

PROMETHEAN REBELLION IN RAY BRADBURY'S *FAHRENHEIT 451*: THE PROTAGONIST'S QUEST

FERNANDA LUÍSA FENEJA

ISLA CAMPUS LISBOA – LAUREATE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITIES
ULICES/CEAUL (UNIVERSITY OF LISBON CENTRE FOR ENGLISH
STUDIES)

luisasf@sapo.pt

Article received on 01.02.2012

Accepted on 14.08.2012

ABSTRACT

This article aims to reflect on the role of myth in science fiction narrative, namely on the specific forms it may take in utopian/dystopian fiction, such as *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury. The personal development of the main character, Guy Montag, constitutes the focus of this analysis, by which we aim to shed some light on the relation between the meaning of the novel and the Promethean features he evinces in the context of a dystopian novel. The symbolic power of fire and of books is also of core relevance to this study, not only because they highlight the hero's inheritance of the Promethean myth, but also because they provide a deeper insight into the exegetic possibilities of dystopian fiction.

KEYWORDS

Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, Prometheus myth, rebellion, dystopia, science fiction, protagonist.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social criticism has been closely associated with science fiction narrative, inasmuch as the alternative worlds depicted often draw on critical aspects of contemporary society or history, in order to metaphorically highlight its frailties. Resorting to sophisticated technological apparatus, most science fiction texts manage thereby to attain a symbolic level of significance that is somehow reinforced by the apparent gap between the real, recognizable world disclosed in the texts, and the narrative settings and chronotopes framing them. As Claerson notes, science fiction provides “writers of the late twentieth century with the vehicle that has the greatest freedom to seek for metaphors

that can speak for the condition of man”, which is possible because of “its freedom to create unearthly worlds as well as to explore and distort time and space” (Clareson 1971: 24-5).

In fact, and because of such distortion of common reference framework, the symbolic potential of fantasy and of science fiction in particular, relies on more hermetic metaphors, on the one hand allowing for challenging readings of ideas and significance beyond plot, and, on the other hand, requiring a more cunning approach on the reader's behalf. This therefore testifies to the limitless narrative possibilities of imaginative fiction, which the present article also aims to highlight through its analysis of *Fahrenheit 451*.

Throughout his life-long literary career, Ray Bradbury has complied with such a view of science fiction, for his writings, which comprise different literary genres and modes, evince a censorial insight into American society and culture. *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), however, stands out in his work for its clearly dystopian representation of historical reality. In fact, although many of Bradbury's short stories give evidence of his eclectic approach to literary genre, in *Fahrenheit 451* the rhetoric of dystopian fiction seems to superimpose itself on science fiction devices, notwithstanding the relevance of the latter in the narrative structure. Dystopian worlds, however deeply imaginary, mirror real society, in its empirical form, as it is known and recognizable by human beings. It is worth mentioning, at this point, that any reflection of this type necessarily draws on a fundamental distinction between the concepts of *real world* and *imaginary world*. Both terms relate to the idea of fictionality, which, as Aguiar e Silva maintains, is one of the distinguishing properties of literary texts referring at large to an artificial world built by the literary text itself, but nevertheless based upon characters, actions and states that resemble those that anyone can encounter in the actual world (Aguiar e Silva 1984: 640; Kermode 1997: 13). On the other hand, in fantastic and science fiction literature, the fictional world depicted differs from the empirical one we inhabit and is defined, precisely, by its detachment from it (Aguiar e Silva 1984: 646). Also, Reis and Lopes describe this possible world of fantasy and science fiction as built upon a quite different logic, in which empirical reality, though somewhat recognizable, undergoes an elaborate process of what they call “unreal transfiguration” (Reis, Lopes 1994: 245). Therefore, the terms “real world/s” and “possible worlds” will be used throughout this article according to the conceptualization described above.

This article reflects on how *Fahrenheit 451* develops its symbolic construction, whose effectiveness relies heavily upon the use of myth, and aims to reveal various and interrelated levels of significance. In order to achieve this, it uses a reading of the Prometheus myth to shed some light on

the development of the protagonist, Guy Montag, which eventually manages to extend meaning beyond the scope of social criticism, thereby broadening the range of possibilities of interpretation of the novel.

Partly because of this strong, undeniable sociopolitical content, most of Bradbury's scholars, even the most recent, have analyzed *Fahrenheit 451* in terms of its dystopian features, which most naturally encompass issues such as mind slavery, censorship and deprivation of individual liberty (Seed 1994, Eller and Touponce 2004, Bloom 2007, Cusatis 2010). Although a few academic articles have dealt with the use of myth in the novel, the most relevant studies involving the Promethean figure in *Fahrenheit 451* are probably those of William Touponce, which will be referred to and quoted throughout this paper¹. However, considering the protagonist's role, a deeper analysis seems a relevant complement to previous studies of this novel, especially because readings of the sociopolitical scope, due to its very nature, tend to emphasize collective traits and behaviours, therefore largely taking characters as types. While none of these aspects should be rejected, they have to a certain extent overshadowed the strength of the protagonist. This article intends to draw attention to this potential in the light of its Promethean profile, as stated above.

2. SYMBOL AND MYTH IN DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE

Symbolism and myth play a chief role in textual plurisignificance, the latter being considered the key criteria to grant any text the status of literariness (Aguiar e Silva 1984: 662). This concept of polysemous meaning, in Northrop Frye's terminology, relates to the condition of a literary work as part of a larger whole, the meaning of which is drawn from the sequence of contents and relationships in which the work of literary art is placed (Frye 1990: 73).

