



10.2478/abcsj-2021-0002

Poetic Madness in
Malcolm Bradbury's *Eating People Is Wrong*

NOUREDDINE FRIJI
King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

This article addresses the age-old correlation between poetic genius and madness as represented in Malcolm Bradbury's academic novel *Eating People Is Wrong* (1959), zeroing in on a student-cum-poet and a novelist-cum-poet called Louis Bates and Carey Willoughby, respectively. While probing this unexplored theme in Bradbury's novel, I pursue three primary aims. To begin with, I seek to demonstrate that certain academics' tendency to fuse or confuse the poetic genius of their students and colleagues with madness is not only rooted in inherited assumptions, generalizations, and exaggerations but also in their own antipathy towards poets on the grounds that they persistently diverge from social norms. Second, I endeavour to ignite readers' enthusiasm about the academic novel subgenre by underscoring the vital role it plays in energizing scholarly debate about the appealing theme of poetic madness. Lastly, the study concedes that notwithstanding the prevalence of prejudice among their populations, universities, on the whole, do not relinquish their natural veneration for originality, discordant views, and rewarding dialogue.

Keywords: academic novel, genius, poetic madness, Malcolm Bradbury, originality, critical thinking

Much Madness is divinest Sense
– To a discerning Eye –
Much Sense – the starkest Madness –
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail –
Assent – and you are sane –
Demur – you're straightway dangerous –
And handled with a Chain.
(Emily Dickinson 101)

The academic novel, also known as “*Professorromane*” (Fullerty 18), the campus novel, the college novel, or the university novel, embraces a wide range of staple topics, including conference mania, academic parties, the glamour and gloom of academic life, the stresses and strains of hiring and firing, deans and dons’ conflicts and confrontations, departmental policies and politics, and the tensions and pretensions marking social class and race relations. The subgenre’s leading exponents are Kingsley Amis, David Lodge, Philip Roth, James Hynes, Alison Lurie, Tom Sharp, and Malcolm Bradbury, to mention but a few. Bradbury’s teaching career, spanning nearly four decades (1959-1995), accounts for his acquaintance with the nooks and crannies of English academia and for the overwhelming presence of English professors in his *Eating People Is Wrong* (1959), *Stepping Westward* (1965), and *The History Man* (1975). As one of his fictional poets and novelists puts it, “I write about universities because I work in a university and can collect the stuff” (*Eating People* 236).

Stepping Westward centres on James Walker’s journey to and stay in Party, a town in America’s heartland. The British scholar is supposed to give a public lecture known as “The Writer’s Dilemma” at Benedict Arnold University in return for light teaching duties. Asked to sign a loyalty oath, he insists that he is loyal to Britain alone; that he is a liberal, not a Communist; that he aspires to be a “loyalist of the imagination” only (284); and that he will never compromise his faith in freedom. When his opponents conspire against him, he is left with no option but to return home. On the other hand, casting a retrospective look at the 1960s and pitting radicalism against liberalism, *The History Man* records the seismic changes sweeping through the British university and society subsequent to the eruption of the sexual and student revolutions. It also details the ups and downs of the marital life and professional career of a sociologist called Howard Kirk, whose radical ideas and ideals provoke the ire of several students and professors. Eventually, however, he wins the fight against “the liberal reactionary forces” (229) thanks to radical students’ support.

Eating People Is Wrong revolves around its chief characters’ emotional entanglements. Stuart Treece, an allegedly liberal professor and

Department head at an unnamed provincial redbrick university in the Midlands, assumes the role of the matchmaker by urging a liberal graduate student called Emma Fielding not to turn down her suitors, a working-class student and an African student. Although she initially agrees to give them a chance, Emma eventually decides “that to take things any further would be a mistake” (166). Treece, too, abandons his protégés and has a love affair with Emma. The novel then focuses upon the two guilt-ridden characters’ vain attempts to salvage whatever they can from the liberal wreckage. One of the main accomplishments of the novel is that it does not confine itself to re-treading old ground. Following the fortunes of an undergraduate student-cum-poet of rare ability called Louis Bates and an allegedly eccentric poet and novelist called Carey Willoughby, it provides a rich literary context for exploring and deploring prejudice and marginalization in academic circles and for indicating and vindicating their victims. This study starts by providing a sketch of previous research on Bates’s and Willoughby’s iconoclastic attitudes and conduct. It then proceeds to survey the theoretical backdrop on which it draws. Lastly, it analyses and discusses the reasons why Bates and Willoughby are open to charges of eccentricity and madness.

Linda L. Elphick underlines that Bates is a serious student and that he “produces work of real quality,” such as the poems he publishes (87). Commenting on his encounter with Treece on the occasion of the first tutorial in the novel, she writes, “Treece is so threatened by the genius that Bates has displayed in several essays, that he distances himself from the eager student. [...] Dimly aware that Bates presents an intellectual challenge that he, Treece, may be unable to meet, Treece makes no effort to meet it and, instead, attempts to find a woman for Bates” (48). However informative Elphick’s study may be, it does not delve further into Bates’s genius, much less into its supposed association with madness. Robert Morace, on the other hand, hardly touches upon the topics of genius and madness. He simply dismisses Bates as a “fragmentary [...] splendidly irreconcilable character who seems to have stumbled out of a John Braine novel or a John Osborne play via Kingsley Amis into a fictive world” (37).ⁱ Comparing Bates with Treece, he proposes:

