

# Ray Bradbury and the “Tower of Babel,” or Why Great Literature is Good for Nothing

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This cry “art for art’s sake,” is really the best ideal such an age can attain to. It is an unconscious protest against materialism, against the demand that everything should have a use and practical value. It is further proof of the indestructibility of art and of the human soul, which can never be killed but only temporarily smothered.

Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911)

It is difficult to read *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) as anything other than a sci-fi dystopia filled with gadgets (cell phones, personal music players, 3D TVs) and empty engagement (soap operas, televised manhunts, advertisement-overloads, and alt-news), not only because most of the technological gismos are now New Millennial *de rigueur* but also because the novel dovetails so nicely with one of Bradbury’s earliest essays, penned in 1939, for his fanzine, *Futura Fantasia*, in which he has this to say about Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*: “Huxley conceived a future world in which Ford’s mechanistic contributions had become so emphatic as to deprive the people of all but an animal interest in sex.” Bradbury then speculates that Huxley wrote his book as a “searing satire” on “present-day tendencies.”<sup>1</sup> The idea that sci-fi, at least good sci-fi, has a thinly veiled social message, that it is always addressing the *now*, naturally suggests that *Fahrenheit 451*

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<sup>1</sup> Foo E Onya [pseudonym], “I’m Through!” *Futura Fantasia* (fall 1939): n.p. My Kindle edition shows this as location 97.

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has a utilitarian message for its readers. That message seems pellucid enough: reading imaginative literature is good for us and good for society. That reading, however, is not without its complications. I am not here referring to the authoritarian fire chief Beatty, who repeatedly argues that literature is best left to the “charcoal ruins of history.”<sup>2</sup> Rather, I find Bradbury querulously out of step with the old professoriate, the self-appointed custodians of literature, who, in the aftermath of nuclear war, have taken it upon themselves to save as many canonical texts as possible.

Given that their system relies entirely upon the memory skills of greybeards preserving a largely abandoned and unloved body of work, these walking bookmen seem surprisingly contented with the loss of content. Granger, who seems to be in charge of the project, admits that “a lot [of important works] will be lost that way, of course.”<sup>3</sup> We might wonder why someone just doesn’t recopy the texts before they are forgotten. Surely, the longer they remain committed solely to memory, the more likely it is that they will be corrupted or entirely forgotten. Granger’s main concern, however, is not the exactitudes of a specific text, so much as the caching of main or key concepts. As Granger explains, “It’ll [i.e., the memorized knowledge] come when we need it.”<sup>4</sup> Note that literature is here defined as worth preserving because it is *needed*.

There is just one problem with this: it goes against Bradbury’s own views on what literature does and what (if any) social values it promulgates. In his 1939 essay for *Futura Fantasia*, Bradbury argued that the value of any literary text is:

NOT, good lord, [to be] INSTRUCTIVE! [...] The amazing *naivette* [*sic*] of these readers who think their literature is superior merely because they think it teaches—this simple [*sic*] moves me to despair. The fact is, any literature whose function it is to teach, ceases to be literature as such; it becomes didactic literature, which is the color of another horse. When literature becomes obsessed by *ideas as such*, it is no longer literature.<sup>5</sup>

Years later, commenting on *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury said much the same thing: literature that only delivers a message is “pontificating, and that’s dangerous and it’s boring—you’re going to put people right to sleep.”<sup>6</sup>

I can almost glimpse the author cracking into a smile here. Sure, we might all agree that most writers are trying to keep their readers engaged. But if a didactic message is not the writerly intent, then what is the value of literature in *Fahrenheit 451*, and how does it correspond with Bradbury’s distinct literary blend of horror, human interest, Irish folklore, magic realism, and science fiction? Well, we can answer that in a roundabout way by first looking at what *Fahrenheit 451* has to say about the emergence of national (and now worldwide) media platforms and programming:

“Bigger the population, the more minorities. Don’t step on the toes of the dog-lovers, the cat-lovers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, Mormons, Baptists, Unitarians, Germans,

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<sup>2</sup> Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451: A Novel. 60th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 1. Pagination is derived from the Google Books digital version.

<sup>3</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 146.

<sup>4</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 144.

<sup>5</sup> Onya [pseudonym], Kindle loc. 60.

<sup>6</sup> Ray Bradbury, “*Fahrenheit 451*: Audio Introduction,” in *Fahrenheit 451*, 192-98; 195.

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Texans, Brooklynites, Irishmen, people from Oregon or Mexico. [...] The bigger your market, Montag, the less you handle controversy, remember that! All the minor minor minorities with their navels to be kept clean.”<sup>7</sup>

The point of the programming, with its heavy reliance upon interactive TV and sports, is not to celebrate and cultivate difference but, rather, to create a “group spirit” in which people “don’t have to think”.<sup>8</sup> The outcome is vapid consumerism, but there are some upsides: poverty, for example, is a thing of the past. In fact, aside from the firemen busy burning books or the citizen-soldiers that die in the wars (note, *die*, rather than *fight*; the latter seems too active, too engaged to describe a war in which soldiers simply wait for bombs to fall on them), work seems to be a thing of the past. Everyone is well housed; food is in plenty; everyone seems happy, except for those anachronistic and anarchistic book readers.

