The Flight from the Good Life: Fahrenheit 451 in the Context of Postwar American Dystopias

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Surveying the American scene in 1958, Aldous Huxley recorded his dismay over the speed with which Brave New World was becoming realized in contemporary developments: "The nightmare of total organization, which I had situated in the seventh century After Ford, has emerged from the safe, remote future and is now awaiting us, just around the next corner."1 Having struck a keynote of urgency Huxley then lines up a series of oppositions between limited disorder, individuality and freedom on the one hand, and order, automatism and subjection on the other in order to express his liberal anxieties that political and social organization might hypertrophy. Huxley sums up an abiding fear which runs through American dystopian fiction of the 1950s that individuals will lose their identity and become the two-dimensional stereotypes indicated in two catch-phrases of the period: the "organization man" and the "man in the grey flannel suit." William H. Whyte's 1956 study diagnoses the demise of the Protestant ethic in American life and its replacement by a corporate one which privileges "belongingness." The result might be, he warns, not a world controlled by self-evident enemies familiar from Nineteen Eighty-Four, but an antiseptic regime presided over by a "mild-looking group of therapists who, like the Grand Inquisitor, would be doing what they did to help you."2 Whyte endorsed the social insights of Sloan Wilson's 1955

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2 William H. Whyte, The Organization Man (1956; rept. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 33. The term "belongingness" was first used in the 1930s by the behavioural psychologist E. L. Thorndike. Its earliest postwar citations by the O.E.D. are by David Riesman (a contribution to A. W. Loos's Religious Faith and World Culture, 1951) and Whyte's Invisible Man.
novel *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* which dramatizes the conflicts within the protagonist between individual advancement and self-location within a business hierarchy. Despite being an apparently successful executive Thomas Rath registers a tension between satisfaction and its opposite which recurs throughout fifties dystopias.

One crucial sign of this issue is the fact that the protagonists of dystopias are usually defined in relation to organizational structures. Walter H. Miller's 1952 short story "Conditionally Human" is typical of the genre in centring on an official. The action takes place in an America of the near future which has become "one sprawling suburb" ruled over by "Uncle Federal." Because the inexorable rise in the population is clearly threatening the promise of the "good life" the regime introduces draconian limits to the birth rate and the government-sponsored organization Anthropos Inc. designs baby substitutes called "neutroids", chimp-like creatures produced by the radioactive mutation of reproductive cells. The central character Norris has the job of an updated dog-catcher, rounding up stray "neutroids" to his wife's disgust. Already we can see the key generic motifs emerging: the problem of homogeneity, the disparity between restriction and avuncular government, the risk of technology exceeding its moral bounds, and - within the Norris couple - the debate between acceptance and dissatisfaction. When questioned by his wife, Norris characteristically pleads helplessness by appealing to the necessities of the system: "And what can I do about it? I can't help my Placement Aptitude score. They say Bio-Authority is where I belong, and it's to Bio I have to go. Oh, sure, I don't have to work where they send me. You can always join the General Work Pool, but that's all the law allows, and GWP'ers don't have families. So I go where Placement Aptitude says I'm needed." Psychometrics has become institutionalized into a narrow series of legally enforced prescriptions which induce an acquiescence in Norris reflected in the key verb "belongs."

The adjustment of the individual's notion of appropriateness to officially measured norms evident in the story just quoted also figured prominently in the sociologist Mordecai Roshwald's examination of American society in the late fifties. Viewing developments with the special clarity of a newcomer (Roshwald was born in Poland and lived in Palestine before he took up permanent residence in the USA), he applied David Riesman's notion of other-directedness and located a resultant tendency to "imitation and uniformity." His 1958 article "Quo Vadis,

