

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE MORAL OF THE STORIES; OR, FRAUGHT POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY LITERARY CRITICISM

Jerry Varsava
University of Alberta

547

THOMAS DOCHERTY. *Literature and Capital*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. Pp. viii+272. \$95.

CHRISTY WAMPOLE. *Degenerative Realism: Novel and Nation in Twenty-First Century France*. New York: Columbia UP, 2019. Pp. xvi+278. \$140.

Over the course of a long and productive career, Thomas Docherty has authored books on disparate topics, but his more recent work has focused on literary criticism as a sociopolitical practice—*Aesthetic Democracy* (2006) and *Complicity: Criticism between Collaboration and Commitment* (2016)—and the contemporary university as a site of power and political contestation—*For the University: Democracy and the Future of the Institution* (2011) and *Universities at War* (2015). *Literature and Capital* extends these earlier discussions, offering a multifaceted historiography that examines, among other things, the book trade, the depiction of capital(ism) in literature, canon formation, and the state of letters in a variety of loci, especially the university.

Literature and Capital is built around a series of eight chapters grouped under the broad rubrics of Land and Literature, Culture and Capital, and Institutions and Human Capital. The respective chapters break down into many short essays that are mostly topically linked to one another, though at times the collocation can seem a bit miscellaneous and pointillistic. (Docherty acknowledges in his introduction that this book has taken a long time to complete.) Docherty's central claim is that money

has become a private good that stands in structural conflict with culture, which he regards as a common good, a place of sharing created by education/*Bildung* (25). So, on this reading, where university budgets are substantially (though not wholly) dependent upon tax revenues created by free enterprise, universities themselves will come to promote the economically instrumental, and seek to increase human capital at the expense of that which is not economically instrumental, especially cultural capital. And ne'er the twain shall meet.

In Chapter One, Docherty offers an elementary historiography of (Western) political economy. Feudal “land-based capital” shifts to “cultural capital,” with “financial capital,” i.e. “money,” serving as a “medium between the two forms” (35), and effecting what he later calls a “financial revolution” (64). It is the identification of this development that Docherty deems the “major discovery” of the book and, more specifically, that the relationship between these forms has a history, and that that history is “extremely nuanced” (28). He therefore cites various literary depictions of economic life that highlight oppressive relations between the monied and the impecunious: the poor rural poet celebrating the lord of the manor and all he owns under land-based capital; and novelists detailing the modern financialization of residential property under “financial capital,” as we see in Mary Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1800), John Lanchester’s *Capital* (2012), and Jonathan Coe’s *Number 11* (2015). His descriptive claims about the plots of these novels are certainly valid, but the historiography, not to mention the general hermeneutic method on which they are based, do not obviously amount to a “discovery.” Actually, though Georg Lukács is not mentioned in the volume, Docherty appears to subscribe to a fairly orthodox acceptance of the “reflection theory” (*Widerspiegelungstheorie*) of aesthetics, brilliantly distilled in Lukács’s “Art and Objective Truth” (1954).

In Docherty’s reading, the current domination of (financial) capital in those institutions most important to him—literature and the university—has yielded a new “neo-feudalism,” and *Literature and Capital* is an early act of resistance to it. It is clear that the author construes this as an existential, Manichaeian struggle between those who are virtuous and those who are not. Clearly, some of the views Docherty offers in *Literature and Capital* are influenced by the impassioned, divisive politicking around the Brexit issue—the Brexiteers, we recall, prevailed in the 2016 referendum, to the chagrin of The City, Greater London, and the majority of leading opinion-makers in the press and academia. (Personal politics aside, it bears pointing out that recent British history has seen the playing out of two disastrous political stratagems of epic proportion: David Cameron’s 2016 Brexit referendum and Theresa May’s general election call in 2017, each of which achieved precisely the opposite end that the respective principals sought.) Moving away from the (narrowly) economic, Docherty goes so far as to posit a rather arresting analogy, wherein he likens a British Tory politician, Michael Gove—a sometime MP and two-time aspirant to the Tory leadership, and, notably here, a fervent Brexiteer—to the terrorist organization, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). While Docherty acknowledges that the comparison may

seem “crass,” he defends it as apt because, just as ISIS destroyed invaluable cultural sites at Palmyra, Syria, and elsewhere, Michael Gove encouraged Britons to “despise” “experts” during the Brexit campaign, and therein also destroyed important “culture.” Much like a facile *reductio ad Hitlerum*, Docherty’s *reductio ad ISIS-um* has more rhetorical effect than logical coherence.

