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THE INSIGNIFICANT ART OF FASTING:

A STUDY OF THE TEXTUAL BODY AND  
TRANSGRESSION.

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## CONTENTS

SYNOPSIS	PAGE 1 - 2
1. INTRODUCTION TO THE HUNGER ARTIST.	PAGE 3 - 5
2. KAFKA'S PERVERSE BODY.	PAGE 6 - 10
3. BETWEEN THE PAIN AND PLEASURE OF THE TEXT.	PAGE 11 - 17
4. KAFKA COMES OF AGE.	PAGE 18 - 20
5. FEMINISM AND THE ANOREXIC BODY.	PAGE 21 - 29
6. THE TRANSGRESSIVE PROCESS AND PROCESSED TRANSGRESSION.	PAGE 30 - 33
7. THE FASCINATION OF THE INSECURE.	PAGE 34 - 35
8. THE HUNGER ARTIST'S CONCLUSION.	PAGE 36 - 37
BIBLIOGRAPHY	PAGE 38 - 40

SYNOPSIS

TWO PARALLELS

The Kafkaesque Body and (Post) Modernism

Kafka's body of work comes into being as the 'appearance' of the excluded 'other' reluctantly committed to the task of opening the unified homogeneous subject to a recognition of that which it excludes. A study of Kafka as he exists in relation to the law reveals that the body of his literature, his literary body is no more, no less, than a shifting perspective. It is due to its ambiguous and mobile nature that it is condemned to experience its liberation from the originary as domination and its domination as liberating. Kafka thus finds himself within the grip of a force perhaps more sinister than the force of the law, since it operates as seductive, rather than co-ercive. In this way I believe Kafka anticipates postmodernism and the difficulties which it faces at present.

The Anorexic Body and Feminism

I would propose that this contradictory textual body of which Kafka speaks reaches its 'finest hour' in the late 20th century in the form of the female anorexic. She is a subject defined in terms of, and thus inextricably linked to, the discourses of feminism, involved in a practice which is simultaneously read as destructive and constructive for the female. Thus the woman who endeavours to deconstruct the patriarchal structures which have bound her in the past

now finds herself as much imprisoned as liberated by the discourses which constitute and diffuse her position in culture and ideology.

This is the fate of both postmodernism and feminism in an age when a will to deconstruction is revealed as a seductive but ultimately self-negating and cynical power.



INTRODUCTION TO THE HUNGER ARTIST

Interest in fasting as an art form has declined considerably in recent decades. Whereas it used to be well worth staging major performances in the discipline on an entrepreneurship basis, nowadays it is quite impossible. Times have changed... (Kafka, 1983, P.268)

Thus wrote Franz Kafka in the opening lines of his short fictional work. The Hunger Artist, a work in which he traces the progress of a curious artist of the body who practises his 'transgressive art' in a climate of power which surrounds and constructs, then ultimately, invades and liquidates him.

Initially this power is in the nature of that referred to by John Berger in Ways of Seeing, Berger writes -

Men act while women appear.... a woman must continually watch herself...she comes to regard the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent elements of her identity as a woman.

(Berger, 1972)

Thus identifying a power which determines men and womens relations to themselves and each other as the relationship of the law of the father to the excluded 'other'.

It is the body, this excluded 'other' which Michael Foucault describes as -

the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas) the locus of a dissociated self adopting the illusion of a substantial unity and a volume in disintegration.

(Foucault, Kroker 1988, P.169)

It is one which Foucault reveals as existing in the wake of the opening of the homogeneous originary subject to an awareness of what it excludes. It is a body which is both male and female, for within the postmodern scene it is not only the female who suffers at the hands of a denying and restrictive power. As Luce Irigaray has pointed out, the male, isolated from his body which in its 'vile' corporeality speaks of all that is other from him, loses something also, namely, the '.....pleasure of his own body.....'

This body then is defined through its alienation and displacement, theoretically and historically constructed, unable to speak any truth. It is the body of postmodernism. It is also the body of feminism.

It is Kafka's thesis that the work of the 'hunger artist' that (post) modern phenomenon is no longer popular or even possible can it be so?. In the light of the above I would like to consider Kafka's fictional creation, this textual

body, as a transgressive force I will examine the way in which it may initially function as a deconstruction of the 'law of the father' and speculate on the possibility that Kafka's 'body artist' comes of age in the late 20th century in the form of the anorexic. I will draw attention to the fact that in an age in which its transgressive power can only exist as a shifting perspective, this ambiguous body is seduced by its own sinister power into a vertiginous self-negation in the conflict of discourses through which that body is defined and I will ultimately consider the problems which such an empty transgression poses for both feminism and postmodernism. Let me begin, however, by examining the extraordinary factors which prompted Kafka to draw his pessimistic conclusion.