A still greater upside: if all differences are now frowned upon, then this society embraces egalitarianism. As Beatty explains: “We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against.”<sup>9</sup> That social goal, equality for all, seems laudable enough until we see what equality looks like in the flesh. When our protagonist Guy Montag reads aloud Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” a war poem filled with dark images and poetic devices, TV-addled Ann Bowles is infuriated:

“I’ve always said, poetry and tears, poetry and suicide and crying and awful feelings, poetry and sickness; *all* that mush! Now I’ve had it proved to me. You’re nasty, Mr. Montag, you’re *nasty*! [...] Silly words, silly words, silly awful hurting words [...] Why *do* people want to hurt people? Not enough hurt in the world, you got to tease people with stuff like that!”<sup>10</sup>

Reading poetry is hard and unpleasant. Besides, as his fire chief, the aforementioned Beatty, reminds Montag, it’s not like most people *feel* that they are missing anything: “People are having *fun*”<sup>11</sup> and, so long as they are, forget liberty, equality, fraternity; *vive la indifference*.

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Despite the prosperity and tranquility, there remains a utopian hitch: a shocking indifference to human life. While Montag is evading the police, he is almost mowed down by joyriding teenagers intent on killing time and pedestrians. Still more disturbing is the conversation Montag has with his wife, Mildred, and her friends, the aforementioned Ann Bowles and Mrs. Clara Phelps. War has been declared, and Mr. Bowles and Mr. Phelps have been called up for military duty. This prompts Mildred to invite Ann and Clara over for the evening. They don’t watch the news; instead,

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<sup>7</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 55.

<sup>9</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 55-6.

<sup>10</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 97.

<sup>11</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 83.

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they giggle at the song and dance of someone called the “White Clown”. In times of war, distractions are welcome; they may even be healthy. In ancient Rome, for example, soldiers’ wives often got together to sew, a social means of supporting each other while not obsessing about war news and rumor.<sup>12</sup> But in *Fahrenheit 451* no one misses or worries about anyone. Mrs. Bowles and Mrs. Phelps barely remember their husbands and seem uninterested in discussing them. In fact, despite their frequent visits to each other’s homes, these women barely know anything about each other. When Montag suggests that they meaningfully “talk,” the women stare and are confused. Clearly, Montag has crossed some sort of line. He nonetheless continues to press the issue: “How’re your children, Mrs. Phelps?” The reply is both upbeat and chilling: “I put up with them when they come home three days a month; it’s not bad at all. You heave them into the ‘parlor’ [i.e., the 3D TV room] and turn the switch. It’s like washing clothes; stuff laundry in and slam the lid.” That seems like a healthy relationship compared to that of her friend and neighbor Mrs. Bowles, who titters that her kids would “just as soon kick as kiss me. Thank God, I can kick back!”<sup>13</sup> Bad enough that Mrs. Phelps is an absent parent; what is far worse is that no one has heretofore thought to ask Mrs. Phelps about her own life or the lives she has brought into this world. Indeed, even Mrs. Phelps sees no value in discussing offspring or the real possibility that she will be a widow by evening. Montag is so appalled that he throws her out:

“Go home and think of your first husband divorced and your second husband killed in a jet and your third husband blowing his brains out, go home and think of the dozen abortions you’ve had, go home and think of that and your damn Caesarean sections, too, and your children who hate your guts! Go home and think how it all happened and what did you ever do to stop it? Go home, go home! [...] Before I knock you down and kick you out the door!”<sup>14</sup>

Not that Montag is any better! He can’t recall (at least initially) where he met his wife; nor does he experience much tribulation when she leaves him or reports him to the police. On a Monday, he is happily married; on a Tuesday, his wife abandons him; the next day, she is incinerated by a nuclear bomb, and Montag feels nothing.

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This emptiness is considered a civic virtue. What the regime objects to is not reading but *feeling*: despite books being outlawed for generations, everyone still knows *how* to read, so it must be a skill taught in schools. When Montag comes into the TV room holding a book, no one screams in horror. Instead, Mrs. Bowles and Mrs. Phelps assume that Montag is reading a technical manual. So, reading for facts or utility is still part of this culture. Feelings and the discussion of feelings, however, are taboo. When Montag asks his wife whether she feels emotionally alive watching TV,

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<sup>12</sup> As famously depicted in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*; the Oxford Shakespeare editor Francis N. Connor traces the practice to Homer’s *Odyssey*. See *Coriolanus, The New Oxford Shakespeare*. Gen. Eds. Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus, Gabriel Egan (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 1.3.73n. Likely Connor has in mind: “Odysseus, your master, has been long gone. Go back and sit beside the queen and comfort her. Spin yarn or comb the wool.” See Homer, *The Odyssey* (BK18.312-315), trans. Emily R. Wilson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 92-93.

<sup>14</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 98.

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she replies with a soulless rebuke: "If you see that dog outside," said Mildred, "give him a kick for me."<sup>15</sup>

Mildred is not here referring to a puppy or even an actual canine; she's talking about a mechanical dog; an ersatz companion in an equally ersatz world; indeed, the need to replace emotion with sentiment, to cheapen life itself, is at the mechanical heart of this world. Its vascular transmission brings hooliganism full circle. It's not just teenagers who are out joyriding and road-killing. As Mrs. Montag explains: "I like to drive fast when I feel that way. You get it up around ninety-five and you feel wonderful. Sometimes I drive all night and come back and you don't know it. It's fun out in the country. You hit rabbits, sometimes you hit dogs."<sup>16</sup>

