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Source: *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Fall, 1986), pp. 51-61

Published by: FSR, Inc.

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## ANOREXIA, ASCETICISM, AND AUTONOMY: Self-Control as Liberation and Transcendence

Gail Corrington

I thought . . . that I was molding myself into that wonderful ascetic pure image . . . I felt I had to do something I didn't want for a higher purpose . . . I created a new image for myself and disciplined myself to a new way of life.<sup>1</sup>

*Integer, integra, integrum* comes to mind. Untouched. A man is more untouched than a woman. He is inviolate; he does not have to be pregnant. A man remains himself, does not have to assimilate, renounce; only women have to do that.<sup>2</sup>

This soul would fain see itself free and eating is killing it . . .<sup>3</sup>

. . . A full belly does not make for a chaste spirit.<sup>4</sup>

Those whom satiety drove from paradise, fasting restores.<sup>5</sup>

The first two passages above come from interviews with modern women with anorexia nervosa, the so-called eating disorder. The third comes from the autobiography of Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic and doctor (outstanding teacher) of the Catholic Church; the fourth from another female doctor and saint, Catherine of Siena. The fifth statement is advice given the virgin Eustochium by the fourth-century Latin church father, Jerome. All of these statements make a connection between control of one bodily appetite (eating) by fasting, and control of another bodily appetite (sex) through abstinence. Both are forms of self-control. This study will trace certain phenomena, including linguistic metaphors, which are common to modern-day anorexia nervosa and to the asceticism practiced by the female saints of the early and later Middle Ages. Neither a sociologist nor psychologist, I am nevertheless relying upon the observations and analyses of both in

<sup>1</sup> Gertrude, in Hilde Bruch, *Eating Disorders* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 16–17.

<sup>2</sup> Henriette A., in Helmut Thomä, *Anorexia Nervosa*, trans. Gillian Brydone (New York: International Universities Press, 1967), pp. 98–99.

<sup>3</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday/Image, 1960), p. 165.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke, preface by Giuliana Cavallini, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 243.

<sup>5</sup> Jerome, *Epistle 22.10–11 (Ad Eustochium)*, *Select Letters of Saint Jerome*, Eng. trans. F.A. Wright, Loeb Classical Library (New York: Putnam, 1933).

describing these phenomena. These observations will supplement the words of women themselves and my own adolescent experience of anorexia nervosa. My aim is to suggest some historical, sociocultural, and psychological continuities between the two groups of women and to show how both strive for identity and autonomy.

Not only is there a strong resemblance between traditional descriptions of female asceticism, especially where it involves fasting, and the extreme form of fasting referred to as anorexia nervosa, but the two are frequently connected in accounts of holy ascetic women of the patristic, medieval, and even modern periods.<sup>6</sup> Further, anorexia is described by anorectics themselves as a form of *askesis*, a discipline of the body for the sake of a "higher purpose." Like asceticism, anorexia is a form of control. It enables women to resist the prevailing values of societies which they do not control, while at the same time making them acceptable to those societies. As Rudolph Bell has pointed out, "anorexia begins as the girl fastens onto a highly valued societal goal . . .," which she allows to define her identity, but at the same time she transforms and transcends the limitations of that identity by becoming "a champion in the race for perfection."<sup>7</sup> Thus, ascetic and anorectic women refuse either to be defined as, or limited to, their bodies. In the patristic and medieval periods, women adopted a rigorous self-denial originally promoted by and for men, to become a "new ascetic ideal."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, modern anorectics, faced with a "cultural mandate" to deny the traditional roles and even body shapes of women in order to focus upon male competitiveness and power, resist what they see as attempts to impose authority on them from the outside.<sup>9</sup> Eating and noneating thus become symbols of power and control: refusal to eat is a refusal of any authority over the body other than one's own.

<sup>6</sup> Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985). In his study of 261 Italian Catholic "holy women" from 1200 to the present, Bell finds that late medieval holy women described themselves and were described by others "in terms that were similar in important ways to clinical descriptions of modern-day sufferers of anorexia nervosa" (p. ix). Caroline Walker Bynum also points out the connection between fasting and abstinence as similar, if not identical, forms of holiness in the period from 1200 to 1500, "Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women," *Representations* 11 (Summer 1985): 1-25. Judith Van Herik shows that Simone Weil, whose death by starvation was seen as a mark of saintliness, exhibited anorectic patterns in her life and writings: "Simone Weil's Religious Imagery: How Looking Becomes Eating," in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles, The Harvard Women's Studies in Religion Series (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), pp. 260-282.