The analysis of symbols and imagery and the subsequent study of its constructed significance brought science fiction narrative to the realm of mainstream literature, as it searched for new symbolic ways of expression. Dystopian literature represents an even more relevant contribution to this process, especially because, as a new trend within science fiction, it has

¹ Although Bradbury has been a prolific writer whose work keeps motivating academic research at large, the most relevant studies have been carried out by scholars that published most of their investigation in the eighties and in the nineties. William Touponce and Jonathan Eller, for example, are two of Bradbury's most insightful and acknowledged researchers, currently responsible for the Centre for Ray Bradbury Studies (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis).

enlarged its thematic scope. As Clareson points out, science fiction's concern for the anti-utopia² approached it to "themes of the main body of twentieth-century literature" (Clareson 1971: 22-4). And, as he further states, "Ironically, only in doing so, did it begin to receive belated critical and academic attention" (22).

In his seminal work, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye defines symbol as "any unit of any literary structure that can be isolated for critical attention. A word, a phrase, or an image used with some kind of special reference (which is what a symbol is usually taken to mean)..." (Frye 1990: 71). A symbol relates to image when it evinces some analogy between the text, such as poetry, and the nature it tries to imitate (84). Frye further associates symbol with archetype when he highlights the communicative dimension of literature, and here archetype refers to a typical or recurring image that helps classify literary texts in terms of conventions and genres (99). As universal symbols, archetypes work as "associative clusters" by calling up "images of things common to all men", from which they derive their unlimited communicable power (102, 118).

Myth relates to the representation of humankind's archetypes and to narration, which, in turn, relies not only on the stories born into a specific society and the persistent use of them (Slotkin 1992: 5), but also on the power of imagery and symbols that it makes use of, and which can be, for example, archetypes or profound symbols (Durand 1996: 84-5).

Therefore, both communication and narrative are crucial to the definition of myth: for Frye, it appears as the union of ritual and dream in a form of verbal communication (Frye 1990: 106); for Roland Barthes, it is essentially language, by which he means that the ways of expressing an idea are more relevant than the idea or concept itself, as stated in his known phrase "Myth is speech" (Barthes 2007: 261). And, back to Plato, the very word *myth* means narrative, plot, fable. In Plato's *Republic*, the object of mythology is the narrative about gods and divinities, and it is also clearly associated with oral narrative. In platonic terms, myth plays the role of an outward interpretation tool that makes it easier to understand what the *logos* tries to teach. Hence, while *logos* is thought, myth is narrative (Caprettini 1987: 81).

In terms of fantastic literature, within which science fiction is often classified, myth also constitutes both the object of the literary work and the explanation, and its enduring nature derives as well from the fact that it is a common property of a culture (Rabkin 1979: 28). When relating myth and

² Clareson uses "anti-utopia" and "dystopia" as synonyms.

archetype, Frye refers to its two roots, the Classical and the Christian. He establishes four categories of myth: apocalyptic, demonic, romantic and realistic (Frye 1990: 139). Dystopias fall into the first, since according to Frye, two opposing worlds, metaphorically identified, are involved, one of them being desirable and the other undesirable (139). In other words, a dystopia represents a negative world based on the exaggeration of negative traits of the real one. Likewise, a utopia creates alternative worlds, but these oppose real society or life through their radical otherness in an imaginary time and space. For this reason, some critics consider dystopias offshoots of utopia (Baczko 1985: 342).

Utopian tradition developed from sixteenth century *Utopia* by Thomas More, who must have been inspired by Plato's *Republic*. It set the paradigm of a radically different society from the real one, thus defining the pattern of alterity vis-à-vis contemporary society as its enduring feature and also allowing for its use as a weapon of social criticism (Baczko 1985: 342-6). The Prometheus myth can be considered the best example of what has been explained about the nature of myth, a powerful instance of collective cultural property, rooted in ancient Greek tradition and perpetuated through narrative up to the present.

Having considered this relationship between myth and literary narrative, we shall now focus on Prometheus as a dominant myth, and more specifically on its exegetic possibilities within the scope of dystopian fiction, namely in *Fahrenheit 451*.

3. THE MYTH OF PROMETHEUS

Throughout centuries, Prometheus has testified to the value of narrative in both the transmission and the preservation of archetypal myth. Landmarks of mankind's literary production have either highlighted, selected or minimized specific aspects of the rich Promethean odyssey, whose first written record is ascribed to Hesiod, as far back as the eighth century BC, in *Theogony* and later in *Works and Days*. Hesiod's first text tells the story of the original Prometheus, for, within the narrative of the birth of gods and their succession, Prometheus' act of stealing fire from divinity and his consequent punishment (he is tied up and an eagle devours his liver every day) is already narrated. Prometheus' skills, such as his subtlety, smartness and audacity, are already evident in this ancient version. Nevertheless, Hesiod's focus on his moral message (the apology of work and justice) highlights the negative results of Prometheus' act of good-will, both for

himself and for humankind. His brave endeavours were perceived by men as failure and oppression (Trousson 1964: 17-21).

