Translation Studies: Retrospective and Prospective Views **ISSN 2065-3514**
(2009) Year II, Issue 4
Galaţi University Press
Editors: Elena Croitoru & Floriana Popescu
Proceedings of the 4th Conference *Translation Studies: Retrospective and Prospective Views*
8-9 October 2009, "Dunărea de Jos" University, Galaţi, ROMÂNIA
pp. 34-39

LIBRICIDE IN RAY BRADBURY'S *FAHRENHEIT 451*

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Whenever they burn books, they will also, in the end, burn human beings.
- Heinrich Heine

Libricide, genocide and ethnocide

Libricide (the killing of a book) is a sub-phenomenon "occurring within the framework of genocide and ethnocide" (Knuth 2003: viii) and arises from a combination of turbulent social environment, authoritarian or totalitarian leadership, and radical ideologies and policies. Disintegrative conditions on a national scale create an environment in which violence flourishes. The stressed and disoriented population turns to leaders who promise relief through a new political and social structure, based on transformational ideas. These ideas, which may be reactionary or revolutionary, justify, and even glorify, the use of violence to achieve goals such as national fulfillment or achievement of a utopian world. As regimes consolidate control, often becoming totalitarian, they tend to cast libraries and books in a suspicious light, as either seditious, or the tool of the enemy, or a scapegoat for a nation, an ethnic group or class of people that thwarts their policies. Looting, censorship, neglect, and violent destruction of books and libraries are therefore sanctioned practices.

Since books express the humanist and democratic values that characterize modern society and internationalism, violence directed at them is also an attack on these ideals, serving instead a worldview in which the individual being exists solely to serve the collective mission of the state. Dignity, worth, and rights are a threat to the kind of regime that enforces orthodoxy through highly authoritarian and totalitarian controls. The destruction of books and libraries attacks not only individual selfhood but also culture as the foundation of group identity. Hence, "violence to culture is a phenomenon that often shadows political violence; ethnocide shadows genocide" (Knuth 2003: 49).

On the history of libricide

Despite the long history of libricide (the most familiar story is that of the loss of the library of Alexandria, closely followed by the destruction of the library of the University of Louvain in WW I, then the attacks on Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, or the burnings of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books in some parts of the US), it was during a twenty-year period, which began with the Nazi fires in 1933 and ended in 1953 with the publication of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, that the iconic role of book destruction in the popular imagination took hold (Fishburn 2008: xv). The Nazi bookfires have since come to be seen as one of the most infamous political events of the twentieth century also because the enormous crowd took second place to ranks of photographers and film-makers, cementing National Socialism's habit of documenting its own violent spectacles.

It was only in the first years of WW II that a genuinely orthodox position was elaborated, but even then it quickly became so inflexible that it hardly suited the dilemmas of the occupation government in Germany, especially as the process called "denazification" got under way, a term that encompassed everything from questionnaires, fines, and re-education, to the trials at Nürenberg. In this setting, books were potent symbols: on the one hand, those issued under Nazi rule were feared as contagious, and debates about disposing of them bitterly contested; on the other hand, the production of new textbooks became a symbol of the necessary re-education of the German people.

In the early 1950s, an escalation of anti-communism in the US under the guidance of Senator Joseph McCarthy resulted in the targeting of intellectuals and media figures, and censorship of libraries. McCarthy's campaigns played on predispositions within the population towards anti-intellectualism, anti-liberalism, and virulent anti-communism. Although it was blacklists rather than public burnings which were the hallmark of the investigations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (better known as HUAC), books were certainly burned within the houses of the accused. More substantially, during this period the international America House Libraries were investigated and forced to remove titles by authors including Henry David Thoreau, Dashiell Hammett and Langston Hughes. No one seemed to want to be responsible for their ultimate disposition, although the American High Commissioner in Germany was reprimanded for recommending the offending books be merely sold secondhand (Belfrage 1973: 188). Generally speaking, the argument was less about whether the libraries had been censored, but rather about the method of their disposal. Which is why many were horrified at reports the books pulled by librarians in the Singapore, Tokyo and Sydney branches may actually have been burned, and why government officials were so anxious to deny any such suggestion. Little wonder that the historian of the American response to the book burnings in Germany, Guy Stern, commented that it was a "great irony that we let ourselves be drawn into this kind of censorship" (Stern 2003).

Fahrenheit 451 – libricide in a dystopia

It was in this climate that Ray Bradbury published *Fahrenheit 451* (Fahrenheit 451 is the temperature at which book-paper catches fire and burns). The author depicts a future dystopian society where agents of the government, known as "Firemen," control the populace through the destruction of printed material. Books are publicly burned because the State has decided that they make people unhappy. Suspected readers are arrested. The libricide is reinforced by omnipresent radio and television. Instead of reading, people listen to "seashells," tiny radios that fit in the ear, and watch insipid television shows projected on wall-to-wall screens, a "literal theatre of distraction" (Fishburn 2008: 162). In school, students play sports and learn nothing. Fast driving is encouraged, and pedestrians are arrested. Indiscriminate drug use, suicide, overpopulation, and war are rampant.

