The Monster Within: Demonic Images of Food, Bodies and the Desire to Eat in Recent American Literature on Eating Disorders

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The first subject that needs to be addressed is how do the various parts of the title of this essay relate to each other. You may well ask, “What in the world do eating disorders have to do with monsters and recent American literature?” In the past decade more than ten novels, several literary autobiographies, and innumerable poems have been published or posted on the Internet about the experience of having eating disorders. These literary texts describe the experience of anorectics, that is women who remain at less than 80% of normal body weight for their height and are enormously frightened of being “fat” or gaining weight; such texts also depict the experience of bulimics, individuals of “normal” weight—overwhelmingly women—who binge on enormous quantities of food and then try to offset the effects of their excessive consumption by purging, by forcing themselves to vomit, by using laxatives in order to defecate, or by starving themselves or exercising excessively. Still a less well-known eating disorder is described in literary accounts of eating disorders, called the binge-eating disorder, in which normal weight or overweight individuals consume huge amounts of calories in brief periods of time but do not purge actively or passively—by exercising abstemiousness—afterwards. Yet other types of eating disorders have been documented recently, including activity anorexia and night-time eating syndrome.

Describing these phenomena in literary terms is the poem “Howl” by Heather Stephanson, which owes its title and form to the beat poet Allen Ginsberg’s poem of the same name from 1956:

Howl

I.
I saw the best bodies of my generation destroyed by self-control, starving, determined well-healed, jogging through suburban streets at noon looking for a set of scales, slimhipped sweethearts burning for the ancient physical connection to the
lean discipline of the empty dawn,
who affluence and goals and perfect and nude nibbled celery before full-lengths
floating through remembered recipes contemplating eggs,
who bent like nun nurses over pure white porcelain to count pieces of carrot in a
gastric sea,
who passed through universities with mute clouded eyes hallucinating hamburgers
and makeovers among the arbiters of success
who picked kernels off rice cakes, doled out curds of cottage cheese, chewed
50 times a side,
who spent lunch money on cigarettes and clothes to shrink into,
who deathgripped dance barres, whispering the mantra “I’m so fat I can’t do this
I’m so fat I can’t do this I’m so fat I can’t do this” until their thin blood
swished to the beat,
who stepped like shy antelope on swollen toes before Misha’s framed inscrutable
stare,
who clenched and released their buttocks while riding the bus or purgatoried their
torsos night after night
with movies, with candy, with popcorn, fingers and throats and endless abdomens,
calorie clouds of refrigerators, kitchen white knives hospital dawns, Metamucil and
raw fruit bursting over the sink, drugstore families and aspirinhead denial
inches pounds cholesterol counts and RDAs for pigs in the soap opera
afternoons, poolside calculations and harsh daughter’s control of mind,
who sized up every woman they saw, x-ray eyes blazing through the subterfuges of
bold prints and vertical lines,
who mixed powders in shotglasses of blue milk, popped pills and gloried in the
banquet,
who leapt from bed to toilet to scales dropping their nightgowns snipping nails and
shaving legs to make the wand wave lower,
who meditated on glasses of stylish sexy water and eight times a day drank the
cleansing draught,
who weaned themselves on the wizard’s tit of sugarfree lifesavers,
who rocked ’til they dropped at the dance-a-thon in ecstatic communion with
dissolving thighs,
who tweezered pubic hair, toothpicked vomit from braces and walked the beach
once a year in throat-to-ankle raincoats,
who treadmilled their minds into lockstep obsession pared themselves like potatoes
and apologized for every inch of earth they occupied,
who struggled with snaps in department store dressing rooms as the discreet and
polished toes of size 2 salesladies clicked up and down the numbered aisles,
who served seven-course meals on fine china while violins oozed butter in their ears
and fat-fingered CEOs reached for non-existent asses,
who broke down crying in white gymnasiuims naked and trembling before the
machinery of other skeletons,
who scribbled “my body, my choice” on the stretcher sheets in their own blood the
stink of rotting cells and stomach lining leaking from their lips,
who hid huge weights in rectum and vagina to show the smocked irrational judges
how much they’d gained,
The Monster Within

who yanked IVs and bubbling nostril tubes with chopstick arms in the fluorescent stroke of midnight,
who corseted their skulls with celluloid and silicon,
who dried up like apricots, asexual Alices singing happy good-byes to their monthlies

   ah, Mandy, Bella, Rosalie, while you are not safe I am not safe

You chose from the few roles available
That of the most perfect subject for poetry (a beautiful woman dying)
Played it to perfection so the audience gasped.

