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Thoughts for Food, I: French Cuisine and French Culture¹

by Priscilla P. Clark

Les animaux se repaissent; l'homme mange;
l'homme d'esprit seul sait manger. (Brillat-
Savarin, Aphorisme II.)

ONE'S FOOD is a highly personal matter: "de gustibus non disputandum est," "chacun a son goût," "Man ist was er isst," are all statements with which present day natural (and other) food cultists would surely agree. Food is individual and eating has always been one of the most "natural" and individualistic human activities—one must eat and one cannot share the food one eats. Yet the more ritualistic the dining procedures, the more social and less individual the behavior becomes and the more potential individual anarchy is constrained by social imperatives.²

Despite the importance accorded food and its metamorphoses by anthropologists, relatively little serious thought has been given to the functions of food and cuisine in contemporary society. Students of French culture especially might evince more interest in what is, after all, one of the glories of the civilization they study, a dimension of the language they teach, even of the literature they enjoy. For cuisine is not food, it is food transcended, nature transformed into a social product, an aesthetic artifact, a linguistic creation, a cultural tradition. If food by itself approximates what economists term a pure "private good," by its status as a cultural product cuisine is a "public good," shared, though diversely, by many.³

Because of these multiple ramifications, cuisine is best analyzed not simply as a single product, meal or recipe, but as a *process* which involves several distinct products, specific functions and separate actors. The divisions of culinary labor correspond to similar stages in the creation (writing), produc-

¹ Thanks are due the Fellows of Trumbull College, Yale University, who listened to an early version of this article as a post-prandial diversion; to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which partially subsidized further research, gastronomical and intellectual, in Paris; and to my mother, who early instilled a gastronomic consciousness and a culinary conscience.

² The point was made early in the twentieth century by the German sociologist Georg Simmel, "Soziologie der Mahlzeit," in *Brücke und Tür* (Stuttgart: Koehler, 1957), pp. 243–50.

³ See Paul A. Samuelson, "Pure Theory of Public Expenditure and Taxation," in J. Margolis and H. Guitton, eds., *Public Economics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969), pp. 102, 108–10.

tion (publication), diffusion (publicity, criticism, teaching) and reception or consumption (reading) of a literary work.⁴ But if cuisine is created, produced and consumed wherever men exist, elaborate and complex means of diffusion are specifically a contribution of modern society and are, moreover, particularly salient in France. For if every country has a culinary tradition, in France as nowhere else that tradition has become a national symbol of prestige, the incarnation of French civilization.

Unlike literature, but like musical compositions whose performance follows composition and whose composition for the majority of its public is contingent upon performance, cuisine comprehends both an abstract product—the recipe—and a tangible one—the meal. The meal is first prepared by a chef, then produced in a cadre with various attendants (waiters, etc.) and is finally eaten by the diner. Once consumed, this cuisine exists no longer in the same way that the performance of a work of music or drama ends upon its completion.

But beyond cooking—the re-creation of the cook—cuisine, and French cuisine to a high degree, involves, besides the individual diner, the collectivity. This cuisine is consumed independently of its creator much as the work of literature lives beyond its creator. Thus if every chef (creator) cooks, not every cook (re-creator) is a creative chef, although any cook who modifies a recipe is in some measure a chef.⁵

Production necessitates publication of the new recipe in some form while diffusion brings in the critics, the gastronomic journalists, and also in France, the novelists, the poets, the essayists, the legion of those inspired to lyric heights by a well laden table. The receiver-reader participates in a culinary tradition which has been transformed into a tradition associated with high culture, with civilization itself, because cuisine has become in an important sense literature. Cuisine lives and is relived through the many *discours alimentaires* which it prompts. This broad diffusion transformed the aristocratic *grande cuisine* of the Ancien régime into the gastronomy of the nineteenth century. The importance of cuisine in France, its prestige at home and abroad are a consequence of the role played, in what I term the culinary system, by the institutions which diffuse the *discours alimentaires*. It was diffusion that changed *la grande cuisine* into *la cuisine française*.

Few elements of French culture enjoy the prestige of its cuisine, and no cuisine, with the exception of the Chinese, can lay claim to the variety, the refinement and the complexity of French cuisine. It is no accident that

⁴This framework of a literary system is elaborated in my article, "The Comparative Method: Sociology and the Study of Literature," *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, 23 (1974), 5-13.

