PROJECT MUSE®

Introduction: What Remains? Literature and Ethics in a Time of Crisis

Pieter Vermeulen, Charlotta Palmstierna Einarsson, Joakim Wrethed

The Yearbook of English Studies, Volume 56, 2026, pp. 1-12 (Article)

Published by Modern Humanities Research Association
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/yes.00023*

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/997363

[134.58.253.56] Project MUSE (2026-08-12 08:59 GMT) KU Leuven Libraries

Introduction: What Remains? Literature and Ethics in a Time of Crisis

Pieter Vermeulen, Charlotta Palmstierna Einarsson, *and* Joakim Wrethed
University of Leuven, Mid Sweden University, Stockholm University

Turning Back: Literature and Ethics after the 'Ethical Turn'

In a time of geopolitical dislocation, environmental degradation, and digital distraction, ethics might strike us as either the most trivial or the most urgent concern for literary studies. *Trivial*, in the sense that our time of extended crisis might seem to demand something more strategic and something more robust than the soft-coded issues of sensitivity, responsibility, and value that are typically associated with ethics. Something like a real politics, a term with which ethics is often contrasted.[1] *Urgent*, because it at times looks like only a radical break with the sliding status quo in the name of a universal principle of justice — which resonates with a demanding Kantian sense of ethics — can still save us. This 2026 edition of the *Yearbook of English Studies* is inspired by the intuition that an explicit engagement with the question of literature and ethics is overdue, not because ethics has exactly been missing from twenty-first-century literary studies, but because its relation to literature has been assumed rather than interrogated. As the survival of literature and literary studies has become less and less self-evident, literary studies has tended to increasingly associate literature with positive goods — empathy, awareness, community, human flourishing — all things that a previous critical dispensation, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, tended to deconstruct rather than affirm; this now seems like a self-sabotaging dispensation that literary studies can no longer afford.

In many of the most prominent theoretical and critical developments since the beginning of the century, the ethical affordances of literature are assumed

1 Especially in the tradition of Marxist literary studies, ethics has customarily been dismissed as 'not political enough'. The canonical statement in one of the canonical works in that tradition is Fredric Jameson's contention that 'it is ethics itself which is the ideological vehicle and the legitimation of concrete structures of power and domination'. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 114.

Yearbook of English Studies, 56 (2026), pp. 1–12, doi:10.1353/yes.00023
© Modern Humanities Research Association 2026

[134.58.253.56] Project MUSE (2026-08-12 08:59 GMT) KU Leuven Libraries

rather than questioned, as literature is presented as integral to an appropriate ethics: in affect studies, for instance, discussion of affective attunement never strays far from ethical considerations; in ecocriticism, the contexts of climate change and the Anthropocene pose questions of belonging and survival that are always tacitly ethical questions of how we relate to one another and to the natural world; in literary animal studies, the extension of ethical frameworks *beyond* the human is a key concern; in narrative theory (where ethics has been an important focus at least since the work of Wayne Booth), rhetorical narratology continues to centre ethical relations between author, text, and reader; and considerations of the 'uses of literature', inspired by the work of Rita Felski, explicitly raise the question of literature's ethical affordances, also but not exclusively in the increasingly important interdisciplinary fields of the health and medical humanities.[2] In these different subfields, the ethical potential of literature is posited or implied to argue for the contribution that literature can continue to make to the social good.

The developments referenced above (albeit implicitly) mobilize the ethical potential of literature, but they do not really problematize the relation between literature and ethics. Such problematization, of course, has a long history. While it is compulsory to refer to Plato's infamous banishment of the poets from his Republic, the more relevant historical reference point is the debate around literary ethics in the 1990s — more relevant, also, because we believe that some of the historical contexts informing that debate are still with us. While the aftermath of that debate has made the talk of a veritable 'ethical turn' in literary studies somewhat hyperbolic, the debate does mark a vital moment in recent critical history.[3] The broad context was the contestation, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, of the intimate alliance between literature and morality in the humanist tradition, where literature was seen as the carrier of social values or, in a more sophisticated way, as an exceptionally suitable device for exercising mental and moral capacities (sensibility, disinterestedness, intelligence, flexibility) that were themselves seen as morally valuable.[4] Critiques of the violence inherent in such

2 Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Wiley, 2008). Felski's research agenda gained broad visibility and institutional stability thanks to a Niels Bohr professorship that brought her to the University of Southern Denmark, which resulted in the establishment of the Centre for the Uses of Literature. See <https://www.sdu.dk/en/forskning/uol> [accessed 27 February 2026]. Felski's approach is proving very influential for new generations of literary scholars, who have not lived through the debates that the rest of this subsection explores.

