The Policing of Private Conscience: Literary Interjections on Public Morals

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Abstract

The human experience is a complex and unique thing. Humankinds' attempt to give shape to its own perception of existence goes to the heart of the aesthetic experience but faces obstacles to its realisation. This text seeks to explore the cultural currents that interact with literary works that act as a counterweight to censorial forces which manifest themselves in many forms throughout the ages.

Keywords: Ideology; Censorship; Dystopian literature; Freedom of expression

Resumo

A experiência humana é complexa e única. A tentativa de dar forma à perceção da existência está no centro da experiência estética mas enfrenta obstáculos à sua concretização. O presente artigo pretende explorar as correntes culturais que interagem com os textos literários, agindo como contrapeso às forças de censura que se manifestam de forma diversa em diferentes espaços temporais.

Palavras-chave: Ideologia; Censura; Literatura Distópica; Liberdade de Expressão

Human experience is complex and ever-evolving. Rarely can it be completely and wholly described or represented without some imperfection. Experience is different for each individual but there are universal bonds that stretch across temporal and cultural barriers. Accounting for this experience merits engagement and reflection on the artistic endeavours that have taken place and that have provided a strong impetus

to further writing. This text is concerned with examining select theory and literary forays into understanding the human experience and the cultural conditions in which certain aspects of it come to pass.

Certain constraints are in evidence when one examines how humankind reflects upon itself and this forms an important element of the discussion in this text in respect of how the contours of language are regulated and controlled. Bradbury's influential *Fahrenheit 451* is subject to analysis for the great value it brings to the reader in exposing the limits of the freedom of expression and how conscientious members of a community can become aware and seek to overcome such limitations. The experience of overcoming imposed restrictions also involves understanding the nature of the language appropriated to describe the environment in which one lives and how it affects mind-sets are issues also receives attention in the text that follows. The right to freely express oneself would seem to be a fundamental and inalienable right in the modern era. While no right is absolute, the relative strength of the right of freedom of expression is a powerful facility afforded to citizens in most advanced democracies and remains a bulwark against totalizing tendencies of absolutist ideologies. It also provides the conduit through which private musings can be shared with the wider community and thus begin conversations on matters of concern that go beyond the self and touch upon universal experiences that in turn can be fashioned into common trepidations.

Expression of thoughts and concerns forms a central part of being a perceptive human being and attests to our reflexive and curious nature. Doing so affirms our very existence and gives form to our experiences and reflects a person's unique ability to account for their own personal journey. In her book, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt recognises the importance of self-expression:

> But only man can express this distinction and distinguish himself, and only he can communicate himself and not merely something – thirst or hunger, affection or hostility or fear. In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings. (Arendt 175)

It is a person's unique ability to speak (in contrast to other animals) which bestows this facility to sketch the contours of one's values and desires through a process of comparison and negotiation. As Arendt further remarks:

> In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is - his qualities, gifts, talents, and short-comings, which he may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody says and does. (Arendt 179)

While much of this freedom that allows people to express themselves without inhibitions is often problematic and sometimes hazardous, it is a genuine desire and an ongoing struggle. Equally valid is the claim that identity is contested within the public sphere as varying cultural currents come into contact with one another by accident or design. In the case of the latter, artificial barriers have been an abiding feature of organised societies since early times. These barriers vary in form, but all have the objective of regulating or controlling the creation, debate and propagation of unfettered thought by means of which people can attain greater awareness of their own situations, needs and desires.

Inevitably, certain societal forces exercise control over the growth of awareness and of needs and desires within the nature of the narrative, in its formation and structure. This is a crucial site of representation and contestation since most if not all discourse provides the basis on which a social construction of reality can take place. Discourse is turn dependent on the character of our definitions which are themselves heavily influenced by cultural heritage and are reliant upon social interactions to legitimise their standing. Those individuals found to be part of such interactions exercise varying degrees of influence and prestige over the legitimacy and validity of definitions depending on their social standing (e.g. philosophers, scientists, legislators, political activists, etc.) who must also vie for their claims to be accepted as legitimate as modernising and evolutionary processes act upon existing concepts (Schiappa xi-xii).

