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Baking as a Means of Non-verbal Expression: An Aesthetic Inquiry on Conventual Pastry

Maddalena Borsato

Abstract

The aim of this essay is to philosophically explore the domain of conventual pastry by understanding baking as a form of aesthetic expression. I intend to investigate the aesthetic meaning of making sweets, both for the specificity of this taste and for the link between tacit knowledge and the meaning of gift through cloistering. From the very beginning of its production in the monasteries, pastry developed not only as an economic livelihood but also as a way to create a meaningful language beyond the so-called *intellectual activities*. The philosophical interest lies in the relationship of food practice with intimate expression and then, with non-verbal communication, where the link between sweetness and religion has a significant role.

Key Words

baking; cloistering; everyday aesthetics; non-verbal expression; sweetness

1. Introduction

“Tres Salves, y un Padrenuestro y la gracia de tus manos.”[1]

Conventual confectionery represents a particular tradition in different parts of the Christian world, closely related to the rise of women’s monasteries, which mainly involves the more

strongly Catholic areas, such as southern Europe and its colonies. The abilities of the nuns were especially renowned for the preparation of sweets, but also for ointments and liqueurs. [2] The history I will take into account, then, is quite vast and multilayered. From the thirteenth century onwards, cloistered nuns offered a rich heritage of narratives, artistic production, legends and historiographic evidence that interests many different disciplines, from social studies to art history, from theology to more recent feminist studies.[3]

The aim of this essay is to philosophically explore the domain of conventual pastry by understanding baking as a form of aesthetic expression. Stemming from the Deweyan notion, “aesthetic expression” is intended both as the *process* of giving form to a range of emotions through a medium — in this case, the pastries — and the *outcome* of that process, which becomes expressive in itself.[4] Through manifold aspects, I argue that in the monasteries, pastry developed as a way of creating a meaningful language beyond the typical intellectual activities, considered as superior and conducted by male priests.

This essay presents four sections. The second introduces monastic enclosure mainly from a sensory perspective, showing how subordination of the sensitive to the intellectual has conditioned nuns’ life. The nuns’ living conditions may give the impression that they were only victims, but in the next three sections I will argue that they asserted their voice through pastry-making. In the third section, I show how this subordination can be otherwise overcome by tackling the theme of pastry-making as a means of tacit expression. In the fourth one, I highlight, through examples from Sicilian confectionery, some specific aspects of this monastic production, namely the status of sweetness as taste, the link with solitude and eroticism, and the possible link with the Baroque. These manifold features reveal how the production of pastries helped the nuns to express themselves in response to the extreme limitation of their freedom. Finally, in the last section, I propose to use the notion of gift in order to place the conventual pastry within the framework of everyday aesthetics. In doing so, I will try to understand this different modality of communication.[5]

2. Enclosure and the senses: an overview

One of the few cloistered convents still open and active in Italy is the Benedictine Monastery of Palma di Montechiaro, also mentioned in the famous novel, *The Leopard*. Today it is well-known for its *biscotti ricci* (almond crinkle cookies that the convent’s three remaining nuns still prepare and offer for sale through a wheel, a gimmick acting as the only physical junction

between inside (the convent) and outside (society).[6] The wheel acquires a strong significance, since the practice of confectionery donated or sold through it can be seen as one of the few forms of physical contact across the fence.

Albeit with historical variations, monastic enclosure was characterized by the prohibition of going outside the boundaries of the convent and by compliance with the three fundamental vows, chastity, poverty and obedience, carried out through contemplation, prayer and obligation of silence. Besides exceptional reasons like wars or very strong illnesses, no nun could leave the monastery and no outsider could enter it. Nuns experienced enclosure in different ways: either as an obstacle and a forced separation from their families, who often were the perpetrators of their monasticism, or as a defensive and safe escape from the pressures of society, as in the case of Therese of Avila.[7]

The design of time and space within the boundaries of the convent, but also the very architecture of the monasteries, helps to understand the meaning and purport of enclosure: “all existing windows, gates, grilles, or holes facing the public street were to be walled up, including the doors connecting the convent to the church.”[8] The multiplying of walls and grates around nuns becomes emblematic in making their spatial life a sort of jail and together a secret garden — the biblical *hortus conclusus* (enclosed garden) — a symbolic (and physical) space where all virtues of women are preserved or renewed from the perils of a contaminated world.[9]

The relationship between inside and outside is a reflection of the Baroque, the architectural style that, as we will see later, characterizes the monastic pastry itself, a style that recalls the monadic conception, where exterior and interior are independent of each other. Even if internal actions must remain as such, however, an infinite fold creates a constant passage made up of tension and harmony between a peace enclosed within cloisters and a chaotic exterior paradoxically full of openings and holes.[10] The nuns’ lives are monadic, alone in companionship with other solitudes.