3 For the codification of the 'ethical turn', see especially *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, ed. by Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack (University Press of Virginia, 2001). For a survey of the different declarations of such a turn, see Michael Eskin, 'The Double "Turn" to Literature and Ethics?', *Poetics Today*, 25.4 (2004), pp. 557–72 (pp. 557–58, n. 2), doi:10.1215/03335372-25-4-557.

4 Robert Eaglestone has convincingly ascribed this more sophisticated position to the 'modernist

elevations of literature from feminist, postcolonial, and minoritarian angles unsettled the default alliance of literature and morality.

The explicit rearticulation of literature with ethics — a term that, unlike morality, does not bespeak a normative set of rules and values but, as we will see, a principle of fundamental openness and responsibility — can be seen as a way of managing the legitimation crisis of literary studies in the wake of these contestations of engrained ways of valorizing literature as a social good. This legitimation crisis was compounded by a more immediate literary theoretical context: that of the rise of poststructuralism and deconstruction since the 1970s under the rubrics of 'French Theory' or simply 'Theory'. In its attempts to destabilize textual meaning, explode binaries, and read texts against the grain, Theory in many ways intersected with the ambitions of postcolonial and feminist (or indeed new historicist) criticism, were it not that the very radicality of its disbelief in textual meaning was widely (and not incorrectly) seen to leave no room whatsoever for constructing alternative meanings, or, to speak more politically, for articulating novel activist agendas. The verdict that (especially) deconstruction was radically ethically corrupt was sealed after the discovery of posthumous collaborationist writings by Paul de Man, who, together with Jacques Derrida, was the central figure of deconstruction. The discovery set off the so-called 'de Man Affair' in 1987, which took shape as a discipline-wide reckoning with what was seen as the corrupt legacy of deconstruction. Deconstruction, we seemed to have learned, turned out to be not merely an *amoral*, but a positively *evil* dead-end for literary studies.

The resulting debate on the ethics of literature opposed two strands of argument for the ethical import of literature. The first shifted the focus away from deconstruction and politicized criticism alike, and reconnected to an older, humanist mode of literary reading; the latter argued that, against all appearances, deconstruction was ethical precisely through its commitment to the radical strangeness of the literary text. In the humanist strand, philosopher Martha Nussbaum's case for the philosophical importance of literature — in her case, especially the work of Henry James — offered a boost to the legitimacy of literary studies. Literature, for Nussbaum, brings something to moral reasoning that philosophical reason cannot:[5] it teaches the lesson that 'responsible lucidity' requires 'the intense scrutiny of particulars', a scrutiny that the genre of the novel, in its refusal of philosophical abstraction and its investment in round characters and complex ethical situations, conveys to its readers so they can grow into

humanist' critical tradition, of which F. R. Leavis and Lionel Trilling are key examples. Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas* (Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

5 For a recent reassessment of how this position originated in 1980s debates in moral philosophy, see Ruth Murphy, '"*Let me look again*": The Moral Philosophy and Literature Debate at 40', *New Literary History*, 55 (2024), pp. 21–46, doi:10.1353/nlh.2024.a932369.

[134.58.253.56] Project MUSE (2026-08-12 08:59 GMT) KU Leuven Libraries

'people "on whom nothing is lost"'.[6] Literature, that is, helps readers become more empathetic human beings: the 'literary imagination', Nussbaum declares, provides 'an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own'.[7] For this strand of literary ethics, literary texts are neither vectors of power nor unstable self-cancelling constructs; they are occasions for ethically salient imaginative encounters with particular lives in particular contexts.

