

## BOOK REVIEWS

***Entrepreneurial Literary Theory. A debate on Research and the Future of Academia***  
**Alexander Search, Suman Gupta, Fabio Akcelrud Durão, Terrence McDonough**  
**(Shot in the Dark in 2017)**

The debate presented in the book *Entrepreneurial Literary Theory. A Debate on Research and the Future of Academia* concerns recent trends on academic entrepreneurship with regards to literary studies, traditionally considered a humanistic discipline with no business projection. The volume raises questions regarding the potential benefits of literary research, the relationship between the corporate and academic sectors in opening avenues for cooperation, and the methodological trends that are becoming popular for the development entrepreneurial skills in higher education.

The debate is presented in the form of a dialogue between the authors, independent scholar Alexander Search, Suman Gupta, Professor of Literature and Cultural History at the Open University in the UK, Fabio Akcelrud Durão, Professor of Literary Theory at Universidade Estadual de Campinas Brazil, and Terrence McDonough, Emeritus Professor of Economics at the National University of Ireland. The four engage in a debate under Search's impulse. His neoliberal starting point is the assertion that "all literary research is or should be conducted with the ultimate purpose of generating profits for some enterprising sector of the economy; that is, through some corporate or governmental organisation." (2017: 7) Gupta and Durão, who think of themselves as within the spectrum of democratic socialism, respond to Search's arguments, convinced that academic endeavours should never be associated to economic interests. A professional economist, Dismal Scientist (one of the literary personas assumed by Terrence McDonough) makes occasional but important contributions to the debate. The book is divided into four sections: Panoptic, Knowledge Production, Scholarly Publishing and Leadership.

The first part, Panoptic, a term that echoes Jeremy Bentham and Michel Foucault (whose views are discussed elsewhere in the volume), concerns the overall view and characteristics of literary research as well as its current direction. Search summarizes the most important aspects around the study of literature: 1) the fact that it develops around cultural specificities, involving languages, particular geographies, etc., preserving historical memory, 2) the idea that literature articulates an understanding and a performance of Self and of Others as fictional re-constructions of human existence, 3) the conception of literature (and art) as based on emotional intelligence, therefore helping develop moral faculties, including humanistic conduct, 4) the view of literary texts as embedded in particular historical contexts and, thus, as vehicles of ideologies and, in a pragmatic sense, as political interventions, and finally, 5) the insight that art in general, and literature in particular, captures the complexity and ambiguity of world visions, and that this contemplation of the multiplicity and vastness of the world conveys a hint of wisdom, experienced with aesthetic pleasure. Search names these five characteristics of literary research: the philological, the idealistic, the liberal-

humanistic, the politically conscientious and the secondary process of appreciation, respectively. In his view, nowadays the most relevant one is the politically conscientious, which helps support his own argument in favour of profit-making literary scholarship, a profession long under patronage support.

The counterargument given by Gupta is that Search focuses on the political precisely in order to de-politicise his own approach and present it as more pragmatic, thus helping sustain his argument in favour of the functionality of the arts. Durão's reply justifies the pleasure provided by literature and its non-usefulness in terms of market value. In his turn, Search contends that the notion of aesthetic pleasure as an *a priori* of art seems suspect, for, according to him, literature has no existence prior to its appearance as an industrial product. This last topic is taken again in the second chapter of the first part, where the authors discuss "the tricky anteriority of literature".

Once more, Search sets the debate in motion by arguing that "*all literature is produced by the literary establishment, in terms of the latter's authoritative and authorizing power structure and corresponding economic arrangements.*" (17, emphasis in the original). In this way, for Search, literary research might not originate in the researchers' desire to learn and share their knowledge, but its modes of circulation, which have already inbuilt an entrepreneurial character. Search's position is contested in the following section which inquires on the literary product itself. A narrative voice under the name Leandro Pasini offers a short response, emphasizing that, as a product, each literary text has its own rationale and that this might not be congenial to markets and profits. To which Search replies that "products seldom appear in the market *before* the industry that produces them" (19) and that texts are produced in a context of socialization and education, with particular interpretative communities in mind (he refers to Stanley Fish 1989 in this part). In chapter 7, Search illustrates this point in his study of the conditions of reception of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Not without irony, Durão responds that although literary conventions can endorse the worldview of the dominant elite, they can also give voice to neglected groups. To Durão, divesting literature of an *a priori* intrinsic meaning is "a precondition for it to become a properly sellable object" (21), and its levelling in particular interpretative communities might hide the fact that only the voices supported by the most powerful circulation (and publishing) mechanisms are the ones that resonate more strongly.

