THE CONCEPT OF TASTE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract - The idea of taste in academic writing seems virtually inexistent while the concept of style is all-pervasive owing to the increased popularity of international examinations. This may mean that the word "style", which has always had positive connotations, in some degree absorbed the idea of good taste making the use of the word itself less necessary. Another hypothesis is that the idea of taste has become less significant as a social and hence academic value because of the general shift away from complex, long-lasting and highly sophisticated objects to easier-to-grasp and rather disposable ideas and artifacts. Taste development is a demanding process; it always requires enormous amounts of time and often comparable amounts of money. This is probably the main reason why in many spheres, including that of academic writing, "good taste" began to be seen as an elitist quality that causes certain jealousy and sometimes feelings of inferiority in those who lack it. The Paper attempts to look into these questions through axiological analysis of theoretical works on style and taste followed by a survey of university professors' attitude to the idea of good taste and its relevance in writing degree papers and other academic texts, which will probably help to agree on and formulate an optimum approach to the issue.

Keywords - Academic Writing, Attitudes to Concept of Taste, Style

I. INTRODUCTION

The theme of taste suddenly became central to many discussions in the Russian media some years ago. After an arrest of a high-profile regional transport police officer, the federal news channels showed the interior of his house done in the style that came to be called "gypsy baroque", without any reference to the sufficiently respectable kind of music. By that time the Russian public had become less impressed by the amounts stolen as there had been bigger confiscations, but the sheer bad taste of the decorations made the whole country giggle hilariously. Some people suggested organizing special courses in arts and culture for government officials to encourage them to decorate their property in better taste so that the nation would not sob with laughter and "Spanish shame" when those who were corrupted got themselves arrested for bribes or embezzlements.

The decision to write the present paper, however, was not caused by this farcical case. It resulted from frequent observations of manifestations of bad taste within Academia, both by students and some academic researchers.

II. TERMS AND CONCEPTS

The concept of taste can be seen as closely connected with the notion of style, and both words are widely used in many spheres. People do not normally have difficulty understanding them but it may be helpful to specify the meanings relevant for this paper, as each noun has multiple meanings. Thus, the Oxford English Dictionary (the famous OED) registers 18 meanings for the word taste, ten of which are obsolete, and 52 meanings of the word "style", but the obsolete in this case are only 11 [19]. In relation to academic writing, the most appropriate definition of taste comes from Cambridge Dictionary [9] which explains it as the ability to judge and recognize what is good or suitable, especially concerning art, style, beauty and behavior. Style, in its turn, is a manner or way in which something is done, designed, expressed, created or performed; it is typical of a particular place, period of time or group of people - this definition is based on those offered by the 2025 online versions of Longman Dictionary, Collins Dictionary and Britannica Dictionary.

The concept of style does not, as a rule, cause disagreements because people usually know which style is appropriate for which particular activity, academic writing included. Not so with the idea of taste because it involves, or can involve, subjective judgment. University professors could have the right to require that their students' essays be in good taste only if there were clear objective criteria of what is good taste and what is bad, but even the objective existence of such criteria is questioned by professional philosophers, sociologists, artists and also by the lay people who often believe, that, in the words of David Hume, "beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty"[13]. However, the finest minds of humanity have devoted a great deal of intellectual effort to investigating the phenomenon of taste and it would certainly be worthwhile looking at the ideas about taste expressed by prominent authorities on the subject.