The second (and radically different) case for literary ethics did not reconnect to humanist pieties and instead performed a spectacular retconning of the project of deconstruction. Deconstruction's engrained emphasis on undecidability, on aporias, and on the infinite deferral of meaning was, it was now argued, not a strategy for avoiding ethical seriousness and accountability (as it seemed to have been in the life of de Man, where the lessons of deconstruction seemed to have provided an alibi for not owning up to his Nazi-curious past).[8] Instead, it was now presented as an exercise in encountering alterity and in remaining faithful to that otherness without reducing it to one's own terms. The irreducible strangeness of the literary texts, then, was a training ground for respecting and responding to the claim that others have on us. This ethicized update added the name of the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (who theorized the idea of the other's — or more accurately, the Other's — infinite claim on us) to those of Derrida and (increasingly less often, for obvious reasons) de Man as key thinkers of deconstruction. Literature increasingly came to be imagined as a site of traumatic encounter, an encounter so radical that its meaning cannot be grasped directly but can only indirectly make itself felt through, for instance, the complexities of literary form; trauma, then, became a term through which textual paradoxes acquired an ethical charge. The emphasis is not, as it is for Nussbaum, on particularity and adequate responsiveness so much as on singularity and infinite responsibility.[9]

The 1990s debate over ethics — emblematized by a *PMLA* issue on 'Ethics and Literary Studies' in 1999 — decisively broadened our understanding of what,

6 Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Beacon Press, 1995), p. 148 (citing Henry James).

7 Ibid., p. xvi.

8 This reading of deconstruction as alibi in Paul de Man's life is incomplete. For an exceptionally intelligent and sensitive assessment of de Man's (relation to his) guilt, see Geoffrey Hartman, 'History and Judgment: The Case of Paul de Man', *History and Memory*, 1.1 (1989), pp. 55–84.

9 The most remarkable instances of this Levinasian case for literary ethics are Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (Routledge, 2004); Joseph Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (Columbia University Press, 1987); and Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Harvard University Press, 1997). The best accounts of this tendency that manage to balance sympathy and rigour are Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism*, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism and the Just Society* (Duke University Press, 1999).

precisely, literary ethics could mean (much more, it turns out, than a set of prescriptive moral rules), but it was soon displaced from its prominent place on literary research agendas, which (already in the 1990s) were turning more transnational, interdisciplinary, and more materialist.[10] As we noted above, this does not mean that ethics disappeared from literary studies: it survived as the animating force of many critical projects, and it remained a key dimension that, even if it was not named as such, was inherent in such newly fashionable notions as affect, the Anthropocene, and other critical terms. To be sure, some projects continued to foreground explicitly the question of ethics — most notably, James Phelan's rhetorical ethics (featured in this volume), which explores both the ethical valences of the *telling* ('stemming from how the author relates to her audience through the deployment of the various means at her disposal') and those of the *told* ('stemming from the ethical dimensions of what is represented through those means'), and Hanna Meretoja's narrative hermeneutics, which focuses on the ethical relations between life and narrative to show how narrative 'expand[s] our sense of the possible'.[11] In both these projects, ethics, as in the 1990s, is less a set of moral rules than a space of uncodified and unpredictable encounters in which interhuman relations and responsibilities are at stake. It evokes Geoffrey Galt Harpham's generative definition of ethics as 'the arena in which the claims of otherness — the moral law, the human other, cultural norms, the Good-in-itself, etc. — are articulated and negotiated'.[12] Even if ethics has not always been a buzzword in early twenty-first-century literary studies, it is no overstatement that a lot of critical work has (even often implicitly) situated itself in that arena.

What Remains? Literature and Ethics Now

So what remains of literary ethics, after the debate of the late twentieth century and its extension through an extended, open-ended sense of ethics in the decades after? This edition of the *Yearbook* aims to pick up the pieces in light of contexts — environmental, epidemic, technological, economic, demographic, geopolitical — that make ethics look either entirely banal or a matter of urgency. Like the 2024 conference that inspired it, this volume wagers that it is the latter — that ethics is one context in which literature can continue to speak to the present, and that it can profit from doing so with a more explicitly articulated and updated

10 *Ethics and Literary Study*, ed. by Lawrence Buell (special issue of *PMLA*, 114.1 (1999)).

11 James Phelan, 'Rhetoric, Ethics, and Narrative Communication: Or, from Story and Discourse to Authors, Resources, and Audiences', *Soundings*, 94.1–2 (2011), pp. 55–75 (p. 56), doi:10.2307/41200942; Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 90.

