

What Remains? Literature and Ethics in a Time of Crisis

(Stockholm, 20-22 August 2024; deadline for applications: 16 February 2024)

The relation between ethics and literature became a topic of intense academic debate at the end of the twentieth century—at a time, that is, when that relation was no longer self-evident after the challenges of postcolonial, feminist, and deconstructive critique. Humanist proponents of literature’s role as an empathy engine (Nussbaum, Rorty) entered into conversation with theorists who took inspiration from the work of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas to valorize literature as a site of singular otherness—as an occasion of ethical encounter rather than moral instruction (Attridge, Eaglestone, Miller). In the decades since, the debate over the relation between ethics and literature has never completely disappeared: discussions of affect and empathy never stray far from ethical considerations; the attention in ecocriticism to human-nonhuman relations implicitly but controversially transports ethical claims to the object world; in narrative theory, rhetorical narratology continues to center ethical relations between author, text, and reader; and considerations of the “uses of literature” explicitly raise question of literature’s ethical affordances, also but not exclusively in the fields of the health and medical humanities.

This conference aims to bring these different strands of twenty-first-century reflection on literature and ethics together to update the debate on the ethics of literature for the present — for what can by now uncontroversially be termed “a time of crisis.” In light of environmental, epidemic, technological, economic, demographic, and geopolitical upheavals, the question of the ethics of literature may seem peripheral; at the same time, in an age of diminished prospects, it becomes more urgent than ever to raise questions of what values remain or can be salvaged. Capitalizing on Theodor W. Adorno’s contention that art’s ‘powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world’ make it a paradoxically potent site of ethical and political interrogation, this conference will focus on the juncture of literature and ethics in the present—in light of contested pasts and uncertain futures.

Topics:

We invite contributions on the relation between literature and ethics that both engage with particular case studies and situate themselves in ongoing debates on these issues. Possible topics include, but are definitely not restricted to, the following topics:

- the affordances of rhetorical narratology for a literary ethics
- storytelling and human wellbeing
- storytelling, storylistening, and public reasoning
- the values of the unexamined (or unnarrated) life
- the ethics of life-writing
- literature and ethics in the Anthropocene
- literature as a mode of witness in an age of mass extinction
- the value of literature and literary study in a climate changed world
- literary ethics in a posthuman age
- literary ethics in postsecular times
- the ethics of literature and storytelling in aging societies
- medium- or genre-specific accounts of literary ethics
- the ethics of authorship in the age of generative AI
- collaboration and other ethical dimensions of authorship
- literature, ethics, and politics in a hyperpolitical age

- ethics and literariness in the literary marketplace
- empirical approaches to literary ethics
- literature, ethics, and intersectionality
- the limits of ethical approaches to literature

While the conference focuses on the interface of literature and ethics, case studies on other cultural forms (film, theater, performance, ...) that contribute to the debate are also very welcome. The conference language is English, but we welcome papers on texts and documents in any language from any period, as long as they contribute to an understanding of the relation between literature and ethics today.

Confirmed Keynote Speakers:

Hanna Meretoja (University of Turku)

James Phelan (Project Narrative, Ohio State University)

Applications:

Please send an abstract of 200-300 words with a short biographical note (50 words) to whatremains2024@gmail.com by 16 February 2024. Papers should not exceed 20 minutes. Please submit your proposal in Word-format.

Important Dates:

Abstract submission deadline: 16 February 2024

Notification of results: 15 March 2024

Registration: 15 March 2024 - 15 June 2024

Conference dates: 20-22 August 2024

Practical Information:

The conference is organized by Mid Sweden University, Stockholm University, Károli Gáspár University, and KU Leuven. The conference will take place at the [Stockholm Waterfront Congress Centre](#) in the center of Stockholm, which is easily accessible by road, rail, and air. Registration will include coffee breaks, lunches, and one conference dinner. Fees apply. We are currently in the process of securing extra funding to keep fees as low as possible.

Organizers:

Charlotta Palmstierna Einarsson (Mid Sweden University)

Marina Kohnen Ludwigs (Stockholm University)

Anita Rákóczy (Károli Gáspár University)

Pieter Vermeulen (KU Leuven)

Joakim Wrethed (Stockholm University)

Questions:

Please direct all queries to whatremains2024@gmail.com.

Conference Website: <https://eventy.gondor.com/WHATREMAINS>