It is an interesting fact that publications on taste giving quite satisfactory accounts of the philosophical history of the notion in question, appear in popular magazines. In 2021, attempting to answer the fundamental question about the objective or subjective character of taste, the Forbs contributor

Natalie Stoclet appeals to Kant and Bourdier to conclude that universal standard of taste does not exist [22]. In the same year, Daniel Mendelson, in a fascinating article *What Is Good Taste Anyway*?, sparkling with humour and erudition expresses a less categorical opinion. Having mentioned the ideas of Cassius Longinus and Churchill, Plato and Simmel, Dali and Kant, he says that "no one really knows"[18]. It may be significant that both articles appeared in 2021, probably before the covid restrictions were lifted, when people had more time to think about abstract matters. But, even if the lockdown did play a role, such publications mean that taste-related questions are captivating not only researchers but also career-minded people, soon-to-be brides and smart housewives. This is supported by personal experience of this paper's author. It is not idle curiosity for the general public; for Academia it should be especially important and we may see it as our professional duty to investigate these questions in relation to the academic realm.

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This paper deals primarily with the axiological aspect of taste. One of the fundamental studies on aesthetic categories is the book by A. Losev and V.Shestakov, in which the authors summarize ideas of European philosophers, both ancient and modern. It follows from their explanations that the famous ancient philosophers, except Protagoras and his followers, believed in the objective character of beauty and hence objective criteria of taste. For Hesiod, Democritus, Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle, the main category is Measure with its subcategories of harmony, symmetry, proportion, gracefulness, rhythm and meter, and with strong opposition to excesses, as well as insufficiencies.

As concerns verbal arts, Aristotle in his Poetics already wrote about the need for careful use of metaphors and other rhetorical devices. The ancient measure is the aesthetics of the golden middle. The Measure existed objectively in numerical ratios in Nature (Canon of Polykleitos); Plato suggested that the ultimate measure of all things be god or gods. For him, beauty was ontological and moral. For Medieval thinkers, beauty and harmony originated from Divinity, which by definition was objective, albeit transcendental. The aesthetic thinking of Renaissance included the idea of divine (and certainly objective) Nature as the source of all beautiful things and its creative potentialities [17]. Descartes, Leibniz and philosophers of later centuries either asserted the ontological character of taste or, like Hutcheson, and other sentimentalists of the English Enlightment, emphasized its psychophysical nature, common to all Humanity and therefore also objective.

In particular, Francis Hutcheson (1725) who thought that "the Importance of any Truth is nothing else than its Moment, or Efficacy to make Men happy" supposed that there was certain sense of beauty natural to the humankind and "that we find as great an Agreement of Men in their Relishes of Forms, as in their external Senses, which all agree to be natural"[14]. Edmund Burke (1757) is even more straightforward: "The standard both of reason and taste is the same in all human creatures. For if there were not some principles of judgment as well as of sentiment common to all mankind, no hold could possibly be taken either on their reason or their passions, sufficient to maintain the ordinary correspondence of life. It appears, indeed, to be generally acknowledged, that with regard to truth and falsehood there is something fixed… I believe no man thinks a goose to be more beautiful than a swan, or imagines that what they call a Friesland hen excels a peacock"[8]. For David Hume, the principles of taste were universal but he pointed out that "few were qualified to give judgment … or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty". All these authors appear to agree that bad taste is usually caused by a lack of "proper and well-directed" exercise and also by people's vices and passions, such as ignorance, inattention, obstinacy and prejudice that tend to cloud their judgment about things [13].

In the 19th century and later, positivist thinking brought about very different attitude towards taste, "about which there can be no disputing", as G.B. Hills put it. People have their likes and dislikes"[12]. This approach has never been abandoned although many researchers do not make directs pronouncements about their belief in the subjective character of taste: Bender [4], Stojanovis and Kaiser [23], Bonard, Cova and Humbert-Droz [5] prefer to refrain from definitive judgements.
While the European ideas of taste have been evolving on shared foundations of the ancient philosophy and 18th century Enlightment thought and maintaining a certain unity, the Asian cultures appear to be very different from one another. Their aesthetic and cultural sensibilities, which are not very well known to the European and Russian public, can become an inexhaustible source of fascinating discoveries.

