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Gastro-Poetics in Lithuanian Yiddish Literature of the Interwar Period: The Early Work of Moyshe Kulbak (1896-1937)

<https://doi.org/10.51554/Coll.22.49.02>

Annotation: For almost a hundred years, literary critics and scholars have been trying to reach the depths of Moses Kulbak's work and find the most appropriate keys to interpreting his sophisticated and puzzling works. This article is an attempt to approach author's work by focusing on seemingly less important details and reconstructing their relational network. The depiction of eating scenes, meals (including ruined and imagined ones), as well as food and drink have been chosen as focus point. Such strategy, emphasizing body in the humanities, allows to draw attention to other key issues, such as the relationship between body and soul, nourishment and intellect, intellect and faith, etc. The article deals with the first decade Kulbak's work and examines less discussed sources of inspiration of the great Yiddish poet and prose writer. Using metric and semantic analysis, the place and role of eating habits, meal scenes and spectacular food representations in Kulbak's poetic universe are explained and reconstructed. Food metaphors help uncover hidden interconnections, and although they often play only a connotative role, they are still powerful means for expressing the author's message, while simultaneously concealing it.

Keywords: food in literature, Lithuanian Yiddish literature, Modern Yiddish poetry, interwar period, intellectual history, Yiddish metrics.

There¹ is no need to provide an exhaustive biography of Moyshe Kulbak (משה קולבאק) here. Data on his traditional Jewish education are not uniform and

1 This article was made possible by the grant from Latvian Science Council: No. lzp-2019/1-0294 "National Identity: The Gastropoetic Aspect: the Historical, International and Interdisciplinary Contexts." In this article, I follow the rules of YIVO transliteration of the Yiddish, However, I have not changed the spelling in the quotations.

might be inaccurate. According to Zalman Reyzen, Kulbak studied for almost five years at a *yeshivot*.² Although the famous yeshiva (Talmudic academy) in Volozhin reduced its learning capacity after 1892, it remained a prominent center of Jewish education contributing significantly to the Litvak intellectual world.³ Two of Kulbak's early poems involving Biblical and Talmudic motifs are especially noteworthy. The fragments of the *Destruction of Babylon* were published in "Letste Nays" in 1917 (republished in *Di goldene keyt*). The poem *Lamedvoovniks* (Thirty-Sixters) was published in 1920.

Kulbak had gained fame as a writer already before leaving for Berlin, where he tried to enter the University of Berlin, albeit unsuccessfully. He lived in the German metropolis from the autumn of 1920 to 1923, actively using libraries, visiting museums and spending time in the cafes that served as meeting places for the Jewish intelligentsia. "Yiddish, Hebrew, German and Russian-speaking writers gathered at the Romanisches Café, known in Yiddish as the *Rakhmones Café* (café of pity), since many of its customers struggled to scrounge enough money for a meal."⁴ Kulbak lived in Berlin as a typical *Luftmensch*.⁵ Two prose works were the outcome of his intensive life in Berlin. In 1923, Kulbak's drama in three acts, *Jakub Frank* was published; in 1924, the novel *Meshiekh ben Efrayim* followed.⁶

2 Zalman Reyzen, *Leksikon fun der jidisher literatur, prese un filologiyeh in 4 bendn*. Bd. 3, Wilno: Wilner Farlag fun B. Kletskin, 1928-1929, p. 602.

3 According to Shmuel Niger, Kulbak studied at the Mir Yeshiva until World War I. Shmuel Niger, "Moyshe Kulbak," *Yidishe Shrayber in Soviet-Rusland*, Nyu-york, S. Niger Book Committee of the Congress for Jewish Culture, 1958, pp. 69-131. I analyze and interpret the traces of studying in this yeshiva in Kulbak's work elsewhere.

4 Rachel Seelig, "Between Center and Periphery: Transnational Jewish Literature in Weimar Berlin." Ph.D. Thesis, University of Chicago, ProQuest LLC, 2011, p. 15.

5 See: Anne-Christin Saß, *Berliner Luftmenschen. Osteuropäisch-jüdische Migranten in der Weimarer Republik*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012. To make a living, Kulbak served as a prompter in the Vilna Troupe. Whether or not the performed plays influenced the young writer goes beyond the scope of this article. An-sky's [Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport—IL] *Dybbuk* was performed most frequently.

6 Moyshe Kulbak, *Jakub Frank*, Vilna: Klatskin Farlag, 1928. In October 1922, Kulbak wrote to Shmuel Niger that he completed *Meshiekh ben Efrayim*. Moyshe Kulbak, "Finef briv fun moyshe kulbak tsu shmuel niger." *Di goldene keyt*, 1952, No. 13, pp. 235-240, 239. The novel has been translated into several languages: English, German, Polish, Hebrew, and French. Here, I consult three editions: Mosze Kulbak, *Mesjasz z rodu Efraima*, przełożył Krzysztof Czyżewski, Sejny: Fundacja Pogranicze: Ośrodek "Pogranicze – sztuka, kultura,

The scope of this article is limited to Kulbak's early writings. Here, I will examine a privileged medium, namely metaphors, expressions and small narrative units related to food, trying to reconstruct so called gastro-poetics as a tool for approaching the complicated messages hidden in Kulbak's texts. Kulbak had never joined any literary movement or group,⁷ even though he actively interacted with different writers and groups in Vilna, Kaunas and Berlin.⁸ It speaks of his outstanding independence and autonomy.

narodów," 2016; Moyshe Kulbak, *Der Messias vom Stamme Efraim: eine juedische Legende, übersetzung von Andrej Jendrusch*, Berlin: Verlag Volk und Welt, 1996; Moshe Kulbak, *The Messiah of the House of Ephraim*, in: *Yenne Velt: The Great Works of Jewish Fantasy and Occult*, vol. 1, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, New York: Stonehill Publishing Company, 1976, pp. 268-48; Moyshe Kulbak, *Mesijas, Efraimo sūnus*, trans. by Mindaugas Kvietkauskas, Vilnius: Odilė, 2021.

