

EATING DISORDERS AND MIMETIC DESIRE

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Among younger women, eating disorders are reaching epidemic proportions. The most widespread and spectacular at this moment is the most recently identified, the so-called *bulimia nervosa*, characterized by binge eating followed by "purging," sometimes through laxatives or diuretics, more often through self-induced vomiting. Some researchers claim that, in American colleges, at least one third of the female student population is involved to some degree. (Since nine out of ten sufferers are women I will use feminine pronouns in this paper but some undergraduates at Stanford tell me that the epidemic is spreading to male students.)

G.M.F. Russell, the first researcher who focused on the specific aspects of modern bulimia, is usually presented as the discoverer of a new illness. The title of his 1979 publication contradicts this view: "Bulimia Nervosa: An Ominous Variant of Anorexia Nervosa." And, indeed, all the symptoms he describes had been mentioned before in connection with anorexia (see Bruch).

The insurance companies and the medical profession like only well-defined illnesses, and so does the public. We all try to distance ourselves from pathological contamination by giving it a name. Eating disorders are often discussed as if they were new varieties of measles or of typhoid fever.

Why distrust the distinction between two illnesses with symptoms as radically opposed as those of anorexia and bulimia? Because we live in a world where eating too much and not eating enough are opposite but inseparable ways of coping with the slenderness imperative that dominates

our collective imaginations. Most of us oscillate all our lives between attenuated forms of these two pathologies.

The man in the street understands perfectly a truth that most specialists prefer not to confront. Our eating disorders are caused by our compulsive desire to lose weight. Most books on the subject acknowledge the universal calorie phobia but somewhat absent-mindedly, as if it could not be the major cause of a serious illness. How could a fundamentally healthy desire become the cause of pathological behavior, even of death?

Many people would be healthier, no doubt, if they ate less. In view of this fact, it is not illogical to suppose that, in anorexia, there must be some motivation other than this healthy desire, some unconscious drive, no doubt, that generates abnormal behavior. By turning anorexia and bulimia into two separate pathologies, the classifiers make it easier for us to lose sight of their common basis.

The bankruptcy of modern theories

The search for hidden motivations is the alpha and omega, of course, of our modern culture. Our number one principle is that no human phenomenon is really what it seems to be. A satisfactory interpretation must rely on one of the hermeneutics of suspicion that have become popular in the nineteenth and twentieth century, or on several of these, on a cocktail of *soupçon*: psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, etc. We automatically assume that social phenomena have little if anything to do with what is obvious in them, in this case the rejection of *food*.

In anorexia, psychoanalysts usually diagnose "a refusal of normal sexuality," due to the patient's excessive desire "to please her father," etc. These explanations are still invoked in books being written right now but the voice is growing fainter. Around this sort of thing the smell of mustiness is overpowering. Even in Lacan's own land, the old arrogance is gone.

Early in my life, I had an opportunity to observe that the eating practices of young women have nothing to do with a desire to please their fathers. Just before World War II, a pretty cousin of mine was dieting furiously and her father, my uncle, was storming about helplessly, trying to get her to eat more. Fathers, as a rule, are not pleased to see their daughters starve themselves. This particular father was also a physician, at a time when the medical profession had not yet caught the disease it was already trying to cure.

This uncle was our family doctor and, as such, had great prestige in my eyes, at least until that day. I had not yet read Freud but my later skepticism regarding his conception of fatherhood may well originate in this incident. I immediately perceived that my cousin was listening to a command more powerful than her father's desire and, with the passing of time, this more authoritative voice has become louder and louder. It emanates from the people who really count in our adolescence and who are our peers and contemporaries rather than our fathers. The individual models of young people reinforce the authority of the collective models which are the media, Hollywood, and television. The message is always the same: we have to get thinner, regardless of the cost.

The compulsive dieters *really* want to be thin and most of us are secretly aware of this because most of us also want to be thin. All our convoluted systems of explanation, based on sexuality, social class, power, the tyranny of male over female, and *tutti quanti* are floundering on this ridiculous but irrefutable evidence. The capitalist system is no more responsible for this situation than fathers are, or the male gender as a whole.

The capitalist system is clever enough, no doubt, to adjust to the rage for thinness and it invents all sorts of products supposedly capable to help us in our battle against calories, but its own instinct runs the other way. It systematically favors consumption over abstinence and it certainly did not invent our dieting hysteria.

It is the intellectual beauty of our eating disorders at this point in our history that they make manifest the bankruptcy of all the theories that continue to dominate our universities. The problem is not that these eating disorders are too complex for our current systems of interpretation—which would make our explicators salivate with delight. The problem is that they are too simple, too readily intelligible.