⁵Chefs are usually identified with men, cooks with *la cuisine de femme*, more traditional than the *cuisine des chefs*. Yet François Bise, owner-chef of the *Auberge du Père Bise* (Tailloires), a Michelin three-star restaurant for many years, for his part disclaims invention ("on n'invente jamais rien") and says that all his recipes come from his mother's repertoire (interview, 18 June 1973). It should be remembered that "chef" and "cook" are social roles and therefore not wholly identifiable with any individual.

La cuisine française est seule raisonnée, savante, chimique. (Alexandre Dumas, *En Caucase*, 1859.)

“gourmet” cooking generally refers to some version of French cuisine. The word itself is French in origin, as is much of the general vocabulary for things culinary in Western culture.

Nor can readers of French literature fail to be impressed by the abundance of food, the great number and great appetites of diners in French novels, plays, even poems: from Rabelaisian feasts, the banquet of *Le Bourgeois gentil-homme*, the *petits soupers* of eighteenth-century novels, Sadean orgies to the laden tables of Balzac, Flaubert, Maupassant, Zola, Proust, Colette and many more. Dumas *fils* even included a recipe for mussel, potato and truffle salad in his play *Francillon!*

A glory of French culture, this cuisine is, however, relatively recent in origin. Though based on an important tradition that dates from the Renaissance, what is now labelled gastronomy, the myth of French cuisine, its particular social context, were essentially products of the nineteenth century. For a select few the gastronomical revolution was not the least momentous of the revolutions that transformed the social landscape after 1789.

A history of cuisine is not required to establish that the French enthusiasm for things culinary is of long standing. The Romans—no timid souls at the table—were impressed by the stupendous appetite of the conquered Gauls whose national dish consisted of a spit-roasted wild boar stuffed with garlic, spices, served whole with hares, chickens, geese.⁶ However grand this cuisine may have been, it was not yet *la grande (haute) cuisine*. The Renaissance turned French cooking into French cuisine, turned it away from heavy mediaeval fare to the elaborate and complex cuisine associated thereafter with *la grande cuisine*. The winds of culinary change blew from Italy, whence arrived Catherine de Medici in 1535, trailing in her wake artists of all sorts, not the least of which were her Florentine cooks. Soon fresh fruits and vegetables, fresh meat replaced the hung meat, the long stewed vegetables and the strong spices characteristic of mediaeval cuisine. Variety superceded quantity as the guiding factor in the preparation of meals, and *la grande cuisine* came into existence at the French court.⁷

⁶ Robert J. Courtine, *La Gastronomie* (Paris: P.U.F., 1970), p. 27.

⁷ Georges and Germaine Blond, *Histoire pittoresque de notre alimentation* (Paris: Fayard, 1961), II, ch. 11 on the “séduction italienne.” One may wonder both what Italy had to offer and why it did not itself develop gastronomically. For the first, we may suggest that the more clement Italian climate encouraged cultivation of fresh fruits and vegetables. For another, the peasants were not serfs and could cultivate what they wanted; and with a countryside less ravaged by wars than the France of the Hundred Years War (1337–1453), Italians would be less fearful of famine, hence more ready to depend on seasonal crops. Italy’s proximity to the Middle East and its varieties of spices and foods also encouraged experimentation. See Blond and Blond, II, ch. 11. These same factors of independence and decentralization which promoted the innovation of Italian cuisine worked to hinder its elaboration. There was no Italian center comparable to the French court to set the tone, or the table; centralization of control tends to encourage public over private goods. Italy was simply too decentralized to evolve a single culinary tradition.

The great did not disdain culinary affairs. Louis XIII was expert at larding meat (out of fear of poisoning) and personally supervised gardening operations. Louis XIV's granddaughter elicited royal praise for a sauce of her own invention, and on hunting days Louis XV was known to ask each of his attending courtiers to prepare a dish. Culinary duels often capped social (and amorous) rivalries.⁸ The etiquette was elaborate, although refinement was less than universal: in common use in Italy, the fork was not introduced to France until the end of the sixteenth century, and a century later Louis XIV still ate with his fingers (albeit with incomparable grace, according to Saint-Simon).

