

The Anorexic Aesthetic:
An Analysis of the Poetics of Glück, Dickinson, and Bidart

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The Anorexic Aesthetic in Poetry

“And so the poet may come to have a ‘vested interest’ in his handicaps; these handicaps may become an integral part of his method; and in so far as his style grows out of a disease, his loyalty to it may reinforce the disease.”

Kenneth Burke

Discussing the correlation between the mind and body, scholar Kenneth Burke identifies a peculiar yet profound imitation of life in art, specifically drawing a connection between artist and disease in such a way that suggests a nosological classification of a writer’s form and style. The adoption of Burke’s perspective inextricably links disease to art, blending the creative capacities and conscious craft of an artist with his or her engrossing burdens, such as disease (18). Though Burke’s analogic reasoning here focuses on the symptomological dynamic between artist and disease, my analysis (as does a more thorough reading of Burke’s) does not reduce art to mere symptom. Rather, my argument acknowledges the complex liminal space within which the artist creates—one in which art may constitute an act of self-assertion or a deliberate pattern of self-sabotage, among other non-symptomologic, aesthetic purposes. Burke’s interest lies in disease more generally, mine in anorexia.

Anorexia is a disease of contradiction. Through attentive discipline and deprivation, it provides a kind of indulgence through perceived power. This conjuring of self-control leaves the anorexic feeling overcome by impotence. Anorexia is a disease of the mind that attempts to divide the body from the self, to acquire an identity through the act of renunciation. The anorexic ironically thrives and creates through the very act of self-annihilation. Paradoxically, the compulsion undergirding anorexia is to become

visible by disappearing—contradictorily emaciating one’s self in an effort to recreate the body into a form so confronting that it cannot be ignored.

In our current cultural moment, eating disorders are a fierce and significant reality, despite innumerable contestations and claims to the contrary.¹ Evidence of this severe problem is stark, with 85% of American women presenting disordered eating behaviors and eating disorders having the highest mortality rate of any mental illness (NEDA). Oftentimes, “the tendency is to exclusively inculcate the sufferer for his or her deviant and undesirable behavior” (Alexandra 28). Although I adamantly reject the tendency to blame those suffering from eating disorders for their illness, the idea of an anorectic repurposing her deviant behavior toward creative ends intrigues me. Furthermore, the commentative and adaptive implications of a particular kind of “anorexia” inscribing the literary page—a template related to (through the metonymic stance of an author as a community member) yet distinct from society itself—begs further investigation.

I suggest that the integrated fields of literature and medicine provide the theoretical and analytical means to posit a kind of anorexic aesthetic: neurosis (metaphorically and stylistically) embodied in writing and, more specifically, anorexia nervosa embodied in poetry.² While I choose to explore the rendering of anorexia in

¹ A great deal of focus has been directed toward a public awareness of the obesity crisis, rather single-mindedly drawing attention to weight results (Cohen et al 154). While I agree that obesity is a significant problem, such a strict focus on obesity in this way not only shrouds the problem of eating disorders by casting them as a “lesser evil,” but also perpetuates them by emphasizing weight and a “healthy body” that, in our moment, are mediated by the cultural imperative of slenderness touted by the media and ad industry (156).

² I use the term “neurosis” here to refer to the condition of anorexia nervosa, though technically the more severe term “psychosis” may also be ascribed. According to the

poetry, I by no means celebrate eating disorder as a gateway to creative genius or suggest that the anorexic style necessitates a disordered poet at its core. Quite to the contrary, I analyze this stylistic trend in the work of three “anorexic poets,” a term which I operationally use in a stylistic rather than a diagnosing sense. The experiential histories of the poets I choose to analyze vary: first, Louise Glück, officially diagnosed with anorexia nervosa; second, Emily Dickinson, a known ascetic whose apparent anxieties parallel those associated with anorexia nervosa; and, lastly, Frank Bidart, occupying the narrative persona of a woman officially diagnosed with anorexia nervosa. Each of these poets’ works embodies in its own way the vast contradictions built into the contrarian impulses of anorexia and the complex processes by which the margins of often harshly self-disciplined expression are continually redefined. I analyze the poetic aesthetics of these representative authors’ works, allowing each chosen reading to interact with the symptomology, therapy, and neutralization of disorder. In doing so, I deconstruct instances of both “anorexic” poiesis and mimesis throughout the respective collections.

DSM-5 criteria, to be diagnosed as having Anorexia Nervosa a person must display: “(1) Persistent restriction of energy intake leading to significantly low body weight (in context of what is minimally expected for age, sex, developmental trajectory, and physical health); (2) Either an intense fear of gaining weight or of becoming fat, or persistent behaviour that interferes with weight gain (even though significantly low weight); and (3) Disturbance in the way one's body weight or shape is experienced, undue influence of body shape and weight on self-evaluation, or persistent lack of recognition of the seriousness of the current low body weight” (EDV).

Louise Glück

Glück's Anorexic Aesthetic

The dichotomized mind of the anorexic poet manifests itself in the poem through a kind of dual deviancy, which is to say a two-fold manifestation of both submission and retaliation, suggesting a confrontation of oppositional poetic purpose and performance on the page. A poem authored by one deemed “ill” exhibits such deviancy when traces of disorder seep into the authorial design and structure of the work, thereby causing a departure from the “normative” poetic form. But the poem may also exist as a self-fashioned forum for such deviancy to be enacted. This would be the case if, say, an anorexic individual retaliated against the perfectionist personality constructs of their disease on the externalized page by using renegade punctuation, aberrant form, and heavy subject matter to blatantly contradict anorexia nervosa’s impossible insistence on perfect, controlled order. These syntactical choices may be seen as intentional affronts to the poet’s deluded psyche. The proposed concurrence of the unconscious and deliberate suggests a simultaneous surrender to and triumph over disease. Understanding the poetic form not only as a necessary manifestation of lyric “but also as a kind of trap, a vehicle for transplanting the author’s voice and placing it out of her reach,” one may see the intersection of the all-consuming anorexic logic and its retaliatory counterpart (Morris 58). The writing of poetry then becomes a medium through which the poet undergoes long, enduring sessions of cognitive behavioral therapy by offering a disembodied platform onto which he or she can divest of troubling thoughts and disconnect his or her

disordered conscious from the body.³ The individual suffering from anorexia fights back against the disease in a public, external space that allows for an easeful and visually validated confrontation of behavior.

The aforementioned dual deviancy of poetic expression corresponds to the dual nature of poetry and more precisely to the lyric “I” itself. The poetic persona, the narrative “I,” occupies a kind of liminal space, an indeterminate status at the very cusp of conscious awareness. This poetic persona allows a potential sufferer to share his or her story protected by a comforting veil of anonymity, thereby broadening the divide between the biographical poet and the poetic protagonist, and creating uncertainty about identity and motivation. The resultant expansion of anonymity and creation of two distinct yet connected entities thus parallels the division of the anorexic mind. Indeed, anorexia appears to create within the sufferer a second persona with whom she is in perpetual conflict, a delicate yet fastidious binding of the body to the mind accomplished through an illogically constructed and idealized dependency of the former upon the latter. The disintegration of logic reveals itself through the anorexic’s paradoxical aspirations: intentional self-isolation in an effort to achieve conformity with a false communal ideal. The anorexic operates on her own internal logic; one built upon a “confused and confusing opposition of signals” (Becker 145). In other words, the underfed form stands in stagnant contradiction, aspiring toward and claiming to have control, all the while striving for recognition and approval separate and distinct from her person and, therefore, out of her control. The anorexic’s external appearance orients toward the premature, the

³ Cognitive behavioral treatment techniques for anorexia nervosa are aimed at (1) confronting the patient's fears and avoidance behaviors, (2) identifying the patient's areas of deficient problem-solving skills, particularly in the interpersonal realm, and (3) cultivating new problem-solving skills (Kleifield, Wagner, and Halmi 715-737).

skeletal, while her logic operates on an obstinate level deaf to outside influence. The frail body signals vulnerability and neediness despite the fact that the individual to whom that body belongs is under the delusion that she harbors complete control, fulfilled through self-imposed rules and rituals

Though anorexia may invoke an intricate system of internal orders and rules, it also involves breaking the rules of health, normal social interactions, and parental expectations. Adolescents especially must hide their disease to maintain it, submitting to self-denial, lying to those around them, and refusing their commands to eat and begin to heal. They find themselves condemned to that indeterminate space between transgression and obedience: alternately adhering to and defying the external logic put upon them by culture and society and the internal logic their anorexia has devised. The anorexic poet's work functions on two levels: as both a reprieve from internal order and as an external reiteration of the oppositional rule-breaking corollary, an intentional counteraction to divided mentality.

Louise Glück On Her Writing

Louise Glück, a contemporary American poet clinically diagnosed with anorexia nervosa, creates poetry that exemplifies this genre of illness-informed, confessional writing. Her poetry straddles the seemingly dichotomous spheres of reflection and affliction; all at once her poems are cathartic, rehabilitative, symptomatic, and retaliatory. Glück's poetry serves as an externalized vehicle in which she may contradict and refuse her disorderly inclinations, discharge her pain and discomfort, and symptomatically exhibit on the page the many maladaptive behaviors peculiar to her disorder. As such, her poetry effectively acts as a space where aspects of disorder both consciously and

subconsciously are externally actualized, cathartically effervescing the autobiographical message of the poet to the surface.

Writing about *Descending Figure*, Glück contends, “I wanted a poem less perfect, less stately; I wanted a present tense that referred to something more fluent than archetypal present” (“Education of the Poet” 17-18). Her desire for a poem straying from perfection and order suggests a deliberate attempt to circumvent the orderly fixation of her anorexic conscience.⁴ The structure of the poem, which easily could have been spaced to adhere to a manifested form of a womanly figure, is less obviously ordered. The sharp left alignment of the single stanza creates a concrete beginning that may well evoke the initial phase of an anorexic’s journey. As each line continues, the varying lengths and syntax create a more chaotic, less conforming structure hinting at a progression to flexibility that feasibly symbolizes an anorexic in recovery, testing her capacity for rule-breaking and change. In fact, the very desire to create a poem, subjectively interpreting her own emotions and thoughts and vulnerably translating them into verse, may be seen as directly fighting the anorexic impulse toward objectivity. Many anorexics develop behaviors and nurse hunger pangs to pursue thinness as a means of constructing something to control, seeking standards to objectively measure certain faculties and characteristics (Halliday 170). Seeing the gradual decrease of numbers on a scale and the progressively more tightly-cinched circumference of touching fingertips around a thigh, then, becomes less a desire to achieve smallness and more a perverse

⁴ Here, I refer to Glück’s anorexic conscience because, despite her seven years of psychoanalysis and her recognition of her disorder, anorexia nervosa and other such eating disorders are said to plague an individual for their lifetime. They can reach stages of virtual recovery but, oftentimes, the recovery process is actually a cycle of perpetual remission and recovery in which coping skills learned in therapy can help to get the afflicted back on track (“Education of the Poet” 11).

method of meeting a self-prescribed standard, of attaining an empirical sense of self worth. Herein lies the enigma of anorexia, offering a plausible reason for its continually metamorphosing definition in the DSM.⁵

Analyzing “Dedication to Hunger” in the context of Glück’s later essay “Education of the Poet” adds further complexity and nuance to a poem that already exists in liminality, irrepressibly and simultaneously informed by illness and retaliating against the constructs illness affords. Arguably, the attachment of the subject of anorexia to verse suggests an inherent romanticization of self-denial through disordered eating. Furthering this argument, Glück even goes so far as to attribute her poetic prowess and creative mastery as a poet to her disordered eating in an essay contribution to the anthology *Going Hungry*.⁶ This seeming paradox perfectly resonates with the very subject of anorexia as well as with Glück’s own characterization of her writing process.

