

The Modern Which Wants to Be a Classic

Richard Ruland - Malcolm Bradbury:

Az amerikai irodalom története. A puritanizmustól a posztmodernizmusig.

Corvina, Budapest, c1997.

ford: Balkay Fruzsina, Bán Zsófia, Gázsity Mila, Kozma Zsolt, Orbán Katalin,
Péter Ágnes, Rakovszky Zsuzsa, Takács Ferenc.)

[*From Puritanism to Postmodernism. A History of American Literature.*

New York: Penguin Books, 1991]

Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury's book, as it says about itself, besides being a literary history is also a fable, a fictitious quest-story. ("All literary histories are critical fictions," "Our own book is no less a fiction than any other. ... our own tale of a nation's literature ... and the fable a country told itself as it tried to understand its own becoming in writing."¹) It is a quest for origins: the origins of American literature, and the essence

of the so-puzzling Americanness of this literature at the heart of which lies a certain fiction making process. It is already a well known cliché of our postmodern days that the search for an origin in and through language will always only show us the lack of an absolute centre, an unquestionable origin, and where we hope to find this origin we only find language, writing and traces. It is this unspoken supposition which seems to be lurking behind the arguments of the two authors since, through a play with reciprocity, their implications may be reduced to the following conclusion: if we cannot

¹ p. xv, xix. References are to the Penguin edition, indicated in parenthesis after the quotations.

find the origin, let us then create the fiction of the origin by making fiction the origin. Quite paradoxically, but not so surprisingly, this critical manoeuvre, calling literary history fiction, is by no means a renunciation of the past and history, quite to the contrary, it is the genuine expression of the authors' desire to belong to a tradition, to be embedded in the history of a certain kind of writing which we call American.

The authors suggest a multiple-step development. In the beginning there was America as mere writing since "... 'America' existed in Europe long before it was discovered, in the speculative writings of the classical, the medieval and then the Renaissance mind" (4). "It is an invention of Europe, as old as western history itself" (5). This "foreword" sealed the destiny of American literature and became its most important structuring force. After the discovery and naming of the continent, thanks to the uncritical transplantation of the old language to the New World, America proved to be a creative writing which destroyed the actual America but was still not necessarily essentially American. "Because of this imaginary history, which preceded the real one and all but obliterated the history of those who had lived American lives before the Europeans came, we will never

really find a single demarcation point to show us where American writing exactly starts, and certainly not when it became distinctive or broke finally loose from European writing" (6). America as writing destroyed its own would-be referent and then committed suicide before it was even born. Throughout the 17th, 18th and most of the 19th centuries the literary output of the country was undoubtedly "the literature of America" but was not necessarily *American* literature. The history of America starts with this "imaginary history" and, as we will see, ends with another which is essentially the same.

The real change came with the birth of the Modern. The heaviest burden of American modernism was the paradox of a "historyless history." Thus the central project of the era was the dissolution of this burning paradox into a fiction: the fiction of the usable past. The birth of this fiction means the birth of the recognisably American quality of American literature, and it implies an act of creative forgetting inasmuch as it is a conscious reaction against the genteel tradition. Even though the authors do not point out the analogy this modern gesture is indeed a return to the "origins" (or at least to the spirit of the origin) since the merely fictitious (re)creation of America is in accordance with the

European prehistory of the land. It is a return to fiction making or writing as an origin and self-identity. Modernism is the golden age of American literature since "American literature is indeed pre-eminently a modern literature ..." (xvii), and the authors do not refrain from the far-reaching implication that modern literature is essentially American². This already foreshadows the next and so far last transformation of the concept. Thanks to her position as the most influential world power of our times, and to the constant development and widening of the possibilities of exchange and communication which resulted in the breakdown of limiting international boundaries of influence and taste America has become through a not so surprising metonymic extension the emblem for the present state of Western literature.

Due to the intricate relationships between modernity, literature and history, a literary history which has its focus on modernism and makes as one of its main contentions the claim that the essence of that literature, the history of which is to be written, is its modernity, and which

implicitly aspires to the state of being itself a modern history of literature, should take certain perils into consideration. I would like to use Paul de Man's speculations on the subject to highlight some of the problems. "Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks new departure"³. Seen as such, "Modernity and history relate to each other in a curiously contradictory way that goes beyond antithesis or opposition. If history is not to become sheer regression or paralysis, it depends on modernity for its duration and renewal; but modernity cannot assert itself without at once being swallowed up and reintegrated into a regressive historical process." (151) "If we see in this paradoxical condition a diagnosis of our own modernity, then literature has always been essentially modern" (151). De Man even lets the concept grow into a mystic force, the key to our understanding of literature: "Modernity turns out to be indeed one of the concepts by means of which the distinctive nature of litera-

²This implication is mainly created by the unmistakable presence of Hugh Kenner's book, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers*, in the background.

³Paul de Man: "Literary History and Literary Modernity" in *Blindness and Insight, Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism, Second Edition*. London: Routledge, 1993. p. 148. Subsequent references are parenthesised.

ture can be revealed in all its intricacy" (161). If we add all these up we might reach, against our will, some surprising conclusions. If we say that American literature is essentially modern, we may also say that all literature is essentially modern. But if we say that modern literature is essentially American may we also say that all literature is essentially American? The question is, of course, rhetorical.

