

# RECEPTAREA POSTMODERNISTĂ ÎN ROMÂNIA REFLECTATĂ ÎN OPERA LUI MALCOM BRADBURY

## POSTMODERNIST RECEPTION IN ROMANIA REFLECTED IN THE LITERARY OUTPUT OF MALCOM BRADBURY

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### Abstract

*În lucrarea de mai sus am încercat să definesc pe larg postmodernismul și impactul acestuia asupra lumii literare contemporane, exemplificând prin operele unui scriitor britanic de succes, Malcom Bradbury, renumit nu doar în țara sa de origine dar și peste hotare, cu precadere în România. Postmodernismul este o mișcare artistică, o filosofie sau o condiție existențială, apărută după modernism sau ca o reacție față de acesta. Pe de altă parte, el reprezintă un set de reacții, de ordin intelectual, cultural, artistic, academic, sau filosofic la condiția postmodernității. O parte din opera lui Malcom Bradbury a fost tradusă în limba română, bucurându-se de un enorm succes, atât în rândul tinerilor care se amuză pe seama relațiilor interpersonale pe care autorul le trasează între personaje, cât și în rândul adulților sau persoanelor ce aparțin unor structuri sociale diferite. Autorul parodiază viața academică, ironizează relațiile umane, evidențiază aspecte ale comunismului atât de familiare românilor.*

**Key Words:** *Modernism, Postmodernism, university, academic life, mockery, humour, irony, literary criticism*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *modernism, postmodernism, universitate, viața academică, parodie, umor, ironie, critica literară*

Postmodernism is an alliance of intellectual perspectives which involve a challenging critique of the most basic assumptions of the modern educational enterprise. To begin with, I will define in broad lines the postmodernist trend, and then I shall focus on its impact on the belletristic stage of British literature. Postmodernism is highly debated even among postmodernists themselves. It is a set of ideas that has emerged as an area of academic study in the mid-1980s. It is a concept that appears in a variety of disciplines, including art, architecture, music, film and of course literature. The easiest way to define this trend, is to mention first, the idea of modernism, a movement from which postmodernism seems to emerge. Firstly, modernism comes from an aesthetic movement which includes Western ideas about art and literature. Writers from around 1920 to 1930 represented major figures of modernism literature, such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound.

In the vision of the Romanian writer Codrin Liviu Cutitaru, postmodernism is defined as a collective "state" focused on art. In what concerns the Romanian postmodernism, the writer considers that the postmodern literature is made by university professors, scholars and academics, drawing a comparison with the British literature. Representative in this respect would

be Malcom Bradbury, who, in his capacity of writer must be both a literary critic and a remarkable theoretician. Postmodernism has been analyzed from a historical and economic point of view. In the last fifty years, Romania has known a forced lack of synchronization with the values of the Occidental region, and in what concerns the economic and material area, it remained in a state of self-destruction when it preferred the disproportioned industrial progress. Some general characteristics of postmodernism are the feeling of alienation, the identity crisis, the depersonalization.

In Romania, observes Codrin Liviu Cutitaru, postmodernism is, first of all, ideological and not cultural. It imitates the Occidental values, surviving artificially, by taking over doctrines. In our country, this trend is purely aesthetic, isolated from the cultural determinism. Another particularity would be the geographical disproportion. It depends on the academic center where, at a certain point has been formed a group, or a generation able to take over the ideology and impose it. The first postmodern generation in Romania, known as “the class of the ‘80s” was born in Bucharest. Nowadays, we are talking about a Romanian postmodernism only to the extent to which we consider the generation of writers of the 1980s from Bucharest, any provincial exceptions, being the result of aesthetic personal experience.

In what follows I shall refer to a representative postmodern writer, of British origin, Malcom Bradbury who was and still is very appreciated among the Romanian readers of any age. He began his literary career as an ironist, mocking fiction, but also underlining in the background, the sophistication of the human soul and mind. Malcolm Bradbury was a productive academic writer as well as a successful teacher; an expert on the modern novel, he published books on E. M. Forster, as well as editions of such modern classics as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and a number of surveys and handbooks of modern fiction, both British and American. However, he is best known to a wider public as a novelist. His most famous novels, *History Man*, *Eating People Is Wrong* or *Stepping Westward*, make fun of academic life, proving that universities are incompatible with literature.

The Romanian literary critic and writer, Lidia Vianu, has remarked that *Eating People is Wrong*, is a mass of comic remarks, focusing on a provincial university with a Department of English. Referring to his characters she adds that: “Malcolm Bradbury just munches them a little, then spreads them on the page like a doubtfully amusing (or nourishing) paste.”<sup>1</sup> The author is more concerned with humorous sentences than with human beings. Analyzing the impact of Malcom Bradbury’s writings upon the Romanian readers, Lidia Vianu mentions that he seemed to be fascinated by the iron curtain. He always had at least one character coming from a communist country. His novel is a kind of tacit argument with other manners of writing, Professor Lidia Vianu calls the author a Desperado because although he tries to conceal the attempt, he hopes to set up a personal inimitable trend. His books entertain the Romanian readership, by presenting a world different from ours, with all the emotions, plots, tricky writing and reflections characteristic for the British writers. The comic novel is a favourite of the younger novelists.

Translated into Romanian by Gabriel Gafita, *The History Man* or *Un Om al Istoriei*, highlights in the vision of the translator, a university, adept of “glass and concrete” modernism of the ‘70s. Howard Kirk, then protagonist, cultivates his reputation of a radical individual, talks for hours to anyone who is willing to listen to him about social norms and values.