As Beatty explains, the ubiquity of violence, teenagers and adults killing time and each other, does serve society (i.e., the stability of the civilization) insofar as it makes everyone equally anonymous and unimportant. When a wife or husband or child disappears, that's not a problem, as no one remembers or values anyone:

"Funerals are unhappy and pagan? Eliminate them, too. Five minutes after a person is dead he's on his way to the Big Flue, the Incinerators serviced by helicopters all over the country. Ten minutes after death a man's a speck of black dust. Let's not quibble over individuals with memoriams. Forget them. Burn all, burn everything."<sup>17</sup>

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Bradbury famously said that he identified with Faber, the old and tepidly courageous college professor.<sup>18</sup> Far be it from me to doubt the author, but it is my contention that Guy Montag is a better mouthpiece for Bradbury's own views on literature. Montag wants a world in which ideas are debated, emotions explored, and differences cultivated and celebrated; but choice and customization do not cohere with the cost-conscious strictures of mass production. It is cheaper and easier to get everyone to wear the same clothes, share the same opinions, and repeat the same slogans. In the event that a neighbor commits suicide or is arrested or dies in a war, society carries on, order carries on; what does not carry on is humanity.

That might seem cold-blooded and calculated, but in this novel about the comparative power of books and bombs, it is difficult to see how reading would have altered the course of Montag's world. Literature may have many uses, but when negotiating peace, the threat of military force or sanctions is likely more impactful than a quotation from Dickens or Kafka. Where *Fahrenheit 451* does suggest that literature can be effective is in small social gatherings. Montag, for example, is fascinated when Clarisse fondly recalls how her family used to sit around the veranda just talking and appreciating each other.

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<sup>15</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 73.

<sup>16</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 61.

<sup>17</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 57. Harold Bloom, in his short review of *Fahrenheit 451*, suggests that new media has fostered a generation of numbskulls: "Bradbury, a half century ago, had the foresight to see that the age of the Screen (movie, TV, computer) could destroy reading. If you cannot read Shakespeare and his peers, then you will forfeit memory, and if you cannot remember, then you will not be able to think." See his Introduction to *Fahrenheit 451*, 234-235; 235.

<sup>18</sup> Bradbury, "Fahrenheit 451: Audio Introduction," 195-96.

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Montag cannot help but compare her summery memory to his wintry reality: “Nobody listens any more. I can’t talk to the walls because they’re yelling at *me*. I can’t talk to my wife; she listens to the *walls*. I just want someone to hear what I have to say. And maybe if I talk long enough, it’ll make sense. [...] So I thought books might help.” Faber, Montag’s new friend, a former English professor, disagrees: “Books were only one type of receptacle where we stored a lot of things we were afraid we might forget. There is nothing magical in them, at all”; “It’s not books you need, it’s some of the things that once were in books.” He’s talking about the quality of experiences, rather than the mediums of their expression. Faber thinks that even some TV shows might be legitimate art, so long as they exhibit “infinite detail and awareness.” As he goes on to explain, the real “magic” is how a book reader or TV viewer uniquely stitches the “patches of the universe together into one garment for us.”<sup>19</sup>

That phrase “for us” is frankly unfortunate and misleading. (Even Homer nodded.) Art does not create a one-size fits all garment; rather it allows us to create a garment that fits each of us. The mind spindles yarns to order. And it is this practice of individuality, of distinction, of difference that threatens the cohesion of society and, thus, the state. As Beatty points out, literary books must be destroyed because they generate unpredictable thoughts and emotional reactions. It is, therefore, the interpretation of books (and, relatedly, the potential philosophical disagreements such interpretations entail) that is the real threat. Instead of churning out docile and compliant consumers, books generate unique and, thus, unrelatable viewpoints, which, in turn, threaten unity and cooperation: “None of those books agree with each other. You’ve been locked up here for years with a regular damned Tower of Babel.”<sup>20</sup> Worse, left to their own devices, even the most highly skilled readers (humanities professors) will see their positions as inimitable and therefore unimpeachable. In sum, talk among the highly opinionated is always a prelude to civil war: “one professor calling another an idiot, one philosopher screaming down another’s gullet. All of them running about, putting out the stars and extinguishing the sun.” Without consensus, anarchy is inevitable. Warns Beatty, without books, you are happy, just like everyone else; with books, “You come away lost.”<sup>21</sup>

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Reading, we can all recognize, is as individual as our DNA, likely more so, since inheriting your father’s male pattern baldness is inevitable; loving the books your father loves is not. And, as we all acknowledge, while we can discuss our different opinions (something the Beattys of the world suspect is dangerous), the act of reading itself is private, solitary, and antisocial. So, we have, on the one hand, Beatty’s view that an antisocial act breeds yet more antisocial acts (personalization leads to differing interpretation or speculation), and, on the other hand, Montag’s view that reading leads to discussion, which, in turn, broadens and strengthens social bonds.

Who is right? Well, Montag believes that a bunch of antisocial individuals will somehow foster greater stability through an activity that disengages from reality and stirs personal opinion. The opposing view, Beatty’s, is that the development of an inner self will inevitably transform people into individualists, or worse, psychotics walking around mumbling poetry to themselves. No wonder Beatty and so many others embrace business as usual: “If you don’t want a man

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<sup>19</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 78-79.

<sup>20</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 35.

<sup>21</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 59.