La grande cuisine was not the whole of French cuisine. Several cuisines have always coexisted in France, but prior to the twentieth century these were either ignored or transformed by Parisian temples of gastronomy. Peasant cuisine varied by region, tied, like the peasants themselves, to the land, to local products and to seasonal variations—all constraints which *la grande cuisine* endeavored to transcend. Sheer economic necessity dictated the prudence of peasant cuisine, designed to minimize waste and maximize production. Whence the importance of preparations that conserve—*pâtés*, *salmis*, *terrines*, *ragoûts*, descendants of mediaeval fare, representations of a conservative mentality that was the opposite of the innovation and the elaboration of *la grande cuisine*.⁹

In what sense then is *la grande cuisine* quintessentially French? By what right did the cuisine of the aristocracy become identified (after modifications of course) with the nation as a whole? The diffusion of this cuisine is discussed below, but we may still ask why cuisine should have been developed by the French aristocracy rather than another?

As in the ritual of dining, where the individual desire (hunger) is constrained by group norms, so too French cuisine, with its elaborate rules and regulations, applies its code like the *Code civil* to particular situations. The stylization of nature, its aestheticization and spiritualization, are the essence of French cuisine and an important part of French culture as a whole. French cuisine extended communal standards from the cadre of the repast to the content, reinforcing the social control of the dining ritual by the aesthetic control of the cuisine. In a France where literature and the arts were themselves regulated by highly codified standards, the correspondence is not perhaps so surprising. As in the arts, creativity was defined against, hence governed by, a set of rules.

This subtle interaction of individual and group, the tension of the particular and the universal, have been seen as characteristic of French culture and as an especially salient component of aristocratic behavior. The individual creates a unique style in the realization of universal standards. The spontaneous *beau*

⁸ George H. Ellwanger, *The Pleasures of the Table* (New York: Doubleday Page, 1922), ch. 3.

⁹ Peasant cuisine thus has positive connotations as the foyer of tradition as gastronomy was the avant-garde. *La cuisine bourgeoise*, by contrast, while having a certain positive sense as "simple but good cooking," has no well defined culinary content. Simplicity being relative, *la cuisine bourgeoise* is necessarily defined against something that is elaborate, in a word, *la grande cuisine*.

geste, manifestation of *la prouesse*, is determined by the very Cartesian rules of the game.¹⁰ Insofar as this synthesis stands out in aristocratic approaches to life, the affinity between French cuisine and the French aristocracy is explicable. Insofar as it characterizes French culture more generally, the transformation of *la grande cuisine* into *la cuisine française* also becomes plausible. "Ainsi il ne suffit pas aux Français de voir dans la bonne chère une forme de la civilisation. L'intérêt qu'ils lui portent est singulièrement caractéristique de l'attitude française en face de la vie."¹¹

La découverte d'un mets nouveau fait plus pour le bonheur du genre humain que la découverte d'une étoile. (Brillat-Savarin, Aphorisme IX.)

Cuisine under the Ancien régime was one dimension of the aristocratic leisure ethos. Culinary competence was but one of the many roles of the aristocrat, who cooked, or supervised cooking, as he hunted, danced in court ballets, gambled or discoursed more or less knowledgeably on literature and the arts. It would have been contrary to the generalist orientation of *l'honnête homme* to specialize. Sauces, dishes, represented the inspiration of a moment rather than the product of research. The chef labored under his patron's whims and was, like other artists at the time, considered an artisan.

The Revolution altered this situation and indeed transformed the entire culinary system, its actors, products and functions. *La grande cuisine* became gastronomy, relocated in the market, and moved from the *hôtel particulier* to the restaurant. The creation and production of cuisine were transformed from a trade to a profession and an art, while its consumption designated a status in its own right. Where under the Ancien Régime the chef was subordinate to a patron, in the restaurant he declared independence, especially if he owned the restaurant. Once an artisan, the chef had become an artist, and as restaurant owner, an entrepreneur as well. Insofar as the chef conceives of himself as an artist or a savant of the palate, serving his art and his science, he is likely to antagonize customers who may not unnaturally consider that their financial support supercedes culinary authority. The *modus vivendi* (or *bibendi*) was no less precarious for the chef than for other artists in the nineteenth century, newly aware of the vagaries and dictates of the market and at the same time convinced of their superiority as professionals and artists.