Enclosure is not only about spatial seclusion but also about time control. Nuns’ relations with the family were reduced to fleeting encounters in the parlor, within the rigid separation created by thick grilles, from which one could hear the laconic nun’s feeble voice but could hardly see her figure. Here, the exclusion of the face from the relationship with the other, namely the impossibility of accessing another person’s face, hidden *from* and *by* the nuns, is paramount. The face as the “first relationship

with the other," goes beyond its physical appearance.[11] The absence of a nun's face crosses vision and language because it's a felt invisibility, making us unable to fully comprehend her presence. Yet, a nun attests her existence thanks to different acts, as we can also consider her baking. A sweet production of meanings shows an alternative modality of relationship with the material world outside.

In her last letter from the Paraclete Monastery, Héloïse asked Peter Abelard to write a behavioral manual for the nuns of her convent. The letter VIII, named *Institutio seu Regula Sanctimonialium* (Institution or Rule of Nuns), is a kind of treatise, where the three fundamental rules of monastic life (chastity, poverty and silence) are deeply investigated. This letter outlines the deep bond between *logos* (reason) and voice, interiority and dialogue. Solitude is indeed necessary for the nuns, explains Abelard, in order to defend their fragile nature from the temptations of the flesh and senses. Thus, the idea of cloistering transforms itself into protection of the woman from her embedded fragility and not from the outside world. As a way to perpetuate chastity, seclusion and isolation of cells are tools for a visual and tactile imperceptibility. Moreover, Abelard adds, the tiny bodily junction between gustatory taste and verbal language, the tongue, is the source of evil, especially in women, whose bodies are softer and whose muscles more flexible. He refers to the words of Paul the Apostle: "11. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. 12. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent." [12]

The most interesting aspect in Abelard's metaphysics is his position about senses and introspection. On behalf of the "senses hierarchy," he advises Héloïse to use signs in place of words.[13] The voice, in fact, is the direct expression of the intellect — and not as simply *flatus vocis* (voice's breath)— while gestures and other bodily expressions are not. Abelard saw only in the verbal *logos* the expression of the soul and a direct external manifestation of its own interiority. As the voice cannot be a sign for something else, the nuns do not have the right, and, for Abelard, not even the ability to use it.

There is one field free from monastic vetoes: the nuns may write. Writing comes from the voice of the interiority, as the instrument of the silent *logos*. Nevertheless, it was not often addressed by the cloistered rules. On the one hand, there were various levels of writing abilities in the monastery, depending either on the social status of the nuns or on the role in the convent, but also on granted or allowed freedom and personal education. On the other hand, such a means of expression

circulated only among the nuns, within the internal space of the monastery.

The written production was also formed of notebooks of recipes expressing oral traditions and gathering collective heritage. A few of these notebooks have been rediscovered or preserved: uncategorized piles of sheets composed of writings probably from different hands, in which instructions, ingredients, prayers, drawings and practical suggestions are all mingled together.[14] This unsystematic way of writing indicates a perpetual and repetitive daily life, formed of traditions, improvisations and knowledge consolidated by gestures. In this sense, writing does not stand for a clear and distinct transcription of thoughts, but rather for an amalgam of secrets shared by the nuns.[15] It shows the expressive power of written words in connection to baking, where a dynamic relation lies between the ingredients and the reader of the recipe. This allows the recipe to evolve according to the maker in the process of making.[16]

Yet occasionally, writing epitomizes a strategy to obtain recognition and regain some of the suppressed rights. In the famous case of Juana Inès de la Cruz, cloistered until her death (1695) in the convent of San Jerónimo in Mexico City, the novelist, poet and dramaturg managed to make segregation livable through her power of writing. Her pages testify her will to be present and significant, to exist.[17] As is well known, Juana also wrote recipes.

She is an archetype of the strict bond between intellectual work and cookery, as she wrote about her deep engagement in the kitchen with her sisters. Inscribed in the main Western paradigm of separation between mind and body, she kept her cooking skills separate from her intellectual work and deemed as not as worthy of consideration. Even if what de la Cruz named *filosofía de cocina* (cooking philosophy) was probably an attempt to give voice to those who lack one, she translates the rough and miscellaneous notes of various nuns into a tidy recipe book, conforming the traditional and oral knowledge into a common language.[18] In so doing, she tended to exclusively show the noble and scientific procedure, leaving all the gestures unexpressed. Therefore, she still fell into the limitations imposed by the male church by trying to make the recipes more intellectual and respectable in their eyes, sacrificing those dimensions of cooking that cannot be verbally communicated.

