

## Introduction: 'Eating Disorders or Disordered Eating?'

Petra M Bagley, Francesca Calamita and Kathryn Robson

This cross-cultural book on the fictional depiction of eating disorders in contemporary European women's writing came about after the success of the symposium 'Paradoxical Languages', which Francesca Calamita organised together with Gill Rye at the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Women's Writing (Institute of Modern Languages Research, University of London) in May 2014. The selected contributions included here represent the language areas of the three editors, Petra Bagley, Francesca Calamita and Kathryn Robson, namely German, Italian and French.

Throughout the history of western culture, the relationship between women and food has been multifaceted, and often perceived as a metaphor for something else. From the much-debated biblical episode of Eve and the apple to present-day society, women's eating habits have been read not only as acts of self-nourishment but also as displays of affection, sexuality and tendency to sin. This multifaceted relationship between women and food reaches its crisis point in the development of contemporary discussion on eating disorders which, however, have existed under numerous guises for centuries.

Pathological starvation and bingeing are an unidiomatic and paradoxical language employed by women – and more recently by men – to communicate their deepest feelings, express their identity and protest about their socio-cultural roles. Since the 1970s, feminist scholars have highlighted the significant link between anorexia nervosa and social context. Susie's Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978) and *Hunger Strike* (1986), Kim Chernin's *The Hungry Self* (1986), Marilyn Lawrence's *The Anorexic Experience* (1981) and Morag MacSween's *Anorexic Bodies* (1993) emphasise the link between the hierarchical aspects of

the social structure and eating disorders. They thereby echo Mara Selvini Palazzoli's 1963 pioneering analysis, *L'Anoressia mentale* [Mental Anorexia], which places societal expectations and cultural norms placed on women by patriarchal authority at the origin of these pathologies. From different disciplinary perspectives and with different approaches, these scholars suggest that women's troubled relationships with food and body do not fall into the category of traditional illnesses, but they should be considered complex pathologies where sickness, cultural context and women's psychology come together.

The terms used to describe the different shades of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are almost as varied as the causes and symptoms of these eating disorders: eating problems, afflictions, illnesses, diseases, addictions, pathological conditions. What they do have in common is an obsession with body weight and shape among predominantly adolescent girls and young women in western countries. Eating disorders in this context are frequently assumed to be caused by the pressure to conform to socially imposed standards of physical beauty propagated by mainstream media, through the relentless images of (air-brushed) slender female bodies that represent idealised femininity. Both involve abnormal patterns of eating as well as an idealisation of thinness. The anorexic is incessantly preoccupied with food – attraction to and repulsion from. She refuses to eat. The term anorexia nervosa thus describes the syndrome of self-starvation, emaciation and loss of menstruation (amenorrhea). The bulimic has frequent episodes of binge eating, which is always followed by purging by dint of self-induced vomiting, the use of laxatives, diuretics, fasting, over-exercising, all of which are usually done in secret.<sup>1</sup> The sufferers always believe they are fat and never see their bodies as thin enough. Body Image Distortion Syndrome (BIDS) has for a long time been seen as one of the hallmarks of anorexia

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

nervosa. The anorectic stands in front of a mirror, which reflects back to her a grossly inflated and distorted image. Regarded as a widespread cultural disorder, Susan Bordo argues in her seminal study of feminism, culture and the body, that ‘the anorectic does not misperceive her body; rather, she has learned all too well the dominant cultural standards of *how* to perceive’.<sup>2</sup> The numerical figures do not make comfortable reading: roughly ten per cent of anorexics actually starve to death; as many as twenty-eight per cent of all school children may have an eating disorder; girls as young as five are unhappy with their bodies and want to be thinner.<sup>3</sup> Researchers have demonstrated that Barbie dolls could even encourage eating disorders. Girls aged between five and eight were shown various female figures, including Barbie and a new American doll, Emme, whose body proportions represent a larger body shape. The negative effects of the image of Barbie were very strong: the girls were more dissatisfied with their shape and desired the doll’s extreme thinness.<sup>4</sup>

From the moment young girls receive their first Barbie doll, they are bombarded with media images of waif-like models and advertisements for diet pills. For many teenage girls, who see models like Kate Moss on the catwalk, beauty has become synonymous with slenderness. The fear is that by using ultra-thin models with ‘size zero/double zero’ figures, the fashion industry is inadvertently encouraging their admirers to become anorexic. The Italian fashion designer, Donatella Versace, has expressed her concern that girls as young as ten are worrying about their bodies. For example, her own daughter has been battling anorexia for years. In Milan and Madrid super-thin models have been banned from the catwalks after the

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University Press California, 2003), 57.