12 Geoffrey Galt Harpham, 'Ethics', in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. by Frank Lenttrichia and Thomas McLaughlin (University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 387–405 (p. 394).

[134.58.253.56] Project MUSE (2026-08-12 08:59 GMT) KU Leuven Libraries

sense of what literary ethics is or can be.[13] This is so even if literature today is patently no longer what it used to be. The status of literature inside and outside universities has, since the debates over ethics in the 1990s, become much more precarious, through shrinking readerships, diminishing attention spans, declining numbers of literature students, and the decreasing dependence of elites on the kind of cultural capital that literature used to provide. When the title of our 2024 conference pointed to a sense of crisis, then, it also pointed to the increasingly unavoidable realization that literature itself — and the discipline dedicated to it — is a vulnerable entity in need of sustenance and care. In itself, this might make literature a paradoxically suitable interlocutor for ethics in our age of diminished prospects. We take seriously Theodor W. Adorno's contention (more recently resurrected by Sianne Ngai) that art's (or literature's) 'powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world' make it a paradoxically potent site of ethical and political interrogation.[14] In their different ways, the eighteen contributions to this edition of the *Yearbook* bear this out.

When we solicited submissions for our conference on literature and ethics, the over one hundred replies we received provided a privileged perspective on how contemporary literary scholars understand the nexus of literature and ethics — and how that understanding differs from the way that relation took shape in the 1990s. Five developments stood out.

First, in the old debate, the key terms were 'empathy' and 'alterity' — depending on whether one believed that literature gives us imaginative access to others or rather teaches us their fundamental inaccessibility. We noticed a marked shift from such issues of imaginative access to the ethics of representation and the ethical complexity of who can speak for whom (in situations of medical distress, in editing the work of minorities, in speaking for nonhuman entities that do not have a voice, or in relation to the work of dead writers, to name only a few of the topics covered in this *Yearbook*). The emphasis is less on the phenomenological issue of how texts appear to the reader than on the representations through which experience is made visible.

Second, trauma is now less an ethically charged signifier of extreme experience than a mundane part of our ethical and experiential registers. Indeed, trauma is only one of the affective modes through which literary studies now expresses the relations of attunement or detachment that implicate us with human and

13 The conference was entitled 'What Remains? Literature and Ethics in a Time of Crisis', and it took place in Stockholm between 22 and 24 August: see <https://eventity.qondor.com/whatremains> [accessed 27 February 2026]. The three of us are grateful to Marina Ludwigs and Anita Rákóczy for organizing the conference with us, and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, Mid Sweden University, and the University of Leuven for funding the event.

14 Theodor W. Adorno, cited in Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 2.

nonhuman others. Ugliness, ambivalence, wonder, and care are, in different chapters of this volume, as important for naming the affective dimension of our more or less ethical relations to others. Overall, however, dysphoric affects are still vastly more frequent than joyful ones, as ethical enquiry continues to gravitate to contexts of violence and suffering.

Third, the name of the master-thinkers of ethics in literary studies no longer seem as prominent — indeed, it is hard even to discern a new theoretical canon. As we noted, the key name in the 1990s was that of Levinas, followed by that of Adorno and, after 2000, that of Giorgio Agamben, whose account of impossible witness updated the deconstructionist emphasis on the ethical value of aporias for the age of the war on terror.[15] These names have now largely disappeared from the debate, and the truly healthy survivor from mid-century Europe seems to be Hannah Arendt, whose name continues to pop up, together with new names from ecological (Anna Tsing, Timothy Morton) and posthuman thought (Rosi Braidotti) without, however, being nearly as unavoidable as the older names used to be.

Fourth, if in the 1990s the Holocaust served as the implicit or explicit benchmark for ethics, this is no longer the case in present literary critical debate. The demise of de Man (which itself, of course, evoked the spectre of the Holocaust) coincided with the rise of an interest in Holocaust testimony (as generations of survivors began to reach the end of their lives in the 1980s) and of trauma theory, and Agamben's insistence on the *Muselmann* as the paradoxically perfect witness to horrors impossible to witness continued to promote the Holocaust survivor as a key site of ethical energy. This figure has to a large extent stopped to be normative: only two chapters in this volume deal with the ethics of Holocaust survival. To the extent that a new normative figure for ethical deliberation seems to emerge, it is the figure of the refugee.