<sup>7</sup> Bell, pp. 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary R. Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> William Davis, "Epilogue," in Bell, p. 185.

The eating disorder today called anorexia nervosa was first described in 1684 by the English physician Richard Morton, but it did not receive its name or reputation as a psychosomatic disorder until the studies of W.W. Gull and E.C. Lasègue in 1873.<sup>10</sup> It is not surprising that the latter studies come out of a period which was particularly oppressive for women, nor that these physicians should have called the phenomenon "hysterical anorexia."<sup>11</sup> In the past decade, anorexia nervosa has reached such proportions among predominantly white, Western, upper-middle-class young women, that it is being called an epidemic.<sup>12</sup> Despite the rise in the incidence of anorexia, it is still being described by many psychoanalysts as a pathology, a disorder requiring psychiatric as well as medical treatment.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, much of the recent research on anorexia has gone beyond clinical psychiatric and medical descriptions of symptoms and cures, and has centered on the relationship between anorexia and self-image. Garfinkel and Garner note that "a major predisposition to anorexia nervosa relates to difficulties in autonomous functioning and sense of personal identity."<sup>14</sup> The preponderance of anorexia in young females is especially related to self-image, and the drive both for autonomy and acceptance.<sup>15</sup> Both historical and modern anorectics are presented with an image they must imitate at all

<sup>10</sup> Richard Morton, *Phthiologia seu exertationem de phthisi* (Ulm: David Bartholomae, 1714); William W. Gull, "Apepsia Hysterica, Anorexia Nervosa," *Transactions of the Clinical Society* 7 (1874): 22–24; E. Charles Lasègue, "De l'anorexie hystérique," *Archives générales de médecine* 21 (1873): 385–403.

<sup>11</sup> The term, *anorexia*, when used alone, means "loss of appetite." When this loss is of organic origin, it is called *cachexia*, or "wasting," and was first described as such by Morton in 1689 and again by M. Simmonds in 1914, who gave his name to the "hysterical" form of cachexia, which he believed to have been caused by lesions of the hypothalamus ("Über Hypophysisschwund mit tödlichem Ausgang," *Deutsch. med. Wochenschrift* 40 [1914]: 322).

<sup>12</sup> David M. Garner, Paul E. Garfinkel, and Marion P. Olmsted, "An Overview of Sociocultural Factors in the Development of Anorexia Nervosa," *Anorexia Nervosa: Recent Developments in Research*, International Conference on Anorexia Nervosa, Toronto, 1981, ed. Pdraig L. Darby et al. (New York: Alan R. Liss, 1981), p. 67. Cf. *Psychosocial Medicine* 13:2 (May 1983): 231–238, for a review of recent journal literature.

<sup>13</sup> Thomä, p. 21; cf. J.P. Feighner, E. Robins, and S.B. Guze, "Diagnostic Criteria for Use in Psychiatric Research," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 26 (1972): 57–63, for a list of symptoms of clinical anorexia nervosa.

<sup>14</sup> Garfinkel and Garner, "The Multidimensional Nature of Anorexia Nervosa," in Darby et al., eds., p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Regina Casper, "Some Provisional Ideas Concerning the Psychologic Structure in Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia," in Darby et al., eds., pp. 387–393. Cf. recent articles in *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 1:3 (Fall 1983): p. 71–76 (from a Freudian viewpoint); *Journal of Strategic and Systemic Therapies* 4:4 (December 1983): 278–279; B. Wingate and M.J. Christie, "Ego Strength and Body Image in Anorexia Nervosa," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 22:3 (1978): 202–204; A.D. Jonas, "Aus dem Rahmen üblicher Erklärungen fallende Syndrome der Anorexie," *Praxis der Psychotherapie und Psychosomatik* 28:2 (March 1983): 67–71 (for a view counter to the prevailing one). For book-

costs: early and medieval Christian women, with the image of asceticism; modern women, with an ideal of leanness that is frequently translated into asceticism. Both groups of women are resisting a male image of women (passive, lustful, with obvious feminine characteristics) in favor of an image men promote for themselves (stringent self-denial; slimness and fitness). Thus, there may be two definitions of the struggle for bodily control through anorectic behavior. Hilde Bruch suggests that anorexia becomes the means through which women refuse to accommodate themselves to prevailing cultural expectations; Susie Orbach argues that women, trained by a male-dominated society to nurture others rather than themselves, choose anorexia rather than less acceptable forms of assertion.<sup>16</sup> I prefer to see anorexia as a creative solution—in some cases, the only solution—to the need to take control of one's body out of the hands of society and to exert it oneself.

