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The abuse of food by young women is often an expression of the need for attention as well as a form of self-punishment in psychological and physiological terms. This chapter focuses on how contemporary Austrian authors, Anna Mitgutsch and Helene Flöss, raise awareness of eating disorders by exploring the issues of family and social pressures through two fictional accounts, namely *Die Züchtigung* [*Punishment*] (1985) and *Dürre Jahre* [*The Lean Years*] (1998). In the former I explain the impact of an abusive mother on the sexual underdevelopment of her daughter; in the latter I illustrate how a young girl's obsession with the desire to be thin has nearly fatal consequences. In doing so, I revisit the hunger artists of old and show how these modern female bodies can successfully break free from their 'cage', when a supportive environment provides a possible path to recovery.

Eating disorders, family and society

In this chapter I respond to a question posed by Debra Ferreday in 2012, namely 'in a culture saturated with spectacular images of thinness, how can the anorexic subject speak?'<sup>1</sup> My response will include a discussion of how the eating disorders anorexia nervosa and bulimia are portrayed in examples of modern Austrian women's fiction, in particular how the female protagonist uses non-eating and over-eating strategies as a visible but silent protest against familial and social pressures, and thus at the same time transforms her body into her voice. For the female authors, the texts are a manifestation of both the literal and literary body. In her analysis of experiential texts written by female sufferers, Isabelle Meuret focuses on the writing process itself, arguing that 'writing size zero is the becoming flesh of the textual body' and as such the act of writing could be interpreted as providing sustenance and giving her life substance and meaning, albeit not physically.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, she suggests that the process of writing about anorexia is akin to 'the linguistic challenge of turning starvation into creation'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Debra Ferreday, 'Anorexia and Abjection: A Review Essay', *Body & Society* 18/2 (2012), 139-155:142.

<sup>2</sup> Isabelle Meuret, 'Writing Size Zero: Figuring Anorexia in Contemporary World Literatures', <[www.inter-disciplinary.next/msc/hid/hid4/meuret%20paper.pdf](http://www.inter-disciplinary.next/msc/hid/hid4/meuret%20paper.pdf)> , 2006, 3, accessed 17 April 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Isabelle Meuret, *Writing Size Zero: Figuring Anorexia in Contemporary World Literatures* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2007), 13.

Some of the most prominent writers, among them Virginia Woolf, André Gide, Lord Byron, Emily Bronte and Franz Kafka, admitted during their lifetime to having had eating disorders. It could, therefore, be argued that the act of writing was and continues to be a route to recovery, both creative and curative.<sup>4</sup> By analysing the texts of two contemporary Austrian writers, Anna Mitgutsch and Helene Flöss, I will show how the female writer is able to break the silence around the abuse of food as a desperate plea for love and happiness, an expression of the need for attention as well as a form of self-punishment in psychological and physiological terms. Furthermore, research into this debilitating affliction has revealed deep associations with discipline, autonomy and will power, and as such, suggests continuity between contemporary anorexia and the self-starvation of the hunger artists of old. In the words of Maud Ellmann, ‘anorectics are “starving for attention”. They are *making a spectacle of themselves*, in every sense’.<sup>5</sup> I will illustrate in this chapter how Mitgutsch and Flöss bear out this claim..

Anna Mitgutsch’s novel *Die Züchtigung [Punishment]* (1985) chronicles the repeated mistakes of three generations of mothers living in rural Austria, the mistreatment of each daughter, the cruel and callous physical and mental torture passed down from one woman to the next. The narrator, Vera, is the present-day mother who has resolved not to beat her daughter. Although she does not beat her, she still fails to have a happy relationship with her. Vera’s analysis of her own upbringing and her mother’s life in order to find reasons for this absence of happiness are pivotal to the story. As will be shown, the desire of the daughter to please her mother by submitting to her influence is made painfully apparent by the daughter’s attempts to hinder the development of her femininity and so abate her mother’s increasing hatred of her. Later she diets to please her lover and in the process becomes anorexic. This

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<sup>4</sup> In his discussion of the eating disorders of amongst others, Byron and Kafka, Stephan Rössner, even suggests that ‘starvation and suffering improve the quality of artistic work and help to produce masterpieces that would never have been created on a full stomach’. Stephan Rössner, ‘Starvation as a creative force’, *Obesity Research* 4/2 (1996), 183-187: 183.

<sup>5</sup> Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 17. Discussion of the hunger artists takes place later in this chapter and in footnote 14.

obsessive behaviour is further examined in Helene Flöss's *Dürre Jahre* [The Lean Years] (1998). In this story the desire to have the figure of a model begins at the age of fifteen and ends in a psychiatric ward for psychosomatics after seven years of calorie counting. It will become evident how both Mitgutsch's and Flöss's narratives feature young women who suffer at the hands of family and social pressures, so much so that they are prepared to starve for love, but at the same time they are starved of love.

