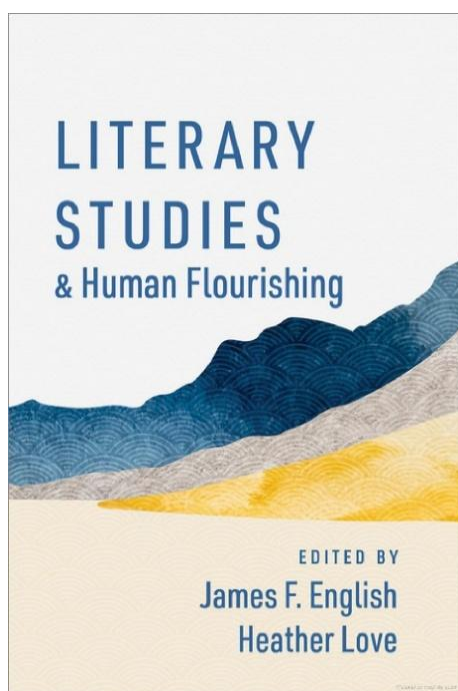


## BOOKS

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**James F. English and Heather Love (eds.), *Literary Studies and Human Flourishing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 230 p.**

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*Literary Studies and Human Flourishing*, edited by James F. English and Heather Love (Oxford University Press, 2023), is the third edited collection in Oxford University Press's *The Humanities and Human Flourishing* series. The series also includes volumes on philosophy, history, religious studies, theatre, cinema and media, music, and the visual arts. In the *Preface*, James O. Pawelski, the general editor of the series and the editor of its concluding volume, which shares the title of the series as a whole, discusses the "transformative power of literature" as it emerges from the studies gathered in this book. He places the entire collective project under the sign of a "eudaimonic turn," a concept he had already outlined in his 2013 essay "What Is the Eudaimonic Turn?," included in *The Eudaimonic Turn: Well-Being in Literary Studies*, edited by James O. Pawelski and D. J. Moores (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press). There, as here, the concept is presented as closely connected to positive psychology, especially to the field

developed by Martin Seligman and his research group.

Rooted primarily in affect studies, *Literary Studies and Human Flourishing* opens a field of discussion shaped by a series of concepts that organise the essays in the volume: *Bibliotherapy* (Leah Price), *Genre-Intolerance* (James F. English, Scott Enderle, Rahul Dhakecha), *Sage Writing* (David Russell), *Literature of Uplift* (David James), *Black Ecological Optimism* (Sonya Posmentier), *Disability Studies* and the *Eudaimonic Turn* (Janet Lyon), *Geropsychology* (Scott Herring), *Therapeutic Redescription* (Beth Blum), and *Critical Affect* (Heather Love). In the *Introduction*, English and Love define the



stakes and methodology of the volume through a concern with “forms of inequality,” approached “by using the tools of critique, but in a spirit that is broadly ameliorative and aimed toward the individual and collective potential.” Their formulation suggests a careful reassessment of the hegemony of critique, in which postcritique appears to remain *within* the field of critical theory rather than to mark a clean break *away* from it. Such a position is persuasive, since the gains of critical theory continue to shape the contemporary theoretical landscape. These gains extend beyond a specialised vocabulary indebted to a passing intellectual fashion. They have also enabled reparative forms of reading in response to an exclusively aestheticising mode of interpretation, once itself hegemonic, which often overlooked the social questions woven into the imaginative texture of the artistic object. What this “project of repair” seeks, then, is less an overcoming of critical theory as an ideological and (ultimately) disciplinary formation than its “amelioration.” This amelioration is pursued through methods drawn mainly from affect theory, which shift the angle of illumination cast upon the artistic object rather than altering the critical understanding of art or the ethical perspective that informs it. In other words, the volume proposes a series of emphases meant to disclose both “the histories of injury and damage” (*Introduction*) and the reparative, affiliative capacities of art, through what theorists such as Rita Felski, Paul Saint-Amour, and Heather Love, repeatedly invoked by the contributors, call *redescription* or a *redescriptive disposition*.

The volume’s sequence of contributions opens with Leah Price’s *Bibliotherapy and Human Flourishing*, which examines the problem of professional and therapeutic reading domains through some reading policies governed by interests and communities that remain partly entangled with a neoliberal logic concealed behind them. To paraphrase Franco Moretti, Price’s subject here might be described as forms (in this case forms of *reading*) struggling for space. Until recently, this space had largely been occupied by academic critical reading. Price argues that it is now claimed by *bibliotherapy* or, in David James’ terms, by the *literature of Uplift*, as forms of primary, immersive identification between the reading subject and the problems presented by the literary text, together with a mechanical adoption of the solutions it offers. Such proposals, Price shows, belong to a market logic that capitalises on individual or collective vulnerabilities and thereby narrows the reader’s freedom of choice. Reading is drawn toward the alleviation of painful symptoms rather than toward the aesthetic and affective gains of the act of reading: “Casting books as a weapon of the weak,” Price writes, “the one place where otherwise powerless readers can escape all social constraints, obscures how often the choice to read comes from above as much as within.” Therefore, in relation to Price’s article, the “eudaimonic turn” proposed by James Pawelski in the volume’s preface may apply more convincingly to readers drawn to such practices than to the market segment that directs them through carefully elaborated promotional strategies. Price’s contribution to *reader studies* fits the broader concerns of the volume by foregrounding, beyond any historical or neoliberal context, the idea of an *emotional response* to literary reading and the need to reform academic literary studies in light of such forms of contemporary public interest.