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unhappy politically, don't give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none.”<sup>22</sup>

Literature is here aligned with freedom and is, thus, a thorn in the side of totalitarian regimes. It is here that we might pick up on Bradbury's admiration for Arthur Koestler's novel, *Darkness at Noon* (1940), in which we glimpse how the Soviets dealt with their own freethinking intelligentsia. In the words of Jonathan R. Eller: “Koestler's cautionary tale soon inspired a series of writing experiments about books—and about those who would burn them. But nine years would pass before the reading public first learned the temperature at which book paper combusts.”<sup>23</sup>

All this admitted, *Darkness at Noon* suffers from exactly the same fault Bradbury found with *Brave New World*: it is not a world of fiction; it is, rather, a work attempting to convey a political message. As such, Koestler may agree with Granger and his old professor friends, shuffling in a forest of other men's thoughts, intent on preserving ideas but surprisingly disinterested in deepening experiences. So intent are they on remembering *what* they are doing, they have forgotten *why* they are doing it.

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I want to return to Faber's idea that even TV has just as much artistic pluck, is just as ripe for fruitful conversation, as any good book. In an era in which we read books on smartphones, the primacy of one medium over another seems old-fashioned. But even within the world of *Fahrenheit 451*, the preservation of books strikes me as archaic. Part of the problem here is the remediation of novels into oral storytelling.<sup>24</sup> That just feels odd (at least to me) because it brings to mind Mildred's interactions with her TV-monitor “family.” Every week, she receives a script in the mail and memorizes her dialogue, then recites those lines on live TV with others doing the same. So, Mildred's biggest thrill is being an unpaid actor in an online, scripted show; that said, she is also honing the skills of memorization, social interaction, and body language. In sum, the activity is not just immersive; it is also pointedly social, a harbinger of our own interactive online gaming platforms.

Is “family” time (i.e., participating in reality TV) really a negation? Montag (and Bradbury?) argues that this sort of “family” is inauthentic. Yet sixty-nine years on from the book's publication, my gut tells me otherwise. After all, this is not the first time we have undergone a global shift in entertainment or modes of storytelling. About 2,500 years ago, before the internet, TV, radio, and even books, mankind placed its most valued stories in the hands of bards.<sup>25</sup> Here in the West, Homer, the bard who recited the story of the Trojan War, has taken on near-mythological

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<sup>22</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 58.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan R. Eller, “The Story of *Fahrenheit 451*,” in *Fahrenheit 451*, 167-87; 168.

<sup>24</sup> My qualm is not shared by Susan Spencer, who, while noting the inaccuracies of the bardic tradition, writes that “Bradbury makes it clear that they will write everything down as soon as possible and will try to reconstruct a fully literate society again. This should not take long, and is certainly desirable. The concept of text is a progressive thing, not a cyclical, and as long as any remnants remain there is always a base, however small, on which to build a better and wiser world.” See her “The Post-Apocalyptic Library: Oral and Literate Culture in *Fahrenheit 451* and *A Canticle for Leibowitz*,” *Extrapolation* 32.4 (1991): 331-42; 335.

<sup>25</sup> G.S. Kirk writes that the Homeric poems find their parallels in Celtic, Norse, Russian and Slav heroic epics, Teutonic poems, and modern Yugoslavian poetry. See his chapter, “The Oral Epic” in *Homer and the Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 1-32; 2-4 and 19-26.

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proportions. According to legend, Homer was just a regular person until one day he was touched by the gods. He would be henceforth blind, but, in return, the gods gave him “second sight,” the ability to recite the stories of the ages, each composed by the heavenly Muses.<sup>26</sup> It took three days, perhaps more, to recite the *Iliad*, likely just as long to recite its companion piece the *Odyssey*, a feat that no doubt led many to believe that Homer was heaven-inspired. But Homer is merely a man whose name has survived. We may also assume that at the height of Greece’s Hellenic civilization, this same Homer was merely one of many accomplished bards, men who traveled up, down, and around the Mediterranean, reciting the stories that both created and sustained Grecian values. Schools must have existed wherein young men, still more likely mere boys, were trained in the art of storytelling. Perhaps bardic second sight is merely a metaphor for insight; perhaps, ritual blinding was part of a graduation ceremony. What is beyond dispute is that in a society that so highly valued bards, in a civilization that valorized and apotheosized this army of the imagination, no one mourned its passing. Who was the last Homeric bard? When did he die? Where was he buried? How was his passing commemorated? Short answers: no one knows who he was, when he died, or where he was buried, obviously because no one cared. There was no mourning, no dirge composed to this man and his way of life. (As Beatty might say, Out with the old; in with the new.) Over two millennia later, Sir Walter Scott celebrated the last of the Scottish bards in his poem, “Lay of the Last Minstrel” (1805). Curiously, the poem retreats from its formal literariness into an imagined reality in which we don’t *read* so much as *hear* what the bard recited. As Scott explains, “the Poem was put into the mouth of an ancient Minstrel, the last of the race [...] when most of the personages actually flourished.”<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, Scott gives us a synopsis of the bard’s retirement. He lies in a “simple hut... [with a] little garden hedged with green.”<sup>28</sup> Giving this Scottish bard a normative end of shuffleboard and bingo is a bit disappointing, but Montag might learn a thing or two here: dedicating your life to memorizing and reciting old stories is intrinsically nostalgic—history fading to fiction; fiction fading, with the death of the last bard, to black. In any case, who’s got three consecutive days and nights to kill on an old story about some forgotten face, a thousand ships, and a wooden horse? What Greece (and the West in general) required was a way of recording these stories so that they could be, in full or in snippet, accessed anytime, anywhere—hence, the formation of the alphabet and (eventually) the full-fledged book industry. (I also note that books and written records are handy for other things: commercial transactions, wills, treaties, recipes, etc.)

