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The Starved Body: Anorexia and the Fracture Within the Self

ANGELA FRANKS

Anorexia seems to inspire comparisons with the realms of the mythical and mystical. Maura Kelly describes her apotheosis this way: “Dieting became a way for me to be my own god and my own creation—Pygmalion and Galatea in the same human body.”^[1] Likewise, the novelist and anorexic Sigrid Nunez rhapsodizes her transfiguration: “To be light as a feather, light as a soul—‘a feather on the breath of God.’”^[2]

Such discourse fascinates the reader, drawn to the considerable agony of the suffering anorexic. The suffering of the disease is so spectacular, and its dangers so significant, that dwelling on them can be as far as most analyses get.^[3] This approach comes at a cost, however, because it risks romanticizing the disease. When romanticize something, we get more of it.

Can we understand the disease more deeply? Neglect and trauma, which may be at the root of many cases of anorexia, have been with us since the Fall, but a culture of eating disorders is a relatively recent phenomenon. Why?^[4]

To answer this, let us turn to the first-person accounts of anorexics. In perusing them, one sees quickly that anorexics are seriously sick. But they are sick not so much as cancer patients are sick but rather as alcoholics are. The alcoholic members of *Alcoholics Anonymous* state frankly of themselves that they are “extreme examples” of “self-will run riot,” and presumably they are in a position to know. But anorexics, too, suffer under the lash of “self-will run riot.”

In fact, the comparison between alcoholism and anorexia has justification. Anorexic memoirs are full of the language of addiction, while anorexics talk about being addicted to the high of starvation and to the control they experience.^[5] As one anorexic puts it on a “pro-ana” message board, “idk you just feel light and empty and dizzy and just so freaking happy not to have eaten anything. it is a high and i crave it.” The medical basis of this is not fully understood, but it appears that starvation can activate the same reward centers in the brain as

drugs such as ecstasy do.

So perhaps when the alcoholics warn, out of their own personal experience, about the deadly nature of self-will run riot, it is relevant for eating disorders as well. I am not trying to moralize either disease. Neither is Alcoholics Anonymous, which popularized the “disease” concept of alcoholism. No one is claiming that a trip to the confessional is somehow a sufficient healing program. But, at the very least, we can say this: regardless of what the causes or cure of the disease might be, anorexia, once contracted, causes radical self-enclosure. The disease reduces a person’s horizons to the shrinking confines of her flesh, while her mind’s expanses become shriveled to an obsessive loop calculating calories and pounds.

Kelsey Osgood’s remarkable, unsparing memoir *How to Disappear Completely* details this painful self-enclosure. When she relapses as an adult, she becomes “self-obsessed” and “cold,” “ruthless and manipulative” with the people who love her.[6] She badgers her dying former therapist, unable to see what another person is suffering. Through it all, the world outside her own skin becomes hazy, while she knows with painful exactitude what she puts inside her mouth.

As Osgood indicates, anorexia is a somewhat socially acceptable addiction, even idealized in young-adult novels. There one finds, former anorexic Alice Gregory complains, “passages that read like demented ads for diamonds or bottled water: ‘I will be thin and pure like a glass cup. Empty. Pure as light. Music.’”[7] Osgood’s youthful admiration for anorexics explains some of this anorexia-chic. Anorexics exhibited “pure defiance” in their pursuit of an impossible goal.[8] To live this way requires, one might think, superhuman powers of control.

Indeed, one of the most common words appearing in the self-descriptions of anorexics is “control.” Helen says, “My problems seemed out of my control but what I ate and what I weighed was within my control.”[9] Kate explains how anorexia reduced her many problems to one manageable one: this hunger, this body.[10] Jackie says, “However much people try and make you eat, no one can control *that*. ... It’s *me* doing what I want.”[11] Lisa calls the eating disorder “control that is so controlled it is out of control.”[12] These accounts reveal, surprisingly, that many of the anorexics also struggle with bulimia and binge-eating, as if being in and out of control are flip sides of the same reality.

