

# From “the tyranny of the stomach” to the World “beyond”: Food and Utopia in *The House of Mirth*

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Stéphanie Durrans

UNIVERSITY BORDEAUX MONTAIGNE

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## Introduction

*(...) what a study might be made of the tyranny of the stomach—the way a sluggish liver or insufficient gastric juices might affect the whole course of the universe, over-shadow everything in reach — chronic dyspepsia ought to be among the ‘statutory causes’; a woman’s life might be ruined by a man’s inability to digest fresh bread. Grotesque? Yes — and tragic — like most absurdities. There’s nothing grimmer than the tragedy that wears a comic mask.*

*Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth*

This is how Ned Silverton expresses the power of food in a long tirade directed against George Dorset’s dyspeptic condition, which resulted in their ending up on “such a damned hole as the Riviera” (*ibidem*). The role played by food and eating habits in *The House of Mirth* has probably been underplayed as a jarring note in a novel otherwise intent on depicting Lily’s tragic fate. Of course, Wharton’s self-definition as a novelist of manners can account for the presence of so many details about dining styles and eating habits as indicators of the evolution of New York’s aristocratic society, but the intrusive, ostentatious nature of references to people’s stomachs and digestive troubles remains most unexpected under the pen of such a well-bred young lady who had no doubt been brought up in the belief that such things should not be mentioned in good company.<sup>1</sup> As a keen observer of the social scene, Wharton could not fail to take an interest in the development of eating patterns at the time. The many pages she devotes to the dinners and delicacies of old New York in *A Backward Glance* testify to the power of food on the mind of an author looking back with

nostalgia to the days of her childhood. However, relishing the memories of her childhood dishes is one thing; describing the digestive system of her characters is another that is slightly more unexpected from the daughter of Lucretia Rhineland Jones. Somehow, the comic touch brought by references to food<sup>2</sup> in *The House of Mirth* does not fit in with more sentimental or tragic readings of Lily's fate. To my knowledge, only two critics have called attention to the role played by food in the novel. In "From Tea to Chloral: Raising the Dead Lily Bart," Bonnie Lynn Gerard draws attention to "metaphors of food and digestion" (Gerard, 1998: 409) and points to fruitful areas of research, but the bulk of her essay focuses on Lily as a naturalistic heroine and Gerard never actually investigates the deeper significance of such a metaphorical network. In his brilliant study of foodways in nineteenth-century American literature, Mark McWilliams analyses the luncheon scene at the Barts' as part of Wharton's more global social satire: "The chicken in aspic and the fish mark the scene, remaining on display even after the servant attempts to remove them, with an insistence that simultaneously highlights both the substance and the superficiality of wealth" (McWilliams, 2012: 175). But even he goes no further and fails to take into account the role of food metaphors in dramatizing the plight of the heroine. And yet, Wharton undoubtedly stands out as one of the novelists who explored and capitalized on the rich narrative possibilities of food and dinner gatherings at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century - a world in which "a good cook was the best introduction to society," according to Carry Fisher (Wharton, 1990: 88).

But *fin de siècle* America was also fertile terrain for dystopian impulses as fears of decadence and degeneracy were gradually gaining ground, replacing the mid-century ideals that had led such thinkers as Fourier and Emerson to establish utopian communities like Brook Farm. Wharton started writing at a time when literary utopias of all sorts were flourishing on both sides of the Atlantic: *Mizora: World of Women* (Mary E. Bradley Lane), generally acknowledged as the first feminist utopian novel, was published in 1881, *Looking Backward* (Edward Bellamy) in 1888, *News from Nowhere* (William Morris) in 1890, *A Traveller from Altruria* (William Dean Howells) in 1893 and *The Time Machine* (H.G. Wells) in 1895. It will come as no surprise, therefore, that Lily Bart should find herself torn between two alternatives that crystallize such a tension: on the one hand Lawrence Selden's ideal "republic of the spirit," and on the other hand the more materialistic universe of upper-class New York, a world revolving around dinner tables to the point of becoming obsessed with its digestive apparatus.<sup>3</sup> This essay consequently purports to throw light on Lily's halting progress towards redemption and a utopian space of her own as revealed

through her ambivalent relationship to food. After a preliminary overview of the dramatic changes that affected American society in the second half of the nineteenth century, we shall focus on Lily's destiny as a potential prey striving to survive in a world of predators. As we are going to see, each of the details provided about food in *The House of Mirth* acquires both social and metaphorical significance, and one could even identify an underlying narrative thread charting Lily's initiation to life through the main dinner scenes punctuating the novel. From such a perspective, her search for a utopian space of expression culminates in her encounter with Nettie Struther in whose kitchen she spends a few moments before going back to her room and taking a lethal dose of chloral.