- 7 Many literary and art groups were active at that time: the Kiev group, the Jung Idysz group in Łódź, the Warsaw group Halastra, and the Jung Vilne. Intensive and diverse literary life also flourished in Kaunas, see: Joanna Lisek, *Jung Wilne – żydowska grupa artystyczna*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2005; Akvilė Grigoravičiūtė, "Jidiš literatūra tarpukario Lietuvoje (1918-940): savasties paieškos," *Colloquia*, No. 29, pp. 38-62; Akvilė Grigoravičiūtė, "Yiddish Literary Life in Interwar Kaunas (1918– 1939)," *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów*, 2014, No. 4, pp. 690-703.
- 8 For more on the atmosphere of cultural exchange and interaction in Poland-Lithuania at the time, see: Lara Lempertienė, "Liaudies kultūros pažinimas Lietuvoje: kai kurie lietuvių ir žydų sąskambiai" [Getting to Know Folk Culture in Lithuania: Some Lithuanian-Jewish Similarities] *Lietuvos žydų kultūros paveldas: kasdienybės pasaulis*, sudarytojas ir mokslinis redaktorius Antanas Andrijauskas, Vilnius: Lietuvos kultūros tyrimų centras, 2013, pp. 168-187, 552; Lara Lempertienė, "Lietuvių ir žydų folkloro sąsajos," *Metai*, 2010, No. 4, pp. 101-109; Lara Lempertienė, „Vilniaus žydų inteligentija ir tautų dialogo idėja“ [Vilnius Jewish Intelligentsia and the Idea of the Dialog of Nations], *Vilniaus kultūrinis gyvenimas: tautų polilogas, 1900–1945*, sudarytoja Alma Lapinskienė, Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2012, pp. 147-156; Mordechai Zalkin, "Sharunas, Prince of Dainava, in a Jewish Gown: The Cultural and Social Role of Hebrew and Yiddish Translations of Lithuanian Literature and Poetry in Interwar Lithuania," *Jahrbuch fuer Antisemitismusforschung*, Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2012, pp. 149-165; Anna Verschik, "Istorinės sociolingvistikos link: savitraštis 'Apžvalga' (1935-1940) ir Lietuvos žydų tapatybės pokyčiai," *Abipusis pažinimas: lietuvių ir žydų kultūriniai saitai*. Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2010, pp. 183-200, Iveta Leitane, "Komparatīvā gastrosemiotika? Baltijas ebreju tulkojumi jidišā starpkaru periodā" [Comparative Gastrosemiotics? The Translations of Baltic Jews into Yiddish in the Interwar Period], *Krustpunkti: kultūras un mākslas pētījumi* (red. Anda Laķe), Rīga: Latvijas Kultūras akadēmija, pp. 178-191.

1. Food in Kulbak's Poetry: "Wine" and "Bread"

Let us look at the first example from Kulbak's *Songs*.⁹

1.	S'hot oyfgeshoymt in mir ein alter vayn ,	The old wine has foamed up inside me
2.	Fun grunt biz grunt .	From bottom to bottom
3.	Es spritzt meyn froyd , fun toyznt kvaln shtramt di shayn	My joy bursts out, radiance emanates from a thousand sources
4.	Adurkhn oyfgepraltn shpunt ...	Through a hole drilled in the chest ...
5.	Ich shling di mide velt , dem mensch mit hak un pak ,	I swallow the weary world, a man with an axe and a bag
6.	Un mit zeyn gal un toybn-blik	With his rancor and his dove-gaze
7.	Kh'bin zun , kh'bin toy . Kh'gei um a demb in frak .	I am the sun, I am the dew, I walk like an oak in a tailcoat
8.	Ikh bin dos glik .	I am a bliss
9.	Dos shprudelnde gezang fun vern , veln zeyn ,	A buoyant song about becoming and the will to be
10.	Fun mir hot oysgehelt ;	Erupts from my chest
11.	S'hot oyfgejoyrt in mir der alter vayn	The old wine has matured inside me
12.	Kh'bin shikur fun der velt .	I am intoxicated with the world

This verse has full twelve lines (a variation of *rondeau prime*), consisting of a septet and cinquain, where the number of syllables and stressed syllables are as follows: 10+4+12+8+12+9+10+4+10+6+10+6 (a crisscrossed pattern with the elements of the embracing pattern, though the rhymes remain crisscrossed here) and 5+2+6+4+6+4+5+2+5+3+5+3. The opening phrase of the first line is repeated as a refrain, with slight changes (*oyfgeshoymt/ oyfgejoyrt*) in the last line. The eliminated or unpronounced vowels at the beginning of lines (*ikhbin*) accelerate the rhythm. The combination of vowels o-oy-oy is also remarkable. Sh in the third line resembles a splashing and is a clear case of onomatopoeisis. The sequence of several shs makes one imagine very dynamic movements, their obstacles, or mobilizes to overcome those obstacles, while the last sh at the very end of the verse, connected with a narrow vowel, is an allusion of liberation (*shikur*). This seems to be confirmed by the peculiarity that the word *velt* ("world") is mentioned only twice in the verse. The first mention in falling intonation is set against the second mention in ascending intonation.

⁹ Moyshe Kulbak, *Lider*, Berlin: Klak-Verlag, 1922, p. 27.

Let us look at the second example:¹⁰

1.	- Hastu broyt?	“Do you have bread?”
2.	Er hot geentfert shtilerheyt:	He answered quietly:
3.	“O, leyder, leyder, itster nit ...	“Oh, regrettably, regrettably, not now...”
4.	Amol hob ikh gegesn alts,	I used to eat everything,
5.	Ay kroyt , ay merelekh ,	Cabbage, carrot. <i>dim</i> , ¹¹
6.	Ay retiklekh mit shmalts,	Radish. <i>dim</i> with fat,
7.	Nor itster nit ”...	But now no more” ...

The number of syllables and their accentuation in septenar show a certain pattern, which manifests some regularity (the embracing pattern), although a rigid scheme cannot be identified: 3-8-8-8-6-6-4 with corresponding stressed syllables 2-4-4-4-3-3-2. The rhymes correspond to the embracing pattern from third to seventh and from fourth to sixth line, with the fifth line positioned separately, while forcing or blowing line six wide open into two smaller parts, absorbing the first part and making a unified phoneme combination. The diminutive forms, which are used only for the names of foods and vegetables here, increase the musicality of the verse and suggest similarity to a folk song. The verse has undeniably refined structure.¹²

The repetition of similar vowels (assonance) and the connections between wide vowels a-oy in the first line and the narrowing ones oy-e-e-e in the central fifth line, which continues with a somewhat reversible course (of wideness-narrowness) e-e-e-a in the sixth line, followed by categorical repetition-negation in the seventh line consisting only of narrow stressed vowels (i-i), echoes and amplify the vowel sequence ey-ey-i-i in the third line. The monosyllabic food names at the beginning of the fifth line (“kroyt”) and at the end of the sixth line (“shmalts”) frame the middle of the ‘outstanding melodic-sounding’ e-e-e in the names of vegetables used in the diminutive forms here. Equally significant

10 Moshe Kulbak, *Naye lider*, Varsha: Kulturlige, 1922, p. 24.

11 Here and hereinafter .dim marks a diminutive form (the diminutive form of the word is one of the main features of folk poetry). When using the diminutives, Kulbak sometimes is ironic.