The need for common sense

All we need, to understand the symptoms described by the specialists, is to observe our own behavior with food. At some time or other, most of us experience at least an attenuated version of the various symptoms that characterize our two main eating disorders. When things are not going well, we tend to take refuge in some form of excess, which turns into a quasi-addiction. Since food is still the least dangerous drug, most of us resort to a mild form of bulimia. When the situation improves, we revive our New Year resolutions and we go on a strict diet. Feeling in control once again,

we experience a psychological lift not unlike the exhilaration of the true anorexic.

Between these "normal" oscillations on the one hand, and bulimia and anorexia on the other hand, the distance is great, no doubt, but the path is unbroken. We all have the same goal, to lose weight, and, to some of us, this goal is so important that the means to reach it no longer matter. *Qui veut la fin veut les moyens*. The anorexic pattern of behavior makes sense within the context not of our nominal values but of what we silently teach our children when we stop chattering about values.

Both the anorexic and the bulimic manage to reduce their calorie intake to a level that will reach or exceed the degree of thinness generally regarded as desirable at any given time. The true anorexic is able to reach this goal directly, simply by refraining from eating. The bulimic reaches this goal indirectly by eating as much as she pleases and then by vomiting much of the food she absorbs. In the competition for absolute thinness, the true anorexic is Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, and Napoleon all rolled into one. In quite a few cases, she does so well that she literally starves herself to death.

Contrary to what the etymology of the word deceptively suggests, the anorexic has an appetite. She still wants to eat just as much as we do and much more, because she is hungrier than we are. Some anorexic patients fear that if they ate a single bite, they would never stop eating. In other words they would become bulimic. And this is, indeed, what occasionally happens. That is why these people never relax. Through superhuman effort, they have triumphed over their normal instinct and now the spirit of unnatural thinness possesses them so completely that the notion of demonic possession suits their case better than the vocabulary of modern psychiatry. The food they formerly craved becomes truly repugnant. Every time their doctor or some well meaning relative tricks them into absorbing some nourishment, they feel nauseated. They know that, in a single instant, they may lose everything they worked so hard to acquire and their love-hate relationship to food is understandable. Their tremendous energy in everything they undertake fulfills a dual purpose: it takes their mind away from the desire to eat and it helps them lose more weight.

Anorexia strikes the best and the brightest among our young women. The typical victim is well educated, talented, ambitious, eager for perfection. She is the super-achiever type and she knows she is playing by the rules suggested by the most powerful voices in our culture, including the medical profession. Researchers at the Harvard medical school have

recently "discovered" that the weight formerly regarded as ideal for women is too high by twenty-five per cent and the lowering of it would give women "a much better chance of survival."

The anorexic is too loyal a citizen of our crazy world to suspect that, as she listens to the unanimous spirit of weight reduction, she is being pushed towards self-destruction. No one can convince her that she is really ill. She interprets all attempts to help her as envious conspiracies of people who would like to cheat her out of her painfully acquired victory, being unable to match it. She is proud to fulfill what is perhaps the one and only ideal still common to our entire society, slenderness.

Many women would like to be anorexics but, fortunately, very few succeed. Even though genuine anorexia is statistically as much on the rise as the other eating disorders, it remains rare in absolute numbers. Success is so difficult to achieve that the failures are countless. The bulimics are would-be anorexics who, despairing of ever making it, go all the way to the other extreme. And then, through artificial means, they manage to cancel out the effects of their constantly repeated defeats. Which explains why, in the vomiting type of bulimia, the prognosis is better than in true anorexia.

The vomiting bulimic is still a winner of sorts. As a matter of fact, unlike the true anorexic, she can be just as thin as fashion demands and no more. In the first stages of her illness, when the physical consequences of her eating practices have not materialized, she may feel as satisfied with herself as her anorexic sister. She can eat her cake and yet not have it in her stomach long enough to assimilate the hated calories. Ultimately, her health deteriorates and she pays dearly for her binges but not in respect to what matters most to her. She never becomes overweight.

Exercising

Given the topsy-turvy relationship of our culture to food, it is not the rise in eating disorders which is astonishing but the fact, rather, that so many people eat more or less normally. Contrary to what our nihilists and relativists tell us, there is a human nature and its resiliency is such that it often manages to adjust to the weirdest cultural insanities.

In order to cope with the thinness imperative without getting involved in practices that endanger their health or destroy their self-respect, many people have a secret weapon: *they exercise*. Much of their time is spent walking, running, jogging, bicycling, swimming, jumping, climbing mountains, and practicing other horribly boring and strenuous activities for the sole purpose of eliminating unwanted calories.

The irritating aspect of exercise is its politically correct justification in terms of outdoor living, communion with nature, the earth mother, Thoreau, Rousseau, ecology, healthy living, the plight of victims, and the other usual excuses. The only real motivation is the desire to lose weight.