Yet, nuns' confectionery seems a matter neither of method nor of elaborate explicit techniques. In the next section, I will try to show how it is rather a predisposition to caring and a daily aesthetic engagement.

3. Baking as aesthetic expression

Contrary to what was outlined in section 2, the nuns did engage in different ways of expressing themselves through pastry-making. As John Dewey points out, daily elements of our life experience become expressive when there is a full interplay between creator, environment and sensuous material.[19] Instead of interpreting the cloistered nuns just as victims of a system imposed on them, I suggest that we see them also as makers of meanings in their environment, particularly, meanings in the form of pastries. This search for a local expressive way indicates in addition a struggle towards self-determination. Therefore, through the bottlenecks of necessity other interesting ways of communication emerge.

In general, the practice of pastry expresses multiple and intermingled forms, starting from the association of sweetness with rituals and festivities, in which pastries convey symbolic meanings. If we look closely to conventual pastry, however, we can find much more than that. As we have already anticipated, the nuns in their kitchens establish mutually beneficial dialogues that, although aphonic, produce a kind of language, which overcome the boundaries of the monastery and establish bridges with an outer as dreaded and also longed for.

Let me briefly describe the historical context of confectionery in monastic life. The reasons for the nuns' particular inclination for sweets and the consequent flourishing production are varied. [20] A very telling example comes from one of the most vivid pastry traditions, the Sicilian one, also considering that the island was the first European producer of cane sugar.[21] A few basic ingredients, in alternation and combination, configure Sicilian confectionery. The richness in production is presumably due to different overlapping cultures that make it particularly heterogenous.

Albeit in 1810 Napoleon decreed the suppression of all the ecclesiastical institutions in the Kingdom of Italy, this did not touch Sicily, as the island was under the Bourbon dynasty. On one hand, this fact allowed the monasteries to survive much longer but, on the other hand, it compelled nuns to offer the confectionery for sale, in order to provide for the maintenance of convents. However, when in 1866 the State definitively incorporated Sicily too, only a few convents survived and many nuns had to continue their monastic life outside the convents, often as cooks or confessors in private homes. At first glance, this contributed to the spread of convents' secret recipes; but more generally it led to the idea of Sicilian monastic production, known as the *cosadùci* (sweet things), as the origin of Italian

confectionery and also, to some extent, as one of the roots of the modern European one.

One of the most important features of laboratory and kitchen activities is the so-called embodied knowledge: baking is neither a passive and mechanical operation nor a simple assembly. It does not coincide with a practice without thought but, on the contrary, it is a process of regular concentration and a modality of thinking with the whole body.[22] Under this lens, the coordination between the bodily parts becomes a sort of rituality of skills in craft labor. The nuns, accustomed to the daily repetition of actions relating to their religious practice, find in artisanal production a perhaps more stimulating counterpart to such rhythm of everyday actions.[23] Through the practice of baking, then, the nuns experience a complete bodily attention, an embodied cognition, although it is not only cognitive but also emotional and felt.[24] It is a different model of knowledge, “an active comprehension of the things known, an action that requires skill.”[25] In the words of Michael Polanyi, it is a skill that has a precise connotation, a fruitful one, if applied to our analysis. It does not mean a simple innate ability, but a capacity formed by rules that could neither anticipate nor replace the practice itself. It is not true, therefore, that the pastry work carried out in the monasteries has no rules just because there is very little written production left. They are rather embodied, as the body becomes an active producer of meaning, neither a vector nor a passive instrument. In their baking, knowing is not purely theoretical, but both practical and communicative.[26] This knowledge has also a social reflection in the concept of teamwork, which belongs firstly to the monastic community. The rhythm of the work repeated daily by all nuns involves not only the individual hands at work but also the various bodies, in a sort of well-orchestrated dance.[27]

Let us consider an example. The dessert named “Triumph of Gluttony,” alongside the sugar *trionfi* (triumphs) adorning the noble Renaissance courts’ tables, is one of the most baroque symbols of the best Sicilian confectionery. It recounts the heterogeneous nature of Sicilian identity, where influences overlap like its layers. This Triumph is indeed composed of different levels of textures and flavors: generally formed by a sponge cake moist with liqueur at the bottom, courgette and pistachio jams, two thin layers of shortcrust pastry and white custard (or *blanc manger*), covered with apricot jelly and royal almond paste. Nevertheless, all these luscious doughs can be differently combined, creating something beyond a strict recipe. The Triumph has neither a standardized procedure nor a unique method, because it is a dessert without a method, made only

through nuns' know-how. This know-how is an internally produced language — the cooking philosophy of de la Cruz — corresponding to a different kind of cognitive experience and including the whole narrative, made up of annotations, records, notebooks and sketches that are handed down from nun to novice.

