

MALCOLM BRADBURY AND THE CONDITION OF THE POSTMODERN CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT:

THE AIM OF THIS PAPER IS TO PRESENT TO EVOLUTION OF THE PERIOD OF POSTMODERNISMS UNTILL THE MOMENT WHEN SOME CRITICS CONSIDERED IT DEAD. MALCOLM BRADBURY IS ONE OF THESE CRITICS WHO ANALYSED THE MOVEMENT, ESPECIALLY THE EVOLUTION AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS. THE PAPER CONSISTS OF THE THREE PARTS, THE FIRST ONE PRESENTS THE CONDITION OF MALCOLM BRADBURY IN THE POSTMODERN PERIOD, THE SECOND ONE DEALS WITH THE EVOLUTION OF THE MOVEMENT, AND THE THIRD ONE IS RELATED TO MALCOLM BRADBURY'S PERSPCTIVES ON THIS POSTMODERNISM. THE CONCLUSIONS OF THIS PAPER ARE RELATED TO THE NECCESITY OF A FURTHER ANALYSIS IN ORDER TO EXTEND THE AREA OF RESEARCH.

KEY WORDS: POSTMODERN CRITICISM, POSTMODERN FICTION, EVOLUTION OF POSTMODERNISM, LITERARY CRITICISM, SOCIAL CHANGES.

1. Malcolm Bradbury – a postmodern literary critic or a critic of postmodern fiction

Malcolm Bradbury was a personality of the previous century, who was known to the public both as a literary critic and fictional author. Furthermore, he wrote in a period of major changes in society, and also in the history of thought. This is one argument that sustains the idea of this article, the fact that even if he had a background coming from modernism, Bradbury, influenced and extremely attracted by the new developments, he decided to write postmodern fiction and to change the perception over the work of criticism. So one of the major questions that govern his career was whether he wrote fiction just to exercise the ideas that appear in his critical works, and in this case we can also speak about a hidden structuralism in a postmodern cover.

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If we are to analyse both his texts of criticism and his fiction novels, we will notice postmodern elements that are clearly designed to be discovered by reader after a close reading. Moreover, his novels do not reveal the narrator's intention or the character's real structure, nor even the plot, as it is the case of "*The History Man*". What is more, his characters usually hide a drama, which is revealed either at the end of the novel, or throughout the development of the plot. And this drama is not visible from the beginning, as it is usually hidden between false demonstrations of well-being and a high social status of the characters that does not betray their inner thoughts. But, all of these ideas mentioned above cannot apply on all Bradbury's work, as starting with the 1990's his ideas on postmodernism change radically. In a study called "*What was post-modernism?*" (1995) Bradbury implies that postmodernism does not exist anymore, which takes us back to a previous question, whether he had ever believed in the concept or everything was just a writing exercise of practising postmodern fiction or mocking postmodernism in a realistic manner.

On order to support our arguments presented in this introduction, we will structure the paper into two main parts, the first one in which we present the condition of postmodernism and what it implies for the evolution of literary criticism, and a second one in which we will present these ideas, but from Malcolm Bradbury's perspective.

2. Literary criticism in the postmodern period

When we want to discuss about postmodernism we must throw a quick glance over the general context when people started noticing the changes in all the areas of activity and knowledge. Starting with the 1960's the postmodern attitude began to interfere with the previous conceptions of modernism and the western societies began to feel the need of finding new ways of expression, both in literary and artistic lives, and social development. Some of the social events that have influenced the evolution of human mankind starting with the 1960's are the assassination of president Kennedy, together with the huge development of industry and technology, the evolution of media resources and freer access to higher education: "The medium, and not its content, was the message, and "culture" now meant the signs, structures and technologies of modern media and processes themselves – into which the revolution of consciousness was itself being incorporated".²

² Malcolm, Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, (England, Penguin Group, 1993), 357.

But like many other movements (sociocultural, literary or economic) the definition of the movement cannot be summarized only in a couple of words and also the perspective depends on the person who provides the definition. Postmodernism is more of a sum of features that regard both the past and the future to define the present.

Therefore, by the early 80's, the concept of postmodernism changed if we are to judge it by some critics' views. For instance, Malcolm Bradbury and Richard Ruland argue that: "Postmodernism looks like a stylistic phase that ran from the 1960's to the 1980's".³ So, there may be some that consider that around the 1990's we can speak more about postmodernism, or post-postmodernism. Moreover, the same idea is also shared by Patricia Waugh who claims: "By the early eighties, however, the term [postmodernism] had shifted from the description of a range of aesthetic practices involving "double-coding", playful irony, parody, parataxis, self-consciousness, fragmentation and the mixing and meshing of high and popular culture, to a use which encompassed a more general shift in thought and which seemed to register a pervasive cynicism towards the progressivist ideals of modernity".⁴

Furthermore, as innovation was one of the words of the period, some changes were also required by the general literary criticism. As one characteristic of postmodern literary criticism is the emphasis on and the revival of the concept of consciousness, there has been a shift from the tendency of being scientific when dealing with a text, seen as an object, to being interested in the subjectivity of the text and the "intentional consciousness"⁵. Of course, the difficult task is an answer the question how we can analyse consciousness by means of objective criteria. A possible solution to this problem, offered by Patricia Waugh, is to stop judging the text in terms of which one is "truer" than the other, so we can try to use the criterion of relevance and usefulness to its purpose. In other words, the necessity of a text should be judged in terms of applicability and necessity within the given purpose.

