

The Young Hunger Artists: the Portrayal of Eating Disorders by Contemporary Austrian Women Writers

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Abstract:

This paper explores how the abuse of food by young women is an expression of the need for attention as well as a form of self-punishment in psychological and physiological terms. In Anna Mitgutsch's novel "Die Züchtigung" ("Punishment", 1985) the daughter attempts to hinder the development of her femininity in order to abate her mother's increasing hatred of her. At the same time she binges to prove to the rest of society that her mother has been feeding her well and is therefore a 'good' mother. In this ambivalent mother-daughter relationship Mitgutsch illustrates how the daughter agonises over her mother's self-sacrifice, whilst eating/not eating in an almost sacrificial manner. Later she diets to please her lover and in the process becomes anorexic. This obsessive behaviour is the focus of Helene Flöss' "Dürre Jahre" ("The Lean Years", 1998). Here the desire to have the figure of a model begins at the age of 15 and ends after 7 years of calorie counting in a psychiatric ward for psychosomatics, where the protagonist weighs just 34 kilos. Both Mitgutsch's and Flöss' novels feature young women who suffer at the hands of family and social pressures, so much so that they are prepared to starve and are starved of love.

In this paper I discuss how the eating disorders, anorexia nervosa and bulimia are portrayed in 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 simultaneously 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 (Meuret, 2006: 3). Some of the most prominent writers, among them Virginia Woolf, André Gide, Lord Byron, Emily Bronte and Franz Kafka, confessed 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. 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 outcry for love and happiness, an expression of the need for attention as well as a form of self-punishment in psychological and physiological terms. Moreover, research into this debilitating affliction has revealed deep associations with discipline, autonomy and will power, and as such, suggests a 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' (Ellman, 1993: 17).

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, but with whom she fails to have a happy relationship. Her 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 obsessive behaviour is the focus of Helene Flöss's *Dürre Jahre* (*The Lean Years*, 1998, author's own translation). In this story the desire to have the figure of a model begins at the age of fifteen and ends after seven years of calorie counting in a psychiatric ward for psychosomatics. Both Mitgutsch's and Flöss' narratives feature young women who suffer at the hands of family and social pressures, so much so that they are prepared to starve and are starved of love.

The terms used to describe anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are almost as varied as the causes and symptoms of these eating disorders, eating problems, afflictions, illnesses, diseases, addictions, pathological conditions. What they do

have in common is an obsession with body weight and shape among predominantly adolescent girls and young women in Western industrialised countries. Both involve abnormal patterns of eating as well as an idealisation of thinness. The anorexic is incessantly preoccupied with food – attraction to and repulsion from. She refuses to eat. The term anorexia nervosa thus describes the syndrome of self-starvation, emaciation and loss of menstruation. The bulimic has frequent episodes of binge eating, which is almost always followed by purging by dint of self-induced vomiting, the use of laxatives, diuretics, fasting, over-exercising, all of which are usually done in secret.¹ The sufferers always believe they are fat and never see their bodies as thin enough. Body Image Distortion Syndrome (BIDS) has for a long time been seen as one of the hallmarks of anorexia. The anorectic stands in front of a mirror, which reflects back to her a grossly inflated and distorted image. Regarded as a widespread cultural disorder, Susan Bordo argues in her seminal study of feminism, culture and the body, that ‘the anorectic does not misperceive her body; rather, she has learned all too well the dominant cultural standards of *how* to perceive’ (Bordo, 2003: 57). The numerical figures do not make comfortable reading: roughly 10 percent of anorexics actually starve to death; as many as 28 percent of all school children may have an eating disorder; girls as young as 5 are unhappy with their bodies and want to be thinner (Moorhead, 2005).² Recently, researchers demonstrated that Barbie dolls could even encourage eating disorders. Girls aged 5-8 were shown various female figures, including Barbie and a new American doll, Emme, whose body proportions represent a larger body shape. The negative effects of the image of Barbie were very strong: the girls were more dissatisfied with their shape and desired the doll’s extreme thinness (Dobson, 2006).

