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Virginia Woolf and the Art of Cooking

If we set focus on the art of Virginia Woolf—undoubtedly the art of writing—the space surrounding her life has at its core the room of her own, the writing desk and the printing press, manuscripts and proofs, notebooks and diaries, and the tools for typing and book-binding. The desk of the writer is markedly different and physically distant from the kitchen table: the former strewn with papers, cards, pens, pencils, inkpots, which speak of the trade of the writer, editor, reviewer, publisher; the latter quite invisible, at least during her youth, being placed behind that "red plush curtain which […] hid the door that led from the dining room" (Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past" 117) to the rest of the house—to the dark underworld of the basement, described as a domestic inferno where the "denizens of the kitchen" (132) toiled.

On reading "A Sketch of the Past" one gets a precise notion of the symbolic plan of 22, Hyde Park Gate. The room at the top was the brain of the establishment and, being Sir Leslie's studio, its intellectual and spiritual peak: at the bottom material functions occurred, in convenient obscurity and distance; in the bedroom on the first floor the same bed was set for rites of life and death. The drawing room was the centre of the Stephens's social intercourse, and the tea table its focal spot (118). Julia Stephen presided over it, daily. Given the physical distribution of areas thus symbolically charged, and loaded with highbrow/lowbrow connotations, the purpose of these notes is to explore in which ways the art of writing and the art of cooking mingled, in the course of Virginia Woolf's life, and in her work. Recent research on her socio-cultural environment provides us with documents, photos, tools, sketches and drawings, which cannot be described as essentially literary. With her *Virginia Woolf and the Servants* (2008), Alison Light explored a territory partially covered by bi-

ography (Lee 1996), but very useful in the context and theme of the present collection. Maggie Humm's *Snapshots of Bloomsbury* (2006) took us nearer to the private lives of Virginia and her Group, allowing glimpses of those who worked behind the red plush curtain; the publication of *The Hyde Park Gate News* (2005) and *The Charleston Bulletin Supplements* (2013) adds precious material to such highbrow-lowbrow relationships, while the recent interest in food as a meaningful token of cultural identity is testified by *The Bloomsbury Cookbook* (2014). Altogether, these precious relics of Bloomsbury's material culture and of its attitude towards "the denizens of the kitchen" provide a dialectic foil to the image of the writer intensely and exclusively concentrated on her books, and on the artistic, literary, intellectual issues discussed by the Group around her.

The cook at the dawn of modernity

If human character sits at the core of Woolf's art project—and if we keep in mind her 1919 statements about "the proper stuff of fiction" ("Modern Fiction" 5-12)—we realize the full measure of her attempt at catching within one single vision "the activities of the intellect" and "the splendour of the body" (12). Despite her criticism against the materialists, the material world is summoned to enhance perception and to prove its physical alloy with the brain: to the extent that in her essay "On Being Ill" (1926) the body actually enslaves the mind. Therefore it should come as no surprise that at the core of one of her most frequently quoted statements about the essence, quality and meaning of modernity, the material culture of the kitchen enters the immaterial precincts of art.

The well-known sentence: "In or about December 1910, human character changed," taken from her 1924 essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (70), has been justly wielded by critics and scholars—Peter Stansky's book the case in point—as a token of Woolf's awareness of a change in human character, in human relationships, in society; a change in the character of the age, which would affect relationships "between masters and servants, husbands and wives, fathers and children" (71). The shift in hu-

man relations would in its turn affect "religion, conduct, politics, and literature" (71)—indeed class and gender, offering new fodder to the novelists, new fellow-travellers to readers and writers alike. Of course change was in the air, in 1910, with the death of the King, the suffragettes, the post-impressionist exhibition at the Grafton Galleries, and Woolf's statement has to do with this cluster of memorable events. But in this famous essay there is also a segment which provides a good starting point to our theme. Woolf argues that, in 1910:

> In life one can see the change, if I may use a homely illustration, in the character of one's cook. The Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature of sunshine and fresh air; in and out of the drawing room, now to borrow the *Daily Herald*, now to ask advice about a hat. Do you ask for more solemn instances of the power of the human race to change? (70-71)

Thus among the signs of modern times the cook is evoked, as harbinger and protagonist of a new era. The adjectives Woolf employs to describe the Victorian cook convey the force of the Biblical monster, endowed with obscure power and authority, occasionally despotic: the Leviathan also evokes the digestive functions experienced by Jonah. Out of those depths then comes the Georgian cook, who is also a reader, which makes all the difference. From the low digestive functions we are heaved upwards, towards fresh air, light, and the rooms where the printed word has its importance. One could not wish for a clearer statement of the case. Let us have a look at the past.