   Were we right? Is heaven clouds of whipped cream?
   Are you angels lighter than air?

Stephanson’s poem reworks Ginsberg’s “Howl,” a prophetic lament against the destructive materialism of his age and a personal appeal to the souls of lost friends. In so doing “Howl” stakes a claim for the place of writing on eating disorders within the literary tradition. The poem makes other intertextual references, including the line: “Asexual Alices singing happy good-byes to their monthlies,” which points to the protagonist of Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland (1865). The original Alice descends through a rabbit hole to enter an upside-down world of magical foods, talking animals and playing cards just as the current anorectic lives in a profoundly unbalanced world. “[S]inging goodbye to their monthlies” describes the phenomenon of ammenorrhea: Due to their extraordinarily low body weight, anorectics stop ovulating and menstruating altogether. The lines from the end of the poem: “You chose from the few roles available / That of the most perfect subject for poetry (a beautiful woman dying) / Played it to perfection so the audience gasped” allude to E.A. Poe’s poetic idealization of dead woman. In his essay “The Philosophy of Composition” the poet wrote: “‘When it most allies itself to Beauty: the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.’” Consider the tradition of Poe’s Annabel Lee, Shakespeare’s Ophelia, Cordelia, and Desdemona, Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott: Beautiful women are often depicted in literature as well as pictorially, for instance by the Pre-Raphaelites, as anticipating or experiencing death. Indeed, in texts about anorexia, narrators frequently adopt this image of woman as a dying swan to portray themselves as
perfect, thin statues or ballerinas: They understand their skeletal forms and starving themselves to be art forms.¹

Like the original "Howl," Stephanson's reworking of the poem presents its reader with a series of horrible surrealistic images. In this case the images concern how women torture themselves with food abuse and destructive bodily practices as well as how they are in turn subjugated by images of how they should look. "Howl" includes depictions of average dieting women and girls. The poem describes how girls use their lunch money for school to buy cigarettes as a method of appetite suppression. Furthermore, women—the poem tells us—chew 50 times on each side of their mouths, drink 8 glasses of water a day, and employ any method to lose weight. Drinking protein drinks rather than eating food, exercising excessively, treadmilling, performing ballet exercises, and apologizing "for every inch of earth they occupy" belong to some of the ways women control their weight.

Within this context I want to mention one explanation of eating disorders that says that as women have gained economic and political clout in Western culture, this gain has been offset by an increasingly difficult-to-achieve standard of how they must look.² At least in the States a woman may be a nuclear physicist, yet if she does not conform to a standard of looks (a standard of slenderness) she may not be considered successful. Or, her achievements may be viewed as compensations for her lack of success with regard to her personal appearance.³

The general obsession with maintaining a certain standard of appearance is further underlined by the poem's images of the women "who corseted their skulls with celluloid and silicon." Women have recourse to surgery to plump up their lips or cheekbones. Like the painful removal of bodily hair ("who tweezed pubic hair") and like extreme eating habits, plastic surgery belong to the repertoire of behaviors many American women feel compelled to practice in order to be attractive enough.⁴

"Howl" also describes a sense of competition commonly felt by women with regard to weight and size. The saleslady in her size two shoes represents an intimidating standard against which the woman in the dressing room feels obliged to measure herself. The saleslady "click[s] up and down the numbered aisles," while the woman in the dressing room struggles to force herself into too-small clothes. This scenario resembles a prison scene in which the prisoner suffers from the
constant surveillance of the warden, while the emphasis on numbers here indicates that the woman in the dressing room is being made to conform to standardized versions of appropriate size.