<sup>3</sup> Researchers from Flinders University in Australia interviewed eighty-one girls aged between five and eight and found that nearly half wanted to be thinner and would go on a diet if they gained weight. See Joanna Moorhead, ‘Sometimes It’s Hard to Be a Girl’, *Guardian* (9 March 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Roger Dobson, ‘Skinny Barbie Blamed over Eating Disorders’, *Sunday Times* (14 May 2006). Since her introduction in 1959, the Barbie doll remains a cultural icon, and according to Greta Olson ‘many eating-disordered narrators describe how important playing with these dolls was to them’ (160), for example, Jenefer Shute’s *Life-Size* (1992). See Olson’s excellent analysis in *Reading Eating Disorders: Writings on Bulimia and Anorexia as Confessions of American Culture* (Frankfurt on Main: Peter Lang, 2003).

deaths of several 'size zero' models.<sup>5</sup> Since April 2015 the Austrian government has been considering a ban on the use of very skinny models in its fashion-shows and in advertising in line with France at the start of the year and Israel in 2013.<sup>6</sup> The German supermodel, Heidi Klum, regularly makes international news like Kate Moss, but in 2005 it was not on account of drug taking nor on account of her beauty. She had been the host and one of the judges in a TV show for aspiring models called 'Germany's Next Top Model'. When the judges eliminated a number of girls in the first round on the grounds they were too 'plump', though none weighed much more than 112lb, a debate erupted in the German and Austrian press about whether anorexia had become a 'status symbol' and being thin was on the same level as success and recognition.<sup>7</sup> Around the same time, the children's author, J.K. Rowling, commented on her website that she did not want her daughters, aged twelve and one, to become 'empty-headed, self-obsessed, emaciated clones', thus condemning a culture in which a 'toothpick' appearance is rated above almost everything else.<sup>8</sup>

Self-starvation among women is of course nothing new. In their study of its history, Walter Vandereycken and Ron van Deth draw parallels with women in the Middle Ages who fasted for religious reasons, yet were possibly possessed by the devil; later, fasting girls in the seventeenth century whose ability to go without food for several months was considered a miracle; by the end of the eighteenth century they had become medical case studies, exhibiting medical conditions, such as chlorosis or hysteria, and more seriously consumption.<sup>9</sup> As Anna Richards notes: 'A closer examination of attitudes towards food and eating at this period suggests [...] that starvation may have represented a means of safeguarding female identity,

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<sup>5</sup> Nick Pisa, 'Versace Heiress's Battle with Anorexia', *Daily Telegraph* (29 March 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Günther Brandstetter, 'Magersucht: "Am Beginn steht häufig eine Diät"', *Der Standard* (6 May 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Campbell, 'Klum's TV Show "Promotes Anorexia"', *Sunday Times* (5 February 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Candida Crew, 'I've Worried about not Being Thin my Whole Life', *The Independent* (9 April 2006).

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

<sup>9</sup> Walter Vandereycken and Ron van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: The History of Self-Starvation* (London: Athlone, 1994).

not unlike the way in which, according to psychologists, anorexia nervosa involves an attempt to preserve ego boundaries today'.<sup>10</sup> Greta Olson makes the cultural link when she comments that 'on an individual level eating disorders have replaced hysteria as a model for deviant feminine behaviour [...] women and girls as dependent members of society are particularly vulnerable to those disorders that reflect and express broader cultural tensions'.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the ideal woman's body that is stressed by western culture is thinner now than it has been at any other time in history. In 1908, archaeologists in Austria unearthed an eleven-centimetre-tall limestone figurine, dating back to the Stone Age, which is of a naked woman who has a hairstyle of parallel rows of curls, large breasts, stomach, hips, thighs and buttocks but has no face.<sup>12</sup> Representations of women as voluptuously corpulent and fertile by painters such as Raphael and Rubens were the norm for many years. The visible guarantee for offspring was important as many women did not reach their fortieth year and child mortality was high. However, a new standard of beauty began to emerge by the nineteenth century with the image of thinness and pale skin being lauded. In Austria, Elisabeth, the last Empress, born in 1837 and killed in 1898, and better known as Sissi, was writing in her diaries about her afflictions which came to be known as the 'Sissi-syndrome' and were indicative of anorexia nervosa.<sup>13</sup> Though not yet known to the general public, the term had just appeared in 1873 in British and French medical journals and was being linked to hysteria.<sup>14</sup> At the turn of the

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<sup>10</sup> Anna Richards, *The Wasting Heroine in German Fiction by Women 1770-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 48.

