

# Forum

## Energy Sources and Literature

### TO THE EDITOR:

On opening the March 2011 issue of *PMLA*, I was surprised to find a cluster of articles in the Editor's Column about the relation of energy sources to literature, "Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources" (*PMLA* 126.2 [2011]: 305–26). When I read *On the Road*, it never occurred to me to ask (as it does to Patricia Yaeger) how often Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise stopped for gas (306). But the polemical position I adopted as a student at Concordia University in Montreal, where I pursued an MA in English, creative writing option, from 1975 to 1977, was informed by the following mouthful: "all else equal, human consciousness, the content of our minds, is predicated on energy and material accessions made available to the human species as a planetary whole." This is not a materialist conception; matter cannot conceive.

My declaration about matter not conceiving was directed at professors who criticized me for being crudely materialistic. For example, I pointed out in one paper that pastorals were written and read not by pastors but by materially well-off authors and audiences living in cities with high standards of living, energy use, and population density. We should think of the great Renaissance humanists who were city builders and city dwellers. Here Patricia Yaeger and Vin Nardizzi, whose essay "Wooden Slavery" examines the depiction of wood as a fuel in "wooden-age literature" (313–15), have one leg up on me because they are able to identify the energy sources (wood and coal) that made city living and the growth of city populations possible. This is a triumph of time-extended (1975 to 2011) collaborative scholarship!

In a paper on the proletarian novel, I noted that by 1930 the chemical and engineering development of the fractional distillation of oil

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permitted the world's two billion human beings to consume 200,000 kilocalories per person per day, up from 70,000 kilocalories during the Renaissance. This increase led to industrial civilization and the rise of the working-class hero, whose conflict with the bourgeoisie and the robber barons was grist for American proletarian novels.

In my combative youth I carried my materialist analysis to excess and risked stripping lit-

erature of the essence that distinguishes it from other disciplines. I now appreciate the fragment of Elisabeth Bishop's poem "The Moose" that Patricia Yaeger includes in her article (307). Those of us who love literature have to step back to recall the "smell of moose" as well as the "acrid smell of gasoline."

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