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Burning Images

The Metaphor of Fire in Literature

David Karlson-Weimann

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Author: David Karlson-Weimann
Supervisor: Joe Kennedy

Abstract: Fire is often used as a metaphor, both in everyday language and in literature. This essay aims to investigate the properties of this metaphor in a literary context through analysis of two novels, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury and *The Great Fire of London* by Peter Ackroyd. The methods used are the linguistic idea of metaphors as a cognitive tool, postmodern theories of intertextuality and the formalist concept of estrangement. By applying these theories, the essay concludes that the fire metaphor has some properties that might seem to make it inappropriate for literary use, but which can be overcome. One method of doing so is by letting the fire metaphor represent several meanings simultaneously, or by letting it become an intertextual focal point for several different texts.

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1. Introduction

Throughout the history of mankind, fire has been a matter of great importance, both in a material and a symbolic way. The moment man mastered the flame and took command over it, we not only gained a servant that would be fundamental in our development, but also took an important symbolic action. Humanity was now in charge of this hitherto uncontrolled natural phenomenon. Fire came to represent a measure of power, and those who held it came to be seen as empowered. At the same time, a moment's inattentiveness could turn the fire around on its wielder. From the very beginning, fire could be looked upon as a multifaceted metaphor, representing both domination and subjugation, control and uncontrollability.

Thus, the word fire is much more complex than solely external element. Fire or heat also lives within us, as anyone can feel when walking outside on a chilly day. We always carry some of it with us, as a result of, and indeed a condition for, continuing life. We know it intrinsically, as a part of ourselves. Heat, and therefore fire, is life: someone who is warm is alive, active and dynamic. A person who is alive is a feeling person, and fire often gets to represent emotional intensity as well, in phrases such as "their passion was fiery" or "she burned with rage". This is a natural, bodily metaphor, as the rush of strong emotion often creates a sense of warmth inside of us. By analogy, someone who is cold is dead, passive and stagnant. Thus, also the opposite of fire has a metaphoric meaning. As the scorching fire inevitably burns out into dead ashes, so the human life too is eventually extinguished.

So fire is an image, which is often used to express several of our most basic concepts: life and death, power and the lack of control, and several of our more intense and active emotions. Many of these concepts are very broad with many subcategories, and some are even contradictory. This peculiar semantic situation becomes even more interesting when one considers that fire metaphors are very common in contemporary culture and literature. Several questions arise: how does an image with so many broad and well-established applications function as a metaphor? Does the plurality of meaning benefit or detract from its usefulness as a metaphor? How does the function in an everyday situation differ from when it is used in a literary context?

To properly begin to explore this, we must first consider the nature of metaphor. Traditionally when meeting the term "metaphor", a reader's mind might most readily wander to the literary sphere. Metaphors, we have been told in school, are typically encountered in poems or other figurative writing where one might wish to express something in terms of something else, leading to the conclusion that it mostly serves an aesthetic purpose.

In their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson upturn this view. Instead of being merely a decorative linguistic nicety that we apply to already formed thoughts but which we really could manage without, they argue that "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (Lakoff and Johnson 3). To exemplify this, they bring up the idea of an argument. When we talk about an argument, it is entirely unproblematic for us to use expressions like "your claims are *indefensible*", "I've never *won* an argument with him" or "if you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*" (ibid. 4). The italicized words show a common theme among the expressions: they all seem to be the kind of words one would use when discussing another, more physical type of struggle, namely war. The authors claim that the concept of argument is commonly understood through the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, and that, importantly, this is not just a matter of speech. We do think of the person we argue with as an opponent, someone we can actually win or lose against. Our entire conception of an argument is coloured by the metaphorical relationship with war. If some other culture had adopted, for example, the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS DANCE, then the idea of winning or losing an argument would seem preposterous to them; instead, they might think of the purpose of argument as one of maintaining a balanced and beautiful performance. If met with this culture, we would not view this as argument at all, because our conceptual metaphor for that is different. Other classes of conceptual metaphors they bring up include orientational metaphors, such as HAPPY IS UP; SAD IS DOWN: I'm feeling *up*, I'm in *high* spirits; I'm *depressed*, I *fell* into a *depression*, or CONSCIOUS IS UP; UNCONSCIOUS IS DOWN: I'm *up*, I *rise* early in the morning; he *fell* asleep, he's *under* hypnosis.

At first glance, it might be unintuitive to think of these kinds of expressions as metaphors when it is just the natural way we talk about things. However, the fact that these expressions have become so ingrained and second nature to our way of thinking and talking about the world does not mean that they are any less metaphorical. They do still express one thing in terms of another, even if we don't perceive it as such in daily life.

