GARVAL, "ALEXIS SOYER AND THE RISE OF THE CELEBRITY CHEF"

Romanticism and the New Deleuze

Alexis Soyer and the Rise of the Celebrity Chef

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Alexis Soyer [was] as kind a hearted Christian as you might find, an admirable cook, an inventive genius, a brave, devoted, self-denying man, who served his adopted country better in the Crimea than many a starred and titled CB [Companion of the Order of Bath] . . . He had no call to be a quack; there was no earthly reason why he should inundate the newspapers with puffs, and wear impossible trousers, or cloth-of-gold waistcoats, cut diagonally. The man had a vast natural capacity, could think, ay, and do things; yet he quacked so continually, that many people set him down as a mere shallow pretender, and some even doubted whether he could cook at all. He was, nevertheless, a master of his difficult art . . . .

—George Augustus Sala (1859, 382-383)

1. Alexis Soyer (1809-1858) was a colorful character, one of the most famous chefs of his day, and a key precursor of our modern celebrity chefs. While largely forgotten today, he has nonetheless been the subject of three recent titles: a children's book, Ann Arnold's Alexis Soyer: The Adventurous Chef (2002); and two biographies, Ruth Brandon's The People's Chef: The Culinary Revolution of Alexis Soyer (2005), and Ruth Cowen's Relish: The Extraordinary Life of Alexis Soyer, Victorian Celebrity Chef (forthcoming, 2006). Soyer does merit a closer look—in particular, at the role he played in the broader evolution of the chef as a public figure. But, before this, some more general background is needed.

The Chef as man of letters

2. Antonin Carême (1783-1833) was, arguably, the first celebrity chef. Yet, in the best-known portrait of him, the Blanchard engraving after the Steuben painting [fig. 1], nowhere to be seen are the chef’s toque, or any other culinary attributes. Instead, with unruly hair, broad thinker’s forehead, dark eyes gazing into the unknown, and body wrapped in swirling drapery, Carême appears a Romantic genius—a Lord Byron perhaps, or a young Victor Hugo. But why should this be?

3. The now international phenomenon of the celebrity chef—which has found its most emphatic expression in the largely Anglo-American model of television chefs like Julia Child, James Beard, Graham Kerr, Emeril Lagasse, or Nigella Lawson—originated in post-revolutionary France. Across the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth, in concert with the rise of culinary nationalism in France (Ferguson), French chefs achieved unprecedented prestige and authority, both at home and abroad. Yet, from Antonin Carême through Auguste Escoffier (1846-1935), famed culinarians were rarely depicted as chefs. Rather, the various portraits, frontispieces, and prefaces constructing their public image would invoke well-worn paradigms of literary distinction—for example, highlighting Carême's signature and pen, his accomplishments as a writer, and the monumentality of his creative aspirations (Ferguson 49-82). Likewise, if Carême's portraits recall a young Victor Hugo, then Escoffier's cast him as an older Hugo, minus the trademark white beard but with a Clemenceau-like moustache: a paradigm of grandfatherly authority, and universal ambassador of French culture. Even in a frontispiece portrait commemorating the silver jubilee of his culinary career [fig. 2], Escoffier strikes a contemplative pose, surrounded with conventional writerly paraphernalia—pen, paper, inkwell, books, desk. Rather than seasoning a sauce, he seems to ponder his next sentence.

4. Such contradictions point to an underlying dilemma: how to envision this new category of public figure? Mentalities often lag behind innovations, and we see new things in terms of older ones, making sense of novelty through reassuring precedent. Much as early automobiles resembled horse-drawn carriages, the apotheosis of the writer in France, from Voltaire through Hugo, was modeled largely on pre-existing paradigms of military and aristocratic glory; in turn, chefs' new-found fame emulated established modes of literary renown. Under the ancien régime, chefs had long been lowly, largely itinerant domestic servants, giving rise to a persistent vision of them as comical, subservient figures, which survived well into the post-revolutionary period, in popular and humorous contexts, like this 1898 illustrated menu [fig. 3]. Casting chefs as monkeys implies clownish behavior, subhuman status, and ability only for clumsy imitation, far from the
transcendent culinary artistry posited by gastronomic writers from Alexandre-Balthazar-Laurent Grimod de la Reynière (1758-1838) onward. In order to be seen as important personages and artists in their own right, figures like Carême and Escoffier would be styled, and style themselves, as great men of letters. Indeed, by the middle of the nineteenth century, chefs’ writerly pretensions were so familiar that they became the butt of satire. In Briffault’s *Paris à table* (1846), for example [fig. 4], illustrator Bertall puts the would-be cook of letters back in his place, in the kitchen, an ill-fitting chef’s uniform accentuating his ungracious form, the toque turned into a nightcap, pulled down over the forehead for a more neanderthal effect, his brain taxed by the effort of composing a treatise on “the influence of foodstuffs upon the dispositions of the soul.” If a chef could be lampooned for trying to be a writer, so too could a writer for trying to be a chef, guilty not of aspiring beyond his station, but rather of stooping below it. So it was for Baron Léon Brisse (1813-1876), a provincial aristocrat, former bureaucrat, and minor man of letters, who achieved notoriety late in life by publishing recipes, menus, and gastronomic advice: his culinary dabbling made him a favorite target of contemporary caricaturists, dismissed by Lemot as a third-rate *éditeur* [fig. 5], and quite literally roasted by Gill [fig. 6].

5. As Baron Brisse’s example suggests, gastronomic writers and professional chefs were closely interrelated, but not parallel public figures. This is all the more apparent in the *Galerie des Gastronomes et Praticiens français, de Brillat-Savarin à nos jours*, a revealing collective portrait in Chatillon-Plessis’s *La Vie à table à la fin du XIXe siècle* (1894) [fig. 7]. The title appears to promise equal treatment, and gastronomic writers and chefs do stand together in the print, but all styled as debonair men of letters at an elegant garden party. With nary a toque nor skimmer to distinguish practitioners from theoreticians, chefs seem subsumed into the domain of writers.

6. Despite its focus on personalities since Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755-1826), the *Galerie* includes statues of the medieval chef Taillevent (Guillaume Tirel, 1310-1395) and renaissance writer François Rabelais (1494-1553), both placed in the garden, as well as of the seventeenth-century *officier de bouche* François Vatel (1631-1671), installed beyond them, on the balustrade. Seeking prestige and legitimacy through venerable predecessors, revered all the more emphatically through public “*statification,*” the print indulges in a combination of self-serving strategies—genealogy and monumentalization—not limited to, but particularly characteristic of nineteenth-century French literary culture (Garval 2004a). Among the precursors invoked and honored here, there are two hands-on culinarians, and only one man of letters, which might seem to suggest the primacy of praxis over commentary, at least historically. Among the moderns however, writer Brillat-Savarin, not chef Carême, is highlighted as number one, both in the print and in its numerical key [fig. 8]. Indeed the whole composition, and particularly this detail, recall Nadar’s 1854 pantheon of literary luminaries, where Victor Hugo plays the equivalent starring role (Garval 2004a, 17-19). The *Galerie* offers chefs a place of honor within an analogous gastronomic pantheon but, alongside this consecration, it also reveals the limits of their new-found status for, nearly a century after Carême rose to prominence, chefs’ fame was still filtered through the lens of literary renown.

7. Unfortunately, there has been little critical reflection on how chefs from Carême to Escoffier, as well as self-styled public gastronomes from Grimod de la Reynière to Curnonsky (Maurice Edmond Sailland, 1872-1956), shaped the development of the modern celebrity chef. But, as Chatillon-Plessis’s *Galerie* suggests, chefs long remained formulaic and fundamentally conservative in their relationship to fame: content to continue emulating men of letters; reluctant to abandon this flattering literary guise. On the whole, gastronomic writers proved more daring and entrepreneurial vis-à-vis their public image, as evidenced for example by the provocative and self-promoting frontispieces to the eight volumes of Grimod’s ground-breaking *Almanach des gourmands* (Garval 2004b), or by Curnonsky’s much-touted election to the fanciful post of “Prince des Gastronomes” (Vrinat). Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about the extraordinary Alexis Soyer is that, while he too fashioned himself a man of letters, he would also transcend the constraints of this literary model and, far ahead of his time, prefigure the flamboyant personas of today’s celebrity chefs.

**Fame à la zoug-zoug**

He wore a kind of paletôt of light camlet cloth, with voluminous lapels and deep cuffs of lavender watered silk; very baggy trousers, with lavender stripes down the seams; very shiny boots and quite as glossy a hat; his attire being completed by tightly-fitting gloves, of the hue known in Paris as *beurre frais*—that is to say, light yellow. All this you may think was odd enough; but an extraordinary oddity was added to his appearance by the circumstance that every article of his attire, save, I suppose, his gloves and boots, was cut on what dressmakers call a “bias,” or as he himself, when I came to know him well, used to designate as *à la zoug-zoug*. He must have been the terror of his tailor, his hatter, and his maker of cravats and underlinen; since he had, to all appearance, an unconquerable aversion from any garment which, when displayed on the human figure, exhibited either horizontal or perpendicular lines. His very visiting-cards, his cigar-case, and the handle of his cane took slightly oblique inclinations.