<sup>11</sup> Olson, *Reading Eating Disorders*, 109-113.

<sup>12</sup> Venus of Willendorf is one of the most famous archaeological finds in Austria. The sculpture is exhibited in the Museum of Natural History, Vienna.

<sup>13</sup> For a mother of four children, Sissi's slim figure was unusual. She never weighed more than fifty kilos and her lifestyle of strict calorie-counting and playing sport excessively was typical of an anorexic. Her collection of photos show how obsessed she was with beauty; many of the images are those of ballerinas. See Walter Vandereycken, Ron van Deth and Rolf Meermann, *Wundermädchen, Hungerkünstler, Magersucht: Eine Kulturgeschichte der Ess-Störungen* (Weinheim: Beltz, 2003), 266-267.

<sup>14</sup> 'Anorexia nervosa' (a nervous loss of appetite) was first discussed in detail by the English physician, Sir William Gull, in his article for the London medical journal *Transactions of the Clinical Society*, 7 (1874), 22-28. In 1873 both he and the French physician Ernest Charles Lasègue had made similar discoveries simultaneously. Gull linked the disorder to a failure in the nervous system of both women and men, whilst Lasègue saw the condition as only occurring in women and described his findings in a paper entitled *De l'Anorexie hystérique*. Giovanni Brugnoli was the first Italian physician to write about anorexia in a medical article entitled 'Sull'anoressia' [About Anorexia] 1875. Bulimia nervosa was given a name only in 1979.

twentieth century, the Austrian artist, Gustav Klimt, who was becoming renowned for his portrayals of the sexuality and beauty of women, painted an anorexic woman. Entitled 'Nagging Care', the figure is that of a solitary woman, who appears to be holding within herself her own pain and suffering.<sup>15</sup> Only twenty years later the agony of anorexia had turned into a fashion statement, when the 'flapper' look came into fashion alongside the Women's Movement. Asexual images of women appeared to mirror increased social status and freedom. The curvaceous body was disappearing and only made a fleeting appearance in the post-war era in the shape of cinematic divas such as Marilyn Monroe, Sophia Loren and Anita Ekberg. They exemplified the dominant ideal of female beauty and at the peak of their popularity were often described as 'femininity incarnate', 'femaleness embodied'. By the early 1960s there developed another trend of the idealisation of thinness as epitomised by Twiggy, and thereafter a byword for super-skinny models.<sup>16</sup> It cannot be a coincidence that at the same time eating disorders were becoming epidemic and were a predominantly feminine issue.<sup>17</sup> With the second wave of the Women's Movement this cult of thinness was being questioned by feminists.<sup>18</sup> In *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978), a pioneering work on the links between sexual politics and female diets, Susie Orbach notes that 'this bird-like eating is a reflection of a culture that praises

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<sup>15</sup> Klimt's 'Nagender Kummer' (1902) is the last of three sets of characters forming the middle panel of his Beethoven frieze, entitled 'Die Sehnsucht nach Glück'. The frieze, which focuses on the female body, was created for the fourteenth exhibition of the Viennese secession in homage of Beethoven and his 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony.

<sup>16</sup> One of the first models blamed for eating disorders, Twiggy, was the nickname given to Lesley Hornby for her waif-like figure. Today she puts the blame on Hollywood actresses for the new size-zero trend. In her 2008 memoir, *Killing My Own Snakes*, the British journalist, Ann Leslie, writes about the Swinging Sixties and what 'the Twiggy Effect' (including the model's anorexic bones) had on young women at the time, namely swallowing pills obtained from slimming clinics so that they could become just as super-skinny as Twiggy. Ann Leslie, *Killing My Own Snakes* (London: Macmillan, 2008), 97.

<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed overview of changing fashions see Bridget Dolan and Inez Gitzinger, eds, *Why Women? Gender Issues and Eating Disorders* (London, New Jersey: Athlone, 1994). A worrying current trend is the existence of websites and chatrooms, which present eating disorders as a lifestyle choice. The users of 'pro-anorexia' sites encourage each other to starve and purge, even holding weight loss competitions and posting pictures of their own emaciated bodies. Devotees refer to them as pro-ana/mia and wear a red bracelet as an underground signal linking anorexics.