A few months ago, *The Stanford Daily* published the statement of some resident psychiatrist, I believe, asserting that quite a few female students make an excessive and compulsive use of gymnastic facilities. In the near future, I suppose, this person will be officially credited with the discovery of an entirely new syndrome, *gymnastica nervosa* perhaps, or *jogging bulimia*. . . .

Don't we need a special label, as well, for these fattish professors who drag themselves up the Stanford hills carrying one heavy weight in each hand? They obviously believe that the more excruciating their ordeal, the more profitable it will be in terms of personal rejuvenation. With perspiration streaming down their faces, blinding their wildly imploring eyes, they evoke the more exotic tortures in Dante's *Inferno*. Being tenured, they could spend their lives comfortably and securely. The spectacle they offer makes one wonder if the poet's description of hell is as outrageous after all as claimed by our humanists. If they, themselves, voluntarily recreate the worst aspects of hell in their leisure time, with no outside compulsion, they unwittingly demonstrate the realism they imprudently question.

What am I doing myself on these Stanford hills? . . . Is that your question? It has no relevance to our topic and deserves no answer. I will point out, though, that no one has ever seen me carrying anything in my hands for the purpose of making myself heavier than I am.

We live at a time when the healthiest and the unhealthiest actions can have the same motivation. The true reason why many young people, especially women, join the ranks of smokers, these days, or do not give up smoking, not even at the urging of their Government, is the fear of gaining weight, a fear which this same Government, curiously, does its best to foster and intensify.

The mimetic nature of modern eating disorders

What is the cause of all this? As I already observed, we can no longer blame the favorite institutional scapegoats beaten to death by our master thinkers of the last two centuries. These beasts of burden have all collapsed long ago, just like Nietzsche's famous horse in Turin. One can go on beating dead horses for several decades, no doubt, especially in graduate seminars but, even there, there will be an end. No one can really believe

that our families, the class system, the male gender as a whole, the Christian churches, or even a repressive university administration, might be responsible for what is going on.

Sooner or later, we must finally identify the fierce and lively obstacle that modern and postmodern theories never anticipate, the uninvited guest that no one ever expects, the mimetic rival. As long as they are respected, the hated prohibitions keep this living *commendatore* out of sight. They make mimetic rivalry more difficult, if not impossible.

Both modernism and postmodernism are helpless when confronted with the intensification of mimetic rivalry that necessarily accompanies the dissolving of all prohibitions. Like those insects that go on building their nests when their eggs are gone, our modernists and postmodernist teachers will keep blaming the dead prohibitions until doomsday, but their students, some day, should finally question this dogma.

A few years ago, a popular formula of our contemporary individualism was: looking out for number one. If we were happy with ourselves, we should not have to look out for anything, we should not always be on the look out. When we look around, most of us discover that, far from being number one, we are lost in the crowd. In everything that matters to us, there is always someone who seems superior, in looks, in intelligence, in wealth, and most dreadful of all these days, in slenderness. Even a radical shift from the deconstructors to the Eastern mystics will not give us the peace we are looking for. Westerners are always forced into action and, when they no longer imitate heroes and saints they are drawn into the infernal circle of mimetic futility. Even at that level, especially at that level, the number one status can be achieved only through hard work and cutthroat competition.

The people with eating disorders are not the people with a religious hangover, the traditionalists and the fundamentalists, but the most "liberated." I remember one of the Seinfeld shows on NBC that brilliantly captured the "normality" of *bulimia nervosa* in our world. At the end of a meal in New York restaurant, a young woman goes to the bathroom to vomit the large plate of spaghetti she has just finished eating. She announces this to her companion, another woman, in the same tranquil and matter-of-fact tone as, in by-gone days, she might have said: "I'll put on some lipstick."

She behaves like those decadent Romans whose stories horrified my innocent youth but she needs no slaves to tickle her throat. A good and self-reliant American woman can take care of everything all by herself. This

one plays both the master and the slave in such an efficient and matter-of-fact way that it all seems perfectly natural and legitimate. She's bought this spaghetti with her own money and she can do with it whatever she pleases. We feel that everything in her life, from her professional career to her love affairs, must be managed in the same efficient way. Watching that show, I marveled once again at the superiority of dramatic expression that can suggest in a flash what volumes of pompous "research" will never come close to apprehending.

Compared to the young woman on NBC, the decadent Romans were innocent sensualists. They, too, were eating and vomiting in turn, but for themselves only and not for anybody else. They were really looking out for number one. Our modern bulimic is eating for herself, to be sure, but she is vomiting for others, for all these women who are watching each other's waistlines. Her radical freedom is synonymous with her enslavement to the opinion of others.