Although Docherty briefly acknowledges that “other forms of material possession” exist, his interests lie elsewhere (35). Literature is tied to geophysical property, because the capitalist economy that it describes is similarly tied to it (64). In its examination of British imperialism in India, Chapter Three covers important ground. Though much of this may be familiar to students of (post)colonialism, Docherty brings together important strands of a very complex tale. “English” comes to serve as a kind of *lingua franca* for governance and commerce, but also for education, and the Macaulay Minute (1835) is examined in detail. “English literature,” and the myriad assumptions and values that inform it, displace indigenous Sanskrit and Arabic and their literatures, and the cultural identity that they have shaped for millennia. So, the interests of empire and capital become inextricably linked with the “career of English” in India. Though tangential to the main discussion, Docherty echoes the lament of Rana Dasgupta’s *Capital* (2013) that the Indian government has in recent years retreated from “social and economic life,” leaving poor and middle-class Indians in economic precarity (96). He goes on to cite the crisis of suicides among Indian farmers, who have become losers under globalized neoliberalism.

549

George Orwell emerges as Docherty’s exemplary intellectual in the three essays of the second part of his book, though one hastens to add that it is not the Orwell of *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), the sympathetic advocate for the working poor of northern England. Rather, Docherty’s Orwell is the essayist of the early 1940s and the immediate postwar period. Two primary Orwellian themes are contextualized within contemporary British politics: the institutional control of language, and the rise of bureaucracy and the managerial class in government and universities. Like Orwell, Docherty strives to define Englishness and the political values that undergird it, but Docherty does so in more schematic terms than Orwell. Thus, English “restraint,” pragmatism, and the privileging of the empirical are viewed as troubling manifestations of a ubiquitous privatization, of a turning away from the communal, from social issues, and from society itself. In Docherty’s dualistic reading, the coexistence of the private and public spheres necessarily entails the subordination of the latter to former, rather than a fruitful interanimation of the two spheres envisioned by Lockean liberalism, and analyzed so incisively by Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). For his part, Docherty later criticizes Habermas for his approbative reading of the public sphere, which, in Docherty’s view, he renders in overly abstruse terms—a “somewhat nebulous affair”—that neglects the “value of material experience” (200).

Working in broad strokes, Docherty argues that the sensibility of privatization has come to dominate British politics, yielding a “privatization of truth.” By way of

illustration, he cites Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal breaking of unions, her questioning of the editorial "balance" of BBC's reporting, and the privatization of public housing (107). In particular, in his (notionally) Orwellian reading, Docherty claims that Thatcher's views are in fact a subversion of objective history (as reported by the BBC), and that "balance" is in fact a subterfuge for the relativization of facts, for the reduction of all reporting to (mere) "*interpretation*" (107; emphasis in original). In his view, this is a "recipe" for a "state of totalitarian governance" (108). In suggesting that BBC reporting in the 1980s (and beyond?) is bereft of editorial bias, one wonders if Docherty is not being overly tendentious, if in fact his position does not covertly endorse, to return again to Lukács, what the latter approvingly calls (after Engels) "partisanship of objectivity," and what might otherwise be called ideologically inflected reporting (798).¹