KAFKA'S PERVERSE BODY

The relationship of the criminal to the law of the father informed all of Kafka's efforts, be they in literature, or indeed, his very life itself. Any reader or both fictional and non-fictional works will be struck by their open-ended nature, the difficulties with which one is presented when attempting to extract any definite meaning, the thin dividing line between fact and fiction. Consider, for example, the following statement-

Whenever I was satisfied I wanted to be unsatisfied and sought dissatisfaction by all the means of time and tradition accessible to me, then I wanted to turn back so I was always unsatisfied even by my dissatisfaction. It is odd that with enough systemisation some reality should have come of this ridiculous situation.

(Diaries, 1922)

What can one confidently say of an individual who creates bewilderment in a systematic and orderly fashion out of chaos, who allows order to exist only to the extent that it ensures disorder? I can only propose that the relationship between the real and the imaginary is fundamental to, and plays out, the criminal/law conflict which intrigued Kafka. I would suggest that it is in its very open-ended nature that the power of this work lies. This will not prove an easy task for the reasons I have already outlined. However, within both diaries and fiction certain obsessions occur with enough regularity to convince one of their importance in directing his thought.

To begin with let us consider this extraordinary story.

Kafka loved the law of the father. He respected it entirely and would not question its authority. He himself was banished from its sphere through a stubborn allegiance to his own peculiarity, his writing, his individuality. Kafka writes-



I remained seated and leaned towards my family as I had done before, but, in fact, I had been banished from society in one stroke.

(Bataille, 1985, P155)

Since Kafka respected the law, its oneness and order being, for him, the ultimate good to which all humankind aspired. He had to believe that he was somehow unworthy, that which was excluded i.e. his individuality was worthless, superfluous. Against the wholeness of the father's realm, he is forced to see himself as lacking as 'other' is forced like his fictional alter-ego in The Metamorphosis to awaken to an awareness of himself as something monstrous -

Gregor Samsa awake one morning from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were, armour-plated back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his dome-like brown belly divided into stiff arched segments.....his numerous legs which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk waved helplessly before his eyes.

What has happened to me? he thought. It was no dream.

(Kafka, 1983, P. 89)

Never at any stage did Kafka rebel against this 'judgement'. How could he? To situate himself in the role of the rebel would be to assume action and action, as the prerogative of the father, is not an option which is open to him. If Kafka were to assert disorder, idleness, irrationality over productive activity and rationality, he would be assuming power in imitation of the father. His position would be a sham, a parody which would merely re-inforce the order it sought to refute. Such an attempt of transgression would be no transgression at all.

My reading on the subject has brought to my attention a strange tendency among critics to valorise the image of Kafka, to locate him in the role of the heroic outsider, to justify his peculiar choices. It strikes me that in an over zealous

attempt to demystify their subject they are missing entirely the point of his project and are thus denying Kafka the possibility of attaining his objective. As I see it there can be no doubt that if Kafka's project is to be at all successful it must be given the opportunity of being infinitely wrong. Kafka's 'success' depends entirely on an unflinching awareness, to the point of anguish, of the ignoble, even 'silly', nature of his much referred to 'struggle'.

As such Kafka accepts his role as the discarded debris of ordered society, as something excremental which, by its very excremental nature, is, as Kafka sees it, filled with abundant possibilities; filled, that is, with potentially for sublime transgression. For the law of the father cannot absorb into its closed, ordered structure, certain aspects and elements of human experience without doing violence to that closure and order. It is these elements which Georges Bataille speaks of as-

All that homogeneous society rejects, either as detritus or superior transcendent value. These include excremental products of the human body and certain analogous materials, the parts of the body possessing an erotic charge, the diverse unconscious. Processes such as dreams, neuroses, the numerous elements and social forms which the homogeneous sector is incapable of assimilating.

(Kroker, 1988, P123)

In other words rationality cannot assimilate those elements, the very essence of which is irrationality.

Abject before the law Kafka chooses the irrationality of the paradox. He chooses to - 'want what (he) (does) not want' - Yet make no mistake he does not actively want, he merely wants - 'because it is all that (he) can do' - with a consummated perversity. Kafka loves the law, but chooses allegiance to unlawfulness and childishness. He writes-



My mental decline started as a childish game, though admittedly it was a consciously childish game. For example, I pretended to have nervous tics. I went around with my arms crossed behind my head a detestably childish thing to do but it was successful. If it is possible to produce misery one should produce it thus.

(Diaries, 1922)

As such Kafka becomes the wielder of a curious power, albeit one which would not dare declare itself so. It is a power which cannot transgress as the power of refutation or destruction, an act which would render it merely a criticism, a condemnation. It is a power which declares itself abject and in doing so both limits itself and opens up the possibility for transgression. It is a limit which paradoxically can exist only if Kafka professes no desire to transgress it. In such a way is a Nietzschean 'will to power' remoulded in Kafka's hands to become an empty, but for all that no less obdurate, 'will to will'. And, of course, it is the strength and unremitting nature of this pure will which is significant, rather than the puerile and useless 'struggle' which preceeded it.