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America?” concludes with an indignant polemic against the complacency of imagining that the only danger confronting society is the external physical threat of atomic war. Not so. “The loss of individual norms in moral issues, the admiration of unjust power, the lack of tradition” and a host of other dangers present themselves just as urgently, and Roshwald here opens up a potential purpose for the writer of dystopias: “to warn against these and to fight them may be a second front in the fight for human survival.” Roshwald was in fact already contributing to that fight by working on his own dystopian novel Level 7 (1959) which transposed the streamlined production systems of Brave New World on to the self-contained mechanized environment of a nuclear defence bunker. The inordinate reliance on technology and bland interchangeability of American manners which “seemed to point to a uniformly happy, efficient and self-sufficient society, verging on automatons or robots,” finds its expression in the novel as an ironic implication that the operative-protagonist is an extension of his machines instead of vice versa. As happens with Montag in Fahrenheit 451, X-127, known only by his functional label, comes gradually to realize the consequences of his participation in a system, here of nuclear destruction, but with the added irony that his realization comes too late to make any difference even to his own fate. Roshwald’s original title for this work was The Diary of Push-Button Officer X-127 which appropriately stressed the issue of robotization, partly problematizing the individual’s relation to technology and partly using that technology as a metaphorical expression of the individual’s conformity to prescribed roles. Quite independently Erich Fromm identified the emergence of exactly the same social type, declaring: “Today we come across a person who acts and feels like an automaton; who never experiences anything which is really his; who experiences himself entirely as the person he thinks he is supposed to be.”

Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 (1953) goes one step farther. Not only is the protagonist Montag initially a robot too, he is also a member of the state apparatus which enforces such prescriptions by destroying the books which might counteract the solicitations of the media. The regime of the

6 Letter from Mordecai Roshwald, 29 April, 1993. I have discussed these themes in greater detail in “Push-Button Holocaust: Mordecai Roshwald’s Level 7,” Foundation, 57 (Spring 1993), 68–86.
novel masks its totalitarianism with a facade of material prosperity. Montag’s superior Beatty explains its coming-into-being as a benign process of inevitable development, everything being justified on the utilitarian grounds of the majority’s happiness: “technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God.” A levelling-down is presented as a triumph of technological know-how and of system; above all it was a spontaneous transformation of society not a dictatorial imposition (“it didn’t come from the Government down”).

Bradbury’s description of the media draws on *Brave New World* as confirmed by postwar developments in television. Observing the latter boom in America, Huxley commented: “In *Brave New World* non-stop distractions of the most fascinating nature... are deliberately used as instruments of policy, for the purpose of preventing people from paying too much attention to the realities of the social and political situation.” He continues in terms directly relevant to the world of Bradbury’s novel: “A society, most of whose members spend a great deal of their time... in the irrelevant other worlds of sport and soap opera... will find it hard to resist the encroachments of those who would manipulate and control it.”

Where Beatty minimizes the firemen’s role as benevolent guardians of the status quo, Huxley refuses such a tendentiously spontaneous account in order to pinpoint political purpose.

The result of this process in *Fahrenheit 451* is a consumer culture completely divorced from political awareness. An aural refrain running through the novel is the din of passing bombers which has simply become background noise. This suggests a total separation of political action from everyday social life and correspondingly when Montag’s wife Millie and her friends agree to “talk politics” the discussion revolves entirely around the names and appearances of the figures concerned. In other words the latter have become images within a culture dominated by television. “The Fireman” (the first version of *Fahrenheit 451*) summarizes the typical programmes as follows:

... there on the screen was a man selling orange soda pop and a woman drinking it with a smile; how could she drink and smile simultaneously? A real stunt! Following this, a demonstration of how to bake a certain new cake, followed by a rather dreary domestic comedy, a news analysis that did not analyze anything and did not mention the war, even though the house was shaking constantly with the flight of new jets from four directions, and an intolerable quiz show naming state capitals.

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9 Huxley, 37.
The very tempo of this list, a rapid sequence of short items, has been explained by Beatty as economy ("the centrifuge flings off all unnecessary, time-wasting thought") but the discourse of production has now become contradictory as it has been displaced onto consumption. If commercial efficiency notionally releases workers to enjoy new leisure opportunities, the aim of the new media is to fill that leisure time not to economize on it.

The novel significantly magnifies the references to TV which occur in "The Fireman" on to a larger scale. Montag's living room has become a 3-D televisial environment for his wife who dreams of adding a fourth wall-screen so that the house will seem no longer theirs but "exotic people's." One of Montag's earliest realizations in the novel is that his house is exactly like thousands of others. Identical and therefore capable of substitution, it can never be his own. That is why the clichéd designation by the media of Millie as "homemaker" is so absurdly ironic because at the very moment when the television is promoting one role it is also feeding her with desires which push in the opposite direction, ultimately inviting her to identify with another place preferable to her more mundane present house. Fahrenheit 451 dramatizes the effects of the media as substitutions. Millie finds an ersatz intimacy with the "family" on the screen which contrasts markedly with her relation to Mongag. Again and again the dark space of their bedroom is stressed, its coldness and silence; whereas Millie's favourite soap operas keep up a constant hubbub and medley of bright colours.