### **Food and Society in Nineteenth-Century America<sup>4</sup>**

The power of food was clearly demonstrated by the outcome of the presidential election of 1840 after a breathtaking campaign that pitted "soupe à la reine" (i.e. the incumbent president Martin Van Buren) against "raw beef without salt" (his Whig opponent, William Henry Harrison). Van Buren's detractors did not hesitate to read out the whole menu of a White House dinner in front of an assembly of congressmen with a view to exposing the extent to which the president had alienated himself from his people by such dubious associations with French cuisine and "royalist" dishes.<sup>5</sup> Inversely, Harrison had allegedly survived on "raw beef without salt" and was thus a more fitting representative for the conquering nation's democratic ideals. More than anecdotal evidence, the raw beef that brought Harrison to power is a telltale sign of the nation's consciousness that "food reflects and shapes individual and national identity" (McWilliams, 2012: xv). By the end of the nineteenth century, such concern with preserving the myth of Republican simplicity came to clash with modern modes of conspicuous consumption. The utopia that the US was supposed to embody in the eyes of the world somehow turned into dystopia under the pressure of market forces, consumer culture and excesses of all sorts. The period during which *The House of Mirth* is set was indeed characterized by "dramatic changes in eating habits" and "continuing tension between republican simplicity and cosmopolitan sophistication [that] helped create the American food scene we know today" (*idem*, 16). The period between the Civil War and the First World War was marked by the rise of haute cuisine. At the same time, though, "increased consumption was celebrated in popular guides like T.C. Duncan's *How to Be Plump* (1878)" (*idem*, 112). New kitchen ranges

and cookstoves revolutionized family life, cookbooks became increasingly popular and the first American cooking school was established by Juliet Corson in New York City in 1876 (*idem*, 132). Eating habits were most dramatically affected both inside and outside the domestic sphere. The second half of the nineteenth century saw a new type of restaurants sprouting up across America (and especially in New York):

*Unlike the eating house or inn common in earlier periods, where a single meal with a fixed price was served at set times at a common table, restaurants offered what Joanne Finkelstein calls a 'diorama of desire': a menu of individually priced dishes served at any time at private tables (idem, 117).*

“[O]bscene displays of wealth and poor taste” (*ibidem*) could be observed in certain restaurants as the pressure of conspicuous consumption reached its peak. As shown in *The House of Mirth*, such restaurants collapsed the boundaries between public and private spheres by turning fancy dinners into a veritable spectacle to be reported in the popular press of the time, hence the presence of the journalist Dabham, specifically invited by Mrs. Bry to make sure the news of her success with the Duchess would reach across the Atlantic, not to mention the mass of people gathered at Bécassin’s with the only purpose of watching the guests gorge themselves on sumptuous food. As underlined by McWilliams, “Dining became an individual act communally visible, and even restaurant design, with large windows to attract guests and spacious rooms filled with individual tables, encourages both voyeurism and performance” (*idem*, 119). Even after her disgrace, Lily significantly makes a point to eat only dishes that show she can still afford them; form and status consequently prevail over matters of taste. She goes to the restaurants she used to frequent in better days, restaurants where “she lunched luxuriously, as she said, on her expectations” (Wharton, 1990: 178). The aim is not to eat but to *be seen* eating the kind of food that helps her keep up appearances in the face of adversity: “Think of Grace Stepney’s satisfaction if she came in and found us lunching on cold mutton and tea! What sweet shall we have today, dear - *Coupe Jacques* or *Pêches à la Melba*?” (*idem*, 178).

While the boundaries between public and private spheres became porous in the newly fashionable restaurants of the time, strict compartmentalization was still the rule at home. In *The House of Mirth*, threats of transgression in the social order are consistently associated with food and eating habits. Lily’s intense discomfort when waking up at Gerty’s the morning following her confrontation with Trenor is first generated by “a smell of cooking [penetrating] the crack of the door” as she is lying in

bed (*idem*, 134). Gerty is indeed first introduced to the reader as a young woman who has “such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap” (*idem*, 8). By the same token, “the mere idea of immorality was as offensive to Mrs. Peniston as a smell of cooking in the drawing-room” (*idem*, 100). As for Trenor, he does not hesitate to denigrate his hosts behind their backs and he expresses his reluctance to stay for dinner at the Wellington Brys’ or even accept the offer of a cigar since “likely as not the *chef* buys the cigars” (*idem*, 109). Lastly, the façade of the Greiner house (significantly bought over by Rosedale) is described as “a complete architectural meal” and consequently reveals the humble origins of a man who “came from a milieu where all the dishes are put on the table at once” (*idem*, 126), as opposed to the Trenor house, built with the best of tastes and which “doesn’t look like a banqueting-hall turned inside out” (*idem*, 126-127). In all these cases, preserving the purity of this aristocratic caste is predicated upon the ability to restrict cooking and its attendant smells to their proper sphere, thereby containing the potential threat of contamination within prescribed limits. Interestingly enough, though, Wharton’s own ubiquitous use of food metaphors points to the failure of these attempts to restrict such risks of invasion.