<sup>18</sup> For the twenty-first century, the reference to 'the cult of thinness' no longer seems appropriate, as Elizabeth Eckermann explains, the cultural landscape inhabited by young women is dominated by what she terms 'multiple cults of thinness', since concepts range from 'heroin chic, healthism saints, carbon footprint minimisers, gym junkies to emo (emotional) gaunt'. Elizabeth Eckermann, 'Theorising Self-Starvation: Beyond Risk, Governmentality and the Normalising Gaze', in Helen Malson and Maree Burns, eds, *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders* (London: Routledge, 2009), 9-13: 11.

thinness and fragility in women' and in *Bodies*, three decades later, she asserts that 'the preoccupation with thinness and beauty [...] has recently been joined by another fixation: the rising rate of obesity'.<sup>19</sup> Her studies, along with those of Susan Bordo, Kim Chernin, Marilyn Lawrence and Morag MacSween explore the gendered aspect of modern 'eating pathologies' as well as the admiration and aestheticisation of slimness.<sup>20</sup>

Within this framework, anorexia may be seen to represent utter compliance to socially-imposed images of femininity, yet the anorexic subject also displays remarkable self-control over hunger, acting as autonomous agent, refusing bodily urges, as well as victim of patriarchal pressures. Anorexia has been repeatedly associated with identity crisis (eg Kim Chernin as above; Sheila MacLeod, *The Art of Starvation* (1982)<sup>21</sup>, Julie Hepworth, *The Social Construction of Anorexia Nervosa* (1999)<sup>22</sup> and with a refusal of (adult) gendered identity in particular (hence its frequent occurrence in adolescent girls); it is bound up in a wider cultural revulsion towards and shame around the female body (Barbara Brook, *Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (1999<sup>23</sup>)) and cannot be seen (exclusively) in terms of a desire to be thin.

A slim body shape has been associated also with a femininity which differentiates significantly from previous generations. As Chernin suggests, 'The body holds meaning. A woman obsessed with the size of her body, wishing to make her breasts and thighs and hips and belly smaller and less apparent, may be expressing the fact that she feels uncomfortable being female in this culture'.<sup>24</sup> In light of this any attempt to change the body is also a way to set socio-cultural boundaries within the mother-daughter relationship: 'When we attempt to

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<sup>19</sup> Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue: The Anti-Diet Guide to Permanent Weight Loss* (New York: Paddington Press, 1978), 153 and *Bodies* (London: Profile, 2009), 4.

<sup>20</sup> Kim Chernin's feminist/cultural analysis of eating disorders stresses the intersection of culture with family, economic, and historical developments together with psychological constructions of gender. This is reiterated in her later work *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity* of 1985 (New York: Harper and Row).

<sup>21</sup> Sheila MacLeod, *The Art of Starvation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).

<sup>22</sup> Hepworth, Julie Hepworth, *The Social Construction of Anorexia Nervosa* (London: Sage, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Brook, *Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Kim Chernin, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981),

determine the size and the shape of a woman's body, instructing to avoid its largeness and softness and roundness and girth, we are driven by the desire to expunge the memory of the primordial mother who ruled over our childhood with her inscrutable power over life and death'.<sup>25</sup> The ambivalent struggle for autonomy from the mother may persist life-long in women and is all too easily acted out via abnormal control of food intake and body shape, as Hilary Beattie explains in her 1988 research into the link between eating disorders and the mother-daughter relationship. In psychological terms, food and nourishment are symbolic of the mother, hence a daughter's refusal to eat can be seen as an attempt to escape a mother's control as well as to separate from her: she decides for herself to close her mouth, thereby 'rejecting what her mother gives and hurting her in the most powerful way she knows how'.<sup>26</sup> It is usually the case that the foundation of eating disorders is an unhappy mother-child relationship, in which the mother shows lack of love or is over-protective; for this reason, this volume opens with discussion of the role of the maternal in literary representations of anorexia. Women, and indeed men, who are affected by anorexia or bulimia often have something in common, namely a dominant and domineering mother whose wishes and demands can have a devastating effect. These children face the constant pressure of having to fulfil their mothers' expectations, but rarely succeed in making her happy. Fear of failure and feelings of powerlessness are thus common characteristics of anorectics and bulimics.

The attention given to eating disorders stems not only from the concern for preventing and curing these pathologies, but is also fed by an increasing corpus of works: memoirs, fictionalised accounts, photographic collections, documentaries, and more. There are clear risks to the representation of anorexia. One notable example worth drawing on here is that of the French model Isabelle Caro, whose nude body formed the centrepiece of the photographer

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<sup>25</sup> Chernin, *The Obsession*, 143.