Millie and her friends are defined entirely by their roles as consumers, whether of sedatives, soap-operas, or fast cars. Bradbury anticipates Marshall McLuhan by presenting the media which stimulate this consumption as extensions of faculties (the thimble anticipations of Walkmans) or their substitutes (the toaster has hands to save her the trouble of touching the bread). A bizarre passage Bradbury planned to include in the novel pushes the dehumanizing effects of the media to Gothic extremes:

They sat in the room with the little electronic vampires feeding silently at their throats, touching at their jugulars with great secretness. Their faces were masked over with black velvet, and their bodies were draped in such a way as not to prove whether man or woman sat there beneath. And the hands were gloved with thickened, sexless material, and only the faintest gleam showed in the slits of their eyes, in the half dark twilight room.

Here dress performs a near total erasure of feature and even gender, replacing skin with an insulating patina. Bradbury's application of the
vampire myth stresses loss of vitality whereas Marshall McLuhan draws on the story of Narcissus: "This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image."11 The result in both cases is immobility and the creation of a closed system between the individual and technology which, in the Bradbury passage quoted above, drains off the sociability of the gathering described. Mildred’s house combines all the electronic gadgetry associated with the fifties “good life.” But these things have a cost. Bradbury further anticipates McLuhan in rendering television as an aggressive medium: “Music bombarded him at such an immense volume that his bones were almost shaken from his tendons,” and then, as it quietens down, “you had the impression that someone had turned on a washing-machine or sucked you up in a gigantic vacuum.”12 The experience of one consumable can only be understood through comparison with another, and here the individual is put into a posture of maximum passivity as subjected to machines, not their controller. McLuhan explains the television in far more positive terms, but still ones which partly echo Bradbury’s. Thus “with TV, the viewer is the screen. He is bombarded with light impulses.” And because TV is no good for background it makes more demands on the viewer than does radio: “Because the low definition of TV insures a high degree of audience involvement, the most effective programs are those that present situations which consist of some process to be completed.”13 Bradbury burlesques this notion of audience participation as no more than an electronic trick whereby an individual’s name can be inserted into a gap in the announcer’s script (and even his lip-movements adjusted).

The media in Bradbury’s novel then induce a kind of narcosis. There is both a continuity and an analogy between Millie watching the wall-screens and then taking sleeping pills. Similarly in Brave New World the opiate soma has become the religion of the people. Huxley subsequently explained that “the soma habit was not a private vice; it was a political institution.”14 Bradbury’s emphasis on the consumer end of the cycle of production was shared by, for example, Ann Warren Griffith whose 1953 story “Captive Audience” portrays an America dominated by the Master Ventriloquism Corporation which specializes in placing aural advertisements in consumables. The Corporation’s influence on Congress and the

12 Bradbury Fahrenheit 451, 46, 47.
13 McLuhan, 313, 319.
14 Huxley, 69.
Supreme Court has been so successful that any resistance to their sales techniques has been declared illegal. The Writer who most successfully dramatized the political power of business combines in this period was however Frederik Pohl. His collaboration with Cyril Kornbluth, *The Space Merchants* (1953), rewrites the Cold War across a commercial grid. The world has been almost taken over by a massive American-based multinational named Schocken Associates which is locked into a struggle with its main rival, not only for the world market but also to develop Venus commercially. Working against Schocken is an organization of subversive Conservationists known as “Consies.” Mitchell Courtenay functions happily as an advertising executive within Schocken until a complex series of events displace him into the alien contexts at the opposite extremes of the social spectrum, so that he experiences a series of discoveries about the nature of manual labour and consumerism. It is the impetus of the plot itself which carries Courtenay towards social awareness and therefore towards disenchantment with his company, whereas we shall see that Montag’s flight from his culture is more willed.

