

## Food Imagery in Lesley Saunders' Poetry

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### **Abstract**

The essay entitled “Food Imagery in Lesley Saunders’ Poetry” expands upon various food issues that will be approached via Gaston Bachelard’s aesthetic theory which situates us in the proximity of a sensible point of objectivity further enlarged upon from a phenomenological perspective that merges the exterior substantiality of food with the reality of imagination. The acquired intimate connotations of the poetess’ food environment are tackled in terms of the inner/outer opposition and the Platonic dialectics that involves old versus new, good versus evil, plenty versus scarcity, revealing the dynamic virtues of “roots,” the emblem of the diversity of food. Our approach to the house, where various types of food are being prepared, in relation to its pivotal functions of dwelling, preparing food and sharing it, turns both the house and food into the unfailing communality and sociality constructs of all places and ages.

**Keywords:** Saunders, Bachelard, food, house, commonality and sociality constructs

Lesley Saunders is a widely published British poetess whose writings include a pamphlet “The Dark Larder,” whose title poem won the prize in the George MacBeth competition, a co-authored book with Jane Draycott and artist Peter Hay, “Cristina the Astonishing,” featured on BBC Radio as “A Good Reading,” and, most recently “Her Leafy Eye,” in collaboration with the artist Geoff Carr. In our approach to food imagery in Saunders’ poetry, her felt commitments to this issue are obvious in her poem entitled “Walking on Eggshells” (in the *New Words Berkshire Literature Festival Anthology*) focused on an unusual detail, that of ‘eggshells.’ Our interpretative concern is to grasp how much this detail increases both the meaning of the objects and of the persons associated with it and in what way it situates us in the proximity of a ‘sensible point of objectivity’ (Bachelard 183, our translation):

Here’s an old lady with tangerine hair  
 living in a hut that walks on hens’ feet  
 in the middle of the forest whose dawn  
 looms at one edge as the setting sun’s  
 gnawed by a gang of sows at the other.  
 The air’s a stew of pine and blewit,  
 The earth rusty with old needles.  
 The wolfish trees sigh through clenched  
 teeth for a sea that sparkled like knives  
 a thousand miles ago and pours  
 in stinging splinters through their pelt. (52)

From the very beginning, we are projected into a closed area consisting of a hut, situated next to a forest, bathed in sun light, where an old lady lives. Following Gaston Bachelard’s aestheticism, we opine that the mild warmth of this closed area is the first clue of intimacy (2003: 183) and the root of all the images present in the poem. The image of the air compared to a stew of pine, of the earth “rusty with old needles,” of the wolfish trees that “sigh through clenched teeth” or a sparkling sea, all prove that they correspond to an exterior palpable reality.

The old lady's belonging to this special intimate environment is described by the poetess from a phenomenological perspective, placing it in relation to a familiar object introduced in the second stanza as follows:

Carefully she takes an egg, blue as  
hyacinth, from a trug. Digs her  
thumb nail in, splits it, finds the knot  
of blood small as a naevus, hooks it  
out with a pin. She's the one I leave  
my door open for, ruddering across  
the lawn with her pestle at noon. (52)

The poetess describes the egg from a phenomenological perspective in terms of its being "blue as hyacinth." The fact that it has been taken from a "trug" suggests a world we are all familiar with, the world of our retrieved childhood and adolescence. The old lady as part of that idyllic world is the one for whom the poetess, whose functional role is that of an intuitive yet emotionally involved observer, leaves the door open so that, after "ruddering across/the lawn with her pestle at noon," she could continue her simple provincial existence.

For us, the modern readers, such an image is rather surprising not because it is new; on the contrary, because it looks familiar to us. Familiarity is increased within the next stanza, focused on the house itself, described in terms of an already solved contradiction between the outer and inner connotations of this environment.

On Saturdays her house is good enough  
To eat, the gutters are made of halva,  
there's a crib of sugared violets  
on the step. I'll take the children visiting,  
they're the right age and their manners  
will have to do. The table is set for guests  
with heavy spoons and knives, dented with  
all that eating and carving and scrubbing.  
When she cooked, she comes out flat

and tawny as gingerbread. (53)

The lines “On Saturdays her house is good enough/to eat, the gutters are made of halva, /there’s a crib of sugared violets/ on the step,” suggest the fact that the old lady’s house has surpassed its exterior substantiality and has turned into the ‘reality of imagination’ (Bachelard 187, our translation). The fairy-like image of the house that is good enough to eat due to its “gutters made of halva, and a crib of sugared violets on the step” has helped us ‘rediscover the living embryos of the imaginary’ (2003: 187, our translation).