—George Augustus Sala, on meeting Soyer in the Hungerford Market (Sala 1894, II, 240-241)

8. Alexis Soyer was born in France and raised there, first in Meaux-en-Brie—known for its cheese—then in Paris. During the Revolution of 1830, he was working in the kitchen at the Foreign Office, when it was attacked by angry insurgents. He ended up singing, not for his supper, but for his life:
Soyer soon fled to England, where he would make his reputation, notably as chef of London’s prestigious Reform Club from 1837 to 1850. But his close call during the July Revolution remains an oddly revealing point of departure for his later, successful career. Casting him in the suggestive role of the faux-revolutionary, it already offers a glimpse at his general propensity for theatrics; his talent for rallying the public, and for making the most of unlikely opportunities; as well as his ambivalent class status and loyalty. A modestly-born opportunist, slaving away in service to the upper crust, and belting out Rouget de Lisle’s or Casimir Delavigne’s rabble-rousing lyrics at gunpoint, he appears at once a man of the people and lackey of the elite.

9. Soyer was, in so many ways, a study in contradictions, “who drew the breath of his being from the French Romantics and who won the respect of Victorian England for his practical resourcefulness and powers of administration” (Morris 1). He served refined food to the rich and powerful, and strained to ingratiate himself to them as well. But, amid the social and intellectual ferment over the problem of poverty, in the years surrounding the Revolution of 1848, he also put his skills to more humanitarian and egalitarian use. He toiled to feed Ireland’s poor in the 1840s, or starving British soldiers in the Crimea a decade later, and published invaluable information to help the needy better feed themselves: first in a booklet, “The Poor Man’s Regenerator” (1847), from each copy of which he gave a penny to the poor; then more extensively in his Shilling Cookery for the People (1854). A versatile, compassionate, and inventive cook, he was a prolific inventor as well—of bottled sauces and drinks, culinary gadetry of all sorts [fig. 9], numerous innovations in the Reform Club’s celebrated new kitchens, and many other things, including an excellent field stove [fig. 10], a variant of which, still called the Soyer stove, was used by the British army through the first Gulf War (Brandon 241).

10. Soyer was known for his exuberance, and eccentric style. A wit, prankster, raconteur, fine singer—and not just of revolutionary ballads—his first ambition was to be a comic actor, and for much of his life he frequented theaters and theatrical performers. A dapper Frenchman among drabber Victorians, he dressed as a Romantic dandy, in a style no longer the height of fashion at the height of his career in the 1840s and 50s—and did so even in the kitchen, eschewing the conventional chef’s uniform. Beyond their rich embroidery, lavish silks, and extravagant colors, Soyer’s clothes were characterized by their insistent cut on a bias, “à la zoug-zoug” in his own coinage, an idiosyncratic rendering of “zig-zag,” the English phrase itself taking on the gallic flair of its inventor. Indeed, this predilection for diagonal lines was not limited to clothing designed and worn “studiously awry” (Sala 1894, II, 241), but rather part of a broader pattern. As biographer Helen Morris notes,

Soyer’s desire to be noticed, to be admired, above all to be extraordinary, grew ever more dominant. He tried not only to cook differently from everyone else, but to dress and talk and walk differently too. . . . [H]e would not wear a single garment with either horizontal or perpendicular lines. His hats were specially built so that when clapped on at any angle they slanted in a coquetish way—in his own phrase, à la zoug-zoug. His coats had to be cut on the cross . . . . His visiting card . . . was not a rectangle but a parallelogram; so was his cigar-case, and even the handle of his cane slanted obliquely. (25)

To this list could be added many things: advertisements for Soyer’s products, like these for his Sultana’s Sauce, one with the central bottle tilted diagonally through the copy [fig. 11], the other with the copy inside a parallelogrammic field [fig. 12], recalling the shape of his carte de visite [fig. 13]; a whimsical dish created in honor of the ballerina Fanny Cerrito [fig. 14], with whispy diagonals spiraling round a conical base, surmounted by a dancing figurine on pointe atop a thunderbolt-like stand composed of alternating angles; “a zig-zag passage,” which Morris calls a “true Soyer touch” (78), leading into the model soup kitchen that Soyer designed in Dublin; his fanciful menu for a “GRAND SUPERPER LUCULLUSIEN À LA ZOUG-ZOUG” (Volant and Warren 152); and, as we shall see, numerous diagonal elements in the portraits of Soyer that accompany his published work. As such varied examples suggest, à la zoug-zoug might best be understood as the central trope in Soyer’s creative imagination, and in his dandified public persona, emblematic of his drive to distinguish himself—both to achieve distinction, and to do so by being different.

11. Soyer’s position as chef of the Reform Club secured him some prominence but, in itself, does not explain the magnitude of his fame. His constant letters to various London papers, particularly the Times—touting his own accomplishments, promoting his latest schemes, weighing in on the questions of the day—helped keep him in the public eye. So too did the extensive marketing of his products, notably “Soyer’s Sauce” [fig. 15], as well as his several successful books on food and cookery. Combined with his flamboyant personal style, these forms of exposure made Soyer a favorite target of popular satire which, for better or worse, only increased his renown. He “figured more often in the pages of Punch than many a Cabinet Minister” (Morris 1), as in this rendering of his resignation as chef of the Reform Club [fig. 16]. His face remains hidden by his hand, all the better to draw attention to him, and to point up the extent of his celebrity. Soyer’s face is so familiar that its features have become superfluous. Other attributes suffice to identify him: the hat rakishly askew, his chef’s knives, and stylish street clothes that contrast with the ordinary kitchen garb of his staff, whose faces register varying
To be sure, Thackeray’s treatment of this fictional lynched by a revolutionary mob while standing his ground in the street, whereas Soyer was nearly lynched by a revolutionary mob while fleeing from a palace kitchen.

12. Other contemporary satirical treatments of Soyer include, notably, his parodic double Alcide Mirobolant, in Thackeray’s novel Pendennis (1849). Thackeray and Soyer had known and esteemed each other since meeting at the Reform Club in 1837, and the novelist often joked that the friendship the chief in his contributions to Punch, which also afforded Soyer considerable free publicity. In Pendennis, Mirobolant—whose surname means “dazzling” in French—arrives in a small English town to become chef to the local lord, and creates a stir among the inhabitants. Thackeray has also made him a Gascon, that legendary figure of strutting braggadocio. To wit, Mirobolant strides about town of a summer afternoon, in outlandish attire reminiscent of Soyer’s:

his light green frock or paletot, his crimson velvet waistcoat with blue glass buttons, his pantalon Écossais of a very large and decided check pattern, his orange satin neckcloth, and his jean-boots, with tips of shiny leather, these, with a gold embroidered cap, and a richly-gilt cane, or other varieties of ornament of a similar tendency . . . in which he considered that he exhibited the appearance of a gentleman of good Parisian ton. (Thackeray 1898, 222; all references to this edition, unless noted otherwise)

Fancying himself irresistibly attractive, he ‘walked down the street, grinning and ogling every woman he met with glances, which he meant should kill them outright’ (222) for, as a Frenchman, he was “accustomed to conquer” (225). Recalling Soyer’s own histrionic bent, he declares ‘with a deep bass voice, and a tragic accent worthy of the Porte St. Martin and his favourite melodrones’ that he is “a fatal man,” destined to inspire “hopeless passion” (226). Mirobolant’s self-proclaimed “determination to marry an Anglaise,” to find a mate among “[t]he blonde misses of Albion,” (225) perhaps alludes to Soyer’s own marriage to an Englishwoman (cf. below), or even to the dedication of The Modern Housewife, or Ménagère to “The Fair Daughters of Albion” [fig. 17]. In any case, it is left to the reader’s judgment “[w]hether Alcide was as irresistible a conqueror as his namesake, or whether he was simply crazy’ (226). This remark calls attention to the chef’s given name, which is both reminiscent of Soyer’s (Alcide-Alexis), and echoes that of the protagonist in Jean-Baptiste Lully’s opera Alceste, ou le Triomphe d’Alcide (1674), as well as in the lesser-known Alcide, ou le Triomphe d’Hercule (1693, written by Jean Galbert de Campistron, with music by Louis Lully and Marin Marais)—ironic associations for, while a conqueror of men and even of death, and despite vigorous attempts at amorous conquest, the Alcide figure in both these operas ends up unhappy in love.

