

RICHARD LEAHY, *LITERARY ILLUMINATION: THE EVOLUTION OF ARTIFICIAL LIGHT IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE* (CARDIFF: UNIVERSITY OF WALES PRESS, 2018) ISBN 978-1-78683-268-9 (HB) £85.00 [NICOLETTA ASCIUTO]

When we think of the urban and domestic atmospheres of Victorian novels, many of us will immediately conjure up images of London's gas-lit streets and shop windows, of snug interiors warmed by a roaring fire, and even of someone reading beside a candle, or an oil lamp at a desk. Equally, when we think of the atmosphere in early twentieth-century science fiction, and particularly H. G. Wells, the mind goes to visions of the future under glaring electric light, as the new technological experiment of the twentieth century. During the nineteenth century, the increasingly more advanced and diversified illumination technologies populate literature. At the core of Richard Leahy's *Literary Illumination: The Evolution of Artificial Light in Nineteenth-Century Literature* is the idea that '[t]he nineteenth century was a period characterized by its relationship with artificial light' (7). Leahy sets out to undertake a commendable task: tracing the symbolism of different types of artificial light as they intersect nineteenth-century literature broadly conceived, mainly in English, but also with some reference to French authors. Only a limited number of monographs exist on related topics, such as William Sharpe's *New York Nocturne: The City after Dark in Literature, Painting, and Photography, 1850-1950* (Princeton University Press, 2008), and Matthew Beaumont's *Nightwalking: A Nocturnal History of London* (Verso, 2015), but none considers science fiction or Wells as part of an important equation between artificial illumination's development and the modern novel.

In the introduction to *Literary Illumination*, Leahy declares his indebtedness to that unrivalled work on the Victorian history of light, Chris Otter's *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), which has been so crucial to understand the superimposition of various lighting technologies in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Following this claim by Otter, the book is divided into four main chapters, each dedicated to one type of artificial light: firelight, candlelight, gaslight, and electric light. Leahy justifies this choice, claiming additionally that 'it is difficult to maintain focus on one particular time, place or writer', because of illumination history's 'transnational' nature (4). What Leahy sets out to do instead is to 'privilege' light itself: 'cover[ing] wherever, whenever, and in whomever's work, the effects of artificial light are most strongly felt' (4). This decision causes Leahy's book to be rather fragmented and partial. In deciding to follow light's own story, so to speak, Leahy neglects to acknowledge important historical and socio-political shifts, as well as the connections between the very texts, authors, and literary traditions he is investigating. How do Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and E. M. Forster deploy electric light imagery in comparable ways? Can we sense the influence of Gaskell's and Dickens's light imagery on later 'realist' novelists, such as Edith Wharton and E. M. Forster? What *Literary Illumination* does successfully, however, is that it surveys the symbolism of artificial light in nineteenth-century prose, providing the reader with an abundance of relevant material worthy of further exploration.

Every chapter starts with a section zooming on the history of a specific lighting technology, before moving on to consider the actual literary texts. Chapter 1, 'Firelight', explores fire as 'a narrative device' (10) in the domestic spaces of Elizabeth Gaskell's novels, mainly *Cranford* (1851), *Mary Barton* (1848), and *Ruth* (1853), with some reference to Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) and Gaston Bachelard's theories of fire reverie. According to Leahy, Gaskell creates 'an intense emotional link between women and fire' (22) in *Cranford*, as women would normally tend to it, while in *Mary Barton*, it is rather the protagonist's husband, John, who gets 'implicitly associated with the light of the fire', having 'traversed the entire range of fire's mutability' (31). Fire, directly connoted with 'the urban poor' (35), becomes 'synonymous with life itself' (37). Leahy compares gaslight to fire, as a 'more processed and artificial' illumination still retaining some of the 'power' of firelight (35), and it is certainly fascinating to think of gaslight as a more refined gift of Prometheus – fire tamed for the urban indoor space. Chapter 2, 'Candlelight', allows Leahy to make similar but more nuanced considerations with regard to candles in the fiction of Arthur Conan Doyle, Wilkie Collins, and Edgar Allan Poe. While candles are often seen as 'reflect[ing] the life of the individual' (72), Leahy stresses the importance of candles as 'symbol[s] of individuality' (53). Indeed, Leahy suggests that the material features of the candle themselves embody their isolation, as single units not belonging to a network, unlike gaslight and electricity, and as markers of time passing.