This can be put into contrast with what Lakoff and Johnson call "new metaphors" (148). These are metaphors which are not as established on the conceptual level. Instead, they seem to be much more consciously considered. When discussing the example LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART, Lakoff and Johnson talk about how the metaphor "highlights certain aspects of love experiences, downplays others, and hides still others" (ibid. 149). Using that particular metaphor picks out a certain range of our experiences of love,

which another metaphor, for example LOVE IS A STRUGGLE, would not. The new metaphor is more like what we earlier referred to as the "school version" of a metaphor, and the way they are discussed suggests an element of conscious consideration that is absent in more conceptualised metaphors. Furthermore, the authors suggest that new metaphors can themselves, through their similarities with what they represent, create new similarities between the depicted word or term and the metaphor. For example, in the case mentioned above, LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART may serve to highlight the similarities between love and an aesthetic experience, but may also cause the reader to start associating aesthetic experiences with love: clearly much care has been put into a beautiful and significant piece of art. This relation again points towards the new metaphors as a more volatile form of language. It points to the new metaphors as having at least aspects that can be considered linguistic or textual, rather than being purely conceptual.

This view is corroborated by Ana Altaras Dimitrijevic's and Marija Tadic's article "Figuring out the Figurative: Individual Differences in Literary Metaphor Comprehension". Citing Dedre Gentner and associates' article "Metaphor is Like Analogy", published in *The Analogical Mind: Perspectives from Cognitive Science*, they state that people consistently value new metaphors as more metaphorical than conventional metaphors. This is natural, in a way: as stated above, the established, conceptual metaphors can often slip by without us thinking of them as metaphors at all. They go on to state that "literary metaphors (which are by definition unconventional) are even more complex than novel metaphors" (Dimitrijevic and Tadic 402). The authors thus seem to establish a spectrum for metaphors. At the one end, we have the conceptual metaphors, which are almost entirely unnoticed by us and used automatically in our daily speech. At the other end lie the literary metaphors, things we consciously think of as form, as language made apparent.

To summarise, on the one hand it seems that fire is a very basic and natural image, which would make it hard to use to great effect in a literary context. Despite this, we can see the presence of "fiery" images both in our literature and in our popular culture. Through analysing the specific instances of fire metaphor usage in two novels, this essay seeks to investigate this seemingly contradictory state of the fire metaphor as a literary tool.

2. Aim and research question

The aim of this essay is to analyse the occurrence of the fire metaphor in the novels *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury and *The Great Fire of London* by Peter Ackroyd. It will seek to uncover some of the conditions the fire metaphor operates under and how it might be used in a literary context. Specifically, it will attempt to answer the question: what are the properties of the fire metaphor in everyday language, how does this affect its general literary properties, and how can it be used in literary practice as seen in the analysed novels?

3. Method and theory

3.1 Formalism

Formalism is a movement of literary criticism that focuses on the evaluation of the formal aspects of the text. Text type, grammar, syntax, meter, rhythm and the use of metaphors, analogy and other literary devices are, according to formalist theory, what is interesting and worth analysing in a piece of text. To a formalist, a certain mode of language is not only typical of literature but indeed what actually creates it, what makes it different from the normal everyday language and what creates the literary mode of communication.

The Russian formalists active in the early decades of the 20th century shaped the theoretical field of formalism. One of the most famous of these authors was Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984). In "Art as Device", published in his essay collection *Theory of Prose* (1925), he discusses the idea of the automatic. When something, like performing a certain task, becomes a habit to us, the amount of energy we have to expend to perform the task decreases. With training, we do not have to consider each small step that comprises the act we are performing, but slowly learn to do more and more of it by routine, not thinking about it. This automatisation process occurs naturally throughout our daily life, as the essay exemplifies by an extract from Lev Tolstoy's (1828-1910) diary. In this extract, Tolstoy is dusting his room and suddenly cannot remember if he had done the couch or not. The act has become so routine to him that he no longer perceives it, leaving no impression on him. That part of life has become dead and stagnant to him, and he worries that, by extension, "[i]f the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious, then it's as if this life had never been" (Tolstoy qtd. in Shklovsky 5).

Shklovsky agrees with this. He proposes that art should be the treatment for the over-automated mind. Art should present the world in a way we are not used to seeing it. It should provide perspectives and presentations which have not been automated to the reader, injecting a measure of energy and new experience in them. To this end, Shklovsky proposes one of the most important concepts in formalist criticism, namely that of estrangement or defamiliarization. If the automated mind is produced by experiencing the common through recognition, then art should strive to "lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight, not recognition" (ibid. 6). Estrangement is to make the perception of an item, emotion or situation harder, to make it strange and unintuitive to us. This makes us have to expend energy, time and thought to properly digest the work, and not just immediately recognize it. By expanding the time it takes for us to interact with our impressions, the process of automatisation is counteracted.

Worth noting is that according to the formalist theory it matters less what is being perceived. It is the process of perception that is the key: "Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artefact itself is quite unimportant." (ibid. 6). The purpose is not to find a new purpose or value in what is around us. The value comes from engaging our minds, from experiencing the event of novel thought.