13. Mirobolant harbors artistic pretensions as well:

It was a grand sight to behold him in his dressing gown composing a menu. He always sate down and played the piano for some time before. If interrupted, he remonstrated pathetically with his little maid. Every great artist, he said, had need of solitude to perfectionate his works. (Thackeray 1849, 1, 218)

One of Thackeray’s own illustrations for the novel depicts this scene [fig. 18], with the maid scolded by the chef in his elegant dressing-gown, and diagonally-slanted cap reminiscent of Soyer’s. In the Frenchman’s quarters, a saucepan stands next to a couple of thick volumes, and on the wall above this hang portraits honoring two key culinary figures: Louis-Eustache Ude, the best-known French chef in England before Soyer; and, the Marquis de Béchamel, a seventeenth-century nobleman and supposed inventor of the famed sauce bearing his name. Mirobolant worries, moreover, that his “genius” is wasted upon England’s “dull inhabitants”: “the poesy of my art,” he laments, “cannot be understood by these carnivorous insularies” (225). Indeed, so emphatic is his artistic and, with it, social affectation that, when the novel’s title character calls him a cook, he takes this as an affront to his honor: “I am Chevalier de Juillet,’ said [Mirobolant] . . . slapping his breast, ‘and he has insulted me. . . . Il m’a appelé—Cuisinier” (258). Others intercede to avert a duel, a possibility hinging, precisely, on the cook’s problematic social status. Pendennis contends that he ‘can’t fight a cook’ (261)—a domestic, hence an inferior—and is furious that Mirobolant accosts him, as if his equal:

To be tapped on the shoulder by a French cook was a piece of familiarity which made the blood of the Pendennis to boil up in the veins of their descendant, and he was astounded, almost more than enraged, at such an indignity. (257)

In contrast, Mirobolant sees himself, not only as an exalted artist, but as an heroic insurgent, a “Chevalier de Juillet” who “killed four gardes du corps with his own point in the barricades” (261). This claim to glory, doubtless exaggerated in stereotypical Gascon fashion, caricatures, indeed cleverly reverses the terms of Soyer’s own, far less swashbuckling role in the July Days—Mirobolant would have slain elite troops while standing his ground in the street, whereas Soyer was nearly lynched by a revolutionary mob while fleeing from a palace kitchen.
hearted, even tender, conceived "in the fulness of our love and respect for Monsieur Mirobolant" (212). Satirical barbs are aimed as much at the English townspeople as at the colorful Frenchman in their midst: 'Not having been accustomed to the appearance or society of persons of the French nation, the rustic inhabitants . . . were not so favourably impressed by Monsieur Alcide’s manners and appearance' (222). Curious little children begin to follow him, soon joined by older ones, "laughing, jeering, hooting, and calling opprobrious names to the Frenchman" who “at length . . . began to perceive that he was an object of derision rather than of respect to the rude grinning mob" (223). So too does another of Thackeray's illustrations evoke the misunderstandings between the locals and their foreign visitor, with a group of children forming behind the bizarrely-clad Mirobolant—the older ones seem amused, while the youngest, clutching her doll, appears frightened—and a young woman looks baffled and perhaps scared as well by the predatory stare he fires her way [fig. 19].

On another level, Mirobolant's misfortunes during his stroll about a small English town—his hapless pursuit of local ladies, and persecution at the hands of a juvenile "mob"—offer an ironic counterpoint to his supposed heroism on the street, in the French capital, during the July Revolution.

15. In his day, Soyer even enjoyed considerable renown in America, where his books were widely read and admired, and his various schemes, inventions, and exploits received ample coverage in the popular press. For example, a review of the American edition of Soyer's *The Modern Housewife or Ménaigère*, in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, accords the author great reverence:

> We sit down to discuss a volume of M. Soyer as the undergraduate rises to address an assemblage of professors and doctors of divinity; that is to say, with an unaffected sense of our own incapacity, and an overwhelming conviction of the magnitude and difficulty of the task. (210)

Similarly, the review of Soyer's *Culinary Campaign*, in *Harper's Monthly*, declares, "Every one has heard of Alexis Soyer, the celebrated chef de cuisine, . . . [a] litterateur, as well as the greatest living master of the mageric art" (325).

16. While multiple factors contributed to such far-flung fame, Soyer’s publications were the most important. Long before chefs could serve themselves up to a mass public on television, Soyer’s books were both widely distributed, and offered ample opportunity for self-presentation, in prefaces and title pages, frontispieces and other illustrations, and even throughout the text, as we shall see in the case of his *Culinary Campaign*, in which he stars as the hero of this autobiographical narrative.

17. Soyer published his first book in 1845, in French, called *Délassements culinaires*, which features a ballet, "La Fille de l'Orage," dedicated to dancer Fanny Cerrito. The slim volume also includes gastronomic essays—like the recipe for *La Crème de la Grande Bretagne*, actually an elaborate compliment to British society ladies—more reminiscent however of Brillat-Savarin's entertaining "Variétés" than of the practical culinary advice Soyer would proffer, with such success, in the years ahead. Oddly enough, the part of *Délassements culinaires* most suggestive of the future course of Soyer’s career is the curious frontispiece portrait of the author [fig. 20]. Like other prominent nineteenth-century figures—namely Napoleon, Byron, Hugo, P.T. Barnum, and Sarah Bernhardt—Soyer seems to have intuited much about the importance of images within the period’s burgeoning fame culture. He no doubt benefited in this respect from marriage, in 1837, to the artist Emma Jones (1813–1842) [fig. 21], an accomplished portraitist, whose work he venerated, and all the more so after her untimely death in childbirth—as in this print from *The Gastronomic Regenerator* (1846) [fig. 22], in which Emma’s absence from Soyer’s "table at home" is made all the more poignant by the presence of her canvases, and by the caption, with its Lamartinian undertones, deploring the barrenness of a gastronomic gathering “sans Dames.” In the frontispiece portrait for *Délassements culinaires* Soyer’s face appears elongated, as if distorted in a fun-house mirror. This seemingly unflattering likeness nonetheless inspired a “complimentary epistle,” reported in Volant and Warren’s *Memoirs of Alexis Soyer*, that ends revealingly:

> Behold this phiz, of awful length,  
> Equipped with brains of wondrous strength,  
> Compared with which Carême’s [sic] were dull,  
> And Ude can scarcely boast a skull.  
> Long-headed Soyer, long may thy name  
> Be stretched upon the rolls of Fame.—L. (57)

While in jest, Soyer’s anonymous contemporary (presumably a friend, based on the familiar tone) makes a key connection between the elongation of Soyer’s physiognomy (“phiz”), and his desire for renown. Aspiring to rival, even to surpass the most celebrated French chefs of the previous generation, Soyer does not hesitate to bend and stretch the lines of his portrait, to manipulate his image both literally and figuratively. We shall see how his penchant for self-aggrandizement, for diverging from constraining norms, and for reinventing himself, all in the service of his reputation, informs his later works, particularly their frontispiece portraits. But this propensity is already here, in embryonic form.

18. *Délassements culinaires* seems to have been well-received. In particular, Fayot, the editor of *Les Classiques de la Table*, who prided himself on having befriended such seminal gastronomic figures as Carême, Brillat, Grimod, and the Marquis de Cussy, congratulated Soyer at once on the work’s culinary and literary merits: "Chez vous, monsieur," he wrote, "le cuisinier rempli de goût et d’une charmante élégance, étincelle dans l’écriture" (Marquis 46). Here, if needed, was ample
In short, Soyer's books were always a pose, passing him off as something that, on the most basic level, he was not: a writer. This necessarily involved wrestling with deep-rooted societal prejudices against cooks, still seen largely as lowly domestic help—indeed, "when, in the 1841 census, Soyer gave his occupation as a cook, the census-taker automatically listed him among the servants, when in fact he was the householder" (Brandon 73). So too might chefs, whatever their pretensions, be dismissed as ill-educated simpletons—like the dim-looking gent in Bertall's illustration [fig. 4]—the antithesis of the urbane men of letters whom ambitious sorts like Soyer sought to emulate. As a follow-up to Délassements culinaires, The Gastronomic Regenerator exhibits both the contradictions inherent in Soyer's status as would-be man of letters, and his efforts to make the most of this tenuous situation. The Gastronomic Regenerator would appear, at first glance, to be more of a challenge for his questionable literacy. It was much longer, and written in English, a language he mastered even less than his native French. Yet it was also far less literary than its predecessor, not a gastronomical essay but rather a practitioner's compendium of useful advice, that fit easily within a long tradition of similar efforts by distinguished French culinarians, from Taillevent to Menon to Carême, and continued afterward by figures like Jules Gouffé, Escoffier, or Bocuse. Despite whatever difficulties English presented—largely mitigated by the efforts of his secretaries—The Gastronomic Regenerator staked out familiar territory, in which Soyer could operate from a position of greatest strength. Addressing the public of his adopted land in its vernacular, and in a popular format that showcased his expertise, Soyer hit upon a combination most likely to boost his fame, but not to raise doubts about his qualifications as an author.