Modern anorectics are frequently conscious of practicing a kind of asceticism. Nadia, an adolescent girl described by Janet in 1908, wanted "to be completely sexless, apparently even completely bodiless." Henriette A., a nineteen-year-old studied by Thomä, sought asexuality to be attained through asceticism, particularly fasting, because she saw oral reception, like sexual penetration, as an invasion of her body. Gertrude D., another of Thomä's patients, asserted both her desire for autonomy and for asexuality by means of non-eating: "I am afraid of being a woman . . . I am much freer when I eat nothing . . . Eating is as burdensome for me as having children is for other women." Anne, an adolescent anorectic studied by Jungian analyst Marion Woodman, stated, "I don't want to be a sexual, bodily being. I want to be a zero, a blob." Gertrude, a patient of Hilde Bruch's, molded herself into an "ascetic pure image," denying herself the food she wanted in order to pursue a "higher purpose." From the analysts' point of view also, the anorectic's desire to be a "pure, sexless being," reflects the association of "eating . . . with sinfulness, starvation with saintliness." Woodman observes that, for the anorectic, "unthinkable sexual fantasies are . . . displaced onto food, and for a religious girl, the complex is further charged by desire for union with God as an escape from a world with which she cannot cope." The twentieth-century French mystic, Simone Weil also saw eating as a form of sexual dominance and the acceptance of power, the refusal to eat as a

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length studies, see Marion Woodman, *The Owl Was a Baker's Daughter*, *Studies in Jungian Psychology* 4 (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1980), esp. p. 101; Hilde Bruch, *Eating Disorders*, and *The Golden Cage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), esp. pp. 62, 135; Angelyn Spignesi, *Starving Women: A Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1983), esp. p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> Bruch, *Eating Disorders*; Susie Orbach, "The Construction of Femininity: Some Critical Issues in the Psychology of Women," presented at the third annual conference of the Center for the Study of Anorexia and Bulimia, New York, 1984, cited by Davis in Bell, p. 213.

deliberate refusal of power so that one may be totally consumed (eaten) by God. Van Herik suggests that Weil's "anorexic stance" was a form of recognition of and protest against "woman's symbolic edibility . . . by refusing to treat anything else as food."<sup>17</sup>

The association of fasting with asexuality, and the bodily image of the anorectic—pale, skeletal, nearly "bodiless"—are reminders of those earlier female ascetics for whom severe fasting and other austerities were a means of erasing their female, bodily nature and a way of achieving an asexual, spiritual union with God (or Christ)—the only form of dominance they would accept. The link between eating and sexuality, however, had been made by men, the Desert Fathers, particularly Anthony, in the fourth century.<sup>18</sup> Jerome promoted it particularly strenuously, advocating abstinence as an ideal for both men and women, and praising those of his aristocratic female associates who made their "whole life a fast" (*Ep.* 45.3).<sup>19</sup> Jerome saw fasting as especially necessary for women, since the female sex was prone to incontinence (*Ep.* 22.21), and since "chastity cannot be safe by other means than fasting" (*Ep.* 22.11; cf. *Ep.* 44.8-10). Food is associated with lust, because eating is a bodily appetite: "Nothing so inflames the body and excites the genital members unless it be undigested food and convulsive belching" (*Ep.* 54.10; cf. *Ep.* 22.17).