This limit then is the limit of his conflict and since for Kafka being is conflict it is the limit of his being, the transgressing of which is certain death. Bataille speaking of the doom of all that is humanly sovereign writes-

Sovereignty survives either by denying itself (even the smallest calculations is on the ground level: only subservience remains, the primacy of the object of calculations over the present) or else in the durable moment of death. Death is the only means of avoiding an abdication of sovereignty. There is no subservience in death, in death there is nothing.

(Bataille, 1973, P160)

Kafka himself becomes greatly attracted to the idea of death - 'I will confide in death' - realising the full implication of

its nature he writes -

I do not hope for victory. I do not enjoy the struggle for its own sake. I could only enjoy it because it is all that I can do. As such the struggle does indeed fill me with joy which is more than I can enjoy, more than I can give. I shall probably end by succumbing not to the struggle but to the joy.

(Diaries, undated).

Out of this conflict comes joy, as an excess, so intense that Kafka speaks of dying for it. The moment of death, Kafka's - 'lightning flash which still lasts' - that sovereign power which lights up the seam between being and nothingness and the bliss of the void.



BETWEEN THE PLEASURE AND PAIN OF THE TEXT

Of course it goes without saying that the death which Kafka speaks of is of the sacrificial kind. It is the symbolic death which Bataille speaks of as indistinguishable from 'Real death', 'deleterious and blind joy' coupled with an openness to danger. It is this joy of excess which Kafka speaks of in terms of writing when he states -

I never could understand that it was possible for almost anyone who could write to objectivise pain in pain. For example, in my misery, with my head still burning with misery, I can sit down and write to someone; I am miserable. I can go still further and in various flourishes according to my capacities, which seem to have nothing in common with my misery, I can improvise on this theme, simply, antithetically, or even with entire orchestras of associations. And that is no lie, it does not alleviate the pain: it is an excess of strength accorded by grace in a moment when pain has visibly exhausted all my energy. What is this excess?

(Diaries, 1917)

Perhaps I can answer such a question by suggesting that this excess is a consequence of Kafka's stubborn commitment to operating within the realm of the law, within the rigour and precision which is the tradition of language. Just as Josef K. of The Trial is placed under arrest in a way that defies credibility, and thus begins to act 'as if' he were

guilty while simultaneously denying that guilt. So too does Kafka refuse to draw analogy between his fictional body and an original, while at the same time acting 'as if' this fiction were real. In this way Kafka, while accepting that the 'real' is no longer, still maintains the 'rules' of that reality. Stating the language no longer signifies, he continues to act 'as if' signification were possible. He signifies in absence of any signified. Sacrificing the goal for the 'thrill of the chase', he is satisfied with the 'act' of signification for its own sake. Thus he uses precision and rigour, the economy of signification in excess of any purpose, in such an incessant and plethoric way as to break the bounds of that precision, that economy. So for Kafka writing comes as an excess something superfluous and beside the point. Objectified himself by history he objectifies the resulting conflict in conflict itself, in literature, in a double metamorphosis. If Gregor Samsa's body is a metaphor for Kafka's rejection by the father, then Samsa's death can be the only symbol for Kafka's rejection of that rejection, his deforming of that deformation. Thus meaning which has been revealed as concentrated only in the 'fact' of its process, is finally put to death in an excess of process.

De sade once wrote -

The secret is fortunately only too sure, there is not a libertine anchored in vice who is not acquainted with the power effect which murder has on the senses.

(Bataille, 1987, P.11)

What then is the effect on the senses for one who murders his own murdered body?. The answer to this is 'lived' in a virtual sense by Kafka, through his own fictional creations. The son in the short study The Judgement is virtually 'murdered' by his father and takes the following extreme action -

He rushed out of the door and crossed the tram lines, pulled irresistibly towards the water. He clung to the parapet as a starving man clings to his food. He jumped over the safety rails like the expert he had been in his youth, his parents pride. He held himself for another instant with a weakening grip, watched a bus pass between bars, the roar it made would easily drown the sound of fall. He cried feebly, 'Dear parents I have always loved you', and let himself go. At that moment the traffic on the bridge was literally frantic.

(Kafka, 1983,P.88)



Bataille, in Literature and Evil, casts an interesting perspective on this particular piece, bringing to light one of the rare literal interpretations which Kafka offers on the subject of his work.

Apparently in conversation with Max Brod he made the following confession-

Do you know what the last phrase means. As I wrote it I thought of a violent ejaculation.

Bataille insists on the erotic basis of this 'extraordinary declaration' and rightly so. He poses the question - 'in the act of writing is there some sort of compensation for defeat before the father and the failure of the dream of transmitting life.' - In the light of our earlier explorations, I believe, we can only answer in the affirmative.