According to Trousson, Aeschylus is the true vehicle of the Promethean myth, due to his reading of human possibilities and to the enduring quest that Prometheus, through his deeds – specifically stealing fire from god (Zeus) and giving it to humans – endowed to them. Not only did he save men, but he also bequeathed to them the unending search for intellectuality, knowledge, and the sublime, essential features in the condition of humankind. Prometheus' suffering in *Prometheus Bound*, as the punishment for his actions, together with the nature of the conflict between humans and gods – based, in Trousson's perspective, more on differences than on hostility – lends an ethical dimension to Aeschylus' text. Aeschylus hence established the myth, celebrating human grandeur and commitment to progress (37-38). In the light of what has been mentioned above, this seems strikingly true when we consider that Aeschylus' expression of the legend has remained the dominant, common subject which survived in all the subsequent variations. It constitutes, therefore, a common property which so many literary forms have been molding, in their own particular genre, over the centuries.

Aeschylus' perspective is also particularly relevant to the scope of this article, for despite the fact that Prometheus has inspired human arts in a number of ways, it is his commitment to humankind and the concepts of positive transgression, humanist rebellion and knowledge that we shall consider as core elements in the development of *Fahrenheit's* main character.

4. GUY MONTAG AS AN EVOLVING PROMETHEUS

Fahrenheit opens with a small, simple, yet powerful statement: “It was a pleasure to burn” (Bradbury 2008: 9). The motto frames the forthcoming setting, as a short description of Montag's daily routine follows and hints at the novel's diegesis: a world where the role of firemen has been reversed as they no longer extinguish fires, but instead ignite them to burn books. Book burning³ is the major motif of the novel, and the initial description gives the reader a picture of a competent, fulfilled professional doing his job in an efficient way, obeying orders without question and, what is more, taking pleasure in what he does.

³ The theme of book burning is also explored in other Bradbury's writings, as, for example, in the short story *The Exiles* (1967), in which literary censorship conveys clear criticism of restrictions on creative freedom and genre diversity.

The diegetic departure point establishes the major metaphor upon which all other symbolic devices are built; in other words, not being allowed to read books, let alone to own them, and the corresponding legal action carried out against those who still violate the law, characterize societies which deny their citizens freedom of thought. Academic research has used this metaphor to discuss different aspects of the novel, such as its connection with Cold War narrative (Hoskinson 1995), mass exploitation (McGiveron 1996, 1998), the relationship between utopia/dystopia and the psychoanalytic concept of “reverie” (Touponce 1984), or social criticism in general, as referred above. A metaphor is a symbolic device, a literary trope, which implies that “everything is potentially identical with everything else” (Frye 1990: 136). As a trope of correspondence based on analogy (Blasing 1987: 4), metaphor allows the creation of new settings. The implicit, hidden comparison that lies at the core of metaphor represented a privileged means of exerting social criticism in times of political censorship, as mentioned earlier⁴, of which book banning constitutes a relevant example. Furthermore, as Bradbury himself notes in an interview for *The Paris Review*, metaphors are effective because they live on in people’s memory: “I write metaphors. Every one of my stories is a metaphor you can remember” (Bradbury 2010).

Therefore, the fictional world of *Fahrenheit* society metaphorically stands for totalitarian regimes. Written in 1953, it has thus been considered a “cold war novel”, expressing the core concerns of that time, such as the conflict between the individual and the state, the vulnerability of human life under threat of nuclear extermination, and man’s conflicting nature: “... a man antagonized by conflicting allegiances – one to his government, the other to his personal sense of morals and values” (Hoskinson 1995: 358). *Fahrenheit* follows the trends set by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* (1932) and by George Orwell in *1984* (1949), since both writers create imaginary worlds in a future time that reproduces contemporary fears and readings of society.

As pointed out above, such a degree of mimetic dependence on historical experience, in the case of *Fahrenheit*, clearly suggests the American context in the years following World War II, with the spread of Soviet communism to eastern European countries and the American overreaction to it, that is to say, the fear of communism on American soil and the subsequent atmosphere of suspicion and political persecution, also known as witch-hunt. The McCarthy years represented an extreme response to this growing, pervasive paranoia in

⁴ As William Touponce puts it, “to write a utopia is to *indicate* what cannot yet be *said* within the available language” (Touponce 1998: 109).

American society, which, through censorship, fostered an all-pervasive climate of mass conformism and apathy (Tindall and Shi 1997: 976-7, 991).

Although other works by Bradbury demonstrate a similar approach to this issue, in particular, *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and a number of short stories in *The Illustrated Man* (1953), in *Fahrenheit* it clearly becomes the defining structure, especially because it evokes other social, cultural and historical elements of that period, such as the advent of domestic gadgetry, the power of the media, namely that of television, or the addiction to narcotics as a way of evading the emptiness of daily life (Millie, Montag's wife, becomes a type-character in the novel for these two dimensions). The whole setting of *Fahrenheit*, as well as the plot itself, also reflects another major fear of the time, that of the atomic threat, which underlies much of utopian and dystopian fiction in their representation of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic worlds.

It is in such an urban society that Guy Montag is introduced to the reader both as an expression and an extension of it. However, his inherent acceptance of the world he lives in will not last long. Strikingly enough, the most relevant turning point of the plot takes place early in the novel, when he first meets Clarisse McClellan, a 17-year-old girl who despite being a secondary character has, in fact, a decisive influence on Montag's development. As early as in their first encounter, Montag's conformism and support of the regime are emphasized, but only to make clear that this episode triggers his first doubts and, consequently, sows the seeds of dissension in him. Even if he does not really acknowledge this, feelings of uncertainty and unease arise, whose causes he – at this point – is not fully able to identify.