<sup>26</sup> Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, 160.



Oliviero Toscani's 'Nolita' campaign, intended to show the public the horrific reality of the severely underweight anorexic body, as opposed to the airbrushed fantasy of standard fashion photography. Yet the 'Nolita' images did not only incite revulsion, but also envy ('The advertisement's message was supposed to be: "You don't want to look like this", but 'By boldly displaying a stick-thin body on huge billboards or in two-page newspaper spreads, the campaign inadvertently made another statement: "Look like this and you can be famous"'<sup>27</sup>). Later, Caro wrote a blog, as well as a memoir documenting her battle with eating disorders, entitled *La petite fille qui ne voulait pas grossir* [The Little Girl who Didn't Want to Get Fat], which includes a series of shocking images of her at her most underweight, and she appeared on various television documentaries, before dying after acute respiratory illness caused probably by the suppression of her immune system by prolonged self-starvation. Her fame was directly linked to her anorexia: her multifarious self-representations (in the memoir, the blog and on television) depended on her continuing status as what Debra Ferreday called 'the really skinny one'<sup>28</sup> attracting both fascination and horror. Here one can see the problem of representing anorexia nervosa, given the impossibility of controlling the reception of any textual or visual image of the anorexic subject.

Since before the medicalisation of these pathologies in the late nineteenth century through to the present day, writers across a variety of languages and cultures have depicted the complex meanings of anorexia, bulimia, binge-eating and troubled relationships with food and bodies. This cross-cultural volume seeks to explore the fictional portrayal of these self-destructive yet paradoxically and arguably self-empowering behaviours in contemporary French, German and Italian women's writing, drawing out different aspects of the cultural

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<sup>27</sup> Mark Anspach, 'Why did Isabelle Caro Die? Mixed Messages in an Anorexic Model's Death', *Revue du MAUSS permanente*, 24 mars 2011, <<http://www.journaldumauss.net./?Why-did-Isabelle-Caro-die-Mixed>> accessed 21 November 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Debra Ferreday, 'Haunted Bodies: Visual Cultures of Anorexia and Size Zero', *Borderlands* 10/2 (2011), 1-22: 12.

encodings of anorexia in Europe today, as well as analysing how literary texts seek to recount and indeed to challenge wider cultural representations of eating disorders. Whilst the volume seeks to bring together a transnational approach to women's writing on eating disorders (there are more similarities than differences in the ways in which anorexia is inscribed), it is nonetheless important to draw out some national specificities. Groulez has highlighted, for instance, that narratives of anorexia emerged later in France than in other countries, notably the United Kingdom and the United States<sup>29</sup>, whilst Cairns observes a 'relatively slow appearance of anorexia on the scene of French women's writing', as most of the texts featuring anorexia in French have been published since 1990 and even more strikingly in the twenty-first century.<sup>30</sup> Anorexia is, however, a major theme in contemporary French women's fiction – addressed by some of the most well-known French writers like Marie Darrieussecq in her novel *Truismes [Pig Tales]*<sup>31</sup> (as discussed by McGrath and Stojanovic in their chapters here) and Amélie Nothomb (whose novel *Robert des noms propres [The Book of Proper Names]* is analysed by Robson in this volume)<sup>32</sup> – as well as in autobiographical fiction (including Geneviève Brisac's *Petite [Petite]* and Lou Delvig's *Jours sans faim [Days without Hunger]*, also discussed by Robson here) and in autobiography (see, for instance, the texts analysed by Siobhán McIlvanney here), which goes some way to explain why there are comparatively more chapters in this volume devoted to eating disorders in French texts.

Italian women writers have depicted characters who display the symptoms of anorexia, bulimia and binge eating, such as Neera's *Teresa* (1886), Natalia Ginzburg's 'La madre' [The Mother] (1948) and Clara Sereni's *Casalinghitudine [Keeping House]* (1987) since the

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<sup>29</sup> Marianne Groulez, 'Ecrire l'anorexie: évolution de la maladie, renouvellement du discours', *Études* 10/405 (2006), 330-337.

<sup>30</sup> Lucille Cairns, 'Bodily Dis-ease in Contemporary French Women's Writing: Two Case Studies', *French Studies* 69/4 (2015), 494-508: 495.

<sup>31</sup> Marie Darrieussecq, *Truismes* (Paris: P.O.L éditeur, 1996) [*Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: The New Press, 1997)].