Paradoxically, the two narratives discussed here originate in a country famous for its cakes and pastries. The continental confiserie is in every Austrian town, the coffee houses of Vienna are legendary. Yet according to the Austrian Ministry of Health, in the last twenty years alone the number of young women who have experienced an eating disorder has increased tenfold.<sup>6</sup> Its report into women's health shows that around 200,000 Austrian women have had an eating disorder once in their lives; at least 6,500 women aged between twenty and thirty suffer from bulimia and 2,500 girls between the ages of fifteen and twenty are anorexic.<sup>7</sup> In their 2011 study of young women in Europe, Joan Costa-Font and Mireia Jofre-Bonet describe anorexia as 'a socially transmitted disease', having discovered that women in Austria were the thinnest based on the fact that they had the lowest average body mass index of 23.67 compared to an average European BMI of 25.<sup>8</sup> The highest anorexia rates were in Austria, Italy and Ireland: Austria's anorexia rate was 1.55 per cent among all women (the highest prevalence of female anorexia) and 4.02 per cent among young women between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four. As a result of their economic analysis of anorexia, Costa-Font and Jofre-Bonet come to the conclusion that the social and cultural environment influenced the decision by young

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<sup>6</sup> 'Essstörung: Zahl der Betroffenen in 20 Jahren verzehnfacht', *Der Standard* (4 February 2015), <<http://derstandard.at/2000011255486/Essstoerung-Zahl-der-Betroffenen-in-20-Jahren-verzehnfacht>> accessed 14 November 2015.

<sup>7</sup> The 2010/2011 report by Ines Stamm on women's health in Austria is available at <[http://www.bmgf.gv.at/cms/home/attachments/1/6/5/CH1572/CMS1466495497539/frauengesundheitsbericht\\_kurzfassung.pdf](http://www.bmgf.gv.at/cms/home/attachments/1/6/5/CH1572/CMS1466495497539/frauengesundheitsbericht_kurzfassung.pdf)> accessed 14 November 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Joan Costa-Font and Mireia Jofre-Bonet, 'Anorexia, Body Image and Peer Effects: Evidence from a Sample of European Women', Centre for Economic Performance, discussion paper 1098, November 2011, available at <<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1098.pdf>> accessed 7 November 2015.

women to starve themselves in search of what they perceived to be an ideal body shape. Much of the recent literature on eating disorders argues for a cultural interpretation, for, as Susan Bordo points out, ‘the unique configurations (of ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, religion, genetics, education, family, age, and so forth) that make up each person’s life will determine how each *actual* woman is affected by our culture’.<sup>9</sup> Worth noting here, too, is that the 2009/2010 World Health Organization’s survey of the social determinants of health and well-being amongst young people from forty-three countries across Europe and North America shows that Austria is among the top ten countries for negative body image (feeling too fat) among eleven- to seventeen-year-olds as well as for frequency of attempts to lose weight (especially dieting among thirteen-year olds). Moreover, according to the same report, ‘young people (even those in older groups) who report ease of communication with their parents are more likely to report positive body image [...]’.<sup>10</sup> Currently, 7,500 Austrians under the age of twenty suffer from the eating disorders bulimia and anorexia.<sup>11</sup> In order to understand what drives the young female protagonists featured in these Austrian novels to abuse their bodies through self-starvation, it is therefore necessary to explore how the authors depict family

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University Press California, 2003), 62. According to Joan Brumberg, food rejection, fasting and self-starvation are socially embedded. She argues that it is the cultural context within which fasting is practised that constitutes its meanings, rather than the ‘symptomatic’ behaviour itself. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa* (New York: Vintage, 2000). Similarly, Walter Vandereycken, Ron van Deth and Rolf Meermann chart the history of eating disorders within a cultural context in their study: *Wundermädchen, Hungerkünstler, Magersucht: Eine Kulturgeschichte der Ess-Störungen*, (Weinheim: Beltz, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Candace Currie, et al. eds, ‘Social determinants of health and well-being among young people’, *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study: international report from the 2009/2010 survey* (Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2012) (Health Policy for Children and Adolescents, No. 6), 19. For the past thirty years the WHO Regional Office for Europe has been conducting every four years collaborative research with the organisation Health Behaviour in School-aged Children. In their latest report from the 2013/2014 survey, they note that an increased risk of obesity has been linked to poor mental health in adolescence, in particular longer-lasting low moods. Both reports are available at <<http://www.hbsc.org/publications/international/>> accessed 30 April 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Due to the rise in young people suffering from eating disorders, the Austrian Ministry for Family Affairs began in January 2016 a series of workshops, entitled ‘body.talks’, aimed particularly at educating parents to spot the warning signals and help prevent young people linking body image and food via digital media, such as the ‘Pro-Ana/Pro-Mia’ websites, which glorify eating disorders as a desirable lifestyle. See Petra Tempfer, ‘Ein Reiscracker pro Tag’, *Wiener Zeitung* (12 November 2015).

relations and social pressures, the former being the focus of Mitgutsch's *Punishment*, the latter being a central theme of Flöss's 'The Lean Years'.