Women ‘size each other up’ through whatever clever clothes they are wearing to determine each other’s actual body size, as the line “x-ray eyes blazing through the subterfuges of bold prints and vertical lines” indicates. A whole paradigm of female perfection is alluded to: Woman should be size two, hairless, and perfectly sculpted. Any means is employed to achieve this standard.

More alarming than the image of average dieters the poem presents are its depictions of anorectics and bulimics. We read about women using knives to cut themselves. Self-cutting or “delicate self-mutilation” (Cross) has a high coincidence with eating disorders and is an overwhelmingly female disease: For the most part young women cut themselves on their arms, hands or wrists, and then “take care” of their wounds in an elaborated, ritualized manner. Whereas anorexia is referred to as the disease of the 70s, and bulimia as the disease of the 80s, self-cutting may be the disease of the 90s and the beginning of the 21st century. The poem speaks of bulimics who vomit Metamucil (a laxative) and fruit all over their sinks, about girls—we know they are girls because of the braces on their teeth—who use tweezers to remove the residual vomit from their purging sessions, and severe anorectics whose fear of weight gain is so enormous that they hide weights in their orifices so as to appear to have gained weight and not to be fed intravenously after they have been hospitalized.

Hopefully, the question of what eating disorders have to do with literature has been answered by this analysis of “Howl.” What eating disorders have to do with American culture and with monsters remains to be addressed. In reading texts such as “Howl” I take a cultural studies approach to literature. Versus New Criticism, formalism, or deconstruction, cultural studies understands literature to be embedded within the world out of which it was written and in which it will be received and read. Practitioners of cultural studies do not regard literature as separate or specialized writing with its own particular kind of language, field of reference, and form of being. Instead, cultural studies examines how texts reflect attitudes about—or, to use the much more political word, ideologies of—gender, class, and race. This method of reading takes as a given that what we think of as being ‘literary’ involves value judgements about what our dominant culture
Greta Olson considers to be valuable. And these value judgments alter over time. For instance, for modernists such as T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, literary value was discovered in the universal nature of a text and its lack of personal self-references; in the Victorian era, by contrast, good literature was supposed to teach, be morally useful and religious. Current standards for what makes literature ‘good’ reflect prevailing societal values. Hence literature reveals a great deal about how a culture lives and thinks and, simultaneously, reflects and creates that culture.5

What then can we read about American culture in “Howl”? It has become something of a media cliché to think of eating disorders as temporary problems of rich adolescent white girls or glamorous celebrities such as Jane Fonda, the late Princess Diana (both bulimics), or Princess Victoria of Sweden (a recovering anorectic). Many people think of eating disorders as only anorexia. Traditionally, eating disorders have been explained using medical or psychological models.6 At the beginning of the 20th century, Sigmund Freud diagnosed anorexia as an arrested stage of psychosexual development in females, typified by a fear of pregnancy and an unwillingness to be regarded as adult women; later, system therapists such as Mara Selvini Palazzoli in Italy and Hilde Bruch in the U.S.A. considered the eating problems of an individual girl to be symptomatic of the pathology—that is, the unhealthy psychological interaction—of an entire family: The illness of the girl represents the weakness of the entire family, which has to be treated and healed as a system. More recently, another explanatory model understands eating disorders as cultural illnesses. Anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating manifest larger societal problems and tensions, which are literally written on the body of sufferers (see Turner 114). Eating disorders then reveal illnesses in American culture. These illnesses concern class and gender distinctions in particular.