Victorian kitchens

According to Isabella Beeton's weighty *Book of Household Management* the Victorian household had to march like a factory. Three meals a day, with a rigid schedule, were served at the table, according to the fashion *à la Russe*, observed in Julia Stephen's household. To quote from Beeton: "as with the commander of an army, or the leader of any enterprise, so it is with the mistress of a house" (7). Together with the mistress of the house, residing

upstairs, the Victorian cook held undisputed sway, albeit in the depths: together, mistress and cook, they are the Zenith and the Nadir of the Victorian household. Between them, Beeton details an elaborate ranking not only of vegetables, animals, fishes, according to seed-scattering mechanisms or reproductive habits as described by Charles Darwin: she delineates the role and function of "the household's human inhabitants" (Hughes 186), marshalled into a set of clear-cut hierarchies. "From the mistress at the top to the scullery maid at the bottom, everyone has their place, their price, their specialist function" (Hughes 186).

The reign of the cook was the kitchen, placed in the basement; in the kitchen, ranges or "kitcheners" had to be stocked with fuel, coal or wood, kept in storerooms nearby. Mrs Beeton mentions the Leamington range as a modern domestic appliance. Candlelight provided scanty illumination.

No timer, thermostat or heat regulation. Hard work and punctuality were the rule. A manual of the 1880s tells plain cooking apart from "professed cooking" (Light 33); actually the general cook enjoyed a certain prestige, lording it over kitchen maids, scullery maids, and skivvies of very low rank. It took a remarkable open-mindedness, and a decided detour from the upper regions of the house, for Woolf to focus on the Georgian cook, and recent criticism has given us plenty of food for thought, especially with the book by Alison Light, where the lifelong relationships between Woolf and a crowd of servants and cooks are finely brought to light and analysed. The book brings to the fore a host of people working for the Stephens, the Duckworths, and subsequently for the enlarged Bloomsbury Group. Here is a brief survey.

Denizens of the kitchen. From 22, Hyde Park Gate to Bloomsbury

The oldest, Sophia Farrell, from 1886 worked at 22 Hyde Park Gate, where in the role of general cook she "was dominant over all the other 'denizens of the kitchen'" (Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past" 132); Sophia then followed the siblings when they moved to Bloomsbury and afterwards worked for Adrian and other members of the Duckworth tribe. Annie Chart was the cook at

Asheham and Hogarth House in 1915-16, during Woolf's illness. Rose Bartholomew, Lydia Bartholomew, and Rachel Ann Dedman were occasional cooks at Monk's House. Nellie Boxall, formerly employed at Roger Fry's residence, was with the Woolfs as "cook general" from 1916 until 1934, when she was dismissed. Louisa Annie Everest, "Louie," cook and housekeeper from 1934 until 1969, in 1936 obtained a Diploma in Advanced Cooking, and would be fondly remembered by Leonard in his autobiography. Mabel Haskins, servant and cook at Tavistock Square from 1934 until 1940, was the last live-in servant in the Woolfs' household. Lottie Hope was housemaid and cook between 1916 and 1924. Anne Louisa Thompsett, cook and daily help to the Woolfs in the late 1920s and 1930s.