¹⁰These observations are prompted by the analysis of Simmel, cited above (n. 1) and the comments by Prof. Donald N. Levine. Although Simmel was concerned with the meal rather than the cuisine, the notion of the aestheticization of individual needs in accordance with social standards applies to French cuisine very well. The meal, and by extension, French cuisine, are at one and the same time general and inimitable. The centrality of *prouesse* in French culture and particularly aristocratic culture has been argued by Jesse Pitts, "Change in Bourgeois France," in Stanley Hoffman et al., *In Search of France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 240–46. A parallel tension between Cartesianism and spontaneity is discussed briefly by P. Clark and T. N. Clark, "Writers, Literature, and Student Movements in France," *Sociology of Education*, 43 (Fall 1969), 293–314.

¹¹La Reynière (Robert Courtine), *Le Monde*, 6–7 mai 1973, p. 18.

As patrons became clients the chef's responsibility became more diffuse. It was not just a question of prestige but of economic survival; indeed prestige was inseparable from economics. The salaried chef of a restaurant need not worry directly about financing, but neither can he impose his conception of gastronomy in absolute defiance of the customers' wishes. The equilibrium between devotion to an ideal and accommodation of the client is at best a delicate one, and certainly ambiguous, as many another artist will testify.

At the center of the shift from an individual patron-employee to a more or less anonymous public is the restaurant. The first restaurant is generally said to have opened in Paris in 1765 (although Brillat-Savarin gives 1770 for another establishment). Until then the word *restaurant* referred to a restorative double bouillon. To be sure, cabarets, cafés, inns, tables d'hôte and caterers (*traiteurs*) existed, and in abundance. The restaurant, however, was different. It implied both further specialization (meals were the sole concern) and, for the more elegant establishments, an elevation in prestige: these were the new temples of *la grande cuisine*. While the restaurant grew out of the earlier forms, it offered more choice, a more systematic presentation (menus) and, most important, undivided concentration on the meal as a harmonious entity. Further, the cadre expressed the aspirations of the restaurant, the elegant crystal and silverware being associated with *la grande cuisine*, less impressive ware presumably corresponding to less impressive fare.

The restaurant was an urban, and more specifically, a Parisian phenomenon. As centers of communication, of transportation and supply, cities receive more foodstuffs more often and in greater diversity. With more restaurants because of more people, cities are most likely to be the first to benefit from innovation in the culinary domain, whether in new dishes or new methods of preservation and conservation of food—clearly the case for nineteenth-century Paris.

Then the density and diversity of the urban population permits, indeed encourages greater specialization over a wide range of activities. The culinary system is no exception. The population of Paris doubled from 1801 to 1846, and the influx of so many, most without permanent abodes, constituted an obvious incentive to restaurants. The legislators and hangers-on whom the Revolution brought to Paris formed an important clientele. The restaurant personnel was often supplied at this period by the unemployed cooks of the émigré aristocracy: the Prince de Condé emigrated on 17 July 1789; his chief chef founded a restaurant before the year was out. When the émigrés returned during the Empire or the Restoration, they were too impoverished from the confiscation of property (for which they received only partial indemnity) to sustain the exorbitant expense entailed by *la grande cuisine* in its new and even more grandiose manifestations. By then, moreover, the restaurant had become a fixture of the urban scene.

The idea and the fact spread rapidly. Before the Revolution, fewer than thirty restaurants existed in Paris; by 1820, an estimated 3,000 or more (depending on how one distinguishes restaurants from bistrots, cafés, etc.)

were serving 60,000 to 100,000 customers daily.¹² The restaurant is, ostensibly, a democratic institution, or rather a bourgeois one, given the ambiguities of its ties to the aristocratic tradition of *la grande cuisine* on the one hand and to a supposedly open society on the other. In distinction to the private home, the club, or the court, the restaurant is open to everyone and anyone. Commensality has always connoted equality—the king ate alone as did the Pope (until John XXIII). Julien Sorel understandably insists on eating with the Rênals when he enters their household as a tutor. In the restaurant, however, the situation, once again, is ambiguous: is one equal to other diners before one enters the restaurant or does being in the restaurant make one their equal? In fact, economic considerations operate to create a more or less rigid system of stratification, the menu habitually posted outside restaurants in France serving as an invitation to be sure, but also as a warning: *caveat emptor*.¹³