The making of Triumph exemplifies the idea of tacit knowledge. However, it is important to point out that such knowledge is not only cognitive and does not concern mainly the mind. There is a difference between the explication of knowledge and its verbalization. Beyond articulation in logical terms, there is much more that flourishes from these expressions.[28] Nuns' gestures are certainly not without cognition; rather, they are thoughts inscribed in their gestures.[29] At the same time, cognition does not fulfill the whole meaning of those artifacts. In the interaction between the monastic environment, the teamwork and the work of their bodies such expression emerges, an expression that is both a practical knowledge and an embodied thinking. Differently from a cook who mechanically follows a written recipe, the nuns share among them this knowledge in the ongoing interaction between the monastic atmosphere and the work of their bodies.

The model proposed here affects the idea of communication, too. Beyond expression in words, there is another possibility for telling without verbalizing. Even if the nuns knew how to articulate what and how they bake, they were not allowed to do it. So, they found a way to tell it in an effective way through a mesh of meanings and expressions that go beneath mere speech. Nuns' bakery is a niche where the allegedly silent craft is concretized into a final noisy expression. Instead of explaining, such gestures turn out aesthetic, as they describe lives, feelings and thoughts. Knowledge and communication, therefore, flow through a bodily medium, in particular via the work of their hands.[30] We can imagine nuns' hands as life-tales and tools to express, full of cuts and calluses due to the labor of a challenging matter: boiling sugar, sticky honey and ground almonds are living and demanding materials. Precisely this particular kind of expression has been changing as the mediating instruments between matter and hand have been replaced by machines that allow perfect and depersonalized reproduction, revealing the difference between the artisanal and embodied work of the nuns and what could be defined as "commercial reproduction," represented, for example, by the first Sicilian pastry shops.

In every pastry made by the nuns lies the expression of a life and of a sentiment, according to which the difference between person and thing is never clear-cut and fixed. The cake, meticulously decorated, mingles with the nun herself, bringing her outside the cloister and thus giving life to a relationship. In Sections 4 and 5 I will explore the different ways in which the nuns express themselves and establish relationships through the practice of pastry.

4. Sweetness, eroticism and the Baroque

The ambivalent meanings of the sweet taste characterizing this monastic production can be linked to some particular aspects of nun's life, namely those of solitude, eroticism and humor. These peculiar features are significant in revealing how the pastry-making helped the nuns express their manifold feelings and actively respond to the limitation of their possibilities.

Let us go back to the "Triumph of Gluttony." In the following description, the Sicilian writer Dacia Maraini recalls the words of her mother, the princess and painter Topazia Alliata: "a green hillock... It melts in the mouth like a cloud spreading intense and amazing scents. It's like eating a mountain landscape, with all its woods, its rivers, its meadows; a landscape made soft and crumbly by a luminous mollicodde cotton which transforms it, from joy of the eyes to joy of the tongue."^[31] In this sensual and metaphorical narrative of the Triumph, we find an umpteenth different composition of it that shares with other recipes a kind of divine origin. It represents a combination of natural and religious symbolism, transforming it into a moment of ecstatic incorporation of the whole world.

Along this line, confectionery production emerges as a whimsical movement of concrete gestures and harmonious commonality, within an environment that, as we have already seen, is not strictly and solely a monadic niche, separated by a grate from the outside. In its ancillary and also its superfluous nature, this cake becomes more and more of a way of opening up desire. As the few stories of life inside the monastery narrate, the nuns, through their gestures, know how to be desiring, sympathetic and devout, but also evil, gossipy and vindictive.^[32] In their experience of solitude and impossibility of verbalizing relationships, nuns make pastries their tongue and ears. Occasionally they spit out sentences; some others listen to harsh truths; they are a source of gossip, bearer of arguments too lascivious to be verbalized. Pastries' names, shapes and complex flavors reflect a strong symbolism. They are capable of communicating the forbidden: missed marriages, unwanted or

desired confessions, hated or regretted family life, resentment or devotion.