The concept of estrangement is important in the analysis of the fire metaphor below. It will help determine when a metaphor could be said to be "literary" and when it could be considered less so. It will serve as the criterion against which the essay will compare the different uses and effects of the fire metaphor.

3.2 Gaston Bachelard and Our Perception of Fire

Despite fire playing a significant role in the history of humanity, it is not a subject which has been afforded much attention in critical academic discussion. In his book *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1938), Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) addresses why it might be so, and also provides his analysis of how people interpret and interact with it. His discussion of fire is based on his idea of science and art as concepts in opposition. For him, "the axes of poetry and of science are opposed to one another from the outset" (Bachelard 2), the one objective, the other subjective. The problem with fire, Bachelard claims, is that it carries its subjective connotations with it into the sphere of science, making it hard to engage with in scientific terms. The book is intended to reveal some of what he saw as the complexes or myths obscuring the truth. However, the author is eager to stress the subjectivity of his thesis,

warning that a reader of his book "will in no way have increased his knowledge" afterwards (ibid. 5). This is his way of categorizing the interpretations surrounding fire, not a way to say anything qualitative about it. However, since the essay deals mainly with interpretation of fire, the categorization is still helpful. Two complexes in particular are useful.

The Empedocles complex is named after the ancient Greek philosopher Empedocles, credited with, among other things, the idea of the classical four elements. According to legend, he committed suicide by throwing himself into the volcano Etna on Sicily, attempting to transcend his mortality and become a god. The complex named after him fittingly represents "the call of the funeral pyre" (ibid. 16). The Empedocles complex deals with the emotional reverie incited by the flickering flames and the mystery harboured therein. It represents "the desire to change, to speed up the passage of time, to bring all of life to its conclusion" (ibid. 16). For the fascinated individual, "destruction is more than change, it is a renewal" (ibid. 16). By letting yourself be consumed, you are incorporated in the mystery and transcend your level of existence.

The Novalis complex is named after the famous Romantic poet, whose poetry Bachelard considers "an attempt to relive primitivity" (ibid. 38). The Novalis complex deals with origins. Bachelard proposes that the origin of physical fire was the metaphorical one. The idea of continuously rubbing two pieces of wood together came from the experience of what happened when continuously rubbing two bodies together: "before being the son of wood, fire is the son of man" (ibid. 25). For the Novalis complex, fire is internal first and external second. Life is created by the same sustained, persistent, loving, rubbing motion that creates the spark, and only from the heat generated between either sticks or humans is something born.

Through Bachelard's thoughts on the nature of our fascination with, and, therefore, our perception of, fire, we can derive a few of the most prevalent interpretations that the fire metaphor is used to represent. They are used to analyse the content of the individual metaphors and to illuminate similarities and differences between them.

3.3 Postmodernism and Hypertextuality

Postmodernism is a term that can refer to a variety of things. At its broadest, the term is used to describe the era we currently live in, and the different ideological advancements that take place in it. More narrowly, it is a line of thought that seeks to emphasize the unknowability

and non-essentiality of existence. Literarily, the most obvious example of this is poststructuralism. The movement can be seen as structuralism taken to its extreme point.

Structuralists such as Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) argued that the structure of language was what decided its content; a word only carried meaning in relation to another word, and at no point was the linguistic system founded in any kind of essential truth. (Allen 10) Structuralism recognized language as arbitrary, but still useful as a tool for expression as long as one understood the premise. Their attitude was largely scientific, concerned with finding out verifiable aspects of communication. Poststructuralists, however, accused the structural thinkers of not committing to their thesis. If indeed all language is arbitrary, relational and uncertain (and they did not argue that it was not), then how could it ever be used to have knowledge of anything essential? The poststructuralist thinking put forth that true, essential knowledge was impossible, since our systems of cognition and communication did not in fact interact with the essential, but only with themselves. In other words, language could only ever express the relational.

In 1997 Gerard Genette published his work *Palimpsests*. A palimpsest is a piece of text written on a surface or material upon which an earlier text has already once been written and possibly erased, but still left some marks in the paper from where the pen has depressed it. It deals with different ways in which a text can appear in another text, and one of the main ways for this to happen is through what he calls hypertextuality. He defines this as "any relationship uniting a text B [...] with an earlier text A [...] upon which it is grafted in a manner which is not that of commentary" (Genette qtd. in Allen 108). The earlier text is called the hypotext, while the later text is called the hypertext. This concept of texts influencing and defining other texts, of texts being relational, plays well into the structuralist and poststructuralist views.

The hypertextual theories are appropriate for analysing the chosen novels which, in addition to having and abundance of fire metaphors, also have a distinct intertextual quality. Both refer back to older works in their own ways, and, as will be shown, to the "text" of our own history as well. It will be shown that the fire image serves as an important point in which the intertextuality of the novels comes to the forefront.