The essential trigger to that flight is supplied by an alienation not only from suburban monotony but also from Montag’s consumer-wife. He contemplates her as if she has ceased to be a human being: “...he saw her without opening his eyes, her hair burnt by chemicals to a brittle straw, her eyes with a kind of cataract unseen but suspect far behind the pupils, the reddened pouting lips, the body as thin as a praying mantis from dieting, and her flesh like white bacon.” Millie here fragments into disparate features transformed by dye, cosmetics or dieting. Instead of being the consumer she is now consumed by commercially induced processes. The passage points backwards to an original state which is no longer recoverable and in that respect the images approach the free-floating state of simulation described by Jean Baudrillard. In the contemporary phase of capitalism, he argues, abstraction and simulation now involve the “generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.” Signs now become substitutions for the real, at their most extreme bearing no relation to any reality. It is the penultimate phase of the image or sign, however, which best glosses Bradbury’s novel, namely when the image “masks the absence of a basic reality” (Baudrillard’s

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16 Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 49.
emphasis). The adjective "reddened" only appears to suggest a physical state prior to make-up. Later in the novel when Millie flees from the house without lipstick her mouth is simply "gone," as if the adjective has grotesquely taken over actuality from its referent.

Montag clearly functions as a satirical means for Bradbury to question the impetus of consumerism and passages like the one just quoted estrange Montag from an environment he has been taking for granted. Frederik Pohl likewise exploits estrangement effects in "The Tunnel under the World" (1954). Here the executive-protagonist goes to the office on what seems to be a perfectly normal morning, normal that is until small differences begin to strike him like the fact that he is offered a new brand of cigarettes. Guy Burckhardt's routine, even his sense of reality, has been determined by an accumulation of such details: brand names, consumer objects, and advertising jingles. To his understandable horror Burckhardt discovers that a local company Contro (control?) Chemicals has concealed a massive industrial accident by building a replica of his town and has even housed the brains of the few survivors—Burckhardt's included—in anthropoid robots. The story in other words presents a grim parable of the extent to which commerce can construct the consumer's reality, appropriately reflecting Kingsley Amis's claim that Pohl's characteristic work is the "satirical utopia."  

Where Pohl briefly surveys the control of a whole environment Bradbury sets up contrasts between different kinds of social space in Fahrenheit 451, particularly between interiors and exteriors. A 1951 short story, "The Pedestrian," anticipates these themes and describes a point of transition just before the uniformity of the novel is finally established. The subject is simple: a pedestrian is arrested for walking the streets at night. The opening paragraph introduces an iterative account of what the protagonist has been doing for ten years:

To enter out into that silence that was the city at eight o'clock of a misty evening in November, to put your feet upon that buckling concrete walk, step over grassy seams and make your way, hands in pockets, through the silences, that was what Mr. Leonard Mead most dearly loved to do. He would stand upon the corner of

18 Kingsley Amis, New Maps of Hell (London), 119. Relevant critical commentary on this aspect of Pohl's work is also given by R. Jeff Brooks, "The Dystopian American Futures of Frederick Pohl," Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas, 4 (1973), 55-64.
Bradbury’s infinitives and then his use of the hypothetical second person draw the reader into a pattern of action which turns out to be a rhetorical cul-de-sac because Mead, it transpires, is the last of his line pursuing a habit which has become obsolete. The unusual opening phrase destabilizes our distinction between interior and exterior space and the description then draws on post-romantic survival narratives like Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* to suggest an ultimate state of isolation. But Mead stands in ironic proximity to a new species of citizens who, in anticipation of Millie, fill their leisure time watching television. Even the police car which arrests Mead (since there are no officers inside it is literally the car which does the arresting) is the last of its line since there is no longer any urban crime, and the story concludes with Mead being taken away to the “Psychiatric Center for Research On Regressive Tendencies,” thereby signalling the demise of a social possibility. When Bradbury worked this story into his novel it became part of the regime’s past, helping to explain why in *Fahrenheit 451* the nocturnal streets are either deserted or used as improvised race tracks.

It is of course a truism that the dystopias of the fifties base themselves on the premise that dissatisfaction with the prevalent regime will be registered sooner or later by their protagonists. In order to accelerate this process of realization some novelists use catalyst-figures whose role is to function as a productive irritant in the protagonist’s consciousness. So Clarisse, the niece it turns out of Leonard Mead, fascinates and disturbs Montag because she seems wilfully to stand outside social norms. Neither child nor woman, she introduces herself as a social misfit (“I’m seventeen and I’m crazy”) and challenges Montag to confront awkward questions such as whether he is happy. In Kurt Vonnegut’s *Player Piano* (also published temporarily under the title *Utopia 14*) Finnerty also performs the role of misfit. He is an old friend of Paul Proteus but his appalling manners repeatedly disrupt the decorum of the rituals which bond together that novel’s managerial elite. Like Montag Proteus envies the apparent freedom of the other: “It was an appalling thought, to be so well-integrated into the machinery of society and history as to be able to move in only one plane, and along one line. Finnerty’s arrival was disturbing, for it brought to the surface the doubt that life should be that