Fifth and finally, and linked to all of the previous four points, our survey reveals a vastly different disciplinary constellation. The earlier debate happened in the shadow of capital-T theory; current developments increasingly occupy interdisciplinary domains, such as those of the health and medical humanities, the environmental humanities, or migration studies. Which is to say that the nexus of literature and ethics is mobilized most extensively in domains where literature liaises with other disciplines and where the affordances of literature need to be argued for. This points to the continued need of literature, and of literary studies, for legitimation, for affirming its right to a place at the interdisciplinary tables where the future of the humanities is being decided. In this context, the distinction between empathy and alterity that exercised so many

15 See especially Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (Zone Books, 2002).

[134.58.253.56] Project MUSE (2026-08-12 08:59 GMT) KU Leuven Libraries

people only a quarter of a century ago seems decidedly quaint, as both empathy and alterity have become constituents of the case that literature makes for its own continued relevance. Not least in this volume.

Variants of Literary Ethics

This volume is divided into five sections, the titles of which reflect the new emphases in discussions of literary ethics we have outlined above: the first, 'Ethical Paradoxes', showcases how literature, decades after the deconstructionist case for literary ethics, continues to serve as a site for querying complexity (rather than for moral instruction); the second, 'Ethical Environments', reflects the increasing recognition of the lifeworld as an object of ethical concern, especially in the literary environmental humanities; the third, 'Ethical Minds', recognizes the interfaces of the human brain, mental health, and literary ethics that are increasingly taking place under the rubrics of the health or the medical humanities; the fourth, the 'The Ethics of Witnessing', for its part, shows how the focus on the paradoxes of impossible witnessing from an earlier episode in the history of literary ethics have survived into new contexts; and the fifth, 'The Ethics of Representation', zooms in on the ethical complexities that beset the literary rendition of ethically charged content. Cumulatively, the sections serve as a foundation for an updated sense of what literary ethics can be.

The contributions to the first section, 'Ethical Paradoxes', testify to the capacity of literature to challenge all too facile considerations of ethical issues. Aleksandra Urakova pores over the ethical implications of abortion, infant death, and organ transplantation, thematized in three contemporary novels, to suggest that the notion of the 'gift of death' reveals the co-constitution of life and death and the intellectual confusion of individualism and the burden of guilt (a conundrum also pursued in the contributions of Stephen Kidd and Miikka Laihinen in Section 4). For Thomas Claviez, literature's contribution to ethics similarly consists in bringing out the ethical implications of paradox. Paul Auster's work, he argues, deprives readers of closure and invites them to reflect on the possibility of ethical action in a contingent and unpredictable world. Ultimately, it is only such contingency and unpredictability that make ethics possible, and at the same time unavoidable (which is to say, necessary, which is in turn to say, non-contingent). Finally, Joakim Wrethed examines the limits of binary thinking in the context of education, suggesting that the power of imagination thrives on paradox, even as contemporary cultural trends make it harder and harder to sustain paradox and not reach for consoling if unimaginative moral pieties (an issue that also surfaces in Marina Ludwig's contribution to the final section of this volume). For Wrethed, the cultivation of empathy and appreciation of alterity paradoxically require a pedagogy of the ugly and the unaesthetic, and, ultimately, also of the *un*ethical. The contributions in this section explain why moral

situations can be experienced as both right and wrong (Urakova), both contingent and predictable (Claviez). They also explain that both the ethical and the unethical deserve attention, as cultivating a properly ethical stance requires a concern for complexity. Thus, the contributions in the first section bring out the relevance of an ethics that takes interaction to be a crucial ethical aspect of experience.