⁵ The DSM-V, the most updated version of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual), “substantially decreased the frequency of EDNOS [eating disorders not otherwise specified] diagnoses and increased the number of cases of anorexia nervosa” (Ornstein et al. 303). Each new version of the DSM contains modifications that alter the diagnostic criteria for the disease and the most recent changes and additions to the anorexia nervosa diagnosis include: “the amenorrhea criterion has been removed, there is more reliance on the behavioral manifestations of the disorder with less emphasis on cognitive systems and self-report, and, most notably, the explicit weight criterion has been removed” (304). While the increase in anorexia nervosa diagnoses is certainly saddening, confirming the growing eating disorder victim pool, much of the increase in anorexia nervosa diagnoses specifically results from the DSM-V diagnostic shift as well as heightened awareness about the disorder. In fact, the increase in anorexia diagnoses as opposed to EDNOS diagnoses may actually be seen as beneficial from a doctor-patient perspective. The ambiguity and liminality of EDNOS as a disorder (constituting a “somewhere within the spectrum” yet not confirmed disorder) complicates the available treatment options for those diagnosed. Being classified as an anorexic, then, allows patients who previously would have been thrust into a garbled, “not otherwise specified” category, to seize some legitimacy for their disorder and provides them more hopeful prospects of recovery.

⁶ *Going Hungry*, a collection of essays compiled by a reporter at The New York Sun exploring the ramifications and motivations of the anorexic mind. Rather than glamorize, the collection brings attention and awareness to intentional starvation and its witnessed

Glück's very explanation of what constitutes effective poetic language, in her opinion, reconstitutes the contradiction of the anorexic mind. In her autobiographical essay entitled "Education of the Poet," Glück writes: "...the sort of sentence I was drawn to, which reflected these tastes [simple vocabulary, possibilities of context, subtleties of timing and pacing, etc.] and native habit of mind, was paradox, which has the added advantage of nicely rescuing the dogmatic nature from a too moralizing rhetoric" (5). Glück's preference for simplified, diminished vocabulary and the hidden "scale"—the wittiness of which is not lost on me—of meaning behind those words reflects an anorexic pining for lessening, dwindling, practically disappearing. She associates minimalism with writing well; her artistic tastes tend toward leanness: crystallized language, proportion and unfussiness, streamlined text. Glück comments, "I loved those poems that seemed so small on the page but that swelled in the mind" ("Education of the Poet" 5). This concept of saying much with very little parallels the anorexic's aspiration to construct a self of grandiosity by achieving, basically, emaciation. This emaciation emerges at the poetic level in the form of brief, fragmented lines and simplified language.

Further identifying an anorexic aesthetic or tendency in her poetic style of writing, Glück appears to struggle to free her verse of regular formal constructs, associating her expression of language with a kind of wanton lawlessness. Though I concede that this reputed disregard of form may be attributed to the modernist moment in which she writes, I argue that intentional dissonance and formulaic failing in her poetry constitute symptoms and/or retaliatory gestures. Arguably, her choice of poetic form surpasses even the unconventionality of modern poetry and thus produces a new kind of

connections to dedication, aspiration, and success, especially in creative and intellectual spheres.

illness-informed poetry, the lawlessness of which engenders multiple, sometimes conflicting messages of recovery, retribution (insofar as retaliating against one's own diseased mind on the page serves as a contrived vengeance, exposing the victimizing capacities of the disease and conveying its failure to fully gain control), and psychological turmoil. This lawlessness, dare I say subversiveness, of verse may be grasped in her work by its incorporation of adjacent, oppositional line fragments; commonplace language; a prose-poetical quality; aberrant, short lines; a disparity between apparent bluntness and subtextual feeling and power; and a simultaneous reliance on repetition and omission.

Paradoxically, this unregulated style breeds power because it is the poet's very artistry and method which constitute the poem as a space of control: "The only real exercise of will is negative: we have toward what we write the power of veto" ("Education of the Poet" 3). This statement dually suggests a craving for power and a desire to deplete, to remove. Glück perceives the fundamental experience of the writer to derive from the act of creating and then, gradually, cutting down the text to a preferable size and form, dictating the desirable weight of certain lines and disposing of those that don't fit within her ideal. She devises her own form and her own rule system for that form, creating a poem far more tightly controlled at the personal level than even the villanelle or sonnet. Glück's later contention that she prefers that poetry "request or crave a listener" adheres to the anorexic's desire for external approval and validation ("Education of the Poet" 9). The intent of anorexia is not self-destructive, though tragically that is how it presents. Rather, the anorexic aims to construct "a plausible self," one which is externally recognized as perfect ("Education of the Poet" 11). Glück aligns

this motivating factor with destruction, thus insinuating the causal relationship between the two, in “The Deviation:” “it is the same need to perfect,/ of which death is the mere by-product” (63-64).

Louise Glück and “Dedication to Hunger”

The confused and disordered internal logic of the anorexic is especially manifested in the poetry of Glück. Her poem “Dedication to Hunger” from her collection *Descending Figure* situates the convergence of writerly and bodily anorexic impulses in a way that resembles the work of psychologist Morag Macsween: “Anorexics enact with their bodies the process that Western logic inscribes: they physically demonstrate its subtext,” through the process of cutting away, fragmenting, and adhering to sparseness of form (252). Glück’s process of poetic production articulates this anorexic logic, this tendency toward verse minification and syntactic suppression, while simultaneously hinting at her oppositional agency through fierce application of suggestive aberrant form and by displacing the anorexic subject into the past. Her poetry constitutes an act of writing that extracts freedom from the confines of the disordered script of the anorexic mind and serves as an interface through which she can act as an agent of negation, willingly violating order and transferring the projection of the mind’s twisted ideals from her physical body to that of her text.

Though the fourth section of Glück’s poem “Dedication to Hunger” most powerfully enacts an anorexic aesthetic and style, the first three sections collectively suggest a motivation for the speaker’s struggle with anorexia. She demonstrates this, first, through a thematic of self-cancellation across generations and, second, by casting the subject of maturation into womanhood as unaesthetic and destructive. Glück not only

writes in the anorexic mode, indicated by the poem's syntax and diction, but also hints at the motivational philosophy behind her writing as a means of elucidating the condition of the anorexic as a societally-victimized and marginalized individual.

The first three sections establish a motive which may well illustrate an anorexic philosophy: an ingrained fear of femininity and womanhood. These sections constitute a kind of retrospective detailing of certain childhood experiences that were influential in the shaping of the anorexic philosophy of this poetic persona. Glück's motivation and philosophy for writing function on both the cathartic and instructive level. A re-evaluation of the past and an attempt to derive correlations between experience and present mindset offer a cathartic role for the sufferer (especially one whose anorexic logic wills them to desire understanding and controlled explanation). Alternatively, Glück's philosophy behind writing poetry may be seen as a means of commentary under the guise of creative expression—the veil of poetic license and artistry—expounding upon the human condition and the ills put upon humanity by societal constructs (such as the media-dispersed ideal of beauty). This interpretation of Glück's writing philosophy is one which suggests her desire to raise awareness about anorexia as a disorder and to artfully propose an underlying contributor to the mentality: the inculcation of self-abnegation, especially among women.

The first section of *Dedication to Hunger* introduces the idea of the feminine as a foundation for rejection:

1/ *FROM THE SUBURBS*

They cross the yard
and at the back door

the mother sees with pleasure
how alike they are, father and daughter—
I know something of that time.
The little girl purposefully
swinging her arms, laughing
her stark laugh:

It should be kept secret, that sound.
It means she's realized
that he never touches her.
She is a child; he could touch her
if he wanted to. (1-13)

The section begins with the third person plural pronoun “They,” a reference that excludes the poetic persona and at once creates an impression of distancing and isolation. From a feminine-escapist lens, “They” may be considered “in anaphoric reference to a pronoun of undetermined gender: he or she” (“They” OED 2). This ambiguous reference, the antecedent of which turns out to be “father and daughter,” serves to further distance the daughter—currently in a state of girlhood—from the more strict gendered binaries of male and female (which would have been accomplished through the use of “He and she” as opposed to “They”) and, more importantly, from the mother herself, a symbol of adult sexuality and womanhood (Glück 4). The space between the father-daughter pair and the mother is further lengthened by Glück’s use of a dash. The placement of the dash not only elongates the visual separation of the “daughter” from the mother, the “I” speaker,

but also creates a verbal disjunction in the process of reading (4). Perhaps the attachment of the dash to the word “daughter” is even more purposive in that it lends a sense of perpetuity and stasis to the daughter character, suggesting a stagnation in girlhood and a prolonged status as a “daughter,” a female child whose position is considered inferior to parental figures and inextricably conjoined to youth.

Another interesting aspect of the father-daughter relationship implicit in Glück’s diction is a kind of enigmatic, almost incestuous connotation. The laugh, a symbol not only of youthfulness but also of pleasure, is cast by its parallel position in the last stanza, as a remnant of innocence. Innocence is in imminent threat of being stifled through a suggestively sexual, violative act between the father and daughter. This interpretation holds particular merit when the poem is read through an “anorexic” lens because the incidence of sexual abuse in eating disorder patients appears significant.⁷ Sexual abuse would certainly constitute a detrimental factor to the young daughter’s perception of womanhood, especially as it relates to sexual tension and practice, and contribute to her conflicted feelings about femininity.

The apparent failure of the daughter to affiliate herself with femininity from the outset of the poem casts her as one who lacks the feminine qualities associated with the mother (instead bearing likeness to her father) and, by extension, suggests a rejection of these qualities (4). The mother engages in self-suppression, deriving pleasure from her exclusion from the group, commenting as a removed bystander. She distances herself from the girl and acknowledges that her daughter has not yet realized or embraced the

⁷ A PubMed study showed: “Fifty percent of both anorectic and bulimic patients reported a history of sexual abuse while only 28% of a non-anorexic, non-bulimic control population reported similar problems (p less than 0.01)” (Mehler and Weiner).

implications of maturation, instead choosing to revel, laughing with her father (6-10). Whether the daughter herself evades womanhood, through physical detachment from her mother and reliance on girlish playfulness, or whether her mother strives to reinforce her daughter's naiveté and pre-womanliness in an effort to keep the girl safe from the anxieties that accompany maturation remains unclear. In either case, however, the negation of the feminine, characterized by the mother's willful lack of involvement in the playtime ritual and by the daughter's pleasure in lieu of the presence of her mother, is apparent.

The second section of the poem features a parallel process of self-cancellation:

2/ *GRANDMOTHER*

'Often I would stand at the window—
your grandfather
was a young man then—
waiting, in the early evening.'

That is what marriage is.
I watch the tiny figure
changing to a man
as he moves toward her,
the last light rings in his hair.
I do not question
their happiness. And he rushes in
with his young man's hunger,

so proud to have taught her that:
his kiss would have been
clearly tender—

Of course, of course. Except
it might as well have been
his hand over her mouth. (14-31)

The verses inextricably link rejection and powerlessness. The woman's role in marriage is characterized as one of subservience, necessitating a requisite validation of the husband, and a satiation of external hunger (25-31). Glück incorporates hunger in this section as a domineering, masculine intensity to which the grandmother passively submits. Interestingly, the concept of hunger becomes highly gendered, especially when considered in relation to the poem's fourth section, which I discuss later in my thesis. Here, hunger is equivalent to sexual voracity, the young man "changing to a man" as he acts on that hunger, that sexual drive (20). (This jarringly contrasts the female's "dedication to hunger" in section four in which hunger is described synonymously with a "fear of death" and thus paradoxically gravitates toward avoidance rather than sexual edacity.)

The tone of the verses is rather subdued, and deceptively so, suppressing true emotion even on the page. The ending stanza hints at an underlying suppression on a formal level, complicating the kiss between husband and wife that appeared "tender" but really constituted a defensive reaction, a submissiveness and cancelling out of personal power so as to prevent her partner's aggression. In this section, the feminine is abnegated

to make way for and to ensure servility to the masculine. From a Freudian perspective, the emphasis of the text is on what is withheld: the gaps and silences intimate the renderings of the unconscious and also serve as a way to detach and disembody the self of the poetic persona.

The third section, Eros, returns to the father-daughter pair introduced in the first section but the identification between the two has altered:

3/ *EROS*

To be male, always
to go to women
and be taken back
into the pierced flesh:

I suppose
memory is stirred.
And the girl child
who wills herself
into her father's arms
likewise loved him
second. Nor is she told
what need to express.
There is a look one sees,
The mouth somehow desperate—

Because the bond

Cannot be proven. (32-47)

The daughter appears to have grown and undergone “cultural mediation” (Heywood 45). The willful act of identification described here is posed as enigmatic: “the mouth somehow desperate—/Because the bond/cannot be proven” (45-47). Taking into account the definition of “desperate” as describing one “whose recovery is past hope” dovetails the twin concepts of acculturation and maturation to the concept of disorder and suggests an irreversible trajectory from the former to the latter (“Desperate” OED 3). This interpretation is rather stark because it presupposes a triumph of disorder, attaching consistent suffering to the inevitable patterns of life and societal assimilation while failing to provide any justification for the correlational dynamic. Glück refers to this unproven bond, subtly alluding to the “unreadable text” of anorexia as “a system of signs that refuses to signify” (Heywood 64). The meaning of the disease, the specific reason for its emergence, remains secret and unclear, which only encases it in more obscurity.