*The History Man* (1975), set in the fictional University of Watermouth, was a dark satire of academic life in the then fashionable newer universities of England. It was later made into a successful television serial. Although he is often compared with David Lodge, his contemporary

as a British exponent of the campus novel genre, Bradbury's books are consistently darker in mood and less playful both in style and language. He also wrote extensively for television, and adapting novels such as Kingsley Amis's *The Green Man*. His best-known novel, *The History Man*, for example, is satire whose only substantial departure from conventional narrative technique is the extended use of the present tense. This contributes to a rapid narrative pace, dramatizing university life in the rebellious late sixties and early seventies, when the conflicts of Vietnam burned in the background. At a certain point, the author was mistakenly thought to be the real History Man. People believed that the story was based on his life.

Set in Watermouth University, this is the story of Barbara and Howard Kirk, their very modern marriage and their equally radical politics. It captures the complexities of academic life, from tedious meetings and work-place machinations, to corruption and disruption at the highest levels. It's also the story of life at the fictional Watermouth University. A radical and sexually predatory sociology teacher, Bradbury's protagonist, Howard Kirk, is an intellectual who observes the chic pretensions of the period. He has published books which are "in consort with the times." Women are drawn by his progressive promiscuity. Malcom Bradbury's characters, have a counterpart in the Romanian academic world. They are empty and shallow and therefore not very dangerous. Kirk stirs a political mess in his seminars, and Zapp shamelessly pursues his only goal in higher education: to become the most highly-paid professor in the world.

As David Lodge suggests, his "creative practice" is clearly connected to the fiction of the fifties: he and Malcom Bradbury are the principal English novelists to follow Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, in comically depicting campus life. Though some of Bradbury's novels include self-conscious or modernist techniques, these appear rather modestly: like Lodge's, it is mostly to the realist tradition that his work belongs.

Due to the great success of Malcom Bradbury's novels in Romania, they have been widely analyzed, criticized and debated. Lidia Vianu comments upon *Rates of Exchange*, a book published in 1983. It presents a humorous description of the People's Republic of Slaka. The author mocks at the communist regime from this country, missing the human tragedy behind the iron curtain. In the critic's opinion, Bradbury's attitude proved to be shallow to the very end, implying a lot but failing to say much.

We merely hear him talk and accompany his discomfort. Whatever Bradbury ever saw in his characters is very hard to tell, since he most certainly does not share any deep knowledge with us. On the other hand, the author's humour is not rich enough to keep us occupied all through his fairly long novel. The plot is mostly picaresque: incidents come and go, in a linear report of more or less enjoyable adventures. [...] Bradbury did perceive a number of details correctly, but he was denied real understanding. He describes puppets, not real human beings, and if he, as a writer, is satisfied with that satirical approach, I suspect so must we be. We have no choice, anyway.<sup>2</sup>

This book has been perceived as having a linguistic humour, as Slakans torture English in the most inventive ways. Protagonists turn up or leave the stage unexpectedly. The Romanian critic also explains the title, *Rates of Exchange*. It springs from the five different rates of exchange of hard currency into the national coin (vloskan), aiming at the way the westerners and the communists connect. They don't seem to have much in common. These rates represent in fact, five arbitrary paths of the mind, and none is realistic.

Malcom Bradbury gives significance to the names he employs in his story, suggesting the opposite of the word incorporated in them. For example, in the book above mentioned, the protagonist's name Angus, reminds us of his constant mood of anxiety. His guide, the most

unfeminine and unlovable creature is called Lubijova, *lubov* meaning love. Katya Princip, another character whose name suggests strong principles, represents exactly the opposite. Analyzing this theory of names, Lidia Vianu observes another particularity:

Picnic is the name of what Lubijova most determinedly calls an 'agent' at the Faculty of Germanic Languages (the name seems to belong to the Romanian faculty of Bucharest, which Bradbury has also visited). The whole novel is certainly no picnic and, come to think of it, to someone who knows communism from the inside, not much fun.<sup>3</sup>

The author referred to life under communism considering it an endless line of experiences under pressure. The people who live under such conditions are psychically affected by the situation experiencing a state of permanent fear. In my opinion, this book is worth reading as it reflects aspects of communism which have once been very familiar to our country and citizens. Malcom Bradbury approached the hidden face of communism without going deep into the matter. Therefore, *Rates of Exchange* is another representative novel, highlighting the influence and impact Malcom Bradbury's books had in Romania.

The translators should be praised for their efforts of providing the Romanian public, with the opportunity of studying and enjoying Malcom Bradbury's fiction. The importance of a good translation is better underlined if taking into account the subsequent response of the reader. The act of reception depends on the accuracy of translations and on the translator's skills in transposing the original intentions of the text into the target language. The professionalism of Romanian translators has been proved by Malcom Bradbury's success in our country.

To sum up, with this paper my intention was to bring Malcom Bradbury closer to the souls of the Romanian readership and to present a new perspective underlined by different points of view. His novels are funny, with a brilliant structure, appealing to the most uneducated reader; they are nice satires inspired by every day life experiences. They are pleasant and relaxing narrations teaching us the importance of literature in the contemporary society.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, postmodernism cannot be conceived and appreciated critically, only by reporting it to modernism. It is difficult to define this term because it is used not only in literature, but also in architecture, arts, and philosophy. Under the burden of the previous centuries, the postmodern author must reinvent meaningful cultural fragments, considering the fact that everything has already been written. Representative in this respect is Malcom Bradbury who, approached themes belonging to the past, such as the idea of communism. He employs ironic quotations, games, and parody, intertextual dialogue, the relationship between fact and fiction.

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