Another point of view that marks the evolution of postmodernism criticism is the one supported by Jean Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* where he considers that the postmodern age should no longer be based on the modernist ideas of the "liberation" the world through science, but we should take into account the reasons that

³ Malcolm, Bradbury, Roland Ruland, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism* (New York, Penguin Groups, 1991).

⁴ Patricia, Waugh in *Literary Criticism*, Chapter 22 - Postmodernism, (Cambridge, The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, 2008) 293.

⁵ *Ibidem*, page 304.

sustain the universal knowledge. Also, Lyotard foresees that the nature of knowledge was going to be strongly influenced by the huge amounts of information provided by the development of technology and computer science. He also predicts that the nations would soon fight to gain control the areas of information so there will be some sort of global knowledge war.

On the other hand, Lyotard somehow avoids actually giving a definition for the exact period of postmodernism as he claims that postmodernism in a continuous existence that we cannot speak about a moment when it appears and another moment when it may be replaced by another movement: “A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant”.⁶

As we can see the concept of postmodernism is of a high ambiguity, at least from two points of view: firstly, it is not clear the period when it reached its high acceptance. We know from historical facts that it started around the 1960’s but we cannot say for sure if it ended around the 1980’s or it just its form. Secondly, the opinions related to postmodernism are not necessarily unanimously shared. Literary critics cannot provide a complete and similar definition to the concept and they cannot say for sure what changes the postmodernism movement brought. For instance, Barry Lewis, in the essay *Postmodernism and Literature*, from *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, where he analyses the postmodern period of the 1960-1990, establishes some of the major characteristics of the postmodernist fiction. He speaks about the temporal disorder, pastiche, fragmentation, looseness or association, paranoia, vicious circles, and he explains that such characteristics are not necessarily new and many of them could be easily recognised in modernist fiction and poetics, but what makes them innovative are the reasons, the “motivations” as he calls them, that lay behind them.

Another point of view that should be considered when we speak about the literary postmodern criticism is David Lodge’s opinion expressed in *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977). In his study he establishes the three most important modes of writing that characterize the twenty-first century: modernism, postmodernism and antimodernism. In the second chapter of the book, Lodge examines four of the most important features and elements of postmodernism: life as expression of realism, metafiction, intertextuality and

⁶ J.F. Lyotard, What is postmodernism? in *Modernism/Postmodernism – a reader*, Peter Brooker, page 60.

carnavalesque. Judged from this perspective these are the main techniques that make Lodge a postmodern writer and critic. Intertextuality is broadly used in his fictional writings, especially in the Trilogy, where he criticizes the world of academics and the postmodernist dark vision over the human life by means of parody of the Arthurian legends and other myths of the literary classics. All of these features lead to his antimodernist view of literature, where he deliberately rejects the experimentation of modern life, states the writers' obligation to deal with real life situations and universal themes, and also to create objective characters, inspired from reality that people can identify to. Moreover, Lodge is one of the best examples that the condition of literary critic and criticism during the postmodernist period had a double status: on one hand, we can easily notice postmodern techniques in his writings, techniques that he clearly admits to experiment, and on the other hand, Lodge's main orientation is structuralism, in a period governed by postmodernism. He plays and combines all the major characteristics of the movements, and then he discusses about them in his critical works.

But opinions have changed dramatically after 1990, when the concept of postmodernism got a totally new direction. What postmodernism was in the 1960's till 1980's is now something outdate, and the literary criticism is now oriented to other new directions. There are many of those who state that postmodernism is now dead, and it may have been replaced by a new type of critical realism inspired by the evolution of technology that could not have been foreseen more than twenty years ago. We now live in a very commercial culture and this aspect had a great impact on the types of fiction promoted. Literature nowadays can hardly be seen as having the same value as it had twenty years ago. Other critics speak about a so-called pseudo-modernism⁷ not based on the author, but on the reader or viewer whose desires must be fulfilled by the new-modernism.

3. Malcolm Bradbury and the postmodern movement

Malcolm Bradbury's opinions on postmodernism are at the middle of the dispute we have already mentioned in this chapter: was there a real movement called this way or it was just another form of modernism, in a new society? Bradbury states his perspective

⁷ See Kirby, Alan, The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond, www.philosophynow.org/issue58/58kirby.html

very clearly in at least two of major works: *From Puritanism to Postmodernism – A History of American Literature*, and *The Modern British Novel*.