In the second section, 'Ethical Environments', James Phelan examines an intra-narratological zone of literature as a safe space for ethical examinations and elaborations. Continuing his long-standing interrogation of rhetorical poetics, Phelan explains how storytellers operate from within what he calls a 'Zone of Literary Fiction' to mobilize their artistic freedom to create speculative narratives with provocative scenarios. Phelan argues that the tacit knowledge of readers and authors has a decisive role to play in how narratives are responded to — cognitively, affectively, but also ethically. The essay analyses T. C. Boyle's short story 'Chicxulub' as an example of a text that displays the ethical function of tacit knowledge. Offering a more familiar (and less metaphorical) spin on the notion of environment, Alice Sundman's contribution scrutinizes the ethical spaces provided by the genre of climate fiction. Specifically, she looks at Emmi Itäranta's 2014 novel *Memory of Water* and its positing of an ethical dilemma for readers to grapple with. Such a familiar intra-textual literary feature becomes more charged when readers confront it in the present, when it is virtually impossible not to be aware of the ethical dimensions and challenges of climate change, not least as it concerns the increasing scarcity of clean fresh water. However, literature's most salient ethical potential, Sundman asserts, is to be found in the novel's evocation of ethical choices and possibilities, prompted by the sharp ethical dilemma that the novel sets up for its readers. Carole-Anne Sweeney dissects yet another narrative environment through engaging with Olga Tokarczuk's unreliable and patently *un*ethical narrator in her novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (first published in Polish in 2009). Sweeney shows that environmental concerns provoke the solitary protagonist to act in the plot of the novel, even if the novel's true ethical challenge only arrives through what she analyses as the novel's 'tender narration': ethical questions are at first concealed from readers but eventually they are handed over as an ethical dilemma for readerly reflection. Cumulatively, these three contributions to a literary ethics of the environment exemplify that the relevant environment is not only the lifeworld we live in, but also the space of narration in which we render and receive that world.

The contributions in Section 3, 'Ethical Minds', bring out the importance of attuning to the tacit dimension of experience and of sharpening sensitivity to ethical dilemmas raised in narratives. David Lombard underlines the vital importance of literature, and especially of patient narratives, in allowing medical

[134.58.253.56] Project MUSE (2026-08-12 08:59 GMT) KU Leuven Libraries

doctors to become truly attentive to the embodied dimension of trauma. He shows how the ethical dimension of listening is key for the patients' experience of the treatment, and how the genre of memoir's affective mobilizations can figure in the process through which medical doctors and patients co-construct knowledge about the patient's illness. Katarina Bernhardsson and Anna Hultman continue this exploration of the value of literary ethics for the health humanities. Their contribution engages with Hanna Meretoja's narrative hermeneutics to highlight the extent to which ethics is rooted in modes of attention and engagement that literary texts can foster. Homing in on narratives that mobilize even if they problematize an ethics of care, they tease out the entangled motives and/or co-dependency that frequently propel participants in care interactions, especially in contexts of what they term 'desperate care' (this issue is also central to Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir's contribution to the final section of the volume). In so doing, they invite reflection on how an ethics of entanglement could be seen to complicate a more normative notion of ethics as rooted in consolidated moral principles and rules. Donald R. Wehrs's contribution throws light on the scientific and phenomenological underpinnings of such entanglement. Targeting the synaptic processes at work in the act of making sense of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, Wehrs develops a normative enquiry into the ethics of reading while paying attention to the synaptic mechanisms that foster and deepen reader responses and the tacit cultural reservoirs substantiating such responses. Taken together, the contributions in this section thus show how ethically valuable practices of discernment are subject to tacit assumptions that limit or control understanding of the ethical dilemmas that readers and narrators confront and reflect on in their encounter with or participation in narrative.

Stephen Kidd starts off Section 4, 'The Ethics of Witnessing', by asking a pertinent if troubling ethical question: what responsibility do we have towards the dead? He thinks through possible ethical demands placed on us in relation to dead authors, and, by looking more closely at archaeological protocols for dealing with human remains, he concludes that the reason we sense an imperative to treat the dead with respect comes to us from 'the future we envision' rather than from the past we cannot leave behind. Miikka Laihinen is also concerned with the ethics of a distant past. In studying the poetry of Finnish poet Mikael Brygger, who has incorporated text fragments from the walls of Pompeii in his poetry, he asks how this material can be read and treated in an ethically appropriate way. Building on Deleuze's semi-cosmic concept of counter-actualization, Laihinen ponders what the reading of — and real-world encounters with — the Pompeii fragments actually mean in ethical terms. The other two contributions to this section take us back to a more familiar context in which a literary ethics of witnessing has been developed: that of the aftermath of the Holocaust. Utilizing