The performance of the female hunger artist

As Marie in Mitgutsch's *Punishment* sees her fourteen-year-old daughter maturing physically, the eventuality of separation becomes threatening and imminent. Vera, sensing her mother's resentment, goes on an eating binge so that she becomes the fattest girl in her class. She thereby pleases her mother because her fatness proves to the rest of society that her mother has been feeding her well – a sign of care and attention, of being brought up well. Here eating disorders clearly signal this young girl's insecurity with herself, which becomes transposed into insecurity with her body, since she eats compulsively to oblige her mother. In *The Anorexic Experience* Marilyn Lawrence notes that

one of the central elements in anorexia is the tendency to want to please and to comply with other people's expectations. It is when complying and pleasing others becomes incompatible with the demands of real maturity and autonomy that anorexia tends to occur.<sup>12</sup>

Vera continues this desire to please others for seven years after her mother's death, this time in the form of self-starvation in her relationships with men, describing herself as 'ein weiblicher Hungerkünstler, eine Liebesleiche [...] ein gehorsames Opfer' (178-179) [a female hunger artist, an erotic corpse, [...] an obedient victim] (155-156).<sup>13</sup> Like the European hunger artists,

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<sup>12</sup> Marilyn Lawrence, *The Anorexic Experience*, (London: Women's Press, 1984), 85. Grace Bowman, the author of *A Shape of My Own* (2006), refers to anorexia as her 'security blanket', which is an apt description for the two portrayals here. She also notes that many anorexics want to please their parents and be universally liked. See Candida Crew, 'I've worried about not being thin my whole life', *The Independent* (9 April 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Anna Mitgutsch, *Die Züchtigung* (Munich: dtv, 1985). This was first published in English in 1987 in America under the title *Three Daughters*. Translated quotations are taken from the British edition *Punishment* of 1988.

who were almost exclusively male and whose popularity reached its peak at the end of the nineteenth century, she embodies a spectacle of hunger, which is centred on suffering and pain.<sup>14</sup> Unlike those hunger artists, she is not going without food as a form of theatrical spectacle and starving herself for public entertainment and amusement. As Sigal Gooldin explains ‘one can point to some resemblance between the Hunger Artist spectacle and that of the contemporary anorexic. Both, so it seems, display the disciplined self, a self whose production inevitably involves suffering’.<sup>15</sup> In Franz Kafka’s short story ‘A Hunger Artist’, written in 1922 and published in a collection of stories, also entitled *A Hunger Artist* in 1924, the year he died, he portrays such a character. This professional faster locks himself in a cage to starve for the amusement of an audience at a time when Hunger Artists are no longer in vogue. Here the hunger artist starves in the doomed effort to perfect hunger as a work of art. In her discussion of Megan Warin’s ethnographic study of anorexics, Debra Ferreday notes that like Kafka’s hunger artist ‘anorexic women are offered up for consumption in a way that privileges a prurient, colonizing gaze. [...] What Warin suggests is that to read anorexia as performance is to reproduce certain received and inaccurate, accounts of anorexic embodiment’.<sup>16</sup> In

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<sup>14</sup> Whilst hunger artists were a phenomenon of the nineteenth century, they are documented from as early as the seventeenth century. The first known case of extraordinary anorexia which was put on public show is mentioned in a pamphlet from 1620: a fifty year-old Austrian carpenter, Wolfgang Gscheidter, lay starving for more than fifteen years. In the Tyrolean pamphlet he is presented as a symbol of the town of Innsbruck and the reader is encouraged to visit him in the local church and leave alms. According to Sigal Gooldin, the hunger artists ‘were a popular medium of entertainment, performing an emaciated body in the carnivalesque context of European amusement culture.’ Sigal Gooldin, ‘Fasting Women, Living Skeletons and Hunger Artists: Spectacles of Body and Miracles at the Turn of a Century’, *Body & Society* 9/2 (2003), 45. These particular performers were usually men. The phenomenon of fasting has been predominantly female and dates back to thirteenth century saints (anorexia mirabilis), which contrasts with the secular self-starvation of contemporary women. The socio-cultural context is of course of importance to both forms. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries fasting women continued to have a miraculous status, whilst their male counterparts performed freak shows as Hunger Artists or Living Skeletons (see Sigal Gooldin for a detailed analysis). In terms of literature, male and female German authors were portraying wasting heroines from the late eighteenth century. An in-depth study is provided by Anna Richards in *The Wasting Heroine in German Fiction by Women 1770-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004). In her discussion of anorexia in literature Bettina Blanck analyses German women’s novels from the early 1980s (Maria Erlenberger and Lore Berger): Bettina Blanck, *Magersucht in der Literatur: Zur Problematik weiblicher Identitätsfindung* (Frankfurt: R.G.Fischer, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> Gooldin, *Body & Society* 9/2 (2003), 50.