It seems that Saunders’ intention has been to operate with the ‘acts of imagination’ as if they were as real as the ‘acts of perception’ (Bachelard 187, our translation), inviting also the readers to participate in the genuine lunch ritual charged with intimate connotations. Intimacy arises from the presence of both the adults and the children, the latter already fascinated by the vegetal environment due to the house being situated in the vicinity of the forest full of wolfish trees and flowers.

The table being provided with “heavy spoons and knives, dented with /all that eating and carving and scrubbing” suggests that imagination and reality go hand in hand in order to better render the warm intimacy of the house where all the other images are rooted. The strongest image is that of the woman who “comes out flat and tawny as gingerbread” after she has finished cooking.

The last stanza highlights the particular circumstance that has reunited the family members within the respective cottage, namely the celebration of the poetess’ birthday. This event increases the meaning of every detail as follows:

This birthday I have to wear glasses;  
words are creeping too close, the children’s  
friends leave messages in code.  
Blackberries redden like nipples  
in the child-tall nettles. I fling a shoe  
at the ginger tom who’s come

to sniff our mice. The lino's cold. Eggshells  
shatter as I walk, fainter than hens' feet  
or hairfall. (53)

The poem entitled "Roots" (in *Harvest '92*, the 1992 *Bridport Prize Anthology*) is apparently focused on this detail that is very likely to diminish its meaning unless, following Bachelard's aestheticism, we share his opinion that a word is often 'an embryo for dreaming' (175, our translation). He further posits that words can be figured out as being similar to houses, provided with cellars and attics. Getting down into the cellar equates with looking for genuine meanings inaccessible through the ordinary, logical procedures.

The poetess has scrubbed the winter soil looking for parsnips and other "roots" in order to offer some special natural food to her family:

Dark tea-times  
– December, January –  
I've scrubbed soil  
From whiskered  
pale skins, boiled  
and buttered  
parsnips, swede, etc.  
At table children  
turn up their noses.  
There's earth  
in the taste. They  
like frolicsome  
overground food, ponds  
and leaves they can  
see. These solid veg  
lay down on tenanted land  
carbohydrates  
like seams of coal. (71)

Saunders seems to have intended to create some sort of unity of 'space, time and action' (Bachelard 174, our translation). The act

of scrubbing soil from “whiskered pale skins,” of boiling and buttering parsnips and other “roots” and of serving them as food during “dark tea-times, in December and January,” helps the poetess create an apparently harmonious space. However, the children “turn up their noses” preferring “frolicksome overground food, pods and leaves they can see.”

To psychologically win the readers’ heart and soul regarding the issue of how valuable “roots” are, Saunders emotionally reconsiders those times when the crops went wrong and when things were really bad:

Caravans of paupers  
Fleeing famine,  
charity. Packing case  
coffins with a  
four penny plaque.  
Nowhere is a fine skull:  
You could plug  
New potatoes plip  
plop in its sockets.  
A carrot for the nose.  
Look in the mirror.  
There. Scrawnier  
neck. Sagging jaw.  
Flesh slithers from  
its bones casually,  
tactlessly. (72)

The above-quoted lines render an account of intense suffering associated with periods of famine and death. The Platonic dialectics involving old versus little, good versus evil, plenty versus scarcity are meant to reveal the ‘dynamic virtues’ (Bachelard 187, our translation) of roots, which are again brought into bold relief in the last five lines:

Eating  
Roots from a spoon

in winter I roll  
 earth over my tongue  
 acquiring the taste. (73)

To surpass suffering and to make us reconsider how valuable nature is, Saunders has restated her conviction that the objective reality can release us from the temptation to embrace the artificial and can restore us back to our senses and help us acquire the taste of how good and tasty “roots” can be. Saunders has helped us all face the great psychological law of getting to appreciate the unnoticed and humble detail of the valuable roots, to assimilate and make them part of our retrieved childhood and adolescence via her poetic lens and immense sensibility.

The poem entitled “Darjeeling”<sup>1</sup> is focused on a variety of tea that grows on the mountain regions around Darjeeling from India, whose qualities are depicted as follows:

.... Brash monsoony liquor  
 loosening old griefs like  
 bruised leaves downstream,  
 impassioned tales told and retold  
 in the shade of hill stations  
 then traded for calicio  
 and prophesies-till how it all  
 started’s forgotten, forgiven,  
 sunlight pooling on snow....