In his study of *The Poetics of Reverie* (1984) in Bradbury's writing, William Touponce classifies change in Montag as his discovery of consciousness, connected to a world of intersubjectivity, an area of response that blends memory and imagination and which he develops from Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Reverie* (Touponce 1984: 83, 107-114). Clarisse tells Montag:

"If you showed a drive a green blur, Oh, yes! he'd say, that's grass! A pink blur? That's a rose garden! White 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 fun, and sad, too?"

"You think too many things," said Montag, uneasily (Bradbury 2008: 16).

Conformism and transgression are clearly stated in Clarisse's words, the first in connection with the complete absence of critical thought and, also, of aesthetic fruition in the world. The visible world comes down to its physical

and recurrent characteristics, without people thinking about what they see. The tendency to blur differences reflects the aim of totalitarian politics to control the individual in what makes him unique, making all people seem alike and, most importantly, think alike. Even the houses, “white blurs”, which seem to reflect the urban development in the fifties in American suburbs, illustrate that sameness – in the whole passage, the word “blur” significantly works as a metaphor for both the annihilation of individual thought and for physical characteristics of living places at the time, also concurring with the overall blurring of all types of differences. A little later in the novel, Montag also realises how standardized his own house is, and because of it, how unfamiliar, depersonalized.

Furthermore, curiosity is strongly discouraged, because it leads to knowledge and knowledge leads to questions. Born into a family of dissidents, such as her uncle, who was punished for having broken the rules, Clarisse is aware not only of the way society works, but also of the unfairness and nonsensical nature of its rules. A victim of her own knowledge, questioning and insight, she could be considered a true heiress to Prometheus, particularly because, just like the Titan, she suffers because she knows more than the others, and will be punished for it as well. However, her role is one of catalyst; by arousing Montag's own capacity of questioning and by dying as a martyr, she somehow passes the torch to him.

This type of character belongs to the conventions of dystopian narrative and constitutes an inevitable device in the standard plot development, to which *Fahrenheit* conforms, as David Seed states: “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” (Seed 1994: 233).

Seed highlights Clarisse's status as a “social misfit” (233), to which he ascribes Montag's fascination for her. Nonetheless, and even in the context of dystopian narrative, her trait of individuality set against mass behavior and collectiveness appears far more important. She fully represents alterity and difference against sameness and likeness, and this is the trait that most impresses Montag and thus ignites his life change. It is noteworthy, at this point, that Clarisse's uniqueness and otherness bear a human dimension that appears reinforced in the context of a dehumanizing society such as those fostered by totalitarian politics. There is recurrent evidence of this throughout the novel, for example, in the passage that describes how “operators” replaced doctors in providing medical care:

“Hell!” the operator's cigarette moved on his lips. “We get these cases nine or ten a night. Got so many, starting a few years ago, we had the special

machines built. With the optical lens, of course, that was new; the rest is ancient. You don't need an MD, case like this; all you need is two handymen, clean up the problem in half an hour". "Look" – he started for the door – "we gotta go" (Bradbury 2008: 24).

In such a context, Clarisse clearly represents human potential against a world of automatons, and in particular in their quest for happiness that the latter, Montag included, seem to totally lack. "Are you happy?" she asks him, to which he replies "Am I what?" (Bradbury 2008: 17).

When considering the protagonist's development, one could start by questioning whether Montag's initial status does not already depict Prometheus' holding of fire. It seems particularly relevant to point out that at this stage his resemblance to the mythical figure lies merely in his mastering of fire; this is a crucial departure point just as it was for Prometheus. In fact, the opening description of Montag's job illustrates not only the appeal of fire but also, and more importantly, the power it gives to him:

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 charcoal ruins of history (Bradbury 2008: 9).

Two powerful metaphors can be identified here: the very power of conducting people's lives as the orchestra's conductor does in regard to the musicians' performance, the roles of superiority, guidance and leadership; and that of the python as symbolizing evil and man's rival, as this is a destructive, sadistic power, its pleasure deriving from destruction and the misery of others, a psychological phenomenon Donald Watt calls the Nero complex (Watt 1980: 195).

This imagery becomes all the more significant as it emphasizes the changes Montag is about to undergo. Montag's possession and control over fire at this stage may be subjected to a psychoanalytic analysis too, as it implies the conflict between renunciation and the instinct to control. Furthermore, fire involves danger; if possessed, it also grants superiority (Touponce 1980: 208). Rabkin, however, restricts the idea of guilt connected to danger – to the danger of uncontrolled fire – to Prometheus, since humans cannot be held responsible for Prometheus' act of stealing fire. Instead, Rabkin draws attention to fear, which, from his perspective, need not be transformed into guilt. This fear is consistently associated with that of power obtained through increasing knowledge, a motif repeatedly present in the story of Prometheus (Rabkin 1979: 9). This is the fate of modern Western

civilization, out of control due to unparalleled, uncontrollable progress, a theme dear to dystopian fiction. For this reason, Prometheus is also considered a favourite myth of the industrial age (Frye 1990: 155), especially because his act of stealing fire represents the possession and endowment of all arts to men⁵, providing them with the intellectual skills that would lead to civilization and progress. By doing so, he spurred men's instinct for progress, of which he would later become a victim, a paradigm that inspired, for example, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1831) and often represented in dystopias.