<sup>16</sup> Debra Ferreday, ‘Anorexia and Abjection: A Review Essay’, *Body & Society* 18/2 (2012), 142. Megan Warin’s 2010 book *Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia*, is an ethnographic study of forty-four women and three men who had been diagnosed with anorexia, which was carried out over several years in Canada, Scotland and Australia. She is deeply critical of how the mass media presents emaciated female bodies as a spectacle.

Mitgutsch's text the outcome of self-starvation has an ironic twist: Vera's body becomes so emaciated that she looks more and more unfeminine, her menstruation stops and her body shape turns into that of a boy. Not only does this transformation suggest a defence mechanism in that the daughter feels untouchable and out of the reach of hurt, but in her imagination it would also satisfy her mother, whose apparent control over her daughter's mind and body even after her death is consequently assured. Her childish dependency is further symbolised by her childlike body:

Ich betrachtete meine knabenhafte Figur im Spiegel, die Brüste weg, die Hüften weg, die Regel weg, das Ärgernis war fortgeschafft, jetzt konnte sie mich wieder lieben, mich auf ihrem Schoß sitzen lassen, ich war wieder ein Kind, sie brauchte sich nicht mehr bedroht zu fühlen. Sie hatte gewonnen, ich hatte mich unterworfen. Sollte sie alle Weiblichkeit haben gegen eine kleine Scheibe Liebe zum Verhungern. (177)

[I looked at my boyish figure in the mirror: breasts gone, hips gone, period gone. The aggravation had been removed; now she could love me again, let me sit on her lap; I was a child again and she could no longer feel threatened. She had won; I had given in. She could have my sexuality in return for a little slice of love that left me hungry.] (154)<sup>17</sup>

### Self-punishment and the abusive mother

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Megan Warin, *Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010). For a detailed study of how attitudes towards hunger have changed over the centuries, see Sharman Apt Russell's *Hunger: An Unnatural History* (2006).

<sup>17</sup> A different interpretation of the loss of the female form would be to see thinness as a symbol of social and sexual freedom, androgynous independence, self-discipline and self-worth. 'For some anorexics, the slenderness and loss of curves that result from dieting represent a triumphant transformation of the female figure into that of a preadolescent boy.' Richard A. Gordon, *Anorexia and Bulimia. Anatomy of a Social Epidemic* (Oxford and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1990), 56.

Psychologists identify the characteristics of anorexics as being over-submissiveness, lack of self-assertion and an extremely low self-esteem, which are all true of Vera. As Joanna Bunker Rohrbaugh explains, the mothers are typically dominant and have ‘an emotionally intense but ambivalent relationship with the child’, whilst the fathers tend to be passive and detached from the family.<sup>18</sup> Mitgutsch’s novel aligns itself with this view. Due to her father’s lack of influence on her upbringing Vera has no need of a man in her life, especially after the father of her own child walked out on her when their baby was born. Her inability to love and be loved is reflected in the adult daughter’s contempt for the men who do enter her life in that she changes her ‘Liebhaber wie Hemden’ (115) [lovers like shirts (100)] and expects the relationship to be violent, since she had been brought up to understand punishment as a sign of love. Mitgutsch clearly provides the ‘perfect’ psychological case study of an anorexic/bulimic daughter, who like other girls and women in a similar position, dominated by depression and anger, ‘internalise all their anxiety and distress and experience it via their bodies’.<sup>19</sup> When this daughter’s overeating is also taken into account, it is impossible not to reach the same conclusion as feminist therapist Mira Dana about women’s eating disorders, namely that they are the ‘effect of the mother’s failure to validate her daughter’s need’.<sup>20</sup> This is because

it is our mothers who normally feed us when we are children, so any abuse of food can be read as a powerful communication about our nurturing. [...] Overeating may express a great need for parental attention which might have been scanty. And starving and stuffing also act on the body’s biochemistry in a way that temporarily relieves emotional stress.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Joanna Bunker Rohrbaugh, *Women: Psychology’s Puzzle* (London: Abacus, 1981), 413.

<sup>19</sup> Judy Sadgrove, ‘Why Food is Still a Four-Letter Word for Women’, *Guardian* (28 July 1992). The title of this article recalls a 1984 study of anorexia, entitled *When Food is a Four Letter Word: Programmes for Recovery from Anorexia* by Paul Haskew and Cynthia H. Adams (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall).