But the control comes at a price. The anorexic serves her disease, which exhibits an unerring sense for how to browbeat into submission. One anorexic describes the inner voices: they “will tell you that someone so horrible does not deserve that food. If you do eat, they are screaming at you to get rid of it. They tell you that you are weak for eating and that if you do not get rid of it, you will surely become fat. They will tell you that no one will love you if you gain weight.”[13]

Why does this inner dictator register such urgency? Why does anorexia seem like a life-or-death matter to the anorexic—“I didn’t see food as life-sustaining. I saw it as life-threatening”—but for all the wrong reasons?[14] The best explanation seems to be that nothing less than one’s very identity is at stake. Anorexic Katy Waldman argues that “anorexia is an inveterate liar whose grand theme is your identity.” Anorexia is a performance in which the protagonist is also the stage on which the play is set.[15]

But it is the performance of a disappearance. In anorexia, “role-playing thus attempts to altogether replace who one is,” philosopher Tzachi Zamir contends. “The liberation and pleasure of performance is ... linked with self-violence: an attempt to altogether erase one’s previous sense of self.”[16] The anorexic, in other words, forcibly creates an identity out of nothingness. Layla says that being thin means “having no tummies [and] no great bottoms,”

while Tricia confesses, “I remember feeling so up really *out* of my body that I remember looking in a mirror and being actually surprised that I saw a form in the mirror and not just a nothingness.”[17] Waldman compares anorexia to a performance that enslaves. “The choreography becomes so absorbing that you can no longer access your own will or desires. You may require an external party to confirm for you that you exist.”[18] Nicki says, “If I didn’t have it [anorexia], if I wasn’t thin, then I wouldn’t have an identity. I’d just be this big bad blob.”[19] When Tricia was told by a doctor that he wanted to hear about her, not about her anorexia, she thought, “But I am the anorexia. This is my identity.”[20]

This pursuit of identity helps to explain the phenomenon Osgood describes and suffered under, that of “wannarexia.” Wannarexics are usually girls who scour “pro-ana” websites and read anorexic memoirs like how-to manuals. They *want to be* anorexic. They often succeed in making themselves quite sick. Anorexia provides women with a ready-made identity, one that is simultaneously glamorous and tragic—an elaborately-staged, slow-motion suicide that irresistibly draws the gaze like a car wreck.

Why anorexia afflicts women disproportionately is a question not answered to anybody’s satisfaction, but I will hazard two observations. First: anorexia is gendered Prometheanism. Our media-saturated society reduces women to the value of their decorative appearances.[21] Hence, anorexia both plays by society’s rules while simultaneously overturning them. It follows the rule book in reducing the anorexic’s value to her exterior appearance. Yet the defiance is found in the disorder’s limit point, a skeletal extremity that no one actually finds attractive.

This defiant compliance with societal expectations goes a long way toward explaining anorexia-chic. Osgood and Waldman rail against the irresponsible narcissism that saturates anorexic memoirs, in which the putatively recovered author lovingly describes her jutting collarbones and gives careful descriptions of her diet regimen, like a reformed jihadist detailing how he built his bombs. The anorexic receives a voyeuristic attention not given to her awkward cousin, the bulimic, and even less to her ugly step-sister, the obese overeater, who truly defies Instagram-ready feminine stereotypes. Always the overachiever, the anorexic’s defiance consists in seeing that stereotype and raising it.

And yet, Feminist commentary on anorexia emphasizes that “fat is a feminist issue” for these reasons, and it is partly correct. But it is also partly wrong. The dictates of the fallen male gaze are unreasonable enough, but they do not tend toward skeletal women. They are rather perfectly expressed by the bodies specifically produced for male consumption, namely, the bodies of porn stars and sexbots. “Voluptuous” might be a polite descriptor for such bodies; “anorexic” would not be. The ordinary male is baffled by the drive of his female partner toward thinness. Anorexia is gendered Prometheanism in large part because women themselves are the pace-setters in the body-image race.

But why in the world would women choose this particular body image? Here a second observation is crucial: the romanticization of sexual expressionism roughly correlates with the spread of eating disorders such as anorexia. As noted, although instances of anorexia have existed for centuries, it is incontestable that the twentieth century and beyond have seen the vast majority of them. Thinness as a widespread cultural ideal is evident in the 1920s, which was also the era of a proto-sexual revolution, and becomes firmly sedimented by the 1960s.