This section also throws into rather cold and unappealing relief the bond between man and woman, the subject of sexuality, through the exploration of the fraught relationship of the girl to her father. The unprovable nature of the bond and the violence with which it is associated, intimated by sharp diction such as “pierced” and “desperate,” serve to excoriate eroticism and sexuality. As such, the bond of Eros—the mature yearning for sexual pleasure—is characterized as a victimizing longing and reiterates the self-cancellation theme through the relinquishment of the sexual self.

These first three sections establish a consistent thematic of dis-ease surrounding the process of maturation into womanhood. The coping mechanism employed by the

characters from each section is self-cancellation, indicative of low self-esteem and a general feeling of submissiveness and lack of control. Having established these emotions and proclivities as generalizable to the vulnerable female (the pre-anorexic, so to speak), I advance to an analysis of the fourth section, arguably the most psychologically complex and anorexically-attuned of Glück's work.

The fourth section of Glück's poem, entitled "The Deviation," illustrates both stylistically and topically, some of the trials and fixations of the anorexic mind, prominently exhibiting an anorexic aesthetic. This section engages in a very physical process of self-cancellation in which the anorectic experiences dejection and starvation through an emphasis on bodily form. The poetic persona speaks as an agent of negation, willing destruction and fostering a mindset that has been associated with eating disorder patients in clinical studies performed by doctors such as Hilde Bruch: "making out of [her] body [her] very own kingdom where [she is] the absolute tyrant and dictator" (65).

4/ The Deviation

It begins quietly
in certain female children:
the fear of death, taking as its form
dedication to hunger,
because a woman's body
is a grave; it will accept
anything. I remember
lying in bed at night
touching the soft, digressive breasts,

touching, at fifteen,
the interfering flesh
that I would sacrifice
until the limbs were free
of blossom and subterfuge: I felt
what I feel now, aligning these words—
it is the same need to perfect,
of which death is the mere by-product. (48-64)

When defining deviation as “the act of turning aside from a path or track; swerving,” one detects hopefulness and positivity with respect to recovery (OED 1a). Interpreted another way, the deflection hinted by the poem also suggests a deviation from normative appearance: the anorexic occupies a self-inflicted skeletal form distinct from the natural, healthy proportions of the human body and from the fuller form of past generations. The deviation could also refer to the divergence of self from body as the anorexic renounces her own body until she has attained the “ideal self” as conceptualized by her disordered mind.

Glück first references her disorder with the enigmatic “It,” creating an identifiable entity prescribed power by way of its granted tangibility as a pronoun (“Dedication to Hunger” 48). She highlights the surreptitiousness and almost imperceptibility of the entrancing disorder by characterizing its beginning as “quiet” (48). This qualification may seem to evince a kind of peace or serenity, an initial conception that is haltingly juxtaposed by its association with “the fear of death” (50). Equating quietness with fear suggests an awe-inducing stupefaction of terror and equating it with death similarly

silences any intimations of repose. The assertion that the disorder, the so-called dedication to hunger, begins in female children appears out of place with the ensuing declaration that “a woman’s body/ *is* a grave” (52-53).

A more in-depth analysis reveals Glück’s astute alignment of phrases, elucidating their implicit messages about the nature of anorexia. The fluid inclusion of both the adolescent and the mature, the child and the woman, reflects the lifespan of the disease—one in which, once it afflicts, constantly battles to reemerge within the sufferer. The phrasing subtly suggests the intentions behind many females who suffer from anorexia: a primary anxiety about the female body and sexuality and a fear of actualizing this transition from adolescence that effectively thrusts them into a world of full exposure and responsibility. Occupying the prototypical role of woman, complete with stereotypical curvy hips and supple breasts terrified the adolescent Glück because it “threatened her uniqueness” (“Education of the Poet” 11). Anorexia acted as a means by which she could forestall puberty and womanhood, creating a sort of “gender halfway house” for Glück to occupy as she strayed from the conventionally womanly and stagnated as woman’s pre-pubescent corollary (Becker 145). Ironically, Glück asserts that the woman’s body will “accept anything” (“Dedication to Hunger” 53-54). She portrays one’s “dedication to hunger” as something a body will accept, rather than something a body will evade and fight against. The female body accepts even rejection. This conveys the resilience of the body and also suggests the overweening power the mind can have over something as concrete and seemingly invincible as the human body. By bending to hunger, contorting to the whims of the mind, the body is proven to be vanquishable.

Glück's characterization of the female body as willfully submissive and signifying death raises the question of volitional acquiescence, which is to say chosen adherence to a socially delineated role. In other words, volitional acquiescence presupposes an ambiguity about agency and choice. Indeed, volitional acquiescence seems to be less empirical and unidirectional in nature. Rather, it seems to rely upon a kind of long-term performativity in which psychosocial scripts and norms are internalized and affect what ostensibly seems to be the free choice of an individual. Recognizing this paradox illuminates Glück's description of the female body because it begs the question of intentionality in those suffering from anorexia. Identity formation and role responsibilities—including but not limited to codes of conduct, priorities, and definitions of "normality"—depend upon an internalization of extrinsic categorization which society confers on individuals.⁸ Choice, therefore, allegedly starts with stable and established preferences or constructs and, as such, is normatively constrained. Interpreted in this way, the propensity for voluntary submission and decision-making appears impossible because the individual is always a secondary agent in a constructed society. Individuals may believe they are consciously deciding to look a certain way or fulfill a certain persona, but this desire is underpinned by societal interpellation; as such, though seemingly agentic, individuals actually lack power and are passive players in society's ideological

⁸ The medical regime and media realm may both be said to form identity and role expectations in an interpellative fashion, which compels individuals to perceive of themselves and their bodies in a particular way. This idea of ideological interpellation advances the argument that regimes, ISA's, and their requisite ideologies maintain control by reproducing subjects who believe their social position and social role to be naturally ordained.

game.⁹ Glück's declaration, "a woman's body/ *is* a grave" (52-53), reiterates this paradox of volitional acquiescence and tacitly chastises society's construct of the female body with its blunt, despondent diction and phrasing. The italicization of "is" suggests that the professed characterization constitutes a strong societal stereotype both internalized by women from cultural media and channeled by women into society. The paradox of volitional acquiescence parallels the inherent contradiction of anorexia, a disease which seeks to enhance self-worth, reputation, and grandiosity of being through acts of renunciation and retreat.

The poem engages in a retreat of sorts, treading into the seeming oneiric mode as Glück recalls her self-conscious bedtime rituals:

lying in bed at night
touching the soft, digressive breasts,
touching, at fifteen,
the interfering flesh
that I would sacrifice
until the limbs were free
of blossom and subterfuge. (58-61)

The act of touch is foregrounded with its parallel repetition in two consecutive lines, thereby compounding and correlating the "digressive breasts" with "interfering flesh"

⁹ Interestingly, this reading casts anorexia nervosa as a symptom of societal construction rather than a disorder of the psyche. Arguably, anorexia may be perceived as a socially-constructed disease perpetuated by society itself. Insofar as this is true, society then holds the key to mediating this seemingly pervasive psychological disorder and Glück becomes more of a social arbiter figure, holding a mirror up to society to show its faults. "The Deviation" is less of a poem of catharsis or psychological turmoil and more of a template by which readers may recognize the interpellative consequences of a society with a skewed perception of normativity.

(56, 58). The characterization of the breasts as “digressive” interestingly evokes an image of their placement on the body, raised above the abdomen and chest and falling to either side of the body when reclined in a prostrate position. Additionally, the adjective suggests the deviation from the desired form of the anorexic: one of angularity and bones as opposed to one of fullness and flesh. Diction of surrender and deception—“sacrifice”, “free,” “subterfuge”—suggests the feelings of entrapment suffered by the anorexic as she battles against the very institution of her body, depriving it of sustenance in an effort to prevent its maturation, its “blossom” (61). The concept of touch as it is expressed here evinces a sense of violation as if, alone and obscured by the dark, she possesses the power to cause undue harm and violence to herself. This feeling of victimization at one’s own hands speaks to the discord between the agentic, healthy self and the domineering anorexic mind.

The concluding lines of “The Deviation” make clear Glück’s personal motivation for anorexia: “the need to perfect” (15). She shrouds this desire in a satiric veil of delusion by clarifying perfection as a need “of which death is the mere byproduct” (16). The adjective “mere” serves to belittle and detract from the seriousness of death, an implicit rendering of anorexic mentality and justification. Glück reiterates in these two lines the concept of volitional acquiescence discussed earlier with regard to the woman’s body as a grave. The repetition of the concept here effectively conflates perfectionist mentality with the woman’s body. This psychosocial attribution is further gendered and by way of the poem’s explicit connection to “certain female children” (“Descending Figure” 2). The 16-line block of this poem may be seen as a testament to Glück’s 16 years of ignorance during which she was plagued by her eating disorder. She sought

psychoanalysis in high school, a time when she would have been around the age of sixteen.¹⁰ Thus, her intermingled acknowledgements of anorexic mentality and her own body image distortions and anxieties reflect her thought processes right at the time she began to confront her issues and seek treatment. As such, this poem alludes to both recovery and suffering and can be read with inspiration or pity, awareness or ignorance, depending on the reader's personal state of physical and mental health.

Elaborating on the concept of self construction and motivation brings us back to the very title of Glück's poem: "Dedication to Hunger." Reflecting on this poem as a cathartic account on Glück's behalf personalizes the title as a declaration of her own commitment to anorexia as an adolescent. Glück admits, "[By refusing food], I claimed ownership of my body" ("Education of the Poet" 10). Thus, her dedication to hunger reflects a projection of control toward satiation in an effort to solidify ownership, control, and power, of her self. She devotes herself to hunger in service to the pursuit of a disordered purpose, a delusional attempt to claim control and possession through means of self-harm and starvation ("Hunger" OED 2*fig*). Considering "hunger" in more of a metaphoric context, the title fosters implications about Glück's desire for praise and recognition. This dually connects to both her anorexic struggle and her writing journey as an author. A more hopeful message emanates from "dedication" when considered in light of the alternative definition of the word as "a commemoration" (OED 1c). When regarded as honoring the memory of hunger, the compulsion to starve and the obsession

¹⁰ Glück informs us that, "by the time [she] was sixteen," her anorexia had reached the point at which she could either die or try to live and seek help through psychoanalysis (*Proofs & Theories* 11). "[Psychoanalysis] taught [her] to use [her] tendency to object to articulated ideas on [her] own ideas, taught [her] to use doubt, to examine [her] own speech for its evasions and excisions" (12).

with thinness become short-lived experiences of the past. The revocation of this past obsession connotes the propensity for healing and recovery for those afflicted with anorexia. Alternatively, one may detect remnants of disorder, a suggestion of the triumph of anorexic tendencies, if one considers the connotation of “dedication” as an act of celebration and memorialization. Reading “Dedication to Hunger” in more of a glamorized light suggests a reminiscence for compulsions embraced in her past and suggests that, even in a state of recovery, the potential for relapse is possible, albeit latent.