If the first four chapters of the Panoptic part clarify debate positions, chapter 5 moves the argument further into the entrepreneurial realm in general, and the case of Britain in particular. Gupta's main point in this part is that "profit making has behind it *a process of realisation* and before it *the mechanics of distribution.*" (23) This line cleverly paves the way for a discussion on benefits and profits which takes place in the following section. Once more it opens with Search's 'universalizing' (although not totalitarian, he defends himself) arguments for a mutual dependency between benefits and profits for the public good, and his assertion that academic research should thus strive to maximize profits. He also indicates that such a rationale is nowadays already embedded in the educational institutions of the majority of states in the world, embodied

in their academic leaders, even if employees (lecturers, professors, etc.) might not accept it (the point is taken up again in page 40). Search also speculates, at the end of chapter 7, that literary research is basic research (as opposed to applied research), where benefits are indirectly experienced and not clearly linked to profits. In this context, entrepreneurial development is more difficult to achieve but also, according to Search, more desirable. The final consideration, brought up by Gupta later in chapter 11 is with regards to scientific advance as related to academic freedom. Gupta claims that “*Academic freedom is enjoined in arrangements for research work that allow basic researchers to pursue any line of enquiry pertinent to the natural or social or textual world for the sake of understanding and clarifying it, irrespective of considerations of benefits and profits, indifferently to the purposive calls of the public good.*” (45 emphasis in the original) The final words in this section are Search’s, who stresses that literary research can never be disinterested. It is at this point that a lurking “moral choice”, to use Gupta’s term (49) begins to emerge, and with it the grounds where Durão defends literature having a critical function with regards to the *discipline* of literary research (section 13). As the Panoptic part draws to a close (chapters 15-16-17), the discussion shifts to contemplating dialogical *inter-disciplinary* affiliations, and border crossings among institutional departments. Gupta points out that it is important to look at how the historical continuum of institutionally defined disciplines, which seem to have always been negotiated in relation to the university (60-61). His exploration, however, also shows that the current situation has shifted, and nation states no longer require the university to sustain their authority. This may also be one of the reasons (alongside the worldwide economic crisis) behind the reduction of public investment in higher education, and the opening of the university to corporate capital.

The above lines provide an idea of the complexity and implications of the topics under discussion in this volume. Far from clear-cut categories that might connect certain functionalities to particular profits and market niches, this first part shows the benefits of an inquisitive dialogical approach. The positive outcomes of getting lost in the ‘open woods’ (to use Umberto Eco’s expression), wandering in the complex network of life’s forking paths (to use Borges’) might not be evident right away. To focus on final achievements, as market oriented perspectives often do, may miss seeing ‘the forest for the trees’. Literary research is indeed about learning to argue and think critically. Although literary scholars might employ close reading (see Search in chapter 25), critical thinking is, in fact, a matter of maintaining a distant perspective (see discussion in chapter 28) in order to avoid short-sightedness. Distant reading focuses on the ‘how’, rather than on the ‘what’. It panoptically strives to see the bigger picture (with the spatial including the temporal/historical as Gupta indicates).

Thus, once the 3D dimensions of the picture have been established beyond 2D approaches, the lengthier second part focuses on the institutional dimensions of knowledge production, the neoliberal privatization of the university, the balance between benefits and profits in the convergence between corporate research providers

and the university, how all these aspects affect pedagogy and knowledge transfer and, finally, how they relate to academic responsibility. Although the debate is meant to address similar situations across the globe, the discussion is particularly related to the British case.

Further in this part, the debate focuses on the practice of close-reading and interpretative analysis as possible contributions to professional pre-purposed texts and open-to-purpose texts for professional objectives (see chapter 31), a trend that is particularly relevant to the current debate on strategic narratives as empowering devices (i.e. see projects developed under the research program <http://www.ucm.es/siim>). In this part, the discussion resembles a philosophical inquiry into the prevalence of Socratic and Platonic approaches to knowledge (chapter 34) as opposed to what Gupta considers ‘deafness’ and ‘targeted cynicism’ (146) towards the literary profession, traits that seem to emerge from Search’s interventions. Indeed the tone of the debate in the entire volume is close to Plato’s Socratic Dialogues; a tone often accusatory but with the freshness of casual conversation among dissenting friends. Hence Gupta’s last line (section 34) where he stresses that “entrepreneurial authority is lodged vampire-like on the body of scholarly authority” (150).

