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ELENA BRAN

# MALCOLM BRADBURY

## From the language of criticism to the language of fiction

Preface by Lidia Vianu

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## **Preface**

The style the author decides to use in the book is what makes it different from other attempts of the same type. Just like the writer she examines, Elena Bran is interested in language and society between the 1960's and the 1990's. She interprets everything in a personal manner, in her own words, creating her own terms.

Following Bradbury, Elena Bran focuses on language more than on characters or plot. She defines the campus novel as a rebellious genre which challenges both style and plot. Irony, sarcasm and parody are the main tools. They are applied to the academic and the socio-political worlds at the same time. The main themes under analysis are the academic world, the communist regime, the fall of the Iron Curtain, American society and various literary incidents. Bradbury's invented words, imaginary countries – approximating communism –, improbable characters are carefully dissected.

Elena Bran, following Bradbury's lesson, is both theoretical and clear. Her book defies the fashions of our time in criticism. Her conclusions are not only correct, but also unlike those reached by contemporary analysts of Bradbury's work.

*Lidia Vianu*

Chapter 3 describes the language used by the author and correlates it to social change in four distinct sections. Section 1 explores the themes of Communist regimes and Capitalism realities in the novel *Doctor Criminale* – but also how differences in language are used to refer to concepts specific to communism and capitalism. This discussion is continued further in a masterpiece of language creativity, *Rates of Exchange*, and later in the pseudo-travel guide *Why come to Slaka?* The theme of social change is further covered in *The History Man*. The latter is the novel that made Bradbury famous in the world of fiction and is seen as both a written tour de force but also as a highly successful screen adaptation. The last section marks his transition to other forms of writing, notably script writing. Bradbury wrote screen adaptations and even a play, *Inside Trading*, which dealt with the effects of Thatcherism.

His literary criticism has a privileged position in this study in Chapter 4. There are two sections to this chapter: one dedicated to a quest for intelligentsia: *My Strange Quest for Mensonge*, and a second which deals with the main characteristics of Bradbury's literary criticism and the language of his criticism.

The results and the findings of our interpretation of Bradbury's work will be summarized in Chapter 5. We shall therefore analyse the fulfilment of the objectives presented in the Introduction by providing the answers to the four questions explained above.

The last part of the paper includes a Bibliography. There are three parts to the bibliography: part one includes works of general interest, the second part lists primary sources and Bradbury's volumes available at the time of the study, and, finally the third part lists online sources.

## Chapter I

### The dichotomy literary critic – fiction writer in Malcolm Bradbury's writings

#### 1.1. A liberal humanist and a theorist of sociological movements

As is so often the case with fiction, the reader takes the novel for granted, without really deeply analysing what lies behind the text. The question mark so often only arises when we know the background of the writer. This is very much the case with Malcolm Bradbury, who, as well as, being a fiction writer of considerable talent and inventiveness was also a literary critic.

There are those that claim Bradbury was more of a literary critic than a fiction writer because he began his writing career as a prolific and esteemed critic. We must also ask ourselves the question: how much of his literature was influenced by criticism, and vice versa. We cannot deny the significant coming together of the two genres because if we see things from a cognitive stylistics perspective, fiction and criticism are nevertheless his dialogue; and they are the product of the same brain and mind, and so the results inevitably cannot be seen independently.

The modern writer often represents a complexity of structured ideas expressed in a variety of ways from novels, essays and criticism, on to teaching. This is very much the case with Malcolm Bradbury, a man who covered a wide panoply of

ideas and expression. The opportunity for writing both literature and criticism gave Bradbury the chance to explore two areas which can have an impact on the reader and also change their view on the evolution of literature and their expectations of it.

Since we are talking both about a critic and a writer, the question that inevitably arises is a very common and logical one: how much literature is there in his criticism and is literature just a tool for Bradbury to apply his ideas of criticism? Or is literature just a form of ideas, a creation in which those ideas can be explored further from behind the narrator's mask?

For Bradbury, writing literature is a way of expressing himself. It is a means of creating realistic situations inspired by society in a world of continuous change and for whom the world represents a fascination of comic dimension. It is probably a truism to say one well established way of observing class changes was through irony and comedy. Bradbury does this both in fiction and in criticism. Irony was one of his favourite tools of mocking society and its main agents. Through his characters he is able to reach out to the reader.

