

Energy and Literary Studies

BRENT RYAN BELLAMY

Energy Humanities excite thought, innervate methodology, and occasion new research. In one jolt the proposition that humanities researchers, literary scholars among them, address history from the standpoint of energy fuses against accusations of irrelevance that humanities departments face. The call asks researchers to join in an assessment of the historical dynamics of energy systems in order to speculate, along the lines proposed by Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer's question, "how to work towards a sustainable energy future?" (40). Given the current global climate and the tumult over energy resources, it would seem that there is no time like the present to come to terms, on a number of fronts, with the cultural, economic, and political roles of energy in late capitalism and its historical development.

Allan Stoekl, author of *Bataille's Peak* (2007), suggests that those taking up energy ought to resist the well-nigh ontological stance oil might take should we allow it to overshadow our other concerns. In the foreword to *Oil Culture*, he writes, "the most effective way of refusing such a reification of oil, all the while granting it the visibility it deserves, is to write its history ... It's when we think about what 'oil history' could mean that we take a *natural* entity and recognize its *cultural* centrality" (xii). Though oil presents itself as critically overwhelming, responses to it should not back away, but instead find ways to *mediate* the particulars of oil and the general situation of our energy system. Put differently the goal is to understand the contemporary (or many contemporaries) as energy soaked moments in history, and what I call for here is an elaboration on the forms of critical mediation we have, and need, in order to get to the energy sources of culture, and the cultural sources of energy. Thus, humanities scholars are already in position to address the historical specificity of energy. Literary study in particular brings a hermeneutic precision to the table that engages the relationship between narrative and duration.

Where, how, and when to incorporate energy into our various and varied research programs? I would like to offer what will seem like an all-too broad schematic for the study of literature and energy, but is actually quite modest methodologically. My proposition is that those interested in cultural and literary studies might find such a schema useful in thinking through what Energy Humanities might offer to existing and emerging questions alike. In short, one could 1) include energy in the narrative frame of history; 2) locate the signs of energy through close reading; 3) assess trends

across a set of digitized texts; 4) return to old archives looking for new finds; 5) read against the text against itself; or, 6) search out the tell-tale absences of energy. The following remarks briefly touch on each proposition.

New historical and new critical approaches could return to coal era novels such as Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), which offers a bleak description of Coketown: "It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it...It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves forever and ever, and never got uncoiled" (19). Here, coal makes an obvious impact on the realist novel. Energy saturates setting, generating a poesis parallel to that of character, but only occasionally overlapping. What else does *Hard Times* say about the impacts of carbon energy on the industrial revolution or on the bodies that lived and labored in such places or on the soil, the air, and the water? Are other texts similarly marked? This approach turns the explicit, the obvious, the setting of energy in history, into the point of contact for a critical study of energy.

A distant reading approach could look for energy keywords in a variety of texts and genres. Reading energy on the level of content would be a way to understand when and how energy sources arise in literary form and to ask which forms seem to come to terms with energy, in any given manner, most prominently and most directly. This approach could be a way to move beyond the broad questions, towards more focused research on stories about wood, about coal, about oil, about nuclear energy, and so on. These approaches are already available; it is amazing how attuned distant and close reading in particular are to gleaning for the narratological qualities of energy (for instance, one might look for scenes of coal stoking and steam engines in novels already interested in maritime and oceanic mobilities).

When it comes to genre, I first consider my work on U.S. post-apocalyptic novels. I would ask, what does it mean to write about an energy scarce future in the midst of an energy rich one? And, what can be learned by reading against the grain in stories set after the end of petromodernity? Other questions materialize rather quickly once we begin to look for energy in relation to other literary genres from the steam powered western to the "Improbability Drives" of science fiction.¹

These observations about genre can also be tested within a global scale in a comparative mode. The contemporary situation in Russia, as described by Alexander Etkind (2014), remains vastly different from the North American context—indeed, he de-

¹ For a full consideration of science fiction and energy see Gerry Canavan "Retrofutures and Petrofutures" and Graeme MacDonald, "Improbability Drives."

scribes the post-soviet oil novel as a kind of “magical historicism” (161) replete with historian protagonists, shape-shifting wolves, and new forms of energy which result in the destitute eating products made of oil. Similarly, in the (neo)colonial context of the Niger Delta, Jennifer Wenzel deploys the term “petro-magical-realism” as a way to elaborate “the fantastic and material elements” of Amos Tutuola’s fiction, “linking formal, intertextual, sociological, and economic questions about literature to questions of political ecology” (450). Reading the genre as bound up with energy opens compelling pairings of texts and situations.

Perhaps the most attractive approach is a symptomatic reading that looks for energy as a kind of structuring absence. Amitav Ghosh asks why the oil encounter has not produced the same literary response as the colonial spice encounter did—there are many novels about the spice trade, where are the oil novels? A symptomatic approach to energy would need to follow Patricia Yaeger’s suggestion that “...energy invisibilities may constitute different kinds of erasures” than other invisibilities (309). How are the imprints of coal dust left on the texts of 1848 different than the nuclear glow of high modernism? Does oil drip from the post-1989 novel on a global scale, and how might its markings change during the political turbulence of the long-1990s and early twenty-first century?

These suggested approaches cannot be read without attendant theoretical commitments, once combined with other abiding concerns, such as decolonization, anti-racism, feminism, queer politics, and ecocriticism, a radical idea of what Energy Humanities can be and do for our future will emerge.² Perhaps it is the authority of oil as energy that precludes its narrativization on the same level as the spice encounter or the industrial uses of coal. Perhaps it is difficult to write a compelling plot that still maps out energy infrastructures without falling into the genre trap of the thriller or presenting something massively incalculable. Beyond a doubt, the fact that its role is being re-narrated today demonstrates the age of its flourishing is at a crucial moment for intervention.

Works Cited

Boyer, Dominic and Imre Szeman. “The Rise of Energy Humanities.” *University Affairs* (March 2014): 40. Print

Canavan, Gerry. “Retrofutures and Petrofutures: Oil, Scarcity, Limit.” *Oil Culture*.

² For a discussion of the way some of these concerns and politics overlap, especially gender and Indigenous politics, see Wilson “Gendering Oil.”

Eds. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP: 331-349. Print.

Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. Penguin: New York, 1994. Print.

Etkind, Alexander. "Post-Soviet Russia: The Land of the Oil Curse, Pussy Riot, and Magical Historicism." *Boundary 2* 41:1 (2014): 153-170. Print.

MacDonald, Graeme. "Improbability Drives: The Energy of Science Fiction." *Paradoxa* 26 (Fall 2014): 111-144. Print.

Stoekl, Allan (2014). "Foreword." *Oil Culture*. Eds. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP: xi-xiv. Print.

Wenzel, Jennifer. "Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature." *Postcolonial Studies* 9.4 (2006): 449-464. Print.

Wilson, Sheena. "Gendering Oil: Tracing Western Petrosexual Relations." *Oil Culture*. Eds. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP: 244-263. Print.

Yaeger, Patricia. "Editor's Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale-Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power and Other Energy Sources." *PMLA* 126:2 (2011): 305-10. Print.