The volume goes on like this, opening up the discussion only to bring it back to a point raised previously. For the pleasure of Joycean readers, it often brings the Irish writer into the picture (see for instance chapter 36); not only as a paradigm of the conflicted value of literature, the prostituted subject/object position under which the Modernists often saw themselves (“Circe” is indeed a turning point in Ulysses’ journey). The fractal architecture of Vico’s cycles is also present in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, a book that provides an early model for complexity and the mechanics of the so-called chaos theories. Indeed, dynamic systems theory is a useful tool to ‘measure’ (see chapter 37) the variations of the commercial value of shares at the stock exchange. As Search indicates, one of the ways by means of which the discipline of literature can have a real impact in the world is if literary researchers “disinvest from conceiving of literature and literary research as a discrete system,” and “invest in thinking about literature and literary research as factors (or as sub-systems) within more complex and inclusive social system models” (166)

Interestingly, the volume goes on to prove that being a good Joyce reader can narrow the distance between literary utopias and the literary scholar, a professional of narrativity as a valid arbitrator of commercial success (154), since “*all apprehension of value is in the first instance subjective, whether that is understood in terms of need or desire, grasped as aesthetic or ethical or functional, perceived in relation to things or experiences – and, in the first instance, is expressible in relative normative terms.*” (Gupta 156) In this way, Gupta’s view is complementary to Search’s assertion that “Precision of measurement is the key to possibly realising economic value in monetary terms, and activating the market” (157), because “*graded and precise measurement extricates objective valuation from all or any kind of subjective evaluation*” (157). He goes as far as affirming that “Happiness, pleasure, freedom,

love, suffering, guilt, beauty, intelligence, legitimacy, doubt, prejudice, violence, oppression, trust, life (or loss of life), etc. can all be brought within some kind of index of measurement, expressed in precise degrees according to some standard or paradigm, or organised into some sort of tabular or tractable form.” [...] “And then to conduct the measurements and analyse the data acquired in rationally robust ways to, as far as possible, come to grips with literary value.” (158) This is the kind of “modelling” that Search believes can offer concrete impacts from the disciplines of literature to the world of profits.

Many literary professionals would tend to agree with Gupta, who finds Alexander Search’s projects to give impact to the discipline of literature (described in sections 37 to 39) “unusually boring” (170). Additionally, Gupta finds agency and responsibility removed from the system-based models presented by Search. Similarly, Durão fears that at this rate the ‘literary’ will be dissolved, for instance, in the mass of books produced by the culture industry at large (174). And Dismal Scientist ponders on the difficulties of measuring cultural capital in general.

At this point the discussion moves beyond qualitative and quantitative measuring to concerns over the role of the teaching professional in the world of artificial intelligence, including a wide range of aspects such as the role of Corporate Research Providers of various automated services, MOOCs, etc., all of which might serve to reduce the cost of work performed by humans. Gupta fears that leaders and bureaucrats will follow this entrepreneurial direction in order to reduce costs and increase returns. He concludes as follows: “In brief, the shrinking teacher is complemented by growing (and distributed and coordinated) AI capabilities in the University. Inevitably, the profit-making potential of the entrepreneurial University is accordingly enhanced, insofar as competition allows.” (181) Therefore, this part contributes to the discussion on leadership, ethics and responsibility in education as well as the possible role of corporate leaders in the university, which is introduced in more detail in part four of the volume.

The third part of the book explores scholarly publishing in a comprehensive way. It moves from the financial imprints and scholarly publishing agreements of academic works to the debate between commercial e-publishing and Open Access. The future of the monograph is another cause of concern. As with the rest of the volume, this part is carefully researched, offering up-to-date details regarding publication costs in various academic publishers and a wide range of useful information, always backed up with a wide range of relevant secondary sources.

The last part of the volume deals with “Leadership” and how, in Search’s view, literary texts could be purposed for leadership education. According to Search this could be achieved if the texts were “treated as straightforward mimesis, without being complicated by stylistic, formalistic, aesthetic, historicist or inter-textual considerations.” (246) His discussion offers various literary examples and their critical interpretations that serve to illustrate his point. As in previous counterarguments, Gupta is always blunt and conclusive: “Eventually the entrepreneurial rationale of AI

may erase the differences between leaders and followers among us, and realise the potential of freed *and leaderless* human beings. Perhaps the full scope of literary research can only be conceptualised with the horizon of freed and leaderless human beings before us.” (252) The volume also includes an appendix with a text by Gupta (originally from 2015) where he articulates seven broad phases that rationalise academic work in cost-benefit accounting terms.

A must-read for anyone interested in the current debate on entrepreneurship in the humanities in general, and in literary research in particular, this well-written volume offers a comprehensive and fresh account, as well as a thought-provoking approach, to the different problems involved in *Entrepreneurial Literary Theory*. Full of secondary sources and useful information, the book is written in the form of a dialogue and debate between the narrative voices of the authors (in some cases more than one voice). With topics ranging from knowledge management to literature, cultural studies and philosophy, institutional politics, reports on the publishing world, the future of academia, and so on, the volume requires a reader who feels at ease with interdisciplinary approaches and inconclusive arguments. That is, a reader who might feel ethically drawn to enter the discussion, and perhaps lead on.

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