In this world lives Guy Montag, the main character, who smilingly and unquestioningly accepts his job as a fireman. But his private life is less than satisfactory and he feels vaguely estranged from the world and his wife, Mildred, who watches endless hours of television and overdoses on narcotics. Early in the novel, a young neighbour, Clarisse, shocks Montag by asking whether he ever reads the books he burns and whether he is happy: "He wore his happiness like a mask and the girl had run off across the lawn with the mask and there was no way of going to knock on her door and ask for it back" (Bradbury 1976: 12). Although she is later killed by a hit-and-run driver, Clarisse is the catalyst through which Montag begins to evaluate his life and career, and finally the society he supports. Clarisse and Mildred are "foils" (Kerner in Kelleghan 2002: 194): Clarisse's thinking and questioning is a threat to the State, whereas Mildred's zombielike addiction to

television and pills makes her the personification of this society. Montag's re-education continues when he is deeply moved by the self-immolation of an old woman who chooses to die with her books rather than be separated from them. What power can books have that some people are prepared to die rather than relinquish them? It is at this point that Montag secretly takes and reads one of the old woman's books to satisfy his curiosity.

Captain Beatty, Montag's supervisor and a master at brainwashing, rewrites history to say that firemen have always set fires and reading has always been forbidden. Beatty explains the State's philosophy that humans need only entertainment, not the insights, self-reflection, uncertainty, and occasional sadness provided by books. He explains that in order to achieve societal equality and happiness, people should not be given two sides of an issue or books to debate, think about, or question:

> *We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against. 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*?
>
> (Bradbury 1976: 58)

Montag's increasing inner numbness draws him closer to reading books. It also draws him to Faber, a retired professor of English. Faber, a "foil to Beatty," (Kerner in Kelleghan 2002: 195) explains to Montag that what is contained in books gives life depth and meaning. Books can present a higher quality of information as well as the time to think about and then act on that information:

> *After all, when we had all the books we needed, we still insisted on finding the highest cliff to jump off. But we do need a breather. We do need knowledge. And perhaps in a thousand years we might pick smaller cliffs to jump off. […] the things you're looking for, Montag, are in the world, but the only way the average chap will ever see ninety-nine percent of them is in a book. Don't ask for guarantees. And don't look to be saved in any one thing, person, machine, or library. Do your own bit of saving, and if you drown, at least die knowing you were headed for shore*
>
> (Bradbury 1976: 86).

Montag realizes that he has become a rebel. He encourages efforts to create an underground press and attempts to convince Mildred and her friends that reading is an important right. But, after reading to them Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," a poem about the erosion of faith, they turn him in to the police for breaking the law. When Beatty and the firemen arrive at the Montags' house, Montag is given the option of redeeming himself by burning his own books as a public gesture, and he does so - but as an act of defiance, not surrender, immolating Beatty in the process. Rescuing a small number of books, he escapes to a remote colony of intellectuals, one of several such groups that live in the woods. Group members have memorized and therefore "become" books. They recite their books, thus passing on their knowledge to their children, who will await the rebirth of a literate civilization. The novel ends with a quotation from the last chapter of the Bible and the guarded optimism that the anti-literate State will soon self-destruct and a new, cultured society will rise from the ashes.

> *And on either side of the river was there a tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month; And the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.*
> *Yes, thought Montag, that's the one I'll save for noon. For noon…*
> *When we reach the city.*
>
> (Bradbury 1976: 165)

Like most dystopias, *Fahrenheit 451* takes a perceived trend in current society and extends it to an illogical extreme. Bradbury undoubtedly reacts to the witch-hunts of Senator McCarthy, which reverberated in the artistic community, as well as expressing a general criticism of societal pressures towards conformity and uniformity of opinion. There is also a fainter concern about the misuse of technology. The people in Bradbury's future world have their views shaped by a homogenous mass media to which they are exposed on a regular basis. Although Montag's response to machines is ambivalent, there are times when he describes them in clearly negative terms. Another expressed concern is what we would now term "political correctness." Bradbury asserts in the novel that the suppression of books originated within the mass of people, specifically special interest groups that objected to one or another set of unpopular or contrary views and insisted upon suppressing that subset of books, eventually leading to a wholesale banning as the only solution to the problem of "subjective" viewpoints. Therefore, "Bradbury's dystopia is not imposed by a small but powerful minority but by a large and thoughtless majority, and that message remains as valid today as it was when it was written" (D'Ammassa 2005: 137).