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way. Paul had been thinking of hiring a psychiatrist to make him docile, content with his lot, amiable to all." As in *Brave New World* the factory system once again sets coordinates for the self and Proteus feels himself to be tugged in two directions: On the one hand Finnerty lifts his level of dissatisfaction, on the other a psychiatrist - again a typical detail of the genre - would encourage acquiescence to the regime in the name of "adjustment."

*Fahrenheit 451* and *Player Piano* both narrate a dual process of learning and disengagement where the protagonist's field of consciousness supplies the ground of the action, indeed even becomes the central issue within that action. At one point Clarisse declares "this is the age of the disposable tissue," a strategic pun on Bradbury's part which relates directly to Vonnegut's novel also since both writers are describing acts of resistance towards social and economic systems where human beings have become dispensable material. Characters accordingly are grouped oppositionally around the protagonists. Finnerty's niggling influence on Proteus is counter-balanced by those representatives of his managerial group who warn him what he might lose. In *Fahrenheit 451* Clarisse and then later an English professor named Faber stimulate Montag towards overt resistance, whereas Beatty functions as antagonist. From a very early stage in the novel Montag internalizes Beatty's voice as a censorious or punitive force, the voice of the superego resisting taboo thoughts or actions. Every scene where Beatty figures then becomes charged with ambiguity as if he is accusing Montag of crimes. When the latter comes down with a "fever" Beatty visits him without being called, explaining that he could foresee what was going to happen. In a simulation of a doctor's visit Beatty tries to deindividualize Montag's problem as a typical case which will pass. If we visualize Montag being addressed on the one side by Beatty and on the other by Faber like a morality play, although the latter occupies the moral high ground, Beatty represents a far more sinister presence by his uncanny knack of predicting what Montag will think. Francois Truffaut described the action as "une forme de lutte contre l'autorité" and Montag must kill Beatty as the personification of that authority however euphemistically the latter presents his power.  

The key progression in this process is a shift from the latent to the overt, from the implicit to the explicit. Montag discovers an inner voice which he has been suppressing and his previously unified self fractures into dissociations of mind from body and limb from limb: "His hands had

The Flight from the Good Life

been infected, and soon it would be his arms. He could feel the poison work up his wrists and into his elbows and his shoulders, and then the hump-over from shoulder-blade to shoulder-blade like a spark leaping a gap. His hands were ravenous. And his eyes were beginning to feel hunger...."\textsuperscript{22} The metaphor of poison encodes Montag’s dissidence within the ideology of a regime devoted to maintaining the so-called health of the body politic; but the displaced hunger of his other limbs suggests a desire that will take him out of that dominant ideology. We can see from this passage how the issue of authority pervades the very style of the novel. In his 1968 article “Death Warmed Over” Bradbury mounts a spirited defence of classic horror movies and fantasy fiction by contrasting two broad artistic methods: the accumulation of fact and the use of symbolism. He condemns the former as being appropriate to another discipline altogether: “We have fallen into the hands of the scientists, the reality people, the data collectors.” And he goes on to propose selective resonance as an alternative. “The symbolic acts, not the minuscule details of the act, are everything."\textsuperscript{22} Retrospectively this article helps to explain the method of \textit{Fahrenheit 451} which, like the other dystopias of the period, uses the dissatisfaction of one individual to reflect on the general inadequacies of a regime perceived as in some sense totalitarian. This dissatisfaction is articulated through an intricate series of symbols and images which support the action at every point. The repeated syntagmatic metaphors always run counter to the fixity and therefore the values of the official discourse of the state.

The most prominent example of such symbolism occurs in the references to fire. Donald Watt has argued that “burning as constructive energy, and burning as apocalyptic catastrophe, are the symbolic poles of Bradbury’s novel” and certainly the antithesis of extremes could not be stronger between fire as destructive and fire as transforming or life-giving.\textsuperscript{24} The range of signification is introduced in the astonishing first paragraph of the novel:

\textbf{IT WAS A PLEASURE TO BURN.}

It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed. 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. With his

\textsuperscript{22} Bradbury, \textit{Fahrenheit 451}, 43.