Urban the restaurant was in its very conception, a veritable microcosm of urban life. Like urban society more generally, the restaurant combines proximity of great and diverse numbers of individuals in a setting that maintains psychological distance between these same individuals. The restaurant is at one and the same time a public and a private place, combining promiscuity and privacy, effectively isolating the individual or small group within the anonymous crowd. The addition of *cabinets particuliers* made it relatively plausible that the narrator of Balzac's *La Maison Nucingen* should overhear by judicious eavesdropping all of the story related by Blondet and Bixiou (dinners were long and this is, for Balzac, a short story).¹⁴

The change of cadre from private home to public restaurant would not in itself have sufficed to transform *la grande cuisine* of the eighteenth century into the gastronomy of the nineteenth. The social changes that affected the cadre and the creator and favored the development of the restaurant, also affected the consumer and beyond that, cuisine itself. *La grande cuisine* had of course always served the social ends of the consumer, but the significance of those ends altered. The transfer from court to restaurant signaled the transfer from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie. For the Ancien Régime aristocrat, in principle confident of his social status, culinary ostentation emanated from

¹² Jean-Paul Aron, *Essai sur la sensibilité alimentaire à Paris au XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1967), p. 15. See also the more recent *Le Mangeur du XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1973), which is on the order of a *Guide Michelin* for nineteenth-century Paris.

¹³ One is therefore either inside the restaurant, in which case one is equal to other "insiders," or one is outside, and one is not equal. It is the institution (the restaurant) that equalizes, as the *baccalauréat* equalizes all those who hold it, and at the same time separates them irremediably from those who do not. The institution is therefore both leveler and obstacle. See Edmond Goblot, *La Barrière et le niveau: essai sociologique sur la bourgeoisie française moderne* (1925, 2d ed. Paris: P.U.F., 1967).

¹⁴ Aron hypothesizes (p. 17) that the restaurant owed no small part of its success to the public-private dimension which made it an escape valve from the tightly knit bourgeois family unit, more constraining on its members than the looser style of life associated with the aristocracy. It was not normally considered proper for upper class women to dine in restaurants. Their reputation as places of assignation lingered long. Gastronomy was a man's world in the nineteenth century as *la grande cuisine* had not been in the eighteenth.

even as it expressed that status, which itself was defined by other (ascribed) criteria. For the nineteenth-century bourgeois this, the most conspicuous of consumptions, could become a means of legitimating a social status newly acquired.

If, as Thorstein Veblen argued in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), conspicuous consumption generally marks efforts to stabilize high social status, the forms it takes vary considerably. The French bourgeoisie turned to cuisine. By virtue of its long-standing association with the aristocracy, *la grande cuisine* conferred prestige upon the parvenue bourgeoisie. The bourgeois at the table participated in the leisure ethos associated with the aristocracy of times past. It is thus entirely appropriate that Lucien de Rubempré should hasten to the elegant and expensive *Véry's* as his first step on the way to success. And it is equally understandable that, having splurged his entire month's allowance of fifty francs (on what is in Balzac's eyes a rather meager repast), he should betake himself thereafter to *Flicoteaux's* in the Latin Quarter, where dinners run to eighteen *sous*.

Gastronomy, like political suffrage, was based on merit, although merit in both cases was contingent upon wealth. The gastronome was a self-made man, gastronomic competence an acquired not an ascribed characteristic, for it required study and diligent labor for the dedicated. Gastronomy could define a social status in its own right—the gastronome or gourmand or gourmet could have said with small fear of contradiction, "je mange, donc je suis."

But, just as all aristocrats were not patrons of the arts, not all consumers of gastronomy were gastronomes, far from it. Whence the significance of gastronomic journalism. Because the gastronome was made—educated—not born, there needed to be available vehicles of education (taken in the broadest sense) for those not born with silver spoons in their mouths or truffles on their plates. These writings educated potential consumers, and, more important still, reinforced the prestige of French cuisine, thereby maintaining its validity as an instrument of social legitimation.