The remarkable thing, to be gathered from Light's fascinating book, is that the cooks mentioned (excluding housemaids, gardeners, and other servants) belonged, in a sense, to the entire Bloomsbury Group: their destinations varied in time, and according to need they shifted between the homes of the Woolfs (both in London and the country) and those of Clive and Vanessa Bell; some would come from Durbins where the Frys lived; some would stay on with Adrian, or move into the Duckworth circle; some worked for John Maynard Keynes, or for Duncan Grant. The MacCarthys and the Stracheys are also part of the picture. These servants shuttled between London and the countryside locations where weekends and holidays were spent. It could be safely admitted that the servants of the Bloomsburies made as thick a net of relationships as those who were their masters, much in the same way—perhaps—as described by Doris Lessing in "A Home for the Highland Cattle" (1953). In this story, set in Southern Rhodesia, the elegant homes of the whites in Cecil John Rhodes Vista have at their back a dust lane, or sanitary lane, inhabited by their black servants, where gossip, exchange, mimic attitudes, closely and comically imitate whatever happens on the front, starched and stiff and rigid. Highbrow and lowbrow have their distinctive, albeit mutually hinged together, rituals. Frigid convention and high drama dovetail into the warmth of low comedy and parody. Yet Light also reminds us that the Bloomsbury people had very informal households; nobody dressed for dinner;

there was no table waiting at meals; servants were not expected to go to church and unmarried mothers were employed. Bloomsbury was sympathetic and decent, sociable and fun: servants in a sense borrowed their glamour from their famous masters, "and in a pathetic tribute to Bloomsbury, mirroring the cliquish world in which they moved, the servants called themselves 'the click'" (Light 156-57).

But Bloomsbury could also be possessive and insular. When, in 1905, having left 22 Hyde Park Gate, the siblings move to Gordon Square, Sophia Farrell goes with them, to ensure that the usual schedule of three meals a day may still be followed by the young Stephens. Life changes, but in Bloomsbury, at first, the rituals of Victorian eating are still observed (Light 53). The kitchen is still in the dark basement. After Vanessa's wedding, Virginia and Adrian, with Sophia Farrell, move to Fitzroy Square in 1907. In 1910 Virginia's headaches and sleeplessness convince Dr. Savage to place her into a private nursing home at Twickenham, where she is treated with "deliberate overfeeding" (Light 63; Lee 175-200; Glenny). This will be the cause (or the effect) of her attitude to food, to fleshiness, and the association of bodily weight with mental torpor. Glenny suggests that

> dwelling on food was, as Woolf saw it, an act of female liberation. It was part of the process both of seeing the world through our own, female, lenses and, more actively, of righting a skewed world which had purged the sensual and elevated the rational. […] Writing was for her a pursuit that took place within the context of domesticity, not in monastic seclusion from the activities of the kitchen. (xii)

In 1911, when Virginia moves to Brunswick Square, where John Maynard Keynes and Leonard are also lodged, she makes a rule to have a tablet placed in the landing with the menus for the daily meals. *Each* lodger has to set his or her own initials next to the desired items: then trays will be prepared accordingly, punctually placed in the landing, and punctually withdrawn when empty. Sophia Farrell still presides, made invisible yet immensely efficient, over the meals of this kind of cloistered collegiate system. After 1912 Sophia is dismissed: Virginia will run her married home. But she will still be in need of a cook.

Sophia Farrell and Nellie Boxall. Past and present

Speaking now of the cook Sophia Farrell, we have the photo taken in 1890 where she—proud, strong, buxom, smiling—wrapped in a long starched white apron, holds the tools of her trade, the pot and ladle. This portrait made by Gerald Duckworth, and stuck in the album with those of other servants, is like those genre paintings that portrayed "low life"—as remarked by Maggie Humm in her invaluable *Snapshots of Bloomsbury* (49). But her photo also shows a confident smile, a degree of affection, an intimacy which according to the Hyde Park Gate News was discouraged: the kitchen was forbidden territory for the children of the house. Yet the cook was part of the household, part of the family. Sophia, "an illiterate, illegitimate farm-labourer's daughter […] had gone into service with Julia as a child, taught herself to read, […] and stayed doggedly loyal to the family all her life" (Lee 238). In Woolf's sketch "The Cook" we read: "Her room is hung with photographs. Her mind is like a family album" (qtd. in Light 70; Lee 49). The room of the servant looks like a lumber room, full of the detritus from the masters' life, discarded from the upper parts of the house: Sophie is the slab of stone where dates and names are engraved. In *The Years* (1930s) Sophie and Shag will reappear as Crosby and the old family dog Rover—dog and servant united, if anything, by their faithful disposition, even when the family group they belong to has been dispersed by time, life and death.