The point here is that fiction, like life, or, more properly, the imaginative life, finds a way. Tech is the driving force of that change. It always has been. The pencil, after all, is a force of technology. If more recent tech seems alien to bibliophiles, it is because it is destabilizing. All the mom-and-pop bookstores are closing; bookseller Borders, with its 511 superstores, is no more.

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<sup>26</sup> Emily R. Wilson refers to Hesiod’s Homeric Hymn, which instructs the girls who worship Apollo on Delos to remember the poet who composed the present song: “Girls, who is to you/ the sweetest of all singers? Which one gives you/most pleasure?” All of you must answer him, /“He is a blind man and he makes his home/in rocky Chios; all his songs will be/the best forever” (Introduction, *The Odyssey* [New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018], 74). In the *Odyssey* itself, Homer introduces a blind bard, Demodocus, who is described thus: “[The] Gods inspire him, so any song he chooses to perform is wonderful to hear” (BK8.44-46).

<sup>27</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1888), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Scott, *The Poetical Works*, 41.



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Barnes & Noble is a tottering giant.<sup>29</sup> Yet, fiction is alive and well; the printed page, however, is a doomed Homeric dodo. And like the last bard, there is nothing here to mourn. It is simply the way of things.

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What *Fahrenheit 451* is championing becomes curiouser and curiouser. It wants to preserve the written word by converting it into a pre-literary form. But Bradbury is clear that oral culture is a danger to the written word because it intrudes on introspection. It's also an inefficient and ineffective way of storing information. Even while concentrating on the old written word, Montag is overwhelmed by a barrage of commercial jingles:

[...] no phrase must escape me, each line must be memorized. I will myself to do it.  
He clenched the book in his fists.  
Trumpets blared.  
“Denham’s Dentifrice.”  
Shut up, thought Montag. Consider the lilies of the field.  
“Denham’s Dentifrice.”  
They toil not—  
“Denham’s—”  
Consider the lilies of the field, shut up, shut up.<sup>30</sup>

Even when there is no interference, the texts committed to memory betray their bardic hosts. Beatty, the apostate book collector, sums up the problem. He’s read many books; he just hasn’t remembered them very accurately. He refers to Shakespeare’s play *All’s Well that End’s Well* as “All’s well that is well in the end.”<sup>31</sup> Then again, as Bradbury learned firsthand, books have accidentals and expurgations that call into question their own accuracy and legitimacy. Without the author’s approval, *Fahrenheit 451*, a book championing the freedom of the written word, was censored for high school readers:

[...] some cubby-hole editors at Ballantine Books, fearful of contaminating the young, had, bit by bit, censored some seventy-five separate sections from the novel. Students reading the novel, which, after all, deals with censorship and book-burning in the future, wrote to tell me of this exquisite irony.<sup>32</sup>

While Bradbury was outraged (and alive to the irony), he was also, as I will discuss, in favor of some forms of censorship. From the point of view of Bradbury, Granger, and the professoriate, so long as the forest is not clear cut, pruning a few lines is no big deal.

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<sup>29</sup> On Borders see Wikipedia on its history and demise; as well as Lynn Neary’s NPR article, “Borders In Bankruptcy. Is Your Bookstore Next?” (February 16, 2011; <https://www.npr.org/2011/02/16/133808429/borders-in-bankruptcy-is-your-bookstore-next>); as for Barnes & Noble, see John Kotter’s *Forbes* article, “Will Barnes & Noble’s Next Chapter Be Its Last?” (February 9, 2021; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnkotter/2021/02/09/will-barnes--nobles-next-chapter-be-its-last/?sh=23400d7d23d3>).

<sup>30</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 74-75.

<sup>31</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 104.

<sup>32</sup> Bradbury, “Coda,” *Fahrenheit 451*, 209-21; 210.

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If the accuracy of the text isn't paramount, then the word isn't inviolate. Yet again, we seem to be confronting the possibility that we are fetishizing the printed text. That said, it is my belief that the act of sitting and silently reading, the related cloistered library, and the scolding *shush* of the librarian, all promote the proper conditions for an aesthetic experience unique to narrative works of literature.

What I am aiming at here will, at least to some, seem to miss the mark because of what looks to be a grand exception: Shakespeare (a playwright)—though Shakespeare may well be the exception that proves the rule: Charles Lamb, for example, considered Shakespeare to be a *de facto* novelist, an armchair playwright, a playwright of the mind. His dialogues might allow his characters to speak, but it is his soliloquies that reveal their inner thoughts; functionally, they are a form of narration by which we learn more about, say, Hamlet than anyone else in his world:

But in all the best dramas, and in Shakespeare above all, how obvious it is, that the form of *speaking*, whether it be in soliloquy or dialogue, is only a medium, and often a highly artificial one, for putting the reader or spectator into possession of that knowledge of the inner structure and workings of mind in a character, which he could otherwise never have arrived at *in that form of composition* by any gift short of intuition. We do here as we do with novels.<sup>33</sup>