19. The preface of The Gastronomic Regenerator is particularly revealing. Soyer begins with his supposed reluctance to embark on a project of this sort, despite requests from distinguished visitors to the Reform Club, especially ladies:

Why do you not write and publish a Cookery-book? was a question continually put to me. For a considerable time this scientific word caused a thrill of horror to pervade my frame, and brought back to my mind that one day, being in a most superb library in the midst of a splendid baronial hall, by chance I met with one of Milton's allegorical works, the profound ideas of Locke, and several chefs d'oeuvre of one of the noblest champions of literature, Shakspeare; when all at once my attention was attracted by the nineteenth edition of a voluminous work: such an immense success of publication caused me to say, 'Oh! You celebrated man, posterity counts every hour of fame upon your regretted ashes!' Opening this work with intense curiosity, to my great disappointment what did I see—a receipt for Ox-tail Soup! The terrifying effect produced upon me by this succulent volume made me determine that my few ideas, whether culinary or domestic, should never encumber a sanctuary which should be entirely devoted to works worthy of a place in the Temple of the Muses. (vii-viii)

Tellingly, the idea of producing his own cookbook conjures up in his mind the most prestigious works in the British literary canon, mentioned ostensibly in contrast with culinary works not worthy of such elevated status. Yet it is precisely such a book that beckons him. Its numerous editions, its "immense success of publication," and the extraordinary fame of its author arouse his "intense curiosity," even if he feigns "great disappointment" upon discovering it to be a cookbook. Through this amusingly contrived anecdote, Soyer grapples with traditional notions of literary glory, in order to stake his own, alternate claim within the world of letters. Within this context, it does not seem coincidental that he refers to great works of literature as "chefs d'oeuvre"—he could have used the English term "masterpieces"—making "chefs" intrude into a category that would seem to exclude them. This turn of mind becomes all the clearer in the preface's concluding sentence. Having now written a book of recipes, he begs the reader to "put [it] in a place suited to its little merit, and not with Milton's sublime Paradise, for there it certainly would be doubly lost" (viii). This last phrase is particularly suggestive for, if side-by-side with Milton, Soyer's volume would be condemned to nether regions of literary endeavor, yet also, in the rarefied space of a baronial library, it would not be available to the far broader public it targets. Foregoing the "sublime," Soyer aims instead at popular "success." Perhaps most tellingly, and notwithstanding his pretense of modesty throughout the preface, the last line is followed by a large, bold facsimile of Soyer's signature—the graphic measure of his authorial ambition.

20. The frontispiece portrait of Soyer in The Gastronomic Regenerator [fig. 23] is far less unusual than the one in his first book. It is a flattering likeness, lovingly rendered by his wife, in which, with his dark eyes and sensuous mouth, he appears handsome, sensitive, thoughtful, and also younger than at the time of the book's publication (necessarily so, since Emma had died four years earlier). There is no border here, in contrast to the increasingly elaborate ones that would frame his portrait in his next two major publications, The Modern Housewife, and The Pantropheon. His attire is also more restrained.
than in other likenesses, though he does wear his signature cap on a characteristic diagonal—a hint, at least, of the sitter’s eccentricity.

21. The frontispiece for The Modern Housewife, or Ménagère [fig. 24] uses the same portrait by Emma Soyer, but surrounds it with a fanciful border that combines floral garlands with other decorative motifs which, at the level of the author’s head, morph into chimera-like winged creatures, likely an allusion to the flights of his creative imagination. Above his head we find a fleur-de-lys-like motif, perhaps betokening the author’s Frenchness, and below him the border forms a frame around his signature, the quintessence of authorial identity. Already, this image tries harder to portray Soyer as an important personage and, specifically, as an author.

22. Soyer seems to have found himself increasingly emboldened by the success of these books. His authorial pose thus continues, indeed culminates in his next publication, the Pantropheon (1853). The frontispiece [fig. 25] offers an elaborate iconographical program, seemingly appropriate for an ambitious work subtitled ‘History of Food, and its preparation, from the earliest ages of the world.’ The central portrait of the author—again, the same one by Emma Soyer—is surrounded by a gastronomic allegory spanning food production, preparation, service, and writing, in vignettes organized clockwise, around five putti figures. In addition, parallel staffs flank the composition: at left, topped by a pineapple and hung with fowl, symbolizing hospitality and plenty; at right, topped by a trident and hung with fish, symbolizing the ocean’s bounty.

23. At lower left, one putto sits wedged between a sheaf of wheat that rests upon a pile of game, and grape vines surmounted by a cluster of hanging fowl. He gazes downward at the bunch of grapes in his hands, which he squeezes into a chalice, the fruits of the natural world thus transformed by human hands. Above, three more putti display finished products, in divergent realms of gastronomic endeavor: wine and spirit-making, as the figure at left hoists a massive, crystal decanter; pastry-making, as the one at right holds up a decorative, circular confection upon a platter; and cooking, as the central putto lifts the lid from a steaming cauldron set upon a lively fire, an archetypal pot au feu. There is upward movement throughout, accentuated by ardent flames and ascending puffs of smoke and steam, figuring a Hegelian Aufhebung, toward what Brillat-Savarin called ‘transcendent gastronomy.’ Indeed, this whole scene is reminiscent of the upper vignette in Bertall’s “Les Aliments” [fig. 26], a plate for the 1846 (and then still recent) edition of Brillat-Savarin’s Physiologie du goût, in which the raw is cooked, transfigured through the alchemy of fire and artistry of a professional chef, as smoke and steam billow up, into a celestial vision of gastronomic delight, crowned by a giant mouth, from which beatific rays project outward—illustrating both Brillat’s concept of transcendent gastronomy, and the broader French ideal of cultural “rayonnement.”

24. Returning to the Pantropheon frontispiece [fig. 25], the final vignette shows another seated putto, his right (and writing) hand resting upon a pile of giant books marked with the names of classical authors; his left held pensively to his mouth, pathway to gastronomic experience; his head tilted and brow furrowed, further signifying thoughtfulness; with, at his feet and alongside the oversized tomes, water running across and down, toward the lower right corner—spilling over, as it were, into the text that follows. In this way, it depicts the contemporary food writer’s work, his reflections both inspired by gustatory remembrances and flowing from classical ‘sources,’ thus completing the sweep of this gastronomic allegory, from raw ingredients, through prepared food and drink, on to the written appreciation thereof.

25. The five putti, as well as the branch and vine motif linking them, recall another Bertall plate for the 1846 Physiologie du goût, “Les Sens” [fig. 27], and through this the long philosophical and iconographical traditions of five senses allegories, so often invoked in gastronomic contexts like this (Garval 2005). In addition, the allusions here to earth, air, fire, and water call to mind allegories of the four elements. Together, the intimations of these two venerable allegorical traditions elevate the gastronomic allegory at hand, lending classical resonance and philosophical depth to the engraving and, by extension, to the work that follows. Indeed, the next plate in the volume continues in this vein, suggesting yet more emphatically the scope of Soyer’s ambition. Set opposite the dedication “To the Genius of Gastronomy,” the print shows the earth, floating in space, amid the brilliant rays of the sun and dramatically-shaded masses of clouds, and encircled by a giant banner inscribed with the motto “DEUS CREATOR, TERRA NUTRIX.” Soyer’s seemingly humble subject—food—takes on cosmological dimensions. [fig. 28]

26. But what of the central author’s portrait in the frontispiece [fig. 25]? At bottom center, an antler projects into this space on a bias, directing our gaze toward Soyer, and drawing attention to the diagonal skew, not only of his hallmark hat, but also of the oval frame surrounding his effigy. These angles are likewise echoed and emphasized by those of the wheat sheaf and books below, as by the decanter and pot lid above, with the uppermost putto similarly coiffed but facing the opposite way, at once a visual counterpart in the composition and mirror image of the mature chef he emulates. While less obvious, the upright staffs and the portrait itself also lean slightly in the same direction as the oval vignette, as if pulled by an alternate, tilting gravitation, a subtle warping of ordinary physical laws. Contemplating this idiosyncratic rendering of an eccentric figure, who looks out at us, and we in at him, through an unusual, diagonal window, we stand before a portal into Soyer’s realm—into a text that promises his peculiar, gastronomic slant on the world, and world history.