Bates is Treece's comically decrowning double who boldly and cartoonishly speaks what the timorous Treece allows himself to think. Bates is so comic a figure precisely because he takes himself and his world so seriously, so monologically. Unlike Treece, or Treece's Chaplinesque precursor, Prufrock, he cannot perceive, much less understand, even glancingly, his own absurdity. (38-39)

Morace goes on to argue that Bates also bears a curious resemblance to Willoughby, the self-centred and "parasitic" novelist, social rebel, and representative of the Angry Young Men (40).ⁱⁱ After undergoing many trials, these characters "linger on, feeling contingency exert its ever increasing pressure on characters and author alike" (43). Finally, while admitting that Bates is intelligent and "the most deserving case in the book," Peter Widdowson believes that the other characters are justified in rejecting him on grounds of his "not being a 'pleasant person'" with regard to his physical appearance, "dandruff and manners" (18).

As seen above, while elucidating some aspects of Bates's character, the aforementioned researchers sidestep the examination of the presumably inexorable intersection between the twin motifs of poetic genius and madness. A theme of such importance, therefore, deserves closer scholarly attention. I believe that certain professors' unfair treatment of Bates is proof of their personal antagonism towards him and dissatisfaction with his nonconformity, which heavily influences their evaluation of his creative endeavours and academic performance. Arguably, this may be related to the customary conflation of poetry and madness on the part of people, in general. The same is true for academics' handling of Willoughby. Before proceeding to this investigation in more details, however, it is useful to set up a conceptual framework for it.

The purportedly inextricable link between poetic genius and madness is premised on the assumption that writers, armed with the gift of imagination, succeed in creating things that have not existed in the first place, which accounts for Plato's insistence that artists be banned from society (Beaugrande 17).ⁱⁱⁱ Democritus ascribes the creation of "exceedingly beautiful" poetic texts to "the influence of enthusiasm" and "holy inspiration" and believes that only the mad can pen great poetry (Greene 9). During the Romantic period, too, it was believed that the notion of "the *furor poeticus*" made it possible for poets' imagination to

break free from the shackles of conformity (Burwick 2). This conjecture gained wider currency thanks to scientific backing:

The idea that a mental illness could liberate the imagination received significant scientific endorsement when Emil Kraepelin, professor of psychiatry at Heidelberg during the 1890s, identified and explained the manic syndrome. He identified “Mania” as an affection of the mind that may “set free powers that otherwise would be constrained by inhibitions.” Mania in itself has nothing to do with the intellectual power of the mind; when it affects the mind of a person of ability or talent, however, it can bring forth those gifts. (Burwick 3)

Clinically oriented approaches also stress the close connection between insanity and creativity, theorizing that artists have greater access to the repressed memories and unconscious conflicts of childhood and that successful creative people, given their strong ego, “use unconscious material constructively” by sublimating or redirecting “otherwise dangerous urges into acceptable expressions of aesthetic imagination” (Lindauer 34). According to Rieger, this is true for several eighteenth-century writings, such as the satires of Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, and Jonathan Swift and for the writings of the Pre-Romantics and Romantics. As he argues,

Coleridge, in ‘Kubla Khan,’ revives the idea of the divine, mad frenzy of the writer, and the writings of Wordsworth, Byron, DeQuincey, Southey, Lamb and Clare deify the human ego and promulgate the creative, healing aspects of the insane. Some Victorian writers, especially Tennyson, suffered personal depressions and explored madness as a theme. (3)^{iv}

The same applies to William Blake, who “represented with mystic intensity the grand labors of the artist in a world that seems to fear the rebellious energies of imagination” (Burwick 13) and who not only wrote a great deal about madness but was also thought to be mad and to have resided in Bedlam, a well-known lunatic asylum (Youngquist 113-119). As the Age of Reason tended to dismiss visionary eccentricities as evidence of insanity, Blake’s attack on this order was one of the reasons why he was accused of madness and consigned to the margins of society (117-118). In the nineteenth century, however, several critics tried to exonerate him from this allegation (115). So did twentieth-century critics,

such as Northrop Frye in his *Fearful Symmetry* and Harold Bloom in his *Blake's Apocalypse* (116-117).

Having briefly outlined a few hypotheses about the assumed correlation between poetic genius and madness, the study now attempts to gauge the extent to which they find literary illustration in Bradbury's *Eating People Is Wrong*. I start from the premise that a number of academics in the novel, leaning on inherited assumptions and on the aforesaid literary, philosophical, and scientific speculations, dismiss both Bates and Willoughby as eccentric and mad. However, while these theories may have enough authority to warrant considerable consideration and while certain poets may have certifiably been afflicted with insanity, poets, in general, should not, with reason, be pigeonholed offhandedly as insane. Generalizations and exaggerations in this regard do not only reveal their advocates' bias but also deviate from universities' mission of enlightenment.

There is enough textual evidence in Bradbury's novel to substantiate Bates's claim to originality, both as a student and as a poet. While arguing with his teacher, Treece, during the first tutorial of the new academic year, he underlines the significance of having discordant opinions: "Well, it's really no use our talking in the way we have been doing if the words we use mean something different to each of us [...] and nothing [...] to some of us" (*Eating People* 16). His dogged faith in critical thinking is manifest in his use of the expressions "I think,"^v "in my view," "I mean," and "I grant you" (17) and in his confident elucidation of the term *organic* by drawing on Coleridge's reading of Shakespeare. Equally significant is his belief that the student "could be [...] the rubbing-post for the thought of his teacher" and that universities are expected "to promote that interplay of view, that discussion and dispute, that cumulative narrowing down of possibilities that led to the formation of accurate opinion" (20). Bates's originality finds further corroboration in his "diatribe" against intellectuals on the occasion of a tea party thrown by Treece. His claim that intellectuals are "out-and-out relativists," that none of them is "right," and that "the common man" matters more than the intellectual comes as a "shock" to the other guests (84). No less relevant is

his own indirect identification with a few “*enfants terribles*,” like Empson and Isherwood at Cambridge and Auden at Oxford (86).