In Kafka's 'declaration' one can recognise only too easily the atmosphere which enables one such as Roland Barthes to write.-

The whole effect consists in materialising the pleasure of the text in making the text an object of pleasure like any other. The important thing is to equalize the field of pleasure and abolish the false opposition of practical and contemplative life. What we are seeking to establish in various ways is theory of the materialist subject.-

Kafka more than half a century before recognised this 'Pleasure of the text', the nature of which, as he sees it, can only be perverse. A pleasure which is born, as a joy of excess, of transgression and unmitigated evil. In this he anticipates such deconstructivists as Spivak according to whom -

Deconstruction seems to offer a way out of the closure of knowledge. By inaugurating the open-ended indefiniteness of textuality.....it shows us the lure of the abyss as freedom. The fall into which, inspires us with as much pleasure as fear .... we are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting the bottom.

(Kroker, 1988, P. 245)



Thus Kafka's world is the (post)-modern world. The Kafkaesque body is Foucault's body inscribed by power, one of appearance in absence of substance, an empty image in absence of meaning. It is dazzling, loose, displaced, bizarre in its excess, disquieting and ultimately seductive. Kafka's literary body is a surface emblazoned with the trappings of the fantastic without and hollow within. -

How would it be if I were to tell you that one day everyone wanting to live will look like me - cut out of tissue paper, like silhouettes and when they walk they will be heard to rustle? Not that they will be any different from what they are now but that is what they will look like. -

And Kafka aware that the originary, his God, has perished, knows also that his 'unholy' body is open to the potential for re-symbolisation through a never-ending series of fantastic images. For in the world of Kafka all is signification with nothing signified. It is a world in which names have come loose from objects and objects can be renamed at will. Consider this passage from one of his more whimsical works, 'Description of a struggle' -

What is it that makes you all behave as though you were real? Are you trying to make me believe I'm unreal standing here absurdly on the green pavement? You sky, surely its a long time since you've been real .....its true you're still superior to me, but only when I leave you alone.

Thank God moon, you are no longer moon but why do your spirits fall when I call you 'forgotten paper lantern of a strange colour'. And why do you almost withdraw when I call you the 'virgin's pillar'. As for you pillar of the virgin Mary, I hardly recognise you threatening attitude when I call you 'moon shedding yellow light', God how more profitable it would be if the thinker could learn from the drunk.

Arthur and Marilouise Kroker in their critique of post modernism 'Excremental Culture and Hyper-aesthetics', point towards the kafkaesque world as emblematic of a sinister power at work within the realm of the post-modern. A power which substitutes the closure of homogeneity with a closure perhaps more dangerous since it operates as seductive rather than as coercive. The Kroker argument, drawing on Baudrillard's thesis of the 'catastrophic' as a reference point, proposes that the world of Kafka displays itself as a closed economy, is in fact a perfectly spherical sign system. While I would agree on the seductive, and even sinister, aspect of Kafka's Power. I am slightly disturbed by the use of the word 'economy'. As I see it the ambiguous allusive nature of Kafka's textual body cannot be reduced to any 'economy'.

At this point it may prove valuable to consider Lacan's writings on the subject of the metaphor. In his consideration of the postmodern slippage of the signifier he allows for a certain inconsistency, a certain 'subversive' element which can breach the resulting gap between signifier and signified. This subversive element is the power of metaphor, which Lacan describes as 'the signification effect of poetry or of creation'. It is true that once anchored in place any resymbolisation will prove just as restrictive as the original deconstructed symbolisation. Yet it is necessary to consider the terms in which Lacan expresses this 'signification effect'. To him it is a 'creative spark', something momentarily glimpsed, something intangible and elusive. Is this not comparable to Kafka's sovereign 'lightening flash' which exercises its power in an instant and is gone.

If Kafka exercises the process of signification upon his alienated body, it is not to return that disordered body to any process or economy. The Krokers are ignoring the fact Kafka's Power, although indeed comparable to the seductive power which Baudrillard treats so comprehensively in his texts, is always but a reversal between perspectives. It is this 'always at least double' nature which Baudrillard allows for, indeed, demands as a basis to his



thesis. The krovers refuse to allow that, that of which the metaphor speaks i.e. infinity, the void, inspires ecstasy even as it reveals the horror of existence. It is in its multiple nature that its significance lies. This then is Kafka's paradox. Unable to entirely glorify nor rejoice in the death of the originary, he is at the same time powerless in the face of the seductive chasm that originary's death reveals. Thus the body Kafka presents is free but dominated, displaying an eroticism but an eroticism in which there is nothing of the voluptuous, a pleasure which is a pleasure of pain. The freedom which is celebrated can at any point slide over into its opposite and reveal itself as a maze of surreal nightmare. It is in this very slide, 'spark' of power, so seductive, that Kafka's body is freed, re-metaphorized, lives and dies.

KAFKA COMES OF AGE

In this way Kafka diagnoses the dilemma of the artist 'of the body' as the postmodern age opens out before him. And reveals the nature of his task in the face of his realisation of the world's inarticulate meaning, in the face of his awareness that that foundation upon which his art is built, namely the truth, is indivisible and thus may never know itself. This then is the impossible dilemma of the postmodern artist and it is Kafka's dilemma, that he must endeavour to speak the 'truth' but that that truth is socially and historically constructed. Therefore like the solitary, caged, character of Kafka's romantic composition the (post) modern 'Hunger Artist' reveals himself to be a fraud who lies even as he endeavours to speak the truth.