550 Docherty uses climate change denial as an illustration of a dangerous relativization of truth, of a discursive "equality"/"balance" where everyone is allowed her own view on the subject (107). This claim is mistaken. While climate change denial does of course exist, deniers now largely operate on the fringes of discourse on the subject. To be sure, across all quarters of civil society there is a wide-ranging discussion on how to best ameliorate the planetary condition, but that is the normal commerce of policy formation in a democratic society. Docherty presses his critique of "equality"/"balance" into the domain of literary studies. So, for example, Erich Auerbach is found wanting in *Mimesis* (1946)—widely regarded as one of the greatest works in Comparative Literature—because his attention to equality in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) fails to address the overtly political, while also offering a regrettable relativistic view of literary representation itself. Comparative Literature is broadly disparaged for its preoccupation with "idea of an equality among languages," but also for its "wished-for and fantasized equality among people" (113). Further, in his view, "some of our vastly expanding University Creative Writing Programmes" can come "tantalizingly close" to "the kind of quasi-industrial mode of production" that Orwell warns against in "The Prevention of Literature" (1946) (120). Considering the diverse and distinguished rosters of instructors and students in major creative writing programs, recourse to an essay whose major burden is to defend "intellectual liberty" is unconvincing. (For an alternative and certainly more sanguine view, one might read Mark McGurl's *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* [2009]). Even, oddly, Cartesianism doubt—the foundational epistemology of the Western scientific method—is taken to task for valorizing the questioning subject in a world of (notional) apodictic truths, or what Docherty calls, with somewhat daunting self-assurance, "what is actually the historical case" (124).

Literature and Capital postulates a dichotomous, conflicted world where "neoliberal capitalism"—here mistakenly taken for capitalism *tout court*, rather than a subspecies of it—seeks to vanquish all sense of communality and the commonweal. It offers often bold judgements on contemporary British politics, the state of the modern university, and all manner of important topics—income inequality,

Trumpism, *Wikileaks*, the housing market, and the instrumentalization of knowledge, among others. Concurrently, it details imaginative readings of a miscellany of (mostly British) literature that, in many instances, question interpretive orthodoxy, even if they are typically not underwritten with doubts, Cartesian or other. Still, we might well wonder if the world is actually so statically dichotomized or if, contrariwise, it is a much noisier place, a cacophony of voices, sometimes competing with one another, sometimes cooperating, where the extremes of Docherty's communitarianism and a Friedmanian neoliberal libertarianism are avoided by people of good will.² Further, should there not be a place for the *private* in literature—what is sometimes pejoratively reduced to “bourgeois consciousness”—where the pronoun “I” has a place, though not to the exclusion of “We,” beyond economics? In any event, *Literature and Capital* is a readable, and certainly nuanced, if sometimes strident, book that asks large, difficult questions, and encourages its readers to do the same.

Like Thomas Docherty, Christy Wampole engages major contemporary political issues. In her highly readable *Degenerative Realism: Novel and Nation in Twenty-First Century France*, she examines the “reactionary imaginary” in France over the last century and half or so, while attending most closely to her key construct of “degenerative realism” in her analyses of a broad range of contemporary French fiction. Degenerative realist fiction has three main tendencies: a sense of broad societal decline in the West; a loss of a sense of the “real” in a period of proliferating fake news, conspiracies, and misinformation; and, finally, a frequent miscibility of realism and speculative genres like science fiction and dystopia. Wampole's interpretation of this body of fiction is unrelievedly declensionist. It is lamentably atavistic on her account, “suffused with a kind of nineteenth-century ectoplasm, having failed to exorcise the sociologism, Darwinism, Decadence, and positivism of that period” (2). She juxtaposes the (really real?) realism of nineteenth-century fiction and the failing “real-time realism” of her subject writers, with the latter moving beyond what she somewhat dismissively calls the “amusements” of postmodernism, beyond the latter's “metatextuality, combinatoric spasms, and conceptual play” (4, 23). So, in this reading, degenerative realism operates beyond the objectivist mimesis of the great French realists and the ludic formalisms of the postmoderns, a view that at once overstates the objectivity of Balzac, Hugo, and Zola, while understating the mimetic efficacy of postmodern fiction.