<sup>20</sup> Janet Sayers, *Mothering Psychoanalysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 13.

<sup>21</sup> Sadgrove, *Guardian* (28 July 1992).



As Renata Cornejo points out: ‘Das Essen funktioniert als Kontroll mechanismus und Strafmaßnahme der Weiblichkeit’ [food functions as a control mechanism and as a way of punishing femininity].<sup>22</sup> The dinner table becomes a daily battle place where physical punishment and terror of food are palmed off as love and maternal care: “[...]iß, sonst kommst du nicht vom Tisch weg, iß, oder ich schlage dich, bist du dich nicht mehr rührst” (95) [“eat, or you cannot leave the table; eat, or I’ll beat you within an inch of your life” (82)].<sup>23</sup> The refusal to eat could be regarded as an act of rebellion against the suffocating mother but this is not the case in Mitgutsch’s novel, where the daughter eats/does not eat in an almost sacrificial manner and perpetuates the act of punishment, ‘eine fortgesetzte Selbstzüchtigung’ (180) [a continuous self-punishment(156)], thereby self-imposing her mother’s will.<sup>24</sup> As she grows up, Vera learns to swallow her mother’s frustrations: ‘Zuerst aß ich um der Liebe willen, später fastete ich um der Liebe willen’ (176) [First I ate for the sake of love, then I fasted for the sake of love (154)]. Her anorexia develops after the death of her mother and is a direct reaction to her mother’s force feeding. It is this fear of becoming an abusive mother towards her own daughter which haunts the adult Vera. This fictional portrayal has a theoretical explanation as evidenced by Simona Girodana’s comment in her study of eating disorders, namely that:

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<sup>22</sup> Renata Cornejo, “‘Im Namen des Gesetzes, der Vernunft und der Angst’”. Zum feministischen Postulat einer Ich-in-Beziehung in Anna Mitgutschs Roman *Die Züchtigung*’, *Brunner Beiträge Germanistik Nordistik* 22 (2008), 94. My translation.

<sup>23</sup> Over the centuries, many children from German-speaking countries have been nurtured on Heinrich Hoffmann’s *Der Struwwelpeter* [Shockheaded Peter] (originally published in 1845) in which ten illustrated and rhymed stories tell of the terrible consequences of children’s misbehaviour and disobedience. *Die Geschichte vom Suppen-Kaspar* [*The Story of Soupy Kaspar*] tells of how a young boy wastes away after refusing to eat his soup, resulting in his death on the fifth day. Clearly, well-behaved children should always eat what is on their plate and food refusal as a rebellious act has a fatal consequence. These stories with a moral message are part and parcel of German and Austrian culture and education. Thirty years later the first reports of the existence of a possible fatal anorexia nervosa appeared in which Gull and Lasègue described their patients as rebellious and stubborn.

<sup>24</sup> A number of eating disorder theorists, including Kim Chernin and Susie Orbach, claim that abstaining from food is a form of weaning from an all-powerful or all-destructive mother, thereby underlining the dependency that is inherent in the mother and anorexic daughter relationship.

The transmission of values from mother to daughter is also thought to account for the arousal of eating disorders. [...] on the one hand, the future anorexic is taught to achieve high standards of performance at school and work, as she has to be independent and to rely on herself (men cannot be trusted – a daughter should not repeat her mother’s mistakes). On the other hand, though, the daughter is also expected to be caring and sensitive towards the family, and to give priority to the needs and desires of others.<sup>25</sup>

The attraction and attractiveness of self-starvation

Written in 1998, thirteen years after *Punishment*, Helene Flöss’s *Dürre Jahre* [The Lean Years] is the contemporary story of a young Austrian girl’s battle with anorexia nervosa.<sup>26</sup> Flöss’s story provides a different perspective and a more detailed explanation of the symptoms and causes of this eating disorder because the reader is privy to Dali’s thoughts and experiences ‘with her’ her pain and suffering from the age of fifteen to twenty-two. At the same time, the reader ‘sees’ how Dali’s weight drops from sixty to thirty-four kilos. These seven years of self-starvation, which she also refers to as ‘die sieben toten Jahre’ (76) [her seven dead years], graphically illustrate Dali’s all consuming, daily calorie counting and her isolated existence.<sup>27</sup> The calorie

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<sup>25</sup> Simona Girodana, *Understanding Eating Disorders: Conceptual and Ethical Issues in the Treatment of Anorexia and Bulimia Nervosa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 143.