Chapters 3 ('Gaslight') and 4 ('Electric Light') are the most interesting because they discuss the superimposition of the two technologies. This is also the most relevant part for the Wells scholar. Leahy begins by introducing gaslight's initially difficult process of domestication, which mirrors the history of the early electric light at the start of Chapter 4, and connects its rise with industrialisation and its technological advancements, as well as 'the evolution of visual society and culture' (94). If candles radiated individuality, gaslight now 'tinged everything with an aura of the performative' (94). Drawing mainly on Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard, Leahy reads works by Émile Zola, Charles Dickens, and Oscar Wilde, amongst others, alongside ideas of spectacle, consumerism, and night walking. Gaslight is ultimately, for Leahy, the reminder of the 'constant struggle between reality and unreality' (109).

Electric light, by contrast, is lifeless, and its light 'more absolute' than ever before (138): it was, Leahy claims, 'overwhelmingly modern, invasive and impersonal' (139). Leahy's decision to focus mainly on science fiction in the chapter on electric light is therefore not surprising. The growth of science fiction as a genre is strictly 'intertwined' with that of the new electric light: 'here was a technology that seemed to be imagination made real, nature's energy harnessed by man, better suited to tales of fantasy than reality' (149). In Jules Verne's stories, electric light is a symbol of power and control (such as in *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, 1863), or a substitute for sunlight as a guiding force (as in *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, 1864, with Axel's electric lamp). While Leahy connects these fictional uses of electric light with the growing 'dependence on technology' (154), he also detects Verne's more pessimist take on the new technology in a 'prophetic' Paris of 1963 in *Paris in the Twentieth Century* (1863, published in 1994). Electric light, Leahy argues, becomes for Verne 'a light that blinds more than it illuminates' (161). It is within this more pessimistic sense that we should also understand Wells's usage of electric light. Leahy reads Wells's various short stories and novels against the historical developments of electric light's domestication in the West (with sun towers and arc lamps, for example) and shifts in modern literary aesthetics, such as *fin de siècle* and Italian Futurism. However, the latter are far too sketchy. A more sustained comparative investigation of aesthetic uses of electric light in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Wells would have been more rewarding. In both *The War of the Worlds* and *The Sleeper Awakes*, electric light is a symbol of authoritarian power and control (168), not much different from what it had become in Verne before. In *The Time Machine*, Leahy notices the conspicuous absence of electric light, as Wells prefers only 'several subtle acknowledgements' of it (171). In this latter novel, Wells recognises the 'imperfect balance' between individuals and 'social collectivism', and returns to earlier technologies, such as firelight and matches, suggesting the dangers of relying on the more recent technologies (173). Unfortunately, Leahy moves too swiftly away from Wells into E. M. Forster's 'The Machine Stops' (1909), where electric light returns as a symbol of authority, and *Howards End* (1910), where electric light is used to enhance the realist qualities of the novel. Leahy's final case study is Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905): Wharton, who was notoriously against the vulgar aesthetics of electric light, employs its symbolism to portray her protagonist Lily Bart's changing place in society.

Literary Illumination covers much ground in just under 200 pages. Leahy's book presents some fascinating material and works as a handy starting point for anyone interested in understanding the development of lighting symbolism in nineteenth-century literature. Leahy considers a commendable number of sources and discusses key literary moments that include representation of firelight, candles, gaslight, and electric light in chronological order. The book will be of particular interest to undergraduate students interested in these texts, or light in modern literature, as well as scholars working on literature and technology. As a history of artificial light in literature, *Literary Illumination* is a useful aid for other researchers working in the field.