

# The Sin of Gluttony and the Cultural Conflict. On the Margin of Babette's Feast

1. *De re coquinaria* by Apicius (first century A.D.) was probably the first to verbalise the view that the way of taking nourishment is a refined “culinary art” – a skill that belongs to the domain of art (*ars techne*), and thus entails doing something according to a set of rules. Close to Aristotelian “productive knowledge”, *ars victuaria* in the twelfth-century classification by Radulf da Campo Lungo, known as el Ardiente, and by Hugo of St. Victor was one of the seven mechanical arts. Although later it was excluded from classifications aimed at formulating a definition of art exclusively as an ability to produce beauty (the seven fine arts according to Batteax in the mid-eighteenth century), thanks to idealistic aesthetics “culinary art” could find its place either among skills still comprehended according to the classical and only slightly redefined distinction (art conceived as professional knowledge, such as tailoring, medicine, trade, and “defensive capability”), or – as Libelt interpreted it in a slightly convoluted manner – among the so-called social sciences showing Platonic ideals of truth, beauty and goodness in life, all enhancing the latter. Such maximalist speculations constituted the whole sphere of material culture, of which it was demanded that it should satisfy purely practical needs on par with “superior” requirements, so that the useful would be simultaneously pleasant, as Aristotle desired. This shifts the whole issue to an equal degree towards psychological aesthetics (especially its Cartesian hedonistic version, rendered dynamic by basically anti-intellectual twentieth-century speculations on the theory of satiation) as well as towards the history of culture and cultural anthropology. Culinary art, together with the accompanying ritual of recipes, cookbooks, hierarchy of interiors, furniture, table setting, servants, etc., is one of the key moments in manners and morals (lifestyle) embedded in social hierarchies. Today, it may be viewed in yet another, new way toppling the old, segmentary findings, which separated the inherent from that, which is gained through culture: we know that manners and morals – social experience – cultural (*milieu*) conventions shape our personality thanks to their durability/rootedness

and become part of the genetic code. Cultural habits are our “second nature”, making itself known in the most varied situations.<sup>1</sup>

2. *Babette's Feast*: a refugee fleeing France in the throes of revolutionary terror arrives in a small Danish settlement. The kindly albeit distant Danish women who offered her shelter entrust her with keeping their home and introduce her to the arcana of local culinary art – simple or even primitive, frugal recipes based on a few basic ingredients (the famous recipe for rye bread soup, *nota bene* used up to this day in traditional Scandinavian cooking). Babette, slightly mysterious, with an obscure past, adapts herself to the new environment but when she unexpectedly wins in the lottery she spends all the money on a curious caprice – a sophisticated banquet for her Danish hosts. The meal becomes a demonstration of her culinary mastery as the former chef of a famous Parisian restaurant as well as a manifestation of the refined and always slightly libertine French culture of dining.

This simple plot told in the unhurried rhythm of consecutive sequences of preparations for the feast – whose detailed presentation at a certain moment outright balances on the edge of a television cooking show – should be analysed as an out-and-out textbook exercise in cultural anthropology. We are dealing with a typical confrontation of two different lifestyles – dissimilar sets of daily/routine behaviour within the range of European culture in which the table (the culture of dining) is, according to Norbert Elias, a fundamental element of Western civilisation and testimony of certain domains of cultural competence (lifestyle/manner of living).<sup>2</sup> Obviously, “table manners” (to paraphrase the title of a textbook by Erasmus of Rotterdam, basic for modern Western civilisation) is simultaneously an expression of a certain existential thesis and, consequently, as a behavioural category it is an element of social stratification and a factor shaping distinctive behaviour. This makes it possible to treat the story described in *Babette's Feast* as part of the socio-ethnological *orbis interior-orbis exterior* thesis and an illustration of a cultural confrontation initiated by the appearance of the “stranger”. In this case, we are concerned with a confrontation of two antithetical European cultures: the closed, severe “town” culture and the open, refined and cosmopolitan “court” culture, created and “civilised” by modern France, whose social symbol became French cuisine. French cooks (M.A. Careme), aristocrats and statesmen (e.g. cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin or Marquis Louis de Béchamel), succeeded in granting modern culinary art created during the sixteenth century by the Italians a heretofore unknown sophistication and diversification, propagated subsequently by such works as the famous *La Physiologie du Goût* by A. Brillat-Savarin (1825).