Degenerative Realism begins with a well-researched survey of earlier French conservative and reactionary thought as seen in the work of, among others, Paul Bourget, Maurice Barrès, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, Charles Maurras, and Paul Claudel, whose *déclinologie* of France in the first half of the twentieth century anticipates a similar sensibility among contemporary French intellectuals like Éric Zemmour and Renaud Camus, novelists like Frédéric Beigbeder, Yann Moix, and Michel Houellebecq, and members and supporters of the Le Pen political franchise. While correctly acknowledging the pertinence of Virginie Despentes's *King Kong Theory* (2006) and her trilogy, *Vernon Subutex* (2015, 2015, 2017), Wampole makes only passing

reference to these, opting to concentrate solely on male authors. Consideration of something by Marie Darrieussecq would have also added depth here. For Wampole, two events have had an outsized influence on French degenerative fiction: the arrival of Minitel—a French precursor to the Internet—and the 9/11 attacks by Islamists that killed nearly 3,000 people and which launched the “War on Terror.” In the first instance, Minitel helped facilitate the rise of social media and a general elision of the boundary between fact and fiction over the course of its lifetime (1980-2012) and, in the second, 9/11 has given rise to a sometimes poignant and sometimes amorphous fear of Islam. Wampole acknowledges at the outset that her corpus is not comprised of “feel-good books” (6), that her engagement of them is something of a “demoralizing” enterprise (27), though a morally necessary one for her.

552 The thesis of Chapter One is that demography is used in degenerative realism as a plot structuring topic to highlight a variety of declensionist concerns: “national suicide, social Darwinism, *le Grand Remplacement*, recreational versus reproductive sex,” among others (33). Novels such as Beigbeder’s *99 Francs* (2000), Aurélien Bellanger’s *La Théorie de l’information* (2012), and Houellebecq’s *Submission* (2015), among others, portray the general commodification of human beings in an age of irreversible ethnonational decline predicated on consumerist and economic imperatives. At least as importantly, degenerative realist fiction also examines another notional source of immiseration: the decline of certain notions of Frenchness, of French identity. Wampole properly contextualizes this sense of malaise within French thought that stretches well back into the nineteenth century. Labelling it a “new old anguish,” she then briefly surveys this *mal de siècle* sensibility in contemporary French fiction. In support of her claim that degenerative realists succumb to a too-easy, a too-pervasive determinism, she criticizes what frankly might otherwise be seen as informed and discerning commentary on contemporary life: criticism of the tentacular reach of globalization into our quotidian lives presented in *99 Francs*, and the rejection of market-based consumerist identity formation in *Submission*. Not entirely convincingly, Wampole aligns these specific legitimate concerns of Beigbeder and Houellebecq with a generalized anxiety over demographic trends in France.

Still, as Wampole claims, “[d]emography can be a fear-inducing science,” as her cataloging of the views of a number of contemporary right-wing public figures—Renaud Camus, Éric Zemmour, and Marine Le Pen, among others—carefully documents. She pays particular attention to the writings of Camus, the author of several works decrying the decline of his notional traditional France and French culture, whose ideas are predated by those, for example, of Max Nordau, Édouard Drumont, Raymond Aron, and Marc Bloch, all of whom lament variously the death of France, its “suicide,” its *déchéance*. Camus sets out his theory of French demography in *Le Grand Remplacement* (2011), a position now widely known and generally excoriated. His basic assertion is that “native” “indigenous” French are being displaced and replaced by immigrants from non-Western countries, and that this is a project of conspiratorial elites intent on controlling France and the world. Wampole carefully parses the

prejudice and intolerance of Camus and kindred thinkers; that said, she does not avail herself of a powerful argument against Camus. At one point she laments the “conspicuous absence of (reliable) statistical data” for French demographic trends, but this is not exactly an unstudied area, issues of methodological optimality aside (36). The demographic trajectory of the French population simply does not in any way corroborate Camus’s thesis, as demonstrated in Ekrame Boubtane’s highly informative article, “France Reckons with Immigration Amid Reality of Rising Far Right” (2022), and several of its citations.