27. We thus might well expect the originality of Soyer’s thought in this work to rival the legendary originality of his
appearance. However, the biggest put-on here is not the pretentious frontispiece, but the text that follows. Soyer's contemporaries did not know it, but it has since been revealed that he most likely did not compose it himself, with the exception of the chapter on "Modern Banquets" (McKirdy). The rest of this sizable work was probably written by a certain Adolphe Duhart-Fauvet, an obscure French teacher living in London at the time, whose knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin (in contrast to Soyer's marginal literacy in modern French and English) would have enabled him to handle the book's roughly 3,000 classical references. Soyer seems to have paid Duhart-Fauvet for his efforts, had the work translated into English—"misérablement traduit en Anglais par je ne sais quels manoeuvres littéraires," according to Duhart-Fauvet's handwritten notes on his copy of the book (McKirdy 19)—and then he took all the credit. Perhaps, as Brandon suggests, this "one truly dishonest act of his life" can be explained through his state of mind at the time, which she qualifies as "something as near depression as was possible in so buoyant a character," following the collapse of his grandiose Symposium of All Nations restaurant project, in 1851 (Brandon 228). But, as the visual evidence of his increasingly elaborate frontispieces suggests, this was also a logical next step in Soyer's ongoing, authorial masquerade: to appear in the most exalted of guises, as a savant who appropriates the wisdom and prestige of the ancients. This was an ideal all the more desirable for a man with Soyer's great ambition but negligible education. After realizing it, however disingenuously, he retreated from this encroachment upon the hallowed ground of classical scholarship, and returned in short order to more familiar territory, publishing another cookbook the following year. Perhaps, a fundamentally decent man, he found it impossible to continue such a flagrant imposture. Perhaps he just decided that it didn't pay, since the Pantropheon sold badly.

28. In contrast to the Pantropheon's arid classical erudition, the lively popularizing bent of Soyer's Shilling Cookery for the People (1854) made it a great publishing success. In the frontispiece [fig. 29], Soyer's portrait has, finally, been updated, and looks more like the 45-year old he had become. It does appear again inside an attractive, oval vignette, but this time standing sensibly upright, and minus the surrounding decorative and allegorical program: a more sober presentation, seemingly in concert with this work's common-sense, no-frills theme. There are still however three "signature" elements, within the oval frame, that all run on the same jaunty slant: his hallmark hat; a copy of this book, which its author holds in his hand (the spine reads "Soyer's Shilling . . ."); and, his signature itself, far larger and bolder than those, on either side, of the artist and engraver. Soyer cuts a rakish figure in this portrait, with his elaborately-knotted cravat, embroidered vest, and silk moiré-trimmed waistcoat. To be sure, there is some contradiction in such a self-presentation leading off a volume "embracing an entirely new system of plain cookery and domestic economy." Yet, while his writerly pose is less emphatic here than in the Pantropheon frontispiece, Soyer still aims to fashion himself in a literary mold, not so much as the author of this work, but more generally as an Author, whose œuvre projects well beyond this particular volume. To this end, on the title page, his name is followed by an implicitly expansive list of his works: "Author of 'The Modern Housewife, Etc., Etc.' Similarly, beneath this, he quotes from the Pantropheon:

'Religion feeds the soul, Education the mind, Food the body.'

His would-be pearl of wisdom is doubly unoriginal: 'Food feeds' is the most uninspired of gastronomic reflections and, like the rest of the Pantropheon, probably plagiarized. But, this irony notwithstanding, by citing his Pantropheon at the head of a new volume, Soyer points toward his larger œuvre and also indulges in a quasi-Napoleonic gesture of auto-apotheosis, anointing himself as an Author and, in the original sense of the word, as an Authority. This suggests, once again, the lengths to which he might go to advance his reputation. Yet Shilling Cookery also found Soyer at a crossroads of distinct but related evolutions within his career. On the one hand, his literary pretensions had risen in a crescendo, from The Gastronomic Regenerator, to The Modern Housewife, to a veritable paroxysm of bad faith in the Pantropheon. On the other, his popularizing bent had grown more pronounced over the years as well, from The Gastronomic Regenerator, aimed at well-to-do readers; to The Modern Housewife, which targeted a bourgeois audience; to Shilling Cookery (anticipated by his earlier booklet, 'The Poor Man's Regenerator') which catered to the working class. In short, in his ongoing quest for fame, he had already pushed his authorial masquerade to the maximum in the Pantropheon, and now retreated from this extreme stance; so too he had worked his way from the top to the bottom of the social ladder in his cookbooks, striking an egalitarian note as well with his interesting though short-lived Symposium of All Nations.

29. Within Soyer's career there were also suggestive parallels with that of another ambitious Frenchman living in London in the 1840s: Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte. In 1846, Napoléon Bonaparte's nephew published De l'extinction du paupérisme, a utopian socialist tract on the problem of poverty; in 1847 Soyer did much the same, in a gastronomic register, with "The Poor Man's Regenerator." Both works appealed to the masses and, riding the wave of social unrest leading to the Revolution of 1848, cast their authors advantageously as concerned champions of the people. Louis-Napoléon's populism, which helped get him elected President of the French Republic, turned authoritarian and megalomaniac with his coup d'état of December 2, 1851, and ascent to the imperial throne as Napoléon III, on the coup's anniversary (these dates deliberately echoed the glory of Napoléon I, who crowned himself Emperor on December 2, 1804, and prevailed at Austerlitz exactly one year later). Soon Soyer ventured an analogous self-promotion, with the publication of his Pantropheon (1853), a gesture likewise imperialist in scope—covering food across the globe, throughout history—while also fundamentally bogus. But, at least at this point in history, a Bonaparte could still get away with a level of dubious self-aggrandizement that a chef,
However renowned, could not. Faced with the lukewarm reception accorded his most recent work, Soyer was wise to stake his reputation instead on a more genially crowd-pleasing volume: the flatulent pretense of the *Pantropheon* thus yielded to the frank populism of *Shilling Cookery*.

30. One could imagine that a less restless, more boringly sensible sort would feel that he had found his path at last and, nearing 50, would settle down to a comfortable life writing popular cookbooks. But not Soyer. So what would this peripatetic figure do next?

**The Logician as Romantic hero**

M. Soyer’s account of the Crimean campaign . . . . magnifies his office. He has no misgiving that cookery is not the most sublime and important of professions. He has immense faith in himself and his noble art. He writes of the campaign as Lamartine writes of the last French Revolution, making himself the central figure . . .

—Review of *Soyer’s Culinary Campaign*, in *The North American Review*, January 1858

31. The Crimean War offered Soyer an unexpected opportunity to try something new, to reinvent himself yet again and, in the process, to further his renown. Dismayed by the newspaper accounts of British troops starving, Soyer volunteered his expertise. He designed a superior field stove [fig. 10] and, despite the many dangers, traveled to the Crimea where, from the Spring of 1855 to the Spring of 1857, he reformed the British Army’s kitchens, as well as its inefficient ways of provisioning them. While there, he also hobnobbed with British and French high commanders, and with the war’s other humanitarian celebrities, Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole. His efforts attracted attention in the press, and provided fodder for contemporary satirists, as in the comic sketch “Camp Cookery”—attributed to “Alicksus Sawder” and published in the humorous collection *Our Miscellany* (1856)—which poked fun at the preparations Soyer designed for the troops [fig. 30]. His work did, nonetheless, improve the plight of British soldiers, making a real contribution to the war effort.

32. When Soyer returned to London, he published an account of his adventures in the Crimea, entitled *Soyer’s Culinary Campaign* (1857). Reviewers ridiculed the *beau rôle* Soyer accorded himself in these historical events, their criticisms enlivened with abundant culinary references: *The Times* of London remarked, for example, that “Alexis the Savoury opens his box of condiments, and shows us indisputably how fields are won. Such and such proportions of pepper and salt went to make such a breach or to repulse such a night attack.” *The North American Review*, while published in faraway Iowa, also refused to be duped by the famed foreign chef’s visions of grandeur, and decried “this very inordinate vanity, this exaggeration of the value of his services and the importance of his reforms, this singular simplicity of egotism” (262). But, if nothing else, the book brought Soyer renewed attention—and perhaps there is no such thing as bad publicity, as P.T. Barnum is supposed to have said.

33. In his previous published works, Soyer’s efforts at self-presentation were limited largely to the paratext, i.e. the prefaces, title pages, and especially frontispieces. His *Culinary Campaign* however offered Soyer an unprecedented forum for self-fashioning and promotion, turning himself into a sort of bold, humanitarian Mirobolant—the multifaceted if deluded hero of his own narrative. As the *Times* review remarks, “Soyer the Great, like the heroes and demigods of ancient mythology, . . . with his compound functions, is nevertheless a consistent personage, except where, possibly from his wanting a little medicine, he forgets for a moment that he is the centre of creation.”