Given our access to Hamlet's thoughts, is it too odd to imagine that he confides in us, or that we understand him as does no other in Elsinore? As Harold Bloom put it: "Can you lavish what must be all your intelligence upon Hamlet, and not somehow be Hamlet?"<sup>34</sup> The same is true for any other great literary text. The more we read, the more we come to understand the world as others see it. In this regard, Montag is a natural narratologist. Watching his wife perform in the "family" filming, he can't help but try to make sense of the inner lives of these talking heads: "But what are they mad about? Who *are* these people? Who's that man and who's that woman? Are they husband and wife, are they divorced, engaged, what? Good God, *nothing's* connected up."<sup>35</sup>

Montag won't get any answers by watching more bad TV because what interests him (whether he knows the term or not) is narrative. "I am hungry," seems rather straightforward. Saying, "he was hungry," however, demands that we live the life of another. That skill is further enhanced through meaningful discussions. Clarisse, for example, explains that her family used to spend their evenings on the veranda talking—*not bantering* but, rather, listening, debating, sharing. They had much to discuss: they were subversive book readers. But the takeaway is not that Clarisse is interested in starting a book club, but, rather, that Clarisse, a lifelong reader, feels that she knows people because, in the act of reading, she has walked in other people's shoes. Later in the novel, Montag has the same empathic insight:

Here was the single familiar thing, the magic charm he might need a little while, to touch, to feel beneath his feet, as he moved on into the bramble bushes and the lakes of smelling and feeling and touching, among the whispers and the blowing down of leaves.

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<sup>33</sup> Charles Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare" (1811), *The Complete Works of Charles Lamb in Prose and Verse* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1901), 253-65; 255.

<sup>34</sup> Harold Bloom, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 29.

<sup>35</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 43.

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He walked on the track.

And he was surprised to learn how certain he suddenly was of a single fact he could not prove.

Once, long ago, *Clarisse had walked here, where he was walking now* [emphasis added].<sup>36</sup>

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Earlier in the essay, I wrote that the state is interested in managing and suppressing emotions or feelings. But cognition, thoughts that give rise to feelings or stir individuality, are also on the chopping block. Rene Descartes once wrote, “I think therefore I am.” To Descartes, cognition, reason itself, was a personal matter, not a function of the state. In *Fahrenheit 451*, it is the state that does all the thinking; as such, it is only the state that can claim the status *cogito ergo sum*. Most of the people in *Fahrenheit 451* don’t think and, therefore, have no (and need no) voice. Of course, totalitarian governments are nothing new, and the state’s attempt to control individuals does not entail success. People resist. As Montag explains, if he is going to be a rebel, it seems pointless to become a drone: “I don’t want to change sides and just be *told* what to do. There’s no reason to change if I do that.”<sup>37</sup> In response, the government redefines all resistance as resistance to reason: Montag is a “Fugitive in [the] city” because he has committed “crimes against the State.”<sup>38</sup> He has done worse than hide his thoughts; he has revealed that he has them. As such, he reclaims his thinking, his “am-ness.” That act makes him an enemy of the people. We often say that we shouldn’t judge a book by its cover. Well, if Montag is a fugitive, it is because his cover is blown.

But let’s play devil’s advocate here. The notion that books can put bad (socially inappropriate) thoughts into your head is obvious. Reading a novel or a poem has an impact on each of us. We might in principle agree that the writer’s role is not to tell us what to think. To some, however, the approach (or excuse) that writers are not responsible for what others do with their words seems, well... *irresponsible*. After all, we accept that some images and ideas are age appropriate. We further accept that experience is related to our psychological development and well-being and, as such, we are all concerned with the possible dangers of alternative realities—for example, the addictive properties of pornography, snuff films, and other dark and dangerous fantasies. Preserving Milton or Shakespeare is not the same as preserving the *Anarchist’s Cookbook* and a copy of *Mein Kampf*. It, therefore, follows that we have to exercise personal, if not governmentally legislated, censorship.

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As I suggested earlier, the world of *Fahrenheit 451* is one in which thought itself is governmentally sanctioned and regulated. While some might read the novel’s final pages, in which nuclear war all but destroys humanity, as a failure of the ruling order, there is, nonetheless, an irony. If the logic of burning books is to stop people from thinking, then the most expedient means to that end is to burn people, not books. After all, dead people don’t think *anything* . . . Or do they? Dead authors,

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<sup>36</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 138.

<sup>37</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 88.

<sup>38</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 117.

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at least in Bradbury's mind, are very much alive, even procreative: "the library was my nesting place, it was my birthing place, it was my growing place."<sup>39</sup> The notion that literary works somehow birthed Bradbury is something he was extraordinarily proud to own: Bradbury referred to Poe as "My Papa";<sup>40</sup> in a 1972 interview, Bradbury confessed that he thinks of himself as "the bastard son of Shakespeare."<sup>41</sup>

If Poe was his "Papa," then Shakespeare was, presumably, his mother. Of course, Bradbury was being metaphorical. Nonetheless, his attempts to share with us what goes on in his mind suggests more than just a nice turn of phrase. The author's literary bloodlines are presented as active and *interactive*:

I have [...] taken night trains with my favorite authors across the continental wilderness, staying up all night gambling and drinking, drinking and chatting. I warned Melville, in one poem, to stay away from land (it never was his stuff!) and turned Bernard Shaw into a robot, so as to conveniently stow him aboard a rocket and wake him on the long journey to Alpha Centauri to hear his Prefaces piped off his tongue and into my delighted ear.<sup>42</sup>