Kafka's answer then is this, that the artist in order to speak, in order to tell the truth must resort to deceptions ruses and when he is forced to reveal his position he must reveal it as one of ambiguity, one of paradox. The only option open to him is an exploration of possible signification, in which each signification, taken by itself, is little more than an obvious lie, but when considered as a complex multiple body paradoxically reveals the artist's truth in its very multiplicity and that 'truth' is that there is no 'truth' as such.

Parallel to my readings on the subject of Kafka, the body and post-modernism I have carried out readings on the subject of feminism and the body. And from these have been forced to make an often uneasy connection between the project of the (post) modern artist as outlined by Kafka, and the project of feminism. This connection is such a problematic one that it forces a deeper examination. To know the truth is also the project of feminism and that truth is the truth of the feminine subject. Consequently the dilemma facing feminism can be outlined thus. The move to establish a feminine aesthetics or a feminine poetics must by definition presume the existence of a feminine subject, who's perception, vision and creativity is formed through and by her femininity. However, if feminism acknowledges, as it does, that



femininity is historically constructed, imposed from without, internalized within and defined by its alienation, fragmentation and sense of loss/lack. How can one establish a positive or authentic sense of the feminine, outside of the historical and cultural process which construct and give it its (illusory) reality? Feminism realises, as did Kafka, that tradition and language construct and maintain control of the body. However Kafka's answer to the resulting dilemma, the liquidation of the subject and transgression as the nihilism of empty signification does not auger well for feminism.

In the postmodern climate which Kafka both describes and creates the situation of feminism becomes a turbulent one. Marilouise Kroker has drawn attention to the fact that in the displaced postmodern climate, the female is destined to experience her emancipation from the patriarchal realm of gender ideology as a simultaneous freedom 'and' domination. It is the climate of neither one or the other but 'both', where the liberating and deconstructive nature of postmodernism can at any point tip over to reveal it's darker side. And this dark side being the threat of nihilism, a repressive tolerance and the danger of what Kroker terms a 'processed feminism', where deconstruction alternates between a call for transgression and a denial of the possibility of such a transgression. Luce Irigaray once stated that the limit of feminism would be reached when a 'feminist ecriture of jouissance equal to the full geneocentric critique of Phallogocentric logic managed to reduce itself to a mirror-reversal of male stream discourse.'

I would like to propose at this point, that Kafka's 'Hunger Artist' has reached the age of consent/dissent in the late 20th century and finds its mirror image in the textual body of the female anorexic. While examining the shifting discursive practice which she represents and considering the implications such a practice raises for the future of the feminism.



FEMINISM AND THE ANOREXIC BODY

'I have always wanted you to admire my fasting'.  
said the hunger artist, 'we do admire it'.  
said the overseer, affably. 'But you shouldn't',  
said the hunger artist, 'well then we don't admire  
it's, said the overseer, 'But why shouldn't we admire  
it', Because I have to fast, I can't help it', said  
the hunger artist. 'what a fellow you are' said  
the overseer, 'and why can't you help it', 'Because'  
said the hunger artist 'I couldn't find any food I  
liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have  
made no fuss and eaten my fill like you or anyone else'.

It is surely only in such an age as ours an age when alienation and displacement form the main cultural climate, an age in which eating, like every other physical function has become plethoric, in which every type of gratification is almost obligatory, that anorexia nervosa can come to being and flourish. As Marilyn Lawrence articulated in The Anorexic Experience - 'Human beings need to be confident that there is enough to go around before they can indulge in the luxury of self denial'. For anorexia is not illness of scarcity as is generally thought, nor can it truly be said to be an illness of abundance. Yet strangely it 'is' a state of excess and this excess is its nature as an illness of contraries. As such it comes as no surprise to discover that it has become the subject of an ongoing and controversial debate within the feminist arena. From the body of literary and critical writings which I have explored on the subject two main 'voices' as I see it emerge. Both share a common ground in reading anorexia as a logical conclusion to the social and cultural 'rape' of the female as is outlined by Berger i.e. the means by which she is rendered other by a patriarchal power which may only maintain itself through 'acting upon' that other.

Anorexia is perceived as a taking to extremes the feminine internalization of that co-ercive mutually defining power relation. In other words anorexia is seen as female conflict articulated at



the level of the body, as, quite literally, the embodiment of conflict. However the means by which these two readings reach such a position and the conclusions they draw are quite dissimilar.

The first perspective on the debate is best expressed in a passage from Hilde Bruch's The Golden Cage in which Bruch states that she relates anorexia -

To the enormous emphasis that fashion places on slimness magazines and movies carry the same message. But the most persistent is television drumming in day in day out that one can be loved and respected only if one is slender.