In fact, sweet is ambiguous and has different aesthetic meanings. It represents the simplest and the most disturbing taste, blurring the boundaries between pleasure and risk. More than other tastes, sweet has gone through a vastness of metaphorical uses with a corresponding variety of values.[33] Its semantic field contains elements that refer to pleasure, purity and candor, in addition to coercion, persuasion and dependence. Sweet food expresses caring for someone else and, more generally, it creates a relationship through a material substance that contributes to expanding the boundaries of one's own individuality. At the same time, the history of sweetness is connected to slavery, addiction, illnesses. Therefore, sweet is ambivalent: It can be a means of sedation and acquiescence of the others and also of complicity and intimacy with them. On one side, sweetness remains a subtle power device that does not require intellectual explanations. On the other, thanks to its positive effects and disposition to be a gentle reward for daily sufferings, over time it has eluded all the ethical, if not even theological, attacks normally reserved for sinful food and gluttony. For these reasons, sweetness can convert into an instrument of emotional manipulation.

Let us consider another Sicilian example. The "Minne di Virgini" (Virgin's Breasts) is a dessert of ancient origin, traceable in different variants and parts of the island and linked to manifold monastic (but also pre-Christian) traditions. Just looking at these breast-like pastries made people long to commit sin, so much so that the protagonist of *The Leopard* wonders why they were never banned by the Holy Office.[34] These irreverent pastries narrate a story where eroticism and shamelessness of sweetmeats are commingled with the mysticism of a martyr: Saint Agatha's breasts were removed with a pincer to punish her for refusing to marry the consul of Catania. We can interpret the mysticism of the saint as a kind of transposed or decentralized sexuality, operating in a complete detachment from materiality. While eroticism in the Christian view is associated with evil and temptation, sexuality and mysticism are seen both as expressions of the link between life and death, hence considered differently.[35] In this case, sweetness is the specific medium that glimpses the sensuality and eroticism of this religious experience. These pastries can be an innocent yet not naive way to express unshowable feelings and to create a bond with otherness.

In a lecture given in 1955, George Bataille analyzed eroticism in relation to holiness and solitude. For our current purposes, in the monastic context, this is particularly interesting. Human time is divided into the profane and the sacred. The sacred time is that of the feast. In the festivities, sexual transgression is linked to eroticism, the forbidden desire that establishes a conflict between the woman/man and her/himself.[36] This has a connection with the religious time of sacrifice, which is instead the transgression of the prohibition of killing. Confectionery is significant in these correlated aspects because the preparation and consumption of sweets manages to bring these tensions together. Sublimating both sacrifice and eroticism in the moment of celebration, sweetness is together sinful *and* salvational.

Actually, we can add something to this idea of eroticism. Even if it happens in silence and solitude, being something forbidden, out of ordinary life, eroticism can actually also be seen as an energy towards knowledge and empowerment, and a way to recognize and express unspoken feelings. The nuns live in the insoluble strain between a life of isolation, in which neither speech nor erotic materiality can penetrate, and yet in consistent need to express, where their holiness intermingles with embedded acts of eroticism. Pastry-making becomes their modality to fully feel and communicate this unexpressed erotic force.[37]

Finally, solitude and eroticism can also somehow amuse. In some other parts of Italy and Europe, the *minne* (breasts) are named differently, still evocative, though more allusive, like in northern France, where they go by the name of Nun's Whispers. They are so called because they are crunchy outside and soft inside, so that when bitten, they emit a faintly ludicrous breath, a whisper from the inner world of the nuns, that outside the presumed prudishness of the convents becomes even nun's farts — *le pets de nonne*. This humor is another typical trait of monastic production, which reveals itself to be deeply baroque. The nuns' art depicts one among many expressions of this style, which is undefinable in a unique way. One of the most bizarre examples is the "Fedde del Cancelliere" (Chancellor's Buttocks), a dessert that has almost disappeared from contemporary production.[38] It is shells of royal paste — an elastic mixture of sugar and almonds or pistachios — originally containing white custard and apricot jam. It is made inside shell-shaped pottery or ceramic hinged molds; once closed, the two parts make a bit of compote come out, resembling male buttocks (or also female genitals). A shameless message in the form (and taste) of a sweet simulacrum? By combining sweetness — widely

associated with naivety and childishness — and the impudence of these pastries, one is somehow able to veil the message and to create a ridiculous short circuit.

The restlessness and passion of the Baroque style is marked by clear contradictions. On one side, religious recollection and severity of customs due to the Church reforms; on the other, a constant dissatisfaction and nervousness that more than fulfills, it overwhelms with a possible link to the mystical ecstasies and ardent abductions of female saints and nuns.[39] These tensions reveal a feeling of conflict and awareness of the dualism that runs throughout modern thought. The baroque lifestyle, which also characterizes monastic production, is a sentimental contradiction, in which pleasure becomes pain and ecstasy *quasi-erotic*. [40] Thus, monastic production expresses the experience of mysticism in a sensate form: the Triumph, too, is baroque for its internal contradictions.