We might be tempted to dismiss this idea as seemingly more lyrical than earnest, but it is bulwarked by sundry interviews and essays. In his essay, "My Demons, Not Afraid of Happiness," Shakespeare's spirit speaks directly to the author by citing or alluding to passages from *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*: "If you must write of assassinations, rapes, and Ophelia suicides, speak the speech, I pray thee [...]. Remember how glad Iago was to think on Othello's fall. How, with smiles, Hamlet prepared his uncle's death";<sup>43</sup> in "Zen in the Art of Writing," Bradbury argues that writing is a dialogue between your "subconscious [and] what Wordsworth called 'a wise passiveness';"<sup>44</sup> in his essay, "A Feasting of Thoughts, A Banqueting of Words," Bradbury has extended conversations with Plato, Aristotle, and Emily Dickinson;<sup>45</sup> in his essay "Who Owns Wants What and Which and Why," Bradbury engages in conversations with Shaw and Shakespeare, and suggests that his writing is what "I and others have helped to make."<sup>46</sup> Likewise,

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<sup>39</sup> Bradbury, "Fahrenheit 451: Audio Introduction," 196.

<sup>40</sup> On Poe parentage, see Phil Nichols' blog: <http://bradburymedia.blogspot.com/2014/03/bradbury-doodles.html>

<sup>41</sup> Arnold R. Kunert, "Ray Bradbury: On Hitchcock and Other Magic of the Screen" (1972), rpt. in *Conversations with Ray Bradbury*, ed. Steven L. Aggelis (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 54-79; 59.

<sup>42</sup> Ray Bradbury, "Investing Dimes: Fahrenheit 451," in *Fahrenheit 451*, 200-5; 201.

<sup>43</sup> Ray Bradbury, "My Demons, Not Afraid of Happiness," in *Bradbury Speaks: Too Soon from the Cave, Too Far from the Stars* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005; ppbk 2006), 3-5; 5.

<sup>44</sup> Ray Bradbury, "Zen in the Art of Writing" in *Zen in the Art of Writing* (Santa Barbara, CA: Joshua Odell Editions, 1996), 139-53; 152.

<sup>45</sup> Ray Bradbury, "A Feasting of Thoughts, A Banqueting of Words" (1973), rpt. *Yestermorrow: Obvious Answers to Impossible Futures* (Santa Barbara: Joshua Odell Editions/Capa Press, 1991), 197-213.

<sup>46</sup> Ray Bradbury, "Who Owns Wants What and Which and Why" (1990), rpt. in *Yestermorrow*, 49-57; 56. Another example: while he was working on the film *Moby Dick* (1956), Bradbury met Bernard Berenson, who suggested a *Fahrenheit 451* sequel. According to Bradbury, Berenson said:

You could do a sequel to your novel, in which the Book People, at later date and time, when the Burners vanish and the world is safe from fire—when the Book People are called in to recite their memorized books and remember them all wrong.... *War and Peace* told by an idiot. *Crime and Punishment* remembered by a fool. Machiavelli's *The Prince* mouthed by a numskull. *Moby Dick* recited by an alcoholic cripple. Oh, the variations are many! You could do a chapter on each book and

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in his poem “What I Do Is Me—For That I Came,” Bradbury writes directly to Gerald Manley Hopkins, whom he considers to be a friend and a collaborator: “What we do is *us*.”<sup>47</sup> He returns to this idea in a 1998 interview: “You are spectrum gathering all the light of experience [he details “experience” by listing his favorite authors, among them, Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Washington Irving, Rudyard Kipling] and in turn throwing your spectrum onto the page.”<sup>48</sup> In sum, Bradbury suggests that writers and their characters don’t tell us what to do; rather, it is we who ultimately befriend our books, befriend our authors, and then invite them to join us on lifelong journeys. We inevitably build a relationship with people who are not really there, and in many ways value them more highly than many of the people we encounter in “real” life. Unsurprisingly, Bradbury’s stories are often peopled with his favorite authors and literary characters. In “Any Friend of Nicholas Nickleby’s is a Friend of Mine,” Bradbury presents us with Mr. Wyneski, who also calls himself Charles Dickens, and offers us the following explanation of the literary experience:

“[...] how I devoured Tolstoy, drank Dostoevsky, feasted in De Maupassant, had wine and chicken picnics with Flaubert and Molière. [...] All of Dickens, Hardy, Austen, Poe, Hawthorne, trapped in this old box Brownie [i.e., his brain] waiting to be printed off my tongue [...] I’m Shylock. Snuff out the light, I’m Othello. All, all, Pip, all!”<sup>49</sup>

In “The Exiles,” a story in which the spirits of Edgar Allan Poe, Algernon Blackwood, Ambrose Bierce, Arthur Machen, Charles Dickens, and William Shakespeare, along with many of their literary creations, find themselves relegated to the outer confines of human development.<sup>50</sup> The authors and their characters exist only so long as copies of their works survive. When the final copies are destroyed, they and their literary progenies cease to exist.

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Despite the temporal sequence, it is tempting to read “The Exiles” (1949) as the final, lost chapter of *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). “The Exiles” presents a humanity that agrees with the utilitarian values of Granger, who sees literature as a sort of encyclopedia, good only because it is potentially useful. What at least staves off the imaginatively ashen fate of mankind is Montag, an autodidact, who sees and hears within books other voices, other visions, other feelings, other ways of being.

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how it was boned, marrowed, broken collapsed in ruins and put back together by morons or well-meaning pundits who remember their own interpretation of the soaring lines (“The Renaissance Prince and the Baptist Martian.” 1979. Rpt. *Yestermorrow*, 105-128; 114-115).

