

## Burning Bright: *Fahrenheit 451* as Symbolic Dystopia

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On *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

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*In his essay on fire symbolism in Fahrenheit 451, Donald Watt emphasizes the real possibility that modern culture may eradicate itself in nuclear war, an ironic notion when one considers that the technological tools developed to create a greater sense of freedom ushered in an alienated age of disillusionment and paranoia. As Watt says, Montag, the book's protagonist, desires "something enduring in man's existence—history, heritage, culture. Montag seeks, in essence, a definition and a preservation of the identity of human kind." To live in a world of destruction that is quickly erasing its past is to become an exile, one who seeks to keep "the flame of man's wisdom and creativity" alive. Montag and the other exiles try to preserve humanity's accumulated wisdom by memorizing books: our tools of self-understanding and self-preservation in an alienating age. Bradbury's tale suggests we have lost our humanity in the search for knowledge and technological advancement. Thus, his dystopian world both represents and decries modern alienation, itself a symptom of unbridled "progress" in which, by following blind ideals, "we can hardly escape from ourselves."*

"It was a pleasure to burn," begins Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. "It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and *changed*." In the decade following Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Bradbury's eye-catching opening for his dystopian novel assumes particular significance. America's nuclear climax to World War II signalled the start of a new age in which the awesome powers of technology, with its alarming dangers, would provoke fresh inquiries into the dimensions of man's potentiality and the scope of his brutality. *Fahrenheit 451* coincides in time and, to a degree, in temperament with Jackson Pollock's tense post-Hiroshima experiments with cobalt and cadmium red, as well as the aggressive primordial grotesques of Seymour Lipton's 1948 New York exhibition—*Moloch, Dissonance, Wild Earth Mother*. Montag's Nero complex is especially striking in the context of the looming threat of global ruin in the postwar era: "With the brass nozzle in his fists, with this great python spitting its venomous kerosene upon the world, the blood pounded in his head, and his hands were the hands of some amazing conductor playing all the symphonies of blazing and burning to bring down the tatters and charcoal ruins of history."<sup>1</sup> Montag's intense pleasure in burning somehow involves a terrible, sadomasochistic temptation to torch the globe, to blacken and disintegrate the human heritage. As Erich Fromm observes, destructiveness "is the outcome of un-lived life."<sup>2</sup> Modern man actively pursues destructiveness in order to compensate for a loss of responsibility for his future. Seeking escape from the new freedom he enjoys as a benefit of his new technology, man is all too likely to succumb to a Dr. Strangelove impulse to destroy himself with the very tools that gave him freedom. The opening paragraph of Bradbury's novel immediately evokes the consequences of unharnessed technology and contemporary man's contented refusal to acknowledge these consequences.

In short, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) raises the question posed by a number of contemporary anti-utopian novels. In one way or another, Huxley's *Ape and Essence* (1948), Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952), Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), Hartley's *Facial Justice* (1960), and Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) all address themselves to the issue of technology's impact on the destiny of man. In this sense, Mark R. Hillegas is right in labeling *Fahrenheit 451* "almost the archetypal anti-utopia of the new era in which we live."<sup>3</sup> Whether, what, and how to burn in Bradbury's book are the issues—as implicit to a grasp of our age as electricity—which occupy the center of the contemporary mind.

What is distinctive about *Fahrenheit 451* as a work of literature, then, is not what Bradbury says but how he says it. With Arthur C. Clarke, Bradbury is among the most poetic of science fiction writers. Bradbury's evocative, lyrical style charges *Fahrenheit 451* with a sense of mystery and connotative depth that go beyond the normal boundaries of dystopian fiction. Less charming, perhaps, than *The Martian Chronicles*, *Fahrenheit 451* is also less brittle. More to the point, in *Fahrenheit 451* Bradbury has created a pattern of symbols that richly convey the intricacy of his central theme. Involved in Bradbury's burning is the overwhelming problem of modern science: As man's shining inventive

intellect sheds more and more light on the truths of the universe, the increased knowledge he thereby acquires, if abused, can ever more easily fry his planet to a cinder. Burning as constructive energy, and burning as apocalyptic catastrophe, are the symbolic poles of Bradbury's novel. Ultimately, the book probes in symbolic terms the puzzling, divisive nature of man as a creative/destructive creature. *Fahrenheit 451* thus becomes a book which injects originality into a literary subgenre that can grow worn and hackneyed. It is the only major symbolic dystopia of our time.