After stating that a single point of origin of American literature is most likely never to be found, since it is irretrievably lost in an inextricable dialectic intertextual relationship between Europe and America which defies univocal classifications based on e.g. anteriority, the authors still fall into their own trap when they contradict their own premises by performing an act of renaming. Ruland and Bradbury refuse F. O. Matthiessen's label "American Renaissance" for the literature of the middle of the 19th century (which arose from a totally different, but not necessarily valid, understanding of the word) and through a stroke of *originality* they call it instead "American naissance." They think it a more proper expression since this was the era which gave birth to the modern instinct which came into its fullest bloom at the beginning of the next century. This is why the authors constantly emphasise

Poe's, Melville's, Hawthorne's, Whitman's and Dickinson's "modernity," which in most of the cases appears to be an intentional ambiguity which "was more than a wilful obscurity, for it gave America what it lacked and soberly needed, a truly critical literature" (144). However, as we have seen, if we understand modernity as "a way of acting and behaving" (de Man 142), as an urge for constant renewal, the concept becomes so large and universal that it appears to engulf the whole of Literature regardless of temporal and geographical boundaries. This spirit of modernity is echoed by Ezra Pound's "Make it New," and for that matter also by William Carlos Williams' "Back to the Beginning." The peculiarity of America is that (in spite of their different roots) the two coincide and not necessarily only because the renewal of something may be achieved through the dubious return to even more dubious beginnings or, to turn it around, not even because the return to the beginnings is something new, but because the two in the present contexts mean essentially the same. The history of America (on the continent), as we know it, was initiated by the desire to rewrite either the maps or history. The utopia with which the first Europeans arrived, no matter whether of spiritual or of pecuniary nature, was

the utopia of "starting it all over again." From the beginning there is only beginning *again* and the wish to make it *new*. Emerson's *Nature*, which marks the beginning of the American *naissance*, "with its repudiation of the past and the 'retrospective age' and the assertion of a new vision" (Ruland, Bradbury 105) is indeed the manifesto of the same modernist instinct, the renunciation of the past in the hope of reaching the present as a source of origin, which in de Man's interpretation is the essence of Nietzsche's and Baudelaire's modernity. But the same relation to the past is reflected by the utopistic writings of the European Renaissance as well as the puritan dissent and revolutionary patriotism. So the celebrated "*naissance*" of American literature is after all a *renaissance*, a single moment resembling all the others in the metaphoric chain of a constant *renaissance*, an endless labour. As de Man points out about all the tragic penmen who ever tried to be modern: "... their claim to being a new beginning turns out to be the repetition of a claim that has always already been made" (161).

The postmodern turn is presented by the two authors as a multiplying, mirroring substitution. It is easily seen as the phase of modernism which realises (in both senses of the word) the impossibility of being

original or to take it one step further (and this is also a reflection on the methods of the critic): "One is soon forced to resort to paradoxical formulations, such as defining the modernity of a literary period as the manner in which it discovers the impossibility of being modern." (144) (If there is an edge of self-irony in these words let us simply call to mind that de Man is after all a postmodern critic who is aware of his "modernity.") According to the authors one of the basic experiences of the postmodern individual is the confrontation with a reality which does not resemble reality anymore, it is more like what one used to know as fiction. The point of departure is the birth of the fiction that reality is a fiction, and as reality became fiction the role of literature underwent another modernisation, "... and fiction needed to become *superfiction* to cope with an ever more fictional age of history" (Ruland, Bradbury 371). But what is the role of criticism in this wilderness of changing roles and mirrorings?

The two authors' rather meagre survey of post-W.W.II American literature, which in some cases really does not exceed a mere cataloguing of names and titles, is closed by a reflection on American literary criticism. This last subchapter, which starts from the institutionalised New Criti-

cism of the 1950's and arrives at the Yale critics, fits very well into the plot of our tale. After pointing out that Leslie Fiedler called his work *Love and Death in the American Novel* a novel and that Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* is actually a poem the authors write that "[f]or a time, this critical writing that so resembles and asks to be read as poetry has been the freshest, most imaginative literary work produced in the United States" (428). And if we did not do it so far then this is where we start to realise that the postmodern story that we have been reading is the metafictional history of its own coming into existence: a very *American* history of literature. What the authors wrote about American is true about this history of literature: it is the fable the text "told itself as it tried to understand its own becoming in writing" (xix). In the present case the history of American literature ends with Ruland and Bradbury's book, a tale about the history of American literature itself.

What Walter Benjamin observed about Baudelaire's rebellious modernity, that it was controlled from the background by a desire to be a classic⁴, also pertains to the literary

history we have been reading. The work presents its own way into the canon. And if we think that such a tendency is in direct opposition with the innovating spirit of modernity we are mistaken. As a matter of fact this is where we should start looking for its modernity because the ambiguity of language is such and the paradoxicality of modernity is so deep-rooted that it may well be disguised as its opposite. "We live or have lately lived in the age of Postmodern deconstructions, in which more energy has been put into demythologizing interpretive myths than constructing them. Earlier canonizations have led to a rage for decanonization as the desire to challenge the usable past of the moderns has become dominant." (xv) The modernity of this literary history is by no means to be found in its return to the modernist credo of a usable past or its conception in the spirit of the postmodern obsession with fictions but in its pro-canon stance which is presented by the text itself as a mode of anti-postmodernity (which has to assert and deny itself at the same time). As de Man put it: "[Modernity] is a very revealing paradox, confirming again that anything touching upon literature becomes at once a Pandora's box, that the critical method which denies literary modernity would appear - and even, in certain respects,

⁴Walter Benjamin: A második császárság Párizsa Baudelaire-nél. in *Angelus Novus*. Magyar Helikon, 1980. p. 917.

would be - the most modern of critical movements" (164). Whether this work will actually make it into the canon or not is to be decided by the generations of readers that are to come. Reminding us that the postmodern era is drawing closer and closer to its end,

the authors themselves awaiting a conservative turn, the work ends with a quite optimistic millennial prophecy and leaves us with the taste of the same old realisation in our mouth: we are standing on the edge of a new beginning.