4. Previous research

4.1 *The Great Fire of London*

Much of the critique and research about Ackroyd focuses on his postmodern style of writing and on his theme of historicizing London in different ways. In the book *Postmodernism: The Key Figures* (2002), Susana Onega identifies the prevalent mode in *The Great Fire of London* as being what she calls Borgesian, showing the idea that texts are "self-begetting", trapping readers and authors and texts in a constantly derivative textual world, a "Library of Babel" where all possible combinations of all known letters exist (Onega, *Postmodernism* 2). *The Great Fire of London*, she says, is characterized by everyone trying to impose their own subjective reading of *Little Dorrit*, despite each one being as subjective as the others (ibid. 3).

Similarly, in her article "The Intertextual City in *The Great Fire of London* by Peter Ackroyd", Marta Komsta explores the way Ackroyd's novel works with its hypotext, specifically focusing on themes of imprisonment and performance. She argues that "the hypotext *(Little Dorrit)* dominates the hypertext *(The Great Fire of London)* in a form of an intertextual ball and chain" (Komsta 172). Drawing on Onega, she claims that the characters, for all their attempts to push their own reading of *Little Dorrit*, are still themselves prisoners in the textual world of Ackroyd's creation. No matter what the characters do, their actions are dictated by the hypotext. There is no freedom, no escape from the textual prison, except in one paragraph in which Komsta identifies a hint at a way out, a path to "transcendence that might provide the alienated world of narrative with a sense of cultural belonging" (ibid. 187). Through the recognition of cultural belonging, Komsta argues that Ackroyd sees an opportunity for characters to gain "continuity" and "an identity extending beyond the frame of the text" (ibid. 187).

4.2 *Fahrenheit 451*

Much has been written about Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. One of the most relevant texts for this essay might be the "Burning Bright: *Fahrenheit 451* as Symbolic Dystopia" by David Watt. He explores the themes of dystopian apocalypse as they relate to alienation. He also examines the use of the fire metaphor, noting its dual nature: "Burning as constructive energy, and burning as apocalyptic catastrophe, are the symbolic poles of Bradbury's novel". (Watt location 853) Watt goes on to analyse the dual nature of fire in Bradbury´s book, concluding

that the metaphor is used to describe and relate many concepts throughout the book. As we get to observe the world through Guy Montag's eyes, the fiery language becomes natural. Montag is also at one point described as having a "Nero complex" (ibid. location 838), a word that seems to carry very similar meaning to the Empedocles complex.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Status of the Fire Metaphor

In order to begin an analysis of how the fire metaphor is used in literature, we must first try to determine the current state of the fire metaphor itself. Starting with the idea of the metaphoric scale proposed by Dimitrijevic and Tadic, the way we normally use the fire metaphor does not seem to occupy the very far conceptual end of that spectrum. When we say "he was burning with rage", we conceive of someone who is for the moment engulfed in his emotions, possibly to the point of losing control over his actions. However, we do not conceive of him as actually being on fire, in the way we think about our opponent in an argument as actually being our enemy. Nonetheless, older images of fire, after all, probably belong more on the conceptual than on the linguistic side of the spectrum.

One of the hallmarks of a new metaphor according to Lakoff's and Johnson's description, namely that certain aspects of the subject of the metaphor can be promoted or hidden, is less present in the older fire images. The meaning of the fire metaphor is to some extent preformed in our heads, it fits with the established patterns of how such images usually work, and we are used to its different interpretations. It is therefore reasonable to consider it, if not entirely conceptual, at least fitting on the conceptual side of the spectrum. If we consider the fire metaphor as mainly being conceptual, however, attempting to use it in a literary context might cause problems. A conceptual metaphor, a metaphor we accept without much thought, cannot easily be part of a literary language that fulfils the purpose of estrangement as proposed by Shklovsky. Such metaphors must be new and unfamiliar to the reader, so that they engage in them with their conscious mind, not their recognition, and wrestle with their interpretation. Metaphors such as fire, which seem to lie closer to the conceptual end than to the linguistic end of the metaphoric spectrum, would therefore, according to Shklovsky, be a poor fit for literary use. The estrangement effect would be difficult to achieve, on account of our being too automated in our perception of fire.

5.2 The Great Fire of London – Fire from Multiple Perspectives

The Great Fire of London (1982) by Peter Ackroyd (1949-) is a novel set in a contemporary London, but which draws parallels back to the novel *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857) by Charles Dickens (1812-1870). An anchor character is Spenser Spender, a film producer who embarks on the project of making a film of *Little Dorrit*. This project touches on the lives of several other characters. Among them is Letitia Spender, Spencer's wife, who wrestles with the issues of their relationship. She both leaves and comes back to Spencer, without it really changing much between them. There is also Audrey Skelton, a working class phone line operator who slowly descends into psychological anguish related to the *Little Dorrit* movie. Rowan Phillips is, an intellectual and self-centred literary critic struggling with his homosexuality, who Spenser contacts to help with the movie script, and who ends up seducing Audrey's boyfriend Tim. As the story progresses, all of the characters get interconnected with each other through the touchstone of the *Little Dorrit* movie adaptation.