Marshalling a constellation of what may be termed legitimate definitions facilitates the creation of a particular social knowledge that sustains a shared understanding within the community about peoples' perception of their own reality and the manner in which they should describe it. It is at such a juncture of perception that "authoritative" versions of the recognised definition of words are deployed with particular potency (Schiappa 3). Moreover, as Quine observes: "Language is socially inculcated and controlled; the inculcation and control turn strictly on the keying of sentences to shared stimulation" (28). Fashioning an acceptable common vision of reality thus creates effective and lasting conditions to control thought and conduct.

Furthermore, an agreed position on descriptions ensures compliance with existing definitions whenever variations that may inspire doubt or sow the seeds of discord which would otherwise cause disharmony. Achieving this requires zealous respect for definitions so that a natural reaction part on the part of matured persons to ordinary linguistic terms is to acquiesce whenever experience diverges from accepted constructions so that a process of self-correction ensues that has the effect of forcing our linguistic behaviour to respect expected patterns.

Such is the power of accepted linguistic patterns that, as Cox has affirmed, it adds a layer of pragmatic control over our decision-making in the sense that it determines the delineation of decision-making grounds which can be regarded as acceptable in respect of what should be regarded as "rational, reasonable, or justified" (200-2). Once these grounds are established it also identifies the kind of information sought and advances approved modes of analysis to interpret them (*Ibid.*). The cumulative effect of the operation of these constraints on meanings has been sketched out in *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning* by Edward Chiappa who asserts:

> Definitions constitute a form of rhetorically induced social knowledge. That is, definitions are the result of a shared understanding of the world and are both the product of past persuasion and a resource for future persuasion. . . . In short, definitions *matter*. The "natural attitude" toward definitions are assumed to represent the way things "really are" . . . . (167)

Chiappa's argument provides an instructive insight into the power of discourse in the formation of opinion and the application and reinforcement of accepted constructs. Other scholars have come to similar conclusions about the nature of argument formation in the public realm. Thus, a credible claim could be made to the effect that the process of opinion formation at the level of discourse and the standard of results therefrom within an oscillating level of rationality as information, ideas and reasons are exhaustively debated as part of the nature of public communication. Public opinion is thus conditioned by the philosophy and ideology that shape the criteria that govern how recognised public opinion emerges. The relevance of public opinion is that it provides a primary conduit for cultural activities and interactions in the public sphere and it is here that influence can be created and sustained through mutual understanding within the culture, this influence can be fashioned into a form of power that makes use of trust in beliefs that have yet to their authenticity and veracity confirmed. This facet of public opinion presents an opportunity to influence social

beliefs that can be later fashioned into political behaviour consistent with these beliefs that is then transformed into the political power to wield binding decisions by maximising recognised institutional procedures (Habermas 362-3).

Recognised institutional procedures are usually found to happen within the deliberative processes of legislative bodies, the courts, public debate, etc. Influence thus develops within the public sphere and becomes the focal point of contestation in that same venue. Varying degrees of success for different perspective can also be dependent on the reputation of the parties advancing their claims which may include religious figures, literary and artistic figures, scientists and popular public figures such as athletes and film stars. The moment the realm of debate expands beyond personal interactions into the public sphere, fragmentation and dispersal come to characterise the nature of the arguments advanced thereafter as different speakers and hearers compete for access to and control over different settings which Habermas refers to as "arenas and galleries; stage and viewing space" (364). These settings serve an important purpose in that they provide the location for the performance of communication of issues that exhibit both personal and public perspectives. Apart from religion, art and literature, only one's private life sphere can serve as a source of existential language against which socially-generated experiences and challenges can be judged in conjunction with the life history of the individual. From that perspective, challenges communicated in the public sphere can trace their original acknowledgment to the personal account as soon as they are felt in the private life of the individual. Human experience is given a powerful articulation in the form in the expressive codes of religion, art and literature and it is within the literary sphere that one could argue the most powerful representation is to be witnessed. The literary context finds itself engaged in an age-old articulation of the struggles of values and representation of different world visions and it is for this reason closely interwoven with the (political) public sphere (Habermas 365).