(Bruch, 1978)

Thus presenting a reading of anorexic as very much the passive victim of the co-ercive gaze as responding to the colonisation of her body with a sense of guilt and a rejection of her otherness. A response which leads ultimately to a recreation of her body in the image of the ideal in naive, misguided hope of gaining acceptance at all costs.

Paula J. Caplan in 'women's masochism' outlines the dilemma in which this 'victim' finds herself, as she writes -

Females are expected to be thin and that thinness is made so important to their femininity that many growing girls feels that they are never thin enough. If they are overweight they suffer feeling unfeminine.

If they constantly diet they suffer from physical deprivation and the emotional strain of having to be constantly vigilant about their bodies. Either way one suffers.

(Caplan 1988)

Caplan presents an image of the anorexic as one possessing little control over her life, one who is entirely dependent on others and endeavours to achieve a modicum of control by organising her eating habits. In this she is backed up by a comment from Susan Brownmiller in which she states emphatically that -

The typical anorexic usually comes from a privileged background and she is often described as an over-achieving perfectionist whose obsessive pursuit of thinness has crossed the line into self-destructiveness.

(Kroker 1988, P.203)

These quotations taken from feminist critiques express a popular view which posits the anorexic as the ingenuous dupe of media, educational, literary, and artistic constructions, as accepting indiscriminately the impossible representations with which she is presented as moulding herself in the degrading images which patriarchy offers her and as thus submitting the patriarchal will. Alternatively she is presented as a frustrated power-seeker who in the absence of social and cultural power, clothes herself in the trappings of that power. In other words as one who exerts control

over her body in imitation of the very power which denies her. Thus defining the position of the anorexic as very much a submissive, subordinate one not only in relation to the patriarchal sphere but also in relation to the feminist who is in a position to make such a criticism. I would like at this point to refer to Sally Cline's - Just Desserts as emblematic of the sinister tendency at work in such feminist analysis. Cline's critique is organised, in the main, in the form of presentations of 'case histories'. Here we have Cline approached in her official capacity by women of varying ages and backgrounds all displaying anorexic symptoms. Cline's recording of these 'cases' abound in references to the fact that such women '(do) not possess knowledge' of their exploitation, at the hands of patriarchy, that '(they are) unaware' of the way in which they themselves are conditioned by the dominant ideology. In all cases it is Cline well-educated, enlightened who must make good the loss who can initiate a 'cure' through introducing her subject to knowledge and that such a 'cure' is desirable since now the anorexic position is not merely one of subordination but of ignorance too.



In such critiques the discursive power of feminism becomes just as restrictive as that of patriarchy. Anorexia is denied any consideration outside of its representing a lack of knowledge and a susceptibility to the negative influence of western culture, on the part of certain women. The anorexic is helpless and cannot initiate any form of solution to her problem. Caplan in considering the possibility of a solution can only conceive of one which would occur within culture itself without the anorexic's intervention. She states -

Preventative measures would be a relieving of the pressure on women to conform to a particular ideal of beauty.

(Caplan 1988)

As I see it such a reading of anorexia on the basis that it merely maintains existing power relations is certainly a crass oversimplification such a view is, I believe, a greatly impoverished one leading mainly to closure of debate on the subject and an exclusion of the anorexic into even greater isolation by the very party which proposes to be her salvation.

In her essay The Anorexic Body Elspeth Probyn draws attention to another possible interpretation of the anorexic dilemma one which is quite popular with present-day feminism. Here she juxtaposes two quotations one taken from Susie Orbachs 'Hunger Strike ..... The anorexic struggle as a metaphor for our age' in which Orbach states -

The individual woman's problem for which the anorexic has been the solution, is that despite a socialization process designed to suppress her needs, she has continued to feel her own needs and desires intensely.

(Kroker, 1988, P.209)

The other taken from Arthur and Marillouise Kroker's excremental culture and hyper-aesthetics in which anorexia is described as emblematic of -

The movement to the massless state when the body has succumbed to the parasites of post-modern culture.

(Kroker, 1988 P.210)

Probyn thus illustrates what she believes to be a very tempting, yet none-the-less worrying, tendency among postmodern critics to idealize and co-opt the local experience of the anorexic individual to further their own ends.

Orbach adopts the anorexic as a metaphor for a particularly female experience of displacement, one in which the anorexic, through denying and rejecting the voluptuousness of the 'natural' female body and embracing the more sexually ambiguous body of the androgyne is symbolically rejecting the options with which she, as a woman, is presented. Anorexia is a metaphorical process which allows for the creation of an interval, a suspension. It is a reclaiming of a space for the female in a culture which deprives her of a valid space while simultaneously enclosing her within restrictive and alienating constructions, e.g. the space of the object of desire the space of the mother. Orbach insists on seeing anorexia as a positive strategy, a self-established site within which the struggle for power between restrictive patriarchy and the rebellious female may be negotiated. In the hands of the Krokers the anorexic's plight becomes both the symptom and product of the post-modern age. An age in which the female's displacement has become the blueprint for the plight of humanity in general.