What distinguishes gastronomy from *la grande cuisine* is precisely this gastronomic journalism (of which cookbooks formed perhaps the least important segment). Under an individual patron, a chef had no need to diffuse his creations in order to satisfy his employer. But the restaurant depended on a clientele that would pay, would return, and bring new customers. Gastronomic journalism both whet the customer's appetite and educated his palate. Bourgeois gastronomy is aristocratic *grande cuisine* writ large, and more significant, written down. *La grande cuisine* remained more or less confined to its consumers; gastronomy on the other hand exerted an influence well beyond the fortunate and fortuné few who actually partook of its splendors.¹⁵

¹⁵ Whatever its gastronomic merits, the gigantic meal Gervaise serves on her name day in *L'Assommoir* vividly demonstrates the association between food and social status: "C'était le rêve des Coupeau; écraser les Lorilleux" (ch. 7), and they do it with a dinner. The myth of gastronomy was not confirmed to those who consumed it directly. Working class families participated symbolically and materially by buying leftovers from the best restaurants, embassies, homes Jean-Paul Aron, *L'Express*, 31 déc.-6 janv. 1974, pp 61-62).

Cookbooks and treatises of course existed prior to these gastronomical journalistic efforts, but the diffusion of cuisine as a general cultural ideal was a contribution of the nineteenth century. The word itself was new: although found in 1623 *gastronomie* did not come into general usage until the publication in 1800 of Berchaux's *Gastronomie*. *Gastronome* followed in 1803, *gastronomique* in 1826. English usage followed the French, *gastronomy* making its appearance in 1814, *gourmet* in 1820, *gastronome* in 1823. Then we note the proliferation of journals like the *Almanach des gourmands* (1803–12), gastronomical societies like the Société des Epicuriens, treatises like Brillat-Savarin's *Physiologie du goût* (1826), innumerable guidebooks, both French and foreign, cookbooks like Carême's monumental five volume summum, *L'Art de la cuisine française au XIX^e siècle* (1835); and then items like Balzac's somewhat but by no means entirely facetious "Nouvelle Théorie du déjeuner," and Alexandre Dumas' *Grand Dictionnaire de la cuisine* (1873, reprinted 1973).

The culinary commentators of the nineteenth century did for cuisine what the *Encyclopédie* aimed to accomplish for the state of knowledge in the eighteenth century (and what the system of *appellations contrôlées* would later do for wine): they codified. The same mentality presided at both enterprises: witness the definition of gastronomy given by Brillat-Savarin as "la connaissance raisonnée de tout ce qui a rapport à l'homme en tant qu'il se nourrit."

Rules multiplied, dishes proliferated and became unbelievably complex; courses multiplied both vertically (a succession of courses per meal) and horizontally (multiple dishes per course, although one normally partook only of that which was within easy reach). The meal as a whole became so elaborate in some cases that sherbert was eventually introduced between fowl courses to clear the palate. Individual dishes were all but smothered in the complexities of stuffing, sauce and garnitures; desserts were often veritable architectural edifices (*pièces montées*). All in all, it is quite understandable that Proust should have compared his monumental *A la recherche du temps perdu*, elsewhere likened to a cathedral, to a *boeuf mode* prepared by the "Michel-Ange" of his parents' kitchen.¹⁶

Any excess—and nineteenth-century gastronomy was excessive by any standard—inevitably brings about a reaction. Toward the end of the century menus became less extravagant, courses were reduced to a single dish. Ostentation was maintained by the marked predilection for banquets. The culmination of these "banquet years" was surely the repast served in the Tuileries in 1900 to 22,295 mayors of France, a banquet symbolic of the "nationalization"

¹⁶ Marcel Proust *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Pléiade ed., 1961), III, 1035: "ne ferai-je pas mon livre de la façon que Françoise faisait ce boeuf mode . . . dont tant de morceaux de viande ajoutés et choisis enrichissaient la gélée?"

of *la grande cuisine*, symbolic too of the centrality of cuisine in French culture. The twentieth century brought further modifications, but cuisine remains a significant value in the France of the 1970s.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO CIRCLE

[*Part II of "Thoughts for Food", "Culinary Culture in Contemporary France," will appear in the December issue.*]