### **Lily Bart as Fair Game in a World of Predators**

Men’s relationship to food usually serves as a good indicator of their position or of their role in society. George Dorset is introduced as “a mournful dyspeptic, intent on finding out the deleterious ingredients of every dish and diverted from this care only by the sound of his wife’s voice” (*idem*, 44). As for “young Silverton, who had meant *to live on* proof-reading and write an epic, [he] now *lived on* his friends and had become critical of truffles” (*idem*, 45, emphasis added). Rosedale’s social ascent is significantly measured by the number of banquets and high society dinners he is invited to (*idem*, 188). Even his presents bespeak the importance of dinner invitations as indicators of social acceptability, as shown by the comically disproportionate diamond pendant, “as big as a dinner-plate” (*idem*, 72) that he gives to Gwen Van Osburgh on her wedding-day. But the man who undoubtedly dominates the social scene is Gus Trenor who, “with his heavy carnivorous head sunk between his

shoulders”, is described “[preying] on a jellied plover” (*idem*, 45) during the dinner given at Bellomont.

*While men are defined by what they eat, women are more likely to be defined by what they cook and how they cook it. In most American novels of the time, “Skill in cookery and household management became portrayed as a measure of a woman’s moral worth” (McWilliams, 2012: 63). Failures in cookery could even be signs of serious character flaws (idem, 77). McWilliams shows the extent to which such a metaphorical “code [became] internalized [so that] novelists [could] use this shared knowledge to shape readers’ opinions of fictional characters” (idem, 80). “Women who cannot cook are either dangerous (...) or deeply immoral” (idem, 81) and initiation to the art of cooking was often used to give the measure of the heroine’s growth and spiritual development. Such literary codes could well apply to Gerty Farish. The young woman arouses a sense of wonder in Selden as he marvels at her ability to make her own caramel custard and later inquires about her domestic arrangements, learning how to “improvise delicious dinners in a chafing-dish” (Wharton: 1990, 122). This leads Selden to wonder naively about Lily’s own abilities as a housewife as he contemplates proposing to her, but Wharton actually appropriates the language of cuisine to portray her female characters (Gerty excepted<sup>6</sup>) in a more disturbing light:*

*Miss Van Osburgh was a large girl with flat surfaces and no high lights: Jack Stepney had once said of her that she was as reliable as roast mutton. His own taste was in the line of less solid and more highly-seasoned diet; but hunger makes any fare palatable, and there had been times when Mr. Stepney had been reduced to a crust (idem, 40)*

Later, Miss Van Osburgh’s face is said to be “turned towards her companion’s like an empty plate held up to be filled” (*idem*, 40). Even Carry Fisher has a “general air of embodying a ‘spicy paragraph’” (*idem*, 45). As to the Gormers, they “swallowed [Lily’s] past as easily as they did Miss Anstell’s, and with no apparent sense of any difference in the size of the mouthful” (*idem*, 182). In the refined world of *The House of Mirth*, women consequently assume the unexpected role of gourmet fare - not the role of cooks or housewives one would expect them to be given.<sup>7</sup>

As pointed out by Gerard, “Wharton’s New York society in *The House of Mirth* is, without doubt, a consuming society, both figuratively and literally” (Gerard, 1998: 409), and “Lily Bart’s pursuit of social status as an empowered consumer presents her with a paradox: in order to become a consumer she must first present herself as an item to be consumed” (*idem*, 410). Women undoubtedly stand out as beautiful objects destined for male consumption - a word to be taken quite literally in *The House of Mirth*. Instead of participating in the game, Lily turns into fair game for the male

predators around her. Her “flesh and blood loveliness” (Wharton, 1990: 106) in the *tableau vivant* scene further dramatizes this tragic plight. Men like Van Alstyne significantly prefer to leave the place before dinnertime, implying that the sight of such “goddesses gobbling terrapin” (*idem*, 109) would spoil their own pleasure and constitute a breach in these women’s assigned status as mere objects of consumption. Lily’s observation that “[f]inery laid off is as unappetizing as the remains of a feast” (*idem*, 133) similarly draws a disquieting parallel between food and women if we consider the recurrent metonymic association between women and clothes. Even in the restaurant scene with Rosedale, at the end of the novel, Lily’s beauty is made to stand out against the “dull chocolate-coloured background of the restaurant” (*idem*, 226). When Rosedale takes Lily back to her place, they both walk through a neighborhood that is strewn with “the *disjecta membra* of bygone dinners” (*idem*, 229). The Latin phrase emphasizes another disquieting parallel between humans and refuse. It thus takes on metaphorical significance and resonates hauntingly in the minds of readers who are aware of Lily’s move from the dinner tables on which she figured as a gourmet dish to the rubbish heap of high society.