Given the potency of the literary work, particularly when digested by a cultural-engaged audience with political awareness, this power can come to be checked by means of coercive policies which attempt to arrest its potential to inspire inquisitive attitudes and alternative visions. Enterprises of the kind that seek to regulate the power of literature frequently engage in coercive comprehension and censorial practices. However, the perceived necessity on the part of governing agencies to engage in such practices varies according to the level of awareness within a culture and the strength of free speech present within the wider community. Moreover, this would also depend on the level of adherence to 'legitimate' narratives.

In situations where there is increasing levels of anomie and apathy – a prominent feature of many industrial societies – acquiescence replaces resistance and it is at this point that the true extents of the success of censorship policies reveal themselves. This point is recognised by Pierre Bourdieu in his *Language and Symbolic Power* where he remarks:

> Censorship is never quite as perfect or invisible as when each agent has nothing to say apart from what he is objectively authorized to say: in this case he does not even have to be his own censor because he is, in a way, censored once and for all, through the forms of perception and expression that he has internalized and which impose their form on all his expressions . . . . (138)

In cultural contexts where the interest in freedom of expression has suffered significant decay or has seen major curtailment, censorship gains a strong foothold and perpetuates restrictive practices in public communication. Certain forms of expression become the only authorised ones and thus thought itself becomes indistinguishable from the language it is expressed in. In turn this leads to a much reduced range of possible appropriate expressions and topics for debate whereby issues outside the approved range become impossible candidates and unviable topics of contestation (Bourdieu 139).

Living under a regime in which censorship is central tenet of control obviously imposes limitations on what the human being can achieve, particularly in the areas of expression and learning. Greater levels of knowledge tend to favour conditions of more acute awareness in the citizenry and foster a more critically reflective mind-set. Inevitably those who seek to defend and perpetuate restrictive conditions will seek to demonise any initiatives that are designed to increase access to learning and greater levels of critical self-awareness. These two factors empower individuals to find and utilise the means of self-realisation, and this by its nature, poses an existentialist threat to power systems based on the curtailment of freedoms. A struggle thus ensues between the oppressed and the oppressor for the control of agencies of power. One powerful instrument in this respect is the ability of education to empower citizens. This has long been recognised as a fundamental tool in the quest to deconstruct undesired power systems, although there have been thinkers who have encouraged intellectual temperance so as to avoid hegemonic tendencies overwhelming otherwise positively empowering projects of knowledge enhancement. In his *Advancement of Learning, Book One,* Sir Francis Bacon states his conviction that:

> If then such be the capacity and receit of the mind of man, it is manifest that there is no danger at all in the proportion or quantity of knowledge, how large soever, lest it should make it swell or out-compass itself; no, but it is merely the quality of knowledge, which be it in quantity more or less, if it be taken without the true corrective thereof, hat in it some nature of venom or malignity, and some effects of that venom, which is ventosity or swelling. This corrective spice, the mixture whereof maketh knowledge so sovereign, is Charity which the apostle immediately addeth to the former clause; for so he saith, 'knowledge bloweth up, but charity buildeth up'; not unlike unto that which he delivereth in another place . . . . (124)

The alleged precise faults are set out in further remarks where Bacon says:

> And as for that censure of Saloman concerning the excess of writing and reading books and the anxiety of spirit which redoundeth from knowledge and that admonition of St. Paul, that 'we be not seduced by vain philosophy', and they do indeed excellently set for the true bounds and limitations whereby human knowledge is confined and circumscribed; and yet without any such contracting or coarctation, but that it may comprehend all the universal nature of things. For these limitations are three. The first, that 'we do not so place our felicity in knowledge, as we forget our mortality.' The second, that 'we make application of our knowledge to give ourselves repose and contentment and not distaste or repining.' The third, that 'we do not presume by the contemplation of nature to attain to the mysteries of God.' For as touching the first of these, Saloman doth excellently expound himself in another place of the same book where he saith, 'I saw well that knowledge recedeth as far from ignorance as light doth from darkness, and that the wise man's eyes keep watch in his head, whereas the fool roundeth about in darkness: but withal I learned that the same mortality involveth them both.' (124)

Many issues of a multi-faceted nature are raised in the above excerpt, however, one issue that is exceedingly difficult to rebut is that additional knowledge alleviates the symptoms of ignorance: "knowledge recedeth as far from ignorance as light doth from darkness". The implication of this point leaves the reader in little doubt as to the enduring relevance of Bacon's remarks particularly in an era where there is a superabundance of information with ever-increasing forms of indoctrination as varied as the number of conduits of electronic communication that transmit the content.