The Great Fire of London is a novel in which the author takes a very playful, nonstandard position in the use of both the fire metaphor and in the relation to the both explicit and slightly more subtle intertextual ties. Many of these ties also coincide with the fire images, making the novel highly interesting to investigate. In the novel, fire is something that smoulders under the surface, almost forgotten, until it suddenly erupts and reminds the world of its existence.

In *The Great Fire of London*, there is obviously a theme of fire permeating the work. Audrey Skelton, for example, is a character that the novel often describes in terms of, or in proximity to, fire. An example is the very first description we get of her, where she dreams of being a dancer with her red hair "trail[ing] around her like a circle of flame" (Ackroyd, *Great Fire* 8). On the following page, there are scenes of firemen on TV. These scenes are described as "the staple of television for many years; they were as predictable as a child's fantasy and yet, strangely, most people watched until the end" (ibid. 9). From the perspective of this essay the phrase could be seen as a sort of recognition. The fiery scenes and the images painted by fire are admitted to be stock material, perspectives that are familiar to us, which do not challenge us or provide any estrangement, but still fascinate us. This admittance also provides a certain expectation or foreshadowing. Through the citation about the predictability of the fire images above, the author can be considered to have pointed out the limits of the fire metaphor. Since he is clearly using it anyway, we might therefore expect him to later attempt a subversion.

Rowan Phillips is a rather cold character. He is typically calculating, always analysing, never quite in touch with his feelings. Despite his focus on sex, he is scared of attachment. When Rowan seduces a man in a bar and follows him home, the following sex scene is described in very terse, matter-of-fact statements, spanning only about six sentences. (ibid. 75-77) As Rowan promptly leaves and walks out into the rain to hail a cab, "small cold drops ran through the leather jacket and on to his skin. He barely felt them" (ibid. 77). Here, we see an interpretation of fire that is congruent with Bachelard's idea about the Novalis complex. According to Bachelard, the heat of the body and the increase of heat caused when rubbing it against others in a loving, patient and passionate way is the basis of our relationship with fire. The lack of passion in Rowan is thus made clear through a lack of literal body heat. Despite the act of physical rubbing he just experienced, he is still as cold and stagnant as the autumn rain.

Throughout the book, frustration and obsession grow in Audrey. The ghost of little Dorrit, who she has seen in a vision at a séance, has shaken her, causing her to grow ever more upset with Spencer's film adaptation of the original novel. Eventually, she gets fired from her job at the telephone exchange (ibid. 142). In the scene where she relates this to her boyfriend, there is plenty of fire involved. Audrey drops a match on the carpet as she lights a cigarette, and proceeds to continuously smoke as she paces around in frustration. It is up to her boyfriend Tim to stamp the match out, and he then chases her around with an ashtray. Audrey's smouldering discontent is about to cause a disaster, and Tim wants to avert it, but it is futile work. Audrey has dreams and visions, she does not want to be stuck here in a cramped flat, going nowhere. In this way, she is a representative of the poor of our days, stuck in their situation with little means of getting out. It is reasonable, then, that a film re-enacting the story of *Little Dorrit* would sting her eyes. Dickens' novel grappled with the social issues of the time, attacking the harmful factory conditions and the idea of debtor's prisons where people were tossed when they could not pay, and, in general, sided with the outcasts of society. Reproducing *Little Dorrit* would have been entirely possible even if Spencer had set in the current London, focusing on unemployment and people sleeping in the streets, but instead the film focuses on the cruelties of the Victorian time, thereby suggesting that such problems belonged to a bygone age. Such frustration is, of course, not possible to erase just by extinguishing the results of it, as Tim tries to do. In fact, he even fails to do it completely: the mark in the carpet from the dropped match constantly reminds Audrey of the deplorable state of things (ibid. 159), and she finally runs out and gathers up a group of homeless people to help her torch the film set. As will be elaborated below, the fiery imagery

can be seen as the intertextual layers starting to weaken and intermix, the first embers of the titular Great Fire which will serve as a connection point between worlds.

Making a movie out of *Little Dorrit* is Spenser Spender's brain child, and, to some degree, his obsession. When his wife leaves him for another man, he is admittedly shaken, but his reaction is to focus even more of his time into the movie to try to shield himself from emotions rather than trying to win her back. Then, when she attempts suicide and ends up in hospital, Spenser comes and picks her up and takes her home, but his conclusion is that now, "[e]verything is back where it should be. He could continue filming with a clear conscience, all conflicts resolved" (ibid. 141). Despite his wife stating to feel "dead inside" (ibid. 140), it never occurs to him that she might have left him for a reason. To him, the movie is the main cornerstone of his life, and it blinds him from seeing the state of the parts of his life which is not the movie.

In the last pages of the book, Audrey and Spenser come together in a dramatic final scene. Audrey and her band of homeless people find the movie set and go on to light it on fire, when Spenser and Rowan come along and discover it.