The plot of *Fahrenheit 451* is simple enough. In Bradbury's future, Guy Montag is a fireman whose job it is to burn books and, accordingly, discourage the citizenry from thinking about anything except four-wall television. He meets a young woman whose curiosity and love of natural life stir dissatisfaction with his role in society. He begins to read books and to rebel against the facade of diversions used to seal the masses away from the realities of personal insecurity, officially condoned violence, and periodic nuclear war. He turns against the authorities in a rash and unpremeditated act of murder, flees their lethal hunting party, and escapes to the country. At the end of the book he joins a group of self-exiled book-lovers who hope to preserve the great works of the world despite the opposition of the masses and a nuclear war against an unspecified enemy.

In such bare detail, the novel seems unexciting, even a trifle inane. But Bradbury gives his story impact and imaginative focus by means of symbolic fire. Appropriately, fire is Montag's world, his reality. Bradbury's narrative portrays events as Montag sees them, and it is natural to Montag's way of seeing to regard his experiences in terms of fire. This is a happy and fruitful arrangement by Bradbury, for he is thereby able to fuse character development, setting, and theme into a whole. Bradbury's symbolic fire gives unity, as well as stimulating depth, to *Fahrenheit 451*.

[...]

Bradbury continues to play variations on burning in the final sequence of Part Two, where the two different, indeed opposite, kinds of flame flicker out at each other. Montag's return to the firehouse provokes Beatty to welcome him: "I hope you'll be staying with us, now that your fever is done and your sickness over" (p. 94). For Beatty, Montag's inner burning is the result of a fever. From Beatty's point of view, this burning means that a man has been unwell. But Montag wishes to nourish the burning; he doesn't want to return to normal. Beatty, however, enervates Montag with his "alcohol-flame stare" (p. 95) and a confusing barrage of conflicting quotations. Montag feels he cannot go on burning with the firemen, yet he is as powerless to answer Beatty's onslaught as he would be to stop the Salamander, the fire engine, that "gaseous dragon roaring to life" (p. 98). Montag is chagrined by the recollection of reading a book to "the chaff women in his parlor tonight" and realizes it was as senseless as "trying to put out fires with waterpistols" (p. 99). In his typically figurative way, Bradbury is telling us that Montag's psychic temperature cannot remotely approach the 451 degrees Fahrenheit which is the minimal level of power enjoyed by the firemen. On appearance, at any rate, and for the moment, Montag's rage for individual responsibility is puny by comparison with the firepower of Beatty's crew.

The ramifications of Bradbury's two fires become clearer in Part Three, "Burning Bright," for the sequence of events portrays Montag's movement from one to the other, from the gorging arson of his own house to the comforting campfire of Granger. In this section Montag's growth develops into a belief in what Blake symbolizes in his poem, "The Tiger":

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Blake's tiger is the generative force of the human imagination, the creative/destructive force which for him is the heart of man's complex nature. Montag becomes Bradbury's tiger in the forests of the night. He becomes a hunted outcast from an overly tame society by making good his violent escape from the restraining cage of the city. In his rebellion and flight, Montag *is* burning bright. Paradoxically, the flame of his suppressed human spirit spreads through his whole being after his horrible murder of Beatty. In burning Beatty, Montag shares the ambivalence of Blake's tiger, with its symbolic combination of wrath and beauty, its "fearful symmetry."