The idea of guilt, nevertheless, goes beyond Rabkin's perspective, and, in a sense, seems to contradict it. By possessing and controlling fire, that is, the knowledge, skills and tools illustrated in the Promethean metaphor, man becomes responsible for it; therefore, guilt is the natural consequence of his recognition of whatever evil derives from his misuse of fire. In fact, guilt underlies Montag's profile from the very beginning of the story. It is most likely associated with his inner, hidden, unconscious insecurities, which partly explain his rapid growing development of doubt. Inner guilt, though not acknowledged, plays its part in Montag's evolution, and laid the foundation for Clarisse, the catalyst character, to act with ease. Such guilt becomes more evident and objective later in the novel, as Montag's possession of books is disclosed.

However, one must clearly distinguish two types of guilt in the novel: the one that is brought about by fear, fear for having disobeyed or transgressed, as in the case of book owning or reading, and guilt in moral terms, of one's conscience. This type of guilt is described by Montag when referring to Beatty, the chief book burner: "And Clarisse. You never talked to her. I talked to her. And men like Beatty are afraid of her. I can't understand it. Why should they be so afraid of someone like her?" (Bradbury 2008: 87). Although it becomes obvious that people like Clarisse pose a threat to the established society as they can trigger criticism and dissension, the recognition of her moral superiority also underlies Montag's words: it points up his own inner and most terrible guilt, that of having killed a woman who had refused to leave her house when the firemen, Montag included, went to set fire to all her books. Guilt takes a different shape in another character, Faber, a former literature professor, for not having spoken in time, for having been an accomplice through his silence (Bradbury 2008: 106).

⁵ Aeschylus' *Prometheus* lists all the arts given to human beings by Prometheus: maths, architecture, astronomy, agriculture, navigation, medicine, among others (Trousson 1964: 28).

While the first type of guilt relates to the atmosphere of censorship and dictatorship of totalitarian regimes, as noted above, the second one is more relevant in terms of the meaning and development of the plot and of characters, especially the protagonist's, which constitutes the focus of this article. Indeed, because it extends the common patterns of the firemen's behaviour far beyond whatever limits of humanity they had respected, this episode complemented Montag's desire for the change that Clarisse had ignited. His sense of guilt becomes unbearable, as a significant metaphor underlines, and his fascination for fire suddenly becomes refusal of light: "I don't want the light", he tells his wife that night (Bradbury 2008: 55); he no longer wants to see himself, for example, to look at himself in the mirror, because of self-contempt. Rather, he feels poisoned and infected: "His hands had been infected, and soon it would be his arms. He could feel the poison working up his wrists and into his elbows and shoulders..." (55). David Seed, in his analysis of dystopian features in *Fahrenheit 451*, explains the metaphor of poison spreading to Montag's limbs as the birth and spread of Montag's dissidence regarding the established ideology, which he further supports with one of the conventions of post-war dystopias: individual dissatisfaction rendered through a number of symbols and images so as to convey the overarching idea of the negative points and weaknesses of politics and society (Seed 1994: 235).

Although this perspective makes all the sense in terms of the characteristics of dystopian narrative, since the use of metaphor, as noted above, was a major means of exerting social and political critique during McCarthyism, for the purpose of this study, the protagonist's individual and inner development will be highlighted, dissidence being part of his complex process of change.

Montag's realization of what his life and actions have been so far coincides strategically, in terms of narrative structure, with the end of part I. Up to this point, we can conclude that although he could be considered a Promethean figure for his possession of fire, the power he attains through it is a destructive one. On that account, it soon evolves into a state of acute consciousness and, consequently, into suffering. As in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, understanding requires suffering (Trousson 1964: 35), and Montag's pain evolves from consciousness and guilt into personal loss.

A turning point is signalled with the start of part 2, "The Sieve and the Sand", which opens with a poetic description of the act of reading: "They read the long afternoon through, while the cold November rain fell from the sky upon the quiet house" (Bradbury 2008: 94). Transgression is clearly assumed here, making clear what the epigraph chosen by Bradbury for *Fahrenheit* had

already illustrated: “If they give you ruled paper, write the other way”, by Juan Ramón Jiménez⁶. So this is Montag’s first step in his movement from thought to action, one that takes him from the role of Prometheus the sufferer to that of Prometheus the rebel. Here Montag performs the Promethean transgression in which the act of reading metaphorically corresponds to Prometheus stealing fire, which combines two primeval ideas in the Promethean myth: transgression driven by the appeal of forbidden knowledge, and disobedience. In Gaston Bachelard’s perspective, this urge towards knowledge and intellectuality interrelates with interdictions to those, thereby being designated by him precisely as the Prometheus complex, in which he associates “reverie” with the quest for intellectual life, the attempt to “handle one’s fire” (Touponce 1980: 214). The concept of disobedience, in turn, relates directly with the theme of social rebellion⁷.