Bates’s “energy of intellect” (19) stands in marked contrast to his classmates’ uncritical embrace of lectures, hence their “embarrassment” when asked to take part in the discussion (17, 18). Treece assumes that they came “straight from some grammar school sixth-form” or that they “were rejects of Oxford, Cambridge and the better provincial universities [...] one could name almost the haphazard collection of books that they would read, one could sketch out beforehand the essays they would write, indicate simply their primary values” (14). He also finds it difficult to engage their attention, as they evince indifference, do not buy books or read the assigned ones, and are “unacquainted with the principles of logic and straight thinking” (13). Interestingly, the University’s students, in general, are described as “gauche youths” who defeat the teacher’s attempt to “mould the great spirit” by plodding “along the towpath like barge horses” and by habitually “shuffling their feet, opening and shutting their new briefcases, noting down with ostentation the not-always-valuable points, turning red when spoken to [...] furtively inspecting their new watches to see how much longer this was going to continue” (13).

Bates’s superiority over the other characters manifests itself not only in his capacity for critical thinking but also in his unique “poetic temperament” (262). Thus, he indirectly identifies himself with the renowned and disowned poet Blake by inviting Viola to join him in re-enacting a scene in which Blake once read *Paradise Lost* in the garden in the company of his wife while he was naked at the bottom. Likewise, in an attempt to win Emma’s affections, he considers himself “like the poet Keats” and proceeds to quote him: “I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart’s affections” (131). To make a stronger impression on Emma and to highlight the purported resemblance between himself and Alfred Tennyson he recites a few lines from a poem entitled “The Brook” without attributing them to the Victorian poet: “I come from the haunts of coot and hern, I make a sudden sally, and sparkle out among the fern, to bicker down the valley” (139).^{vi}

The fact that the publication of Bates’s poems in a famous literary magazine is hailed as “a distinguished event [...] in the world of letters”

(261) bears further testimony to his creative talent. In contrast, there is no indication that any other character has finished or published a valuable piece of scholarly work. Walter Oliver, the “*enfant terrible* of the University” (153) and “the kingpin around which university literary life circulated” (154), admits that he cannot proceed with his new novel because he is “stuck” (213), that he can write only “seventh chapters” in novels (153), and that he hopes to meet someone who can write “first chapters” (154). Accordingly, he consoles himself with the thought that “I’m too busy to waste my time writing. I just talk about it” (155). The same is true for Carfax, who claims that he is a scholar, not a writer, and that only Kingsley Amis can be recognized as a writer in an English provincial university. As for Treece, he has only one book to his name and he is “not very proud of it” (190). Lastly, Emma laments that she finds it difficult to continue working on her PhD and that she is “reaching the stage where you feel that it will take you at least a hundred years to finish writing it” (84).

The novel’s leading characters unanimously confirm that Bates stands out as the most brilliant person in their academic circle. While complaining that he (Bates) is “egocentric to the most extravagant degree,” “irrepressible,” and “a personal problem,” Carfax concedes that he is still “a wild, untutored genius” and that he had better “stay untutored” (109). Viola Masefield, an Elizabethan drama teacher and a notorious poser, admits that Bates is intelligent and that “[i]ntelligence is a good thing to discriminate on behalf of” (73). Finally, Treece believes that Bates’s essay on Pope is good enough to be published in *Partisan Review*, that his essays about E.M. Forster and Bernard Shaw attest to his unique talent, and that teachers should “foster” his “genius” regardless of the “embarrassment” it may cause them (109). He also indirectly likens his student to Shelley, hoping that his own university will not commit the same mistake as Oxford did when they expelled Shelley. To highlight the similarity, he reads out to his tutorial group a few lines from Shelley’s written attack on Oxford: “Oxonian society was insipid to me, uncongenial with my habits of thinking. I could not descend to common life; the sublime interest of poetry, lofty and exalted achievements, the proselytism of the world, the equalisation of its inhabitants, were to be the

soul of my soul” (162). Like Treece, the narrator, joining the chorus of admiration for Bates’s genius, protests that the University has not offered Bates the “liberality” and “respect” a “wild genius” deserves (166) and accentuates the correspondence between Bates’s and Shelley’s life circumstances:

Shelley had been an oddity, just like Bates; and at school and university they had called him what Carfax, what they all, had called Bates - mad. [...] Shelley used to send out offensive atheistic letters to divines, over a false name; to blow up fences with gunpowder; to ask mothers carrying babes in arms, ‘Will your baby tell us anything about pre-existence, madam?’ [...] Shelley, it was said, had his tutor ‘in great perplexity’; and Treece had to admit that when they wrote up Bates they could use the same phrase of him. (162)

Bates’s affinity with Shelley finds expression in the fact that the student literary society chaired by Bates refuses to give a bunch of flowers to a lady novelist who has attacked Shelley and in the fact that Oliver, recommending the creative student’s novel for publication, describes it as one of the “knee-stroking novels” about “pale young working-class men, reading Shelley to one another and saying, ‘Art though pale for weariness?’” (213).