Bradbury introduces another allusion, one connected with his major symbol, when the fire engine pulls up before Montag's house at the opening of the third section and Beatty chides him: "Old Montag wanted to fly near the sun

and now that he's burnt his wings, he wonders why" (p. 100). Beatty's reference is to the mythological Icarus who soared into the sky with Dedalus, his father, on wax wings. But Icarus, carried away by the joy of flying, went too close to the sun, causing his wings to melt and making him fall. Clarisse, we recall, used to stay up nights waiting for the sunrise, and her face reminded Montag of a clock dial pointing toward a new sun. The sun, traditional symbol of truth and enlightenment, is antithetical to the dark night of ignorance that Beatty spreads across the land. The difference between Montag and Icarus—which, of course, Beatty will never live to see—is that Montag, though crippled by the Mechanical Hound, survives his own daring. Burning bright and living dangerously, Montag skirts the destruction Beatty plans for him and flees to the liberated periphery of society where pockets of truth endure undimmed.

At the beginning of Part Three, however, Beatty prevails. Montag once more enjoys the purging power of the fireman as he lays waste to his own house: "And as before, it was good to burn, he felt himself gush out in the fire, snatch, rend, rip in half with flame, and put away the senseless problem... Fire was best for everything!" Montag destroys his house piecemeal, surprised that his twin beds go up "with more heat and passion and light than he would have supposed them to contain." Bradbury's lyrical style conveys Montag's fascination with the splendor and the transforming power of the flames. His books "leapt and danced like roasted birds, their wings ablaze with red and yellow feathers." He gives the TV parlor "a gift of one huge bright yellow flower of burning" (p. 103). Beatty affects Montag strongly with his enticing argument for burning:

What is fire? It's a mystery. Scientists give us gobbledegook about friction and molecules. But they don't really know. Its real beauty is that it destroys responsibility and consequences. A problem gets too burdensome, then into the furnace with it. Now, Montag, you're a burden. And fire will lift you off my shoulders, clean, quick, sure; nothing to rot later. Anti-biotic, aesthetic, practical. (p. 102)

With a happy vengeance Montag levels the house where he has become a stranger to his own wife. He feels as though a fiery earthquake is razing his old life as Montag the fireman, burying his artificial societal self, while in his mind his other self is running, "leaving this dead soot-covered body to sway in front of another raving fool" (p. 104). Beatty cannot understand that at this point Montag is inwardly turning the flamethrower against its owners, that by burning his house he is deliberately destroying his niche in Beatty's system.

Only when Beatty threatens to trace Faber does Montag realize that the logical end to his action must be the torching of his chief. As Montag recognizes, the problem is, "we never burned *right* ..." (p. 105). The shrieking, melting, sizzling body of Beatty is Bradbury's horrible emblem of the end result of a civilization based on irresponsibility. Beatty has always told Montag not to face a problem, but to burn it. Montag considers: "Well, now I've done both" (p. 107). One may conclude that Montag fights fire with fire.

The remainder of the novel consists of Montag's escape from the domain of the Mechanical Hound, his immersion in the countryside, and his discovery of Granger's group of bookish outcasts. Montag is still very much in Beatty's world as he flees through the city. Stung by the Mechanical Hound, his leg is "like a chunk of burnt pinelogs he was carrying along as a penance for some obscure sin" (p. 107). As he runs his lungs feel "like burning brooms in his chest" (p. 112), his throat like "burnt rust" (p. 123). In his narrow escape from a police car, the lights from the highway lamps seem "as bright and revealing as the midday sun and just as hot" (p. 112), and the car bearing down on him is "a torch hurtling upon him" (p. 113). Montag wants to get out of the distressing heat of Beatty's city and into the cool seclusion of the country. Bradbury stresses that the real insanity of the firemen's world is the pleasure people take in random violence and destruction. Accordingly, just before he sets off to elude the Mechanical Hound, Montag tells Faber that in his death scene he would like to say just one or two words "that would sear all their faces and wake them up" (p. 120). He deeply regrets what he did to Beatty, transformed now into "nothing but a frame skeleton strung with asphalt tendons," but he feels he must remember, "burn them or they'll burn you.... Right now it's as simple as that" (p. 109). It is perhaps instructive to note that one of Montag's last acts in the city is to frame the fireman named Black.