However, as punishment is introduced as the legal consequence of his crime, Montag’s pain becomes more personal, as his wife leaves him and his house and books are burnt by Beatty, who, in narrative terms, can be considered the antagonist character⁸. Montag’s role is completely reversed now – no longer a performer of authority, he falls prey to it instead. Beatty compares him to Icarus: “Old Montag wanted to fly near the sun and now that he’s burnt his damn wings...” (Bradbury 2008: 147), but Montag’s development is not born out of pure selfish ambition, like Icarus’ shallow yearning to reach the sun. His transgression did not arise from a personal or individualistic dream, but rather from his awareness of other people’s lives and suffering, thereby evolving into social consciousness. In this sense, his disobedience represents a true humanist approach which seems to fit in Aeschylus’ warning against hubris. Montag becomes a fugitive persecuted by the police for having committed crimes against the state. And even if at this point the plot could illustrate how he embodies Prometheus’ role – being punished for his support of the human cause, namely through the endowment of knowledge (symbolized by fire in the mythic figure, and by the preservation of books in Montag), this step acquires more relevance in the overall meaning

⁶ Juan Ramón Jiménez, Nobel Prize Spanish poet, opposed Franco’s fascist rule and thus became an exile to the USA during the Spanish Civil War.

⁷ In terms of American culture and literature, this concept of disobedience can be traced back to Henry Thoreau’s essay *Civil Disobedience* (1849).

⁸ It is interesting to note that this type of character was first introduced by Aeschylus, allowing for dialogue development in theatre. As the chief opponent to the protagonist, in modern fiction, the antagonist is usually portrayed as the villain. The opposing views of Montag and Beatty in *Fahrenheit*, besides illustrating the key topic of the novel, reflect this primeval literary convention.

of the plot because of its connecting function with the end of the novel. It is because of his flight that Montag meets the book people, society outcasts who had established a rural and cultural community and who had memorized books as a way to prevent their state-inflicted extinction.

5. BOOK AS MYTH

In order to reflect how this final stage of *Fahrenheit* reinforces the Promethean construction illustrated in this article, it is important to recall how this core motif belongs to dystopian fiction and to its inherent criticism of totalitarian regimes. In the opening description of Montag's approach to his job, books are termed "the ruins of history" and burning them means destroying all past knowledge in order to hinder critical thought, which, in turn, would trigger opposition. Ironically, the book burning motif in the novel is clearly rooted in a historical event, the Nazi book burning in 1933, a way of controlling the diffusion of Jewish culture, but which was also intended to promote German cultural and ideological supremacy.

Because they are guardians of the written word, books promulgate ideas and render them immortal. In addition to extending the oral, spoken narrative tradition to which they relate, books also undermine the power of such a tradition through the registering of the spoken word (Di Nola 1987: 213). Even after the advent of the press and the subsequent democratization of the book, it somehow retains its elitist character because it is never available on equal terms to all people (221, 240-1). Books are the guarantee of collective memory, which, as we noted above, is part of the concept of myth. They are also symbols of wisdom (Touponce 1998: 108) and definitely contradict Montag's initial conviction that it is necessary to destroy the "charcoal ruins of history" (Bradbury 2008: 9). Touponce states that "social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought, from remembering the mistakes of the past and not from forgetting them" (108). In fact, this is one of the main goals of dystopias, to show an invented world distorted to such an extent in its negative characteristics that the impact has to be a didactic one: in Hilegas's words, the dystopia "extrapolates existing tendencies in our world today to warn us what the future may be like" (Hilegas 1971: 274). As such, books go against the regime in *Fahrenheit* and have to be banned, especially because, as Touponce notes, "they are the only thing left that harbours the forces of negation or principles through which the world around us could be made to appear false and alienating" (Touponce 1998: 106).

Montag's rebellion embraces this allegiance to books and, by joining the book community, he takes it to its extreme and is finally able to put into

practice what he had previously thought of: memorizing a book in order to prevent its death. Thus oral narrative is restored and, with it, faith in the democratization of culture and knowledge, which can also be read into Montag's personal victory over the state. Therefore, he can be considered a cold-war man (Hoskinson 1995: 358), experiencing the typical conflict between allegiance both to government and to personal beliefs, often portrayed in dystopian and cold war narratives – a conflict which also embodies a statement of personal freedom against oppression of thought. As a tool for spreading the word, it testifies to the Promethean commitment to rescuing human beings from ignorance and from oppression.

This original strategy of keeping books alive assumes particular relevance in the context of the novel, for, on the one hand, such a process bears the ultimate expression of knowledge at an individual level, and, on the other hand, by being memorized, books have to be shared with other people through speech. Therefore, the value of the spoken word in narrative, where myth was born, is restored. Also, by being shared and passed on to further generations, now orally, books symbolise the democratization of knowledge, against the elitism of their written version, as Di Nola maintains. This ambivalence of knowledge (individual versus collective) is expressed in the writings of the Portuguese poet Almada Negreiros (1893-1970), addressing the individual dimension of knowledge, while simultaneously defending that it should be shared by everyone (Silva 2009: 163), a pattern that is clearly evident in the forged reading process of the book people in *Fahrenheit*.