The Elusive Emily Dickinson: The Ascetic Aesthetic as a Historical Analog of the Anorexic Aesthetic

Emily Dickinson's poetry offers an alternative to the anorexic aesthetic found in the contemporary poetry of Louise Glück. Dickinson's poetry is differentiated from Glück's in part by its metaphoric dimensions, as well as in the various ways that Dickinson adeptly weaves the anorexic aesthetic into the structural fabric of her work exclusively through themes and punctuation in a formal mode distinct from yet related to the anorexic aesthetic. By considering Dickinson's poetry, we come to frame the anorexic aesthetic as a kind of modern-day vestige of an ascetic aesthetic and tradition composed during the Victorian Age. As I will show, the overlap in relevance of these two similar styles and logical perspectives (by which I mean asceticism and anorexia) grants greater adaptability and perpetuity to what I earlier defined as an anorexic aesthetic in the poetry of Glück by extending its purview to centuries past. Thus, Dickinson's poetry challenges those who may see the anorexic aesthetic as purely nosological in its interpretive grant, instead affording the poetic properties of anorexia more freedom to lithely manifest in poems irrespective of the poet's medical diagnosis. Dickinson's poetry proves that the anorexic aesthetic is not to be understood merely in terms of its symptomological dimensions but as a stylistic analog, an as yet unacknowledged relative, to today's anorexic style, which may also be seen as having some of its origins in religious (specifically Christian) ascetic traditions.¹¹ In light of present eating disorders, ascetic

¹¹ The consideration of asceticism as a historical predecessor to the "anorexic aesthetic" rather pessimistically suggests an impasse, a stagnation in societal progress when seen through the lens of contemporary eating disorders. Though Dickinson and Glück's literary moments are more than a century apart, the societal manipulation of beauty holds fast across both periods. The external corset of Dickinson's era (as a symbol of

rituals and philosophies may be seen as traditions that historically have championed a mortification of the flesh for the purpose of bringing one's spirit closer to the Divine.

I do not wish to assert a postmortem diagnosis of anorexia nervosa of Emily Dickinson but, rather, to detect an anorexic aesthetic within her work through the creative interpretation of her innovative and idiosyncratic style. I am not the first to think about Dickinson's poetry in relation to anorexia. Literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman recognizes in Dickinson's smallness, an anorexic aesthetic at work, mentioning her tendencies for unvaried patterns and contained experiences: "[Her chaste mode of expression] is not a fatty degeneration but lean degeneration: a powerful appealing anorexia" (139). Professor and PhD Heather Kirk Thomas' scholarly article approaches Dickinson's poetry even more nosologically, just short of tendering an anorexia diagnosis in the poet, using Dickinson's biographical information and letters as evidentiary support bolstering the poet's postmortem diagnosis. My analysis of Dickinson's poetry is more in line with Hartman's, looking at belletristic aspects of the work so as to see what a "powerful appealing anorexia" might mean when considered further in Emily Dickinson's poetry.

I consider Dickinson's leanness of expression, her poetry's anorexic aesthetic, to be a product primarily of the male-dominated literary sphere of her cultural moment. The androgyny of the 19th century appears to leech into the writing community so that one may see the radical revisionary efforts of Dickinson's first editors, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd—especially the normalizing of Dickinson's idiosyncratic punctuation and the changing of her words—as a darker manifestation of

femininity, social class, and patriarchal hegemony) reappears now in the form of fad diets and eating disorders (symbols of the media's commercial hierarchy and authority; an internalized "corset" of self-restraint and angularity, if you will).

societal influence on artistic production based on more normative perceptions of beauty of the time. Rather sinisterly, these editors “disfigured” (and “winnowed away”) the public body that Dickinson created—editorial revisions serving as their own physical embodiment of an impulse—and thus by their editorial violations repurposed in the poetic medium society’s more narrowly defined constructions of beauty. Poetry may well be a constructed body but, before any editorial input and reconfiguration, it is a body constructed by a self—one might even say a transmutation of the self—and thus reflects an agentic confidence rather than a submissive winnowing to public decree so that the anorexic aesthetic, the seeming act of the neurotic, becomes symbolic. In other words, Dickinson’s departure in thought and aesthetics from the conventional allow her to construct a public body through poetry that corresponds less to other’s ideas of beauty and more to her own unique vision, even as it embodies a lithe, sinewy shape (more in line with the contemporary “waif” than the Rubanesque).¹²

Deleteriously limited by the conventional literary and societal forces of her time, Dickinson became a pioneer of sorts with her use of more eccentric punctuation, profoundly going against the dominant contemporary aesthetics—aesthetics which

¹² The idea of society’s construction of beauty is particularly fascinating to consider alongside the period’s simultaneous construction of normalcy. Disabilities studies specialist Lennard Davis speaks of the hegemony of normalcy: “To understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body...” (23). Davis situates the birth of the word “normal” and its coming into consciousness as we understand it today [as ‘constituting, conforming to, not deviating or differing from, the common type or standard, regular, usual’] in the period 1840-1860 (24). This is particularly interesting to consider in light of the time of Dickinson’s scholarship, which began roughly around the time that ‘normalcy’ became a constructed term. Thus, society dictated perceptions of beauty and created the foundations of normalcy from which illness, disorder, and maladaptivity (all terms associated with the 20 and 21st century classification of anorexia) arose.

seemed to privilege a more regularized meter and metrical form. Whether or not Dickinson herself suffered from anorexia, I argue that her use of particular punctuation, the inclusion of diction relating to hunger, and her reliance on themes of renunciation (an emblem of Christian ascetic tradition) contribute to what I have identified as an anorexic aesthetic. Focusing on these elements, I will provide an effective means for considering certain formal and thematic aspects of her poetry. Analyzing common themes of starvation and renunciation, perspectival choice of her poetic voice, and idiosyncratic punctuation—especially the frequent utilization of the em-dash, I will elucidate both the strengths and weaknesses of what Hartman so aptly terms “a powerful appealing anorexia.”

Starvation (Hunger and Thirst)

Among Dickinson’s poems are a notable number of selections dealing directly or indirectly with food, describing the internal deprivation of the poetic persona.

Preoccupation with starvation and thirst strongly connects to the anorexic aesthetic as research shows a correlation between being deprived of a food and consequently craving that food (Polivy et al 301). The frequent usage of food-related diction and a theme of starvation in poetry, then, hint at the poet’s attempt to disengage from feelings of hunger and craving by externalizing them on the poetic page. This act parallels common acts of anorexics to keep extensive, detailed lists of the food they ingest, obsessively counting calories. Writing about food, and more specifically writing about it in such detail, could feasibly constitute a coping mechanism used by the poet to legitimize her starvation and to record her own feat of self-control, thereby placating her disordered conscience. For Dickinson particularly, the hunger and longing at the core of her poetry seems

metaphoric; she resorts to food metaphors to make palpable her spiritual struggle. Thus, the anorexic aesthetic of her poetry's starvation thematic serves to dramatize the poet's spiritual hunger. As author and professor Beth Maclay Doriani posits, "Dickinson often speaks of self-denial in terms of suffering, proclaiming that spiritual awareness comes from the suffering associated with self-denial" (170). Dickinson's self-annihilating impulses (manifested in the act of starvation) may be seen as a product of her asceticism; she conquers her bodily appetite so as to transform it into a more "acceptable" spiritual appetite. Even if we may not strictly describe Dickinson as anorectic, she expresses herself in anorectic terms and codifies this leaning in her poetry through the anorexic aesthetic.

Interestingly, her references to food and drink specifically call attention to proportion rather than sensorial aspects. In keeping with an anorexic aesthetic, the emphasis lies on size as opposed to qualities pertaining to taste and texture: a preoccupation with appearance and magnitude emanates while any properties experienced through the act of ingestion are peculiarly removed. This distanced description of food and drink suggests Dickinson's removed stance from the experience of ingesting food and a desire to withdraw from organicity (from the natural world) by shifting away from foodstuffs and those entities which lend vitality. The shift of focus away from that which sustains and vitalizes gives us as readers pause to consider what then gives purpose to the life of the narrative "I."¹³ She cultivated a lifestyle of

¹³ I would like to acknowledge that I recognize the shortcomings of my argument in its foundational assumption that the poet and the poetic persona are closely related, if not one and the same. To support my position, I briefly reference the work of Dickinson scholar Paul Crumbley whose analytical piece entitled *Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson* offers an interpretation of Dickinson's polyvocality that may be

reclusiveness and renunciation, denying the needs of her social, worldly self, and constructing her own environment within which she could dictate exactly where and how to satisfy her spiritual and emotional needs. Unsurprisingly, she accomplished this through writing poetry; thus, poetry became not only her livelihood but her sustenance. By denying her hunger she, in effect, actualized a new form of poetic hunger: later in life, the more she appears to succumb to anorexic tendencies (judged, for example, by the duration of her isolation and, by implication, her apparently Christian form of ascetic devotion), the more writing she produces.

By career's end, Dickinson writes extensively—a veritable gorging of poesis and celebration of the poetic body—and in some ways thereby transfers her emotions and vitality to her poetic persona. An artist devoted to her craft, she willingly, knowingly and purposefully reinvents herself so that her mind is reconstructed and made even more shapely in her writing; we may see this process as an indefatigable strategy for immortalization through text and glorification, one might even say deification, of poetry itself. Even more compelling about her self-reconstruction through poetry is the durable, immortal body she was able to produce as a poet.

extrapolated to support my conflation of the poet and the poetic persona. Crumbley argues that Dickinson uses multivocal strategies to convey a perspectively-divided personality in both her poetry and in her personal letters to Thomas Higginson (115). The fact that polyvocal essences appear in both Dickinson's poetry and in her more personal correspondences intimates a parallelism in voice and prompts us to appreciate and consider the rather scintillating possibility that Dickinson's "I" in her poems and her "I" in her letters are not far removed. Both the poems and the letters express an insatiable need for a response from an addressee who rarely responds; the focus of her poetry rather dramatically orients focus back to her rather than to her addressee. I believe that this association is certainly worthy of further study and find it a compelling basis to serve as a foundational presumption for my thesis.

Dickinson's apparent preoccupation with starvation manifests itself in the form and diction of her poems. Commenting on this reductive tendency, literary critic Heather Kirk Thomas says, "Less was more for Dickinson, and this triumph of renunciation informs her poetry with a minimalist's art. Only in her powerful act of denial did she find personal identity" (222). Whether the act was unconscious or intentional, the metaphors of starving and thirsting intimate a self-deprivative quality all too reminiscent of the anorexic logic, and by extension the ascetic philosophy of the day.¹⁴ By employing tropes of food intake and a refusal to eat, Dickinson interrogates a kind of desire based on the dialectical relationship between pleasure and pain. Her poems appear to ponder pain, symbolized by appetite neglect and hunger, as a pathway to pleasure or triumph. Thus, the art of the anorexic's survival mentality manifests in the art of Dickinson's poetry:

God gave a Loaf to every Bird —

But just a Crumb — to Me —

I dare not eat it — tho' I starve —

My poignant luxury —

¹⁴ UC San Diego's medieval history specialist Nancy Caciola explains, "Religious women not only showed their devotion to God through their ability to control their desire for food, but they also were able to separate themselves from the culturally-ascribed negative female traits ... which caused them to be seen as inferior to men (Caciola 159). In addition to perceiving of fasting as a means of purging some of the impurities associated with the human body, abstinence from food was also considered to be a spiritual exercise that improved the state of the soul (Bynum 222). Ultimately, the soul was considered superior to the body, due to the body's subjectivity to age, illness, and disease. The female body was considered inferior to the male body because of their greater need to engage in purging activities, such as sweating, urination, and menstruation" (236). As such, women had the most to gain from asceticism because the tradition allowed them to disassociate from their bodies and to focus purely on the condition of their soul which, for all intents and purposes, was equal to that of men. Thus, women were able to circumvent inequality and subjugation through the self-deprivative, food-based ascetic practices which denied the physical body for the sake of the superior, ungendered soul.