Taking the foregoing attestations to Bates’s genius into account, the logical questions to ask now are: how can the torrents of vituperation descending on him be accounted for and which particular aspects lead the other characters to dismiss him as a mad man? For a start, it may be logical to consider people’s long-standing hostility toward poets as the major culprit. As a matter of fact, tracing Bates’s pertinence back to a six-month work period he spent at a mental hospital’s library and revealing that the University was a mental asylum in the Victorian period and that there are still some bars over the windows to prevent the sick from hanging themselves, the narrator, speaking on behalf of Treece, seems to imply that Bates fits in perfectly with his environment. To Treece, as the narrator goes on, the University “became an asylum of another kind; great wits are thus to madness near allied” (24).^{vii} This accounts for the fact that while impressed and “affected” by the “quiet and firm” manner in which his student speaks during the tutorial (20), Treece looks “ominously” (18)

at him, feels “a trifle disconcerted” and “a trifle uncomfortable,” and fears that he is going to be a burden and a nuisance, “the buffoon, the creature who couldn’t be taken seriously” (22).

Equally significant is the fact that while ostensibly singing Bates’s praises and springing to his defence, Treece simply downplays instead of seriously refusing and refuting the charges of madness levelled against him. Objecting to Carfax’s claim that Bates is mad, psychotic, and schizophrenic, he concedes, “I suppose *it’s true that his character does lie within the pattern of derangement*. But if he is like that, that puts our whole problem on another dimension” (106, emphasis added). The same is true for Treece’s disapproval of Viola’s claim that Bates may harm other people if he is not taken to a mental hospital:

Nonsense, Viola; he’s not psychopathic. It isn’t that kind of derangement at all, as far as I see it. Madness, genius, originality—it’s all the same thing; it’s a breaking of our normal value structure and the substitution of another one [. . .] He’s simply an original; he’s no more wild than that. His *delusions* don’t prevent him from living in the ordinary, everyday world; he *isn’t that severely impaired*. (107, emphasis added)

What is more, to Treece, “Bates’s *faults* seemed eminently permissible,” being mere “*pathological lesions*” (106-107, emphasis added). Later, observing his three students during the tutorial, he focuses on Bates, “this erratic, easily despised and pitiable figure, *unstable yes*, but honest, pure and concerned for human values” (162, emphasis added).

As for Viola, she objects to Bates’s habit of trumpeting his own merits and considering himself “naturally privileged” (73). Being “a normal, healthy woman” (112), she decides that Bates is mentally deranged and urges that he be given “a B.A. honors degree in schizophrenia” (108) and that “we ought to get him out of here as soon as possible, to somewhere where he can be looked after” (106), as professors are not supposed to “provide a haven for the ill-adjusted” (108) and cope with Treece’s “madman” (107). Later, she asks Treece if he has expelled “the ghoul,” complains that “he’s over there by the door now, smelling girls’ ears as they go past” (174), and asks proactively, “Mr. Bates, Mr. Bates, what does that word remind me of?” (179).

No less displeasing to the other characters is Bates's self-consciousness: hence, Carfax's claim that he (Bates) "devotes himself carelessly to trying to win attention and sympathy" (109); Emma's belief that "he sought affection from every heterosexual discussion" (262); and the narrator's claim that after leaving hospital, where he has been treated for pneumonia, Bates "had been for once the centre of the world" due to his "self-conscious and highly personal state of mind" (285). In a similar vein, Viola protests that Bates keeps begging for sympathy as if he were "a latter-day Rimbaud" and that he "carries his soul around in a paper bag as if he'd just bought it at Marks and Spencer's" (194). While emphasizing that Bates, Blake, and Rimbaud are "[r]are spirits" who "want to live so intensely," the quick-tempered teacher does not consider Blake and Rimbaud fools because they lived in the "age of the heroic," unlike Bates, who is living in "an ironic mode" (194).

Bates's opponents even try to lend more credibility to his alleged eccentricity by bringing their personal animosity towards him to bear on their evaluation of his character. Carfax is irritated by the fact that Bates once advised him, in the middle of a lecture, to take rose-hip syrup to cure his cough. Viola cannot wait to get rid of her unworthy and assumedly mad working-class admirer because he keeps "observing her every movement—the way she stretched up for books off the shelves; the sight of her legs as she emerged from behind her desk" (75). In addition, she considers him a "sexually unpleasant," a "Solitary Raper," and "a walking phallic symbol" (116). She goes so far as to urge Emma to distance herself from him:

You have this saint complex. You always want to help lame dogs over stiles. You should keep away from people like that. They drag you down. You have to stay away from people who can't give you anything, or otherwise you destroy your own potential [...] Life is catalysed by knowing interesting people. That's where the vivid moments come from. And there just isn't time for bores and *fools*. (193, emphasis added)

Treece is aware that Viola's judgments are based on "purely personal reasons" (75), which he finds unfair. Indeed, he "had been inclined to be amused by this example of the faculty which women seemed to have for reducing abstract issues into personal terms, in the manner of one of his

girl students who had once said that she held a low opinion of Donne's poetry because she didn't think she would like him as a person, really" (72). But then Treece's own perception of Bates seems to be coloured by his personal dissatisfaction with the latter's appearance and demeanour. For example, he is put off by the "ugly and ungainly clothes" worn by his "seedy" and "frowsy" student, by the "long sheep-like North-Country a's" dominating his accent, and by his bad smell (164). No less displeasing to him is Bates's disregard for manners, as when he arrives an hour earlier than the appointed time for Treece's tea-party. To be sure, it "was really the first time he [Treece] had been confronted" by his guest, who seems to have taken "eccentricity to the point of downright inconvenience" (72).