12 On sound patterns in Yiddish poetry see: Benjamin Harshav, “The Meaning of Sound Patterns in Poetry: An Interaction Theory,” *Poetics Today*, 1980, Vol. 2, autumn, No. 1a (Roman Jakobson: Language and Poetry), pp. 39-56. For the earlier attempts see: Shmuel Niger, “Moyshe Kulbak,” *Yidishe Shrayber in Soviet-Rusland*, Nyu-york: S. Niger Book Committee of the Congress for Jewish Culture, 1958, pp. 69-13.

is the fact that both mentioned vegetables—carrots and radishes—contain some sweetness, even if the radishes already start a series of “bitter” (and in the context of Jewish holidays, “memorative”) vegetables.

Jews recollect the exodus from Egypt by eating these vegetables. The word “all” appears to be an oxymoron, because the words that follow is a list of rather modest food. However, the situation is ambiguous, as these food items refer to a festive meal as well.¹³ What is striking in this verse is its apparent prosaicness, as indicated by the topic of the dialogue. The ambiguity of the borders between the author’s and the lyrical hero’s selves, and the radical emphasis on the time difference “ever/once” vs. “now” (*itster*) is also embarrassing. One explanation of this use is based on the assumption that the deterioration has occurred, which here is marked by the scarcity of food, as indicated by the mentioning of “bread”—simple, mundane, and rough food, which the hero not just occasionally does not “have” “now” but does not have it in the sense yet to be interpreted. One may think that the holiday meal is an improvement whether or not there is “bread” at the time, because the ‘scarcity of bread’ can allude not only to the shortage of ‘real’ bread but also, perhaps primarily, to the shortage or even the loss of important signifiers.

Besides, such expressions as “nothing but bread” or “not even bread” are prominently used in Yiddish classics. Yitzhak Bashevis Singer, for instance, mentions “someone, who has/lives Pesach holiday all year round, but doesn’t even have a slice of bread.”¹⁴ Generally speaking, in the Jewish menu, the bread cannot bear the same significance as it does in the surrounding Baltic-Slavic world, where even the flourishing of the cult of bread might be detected. According to halakhic rules, fermented bread is forbidden during the Pesach

13 Let us keep in mind that fasting and celebration coincide in Yom Kippur. Fats are eaten particularly during Jewish holidays, for example, goose fat is consumed during the Pesach. It is during the Hanukah festival that *retekh* salad is eaten. It is made from beets, turnips (olives) and onions, fried in goose fat, with pieces of poultry (chicken, goose) fat along with *gribenes*. *Gribenes*: poultry skins fried in fat with onions.

14 Qtd. from Ruth Wisse’s *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, 43f. People who come to a Jewish convert or heretic Jakob Frank ask different things, including bread. Frank’s home provides bread for all newcomers, the community and guests (Moyshe Kulbak, *Jakub Frank*, Vilna: Klatskin Farlag, 1928, p. 45). This practice turns out to be suspicious, though, and the provision of bread does not prevent the community from breaking apart.

Seder, thus its shortage might carry festive connotations. To sum up, “bread” can mean not only concrete piece of bread, the availability of which is denied in the response of the hero (poor man’s, Yiddish: *oremans*), who is poet’s counterpart.

Bread is explicitly excluded from the positive list of the past (menu), consisting only of vegetables and fats. It becomes clear that it is ‘food’ in general, metaphorical and extended sense. The use of the quantifier “all” or “everything” (*alts*) in the fourth line correlates and contrasts with “fatty” (*shmalts*) in the sixth line, making an allusion to a compressed word from “**SHMekn ALTS**” (taste everything). Besides, the word *alts* (in correlation with *shmalts*) alludes to the wholeness and even perfection (*shlemut*). Thus the melodic names of vegetables, following the mention of ‘everything’ in the fourth line, strengthen the meaning of modesty as perfection.

The negation of the availability of bread (*itster nit*) only intensifies the search for its possible referent, without singling out (making it firm so that it cannot be changed) any of them rigidly. To use an example from another verse of Kulbak: the “Fatness of life” comes close to the “intoxication” and is somehow related to the swallowing of “sharpness” (“spiciness” and “sharpness” are expressed by the same word “sharp” that allows to merge—say—the “vulnerability” with the quality of “taste”) and “bitterness.” We will see that the bitterness is a leading ‘taste’ category in other Kulbak’s works as well. We can conclude with two expressions from classical sources. The first: A king’s meal consists of a handful of vegetables¹⁵ and the second: “it is *God’s* way to *sweeten the ‘bitter’* with a ‘bitter’.”

Let us look at the third example¹⁶ from Kulbak’s poem *Wedding*:

Wedding (frag. stanza 5)

Derlangt aher di karpn-kep ,	Pass the carp heads here,
Di shleyen un di hiner-zup	Then tench and the chicken soup
Di helz lakh fun di tsholent-tep ,	The necks from the <i>cholent</i> pot,
Un hey -gelebt zol zeyn! ...	Oh, let us live! ...
Men lebt nur eyn mol oyf der velt ...	Man lives only once in the world ...

15 Sanh. 94b; PK [Pesiqta de Rab Kahana] VI 59b; PR [Pesikta Rabbati] XVI 82a; Midrash Mishle Xiii 74.

16 Moyshe Kulbak, *Lider*, Berlin, Klal-Verlag, 1922, p. 36.

Oy, ore —tsore kum aher ,	Hey, poor man (man of sorrows), come here,
Vos hostu zikh avekgestelt ,	Why do you stand silent away from everyone?
Ot nem in moyl areyn!	Gobble it up!
Joyh tsu fule shiselakh,	Here is a bowlful of soup,
Un mashke oykh tsu kapelakh ,	And a drop. <i>dim</i> of a drink,
Tsu kapelakh , tsu kapelakh ,	Drop. <i>dim</i> after drop. <i>dim</i> after drop. <i>dim</i> ,
Un nemt zikh on mit mut!	Help yourselves!
Vos shteyt ir do in kopkelakh?! ...	Why are you standing by timidly?! ...
Ot nemt zikh tsu di tsimeslakh ,	Take it, here's a <i>tsimes.dim</i> ,
Di kuglen un di popkelakh —	And <i>kugels</i> and <i>popkels.dim</i> —
Un zol undz geyn nor gut! ...	Good fortune to all of us! ...