Chapter Two discusses the influence of Minitel and the Internet on popular conceptions of the true and the real. The history of the now-defunct Minitel is not widely known at this point, and Wampole’s detailed description of it is informative. While Minitel comes up in many contemporary French novels, her paradigmatic “wired novel” is Bellanger’s (yet to be translated) *La Théorie de l’information*—an exercise in *maximalisme balzacien*—which explores interactions between humans and the virtual nonhuman digitized world. The protagonist, Pascal Ertanger—based on the founder of Minitel, businessman Xavier Niel—develops an obsession with technologically-mediated immortality. The chapter goes on to discuss *Minitel rose*, a chatroom for the exchange of sexually-charged messages, as well as Minitel as a site where religious longing and the pursuit of the ineffable play out in *La Théorie de l’information*. While Wampole’s reading of the novel is resourceful, it is not always clear how the latter, or Antoine Bello’s trilogy, *Les Falsificateurs* (2007), *Les Éclaireurs* (2009), and *Les Producteurs* (2015), also discussed here, are illustrations of precisely “degenerative realism,” a term that comes up only sparingly in the chapter, rather than simply ingenious and ambitious works of speculative fiction.

553

A primary preoccupation of Bello’s trilogy is the relationship between the “true” and the “fake.” Bello does not abandon notions of the “true,” but does problematize them. His own nuanced, constructivist view of the “true” does not align with Wampole’s essentialistic position based on her generalized belief in a “common truth” (119). Clearly, it needs to be said, there is a grave problem today with self-serving, dishonest declarations of fake news, and the serial mendacities of someone like Donald Trump are easily unmasked, even as, admittedly, many people believe them. No, his Electoral College victory in 2016 was not the greatest in history as he asserted; and, no, the Big Lie is just a big lie. Still, there is an attendant issue with the media. Many claims advanced by opinionmakers of all sorts, irrespective of where these claims are disseminated, carry ideological shadings that (purport to) build on apodictic fact, leading to discourse where fact and politics seem inextricable. So, advocacy journalism often erodes the line between, for example, the “news” and the “opinion column,” between factual reporting and media editorializing. Inevitably, in the process, perceptions of “empirical reality” often prove to be dynamic and malleable. A major Pew study from April 2019 compared attitudes towards the news media in eight Western European countries, including the four largest: France, Britain, Germany, and Italy. By way of summary, it found that only 35% of the French trusted

the news media a “lot” or “somewhat,” placing it in a group with three other countries with comparably low levels of trust: Italy (29%), Britain (32%), and Spain (31%); levels of trust were appreciably higher in Denmark (47%), Germany (64%), Sweden (64%), and the Netherlands (67%). So, Bello’s interrogations into what constitutes the true and the fake are highly apposite; among a great many people, the French public seems to be engaged in the same enterprise.

Wampole organizes the latter half of her study, Chapters Three and Four, around what she calls an “immediacy effect,” which is achieved though “real-time realism” that emulates journalism, social media, and internet opinionmaking (123). The former chapter serves as a setup for the latter; it discusses a miscellany of topics, including Jean Raspail’s *The Camp of the Saints* (1973), American New Journalism, and global events. Raspail’s near-future novel depicts the migration of a million Bengalis in a fleet of a hundred boats, intent on fleeing hunger and other deprivations, making their way around the Horn of Africa to the Côte d’Azur and on to the French interior. While in part a response to concerns of the day about global population growth—Paul Erlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968) predates the novel by a few years—*The Camp of the Saints* is built on a white-supremacist politics, and depicts a hellscape of rape, murder, coprophagia, and cannibalism, among other depravities. Though she acknowledges that the novel is not a *realist* fiction as such, but rather a wild, hyperbolic racist satire, Wampole includes it here given its thematic relevance for her final chapter.