Alison Light also suggests that Sophia may have been a kind of surrogate mother figure for Virginia (73-74): two portraits, of Julia and Sophia, are placed *vis-à-vis* in Humm's text (45). One is a 1890 sketch by Sir William Rothenstein, of Julia's elegant profile, evanescent and almost spectral. The other is a 1890 photo of Sophie, frontally facing the camera, full of life and buoyant energy. Actually what we register is that Woolf's relationship with the servants would become increasingly difficult, and Virginia eventually wished not to have resident servants anymore. While her Victorian mother was a disturbing ghost from the past, that could be written down and thus set to rest, other Victorian surrogates had to be dismissed in order to ease her mind. The full dimension

of Woolf's attitude, her revulsion as well as her anguish will be articulated between April 1939 and November 1940 in "A Sketch of the Past." At 22 Hyde Park Gate, she remembers:

> The basement was a dark insanitary place for seven maids to live in. "It's like hell," one of them burst out to my mother as we sat at lessons in the dining room. My mother at once assumed the frozen dignity of the Victorian matron; and said (perhaps): "leave the room;" and she (unfortunate girl) vanished behind the red plush curtain which […] hid the door that let from the dining room to the pantry. (116-17)

The Victorian matron will resurface again and again in Woolf's work—the Angel in the house that has to be hit with the inkpot, and killed. Cooks are a different kettle of fish.

After the reign of Sophia Farrell, the last Victorian cook, dismissed by the Woolfs in 1912 (Light 318-19), Nellie Boxall, "cook general," and Lottie Hope "housemaid and cook," arrive in 1916 at Hogarth House. They both come from Durbins, Roger Fry's residence where modern conveniences ease a servant's life: they will be friends and work together until 1924. Nellie will stay on until 1934. If we compare a photo of Nellie and Lottie, taken in 1922 (Light 158), with the rigid pose of Sophia Farrell, still wearing in 1912 and 1914 the starched white apron, from which she derives at once identity and power (Humm 70, 110), we may remark that Nellie and Lottie look just like two modern girls in the open air of the countryside, with short hair, pretty hats, and smiling faces, easy postures and no aprons or uniforms. Nellie will work for 18 years at the Woolfs' with frequent rows, threats, words of love and jealousy, waspish behaviour, reconciliations, as stated by Woolf in exasperation:

> And today, for the 165th time, Nelly has given notice—Won't be dictated to: must do as other girls do. This is the fruit of Bloomsbury. On the whole, I'm inclined to take her at her word. The nuisance of arranging life to suit her fads, & the pressure of 'other girls' is too much, good cook though she is, & honest, crusty old maid too, dependable, in the main, affectionate, kindly, but incurably fussy, nervous, unsubstantial. (6 January 1925, *Diary* 3: 3)

They have much in common, mistress and cook, due to the proximity and the shared intimacy that, no longer channeled in the conventional master/servant, order/obedience pattern, shows,

as Light remarks, the naked exposure of emotions, in their (my emphasis) *all too familiar ferocity* (164-72).

The impression we get from the photos and the collected evidence is indeed of a close relationship between the two women, stemming from the critical attitude toward old traditions endorsed by the Bloomsburies, and the difficulties this creates to all the actors involved. Such attitude is at once highbrow and lowbrow, a tension of inherited patterns and bold experiment, with attempts, from both sides, at extricating oneself out of them. Humm remarks that "[t]he Woolfs' photographs are ambient props against the social and personal instabilities of the 1930s" (37). The tension is at once horizontal, involving two classes, Virginia and Nellie, mistress and cook, but also vertical, as it invests two generations, Julia and Virginia, mother and daughter. The maternal imprint seems to hold, despite all the poignant awareness of gross injustice. Despite Woolf's 1918 remark, "My opinion never changes that our domestic system is wrong," repeated in 1929: "the fault lies in the system." (Friday, 28 November 1918, *Diary* 1: 314; Saturday, 13 April 1929, *Diary* 3: 220). And, as it happens with Woolf, all precipitates into fiction.