It is the barker's speech inviting the participants of the wedding feast. The speech is extremely rich in food names, many of them expressed using diminutives, and is filled with all kinds of requests to come and eat this or that. Many encouraging appeals addressed to the passive or shy guests follow one another. The listing of food names functions as a social focus here. It is achieved thanks to the plentiful use of the copula "and," to inviting phrases, comprising the lists of menus, and to the use of auxiliary and demonstrative words like "this one," "that one," and "here/hither" (*ot*, *aher*). The speech is interspersed with the refrains that are reminiscent of toasts, one of which concludes the stanza (*Un zol undz geyn nur gut! Un hey—gelebt zol zeyn!*). The use of this communication strategy allows for a lively participation of other guests in the event, especially the poor. The use of diminutive forms for food and dishes used in the barker's speech at the same time reveals the deeply intimate nature of the festive meal itself, simultaneously drives it forward. Full meal is reserved for the events like weddings that carry high literal and symbolic value.¹⁷ Unlike the excessive meals in corrupt and decadent circles (Polish, German or Jewish environment), this meal appears to be a real feast, where nobody is posing and nobody is excluded, not even the poorest of the poor. People are called inside to eat and drink. This stands in sharp contrast to the decadent celebrations of the rich and powerful where one (like Leah or Lord Lyubomirsky's daughter in *Meshiekh ben Efrayim*) feels forced to flee in search of a deeper spiritual satisfaction.

17 Raymond Apple, "Marriage," Fred Skolnik, Michael Berenbaum (eds.), *Jewish Encyclopedia, 2nd edition*, 2007, vol. 13, pp. 563-565. Available: https://dbis.uni-regensburg.de/frontdoor.phtml?titel_id=6830. [Accessed 13 02 2022]

2. A Closer Look at the Meal Scenes in Kulbak's Prose

One of the ways to approach the semiotics that are at work in Kulbak's novel *Meshiekh ben Efrayim* is to study the feast and meal scenes described in it. Restricted traditionally and charged symbolically, 'food' began to play an outstanding role under the conditions of religious crisis and secularization in the rapidly developing modern secular literature. 'Food' or 'nourishment' cannot be understood unless these concepts are embedded in larger context. The metaphor or trope relies on the meaning and use of a couple of other metaphors, the most important of them being 'garments,' 'intellection,' 'faith,' 'abstinence,' 'temperance,' 'negation' and alike. The meaning of these metaphors is derived from various narratives and conceptual sources, which provide the context for them. Let us take a closer look at how Kulbak's main characters behave in relation to 'food.'

Reb Benye lives a very modest life: "Every day, Benye would cook his bit of food alone, milk the cow alone, and then stroll around the mill with his hands behind his back, or else recite the psalms, as lonely people tend to do."¹⁸ When the philosopher Gimpel arrives, Reb Benye is cooking potatoes, which Gimpel would eat in a hurry soon after. (M(E), 286)¹⁹ When the three guests (the eldest guest, the tall guest (Cabbalist) and the grumpy guest) visit Reb Benye, he asks "Wanderers [Friends], what should I do?" Instead of an answer he gets a question: "Do you have any food?" Reb Benye's perplexed introjection expressed as a question "Do I have?" is countered by the ambiguous advice of the eldest guest: "Don't do anything." (M(E), 272) Unlike Abraham, who once welcomed three angels and served them a generous meal, Reb Benye does not offer anything at all to his guests and does not eat himself either. The whole visit

18 Moshe Kulbak, *The Messiah of the House of Ephraim*, in: *Yenne Velt: The Great Works of Jewish Fantasy and Occult*, vol. 1, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, New York: Stonehill Publishing Company, 1976, p. 269. Hereinafter, an abbreviation M(E) and a page number in the brackets are given.

19 Probably it is a biographical detail. Elsewhere, Kulbak mentioned his father, who hastily swallowed hot potatoes (Moyshe Kulbak, *Gut iz der mentsh. Geklibene lider un poemes*. Moskve: Sovetski pisatel', 1979, p. 186). During a similar "potato meal," Gimpel manages to "convert" his interlocutors to his Rousseauan-Nietzschean philosophical system, though it does not happen immediately. The "potato meal" here seems to play the role of the patriarchal harmonizing context, suitable for a fruitful exchange and the reception of views during the conversation. The folk/popular etymology of 'potatoes' in German means a "wise man" and "connoisseur" (*Grübling und Klugling*).

is marked by a lack of food. The advice can probably be alternatively translated as “Do nothing!” (*tu garnisht*), and this doing “nothing at all” in turn can be interpreted as a hint to being more sophisticated. We remember that Eleazar of Worms—a source that might have had influenced Kulbak—is quoted in “Halakhot on Chassidut”: “Everything is Nothing to him, except to do the will of his Creator, to do good for others, to sanctify the name of God.”²⁰ Gershom Scholem speaks in this regard of the “moral ideal of *ataraxia*, passionlessness,” “closely related to the ascetic idea of monasticism.”²¹

We are also told about another character, the ex-Rabbi Simche Plakhte, who lived in the forest, “ate all sorts of vegetables, drank water, and smoked herbs [an herb] that he himself prepared.”²² Simche Plakhte thought: “And as long as I, this chunk [clod] of world, still have a loaf of bread²³ [in my shack] and a sheep’s clothing [sheepskin], what should I care?” (M(E), 305)²⁴ And “[h]e was

20 Qtd. from Gershom Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen*, Frankfurt a.M.: Alfred Metzner Verlag, 1957, p. 103.

21 Ibid. p. 104. “In practice, this asceticism enjoins the renunciation of profane speech. ... it amounts to turning one’s back on ordinary life as lived by ordinary people, *azivath derekherets*, to quote the pregnant term used in the “Book of the Devout.” (Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1954, p. 92)

22 Moshe Kulbak, “The Messiah of the House of Ephraim,” *Yenne Velt: The Great Works of Jewish Fantasy and Occult*, vol. 1, trans. Joachim Neugroschel. New York: Stonehill Publishing Company, 1976, p. 277. Cf. the Yiddish song: “The rich eat turkeys, the poor gnaw bones; the rich eat roast goose, the poor remain poor; the rich eat freed chicken, the poor suffer disease; the rich eat roast pigeons, the poor have miseries; the rich wear galoshes, the poor wear “lapti” (sandals made of coarse straw); the rich drink spirits (Yiddish: *marshke*), the poor are sober; the rich wear satin clothes, the poor are forlorn; the rich eat roast gizzards, the poor have troubles; the rich eat fried cutlets, the poor eat radishes; the rich smoke Shereshevsky’s cigarettes, the poor smoke weeds.” (The Poor Man “akdomois”) (Dem oreman’s akdomois, Chaim Kotylansky, *Folks-Gezangen. A Collection of Chassidic Songs and Chants*, Yiddish Ukrainian Folk Songs and “Steiger-lieder,” Los Angeles: Altveltlekher Yiddisher Kulturfarband “Yucuf,” 1944, p. 135). The tobacco factory I.L. Shereshevsky was one of the greatest Russian companies in Grodno.

