“Inside the fat woman, trying to get out”: Louise Glück’s Lyric Poetry and the Aesthetics of Anorexia

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Abstract

In *How to Disappear Completely*, Kelsey Osgood asserts that modern accounts of anorexia are often written in first person and glamorize the illness. Moreover, these memoirs are often written from the perspective of a healed body and thus, the authenticity of these memoirs is questionable. Or as Strawson argues, “telling and retelling one’s past leads to changes, shifts away from the facts” (Strawson 447). This trend is clearly observed in most narratives of anorexia nervosa, wherein the past is reinvented and reshaped.

The anorectic’s story then, is a misrepresentation of the illness experience as the narratives are a fabricated reconstruction of the past. Addressing this issue, scholars such as Lawrence J Kirmayer and Josie Billington propose that rather than the narrative form, the lyric poem is better suited to capture illness experiences as “lyric poetry tends to emphasize simultaneity, evoking a moment of consciousness.” (L. J. Kirmayer 20).

Drawing from current theories in medical humanities, my thesis analyses the lyric poems of Louise Glück on anorexia nervosa and asks the following questions – Is there an anorexic aesthetic in lyric poetry? How does the lyric form contribute to our understanding of the illness and finally, is the lyric form better suited to convey, understand, and examine the illness?
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Introduction

Among the drawbacks of illness as matter for literature, there is the poverty of the language. English which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear has no words for the shiver and the headache. – Virginia Woolf

While words may fail to describe the shiver or the headache, the tortured mind has attempted to chart out illness experiences in various forms: poetry, prose, film or the visual arts. The practice of using art as therapy has a history that extends beyond western intellectual tradition\(^1\). (Clift and Camic 13). For instance, Rafael Campo demonstrates, Native American Cultures relied on the healing benefits of ritual practices which often involved incantation and poetry (Campo 31-2). Specifically, he refers to the Navajo “night chant”, a poem that is orally transmitted through generations, wherein the poem appeals to natural elements such as the moon, sky, sun, the land and other elements present in the sufferer’s vicinity (Campo 34).

The therapeutic benefits of the arts can be seen in religious imagery as well: Apollo, an important God in the Greek pantheon was the god of both, poetry and healing (Clift and Camic 14). Similarly, Judeo-Christian tradition displays a faith in the connection between poetry and healing, especially in the Psalms and the Song of Solomon (Clift and Camic 14). Drawing parallels from various historical sources such as the Egyptian civilization, ancient Greece and the Bible, Campo’s book The Healing Art: A Doctor’s Black Bag of Poetry (2003) brings to light the therapeutic and healing benefits of poetry, for both the reader and the writer. Inspired by the versatility of expression in poetry, he declares that poetry is a “wellspring for fresh metaphors that reconsider illness in radically new ways” (Campo 93). His assertions about the symbolic aspect of poetry in conveying the language of illness is by no means a new revelation. Much before Campo, Freud proclaimed that poetry is central to the functioning of the unconscious. Expanding upon this idea, Lionel Trilling goes as far as declaring that the “mind,

\(^1\) Ideas about purification and healing through creative expression or as Aristotle famously termed it, catharsis, were already in circulation before he formulated them in his work, Poetics. (Clift and Camic 13)
as Freud sees it, is in the greater part of its tendency exactly a poetry-making organ.” (Trilling 52).

If we follow Freud’s and Trilling’s assertions it follows that the mind, “as a poetry making organ” first and foremost thinks in terms of metaphors and symbols, before language. Thus, illness experiences which cannot always be defined efficiently in the prose form have a more successful chance of finding expression in poetry. Experts in the field of medical humanities have begun to recognize the merits of poetry in conveying an illness experience and consequently, encourage their patients to script their illness stories in the poetic form. However, despite compelling evidence that illustrate the therapeutic effects of the lyric, there are two conflicting lines of thought about poetry therapy\(^2\) and its benefits.