Let me be clear. I am not claiming a causation but rather a correlation. We can, I think, regard both sexual expressionism and a valorization of female thinness as symptoms of something deeper, namely, what John Paul II calls the “fracture” within the person’s interior.[22] This

fracture originates in the Fall, which split the previously harmonious unity between body and soul into an antagonistic unrest. This inner fracture has taken on specific contours in late modernity.

Many thinkers have by now explained why the mind-body split is intrinsic to sexual expressionism, in which the body becomes a useful pleasure-tool of the “real self,” the mind. But we see the same dynamic at play in the anorexic, whose person is deeply fractured. Osgood experienced this: for her, anorexia is an abusive relationship, one in which abuser and abused are the same person.[23]

Consider also the astonishing but little-observed similarity between the language used by anorexics and that of female sexual revolutionaries. Margaret Sanger promoted the word “birth control” deliberately, because “control” over the chaotic female body was the essence of her program—something with which an anorexic can sympathize. The body is viewed as alien and unstable, requiring control. Likewise, the anorexic Nicki states, “I sort of saw my body as a separate thing, like it wasn’t me ... and I wanted to sort of distance myself from it. ... All of a sudden [with menses] it was doing something that was out of my control and I saw it as being not me and I couldn’t relate to it and I wanted to sort of get rid of it.”[24] Emma says, “It’s just, it’s just the fat. I just hate it. It just doesn’t feel like it should be part of me. It feels all wrong.”[25]

But fat makes baby-gestation possible. Unsurprisingly, anorexics often express disgust at the maternal orientation of their bodies. Teresa alludes to the figure of Dodo Conway in *The Bell Jar* as “just a cow without a brain who’s just massively fat and unattractive. Her whole motive in life is just to have mindlessly more children and breed more, more and more and more. ... And that is I suppose an image of horror for me.”[26]

A woman’s body anchors her in place and time and points to future fruitfulness, to “more and more and more.” The deeper project of feminist sexual revolution has been to untrammel oneself from the weight of the female body. As Dorothy Day observes, “Women’s bodies, heavy with children, dragged down by children, are a weight like a cross to be carried about.” [27] Female bodies are tied to the potency for pregnancy and nursing, and feminist sexual liberation aims to cut those ties. Simone de Beauvoir’s chapter on biology in *The Second Sex* is one long complaint about the “more and more and more” to which women are lashed by their fertile bodies: “The male finds more and more ways to use the forces of which he is master; the female feels her subjugation more and more; the conflict between her own interests and those of the generating forces that inhabit her exasperates her.”[28]

The man seems light and liquid, the woman heavy and tied down. Likewise, the anorexic strives for the light and airy. Rather than sinking into the earth, the anorexic who dies is said to have “escaped gravity.”[29] She escapes the gravity not only of her body but also of need.[30] Maura Kelly’s self-apotheosis demonstrates the anorexic counter-strategy to dependency: “I kept chiseling away at myself, trying to purify myself more, and to need less.”[31]

Ultimately, both sexual revolution and eating disorders rebel against the given, against what is inescapable. Sex creates babies. Bodies require food. But who says? The rules don’t apply to me. Modernity valorizes the independent, self-sufficient man, as he strides rationally and freely into the well-managed future of his own creation. But the cheerleaders of secularism do not seem to have reckoned with the innately destructive quality of the self that has been unleashed from any transcendent orientation.

Beholden to the disease inside her head, the anorexic exemplifies what all fallen persons must

reckon with, namely, the abusive relationship that results with the surrender to a will—one’s own—that is not infinitely loving. Waldman describes her anorexic decline: “The fatigue sets in. You feel like a torn net through which the thoughts pass, hazily. You cannot speak or write or do. Starving doesn’t transform your life into one glorious act of self-expression. Starving silences who you really are.” Anorexia is a contemporary testimony to the ancient truth that “self-will run riot,” if not healed, does not lead to the aggrandizement of the self but to self-consumption. It leads, quite literally, to nothing at all.