> Spenser Spender ran towards the strange group of tramps, who now stood a little way back from the flames. "Help me put it out!" he shouted at them. […]
>
> "For God's sake, Rowan!" he shouted into the wind which spun around the buildings. "Help me control this thing!"
>
> "Spenser, there's nothing we can do! It's taken a hold! Look at it – it's too enormous!" […]
>
> [Tim has come to look for Audrey.] And she was there – in a small alley between the burning buildings. She was swaying to and fro, as large pieces of burning timber fell around her. She was trying to sing, but the smoke made her choke and retch. […]
>
> He ran out of the alley, through the haphazard flames, and towards the barrier. He felt her body relax in his arms when they reached the cooler air, as if she had drawn strength from the inferno, and when they reached the pavement he laid her gently on the ground. She was breathing peacefully now. […]
>
> Spenser Spender lay dead in the ruins of *Little Dorrit*: he was the first victim of what came to be known as the Great Fire. (ibid. 162-165)

In this scene, something interesting happens with the fire metaphor. From one perspective, we can see it as the culmination and eruption of Audrey's discontent and fury. The young woman seems to revel in the results of her actions, taking great satisfaction in her handiwork and, to some extent, becoming empowered by it even as it threatened her. The fire as her tool, her vector of action, represents the act of revolution and protest when things have gone too far. It is the fire of justified rage.

From another perspective, the fire represents Spenser's self-consuming passion. The movie which has consumed almost all the attention in his recent life has now also consumed his actual life. We see the Empedocles complex fulfilled: the fires of the film set were not enough to dissuade him from what Rowan clearly warned him was a futile task. At some point, possibly subconsciously, he must have come to the conclusion that his passion for *Little Dorrit*, represented by the flames, was more important than survival.

Rage is, in itself, not a particularly novel target for a fire metaphor, nor is passion, self-destructive or not. But there is an argument to be made for there being a sort of subversion of the fire metaphor happening here, as somewhat hinted at in the first pages of the book. The fire represents different meanings for different people. This, in itself, is not strange, as has been shown earlier. However, at this point, it does so *simultaneously*. The reader is asked to conceive of the fire image not only as a container for one of many possible semantic states, as they might commonly be accustomed to, but as a container for several of them at the same time. In this manner, the image itself becomes dislodged. The meaning of the fire image is no longer complete in itself, because independently of how you look at it, the split perspective causes the other meaning to hover in the background. The fire is lifted to the forefront as a construction, something that can never encapsulate the full and proper meaning of what it tries to describe, and thus the metaphoricity of the metaphor is made apparent. This encourages readers to consider the metaphor as a textual element rather than as a conceptual one and it causes two instances of estrangement. The subject matter is estranged, giving a new and non-automated meaning to the image of fire. It causes the readers to break free from their accustomed ways of thinking about fire and provides a new perspective. This estrangement, however, is only relevant in the context of the individual novel. I would argue that a second estrangement takes place as the metaphor of fire slides along the metaphor scale. This is the estrangement of the form, the opening of a possibility that fire might not always be readily interpreted as the readers are accustomed to, and which might therefore cause them to look at other fire metaphors with a more critical eye. This new perspective would remain in the mind of the reader, rather than being bound to a single instance of interpretation, and it is thus fitting to talk about them as different entities. The combination of these two levels of estrangement serves to revitalise and renew the power of the fire metaphor as a literary construct.

5.3 *Fahrenheit 451* – Fire in a Changing Perspective

Fahrenheit 451 (1954) by Ray Bradbury (1920-2012), named after the temperature at which the author thought book paper caught fire, is set in a dystopian future where all books have been banned and outlawed by the government in order to keep the population sedate. By denying them books and instead feeding them light audial and visual entertainment, no one questions the government or the order of society. They have even managed to hide the fact that the war they are currently in is likely going to eradicate them, and instead they tell people that they are well prepared for a decisive victory. The fire brigades have been converted from institutions that extinguish fires to ones that burn what is considered as illegal books and documents. Guy Montag is a fireman who has worked for the brigade for a long time, but, when he meets the peculiar teen Clarisse McClellan, he starts questioning his vocation. Throughout the book, we can follow his struggle as he starts to question more and more of the society he lives in, and his role in it. Hiding a book away from one of his missions, he falls into trouble both with his wife Millie and with Mr Beatty, the head of the fire department, who both suspect that something is wrong. Later, he also meets the retired literature teacher Faber, who helps him in coming to terms with his dangerous new desire. The book ends with Guy Montag fleeing from the city and joining a band of renegade humanists while the city is obliterated behind him in a big nuclear bomb strike.

Fire is an ever-present concept in *Fahrenheit 451*. It is not hard to find historical parallels for this; it was a "fiery" time. The Second World War had ended just a decade before Bradbury published his novel. The Nazi oppression of the Jewish people and their culture through the burning of books perpetrated in the name of the state has clear parallels in the novel. Fire represents destruction here, the eradication of culture and memory, the severance of life from history and also the impoverishment of life through the lack of reflection and connections to other people.