It is no longer merely the female who suffers at the hands of a destructive order but indeed that very order itself. Anorexia becomes symbolic of the dark side of postmodernism, the body 'invaded' and turned inside out, ambiguous, displaced. No longer a site of negotiation nor a battleground for the warring parties of body and ideology, but the residual remains of a battle which has already been fought and won in favour of restricting ideology.

What concerns Probyn in her investigations is not how, if at all, the anorexic may be read as a metaphor for feminine conflict or the conflict of our age, but rather how such readings can idealize their subject in a way which bears little relation to her 'lived' experience. Is there an anorexic woman in existence who would view her situation as a positive response to the colonisation of her body by patriarchal culture ? Is it not rather an instance of the local plight of the individual being taken out of its private context and being raised/reduced to the level of a general theory ? Probyn herself writes -

As I hope to have made clear, anorexia as a practice works across multiple planes as it shows up contradictions within discourses. I suggest we look closely at the specificity of her situation, at the particular ways in which anorexia lays bare the discourses that construct femininity.

(Kroker 1988 p.210)



Thus defining her position in relation to the subject as being very much a 'middle of the road' one. She emphasises the value of submitting anorexia to theory for it is only through mediation of language that any understanding, however provisional, may be reached. She also stresses the value of reading anorexia as a site which deconstructs traditional discourses, yet throughout refuses to sacrifice the local experience of the anorexic to theory. In this she shows her stance on the issue to be midway between the body and ideology and, I must confess, it is in this position that I now seem to find myself. For as far as I have been able to ascertain from my readings on the subject, the feminist debate on anorexia seems unable to resolve itself in favour of either the body or ideology. And so I am left endeavouring to perform a rather delicate balancing act between on the one hand a theory which refuses to see the anorexic as anything other than a submission to the dominant ideology lived through the physical body and on the other hand a reading which sacrifices the corporeal experience of its subject in an ideological interpretation which is only nominally connected with the body. I can only conclude that both exist merely as opposite faces of the same issue. It is in this division one can recognise all too easily the classic either/or binary opposition which has been the traditional means of rendering the female other and

dominated. However, what is significant here is the fact that the debate neither comes to rest on one side or the other but becomes concentrated in the shift from one perspective to the other, in the negotiation of 'both'. As I see it, it is only in this ambivalence and mobility that the 'truth' (if such a word may be used) of the anorexic experience may be located, and expressed at the level of discourse with any degree of integrity.

THE TRANSGRESSIVE PROCESS AND PROCESSED TRANSGRESSION

Probyn's short essay aside, I have come across only one feminist study which focuses its argument on the ambiguous and mobile nature of anorexia. The study to which I refer is Marilyn Lawrence's The Anorexic Experience. The study includes a variety of autobiographical accounts contributed by present or ex-anorexic women. What I find particularly interesting about Lawrence's exploration is not so much the fact that she allows anorexia the opportunity to 'speak for itself', although this is an interesting approach, but rather the 'way' in which these subjects express themselves again and again. One subject writes -

I feel I am living on a knife edge .... in a state of continual civil war.

And another -

You know sometimes I think I'm really dead, its as though my body just hasn't noticed yet. I don't have any feelings about anything ....I don't really have any thoughts of my own....I think about food - well it seems like all the time.

(Lawrence, 1984, P.22)



Thus this woman articulates her fearful realisation that she is nothing more than the structure of her symptoms, nothing more than a 'process'. It is this process which Lawrence identifies as being one of power, an ambiguous power which acts upon the external phenomenon which the anorexic's body has become. It is this external which exists as so powerful to one who is paralysed by a sense of her own inadequacy. It is this external which must be reordered and brought under control, but paradoxically such an action merely reinforces the anorexic's awareness of her own lack of control. Lawrence articulates it thus -

The obsessional aspect of anorexia is without doubt a desperate need to be in control, yet one will often experience it as an overwhelming feeling that loss of control is just around the corner.

(Lawrence, 1984, P.23)

This 'process' then is one in which every experience, phenomenon and every emotion or thought which these inspire, is reduced to an organised term in a never-ending exchange. The controlling power is one which exists as a constant reversal between these terms. It is undoubtedly a seductive power, indeed it can only assert itself as such, where there exists just enough awareness of a lack of control to ensure a controlling of that lack, just enough anxiety to inspire a desire to control that fear.

It becomes obvious in the light I have just revealed that anorexia is in fact a solution (or at least manifests itself as such to the subject.) Yet it is a solution which is limited in scope, which exists to the initial problem of alienation as a series of escapes to nowhere. It is a no entry/no exit site. When seen in the light what is significant above all, is the 'total' nature of anorexia. Lawrence remarks that one of the most extraordinary aspects of the 'condition' is the thoroughness with which it carries out its function. It is an example of power working in a 'total' way, as a self-generating, self-sustaining but ultimately self-containing system. It is a 'dead' power, a 'dead' process in absence of any goal but its own empty self-propagation. The internal collapses outwards the external is seduced within in a disappearance of distinction between inner and outer, in an amalgamation of power/process which deals a death blow to a body which is no longer needed nor desired despite the fact that it 'hasn't noticed yet.'

