

University of Cambridge Department of German and Dutch

2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Schröder Lecture

Prof. Sarah Colvin (Schröder Professor Elect)

5 pm, Friday 25 October, Magdalene College Cripps Auditorium, ,  
Chesterton Rd, Cambridge

“You have to change your life”? The Ethics of Reading and  
German Studies.

“You have to change your life” is the famous last half-line of a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke (“Archaic Torso of Apollo”, 1908). Rilke’s poem describes as well as stimulating an aesthetic response: that mysterious reaction to a work of art. Over the last decade or so, an “ethical turn” has led scholars in the humanities to question (not for the first time) the relationship between *aesthetic* and *ethical* responses.

Talking about ethics and reading can provoke anxieties about black-and-white, prescriptive, or moralizing approaches to complex works of literature. Those concerns can be addressed by a focus not on the (immobilized) status of text or reader, but on the (dynamic) relationship between them. “Ethics” are defined in different ways, but often with reference to the relationship or encounter between self and other. Cognitive theorists, philosophers, and literary critics seem to agree that the encounter with the other through reading can engender something C. S. Lewis called *enlargement* (“we seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves”). But is enlargement – being “more than ourselves” – an aesthetic, or an ethical response?

If we consider not only the aesthetics but the ethics of reading, then we have to look again not only at *why* and *how* we read, but at the choices we make about *what* to read, and what not to. If the aesthetic response (and perhaps the ethical one too) is a form of *Aufmerksamkeit* (attentiveness), how do we decide what deserves our attention, in German Studies and beyond?