Bacon's riposte to charges that greater levels of knowledge equate to higher levels of corruption in the nature of man and his ability to respect established societal norms is highly instructive in that it seeks (and largely succeeds) to acknowledge suspicions but not elevate them to the level of indisputable fact:

> And as for those particular seducements or indispositions of the mind for policy and government, which learning is pretended to insinuate if it be granted that any such thing be, it must be remembered withal that learning ministreth in every of them greater strength of medicine or remedy, than it offereth cause of indisposition or infirmity. For it by a secret operation it make men perplexed and irresolute on the other side by plain precept it teacheth them when and upon what ground to resolve; yea, and how to carry things in suspense without prejudice till they resolve. If it make men positive and regular, it teacheth them what things are in their nature demonstrative, and what are conjectural; and as well the sure of distinctions and exceptions and as the latitude of principles and rules. If it mislead by disproportion or dissimilitude of examples, if teacheth men the force of circumstances the errors of comparisons, and all the cautions of applications; so that in all these it doth rectify more effectively than it can pervert. (128-9)

An analysis of these further remarks yields the realisation that while new knowledge can divert ones previous beliefs, or perhaps cancel them altogether, one could say that it is this knowledge that provides the greater awareness which is itself a necessary evil. Bacon's appeal to adopt a set of principles under which it becomes possible and desirable to establish principles and rules and the necessary attendant "distinctions and exceptions" attest to the complex nature of the pursuit of knowledge and the hope it brings of greater understanding of the human condition and the world we inhabit.

One could argue that acute awareness of oneself and the issues that affect the well-being of both body and mind can be achieved through free oneself as much as possible from constraints whether self-imposed, culturally-endorsed or officially authorised. If a high-degree of freedom can be achieved – suspending momentarily scales of probability of such a thing ever happening – a catalyst of some kind must be found to bring about what has been referred to as "the unencumbered-self" (Sandel 162). A self of this kind would be free to postulate, identify and pursue dreams and goals without experiencing excessive artificial barriers to reaching those objectives. However, a distinction can and should be made between the values held dear by the individual and the identity of each person as being part of the same person's identity but not fused as one. Reaching a position in which the individual can be described as enjoying the freedom granted by an unencumbered status means, according to Michael Joseph Sandel in his *Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics* that: "For the unencumbered self, what matters above all, what is most essential to our personhood, are not the ends we choose but our capacity to choose them. The original position

sums up this central claim about us . . .” (162). Closely mirroring the sentiments expressed by Sandel here is the position adopted by Joseph Rawls who defends that: “It is not our aims that primarily reveal our nature, but rather the principles under which these aims are to be formed. . .” (101-2).

Taken together these claims about the capacity to choose and the principles which guide those choices demonstrate the acute need to consider the central role played by the personal philosophy and conduct exhibited by each individual. Respecting individual choice can be challenging when values are in conflict, particular when they conflict with official doctrine. Resisting the destabilizing and disruptive forces encapsulated by conditions of modernity often labelled as “anomie”, “fragmentation” and “social disintegration” at individual level is a distinct product of modernizing societies. In the facing of ever-evolving environments, governing agencies – particularly states – have made full use of modern technology to arrogate and centralise power. Once this power reached a critical mass at levels on a scale never before seen, it has been used to penetrate previously restricted domains where ruling groups penetrate belief systems in civil society and deploy them to justify increasing fusion between social relationships and the industrial economy so as to bring state and society into union (Wolin 28-9).