The concept of "*rasa*" is considered central to the discourse of Indian aesthetics. The term primarily means the emotional experience embodied in a work of art, initially drama [24]. Sheldon Pollock translates the word literally as "taste"; some other researchers disagree, regarding it as having a broader meaning [3]. The involvement and major role of emotions could imply the subjective character of *rasa* and therefore of the ideas about the good and the beautiful. If, however, these ideas are shared by all people, their origin must be rooted in the nature of human beings and thus have an objective character.

Trivedi emphasizes that people need to be "cultured" to fully experience and appreciate a work of art. From this we can infer that the ability to perceive and enjoy it is to a large extent determined by social factors. The researcher also points out that the ultimate goal of such perception is to overcome one's individual emotions and rise to the level of collective human experience, achieving transpersonalisation.

Researchers writing about Japanese aesthetics almost invariably begin by pointing out its modest, unostentatious character with a pervasive note of melancholy. At the same time, "aristocratic elegance, refinement and sophisticated grandeur" are not at all alien to this culture [10]. The clarity of image is essential in visual arts but people who are familiar with Japan may remember buying cups or soya sauce dishes with somewhat rough-textured bottom or certain irregularities of shape. These are made in accordance with the idea of "elegant simplicity" or even "refined roughness"[21]. It is generally agreed that Japan's aesthetic categories have religious and philosophic origin: the sacred Nature of the Shinto religion and Buddhist perception of the permanent change and the fleeting character of all things terrestrial are seen as the main sources of Japanese aesthetic sensibilities. Both exist independently from humanity; people who are wise and masterful will create things full of taste and beauty.

It appears that one is free to choose how to think about taste: see it as involving only subjective likings and dislikings or consider it to be based on objective qualities of reality. Our hypothesis is that those who prefer to assume the objective character of taste tend to find this category relevant for today's Academia. People who make the opposite assumption are likely to assert the need for teaching the right style but deny the importance of taste in academic writing and probably in university education in general. Losev refers to Verner Ziegenfus who in 1949 insisted that the category of taste must be completely abandoned and replaced by the category of style, which is based on technical norms rather than personal judgements [17]. However, there is another attitude: rather than attach importance to the origins of aesthetic taste, philosophers and social scientists explore its socio-cultural implications.

This brief overview of different ways of thinking about taste as a category in aesthetics throughout history is by no means comprehensive but it is sufficient for our purposes as it provides background to our analysis of academics' opinions about taste in contemporary academic writing. It shows that the great minds of the past considered taste an important category, believed in its objectivity and found its cultivation necessary.

IV. TASTE AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PHENOMENON

Focusing on the implications of taste as a phenomenon related to socio-cultural context is typical of the modern-time thinking. Walton (1970), Buckridge (2009), and other authors discuss its social and class nature. Bourdier argued that the ruling elite used taste to define itself [6]. Walton wrote about 'socially established categories of art"[25]. These philosophers did not seem interested in the origins of taste, objective or subjective. But their contribution, e.g. Bourdier's idea of taste as an element of cultural capital, may be appreciated by the teaching academics, particularly those who prefer to assume that taste is subjective and thus has no universal or metaphysical value, and become an incentive for introducing it in their teaching.

Hans-Geog Gadamer saw taste as "a social phenomenon of the first order" that played an important role in producing "the shared community of meaning" and maintaining continuity between generations. This outstanding philosopher, who also wrote about "the ontological function of the beautiful" pointing out that "It is clearly meaningless to talk about a purely individual and subjective taste in the field of aesthetics [. He also reminded the readers about Baumgarten's definition of aesthetics as the "ars pulchre cogitandi" or "art of thinking beautifully"[15], which indicates that taste may have a cognitive function – the idea supported by Hendriksen and Wragge-Morley [11], Alpers [1] and other scholars. It is therefore the author's profound conviction that cultivating good taste in academia is of utmost importance.