As “Howl” attests, eating disorders have a class component, because weight is a class marker in the United States. To the degree that class is synonymous with race there, eating disorders have a racial aspect as well. Obesity is over-represented in the Mexican American, African American and Native American populations as compared to Americans of European descent (see Foreyt 47). Indications of the class nature of eating disorders can be seen in “Howl” in the lines “starving, determined well-healed, / jogging through suburban streets at noon.” The poem features university-educated women who have the means to attend ballet classes, sit by the pool in the afternoon, serve elaborate
meals, and who can afford plastic surgery. The poor in America, whether rural whites or inner-city African Americans, are disproportionately overweight. Franchises cater to the inner-city poor, who may eat two out of three meals a day in McDonald's or similar fast-food restaurants. Often low-income minority urban dwellers have little access to healthy food alternatives—reasonably priced shopping markets must be driven to; fruit and vegetable markets closer at hand are prohibitively expensive (Crister). Being thin or—using the choice adjectives since the exercise-wave of the 80's—"lean," "slim," "fit" or—with the new emphasis on muscularity—"toned" is then a prerogative of the rich in America, who have access to exercise and to healthier, more expensive foods. A cultural cliché involves the idea that one cannot trust someone to control a budget or run a staff if she or he cannot control their contours. By the same token, bulimia and anorexia are disproportionately represented in the upper-middle-class white population of America, in which being thin is a more powerful part of the cultural ethos. The more socially important it is to be thin, the more individuals will resort to extreme methods to achieve this standard.

Let me qualify what I just said by reporting that eating disorders are also strongly represented by immigrant women, who seek to assimilate themselves in the States or Britain—where studies of this have been done—by adopting the cultural values of their new target culture. Evidence suggests that as both unhealthy American eating habits and beauty standards become global standards, eating disorders will increasingly affect women in so-called third-world nations. 7

We Americans—both men and women—have grown steadily fatter during the past century. More than half of the population can be considered obese, and this number is on the rise (Gibbs). Even since 2000 the rate of overweight adult Americans has risen by 9 percent (see Patz 72). A number of factors account for this, including our increasingly sedentary life-styles and the break-down of more formalized eating rituals—that is the move away from eating in family or group situations at set periods of the day to snacking on the run at any time of day or night (see Falk 29-35). Furthermore, dieting has become a form of ersatz religion: Americans eat excessively and promiscuously and then expiate guilt for consuming too much by imposing periods of abstinence upon themselves. 8 However, standards of beauty, particularly for women, have gotten steadily thinner. Studies of Miss America contest winners and Playboy bunnies demonstrate that
during the 1950s representatives of these two different models of desirable femininity might have been around 5'6" and 150 pounds; they are now more likely to have the proportions of professional models: they are 5'8" or more and weigh less than 110 pounds (see Seid 3-16). Hence the beauty stakes have gotten higher; it is much harder for the average woman to conform to the beauty standard, so her means of trying have become much more extreme. To encapsulate the argument, eating disorders begin with diets (see Habermas 153). Restricted eating leads people to have obsessive thoughts about food—as studies of starving individuals have shown. Most individuals react to periods of dietary deprivation by binging; this makes many dieters feel guilty, which then leads them to be extremely prohibitive about their food intake again (see Zerbe 251-254). A vicious circle ensues. For this reason, many anorectics become bulimic, whereas few bulimics develop anorexia. Only few individuals can starve themselves indefinitely.