34. Conversely then, the paratext here is remarkably understated, giving little hint of the fanciful memoir that follows. The frontispiece [fig. 31] is sober, with no tell-tale borders, depicting “The Author” simply as the tired, aging, ailing veteran of this “culinary campaign,” without even his signature cap. While the engraving of his likeness “From a Photograph” does, at this early point in the history of photography, confer upon the sitter a certain stylish and modern air, it also suggests a kind of documentary seriousness, which Soyer’s grave facial expression seems to confirm. So too does the title page present the work in earnest tones, as

**BEING HISTORICAL REMINISCENCES**

**OF THE LATE WAR.**

**WITH**

**THE PLAIN ART OF COOKERY**

**FOR**

**MILITARY AND CIVIL INSTITUTIONS, THE ARMY, NAVY,**

**PUBLIC, ETC. ETC.** (Soyer 1857)

His “principal object,” he claims in the preface, is to “perpetuate the successful efforts made by him” to improve British soldiers’ diet. The preface also alludes to the book’s “literary portion [which] the Author has dished up to the best of his ability,” yet downplays it, allowing that readers may not “relish” this, and hoping that the work’s “literary deficiencies” will be “compensated for by the ability,” yet — Review of *Soyer’s Culinary Campaign*, in *The North American Review*, January 1858

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would be compensated for by the “succulence” of “the many new and valuable receipts, applicable to the Army, Navy, Military and Civilian Institutions, and the public in general” (Soyer 1995, xiii; all references to this edition, unless noted otherwise). His use of culinary vocabulary (“portion,” “dish up,” “relish,” “succulent”), like the title page’s qualification of him as “Author of ‘The Modern Housewife,’ ‘Shilling Cookery for the People,’ Etc.,” underscores the modesty of the role he seems to be assuming, as no more than a simple cookbook author.

35. Should all this make one expect a dull treatise on mess-hall dining, the book’s opening plate and opening line promise far more spectacular fare instead, in line with Soyer’s well-known histrionic proclivities. “HURRAH! hurrah! Bravo! Bravo!” (1) begins the narrative, with rounds of applause that mark the end of a show Soyer attended at “Old Drury,” making the reader wonder what other sorts of performances lie ahead. So too the opening plate [fig. 32], by illustrator G.H. Hine, on the preceding page, offers a kind of alternate frontispiece, far more theatrical, and suggestive of what is to come, than the official one, with its subdued portrait. Here Soyer stands center stage within a scene that, in concert with the work’s title, juxtaposes kitchen and battlefield. He stands in the foreground, next to one of his field stoves, from whence rise smoke and steam that mix with the surrounding battlefield haze, the literal fog of war, to form a cloud in which appear the work’s title and author’s name, the latter on a characteristic, sharp diagonal. At Soyer’s feet lie battlefield debris, like broken wood or various-sized cannonballs, and, most prominently, next to the stove, provisions for cooking. These include a large cabbage beside a large cannonball, and smaller soup vegetables (onions, turnips) that resemble the smaller cannonballs nearby. The similar size and shape of foodstuffs and munitions, and their proximity, suggest their affinity—their parallel role in a “culinary campaign.” In the hazy background we can just make out the silhouettes of two cannoneers, who load guns to be fired out, beyond our field of vision, into the battle, thus placing Soyer and his field kitchen squarely behind the lines and, paradoxically it seems—given his starring role here—behind the scenes.

36. In the middleground two soldiers carry a stockpot, suspended on a pole, toward the line of battle. A few steps away, a kneeling artilleryman lifts one cannonball from a pile, presumably to bring it to the cannoneers for loading. He faces us, his back to the hostilities, but when he has lifted the cannonball, he will no doubt turn and head the same way as his stockpot-toting comrades. In the other direction, in the space separating him from Soyer, providing a visual link between the two men and the spaces they occupy, sits an unidentified case, fitted with wooden supports to facilitate carrying, suggesting its use transporting supplies to and fro, yet the nature of these contents—culinary, or military?—remains indeterminate. Along similar lines the Times reviewer asks, about the “spherical objects” in this print, “Are they cannon-balls to be stewed into cannon broth, or Dutch cheeses about to be fired from a mortar? . . . the culinary and combative emblems are so mixed that our judgment is perplexed and we stumble over our history.” Indeed, starting from the provisions at lower right, sweeping across and upward like the stove’s copious exhaust, through chef Soyer, to the kneeling artilleryman, to the soup carriers, and on to the distant cannoneers at upper left, the composition traces a supply chain, visually compelling and coherent, yet heterogeneous, systematically mixing food and weapons. Despite the scene’s apparent seriousness and sense of purpose, there also lurks, just beneath the surface, the carnivalesque spectacle of a Rabelaisian food-fight, with cabbages as cannonballs, and stockpots as war engines.

37. This plate reverses conventional battlefield imagery, highlighting not some bold cavalry officer’s charge into hostile territory, but rather the chief culinary campaigner’s efforts behind the lines. The focal point of the composition, Soyer stands next to both his signature invention and byline writ large, his name and hat both on a characteristic diagonal, the latter less emphatically so, however, than in other portraits. Indeed, his garb is less dandified than elsewhere, and generally martial, but still with original twists—in addition to the cocked hat, his extra-wide trouser stripe, or broad, flaring lapels. “Standard issue” was just not Soyer’s style.

38. The small cannonballs on the ground around him, whether stray British munitions or vestiges of enemy volleys, signal the nearness of hostilities, and thus danger to the would-be warrior-chef, who strikes an appropriately resolute pose. On some level, this may be a wishful reworking of Soyer’s far less heroic stance under fire during the July Revolution. But, more than just unflappable here, Soyer appears virtually immobile. His hands are absent, lost in his pockets. His tiny feet, while signifying elegance and refinement to the nineteenth-century viewer, also seem inadequate for his well-nourished frame, offering dubious support for a man of action. These apparent handicaps only make sense within the context of his broader efforts to fashion himself an author and inventor. A man not so much of action, but of ideas—less a warrior, than a wizard—he accomplishes extraordinary things less through physical agency than through sheer force of will, as if by magic.

39. There are indeed, in this plate, intimations of something greater, grander, beyond the seemingly mundane, repetitive tasks being performed. These include the eerily bright light bathing Soyer, the high seriousness of his facial expression, or various literary and cultural resonances—from the Rabelaisian undertones, to the message emerging from a puff of smoke, shades of Aladdin’s lamp, the sorcerer’s cauldron, and even the Angel of God in the burning bush. So too, in Soyer’s narrative, what seems ordinary never is: thus, a ragged young stowaway, “in spite of his attire, looked as brisk and independent as a modern Diogenes” (300); or, Lord Raglan’s headquarters which, while “by no means grand nor imposing,” brings to mind illustrious comparisons, “Shakespeare’s house at Stratford, or the humble cot of the poet Burns in Ayrshire” (124). Likewise. a visit to the hospital and barracks at Kululee. to take stock of kitchen utensils and provisions (including
40. Much like his contemporary Victor Hugo, who, in exile during the Second Empire, turned increasingly to distinguished precursors (e.g. Moses, St. John the Baptist, Dante, or Voltaire) to defend and illustrate his reputation (Garval 2004a 177-187), Soyer conjures up notable ghosts. At an unexpected luncheon encounter with "the scion of a celebrated epicure," his apostrophe to the departed *gourmand* recalls Hugo's dabbling in spiritism at the time: "Oh! Sefton, Sefton! may your noble ashes repose in peace in your tomb! The glory of your name has not faded: your grandson, the youthful Lord Sefton, is an epicure!" (284). The other gastronomic and culinary figures he invokes include the ancients Apicius (196) and Lucullus (278); his "countryman" Brillat-Savarin (166); and especially Vatel, the patron saint and holy martyr of French cuisine—actually an *officier de bouche* or steward, whom Soyer, like many others, mistakes for a *chef de cuisine*, an inaccuracy that exaggerates chefs' social status at the time: "O Vatel! my noble master . . . Fortunately you lived in an era of gastronomic grandeur, when a *chef de cuisine* bore a high rank, and had your own aristocratic weapon wherewith to do the noble deed which gilds your name" (280-281; cf. also 229). With no such weapon at hand, but likewise facing a grand dinner "in jeopardy," the incurably cheerful Soyer does not imitate his paragon's suicide; instead, he opens a bottle of champagne and, he notes, "At the second glass . . . everything appeared *couleur de rose* . . . I felt that success was certain" (280).

