

**THE EXPLICITNESS OF A LANGUAGE TEACHER IN
LITERARY CRITICISM.
MALCOLM BRADBURY AND THE LANGUAGE OF
CRITICISM**

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ABSTRACT:

MALCOLM BRADBURY WAS ONE OF THE MOST PROLIFIC BRITISH WRITERS, WHO SUCCESSFULLY MANAGED TO COMBINE WRITING LITERARY CRITICISM, FICTION, SCRIPT ADAPTATION AND TEACHING. THE OBJECTIVES OF THIS PAPER ARE TO EMPHASIZE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE LANGUAGE OF A TEACHER AND THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF BRADBURY'S LANGUAGE IN CRITICISM. THE MAIN STRATEGY OF REACHING THESE AIMS IS TO APPLY A COGNITIVE STYLISTICS APPROACH ON HIS WORKS OF CRITICISM, AND TO TRY TO REFER TO THE THEORY OF COGNITIVE SCHEMATA WHEN DEALING WITH HIS TEACHING EXPERIENCE. THE FIRST PREMISE THAT INSPIRED THIS PAPER GOES BACK TO BRADBURY'S FIRST YEARS OF WRITING, WHEN HE WROTE HUMOROUS SKETCHES, AND THIS HAD AN IMPACT OVER THE WORK THAT WAS TO COME. BY MEANS OF COGNITIVE STYLISTICS, WE GO BACK TO THE TEXT ANALYSIS AND WE SHALL IDENTIFY SOME OF THE MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF HIS STYLE, AS A CRITIC. WE DECIDED TO DEAL WITH LITERARY CRITICISM AS BRADBURY'S EFFECTIVENESS OF EXPLANATION AND COMIC PERSPECTIVE OVER THE NOVEL DIFFERS FROM WHAT IS USUALLY EXPECTED FROM A LITERARY CRITIC. WE CONSIDER THAT THIS HAPPENED BECAUSE OF HIS TEACHING BACKGROUND, WHICH REQUIRED HIM CERTAIN EXPLICITNESS AND CLARITY OF SPEECH AND THOUGHT.

KEYWORDS: THE LANGUAGE OF A TEACHER, COGNITIVE SCHEMATA, LITERARY CRITICISM

I. WHO WAS FIRST: THE TEACHER OR THE LITERARY CRITIC?

All throughout his career, Malcolm Bradbury manifested a keen interest in the recent critical theories, which at times raised the debate over the expression of criticism in the novels. There are some that still wonder whether Bradbury's novels are just the context for expressing the ideas from criticism, whether Bradbury used the novel just like a tool for exploring and practicing the art of fiction. On the other hand, Bradbury wrote a precarious fiction, following the principles of the realistic tradition. Even if his entire work can be seen as a manifesto and a mirror of the social reality, considered tough at that time, the novels are still accessible, both in form and also in style.² Inspired by the fashionable subgenre of

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² Robert A. Morace , *Dialogic Novels of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge (Crosscurrents/Modern Critiques)* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 2

campus novel, Bradbury wrote more of an academic fiction, as his novels were a combination history, society and maybe popular fears and reactions of the time. That is how the comic novel appeared, not through historical or sociological methods, but by exploring the world as it was: changing from old to new and trying to adapt to the modern way of life. This is actually the point where Bradbury's work as a literary critic and fiction writer coincided.

Bradbury stated his career as a fiction writer, with the novel *Eating People is Wrong*, and continued with his first work of criticism, *The Social Context of Modern English Literature*. This was actually the first moment when writing literature and thinking about it critically went hand-in-hand.³ Also, one should not forget that Bradbury's initial profession was as a teacher, and so the future course of creative writing that he was going to be introduced by Bradbury at the University of East Anglia found its origins in his first critical attempts. Furthermore, this idea takes us back to David Lodge's quote of T.S. Eliot from *The Function of Criticism*, as it appears in the Preface of *The Practice of Writing*:

Probably....the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour, the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing; this frightful toil is as much as creative.⁴

Bradbury, together with other literary critics understood their position: for him the literary criticism did not consist strictly in assessing and summarizing the previous theories on literature, but also explaining and creating new criteria for the present literature. This attempt that Bradbury successfully managed to coordinate with his teaching activities resulted in a permanent dialogue between present literature and previous conceptions. The result was a new perspective over the process of writing, over the labour, as Eliot calls it, that gained the form of a creative writing course.

