

Bradley J. Irish, *Literary Neurodiversity Studies. Current and Future Directions*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025, 106 pp., ISBN 9783031806025.

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Originating in the established lineage of literary studies on the history of emotions and affect—such as love, lust, desire, envy, and rivalry—in the English Renaissance, and on how deeply these forces governed, perturbed, and shaped human individuality and interaction (Irish 2018; Irish 2025b; Irish 2025c), Bradley J. Irish’s latest manuscript compellingly affirms the expansion of his critical framework to encompass neurodiversity within early modern literature and culture. Beyond this, it interrogates both the current state and the future trajectories of the emerging field of Literary Neurodiversity Studies, which applies the principles of neurodiversity theory to literary criticism. Irish has the merit of delivering an intuitive field map, deliberately positioned at the threshold of a still largely uncharted terrain, and offering a generous invitation to break new ground. This contribution is the first to meaningfully synthesize the field’s foundational efforts into a compact and programmatic overview.

Published in Palgrave’s Literary Disability Studies series, the essay unfolds over five chapters. Serving as a preface, the opening chapter highlights the intensely personal dimension of Irish’s academic endeavor. An associate professor of English literature at Arizona State University, Irish publicly identifies as both autistic and ADHD, having received both diagnoses in adulthood. After explaining how this lived experience informs his critical engagement with neurodivergence, he proceeds to a conceptual and theoretical

mapping of the field, beginning with an essential analysis of the various—and frequently contested—approaches to this intricate and multidimensional topic. As already indicated, Irish reflects his longstanding research interest in emotional experience by proposing a theoretical framework centered on the triad of cognition, emotion, and sensation, as evidenced in his previous publications.

Overcoming the notion of neurotypicality, Irish offers a diachronic account of neurodiversity based on a biocultural perspective (Walker 2021; Seymour 2025). Despite acknowledging that “not all forms of neurodivergence are inherently disabling,” (Irish 2025a: 10) he emphasizes that the idea remains deeply rooted in the history of disability studies, although the definition of neurodiversity is inherently open and flexible due to its inclusive character. The author also points out that regional differences exist in academic approaches to neurodiversity: European scholarship tends to emphasize philosophical and sociological viewpoints, whereas American research usually adopts alternative methodological and disciplinary orientations. Irish outlines at this point his two-fold aim, worthy of consideration: first, to stabilize the field’s foundations for teaching and research; second, to catalyze methodological innovation by tying it more tightly to empirical-adjacent work on reading, emotion, and sensory experience. As a field primer, the book is deliberately accessible. At the same time, it offers a programmatic agenda by specifying where Irish identifies the most promising cross-disciplinary exchange—particularly with cognitive literary studies, affect theory, and the often-underexplored sensory dimensions of literary engagement. The author also advances a “polemical purpose” (Irish 2025a: 16) of the book: to make room for understanding the neuro-reading of a literary text no less basic than one that is grounded in other elements such as sex, gender, race, etc.

In the second chapter, Irish’s effort could be described as the compilation of an extensive bibliography intended to serve as a practical resource, citing some of the most comprehensive and tentative works to delineate features of a literary text read under the lens of Literary Neurodiversity Studies (e.g. Philippian 2025; Stenning 2024; Rodas 2018; Yergeau 2018). While the issue of representation is quoted as relevant, Irish also addresses broader global perspectives, specific case studies, and recurring tropes. His synthesis highlights how the field draws on and reworks adjacent frameworks—neuroqueer studies, crip theory, rhetoric, and autistic poetics—while firmly insisting on literary method (close reading, analysis of genre and form, readerly phenomenology) as the field’s core. The emphasis on Literary Neurodiversity Studies as literary

criticism—rather than as clinical commentary on literature—proves both clarifying and pedagogically useful. Moreover, Irish’s overview also names a canon of anchors and trends that can quickly be mobilized in a literature review.

