

Repair the World Alexandre Gefen
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talk of repair has become ubiquitous in recent years in the age of trauma culture art and literature have a new purpose to do justice to console comfort and heal drawing on works of twenty first century french language literature this monograph shows how literature can not only serve as a means of personal development but expand our capacity for empathy help repair the brokenness implied in victimhood and redress individual and collective traumas centered on a critical reflection on discourses of repair and reparations it questions the canonical theories on the functions of literature and proposes a new way of writing and reading literary history praise repair the world is an invigorating and essential call to arms the modern category of the literary it declares is being outpaced by the contemporary uses of literature as a medium of exorcism empathy reparation testimony commemoration existential renewal and ethical or political connectivity neither celebrating nor condemning such uses gefen models a much needed style of criticism interdisciplinary pragmatic relational that comes to grips with their importance rita felski the john stewart bryan professor and professor of english at the university of virginia usa in an era where self help memoir and autobiography command more than their fair share of publisher s lists in france it s tempting some fifty years after post structuralism s heyday to ascribe an impending death of literature to a taste for narcissistic exhibitionism in french literary culture but why bemoan the waning relevance of the question what is literature asks alexandre gefen when evidence abounds in the new century that literary writing increasingly posits itself as a restorative reparative act in the best instances authors who give form to embodied experience imaginatively forge with their readers empathetic bonds of the sort that secular and religious institutions long sustained repair the world is not only a capacious study of writers who hail from surprisingly broad sectors of french society from health and social workers to skilled laborers journalists and educators it s a situated call for a pragmatics of reading that makes of each book an intervention into the fabric of the real harnessing sources in affect theory trauma studies ethics and cognitive science alexandre gefen performs a critically reparative act all his own reminding us that the notion of literature as autonomous object was itself a historical construct in short an ideology reading and writing have always conjoined care for the self and care for others and it s upon that reciprocity that the communities of sense of tomorrow can flourish in a spirit of reparative humanism derek schilling professor of french director of the centre louis marin department of modern languages and literatures johns hopkins university usa alexandre gefen s wide ranging thought provoking study takes stock of a paradigm shift in contemporary french literature away from a model of autonomy and intransitivity to ways of writing and reading that seek to repair restore reassure and rebuild from the varied forms of expressivity found in self narratives to the empathetic projections of fiction repair the world maps out an expanding literary territory that seeks not critical negativity but rather the power to intervene for good in individual and collective life while reserving judgment on the actual extent of literature s effects gefen demonstrates that contemporary projects and discourses undeniably center the therapeutic and remediative uses of literature with its nuanced readings and keen insights repair the world has been rightly influential in france its powerful diagnosis of contemporary sensibilities resonates far beyond revealing both the

promises and predicaments of literature in the twenty first century alison james professor of french and chair of the department of romance languages and literatures at the university of chicago usa what would it mean to ask sartre s post war question what is literature in the 21st century in this wonderful essay alexandre gefen argues convincingly that the main purpose of literature today is to repair a broken world and memorialise forgotten lives taking examples from predominantly contemporary french literature he proposes that literature as therapy has replaced religions of salvation a politics of emancipation and formal experimentation today literature s mission is to heal traumatised individuals and communities resurrect the lives of the vulnerable and commemorate their deeds in the face of the forces of oblivion for gefen patrick modiano s dora bruder 1997 is the contemporary literary archetype of these lost identities to be rehabilitated and reinhabited gefen describes this new role for literature without taking sides the writing is lucid compelling and non partisan in an age of victimhood testimony empathy self expression and identity gefen s reparative paradigm is as persuasive as sartre s political version in the age of ideology max silverman professor of modern french studies university of leeds uk

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