This preservation of books seems also dependent on people's communion with nature. The return to nature, evoking the Arcadian myth, allows a dimension of global harmony as well. That would mean a restoration of the entire, global human dimension put forward by Albert Camus in his seminal essay *Prometheus in Hell* (1946) in which he discusses the meaning of the mythical figure to modern man⁹. In fact, by returning to nature, Montag completes his regeneration, his inner and physical journey (Watt 1980: 199) and in a sense ends the circle started by Clarisse, as she, in their first dialogue, represents nature both in words, gestures and symbols; she tells Montag, for example: "Bet I know something else you don't. There's dew on the grass in the morning" (Bradbury 2008: 16). Watt elaborates on the idea of Montag's inner journey:

Montag's growth is, in one sense, a journey, both physical and psychological, away from the mechanized, conformist environment of the firehouse, with

⁹ The Promethean myth is also addressed by Camus in other works, such as *The Rebel* (1951).

the men playing an interminable card game, to the natural setting of the woods, where men dwell on the best that has ever been thought or said (Watt 1980: 199).

While he urges us to reinvent fire, Montag mentally recites an excerpt of the *Ecclesiastes*¹⁰, which he will tell the others. The continuous rebirth of nature through the tree of life is celebrated here to underline the novel's optimistic end, and Montag's personal reinvention of the fire. Drawing mainly on Bachelard's *Psychanalyse du Feu* (1937), Paula Buhl highlights the redemptive role of fire for Montag, for despite being destructive it eventually leads to his regeneration. In this sense, he illustrates Bachelard's view of Prometheus as a creature devoted to overcoming limits and prohibitions. Hence, while fire is initially intended to erase memory, in the end it is able to create thought (Puhl 2004). Besides its identifying role in the Prometheus myth, the symbolic power of fire attains a second layer of meaning, as it undergoes change together with the protagonist's, which means that the symbol itself was subject to a process of redemption equivalent to Montag's.

One should not, therefore, misread Bradbury's rendering of Biblical myth, although its archetypal common ground does not undermine the Promethean features we attribute to Montag. In fact, he becomes the hero in the universal sense of the word, like Prometheus and like Christ, fighting for humanity against a number of threats: oppression, oblivion, uncontrolled progress, ignorance. Such a catalogue of examples of human misery illustrates, in Bradbury's view, man's condition in the modern age, and that is why *Fahrenheit* seems to fall into the type of science fiction narrative that displays men's opposition to his fellow men, which defines dystopias too, according to Bloch (1969: 103).

This synthesis of Prometheus and Christ has been explored before, for example by Almada Negreiros, who identified his "modern Prometheus" with the burden of knowledge that made both of them heroes and victims; or also by another Portuguese writer, Guerra Junqueiro, who, inspired by Shelley and Quinet, created a poetic version of *Prometheus Unbound*, someone who rebelled against tyranny, not of the divine sort, but that carried out by men, a pattern repeated by Montag in his rebellion against the state in *Fahrenheit* (Quintela 2009: 197). It is, however, noteworthy that in this approach, Prometheus attains his freedom because the Messiah (Christ) frees him (197).

¹⁰ "And when it came to his turn, what could he say, what could he offer on a day like this, to make the trip a little easier? To everything there is a season. Yes. A time to breakdown, and a time to build up. Yes. A time to keep silence and a time to speak. Yes, all that". (Bradbury 2008: 210-1).

Similarly, the Old Testament's words to which Montag resorts at the end of the novel helped him achieve plain spiritual freedom and harmony. Touponce highlights the supreme power of the Bible as a metonymy for the whole of literature, for containing and having inspired so many myths in literature, and considers that Montag's choice of identifying with *Ecclesiastes* proves his love of preaching wisdom as a moral to society (Touponce 1998: 126).

Montag's development is a path of self-knowledge, of discovery and of growing awareness – of himself, of other people, of society, of what man has made of man. It is on a path of individual choices, and those choices lead him to a final stage of harmony where he reaches man's global balance. This trail crosscuts different stages of Prometheus' odyssey: from the opening unquestionable possession of fire, symbol of power, he evolves into a stage of painful awareness and then of inner and outspoken rebellion against the state; he falls prey to this deed, and in his flight decides to memorise books so as to give knowledge to man, finally attaining the end-stage of peace and redemption, catalyzed by the discovery of the Bible. Thus, like Prometheus Bound, he was punished for disobedience in favour of humankind, in particular, for having given men the gift of knowledge and wisdom; and, like the Modern Prometheus, his rebellion is against human tyranny.

6. CONCLUSION

Although it can be said that Montag, as a character, lacks a certain depth, his deeds make him heir to the Promethean tradition, in those aspects of humanity, rooted in Aeschylus' primeval perspective. His personal development derives in great part from Clarisse's influence on him, being Clarisse a bearer of Promethean values, namely quest, transgression and humanism – for which, like the Titan, she had to be sacrificed. Therefore, faith in the human being in a world threatened by science is restored, situating dystopian fiction in a more optimistic field. Furthermore, Montag's embodiment of Prometheus reaffirms the place of science fiction in the realm of myth, where Prometheus persists as a universal symbol that unites and explains human substrata, regardless of all its diverse and multiple expressions. As stated by Caprettini, mythical narrative can be significantly altered by changes in the cultural or social context. However, this doesn't affect its inner essence, that of original, immutable revelation (Caprettini 1987: 101). *Fahrenheit* constitutes a fine example of this phenomenon, for, in a radically new context – one of an imaginary future time – myth superimposes on science fiction diegesis to reveal and to try to explain man's concerns, perplexities, contradictions and enduring quest for meaning.