<sup>32</sup> *Robert des noms propres* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002).

medicalisation of these illnesses in the late nineteenth century; however it is only from the 1990s onwards that Italian women authors have been writing novels and autobiographies where eating disorders take centre stage, precisely when these pathologies started to spread epidemically in western countries. From Gianna Schelotto's *Una fame da morire* [Starving to Death] (1992), which focuses on binge eating and bulimia in the short story 'La ragazza che mangiava la luna' [The Girl Who Ate the Moon], and Alessandra Arachi's *Briciole* [Crumbs] (1994) to Michela Marzano's *Volevo essere una farfalla* [I Wanted to Be a Butterfly] (2011) up to Arachi's new novel *Non più briciole* [No More Crumbs] (2015), to mention only a few well-known fictional accounts or retelling of personal experiences with these pathologies, present-day Italian literature has been characterised by a new genre which Francesca Calamita proposes to call in her article *bulimanografie*, following in the footsteps of French Studies. Arachi's *Briciole* has generated curiosity among Italian literary scholars whose work focus on the area of women's writing and eating disorders (Menechella 2001), since it is one of the first accounts to describe the anorexic protagonist's routine in detail. In this volume, all three articles on Italian women's writing focus and/or make references to *Briciole* and Marzano's *Volevo essere una farfalla* as a consequence of the lively debate generated around them.

In German fiction, male and female authors have been depicting wasting heroines from the eighteenth century onwards, as Anna Richards' illuminating study, which focuses on women's fiction during the period 1770-1914 by amongst others, Sophie von la Roche, Fanny Lewald, Gabriele Reuter, and Hedwig Dohm, illustrates.<sup>33</sup> More recently, Iris Schäfer depicts the origins of anorexia nervosa in the literary portrayals of hysteria by authors such as Gabriele Reuter and Lou Andreas-Salomé as well as discussing male hysteria in works by Arthur

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<sup>33</sup> Anna Richards, *The Wasting Heroine in German Fiction by Women 1770-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004). Before devoting four chapters to women's fiction, there is a chapter on the wasting heroine in fiction by men in which the author explains the extent to which male German novelists at the time were influenced by Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* published in England in 1747/8. In the novel *Clarissa* refuses to eat as a result of having been raped and suffers a lingering wasting death.

Schnitzler and Robert Musil.<sup>34</sup> This allows her to link mental illness in adolescence as depicted in fiction at the start of the 1900s as well as to show that anorexia has become increasingly the topic of young German writers from the 1980s onwards. Schäfer questions the extent to which anorexia is a modern form of hysteria by analyzing the portrayal of the adolescent anorexic protagonists in Marjaleena Lembke's *Der Schatten des Schmetterlings* [The Butterfly's Shadow] (1998) and Birgit Schlieper's *Herzenssucht* [Addiction of the Heart] (2008). She reaches the conclusion that during the last few years anorexic protagonists have been getting younger and younger and that in terms of literary depictions anorexia nervosa is primarily a female illness, which has become an expression of modern adolescence.<sup>35</sup> These two aspects come to the fore here in Petra Bagley's chapter on contemporary Austrian women's novels, where the problematic relationship with food begins in the teenage years of the female protagonists. It is more than often the case that the authors themselves have suffered from an eating disorder, hence autobiographical texts are not uncommon.<sup>36</sup> In *Der Hunger nach Wahnsinn* [The Hunger for Madness] (1981), which is based on actual medical reports, Maria Erlenberger's first-person narrator writes about her experiences in a psychiatric clinic, where she is diagnosed with schizophrenia. After two years of hunger strike due to a failed love relationship, Lore Berger's female protagonist in *Der barmherzige Hügel: Eine Geschichte gegen Thomas* [The Merciful Hill: A Story contra Thomas] (1981) commits suicide, just like the author herself did when at the age of twenty-two she jumped from a water tower.<sup>37</sup> Ulrike Draesner's novel *Mitgift* [Dowry] (2002), analysed here by Teresa Ludden, also draws on the author's own life, since she has suffered to date two episodes of anorexia nervosa: once during

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<sup>34</sup> Iris Schäfer, *Von der Hysterie zur Magersucht: Adoleszenz und Krankheit in Romanen und Erzählungen der Jahrhundert- und der Jahrtausendwende* (Frankfurt on Main: Peter Lang, 2016).

<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Schäfer completes her study with an analysis of how two young male writers, Tobias Elsäßer and Benedict Wells, depict mental illness (hysteria) in their young male protagonists.