Once this “fusion” of state and civil society has been achieved, the state comes to rely upon bureaucratic power to impose stability which in turn fosters greater levels of predictability through universal rules and regulations so that corporate bodies can apply the same rules so that long-term planning supports product consistency and thus uniformity in society. The ultimate goal of this bureaucratic power is the attainment of a mass market with near-uniform body of consumers with identical tastes. Passivity ensures long-term reliance on the same tastes and this depends upon a politics without memory driven by media-constituted politics. In that sense Sheldon Wolin sees media politics consisting of:

> . . . a succession of images designed to make the present moment the definition of reality dissociated from the past and hence a reality dominated by the present. The present becomes merely an arbitrary arrest of sound, motion, and fashion while the future has no organic connection to past or present and is simply the next successful image . . . . (184)

These “succession of images” are deliberately designed to entertain and distract the public at large as way to distract from serious self-reflection and to discourse penetrating musings on the state of the world. Constant change gives the impression

of instability and that forces the individual and those close to them to preoccupy themselves with dealing with quotidian matters and thus expend their primary energies on survival rather than introspection and dreaming. Disjointed images are difficult to piece together and this further alienates the individual from their cultural heritage and the world at large thus further frustrating any designs to engage with society and affect changes to it. However, this does not mean that genuine engagement between individuals, groups with society and the wider world is entirely unfeasible.

Sense can be made of the world by doing certain things to engage with it and interpret it. Since culture itself is fundamentally characterised by the "intercourse of people" with objects of art that taken together work to mould the nature of authentic political experience. Genuine engagement depends on a person's individual qualities and how they affect the perceived experience of being enlightened by works of art. In order to make the existence of a genuine politics real there must be an accommodating human world where humanly-created objects provide the material and aesthetic comforts necessary for making one's home on earth (Hansen 97).

Making a home on earth requires creating the necessary conditions for people to inhabit a certain environment. Material comforts can be manufactured, but spiritual and intellectual ones must be created in the mind, be given form and sustained by works of art. Before this can happen, however, a hospitable environment for free-reflection and unrestricted writing must be capable of being created or at least be imaginable under the prevailing circumstances. Artistic endeavours such as literary activities can create positive conditions for the freedom of expression. In this respect Paul Hansen holds that: "Art makes thought real, fabricates thought things, transfigures our feelings and emotions in a way that manifests the creative but essentially inner world of thinking itself . . .' (99-100). Private thinking in the mind of the artist can create a private world, a world apart which can be seen as characterising the universe of the literary work of art of an artist who directs his intellectual efforts endeavours to the creation of this semiotic object. Objects of this kind in textual form of sufficient length thus take on the character of universe in which alternative interpretations and the creation of different realities is possible (Coste 241). The creation of these alternative "universes" can be created for quite a number of reasons, which outlined by John McGahern, in his remarks on the occasion of writing "The Image" reveal his understanding of the purpose of art:

> For art is, out of the failure of love, an attempt to create a world in which we can live: if not for long or forever, it is still a world of the imagination over which we can

> reign, and to reign is to purely reflect on our situation through this created world of ours, this Medusa's mirror, which allows us to celebrate even the totally intolerable. And we absurdly reign over this imaginary world in the illusory permanence of false gods, and it may be this need of permanence that creates its turn the need for shape or form . . . . (5)

It is thus to the artist that the responsibility falls to create the means by which we can reign over an imaginary world that allows us to reflect on our situation with a penetrating gaze to reveal previously unrecognised forms of meaning. As noted above, the task of illuminating different conditions of unfulfilled personhood and the conditions which cause frequently falls to the artist. An artistic impetus to quantify experience by giving it some kind of shape or form can arguably make an otherwise futile experience bearable and produce something meaningful that enriches our understanding of our own existence. Gaining this greater understanding stands as symbol of hope that insight can lead to liberation from any number of predicaments or repressive yokes that impede a more complete attainment of self-realisation. One marking experience can inspire a spark of creativity in which the artist brings forth a talent that illuminates dark shadows of ignorance and which may also create the potential to identify the contours of a bewildered mind in search of an appropriate means of expression. At the same time, literary endeavours can finally map the presence of those so-called "false gods" reverence for or deference to whom could have and may continue to act as agents of oppression whether this is readily recognised or not.