These considerations are interesting to better understand the production of sweets. Unlike satire and comedy, humor does not look at the world with an external and judgmental gaze, but from within it, with a sort of sympathetic participation. It encompasses a sort of celebration for those who have enclosed the nun within high walls. The meaning of sweetness, sickly and satisfying, once again serves to express feelings through an ironic male genital in honor of an ecclesiastical authority, in order to transcend and mock the same humanity to which they both belong.[41]

From all these examples, one can imagine confectionery as a pious and humorous eroticism. A dessert could be the fantasy of her confessor's body or her mockery in the shape of a buttock. A nun's whisper, or a part of her body (like a breast) is eager to be shown as a sign of transgressive voluptuousness. Be it a sort of mockery by the nuns, a claim for what they lost, or rather an unexpressed desire that is shaped in a sweet form, in any case, it is an attempt at a diverse communication that associates one's own feeling with one's own making. This peculiar kind of communication materializes in the form of sweet gifts.

5. Sweet gifts

Why do nuns rely so much on pastry making to communicate with the external world? In this last section, I will try to answer this question through analyzing the meaning of gift.

According to various studies, the sale of sweetmeats is a recent phenomenon in monastic history.[42] There is a Sicilian proverb which incisively explains the relationship between monastic everyday life, sweetness and donation: "a Sdirruminica, Fatti

amica a Munica," saying that you need to befriend the nun to obtain those Carnival sweets, intended for only a few powerful recipients.[43]

There are multiple meanings embedded in the idea of sweet donations; and correlated questions could arise. Why is the idea of donations a habitual practice of monastic life? Moreover, does the bond between gift and sweetness have to do only with devotion or symbolism? The gift, in the original religious meaning,[44] seems to connect, sanctioning a sort of belonging to the same world: nuns "keep open and alive, through food, a practical and proactive relationship with the world outside the monastery, distant but not unknown, at the same time feared and desired." [45]

Nuns' lives were not always automatically enforced by enclosure, nor were they in a sort of Edenic garden or, conversely, in disrepair. For a correct understanding of their activities, one needs to avoid the pervasive tendency to put them in a realm with fixed codes. The gift helps to place the problem in its right dimension, as it accurately depicts the interaction between economy, aesthetics and religious ethics. Thanks to confectionery, the power of the social world kept influencing the segregated life of the nuns: material exchanges were thus at the same time a modality of control and an attempt towards a sort of mitigation of it.[46]

The religious stereotype of seeing an attitude of submission or gratuitousness in the gift fails to explain the depth of this ritual involving many monastic communities. The gift is a bond, created, strengthened and manipulated. Associating confectionery with the idea of gift also outlines again the particular role of sweetness. For instance, the attention requested by nuns through these gifts opposes the stereotype of positive sweetness, rather joining with manifold feelings, like revenge or anger. The word 'gift' is thus connected not only with the Greek *timè* (public honor) and, therefore, with the signs of esteem, "social, sentimental and economic notion together," [47] but also with the idea of remedy/poison, so as to tie the figure of women preparing food to that of empowered hands capable of creating both good and evil.[48] At the same time, sweets, unlike savory preparations, are always made for others, because they represent a type of food that sits at the edge between nourishment and symbolism. A demonstration of care for someone else is perhaps the most relevant character of sweet food. At any rate, while the baking activity generates imagination and good feelings, it can also inflame the rivalries between nuns and the dissatisfaction under an imposed coexistence.

Within the monastic panorama of donations, the gift is given to bind someone to a relationship and, together, to express particular emotional states. The story of the nuns still preserves, in this respect, clear traces of the principles that Marcel Mauss highlighted. Whereby Western society distinguishes sharply between things and people, it is in the fusion between them typical of more archaic societies that we find the meaning of the gift as the enactment of a real interactive relationship. The gift, to all intents and purposes, is always an exchange. These materialized messages give the nun the possibility of maintaining a power of control over the donation: "Whatever it is, food, possessions...it retains a magical and religious hold over the recipient. The thing given is not inert. It is alive, often personified."^[49] This animated gift is the embodiment of a sentiment more than of a specific person. The meaning-endowing pastries overcome the individual self of each nun in order to create relationships without possessors and become narrations to express (unusual but) universal emotional states.

