Brândușa Prepeliță – Răileanu
Polytechnic University of Bucharest

NARRATIVITY AND TEMPORALITY AS A LANGUAGE GAME AND A FORM OF LIFE IN MALCOLM BRADBURY'S TO THE HERMITAGE

Abstract: *The paper highlights the co-implication of meaning, time and history in Malcolm Bradbury's novel* To the Hermitage. *In addition to the well-known analysis of fictional time at two levels (the time of the act of narrating and the time that is narrated), the paper refers to a third category of time which is suggested by Paul Ricoeur: the time of life. This category is generated by the writer's selection, pacing and distribution of the most meaningful sequences, which capture some important experiential aspects of narratives. The paper focuses on the fact that, in* To the Hermitage, *Bradbury interrupts the novel's chronological continuity by mixing two temporal schemes: the fictive and the historical. He creates a fictional world that corresponds to both the author's and the reader's real world. The paper explores the way in which the author self-consciously disturbs the simple narrative movement regarding three major aspects of temporal articulation in the creation of meaning at the textual level: order, duration and frequency.*

To the Hermitage – the last and the most important novel of Malcolm Bradbury focuses on the fact that postmodern literature utilizes, in its relationship with time, discourses which construct rather than reflect, invent rather than discover the past. The novel is an active reinvention of the past, a path back to history but concerned to displace historicism with the temporal aporias of narrative time and, a self-conscious textuality in which material processes are transposed into stories and metaphors.

In this novel there is a time–space compression because the increasing speed of the cycle which consigns events to the past and then recontextualises them. It is a type of time-compression with the difference that 'if this can be seen as a deconstruction of linear time within a cultural process, it ought not to be seen as the dissemination of poststructuralist philosophy in culture at large' (Currie 101)

Narration and intertextuality seem inseparable in the novel which we refer to. It is particularly this idea of ironic contextualization that seems to have become dominant, leading many commentators on postmodernism culture to view it as a defining characteristic. Mark Currie highlights the fact that the two main consequences of accelerated recontextualisation are:

> (1) that recycling the past will eventually catch up with the present, and (2) the process of recycling will become a recontextualisation of recontextualisations. Both of these consequences seem to point to a spiraling self-referentiality in the history of style which recalls the deconstruction of narrative time, where signs are nothing in themselves but the traces of other signs in the past and future. (97)

A feature of postmodern condition results – the idea that it is a culture of imagery which dissolves history into a theatre of intertextual references and signs.

Regarding 'the rapid change through which British society has passed, especially in the destabilizing years after 1945, when its world role changed, its values altered, its cultural funds grew ever

more plural', Malcolm Bradbury confessed in the preface to his huge work *The Modern British Novel,* posthumously issued:

> Writers arise from writing, they depend on predecessors, role-models, peers, friends, contemporaries, successors, just as they depend on publishers, critics, reviewers, readers, and re-readers. For most of my life, in one way or another, I have been exploring and wandering this most inquiring of all the literary forms: its great storehouse of narratives, its enormous network of origins, its amazing celebrations both of the representational and the gloriously fictive. On the principle that a good writer should first be a good reader, I have tried to explore the novel as widely as possible, because we do indeed need both ancestors and traditions, rebellions and deconstructions to make up the vital history of the form. (Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel,* XIX)

And indeed, in the last years of his life, Bradbury, seeking that 'vital history of the form', wrote the most complex and representative novel of his work – *To the Hermitage*. This novel combines the past and the present, the history and the present times. Organized in parallel chapters which follow past and contemporary episodes, Bradbury follows Diderot on a journey to Sankt Petersburg. His narrator (like the author himself, an academic novelist) is invited to Stockholm by a pair of Swedish academics, thence to sail to St. Petersburg as part of an entreprise called *The Diderot Project*.

The novel is more a problematizing than just a production of a concept of fiction (and history) and belongs to a number of some famous and most commented novels such as Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*, Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* or Graham Swift's *Waterland*. In this type of novels truth and falsity may indeed not be the right terms. Because, as Hutcheon emphasizes, fiction and history are narratives distinguished by their frames, frames which historiographic metafiction first establishes and then crosses, positing both the generic contracts of fiction and of history. In the novel *To the Hermitage* the postmodern paradoxes are complex. The interaction of the historiographic and the metafictional foregrounds the rejection of the claims of both *authentic* representation and *inauthentic* copy alike, and 'the very meaning of artistic originality is as forcefully challenged as is the transparency of historical referentiality' (Hutcheon, 1995: 77). To re-write the past in fiction is to open it up to the present. For example, as Bradbury himself defined his conception in the *Preface* of the novel:

> This is (I suppose) a story. It draws a great deal on history; but as history is the lies the present tells in order to make sense of the past I have improved it where necessary. I have altered the places where facts, data, info, seem dull or inaccurate. I have quietly corrected errors in the calendar, adjusted flaws in world geography, now and then budged the border of a country, or changed the constitution of a nation. A wee postmodern Haussman, I have elegantly replanned some of the world's greatest cities, moving buildings to better sites, redesigning architecture, opening fresh views and fine urban prospects, redirecting the traffic. I've put statues in more splendid locations, usefully reorganized art galleries, cleaned, transferred or rehung famous paintings, staged entire new plays and operas. I have revised or edited some of our great books, and republished them. I have altered monuments, defaced icons, changed the street signs, occupied the railway station. In all this I have behaved just as history does itself, when it plots the world's advancing story in the great Book of Destiny above. (XXII)

In this context the importance of a novel like Malcolm Bradbury's *To the Hermitage* can be defined in terms of its ability to contest the assumptions of the *realistic* novel and narrative history. This book is so complex that it elegantly tackles the question of the absolute awareness of the past specifying the implications of historical representations, past and present.

Malcolm Bradbury's novel raises a number of specific issues regarding the interaction of historiography and fiction. Among these, there are the nature of identity and subjectivity, the question of

reference and representation, the intertextual nature of the past and the ideological implications of writing about history. Subjectivity, reference and intertextuality underlie the problematized relations between history and fiction.

According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafictions 'appear to privilege two modes of narration, both of which problematize the entire notion of subjectivity: multiple points of view or an overtly controlling narrator. In neither, however, do we find a subject confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty' (1995: 121). Here is an example in which the overtly controlling and contemporary narrator tries to rebuild the puzzle of the past:

> So here we are: in Russia, no, in Petersburg, which is also several other cities, Pieter, Petervar, Petrograd, Leningrad. We're in the city of writers, the capital of intense and troubled souls. My unfinished Finnish enterprise can be finished off at last. And it's a bright cold day in early October 1993 – just 220 years (as near as exactly) since Denis Diderot came to the city to offer his clever political wisdom to a grand-fronted Empress. Russia then as now was in trouble, tugged as it ever has been between west and east, the mystic promises of bourgeois dreams and the amazing passions of the Old Believers, the strange tzars and the incredible impostors, by grand utopian dreams and the burden of those endless dead souls. Here extremity is the specialty, mysticism the rule, history the principle, a grand sense of history that can engulf continents, nature and desert, but still has trouble in struggling into humanity. (265)

In Hutcheon's terms, this is not 'a transcending of history, but a problematized inscribing of subjectivity into history' (1995: 123). The journey to Sankt Petersburg translates the knowing into telling. The narrativization has come as a central form of human comprehension, of imposition of meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of events. The author establishes, differentiates and then disperses stable narrative voices that use memory to try to make sense of the past.

Written on the borderline on fiction and criticism by examining interpretive possibilities within the fiction this novel is an ironic revisitation of the past. Because as Umberto Eco has stated, the postmodern reply to the modern 'consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently' (1985: 45).

In the novel, the authorial tone is subtle, complex and variable. It varies from evaluative terms to the ironic contrast and reversal. The direct appeal to the reader is achieved through rhetorical questions and the indirect appeal to the reader is made through generic statements and other references to a commonality of experience and judgement.

Irony is not at all of one piece, but can register varying degrees of distance or severity, ranging from satirical bitterness to a benevolent awareness of the contradictory impulses which can undermine good intentions in even the best-motivated characters. (Leech 283)

An example is the way in which Bradbury presents Catherine the Great in her first meeting with Diderot at the beginning of the novel:

> And suddenly, there she is: a living statue in herself. Despite what the portraits tell you, she's definitely in her middle years, fiftieth or so. She's big, plump and round, but very stately and now wearing something very masculine and half-regimental; on her ripe shape it's the costume of diva. Dashkova suddenly ushers him forward. The courtiers watch. The moment has come; he looks up, looks down, bows low, reaches out, kisses the plump imperial hand that appears before him.
> 'I'm French', he says. 'My name is Diderot'.
> 'And I am Catherine, Russia', she says, 'the hermit of the hermitage. May I welcome my dear librarian to the place where one day his books will come to rest for all eternity'.
> 'Yes, Your Imperial majesty, that was truly my most wonderful piece of fortune. My pension and my

Posterity. How happy I felt when you promised me that. I knew I should be happy even when I was dead. I took my lute down from the wall and sang a love-song to you. (5)

In Leech's terms we can call this *a three-dimensional description*. The impression results from the convergence of different points of view. Firstly, we notice the magnificent and at the same time ironical presentation of the 'living statue in herself'; secondly, we experience the negative attitude determined by the great Diderot's humility; and thirdly, the implied author's point of view emerging from his attitude which is at the same time sympathetic and ironical, full of understanding for the philosopher's and writer's condition, always willing to provide 'the pension and the Posterity'.