Mimetic desire aims at the absolute slenderness of the radiant being some other person always is in our eyes but we ourselves never are, at least in our own eyes. To understand desire is to understand that its self-centeredness is undistinguishable from its other-centeredness.

The stoics tell me that we should take refuge in ourselves, but our bulimic selves are uninhabitable and that is what Augustine and Pascal discovered long ago. As long as we are not provided with a goal worthy of our emptiness we will copy the emptiness of others and constantly regenerate the hell from which we are trying to escape.

Puritanical and tyrannical as our ancestors may have been, their religious and ethical principles could be disregarded with impunity, and indeed they were and we can see the result. We are really on our own. The gods we give ourselves are self-generated in the sense that they depend entirely on our mimetic desire. We thus re-invent masters more ferocious than the God of the most jansenist Christianity. As soon as we violate the thinness imperative, we suffer all the tortures of hell and we find ourselves under a redoubled obligation to fast. Our sins are inscribed in our flesh and we must expiate them down the last calorie, through a deprivation more severe than any religion has ever imposed upon its adepts.

Even before the thinness imperative appeared in our world, Dostoevsky realized that the new, liberated man, would generate cruel forms of asceticism rooted in nihilism. The hero of *Raw Youth* fasts in order to demonstrate to himself his will to power. Even earlier, Stendhal, even though hostile to religion, had detected the same tendency in post-

revolutionary French culture. The hero of *The Red and the Black* (1830) refrains from eating in order to demonstrate that he can be Napoleon.

There is great irony in the fact that the modern process of stamping out religion produces countless caricatures of it. We are often told that our problems are due to our inability to shake off our religious tradition but this is not true. They are rooted in the debacle of that tradition, which is necessarily followed by the reappearance in modern garb of more ancient and ferocious divinities rooted in the mimetic process.

Our eating disorders are not continuous with our religion. They originate in the neopaganism of our time, in the cult of the body, in the Dionysiac mystique of Nietzsche, the first of our great dieters, by the way. They are caused by the destruction of the family and other safeguards against the forces of mimetic fragmentation and competition, unleashed by the end of prohibitions. These forces could recreate unanimity only through collective scapegoating, which cannot really occur, fortunately, in our world, because our notion of the human person, even degraded into radical individualism, prevents the reestablishment of a community founded on unanimous violence. Which explains why the marginal phenomena I am focusing upon are now multiplying. In these, neopagan and corrupted Judeo-Christian elements are mixed in such an intricate way that, to unravel them all, a more detained analysis would be needed.

The process which has denied God first, then man, and finally even the individual, has not destroyed the competitive urge which, on the contrary, is becoming more and more intense. It is this competitive urge that loads us with tremendous and futile burdens and we vainly try to shake them off by blaming the old scapegoats of the modernists and postmodernists.

But here comes good news at long last. The whole problem, I hear, is about to be solved in the most modern and technological fashion. Some researchers have just developed a truly miraculous food that will be "very tasty," they claim, but not nourishing at all: it will be evacuated in its entirety. Very soon, therefore, we will be able to enjoy a perpetual binge and eat twenty-four hours a day without even having to vomit! We will still have to spend a certain amount of time in the bathroom, I suppose, but not for some abnormal reason; everything will be perfectly normal and legitimate. This is most comforting. This great discovery may well be the final victory of modern science over all our false metaphysical superstitions.

An anthropological parallel: the potlatch

Our thinness hysteria is unique, no doubt, because it is inseparable from our unique brand of radical and radically self-defeating "individualism," but some features of our current behavior are duplicated in other cultures, for instance in the famous *potlatch* of the American Northwest. The great American sociologist Thorstein Veblen was already aware of this fact and, in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, he discusses the potlatch within the context of what he calls conspicuous consumption.

Showing off one's wealth has always seemed important to the *nouveau riche* type everywhere, and in our world there have never been as many nouveaux riches as in America. Being immigrants, or children of immigrants, these people could not pretend they came from old and prestigious families; money was the sole instrument of their snobbery.

When the wealthy become accustomed to their own wealth, straight conspicuous consumption loses its appeal and the nouveaux riches turn into *anciens riches*. They perceive this change as the *summum* of cultural refinement and they do their best to make it as conspicuous as the former consumption. They invent a conspicuous non-consumption, therefore, superficially discontinuous with the attitude it supersedes but, at a deeper level, it is a mimetic escalation of the same process.

In our society conspicuous non-consumption is present in many areas, in clothes for instance. The torn blue jeans, the ill fitting jacket, the baggy pants, the refusal to dress up, are forms of conspicuous nonconsumption. The politically correct reading of this phenomenon is that the rich young people regard their own superior buying power with a feeling of guilt, and they desire, if not to be poor, at least to look poor. This interpretation is too idealistic. The real purpose is a calculated indifference to clothes, an ostentatious rejection of ostentation. The message is: "I am beyond a certain type of consumption. I cultivate more esoteric pleasures than the crowd." To abstain voluntarily from something, no matter what, is the ultimate demonstration that one is superior to that something and to those who covet it.

