

Introduction

The various implications of taste have always been of interest to philosophers, historians, ethnologists, linguists, psychologists, cultural and social anthropologists, and others scholars. As early as 2006, Thomas M. Wilson argued that “[...] eating and drinking as aspects of tradition and heritage are central concerns in many narratives of local, regional and national cultures, that are perceived to be under threat of change due to a combination of external, often global forces, as well as due to forces that are internally produced” (Wilson, 2006, 13). In 2018, a collective monograph edited by Gitanjali G. Shahani, *Food and Literature*, was published in the UK, highlighting the close and reciprocal relationship between the two objects of study. In recent years, Lithuania has also seen a renewed focus on the field of food studies (works by Rimvydas Laužikas, Paulius Jurkevičius, and the forthcoming doctoral thesis “Migrant Identity and Lithuanian Food in America in the 20th Century” being prepared at the Lithuanian Historical Institute by Jurgita Senulienė), but literature has not yet been consistently included in the field of culinary debates. The relevance of this topic is signalled both by the growing representation of food in literary texts and by the work of theorists who propose new and relevant theoretical approaches to food analysis in humanitarian contexts: in the spheres of philosophy and aesthetics, the phenomenon of *gastrosophy* has emerged, which claims to become a humanitarian discipline (Michel Onfray), while literary scholars speak of *gastropoetics* (Parama Roy) and *Kulinaristic* (Alois Wierlacher). In Lithuania, this topic has recently received little focused collective research (the most memorable application was the 2011 issue of the journal *Baltos lankos* devoted to alimentary aspects, where taste was under analysis primarily through semiotic methodology), which is why this collection of papers, based on various methods, is necessary and timely. Taste is a topic of particular interest at the University of Latvia, which has been carrying out a continuous research–academic project called “National Identity: Gastropoetic Aspect. Historical, International and Interdisciplinary Contexts” (“Nacionālā pašidentitāte: gastropoētiskais aspekts. Vēsturiskais, starpnacionālais un starpdisciplinārais konteksts”, 2020–2023), promoting a new reading of food in literary fiction.

The most representative topics for this collection of articles have been selected from the papers presented at the international conference “Literary Taste Map: From Taste Culture to Taste Industry” (September 24–25, 2020, Vilnius, Lithuania) organized by the Lithuanian Comparative Literature Association. The authors’ team consists of renowned and promising Lithuanian scholars, while the contributions of colleagues from other countries is important for strengthening international relations and increasing the competitiveness of Lithuanian humanities research. To make our ideas accessible internationally, we decided to publish this collection of research papers in English rather than Lithuanian. The cultural meanings of taste were chosen as being particularly conducive to interdisciplinary analysis, as they connect three following interrelated areas of concern:

1) the gustative, gastronomic field of cooking, consuming, tasting, and evaluating food;

2) the complexity of the specificity and stereotypes of national identity revealed through the consumption of food, as well as symbolic associations of taste in literature;

3) the aesthetic register, the system of values, and the relationship between subjective/individual and universal choices determined by cultural experience.

The research on the phenomenon of taste is motivated by the desire to update and comprehensively consider a wide field of historical and contemporary issues related to taste, focusing on the reflection on taste experiences and the changes in the “culture of taste” that permeate literary texts and are closely related to identity practices. Our objectives are the following:

1) to update the topic of literary taste, food consumption, and gastronomy as an intertextual phenomenon in social and literary contexts, which is strongly developed in the world, but still poorly represented in the Lithuania;

2) to classify the manifestations of taste, developing the multidimensional issues of taste, gastropoetics, food ideology, and stereotyping;

3) to present the analytical methods that help to define the changes in the category of taste in literature, gastronomy, and sociocultural spheres and to demonstrate their operation;

4) to bring together researchers from different countries and methodologies in one thematic collection of articles in order to reveal historical and methodological insights into taste and food.

Taste is primarily related to a nation's traditions, heritage, and stereotypes, but it is also dependent on the individual's judgment and motives for choice, which is why the collection begins with historical overviews and studies of the changing identity of a nation in emigration and concludes with an exploration of the aesthetic and figurative implications of taste.