Bradbury broadens Montag's perspective on burning when Montag wades into a river and floats downstream away from the harsh glare of the pursuing searchlights. The life-saving river, a symbol of life's journey and its baptismal vitality, carries Montag into the world of nature: "For the first time in a dozen years the stars were coming out above him, in great processions of wheeling fire. He saw a great juggernaut of stars form in the sky and threaten to roll over and crush him" (p. 124). The great fires of the cosmos have been concealed from Montag by the glittering arcs of the

city. Immersed in the river and free of the electric jitters of city life, Montag at last discovers leisure to think for himself. Beatty had said that one of fire's attractions for man is its semblance of perpetual motion. Montag, reflecting on the moon's light, becomes aware that the sun burns every day, burns time, burns away the years and people's lives. Before long, he knows "why he must never burn again in his life." He sees that "if *he* burnt things with the firemen and the sun burnt Time, that meant that *everything* burned!" But he feels that somehow conserving must balance consuming:

One of them had to stop burning. The sun wouldn't, certainly. So it looked as if it had to be Montag and the people he had worked with until a few short hours ago. Somewhere the saving and putting away had to begin again and someone had to do the saving and keeping, one way or another, in books, in records, in people's heads, any way at all so long as it was safe, free from moths, silver-fish, rust and dry-rot, and men with matches. The world was full of burning of all types and sizes. Now the guild of the asbestos-weaver must open shop very soon. (p. 125).

This key passage illuminates Montag's sensed need for some form of permanence to counteract the instability of destruction and change. Man should not capitulate to the tyranny of the nitrogen cycle, to the mutability characteristic of the physical, dynamic world. Montag's emerging desire is for something enduring in man's existence—history, heritage, culture. Montag seeks, in essence, a definition and a preservation of the identity of human kind.

Montag's recognition of another mode of burning, therefore, is at this stage eminently appropriate to Bradbury's theme. Enchanted by the warmth of the country, which is implicitly contrasted with the coldness of Mildred's bedroom, reminded of Clarisse by all the natural smells of the vegetation surrounding him—"a dry river smelling of hot cloves," "a smell like a cut potato from all the land," "a faint yellow odor like parsley on the table at home," "a smell like carnations from the yard [Clarisse's] next door" (p. 128)—Montag comes upon a campfire which strikes him as strange "because it meant a different thing to him" (p. 129). The difference is, he abruptly notices: "It was not burning, it was *warming*." Men hold their hands toward this warmth; they do not recoil in terror from it. Montag "hadn't known fire could look this way. He had never thought in his life that it could give as well as take. Even its smell was different." Montag feels like some forest creature "of fur and muzzle and hoof" attracted to the fire and "listening to the warm crackle of the flames." No longer a fierce tiger because he has escaped the mad jungle of Beatty's city, Montag is now like a shy, wondering animal of the woods. Free of the ceaseless noise of "the family," Montag feels the silence as well as the flame of the camp is different. The men around the fire have time to "look at the world and turn it over with the eyes, as if it were held to the center of the bonfire, a piece of steel these men were all shaping" (p. 130). Bradbury's figure is of utmost importance, since it recalls Faber's comment that all of civilization must be melted down and reshaped. Involved in Montag's sighting of Granger's group is the hope that the new kind of burning may bring about some possibility of a new kind of world.

The purpose of their group, Granger explains, is to preserve man's cultural heritage through the current dark age of his history. They are keepers of the flame of man's wisdom and creativity. They live in the forests of the night, harboring their gentle light against the annihilating torches of the city's firemen. But Montag, expecting "their faces to burn and glitter with the knowledge they carried, to glow as lanterns glow, with the light in them," is disappointed. There is no inner glow to their faces, only resignation. These men are now waiting for "the end of the party and the blowing out of the lamps." They know that nuclear war is imminent, that the joyride of Beatty's society is over, that the future of man is unsure: "They weren't at all certain that the things they carried in their heads might make every future dawn glow with a purer light . . ." (p. 138). Shortly, the bombs turn the city into what Granger describes as "a heap of baking powder" (p. 145), with Mildred and the others now literally buried under the volcano in which they have burned away their existences. The contrast between fire as holocaust and fire as hearth becomes pointed as Granger's men settle around a campfire to cook bacon. Fire, like technology and knowledge, is good or bad, depending on how one uses it.