From the time young girls receive their first Barbie doll, they are bombarded with media images of waif-like models and advertisements for diet pills. For many teenage girls, who see models like Kate Moss on the catwalk, beauty has become synonymous with slenderness. The fear is that by using stick-thin models with ‘size zero/double zero’ figures, the fashion industry is inadvertently encouraging their admirers to become anorexic. The Italian fashion designer, Donatella Versace, has expressed her concern that girls as young as 10 are worrying about their bodies. Her own daughter, now 20, has been battling anorexia for years. In Milan and Madrid super-thin models have been banned from the catwalks after the deaths of several ‘size zero’ models (Pisa, 2007). In 2005, a German supermodel, Heidi Klum, made international news like Kate Moss, but not on account of drug taking nor on account of her beauty. She had been the host and one of the judges in a TV show for aspiring models called ‘Germany’s Next Top Model’. When the judges eliminated a

number of girls in the first round on the grounds they were too 'plump', though none weighed much more than 112lb, a debate erupted in the German and Austrian press about whether anorexia had become a 'status symbol' and being thin was on the same level as success and recognition (Campbell, 2006). Around the same time, the children's author, J.K.Rowling, commented on her website that she did not want her daughters, aged 12 and 1, to become 'empty-headed, self-obsessed, emaciated clones', thus she was condemning a culture in which a 'toothpick' appearance is rated above almost everything else (Crew, 2006).³

Furthermore, the ideal woman's body that is stressed by Western culture is thinner now than it has been at any other time in history. In 1908 archaeologists in Austria unearthed an 11 cm tall limestone figurine, dating back to the Stone Age, which is of a naked woman who has a hairstyle of parallel rows of curls, large breasts, stomach, hips, thighs and buttocks but has no face.⁴ Representations of women as voluptuously corpulent and fertile by painters such as Raphael and Rubens were the norm for many years. However, a new standard of beauty began to emerge by the 19th century with the image of thinness and pale skin being lauded. In Austria, Elisabeth, the last Empress, born in 1837 and killed in 1898, better known as Sissi, was writing in her diaries about her afflictions which came to be known as the 'Sissi-syndrome' and were indicative of anorexia nervosa. Though not yet known to the general public, the term had just appeared in 1874 in British and French medical journals and was being linked to hysteria.⁵ At the turn of the 20th century, the Austrian artist, Gustav Klimt, who was becoming renowned for his portrayals of the sexuality and beauty of women, painted an anorexic woman. Entitled "Nagging Care" the figure is that of a solitary woman, who appears to be holding within herself her own pain and suffering.⁶ Just twenty years later the agony of anorexia had turned into a fashion statement, when the 'flapper' look came into fashion alongside the Women's Movement. Asexual images of women appeared to mirror increased social status and freedom. The curvaceous body was disappearing and only made a fleeting appearance in the post-war era in the shape of women such as Marilyn Monroe. She exemplified the dominant ideal of female beauty and at the peak of her popularity was often described as 'femininity incarnate', 'femaleness embodied'. By the early 1960s there developed another trend of the idealisation of thinness as epitomised by Twiggy, and thereafter a byword for super-skinny models.⁷ It cannot be a coincidence that at the same time eating disorders were becoming epidemic and were a predominantly feminine issue.⁸ With the second wave of the Women's Movement this cult of thinness was being attacked by feminists. In *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978), a pioneering work on the links between sexual politics and female

diets, Susie Orbach notes that 'this bird-like eating is a reflection of a culture that praises thinness and fragility in women' (Orbach, 2006:153) and that three decades later, 'the preoccupation with thinness and beauty (...) has recently been joined by another fixation: the rising rate of obesity' (Orbach, 2010: 4). Her studies, along with those of Susan Bordo and Kim Chernin, explore the gendered aspect of modern 'eating pathologies' as well as the admiration and aestheticisation of slimness.⁹

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 around 200,000 Austrian women have had an eating disorder at least once in their lives; at least 6,500 women aged 20 –30 suffer from bulimia and 2,500 girls between the ages of 15-20 are anorexic (www.praevention.at). Much of the recent literature on eating disorders argues for a cultural interpretation, for, as 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' (Bordo, 2003:62). In order to understand what drives the young female protagonists featured here to abuse their bodies in such a way, it is necessary to explore how the authors depict family and social pressures.