<sup>36</sup> See also Marzano, *Volevo essere una farfalla*; Lou Delvig's *Jours sans faim*, analysed by Nathalie Morello and Kathryn Robson here; Geneviève Brisac's *Petite* (also discussed in Robson's chapter) and the texts discussed by Siobhán McIlvanney in her chapter in this volume.

<sup>37</sup> For a detailed analysis of these texts, see Bettina Blanck, *Magersucht in der Literatur: Zur Problematik weiblicher Identitätsfindung* (Frankfurt: R.G. Fischer, 1984).

her teenage years; the second time when she was in her thirties and facing a crisis of identity, whilst finding it impossible to write.<sup>38</sup>

The increase in literary representations of eating disorders in western culture has attracted much critical attention, leading to labels such as “écriture féminine” (feminine writing), a reworking of the notion of ‘écriture féminine’ (rooted in the body) originally outlined by Hélène Cixous, or “écriture taille zéro” (writing size zero) coined by French critic Isabelle Meuret, which she applies to world literature of anorexia beyond France.<sup>39</sup> Meuret divides literature of anorexia into three broad categories: the first set of texts, labelled ‘renunciation/disincarnation’, represent anorexia from within, in a narrative typically lacking coherence and a cohesive subject position; the second, entitled ‘enunciation/incarnation’, are usually written in the first person and express anorexia more clearly. The third type of texts, classified as ‘denunciation/reincarnation’, offer a more open-ended model of anorexia narrative, often involving more critical distance from the phase of illness and a clear delineation of the distance between past (phase of illness) and present (recovery).<sup>40</sup> This does not of course mean that all texts fit neatly into Meuret’s proposed categories: many, as the chapters in this volume show, have overlapping features belonging to two or more.

Narratives of anorexia do not inevitably follow similar structures or deploy analogous textual strategies, nor can size-zero writing act as a direct textual equivalent to the size zero body. Nonetheless there are striking points of connection between contemporary European texts recounting eating disorders, as may be seen through the chapters in this volume, including

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<sup>38</sup> Ulrike Draesner talks candidly about her experiences of anorexia nervosa because she is determined that the topic should not be a taboo subject. We had the pleasure of meeting her at an AHRC sponsored workshop entitled ‘Hungry for Words’, organised by Heike Bartel at the University of Nottingham, July 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Isabelle Meuret, *L’Anorexie créatrice* (Paris, Klincksieck, 2006). A clear play on Roland Barthes’s concept of “écriture degré zéro” (writing degree zero), it refers to a writing process ‘that mingles flesh and words, helps figure rather than represent the anorexic experience’ (see Meuret, ‘Writing Size Zero: Figuring Anorexia in Contemporary World Literatures’, in Isabelle Lange and Zoë Norridge, eds, *Illness, Bodies and Contexts: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2007), 77-91: 83.

<sup>40</sup> Isabelle Meuret, ‘Writing Size Zero: Figuring Anorexia in Contemporary World Literatures’, *Illness, Bodies and Contexts: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 83.

emphasis on the relation between writing, anorexia and identity, the multiple meanings of anorexia as both rebellion against and conformity to dominant socio-political structures, the renegotiation of figures of the body. The chapters here analyse representations of illness and recovery, in autobiography, fiction and autobiography, drawing on and adding to feminist, psychoanalytic and other theoretical frameworks on eating disorders and on their literary inscriptions.

This volume is divided into four main sections, beginning with eating disorders and maternity, in which Siobhán McIlvanney and Petra Bagley tackle the role of the mother in the onset of anorexia/bulimia as a familial drama or power struggle, in which the anorexic subject both complies with and rebels against maternal control and the mother's culpability and sense of impotence is explored. The next section, 'Eating Disorders as Socio-Political Protest', frames the narratives of anorexia within wider cultural and political struggles, with which, as Francesca Calamita, Natalie Morello and Teresa Ludden show through analyses of Italian, French and German texts respectively, the refusal to eat constitutes both a rejection of and compliance with socio-political structures. Calamita explores the multiple and contradictory meanings of anorexia as protest in both family and society, whilst Morello's reading highlights the risks in a contemporary medical model of eating disorders in terms of individual pathology that fails to take into account its socio-cultural context. Teresa Ludden's chapter on Ulrike Draesner and Karen Duve focuses on the ways in which anorexic bodies (and other deviant bodies) are both shown to be culturally silenced and yet paradoxically also constitute a means of self-articulation. In all of these chapters, anorexia as both quest for and destruction of identity in relational terms is highlighted, whether this is linked to familial relationships or social pressures. The third part of the book explores anorexia and identity through focus on the body, not (only) as the site on which competing socio-cultural demands are inscribed, but also on the body as locus of resistance and transformation. Dearbhla McGrath's and Sonja