Michel Houellebecq is France’s most read, most studied, and most important living novelist, as Wampole and pretty much everyone else acknowledges. Appropriately, while he comes up a good deal throughout the book, Houellebecq is the principal focus of Chapter Four. Wampole adopts Susan Suleiman’s definition of the *roman à these*, which she develops in her well-known and important study, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (1983). For Suleiman, the novels of Malraux, Mauriac, Sartre, and Aragon evince a salutary humanitarian ethos; for Wampole, Houellebecq’s “degenerative realism,” contrariwise, is lacking all redemptive impulse or philosophical conviction; there are “no staunch calls for a renewed nationalism, no full-throated promotion of this or that ideology, no set of demands for specific policy changes” (179). While Houellebecq’s novels are populated with troubled and cynical protagonists in various states of existential angst—and Dostoevsky is a favourite author of his—these novels in fact express discernible and nuanced political convictions. Houellebecq’s first novel, *Whatever* (1994), lays these out in summary form. Contemporary life in the West is afflicted by two phenomena: economic liberalism and the economic inequalities it begets; and sexual liberalism which brings its own inequalities and misery. In each instance, and Wampole in fact quotes this passage at length, there is an “extension of the domain of the struggle [...] to all ages and all classes of society,” and an “*absolute pauperization* results in each instance” (Wampole 235, n. 66; Houellebecq 99; emphasis in original). This philosophically poignant passage carries within it the original French title, *Extension du*

domaine de la lutte, an emphasis sadly lost in the banal, incongruous English title. So, across Houellebecq's now considerable corpus of often dystopian fiction, there is a reiterative critique of modern Franco-Western sociopolitical forms: consumerism, materialism, *les soixante-huitards*, the postnational state, neoliberal capitalism, international multilateralism, and globalization. Far from being devoid of ideological conviction, Houellebecq's novels are insistently ideological, though his views do not align with Wampole's.

Wampole's reading of *Submission* (2015) emphasizes its interpretive undecidability, its irreducibility to a definitive, univocal message. I think this is correct but, unlike her, I do not quite see this as a demerit. Throughout *Degenerative Realism*, we see a hypostatization of certain key aspects of canonical nineteenth-century French fiction: mimetic "realism," linear emplotment, thematic transparency, and unambiguous moral closure. Such works give rise to a relatively untroubled reception. In Barthesian terms, Balzac, Hugo, and Zola produce *readerly* texts; or, as Jonathan Franzen would say, these are "contract writers" whose works are readily accessible to their readers. Houellebecq's *Submission* is Janus-faced, pointing in two obvious interpretive directions, though probably more. Revolving around the peaceful, democratic transfer of power in a near-future France, and the year is 2022, to a political coalition led by an Islamic party, *Submission* at once depicts an ideologically divided nation, but also a notional resolution to that division.³ The novel has an open-ended conclusion. Protagonist François stands undecided, in equipoise, weighing his existential options: the status quo, or a transactional religious conversion to Islam that will arrange for him two wives and a well-remunerated professional future. Readers are left to their own hermeneutic devices in responding to this challenging Barthesian *writerly* text, to what Franzen calls a difficult authorial "status" novel. A provocative work, *Submission* has evoked an unusually broad range of receptions which suggests that Houellebecq has achieved his personal goal as a writer, i.e., that readers "simply be human beings, thinking and feeling for themselves" ("Approaches to Distress" 19). In comparing Houellebecq and other "degenerative realists" unfavourably to the great French realists of the nineteenth century, one runs the risk of rescribing the old tedious Ancient vs. Moderns debate.