As Marie in Mitgutsch's *Punishment* sees her 14-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, one of the most widely read feminist writers on anorexia, 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 (1984: 85).¹⁰

Vera continues this pleasing orientation for seven years after her mother's death, this time in her relationships with men, describing herself as 'a female hunger artist, an erotic corpse, (...) an obedient victim' (P.155-156).¹¹ Like the European

hunger artists, who were almost exclusively male and whose popularity reached its peak at the end of the 19th century, she embodies a spectacle of hunger, which is centred on suffering and pain.¹² 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' (Gooldin, 2003: 50). 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 2002 animator Tom Gibbon made a 16-minute film version of the short story, portraying the performer whose art is determined by his refusal to eat. Historically, fasting per se was also seen as politically correct based on its protest value. Nowadays stunts, such as David Blaine's 44 days without food in a suspended glass box in London in 2003, are seen by many as distasteful and have lost any protest value by becoming a stunt.¹³ In 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 it also satisfies her mother, whose apparent control over her daughter's mind and body is consequently assured. Her childish dependency is further symbolised by her childlike body:

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. (P. 154)¹⁴

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. They also describe the mothers as being dominant and having an emotionally intense but ambivalent relationship with their daughters, whilst the fathers tend to be passive and detached from the family (Rohrbaugh, 1981). 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 her 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 'lovers like shirts' (P.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' (Sadgrove, 1992: 31). 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' (Sayers, 1992: 13). 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 (Sadgrove, 1992: 31).

Sometimes the refusal to eat is 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, a 'continuous self-punishment' (P. 156), thereby self-imposing her mother's will.

Written in 1998, 13 years after *Punishment*, Helene Flöss's *Dürre Jahre (The Lean Years)* is the contemporary story of a young girl's battle with anorexia nervosa.¹⁵ Flöss's story provides a different and 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 15 to 22 and sees how her weight drops from 60 to 34 kilos. These seven years of self-starvation, which she also refers to as her 'dead years' (DJ, p.76), graphically illustrate Dali's all consuming, daily calorie counting and her isolated existence. 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 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 15-year-old over-exercises, swimming, running and skipping for hours each day during the holidays. 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 also compares to birds.¹⁶ There are those around her who unwittingly 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 54 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 "Oh God, Dali, what do you look like! What a shame! How much weight have you put on?" (*DJ* 41). Yet before this brief weight gain at the age of 16, when she weighed 41 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.¹⁷ Her daily ration was 500 calories: usually one apple, which she cut into eight pieces and ate one at a time on the hour after classes.

To keep her eating habits a secret, Dali 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 39 kilos she dreams only of food and drinks three litres of tea a day but nothing can still her hunger; at 34 kilos she becomes unconscious and awakes in a psychiatric ward where she is drip fed 4000 calories a day. Her turning point is the shock she experiences on seeing herself, her 40-kilo-body, on video, now a case study for medical students. This is no longer the mirror reflecting back a distorted body image.

In this literary text, Flöss's focus on the consequences of self-starvation is hard-hitting for her protagonist and her readers. 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 unwittingly becomes a modern hunger artist.

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' (Gordon, 1990: 11). 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 here 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.¹⁸ 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 help us to understand further the 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.

I would like to express my gratitude to the anonymous external reviewer's insightful and helpful comments.