Bates's accident-proneness is, to the other characters, further proof of his eccentricity. Taking part in a game of "Sardines" at one of Mirabelle's parties, he locks himself in the lavatory with a girl. Not until the door is taken off at the hinges does the panic-stricken girl break free. Subsequently, the mere sight of Bates, regardless of the possibility that he may "detain one in conversation," is "enough to send terror into the hearts of the virgins of the University" (136). The clumsy student also causes a bowl of punch to catch fire by passing a cigarette over it while waving his hand. On another occasion, being "lost in amorous transports" while dancing with Emma in a bar (170), he fails to take notice of the musicians, and both he and his dance partner fall down, causing the musicians to scatter and the music-stands to fall. An embarrassed Bates, standing "in the middle of the disaster," apologizes (171). An equally embarrassed Emma has already left, much to the dismay of her suitor.

The other characters' treatment of Bates as an eccentric and mad man spills over into their evaluation of his academic performance. To start with, Carfax charges that Bates has "abrogated his responsibilities as a student and should be asked to leave" (161). The unwanted student has also failed to "fit well into the category which Treece had designated for him, that of the working-class intellectual rising in the world through his own efforts, aided by the tutelage of liberal minded teachers" (161). Finally, Viola concurs with the other members of the "anti-Bates faction" that Bates's poor performance in the exam raises serious concerns about

the possibility of his success and about the “performance of that do-it-yourself intellectual” (161).

The same type of prejudice informs the novel’s characters’ attitudes towards Willoughby, another “literary waif” (224) and nonconformist poet who tries to pre-empt madness allegations by offering various justifications for his conduct. Thus, he drinks milk even while delivering lectures because he is a tubercular patient; changes his socks, even in other people’s presence, because he has gastric problems; steals out of cafés without paying the bills simply to avoid starving; and steals books from bookshops on the grounds that everyone should have free access to culture. Notwithstanding these excuses, Willoughby’s behaviour is believed to hover at the edge of insanity since it is interpreted against a set of inherited beliefs which dismiss poets as eccentric and mad individuals. When he takes off his shoes and socks in the English Department’s Senior Common Room upon his arrival at the University as a guest, the Vice-Chancellor’s wife “looked at his bare feet with distaste,” considers him “*awful*,” and continues watching “in horrified fascination” so much so that “you felt that she had not really seen feet before, or if she had seen them, she had not thought about them” (222). She also regrets having arranged to invite him to dinner in the first place but she finds it too late to cancel the invitation.

Treece, too, considers his guest an “unnecessarily malicious” (198) man who “makes one feel thoroughly unsafe” (200) and is aware that “angry young men seemed to have some special kind of short shrift with guest rooms,” amongst other things. He recalls, for instance, that “in one novel he had read the hero had burned the linen with cigarettes” (243).^{viii} This accounts for his “horror” at the thought that his other “expectantly waiting” guests might be completely “defenceless” (234) when they face this “phenomenon which, while not much in itself, was clearly made of the stuff of drama” (235). No less revealing is Treece’s displeasure at Willoughby’s disregard for etiquette. Firstly, Willoughby “at once and without invitation disappeared upstairs,” much to his host’s “alarm” (233). Secondly, instead of apologizing to Treece for having worn his shoes and socks without consulting him, he asks, “What is man in this world for, if

not to help his fellows?" (235). Finally, he sprays the living-room's floor with flour and the kitchen's wall with fat while preparing a meal.

Mocking the other characters' ingrained prejudice against poets, Willoughby confirms that he is "not civilised," that he is "no gentleman" (246), and that people do not like poets because the latter "are dirty, they cause trouble, they're bad house guests, they cheat, they lie, they fornicate" (226). Feeling provoked by Treece's suggestion that he (Willoughby) can choose not to have a shower, he protests, "I know that phrase. It means: if you're going to persist in being a boor and a ruffian and an outcast, then I'm not going to blame you; but you realize that we all disapprove. Look, I don't *need* a bath yet" (244). He then launches into a tirade against the "bastions of tired morality" (245) espoused by "protocol boys" (244), like Treece and the Vice Chancellor. "You know," he rails at his host, "I'd like to go back to the Vice Chancellor's house and stick my head through the window and shout: 'Life is not a bowl of cherries.'" Willoughby does not believe that Treece and the Vice Chancellor are from "different worlds" (245). Echoing Jim Dixon's attack on Ned Welch's and the college Principal's pretentiousness in his "Merrie England" lecture (Amis 222-227), he proceeds to mock the old, on the whole, including Cambridge dons:

This sums up my seniors, and it's another way of life, these civilised old gentlemen and amateurs [...] I wouldn't do there, you know. All sheries taste the same to me; they're all like cold tea. I only know two kinds of cheeses, mouse-trap and blue. I think it would be terrible to have to live in Sicily. I've never read Sainte Beuve. I don't think that by not having a servant to do all those things of life that don't really matter I've lost everything. Nor do I think that by not being able to go to those old country house week-ends of the early years of the century I missed the most brilliant and civilised gatherings or persons that ever existed. (*Eating People* 245-246)