23 Cf. Nietzsche’s original: “Wahrlich, meine Freunde, ich wandle unter den Menschen wie unter den Bruchstücken und Gliedmaassen von Menschen!” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Kritische Studienausgabe. Herausgegeben von Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988, p. 178).

24 Cf.: BT Yevamot 37b and BT Ketubot 63a; the original phrase, “You can’t compare one who has a loaf of bread in his basket to one who lacks it.” (Quotation from: Joel Berkowitz, Jeremy Dauber (eds.), *Landmark Yiddish Plays: A Critical Anthology*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2006, p. 90).

lying on his fur in a treetop like a stork in its nest, and the little wreaths of smoke from his pipe were curling up to the sky.” (M(E), 305) It is no coincidence that the Hebrew word for stork is *hasidah* and that it can be associated with the word *hasidut*, meaning “piety.” When the three guests enter Reb Benye’s house and leave in the morning, “[T]he red legs bent, a stork fluttered past, from one meadow to the next. He almost touched their heads with a wing.”²⁵

Though Reb Simche Plakhte lived in the forest, to which he withdrew from his disciples, this forest is pretty much depicted as a higher place, like a mountain, because Simche’s departure from the forest is actually described like a descent into the valley (*niderikeit*),²⁶ similar to Nietzsche’s Zarathustra. There he discovers for the first time the cow and Reb Benye, who is lying in the *mud*. Simche Plakhte drinks the milk like a calf: he crawls under Reb Benye’s cow and starts “to suck with greedy gulps [hungrily] from her udders.” (M(E), 279) We know from elsewhere that “the Hassids [forsaken by Simche—*IL*] yearn for the Rebbe and throng to him like calves to their mother’s udder [nipples].” (M(E), 304) Both the literal and the metaphorical sense of drawing from the source directly and rejecting intermediaries merge in this imagery.

In the Jewish and Christian tradition, water has always been a powerful means of purification and thirst—a metaphor for spiritual longing. The pitiful little Lamedvovnik, who Reb Simche passed begging for water, was turned away and directed to the spring: “Then go to the right, you gnom, there is a spring bubbling up there. Drink and praise God but stay away from me.” The little man disappeared into the darkness of the forest.”²⁷ Leah too, when she comes to see Reb Benye, whom she thinks might be the Messiah, asks merely for water. She then drinks submissively lowering her face into the water.²⁸ Already in *Jakub Frank* the need for water is explained by the underlying need for the purification. The Ukrainian coachman, who has already asked for “five geese with a bit of mustard,” is challenging the rabbi by introducing a habit in the

25 Moyshe Kulbak, *Der Messias vom Stamme Efraim: eine juedische Legende*, übersetzung von Andrej Jendrusch, Berlin: Verlag Volk und Welt, 1996, p. 13. Hereinafter, an abbreviation M(G) and a page number in the brackets are given.

26 Cf. Nietzsche’s original: “Währlich, meine Freunde, ich wandle unter den Menschen wie unter den Bruchstücken und Gliedmaassen von Menschen!” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *op. cit.*, p. 178)

27 Moyshe Kulbak, *Meshiekh ben Efrayim*, Buenos Aires: Farlag David Lerman, 1950, p. 69. Hereinafter, an abbreviation M(Y) and a page number in the brackets are given.

28 *Ibid.*, 117f.

Frankian community—“eating pork on Sabbath.”²⁹ Upon hearing this, the rabbi almost faints and asks for “*a bisl vaser*” [some water].³⁰

In a stark contrast to this, plenty of greasy food and large amounts of alcoholic drinks are served at Pan Vrublewski’s family feast: “long platters with spicy roasted [spiced] geese, cakes and wine in silver buckets” (M(E), 317, M(G) 88) were brought in. “The impoverished landowners [squires] were already sitting at the table in readiness, holding their forks in their hands, telling anecdotes [jokes] and greedily eyeing the food. ... The bottles popped open. ... An old aristocrat at the table ignored etiquette. He quickly tucked in napkin at his throat, grabbed a knife, and, fiercely mumbling, started carving the goose.” (M(E), 317, M(G) 89f)

The participants of the feast strike up a conversation on the issues of faith. The priest’s advice to Pan Vrublewski, who is descending into melancholy, is met with the approval of the greedily eating aristocrat: “One must believe, Pan [Lord] Ignats, one must believe.” (M(E), 318, M(G) 90) “The company began to drink. Officers were quietly downing bottles of wine like water. ... The old aristocrat was getting drunk.” (M(E), 319, M(G) 91) Going back to Nietzschean associations, it is Simche Plakhte who will throw Pan Vrublewski in the air, just before he picks up Leah, who is on her spiritual journey in search of the Messiah. Simche is “uprooting” him, the owner of the recently purchased forest, pulling him up from the earthly ground of his own world. In doing so, he resembles the biblical hero Samson.³¹ Thrown in the air, Pan Vrublewski takes on a permanently free-floating state and eventually begins to “do nothing.”³²

This image will be repeated in stanza no. 21 of Kulbak’s poem “Disner tshayld herold” (1933), where the main character says about himself: “I feel just like an air-balloon, / Whose string is loosened and is free.”³³ Nietzsche’s

29 Moyshe Kulbak, *Jakub Frank*, Vilna: Klatskin Farlag, 1928, p. 62. Hereinafter, an abbreviation J and a page number in the brackets are given.