Food and the art of writing. The cook as artist

In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), the Ramsays with children and friends are enjoying their holidays in Cornwall, much like the Stephens did at Talland House, St. Ives. Woolf places here a significant episode about the art of cooking.

In the first part of the novel, "The Window," family and guests gather around the mother and hostess Mrs Ramsay for dinner, and as Margaret Drabble remarks "harmony is struck as they enjoy a *boeuf en daube*" (xvii). Yet Mrs Ramsay is not the author of the culinary masterpiece. She does not do her own cooking. The *boeuf en daube* is created by the cook; although made to a French recipe of Mrs Ramsay's grandmother, it is specifically described as "Mildred's masterpiece" (xxi). This is the passage:

> They were having Mildred's masterpiece—*Boeuf en Daube*. Everything depended upon things being served up the precise moment they were ready.

> The beef, the bayleaf, and the wine—all must be done to a turn. To keep it waiting was out of the question. (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 108)

Mark the word masterpiece; the tongue-in-cheek ironic remark about the original French recipe. And then: "An exquisite scent of olives and oil and juice rose from the great brown dish as Marthe, with a little flourish, took the cover off. The cook had spent three days over that dish" (135). Mrs Ramsay helps a guest, Mr Bankes, to a tender piece of beef, and peers into the dish, "with its shiny walls and its confusion of savoury brown and yellow meats, and its bay leaves and its wine" (135) thinking simultaneously of her social success, and affected by contrasting emotions, love bearing in its bosom the seeds of death. Mr Bankes praises: "It's a triumph," and Mrs Ramsay replies: "It is a French recipe of my grandmother" (136).

And it's a French recipe indeed, because we find the same episode ensconced in the writer Woolf was most intensely reading in those years, Marcel Proust, and namely in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (1919), when the narrator's family invites for dinner the marquis de Norpois, whose good offices allow the young protagonist to attend a theatre matinée with the great actress Berma as *Phèdre*. Proust sets the art of Françoise, the cook, in close counterpoint with the art of the Berma. In fact,

> depuis la veille, Françoise, heureuse de s'adonner à cet art de la cuisine pour lequel elle avait certainement un don, stimulée, d'ailleurs, par l'annonce d'un convive nouveau, et sachant qu'elle aurait à composer, selon des méthodes sues d'elle seule, du boeuf à la gelée, vivait dans l'effervescence de la création; comme elle attachait une importance extrême à la qualité intrinsèque des matériaux qui devaient entrer dans la fabrication de son oeuvre, elle allait elle-même aux Halles se faire donner les plus beaux carrés de romsteck, de jarret de boeuf, de pied de veau, *comme Michel-Ange passant huit mois dans les montagnes de Carrare à choisir les blocs de marbre les plus parfaits pour le monument de Jules II.* Françoise dépensait dans ces allées et venues une telle ardeur que maman voyant sa figure enflammée craignait que notre vieille servante ne tombât malade de surmenage *comme l'auteur du Tombeau des Médicis dans les carrières de Pietrasanta.* […] Ce jour-là, si Françoise avait la *brûlante certitude des grands créateurs*, mon lot était la cruelle inquiétude du chercheur. Sans doute, tant que je n'eus pas entendu la Berma, j'éprouvai du plaisir. (26-27; my emphasis)

The comparison between the blocks of Carrara marble and the best cuts of meat, between the *boeuf* cooked by Françoise and the masterpieces of the great Michelangelo, culminates after a crescendo in which the narrator's ardent wish to see the art of Mme Berma at the theatre is given full vent; but then we are back to the table, and Françoise's "grande creation," "une daube de boeuf" (41) appears: "Le boeuf froid aux carottes fit son apparition, couché par le Michel-Ange de notre cuisine sur d'énormes cristaux de gelée pareil à des blocs de quartz transparent" (41).