We will turn to good account the phenomenology of the verb “to loosen” and figure out how Saunders depicts it in association with profound issues such as Logos and Pathos. Pathos is alluded to through the suggestion that Darjeeling loosen “old griefs like/ bruised leaves downstream” and “impassioned tales told and retold/in the shade of hill stations.” The poetess’ wish to surpass surface meaning and dig for deep meaning, for Logos, emerges from the dialectical construction “then trade for calico/ and prophesies- till how it all/ started’s forgotten, forgiven.”

Constant in her intention ‘to increase the images of immensity’ (Bachelard 212, our translation), Saunders conjures it within the very last line “sunlight pooling on snow.” Both “sunlight” and “snow” connote purity and truthfulness. They can also be regarded as “psychological transcendents” assisting us in going “beyond” current psychological issues. Surprisingly, regarded from the perspective of sound symbolism, the vowels “i” from “sunlight” and “o” from “snow” reiterate the same vowels present in “liquor” increasing its meaning and making it slip in liquid cadences from the first to the last line, aesthetically suggesting the pouring of tea into cups for both the poetess and the readers so that they could enjoy its special fragrance over and over again.

The poem entitled “The Dark Larder” is focused on the twofold significance of the word “larder.” On the one hand, it stands for the objective concrete character of this space with its obvious autumnal connotations, and, on the other, it hints at ‘the secreta larders’ (Bachelard 224, our translation) of our intimate being. The word “larder” is first associated with the concrete reality of the poetess’ mother that was “salting beans,/ packing them under hot glass,/ sealing them with brass fittings,/ rubberrings against/ the coming of rot and mould./ Shelving a dozen jars/ in larder’s dark.” We learn that “she did/ the same for loganberries, red-/currants, bramleys.”

As concerns the poetess, she herself confesses that she has imperfectly learned “the preserving skill.” Saunders further highlights the fact that she does not reproduce “this wifely art.” She is watching instead “windfallen Worcester deliquesce/ into soup kitchens for maggots, flesh/ marinate in its own rheum, / a grey creature velvet/ scrawls over the spreading/ pap you’d gag to taste. This is the unstoppable rot, /the tyranny of enzyme. Ultima / et principia: in this embrace/ I could be fructuous, siphoning/ meaning like honey from a grammar/ of autumn, inflecting daughter from mother.”

The last part of the poem metaphorically tackles the endless space of the poetess’ dark larder from within herself:



My apple tree  
 Speaks volumes, each fruit roused  
 By fingers of sun to an organ of  
 knowledge. Worms in the wet grass  
 are swollen with it all, a huge tongue  
 fills my mouth. Impregnated, I vow  
 my metaphoric art as others  
 children-to name and praise  
 ripening and rotting, the code  
 of compost, coming new. So why this  
 sudden stammer as if a cord's been  
 wantonly cut? I look on the lawn,  
 in the larder, for the right word  
 to roll in my mouth, a wafer of  
 freedom for this hungry gut.  
 Fruit there is, jars and jars  
 of it, wine and waxy honey,  
 and not one word. (8)

The previous verbal structure "siphoning meaning like honey from a grammar of autumn" together with "my apple tree speaks volumes" and "each fruit roused to an organ of knowledge," followed by "I vow my metaphoric art to name and praise the code of compost, coming new" render the poetess' vital intimate conviction regarding her poetic call. The open vowel "a," present ten times within the respective linguistic entities, "works upon the threshold" of the power of Saunders' imagination, voicing out her "speaking sensibility" (Bachelard 225, our translation). We sense how Saunders' employment of this vowel suggests a sonorous space that dynamites and increases the meaning of the poem.

And yet, the last nine lines seem to be focused on stasis rather than on the power of the poetess' dynamic imagination. The sudden stammering of the poetess' élan "as if a cord has been wantonly cut" uncovers her extreme sensibility, closely related to the inner larder, where the "phonetic phenomena and the phenomena of logos" (Bachelard 229, our translation) strive in vein to harmonize themselves. The "word" that the poetess fails to grasp

and which she continues to look for is not part of the outer space, but of the inner one, helping us, her readers, realize that her poetic space does not enclose us within her negative state of mind but, to a certain extent, it acquires new “expressive values” (Bachelard 229, our translation).