<sup>26</sup> There is no publication in English of this story, hence any translations are my own. The translation of the title raises a number of issues. Within the narrative, the protagonist comments: ‘Schlank ist in. Dünn besser. Dürr ideal. (18) [slim is in, thin is better, lean is ideal]. I have chosen to translate ‘dürr’ as ‘lean’ due to the protagonist’s desire to appear ‘fit’, especially for her boyfriend and certainly exercise is something about which the protagonist also obsesses. Other possible translations include ‘skinny’, or ‘twiggy’, which of course takes the reader into the realm of modelling. An alternative title would be ‘wasted years’, alluding to the time that has been lost to this obsession as well as the body actually wasting away. *Wasted* is the title of the American writer Marya Hornbacher’s 1998 memoir of anorexia and bulimia. For detailed analysis of this work, see Anna Aresi’s chapter in this volume. Irene Flöss was born 1954 in Brixen in South Tyrol, which is where her protagonist Dali also has her home. After the First World War, South Tyrol was ceded to Italy and became an autonomous province. Flöss now lives in Burgenland and is considered an Austrian author.

<sup>27</sup> Helene Flöss, *Dürre Jahre* (Innsbruck: Haymon, 1998). Her seven years of food refusal does have a biblical reference, namely Genesis 41:30 and the seven years of famine (translated into German as ‘sieben dürre Hungerjahre’) which occur in Egypt. The seven years’ famine is also part of ancient Egyptian mythology. In 1890 an inscription in hieroglyphics dating back to 322-31 BC was found on a cliff rock on the Island of Sehel in the

counting turns into a compulsion and her determination to starve herself becomes her reason for living. She is in a state of depression, mourning not only the sudden death of her father three years earlier but also the death of her own baby who lives just three days. Her memories of her father are all linked to food: she even used to eat off his plate. An imaginary dialogue with him runs throughout the text. Being the cleverest girl in class and achieving excellent grades means making her father proud. Like Mitgutsch's Vera, she also loses herself in her books and studies hard to ignore her hunger pangs and, like other anorexics, this fifteen-year old also over-exercises, swimming, running and skipping for hours each day during the holidays. The desire to fit in, to be attractive, to be loved, as well as having experienced some kind of individual psychological trauma – all feature as factors in her obsession with self-starvation. Those around her unwittingly provide role-models, for example the Italian countess for whose children she is an au-pair and whom she describes as a dainty little bird which she too wants to be; yet she has to cook for the family, particularly popular are Austrian desserts and cakes. When she is taken to see the Pina Bausch dance company, she envies the lean bodies of the dancers, whom she too compares to birds.<sup>28</sup> Others put pressure on her, for example, her boyfriend who is impressed by her slim and fit physique; or her school-friends, a class of only slim girls, whose reaction to her weight increase to fifty-four kilos after an enjoyable summer, when she was too busy working as a nursing assistant in a clinic to think of her dead father, is “‘Ach Gott, Dali, wie du aussiehst! Schade! Wieviel hast du den zugenommen?’” (41) [“Oh God, Dali, what do you look like! What a shame! How much weight have you put on?”].<sup>29</sup>

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Nile which tells the story of the famine, and is known as the Famine Stele. See André Dollinger, ‘The Famine Stele on the Island of Sehel’ <[http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/famine\\_stele.htm](http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/famine_stele.htm)> accessed 5 November 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Pina Bausch was born in 1940 in Solingen, Germany and died 2009 in Wuppertal. Once described as the wicked fairy of German ballet, she is today considered a national treasure. Most of her pieces deal with searching for love and intimacy. She frequently depicts violence, especially against women. She has often been called a feminist but refuses to be labelled as such. Recurring themes in her dance productions are loneliness, alienation, rejection and the struggle for self-identity. Further details at Tanztheater Wuppertal, <[http:// www.pina-bausch.de/en/pina\\_bausch/](http://www.pina-bausch.de/en/pina_bausch/)> accessed 13 November 2015.

<sup>29</sup> In Austrian schools Flöss's text is used for pedagogical purposes, as teaching material from the age of fourteen to discuss anorexia, obsessive behaviours, the role of women in society, how you perceive yourself and how others perceive you.

Yet before this brief weight gain at the age of sixteen, when she weighed forty-one kilos, she had felt half dead, her rings were falling off her fingers, her shoes were dropping off, her breath smelt of ammonia, her periods stopped, hair was growing on her cheeks and she constantly felt the cold despite layers of clothes.<sup>30</sup> In charting the physical and emotional consequences of her starvation, the reader is forced to calorie count with the narrator. For instance, her daily food intake amounts to five hundred calories: usually one apple, which she cuts into eight pieces and eats one at a time on the hour after classes. To keep her eating habits a secret, she invents a variety of excuses: at the weekends she tells her mother, she is staying with her boyfriend, she tells him that she is at her mother's. In fact, she shuts herself away in the room she rents as a lodger. Behind the locked door she feels safe and saved: nobody can reach her. Even though meals are included, she repeatedly tells her landlady that she has just eaten or she has a stomach upset, hence her weight loss. At thirty-nine kilos she dreams only of food and drinks three litres of tea a day but nothing can still her hunger; at thirty-four kilos she becomes unconscious and awakes in a psychiatric ward where she is drip fed 4,000 calories a day. Her turning point is the shock she experiences on seeing herself, her forty-kilo-body, on video, now a case study for medical students. This is no longer the mirror reflecting back a distorted body image.