This is what Bradbury in 1970 introduced the course of Creative Writing to meet both the students' necessity for a new form of teaching and assessing and also the global perspective over criticism that spoke about the death of the author or the general decay of the British society. Furthermore, this new course he designed was also influenced by his travels to America as visitor professor and lecturer as he had this chance to see a new society governed by rules that understood liberty and freedom as basic principles. Moreover, this course gave him the chance to prove that not all the good writers have migrated to the USA.

As Bradbury mentioned in an Introduction from 1995, published in *Class Work – The best contemporary short fiction* (1995), at the time when they thought of introducing this new course in the universities there had been major changes among the students coming to university.

On one hand, the development of the so-called red-brick universities brought a higher number of students into the higher education systems, and out of these, some had great creative skills which could not have been lost. All of these students were obviously looking for new approaches to literature. Secondly, Bradbury and Wilson, both writers and teachers, had been already working informally with some of these students and their aim was also to transform everything into a formal structure. Last but not least, both of them were working under the influence of the travels they were undergoing to America, where this type of creative writing approach was common since the 1890's.

³ Jon Cook, in the introductory essay on Malcolm Bradbury, published: http://www.malcolmbradbury.com/essay_criticism.html claims that Bradbury's interwoven between fiction and criticism can be seen as an 'engagement with the literature'.

⁴ David Lodge, *The Practice of Writing*, (London: Random House), 2012, page X

II. MALCOLM BRADBURY – THE TEACHER AS THE AGENT OF THE CHANGE

It is already well-known that in his classroom a teacher plays different functions: he is the entertainer, he provides the information, he assesses, and he is a mentor and can easily become a role-model. According to the roles he plays at the same time in many cases, the language differs. These differences occur according to the function of the language involved. The referential function creates a discourse oriented towards the context and so the language becomes official and formal, meanwhile the expressive function will use structures that are empirically understood by the receivers (Jakobson:1960).

Parts of these roles Malcolm Bradbury himself had to play during his years as a professor. He knew he also needed the context, the ‘stage’ on which to play his part. And so the course of creative writing appeared in 1970. Together with his partner, Angus Wilson, they had tried even from the 1960’s to introduce this course, but apparently without any success. The programme was influenced by other similar courses from the American universities, but the whole idea of creative writing practiced in a classroom was not something easily accepted by the British academics. As a result, only one student registered for the first course, and that was a future Booker Prize winner, Ian McEwan, who took advantage of being the only student and wrote some short stories that represented afterwards the draft of his first two novels.

This idea of introducing a new type of course and to revolutionize the academic approached towards teaching came to Bradbury from his travels to America as we have already mentioned above. But in the 1960’s there were plenty who disagreed and watched with suspicious this new attempt. It was just another ‘dangerous’ American invention for which there was no room left in the British Universities. Moreover there were those who argued that writing cannot be taught, it is just a talent and only through reading one can achieve some artistic skills.⁵ But apparently in the 1970’s they made some room for it and the course gained its strength and power.

Nowadays, the course gained a lot of importance in the world of academics, and not only, as in 2012 it received the *Queen’s Anniversary Prize for Higher Education and Further Education in the UK*, one of the most prestigious education awards that can be given. The prize comes as recognition of the innovations brought to the courses for which Bradbury had to fight to make himself heard.

This course gave Bradbury the chance to explore all parts of his personality: teacher, critic and fiction writer. This idea takes us back to *the schemata theory* presented first by Schank and Abelson in the script – based model of human understanding and memory and developed afterwards in the area of cognitive stylistics. This model includes three basic concepts: frame, scenario and script, all covered by the umbrella term of schemata. Basically, in any author’s mind there are processes that organize his discourse. According to the discourse the author presents, both in written and oral speech, we can identify both the function of the speech and at times the intention. Furthermore, a stylistic approach does not deal especially with *how* texts are constructed, but with *what* they actually express and what the text means⁶. Moreover, one of the first aims of a discourse is to operate changes on the initial script from the schemata, or otherwise there will be nothing unique in the author’s intervention. The script refers to the preexisting knowledge stored both by the author and the reader/listener, and this knowledge becomes subject to modification through the discourse.

⁵ Giles Foden in *an Introductory Essay – Sufficient Events, Preparation for a Ghost Story*, http://www.malcolmbradbury.com/essay_uea_and_creative_writing.html

⁶ David Birch, *Language, literature and critical practice* (London/New York: Routledge, 1989), 20

Nevertheless, one aim of the literary discourse is to refresh and to disrupt the already given schemata, according to Cook in his theory on foregrounding and defamiliarisation⁷.