Everything is fast, loud or violent in the world of *Fahrenheit 451*. People drive jet cars (Bradbury 9) careening down the streets with minimum instead of maximum speed limits at a literally breakneck pace, causing deaths among joyriding youngsters. TVs have gone from being a single box to multiple, ideally completely encircling the viewer, and all the shows are filled with noise and emotion. When Guy Montag asks his wife what the show is about, or who the characters are, she cannot answer (ibid. 46-47). This is a world with no time for slowness, with no opportunity to take in the context of one's life or hold up and reflect on something. And Bradbury's view of a society without a cultural context is a cold one. In the

beginning of the book, when Montag first meets Clarisse McClellan, a teen who seems to resist the societal pressure, she points this out: "You laugh when I haven't been funny, and you answer right off. You never stop to think what I've asked you." (ibid. 9). Later, when Montag asks his wife Millie if she could remember where they first met, both find that they cannot. (ibid. 44) In the meantime, the war is raging. The public is kept out of the loop, being told that a million men have been mobilized and that "[q]uick victory is ours if the war comes". However, it turns out, the real number is ten times that (ibid. 90). Despite this, when Montag asks Millie's friend Mrs. Phelps if she's not worried about her drafted husband Pete, he receives a negative reply. In Bradbury's view, the destruction of culture is also the destruction of human bonds. If we are not able to understand our surroundings, our history and the conditions we share, then we cannot understand or care for each other. By burning what gives time for reflected contemplation, replacing it with speed and incoherence, we create a society where no one cares for anyone but themselves.

Fire is a source of constant fascination in the novel. The very first line in the book is "[i]t was a pleasure to burn." (ibid. 9). Even towards the end of the book, when Montag has been betrayed by Millie and tasked to set his own house on fire, he notes that "as before, it was good to burn" (ibid. 114). As he tears his own home down, he does so with a fervour because he "wanted to change everything" (ibid. 113), to remove the memories of his past life. This is reverie, as accounted for by Bachelard's Empedocles complex: the desire for change and progression, renewal and transformation of one's state. Bradbury's society as a whole shows signs of this complex. The speed and recklessness, the desire for stimuli and the unreflecting obsession are constantly brought up throughout the novel. But no change comes from the fire that burns Montag's home to the ground; he is in the same situation as he was before, facing trial for passion of books. As Montag stands there in the street, being interrogated by Mr Beatty, he utters the words "We never burned *right…*" (ibid. 116). What could that mean? One interpretation is that the fire was the improper kind of fire, or fire improperly used. In Bradbury's world, the physical fire is used to seek to control the people, keep them complacent and distracted and unorganized. The connection between people has vanished; they no longer care for each other, no longer share each other's heat. But according to the Novalis complex, that is the proper way of fire; it is an effect of the interaction and friction between items and people. It is the people that must burn, burn metaphorically with the heat created through personal bonds, through shared experience and closeness, for the result created through that union to serve a proper purpose. In the last part of the book, Montag has fled the city and met with a band of renegade humanists. It turns out that these

outcast scholars have each learned a classic piece of literature by heart, and that between them and other groups, many important texts are still alive. Here, there is a clear sense of the Novalis complex taking over the fire metaphor. Montag's physical movement from the modern, exploited world into the natural, primitive one outside the city is telling that we are now returned to an earlier state, a more basic condition of human life. In terms of the fire metaphor, the culture-carrying works now reside inside humans, and so the only way to access them is through human interaction, exactly what the government in the city sought to eradicate. In place of the mesmerized, emotional Empedocles complex that dominated the city, the Novalis complex steps in and sets the tentatively optimistic tone for the new future.

Montag's comment about burning "right" serves to highlight a tension between the two representations of fire. Fire stands for both destruction and rebirth, the one form physical, the other metaphorical. Like in Ackroyd's *The Great Fire of London*, each image of fire is not in itself new. However, as both are forced into simultaneous positions, the reader is made to regard them both at once, and so the inherent linguistic nature of the fire symbol is laid bare, resulting in an estrangement of both the fire metaphor, revealing its metaphoricity and renewing the effect of the image.

5.4 Fire as the Point of Intertextual Intersection

In the above section, it has been discussed how a simultaneous multiplicity of meaning can serve to revitalize a metaphor. In this section, the same subject will be approached also from an intertextual perspective.

Ackroyd's *The Great Fire of London* is an overtly hypertextual work. It explicitly states its hypotext from the beginning, namely the novel *Little Dorrit* by Charles Dickens. As both Susana Onega and Marta Komsta note above, the novel is powerfully bound by its hypotext. The themes of imprisonment prevalent in the novel reflect the textual prison that the characters find themselves in. Even as the titular Great Fire started by Audrey eradicates the (in her opinion) false version of *Little Dorrit* in the end of the book, she is still not free of the version of the text she has herself been part of, the novel written by Ackroyd. The fire, however, introduces a moment of interaction from another text, one in which the titular Great Fire has also occurred: the history of London.

