

Conclusion: ‘Writing Future Narratives of Eating Disorders’

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If, as Megan Warin’s asserts, ‘Anorexia [...] is not solely concerned with food and weight but is fundamentally concerned with issues of relatedness: of relationships with oneself, people and objects in the world’,¹ one aim of this volume has been to explore how narratives of anorexia located in different cultural, linguistic and political contexts may relate to (and differ from) each other. Clearly eating disorders – including anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and others – are of crucial contemporary importance, particularly for women, and they unsurprisingly constitute a strong thematic trend in recent women’s writing, across a range of *genres*, including fiction, autobiography and autofiction, and across languages. As the final chapters in the volume highlight, the question of how to read and respond to narratives of eating disorders remains urgent; this question requires us to negotiate cultural specificity as well as to recognise what these disparate stories of illness and (sometimes) recovery have in common. Several of the texts analysed here deal with maternal relations, others with the ways in which anorexic protagonists or narrators relate to (or fail to relate to) dominant socio-political or cultural regulatory frameworks; in each case, eating disorders act at once as rebellion and as over-compliance.

As the chapters assembled here show, however, whilst anorexia itself is a bodily enactment both of protest and of impotence (and is frequently misunderstood), writing about eating disorders can work more productively. The texts discussed in this volume explore and explain eating disorders from a first-person perspective and interrogate existing understandings

¹ Megan Warin, *Subject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia*, Cambridge Studies in Medical Anthropology (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 187.

and assumptions surrounding what eating disorders mean or represent as well as around the cultural contexts within which they have proliferated. Aresi cites Kelsey Osgood's insistence that '[in order] to destroy anorexia, we must devalue its currency. We must refuse to speak its language' (235) and begin to articulate a discourse of recovery that can loosen the grip of obsessive anorexic language. The chapters in this volume seek precisely to chart and to construct stories of recovery, as well as of illness, yet there are evident fault-lines and gaps in standard narratives of illness and recovery. Meuret writes that many contemporary texts offer a more open-ended model of anorexia narrative, often involving more critical distance from the phase of illness and a clear delineation of the distance between past (phase of illness) and present (recovery);² the texts studied here often also underscore the difficulty of separating past and present. Many of them end with the recovery of the protagonists – and associate writing with recovery – yet they equally interrogate the possibility of leaving the illness behind altogether, as it is also bound up very clearly in identity.

Several texts analysed in this volume also recount tragic conclusions, thus highlighting the enormous difficulties women must face to overcome the socio-cultural obstacles and pressures in modern times. In 1990 Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth* (1990), made the following comment on beauty standards and their legacy for anorexia and bulimia: 'More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers'³. Nearly three decades later it seems that little has changed; indeed, the issues at stake have arguably been aggravated by several factors. Present-day girls and women are influenced not only by glossy magazines and TV programmes, as in the early

² Isabelle Meuret, 'Writing Size Zero: Figuring Anorexia in Contemporary World Literatures', in Isabelle Lange and Zoë Norridge, eds, *Illness, Bodies and Contexts: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2007), 77-91: 83.

³ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used against Women* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), 10.

1990s, but also by social media sites and internet, virtual worlds where authenticity is altered by Photoshop effects, thus creating even more unrealistic beauty standards. Many of the protagonists in the contemporary narratives discussed here struggle with their bodies which they label as imperfect and fat, and therefore consider themselves inadequate when faced with the repeated social emphasis on the idealised feminine body as the key to happiness, success and fulfilment. This is the case, for example, for Elena, the protagonist of *Briciole* [Crumbs] written by Alessandra Arachi in 1994; Elena admires and is envious of her friends' slimmer and longer legs and would do anything to have similar physical traits. Moreover, the protagonist of *Non più briciole* [No More Crumbs], Loredana, worries specifically about her appearance on social media, thus mirroring the changes our society is experiencing and how they contribute to increase or decrease women's self-esteem as well as their connection with eating disorders. Some of the works discussed in this volume portray anorexia and bulimia as paradoxical instruments with which to discuss cultural contradictions associated with women's social role but at the same time they are also the most powerful sedative for women's self-determination and affirmation. At a time of extreme uncertainty about women's rights, which have been called into question by several western countries, including France, Spain, the US and Poland, where abortion rights have been once again discussed by several right-wing, as well as populist, movements, the immense pressure of beauty standards becomes another way to control women, to return them to their traditional roles, to silence them, and to reinforce male dominance. Paradoxically, eating disorders are on the one hand a desperate attempt to rebel against cultural conventions and social impositions, yet on the other hand they are the outcome of an extreme emphasis on the beauty diktat. It will be interesting to see if the numbers of those suffering from eating disorders will increase or decrease in the forthcoming years in relation to the backlash of patriarchy that our societies are currently experiencing.

