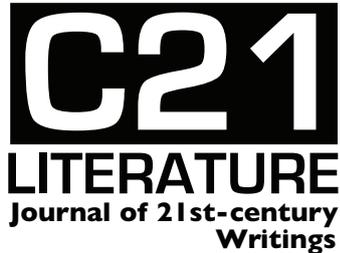




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## Review

**How to Cite:** Greenaway, J., 2019. "Thomas Docherty, *Literature and Capital* (London, Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2018)." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 7(1): 16, pp. 1–4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.1332>

**Published:** 18 September 2019

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REVIEW

Thomas Docherty, *Literature and Capital* (London, Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2018)

Dr Jonathan Greenaway (Manchester Metropolitan University), ISBN 9781350064645, £65.00

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**Keywords:** capitalism; university; literary criticism; Thomas Docherty

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In this fluent, angry, wide-ranging and historically rigorous study, Thomas Docherty offers an overview of the complex, contested and often antagonistic relationship between the realm of capital and the world of letters. Whilst there may well be few people who still hold to the notion of the relative autonomy of the cultural sphere from the economic, Docherty's study provides an excellent introduction to the ways in which that to talk of the literary, (or, more widely, the cultural) requires a keen critic to extend their work to the economic sphere too. As Docherty puts it, 'capital and its discontent are fundamental to our modes of communication, and, importantly, to a consideration of the institutionalization of literature.' (14) Taking a broadly historicist approach Docherty begins with the development of what would be commonly recognised as the early realist novel in English, exploring the ways in which the new fictional genre is intimately bound up within newly emergent structures of finance capital. As two spheres of development – the economic and the cultural – became ever closer, 'the cultural capital' of students, readers and writers 'must be colonized by the economy.' (31–2). Writing in an era of ever-tightening market competition for the university and for many other centres of writing, the aim of the book is to both explain the economic and cultural developments which have brought things to this point and to try and articulate a way out of the current slow decay of both politics and the social.

After devoting an early chapter to the credibility of writing, the following chapter expands the scope of inquiry away from just literature to the institutions of writing too – after all, literature is not simply something done in a specific way, but is done by specific people (who often engage in the para-literary pursuit of criticism). The deployments and instrumentalising of English literature is a form of both economic and cultural power. In the university English Literature is only accessible to those with the financial means to pay for it, and in its professional capacity, English Literature is bound up within the creation of particular kind of subjectivity and the maintaining and furthering of imperialist power (a point amply proven by the backlash to the mild reformist campaigns to decolonise the curriculum in many British universities). Instrumentalised English literature is bound in the idea of a 'certain kind of value' (95) but thanks to the development of capitalism, value itself becomes something no longer wedded to material objects but immaterial forces.

Such a process requires a re-examination of the concept of cultural capital (which forms the majority of the part two of the book as a whole). The chapter on cultural capital and the 'shameful university' is particularly strong as Docherty sets out to answer the question of 'how do we construct value itself – cultural value or cultural capital – from the interplay of shame and dignity.' (159) In this chapter, through close attention to several well-known contemporary authors, Docherty explores the ways in which 'criticism that relies on moral capital will always fail,' (162) which, whilst perhaps harkening back to Leavis-inspired criticism now out of vogue, also manages to indict much of contemporary historicism for its inability or refusal to engage seriously with the material basis for the production of literature in the first place. What this leads into is a rigorous and scathing critique of the shameful university. It is as Docherty puts it, a quasi-feudal state, run by a powerful cadre of authoritarian bureaucrats who immiserate their students by encouraging them into debt whilst threatening their academic staff with unemployment for those who do not vociferously proclaim their fealty to the values of the institute. Couple this with the privatisation of reason within the university and no wonder that Docherty proclaims the necessity for a 'revolution ... we need to change the shameful university.'

(171) The rise of those figures such as Farage and Trump – men who say without shame the most shameful kind of public statements – is a symptom of the failure of the university and a damning indictment of the university's enclosure within the logic of contemporary capitalism.

The final chapter makes some suggestions for resisting this enclosure and for reconfiguring the relationship between capital and culture. Beginning from a familiar argument about the value of literature being in its uselessness or externality to capitalism (an argument also made by Terry Eagleton) Docherty explains that this useless cultural form is either subsumed into capitalism itself or rationalised through its educational value (which is now almost identical with being subsumed into capitalism). Interestingly however, Docherty refuses to restate this argument, instead seeking a broader revolutionary rethinking. As the nation state fractures thanks to the ever-increasing drive for fluid globalisation there is a chance for a new radical geography, a rewriting of the earth and a renewal of the old ideas of cultivation and culture. In the wake of incoming ecological catastrophe and brutal accelerationist capitalism, Docherty modifies Benjamin's famed point about the aestheticization of politics leading only to war and fascism. For Docherty, the danger is the commercialisation of politics, and its concomitant commercialisation of aesthetics that will (and is) leading to the rise of violent fascism. If we are to survive – and this is a "we" that does not just extend to the privileged bourgeoisie but also includes the poor who are all too frequently sacrificed in the face of any adversity – then what is needed is not an understanding of literature as edifying but one that is predicated on shame. Shame, however, may not be enough for us to find a new way of living and rewriting the shared earth if we are to survive – current events have only accelerated the shamelessness that Docherty highlights. The need for a fundamental redrawing is ever more urgent and in this erudite, wide ranging and consistently challenging study there is the first signs towards a more radical engagement with literature and culture as essential tools for facing the complexities of not just enduring the present state of things, but building a new iteration of the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.

## Competing Interests

The author declare that they have no competing interests.

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