41. Soyer relishes basking in the reflected light, not just of such past "gastronomic grandeur" but, revealingly, of grandeur *tout court*. Napoleon, Romantic paradigm of glory, is of course an unavoidable reference. En route from Marseille to Constantinople, Soyer stops at the emperor's birthplace in Corsica, and provides an account of the visit, reproduced in his *Culinary Campaign*. Always eager to distinguish himself, he turns this by-then standard pilgrimage into an original, and appropriately culinary one: presumably mustering the same lady-killing charm as his *sosie* Mirobolant, he convinces La Signora Grossetti, the Buonaparte family's 83-year old housekeeper, to show him the kitchen, "a request having never before been made by the numerous travellers who daily visit" (40). Relating to Napoleon by examining the "ruins" of his kitchen, chef Soyer stakes out an idiosyncratic, personal connection with the now-defunct great man. He thus pens his narrative of the visit "upon the stove in this celebrated kitchen—which first alimented the brain of that great hero," and which, we infer, now inspires these lines. He lays claim to culinary souvenirs "from that epoch"—"a piece of tile from the charcoal stove, and a rough wooden meat-hook . . . found in the larder"—which he intends to place in his kitchen at Scutari. In questionable taste, but likewise revealing of this keen desire to establish an intimate link with Bonaparte, he boasts to his travel companions of his 'amorous adventure with the nurse of the first Napoleon' (40-41). In the accompanying illustration [fig. 33], Soyer stands alone, peering into the shadowy opening of the stove, as if contemplating the mysteries of Napoleon's destiny, the darkness that emanates and enshrouds him suggesting both the stove's erstwhile radiance, and that of the luminary it once nourished.

42. In much the same way, Soyer takes pains to place himself in the footsteps of that other great Romantic hero, Lord Byron, epitome of passion and flair, and celebrated champion of the underdog, who wrote famously of his travels in Greece and Turkey, and perished on a mission to free the Greeks from Turkish rule. Byron, like Napoleon, was an exemplar for nineteenth-century glory-seekers, and particularly for creative figures like Soyer, but the latter's affinity for the Romantic poet and ill-starred revolutionary was especially wide-ranging and long-standing. Soyer dressed with the exuberance of the 1820s well into the sober 1850s, a dashing, Byronic character amid dour, black-suited Gladstones. His culinary campaign aided the British war effort in general, yet benefited most directly the undernourished rank and file, much like his crusade to feed the Irish poor during the Potato Famine, or like his increasingly popularizing cookbooks, which offered the masses appetizing but inexpensive recipes. In addition, Soyer's humanitarian mission to the Crimea took him to the same part of the world, and even to some of the same locales Byron had visited decades earlier; he too fell gravely ill while away and, though he did return to London, his health was altered, and he would survive just over a year, before his untimely death.

43. While Soyer's career ended on this dramatically Byronic note, it had also begun—and, in large measure, played out—in the same "key of B." Arriving in London in 1831, the strains of a fortuitously-intoned *Marseillaise* still ringing in his ears, the young faux-revolutionary took off, and took off with, the recently-defunct radical Romantic's dandified persona. Not unlike the beret-cliffed, baguette-toting American exchange student in Paris, straining to be more French than the French, Soyer came to London and strove to out-Byron Byron. And, throughout his career, Soyer's fervent emulation of the Byronic model largely defined the tenor of his fame, fashioning a figure at once endearing and ridiculous, avant-garde and retrograde, a champion of the common people cloaked in the most uncommon frippery, his extraordinary singularity served up in frenzied pursuit of mass-market ubiquity.

44. As in the case of Napoleon, Soyer's *Culinary Campaign* stresses his personal connection to Byron. He notes of his "first-class
Here, as with Napoleon's housekeeper, Soyer makes this connection through a very old woman, who spans the generations separating him from these illustrious predecessors. Soyer even finds Byron worth mentioning when this is not really relevant, quoting his dragoman who recounts a "curious tale" about the Leander Tower, but then remarks that "it has not the least relation to the legend of the two lovers celebrated by Lord Byron, who also swam from Sestos to Abydos." In Soyer's narrative, he includes as well a letter he addressed to the London Illustrated News, dated "ACROPOLIS, ATHENS, March 18": "At the present time," he notes, "in the ancient Parthenon, I am cooking, with my new camp-stove, on a fallen capital of the stupendous ruins, a petit déjeuner à la fourchette, with Greek and Sicilian wines, for my distinguished fellow-travelers." His choice of a cook-out site is strategic, for this is not only one of the most prestigious monuments in western civilization but, more specifically, a place haunted by the memory of Byron, whose impassioned defense of the Greek claim to the Parthenon friezes so identified him with the ancient temple that it was even suggested he be buried there. The accompanying illustration (fig. 34) parallels the earlier one of Soyer at Ajaccio. As his travel companions look on, Soyer once again stands in the foreground, toward the left, facing a stove that effects his communion with the "ruins" of a distinguished past. What indeed might emerge here from his suggestively-named "Magic Stove"? A trio of hungry officers watch and gesture at the flash of light rising from the pan Soyer heats over the stove: a vision of the fork-breakfast ahead, and perhaps also the ghostly afterglow of Byron's presence.

45. But summoning spirits is a tricky business. Implied comparisons between the great men of yore and the contemporary aspirant can backfire, as the example of Napoléon III so amply demonstrated at the time, with tragedy repeating as farce, and grandeur shrinking to pettiness. Still, the temptation to invoke the prestige of past glory can be irresistible, even for those who should know better. Victor Hugo exorciated Napoléon III for emulating an illustrious uncle, while he himself indulged in far greater genealogical pretensions, verging on messianic delusion, for which he in turn was lampooned by contemporary commentators and artists (Garval 2004a 178-179). What then of Soyer, who rivaled Hugo in his verve and hunger for fame, but without a shred of the critical perspective that, alas, would fail the exiled poet? Not surprisingly, Soyer cuts a ridiculous figure vis-à-vis his chosen exemplars. Where Vatel once brandished a sword, he wields a champagne bottle; where Bonaparte led la Grande Armée, he commands a field kitchen; and, where Byron leapt to the defense of the Greek people, he prepares an omelette.

46. Soyer can seem ridiculous in many ways, both as protagonist and narrator of his Culinary Campaign. He cannot resist a gag or pun, no matter how awful—for instance, about Mary Seacole, a Jamaican mother figure or mère noire, at the Black Sea or Mer Noire. He also interlards his narrative with copious commercial plugs, dropped names, celebrity endorsements, and testimonials. Yet, amid such manic foolishness and puffy, there remains the admirable spectacle of a man who, in a very real way, contributed more to the war effort than the military commanders of this dismally mishandled conflict. Since then, Soyer's innovations have also been recognized for their more general usefulness, by militaries worldwide. Already in 1861, for example, in U.S. Army Colonel H. L. Scott's influential Military Dictionary, the “Cooking” entry quoted 16 pages worth of Soyer’s recipes, directly from his Culinary Campaign. Similarly, an online “Short History” of logistics, maintained by the Canadian armed forces, still notes Soyer's “quantum leap in the art and science of food services during the Crimean War . . . . [He] invented a mobile kitchen, which virtually took military cookery from the Middle Ages into the modern world.”

47. Soyer's Culinary Campaign is remarkable as well for the way it renegotiates his public persona and, in a larger sense, redefines prominent chefs' place in society. The book’s prefatory material already resists the literary pretense so prevalent elsewhere in his oeuvre, the standard recourse of image-conscious chefs for a half-century already, and at least another half-century to come. Turning away from the the man of letters paradigm allowed Soyer to envision other possibilities. In his Crimean adventures, he adopts the seemingly most unglamorous role for a chef, presiding over poorly-appointed military kitchens, performing an institutional function far from the ideals of genius and artistry invoked by ambitious chefs from Carême onward, to boost their prestige and authority. It is a paradoxical, almost Christ-like ploy, embracing the most humble of incarnations, in order to propel himself to the loftiest of heights. He takes the obscure realm of the chef or logistician—behind the scenes, behind the lines, or “back of the house,” in contemporary restaurant lingo—and thrusts it into the limelight. He thus emerges in a novel role, as an actor not just in the Crimean theater of operations, but on the greater stage of world events, a bold Napoleonic-Byronic man of destiny, making his mark on history. In this, as in so many other ways, Soyer was a hard act to follow, but whether or not another chef would assume such a grandiose role anytime soon is beside the point. What matters is the underlying shift here in the vision of the chef as a public figure. Soyer’s example established that chefs did not have to pretend to be great writers in order to be seen as noteworthy personages.
Soyer's Legacy

48. Alexis Soyer was an odd, anomalous figure, reminiscent of Grimod de la Reynière in seeming at once quaintly behind and radically ahead of his time. While Soyer's ostentatious personal style struck his contemporaries as outmoded, his ideas and initiatives anticipated much of our own culinary and gastronomic modernity. His unconventional dress in the kitchen prefigured the vogue today for "non-traditional 'fun' chef's attire" (George 9). Even allowing for the ambiguities and contradictions in Soyer's relation to the masses, he had a degree of social conscience not seen again in a prominent chef before Alice Waters (who, in a book jacket endorsement for Ann Arnold's The Adventurous Chef: Alexis Soyer, praises "this chef who cooked with great talent and compassion"). Soyer was interested in regional and foreign cuisines and even, in his Symposium of All Nations, as well as in the book he did not live to write—to be called The Culinary Wonders of All Nations—anticipated what has come to be known, for better or worse, as "world cuisine." Likewise, long before Julia Child or Emeril Lagasse, he was an unapologetic popularizer, an enterprising promoter of his own image and marketer of associated products, as well as an extraordinary performer and impresario. Indeed, his Symposium, with its diverse attractions, strolling entertainers, fireworks, and other visual effects, was more than a restaurant, "it was also what would today be called a theme park" (Brandon 197). So too the contradictions of Soyer’s existence as a famed French chef in Victorian England—caught between ridicule and veneration, Bonaparte and Byron, Cailles en sarcophage and Yorkshire pudding—already acted out something much like the "cosmic ambivalence about French culture" which Toby Miller identifies as characteristic of "Anglo-speaking countries," and central to the rise there of food television (223).