More disturbing still is the fact that even relationships between women are characterized by this type of survivalist attitude. As one who can easily move back and forth between the aristocratic world of New York and a more disreputable society, Carry Fisher is in the best position to highlight this other, seamy side of the social tapestry. As she is about to hand Mrs. Bry over to Lily, Carry reassures her friend: “oh, we’re on the best of terms externally; we’re lunching together; but at heart it’s *me* she’s lunching on” (*idem*, 156). About Gerty, who she dismisses as a very dull, bland young woman, she says to Lily: “you’re used [to] a little higher seasoning, aren’t you, dear?” (*idem*, 181). And it is Carry again who pointedly comments as follows upon Mattie Gormer’s striking up a friendship with Bertha Dorset: “I’ve no doubt the rabbit always thinks it is fascinating the anaconda” (*idem*, 196).

### **A Novel Structured around Dinner Scenes and Tea Ceremonials**

Such scenes as dinner parties and tea ceremonials are crucial to establishing Lily’s relationship to the society on whose margins she hovers. The novel is structured like a chiasmus around four passages staging tea ceremonials: the first one at Selden’s (Book I, chapter 1) is echoed by Lily’s last visit to the young man in Book II, chapter 12 while

the second one (with a potential suitor, Percy Gryce, in Book I, chapter 2) is echoed by the scene in which Rosedale (another potential match) offers to take Lily to the Longworth's for a cup of tea (Book II, chapter 10). Interestingly enough, though, Lily declines Selden's offer of tea in their last interview (238).

Dinner gatherings also serve as a backbone for the novel. It all starts, chronologically, with a luncheon scene at Mr. and Mrs. Bart's. This is what provides the context for the announcement that will precipitate Lily's fall—Mr. Bart's ruin. Wharton's handling of dinner scenes reveals once again her love of symmetry. The dinner at the Trenors' (Book I, chapter 5) that is filtered through the eyes of Lily is echoed by the dinner at Bécassin's in which Selden takes over the role of a focalizer (Book II, chapter 3). Mrs. Bry's dinner in Monte Carlo is very much of a public affair for which even journalists have been invited (“the restaurant was crowded with persons mainly gathered there for the purpose of spectatorship” *idem*, 168). This is an elaborate ritual, complete with an audience and a young maiden unaware that she is going to be sacrificed on the altar of society's petty ambitions.

However, the high visibility of such dinners should not eclipse the powerful influence of hidden forces—dinners that are not actually represented in the novel but that still played a determining role in shaping Lily's destiny. These two dinners face each other on either side of the break materialized by the move from Book I to Book II: the first one is the dinner organized by Mrs. Peniston after Jack and Gwen's return from their honeymoon, a memorable event seeing as “Mrs. Peniston disliked giving dinners, but she had a high sense of family obligation” (*idem*, 97). She had mentioned the possibility of including Grace among the guests but Lily managed to persuade her aunt that “a dinner of ‘smart’ people would be much more to the taste of the young couple,” whereupon Grace was crossed out of the list. The grudge she holds against Lily who she obviously suspects of such foul play is what leads her to ruin her cousin's reputation with insinuations about gambling and flirting with married men. Similarly, in Book II, chapter 2, Lily's undoing is precipitated by her being “engaged to breakfast (...) with the Duchess of Beltshire” (*idem*, 153). What she is not aware of is that Mrs. Dorset has taken offence at not being included in the invitation and she refuses to see Lily before the latter leaves the yacht to join the Duchess, heedless of the tragic consequences of her insouciance. Such a slight undoubtedly prompted Bertha to get her own back on Lily by exposing her to public contempt at Bécassin's after the dinner given in honor of the Duchess. In both cases, the shame or spite that exclusion from a dinner party brings about acts as a catalyst for Lily's downfall.

