

## Christiansen on Becker (2017) and on Briffault, trans. Weintraub (2018)

Becker, Karin. *Gastronomie et littérature en France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paradigme, 2017, pp. 186, ISBN 978-2-86878-031-7

Briffault, Eugène. *Paris à table 1846*. Translated and edited by J. Weintraub. Oxford UP, 2018, pp. lix + 211, ISBN 978-0-19-084203-1

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Becker's book, which explores the dynamic between *le discours gastronomique* and its adaptation by the major novelists of the nineteenth century, brings together a series of essays published since 2003 (most of which first appeared in Becker's *thèse d'habilitation allemande*), including the introduction, which is a translation of an article previously published in German. By adopting a sociohistorical approach, Becker claims to set herself apart from most scholars who look at the intersection of food and literature through the lenses of psychology, semiotics, and esthetics (10). Her corpus is immense: eleven Balzac works, four by Flaubert, eight Zola texts, eight by Maupassant, as well as Hugo's *Les Misérables* and Baudelaire's *La Fanfarlo*.

Of the five chapters, those treating table manners, *le mangeur et son corps*, and the relationship between *la gourmandise* and eroticism are the richest. To wit: when workers and peasants had trouble with appetite control, it was considered an expression of their enthusiasm and their praise for the quality of the meal, but when bourgeois had the same problem, etiquette required them to maintain "un équilibre subtil entre la démonstration de l'appétit d'une part et le contrôle du désir spontané d'autre part" (103–04). An *embonpoint* was viewed by bourgeois society as a sign of fortune and social success; it was only toward the end of the century that the public became aware of the dangers of obesity. The term *gourmand* was somewhat slippery, referring at once to a cultivated individual well-versed in the culinary arts and to "l'ogre ordinaire qui dévore sans différence" (135). *La société gourmande* and *le discours gastronomique* were for the most part androcentric and misogynous (140). Women eat delicately in Realist and Naturalist fiction, "croqu[ant]," "grignot[ant]," and "suç[ant]" (141), and prefer sweets, fruits, salads, and vegetables (men interested in the latter supposedly had questionable virility [142]). Chocolate was considered sensual, even erotic, in contrast to coffee, coded as intellectual (149). Sugar was a multi-tasker, serving as a means of seduction, consolation, and fortification (for women, that is; men energized themselves with meat [155]).

Becker concludes that the novelists' engagement with gastronomical discourse alternates between "la valorisation des facteurs matériels" and "la dénonciation de leurs effets dévastateurs sur l'âme et le corps de l'individu" (176). More important, literature is not just a response to socio-historical reality, but also, thanks to the novelists' practice of inserting themselves into gastronomical discussions, an attempt to influence that reality. "Le roman constitue donc bel et bien un enrichissement de la littérature gourmande au sens strict du terme," Becker says, to the point that *les belles-lettres* and *la littérature gastronomique* cannot be disentangled (175).

Becker's analysis tends to follow a pattern: an observation followed by a series of specific examples (typically in the form of quotes) in close succession, drawn from her corpus. There is some repetition early on, and some overlap between chapters (on the subject of sugar, for instance). The section on Baudelaire seems a bit "tacked on," perhaps because he is the only poet in the group. Certain observations are rather prosaic: it is probably not necessary to state that table manners deteriorated as alcohol flowed (106), or that the subjects of religion and politics were to be avoided during dinner conversations (118–19). There is a bibliography, but Becker does not often avail herself of sources other than the primary texts, and sometimes lapses into speculation, often of a psychoanalytic nature: Balzac's gluttony was the result of his not having been breastfed by his mother ("C'est probablement dans cette frustration, ressentie comme un rejet de sa personne, que réside la raison profonde de la glotonnerie périodique de l'auteur, par laquelle il cherche à compenser, d'un seul coup, ses besoins refoulés, dans un acte autoérotique et destructeur" [130]); Maupassant was proud of his flat stomach, and his indifference about eating well was because he was "un homme à femmes, un 'génital,' pour qui la gourmandise n'est qu'une jouissance secondaire" (133). A minor, but revealing, slip-up: Becker confuses the names of the Lantiers in *L'Assommoir*, referring first to "la gourmandise d'Étienne Lantier" (134), then to the diet Étienne Lantier went on, "tout comme Zola lui-même" (138). Obviously, she means Auguste, Étienne's father. In short, as serious a work of criticism as it is, Becker's book strains to go beyond a doctoral thesis, but does not always quite get there. This does not mean that it is not an enjoyable read; *dix-neuviémistes* and non-specialists alike will welcome the opportunity to revisit familiar scenes (Gervaise's birthday dinner, the Bovarys' wedding feast, etc.) and to discover others in works they have not (yet) read.