To own it — touch it —
Prove the feat — that made the Pellet mine —
Too happy — for my Sparrow's chance —
For Ampler Coveting —

It might be Famine — all around —
I could not miss an Ear —
Such Plenty smiles upon my Board —
My Garner shows so fair —

I wonder how the Rich — may feel —
An Indiaman — An Earl —
I deem that I — with but a Crumb —
Am Sovereign of them all — (791)

Dickinson's precious talk of crumbs and perceived power through weakness and physical shrinking invokes the illogical dichotomy of the anorexic at the self-same time that it invites a parallel consideration of the poet's asceticism (and religious asceticism more generally). To reiterate, the illogical dichotomy of the anorexic is the desire to achieve grandiosity and power through the contrarian impulses to exercise self-denial and to will bodily destruction. Dickinson invokes the generic idiom "she eats like a bird" with her inclusion of bird imagery and her identification with a bird with phrases such as "for my Sparrow's chance" (7). She enviously ponders the experience of richer men, the word

“rich” conveying a double meaning of both wealthy fulfillment and robust fullness of flavor. She concludes that she is “sovereign of them all” with just a crumb yet denies herself even that sustenance, proclaiming “I dare not eat it” (3). She characterizes this compelled starvation as a “poignant luxury,” a description which suggests keen distress while antithetically connoting indulgence and privilege. She bears this power struggle because she is the ultimate agent behind her hunger; she becomes autonomous or “sovereign” by refusing even the crumb that is provided for her. Ironically, Dickinson finds a rare savoring in her self-appointed period of starving. While I concede that the crumb may be seen as a vestige of the poet’s spiritual longing, as something left to her by God, her seclusion and spiritual hunger may be seen as evidence of Dickinson’s religious asceticism—a practice which, although meant to ultimately become one with God, relies on the agency of the ascetic individual to consciously adhere to such a philosophy for life. Dickinson must accept “just a crumb” and, even more significantly, must exercise self-discipline to the detriment of her own physical body for the sake and glorification of a higher power. Thus, though redemption is implicit in the line “God gave a loaf to every bird—/But just a Crumb—to Me,” this redemption may not come wholly from God since it is the speaker’s will that must be decided upon and submitted to in the liminal time frame and space of the poet’s life on earth. Such self-abnegation and conscious submission recalls the anorexic logic to engage in destructive self-discipline, intentionally denying the body in order to, albeit illogically, construct a self of grandiosity through emaciation.

Dickinson’s fear, which emerges rather subtly from “God gave a Loaf to every Bird,” becomes more explicit in other hunger-themed poems such as No. 579:

I had been hungry all the years;
My noon had come, to dine;
I, trembling, drew the table near,
And touched the curious wine.

'T was this on tables I had seen,
When turning, hungry, lone,
I looked in windows, for the wealth
I could not hope to own.

I did not know the ample bread,
'T was so unlike the crumb
The birds and I had often shared
In Nature's dining-room.

The plenty hurt me, 't was so new, --
Myself felt ill and odd,
As berry of a mountain bush
Transplanted to the road.

Nor was I hungry; so I found
That hunger was a way
Of persons outside windows,

The entering takes away.

The speaker details how she, starving for so long, is granted an opportunity to eat but refuses, finding that she lacks an appetite for the food. This seems to be a forced lack of appetite, as her “trembling” seems to suggest a physical response to emaciation and a mental fear of food (or from the ascetic perspective a kind of holy hunger). The poem speaks of the paradoxical junction of hunger and refusal. Dickinson characterizes food as “wealth/she could not hope to own,” describing the hopelessness with which she associates satiation and the desire to eat (7-8). She reiterates the bird imagery witnessed in the last poem and expresses the overwhelming anxiety wrought by even her proximity to a loaf as opposed to a crumb of bread. The concluding stanza reiterates the trope of contrariness in desire: temptation and repulsion, satiation and hunger. She recognizes that, for her, the most comfortable stasis, albeit illogical, is hunger, though the suggestion of fear and anguish in acquiescing to that hunger is telling of her underlying mental instability and potential doubts about the utility and effectiveness of the ascetic’s doctrine of renunciation and self-discipline when God “cannot be found” (Dorioni 168).

The concept of starvation and its paralyzing consequences are further scrutinized in “It would have starved a Gnat:”

It would have starved a Gnat —

To live so small as I —

And yet I was a living Child —

With Food's necessity

Upon me — like a Claw —

I could no more remove
Than I could coax a Leech away —
Or make a Dragon — move —(612)

The act of “living small” fosters dual implications of both living with little in seclusion and of having a small physical frame. Dickinson characterizes herself as a child who needs food and is consistently panged with hunger as a result of her failure to attend to that need. Dickinson’s comparison of herself with the inconsequential “gnat,” a tiny fly, further highlights her smallness as does her reversion to simplistic language and hyperbolic similes reminiscent of those that would appear in an explanatory conversation with a young child. The association with childhood not only parallels the anorexic desire to delay maturation into womanhood but also corresponds to the ascetic notion that every person is a child of God.¹⁵

Solipsism

Before I further my analysis of Dickinson’s poetry, I would like to reiterate that I recognize the shortcomings of my argument in its foundational assumption that the poet and the poetic persona are closely related, if not one and the same. However, adopting a Burkean lens and analyzing Dickinson’s poetry as art that imitates life—and more specifically disorder—allows for a creative reinterpretation of her work. The anorexic aesthetic portrayed on the poetic page takes on even more significance and depth when considered alongside the metaphoric dimensions of a specifically Christian aesthetic or religious hunger or longing present in the voice of Dickinson’s poems.

¹⁵ According to the Christian ascetic tradition, those who remained celibate, abstained from marriage, and lived according to ascetic ritual are “*isangeloi* (like the angels) and are children of God, since they are children of the resurrection” (Wimbush and Valantasis 135).

To support my identification of the “I” or poetic persona with Dickinson the poet, consider the author’s seeming solipsism, both in art and in life. Solipsism may be defined as “excessive regard for oneself and one’s own interests; preoccupation with oneself; isolation and solitude” (“solipsism” OED 1). It is a well-known fact that Emily Dickinson published almost no poems while she was alive yet was boosted into enormous popularity four years after her death with the publication of her first book.¹⁶ Her posthumous popularity is significant because, since most of her poetic legacy was not published until after her passing, it appears that Dickinson wrote without the intent of publication; she seemed to write for herself as if she were extremely preoccupied with her own thoughts and was distanced from the outside world.¹⁷ It is possible that Dickinson may never have prepared her poems for publication because she wanted to retain ultimate control over her words and the way in which they appeared on a page. Perhaps she rejected print because she would have then had to yield some of her authority and thus sacrificed certain aspects of structure in the mechanical transcription process necessary to create monotype from handwritten orthography.

¹⁶ Sources vary as to the number of poems published in her lifetime. The editor of the authoritative edition of her poems puts the number at seven (Johnson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, vol. 3, 1207) though recent scholars have suggested a slightly greater or fewer number. In any case, the number is very small compared to the 1775 poems she actually wrote.

¹⁷ The Emily Dickinson museum site describes the peculiar yet fastidious fashion in which Dickinson bound nearly 850 of her poems into packets, or fascicles (Amherst College). These poems were not discovered until after her death and they were unaccompanied by any instructions about their handling or potential for distribution/publication. The site’s scholars also explain the prevailing uncertainty about Dickinson’s desire to publish her work, since roughly ten of her poems appeared in newspapers during her lifetime but her authorization of these publications is unknown and her poetic legacy was large enough to make that small number of published poems seemingly inconsequential and, at the very least, unrepresentative.

Another possible reason for Dickinson's failure to publicize her poetry was an intrinsic awareness of the power of her verse. She was keenly aware of a text's persuasive power and that "[it] can become a weapon in a kind of metaphorical germ warfare" ("Infection in the Sentence"). Thus, Dickinson chose a kind of radical autonomy, both of her self and her poetry, presumably an extension of herself. Perhaps, Dickinson wanted to guard others from the "infection" of her poetry and to remove herself from the surrounding spheres of influence. Resurrecting and repurposing Harold Bloom's theory of the artist's "anxiety of influence," Dickinson may have removed herself so as to prevent crossover and struggle with other artists and poets. She may have recognized the enduring attributes of her work, wishing to keep them close to her and also to remain far from literary circles so as to maintain her uniqueness. If we are to recognize her writerly anorexic aesthetic as symptomatic of an underlying asceticism, her seclusion may be seen as a pre-emptive distancing effort so as to contain her behaviors and perform the most rigorous of self-disciplines, keeping her musings between her own self and God.

This speculation of control-seeking and perceived singleness finds reinforcement in Dickinson's leading of a peculiarly renunciative life in an isolation of unknown cause (Thomas 209). Considering an alternate definition of solipsism as a belief that "one's own mind exists or is all that can be known" suggests that all knowledge created outside of an individual mind is unjustifiable ("solipsism" OED 2). This definition is particularly interesting to contemplate with regard to the anorexic aesthetic because it leaves the characterization of self—as either distinct from or conflated with disorder insofar as we may consider extreme asceticism as a precursor to modern anorexia in its "association of eating...with sinfulness, starvation and saintliness...[and] of fasting and the bodily image

of the anorectic as a means of erasing [one's] female, bodily nature and achieving an asexual spiritual union with God" (Corrington 54-55)—in ambiguity. The anorexic aesthetic of Dickinson's poetry, then, provides the opportunity for a dual interpretation, depending upon how exactly one constitutes the components of the "mind" of the solipotent author. Such a reading should not suggest a reductive preoccupation with her mental or spiritual state but, rather, suggest a depth to her poetry and an elevated subtext as a result of mental anguish and spiritual growth, positioning her poetry as conceivably symptomatic, cathartic, or retaliatory.

Supporting the idea that Dickinson's poetry served as a conscious craft of catharsis, psychiatrist John Cody (1971) contends that Emily Dickinson suffered from psychological imbalance and that "the threatening personality disintegration [caused principally by her mother's failure to impart adequate love] compelled a frantic Emily Dickinson to create poetry—for her a psychosis-deflecting activity" (391). Indeed, many of her metaphors seem to represent attempts at self-diagnosis of some peculiarity and suggest that her poetry serves as a medium through which she finds therapy and recourse. Some scholars maintain that Dickinson indisputably suffered from physical illness, since in her letters she refers to fainting spells, eye trouble, and "revenge of the nerves" (Johnson, *Letters* 3: 827), though the causes are never clarified. I reiterate that my assertions do not proclaim a diagnosis but, rather, suggest an interesting correlational heuristic—an anorexic aesthetic—with which to adjudge Dickinson's poetry.

Dickinson acknowledges her radical autonomy from society, an admission that suggests a triumph over the psychological stage of denial and even an intentionality behind such seclusion. She writes of her isolation in "The Soul selects her own Society":

The Soul selects her own Society

Then shuts the Door

On her divine Majority

Obtrude no more—(1-4)

This poem vivifies the solipsistic characterization of Emily Dickinson previously discussed using the construction of a social space all her own and the elevation of the soul to a state of “divinity” (3). The speaker, who I argue may be Dickinson herself, suggests that her reclusiveness is a product of choice, of intentional selection. She foregrounds the two antithetical actions of selection and rejection. This act of exerting control and being left with feelings of both triumphant isolation and impenetrable confinement correspond to an anorexic as well as an ascetic thematic. Just as anorexics lose to gain and become controlled in an effort to be all-controlling, Dickinson’s supposedly “chosen” isolation becomes a harbinger for loss of choice. Indeed, the choice to isolate may have been hers but the inability to leave once that isolation was entered into became a matter beyond her control. From the ascetic perspective, Dickinson may have “chosen” an ascetic lifestyle but her choice was dependent upon the belief that renunciation (hunger and reclusiveness) was a necessary sacrifice in order to lead a sacred, holy life. Thus, the choice was only deceptively her own and, as is the case with the anorexic’s isolation, was a matter beyond personal control.

Dickinson, seemingly disenchanted with gendered, societal norms of the moment, chooses reclusiveness in reaction to this contemporary imbalance. She appears to engage in self-seclusion in an effort to remove herself from the strictures of a society that ostensibly normalized, if not glorified, female illness in the form of eating disorders. In

the nineteenth century, the desire to become beautiful and frail “led to tight-lacing [corsets] and vinegar drinking” (“Infection in the Sentence”).¹⁸ I do not wish to assume the generic perspective of Dickinson as a madwoman or peripheral character stifled into seclusion as a result of patriarchal hegemony. Rather, I assert these timely trends to offer an alternative characterization of Dickinson’s self seclusion: one of disenchanting, agentic strength rather than one of frail passivity and submissiveness. Perhaps Dickinson internalized the unrealistic strictures of society and chose seclusion so as not to be unfairly bound by them. She was insightful about the changes in the self that accompanied seclusion and exclusion from an idealized society and her poetry expresses this through the language of withdrawal and by utilizing an anorexic syntax.