At the close, Granger compares man with the Phoenix, the mythical bird that lives for hundreds of years in the desert, consumes itself in fire, and then rises reborn from its own ashes. It appears to Granger that man periodically does the same thing, with the difference that man knows what he is doing to himself: "We know all the damn silly things we've done for a thousand years and as long as we know that and always have it around where we can see it, some day we'll stop making the goddam funeral pyres and jumping in the middle of them." Granger hopes that, with more people each generation seeing man's record of folly, some day they will "remember so much that we'll build the biggest steamshovel in history and dig the biggest grave of all time and shove war in and cover it up" (p. 146).

Bradbury's mood at best is one of modified optimism, at worst, skeptical ambivalence. The question he raises but leaves unexplored is whether man can ever transcend the cycles of construction and devastation that have characterized his history. Granger's hope notwithstanding, one must remember the phoenix-disc is also one of the firemen's symbols.

Yet at the very end, Bradbury does inject the promise of at least a seasonal renewal, and perhaps more, for man. As the men put out their campfire, "the day was brightening all about them as if a pink lamp had been given more wick" (pp. 146-47). The candle figure is instructive, for it brings the reader all the way back to Clarisse and the kind, humane light she stands for. As they break camp the men, including Granger, fall in behind Montag, suggesting that he will become their leader. Montag, which means Monday in German, will conceivably light their way to a fresh beginning for man. As he wonders what he can say to make their trip upriver a little easier, Montag feels in his memory "the slow simmer" of words from the Bible. At first he remembers the initial verses from Chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes: "To everything there is a season. Yes. A time to break down, and a time to build up. Yes. A time to keep silence and a time to speak. Yes, all that." But The Preacher's words on the vanity of worldly things are not enough for Montag. He tries to remember something else. He digs into his memory for the passage from Revelations 22:2: "*And on either side of the river was there a tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month; And the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations*" (p. 147). This is the thought Montag wants to reserve for noon, the high point of the day, when they reach the city. Bradbury draws on the Biblical notion of a heavenly Jerusalem, the holy city where men will dwell with God after the apocalypse. Its appeal for Montag is the final stroke of Bradbury's symbolism. In the Bible the heavenly city needs no sun or moon to shine on it, for God's glory is what keeps it lit. The nations of the Earth will walk together by this light, and there will be no night there. The light Montag bears in Granger's remnant of humanity is the Biblical hope for peace and immutability for mankind. This light is the permanent flame Montag has discovered in answer to the devouring nuclear burning invited by Beatty's society and as a counterpoint to the restless Heraclitean fire of the visible cosmos.

From its opening portrait of Montag as a singed salamander, to its concluding allusion to the Bible's promise of undying light for man, *Fahrenheit 451* uses a rich body of symbols emanating from fire to shed a variety of illuminations on future and contemporary man.<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, the novel has its vulnerable spots. For one thing, Montag's opposition is not very formidable. Beatty is an articulate spokesman for the authorities, but he has little of the power to invoke terror that Orwell's O'Brien has. The Mechanical Hound is a striking and sinister gadget; but for all its silent stalking, it conveys considerably less real alarm than a pack of aroused bloodhounds. What is genuinely frightening is the specter of that witless mass of humanity in the background who feed on manhunts televised live and a gamey version of highway hit-and-run. For another thing, the reader may be unsettled by the vagueness with which Bradbury defines the conditions leading to the nuclear war. Admittedly, his point is that such a lemming-like society, by its very irresponsibility, will ultimately end in destruction. But the reader is justifiably irritated by the absence of any account of the country's political situation or of the international power structure. The firemen are merely enforcers of noninvolvement, not national policy-makers. The reader would like to know something more about the actual controllers of Beatty's occupation. Who, we wonder, is guarding the guardians?