¹ There are variants on the theme, such as 'anorexia athletica', which describes sufferers who play sport excessively. Ironically, obsessive exercise causes others to assume the person must be healthy. Just a decade ago an American doctor, Steven Bratman, coined the term 'orthorexia' and applied it to those individuals, who became emaciated as a result of a pathological fixation on eating proper, quality food, e.g. raw foodism. For further details, see Bratman's website at www.orthorexia.com.

² Researchers from Flinders University in Australia interviewed 81 girls aged between 5 and 8 and found that nearly half wanted to be thinner and would go on a diet if they gained weight (Moorhead, 2005).

³ Candida Crew's own account about her struggle with food and dieting, entitled *Eating Myself*, was published by Bloomsbury in 2006.

⁴ Venus of Willendorf is one of the most famous archaeological finds in Austria. The sculpture is exhibited in the Museum of Natural History, Vienna.

⁵ 'Anorexia nervosa' was first coined by the English physician, William Gull, in his article for the London medical journal *Transactions of the Clinical Society*, 7:22 1874. Bulimia nervosa was given a name only in 1979.

⁶ Klimt's 'Nagender Kummer' (1902) is the last of three sets of characters forming the middle panel of his Beethoven frieze, entitled 'Die Sehnsucht nach Glück'. The frieze, which focuses on the female body, was created for the 14th exhibition of the Viennese secession in homage of Beethoven and his 9th Symphony.

⁷ One of the first models blamed for eating disorders, Twiggy was the nickname given to Lesley Hornby for her waif-like figure. Today she puts the blame on Hollywood actresses for the new size-zero trend.

⁸ For a more detailed overview of changing fashions see Bridget Dolan and Inez Gitzinger (eds) (1994), *Why Women? Gender Issues and Eating Disorders* (London, New Jersey: Athlone). A worrying current trend is the existence of websites and chatrooms, which present eating disorders as a lifestyle choice. The users of 'pro-anorexia' sites encourage each other to starve and purge, even holding weight loss competitions and posting pictures of their own emaciated bodies. Devotees refer to them as pro-ana/mia and wear a red bracelet as an underground signal linking anorexics.

⁹ Chernin's feminist/cultural analysis of eating disorders stresses the intersection of culture with family, economic, and historical developments together with psychological constructions of gender. This is reiterated in her later work *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity of 1985* (New York: Harper and Row).

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ First published in English in 1987 in America under the title *Three Daughters*. Quotations here are taken from the British edition *Punishment*, of 1988. Abbreviated to *P* with pagination in brackets.

¹² Whilst Hunger Artists were a phenomenon of the 19th century, they are documented from as early as the 17th century. 'They were a popular medium of entertainment, performing an emaciated body in the carnivalesque context of European amusement culture' (Gooldin, 2003: 45). These particular performers were usually men. The phenomenon of fasting has been predominantly female and dates back to 13th 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 18th and 19th centuries fasting women continued to have a miraculous status, whilst their male counterparts performed freak shows as Hunger Artists or Living Skeletons (see Gooldin for a detailed analysis). In terms of literature, male and female German authors were portraying wasting heroines from the late 18th century. An in-depth study is provided by Anna Richards in *The Wasting Heroine in German Fiction by Women 1770-1914* (2004). In her discussion of anorexia in literature

Bettina Blanck analyses German women's novels from the early 1980s (Maria Erlenberger, Lore Berger and Katharina Havekamp).

¹³ For a detailed study of how attitudes towards hunger have changed over the centuries, see Sharman Apt Russell's *Hunger: An Unnatural History* (2006).

¹⁴ 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' (Gordon, 1990: 56).

¹⁵ Herewith referred to as *DJ* with page numbers in brackets. There is no publication in English of this book, hence any translations are my own. 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.

¹⁶ Pina Bausch was born in 1940 in Solingen, Germany. 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.

¹⁷ 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 Rohrbaugh for further information.

¹⁸ Research in 2005 suggests that in addition to the array of psychological and social factors, which give rise to anorexia, a deficiency in the mineral zinc may play a part (Briffa, 2005).

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