The poem entitled “In Dulci Jubilo” tackles the expressive values of the poetic space as follows:

Cold hands make the best pastry: knuckles  
Whiter than flour, a cool head, butter on ice:  
a winter morning, the mist of your breath.  
Then the flame of raisins and brandy,  
blood-orange, clove and all spice, the stove.  
The whole sky lit with gold, the Christmas rose.

Saunders pursues the expansion of her intimate space. Due to the appropriation of Christmas, she experiences the ‘expansion of infinite things’ (Bachelard 23, our translation) in a gradual manner. Notice is to be made of the fact that the poetess embarks upon the depiction of the concrete pastry-space filled with the knuckles that are whiter than flour, with clove and all spice, with the flame of raisins and brandy, blood-orange, then moves on to the stove-space. The previously mentioned word “flame” intimates the sky-space, “lit with gold, the Christmas rose.”

The poem entitled “Pan de Mama” expands upon the house-space where mother is used to preparing bread:

We use whatever’s to hand, the basics:  
salt, honey, flour, butter, the mothers.  
for the daughters rushing in from their lives  
with a whirl of autumn leaves and frost  
in their hair, the bread-smell was ovenish  
and freckled, a warm glove, the old print  
of flamey roses above the table. These days  
the window where we’d kept the curatrain  
pulled back, the lamp always lit for them,  
is flung wide open: a wild yeast flies in

and we wait uncertain as the dough proves.

The intrinsic dimension of the house emerges from its “centres of intimacy” (Bachelard 60, our translation) which consist of the kitchen-space provided with “salt, honey, flour, butter and mothers.” The simplicity of this environment is firstly predicated by the verb “to use” and the existential verb “to be,” both present in the line “we use whatever’s to hand, the basics.”

The joy associated with the act of preparing bread arises from the image of the daughters “rushing in with a whirl of autumn leaves and frost in their hair” attracted by the “bread-smell” that was “ovenish and freckled” and by “the old print of flamey roses above the table,” from the curtains being pulled back allowing the window to be flung wide open.

If so far a sense of sociality has been expanded upon through references to the act of preparing bread and the daughters’ attraction to the bread smell, the “wild yeast” that flies in and the eagerness of the watchers for the “dough” to prove its magical properties are its “ramifications” (Bachelard 62, our translation) meant to ensure its duration in space and time.

Bread is Saunders’ basic symbol in many poems focused on the food issues and the poem simply entitled “Bread” proves it:

At Maria’s into whose painted kitchen  
the washed light walks like another friend  
we chew olive bread and talk, the poet-mothers.  
The bread is studded with tart black morsels,  
The herbs fresh from the garden. Bread  
from the corner shop, here comes the van,  
and our talking smells so warm-can you hear  
the woman singing? On a good night it’s said  
they would bake and stack eighty thousand loaves,  
orange awnings rattle down, the light’s weak,  
queues stretching already to the end of the block,  
it’s a love song, yes, her fierce voice reels  
and plunges, scourging pour hearts –

The image of bread is another great poetic instance charged with emotional, social and historical connotations. Associated with Maria's kitchen, the bread image has been endowed with a "well-determined centre." It firstly merges with social and sensorial impressions as the depicted people "chew olive bread and talk, the poet-mother" enjoying its being "studded with tart black morsels, the herbs from the garden."

The image acquires further social connotations by being deprived of the former intimacy and by the poetess insisting on its delivery from the corner shop. Bread production is alluded to through the fact that those employed in this business "would bake and stack eighty thousand loaves" and yet the people's queues could be noticed "stretching already to the end of the block." The last detail sounds unpleasant and out of place for the modern reader, and yet, Saunders continues to investigate the social environment inserting the image of a woman singing whose "fierce voice reels/and plunges, scourging pour hearts." This sonorous image charges the atmosphere with utter sadness due to the fact that it is "scourging pour hearts."