The third chapter is set in the future –or, better, in “*one* possible future”– (Irish 2025a: 47) of the field and represents the book’s intellectual fulcrum. Irish proposes a “radical reimagination” (Irish 2025a: 47), a tighter braid between Literary Neurodiversity Studies and research on literary cognition, literary emotion and affect, and literary sensation. He affirms that, because neurodiversity encompasses the full spectrum of cognitive, emotional, and sensory functioning, *all* literary analyses of these domains may be understood as part of the field of study, within a neurological approach. All the abovementioned critical traditions share a concern with “mind-contingent” phenomena, so bringing this triad under the umbrella of literary neurodiversity would increase their scholarly visibility, foster interdisciplinary collaboration, and foreground their interdependence. This broadened vision, however, raises ethical concerns, particularly the risk of marginalizing neurodivergent voices. Irish rightly insists that neurodivergence must remain pivotal to the field’s core, emphasizing that any expansion of the field must strengthen, not dilute, its liberationist aims. Irish ultimately supports a two-pronged strategy: maintaining the emphasis on neurodivergent modes of being while adopting a more thorough conceptualization of neurodiversity that incorporates literary analysis that is cognitive, emotional, and sensory. He contends that doing so will depathologize neurological differences and increase the legitimacy of the field. Irish’s proposal sits productively amid current developments about moving beyond high-level theoretical claims, like for example “double empathy” (Milton 2012) that reframes social-cognitive differences as reciprocal misattunements; in Literary Neurodiversity Studies, neurological ways are treated as methods rather than biases. Indeed, in neurodivergent temporalities an emergent work is already expanding the toolkit for linking form (rhythm, pacing, iteration) with autistic and other non-normative experiences of time (e.g. Yeager’s concept of “*kakokairos*”, cf. Yeager 2025). Irish’s call to integrate cognition/emotion/sensation provides a frame into which these developments snap.

In the fourth chapter, the author models “neurological reading” through Othello. Irish’s choice of a canonical, much-taught Shakespeare play is strategic: it shows how Literary Neurodiversity Studies can operate in familiar curricular terrain and how neurodiversity reframes long-debated questions such as jealousy, manipulation, and perception through a different lens. The analysis

is designed less to declare definitive diagnoses and more to demonstrate practice: what it means to attend to cognitive/affective/sensory dynamics, to resist pathologizing shortcuts, and to keep literary form and historical context in view. As a teaching model, this represents a strong, reproducible template for seminar discussion and writing of neurological readings without medicalizing characters or authors.

Trying to define its contribution and significance, Irish's analysis matters for at least three reasons: (1) it crystallizes objects, questions, and methods in a systematic pathway, starting from definitions to demonstrations, passing by the present state and setting of an agenda; (2) a research-forward agenda that remains strongly rooted in literary analysis; (3) its pedagogical usefulness, enclosed above all in the case study centered on Shakespeare's Othello.

Nevertheless, several challenges remain. First, the broader Critical Literary Neurodiversity Studies landscape remains anchored to autism, while the rest of the spectrum of neurodivergence will need equal theoretical depth about their peculiar and distinctive literary-aesthetic signatures. Second, the case study effectively models the method but also keeps the attention in the Anglophone canonical zone in the early modern period. Third, Irish's call to bridge the field with the branch on cognition, emotion and sensation needs to be operationalized, and this would mean an effort on measurement, replicability, and methodology, considering the shown deficits of framings and constructs like Theory of Mind (ToM), as Yergeau (2018) and others have argued (see Milton 2012).

Overall, the bibliography in the appendix is of considerable value, and the study constitutes a timely and field-defining work, because it offers a persuasive sketch of where Literary Neurodiversity Studies are and could productively lead. The book provides tools to apply the neurodiversity lens to literature, but above all launch an important call to action for scholars: to continue compiling a collective comparative case studies history, a living bibliography beyond the Anglophone canon; engaging in design the participatory, neuro-affirming research protocols; and expanding theory-building beyond autism to encompass a fuller spectrum of neurodiversity.

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