This seems indeed the source of the French recipe of Mrs Ramsay. While Light reminds us of the course in French cuisine taken by Nellie, at Boulestin's (236), Mildred's art has been compared to an impressionist canvas (Knapp). Virginia Woolf, in many passages of her diary, and as early as 1923, admits that reading Proust is for her a challenge and a possible influence: *To the Lighthouse* is indeed about the *Temps Perdu* and the *Temps Rétrouvé*, and Drabble remarks that, like Proust, Woolf tries to "redeem and release loved ones from death into the eternity of art" (xxiv). Both resurrectionists, Proust and Woolf have recourse to art as the only medium granting eternity to life; and here the art of cooking and the *art de la cuisine*, Mildred's "masterpiece" and Françoise's "grande creation," belong to the same sublime rank as Michelangelo and the Berma. The passages interweave past and present, high and popular culture, and suggest thereby a "more complex experience of modernity/modernism […] at odds with many of modernism contemporary critics" (Humm 29).

It is indeed relevant that neither Woolf's Mrs Ramsay nor Proust's mother figure create their masterpiece: their servants are the authors—and artists. In this sense both mothers belong to the older generation, garnering the praise due to their cook. They both live, ideally speaking, before December 1910. Yet by placing food and the art of cooking at the core of their novels, Proust and Woolf not only do fully exploit the symbolic force of the symposium knotting together, in presence and memory, the threads of life and death: the past and the future. They also make a decided move toward the culture of modernity, by giving relief and identity to those anonymous figures of the past who preside over the body, in all its functions and pleasures. In her *Diary* for

1925 Woolf wrote that Proust's prose is "tough as catgut & as evanescent as a butterfly's bloom. And he will I suppose both influence me & make me out of temper with every sentence of my own" (Wednesday, 8 April 1925, 3: 7).

The art of cooking

While Bloomsbury enjoyed France, and French cuisine, as in Vanessa's house in Cassis, Virginia in London sent Nellie Boxall to take lessons of French cuisine from the chef Marcel Boulestin, who ran cookery courses at Fortnum & Mason, and was the celebrity chef of the Restaurant Français, decorated by Duncan Grant. Virginia herself slowly mastered the secrets of the omelette. Thus we are gradually moving toward recipes, toward real food. And to the kitchen. The great change occurred with the new cooker the Woolfs bought in 1929. The old solid fuel range was replaced by a modern oil stove, and in enthusiast tones Virginia writes in her diary:

> But what interests me is of course my oil stove. We found it here last night on coming back from Worthing. At this moment it is cooking my dinner in the glass dishes perfectly I hope, without smell, waste, or confusion: one turns handles, there is a thermometer. And so I feel myself freer, more independent—& all one's life is a struggle for freedom—able to come down here with a chop in a bag & live on my own. I go over the dishes I shall cook—the rich stews, the sauces. The adventurous strange dishes with a dash of wine in them. (Wednesday, 25 September 1929, 3: 257)

Virginia is now stepping down to the basement, wishing to emulate the Georgian cook: or rather they are meeting halfway. The art of cooking (the *boeuf en daube* still evoked) is contrasted and compared with the art of writing, with surprising results, as she writes to Vita Sackville-West:

> I have only one passion in life—cooking […] I have just bought a superb oil stove. I can cook anything […] I cooked veal cutlets and cake today. I assure you it is better than writing these more than idiotic books. (Woolf, *Letters* 4: 93)

To become "free forever of cooks," as she writes to Vita, does not mean to give up cooking, but perhaps increasingly to assess and realize its value, to appropriate its manifold meanings, to use its symbolic potential in the context of writings where food is asked to perform a cultural office. It also means to get rid of a class system that relegates the cook to the lowest ranks of society, and the mistress to her drawing room.