30 *Ibid.*

31 “Simkhe trudged over, grabbed Vrublewsky and lifted him high in the air while his foot pressed the dog’s head to the ground. ... And then he flung him across the autumnal fields, hurled him with all his strength across the meadows and woods up into the sky.” (M(E), 330)

32 “What are you doing here?” “Nothing.” “What do you mean nothing?” “Absolutely nothing, Gimpel, just that.” (M(E), 339) In Yiddish: “Vos tust du do?” “Garnisht.” “Vos heyst garnisht?” “Ot, Gimpele, garnisht, azoi zikh.” (M(Y), 138)

33 Robert J.A. Peckerar, *The Allure of Germanness in Modern Ashkenazi Literature: 1833-1933*, Ph.D. Brandeis University, Waltham/Boston, Massachusetts, USA, 1997, p. 226 (Peckerar’s translation). By the way, Hermann Hoernes wrote several works on air-balloons, for example:

idea of liberating oneself from the past faith is depicted here in a powerful way, and Simche's Samsonian gesture reveals this state of affairs. Feeding the whole company is unmasked as a mere substitute for failing to provide meaningful signifiers and for the absence of faith. The crisis of faith in the Christian society is demonstrated in the characters of hypocritical priests and aristocrats. Jesus Christ³⁴ climbing down from the crucifix at the crossroads can be interpreted as a symbol of hunger for faith. The latter event corresponds to the terrible death of Reb Benye, which becomes the zenith in Kulbak's novel.

The participants of the last gathering imagine what the Messiah's meal might be. The tall guest is "counting off on his fingers the delicacies in store for them on the table of Messiah: "Winey apples, pears, paprika,³⁵ white bread,³⁶ smoked herring,³⁷ sausages³⁸..." (M (E), 336) Then the little Lamedvovnik asks

Lenkbare Ballons [Dirigible balloons]. Leipzig: Engelmann, 1902. Kulbach was introduced to the subject while visiting in the libraries in Berlin, even if the knowledge was rather superficial. The link between technomorphic metaphors and food metaphors in his work require further exploration. See also footnote no. 47. It is all the more important that the hero says to himself right before that verse: "... To enjoy everything. To taste every side of the world!" (Fun alts genisn. A nash getan fun jeder zayt di vel!)," Moyshe Kulbak, Gut iz der mentsh. *Geklibene lider un poemes*. Moskve: Sovetski pisatel', 1979. Compare with the opposite meaning of "taste everything" in the fourth line of the second example above.

- 34 On christological motifs in Kulbak's work see: Maks Erik, "Moyshe Kulbak. Bamerkungen tsu zayn dikhterishn veg," *Literarische bleter*, 1926, No. 123, 5f.; Avraham Novershtern, "Moyshe Kulbaks 'Meshiekh ben efrayim': a yidish-modernistish verk in zayn literarisher gerem," *Di goldene keyt*, 1989, No. 127, p. 156f.
- 35 Paprika was not known in the Jewish Antiquity. As a Hungarian food it is mentioned in the popular Jewish song "Stuffed fish" ("Gefilte fish").
- 36 *Kamlikes fun hala* is a braided raisin bread, a favorite delicacy on the Sabbath, a must have during every Sabbath meal.
- 37 In Yiddish: *gevyondzelte hering*, cf. to Polish: *wędzony śledź*. Grimm's Lexicon calls herring a low-value food and places it on the fasting menu ("*Geringer und Fastessen*"), while fried herring is called a delicacy ("*gebratene hering ... leckerbissen*"). Smoked herring is not mentioned. The relevant name in German is "Bückling" (*bent, bending over*, as the indication of a typical preparation technology). This word is related to the gesture of "bow" and "service," see: *Deutsches Woerterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm* online. Available: <https://woerterbuchnetz.de/?sigle=DWB#8> [Accessed 31 12 2021]. The Hebrew translation of "smoked herrings" "*dag maluah me'usan*" emphasizes 'salted' and 'warm' qualities of this dish. In the poem "Raysn" (Belarus), the poet's grandfather, working in the hay field, dreams about herring dinner: "men zet shoyn dem hering dem breytyn." (Moyshe Kulbak, *Kultur*. In: *Ale verk fun Moyshe Kulbak*, Band II. Vilne: Farlag fun B. Kletskin, 1929, p. 38)
- 38 In Yiddish: *dare kishke*, in Polish: *Kiszki cieniotkie*, and in Russian: *фаршированные кишки*. The English translation ("sausages") is rather misleading, although not completely wrong.

“with ease and joy”: “And we’ll drink, won’t we, raisin³⁹ wine or even Cyprus wine?” After a short while the tall guest adds to the list already mentioned one more item especially meant for Kyril (Kiril in Yiddish): “Yes, and ice cream too.” (M(Y), 133–134) The use of Hebrew, Yiddish and Slavic words in the description of the meal is significant. Wine, for example, refers both to Yiddish *veyn* and Hebrew *jajin* (Cyprus wine, which is probably the oldest wine in the world, known under the name Commandaria, in the expression evokes strong halakhic associations). The impoverished Marquis by Carlo Goldoni’s (the author of the famous *The Servant of two Masters*) comedy *The Mistress of the Inn* treats guests to Cypriot wine from a microscopic bottle.

A couple of delicacies are also mentioned in German and Yiddish (*birnen*, paprika, and *geroyherte hering*), and only one Slavic expression is used in the description of the messianic table, intended for the convert Kyril, namely, ice cream, in the original called *sakharni moroz*.⁴⁰ Most probably it was the author’s intention to create an association with the cold temperatures in Russia, which in the novel was presented as a ‘neutralized,’ sweetened quality. ‘Cold’ suggests associations of being underway, in the conditions of scarcity and facing great unknowns. No wonder it is associated with fasting.⁴¹ ‘Sweet’ is usually combined

39 Cf. the German expression: “Grosse Rosinen im Kopf haben” (to have large raisins in one’s head): “hochfliegende, nicht realisierbare Plaene oder unrealistische Vorstellungen haben (to have unrealistic plans, outlandish, unrealistic ideas.” (*Deutsches Woerterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm* online. Available: <https://woerterbuchnetz.de/?sigle=DWB#8> [Accessed 31 12 2021]). Besides, raisin wine is an extremely sweet alcoholic drink.

40 It is rather unusual expression in Belarusian; cf. the Polish equivalent *lod cukrowy*. The correct expression in Belarusian would be *cukrovy lod*, in English: *sugar ice*. It is remarkable that Kulbak, who was living in Berlin when he wrote the novel, did not use German expressions, like *Eiscream* (ice cream) or *Eis* (ice), but chose to use a Slavic composite expression that combined the qualities of ‘cold’ and ‘sweet’ taste. It can be assumed that he wanted to keep the ‘milk’ component for other meaningful significations. Reb Simche is sucking cow’s milk, when he meets Reb Benye for the first time. The metaphorical nutritional link between the ex-rabbi Plakhte and his Hassidim whom he deserted is also significant. Kulbak generally distanced himself from the ‘sweetness’ as a preferable taste quality (unless combined with ‘bitterness’) and from erotic connotations (“sweet lips.*dim*”) to sacred ones (“sweet Mass”). The person to whom this message is addressed is non-Jewish Kiril, who becomes affiliated with the lamedvovniks. ‘Sucking’ is mentioned in *Jakub Frank*, where ‘sucking from her breasts” (J, 28) refers to the cult of Matronita, thus revealing even more complex genealogy of this food image.