Oddly enough, we only see Lily actually eating something at the end of the novel. To be sure, all the dinner gatherings that have been depicted so far focused on the guests' orgy of consumption, but Lily herself always adopted the position of a detached observer of the social scene. At the Trenors' in chapter 4, we are told that "Lily did not want to join the circle about the tea-table" (*idem*, 40). Later, during the dinner that takes place the same night, she observes the guests around the table at length and lends a compassionate ear to Dorset's stomach complaints but never actually eats herself. The situation might have been reversed during Mrs. Bry's dinner at Bécassin's, since this time Selden is the one who observes the small assembly of guests, but once more not a mention is made of Lily's eating habits, table manners or favorite dishes. After Rosedale's visit in Book II, chapter 11, "She lay late in bed, refusing the coffee and fried eggs which the friendly Irish servant thrust through her door" (*idem*, 235) and after wandering in Central Park, she "took refuge in a little restaurant in Fifty-ninth Street. She was not hungry, and had meant to go without luncheon; but she was too tired to return home, and the long perspective of white tables showed alluringly through the windows" (*idem*, 235). The women in the restaurant "were all engrossed in their own affairs, (...) *devouring* magazines between their hurried gulps of tea" (*ibidem*, emphasis added) and Lily felt lonelier than ever, but after drinking a few cups of tea and eating a "portion of stewed oysters," she felt regenerated: "her brain felt clearer and livelier when she emerged once more into the street" (*idem*, 235-236). From a sociological point of view, oysters are indeed one of the dishes Lily could easily afford despite her limited means since they were, at the time, one of the most common, inexpensive dishes on all American tables (Mallery, 1888: 203-204); but, from a more symbolical standpoint, oysters also happen to be intimately connected with Lily's present status if we keep in mind that the word "ostracism" derives from the oyster in whose shell was written the name of the person sent into exile by the citizens of Athens in Greek antiquity. The oyster is also well-known as a symbol of femininity, love and beauty (at least ever since Venus-Aphrodite is supposed to have emerged from its shell). At such a point in the novel, therefore, Lily seems to have internalized her condition as an outcast (as indicated by her ingestion of oysters) and her refusal to be "consumed" by any man is marked by the fact that *she* is the one eating this time. This also throws light on her refusing the cup of tea offered by Selden in their last interview—the stimulant most often associated with hypersensitive, nervous women at the time.<sup>8</sup>

Lily eventually rejects such a role, intending to live on more substantial fare from now on. Such a dramatic change is not easy to negotiate for a young woman

whose resistance to food and to the rumors upon which other women appear to live is manifest right from the beginning of her journey. She feels at odds with Mrs. Trenor's voracious appetite for gossip (Wharton:1990, 110), for instance, and worries about the fact that "rich people always grow fat" while waiting for her aunt's will to be disclosed: "If I inherit, I shall have to be careful of my figure" (*idem*, 174). Lily's real appetite is of a higher moral order, as suggested earlier in the novel by the following passage in reference to her short-lived interest in poor working-girls: "her taste of beneficence had wakened in her a momentary appetite for well-doing" (*idem*, 119). Her insatiable yearning for the world "beyond"—significantly associated with a flying ship on Lily's stationery—also brings utopian ideologies into play, suggesting a desire to reach out to some imaginary world that can never find concrete expression within the limited space of her existence. Selden had already allowed her to catch a glimpse of such a utopian world when sharing with her his dream of building some ideal "republic of the spirit," a non-place where he would be free from everything, "from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents" (*idem*, 55). I agree with Lois Tyson, however, when she points out that this "quest for transcendence is a quest for social superiority as well: Selden wants to be 'above' his social group in every sense of *above*. The irony is that this very desire, because it is socially produced, ties him to the society he would transcend. Selden doesn't escape social desire; he merely abstracts it" (Tyson: 1994, 27). When read along such lines, it makes sense that Lily's own spiritual journey should reach its apex not in the imaginary unsustainable world of Selden's republic but in the enclosed, protective space of Nettie's kitchen, where she can find the kind of nurturing atmosphere necessary to find her own way towards a utopian space of her own.

### **Utopian Space: Nettie's Kitchen as the Climax of Lily's Initiation**

In many ways, the kitchen scene appears as the culmination of a long initiation whose starting-point can be identified in the luncheon scene at the Barts', a scene to which it provides a perfect counterpoint. Just like the many other references to food, this scene has been stripped of all metaphorical significance and disparaged as a mere lapse into sentimentality by most of Wharton's critics.<sup>9</sup> These responses were understandably prompted by such rapturous descriptions as "Mrs. Struther [proceeding] to prepare a bottle of infantile food, which she tenderly applied to the baby's impatient lips, and while the ensuing degustation went on, she seated herself with a beaming countenance beside her visitor", whereupon she even offers Lily