\textsuperscript{24} Donald Watt, “\textit{Fahrenheit 451} as Symbolic Dystopia,” in M. H. Greenberg and Joseph D. Olander, eds., \textit{Ray Bradbury} (Edinburgh: Paul Harris, 1980), 196.
symbolic helmet numbered 451 on his stolid head, and his eyes all orange flame with the thought of what came next, he flicked the igniter and the house jumped up in a gorging fire that burned the evening sky red and yellow and black.

The opening sentence leaves an ambiguity about how active the verb is, suggesting at once an intransitive state which looks forward to Montag's "fever" of disobedience, and also suggesting an absent object. Although we know that Montag is a fireman the description shifts voice to place him in the position of a spectator rather than an agent. The true object of "burn" is deferred until Part III of the novel where Montag destroys first his house and then Beatty. Already the political theme of the regime's attempted erasure of the past has been established and also the quasi-sexual intoxication of power. The latter implication came out more strongly in Bradbury's original version of the passage where the third sentence read: "With his symbolic number 451 on his earnest head, with his eyes all orange fire with the very thought of what was to come, he let the boa-constrictor, the pulsing fire-hose in his fists spray the highly incandescent fluid upon the flanks of the ancient building."25 Here sex and work have become more firmly identified in a depiction of orgasmic destruction and the passage (in either version) articulates a preliminary state of mind where Montag is totally engrossed by his work. Questioning comes later.

Symbolism of course is historically determined and vulnerable to political manipulations and fire symbolism is no exception. On the night of 10 May, 1933 Nazi followers destroyed piles of books in German university towns. As the flames rose in the square opposite the University of Berlin the Propaganda Minister Dr. Goebbels praised the gathered throng for ending the "age of extreme Jewish intellectualism" and ushering in the new German era: "From these ashes there will rise the phoenix of a new spirit... The past is lying in flames. The future will rise from the flames within our own hearts."26 The equivalent of such utterances in Bradbury's novel are slogan-like statements by Beatty ("fire is bright and fire is clean") but the symbolism has become even more rigidly codified in the uniforms and equipment of the firemen. It would be wrong to suggest any direct application by Bradbury of such historical occurrences because his novel does not explicitly identify the country being described. On the other hand, like Mordecai Roshwald in Level 7, he positions the reader so as to be able to infer connections with the USA.

25 Fahrenheit 451 papers, second folder.
In a retrospective article on the novel Bradbury comments on the Nazi book-burning: "when Hitler burned a book I felt it as keenly, please forgive me, as his killing a human, for in the long sum of history they are one and the same flesh." And he has since confirmed that the main burnings he had in mind were those which took place in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, adding: "fortunately, nothing of the sort in the United States. Minor altercations with town censors, mayors, politicians, which have all blown away in the wind." In fact the situation in the United States was serious enough for the American Library Association to issue a manifesto in 1953, the same year as Bradbury's novel, which proclaimed that "the freedom to read is essential to our democracy" and which set out to protect exactly those rights which have disappeared in Fahrenheit 451:

Private groups and public authorities in various parts of the country are working to remove books from sale, to censor textbooks, to label "controversial" books, to distribute lists of "objectionable" books or authors and to purge libraries. These actions apparently rise from a view that our national tradition of free expression is no longer valid; that censorship and suppression are needed to avoid the subversion of politics and the corruption of morals.

The document rails against the encroaching power of officialdom to prescribe taste which the "firemen" are doing without any constraint.

The state control of the printed word has been a major concern in modern dystopias. Yevgeny Zamyatin's We describes the use of the Gazette of the One State to induce the individual's subservience to collective civic purposes ("the beauty of a mechanism lies in that which is undeviating and exact"). Brave New World polarises literary expression between the minimal expressive needs of the present and the library of "pornographic old books" locked away in the safe of the Controller, himself a precursor of Beatty. And Nineteen Eighty-Four collapses together "every conceivable kind of information, instruction, or entertainment" in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth so that newspapers, text books, and novels all function on the same level of representation. In these three classic dystopias the state reduces printed output to a utilitarian minimum, whether in the name of political efficiency or the supposed

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89 The Freedom to Read (Chicago: American Library Association, 1953), 1, 4.
happiness of the greatest number. By depicting a regime where all books are banned, however, Bradbury implicates the reader from the very start in illegality, in an oppositional relation to the regime. Automatically then Montag’s resistance becomes privileged as he learns to cherish books, as he appropriates the official fire-symbolism to his own purposes (reading it as suggestive of renewal), and most importantly as he gradually refutes the state separation of books from humans. One draft for the novel has Beatty describe the destruction of the former as an execution (“Books are dinosaurs, they were dying anyway. We just gave them the bullet behind the ear”), whereas Bradbury has summed up the novel as revolving round a “book-burner who suddenly discovers that books are flesh and blood.”