The wealthier we are, the more precious the objects must be for which we deign to compete. Very rich people no longer compare themselves through the mediation of clothes, automobiles, or even houses. The more wealthy we are, in other words, the less grossly materialistic we can afford to be in a hierarchy of competitive games that become more and more rarefied as the escalation continues. Ultimately this process may turn into

a complete rejection of competition, which is not always but may be the most intense competition of all.

In order to understand this better, we only have to think of the potlatch which really illustrates not the straight type of conspicuous consumption but the inverted type. Among the Kwakiutl and other Northwestern Indian tribes, great chiefs used to demonstrate their superiority by giving away their most precious possessions to their competitors, the other great chiefs. They all tried to outdo one another in their contempt for wealth. The winner was the only one who gave up the most and received the least. This strange game was institutionalized and it resulted in the destruction of the goods which the two groups, in principle, were trying to give to each other, just as most human groups do in all kinds of ritual exchange.

Vast quantities of wealth were thus squandered in competitive displays of indifference to wealth, the real purpose of which was prestige. There can be rivalries of renunciation rather than acquisition, of deprivation rather than of enjoyment.

At one time, the Canadian authorities made the potlatch illegal and we can well understand why. They realized that this search for collective prestige ultimately benefited the big chiefs only and had a negative impact on the vast majority of the people. It is always dangerous for a community to place negative forms of prestige ahead of the positive which do not yet contradict the real needs of human beings.

Even in our society, there can be a competitive aspect to gift giving which, in the potlatch, becomes exacerbated almost beyond recognition. The normal purpose of exchanging gifts, in all societies, is to prevent mimetic rivalries from getting out of hand. The spirit of rivalry is so powerful, however, that it can transform from the inside even institutions that exist only for the purpose of preventing it. The potlatch testifies to the formidable stubbornness of mimetic rivalry. It may be defined as a frozen slice of mimetic crisis that becomes ritualized and finally plays a role, but at great cost, in the control and attenuation of the competitive fever.

In any society, competition can assume paradoxical forms because it can contaminate the activities most alien to it in principle, especially the gift. In the potlatch, as well as in our world, the drive toward less and less can substitute for the drive toward more and more and ultimately mean the same thing.

Unnatural thinness may well be to our society what a great destruction of blankets and furs was among Northwest Indians, with this difference, however, that in the potlatch everything is sacrificed to the pride of the

group, which was embodied in the big chief whereas, in the modern world, we compete as individuals, against all other individuals. The community is nothing and the individual is everything. We have identified the enemy and he is us. Every individual ends up with his own personalized equivalent of the potlatch madness.

A brief history of competitive dieting

The anthropological key opens the antechamber of competitive dieting but the inner sanctum remains closed. Since mimetic phenomena always tend to escalate, they must have a beginning, a development, and finally an end, which is not yet in sight in the case of our eating disorders... Mimetic phenomena have their own specific temporality or historicity and they must be read in a historical as well as in an anthropological key.

The history of the rage for slenderness can be reconstituted, at least in part. It all began, as it should, as in a fairy tale, with some beautiful and prestigious women in very high places. The most important of these mimetic models was Elizabeth of Austria, the wife of Emperor Franz Joseph, better known as Sisi. She presented herself as a "new woman." Being unhappy as a wife and mother she sought an *identity* of her own, away from ceremonial obligations. She tried to find it in a special body culture which made her into the prototype of the modern "advanced" woman (see Vandereycken and van Deth).

Together with the wife of Napoleon III, Empress Eugenie of France, another famous beauty, Sisi put an end to the crinoline that imprisoned the lower part of a woman's body. At some encounter of their two imperial husbands, these great ladies retired to a private room for the purpose, we are told, of comparing their respective waistlines. This incident suggests some kind of incipient competition between the two, exactly what was needed to start a pattern of mimetic rivalry among the numerous aristocratic ladies who had nothing to do but to look up to Sisi and Eugenie and copy their behavior down to the last detail. The two empresses certainly played a role in the triggering of the mimetic rivalry that has been widening and intensifying ever since. After World War I, the escalation reached the middle class and after World War II, at least in the opulent West, it spread to all social classes.

Sisi's life pattern was typically anorexic; she insisted on a rigid low calorie diet and she dedicated herself to gymnastics and various sports in a manner prophetic of our own time. We still have princesses, of course, but in keeping with the rest of our civilization, they have gone down one

notch or two. The bulimic pattern is more characteristic of them than the heroic anorexia of the "genuinely" quixotic Sisi.