As we do not possess any writings of the women from this ascetic Roman circle, except a letter of Paula on her visit to the Holy Land (*Ep.* 45), we cannot know, from direct accounts, how they felt about this connection between fasting and continence. However, judging from the writings of Jerome and others, the women had perhaps made this connection themselves. Marcella, the founder of the circle, was influenced by the strict Egyptian form of asceticism (*Ep.* 127.15), and the privations practiced by the members of her group could be so severe that one of their number, the young Blesilla, died from prolonged fasting.<sup>20</sup> Blesilla's mother, the elder Paula, is known for her own fasting (Jerome, *Ep.* 45.3), as is Asella, another member of the circle (*Ep.* 24). Paula's fasting becomes legendary: in the thirteenth-

<sup>17</sup> P. Janet, "Les obsessions et la psychoasthénie (Paris: Alcan, 1908), cited by Ludwig Binswanger, "The Case of Ellen West," in *Existence*, ed. Rollo May et al. (New York: Basic Books, 1957), pp. 155-157; Thomä, pp. 21, 201-202; Woodman, p. 78; Bruch, *Eating Disorders*, p. 62; Thomä, p. 253 and Spignesi, p. 18; Woodman, p. 79; Van Herik, p. 278.

<sup>18</sup> See *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers*, ed. Benedicta Ward, SLG (Oxford: SLG Press, 1981), esp. pp. 7-21.

<sup>19</sup> Like Jerome, Chrysostom praises the ascetic virgins who practice self-mortification (*De studio praesentium* 3, PG 63.488ff.), and praises Olympias as an example of a "dead body" in this world (*Ep.* 2, PG 52.561). However, the Greek fathers tend to praise female asceticism in the same terms as male, without Jerome's particular emphasis. For a discussion of the Greek fathers' various motivations for fasting, see Herbert Musurillo, "The Problem of Ascetical Fasting in the Greek Patristic Writers," *Traditio* 12 (1956): 1-64.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. F.A. Wright, introduction, *Letters of Saint Jerome*, p. ix; cf. also Jerome, *Ep.* 39.6; 27; 28. Translations of the Latin are mine.

century *The Golden Legend*, Jacob of Voragine relates that Paula never ate in the presence of a man, and that she made the virgins of her Bethlehem community imitate her strenuous fasting, “preferring the health of their souls to that of their stomachs.”<sup>21</sup> Jerome quotes her as saying that her motive in fasting so severely was to provide an example of self-control for others: “I keep under my body and bring it into subjection” (*Ep.* 108.1: Eng. tr. in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 6:196).

Certainly neither the elder Paula nor the elder Melania fit the contemporary model of anorexia, described by Anna Freud as the “asceticism of puberty,”<sup>22</sup> nor can we assume that, because these ascetic women are praised by men, that they fast in order to gain that praise. Yet the evidence does suggest two possible motivations which might show an anorectic stance, particularly in younger women of the patristic age (e.g., Blesilla, the younger Melania). The first is that asceticism was a valued goal and fasting a means by which women could achieve the new ascetic ideal of the fourth century. As Rosemary Ruether has pointed out, “The ascetic way was one of the most interesting options open to women in the fourth and fifth centuries. It offered women possibilities which departed dramatically from their traditional roles under patriarchy,” in that it allowed women control over their own bodies and their own destinies.<sup>23</sup> If this motive seems too much a form of accommodation to a male ideal, two things should be noted. First, Marcella and her circle deliberately chose the ascetic mode of life on their own initiative, as a means of escaping the limitations placed by men upon women as “daughters of Eve” (cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 22.24). Second, the daughters of aristocratic Roman women of the fourth century refused to accept their social roles (marriage, daughterhood, motherhood) and defied their parents by adopting the ascetic life-style.<sup>24</sup> This point, suggested by Ann Yarbrough, offers a second motive for the asceticism whose hallmark was fasting. *The Golden Legend* relates examples of virgin saints who defied parents’ plans for their marriages, specifically through refusal to eat. St. Agnes referred to marriage as food, “the nourishment of crime” (I.191), while St. Anastasia refused food, so that she would starve to death, and not have to marry an earthly suitor (I.79).<sup>25</sup> Although Bell refers to this anorectic behavior as

<sup>21</sup> Jacob of Voragine, *La légende dorée de Jacques de Voragine*, trans. (into French) J.B.M. Roze (Paris: Edouard Rouveyre, 1902). English translations are mine.

<sup>22</sup> Anna Freud, “The Psychoanalytic Study of Infantile Feeding Disorders,” *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 2 (1946): 119–132.