Cooking and gender

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929) cooking tells apart colleges for men and women, providing at once gender and class distinction. At Oxbridge the description of food in a male college is charged with so many adjectives, metaphors, references to sugar waves, white cream counterpanes, rosebuds and waves of sugar, flashes of yellow and crimson, that it becomes itself the exuberant portrait of social pomp and circumstance:

> […] the lunch on this occasion began with soles, sunk in a deep dish, over which the college cook had spread a counterpane of the whitest cream, save that it was branded here and there with brown spots like the spots on the flanks of a doe. After that came the partridges, but if this suggests a couple of bald, brown birds on a plate you are mistaken. The partridges, many and various, came with all their retinue of sauces and salads, the sharp and the sweet, each in its order; their potatoes, thin as coins but not so hard; their sprouts, foliated as rosebuds but more succulent. And no sooner had the roast and its retinue been done with than the silent serving man, the Beadle himself perhaps in a milder manifestation, set before us, wreathed in napkins, a confection which rose all sugar from the waves. To call it pudding and so relate it to rice and tapioca would be an insult. Meanwhile the wineglasses had flushed yellow and flushed crimson; had been emptied; had been filled. (9-10)

It has to be remarked that the description of this meal is not introduced as the background or discursive context in which "something very witty […] was said," but that Woolf, setting herself against "the novelist's convention not to mention soup and salmon and ducklings" (9), intentionally dwells on the art of cooking, rather than on the conversation. At the other college, for women, we are given another description of inverse import (pov-

erty *versus* wealth) but of equal artistic ambition. Food is central again, in its own right, a powerful marker of cultural identity:

> Dinner was ready. Here was the soup. It was a plain gravy soup. There was nothing to stir the fancy in that. One could have seen through the transparent liquid any pattern that there might have been on the plate itself. But there was no pattern. The plate was plain. Next came beef with its attendant greens and potatoes—a homely trinity, suggesting the rumps of cattle in a muddy market, and sprouts curled and yellowed at the edge, and bargaining and cheapening and women with string bags on Monday morning. There was no reason to complain of human nature's daily food, seeing that the supply was sufficient and coal-miners doubtless were sitting down to less. Prunes and custard followed. And if anyone complains that prunes, even when mitigated by custard, are an uncharitable vegetable (fruit they are not), stringy as a miser's heart and exuding a fluid such as might run in misers' veins who have denied themselves wine and warmth for eighty years and yet not given to the poor, he should reflect that there are people whose charity embraces even the prune. Biscuits and cheese came next, and here the water-jug was liberally passed round, for it is the nature of biscuits to be dry, and these were biscuits to the core. That was all. The meal was over. (15-16)

Food here tells a story of scanty supplies, of denial, of a relentless saving policy, of liberal poverty. For the writer, to master food description means to illuminate a whole social scenario, and to make its nature affecting, evident, and culturally poignant.

Actually, the more we follow Woolf's life as a writer who relies on the effect to be drawn from food and cooking (Lowe; Southworth), the more we perceive that both activities are pursued not in mutual exclusion but in unison. In 1930 and after, Woolf more and more enjoys the freedom she is acquiring at home, the fact of not having a live-in cook and servant; she learns to cook mushrooms, to prepare fruit for stewing, to pare cold mutton for a hotpot. Bread she already knew how to make, and we shall see to this in the conclusion of my notes.

It was necessary indeed to get rid of the actual cook, and the system it stood for, to replace it with her own art of cooking. This happens in 1934, when Nellie Boxall "the affectionate domestic tyrant" is finally dismissed.

Transformations

But Nellie will soon find another excellent job at the Laughtons, Charles and his wife Elsa Lanchester. They were the most famous theatre and cinema stars in Britain, and they lived in a very modern apartment at 38, Gordon Square. Thus Nellie will remain in close contact with "the click" (Light 212), that is, she will not be parted from the familiar group of the Bloomsbury servants. But as the cook of the famous Mr and Mrs Charles Laughton, Nellie will enjoy fame and publication when her ability and rank as refined cook are mentioned in the page of a newspaper in order to confer reliable prestige to the Regulo, the New World Gas Cooker. The Regulo and Nellie's own words are quoted in a page of the *Daily Mail* in 1936:

> "A fillet of beef, weighing about 4 pounds, is a favourite in our household" states Miss Nellie Boxall—Mr and Mrs Laughton's cook, when interviewed in her spotless little kitchen with its gleaning New World Gas Cooker of which she is very proud. "I go myself to the butcher's to choose it" […] "Another tip is to use plenty of fat—five to six tablespoons—because fillet of beef is, of course, lean. I set the Regulo at '7' for twenty minutes before putting in the meat. Once it is in, the New World does the rest. After about an hour and a quarter the beef is beautifully cooked." And Miss Boxall added, "I wouldn't be without my New World Gas Cooker for anything". (Light 217)

Nellie Boxall—the Georgian cook—now not just a reader but a writer, and a published authority on cooking, has acquired a voice, her own proud voice. Even more poignantly, Nellie becomes a literary author in the novel by Alicia Giménez-Bartlett *Una habitación ajena* (1997; *Una stanza tutta per gli altri* 2009) where her 1919-1934 diary makes the bulk of the story, interwoven with Woolf's diary, and offering a totally different perspective. In this recent novel we get the full sense of a transformation affecting social relationships and disrupting the bastion of Victorian rules: a transformation starting from within the culture of the Bloomsbury Group and fully endorsed by "the click" as Nellie's acute remarks and prompt response indicate. Along a reverse path, Virginia Woolf would proceed from the page to the kitchen.

On February 1st 2013, Paula Maggio publishes the article "Virginia Woolf: writer and bread baker," quoting an article that appears in *The Guardian* on the very same day: it's Woolf's 131st birthday, and Maggio reminds us that the US food-and-lit blog *Paper and Salt* had just included a recipe for the cottage loaf, exactly as Virginia Woolf used to make it. The source was Joan Russell Noble's *Recollections of Virginia Woolf by Her Contemporaries*, in which Louie Mayer/Louisa Annie Everest, the Woolfs' cook at Rodmell from 1934 to 1969, describes how Virginia Woolf taught her to make bread:

> But there was one thing in the kitchen that Mrs Woolf was very good at doing; she could make beautiful bread. The first question she asked me when I went to Monks House was if I knew how to make it. I told her that I had made some for my family, but I was no expert at it. "I will come into the kitchen Louie" she said, "and show you how to do it. We have always made our own bread." I was surprised how complicated the process was and how accurately Mrs Woolf carried it out. She showed me how to make the dough with the right quantities of yeast and flour, and then how to knead it. She returned three or four times during the morning to knead it again. Finally, she made the dough into the shape of a cottage loaf and baked it at just the right temperature. (Cooks Grigson; Light 318)

The recipe follows. And many more recipes are contained in the recent *Bloomsbury Cookbook*, where they alternate with images of artworks, paintings, decorations, and where, together with the Victorian authority of Mrs Beeton, many Bloomsburies (Molly MacCarthy, Frances Partridge, Duncan Grant, Helen Anrep, Angelica Garnett, Dora Carrington, Vanessa Bell for the marmalade) appear to be very busy in the kitchen and with food. Certainly this very collection is the outcome of a change in attitude which stems from Bloomsbury: the Group envisaged and fully enjoyed the greater creative freedom which the blurring of distinctions between high and low permitted. This would affect not only social mores, but the very evaluation of art and ultimately the very notion of cultural identity. In *The Pargiters* (soon to be separately wrought into *Three Guineas* [1938]) and *The Years* [1937]) Woolf conveys the full measure of the change affecting at once men and women, indeed housemaids, kitchen maids and cooks:

> He goes into the library—an august apartment which he is accustomed to have all to himself—and finds the kitchen maid curled up in the arm chair reading Plato. He goes into the kitchen and there is the cook engaged in writing a Mass in B flat. He goes into the billiard room and finds the parlourmaid knocking up a fine break at the table. He goes into the bed room and there is the housemaid working out a mathematical problem. (qtd. in Barrett xxvi)

One could not wish for a clearer statement describing the transformations going on within the Group: not just in 1910, when "human character changed," but in the following decades, despite the war and its losses.

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