A central part of the artistic endeavour to illuminate these situations comes in the form of the creation of the semiotic object and it is to one well-known and respected example of this that attention shall now be turned. Ray Bradbury's dystopia *Fahrenheit 451* stands as an enduring example of how literature can map the many complex contours of the struggle against state-sponsored mechanisms that impede meaningful awareness and critical reflection on the part of ordinary citizens in a fictional world that mirror the many challenges faced by those outside the artist-created world. It is primarily concerned with censorship. The reader is introduced to Guy Montag, a fireman employed by the state. He lives with his wife Mildred in rather dull-world. On a walk returning home from work one day teenaged neighbour Clarisse McClellan accompanies him for a few minutes on the street. She demonstrates her love of literature and culture in contrast to the vast majority of the other citizen of their dystopian world. Her conversational style and linguistic patterns force Montag to question his own conscience:

'Are you happy? she said.
'Am I what?' he cried
But she was gone – running in the moonlight.
Her front door shut gently.
'Happy! Of all the nonsense.'
He stopped laughing…
Of course I'm happy. What does she think? I'm not? he asked the quiet rooms.
. . . (*Fahrenheit*[1] 17)

Moments before these remarks Clarisse's cogitations had revealed her concern about what people really saw in the world about them:

> *'. . . I sometimes think drivers don't know what grass is, or flowers, because they never see them slowly,' she said. 'If you showed a driver a green blur, Oh yes! He'd say that's grass! A pink blur? That's a rose-garden. While blurs are houses. Brown blurs are cows. My uncle drove slowly on a highway once. He drove forty miles an hour and they jailed him for two days. Isn't that funny, and sad too?'*
> *'You think too many things,' said Montag uneasily . . .*
> *'I rarely watch the "parlour walls" or go to the races or Fun Parks. So I've lots of time for crazy thoughts, I guess.* (*F* 16)

Here Clarisse alludes to the existence of large television screens present in every home in their country which serves as a permanent distraction[2] for the population which ensure they rarely ever think about nor even engage with meaningful musings about themselves. In comparison to other citizens and other families, she is an oddity in how she has the presence of mind and freedom to be different to wonder about the world at leisure. Her comportment jolts Montag and stirs something within him:

> *He glanced back at the wall. How like a mirror, too, her face. Impossible; for how many people did you know that refracted your own light to you? People were more often – he searched for a simile, found one in his work – torches, blazing away until they whiffed out. How rarely did other people's face take of you and throw back to you your own expression, your own innermost thought?'* (*F* 18)

Montag is a fireman, but does not quench fires, rather the role of the institution he works for is to burn all books once their existence has been reported. Up until this

point, he does not question whether or not he is happy or whether or not what he is doing is actually morally acceptable. From this point forward, his conscience has been awakened and he begins soul-searching and questions begin to mount in his mind. One day, while at work in the fire station, Montag is occupying his time with his colleagues awaiting possible call outs. They are all sitting at a table, playing cards with their manager, Captain Beatty. It is at such a moment that he voices his growing doubts:

> *'. . . I've been thinking. About the fire last week. About the man whose library we fixed. What happened to him?'*
> *'They took him screaming off to the asylum.'*
> *'He wasn't insane.'*
> Beatty seeks to correct his subordinate by asserting:
> *'Any man's insane who thinks he can fool the Government and us.'*
> *'I've tried to imagine,' said Montag, 'just how it would feel. I mean to have firemen burn our houses and our books.'*
> *'We haven't any books.'*
> *'But if we did have some?'*
> *'You got some?'*
> *Beatty blinkered slowly.*
> *'No.'*

Montag realises his discomfort but ventures further in his increasingly hazardous inquiries as he asks:

> *'Was it always like this? The firehouse, our work? I mean, well, once upon a time . . .'*
> *'Once upon a time!' Beatty said. 'What kind of talk is that?*
> *'Didn't firemen prevent fires rather than stoke them up and get them going?'*
> *'That's rich!' Beatty responds.* (*F* 47)

Montag's crisis of conscience continues and this is further fuelled by a coalition of events that reinforce his doubts. A call comes through to the fire stations and the crew is deployed to burn down another house containing a large quantity of books. Mistakes are made by other on that evening and this forces Montag to seek further justification in his own mind for what he is now doing:

> The police went first and adhesive-taped the victim's mouth and bandaged him off into their glittering beetle cars, so when you arrived you found an empty house. You

> weren't hurting anyone, you were only hurting *things* . . . there was nothing to tease your conscience later. You were simply cleaning up. Janitorial work, essentially. Everything to its proper place. Quick with the kerosene! Who's got a match!' (*F* 50)

His difficulties with an uneasy conscience are compounded when he discovers the victim has not been removed by the time his fire crew arrive to dispatch with the offending material of the collection of books in a woman's home:

> This woman was spoiling the ritual. The men were making too much noise, laughing, joking to cover her terrible accusing silence below. She made the empty rooms roar with accusation and shake down a fine dust of guilt that was sucked in their nostrils as they plunged about. It was neither cricket nor correct. Montag felt an immense irritation. She shouldn't be here on top of everything . . . (*F* 50)

Such is the depth of his despair and the disintegration of his will to continue as before in the face of his strong disillusionment, he gradually takes ill and becomes increasingly alienated from his job and even his wife. His misses a day at work and discusses the possibility of resigning his position with his wife (*F* 67-8). This absence prompts a personal visit from Beatty to the Montag's home. This occasion becomes an opportunity for an exchange of views and Montag questions how Clarisse has come to vanish which invites a firm rebuttal from his captain: "She was simple-minded" (*F* 68). Beatty also takes the opportunity to firmly impress his vision of the order of things on his employee and attempts to disabuse him of any notion of free thinking:

> *Speed up the film, Montag, quick. Click? Pic? Look, Eye, Now, Flick, Here, Three, Swift, Pace, Up, Down, In Out, Why, How, Who, What, Where, Eh? Uh? Bang! Smack! Wallop, Bing, Bong, Boom! Digest-digests, digest-digests-digests. Politics. One column, two sentences, a headline! Then, in mid-air, all vanishes. Whirl man's mind around so fast under the pumping hands of publishers, exploiters, broadcasters, that the centrifuge flings off all unnecessary, time-wasting thought!'* (*F* 73)

Beatty becomes the embodiment of public authority, of regime orthodoxy and impresses the necessity for absolute conformity that denies all deviations from the official narrative.

> *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 cover, to judge themselves against. So! A book*

> *is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it! Take the shot from the weapon. Breach man's mind. Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man? Me? I won't stomach them for a minute . . .* (*F* 77)

Montag strips all pretence away with his revealing remarks and confirms what Montag had come to realise that he should have known all along: *"…there was no longer need of firemen for the old purposes. They were given the new job…official censors, judges and executors. That's you Montag, and that's me…*" (*F* 77).

Having finally had the truth laid bare before him by his own manager, Montag is left in absolutely no doubt whatsoever about the nature of thing in his new state of consciousness. Mulling over his new found realisation, he attempts to steady himself within his dizzied state of shock, revulsion and near-rebellious behaviour. His wanders through his thoughts and these in turn lead him to seek out other like-minded people and it is while in this state that he recalls a moment some time previous of having met a person in a public park who appeared to have a book on his person but made furtive moves the moment he realises this has been witnessed by Montag. Time and circumstances brings them together again and a plan is designed to affect change for the greater good. This character, Faber is revealed to be a retired Professor of English who shares Montag's revulsion for the current complexion of society (*F* 97).

Faber's ideas provide strong inspiration and a structure within which Montage can now project his future designs. Despite battling his own misgivings and a strong sense of fear, Faber and Montag find strength in one another to face the coming challenge since the latter has now firmly turned away from his former life and invites the full force of the state against him. In a sea of confusion and fear, the two friends seek to charter a way forward and it is Faber's insightful description of the current malaise that sets forth a clear picture of what actually face:

> *. . . Number one, as I said, quality of information. Number two: leisure to digest it. And number three: the right to carry out actions based on what we learn from the interaction of the first two. And I hardly think a very old man and a fireman turned sour could* do *much this late in the game . . . .* (*F* 110)

As Faber digests his own remarks to Montag, he comes to the further realisation that an immediate reestablishment of mass literacy would be wholly inadequate as the system is so thoroughly deformed and corrupt that it requires wholescale reformation. The deep-seated fear common throughout the population also ensures that there is steep mountain to climb before any realistic hopes of any significant reformation can

be hoped to be accomplished (*F* 113). However, the fact that it is now possible to discuss such things and some freedom exists to do something about it means that hope can propagate in greater quantities than ever before, regardless of the modest levels that persist in their jaded reality.