41 Haya says in *Jakub Frank*: “Es iz ober aza kalt. ... Reb Leyb Medzhibozher hot oysgerufn ata’anit” [However, it is so cold. ... Rabbi has announced fasting] (J, 48).

with ‘non-cold’ (‘salt,’ on the contrary, is rather cold) and alludes to pleasant conditions.⁴² Thus, the coupling of ‘sweet’ with ‘cold’ creates a ‘chiasm.’

Kulbak’s experiments with the Vilna school classmates in the Yiddish literature class must be mentioned here. Benjamin Harshav, who studied with him in Vilna, reports: “It was a cold day, ice cold, snow ... He opened windows and gave some money to somebody in the class and told him: ‘Go and bring back a herring!’ So he came back with the herring and Kulbak said, ‘Write now [itster shraybt]!’ Snow and herring. You understand?”⁴³ The white tablecloths are compared to the “ice-cold north” in Kulbak’s early poem *Destruction of Babylon*.⁴⁴ The poem starts with the statement: “tables set (*gegreite*) for the feast,”⁴⁵ but the feast does not take place and Babylon will be destroyed. The author refers to the imagined meal in “Meshiekh” with irony, and the meal would finally end in failure. According to rabbinic commentaries on Job 40:30, it was Leviathan whose meat had to be consumed during the messianic meal.

Conclusion

The aim of this article is two-fold: to reconstruct Kulbak’s poetic system and the food elements, scenes and meals, and identify their meaning and function in the system. It is impossible to fully understand one without another. While a comprehensive reconstruction of the whole system cannot be achieved here, the interpretation of the culinary discourse serves a certain approximation of this reconstruction.

Kulbak uses food names and mentions meals or even describes them rarely. A ‘meal’ functions as metonymy for full spiritual and physical satisfaction that is not given and is not representable in reality. This type of meal can only be attributed to the messianic time and to the patriarchal life conditions.⁴⁶ Neither the

42 The title hero Jakub Frank in Kulbak’s drama diagnoses the following ‘shortage’ for the newcomers: a lack of a “warm woman” (*vareme veyb*) (J, 18).

43 See: <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/excerpts/woh-ex-0002384/moyshe-kulbak-taught-my-school> [Accessed 24 04 2022]. The preference of ‘salted’ and ‘cold’ as taste qualities and a “starting condition” for ‘creativity’ cannot be overlooked there.

44 Moyshe Kulbak, “Di ceshterung fun Babel,” *Di goldene keyt*, Tel-Aviv, 1957, Issue 27, pp. 197–199.

45 *Ibid.*

46 In the poem *Raysn* (Belarus), the poet’s grandfather, along with sixteen uncles, is engaged in forest work and rafting; they all eat dinner from one bowl: “Est men vetshere farnakht

abundance (of meals), nor specific menus (exotic and mostly non-Jewish dishes) guarantee this satisfaction in real time. Flawed or interrupted meals, however, become a starting point for various spiritual events that bring the Messianic era closer. Solitary eating habits are presented in the novel as characteristic of the lifestyle and are always modest. Otherwise they are not mentioned at all. They do not cause events or change the status of the participants.

The main message of Kulbak's novel, as far as the gastro-discourse is concerned, is a warning about 'flawed communal meals' and exaggerated fake meals. There are no successful communal meals that would meet the standard of 'fulfillment' (and 'abundance') in the novel *Meshiekh ben Efrayim*. The meals depicted in the novel fall under the category of flawed meals: missed meals (failed to happen) and interrupted or discontinued meals. Both family meals, that of Patashniks' and Vrublewski's, fall under the category of interrupted meals. Further, the missed meals are divided into those that have no real idea behind them (an 'expectation' without 'representation'—the arrival of the three visitors (wanderers) to Reb Benye) and those that (or: the idea of which) have been imagined.⁴⁷

The visit of the three visitors falls under the first subcategory, and the messianic meal falls under the second subcategory. In the first case, the (expected) meal that does not happen is a sign for uncertainty or vagueness. The interrupted meals are divided into meals organized for close familial circle and familial meals organized for large public. Only abundant meals belong to the category of interrupted meals. The interruption is a kind of disclosure of those meals, or more precisely, meeting the standards of 'fulfillment' that the communal meal stands for. The interrupted meals signal significant value conflicts. The interruption is a kind of negation of values involved in abundant false communal or private family meals. Interruption is a result of the 'messianic' encounter, of the coming messianic visitors, or that of the witness of the descent of Christ from the cross, Cyril. The distinct feature of this interruption is that it signals or leads to an intergenerational conflict.

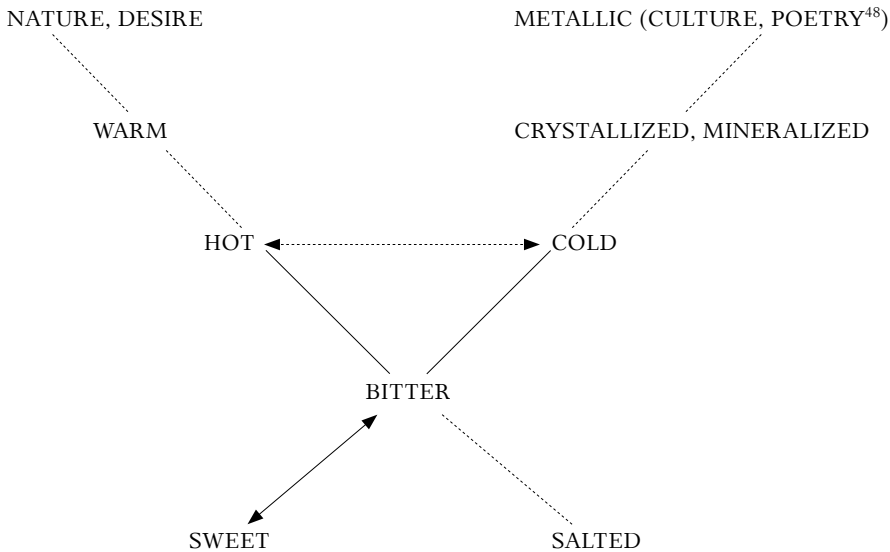
tsuzamen fun ayn shisl." (Moyshe Kulbak, *Kultur*. In: *Ale verk fun Moyshe Kulbak*, Band II. Vilne: Farlag fun B. Kletskin, 1929, p. 37)

47 I am addressing these issues in an article: "Abundance, scarcity and gift: the semiotics of meals in Yiddish literature in Baltics", in: *Food in Literature and Culture*, Ieva Kalniņa et al. (eds.), Rīga, Latvijas universitāte Apgāds, 2022 (forthcoming).