The issue of donations, then, opens up a further and final consideration: the relationship between pastry-making and artistic production.^[50] The nuns not only prepare sweets and liqueurs but also deal with art in a classical sense, which includes painting, sculpture, poetry and theater. Nevertheless, it is not simple to compare confectionery production to artistic activities in monastic life. There is a divergence between the two, precisely in their destination. While the production of sweets is made to exit the convents, nuns often write about themselves and for themselves; they paint to embellish their monasteries and perform theater to make convent life more enjoyable.^[51]

The production of confectionery, although it may aspire to establish relationships and communicate with the external other, can thus have a deep aesthetic significance inside the walls of the convent, too. If we frame this point into the aesthetics of everyday life, in which practices such as baking and donation can be included, then we can easily accept that they all aimed at an experiential and procedural approach to aesthetics *and* art. They are based on the activity of "doing and undergoing," in which impulses and sentiments are expressed and developed through different media.^[52] In this case, the medium is a craft of nuns' ordinary lives, used in such a modality, as a gift, that makes it aesthetically significant. And the sentiments expressed by this aesthetic act are revealed in the very relationship between nuns' actions and the specific situation in which these sweets are created. We are therefore witnessing an aesthetic performance precisely because it does

not represent a direct manifestation of emotions, but rather a form given to them.[53]

Moreover, there is no separation between what constitutes nuns' artistic activity and their moral conduct, because in their daily life there is a continuous merging of practical and spiritual activities that turns their making into an everyday participatory aesthetic engagement. Evidently, one cannot disregard even the receiver of this practice. Whoever welcomes the gift the nuns created becomes a committed and active participant to the process. Therefore, nuns' activity also acquires a socio-political significance, as part of their world-making rooted in the aesthetic power of their daily baking.[54]

In monastic life, the gift is a fundamental part of the process of communication, radical yet not ostentatious. It recognizes a relationship made of silence and secret feelings more than one founded on objects and ideas. Pastry is nothing but the paradigm of this relationship, that goes beyond vision and does not depend on facial and verbal communication. Nuns use baking as a subversive means that challenges the male orthodoxy. Through this process of intimate creation, they get to experience a meaningful embodied knowledge and finally assert their self-determination.

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Endnotes

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observations they both made were all really useful and significant.

[1] “Three Hail Marys, one Lord’s Prayer, and the grace of your hands” (my tran.): the refrain of a song by the traditional Spanish songwriter Carlos Canos about monastic women baking.

[2] Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, *Donne e Cibo: una Relazione nella Storia [Women and Food: an Historical Relationship]* (Milano: Mondadori, 2003), p. 45.

[3] See: Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns. A History of Convent Life. 1450-1700* (Oxford-New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007); Eileen Power (1922), *Medieval English Nunneries c. 1275 to 1535* (Glasgow: Good Press, 2019); Gianna Pomata, Gabriella Zarri (eds.), *I monasteri femminili come centri di cultura tra Rinascimento e Barocco [Women’s monasteries as centers of culture between the Renaissance and the Baroque]* (Roma: Atti del Convegno storico internazionale, 2005).

[4] John Dewey (1934), *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 2005), chaps. 4-5.

[5] See: Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), Wolfgang Iser, *Undoing Aesthetics* (London: Sage, 1997), Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and *Aesthetics of the Familiar. Everyday Life and World-Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), Andrew Light, Jonathan M. Smith (eds.), *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

[6] Data taken from an interview with Alfonso di Vincenzo of the municipal association that takes care of the monastery. The nuns still produce many types of pastries (up to twelve varieties); the production takes place throughout the whole year; they still earn their living from their sale.

[7] Her history in Evangelisti, pp. 55-59.

[8] Evangelisti, p. 48.

[9] “You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain,” *Song of Songs* IV,12 (NIV).

[10] “The criterion or operative concept of the Baroque,” Gilles Deleuze (1988), *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 33.

[11] For “the first relationship with the other,” see Emmanuel Lévinas (1965), *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*

(Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1969).

[12] From: biblegateway.com/passage.

[13] For a philosophical understanding of senses hierarchy, see Caroline Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

[14] As the very famous one ascribed to a nun in the XVI century, in Giovanna Casagrande, *Gola e Preghiera nella Clausura dell'ultimo '500 [Gluttony and Prayer in the Enclosure of the last '500]* (Foligno: Edizioni dell'Arquata, 1989).

[15] Like the recipes often written by chefs without the procedure. If you don't know how to do something, the only ingredients are completely useless.

[16] Lisa Heldke, "Recipes for Theory Making," *Hypatia* 3, 2, pp. 15-29 (Summer, 1988), p. 27.

[17] See: Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Risposta a Suor Filotea [Reply to Sister Filotea]* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1995), p. 85.

[18] de la Cruz 1995, p. 42.

[19] Dewey 1934, p. 103.

[20] For instance, flour and sugar were not subject to spiritual (nor economic) restrictions, as were other ingredients such as meat or fish.