The thematic issue on taste is significant in that it brings together in one place papers devoted to various aspects of taste, mapping cultural and literary tastes, highlighting new theoretical and practical guidelines for the study of this topic, and marking the points of contact between the "continents" of different but interconnected disciplines. The papers present, for the sake of convenience, interpretations offered by Lithuanian and European researchers, ranging from the importance of historical products for our identity to the analysis of different meals in literary texts, to taste as a value criterion. Taste has been chosen as a semantic code that helps delving deeper into literary history and cultural studies, gastropoetics, semiotics of the senses, and aesthetics.

The publications in the collection of papers discuss taste, food (bread, cheese, milk, pancakes), situations of its consumption (breakfast, wartime), and the related literary images not only as a narrative of pleasure, and gourmet enjoyment, but also in other analytical and problematic ways that highlight their symbolic functions: as a system of signs and communication (semiotic aspect); as a ritual of identity maintenance, fragmentation or rejection, and as a means given in deciding the identity and national character of a nation (imagological aspect); as a reference to the social origin, status and cultural background of literary characters (literary sociology aspect); as a marker of the superiority of one culture to another (postcolonial aspect). One can sense the polylogue and the potential of the confluence of these different theoretical approaches. In the field of literary debate, the authors include not only cultures of tastes, but also anti-cultures of tastes, which highlight eating not only as a cultural phenomenon but also as a physiological need (the representation of hunger in literature). The categories of scarcity, lack, and hunger are meaningful for those who live in an era of relative abundance; in the study of the literary and sociocultural context, there are inevitable references to the context of psychology and the analysis of empathy and antipathy reactions.

In the articles, the concept of taste ranges from the local/regional to the global, from the signifier of identity to subjective judgment. The international

team of contributors presents a wide-ranging and innovative map of gustative, gastronomic and aesthetic experiences. Through taste experience and perception, the national self-image is revealed in Lithuanian, Latvian, Albanian, and works of literature of other countries under analysis, as well as the individual's relationship to culture and aspects of intercultural communication. The articles cover tasting and eating practices starting from black and white bread as a symbol of social classes in Maironis' poems (Manfredas Žvirgždas), to various forms of meaning related to food in 20th century Latvian prose (Ieva E. Kalniņa, Ojārs Lāms), the image of pancakes as a symbol of Russian hospitality in prewar Latvian Russian-speaking press (Svetlana Pogodina), and representations of hunger in literature (Laura Laurušaitė, Ieva Kalniņa). The evolution of national cuisine is under investigation to define what stereotypical perceptions accompany "Lithuanian" dishes from ancient times to the present day (Rimvydas Laužikas). It also highlights taste as a value distinction, which allows us to enter the realm of aesthetic considerations. Dainius Vaitiekūnas discusses the authoritative position of Algirdas Julius Greimas as a literary tastemaker; Jūratė Jasaitytė presents the reception of Rainer Maria Rilke's literary taste in Lithuanian poetry; Mārtiņš Laizāns considers the aspects of the untranslatable nature of culinary images and terms, etc.

The international collection of papers shows that Lithuanian studies can be renewed when new fields of inquiry are chosen and international contacts are established. At the same time, a significant part of this is the dissemination of Lithuanian studies in the context of international humanities research at various levels: e.g., Laurušaitė and Pogodina takes a comparative approach to the contexts of food consumption in different countries, stressing the importance of comparative regional studies, Jasaitytė highlights the influence of Rilke on Lithuanian poets, Laizāns concentrate on differences between languages and cuisines, etc. This present collection on taste is likely to broaden the boundaries of academic interests.

REFERENCES

- Wilson Th. M. (2006). Food, drink and Identity in Europe: Consumption and the Construction of Local, National and Cosmopolitan Culture. In: *Food, Drink and Identity in Europe* (Ed. Thomas M. Wilson). Amsterdam, New York, NY: Rodopi.