Willoughby's protest against mainstream values is most evident in his vehement latter-day defence of poets and poetry.^{ix} Addressing a number of academics in the aforesaid lecture, he charges that people treat poetry as a mere means of entertainment and that they do not appreciate the strained efforts poets put into their work. He argues that people find poets unwelcome simply because they "question the values people live by,"

“challenge” their conventional “view of the world,” and spot out “the principle of disorder” underlying the veneer of “order and respectability” marking people’s life (226). He concludes by stating that poets’ dilemma bears resemblance to that of novelists, who are striving “to change the world” in the face of a disheartening climate of mounting “anger and frustration” (231).^x

Willoughby defines and defends the function of poetry further in a lecture he delivers at a poetry conference, insisting that poets, in general, are insane. This statement draws applause from the other poets, who would have been displeased if he had said otherwise. They know well that poets are not insane, but they still prefer to be viewed as being so. As Willoughby contends, it is the audience’s intellectual incompetence and their envy of poets’ creative potency that lie at the root of their loathing for artists and for their scholarly endeavours. He argues that as long as they are unwilling to judge the value of works of art from an objective point of view, people will always be prisoners of their own ignorance and prejudice.

The frustrated poet finds literary and historical precedent for his sick foot in the story of Philoctetes, a Greek social discard who was abandoned on a desert island by his fellow Greeks, and in Henry James’s bad leg. His view that the artists are sane while the world is mad is best illustrated by Van Gogh’s paintings, which, while dismissed as a mad man’s work, testify to his “sanity.” He winds up by reading from one of Van Gogh’s letters to demonstrate that his “melancholy” and “disgust” are ascribable to the miserable life he led (250). An attentive Bates greets these revelations with enthusiastic applause and feels vindicated that “the artist’s madness was grown out of the most painful kind of sanity” (251). Treece is not unaware of the effect of Willoughby’s words on Bates; he “realized that Bates had seen something in the discourse other than what he had seen; that what lay before *his* eyes was of the romantic figure of the poet, Shelley-like” (251).

Invoking Treece’s and Viola’s veneration for Shelley and Blake, respectively, as well as their scant regard for other poets, like Bates and himself, Willoughby stresses that society lets its “maladapted ones” starve throughout their lives but accords them due respect only after their death

because it regards “cultural things not as living appurtenances of its world, but as dead things, museum pieces, and it would rather have the work of a dead artist than a living one; people paid a king’s ransom to buy pictures by painters who had been left starving by their contemporaries” (250).^{xi} The audience’s hypocrisy surfaces when they applaud Willoughby loudly, although he compares them to “a pack of vultures” and admonishes them for feeling a sense of relief after poets’ death:

They were all in fact civilised, humane, good-hearted people, who, had Philoctetes come to them with a bad foot, would have bathed it, and not even mentioned that it smelled, and put him in their car and driven him down to Dr. Scholl’s shop, and paid for the treatment. If only, you felt of them, Van Gogh had been alive, so that they could have sewn his ear back on. (249)

This contradictory stance is reminiscent of the insurmountable inconsistencies marking Plato’s attitude towards poetry and poets. While ascribing poetic genius “to divine inspiration or to a form of madness,” launching a scathing attack on poetry, and professing “to banish the tribe of poets from the commonwealth” on the grounds that “they are perverters of morality, mere imitators and deceivers,” the renowned Greek philosopher concedes that poems which teach virtue are essential to the education of the young in his ideal state (Greene 1). He also quotes several poets in his writings, especially Homer, and he admits the extent to which he has learnt from his tragic poetry (15).

Further evidence of Bradbury’s characters’ hypocrisy can be found in their interpretation of Willoughby’s clumsiness as proof of his eccentricity and madness while deliberately ignoring it with regard to other characters, such as Treece. To be sure, the latter may be considered a neat illustration of the absent-minded professor, a well-known literary figure who owes his intellectual genesis to Aristophanes and who is notorious for his “preference for thought over action” and for “an unhealthy divorcement from the realities of everyday life” (Wiegenstein 22-23). Unsurprisingly, the office occupied by the middle-aged professor was previously a gloomy “padded” cell (*Eating People* 31). His organization of parties, in particular, “had always taken on a strange tone and had not remained unvisited by disaster of one kind or another” (70).^{xii}

A case in point is the small tea-party he organizes in honour of first-class honours. Steering the tea-trolley, he hits it against the door post, scattering cakes and sandwiches around the room and smudging the clothes of some of his guests. In a similar vein, he knocks his driving test examiner down with his bicycle; overturns a tea-pot and spills tea over Emma's lap while sitting with her in a café; and picks up a Chianti bottle and starts to pour a drink when he realises, to his embarrassment, that it is only a table lamp whose shade has been knocked off.

The logical question that may arise at this point of the study is with regard to the reason why Treece is exempt from the charges of eccentricity and madness levelled against Bates and Willoughby. The latter characters' behaviour seems to be interpreted against a vast reservoir of inherited assumptions about poets' alleged eccentricity and departure from the proprieties. As Allen Thiher suggests, "To wit, it has always been easy to argue that every rebel against social norms has been judged mad, since by definition social norms exist to exclude dangerous alterity (as perceived of course by the norms)" (303). In contrast, being a mediocre teacher who prefers having "a discussion on a simple level, accepting simple meanings" (*Eating People* 17) and a conformist individual whose behaviour is dominated by "weighty mannerisms" and "affectations" (11), Treece is not perceived as a threat to social norms but rather as a perfect reflection of the zeitgeist. It must not be forgotten that the 1950s witnessed an infectious spread of conformity and consensus throughout the West and that Britain was not immune to this trend (Langhamer 341).