Anyone familiar with Bradbury recognizes the gaiting rhythms in the aforesaid passage as uniquely his. In sum, Bradbury recalls Berenson, but the old data has been deeply internalized, digested into Bradbury’s thoughts. As such, the memory inevitably bears his linguistic markers.

<sup>47</sup> Ray Bradbury, “What I Do Is Me—For That I Came” in *Zen in the Art of Writing*, 159-61; 161.

<sup>48</sup> Jason J. Marchi, “An Interview with Master Storyteller Ray Bradbury” (1998), rpt. in *Conversations with Ray Bradbury*, 175-183; 181.

<sup>49</sup> The story, also known as “Charlie is My Darling,” was initially published in *McCall’s Magazine*, January 1966; it was republished in *I Sing the Body Electric!* (1969; rpt. New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 151-72; 164-65.

<sup>50</sup> The story is also known as “The Mad Wizards of Mars, originally published in *Maclean’s*, September 15, 1949. It was republished as part of *The Illustrated Man* (1951).

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But what if your bookshelf of memory were filled with aliens, monsters, murderers, spirits, and fiends of all descriptions that go bump in the night? What if your mind was filled with the ravings of a Poe, the nightmares of a Lovecraft, or the apocalyptic visions of a Bradbury? In such cases, would the state have the right to intervene in your reading habits? Would a parent? When asked, Bradbury opined that censorship was necessary: “as a responsible parent, you have to save certain of these things as experiences to be gone through at a slightly later age. I don’t think I would recommend to parents that they rush off and take their eight- or ten- or twelve- or thirteen-year-old kids to see *The Exorcist*.”<sup>51</sup>

I am not a parent, but I can agree with Bradbury on the powerful and permanent impressions left by great writers. I can recall the first time I read Shakespeare; just as I recall the first time I read Poe, Lovecraft, Bloch, and Bradbury. But I can’t remember what I thought like before I encountered these authors; my old self ceased to exist as soon as my imaginary DNA was mixed with theirs. Nor can I imagine what I would be like without these writers in my life; without my “Tower of Babel,” there is no *I*.

Faber tells us that he knows that he is alive because he reads; but what he lives is a lie, a fantasy, what Matthew Arnold in “Dover Beach” called “a land of dreams,” a necessary coping mechanism in a world that “Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,/ Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain”. It’s also lonely. It’s significant that after Montag reads “Dover Beach” to his wife, she dumps him. The plain reality of “Dover Beach” (signified in Arnold’s “really”) is that there is never another. There is only the dream of another, and that dream is a fiction.

Narratives may hone our inner thoughts, but what we often learn is that we are alone with the voices in our heads. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare warns us that “Nothing can come of nothing”.<sup>52</sup> And in the end, unable to relate lovingly to his daughters, the titular monarch is increasingly alienated and made an enemy of the state. The one person who doesn’t desert him, Cordelia, is hanged. A bereft Lear questions the morality of the universe:

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,  
And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never.<sup>53</sup>

As he looks at his dead daughter, Lear enters into an Arnold-like fiction. He imagines that Cordelia lives on:

Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir.  
Do you see this? Look on her. Look, her lips—  
Look there, look there.<sup>54</sup>

Cordelia is with (and within) him in the same way that Pip, Usher, Poe, Hawthorne, and Shakespeare (among others) are with (and within) Bradbury: as voices, auditory hallucinations, and hauntings of the mind. If fiction is a delusion, it is nonetheless a delusion that instantiates our heritage and our humanity. We seem to have come full circle: Reading literature has no utility, no

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<sup>51</sup> Shel Dorf, “The Bradbury Chronicles,” (1975), rpt. in *Conversations with Ray Bradbury*, 85-99; 93.

<sup>52</sup> *King Lear* (Modern, Folio), ed. Michael Best. Internet Shakespeare Editions (ISE), ln.96.

<sup>53</sup> *King Lear* (Modern, Folio), ed. Michael Best. Internet Shakespeare Editions (ISE), lns. 3277-3280.

<sup>54</sup> *King Lear* (Modern, Folio), ed. Michael Best. Internet Shakespeare Editions (ISE), lns. 3281-3282.

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social value, but Bradbury speculates that without art, humans inevitably create a market-driven, media-dominated culture, a “nice blend of vanilla tapioca”,<sup>55</sup> in which no one makes any great impression. Great literature nullifies and transcends the ordered and the ordinary; it is good for nothing because it negates everything.

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<sup>55</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 55.

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### Abstract

The idea that sci-fi, at least good sci-fi, has a thinly veiled social message, that it is always addressing the *now*, naturally suggests that *Fahrenheit 451* has a utilitarian message for its readers. That message seems straightforward enough: reading imaginative literature is good for us and good for society. This message, however, is negated by Bradbury's own statements on literature: "The fact is, any literature whose function it is to teach, ceases to be literature as such; it becomes didactic literature, which is the color of another horse. When literature becomes obsessed by *ideas as such*, it is no longer literature." While literature may have no utility, no social value, Bradbury speculates that without art, humans inevitably create a market-driven, media-dominated culture, a "nice blend of vanilla tapioca," in which no one makes any great impression. Great literature nullifies and transcends the ordered and the ordinary; it is good for nothing because it negates everything.

**Key Words** Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, literacy, bardic tradition, narratology