Onega notes that Ackroyd is concerned with "Englishness" and Komsta notes that he suggests that cultural belonging is a means of escaping the hypertextual prison. Furthermore, in *Metafiction and Myth in the Novels of Peter Ackroyd*, Onega mentions that Ackroyd makes

little difference between fictional and biographical writing (Onega, *Metafiction and Myth* 13). In his history book over the city of London, titled *London: the Biography*, Ackroyd shows an intimate interest in both of these subjects and displays signs of the kind of mixing of genres Onega talks about. The way he talks about the city of London in many ways implies a textual, palimpsestuous theme in the development of the city. As part of the chapter dealing with the Great Fire of 1666, he describes in detail Fetter Lane, one of the streets where the fire finally stopped spreading. Replying to a quote from G. K. Chesterton about the way that human hands and intentions are always present in the stones and structures of the city, he suggests that "every object, every doorway, throws a light upon the ancient territory of which the present Fetter Lane is now the custodian". Under this street, he writes, there has been found a Roman urn and a 9th century sword handle (Ackroyd, *Biography* 230). The remnants of previous eras literally lie in layers beneath the most recent one, giving a foundation for the present incarnation of the street to stand on. Similarly, the suggestion that the city takes on a form of its own, in a way its inhabitants have no control over, permeates the work. When discussing the process of rebuilding the razed parts of London after the fire, Ackroyd describes how the men responsible for the task had several ideas about the new layout of the city. However, they were all for nought: "None was accepted, none acceptable. The city, as always, reasserted itself along its ancient topographical lines" (ibid. 238). The city seems to be formed by previous versions of the city, and the citizens are affected by this as well. As he discusses how the aforementioned Fetter Lane has often been home to revolutionaries and agitators, he asks the question: "Is it possible, then, that certain inhabitants acquire their identity, or temperament, from the circumstances of their immediate locale?" (ibid. 235). The idea of the city as an intertextual entity, communicating through history with its previous incarnations and ruling the people inside it more than they rule it, can be gleaned throughout the chapter.

The fire, then, becomes an element through which the historicity of the intertextual condition is brought to the forefront. In the history of the physical city of London, the current hypertext in the form of physical homes and houses was burnt away by the flames. It is as if the top layer of the palimpsest of London was incinerated. This had the effect of freeing the people of their current situation for a moment, as "debts and property, mortgages and buildings were destroyed by the Fire in equal measure" (ibid. 239). However, the fire simultaneously brought up what lay beneath and thus did not serve to actually free London from the grasp of its history. In *The Great Fire of London*, Audrey likewise sets a current interpretation of the hypotext to the flame, thereby freeing the text from the currently most

prominent version of it, and reasserting a more historically connected interpretation. However, just as with the Great Fire of London, the Great Fire in *The Great Fire of London* does not free the text from its hypotext, but simply brings up the underlying levels. Audrey's fire becomes a sort of intersection between the textual and the historical, the reference to a historical event introducing a second point of reference for the reader in a playful manoeuvre similar to the aforementioned estrangement of the fire metaphor. Here, the fire exists in two worlds at the same time, estranging and blurring the borders between them and making us question the conditions of both.

We can see a similar connection between fire and history in *Fahrenheit 451*. The entire book's main premise, to explore the consequences of burning texts, has an obvious historical parallel in the actual burning of books during the Second World War. Furthermore, in the end of the novel, where Montag's city is eradicated in a giant nuclear bombing run, we once again see the removal of the top layer of civilization to allow for a moment of freedom. Interestingly, the humanists in the forest follow Montag down to the ruins of the city, supposedly to rebuild a new society atop the old one. Both the fire of the burning books and the fire of the destroying bomb become touch points where text and history interact, where the fire lives in two worlds simultaneously, and once more causes a case of different texts entering each other.

6. Conclusion

This essay has set out to describe the properties of the fire metaphor in everyday language, and how these properties affect its use in literature. The fire metaphor is well-established, and a natural part of the common language but still in general recognized as a metaphor. This could affect its literary properties in light of the formalist concept of estrangement. Through analysis of the novels *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Great Fire of London*, it has then been discussed how the fire metaphor can be worked with and adapted to achieve an estrangement effect. Through letting the fire metaphor occupy several semantic states simultaneously, either through carrying several perspectives from inside the story or becoming the point where the text connects to other texts in an intertextual network, the fire metaphor can be gainfully estranged and revitalized as a literary construct, both in individual works and broadly in society.

Fire is an underexplored subject in academic discussion, given its general prevalence and importance and this essay has highlighted one method of dealing with the fire metaphor. Hopefully, it can add to our understanding of one of our most multifaceted, interesting and commonly used images.

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