[21] Since the 1980s, research in the field of Sicilian conventual pastry has grown, thanks in particular to some works. See: Mary Taylor Simeti, *Fumo e Arrosto. Escursioni nel Paesaggio Letterario e Gastronomico della Sicilia [Smoke and Roast. Excursions in Literary and Gastronomic Landscape of Sicily]* (Palermo: Flaccovio, 2008), Maria Grammatico, Mary Taylor Simeti, *Bitter Almonds: Recollections & Recipes from a Sicilian Girlhood* (New York: Open Road Media, 2015).

[22] See Tim Ingold, *Making. Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 111; Lisa Heldke, "John Dewey and Evelyn Fox Keller: A Shared Epistemological Tradition," *Hypatia* 2,3, *Feminism & Science* 1 (Autumn, 1987), pp. 129-140.

[23] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2008), pp. 173-178.

[24] See: Michael Polanyi (1958), *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015); Andy Clark, "Where Brain, Body and World Collide," *Daedalus* 2, 127 (1998), 257-280; George Lakoff, Mark Johnson,

Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought (New York: Basic Books, 1999). On baking and embodied thinking: Krina Patel, *Thinkers in the Kitchen: Embodied Thinking and Learning in Practice* (Cambridge: Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2008).

[25] Polanyi, p. xxvii.

[26] Heldke 1987, p. 133.

[27] André Leroi-Gourhan (1964), *Gesture and Speech* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 309-311. See also: Ingold, p. 115 and Sennett, p. 175. For a suggestive example of embodied knowledge see: Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, quoted from Lisa Heldke, Dean Curtin (eds.), *Cooking Eating Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 249.

[28] Thus revising the very idea of tacit. See Ingold, "Of Work and Words: Craft as a Way of Telling," *The European Journal of Creative Practices in Cities and Landscapes* 2,2 (2019).

[29] What Heldke calls "a thoughtful practice." Heldke 1988, p. 27.

[30] Sennett, p. 153; Ingold 2013, p. 117.

[31] Dacia Maraini, *Bagheria* (Milano: BUR 1993), pp. 56-57 (my tran.).

[32] See Grammatico, Simeti; Enrichetta Caracciolo, *I Misteri del Chiostro Napoletano [Neapolitan Cloister Mysteries]* (Firenze: Giunti, 1986).

[33] Maddalena Borsato, Nicola Perullo, "Primi lineamenti per una genealogia estetica del dolce" [Toward an aesthetic Genealogy of Sweetness: first Elements], *estetica. studi e ricerche*, X -1 (2020), pp. 145-166.

[34] Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1958), *The Leopard* (London: Paperback Vintage, 2011), p. 178.

[35] George Bataille (1957), *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2001), p. 234.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 256.

[37] See: Audre Lorde (1978), *The Uses of the Erotic. The Erotic as a Power* (Tucson: Kore Press, 2000), p. 88.

[38] See: Maria Oliveri, *I Segreti del Chiostro. Storie e Ricette dei Monasteri di Palermo [The Secrets of the Cloister. Stories and Recipes of Palermo's Monasteries]* (Palermo: Genio Editore, 2017).

[39] See: Heinrich Wölfflin (1908), *Renaissance und Barock: eine Untersuchung über Wesen und Entstehung des Barockstils in Italien* (Milano: Abscondita, 2017), pp. 43-44, 94-97.

[40] Saint Therese of Bernini. See: Erwin Panofsky (1953), *Three Essays on Style* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997) p. 51.

[41] Panofsky, p. 60.

[42] Simeti.

[43] "The Sunday before Carnival, make the nun your friend," Giuseppe Pitrè, *Usi e Costumi, Credenze e Pregiudizi del Popolo Siciliano. Volume Primo [Usages and Customs, Beliefs and Prejudices of Sicilian Folk]* (Roma: Casa Editrice del Libro Italiano, 1939), p. 68 (my tran.).

[44] The word 'religion' comes from the Latin *religare*: to bind together.

[45] Muzzarelli, p. 49 (my tran.).

[46] Simeti, p. 54. See Caracciolo, pp. 131-132.

[47] Émile Benveniste, *Le Vocabulaire des Institutions Indo-européennes: Tome 1, Economie, Parenté, Société* (Paris: Les Éd. De Minuit, 1969), p. 47 (my tran.).

[48] The word, 'gift' in different languages, comes from the Latin *dòsis*: poison (see Benveniste, p. 49).

[49] Marcel Mauss (1954), *The Gift: Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (Mansfield: Martino, 2011), p. 10.

[50] Pomata, Zarri.

[51] Evangelisti, p. 9.

[52] Dewey, p. 23.

[53] "Emotion is esthetic when it adheres to an object formed by an expressive act." *Ibid.*, p. 96.

[54] Saito 2007, pp. 54,196.

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