To conclude, this article has investigated the depiction of the purportedly intimate correlation between the time-honoured kindred motifs of poetic genius and madness in Bradbury's *Eating People Is Wrong*, throwing some light on the pretexts used by some opinionated academics to justify their wanton disregard for poets. Far from nurturing latent talent, the "anti-Bates faction" hastens to denounce and renounce it on subjective grounds. Indeed, feeling challenged by Bates's consuming passion for originality and by his refusal to subscribe to mainstream patterns of thinking and behaviour, they downplay his academic stature and achievements and conspire to dispose of him. In a similar vein,

Willoughby's impatience of established rules and roles provokes a backlash from several self-appointed arbiters of good taste who, once again, lean on supposedly indisputable evidence of the interplay between poetry and madness.

People's tendency to attach a common label to poets and to undervalue their creative endeavours has also been attributed to their own intellectual incompetence and their envy of poets' creative potency. Another important point is that the public's oscillation between admiration and loathing for poets not only attests to their (the public's) own hypocrisy but also lends *more* legitimacy to poets' claim to distinction. Finally, it is plausible to suggest that the acknowledgement of Bates's and Willoughby's genius by the University's teaching staff underlines the crucial role which academic settings, in fact and fiction, play in fostering intellectual accomplishments and fruitful dialogue.

Notes:

ⁱ Curiously enough, the unnamed provincial universities in both Bradbury's *Eating People Is Wrong* and Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) resemble the university where Bradbury studied, namely University College, Leicester, which later became the University of Leicester (Bradbury, "Afterword" 292; Lodge, "Afterword" 418).

ⁱⁱ *Angry Young Men* is an expression which refers to a 1950s' group of writers from working-class backgrounds, such as John Braine, John Osborne, Alain Sillitoe, Arnold Wesker, Stan Barstow, Colin Wilson, etc. Like Cobbett, Godwin, and Rousseau, most of them objected to the class system in England (Wilson xv), launched a satirical attack on the political system, and called for immediate change (xvi). Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) and Wilson's non-fiction book *The Outsider* (1956) typify this literary and cultural trend (xix).

ⁱⁱⁱ Striving to "resuscitate the dead art of poetry" (Hynes 151), a fictional poet called Timothy Coogan blames the rise of people's loathing for poets on Plato, who "[s]howed us [poets] to the border of his tinpot republic and told us to piss off. Unless, of course, we wrote him hymns to the gods and songs of praise to famous men. Otherwise, it's on yer bike, paddy. No poets need apply" (146).

^{iv} Painting a sympathetic portrait of a supposedly mad man, William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* emphasizes the indissoluble link between madness and reason. While sitting in a cave by the sea-side "once in the stillness of a summer's noon" and reading Cervantes's book about "the errant knight" (666; bk. 5, line 60), the speaker falls asleep and sees in his dream "an uncouth shape" (75) of "an Arab of the Bedouin tribes" (77) carrying a lance, a stone, and a shell. He is then flooded with happiness at the thought that this man will guide him through

the desert. As he presses the shell to his ear, at the Arab's request, he hears a foreign tongue predicting the destruction of humanity. He later fails to fall into step with the weird man as he (the speaker) hurries away "o'er the illimitable waste / With the fleet waters of a drowning world / In chase of him" (136-38). Immediately after waking from a restless sleep, he admits how greatly he admires this "Arab phantom" (142) and "semi-Quixote" figure and how he has fancied him a "living man" (143). He goes on:

A gentle dweller in the desert, crazed
By love and feeling, and internal thought
Protracted among endless solitudes;
Have shaped him wandering upon his quest!
Nor have I pitied him; but rather felt
Reverence was due to a being thus employed;
And thought that, in the blind and awful lair
Of such a madness, reason did lie couched. (667-668; 145-152)

^v By emphasizing the role of critical thinking, Bates may be said to pay homage to the Cartesian Cogito, "I think, therefore I am," which accentuates the inestimable value of reason. The French philosopher René Descartes, who coined this 'cogito', is credited with laying "the foundations for the dominance of reason in science and human affairs," with setting "the individual human being above church and state," and with inspiring such achievements as the rise of modern science, the rise of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution, the creation of the atomic bomb and the personal computer, and the deciphering of the brain (Watson 3).

^{vi} It is not uncommon for fictional academic characters, especially professors, to identify with their favorite poets. This is, for example, the case with David Lurie, the protagonist of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999). The middle-aged professor is particularly interested in the unrepentant poet's affair with his mistress Teresa Guiccioli, in which Lurie tries to find justification for his own affair with his student Melanie Isaacs. He even considers revisiting the forest between Ravenna and the Adriatic coastline in Italy, where Byron and his mistress once used to go riding. Lastly, he starts writing an opera about his favorite poet and "spends whole days in the grip of Byron" (185).

^{vii} John Williams's academic novel, *Stoner* (1965), offers a similar view of the American university. Here a character called Dave Masters refers to his university as "an asylum or – what do they call them now? – a rest home, for the infirm, the aged, the discontent, and the otherwise incompetent" (30). He also describes the eponymous character as a mere "dreamer, the madman in a madder world, our own Midwestern Don Quixote without his Sancho, gambolling under the blue sky" (31).