#### Bird metaphors and a hint of madness

Worth noting is that the motif of a bird appears throughout the story. At the very start of the narrative, Dali compares the countess to a nightingale and a lark, and sets herself the goal of becoming a bird, initially weighing fifty kilos: 'Das Mädchen möchte von einem auf Händen getragen werden. Also wird es wie Francesca werden. Dünn und zart und feenhaft wie

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<sup>30</sup> These physical symptoms are typical of anorexics: cessation of menstruation (amenorrhea), intolerance to cold, an extensive growth of downy body hair (lanugo), amongst others. See Joanna Bunker Rohrbaugh, *Women: Psychology's Puzzle*, (London: Abacus, 1981) for further information.

Francesca. Francesca das Vöglein' (10). [This girl would like a man to lavish every kind of care and attention on her, so she will become just like Francesca. Thin and dainty and fairy-like just like Francesca. Francesca the little bird]. As noted above, she is envious of how the ballet dancers look like birds. Recalling Susie Orbach's comment on 'bird-like eating' being indicative of a culture, Dali does eat like a bird and her cheeks become covered in a soft down (a common symptom of anorexia); the male nurse in the clinic is able to pick her up from the floor, after she collapses, because she is feather light.<sup>31</sup> According to the narrative, she has become a bird but there is clearly no escape, she is not as free as a bird, since anorexia rules her life and thus she becomes a caged bird: 'Sie haben abstehenden Haarflaum auf den Wangen, Fräulein Dali, wie ein Vogel. Jetzt ist sie also ein Vogel' (22). [You have down sticking out from your cheeks, Miss Dali, just like a bird. So now she is a bird]. In her 1970s' groundbreaking study of anorexia nervosa, Hilde Bruch used the metaphor of a 'sparrow in a golden cage' to refer to anorexia.<sup>32</sup> At thirty-seven kilos Dali's thinning hair (typical of anorexia sufferers) and skeletal face accentuate her pointy nose, just like a bird's beak. She perceives her feather bed as her nest, wanting to bury herself in it. In the clinic for psychosomatics, she resists taking the prescribed tablets: 'Ich will nicht gestopft werden wie eine Martinigans [...] Ich bin kein kranker Vogel' (72-73). [I don't want to be stuffed like a Martinmas goose. [...] I'm not a sick bird].<sup>33</sup> The consultant describes her as a 'dumme Gans' [silly goose] because she does not do as she is told. These many references to birds do simultaneously suggest flight; the aspiration to fly, to be light and to rise, which are all possible indicators of the 'Peter Pan

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<sup>31</sup> Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, (London: Arrow, 2006), 153.

<sup>32</sup> Hilde Bruch, *The Golden Cage: The Enigma of Anorexia Nervosa* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 2001). First published in 1978 Bruch's work has become a classic of eating disorder literature. Self-starvation as a form of incarceration is the focus of Maud Ellmann's study of hunger artists as discussed earlier in this chapter. See notes 5 and 14.

<sup>33</sup> In Austria 'Martinigans' (roasted goose) is the traditional dish served on St. Martin's Day, 11 November. The goose is the symbol of St. Martin of Tours, France, where the holy day originated. This Christian feast day celebrates harvest-time and has similarities to Thanksgiving in America.

syndrome'.<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, in German, if you say to someone "Du hast doch einen Vogel!" (literally, you do have a bird), you are in fact accusing them of having done or said something mad. According to folk legend, birds are supposed to have been the cause of mental illness when they nested in a person's brain. That people with eating disorders might be regarded as being psychologically disturbed is why Dali ends up being treated in a psychiatric clinic.

This desire to fly by breaking free from her 'golden cage' is voiced by the narrator during her convalescence as the story draws to a close. There are two references in English to a song by Leonard Cohen entitled 'Lover, lover, lover' from his 1974 album *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*. Dali's menstruation begins again at fifty kilos and she sings: 'Will be a shield for me, a shield against the enemyyyyyyyyy... (77). At fifty-four kilos she is on the way to recovery and is allowed to leave the clinic but she and her boyfriend, David have gone their separate ways. The story ends however on a positive note. There is a new man in her life and she does not intend to look back, and again from Cohen's song: 'Please, let me start again ...' (78). The actual lyrics are of a dialogue in which a son asks his father for help on how to change his name, appearance and feelings in order to improve his life and be a better person. The cry for help is one that could also be interpreted as one directed at God, the father, whose final reply recalls how the soul, like a bird, is free.<sup>35</sup> The message for the long-suffering protagonist is that there is the hope of winning the battle, psychological and physical, since her being is no longer locked in her body and she can break free from what has been eating away at her: her food obsession as well her depression at the loss of her father and her baby:

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<sup>34</sup> James Barrie, the creator of Peter Pan, was supposed to have suffered from anorexia. See Rössner, 'Starvation as a creative force'.