However, far more than a class issue, eating disorders represent a gender problem. More than 90% of those who suffer from bulimia and anorexia are women. And the incidence of eating disorders reflects larger societal trends. Over a half of American women diet at any one time (see Rand and Kuldau 706). A recent Psychology Today study ("A Very Revealing Picture") demonstrates that two-thirds of the women respondents feel unhappy about their weight and a half of these women would trade several years of their lives in order to be thin. This is not just a question of vanity. Personal appearance is arguably increasingly important in an aging society in which the presentation of the self is of paramount value. Yet women are discriminated against more than men for being 'fat'—I use this negatively-connotated word consciously because it has become a term of abuse—or even slightly overweight. Thin women tend to 'marry or mate up' in American society, and obesity is correlated with downward social mobility. Studies demonstrate that a fat woman is less likely to be hired for a job, admitted to a college or a sorority than a thin one with the same background and qualifications (see Sobal 75, Rothblum 53-76). Hence the problems eating-disordered women have do not just represent the preoccupations of a small minority, but represent exaggerated versions of problems in American culture at large. Many, if not the majority of women, feel threatened by food, worried about their weight, and insecure about their identities in relation to their weight. Fearing food has become ubiquitous to American culture.
Finally, I want to treat the question of what eating disorders have to do with monsters? In the texts I have studied food, the desire to eat, and the body are repeatedly portrayed as fiendish demons out to destroy the self. In a poem by Kathy Anderson called “Surrounded,” the speaker describes herself as going for a walk in the woods; she says “Even outdoors / she sees food everywhere” (161) as though food were encroaching upon or threatening her. Alternately, food stuffs or the urge to eat are portrayed as diabolic: One anorexic narrator describes the potatoes she is served in the eating disorders unit of a hospital as wanting to kill her (see Shute 126). This sense of being threatened by food and appetite is not isolated to sufferers of eating disorders. Normal dieters who narrate poems on eating obsessions speak of similar fears. Even women who correspond to our cultural ideals of feminine perfection, such as the supermodel Claudia Schiffer, report feeling that they are being “attacked by food all the time” (O’Connor 29).

Whereas food itself takes on an element of the frighteningly demonic, the desire to eat or binge becomes synonymous with monstrosity. This is evident in a passage from the following text taken from an Internet web site on eating disorders called “Eat to Live or – Live to Eat”:

... The beastly, horrifying monster speaks to me with
Incomprehensible words.
The beast is a big black hole which fills me up.
It makes me dirty and disgusting.
I fight towards the monster and it against me.
The struggle feels enormous and lasting.

The speaker understands herself to be at war with the monster inside her against which she “struggle[s]” and “fight[s].” Her desire to see herself in contradistinction to her desire to eat is signified by her paradoxical description of the monster’s spatiality. This “beast” is simultaneously a vast black hole or abyss with no physical substance and something that fills her up and dirties her: She depicts herself as both surrounded and invaded by this foreign entity. By associating her need to binge with a subhuman monster or beast, the speaker ascribes alterity to her own motivation to eat. Increasing the speaker’s sense of foreignness in relation to her uncontrollable desire to eat, she associates “[i]ncomprehensible words” with this monster. The monster or beast she describes is overwhelmingly large, all powerful, and fundamentally
different from the speaker’s sense of her desired identity. She disassociates her urge to eat by assigning negative qualities of monstrosity, foreignness, and revulsion (“dirty and disgusting”) to it.

Similarly, the beginning of another poem about bulimia called “The Bulimic Experience; Today Will Be the Last” associates bingeing and the attendant feeling of fatness with bestiality and monstrosity:

Sit and wallow.
Now get up to walk to the mirror and force my eyes upon the raging beast who has crawled into my soul.

Here the speaker brings together images of her body and self with a pig, who “wallow[s].” The mirror reveals a “raging beast” which in reptilian fashion has “crawled” into her self and left her porcine and horrible to herself. Again this poem reveals the speaker’s need to assign otherness to her despised pig-like body as well as the force that she sees as being responsible for her state, the monstrous beast within her.

Images of monstrosity are not particular to poems about eating disorders. In novels about anorexia such as Jenefer Shute’s Life-Size (1992) the eating-disordered body is associated with a horrid demonic entity:

I stopped going back to my parents’ house for the summers, too, and for Thanksgiving, because I couldn’t trust myself around all that food. I lied and said I had a job, an internship, a research project. They seemed relieved and so was I, never knowing what would possess me on any given day. How could I appear among people as the ravening monster I truly was—huge, with a crammed, bloated maw, hands full of food, half-chewed matter drooling from a never-empty mouth, lumbering insatiably towards everything, everyone, in my path?
Godzilla, King Kong, a mutant monster from the sewers. (175)

Here the body appears to the narrator as “ravening” and “huge.” This type of hyperbolic writing about exaggerated images of the human body is familiar from grotesque fiction. In grotesque works, body parts are enlarged and humans are compared with animals, vegetables, and otherworldly entities. The narrator of Life-Size likens herself both to an animal when she refers to her “bloated maw” and to a subhuman monster, who lacks the civilizing principles of eating etiquette, when
she describes her "hands full of food" and her "never-empty mouth" full of "half-chewed matter." She envisions herself as a less-than-human "mutant monster from the sewers." Food here takes on an alien aspect as well: "matter" shares nothing with attractive or mouth-watering images of food.