Renunciation Thematic

Dickinson’s penchant for physical isolation is further complicated and deepened by the poet’s renunciation of her body. The contemporary imbalance of societally normalized perceptions of beauty similarly informs her perception of self. Her poetry seems to deny the body through suppression, evasion, and purification. Dickinson evokes the thematic of fear-induced (or spiritually-acquiesced) bodily renunciation:

I am afraid to own a Body--

I am afraid to own a Soul--

Profound -- precarious Property --

Possession, not optional --

Double Estate -- entailed at pleasure

¹⁸ We see a regeneration of these tactics and social conditioning in our modern moment in the explosion of diet fads and juice cleanses, spurred by media images of “00” models and photo-shopped magazine covers.

Upon an unsuspecting Heir--

Duke in a moment of Deathlessness

And God, for a Frontier. (1090)

The poem proposes a problem of embodiment that arises primarily from an anxiety over identity. The diction and subject matter of Dickinson's poem may best be characterized as obdurate, in that the subtextual implications it connotes and the breadth of analysis it withstands lends an impenetrability to the verse. This textual multiplicity engages in the anorexic aesthetic by engendering within each word, phrase, and stanza a sort of doubling and duplicitousness, which suggests the confrontation of the poetic persona with societal forces—both personal and external. The text, though highly structured, is in contradiction and confrontation with itself across figural levels: metaphysical, hierarchical, and gendered.

I believe it significant that the soul is not privileged in this poem. In fact, the parallelism of the first two lines suggest a surmised equality between Body and Soul. However, the orientation of one above the other dually suggests an opposition between the two, with the Body actually serving a prioritized role at the head of the poem. Thus, the Body may be perceived as existing in constant tension with the Soul. The fear of ownership of a body or a soul connects to a fear of imprisonment and hindrance, evoked by diction such as "precarious," "not optional" and "unsuspecting." Dickinson implies a lack of preparation and choice, which very much connects to the lack of control adolescents feel as they enter adulthood as well as the doubts and anxiousness one might feel about the prospect of death and the validity of God and religion. A primary anxiety about femininity and the implications and duties associated with womanhood would

certainly have fed into the poem's diction. As an unfamiliar and naïve maturity-withstander indebted to both smallness and the abandonment of the societal impulse toward womanhood, Dickinson would have nurtured a conflicted perspective. Her mind seems to engage in a quarrel of sorts, her poem presenting two astoundingly counterposed concepts: a profound versus a precarious inheritance, the double meaning of frontier as both something of untrammelled possibility and opportunity and of repression and delimitation. The repetition of paradoxical actions (desiring and declining, fearing and confronting) recalls the contradictor anorexic logic and hints at the underlying motivation for Dickinson's renunciation as a means of conjuring control and acquiring an identity (and approaching salvation) by paradoxically annihilating and secluding herself. The "Double Estate" to which Dickinson refers suggests Body and Soul but also conjures images of a divided mind. Thus, the mind of the anorexic, harboring in addition to her own logic a restrictive conscience, undergirds the poem and casts the recognition and reconciliation of divided identity as a formative factor in the shaping of anxieties.

Other poems speak to the renunciative desires of the poet while also incorporating food and drink images that intimate a connection between self-renunciation and the hunger thematic present in much of Dickinson's poetry:

Who never wanted,—maddest Joy
Remains to him unknown;
The Banquet of Abstemiousness
Defaces that of Wine.

Within its hope, though yet ungrasped

Desire's perfect Goal,
No nearer, lest Reality
Should disentrall thy soul—(1430)

Dickinson warns against attaining the object of desire. She characterizes deferred gratification as that which offers the greatest pleasure. The joy of wanting over getting, the richness and gift of not having, collectively serve to foreground negation and denial. Dickinson characterizes a state of expectancy, a hope “yet ungrasped,” as inherently more satisfying than fulfillment. The oxymoronical “Banquet of Abstemiousness” to which she refers similarly conveys a depth and tantalizing quality to the act of denial and refusal. Abstemiousness may be defined as an act of restraint, shrinking from self-indulgence “especially in eating and drinking” (“abstemious” OED 1). Thus, a banquet in which the feast ironically involves one’s neglect of appetite, finds glorification in verse. The poet prepares us for a lavish description of actual food and drink and then startles us with a negative abstraction, calling attention to what follows. The “Banquet of Abstemiousness,” presented in parallel structure above “wine,” further heightens the practice of refusal, suggesting a superiority of deprivation over the satisfaction of one’s thirst (metonymically alluded to by “wine”).

For the “Banquet of Abstemiousness” to deface that of wine constitutes an act of depersonalization whereby the “face” of “maddest Joy” is taken away and replaced. “Maddest Joy” suggests a skewed system of valuation through the attachment of the pleasurable noun “joy” to a superlative adjective of the abnormal, the mad. Dickinson celebrates her ascetism—her renunciation—while simultaneously bringing awareness to the obscurity with which such madness operates. The purported “joy” afforded by

madness is characterized as “unknown” and as just narrowly ungrasped. This liminality and ambiguity parallels the motivation and logic of the anorexic in their unorthodox celebration of deprivation and its perpetual drive toward some unknown, unattainable ideal.

In the poem’s final line, the word “disenthrall” implies bondage and reflects the imprisoning mindset that accompanies the impulse to achieve the unreachable. Dickinson’s interesting capitalization of “reality” suggests the word’s possible ironic usage. One’s desire for perfection, in this case a desire seemingly manipulated by an all-controlling logic, is something for which one may only strive. These lines allude nicely to the anorexic struggle toward an unattainable goal, a goal that will forever elude and perpetually entrap until it is eventually recognized as futile or simply as death. This poem rather creatively intimates the ascetic/anorexic logic, affirming that something or someone can only be truly possessed and fulfilled through willed renunciation.

By poem’s end, Dickinson appears to acknowledge the self-fulfilling prophecy of the anorexic motivation and to recognize her own loss of control. Her choice, it becomes clear, is based on a foundation over which she has no control. “Desire’s perfect Goal” becomes synonymous with perfection and ideal image (constructs with which the anorexic is all too familiar) and the poem ends with Dickinson’s recognition of the “reality” in which she dwells. Hunger, then becomes a metaphor for Dickinson’s craving to understand her own behaviors and purpose while ultimately acknowledging the irony and very impossibility of that discovery.

Reassessing Polyvocality and Form in Dickinson's Poetry

Scholars such as Gilbert and Gubar (1979) have oftentimes attributed the polyvocality and multifariousness of Dickinson's writing to Dickinson's "concerted, liberating strategy as a woman poet [to contradict] a repressive patriarchy" (Rogers 139). While I believe this interpretation has its merits, I believe that the multifacetedness of Dickinson's poetic "I" may also stem from her strife as an individual in coming to terms with a conflicting identity, especially if we are to consider her reclusiveness and frailty as symptomatic of psychological turmoil, whether that be a product of illness or spiritual anxiety and doubt. Dickinson may, therefore, consciously split her narrative persona into multiple perspectives as a means of musing on problems of identity, separation, and self integrity as opposed to explicitly constructing multiple masks behind which to express her artistic genius—the act of which paralleled Victorian life in its recognition that a woman need pose in accordance with the patriarchal social structure in order to be heard (140). For the purpose of my analysis, the former will serve as the foundation, as I concentrate on the ascetic associations with anorexia rather than gender as the aspect of Dickinson being imitated aesthetically in her art.

Dickinson's use of multiple voices in her poetry, delivered from speakers whose gender and age differ, reiterates the dual deviancy thematic described earlier with respect to Glück's poetry (on page 3). Child-like speakers, as seen in "It would have starved a gnat," conform to the anorexic style in a seemingly symptomatic way, suggesting a stagnation or desire to remain premature. Utilizing child-like innocence in the poem is a calculated pose granting her the freedom to speak her mind more openly than she felt otherwise capable.

The form of Dickinson's poetry, designed rather traditionally and recalling that of "nursery rhymes, ballads, and church hymns," evinces sentimentality for childhood and thus strengthens the detection of an anorexic aesthetic in Dickinson's syntax and poetic structure. Nursery rhymes were part of an oral tradition in the Victorian period and enacted a romanticization of the past (Sizer). They primarily served a preservative purpose in revitalizing quaint histories and society relied upon their repetition to educate and to moralize as well. Dickinson's specific use of this epigrammatic, short, and simple style may be seen as a means of mental transplantation, a renunciation of maturation by embracing a child-like state both structurally and perspectively. Dickinson's poetic form somewhat adheres to the nursery rhyme genre, though her rhyme experimentation is rather modernist with her frequent usage of slant and eye rhymes (Morris 28). Thus, Dickinson appears to exploit the capacity for paradox in poetic structure; her poetry enacts the anorexic paradox in its simultaneous adherence to and dissent from a prescribed form.

Other anorexic aesthetic elements of Dickinson's prosody include her ingenious usage of inventive syntax structures, most especially the em-dash. Interestingly, the original publication of Dickinson's work in the first half of the twentieth century was edited: Dickinson's unorthodox diction, meter, punctuation, and capitalization were regularized to conform to the expectations of the era's readers (White 2). However, a new edition published in the mid-twentieth century reverted to the original, unaltered poems. This new variorum edition by Thomas H. Johnson presents poems as Dickinson wrote them, "including dashes, irregularities in grammar, capitalization, and punctuation" (White 3). These idiosyncratic prosodic choices had previously been attributed to a lack

of proper schooling but have since been restored for a faithful representation of Dickinson's poetic style. Indeed, the dash constitutes a punctuation device rooted firmly in an anorexic aesthetic. The dash pares down a stanza or line to skeletal form, a brittle and thin streak contributing to poetic minimalism and enacting a kind of renunciation. It disrupts conventional linguistic relations by fragmenting phrases and causing unrelated words to be strung together, acting in an erratic, illogical, and dismantling manner recalling that of the anorexic conscience.

A Re-Emergence of the Dickinson Enigma

Emily Dickinson's "envelope poems," the so-called scraps of her scholarship, which she composed on envelopes and snippets of recycled paper, invite future thought and consideration.¹⁹ These writings intimately detail Dickinson's mode of thinking and composition. They offer a reproduction of the way in which she wrote, parceling out one word at a time onto unassuming paper destined for discard rather than composition-recording. They show a mind uniquely writing: "right-side up, upside down, triangularly, feverishly" (Baker). These newly discovered and published fragments reinvigorate the enigma of Emily Dickinson. Her avant-garde style appropriately accomplishes what the anorexic and ascetic mind eagerly seeks to attain. Anorexics are motivated by perfectionism and much of Dickinson's "odd" behavior and compositional tactics were promulgated by that desire for transcendence. These envelope poems accomplish just that: they call attention to and recatalyze a discussion of Emily Dickinson and the

¹⁹ *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems*, the collaborative efforts of a Dickinson scholar and artist, is the first facsimile edition of Dickinson manuscripts composed of all 52 envelope scrap writings of the poet's later work (Dickinson et al.).

paradoxical anorexic logic of her poetry even a century and a half after her death. The elusive ED lives on...

Frank Bidart: Enacting Anorexia in Persona

Frank Bidart's poem "Ellen West" offers another variety of the authorial "I" and, thus, a new purchase on the anorexic aesthetic. "Ellen West" is a persona poem based on a German psychotherapy text entitled "Der Fall Ellen West" (Cooley). Bidart's poem, then, comes with an intrinsic narrative layering: it is a poem based on a translated version of Ludwig Binswanger's psychiatric case history and spoken from the lips of an author speaking in character as a woman anorexic (Bidart, *Metaphysical Dog* 243).²⁰ I employ the word "spoken" here when referring to Bidart's poetic soliloquizing rather than "written" in accordance with Bidart's perspective on voice as a kind of artifice which must be attached to a page, and further distilled through expressive syntax (Sleigh 24). Indeed, the dramatic intimacy with which Bidart writes this poem makes the verb "write" seem insufficient or inconsistent; he fosters a quintessential authorial voice that undergoes a vivification on the page so that his words, rather than adhere to the page, slip effortlessly into a vocalized medium. Bidart's penchant for eccentric, unusual punctuation—following commas, colons, and semicolons with dashes; beginning lines with ellipses; incorporating extreme typography such as entirely-capitalized or italicized words; and leaving unconventional white space—signifies a sonorous and "powerful [even] appealing" (to use Geoffrey Hartman's notion again) expression of the anorexic aesthetic.