It is interesting to observe that the first clinical descriptions of anorexia were written at the very time when Sisi and Eugenie exerted their greatest influence (Louis-Victor Marce in 1860, Lasegue and Gull in 1873). This first medical anorexia seems to have been primarily an upper class illness.

The specialists readily acknowledge the mimetic dimension of eating disorders but their understanding remains superficial. They are aware that when one case of bulimia becomes known in some college, a few days later, there may be hundreds of cases. But they still conceive imitation in nineteenth-century terms as the purely passive social contagion described by such authors as Tarde, Baldwin, Le Bon, etc. They do not see the competitive dimension, the whole mimetic escalation. They do not see, therefore, that they are dealing with a historical phenomenon.

The rivalry intensifies as the number of imitators increases. The reason for our reluctance to perceive the escalation is that we hate to acknowledge our own mimetic fads as much as we love to acknowledge the *mimesis* of others. All cultures tend to be comical in each other's eyes but never in their own eyes. The same is true of the past in relation to the present.

The spirit of rivalry may triumph in the absence of any specific rival. The whole process is a milder version of Hobbes's "war of all against all." It may also be compared to a series of athletic records that get broken faster and faster as more and more people try to break them.

The constant exaggeration of the collective syndrome is inseparable from its diffusion to larger and larger crowds. Once the mimetic ideal is defined, everybody tries to outdo everybody else in the desired quality, here slenderness, and the weight regarded as most desirable in a young woman is bound to keep going down. All fads and fashions operate dynamically because they operate mimetically. Historians focus exclusively on the supreme phase, just before the collapse. They want to amuse their readers with the foolishness of the past and simultaneously persuade them that their own superior rationality protects our world from similar excesses.

The Hollywood stars of the thirties look rather plump by our standards but they seemed elegantly thin in their own time and, by pre-World War I standards, they appeared downright skinny. By 1940 the trend was so powerful that the food shortages of WWII did not even slow it down. Since that time, with each passing decade, it has become more extreme. The crisis stage is reached when competition feeds exclusively upon itself, forgetting

its initial objects. Anorexic women are not interested in men at all; not unlike these men, they compete among themselves, for the sake of competition itself.

The anorexic ideal of radical emaciation affects more and more areas of human activity. Our professional judgments are often distorted by it. Overweight people complain, no doubt rightly, that they are the object of social and economic discrimination.

Shakespeare's Julius Caesar is suspicious of Cassius's thinness. He detects in it the envy and resentment that, indeed, characterize this personage. Nowadays it is fatness that we distrust. This about-face, however, may not be quite what it seems. What has changed is not our deeper feelings but the culture in which we live, which has become a culture of distrust and, not without reason perhaps, we regard thin people as more able to cope with it than fat ones.

Our anorexic distortion of the past

In order not to see what is going on, we manage to fool ourselves regarding the past, leaning upon various half-truths or downright lies which, like all propagandists, we keep repeating *ad nauseam*. One of these consists in attributing to the entire European past an inordinate predilection for fat women, rooted, we claim, in an obsession with food resulting from the state of semi-starvation which was normal in those days.

Both historically and esthetically, this theory is illiterate. In pre-industrial Europe, more than 80% of the people were living on those small independent units of food production that were called farms. Even if they had wanted to, the most tyrannical rulers and the most unjust landlords would have found it extremely dangerous to starve their own farmers. They were not stupid enough to forget that they depended on these people for the production of their own food.

During their occupation of Western Europe, the Nazis starved city dwellers quite efficiently but the farmers and all the people with farm connections never starved. The only leaders who succeeded in creating huge famines were Stalin and Mao who, in obeisance to their communist dogma, destroyed independent farming and killed more people than all medieval famines combined.

The idea that semi-starvation was a more or less permanent feature of life in pre-industrial Europe is a gross falsification of the evidence and, even if food shortages had been as common as now claimed, it is most doubtful that they would have influenced the conception of feminine beauty

held by painters and sculptors. In these days, aesthetic fashions did not originate with the lower classes but with people too closely associated to the ruling circles not to share in their privileges, at least as far as food was concerned. Even in times of famine, artists were certainly among the last to go hungry. There is nothing to suggest that they dreamed about food half as much as we do.

The fatness imperative we clamp upon the past is a crude projection of our own obsession with food, an obvious maneuver to deny our own singularity. Our innumerable cookbooks and gourmet magazines, our false jolliness in matters alimentary, our endless cooking shows and our perpetual celebration of good eating, demonstrate that the most food obsessed culture in Western history is our own. This obsession is a well-known symptom of anorexia.