Significantly, the monster is characterized as moving "insatiably towards" what it wants to consume, "everything, everyone." Notably, the adjective "insatiable" is now used to describe the appetite for food rather than for sexuality, an interesting turn in what we think of as being excessive or errant behavior. I would invite the reader to examine his or her own thinking about 'lax' or 'bad' behavior. What do you condemn yourself for more? Is this more for sexual deviations—whatever this may represent in your individual life—or for excessive eating and drinking and being lax about your exercise program?

Notions of what constitutes lust have undergone change. In a society which places a premium on function and self-control—with regard to work and bodily discipline—sex is regarded as a form of performance: it burns calories and requires an optimally-trained body in order to be carried out in what is considered to be an aesthetically pleasing manner. By contrast uncontrolled eating now represents messy self-indulgence.

The collocation of the sexually connotated desire to eat with the monstrous body can also be found in Marya Hornbacher’s autobiography *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia* (1988), which describes the protagonist’s more than decade long struggle with eating disorders. Here she describes a protracted week-end binge at her parents’ house:

In the house I dump the bags on the kitchen table, the floor, the counter, and clear a space for myself. I keep eating. I mix up blueberry muffins and let them cook while I suck down everything in sight, run to the bathroom, desperately wanting to rid myself of the feeling of fullness, throw up, run back, frantic to get the fullness back. I stand there eating until all the food is gone. All of it. Gone.

I look up from the empty bowl in front of me and catch sight of my bloated, hideous face reflected in the dark window over the sink.

I lean down and throw up. (221-222)
Words such as “desperately,” “wanting,” and “frantic” demonstrate the protagonist’s sense of being out of control of her actions. Note again that these words have Gothic overtones as well as sexual ones. (Think of descriptions of erotic scenes in which the female protagonist is “desperate,” “wanting,” and “frantic” for sex.) Here sexual desire for the touch of flesh is replaced by the urge to consume blueberry muffins. When the narrator recognizes herself by catching sight of herself in the window in the kitchen that functions as a mirror, she experiences a moment of horror: Her face is bloated and hideous; it bears no resemblance to her normal thin self. Again the embodied self is depicted as monstrous and horrifying when it is in the process of bingeing. The narrator experiences a moment of shame or remorse as individuals are often described as having after they have had deviant sexual experiences.

While surveying prose and lyric treatments of eating disorders I found that the image that occurs most frequently is that of the monster who overpowers the speaker or narrator and forces her to eat. Occasionally, this monster appears as a seductive Gothic hero who tempts the woman to eat. More often, the monster appears as malevolent and force feeds the woman. Commonly, the monster is depicted as male. This may represent a comment on the paternalistic aspects of a culture that enforces female submission with unrealistic standards of how women should look. Conversely, describing the monstrous body or desire to binge as male may reflect speakers’ needs to describe their eating-disordered selves as being as different from their (female) non-eating-disordered selves as possible.

I want to present some preliminary explanations of the need to other the body, the desire to eat, and food as monstrous in literature on eating disorders. This tendency can be understood within the context of the doppelgänger motif in literature, within the context of post-colonial theory, and as a feature of a culture with a lack of an integrated notion of the body and the mind.

Depicting the desire to eat or binge as a demon or monster is analogous to the doppelgänger motif in turn-of-the-century British fiction such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886) and Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891)—or even earlier in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus (1818). In these texts the self is experienced as profoundly divided and dichotomous. Criminality and deviance are hidden from the world of
outer appearances and show up in the monstrous form of Mr. Hyde, the revealing portrait of Dorian, and the creature that Victor Frankenstein produces. Similarly, the desire to eat is experienced by narrators of texts on eating disorders as so horrifying that they need to divorce it from their experience of their preferred images of themselves as thin, controlled individuals. These literary images anticipate Freud’s analysis of repression as well as the Lacanian and feminist treatments of othering that have come after Freud.