However, the idea of taste remains unpopular with most authors of manuals on academic writing. One of the researchers, S. Kacunko, even argues that there is a "taste taboo in the current theory" [16]; in practice, taste, if not tabooed, is clearly neglected. The British author and director of London Museum of Design Steven Bayley claims that "the idea of good taste is insidious… It is more taboo than sex or money" because "taste is a merciless betrayer of social and cultural attitudes" [2]. Given the trends determined by the almost global adherence to political correctness, S. Bayley words may have correctly explained why the authors of books on writing avoid using the word "taste' even when they obviously deal with matters of taste. For example, the Economist Style Guide warns against using words like "address", "key" or "major", which are common for academic papers. These words do not violate the style; it is only that some people think it is not in good taste to use them.

At the Department of Foreign Languages at the Faculty of Economics of Lomonosov Moscow State University, there are over twenty manuals on

academic writing. None of them mentions good taste as a criterion for assessing the tasks. In fact, none of them mentions good taste at all.

V. RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

To find out what university professors think about the concepts of taste and style at the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, 20 academics (Professors, Associate Professors and Assistant Professors) who teach undergraduate, master's degree and postgraduate students at Lomonosov Moscow State University were asked to answer five questions about taste and style in academic writing.

The first question concerned the general attitude of professors to taste and style of university students' papers. The results were rather surprising: exactly half of the respondents pay attention only to the style of students' essays and degree papers; the other half also notice if the texts are written in good or bad style.

The next two questions referred to the features of appropriate style (#2) and good taste (#3). Respondents were offered lists of possible features and invited to indicate their agreement or disagreement with each of them and add any ideas of their own, if so they wished. The analysis of the answers shows that 85% of respondents agree that clarity of the written text and the resulting ease of perception mean that the text is written "in good taste". Opinions differ about the use of borrowed words, "buzzwords", academic jargon, and proportionality of parts: percentages vary between 40% and 60%. As concerns style, the majority (80%) point out that students should refrain from using colloquial phrases and be cautious about borrowed words, resorting to them only if there are no suitable equivalents in their own tongue. 70% think that the syntax is to be of high quality; 50% find academic clichés acceptable; the other 50% are against using any clichés, academic included. Passive voice constructions condemned by George Orwell three quarters of a century ago, which became widespread with the advent of Bologna system, are no longer favoured: 70 % of respondents do not consider them desirable.

Question 4 was to find out if university teachers need and should distinguish between the notions of style and taste; 70% gave positive answer. Finally, the respondents were invited to say if it is necessary not only to teach students appropriate style but also talk to them about good taste; 85% said "yes", 5% were unsure and 10% said "no".

Some of the respondents made valuable comments and useful additions to the items of the questionnaire, reminding about the need to avoid tautology, repetition of the same words, excessive simplification, and also exaggeration and emotiveness, ad hominem fallacy and amateurism. Another important idea is that a good piece of academic work is to include an overview of the previous achievements in the sphere under consideration; if a graduate student or young academic ignores some important research only because it was carried out more than five years ago, their paper cannot be considered written in good taste. To teach students about appropriate style and good taste, professors might think about giving them examples of especially well-written texts. And their own speech and writings should meet the chosen criteria. No one mentioned possible elitist implications of good taste, which shows that for the Russian university teachers the issue is cultural rather than social.

VI. CONCLUSION

The concept of taste, which at the early stage of this study had seemed almost forgotten by practicing academics, proved to be rather popular with researchers around the world. However, taste in academic writing today is not receiving the attention it deserves. Raising the question of taste at the faculty level has sparked interest and willingness to think about this aspect of research presentation. Although opinions were far from unanimous, most professors found it useful to introduce the idea of good taste in writing into their communication with students, even those who were on the whole skeptical about it. The hypothesis about the elitist quality of good taste in academic writing has not so far found empirical proof: in Russia, people do not tend to think about it in terms of social class. However, the small size of the sample does not allow generalizations beyond the Russian university community. Further research should involve opinion surveys of larger and more varied samples and the study of existing manuals on academic writing in order to identify the features of good taste and outline ways to instill in students the desire to write papers that will be good and beautiful.

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