Judging from the history of painting, there never was anything in the past remotely similar to our preoccupation with how much a woman should weigh, or with the possible cellulite deposits on the thighs of the women painted by such people as Rembrandt and Rubens!

Before our century, there were variations of taste, no doubt, in schools of painting as well as in individual painters but they cannot be reduced to any single factor. In Flemish painting, women seem fatter, as a rule, than in Italian painting but exceptions abound. Vermeer paints his female figures thinner than Titian and Tintoretto. Must we assume that he was the best fed of the three?

With the possible exception of the huge breasts, bellies, and derrieres of prehistorical Venuses, the fatness imperative in the history of art seems to be one of the lesser canards in the vast constellation of myths generated by our passion for unnatural thinness. In order not to perceive how exceptional we are, we treat the exception—ourselves—as if it were the rule and the rule—everybody else—as the exception. We piously deplore "ethnocentric fallacies" that dissolved long ago in the massive uniformity of our age but we never notice the one fallacy that obviously afflicts us all, the "modernocentric" fallacy.

The tendency to mistake ourselves for the umbilic of the universe and judge everything from our twisted standpoint is visible in all areas of our culture. One of the real howlers is the current interpretation of religious asceticism as "an early form of anorexia." It should be paired with the revealing justification some of our anthropologists provide for infanticide in archaic culture: "an early means of population control."

There is such a thing as genuine religious asceticism and great works testify to its existence in all periods of our history. When sanctity is officially valued, however, the desire not to be a saint but to *regarded* as one is bound to become a goal of mimetic rivalry. Just as other types of human behavior, religious asceticism can be competitive. But the churches were on guard against such distortions which, at the most, involved a few hundred people, not millions like our current eating disorders. We hate our Christian past so much that we accuse it simultaneously of encouraging anorexia and of "discouraging the great mystics." We never give it the benefit of the doubt and envisage the possibility that it might have encouraged mysticism while discouraging anorexia.

Those who despise the past never seem to suspect that far worse excesses are now going on right under their noses, on a scale unprecedented, no doubt, since the beginning of human history. In the Middle Ages, the possibility of false asceticism was always acknowledged, at least by intelligent observers, whereas our eating disorders are discussed exclusively in medical terms, as if they had nothing to do with the culture at large and its recent evolution.

The problem with our "scientific" observers is that they worship the same idols as their patients. They may be compulsory dieters themselves, or would-be dieters. Few people want to be saints nowadays but everybody is trying to lose weight.

With the end of the last remaining religious prohibitions a most benign and marvelous ritual came to an end, the family meal, a major roadblock, no doubt, on the path to vomiting bulimia. Industrial food is unquestionably easier to vomit than your mother's cooking. The deregulation of meals has had effects similar to the deregulation of air travel. The whole process has become inexpensive, no doubt, but bumpy, chaotic, unreliable, and supremely uncomfortable. More and more people eat alone, at irregular times, and they hurriedly consume vast quantities of junk food. It is interesting that, in their famous binges, bulimic patients accentuate these typical features to the point of caricature. They show a marked preference for cheap pastry and all the mushy and greasy horrors produced by our food industry, which they consume in great haste. This haste is the only point of resemblance with the Passover meal.

In the "developed" world, the forces that pull us in the direction of consumption are just as powerful as the forces that pull us in the direction of fasting. On the side of excessive consumption, there is the cheapness of

food, its ready availability, the enormous advertising pressure and also, last but not least, the collapse of all religious and ethical restraints.

Our entire culture looks more and more like a permanent conspiracy to prevent us from reaching the goals it perversely assigns to us. No wonder if we are also the culture from which many people want to drop out, as a result of sheer exhaustion, and also, perhaps, of a peculiar kind of boredom. In the United States, obesity is even more on the rise than extreme slenderness, especially in those geographical areas and social classes which are less "with it" than the rest of us. One cannot help feeling sympathy for all these drop-outs. In all aspects of life, the oscillation between all or nothing, which is the fruit of hysterical competition, is more and more visible. Even in Europe, where formerly, all classes still lived in all neighborhoods, the cities are dividing between dilapidated sections and the sanitized areas with the enormous houses and the manicured lawns.

The culture of anorexia

The mimetic escalations that culminate in anorexia/bulimia are at work in all areas of our culture. The most revealing one, no doubt, is that of "high culture," which was the first, probably, to be contaminated with "anorexic" tendencies long before losing weight became the universal obsession.