“some of baby’s fresh milk” (Wharton: 1990, 244). Lily’s identification process with the baby has been noted by many scholars. Not only is the little girl named after the historical figure played by an actress who reminded Nettie of her benefactress, but she is also characterized by the same “instinctive motion of resistance” (*idem*, 245). In the end, though, “the soothing influences of digestion prevailed, and Lily felt the soft weight sink trustfully against her breast” (*ibidem*); the identification process is complete when “the weight increased, sinking deeper, and penetrating her with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered into her and became a part of herself” (*idem*, 246). When Lily returns to her room, she still has mixed feelings about food: she decides that she cannot “go without food because her surroundings made it unpalatable” and she makes up her mind to join the other boarders in the restaurant below but at the same time “she [is] glad that (...) the repast [is] nearly over” (*ibidem*) when she reaches the table. How then does the kitchen scene connect with Lily’s spiritual journey?

Gerard has suggested that the “soothing influences of digestion” similarly act upon Lily “whose ‘old life-hunger’ has come to represent the ‘happiness’ of belonging to an intimate human community . [...] Such imaginative empathy and communion is new to Lily, and it replaces her former distaste for working-class people and scenes” (Gerard, 1998: 421). I would suggest reading it in the light of Wharton’s fascination with anthropology, in which case “imaginative empathy and communion” with the working class give way to more unsettling visions of cannibalism as Lily ends up incorporating the body of the child in a metaphorical move towards renewal and redemption. In her own discussion of the scene, Hoeller already points to the function of the kitchen as “a different, predominantly female world, in which women do not negotiate but give freely to each other” (Hoeller, 2000: 118). Hoeller’s argument is based on Lewis Hyde’s seminal distinction between a gift economy and a market economy, which leads her to perceive motherhood as “a form of gift economy and thus as a form of ‘anarchy,’ a female domestic space that defies the rules of the market” (*idem*, 115) while “Nettie’s baby symbolizes the abundance and fertility of a gift economy” (*idem*, 116). I would like to extend this argument by showing how Lily’s identification with Nettie’s little girl forms part of a wider metaphorical network that takes the reader back to the first luncheon scene at the Barts’ and also to the cannibalistic attitude of Lily’s society at large, which allows Wharton to have both the sentimental and the realist traditions coexist in an unresolved tension throughout this scene.<sup>10</sup>

Wharton's worldview was deeply influenced by her early readings in anthropology. Versed as she was in cultural ethnography, she was well acquainted with the most recent developments in this field, including the groundbreaking work of British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor.<sup>11</sup> Anthropologists had recently developed a veritable fascination with food rituals and eating habits. Garrick Mallery's essay "Manners and Meals" appeared in one of the first issues of *The American Anthropologist*, and William Robertson Smith's *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889) included a whole chapter on food. In the literary field, William Dean Howells had already made ample use of food metaphors to denounce the abuses of capitalism in the Gilded Age. In his series of utopian novels generally known as the Altrurian Romances (the first volume of which appeared in 1893), Howells uses the character of Homos to expose the hypocrisy of American society and "the predatory ethos that dominates American life" (Rubin, 2009, 221). As he discovers this new world, Homos

*identifies the conspicuous consumption of the upper classes as inseparable from their cannibalistic social, cultural, and political policies. Even though they do not literally eat human flesh, Howells implies that the upper classes enforce a system of inequitable cultural appropriation and consumption. (idem, 222)*

In this scathing satire of the American system, Howells explicitly contrasts countries "where people live *upon* each other as the Americans do" with countries where people live "*for* each other as the Altrurians do" (*ibidem*, Howell's italics, qtd by Rubin). Lily consequently exemplifies the eat-or-be-eaten ethos that typified late nineteenth-century America and turned it into a dystopian universe, one in which the ideal simplicity and frugality of Republican America has given way to veritable orgies of consumption. The disturbing undercurrent that undermines the romantic, sentimental surface of the text is best evidenced in the sea anemone with which Lily is compared in one of the most famous extracts from the novel<sup>12</sup> and which has systematically been confused with its counterpart on earth, the wood anemone. This partly accounts for critics' failure to perceive Lily's metaphoric cannibalistic nature—the sea anemone being a meat-eating plant.