Prescriptive narrative aesthetics imposes an unnecessary occlusion upon its advocates. As Bakhtin asserts in "Epic and the Novel" (1941), the novel is always a product of the particularities of its time and place, whose "birth and development [...] as a genre takes place in the full light of the historical day" (3). Just as high canonical French realism of the nineteenth century was tied to its historical time and place, so too is the body of fiction that Wampole in general sees as "degenerative." Consequently, its thematic and formal interests cannot be the same as those of its distant antecedents. The meaning of "realism" is not immutable across time. Or, as Erich Auerbach says at the end of *Mimesis*, true to his relativistic reading of "representation," "the term 'realistic'" is not "unambiguous" (556). While Wampole does indeed acknowledge that realism is not immutable, she is often reluctant to acknowledge the

timely sociocritical insight of her subject authors. Further, she is dismissive of their recourse to science fiction and the expressive latitude it affords writers: “I want to suggest that as the perforated membrane between reality and fiction splits open, we can expect more and more novels that begin in the realist mode to ‘degenerate’ into sci-fi or some other nonrealist mode as they move toward their conclusions” (110).

Over the last century and more, science fiction has tendered some of the most incisive political commentary found within the domain of the literary novel. Consider the analytical acuity and cautionary force of works such as Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895), Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931), and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Similarly, what of speculative allegorical novels such as Zamyatin’s *We* (1924), Platonov’s *The Foundation Pit* (1930), and Vladimir Sorokin’s *Day of the Oprichnik* (2006), with their withering critiques of Soviet and Russian totalitarianism?⁴ And what of Houellebecq? He has declared that science fiction was “the most brilliant and most inventive literature” of the twentieth century (“Leaving the Twentieth Century” 116). His characteristic hyperbole aside, Houellebecq uses science fiction, and near-future fictions, to deal with what is for him an inveterate problem of human existence: the misery that desire and will bring us.

Along with Comte, Schopenhauer has had the greatest intellectual influence on Houellebecq.⁵ Schopenhauer is mentioned only once in *Degenerative Realism*, and the reference is to an ephemeral essay, *Eristic Dialectic: The Art of Winning an Argument* (1831). As in Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* (1819, 1844, 1859), *The Elementary Particles* (1998), *The Possibility of an Island* (2005), and *Submission* all contend, in one way or another, with the problem of human unhappiness. And, as with Schopenhauer, Houellebecq’s seemingly unrelenting pessimism is leavened on occasion with a concern for ethics and compassion, which paradoxically seems to suggest a degree of agency beyond the determinisms of desire and the will. Consider, for example, *Serotonin* (2019) and its compassionate rendering of the devastation wrought by the EU’s neoliberal economic policies on dairy farmers in northern France who often turn to suicide in their despair.⁶ Thus, on balance, Wampole’s reading of Houellebecq places greatest emphasis on his pessimism, while understating his sociopolitical critique. As Houellebecq has himself acknowledged, “The author, who takes it upon himself to express [‘all the negative in the world’], obviously runs the risk of being identified with this negative part of the world. That makes writing an at-times difficult activity” (“Interview” 210). What Schopenhauer has said broadly of novelists, applies abundantly and particularly to Houellebecq et al.: “every work of fiction is a peep-show in which we observe the spasms and convulsions of the agonized human heart” (576). Still, far from simple “degeneration,” the fiction of Houellebecq, and that of many of his peers, offers rich explorations of the frailties and failings of contemporary life.

We live in fraught times. To their credit, *Literature and Capital* and *Degenerative Realism* respond to a number of the troubled and troubling social and political issues of the day, as depicted in contemporary literature and literary criticism: Brexit, class

divisions, colonialism, cultural conflict, and the financial precarity of the modern university, among others, in Docherty; immigration, cultural conflict, national identity, media politics, and globalization, among others, in Wampole. Still, in each instance, the author stakes out a strong ideological position that seems to afford little prospect for dialectical resolutions to the dilemmas of our day. Writing in a period of profound ideological polarization like our own—the Sixties of the last century—Thomas Pynchon laments precisely the incapacity to achieve some sort of political middle ground in a highly variegated, highly fractured political landscape. Why, asks Oedipa Maas, the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), has America failed to embrace diversity, “with the chances once so good” (181)? Politics have become reductive and binary: “For it was like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless” (181). In any event, dwarfing the important matters with which Docherty and Wampole contend, we confront today a seemingly endless litany of problems: war in Europe, ever-heightening bellicosity in East Asia, troubled electoral politics in the United States, energy insecurity, food precarity, climate change, population displacement, the death and mayhem of a pandemic, and on and on. We do live in fraught times.