<sup>23</sup> Ruether, “Mothers of the Church: Ascetic Women in the Late Patristic Age,” in *Women of Spirit*, ed. Rosemary R. Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 93.

<sup>24</sup> Ann Yarbrough, “The Christianization of Rome: The Example of Roman Women,” *Church History* 45 (1976): 149–165.

<sup>25</sup> The numbers in parentheses refer to the volume and page numbers of the French translation of *The Golden Legend* (*La légende dorée*), see note 21. Tales of young women’s extreme aversion to marriage or intercourse, in the face of threats and tortures, are

“manipulative” of families, “disorderly males,” and religious authorities, it can be seen in a more positive light, as a struggle to gain back control over the destiny and definition of the body, an autonomy which was possible for ascetic males, but which had not been possible for women, who were limited to the “passive, reproductive roles” ordained for them by society.<sup>26</sup>

Fasting also provided women with a means of transcendence. As Angelyn Spignesi has commented, the ascetic woman links “starvation with saintliness . . . to an ‘angelic,’ ‘ethereal’ world.”<sup>27</sup> The practice of starvation for sainthood is also accompanied by “desire for union with God (or Christ) as an escape” from the unacceptable desires of the flesh. In popular tales of the saints, such as *The Golden Legend* and the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, the unacceptability, as well as the tyrannical nature, of fleshly desire is caricatured in the figures of the monstrous male tormentors of the virgin “brides of Christ.” An interesting version of the familiar pattern is offered by the tenth-century playwright, Hroswitha of Gandersheim, who portrays the torment of the third-century martyrs, Agape, Irene, and Chione, by the prefect Dulcitus as an attempted seduction in the kitchen. Dulcitus has the women locked into a serving pantry, and there he is deluded into kissing and fondling the pots and pans instead of the women. Lust is once again associated with food, bodily nourishment with sexuality.<sup>28</sup> As Casper has shown, for modern adolescent anorectics, the pursuit of this saintly, “illusionary ideal of perfection” is perceived as the only way to transcend a dilemma: society’s demand for perfection, for outward, even desperate conformity, versus the personal need for “a sense of identity, personal initiative, and an emotional equilibrium.”<sup>29</sup>

As bodily appetites are conquered, moreover, they are transformed into more acceptable spiritual appetites. In the stories of the saints from *The Golden Legend*, the earthly “food of crime” (sensuality) is avoided through a mystical, heavenly union with the “bridegroom,” Christ. In *The Dialogue of*

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common to the popular *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*: cf., for example, *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, in Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher; English translation ed. Robert McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965).

<sup>26</sup> Bell, p. 12; Davis, “Epilogue,” Bell, p. 149.

<sup>27</sup> Spignesi, p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Hrotsvitha (her name is variously spelled), “Dulcitus,” trans. Mary Marguerite Butler, RSM, in *Medieval and Tudor Drama*, ed. John Gassner (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 3–12; *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* 22, trans. Herbert Musurillo, for the original account of the martyrdoms; “Hrotsvit of Gandersheim,” in *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), pp. 53–60. Sandro Sticca (“Sin and Salvation: The Dramatic Context of Hroswitha’s Women,” in *The Roles and Images of Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. D. Radcliff Umstead [Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975], p. 12, cited in Wilson, p. 44) points out that, to the medieval mind, the kitchen is “the symbolic abode of the Devil on earth,” and food is associated with carnality.

<sup>29</sup> Casper, pp. 389–391.

the fourteenth-century saint and mystic, Catherine of Siena, there is a striking contrast between the earthly body, which must be “mortified” and “put to death” (43),<sup>30</sup> and the mystic body of the Church, which is also the body of Christ, the “flawless, life-giving food” (192), for which the soul is continually hungry. Images of feeding (especially breast-feeding) and food recur throughout *The Dialogue*.<sup>31</sup> From the breasts of the Church, the body of Christ, the infant soul “takes into the mouth of her holy desire the flesh of Christ crucified” (179). Oral satisfaction is thus achieved without fear of unholy desire or invasion. Those who are “false ministers” of the Church, however, are bloated with “inordinate eating” which leads to “firing up the weak flesh and corrupt[ing] you with perverse desire” (300). The “gentle and glorious martyrs,” on the other hand, deny themselves bodily pleasures, but their suffering is described as a “fattening sadness, that fattens the soul in loving charity, because sufferings increase and strengthen virtue” (147). Thus *bodily* fatness is a sign of corruption, while *spiritual* fatness is a sign of the victory of reason over the body, which thus becomes “the instrument for proving and exercising virtue” (105).