What Bradbury draws our attention to here is the insistent series of humanizing metaphors in his novel which revitalise books and which prevent them from being regarded as inanimate objects.

The last part of Fahrenheit 451 traces out the consequences of Montag’s estrangement from his society. His physical flight expresses in terms of action a disengagement which has already taken place in his mind. Here again Bradbury is following a generic pattern. We have already noted the displacement of the protagonist in The Space Merchants. Vonnegut’s Paul Proteus also has to transgress the boundaries of his city Ilium which have been erected to separate personnel from machines, managerial elite from workers. Where Proteus crosses a literal and metaphorical bridge between these domains Montag undergoes a rite of passage which involves the death of his old self ( spuriously enacted on the TV by the authorities) and rebirth by water (the crossing of a river). Just as the city of Ilium is destroyed in an attempted putsch so Montag’s city is laid waste by atomic bombing out of which emerges a strange new beauty: “gouts of shattered concrete and sparkles of torn metal” compose into a “mural hung like a reversed avalanche.”

Both Bradbury and Vonnegut refute their regimes’ claims of progress by investing a special value in the past. The eponymous object which gives Player Piano its title is a historical throwback to an earlier period and is also a machine played by the ghost of a craftsmanship which has become obsolete. Proteus attempts to enact his disillusionment with modern automation by taking possession of an old farmhouse but this solitary gesture proves to be futile. Montag by contrast discovers a whole social group devoted to preserving books through memory, thereby actualising Bradbury’s earlier metaphors of books-as-people. Similarly in Walter M.

Fahrenheit 451, 153.

Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451, 153.
Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959) a surviving remnant from a nuclear holocaust preserves the few surviving books through “book-leggers” who smuggle them to safety or through “memorizers.”34 One critic has complained that the last section of Bradbury’s novel is “vague in political detail” but the national references are clear and specific.35 The hoboes gathered round their campfires and constantly moving on to avoid a threatening state authority recall the unemployed transients of the Depression (even the rusting railway line strengthens this echo). And the leader of the campers is named after the Granger Movement which flourished in the USA in the late 1860s and 1870s. This movement made a collective protest against the encroachments of large-scale capitalism and asserted the values of the local agrarian community. Its Declaration of Purposes asserted the aim “to labor for the good of our Order, our Country, and mankind”; and the movement set up reading programmes for farming families among other measures.36 Although Montag rediscovers the communal space of the campsite and although the campers do possess contemporary technology, all the appeal of place and community lies in its appeal to the past. Personal memory and collective history blur together as the novel concludes with an attempted exercise in radical conservation which plays on the reader’s own historical memory of a lost agrarian past.

Concluding her 1957 survey of utopian thought from the Enlightenment through romantic despair and Christian fatalism Judith N. Shklar pronounces what is in effect an obituary on the very notion of utopia: “... radicalism in general has gone totally out of fashion. Radicalism is not the readiness to indulge in revolutionary violence; it is the belief that people can control and improve themselves and, collectively, their social environment. Without this minimum of utopian faith no radicalism is meaningful.”37 While it is certainly true that fifties dystopias situate their protagonists in relation to regimes which have apparently concentrated power on a massive scale, the result is by no means simple acquiescence. These are works with as it were a double gaze on the reader’s present and

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34 Miller’s application of Bradbury’s notion is also presented as a kind of revival, this time of the Church’s lost role as guardian of literacy. The purpose is likewise one of preservation: “The project, aimed at saving a small remnant of human culture from the remnant of humanity who wanted it destroyed, was then underway”: Walter M. Miller, Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959; rep. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), 74.
35 Watt, 213.
on the hypothetical future. As Vonnegut declares in his foreword to *Player Piano*, "this book is not a book about what is, but a book about what could be." The direction taken by social change is repeatedly depicted as an erasure of the known and it is here that a polemical edge emerges in the dystopias.