The theme of the novel may be simple, with its message that book burning is the first sign of repression, but while the novel is fiercely pro-literature, the actual books remain almost incidental. Rather, it is language itself, as Faber states: "There is nothing magical in them at all. The magic is only in what books say, how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us" (Bradbury 1976: 83). In fact, the powerful opening paragraph of the novel emphasizes the centrality of language and linguistic play to both *Fahrenheit 451* and the dystopian form itself, the symbolism of black and white, the colours of fire (red, orange, and yellow), and the spectacle of conflagration suggesting the intoxication with spectacle which is the means of control in the Fireman-state. It is one of the moments in the book when the metaphorical link between fire and language becomes tangible (Fishburn 2008: xii).

> *IT WAS A PLEASURE TO BURN.*
> *It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed. With the brass nozzle in his fists, with this great python spitting its venomous kerosene upon the world, the blood pounded in his head, and his hands were the hands of some amazing conductor playing all the symphonies of blazing and burning to bring down the tatters and charcoal ruins of history. With his symbolic helmet numbered 451 on his stolid head, and his eyes all orange flame with the thought of what came next, he flicked the igniter and the house jumped up in a gorging fire that burned the evening sky red and yellow and black. He strode in a swarm of fireflies. He wanted above all, like the old joke, to shove a marshmallow on a stick in the furnace, while the flapping pigeon-winged books died on the porch and lawn of the house. While the books went up in sparkling whirls and blew away on a wind turned dark with burning.*
>
> (Bradbury 1976: 3-4)

Fire burns and controls books, but books, conversely, threaten fire because they threaten the stability of the official discourse. When Montag witnesses the old woman burn to death on the pyre that her books become, it is a moment of blinding exposure: as the books cascade to the ground, Montag "had only an instant to read a line, but it blazed in his mind for the next minute as if stamped there with fiery steel" (Bradbury 1976: 37). This sense of being exposed to language, and the fever of text, is even more explicit when Montag forces his wife and her friends to listen to his recital of "Dover Beach," for as he speaks, "he was all fire, he was all coldness," he was "stunned and shaken" (Bradbury 1976: 99-100).

The destruction of language

The diminution or destruction of language is a key dystopian trope, such as Newspeak in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. To control language is to control reality. Beatty, for

instance, says to the woman whose house he will burn, "You've been locked up here for years with a regular damned Tower of Babel" (Bradbury 1976: 38). If a library is Babel, it signifies a linguistic confusion that undermines the ideology of the state. The Library of Babel is then a "curiously conflated double symbol, both of a plurality which opposes the language control of the state, and of a canon or body of texts which provide the means for intellectual resistance" (Baker in Seed 2005: 491).

Writing of his love of books and libraries, the author said in an article published fourteen years after the first *Fahrenheit 451* edition: "It followed then that when Hitler burned a book I felt it as keenly, please forgive me, as his killing a human, for in the long sum of history they are one and the same flesh" (Bradbury 1967: 19). Indeed, books are literally humanized in the novel, to the extent that they actually take human form at the end of the narrative. The book-people are not simply influenced by books, "but written, even overwritten, by them" (Fishburn 2008: 163).

Bradbury's insistence upon the materiality of ideas indicates his conception of books is as central to human experience and human culture. When books are lost, so is humanity. Books are transmitters of the ethical knowledge that produces stable and liberal communities. The society of *Fahrenheit 451* is one without this source of moral direction, and therefore with no ethical base. The irony here is that although Montag must reconstitute his moral and authentic self in the course of his alienation from the state, the absence of moral frameworks and communitarian ideas means that society is organized "only through culturally reinforced habit and the repressive action of the firemen themselves" (Baker in Seed 2005: 490).

Conclusions

Because there are no books, there is no development of individual morality; because there is no ethical framework, there is no community. As historian Barbara Tuchman said in her 1980 address at the Library of Congress in Washington DC:

> *Books are the carriers of civilization. Without books, history is silent, literature dumb, science crippled, thought and speculation at a standstill. Without books, the development of civilization would have been impossible. They are engines of change, windows on the world, and (as a poet has said) 'lighthouses erected in the sea of time.' They are companions, teachers, magicians, bankers of the treasures of the mind. Books are humanity in print.*
>
> (Tuchman 1980: 13)

This notion is a cornerstone of twenty-first century humanism. The well-being and future of people is linked with the well-being and future of books and libraries. Like an article of faith, Tuchman's words have emotional and rational resonance. The angst in humanists' accounts of the destruction of books and libraries carries a sense of personal trauma akin to accounts of the destruction of groups of people. Libricide does share the same theoretical universe as genocide, government-authorized mass murder that is the most horrific aspect of twentieth-century political history.

P.S. It is ironic that in the 1980s, Ray Bradbury found that the publisher had, through the years, silently censored from his original text seventy-five sections of *Fahrenheit 451*.

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