Bradbury liked close observation. Even if there are times when he hides this fact, it is one of the reasons why he is considered a novelist of manners (Morace, 1989: xiv). In fiction, his characters are always educated people, middle class representatives, undergoing the stress of change times and trying to adapt to it – usually unsuccessfully. Moreover, satire helps Bradbury reinterpret the world around him in a way that can be seen as impossible to do unless done through a historical perspective. Even if in most of his critical writings, such as *The Modern Novel*, or the *Modern American Novel* the perspective is a historical and chronological one. But in the novel, the clash between traditional and modern

values is presented through a comic perspective. Nonetheless his preoccupation for presenting the world through a comic glance and the critical importance he gives to the novel can be seen as a convergence point in his workings.

On the other hand, his interest in the evolution of society made Bradbury a liberal humanist. He found his inspiration from the ample debates about the new industrial phenomenon and to some extent the consequences of living in a commercial society. Bradbury's criticism also showed at times some concern for changing values and the way in which society deals with them. As a consequence, his critical preoccupations can be identified in his fiction. He possesses not only an ironic perspective over everything, but also a liberal consciousness. All of which sums up a portrait of Malcolm Bradbury: a liberal writer, a comic novelist and a post-modernist though one firmly to modernist values.

We mentioned above that Bradbury cannot be classified as a postmodern writer, even if at times there are elements intended to mislead the reader. Bradbury strove at times to find out what it meant. That is why from the beginning as a literary critic he was interested in literary modernism. He recognized his admiration for those modernists who showed a great appreciation for art and tried to emphasize its values more than others. Of course Bradbury makes use of some of the techniques used in post-modern fiction, including the use of irony, sarcasm and satire. This is acquired together with the existence of characters that provoke the reader's mirth but do not show their whole characteristics.

## 1.2. Bradbury – literary critic, between teaching and fiction writing

Defining Malcolm Bradbury as a literary critic is a complex challenge. If we take into account the criterion of published works of criticism, we should notice immediately that the number is greater than the number of novels. He was a prolific critic indeed, but at times his literary criticism came closer to writing anthologies rather than actually providing arguments in favour or against his or others' viewpoints. This is why the question of Bradbury's status as a literary critic has generated many interpretations. It can all be essentially reduced to the force of discourse.

Bradbury is one of those who combined the power of theoretical discourse with that of advantageous fiction, where the author can make use of more mechanisms for exploration and historical contexts than anyone. Thus it is the fictional world that helps Bradbury express passions the world of criticism can only interpret. On the other hand, in the works of other authors, such as Julia Kristeva, fiction 'reflects a frustration in the suppression of intellectual life in a world of passion' (Currie, 1998: 52). This cannot be said about Bradbury as in most cases he combines criticism and fiction in a manner that does not make enough room for frustration.

Moreover, there is also the viewing of considering Bradbury an academic critic since he wrote academic novels and not just campus novels. However, Bradbury's work is complex since it has both a historical perspective and an interpretative one. When comparing criticism with fiction, in some cases, we can try to identify elements of criticism in fiction and fiction in criticism. This is the case when we speak about *theoretical fiction*, the

convergence point between criticism and fiction. This theoretical fiction summarizes theoretical ideas and endows them with the context and the literary form of idealism.

Theoretical fiction covers plenty of areas such as history, sociology and the novel about ideas. The difficult part is establishing the border between the two. This is the point at which the one creates criticism much more creatively than expected, in a style accessible to different target readers and a novel that expresses ideas rather than just a plot. A novel where characters represent typologies and their lives can be viewed from above. Theoretical fiction helps the author incorporate better, and at times more effectively, the self-consciousness and the historical developments, as it makes use of more narratological means than any other possible method.

Bradbury knows how to take advantage of these situations; he develops his own style through this theoretical fiction. One argument in favour of this idea is the fact that most of his critical writings are structured as anthologies, as methods of measuring the flow of history and the theories seen both from his perspective and also from the perspectives of important critics. While comparing this to the plots of most of his novels, we can see that Bradbury refers to the historicity both in fiction and criticism. His works are either analysis of the systems (*Dr. Criminale, Rates of Exchange, Why come to Slaka, Cuts*), or evolutions and comparisons (*Stepping Westwards, The History Man*).

Bradbury's main interest is presenting a historical perspective on the British and American novels and is why works such as *The Modern British Novel* (1993) and *The American Novel* (1971) were born. On the other hand, his criticism also consisted in trying to get together ideas and conceptions upon the world of