²⁰ I recognize that grammatically, the adjective anorexic should precede the subject "woman." However, having studied the disease of anorexia quite deeply for this thesis, I wish to foreground the less inimical designation of "woman." The various texts written about Ellen West's anorexia already sufficiently douse her character and memory with the disorder.

Bidart, in the process of composing the lengthy poem “Ellen West,” bestows upon a clinically-diagnosed, now-deceased anorexic psychiatric patient a kind of material presence. By providing Ellen with a poetic form, a textual body, he actualizes the anorexic paradox. To reiterate this paradox, the anorexic constitutes a living contradiction: she thrives on self-deprivation and strives for significance and grandiosity through the process of diminishment and withdrawal. The poem spans eleven pages, a rather sumptuous and protracted length, which lends fleshiness to the corporeal body of this otherwise radically diminished character and writing style. However, the eccentricity of Bidart’s punctuation and the aesthetic of anorexia in Bidart’s syntax simultaneously suggest a passionate subtraction: it is as if Bidart displays on the page the divided mind of the anorexic patient, the power struggle between two dichotomous forces—the self and the anorexic conscience—and produces a poetic body in contradiction. Thus, “Ellen West” becomes an alchemical repository for the deceased anorexic and foregrounds aesthetically the very disorder that brought on her untimely suicide.²¹

²¹ The process of alchemy, which involves the triad of the body, soul, and spirit, expertly captures the nature of poetry: a poem at once serves as a constructed, public body imbued with the creative sensibilities of authorial spirit, subject anxiety, and syntactical rhythms. It has been said that the ultimate goal of alchemy (the philosopher’s stone) was the equivalent of having “heaven on earth” (Cavillari). The immortality poetry attains—impenetrably transmuting the vitality of a life in narration to a page (or in our modern moment to a hard drive and cyber universe)—serves itself as an alchemical process. Thus, Ellen West exists eternally, attaining the “heaven on earth” through the fastening of her vitality to Bidart’s poem. Bidart subtly alludes to such an alchemical transformation of his Ellen by beginning the poem with the lines “Heaven/ Would be dying on a bed of vanilla ice cream...” (“Ellen West” 109). The anorexic aesthetic comes forth as a product of alchemical striving (a statement which I expound upon in the upcoming sections of this thesis) in this particular stanza with the punctuation and diction casting the poetic page as a kind of “ice cream bed,” if you will, where the heavenly and the earthly intersect.

Punctuation and Hunger

Bidart's atypical punctuation rather trenchantly coincides with diction recalling hunger and eating, producing a syntactical anorexic aesthetic and textual anorexic logic.

Throughout the poem, Bidart hints at Ellen's self distancing from satiety and suggests her anxiety about the act of eating:

I love sweets,—

Heaven

Would be dying on a bed of vanilla ice cream...

But my true self

is thin, all profile. (Bidart, "Ellen West" 109)

In this short excerpt, which begins the poem, Bidart uses two distinct forms of punctuation (double punctuation and ellipses) to mark a shift in content, breaking the flow of phrasing specifically when alluding to food. Indeed, the first three lines of the poem seem misplaced and untrue when read in sequence with the following two, which is significant because it lends a fragmentary quality to the thoughts, suggesting a divided conscience at the same time that it enacts the anorexic contradiction of achieving power and grandiosity through the act of winnowing. Bidart's placement of unconventional punctuation—double punctuation (both a comma and dash)—and ellipses after diction of indulgence interrupts the flow of the work visually, which intimates the interruptive nature these foods have for Ellen, whose "true self/ is thin/all profile" (4-5). A love of dessert, as we know, does not often yield a stark thin form; a "love of dessert" would seem to disrupt and preclude such angularity, although the angularity of the voice is made

manifest in all its power in Bidart's sinewy lines. The seemingly contradictory affirmations beg the question: which is true? Can this narrative voice be trusted? When the poem is reconsidered from the perspective of the "anorexic aesthetic," the meanings behind the poem's edgy syntax and almost fleshy permutations of voice become more understandable. A secondary look to the flavor of the ice cream—vanilla—reveals the choice as simple, unadorned. Her choice of a plainer flavor, rather than a more elaborate mint chocolate or bubblegum, moves this fantasy from forbidden and rebellious to more conformative and submissive. Her choice both adheres to and steals away from the disordered mandates of her anorexia: to become someone noticed yet unseen, to starve the body so as to indulge in the idealism of the angular form. Vanilla ice cream, as such, is nicely situated within the flavor spectrum so as to suggest the liminality of the choice and, thus, to reflect the liminality of the speaker's conscience.

The word "sweets" is followed by double punctuation, which creates a visual image of both separation and connection. The visually-splintered line reveals Ellen's troubled consciousness as her mind appears to linger on the concept of sweets long after the thought is expressed. The prolonged consideration of "sweets" suggests a preoccupation with them, a preoccupation based on a longing for but not necessarily an indulgence in them. The deviation from logical punctuation implicitly suggests a lack of rationality regarding one's relationship with food, an "illogic" reminiscent of an anorexic. Furthermore, the very purpose of punctuation here is heightened, pregnant pauses lengthier even than a full stop period. The purpose of this orchestrated pause is ambiguous: Is Ellen trying to convince herself that this affirmation is true? Or false? Does the irregularity of the punctuation suggest that this is an isolated and infrequent

musings for Ellen? Or, does it draw our attention to the oddity of the statement and infuse it with import as a statement of untruth, as a lie? All of these questions lend an enigmatic tone to the narrator's words and from the very outset of the poem suggest that the succeeding lines and stanzas will similarly perplex.

The ellipsis after "vanilla ice cream" similarly enacts ambiguity, delineating and dichotomizing the act of enjoying and the prospect of enjoying. The oneiric quality produced by the ellipsis again suggests an unfulfilled desire, yet one that quickens the senses nonetheless. The use of ellipsis dually serves as a form of concealment, withdrawal; it seems to suggest that Ellen is withholding either a more elaborate detailing of the sumptuous treats that occupy her mind or a more abrupt declaration about her inability to satisfy her desires. Highlighting the importance of what is not said, the ellipsis, then, appears with the goal of causing something else—a line declaring submission, a phrase further extolling an epicurean smorgasbord—to disappear. She withholds that which she "should not say," a conscious dictate of anorexic logic.²² As such, this chosen punctuation mark manifests the anorexic paradox with its deletion of material and replacement with three perfectly-round, modest dots which fall in one line, much like the all line, all profile physical body of the anorexic.

This interpretation of the punctuation in "Ellen West" as adhering to the anorexic paradox casts Ellen's anorexia as a dominant force that instills both fear and anxiousness. Interestingly, later lines suggest that Ellen interprets her anorexia not as the source of her torment but, rather, a solution.

²² This is all to say that the ellipses are utilized in lieu of a more elaborate description of delectable treats or delights, which an anorexic conscience would adamantly refuse and cast as sinful.

—Then I think, No. The ideal of being thin
conceals the ideal
not to have a body—;

which is NOT trivial... (Bidart, “Ellen West” 117)

Anorexia is a means to heal the breach between her body and her self. Ellen’s self-deprivation, her denial of hunger—both sexual and alimentary—is self-willed. She feels enslaved by her body and all of the bodily properties to which she is contingent: health, age, etc. She feels encumbered by embodiment and envisions her true self as distinct and separate from the materiality of the body, which lacks independence and necessitates certain conditions for survival. To free her true self, then, she exercises the power of controlling her appetite:

—I’d turn down
dinner invitations, so I could eat alone;

I’d allow myself two pieces of bread, with
butter, at the beginning, and three scoops of
vanilla ice cream at the end,— (Bidart, “Ellen West” 110)

She dictates the situations and circumstances in which she will eat and the kinds of foods she chooses to eat. The act of eating is devoid of pleasure or enjoyment, suggested by such diction as “allow” and by her stoic scheduling of times she may eat certain foods in isolation. These lines also reveal a sharp focus on portion size: two slices of bread, three scoops of ice cream. Ellen’s fascination and obsession with not only what and when she is eating but the proportion of her food casts mealtime as a structured, almost clinical

occasion which must be prescribed and monitored. Ironically, though she eats with the self-consciousness and self-proscribed compulsiveness of the strictest of dieters, she selects rather indulgent delights that seem more akin to the indiscriminate appetencies of an epicure. The point of her chosen starvation is more a scheme to reclaim her perceived sovereignty of self and she believes this can be attained through the rejection of the body and its “suffocating customs” as in the following passage (Bidart, “Ellen West” 115):

But soon she felt that she must lose weight,—
that all she was trying to express

was obliterated by her body,

buried in flesh—; (Bidart, “Ellen West” 114)

Ellen characterizes her body as a violent aggressor “obliterating” expressivity, as an agent that inevitably forces the soul to succumb to death. The passivity forced upon the self in the above passage is evoked by the power of the body to stifle expression. The word “buried” recalls death in a metonymical way and once again iterates the anorexic paradox in which a fear of death—the ultimate loss of control—compels one to choose death through the denial of the body. The inversion of double punctuation (the semi colon following the dash as opposed to the dash following the comma) manifests this paradox, attaching the sinewy dash to the fuller, rounded letters that comprise the word “flesh.” Apart from the connotation and meaning of the word “flesh,” the syntax alone displays a purposeful diminution. The semi-colon, which as a punctuation form occupies the liminal space between end-stop and elaborative connector, expertly conveys the dividedness of

persona of the anorexic mind, displaying a desire to adhere and to distinguish, to conform yet to remove.

Here, perhaps, is where questions may arise regarding Bidart's own deftly nuanced use of the anorexic aesthetic. The contrived persona of Ellen West seems to compromise the authenticity and purity of the anorexic aesthetic insofar as the author speaks in persona yet was never personally troubled by the logic of the disorder. Interdisciplinary academic Leslie Heywood, whose Ph.D. dissertation explores the connection between anorexia and modernist aesthetics, illuminates an aspect of the aesthetic:

“What is particular to the [body/spirit] duality in the case of anorexia is that the anorexic logic does not reflect a separation between body and spirit, and a desire to transcend the first; rather, it is a fight between two bodies, male and female, where one remains as the common standard for the body and the other should disappear altogether” (67).

As Heywood asserts, the anorexic logic goads the patient to escape not a gender-neutral body but, rather, a female body. Bidart's narrator seems adamant to deny *any* body:

without a body, who can

know himself at all?

Only by

acting; choosing; rejecting; have I

made myself— (117)

Ellen designates the body she wants to deny “a body” rather than “my body,” making the gender of the body ambiguous and generalizing the statement to any variety of person, to anyone with a body. This same deprivation of sexuality and gender occurs later in the poem in the clinical notes from March 30 when Ellen is described as “the patient” and, worse, as the impersonal “it” (118). Thus, Bidart effectively thrusts the concept of

embodiment and dis-embodiment into an ungendered, liminal space. While Bidart's usage of the word "himself" in the above passage seems to suggest a triumph of the male as the "Heywood standard," this can be readily attributed to the common usage of the word "himself" in our lexicon, referring to the whole of humankind. However, when interpreted through a Heywoodian lens, the lack of specificity in the aforementioned clinical notes and the androgynous connotation of the phrase "know himself at all" surely contradict the anorexic logic.

Bidart's move away from Heywood's gendered anorexic logic is, in my opinion, a result of his infusion of the poetic voice, that of Ellen, with his own existential, metaphysical ponderings. Bidart has oftentimes been regarded as a post-confessional poet, giving rise to voices that had not seized the opportunity or that had not been granted the opportunity to record their own confessions (Gray 714). However, as I've noted here, his confession in personae of Ellen West is tinged by elements of his own existential ruminations. Despite the fact that Bidart seems to integrate his own voice into the narrative, I believe he legitimizes the ungendered, reckless abandon with which the anorexic aesthetic functions. In fact, Bidart traces his own poetics back "to the voices in his head—to the solitary, the nonsocial" (Chiasson 52). Thus, just as Emily Dickinson's isolation and seeming solipsism afforded her a kind of anorexic lens, Bidart himself occupies the metaphoric stance of an anorexic artist, adding a well needed de-genderization to the use of the anorexic aesthetic.