As underlined by Judith P. Saunders, Wharton also happened to be Franz Boas's exact contemporary.<sup>13</sup> Generally acknowledged as the founding father of American anthropology, Boas was particularly well-known at the time for his extensive studies of a North American tribe that practiced cannibalistic rituals, the Kwakiutl. This is a tribe for whom the act of eating (or, inversely, the need to control one's hunger) actually provides a key metaphor to their whole worldview and relationship to the

world, as shown by a number of later anthropologists (Robbins, 2012: 131, 139). Boas's studies of the Kwakiutl also included compiling a collection of the tribe's recipes (156 in total) and culinary rites, most of which make use of what was the staple fare of the tribe, salmon. Whether or not Wharton was acquainted with such a collection, one cannot help noticing her insistence on salmon in the luncheon scene at the Barts', a scene situated at the other extreme of Lily's initiation process since it marked the very beginning of her downfall. What McWilliams writes about this scene at the Barts' is actually not quite true, strictly speaking. What stands out is the salmon, not the chicken, as will be shown if we consider the development of the scene: the "cold salmon of the previous night's dinner" (Wharton: 1990, 27) is referred to right at the beginning; it is mentioned again with more ominous undertones when "Mr. Bart dropped into a chair, and sat gazing absently at the fragment of jellied salmon which the butler had placed before him" (*idem*, 27); before breaking the news of his ruin to his wife and daughter, Mr. Bart again "sat motionless, his gaze still fixed on the salmon, and his lower jaw dropped" (*idem*, 28); and when Lily eventually leaves the room, she turns back and sees her father "sitting with both elbows on the table, the plate of salmon between them, and his head bowed on his hands" (*idem*, 28). At the time, Lily is still a complete stranger to the complex symbolism conjured up by the fish on the family table. As a symbol of sacrifice, salmon is most appropriate to initiate a journey that will lead her to experience death to gain a new life, a journey that will lead her to swim against the social current and go back to the origin of life. In the Kwakiutl's mythological system, salmon stood for so many disembodied souls and eating salmon was a way to commune with these souls. Situated as it is in a position that foregrounds its function as a reflection of the luncheon scene, the kitchen scene acquires metaphorical significance as a necessary stage and even a rite of passage in Lily's initiation. Lily's own "disembodied soul" has been transferred onto the baby (as indicated by the naming process) and, by communing with the baby's flesh, Lily now negotiates her own sacrificial return back to the original scene but with a newly-awakened consciousness about the world she lives in. The Kwakiutl believed that

*when a person dies, his or her soul leaves the body and enters the body of a salmon. [...] Once the soul enters the body of a salmon, it remains there, living in a salmon world that socially resembles the human world. However, when the salmon is caught and eaten by human beings, the soul is once again freed and enters the body of a newborn child. (Robbins: 2012, 139)*

Controlling one's hunger is also regarded by the Kwakiutl as one of the main ways of solving political, economic, or social issues (*idem*, 140).<sup>14</sup> In such a

perspective, Lily's own attempts to regulate her appetites place her in the position of a novice and further estrange her from the voracious, carnivorous, dystopian society surrounding her. Such patterns of imagery offer further evidence of Wharton's anthropological outlook on the society of her times right from the early years of the twentieth century, that is a long time before she wrote the novel in which she would explore the society of her childhood as an archaeologist cum anthropologist (*The Age of Innocence*).

## Conclusion

In an article addressing the naturalist dimension of *The House of Mirth*, Lori Merish evokes the fact that quite a few writers, at the turn of the century, "called for a 'roast beef' of narrative style and an unremitting clarity of vision as against the 'drama of the broken teacup' and the proprieties of popular sentimental fare" (Merish, 2003: 235). Strictly speaking, however, "the drama of a broken teacup" was actually associated by the one who coined the expression not to sentimental fiction but to the realist genre: "Realism is minute; it is the drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner," writes Frank Norris in "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" before concluding:

*Let Realism do the entertainment with its meticulous presentation of teacups, rag carpets, wall-paper and haircloth sofas, stopping with these, going no deeper than it sees, choosing the ordinary, the untroubled, the commonplace.*

*But to Romance belongs the wide world for range, and the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man. (Norris, "A Plea for Romantic Fiction," 1901)*

Such a plea for romantic fiction, coming as it does from one of the foremost exponents of naturalism, makes it clear that naturalism was not conceived as a mere outgrowth of realism but as a way of probing the secrets of the human soul in a truly Romantic spirit. Far from undermining the romantic surface of the text, the naturalist quality of Wharton's prose allows us to probe deeper into it and ultimately retrace the spiritual itinerary of her tragic heroine from the "broken teacups" of good society to the "roastbeef" of a cannibalistic capitalist system.