In all arts, beginning with painting, and continuing with music, architecture, literature, and philosophy, the ideal of radicalism and revolution have long been dominant. What these labels concretely imply is the escalation of a competitive game which invariably consists in discarding one by one all traditional principles and practices of every art. The late comers being still dedicated to the same anti-mimetic principles as their predecessors, they must paradoxically imitate them by doing away with whatever has not yet been discarded by the previous waves of radicalism. With each generation, a new batch of iconoclasts boast that they are the sole genuine revolutionists, but they all really imitate one another and the more they try, the less they can get away from imitation. There have been temporary interruptions of these dynamics, no doubt, and even brief reversals, in the overall history of modernism, but the main thrust is undeniable and it has become so obvious that the systemics of revolution have finally broken down or are in the process of breaking down.

In painting, the realistic rendition of light and shadow was first discarded, and then more and more essential elements, traditional perspective, and finally all recognizable shape, and color itself. In

architecture and furniture the evolution was the same. In poetry, rhyming was abandoned, and then all metrical aspects. The word 'minimalism' now designates only one particular school, but it fits nicely the whole dynamics of modernism. In poetry, in the novel, in drama, and all other genres of writing, this process keeps repeating itself. First, all realistic context is eliminated, then the plot, then the characters; finally the sentences lose their coherence and even the words themselves, which may be replaced by a significant or, better still, an incoherent jumble of letters.

All schools, of course, do not do away with the same things at the same time and local differences have often resulted in brilliant if short-lived creative outbursts. Ultimately, however, everybody and everything tends towards the same absolute nothing which is now triumphant in all fields of esthetic endeavor. More and more critics are beginning to face up to the fact that vigorous novelty is drying up. Modern art is over and its end was certainly hastened, if not entirely caused, by the more and more *anorexic* temper of our century.

Not only is our literature suffused with the spirit of anorexia and bulimia but these conditions are now the subject of literary works such as Valerie Rodriguez, *La peau a l'envers, le roman d'une boulimique* or Stephanie Grant, *The Passion of Alice*. Some day, no doubt, there will be an MLA section dedicated to this appetizing new field. But I doubt that anyone will soon equal *The Hunger Artist* of Franz Kafka. In order to understand this work, one must be aware that, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, so-called "living skeletons" and "fasting artists" were exhibited for a price at fairs and circuses. They all boasted that they had broken all previous records of emaciation. They were a cross between freaks and sporting champions.

Kafka's story is an allegory of our entire culture. The author obviously sees his own art as representative of the negative, gnostic, and egotistical tendencies present in our world. All this was brilliantly analyzed by Claude Vigée, the French poet and essayist in a book entitled *Les artistes de la faim*.

There are now more literal readings. There are reasons to believe that Kafka himself had anorexic tendencies. To a psychiatrist such as Gerd Schütze, his story represents: "the essence, tragedy and desire of anorexics in a way only an insider is able to." This view does not contradict but completes the literary and cultural interpretation of Vigée. Certain trends were visibly at work in our culture long before they influenced our alimentation and the current prominence of physical anorexia and its

bulimic variations must be regarded as an essential moment in the tragic and grotesque revelation of what is happening to us, which is much more significant than an epidemic that would hit us at random, or a bizarre cultural fad unconnected with the general evolution of our society.

In the conclusion of Kafka's story, the crowds lose interest in the *Hungerkünstler* who is finally swept out of his cage and replaced not by someone in the same line of work but by a muscular and menacing panther. This ending is often regarded, rather convincingly in my view, as prophetic of the Nazi era.

The story as a whole, however, and its autobiographical echoes, are prophetic of a later era, our own, in which the metaphor is turning into a massive existential fact, resulting in an uncanny and enlightening reversal of the conventional relationship between metaphor and reality. When our relativists maintain that only metaphors exist, they do not realize how right they are. They underestimate the power of certain metaphors to become terrifyingly real.

All this seems now behind us, however, since our postmodern culture has rejected the principle of novelty at any price. The fetish of innovation has been replaced by chaotic eclecticism. But far from rehabilitating the pious and patient imitation of the classics, postmodernism insolently and indolently appropriates just about anything in the past, for no discernible purpose, and certainly not for providing us with the solid nourishment we so desperately need. The new school implicitly denies all permanent value to the past from which it borrows. It quickly regurgitates whatever it indiscriminately ingurgitates and the temptation is great for me to *reduce* the whole affair to the esthetic equivalent not of anorexia this time, but of our most up-to-date syndrome, *bulimia nervosa*. Like our princesses, our intellectuals, and artists are reaching the bulimic stage of modernity.

Whatever the case may be, the escalation is not really over and we should prepare ourselves for even bigger and better things. If our ancestors could see the gesticulating cadavers of contemporary fashion magazines they would probably interpret them as a *memento mori*, a reminder of death, equivalent, perhaps, to the *danses macabres* on the walls of late medieval churches. If we could tell them that, to us, these disarticulated skeletons signify pleasure, happiness, luxury, success, they would probably flee in a panic, thinking that we are possessed by a particularly nasty devil.

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