Another author that speaks about the world of discourses seen as a link between the reader and the author is Paul Werth who develops a theory that rotates around three 'worlds' of discourses. The first one is the **discourse world**, referring to the space 'inhabited' by the reader and the author, where we can find information acquired through perception. This can be seen as the first place where Bradbury the teacher and the writer interfere, as the level of his discourse as a teacher is very close to one used as a critic. The next discourse is the **text world**, which requires memory and imagination rather than the simple perception and the third one is the **sub-world**. This third one refers to the characters' projection of their thoughts to create a fictive discourse world.⁸ Referring to Bradbury and the connection between teacher and literary critic it becomes obvious that two arguments that can find a theoretical explanation in the theories mentioned above are that:

a) The teacher is a critic, and by this we understand that one of the main aims of a teacher is to transfer the information from him to the students, by means of both oral and written forms. The term critic does not have a bad connotation, but more of a valuable judgment that influences the progress. This progress also marks the visionary perspective Malcolm Bradbury had by introducing this new type of course within the structure of university education. Together with his friend, he felt disappointed about the state of literature and influenced by the students' manifestations in the campuses, they wanted to offer a new alternative to the old views over teaching literature. At that time, the distinction between literary critics and fiction writers was becoming more vivid as ever, and as there was still a literary critic in the Malcolm Bradbury, and the teacher working at the same speed, the course was designed and introduced.

b) The critic can be seen as the teacher of a new philosophy. Having the background knowledge of a teacher, Malcolm Bradbury felt the need of a new type of literary criticism. And, still 25 years later he was not yet convinced of the greatness of his achievement, but at least he sums up his intention when stating that his course created the premises for writing good literature:

After 25 years, I am still not totally convinced myself that writing can be taught – if by that is meant that writers of small talent can be transformed, by the touch of a hand or the aid of a handbook, into significant authors and great moral guides. But what certainly can be created is a significant climate around writing, in which talented and promising authors are taken through the problems, general and specific, universal and personal, of their form and their ambitions, shown the options and the possibilities, challenged, edited, pressured, hastened, treated as members of a serious profession⁹.

In the early 1960's he understood that there was this need of bringing literary criticism closer to the readers. And he started doing this in most of his works of criticism, where there was a real interdisciplinary convention. His works of criticism such as *The Social Context of Modern English Literature* (1971), *The Novel Today* (1977), or *The Modern American Novel* (1983), can be seen as a gathering of many voices in dialogue and opinions, ranging from Iris Murdoch, David Lodge or John Fowles. If one analyses the content of these books, two major observations can be made: Bradbury's works can be grouped into two categories: *syntheses*

⁷ Paul Simpson, *Stylistics – A resource book for students*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 90

⁸ Paul Werth, *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse*. (London: Longman 1999), 52

⁹ Malcolm Bradbury, *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, (London: Fontana Press, 1990)

and *anthologies*. But everything can be reduced to his obvious characteristics as literary critic: a clear speech, empirical analysis rather than an analytical one, concise facts and information, irony hidden under a very sympathetic tone and fair-minded opinions. (Morace: 1989. p.11). This idea of connecting Bradbury the teacher and the critic also came from Robert A. Morace, as it appears in *The Dialogic Novels of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge* (1989), where he claims that the shortcoming of Bradbury's criticism comes exactly from the fact that most of these works were written with a different aim. They were his courses taught at the university that were lately transformed into published critical assumptions:

What is a Novel (1969), for example, grew out of an undergraduate course he taught at the University of Birmingham and the *Modern American Novel* is not (and does not pretend to be) a critical study of its subject but, instead, a useful introduction to it.¹⁰ (Morace:1989, p.12)

CONCLUSIONS

1. Bradbury's works of criticism were in a constant dialogue with his teaching career.
2. Bradbury's clarity of speech and the coherent organization of ideas can be traced back in the academic career that worked hand-in-hand throughout his life.
3. The UEA course of Creative Writing was his way of summarizing two of the major directions of his perspective over the sociological movements and literature: new students needed a guided help to develop their creative skills in an organized manner and even though writing creatively is not something that can be taught, the course can help establish the proper context.
4. The cognitive theory of schemata demonstrates that one's author dialogue with the receivers will have the same characteristics, even if we are speaking about fiction, criticism or teaching.

¹⁰ Robert A. Morace , *Dialogic Novels of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge (Crosscurrents/Modern Critiques)* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 12

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