the Girardian concept of 'interdividuality', William A. Johnsen traces a poetic dialogue between the postwar poetry of Geoffrey Hill and Jon Silkin. In the interdividual poetic space that their dialogue establishes, Johnsen hears the echoes of Holocaust victims as a reminder of how we can respond to the ultimate ethical question: how do we avoid persecution and victimization? By listening carefully or not? Geir Uvsløkk, for his part, poses the question of literary ethics in his engagement with Polish-born francophone Jewish writer and Holocaust survivor Anna Langfus. He looks specifically at Langfus's first novel, *The Whole Land Brimstone*, to explore how her contribution to the literature of hiding gives shape to an ethics of visibility that renders visible traumatic Holocaust experiences. In addition, Uvsløkk's ethical reflection also implicates his own position, as he extends his enquiry to the ethical responsibilities of state officials, editors, scholars, and other agents of the public sphere, who are involved in the publication (or non-publication), dissemination, and reception of this kind of witness literature.

The question of the ethics of representing ethically charged material in public is at the heart of the fifth and final section, entitled 'The Ethics of Representation'. Anna Sofia Churchill's contribution examines the cognitive schemas structuring the works of migrant and Native writers collected in two recent anthologies. According to Churchill, the writers in these anthologies adhere to established cognitive patterns for determining their position in the collectives with which they identify, yet so do the editors of the collections. Churchill highlights the ethical stakes of establishing shared assumptions about the widest possible community to be included in these anthologies that underpin the processes of co-constituting these texts. The ethical question of representation is also at the core of Andrea Macrae's essay, which examines the intersections of storytelling and ethics to expose dominant yet potentially harmful tropes that circulate in picture books about refugee experiences. The opportunity for critical reflection on such tropes, Macrae explains, emerges both in the tension between showing and telling in picture books and in the willingness of authors and illustrators to cross the ethical faultlines of representation and societal stigma. In her contribution, Mary Holland interrogates the ways in which prominent and celebrated contemporary authors like Rachel Cusk, Ben Lerner, and David Foster Wallace implicate their own ethical life in their (more or less) realist writing. Engaging with various ways of relating fiction, reality, and self, Holland argues for the relevance of authors' extraliterary ethics in the way we assess the ethics of their work — which is especially bad news for Wallace.

In her contribution, Maria Ludwigs comes to a pointedly different (if complementary) conclusion, as she argues for the necessity to read literature as representation, emphasizing the power of literature to engage readers in speculation and paradox (which resonates with the contributions to Section 1). Positioning

herself as a teacher of literature and film, Ludwigs interrogates a trend in students to approach literature and fiction not as fiction but as a testament to the author's ethical stance (in the terms of Phelan's contribution to Section 2, this amounts to a failure to understand the particular constitution of the 'Zone of Literary Fiction'). Drawing on two ethically highly-charged texts that thematize Holocaust survival — the 1974 film *The Night Porter* and Boris Fishman's 2014 novel *A Replacement Life* — Ludwigs engages with René Girard's mimetic theory and Phelan's rhetorical narratology to draw out the significance of examining the exchanges of meaning that take place on the scene of representation (Girard), and the relevance of registering the cognitive, ethical, aesthetic, and affective rhetorical effects of fiction (Phelan), as exemplary for the prospect of honing one's critical thinking and reflection through reading fiction and watching film. The final contribution, by Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir, returns us to the question of life-writing and to the ethical vistas that open out from this practice, specifically with reference to the family members who are inadvertently co-constituted as they come into focus through the autobiographical author's narrative. The lines of conflict that Guðmundsdóttir identifies target issues of agency and ownership in narratives that tacitly take the memoirist's interpretative prerogative as given, often at the expense of the (hypothetical) narratives of family members. The ethical stakes are especially acute in the case study Guðmundsdóttir singles out: David Baddiel's *My Family: The Memoir*, which tells the stories of the author's parents, one of whom is dead and the other suffering from dementia. Here also, as throughout the volume as a whole, ethical complexities proliferate rather than find themselves resolved. The main take-away from the volume as a whole, perhaps, is that such proliferating ethical complexity makes a continued investment in *literary* ethics all the more necessary.