Probably a greater problem than either of these is what some readers may view as a certain evasiveness on Bradbury's part. Presumably, the controversies and conflicts brought on by reading books have led to the system of mass ignorance promulgated by Beatty. Even with this system, though, man drifts into nuclear ruin. Bradbury glosses over the grim question raised by other dystopian novelists of his age: If man's individuality and knowledge bring him repeatedly to catastrophe, should not the one be circumscribed and the other forbidden? Such novels as *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Facial Justice* deal more realistically with this problem than does *Fahrenheit 451*. Although the religious light shining through Montag from the Bible is a fitting climax to the book's use of symbolism, Bradbury's novel does risk lapsing at the very close into a vague optimism.

Yet *Fahrenheit 451* remains a notable achievement in postwar dystopian fiction. Surely it deserves more than its recent dismissal by a noted science fiction critic as "an incoherent polemic against book-burning."<sup>5</sup> The book's weaknesses derive in part from that very symbolism in which its strength and originality are to be found. If *Fahrenheit 451* is vague in political detail, it is accordingly less topical and therefore more broadly applicable to the dilemmas of the twentieth century as a whole. Like the nineteenth-century French symbolists, Bradbury's purpose is to evoke a mood, not to name particulars. His connotative language is far more subtle, his novel far more of one

piece, than Huxley's rambling nightmare, *Ape and Essence*. Though the novel lacks the great impact of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Kingsley Amis is right when he says that *Fahrenheit 451* is "superior in conciseness and objectivity" to Orwell's anti-utopian novel.<sup>6</sup> If *Fahrenheit 451* poses no genuinely satisfying answers to the plight of postindustrial man, neither is the flight to the stars at the end of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* much of a solution. We can hardly escape from ourselves. By comparison with Bradbury's novel, *Facial Justice* is tepid and *A Clockwork Orange* overdone. On the whole, *Fahrenheit 451* comes out as a distinctive contribution to the speculative literature of our times, because in its multiple variations on its fundamental symbol, it demonstrates that dystopian fiction need not exclude the subtlety of poetry.

## Notes

1. Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1967, p. 3. Subsequent page references in the text are to this edition of the novel.
2. Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, New York: Avon Books, 1966; orig. publ. 1941, p. 207.
3. Mark R. Hillegas, *The Future as Nightmare: H.G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians*, New York: Oxford UP, 1967, p.158.
4. Clearly there are many additional examples one could cite of Bradbury's uses of fire and its associated figures. An open book falls into Montag's hands at 11 North Elm and the words on the page "blazed in his mind for the next minute as if stamped there with fiery steel" (p. 34). In his initial talk with Montag, "Beatty knocked his pipe into the palm of his pink hand, studied the ashes as if they were a symbol to be diagnosed and searched for meaning" (p. 54). The Mechanical Hound comes sniffing at Montag's door, bringing "the smell of blue electricity" (p. 64). Mildred argues with Montag that the books will get them into trouble: "She was beginning to shriek now, sitting there like a wax doll melting in its own heat" (p. 68). Montag links his stumbling into Mildred's empty pillbox in the dark with "kicking a buried mine" (p. 69). When Montag first visits his house, Faber asks: "What knocked the torch out of your hands?" (p. 73). In rebuking Montag for falling under the influence of Clarisse, Beatty tells him such do-gooders "rise like the midnight sun to sweat you in your bed" (p. 101). As Montag prepares to cross the highway during his escape, he thinks it incredible "how he felt his temperature could cause the whole immediate world to vibrate" (p. 111).
5. David N. Samuelson, "Limbo: The Great American Dystopia," *Extrapolation*, 19 (Dec. 1977), pp. 77–78.
6. Kingsley Amis, *New Maps of Hell*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960, p. 109.

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