Bidart's recent publication of *Metaphysical Dog* reinvigorates the idea of "Ellen West" as a dual confession poem, both for the artist Bidart himself and of his deceased dramatic personae Ellen West. *Metaphysical Dog* reveals the anguish and grief Bidart

suffered during the time of his writing of *Ellen West*, having just lost his mother. Thus, the reprisal of Ellen's story and the analysis of her life and the existential questions brought about by her death in "Ellen West" may well have served as a coping venture for Bidart. By coming to terms with Ellen's death, creating for her a memorial in text and poetically conjecturing on the metaphysical conflict of the body-versus-soul, Bidart dealt with his own mother's death. "Ellen West" was a kind of vicarious atonement for the grieving son/author.

Bidart seems to "render corporeal a problem that is conceptual" in both his translation of Ellen's psychotherapy notes in a body of poetry and his more ideological focus on the body as a manifestation of limitation (James). The metaphysical conundrum, the nature of being and nonbeing, confounds Bidart and his own awareness of the limitations of the body (and specifically *his* body) leads him to grant his Ellen a logic that is not only anorexic but also ontologically-concerned. Ellen earlier expresses her ideal image as "a girl whose/ body is the image of her soul" (Bidart, "Ellen West" 109). Her attempts to control, starve, and deny her body in this context seems like a venture of soul suicide. This assertion suggests a lack of self-confidence and a feeling of personal degradation, a feeling of being perpetually less than. Thus, a contradiction arises in the poem and raises several questions: Does Ellen deny her hunger, her body, and her womanhood because she wants her external appearance to match her degraded, anguished soul? Or, does she willfully destroy her body because she believes that her body stands in the way of her "ideal" and that in order to attain an idealized self she must not be encumbered by a body? Both questions hinge on an illogical foundation that places too

much import on external appearance and constructs a skewed relationship between the body and self as two warring entities.

Though Bidart's own existential subjectivities certainly come into play in the body-spirit relationship of "Ellen West," the anorexic paradox remains an active force as well. Critical essayist Sinclair argues that anorexia projects a modified version of T.S. Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility." Eliot's traditional "dissociation of sensibility" refers to "a divergence of thought and feeling" that occurred just after the metaphysical poet era (Murfin and Ray 118). Sinclair rather creatively invites us to consider this dissociation of sensibility with regard to body and spirit as two unfused ends, analagous to Eliot's dichotomous thought and feeling. Thus, the "dissociation of sensibility" becomes cast as the idea that each of us experiences the body as something anterior to the self; we both have a body and are the body that we have (Sinclair). Bidart's "Ellen West" relies on a similar inverse dynamic that operates between the body and the spirit: Ellen's hatred of her body is at the same time an obsession with it and a glorification of it. Ellen typifies the anorexic paradox through her starvation and, ultimately, through her suicide: her "devout yearning [to deny her body] is expressed through the most extreme bodily fetishism" (Birkerts 119). She enacts a tragedy of will, spurred by a belief that one must become anterior to matter, must become bodiless.

Ellen draws a parallel between her own motivations and those of the late singer Maria Callas, who "starved herself into dramatic credibility and into 'pure spirit'" (Vendler 112). Ellen projects her thought processes on the singer Callas and shifts the concept of satiety from that which nourishes the body to that which destroys it:

The tapeworm

was her *soul*...

—How her soul, uncompromising,

insatiable,

must have loved eating the flesh from her bones. (Bidart, “Ellen West” 114)

This affirmation, though seemingly distanced from Ellen through its projection onto another figure, realigns itself to Ellen when she declares the feelings “autobiographical” (114). Ellen muses rather extensively on the presumed mental anguish suffered by Callas; she conflates the singer’s attentiveness to style, certain trills and vibrato, with acts of idiocy. The italicization of “dramaturgy,” “idiot,” and “material” emphatically interrelate them and convey a sense of simultaneous urgency and hesitancy. Ellen seems to be weighing the worth and legitimacy of these words in her mind. Even her stream of consciousness style of pondering seems conflicted, syntactically evoked by shifts in tonal register as certain words and phrases are written with slanted characters. The slant of these words lends a handwritten quality, which almost parenthetically informs the audience that they are most striking to and most opinionatedly felt by Ellen.

Punctuation’s Prosody

Virginia Woolf writes in *On Being Ill*, “Illness makes us disinclined for the long campaigns that prose exacts. We cannot command all our faculties and keep our reason and our judgment and our memory at attention...” (19). Bidart’s choice of a rather prosaic poem poses some questions about how the poem may stylistically be considered to foster an anorexic aesthetic, a style of “illness.” The poem, which splices together such prosaic fragments as doctors’ clinical notes, letters, speeches, and narrative anecdotes, exhibits recognizably prosaic qualities. As David Lehman points out, however, Bidart’s

radically innovative style—his novel use of punctuation and fragmentation—“performs the work of prosodic devices [so that] what would otherwise be prose becomes poetry of a high order” (124). A second glance at Bidart’s “Ellen West” reveals that it is far from the strenuous “campaign” of prose. He counterpoints a variety of styles (notes, letters, and memories) in such a way that fragments the poem with idiosyncratic punctuation, ornamentation, and typography both tethering and drawing apart the pieces.

...trying to stop my hunger with FOOD

is like trying to appease thirst

with ink.

. . .

March 30. Result of the consultation: Both gentlemen agree completely with my prognosis and doubt any therapeutic usefulness of commitment even more emphatically than I. All three of us are agreed that it is not a case of obsessional neurosis and not one of manic-depressive psychosis, and that no definitely reliable therapy is possible. We therefore resolved to give in to the patient’s demand for discharge.

. . .

The train-ride yesterday

Was far *worse* than I expected... (Bidart, “Ellen West” 118)

Fragmentation fittingly corresponds to the anorexic aesthetic as it performs a kind of disintegration of the text, deteriorating the body of work and creating distance between each piece: the mental anguish of an anorexic patient, the logic of a doctor’s note, and the “normalcy” perceived in the memory of ordinary human interactions witnessed by Ellen. Bidart reinvents punctuation so that it is “raised to a level of syntax,” thereby playing a major role aesthetically and formulaically to define and reflect on the poetic persona

(Rector 131). The supra-syntax quality of Bidart's idiosyncratic punctuation accomplishes a remarkable dramatism, fragmenting the work in such a way that creates a musical pulse and vocal exchange. His punctuation choices effectively "fasten [the voice] to the page for the ear of the imagination" (Schwartz 34). The poem that is produced becomes a true embodiment of the voice behind it. Or, to reiterate a point made previously, a poem more spoken than written.

Just as the voice is effectively embodied, Bidart's unique punctuation and lineation choices also help to break the poetic flow of pentameter, in a sense liberating the narrative voice. He lends a quality of freedom and richness to the voice of his Ellen in such a way that contributes to her legacy as a woman of strong agency and dedication to an ideal as opposed to a pitiful and weak anorexic. Perhaps Bidart imbues the poetic voice with such vitality because he feels an aesthetic imperative to codify in writing a more respectful, humanizing depiction of Ellen West, a figure formerly relegated to the medicalized memorial of inconclusive psychiatric notes rather than the torrid tomb of poetic text. To Bidart, Ellen is more than a pathological case but a woman invested in accomplishing a goal. Bidart's insistence on utilizing his own typography and punctuation, despite frequent failures to become published in a national magazine, show a kind of insistence for his own "moral authority," working and refusing editorial interjection and adaptation so that his poetry expressed what he constructed and understood as "real" (Schwartz 36). Bidart, engaging in the self-discipline and seeming solipsism of the anorexic logic, knew what it was that he wanted and did not relent until he accomplished it.

Concluding Thoughts on Bidart

I must admit that when I began my analysis of Bidart's "Ellen West," I was very much ambivalent about his treatment of the anorexic aesthetic and the potentiality for a lack of authenticity in its application in "Ellen West." After all, Glück and Dickinson's authorial stances are authentically positioned so that the poetic "I" and the poet are closely related if not one and the same.²³ To the contrary, the narrative voice behind "Ellen West" is removed from Bidart, in fact belonging to another person entirely. His postmortem adoption of a persona, approaching authenticity with his use of case study notes, is contrived and speculative at best. A question I felt myself posing in my analysis of his work was: from which party was the anorexic aesthetic being produced: the author (Bidart) or the forged, anorexic persona? Regardless, the purity of the anorexic aesthetic is compromised because even if it originated "in persona," from Ellen West "the speaker" rather than Bidart "the author," the voice is still removed from experience. No amount of clinical notes can erase the divide between the actual person and one who takes on their role in character; the liminality and ambiguity between those roles is unvanquishable and breeds doubt concerning genuineness.

I recognize that my argument is founded not on the legitimacy or logic of the poetry but, rather, on the aesthetic qualities of the work and that, as a result, my point about a lack of authenticity may seem inconsequential. However, I find it significant that there appears to be a marked difference between some of the subtextual logic perceived by one who has not experienced anorexia (Bidart) and others who have (Glück and

²³ I discuss this authorial positioning earlier in my thesis, referencing Glück's tacit acknowledgement of the autobiographical nature of her poem and Dickinson's seeming solipsism and asceticism as evidence of the closeness, if not oneness, of the authorial "I" and the author.

Dickinson—insofar as her ascetic tradition can be understood as a historical analog of anorexia). The syntax operates on the same level throughout each work so that the anorexic aesthetic appears consistent across writers—through punctuation, diction, and a renunciation thematic—though there is a notable breach in authenticity and shift in logic. Since my thesis is concerned with the anorexic aesthetic, I am content to identify this related but distinct issue without pursuing it further. That being said, I do believe that the issues of gender and of experiential versus perceived understanding of a disease are valid considerations that could shed more light on the logic which so closely interrelates with the aesthetics of a poem. One might say that to properly “diagnose” (through its explication) a poem as wholly “anorexic,” a designation which I feel may be afforded to those I analyzed by Glück and Dickinson, further delving may need to be done into the piece’s foundational logic as well as its aesthetic properties.

Conclusion

Frank Bidart's evocative and chilling "Ellen West" both enhances and complicates the undergirding anorexic aesthetic that I have traced throughout this thesis in the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Louise Glück. Thus, each author offers his or her own purchase on the anorexic aesthetic, differentiated by gender, cultural moment, metaphoric dimension of aesthetic application, and level of personal experience with anorexia nervosa.

To reiterate, I do not wish to relegate the anorexic aesthetic to a class of creative genius, a means by which artistry may be attained. To do so would glorify the disease, a position I do not wish to take or endorse. I am concerned here with tracing an anorexic aesthetic—in works ranging from the high modernist cannon to the Romantic, ascetic, tradition—and, by showing the unique yet parallel aspects of three poets' work, reveal an unboundedness to the anorexic aesthetic.

I've argued that a commentative impulse—whether for personal recognition or public awareness—undergirds the creation of the anorexic aesthetic, subtly hinting at the strictures of two distinct cultural moments which sinisterly dictate a "beauty ideal" and subjugate the feminine. Interestingly, the idiosyncratic sensibility behind eccentric punctuation and renunciation (dominant across all three poets' works) itself enacts the anorexic paradox in the process of publication. These stylistic choices though intrinsic to the anorexic aesthetic are not socially-condoned or mediated. In fact, as I mention earlier in my thesis, editors modified (in the case of Dickinson, 29) or failed to publish (in the case of Bidart, 64) anorexia-aestheticized works, and in doing so suggest the works' divergence from the mainstream. In accord with the anorexic logical paradox, then, the

“anorexic” quality of the work (which, when extrapolated to literal anorexia, is intended to bring something or someone closer to the “mainstream ideal”) prevents societal incorporation. Whether intentional or not, the journey of anorexia-aestheticized work vivifies in the public publishing forum the very logic undergirding its style.

All three of these poets’ work proves a dialectical relationship between poetic anorexia and anorexic poetry, bringing light to a poetic mode that extends back to the nineteenth century. Insofar as the ascetic tradition may be understood as a historical analog to anorexia, literary works from the 15th and 16th centuries (the time period when saintly asceticism was birthed) debatably extend the longevity and relevance of the anorexic aesthetic, positing a germane arc worth further exploration. Although the true extent of the purview of the “anorexic aesthetic” is as of yet indeterminate, my thesis makes clear the existence of an aesthetic trend informing the work of three unique poets at least two centuries into the past. These writers’ respective imaginations produced their own hunger and their own food so that for Glück, Dickinson, and Bidart, recovery, salvation, and acceptance were as easy, evocative, and eternal as a poem.

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