49. How then to gauge Soyer’s legacy? Questions of cultural transmission and transformation become all the more thorny when dealing with such a forward-thinking figure. Much of his originality was misunderstood in his day—misconstrued as just vanity, dismissed as simple eccentricity—and largely forgotten afterward. By the 1880s, his books were out of print, and long remained unavailable. In the early years of the twentieth century, "the grandson of 'the great Soyer'" (9) did revive his ancestor’s memory a bit. In a career reminiscent of his grandfather’s, French-born-and-trained Nicolas Soyer rose to prominence as chef of an exclusive London club (Brooks’s), and achieved considerable though short-lived renown for his popularizing efforts and technical innovations—in particular, for what he called "Soyer’s Paper-Bag Cookery" [fig. 35].

Despite the 'great furor' (5) this caused at the time, the "era of Paper-Bag Cookery" (99) turned out to be brief.

50. There is, however, a suggestive if indirect connection to be made between Alexis Soyer and the stars of today’s televised food shows. Like Soyer, Xavier Marcel Boulestin (1878-1943) was, for his generation, the best-loved French culinarian in England. His life also began and ended in ways that recall Soyer. He was born and raised in France (actually a native of the Périgord, thus a Gascon like Thackeray’s Mirobolant); toward the end of his life, at the start of the Second World War, and in the spirit of Soyer’s "culinary campaign," he petitioned the British government (unsuccessfully) to let him use his expertise to help the war effort, by reforming the country’s rationing system.

51. As a young man, Boulestin came to Paris to pursue his literary ambitions, and was engaged as secretary and collaborator by Willy, husband of the novelist and performer Colette. He also performed opposite Colette, and with some success, in a couple of plays, including one by Willy "in which Colette appeared as a gigolo and Boulestin as an English barman speaking poor French" (Hooker 7). Wary though of Willy’s character and motivations, he left Paris—like Soyer before him—to seek a new life in London. There, he frequented leading artists and writers of the day, and was even invited to Soyer’s old haunt, the Reform Club. He tried his hand at many things, including interior decorating in the modern style, translating plays, editing and publishing luxury editions, and writing theatrical reviews and other commentary for the French and British press. In late 1922 or early 1923, seemingly in spite of himself, Boulestin stumbled upon cookbook writing. His account of this turning point recalls Soyer denying his own interest in writing cookbooks, in the preface to The Gastronomic Regenerator. Boulestin had met with an acquaintance in publishing, about another matter:

Just before leaving and hardly realizing what I was saying, I said:

‘By the way, you would not be interested in a cookery book, would you?’

‘It’s exactly what we want’, answered Byard. The contract was signed there and then. Not a line was written, and I was given £10 in advance of the royalties. (Hooker 20)

Thus began a series of successful cookbooks and, with it, Boulestin’s unexpected new career as an expert in French cuisine. He opened his first restaurant, the Restaurant Français, in 1925, at Leicester Square; the even more successful Restaurant Boulestin opened in 1927, in Covent Garden, with walls and ceilings painted by Jean-Émile Laboureur and Marie Laurencin, curtains designed by Raoul Dufy, and a cosmopolitan clientele of London’s high society and distinguished foreign visitors. Boulestin came to be known however for his simple, pretentious, but delicious food, and soon began disseminating his culinary ideas in various ways. He opened “X.M. Boulestin’s School of Simple French Cookery” (Hooker 26), realizing Soyer’s unfulfilled dream of founding a ‘College of Domestic Economy’ (Volant and Warren 197); he wrote articles for the Daily Telegraph and the London Times; he did commentary for the French and British radio; organized food shows; he even held a couple ofakeup’s, including interior decorating in the modern style, translating plays, editing and publishing luxury editions, and writing theatrical reviews and other commentary for the French and British press. In late 1922 or early 1923, seemingly in spite of himself, Boulestin stumbled upon cookbook writing. His account of this turning point recalls Soyer denying his own interest in writing cookbooks, in the preface to The Gastronomic Regenerator. Boulestin had met with an acquaintance in publishing, about another matter:

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In his unfulfilled dream of founding a “College of Domestic Economy” (Volant and Warren 192), he wrote articles for the Daily Telegraph, the Evening Standard, Country Life, and Harper’s Bazaar; he made sound recordings of cookery lessons for H.M.V.; he was featured in British Movietone News, showing how to prepare the famed Omelette Boulestin; and, on January 21, 1937, in a BBC studio in London, he hosted the first installment of a television series called “Cook’s Night Out.” Sharing Soyer’s penchant for popularization, Boulestin took his message to the new media of his day, and reached an ever-larger public. He was Soyer’s spiritual heir in many ways and, not surprisingly, he was the world’s first television chef.

Notes

1 Monkey, in French, is “singe,” and the verb “singer” means to imitate mindlessly—as in “to ape” in English.

2 The drawing, and the tongue-in-cheek commentary below it, play on the meaning of “baron” in culinary French, as a large roast, usually of mutton or lamb.

3 Steward to the Prince de Condé, Vatel stabbed himself fatally with his own sword, during a feast in honor of King Louis XIV, when an important seafood delivery was delayed. The provisions arrived soon after. (cf. Dominique Michel, Vatel ou la naissance de la gastronomie [Paris: Fayard, 1999]).

4 This is similar to Jean-Léon Gérôme’s Phryné devant le tribunal of 1861, in which the courtesan’s gesturing to cover her face, while ostensibly out of modesty, all the more surely calls attention to her resplendent nudity, and to her identity as an incomparable beauty: she was supposedly the model for Praxiteles’s Venus de Knidos, the archetypal nude in Western art.

5 This is similar in conception to Marcelin’s caricature “Romans populaires,” which pokes fun at novelists George Sand, Eugène Sue, Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, and Alexandre Dumas père, through heraldic shields displaying “not the author’s coat of arms, but instead a witty emblem of the work in question” (cf. Garval 2004a, 16-17).

6 Cf. “la guerre Picrocholine” in Rabelais’s Gargantua, or the conflict between the “Andouilles” and “Quaresmeprenant” in Le Quart Livre.

7 Soyer explains that this “letter to the public press” never made it to its destination, “through the mismanagement of my servant, who threw it into the post without paying the postage” (40).

8 This refers to Byron’s poem, “Written after Swimming from Systos to Abydos.”

9 Cf. Karl Marx’s Le 18 Brumaire de Louis Bonaparte and Victor Hugo’s Napoléon le Petit, both published in 1852.

10 Nicolas Soyer was the son of Alexis Soyer junior, himself the illegitimate son of the famed chef and the parisienne Adèle Lamain, resulting from their liaison before the former’s departure for London. Alexis Soyer senior apparently did not learn of his son’s existence until 1851, and recognized him officially as his child in 1853 (Volant and Warren 239-242).

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Dr Michael D Garval. Professor. Vita: download vita. Email: garval@ncsu.edu. Phone: 919-515-2220. Teaching and Research Interests. Nineteenth-century French literature and culture, word & image studies, celebrity, and gastronomy. Alexis Soyer and the Rise of the Celebrity Chef. Education. Ph.D in French from New York University, 1992. Life and Times Alexis Benoit Soyer was a famous chef and food author in Victorian England. He was a household name, and even often the subject of fun, if only owing to his penchant for flamboyant clothing that inc. Parisians took to their favourite sport of hauling cobblestones out of the streets, and using them to build barricades with when the stones weren't needed for heaving at authorities. That very same day, 26 July, Alexis' kitchen was assigned the task of creating a grand banquet for the Prince de Polignac to celebrate Charles X's new decrees. While Alexis and his staff were working, a enraged mob burst into the kitchen and shot two of his coworkers. Alexis saved his own life by bursting out into a spirited rendition of the Marseillaise. Alexis Benoît Soyer (4 February 1810 – 5 August 1858) was a French chef who became the most celebrated cook in Victorian England. He also tried to alleviate suffering of the Irish poor in the Great Irish Famine (1845–1849), and contributed a penny for the relief of the poor for every copy sold of his pamphlet The Poor Man's Regenerator (1847). He worked to improve the food provided to British soldiers in the Crimean War. A variant of the field stove he invented at that time, known as the 'Soyer stove