Catherine’s refusal of bodily nourishment in favor of spiritual refreshment began at an early age. As her biographer, Raymond of Capua, tells us, “The little disciple of Christ began to fight against the flesh before the flesh had begun to rebel. She determined to give up eating meat,” and, when it was served she fed it to her brother or to the cat.<sup>32</sup> Her strenuous fasting, however, was accompanied by a nearly obsessive hunger for another kind of food, “the body and blood of Christ,” which she received in Communion. Raymond tells us, “I myself have seen that poor body, sustained by no more than a few glasses of cold water, reduced to such a state of exhaustion,” that her friends and family feared she would die. But, having gained the victory over her bodily hunger, Catherine then satisfied her spiritual hunger by communing so frequently that she caused a scandal, leading to occasions on which the sacrament was denied her until Christ miraculously intervened to change the celebrant’s heart (295). She describes her soul’s extreme satisfaction after having communed: “She sensed in a wonderful way, in her bodily taste, the savor and fragrance of the body and blood of Christ crucified . . .” (295). When she first began to avoid other kinds of food, she told her confessor, “I feel so satisfied by the Lord when I receive His most adorable Sacrament that I could not possibly feel any desire for any other kind of food.”

<sup>30</sup> The numbers in parentheses refer to the page numbers in the Noffke translation of *The Dialogue*, see note 4.

<sup>31</sup> See Bell, pp. 22–53, for a thorough discussion of the imagery of food and fasting in Catherine’s writings; see also Bynum, pp. 1–25, for a discussion of the imagery of food as related to sexuality in the writings of medieval women.

<sup>32</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Saint Catherine of Siena*, trans. George Lamb (New York: P.J. Kennedy, 1960), p. 33. References to Raymond in this paragraph come from *The Life*, p. 156.

We may hear a striking echo of the words of the ascetic intellectual Catherine in the words of the modern ascetic, Gertrude, a patient of Hilde Bruch's, who aimed at the ascetic's "pure" image, disciplining herself to a "new way of life."<sup>33</sup> In both Catherine's and Gertrude's cases, as in those cited above, sexuality is connected with eating as an appetite which is to be strictly controlled by the woman herself, while spirituality, the "new image," is linked with severe fasting, in order to reduce the power of the body's appetites. This *askesis* (discipline, exercise) provides the anorectic woman, who perceives herself as otherwise powerless, with a sense of control over her own self. As Hazel, another of Bruch's patients, put it, "You make out of your body your very own kingdom, where you are the tyrant, the absolute dictator."<sup>34</sup> Any invasion of the body, whether oral or sexual, is to be strictly guarded against, while power is wrenched away from others and asserted over oneself.

The sixteenth-century mystic, Teresa of Avila, also describes her soul's progress in terms of eating. While her spirit is "growing fat and taking strength," her body suffers from ill-health, aggravated by her constant privations.<sup>35</sup> Although in her mystical classic, *The Interior Castle*, and again in her *Life*, she warns her sisters against fasting to extremes, she also urges them to "forget the body a little and cultivate the spirit" (139). She also forced herself to vomit in order to have her stomach empty, so she might receive the host.<sup>36</sup> She describes the spirit as yearning for transcendence, but eating and other indulgences of the body are "killing it" (165; cf. 205). Like Catherine, Teresa describes her soul as hungry for spiritual repletion. The soul which is becoming close to God through spiritual union, moreover, can feed others with its own spiritual food. Despite the fact that the soul is itself constantly "dying of hunger" for that food, it can receive nourishment by "merely nibbling at it" (169). The soul's progress toward God, "the food of life," however, satisfies its hunger in such a way that "the soul would rather die than eat any other food" (218). Teresa admired the ascetic Peter of Alcantara, who would often go for a week without food if engaged in prayer (256). In her own community, she forbade the eating of meat, save "in cases of necessity" (sickness, presumably), and, like Paula, enjoined upon her sisters fasting and other forms of asceticism (351). She regarded her own sufferings as a source of happiness, because she believed that, when she was ill, she did not "offend God very much" (78-79). Although there were times, particularly in her youth, when she was "nothing but bones," she did not regret them: "When I am undergoing persecutions, my body suffers . . . but my soul is completely mistress of itself" (392). Even if Teresa could not

<sup>33</sup> Bruch, *Eating Disorders*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>35</sup> Teresa of Avila, *Life*, p. 132. Hereafter citations from the *Life* will be referred to in parentheses, by the page number in the Peers translation, see note 3.