Time as the textual arrangement of the event component of the story is a structuring and a structuralist notion. Structuring, because it asserts and articulates relations between particular states or changes of state, and structuralist, in so far as it relies on our recognition of particular similarities and particular differences between specified states (Toolan: 48).

The conventions of story-time and text-time are referring to the linear verbal representation of temporality. A kind of artifice is at work, Toolan observes (49), in which we look for a match between the 'real world' intervals and sub-intervals of time that the narrative implies, and our sense of time passing during our experience of reading that narrative.

In the movement from story to text, Genette isolates three major aspects of temporal articulation: *order, duration* and *frequency*. Under *order* he discusses the relations between the succession of events in the story and their linear disposition in the text. Under *duration* he examines the relations between the time the events are supposed to have lasted and the amount of text devoted to their narration. Under *frequency* he examines the relations between the number of times an event appears in the story and the number of times it is narrated in the text.

The realistic side of Malcolm Bradbury's novel implies the use of prolepsis as a temporally second narrative in relation to the narrative onto which they are grafted and which Genette calls 'first narrative'. A *prolepsis* is the narration of a story-event at a point before earlier events have been mentioned. The narration sees into the future of the story. Rimmon-Kenan (48) specifies that when prolepses occur, they replace the kind of suspense deriving from the question 'What will happen next?' by another kind of suspense, revolving around the question 'How is it going to happen?' In a pure *prolepsis* (*amorce*, in Genette's terms), the reader is confronted with the future event before its time, whereas a mere preparation of subsequent events is on the whole grasped as such only in retrospect. Genette argues that so-called first-person narratives lend themselves to the use of *prolepsis* better than other types, because within the admittedly retrospective character of such narratives it seems more natural for the narrator to allude to a future which has already become a past. Such an example is found in Malcolm Bradbury's novel *To the Hermitage:*

…we drive away from the great white vessel and the man of history, away through the container port, out into the pleasant, decent civic streets of Stockholm…

Now it just so happens that – according to what, as it will all so clearly turn out, has already been written in the great Book of Destiny up above – in just two years on from this time I shall visit Saint Petersburg once again. On that occasion that still sits waiting for me in the future it will be slightly later in the year: in fact in the last days of November, when the final crisp sunshine has gone, the days have grown short, the statues in the Summer Garden have all been shuttered, and the snow, bitter and hard, has already begun to fall. The skies at that time will be as dark as lead. The streets will be an ice-rink or a skid-pan, and on the Nevsky Prospekt, outside my guard-protected hotel, it will be almost too dangerous to walk out. Times will be no better and probably quite a good deal worse. Women will still stand on squares of cardboard in the street, selling old dresses or a household pet. Beggars will lie drunk and dying in the

subways, wrapped passive bundles will sit outside on doorsteps, more armed men will guard even more shuttered banks. (464)

This long *prolepsis* example was intended as an epilogue of the novel. Through a subsequent journey to Saint Petersburg, the reader is confronted again with future events before their narrative time:

> This time I shall be not sailing but flying, and I shall be travelling with a small group of British writers, who have come to open a library in a charming room of old books that doesn't exist yet. The library is a writers' library, a library with a purpose, a library with a strong literary idea: it's the Mayakovsky Library, housed in the centre of Petersburg, in a charming old Golitsyn Palace which overlooks the black Fontanka. In its charming rooms private and public collections will come together, helped by the British Council, which also resides in this building, and the Petersburg Public Library, which I shall recall as the Saltykov-Shcherdrin, but which by then will be called the Russian National Library. I will come because, as you now know quite well, I love travel and libraries; but also because I hope to see, again, Galina. When I arrive, my very first question will be about her. And I shall be told at once that Galina is dead: that she died, in fact, just after our Diderot pilgrimage which right now is ending; that she never managed to do the thing she most wished to do, make a trip to Paris; that the Voltaire collection is still being re-assembled, but perhaps not in the old wonderful way…
> But all this is a matter for the future, and who now can possibly know any of these things? In any case the present is all too present, and busy and demanding enough. I'm checking my flight time, and riding in a taxi through the heart of Stockholm, most pleasant and decent of cities. (464)