From this viewpoint, the story told in *Babette's Feast* assumes the features of a veritable “credo” by referring



– presumably – to the very essence of Kantian poetic involving the middle class (the bourgeoisie) and the higher court class. As a consequence, it evokes a dispute between two moral stands: Protestant (in the extreme version represented by the pietists) and Catholic, together with their dual comprehension of civilisation either as closed and internal morality (Protestantism) or its external counterpart (Catholicism).

All these factors require that we regard *Babette's Feast* as a morality play exploiting the immanent feature of the culture of dining, namely, that as a quintessence of a certain philosophy of life this particular culture is determined by its characteristic ethical premises. In accordance with the steadfast rules of a philosophical-didactic tale we witness a battle waged for human souls, in which the protagonists face the necessity of making a choice between basic categories and concepts that they appear to allegorically personify: between Virtue and Sin (here: Gluttony), Pride and Faith, Truth and Falsehood. The situation of the choice balances on the very edge of a cultural/world outlook conflict in its entire dimension. The decision to participate, or not, in the feast is tantamount to choosing one of two choices evaluated, however, from the Protestant point of view: to opt for tradition (stability, durability, truth) or change (revolution and motion and hence also falsehood and illusion).

Despite the referent danger of disturbing the balance, the very fact of sitting down to a table proves decisive for the ultimate rejection of a conflict for the sake of participation and opening up towards the “stranger”. An examination of this process of attaining acceptance may be explained by the mechanisms of the mutual impact of cultures; we know that such impact is provoked more by differences than similarities for two reasons: either because the “strange” idea becomes part of familiar conceptions and ideas (“a search for one's own”) or, on the contrary, because it is unfamiliar and thus gives

rise to curiosity (“the quest for the strange”). It is the “stranger” who introduces into the inner cultural structures that, which comes “from the outside” and causes the impulse of cultural change.

The course of *Babette's feast*, with its growing dramaturgy of gradually overcoming distance and conventions, turns almost into a rite of mutual gift giving in the manner of the potlatch, a key moment of activating two authentic European cultures “towards integration”. The first bite of sophisticated French *hors d'oeuvre* produces an integration of different traditions; in this case, the gesture has an outright oecumenical dimension, so distant from the destructive leftist vision of the self-annihilating consumer society shown in *La grande bouffe*. Quite possibly, this could be also a poetical gesture if we were to consider the problem from the viewpoint of the still utopian vision of a united Europe (and, more widely, a united world, in the once again activated illusion of “internationalism”). At this point it seems worth recalling the end scenes of *Babette's Feast*: after the magnificent dinner everything becomes the same as before. The level of understanding and acceptance did not cross the limits delineated by, for example, dinner in an exotic restaurant – a mere pleasant, festive episode in the routine of daily life or a tourist programme. New experiences outlined even more strongly the spheres of “one's own-ness” (“smaller homeland”), established by tradition and prejudice, in order to protect them against a successive utopia.

#### Endnotes

- 1 These problems were presented in detail by Elżbieta Gieysztor-Milobędzka, *Natura, nauka, sztuka – nowy paradigm*, in: *Sztuka a natura. Materiały XXXVI I Sesji Naukowej Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki przeprowadzonej 23-25 listopada 1989 roku w Katowicach*, Katowice 1991, pp. 15-29, especially p. 17.
- 2 Norbert Elias, *Przemiany obyczajów w cywilizacji Zachodu*, Warszawa 1980.