When we consider the current trend of an increase in sufferers of eating disorders, both female and male, the outlook does appear bleak. In the decade since 2000, medical research has shown a fifteen percent growth in diagnoses of eating disorders. Whilst this could be due to better awareness, resulting in more diagnoses, the author of the research, Dr Nadia Micali, does suggest that the rise may be due to social pressures, in particular a peer pressure to be thin.⁴ Without doubt, 24/7 social media with its air-brushed images of what is beautiful can play a disturbing part. Skeletal selfies are rife on pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites, which alongside the photogenic waif-like models, promote eating disorders as a lifestyle choice. Such websites are inherently dangerous because they glamorise eating disorders. As Emma Woolf explains, these ‘thinspiration’ websites ‘are dedicated to encouraging young women to maintain their life-threatening illnesses’.⁵ In her 2013 book, *The Ministry of Thin*, she points out that ‘from childhood we absorb messages about weight and appearance, and they’re almost impossible to eradicate. Even if we could ban all magazine, film, TV and Internet images, we cannot undo the cultural pressures to look a certain way’.⁶ Having herself been an anorexic for ten years from the age of nineteen, Woolf insightfully comments: ‘Anorexia is complex precisely because it’s mental warfare; a constant psychological battle with yourself and your body and your hunger. [...] Punishment is good – starving oneself yes, but also pain and excessive exercise and loneliness’.⁷ Interestingly, as a result of research in recent years into anorexia from a neurological perspective, it may well be that anorexics are genetically disposed to the illness due to the fact that part of their brain, namely the insula, works dysfunctionally: ‘In anorexic patients the insula does not function properly, hence characteristics of anorexia,

⁴ Emily Duggan, ‘Exclusive: Eating Disorders Soar among Teens – and Social Media is to Blame’, *The Independent on Sunday* (26 January 2014).

⁵ Emma Woolf, ‘How Social Media is Fuelling the Worrying Rise in Eating Disorders’, *The Daily Telegraph*, (4 June 2015).

⁶ Emma Woolf, *The Ministry of Thin: How the Pursuit of Perfection Got Out of Control* (Chichester: Summersdale, 2013), 280. The author is a journalist as well as co-presenter of the TV programme *Supersize vs. Superskinny*. In 2012 she published her first book *An Apple a Day: A Memoir of Love and Recovery from Anorexia*.

⁷ Woolf, *The Ministry of Thin*, 236-237.

such as distorted body image and altered perception, as well as the ability to block signals of hunger and pain' (242).⁸ Moreover, and on a positive note, there is treatment in the form of Cognitive Remediation Therapy (CRT), which concentrates on the process of thinking, rather than on the content of negative thought.

The texts explored in this volume do not deny the relentless pressure of contemporary social media in particular, nor do they propose or imagine simple solutions or cures to the rising numbers of eating disorders reported in recent years. They do, however, begin to articulate different narratives that might eventually move beyond existing templates of narratives of anorexia nervosa, mainly based around repetitive clichés: these texts largely contradict Debra Ferreday's comment that in general there is no 'meaningful account of the lived experience of anorexia that does not conform to the overcoming/journey narrative of the misery memoir'.⁹ The texts analysed here certainly do move beyond the conventional limits of the misery memoir, seeking different narrative strategies to recount eating disorders differently which may, in turn, allow them to be understood, and defeated, more productively. Furthermore, the range of literary forms and stylistic techniques used by the Austrian, French and Italian authors in this study are testimony to the breadth and complexity of eating disorders. The voices of the suffering protagonists are literally crying out to be heard and understood.

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⁸ The study also suggests that the dysfunctional insula may have been caused by the insula being permanently damaged by starvation.

⁹ Debra Ferreday, 'Anorexia and Abjection: A Review Essay', *Body and Society* 18/2 (2012), 139-155: 153.

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