Stojanovic's chapters both deal with the French writer Marie Darrieussecq, showing how her bestselling novel, *Truismes* (1996), uses the figure of the female body in (possible) metamorphosis into a pig to explore gendered constraints in terms of appetite and desire. Danila Cannamela, meanwhile, uses the cover-image of Alessandra Arachi's *Briciole* as a basis from which to approach the subject of anorexia in a different way. The final part of the book returns to re-read narratives of anorexia differently: Julie Rodgers explores the doubling of text and self in Ying Chen's *Querelle d'un squelette avec son double*<sup>41</sup> [A Skeleton's Quarrel with her Double] (2003), whilst Anna Aresi renegotiates how narratives of recovery in Italian and American memoirs relate eating disorders through a language of mourning that risks glorifying the illness even as it ostensibly seeks to reveal its dangers. Finally, Kathryn Robson uses the figure of the anorexic reader within contemporary French fiction as a means to rethink the relation between reading and anorexia.

As we write this Introduction in 2016, the first annual World Eating Disorders Action Day was held on 2 June 2016. Two hundred organisations and thousands of activists in over forty countries undertook collaborative work to promote knowledge of eating disorders and the need for comprehensive treatment. This was the first time that eating disorders received collective global attention for changes to be made to evidence-based treatment, accessibility, funding gaps as well as the stigma and the stereotyping.<sup>42</sup> According to the National Eating Disorders Association, eating disorders are the mental illnesses with the highest mortality rates.<sup>43</sup> In particular, among pre-teen children eating disorders are seeing a steep rise because increasing numbers of children are struggling to cope with a combination of pressures, including images from celebrity magazines and websites, earlier puberty, fears of obesity and the growth of cyber-bullying. To date the typical sufferer has been female, a teenager or young

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<sup>41</sup> Ying Chen, *Querelle d'un squelette avec son double* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

<sup>42</sup> <<https://worldeatingdisordersday.org/>> accessed 24 August 2016.

<sup>43</sup> See Walter Kaye, 'Mortality and Eating Disorders', <<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/mortality-and-eating-disorders>> accessed 24 August 2016.

woman, a high achiever, a perfectionist who is highly intelligent and whose distorted, disordered thinking manifests itself in an unrealistic self-image. The medical professionals tell us that she will lie a great deal and try to keep her eating disorder a secret; paradoxically, those with anorexia are often good at feeding others, as we also see in this volume in Petra Bagley's discussion of the protagonist in Helene Flöss's *Dürre Jahre* [The Lean Years], or in Francesca Calamita's reading of Alessandra Arachi's *Briciole*, where the young protagonist spends hours cooking meals for her husband.<sup>44</sup> It is certainly the case that the literary texts analysed in the following chapters attest to these characterising symptoms. Not only is the younger age group of sufferers a worrying trend, but the recent phenomenon of 'clean eating', whereby one in three people are choosing to eat 'free-from' food (e.g. dairy-free, gluten-free, sugar-free) and thus restricting or avoiding certain food groups (also termed 'orthorexia')<sup>45</sup> is encouraged by health bloggers, who glorify the restriction of calories and praise those who deprive themselves of the supposedly unhealthy foods. Whilst the aim of 'clean eating' is to achieve a greater sense of wellness, the consequence is that many who become so focused on healthy eating end up in eating disorder clinics, dangerously ill. For those suffering with eating disorders, food obsession is ultimately about control; often it is the only aspect of their lives that they can control.<sup>46</sup> This study seeks to explore and present different perspectives on eating disorders, without seeking to impose a monolithic model, but rather, aiming to open up alternative readings of eating disorders beyond dominant cultural narratives and across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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<sup>44</sup> Dr. Sarah Jarvis was speaking on the topic of Living with Anorexia, Jeremy Vine Show, Radio 2, 23 August 2016. She does point out too that of the estimated 700,000 sufferers in the UK, twenty percent are male. Any figures to do with eating disorders are problematic due to the secretive nature of the illness.

<sup>45</sup> See also footnote 1.

<sup>46</sup> Documentary on 'Clean Eating's Dirty Secrets' was aired on BBC 1, 23 August 2016.



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