible to law, to politics, even to morals: absolute” (*OF* 55; “doit rester intact, inaccessible au droit, à la politique, à la morale même: absolu,” *SP* 129). It is between these two poles, the concrete and conditional, on the one hand, and the unknowable and absolute, on the other, that “responsibilities are to be re-evaluated *at each moment*” (*OF* 56, my emphasis; “les responsabilités sont à réévaluer à chaque instant,” *SP* 130).

Which is perhaps to say simply this: that the living, in all their painful acts—more or less responsible—of atonement, confession, judgment, and forgiveness, must never forget the dead (literal or metaphoric). And yet nor can we speak for them. Recalling the sovereignty of the dead—who can never forgive, of whom we can never ask forgiveness—might allow for a conception of responsibility that reaches above the conditional, an absolute if infinite measure against which to continually re-evaluate our actions and our judgments. Not speaking *for* the dead is not the same as effacing or ignoring or forgetting or silencing them. Michael's narrative only too readily reveals such forgetting, such silencing, in his appropriative reading/writing. In contrast, the Holocaust dead resonate profoundly in the blank heart of *The Reader*. The novel refuses to suture in narrative the wound that they remain and the unspeakable, *unforgivable* crime committed against them. As Blanchot states in one of the epigraphs for this essay: “It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you, even if it be by your forgetfulness or silence.”

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