Torn between these two extremes, Lily finds in Nettie's kitchen the right kind of spiritual food to nourish her newly-found appetite: food that circulates one-way in a gift economy without any hope of return on investment—the kind of ideal, utopian space of expression that leads her to throw Bertha's letters into the fire while Selden is *not* watching. While her first attempt to ingest something more substantial than tea had first led her to seek reintegration into the carnivorous society that sets the rules of her world, she unexpectedly deviates from the path she had set herself and takes the direction of Selden's apartment with the pack of letters that she originally intended to barter in exchange for rehabilitation. As she crosses the street and enters the Benedick, Lily leaves behind her the dystopian House of Mirth<sup>1516</sup> and makes her way towards the light in Selden's window, and significantly “the sudden longing to see him [grows] to *hunger* as she [pauses] on the pavement opposite his door” (Wharton, 1990: 237, emphasis added). In the end, Lily enters the House of Mourning and she comes to embody the utopian “republic of the spirit” towards which Selden was supposed to guide her, while Selden himself remains chained to the social world from which he aspires to take his flight.

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## Notes

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1 "In 1859, Eliza Leslie advised, 'allusions to dyspepsia, indigestion, or any other disorder of the stomach, are vulgar and disgusting. The word stomach should never be uttered at any table.'" Eliza Leslie, *Miss Leslie's Behavior Book: A Guide and Manual for Ladies* (New York: Arno Press, 1972, 131), quoted by Mark McWilliams, p. 148.

2 Think, for instance, of the description of "Mrs. Bry (...) throned in apoplectic majesty between Lord Skiddaw and Lord Hubert" (Wharton: 1990, 168).

3 Garrick Mallery noted as early as 1891 that "a large part of the important work of the civilized world is accomplished or regulated at social dinners" (Mallery, 1888: 195).

4 The first part of this presentation draws from McWilliams's well-documented study of eating rituals and dining habits in nineteenth-century America, especially when it comes to historical background and anecdotes.

5 As pointed out by McWilliams, "soupe à la reine is merely a form of chicken broth, 'but Queen's soup sounded dishonorably regal enough for political purposes'" (McWilliams, 2012: xiv).

6 Gerty's first defining trait in the novel, as she is mentioned by Lily for the first time, is her odd eating habits: "[Gerty has] such queer things to eat" (Wharton, 1990: 7). She is later described as "a parasite in the moral order, living on the crumbs of other tables, and content to look through the window at the banquet spread for her friends" (idem, 118). The narrator also points out that her affection for Lily "had learned to keep itself alive on the scantiest diet" (idem, 119).

7 Wharton would make use of such patterns of imagery in later novels, as shown in the following passage from *The Age of Innocence*, when May and Newland are about to give their first big dinner as a young married couple: "(. . .) a big dinner, with a hired chef and two borrowed footmen, with Roman punch, roses from Henderson's, and menus on gilt-edged cards, was a different affair, and not to be lightly undertaken. As Mrs. Archer remarked, the Roman punch made all the difference; not in itself but by its manifold implications—since it signified either canvas-backs or terrapin, two soups, a hot and a cold sweet, full décolletage with short sleeves, and guests of a proportionate importance" (Wharton, 1996: 270). One notices how the "full décolletage," i.e. the low-cut neckline exposing a sizable part of the woman's breasts, is interestingly presented on the same level as other such delicacies to be put on the table.

8 See George M. Beard's landmark study of such social phenomena in *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences*.

9 Cynthia Griffin Wolff, for instance, argues that the mother and child imagery linking this episode and Lily's deathbed scene points to "Lily's inability to conceive of herself in any other way than as the object of aesthetic attention" (Wolff, 1977: 130-131). Patricia Meyer Spacks similarly deplors the sentimental quality of the scene in which she sees the mere expression of Lily's "escapist fantasy of motherhood" (Meyer Spacks, 1975: 241).

10 For an extended analysis of the topic in Wharton's fiction, see Hoeller's remarkable study in *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction*.

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11 Judith P. Saunders has remarkably contextualized Wharton's fascination with anthropology and provided a stimulating reading of *The Age of Innocence* in "Portrait of the Artist as Anthropologist: Edith Wharton and *The Age of Innocence*." Nancy Bentley's *The Ethnography of Manners: Hawthorne, James, Wharton* also insightfully probes into the complex relationship between literature and anthropology in Wharton's work.

12 "Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make [Lily] the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock" (234-235).

13 See Judith P. Saunders, "Portrait of the Artist as Anthropologist: Edith Wharton and *The Age of Innocence*." Saunders points out that "Bronislaw Malinowski, a valued friend of Wharton's during the latter part of her life, was one of the many prominent ethnologists indebted to Boas's teaching" (87).

14 In "Manners and Meals," Garrick Mallery argues that fasting "probably arose from the desire of primitive and savage man to bring on those abnormal nervous conditions which are supposed to give direct access to the spiritual world, that is, to produce ecstasy" (202).

15 The title of the novel comes from the famous passage in *Ecclesiastes* according to which "the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth" (*Ecclesiastes*, 7: 2-4).