However, the examples of successful meals can be found in Kulbak’s poetry. The full meal is reserved for the events like weddings which are attributed the highest literal *and* symbolic value.

Finally, I present the inner connections, oppositions and qualities of taste, including allegories of action in a following way (the value center is marked in yellow: preferable taste qualities and their allegorical, ‘physical’ and ‘spiritual’ equivalents). Bitterness stands at the centre of Kulbak’s poetic universe and gastro-discourse. It is closely, albeit differently, related to ‘cold’ and ‘hot’ (fire) as the main qualifications and preconditions of tradition-bond creativity (golden chain, *di goldene keyt*) and goes far beyond the well known “bitterness of being”.

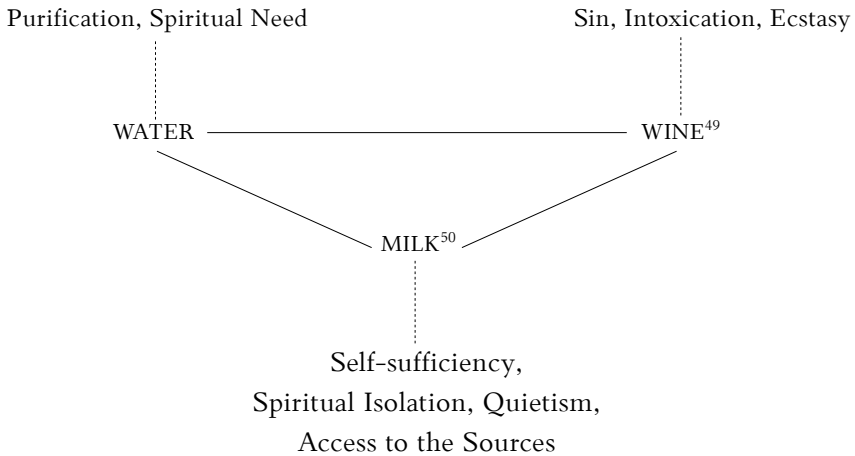
Scheme No. 1



48 The metallic song (*dos metalene lid*) as an “exemplification of culture” that connects epochs, generations, and traditions, functions as a parallel to “railroad” (Moyshe Kulbak, *Kultur*. In: *Ale verk fun Moyshe Kulbak*, Band II. Vilne: Farlag fun B. Kletskin, 1929, p. 206) that connects cities, villages, or cities and villages. Iron as *Kulturmetall* was discussed in the current research on prehistory. For example: *Moritz Hoernes*. Band 3: Die jüngeren Metallkulturen. (Das Eisen als Kulturmetall. Hallstatt- und Latène-Kultur in Europa. Das erste Auftreten des Eisens in den anderen Weltteilen). *Kultur der Urzeit*. 3 Bände. Leipzig: Göschen, 1912. Kulbak calls his father “a knight of iron scissors.” (Moyshe Kulbak, *Gut iz der mentsh. Geklibene lider un poemes*. Moskve: Sovetski pisatel’, 1979, p. 186)

Liquids as drinks in Kulbak's poetic universe might be systematized and represented as follows:

Scheme No. 2



Submitted: 02 18 2022

Accepted: 05 18 2022

Gastropoetika tarpukario Lietuvos jidiš literatūroje: ankstyvoji Moišės Kulbako (1896–1937) kūryba

Santrauka

Moišė Kulbakas, žymiausias jidiš rašytojas, tarpukariu gyvenęs Vilniuje, Kaune, Berlyne ir Minske, savo kūryboje naudojo gastropoetines metaforas ir nuorodas. Jau ankstyvojoje jo kūryboje galima aptikti vienas kitą papildančių perteklinių vaišių ir kuklumo kodų. Ir poezijoje, ir prozoje, derindamas kontrastingus gastrokodus („nevalgyti“, „valgyti viską“, „praryti“,

49 The state of mind that means the intoxication in a non-literal sense.

50 Both: literal and non-literal sense.

„valgyti kukliai“ ir pan.), Kulbakas pasiūlo alternatyvias vertybių sistemas, kitokias laisvės formas. Svaiginančių gėrimų metaforms jis suteikia skirtingus brandumo ir patirties laipsnius, taip parodydamas pasiryžimą skaudžias gyvenimo aplinkybes įveikti su džiaugsmu ir entuziazmu.

Pasitelkus eilėdaros ir semantinę analizę, straipsnyje išryškunami ir rekonstruojami valgymo įpročių, valgymo scenų ir įspūdingų maisto reprezentacijų vieta ir vaidmuo Kulbako poetiniame pasaulyje. Jo eilėraščių eilėdara ir garsiniai junginiai melodiškai pabrėžia „kuklaus“ ir paprasto maisto, kaip antai, daržovių (atliekančių ir atminties funkciją, t. y. susijusių su žydų Paschos švente) reikšmę. Kulbako romane *Mesijas, Efraimo sūnus* (1924) aprašomi tik įsivaizduojami arba sugadinti valgiai. Skaitytojui tai byloja apie neišsipildžiusį dvasinį ilgesį. Kulbako poezijoje vaizduojamose šventėse (*Vestuvės*, 1922) maistas atlieka socialinį vaidmenį dinamiškai integruodamas į šventę jos dalyvius, ypač vargšus. Maisto produktų ir patiekalų mažiųjų formų vartojimas kvieslio kalboje šventės metu valgymo procesui suteikia socialumo ir tuo pačiu intymumo bruožų. Galiausiai straipsnyje bandoma rekonstruoti Kulbako simbolinę skonio schemą, jo dinamiškame poetiniame pasaulyje išdėstant „aukštus“ ir „žemus“, „centrinius“ ir „periferinius“ skonio kodus ir jų fizinius, mentalinius ir alegorinius (kultūrinius) atitikmenis.

Raktažodžiai: maistas literatūroje, jidiš literatūra Lietuvoje, modernioji jidiš poezija, tarpukaris, intelektualinė istorija, jidiš eilėdara.

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