In *Bad Habits on Goodreads? Eclecticism vs. Genre-Intolerance among Online Readers*, James F. English, Scott Enderle, and Rahul Dhakecha develop a reader study organised around three research questions: a methodological question, concerning the

construction of databases capable of supporting generalisations about reading; a sociological question, concerning contemporary reading behaviours; and an anthropological question, concerning the shaping influence of Goodreads-type platforms on those behaviours. The “metrics of similarity” on which such platforms rely in order to construct individual profiles and generate recommendations lead English, Enderle, and Dhakecha to identify a narrow form of reading enthusiasm based on “genre intolerance” and the “compulsion to repeat.” What emerges from their analysis is a form of “genre tribalism” that statistically challenges the (apparent) eclecticism and the (false) democratisation of reading proclaimed by the algorithmic “digital curation” of these platforms.

In the second part of the volume, Christopher Castiglia’s *Flourishing Spirits* establishes a relation of equivalence between spiritualism (understood as a social practice and, perhaps, as a psychological need) and literature, considered through their shared capacity for “belief” in “the *might be*.” This belief functions as a form of compensation in relation to what *is*, which often proves insufficient or even traumatic. The result is a choice between *reality* and its *possibilities*, with the latter absorbed as *truths*. What Castiglia describes here might be called a passive version of reading, counterbalanced in turn by an activism of the real, visible in David Russell’s essay *Sage Writing: Facing Reality in Literature*. Russell examines the intersection between positive psychology and literature as a way of moving beyond a “disease model,” that is, a broadly negative model which, in his view, dominates and affects academic psychology, literary criticism, and the humanities more generally, all of which seem “afflicted by a constitutional aversion to positive claims.” To be sure, Russell’s premises also contain a form of interrogative relativism, since he first asks “what passes for ‘reality’ in a given culture, and how a fuller sense of reality may be faced, or seen with a wider vision.” The answers range from the identification, in Latour’s wake, of historical similarities or functions shared by literature and religion to a distancing from the view of literature as a “set of data” and, following De Quincey, to an understanding of it as “a work of nature,” containing relations rather than information alone. Literature may therefore be understood as an interrelational “space of exploration,” rather than as a set of prescriptions with immediate practical or psychological applicability.

The third part of the book includes David James’s essay *Literature of Uplift*, which examines a recent thematic *trend* on the book market: the emergence of “minor redemptions of everyday life as perfectly acceptable subject-matter for contemporary writing.” The issue invites reflection on the relations between the sentimental novel, the psychological novel, and children’s or young-adult fiction, considered from the perspective of the ameliorative value attached to the representation of “vulnerable or disenfranchised subjects.” The premise seems to be that, in the eyes of the reader of Up Lit, the generic stakes of this literature appear to lie in “textual healing.” Sonya Posmentier’s *Black Ecological Optimism and the Problem of Human Flourishing* then turns to a question situated at the intersection of “Black literary history and the field of positive psychology: how is it possible for individuals or groups to ‘flourish’ without collective freedom.” Posmentier foregrounds the ethical relations between oppressive models and systems and the possibility of individual flourishing as a subject shaped by such systems. She also considers the nature of fictional (or autofictional) representations of these relations.

The discussion is particularised through a selection of traumatic ecological contexts (such as natural disasters) and medical contexts (such as life-threatening disease). Posmentier examines the relation between what she identifies as a “poetics of feelings,” on the one hand, and “individuation,” on the other, both of which serve as a basis for various forms of individual investment in communal practices and projects.

The fourth part of the volume opens with Janet Lyon’s *Literary Study, the Hermeneutics of Disability, and the Eudaimonic Turn*, in which Lyon clarifies the didactic meanings of the eudaimonic turn, together with its psychological implications. Her arguments are framed through the political functions that may emerge from collaborative conversations around texts concerned with disability, nonnormative bodyminds, ableism, and related issues. The study proceeds by comparing the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” placed “in the service of ideological or discursive analysis—usually to unearth disruptive or contradictory forces at work,” with the “hermeneutics of affirmation,” understood as “engagement with a text’s world on its own aesthetic and narrative terms, [...] that explore the available, perceptible, evident meanings frankly offered by a text,” and, finally, with “reparative reading,” which brings the first two together. The theoretical *pro domo* plea is evident here. Scott Herring’s *Positive Geropsychology and the Poetics of Later-Life Floundering* continues the volume’s concern with disadvantaged communities by focusing on *ageing* communities and on the politics of flourishing that may become both the object of literature devoted to this social group and the object of literary criticism devoted to the field known as “Literary Age Studies.”

In the final section of the book, Beth Blum’s *Therapeutic Redescription* explores the forms taken by this technique, inherited from the Greco-Roman Stoics, in contemporary autofiction. As in ancient thought, redescription is meant to “emancipate individuals from the false ‘impressions’ that govern their lives,” for therapeutic purposes. The volume closes with Heather Love’s *Reading, Critical Affect, and the Project of Repair*, which analyses Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading* and *Minima Moralia* in terms of a paradigm shift (in effect a turn) toward affect theory and toward a postcritical age of literary studies, a direction Sedgwick had already pursued in the 1990s and 2000s.

*Literary Studies and Human Flourishing* thus reconstructs an extensive map of the questions and perspectives involved in literary studies oriented and informed by affect studies. It signals the possible, and indeed necessary, relations between literature and concrete existence, between critical practices and their transaesthetic relevance, between the humanities and social policies, whether individual or communal, and, ultimately, between different and successive ages in the interpretation of literary texts.

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