A solution it may be but what a problematic one. Lawrence's conclusion shows her to be ultimately doubtful about the liberatory possibilities inherent in such a situation. She states emphatically -

Women deeply troubled in relation to their bodies must find a way to live in this world - not some other.

(Lawrence, 1984, P.26)

This is easier said than done. But at least Lawerence has shown herself as sensitive to the ease with which anorexia or indeed any manifestation of female protest may become diffused, and ultimately powerless in that diffusion. And thus be rendered effective only in reinforcing and maintaining the tolerance and nihilism, characteristic of the dark side of postmodernism and so destructive to the project of feminism.



THE FASCINATION OF THE INSECURE

Is this then the fate of feminism; when the transgression of the system of binary opposition, which hitherto has held the female in bondage, can only exist as a futile and empty reversal between the terms of that opposition. Whereas until now the female has been faced with the option of one or the other, either freedom or domination, she now experiences both, and simultaneously. It cannot be denied that feminism is fascinated by the liberation/domination, subject/object interchange, of which the anorexic is but one manifestation. Irigaray, for example, although aware of the danger to the female subject inherent in this situation, nevertheless continues to see such an interchange as transgressive. Indeed, it is upon this that she builds her theory of a language of the body.

Irigaray's sex 'which is always at least two' derives its multiple nature from the female's initial submission to the master discourse. Irigaray advocates a miming of the female's subjugation by the 'master'. In such a way, Irigaray believes, the woman can become the 'insecure site' of masculine speculation and from this position may disrupt the subject/object split, loosening the bind that condemns them ever to remain binary opposites.

All this is reasonable enough one may say. It is necessary to engage with the dominant ideology in order to transgress or effect a deconstruction and such an engagement involves a degree of submission. Surely the context is all important.

However, it is in the conclusion which Irigaray draws from this subversive 'mimesis' that the matter becomes unclear. She writes -

She is pure at last because she has pushed to the extremes the repetition of this abjection, this horror to which she has been condemned and to which she condemns herself.

(Irigaray, Hirschkop 1989, P.143).

Irigaray experiences her liberation as domination and vice versa and the result of this she insists on treating as an irreducible femininity, a particularly female purity, a particularly female pleasure, the experiencing of which is not mediated in any way by men. Irigaray's entire argument comes to rest on the notion of context. This, however, I find unconvincing. It is difficult to discern the difference between a domination initiated by men and a domination initiated by women in imitation of that initiated by men. It is difficult also to discern the difference between this specifically 'female' pleasure of displacement as outlined by Irigaray and the vertiginous ecstasy in the face of the void which one such as Baudrillard can define so cynically as a calculating 'fascination'.

THE HUNGER ARTIST'S CONCLUSION

It may well be that Irigaray is out-flanked by her own thesis and is destined, as she predicted, to provide a mere mirror image of the mirror image of the postmodern male. The mirror image perhaps of Baudrillard who speaks his 'truth' thus -

In itself changed by sexual liberation, the body has been reduced to a division of surfaces, a proliferation of multiple objects wherein its finitude, its desirable representation, its seduction are lost. It is a metastatic body, a fractal body which can no longer hope for resurrection.

(Baudrillard 1988)

The female anorexic spoke a similar 'truth' and it is also in a sense Kafka's truth which is revealed when we least expect it. For it is no lie to suggest that the world is bored with the fasting of the hunger artist. In the (post)modern world, which is Kafka's imaginary circus, the excellence of ~~Her~~his transgression, ~~Her~~his sacrifice is liquidated. ~~Her~~His 'art', that appearance, that freakish display, no longer excites interest nor astonishment, admiration nor desire, repulsion nor outrage.

For the hunger artist has confessed to us that there is no more to this appearance, and the appearance of that appearance than meets the eye. An empty sign(~~s~~he confesses



and dies, and in confessing, in dying manages to negate even death itself. - 'In his dimming eyes (remains) the firm though no longer proud persuasion that he is fasting still'- Baudrillard, then, was in a sense wrong. The hunger artist is indeed resurrected not, however, in glory but in the cynical fascination which, as the reversal of indifference, reigns supreme in the face of the hyper-active, hyper-transgressive but ever empty spectacle.

.....and they buried the hunger artist, straw and all. Into the cage they put a young panther. Even the most insensitive felt it refreshing to see this wild creature leaping around the cage that had so long been dreary. The panther was alright. The food he liked was brought without hesitation by the attendants; he seemed not even to miss his freedom; his body furnished almost to bursting point with all that it needed seemed to carry freedom around with it; somewhere in his jaws it seemed to lurk and the joy of life streamed with such ardent passion from his throat that for the onlookers it was not easy to stand the shock of it. But they braced themselves, crowded around the cage, and did not ever want to move away.

(Kafka, 1983, P.277)

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