In *The Modern British Novel*, Chapter Six – The sixties and after, Chapter Seven – Artists of the Floating World, 1979 to the Present, Coda – An Afterword from the Nineties, Bradbury discusses the changes in the society that influenced the fiction of the times. In Chapter Six, Bradbury explains the most important moments in the history of the 1960's why the postmodernism appeared in this context. So, according to Bradbury, all the “revolutions” of the period, including here the war in Vietnam, the Russian suppression of the Prague Spring, the assassination of Kennedy, the rebellions in the university campuses, the easier access to drugs and the rising of expectations lead to changes of conceptions and different people desires. As Bradbury states it, all those changes in the society were actually produced by artists, by those who had the power of influencing conceptions by means of creation: “Literary criticism (now elevating itself into literary theory) was not slow to acknowledge a significant cultural change was occurring – not surprisingly, since cultural politics were central to the Sixties, and the mood of revolt was disproportionately derived from artists, painters, actors, film-makers, music-makers, dramatists, poets and novelists, rather than political figures. Contemporary forms were changing fast; so were the underlying structures”.⁸

Bradbury also takes into account the new consequences of globalization, a phenomenon that starts to develop and interest the world of academics, especially American ones, but Bradbury's fields of vision also include this domain of knowledge. His opinions about the “global village”, which as he states “was less a village, but than a high-tech international conglomerate”⁹ can also be traced in other authors' works, such as Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, where he speaks about the global culture that can be seen through different perspectives, such as ethoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finascapes and ideoscapes.¹⁰

As we have already seen, we cannot speak about postmodernism without referring to the changes in technology that occurred at that time. Bradbury also mentions in a couple of times the technological “revolution” that influenced both the world of goods, but also people mentalities and expectations towards the society. Bradbury speaks about the

⁸ Malcolm, Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, (England, Penguin Group, 1993), page 356.

⁹ Malcolm, Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, (England, Penguin Group, 1993), 358.

¹⁰ Arjun, Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

“technological culture” characterized by adaptation, quotation, pastiche, parody and stylistic mockery that also leads to the rise of the “consciousness industry”. All of these techniques can be considered postmodern characteristics of Bradbury’s style of writing, as one can identify them both in fiction and in critical works. Bradbury likes to play with parody and pastiche, for instance, but also, he does not forget the realist tradition.

Subsequently, as Bradbury sees this whole evolution period, the literary criticism and fiction also needed a fresh new pale of air. For many critics, including here Bradbury, Lodge and Barthes, the novel and the authors were “dead”, the old fiction had disappeared, or it had to be brought up to date. The writers were in search of new topics, new ideas and new conceptions to explore, and the critics needed some proofs to show that the twentieth –century was in bloom and that it was going to mark the historical evolution of literature: “But if old stories were used up, the times provoked many new ones – generic crossovers, crossing of borders, easy passage between the high and the popular forms, or the literary and the media arts. Novelists looked back into the labyrinths of narrative to explore new or different paths, and – in a time of unstable realities, when history itself seemed more like fiction – “fictionality” became a value on its own account [...] The result was a period of considerable innovation in which – perhaps for the first time – it seemed that a new late twentieth – century style was being formed: that, as the critics increasingly began to put it, the arts had entered on a period of “postmodernism”¹¹

But this evolution came to an end twenty years after Bradbury wrote the above words, when as he claimed later, all the important periods of evolution, all the movements must have a big ending. In the last chapter of the book, called *An Afterword from the Nineties (1994)*, Bradbury presents a retrospective of the modern and postmodern times, with their major directions and approaches. As he states, “the eighteen century ended in an age of revolutions”, meanwhile the nineteenth century ended in a “less radical change, nothing less than the revolution of modernity” and so was the case of the twentieth century. The entire twenty century can be characterized by a revolutionary spirit, from the beginnings till the ending, from the First and Second World War, continuing with the great evolution of society and technology that lead to changes in the global mentality and society, then the postmodernist age which raised a great interest in the student unions and academics, causing some other revolts, and the final ending was the fall of the communist

¹¹ Malcolm, Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, (England, Penguin Group, 1993), 358.

regimes from all around Europe, “in November 1989, at the end of a hundred years of “modern” and “postmodern” history, forty-five years of political and ideological stasis came to an end; the great map of world power changed fundamentally. Politicians like George Bush began to speak of the New World Order, historian like Francis Fukuyama of the End of History”.¹²

But actually this end of century lead to the revival of old unsolved political problems, as many ethnic groups started asking for new rights and the borders of many countries had to be re-evaluated.

4. Conclusions

This paper summarizes the main directions that the postmodern movement involved and also it applies these ideas from a critic and writer’s point of view. The postmodern movement appeared and evolved from the 1960’s to the 1980’s when it started to fade, due to the same facts that made it appear: the changes in the society and the need to change something in the history of ideas. The postmodernism was a movement that was sentenced to death by some authors and critics, but as it had plenty of forms, borrowed from art, music and sciences, it was difficult to say whether it is dead or not or what is the name of the period we are living nowadays.

The same ideas are shared by the literary critic, Malcolm Bradbury, who presents the evolution of postmodernism in three works of criticism, *The Modern America Novel*, *The British Novel*, and *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*. Malcolm Bradbury underlines a problem that most of the critics state, related to the evolution and the end of this period. This a question to which only time can answer, because it is difficult for the contemporary critics to foresee the real evolution of criticism, literature and society

¹² Malcolm, Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, (England, Penguin Group, 1993), 467.

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