Frequency is a temporal component not treated in narrative theory before Genette. It is the relation between the number of times an event appears in the story and the number of times it is narrated (or mentioned) in the text (Kenan 57). Frequency involves repetition and 'repetition is a mental construct attained by an elimination of the specific qualities of each occurrence and preservation of only those qualities which it shares with similar occurences' (57). Repetition-relations between story events and their narration in the text can take the following forms: a) *singulative* – the most common narrative form, telling once what happened once; b) *repetitive* – telling *n* times what happened once; c) *iterative* – telling once what happened *n* times.

In Malcolm Bradbury's novel To *the Hermitage* this temporal component is very clearly expressed. More precisely, *frequency* in its *repetitive* form is expressed through the reference to the literary fragment from Denis Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist,* which narrates the encounter between Jacques and his Master, that 'was already written, or else was still being written, in the great Book of Destiny above'. The fragment, which is quoted as a motto, is used again several times in the text sometimes with changes of narrative subject and focalizer, it is also set in different contexts which necessarily change its meaning. In the novel I have counted twenty-nine references to this quotation in the complete form or in an abridged one (*To the Hermitage* XXI, 18, 23, 27, 44, 45, 46, 61, 73, 84, 85, 129, 134, 135, 146, 162, 167, 202, 284, 296, 318, 365, 366, 367, 408, 421, 457, 463, 475). These references evoke Diderot's personality from a complex viewpoint.

In his last novel – *To the Hermitage* – Malcolm Bradbury deals with some interesting solutions concerning the concept of time. The addition of the prologue-and-epilogue frame entails a chronological doubling – 'now' and 'then'. Between Diderot's arrival at the great Court of the North 'just in time for the great imperial wedding' and the epilogue which narrates the death of the French philosopher, the book is built on this parallelism. The thirty-six chapters of the book are organised to alternate the present ('now' in the odd chapters) and events developed two hundred and twenty years ago ('then' in the even chapters). Bradbury follows Diderot on a journey to Sankt Petersburg. He undermines the novel's chronological

continuity by doubling it, mixing two temporal schemes: the fictive and the historical. He creates a fictional world that would correspond as closely as possible to the author's and reader's real world.

This mixture of two temporal schemes is obvious in the novel, unlike the alternance of chapters which we have mentioned above. For instance, 'now' and 'then' meet in chapter twenty-five, entitled Galina's *Tale*. It is an odd chapter which should have been devoted to the contemporary story ('now'), a chapter which Bradbury uses for the remembrance of Diderot's arrival in Russia and also for the posthumous history of the library that he left the tsarine as a legacy. Galina Solange-Stavaronova is the one who remembers, as she has been working all her life 'to make again the Library of the Enlightenment' (321).

At the end of these lines, we could observe that Bradbury's postmodern intertexuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between the past and the present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context. Hutcheon states that it is not an attempt to void or avoid history. Instead it directly confronts the past of literature and of historiography, for it too derives from other texts (documents). It uses and abuses those intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony. In all, there is little of the modernist sense of a unique, symbolic, visionary *work of art*; 'there are only texts, already written ones' (Hutcheon 1990: 124). Malcolm Bradbury proves that narrativity and temporality are closely related. Quoting Paul Ricoeur, we can conclude that for him temporality is 'that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent' (1984: 73). Their relationship is therefore reciprocal.

Works Cited

Bradbury, Malcolm, *To the Hermitage*, Picador Books, London, 2001
Bradbury, Malcolm, *The Modern British Novel*, Penguin Books, London 2001
Currie, Mark, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Macmillan, London and New York, 1998
Eco, Umberto, Reflections *on 'The Name of the Rose'* , Secker & Warburg, London, 1985
Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* trans. J.E. Lewin, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997
Hutcheon, Linda, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History. Theory. Fiction*., Routledge, London and New York, 1990
Hutcheon, Linda, *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995
Leech, Geoffrey N., Short, Michael H., *Style in Fiction. A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*, Longman, London and New York, 1995
Ricoeur, Paul, Time *and Narrative*, (vol 1) Trans. K.McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, London, 1984
Rimmon – Kenan, Shlomith, *Narrative Fiction. Contemporary Poetics*, 2nd edition, Routledge, London and New York, 2002
Toolan, J. Michael, *Narrative. A Critical Linguistic Introduction*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995