Prometheus is the perennial myth that, in Bradbury's dystopian work, leads human search for answers at a new and bewildering time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aguiar e Silva, Vítor Manuel (1984). *Teoria da Literatura*. 6th ed. Coimbra: Livraria Almedina.
- Barthes, Roland (2007). *Mitologias*. Translated by José Augusto Seabra. Lisboa: Edições 70.
- Bloom, Harold (ed.) (2007). *Bloom's Guides: Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Chelsea House.
- Bradbury, Ray (2008). *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Harper.
- . (1967). *The Illustrated Man*. New York: Bantam Spectra Books.
- . (2010). Interviewed by Sam Weller. *The Art of Fiction* 203.
<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6012/the-art-of-fiction-no-203-ray-bradbury>.
- Baczko, Branislaw (1985). "Utopia", in Fernando Gil (ed.), *Enciclopédia Einaudi*, vol. 5. Lisboa: INCM.
- Blasing, Mutlu (1987). *American Poetry. The Rethoric of its Forms*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bloch, Robert (1969). "Imagination and modern social criticism", in Basil Davenport (ed.), *The Science Fiction Novel*. Chicago: Advent Publishers: 97-121.
- Caprettini, Gian Paolo, Guido Ferraro and Giovanni Filoramo (1987). "Mythos/Logos", in Fernando Gil (ed.), *Enciclopédia Einaudi. Mythos/Logos.Sagrado/Profano*, vol. 12. Lisboa: INCM.
- Clareson, Thomas D. (ed.) (1971). *Science Fiction: the Other Side of Realism*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press.
- Cusatis, John (2010). *Research Guide to American Literature: Postwar Literature, 1945-1970*. New York: Facts On File.
- Di Nola, Alfonso (1987). "Livro" in Fernando Gil (ed.), *Enciclopédia Einaudi. Mythos/Logos.Sagrado/Profano*, vol. 12. Lisboa: INCM: 215-242.
- Durand, Gilbert (1996). *Campos do Imaginário*. Translated by Maria João Batalha Reis. Lisboa: Instituto Piaget.
- Eller, Jonathan R. and William F. Touponce (2004). *Ray Bradbury: The Life of Fiction*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press.
- Frye, Northrop (1990). *Anatomy of Criticism*. London: Penguin Books.

- Hillegas, Mark (1971). "Science Fiction as a Cultural Phenomenon: A Re-Evaluation" in Thomas D. Claerson (ed.), *SF: The Other Side of Realism*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press.
- Hoskinson, Kevin (1995). "The Martian Chronicles and *Fahrenheit 451*: Ray Bradbury's Cold War Novels", *Extrapolation* 36: 345-360.
- Kermode, Frank (1997). *A Sensibilidade Apocalíptica*. Translated by Melo Furtado. Lisboa: Edições XXI.
- Landsman, Gail (1972). "Science Fiction: The Rebirth of Mythology", *Journal of Popular Culture* 5: 989-995.
- McGiveron, Raqueef O. (1996). "What Carried the Trick? Mass Exploitation and the Decline of Thought in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*", *Extrapolation* 37: 245-257.
- Puhl, Paula (2004). "*Fahrenheit 451*. A existência humana em chamas", *Famecos/PUCRS*, no. 11 Julho 2004. Porto Alegre. 10 Jan 2012. <http://revistaseletronicas.pucrs.br/face/ojs/index.php/famecos/article/view/813>.
- Quintela, Ana Paula (2009). "O Fascínio de um Mito", in Marta Várzeas and Belmiro Pereira (orgs.). *As Artes de Prometeu. Estudos de Homenagem a Ana Paula Quintela*. Porto: Faculdade de Letras do Porto. 12 Jan. 2012: 193-199.
<http://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/5902.pdf>.
- Rabkin, Eric S. (ed.) (1979). *Fantastic Worlds. Myths, Tales and Stories*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Reis, Carlos and Ana C. Lopes (1994). *Dicionário de Narratologia*. Coimbra: Livraria Almedina.
- Seed, David (1994). "The Flight from the Good Life: Fahrenheit 451 in the Context of Postwar American Dystopias", *Journal of American Studies* 28: 225-240.
- Silva, Celina (2009). "O amigo do homem por amor dos deuses", in Marta Várzeas and Belmiro Pereira (orgs.). *As Artes de Prometeu. Estudos de Homenagem a Ana Paula Quintela*. Porto: Faculdade de Letras do Porto. 12 Jan. 2012: 159-172.
<http://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/5902.pdf>
- Slotkin, Richard (1992). *Gunfighter Nation. The Myth of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Atheneum.
- Tindall, George B. and David E. Shi. (1997). *America*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company.

- Touponce, William F., (1980). "The Existential Fabulous: A Reading of Ray Bradbury's "The Golden Apples of the Sun"", *Mosaic* XIII: 204-217.
- . (1998). *Ray Bradbury and the Poetics of Reverie*. 2nd ed. San Bernardino: The Borgo Press.
- Trousseau, Raymond (1964). *Le thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne*. Genève: Librairie Droz.
- Várzeas, Marta and Belmiro Pereira (orgs.) (2009). *As Artes de Prometeu. Estudos de Homenagem a Ana Paula Quintela*. Porto: Faculdade de Letras do Porto. 12 Jan. 2012
<http://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/5902.pdf>.
- Watt, Donald (1980). *Burning Bright: Fahrenheit 451 as Symbolic Dystopia*, in Joseph D. Olander and Martin H. Greenberg (eds.). *Ray Bradbury*. New York: Taplinger Publishing Company: 195-213.