Angela Franks, Ph.D., is a theologian, speaker, writer, and mother of six. She serves as Professor of Theology at the Theological Institute for the New Evangelization at St. John's Seminary in Boston.

[1] Maura Kelly, “Hunger Striking,” in *Going Hungry: Writers on Desire, Self-Denial, and Overcoming Anorexia*, ed. Kate Taylor (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 3–29, here 9.

[2] Quoted in Kate Taylor, “Introduction,” in *Going Hungry*, xi–xliv, here xxxviii.

[3] Anorexia has the highest death rate of any mental illness, and it is estimated that less than half of the survivors recover (H. C. Steinhausen, “The Outcome of Anorexia Nervosa in the 20th Century,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 159, no. 8 [2002]: 1284–93, cited here).

[4] This essay will not pursue other essential questions, such as how to find help or to support loved ones stricken with eating disorders. The [National Eating Disorder Association](#) offers many resources on its website, and a Catholic resource is [Made in His Image](#).

[5] *Anorexics on Anorexia*, ed. Rosemary Shelley (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd., 1997), 6. Cf. Kelly: “I was addicted to losing” (Kelly, “Hunger Striking,” 9).

[6] Kelsey Osgood, *How to Disappear Completely: On Modern Anorexia* (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2013), 149.

[7] Alice Gregory, quoting author Francesca Lia Block, in “Anorexia: The Impossible Subject,” in *The New Yorker*, Dec. 11, 2013.

[8] Osgood, *How to Disappear Completely*, 50.

[9] Shelley, *Anorexics on Anorexia*, 6.

[10] *Ibid.*, 13.

[11] Helen Malson, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa*, Women and Psychology series, ed. Jane Ussher (New York: Routledge, 1998), 122.

[12] Shelley, *Anorexics on Anorexia*, 134.

[13] Colleen Thompson, “Voices of an Eating Disorder,” 1996.

[14] Penny, quoted in Malson, *The Thin Woman*, 126.

[15] Philosopher Tzachi Zamir, in his philosophy of dramatic acting, proposes that anorexia is “a prolonged unfolding of a theatrical suicidal gesture.” He cites Grace Bowman’s memoir *Thin*: “Like nineteenth-century hunger artists who starved themselves and then displayed themselves as living skeletons, gawped at by people who paid to see these miraculous figures

on show, I made my body into a performance” (in *Acts: Theater, Philosophy, and the Performing Self*, Theater: Theory/Text/Performance [Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2014], 193, quoting Grace Bowman, *Thin* [New York: Penguin, 2007], 73.)

[16] Zamir, *Acts*, 170.

[17] Malson, *The Thin Woman*, 133, 134.

[18] Waldman, “There Once Was a Girl.”

[19] Malson, *The Thin Woman*, 134.

[20] Malson, *The Thin Woman*, 147.

[21] This point is nicely captured by the fact that women tend to speak only around a quarter of the dialogue in Hollywood movies, while they are about five times more likely than male characters to appear in skimpy clothing or just nude (Amber Thomas, “Women only said 27% of the words in 2016’s biggest Movies,” Jan. 12, 2017; Christina Cauterucci, “Somehow Women Still Make Up Less Than a Third of Speaking Characters in Top U.S. Movies,” *Slate*, Aug. 1, 2017).

[22] John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), audience 28:2–3, 244.

[23] Osgood, *How to Disappear Completely*, 149.

[24] Malson, *The Thin Woman*, 118.

[25] *Ibid.*, 129.

[26] *Ibid.*, 139–40.

[27] Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 76.

[28] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books E-books, 2011), 60.

[29] Osgood, quoting Naomi Wolf, in *How to Disappear Completely*, 49.

[30] Poet and former anorexic Louise Glück observes, “Out of terror at its incompleteness and ravenous need, anorexia constructs a physical sign calculated to manifest disdain for need, for hunger designed to appear entirely free of all forms of dependency, to appear complete, self-contained” (Louise Glück, “Education of the Poet,” in *Going Hungry*, 111–28, here 120).

[31] Kelly, “Hunger Striking,” 16.

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