The poetess recalls dramatic past experiences through conjuring real stories still fresh in our memory:

The city bakers once made twenty kinds, seeded,  
knotted, bleached, mounds and sticks of rye, splits and wafers,  
now it's only two, round and square,  
fifty dinars either way, while the mill's still standing.  
What memories tremble in us now like old news reels,  
Our grandparents on the move, northwards,  
west, escaping famine, dole or worse: young  
as our children now? Seers of visions perhaps,  
sellers of soaps and lard, drapers, the schoolmaster,  
milliner, actress, stopping for coffee or barley soup,  
a small dread like a hunger and the eyes dark with tiredness,  
phrases of the new language like pebbles in the mouth;

The syntagm "phrases of the new language like pebbles in the mouth" could be easily replaced with "phrases of the old

language,” still new, through the implication that the “phenomenological echo” (Bachelard 62, our translation) of the images associated with them, aesthetically conjured by the poetess, still reverberates within ourselves. It is activated through the image of “our grandparents on the move, northwards, / west, escaping famine, dole or worse: young then/ as our children now?” Another emotionally charged image is extensively constructed in terms of “seers of visions, perhaps,/ sellers of soap and lard, drapers, the schoolmaster,/ milliner, actress” all stopping “for coffee or barleysoup,/ a small dread like a hunger and the eyes dark with tiredness.” This extended image suggests stasis, collective lack of hope and despair.

The image of the woman’s singing “louder and louder” so that it might be heard by the entire humanity is rendered topical in relation to almost unbearable details in the last lines:

It’s as if all these migrations have come to rest  
tonight in Maria’s kitchen. But no-  
the woman’s singing louder and louder, baring  
her teeth, lifting her torn skirt, her legs gartered  
in gauze, serenading the pain she knows  
these soldier boys know too, a love made mad. Loaves  
roll across the dust, explode in the gutter. An old man  
lies under a sheet, clutching one in each hand.

The overwhelming personal past experience of the respective woman arises from the poetess facilitating our access to it in terms of the detailed description of her having been abused by “soldier boys” unaware of the consequences of their terrifying actions. Saunders’ depiction is intended to signal out an experience that both, organically and objectively, surpasses the “order of the sensitive” (Bachelard 203, our translation). It is a boundary we grow aware of only through the poetic effort of uncovering its significance for the collective memory so that such things should never happen again.

Saunders’ concern with food issues strongly reverberates in the poem entitled “Against the Grain”:

In the valley of the city we sat together at table  
for the secular feast, bread and herring, berry-jam,  
a jar of rampant weed-flowers, a half-candle on a plate.  
Our ancient tumblers, fetched from an old meat safe  
and dusted off with a gingham cloth, were brimful  
of red wine and pleasure, the treasure of a summer gone.  
Open to the sky, our talk chirruped and dawdled  
among the middle clouds and rackety compost heaps  
as if we were preparing to remember this evening  
as peerless: as apricot-gold in the towering dark.

The poetess has recalled a particular spatial and special environment reminding us that a shared space is the unfailing friend of the social minds. The space is directly introduced to readers as “the valley of a city” where the poetess, the members of her family and some close friends joined and “sat together for the secular feast.” This concrete experience is charged with fundamental food images: “bread and herring, berry-jam,/ a jar of rampant weed-flowers,” a half-candle, ancient tumblers, “dusted off with a gingham cloth,” look “brimful of red wine and pleasure, the treasure of a summer gone.” The rhyming pair “pleasure –treasure,” inserted within the sixth line, announces some sort of fusion between the concrete space and a highly qualitative one. The latter is alluded to through the reference to their talk that “chirruped and dawdled/ among the middle clouds and rackety compost heaps.”

The poetic motif of talking and enjoying sociality and communality sets in motion the strongest psychological mechanisms meant to prepare all those present at the secular ceremony “to remember this evening / as peerless.” Even more than that, the word “peerless” suggests the impact of the previous fundamental intimate images on the poetess and the readers as well. They are all encouraged to feel the stirring effect of the evening in terms of colour symbolism through the last line “as apricot-gold in the towering dark.” The opposition “gold/dark” can be associated with the ‘sacred moment’ (Bachelard 237, our translation) of end of summer and the approaching autumn. The “apricot-gold” suggests

autumnal states of mind, where as “towering dark” diminishes the ‘terrestrial narcissism’ (237) of the previous image pushing us into the depth of our intimate being so that we could experience the poetic and social intensity of the annual secular feast. To conclude, food, an embryo endowed with ontological values, needed Saunders’ will to charge it with poetic connotations meant to awake and enhance the readers’ pleasure of reading and decoding poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> The poems “Darjeeling,” “In Dulci Jubilo,” “Pan de Mama,” “Bread” and “Against the Grain” are to be comprised in the *Nosh Anthology*, unpublished yet.

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