<sup>36</sup> Bell, p. 18.

strictly be described as anorectic, she expresses herself in anorectic terms: she is fasting for a "higher purpose," the rapturous union with Christ; she has the images of the ascetics, Jerome, Peter of Alcantara, and the repentant Magdalene before her as models worthy of imitation; she deprives her body for the sake of the freedom of her soul, which she sees as "imprisoned" within it (205); and, finally, she has mystical experiences born of (or accompanied by) severe asceticism, in which she describes her state as "bodiless": "After a rapture my body often seemed as light as if all weight had left it" (196). Sensual satisfaction, grounded in the body, has been replaced by spiritual repletion.

What can be made of these examples? In the first place, the modern phenomenon called anorexia nervosa, characterized by a refusal to eat, resembles patterns of early and medieval asceticism, and vice versa. The current "epidemic" of anorexia among young, white, predominantly Western (and largely American) women has been described as the result of a drive for "sexual and social freedom," in a time of conflict over the proper expression of female sexuality.<sup>37</sup> According to Bell's profile, the modern anorectic, "raised to strive for perfection and to seek approval from . . . parents, . . . is able [through anorectic behavior] to set for herself a daily, relentless, physically torturing challenge, one over which she alone has control."<sup>38</sup> This drive towards autonomy through self-control/discipline/*askesis*, is motivated by a dominating image of herself as a perfect (*integra*), pure being. She will be mistress of her desires by becoming mistress of her appetite, and thus gain self-acceptance.<sup>39</sup> The more others try to make her eat, the more the anorectic resists this form of outside control in an effort to achieve "control, a sense of identity, competence, and effectiveness," but on her own terms.<sup>40</sup> If modern anorectics, unlike their earlier counterparts, appear to be absorbed in nothing more than a fanatical devotion to self-image, to be liberated *from* something (definition as a body) but *for* nothing (such as a transcendent union with God), we should be aware of two things. The first is that anorectics are seeking autonomy and self-definition in a society in which women are subordinate. Hence, the first step is liberation from external definition, resistance, in Simone Weil's terms, to "the rule of force," refusing to eat as a refusal to be "eaten" (symbolically devoured).<sup>41</sup> The second point to be remembered is that, for the modern Christian ascetic, although the path of mystical union with Christ still lies open, as Weil's case shows, it is not a course valued by society as a whole. Thus, the road of the modern anorectic may be even harder than that of her earlier counterpart, in that her society regards her behavior as aberrant.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Garner, Garfinkel, and Olmsted, pp. 71, 78.

<sup>38</sup> Bell, p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Bruch, *Eating Disorders*, p. 135; Spignesi, p. 57.

<sup>40</sup> Bruch, pp. 250–251.

<sup>41</sup> Van Herik, p. 278.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Davis, "Epilogue," Bell, p. 186.

Both ascetics and anorectics strive for perfection, dissatisfied with the feminine image their world gives them, determined to create one satisfying to themselves, but at the same time experiencing, in Catherine's words, a "holy hatred" of themselves. The body becomes the realm in which flesh and spirit battle, and in which desires felt to be unholy, or impediments to transcendence, are subdued. Food and sex, as symbols of male power, are rejected, in favor of a higher or inner form of "nourishment." Striving towards the ascetic image is a source of satisfaction, and a source of liberation from imprisonment of the body (or from its definition by others) and its bondage to an unacceptable world. In both cases, *askesis* is not experienced as self-destructive, but as self-liberating. Hence, since food is seen by others as a source of power and strength, refusal of food is seen by anorectics and ascetics both as a rejection of dominance by others and, paradoxically, as a source of power for themselves, a triumph of the will over bodily limitations, and the forging of a new identity.