^{viii} This is an unmistakable allusion to the experience through which Amis's protagonist Jim Dixon goes in *Lucky Jim*. While spending the night in the house of Ned Welch, a senior professor with whom the final decision of renewing his

one-year contract rests, a drunken Dixon falls asleep and burns the bedclothes with his cigarette. To get away with his blunder, he cuts the edges of the burnt areas with a blade.

^{ix} Willoughby seems to have Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* at the back of his mind while delivering his lecture and to be alluding to the Romantic poet's oft-quoted depiction of poets as "the trumpets which sing to battle [...] the influence which moved not, but moves [...] the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (54).

^x Novelists' aspiration to change or improve the world is confirmed by a poet called Randolph Henry Ash in A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) in a letter he sends to another poet called Christabel LaMotte: "What makes me a Poet, and not a novelist – is to do with the singing of the Language itself. For the difference between poets and novelists is this – that the former write for the life of the language – and the latter write for the betterment of the world" (147).

^{xi} Lodge's biographical novel, *Author, Author* (2004), demonstrates that novelists may suffer the same fate as poets in this regard. For example, Henry James, who is underappreciated during his lifetime, achieves resounding and well-deserved posthumous success. The novel ends with a detailed sympathetic account of the modernist novelist's ultimate triumph over oblivion after prolonged endurance. Thus, his works have enjoyed worldwide circulation and acclaim, and he has, correspondingly, achieved literary immortality.

^{xii} The same theme figures prominently in Bradbury's *The History Man*, in which a teacher called Henry Beamish is presented as the most accident-prone of the characters. According to his colleague Howard Kirk, Beamish is not only "careless and clumsy and uncoordinated" but also "he has an instinct for disaster [...] If Henry came to two paths, one labelled safe and one labelled dangerous, he'd confuse the signs and take the dangerous one [...] If a branch were rotten and going to fall, it would wait until Henry passed under it. How does he get the message to the tree? There has to be a higher plotter, the God of accident" (115).

Works Cited

- Amis, Kingsley. *Lucky Jim*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1976.
- Beaugrande, Robert de. "Literary Theory and the Concept of Madness." *Dionysus in Literature: Essays on Literary Madness*. Ed. Branimir M. Rieger. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1994. 17-31.
- Bradbury, Malcolm. Afterword. *Eating People Is Wrong*. Chicago: Academy Chicago, 2005. 291-298.
- . *Eating People Is Wrong*. 1959. Chicago: Academy Chicago, 2005.
- . *The History Man*. London: Arrow, 1981.
- . *Stepping Westward*. Cambridge: Riverside, 1966.
- Burwick, Frederick. *Poetic Madness and the Romantic Imagination*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1996.
- Byatt, A.S. *Possession: A Romance*. New York: Vintage, 1991.

- Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. New York: Penguin, 2005.
- Dickinson, Emily. "Much Madness is Divinest Sense." *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. New York: Back Bay, 1964. 101.
- Elphick, Linda L. "A World without Real Deliverances": *Liberal Humanism in the Novels of Malcolm Bradbury*. Diss. Ball State U, 1988. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1988.
- Fullerty, Matthew H.G. *The British and American Academic Novel. The "Professorromane": The Comic Campus, the Tragic Self*. Diss. George Washington U, 2008. Ann Arbor: UMI, 2008.
- Greene, William C. "Plato's View of Poetry." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 29 (1918): 1-75. Web. 6 Sept. 2019.
- Hynes, James. *The Lecturer's Tale*. New York: Picador, 2002.
- Langhamer, Claire. "The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain." *Journal of Contemporary History* 40.2 (2005): 341-362. Web. 5 Mar. 2020.
- Lindauer, Martin S. "Are Creative Writers Mad? An Empirical Perspective." *Dionysus in Literature: Essays on Literary Madness*. Ed. Branimir M. Rieger. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1994. 33-48.
- Lodge, David. Afterword. *The Liar's Landscape: Collected Writing from a Storyteller's Life*. By Malcolm Bradbury. Ed. Dominic Bradbury. London: Picador, 2007. 413-427.
- . *Author, Author*. London: Penguin, 2004.
- Morace, Robert A. *The Dialogic Novels of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1989.
- Rieger, Branimir M. Introduction. *Dionysus in Literature: Essays on Literary Madness*. Ed. Branimir M. Rieger. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1994. 1-16.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "A Defense of Poetry." *A Defense of Poetry, and Other Essays*. Ed. J.M. Beach. Austin: West by Southwest, 2012. 31-54.
- Watson, Richard. *Cogito, Ergo Sum: The Life of René Descartes*. Boston: Godine, 2007.
- Widdowson, Peter. "The Anti-History Men: Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge." *Critical Quarterly* 26.4 (1984): 5-32. Web. 2 Feb. 2019.
- Wiegenstein, Steven C. *The Contemporary Academic Novel: A Study in Genre*. Diss. U of Missouri, Columbia, 1987.
- Williams, John. *Stoner*. New York: New York Review of Books, 2006.
- Wilson, Colin. *The Angry Years: The Rise and Fall of the Angry Young Men*. London: Robson, 2007.
- Wordsworth, William. "The Prelude; Or, Growth of a Poet's Mind." *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1994. 631-752.
- Youngquist, Paul. "Vision, Madness, Myth and William Blake." *Dionysus in Literature: Essays on Literary Madness*. Ed. Branimir M. Rieger. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1994.113-132.