557

NOTES

1. Debates about the BBC’s news coverage continue today, with many Britons feeling that its reporting focuses excessively on Metropolitan London and insufficiently on other parts of the country. While centre-periphery tensions are often in part structural, this does not tell the full story, according to polling (see Wright et al.). The BBC’s revenue sourcing continues to be scrutinized, and the compulsory licence model may give way to a voluntary subscription regime in the near future. Britain’s Conservative government suspended increases to BBC licence fees for 2022 and 2023.
2. For a thoughtful discussion of how capitalism is more than the maximization of shareholder capital, see Alex Edmans’s *How Great Companies Deliver Both Purpose and Profit*. For a detailed review of Edmans, see Skinner.
3. For a speculative dystopian novel with a similar premise, see Boualem Sansal’s *2084: The End of the World* (2015), in which religious fundamentalists forcefully create a theocratic dictatorship. Sansal’s books are banned in his native Algeria.
4. Feared by Stalin, *We* first appeared in English translation in 1924, but was not published in the Soviet Union until 1988. Similarly, *The Foundation Pit*, while finished in 1930, and appearing in English translation in 1973, was only published in the Soviet Union in 1987. Demonstrably, the publication history of these works demonstrate the potential political influence of speculative novels.
4. See Houellebecq, *In the Presence of Schopenhauer* (2-5). While some attention has been given to Houellebecq’s debts to Schopenhauer, more work is warranted, and will presumably be impelled with the publication of his reflections on Schopenhauer.
6. In 2018, nearly 200 French farmers committed suicide. Suicide rates among French dairy farmers were 30% above the national average (“French Farmers Protest”).

WORKS CITED

- Auerbach, Eric. *Mimesis*. Translated by Willard R. Trask, Princeton UP, 1953.
- Bakhtin, M.M. "Epic and the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, U of Texas P, 1981, pp. 3-40.
- Boubtane, Ekrame. "France Reckons with Immigration Amid Reality of Rising Far Right." *Migration Policy Institute*, 5 May 2022, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/france-immigration-rising-far-right.
- Edmans, Alex. *How Great Companies Deliver Both Purpose and Profit*. Cambridge UP, 2020.
- 558 "French Farmers Protest against Low Earnings, Deplore High Suicide Rate." *Reuters*, 4 Mar. 2021, www.reuters.com/article/us-france-farmers-protest-idUSKBN2AW2DG.
- Houellebecq, Michel. "Approaches to Distress." Translated by Andrew Brown, *Interventions*, Polity, 2022, pp. 6-23.
- . *In the Presence of Schopenhauer*. Translated by Andrew Brown, Polity, 2020.
- . "Interview with Agathe Novak-Lechevalier." Translated by Andrew Brown, *Interventions*, Polity, 2022, pp. 196-210.
- . "Leaving the Twentieth Century." Translated by Andrew Brown, *Interventions*, Polity, 2022, pp. 115-18.
- . *Whatever*. Translated by Paul Hammond, Serpent's Tail, 1999.
- Lukács, Georg. "Art and Objective Truth." *Critical Theory since 1965*, edited by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, UP of Florida, 1986, pp. 791-807.
- "News Media Attitudes in France." *Pew Research Center*, 23 Apr. 2019, www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2019/04/23/news-media-attitudes-in-france/.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. Perennial, 1986.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*. Translated by E.F.J. Payne, vol. II, Dover, 1966.
- Skinner, Christina Parajon. "Cancelling Capitalism?" *Notre Dame Law Review*, vol. 97, 2022, pp. 417-40.
- Wright, Oliver, Matthew Moore, and Eleni Courea. "Half of Britons Feel the BBC Does Not Share Their Values." *The Times*, 2 Jan. 2021, www.thetimes.co.uk/article/half-of-britons-feel-the-bbc-does-not-share-their-values-gm0z9cxfx.