<sup>35</sup> In describing western society's obsession with exercise, body and appearance, psychiatrist Finn Skårderud has coined the phrase 'the body is the new soul', because we place so much value on controlling and perfecting our physical selves. He is of the opinion that eating disorders are highly culturally sensitive in prevalence, expression and meaning. He gave the keynote lecture at the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Austrian Netzwerk Essstörungen [Network for Eating Disorders] in 2015. Abstract available at: <[http://www.netzwerk-essstoerungen.at/download/k15\\_abstractbook.pdf](http://www.netzwerk-essstoerungen.at/download/k15_abstractbook.pdf)> accessed 30 April 2017. Founded in 1990 and based in Innsbruck, Netzwerk Essstörungen is the oldest institution of its kind in German-speaking countries. Since 1991 it has held annual international conferences on the topic of eating disorders together with the Austrian Society on Eating Disorders (ASED) which is the first scientific society on eating disorders in German-speaking countries.

And may the spirit of this song, may it rise up pure and free.

May it be a shield for you, a shield against the enemy.<sup>36</sup>

In this literary text Flöss's focus on the consequences of self-starvation is hard-hitting for her protagonist and her readers. Being thin is supposed to equate to being happy, so the media and fashion industry would have us believe and that you have to be thin in order to be beautiful. This story highlights that anorexia is not to be seen as a fashionable illness. Ironically, it is only when Dali becomes a spectacle for others on video, and is able to gaze at herself on film, that she begins to comprehend the impact of starvation on her body. She unconsciously becomes a modern hunger artist, who is on the verge of breaking free from her cage.

#### Starving for one's art

As an aside, it is interesting to point out that in 2007 Helene Flöss published a story called *Der Huntermaler* [The Hunger Painter] in which the painter asks his lover to be his model, but in order to do so she must put on weight, thereby satisfying his 'hunger' for the perfect female beauty, voluptuous and curvaceous.<sup>37</sup> As a consequence their relationship breaks down. The Flemish seventeenth century painter, Peter Rubens, finds his reincarnation in the Austrian painter, Peter Franz, who craves absolute beauty, since for him beauty is the only thing worth living for, and the beauty of woman is its crowning glory. His sketches always remain unfinished to the extent that he is starving, unable to find satisfactory nourishment from his art work. References to Franz Kafka and his last love, Dora Diamant, do also occur in the text,

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<sup>36</sup> Leonard Cohen was a Canadian singer, poet and novelist. The focus in the songs of this fourth album is on relationships as a battleground. Full lyrics available at <<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/leonard-cohen/loverloverlover.html>> accessed 13 November 2015. Cohen died at the age of eighty-two in 2016.

<sup>37</sup> There are allusions here to Wilhelm Raabe's *Der Hungerpastor* [The Hunger Pastor] (originally published in 1864) which tells the story of a clergyman whose life is devoted to the pursuit of the ideal, i.e. a pastor of hungering. This pastor who was born into poverty 'hungers' for knowledge and a respected place in society.

whilst Floss's title alludes to Kafka's own story of 'A Hunger Artist' of 1922 discussed above. Kafka himself is known to have suffered since his youth from eating disorders.<sup>38</sup>

Commenting on the contemporary mania about dieting, thinness and food control in advanced industrial societies, Richard A Gordon suggests that anorexics and bulimics 'utilize these cultural preoccupations as defences that enable them to escape from – and achieve some sense of control over – unmanageable distress, most of which revolves around issues of identity'.<sup>39</sup> The satisfaction of control achieved over weight and food becomes very important if the rest of their life is chaotic and emotionally painful. In the two texts discussed in this chapter it is evident that eating disorders are a coping mechanism for both Vera and Dali during intensely emotional periods of their upbringing and education. Both weight-gain and weight-loss are a silent yet visible expression of the hurt within. By making food the focus of their adolescent lives these girls disguise their desperate need for love and understanding by hiding away from reality, hiding behind excuses yet conforming to the expectations of others. Through their fiction Mitgutsch and Flöss thereby help us to understand further the familial and social causes and consequences of the two most prevalent eating disorders in western cultures today. Their young hunger artists literally become paper-thin but by dint of their writing they continue to be 'gazed at' through being read.

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<sup>38</sup> See Walter Vandereycken, et al., *Wundermädchen, Hungerkünstler, Magersucht*, 126, 290-293.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon, *Anorexia and Bulimia. Anatomy of a Social Epidemic*, 11.



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