Montag eventually parts ways with his profession and is pursued by a regime-sponsored mechanical hound, a device specifically designed to execute dissents with an apalling spectre of terrible violence and deadly poison (*F* 171). Before Montag he makes his final break, Faber imparts a final piece of advice as a fateful warning:

> *But remember that the Captain (Beatty) belongs to the most dangerous enemy of truth and freedom, the solid unmoving cattle of the majority. Oh God, the terrible tyranny of the majority. We all have our harps to play. And it's up to you now to know with which ear you'll listen.* (*F* 140)

The character of Faber represents an enlightened consciousness, but one that is relatively rare in the midst of the mass of men. What is accepted as 'right and proper' generally leads to acquiescence on the part of those who live under prevailing conditions, regardless of their nature or consequences. Stimulating interest in or drawing attention to perceived ills presents a challenging task and is not generally welcomed by those it affects the most. Competing narratives inevitably permeate the public consciousness and the struggle for supremacy is an ongoing battle which may see lulls and sudden changes of fortune over time with both wins and losses for each competing side.

An ear well in tune with the ills of the era would seem to be in good position to engage in extensive reflection on the nature of the problem and perhaps on charting its extent that may in turn lead to musings on a way forward. It is the view of the current writer that we must remain eternally vigilant to the great danger and prevalence of totalizing narratives and repressive philosophies that seek to denigrate reflective practices, freedom of thought and expressive introspection. Agents of inertia will naturally seek to adopt any effective strategy to preserve the foundation of their power including resorting to misrepresentation of otherwise clear expositions of dysfunctional cultural practices and corrupting power systems. It is on this note that this discussion concludes with remarks from John McGahern who also recognised these grave threats to genuine freedom of thought in a text titled "A Literature without Qualities":

> A writer's work does not define itself but by results. I think that what is happening – for economic, political and social reasons – is that the reader is predetermined in advance and that the contents of literature are imposed on the reader by means of things outside literature. On book jackets, in newspaper articles, through publicity and blackmail of the bestsellers, one passes over the actual text; whatever value it might have is secondary. Consequently, the reader thinks he knows in advance what he must find in a book and whether or not he finds it has finally no importance whatsoever. In my opinion it has to do with a plan of a repressive nature, contrived to do away with the aesthetic experience, which is after all an extreme form of liberty . . . . (*Love of the World* 181-2)

Thus it could be said that every effort must be made to nurture and protect environments hospitable to the creation of works that honour the aesthetic experience. Written works of literature stand out as a powerful tool in this respect and deserve our care and attention if we wish to protect our fundamental liberties into the future.

Conclusion

While it would be naïve to hold the expectation that greater awareness would instantly provoke the crystallization of underlying discontent into concrete opposition – it does hold out the possibility that the well-nourished imagination is a powerful agent of resistance against totalizing ideologies. Cultural conditions are inextricably linked to political circumstances and these circumstances change from time to time. A docile community is more easily dominated, but there is less likelihood of this happening once this community has been "awakened" in some way. Bacon's timeless reminder that education "doth rectify more effectively than it can pervert" stands as a testament to the power of literature to fertilize and nurture the minds of men, young and old. While perfection is unobtainable, the act of enquiry, of entertaining curiosity expands the envelope of freedom as it deflates the envelope of ignorance. Thus, reaching Sandel's "unencumbered self" is an important goal, but it cannot be the only one. Canvassing the cultural spectrum for a genuine "aesthetic experience" requires active engagement from those motivated and suitably-equipped to do so and it is the cause of freedom that must continue to motivate the desire to represent the human condition.

Measure for measure, Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* offers the discerning reader a valuable lesson: freedom, particularly, the freedom of expression is a delicate quill and is only as strong as the hand that wields it. It can be blown in the wind, yet its

sharpened point has the power to penetrate even the most impervious fortresses – both of mind and men. Depictions of alternative realities present a detached perspective which grants distracted denizens fresh opportunities to recognize and renew their own circumstances lest they lose all notion of the currents that both shape and govern their lived experience.

It could be argued that in order to protect artistic freedoms and our right to freedom of expression, we must continue to vigorously exercise those freedoms. In so doing, these freedoms remain on display and renew themselves with each act of their affirmation. Despite the challenges that may come to challenge and perhaps even attempt to demolish these privileges, they are worth every effort to defend them.

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[1] Henceforth identified in quotes by its initial: *F*.

[2] This aligns closely with Wolin's "succession of media images . . . dominated by the present" mentioned above.