Both kinds of readers will appreciate Becker's study more when read in tandem with the first complete English translation of Eugène Briffault's *Paris à table 1846*. As an editor, journalist, theater critic, man of letters, and celebrated *bon vivant* (xv),

Briffault was adept at wearing many hats, according to his translator and editor, J. Weintraub; he was also a colorful figure, if we are to judge by his prowess at “doing the cloche,” which involved filling a cheese cloche with champagne and draining it in a single draft (xxiv). Sadly, he apparently went mad one day and had to be locked up at Charenton.

In his introduction, Weintraub surveys key figures who had made their mark on the culinary scene—Alexandre-Balthazar-Laurent Grimod de la Reynière (the first culinary critic and journalist); Marie-Antoine Carême (the first celebrity chef); and Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (author of the landmark *Physiologie du goût*, the first comprehensive treatment of food from composition to production to preparation to consumption [xxx]). Briffault focuses, in the first four chapters, on dinner, delving thereafter into the subjects of “people who do not dine” (chapter five); breakfast, lunch, and dinner (chapters six through eight, respectively); clubs, *cercles*, *tables d’hôte*, *pensions bourgeoises*, and rest homes (chapter nine); the restaurants of Paris (chapter ten); and “eccentricities” (chapter eleven). Briffault’s narrative is replete with maxim-like pronouncements: writers and men of letters love a good dinner “but preferably at the homes of others [...]” (86); a banquet is not a pleasure, “but a duty to be endured” (84); the bohemian hordes, “these veterans of Parisian misery” gather in the most opulent places (116); post-dinner sociability has a “mortal enemy” in the cigar (98); supper in 1846 “is no more than a grandeur deposed” (137); the thinner and more delicate the woman, the more she stuffs herself with pastries, sweets, and fortified wines (134). Other information comes in the form of straightforward facts: the Jockey Club was one of the only clubs to take root in Paris (158); the *table d’hôte* was a public establishment offering single meals at a fixed price and a set hour, communal tables, and regular clientele (162), whereas the *pension bourgeoise* was a private dwelling where the elderly and convalescent lived at joint expense (164); waiters (who are “never at fault” [199]) typically received five percent of the bill’s total in dining rooms but ten in private rooms, venues favorable to the whetting of appetites both gastronomical and sexual (200).

The most appealing feature of Briffault’s text, besides the stunning and plentiful woodcuts by Bertall (who also provided almost half of the illustrations for the first edition of *La Comédie humaine*), is the author’s playful portrait of not-always-commendable human behavior. At a ball, the orchestra would signal suppertime with a fanfare, “[a]nd so, a pack of hounds, hungry for entrails when the horn is sounded at the end of the hunt, stampedes with no more fury than did the ball for its supper” (143). The *pension bourgeoise* “is infested by a pair of harpies: pretension and boredom,” and in certain ones, “cleanliness and proper form are offended incessantly and treated like something superfluous” (165). The cheapest eating-houses “present a spectacle, swarming like that of a mass of insects” (191). David Downie, who authored the book’s preface, has ample reason to laud Briffault’s “gleeful hyperbole and painterly prose” (ix). Briffault’s affection for those he describes—like Francis Egerton, Eighth Earl of Bridgewater (renowned for the dinner parties he hosted for his costumed cats and dogs) (101), or the “locomotive cook” with an *appareil de cuisine* around her neck, meat and fish suspended from her haunches, and other foodstuffs sizzling in a frying pan (71)—is as palpable as that of Weintraub.

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