Dorian Gray’s final confrontation with his tell-tale portrait resembles the moment of horrified self-recognition eating-disordered women have when they look at themselves in mirrors. Dorian’s portrait has visibly recorded the life of debauchery he has lead whereas his face has not aged or altered at all. On looking at the portrait Dorian thinks: “The thing was still loathsome—more loathsome, if possible, than before—and the scarlet dew that spotted the hand seemed brighter, and more like blood newly spilt” (261-262). Similarly, the speaker of the poem on bulimia and the narrator of Wasted experience their visual selves as deviant, monstrous, or animalistic (“wallow”) when they recognize their depraved hidden selves in the mirror.

Furthermore, the radical othering of the body or the desire to eat as monstrous can be explained in terms of post-colonial theory. Following Edward Said’s account of “orientalism” (1978)—that is the West’s need to make exotic and dangerous all that is Eastern—eating-disordered women divorce themselves from the qualities they dislike by turning them into exaggerated monstrous entities. As individuals from one culture or race shore up their identities in contradistinction to what they regard as opposite from themselves, the bulimic or anorectic or compulsive dieter assigns radical foreignness to her body and her desire to eat. The fear of eating, then, is considered so hideous by eating-disordered narrators that they try to literally sever it from themselves by projecting it onto a monster.

Whatever the specific explanation, many women in America are so anxious about food, and feel so under pressure to be thin that they need to cut themselves off from their desire for food. In text after text appetite and the body are identified with beasts, demons, or monsters; malevolent agency is projected onto food stuffs and the hungry body. Food appears to devour the speaker or force her to eat in a form of reversed cannibalism. The body appears demonic, an aggressive
pursuer. By contrast the eating-disordered speaker portrays herself as a helpless innocent who has no power to determine her own actions.

I read eating disorders as pathologies of American culture. Eating-disordered narrators express intensified versions of worries many middle-class American women have about their bodies and food. Many have a lack of ease with eating that leads them to perceive their appetite and their bodies as monstrous. Wanting food is depicted as evil and overwhelming; the body that eats resembles a rabid beast or demon. Portrayals of the body as monstrous and divided reveal the fractured way many American women experience embodiment. They divorce hunger for food from their idealized selves and perceive themselves as evil when they do eat. In these texts we find images of a culture that through endless reinforcement makes many women sick.

Notes
1 See, for instance, Jenefer Shute's *Life-Size*, 33-34.
2 A powerfully written popular treatment of this theme is Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1981). More academic discussions of the connection between female emancipation in the work world and female subjugation due to the dictates of personal appearance are provided by Susan Bordo, Sandra Lee Bartky and Sharlene Hesse-Biber.
3 See, for instance, Jeffery Sobal for evidence of the gender bias in American sizism, that is social prejudice based on weight and size. In "Social Influences on Body Weight" Sobal documents the inverse relationship between wealth and weight among American women—more well-off women tend to weigh less than their economically disadvantaged counterparts—and argues that heavier women have more difficulty finding desirable romantic partners than thin ones. The covariation between thinness, wealth, and romantic success for women increases the belief that heavier women who achieve in their careers need to compensate for their lack of success in shaping their bodies.
4 See Sarah Hildebrandt's essay on hair removal in this volume.
5 Founders of cultural criticism and cultural materialism include, among others, Raymond Williams, who argues that cultural hegemony involves a fluctuation between dominant and emergent elements, and Clifford Geertz with his insight into the constructed quality of all notions of humanity. See *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (1996) for an excellent introduction into this textual practice.
6 For the history of eating disorders see Brumberg and Habermas.
7 See Mervat Nassar on the globalization of eating disorders.
8 See Peter Stearns's *Fat History* for a cross-cultural comparison of the meaning of dieting in France and the United States.
Bibliography