While scholars such as Campo vouch for poetry therapy, experts on the other end of the spectrum such as James C. Kaufman and Janel D. Sexton argue that as “poetry tends to be shorter than prose, there is less of an opportunity for a shift in perspective and/or an evolution of ideas, emotions, and cognitions to take place.” (Kaufman and Sexton 275). Furthermore, it appears that writing excessively about a traumatic event may be deleterious to one’s health. (Honos-Webb, Harrick and Stiles 9)

In this thesis, I examine the anorectic story in the memoir and the lyric and hypothesise that the language of the lyric corresponds more closely to an illness experience such as anorexia. Here, I argue that the relevance of a lyric poem unlike that of a memoir, is not contingent upon the spatial and temporal context in which it is conceived. Rather, as I will demonstrate, because of its simultaneous and epiphanic qualities it allows a more pervasive examination of an illness such as anorexia. Moreover, I further demonstrate that memoirs on anorexia often act as “thinspiration”, “how-to-guides” and are often verbose and thereby, discourage readership.

To validate my hypothesis, I first compare the anorectic experience in prose and lyric form. The memoirs considered in this thesis are Marya Hornbacher’s Wasted (2006) and Kelsey Osgood’s How to Disappear Completely: On Modern Anorexia (2013), both highly recommended in literary circles. For the lyric, I limit the scope of my study to the works of poets such as Louise Glück, Carol Ann Duffy and Eavan Boland as these women are contemporary poets and have discussed anorexia in several of their poems. Then, I examine the lyric poems of Louise Glück and perform a diagnostic study of her poems through a formal analysis. In doing so, I study the

\(^2\) A supplementary form of art therapy wherein the medical practitioner encourages his or her patients to write or read poetry that examines deep-seated emotions.
syntactic choices of an anorexic patient in a lyric poem and furthermore, I develop the aesthetics of minimalism or anorexia in a Louise Glück’s lyric poetry.

The first chapter provides a short account of the role of narrative in medical humanities and the description of illness experience. The second chapter compares the stories of the eating disorder in prose and poetry. The third chapter develops a theoretical framework to define the aesthetics of anorexia. The fourth chapter performs a diagnostic analysis on Louise Glück’s poem, “Dedication to Hunger”, from the volume, Descending Figure.

The Role of Narrative in Medical Humanities

Peeved by Rudyard Kipling’s portraiture of Indians in the novel Kim, Shashi Tharoor poses a question that is relevant to this thesis –

To the extent that literature captures our imagination with a version of experience that privileges a particular point of view, isn’t it desirable, even essential, that others give voice to those who were voiceless, silent, marginal, even absent in the original narrative? (Tharoor)

While speaking of another marginalized group, Tharoor’s question also captures one of the core issues of medical humanities – the great divide in the representation of illness and suffering between the health care practitioner and the sick. The patient is thus, a part of a marginalized group and medical humanities3 is a medium that attempts to enable them to adequately express themselves. Recognizing the inadequacy of the voice of patients in medical accounts, physician and literary scholar, Rita Charon terms patients the “true ethicists” (Charon xii) as it is the patients who are closest to their illnesses. This chapter thematises the concept of narrative in medical humanities, with respect to anorexia.

Marya Hornbacher, the author of the memoir Wasted recognizes the discrepancies between the physician’s account of suffering and that of the patients, when she alludes to an older research finding on anorexia and states that “shrinks seemed absolutely convinced that there would be these necessary ingredients: one overbearing, invasive, needy mother; one absent and emotionally inaccessible father; one materially spoiled but emotionally neglected, regressive, passive, immature child.” (Hornbacher 25). Hornbacher reappropriates this stereotyped version

3 Medical Humanities has several definitions. Amongst these, Kirklin offers that it is “an interdisciplinary and increasingly international endeavour that draws on the creative and intellectual strengths of diverse disciplines including literature, art, creative writing drama, film, music, philosophy, ethical decision making, anthropology, and history in pursuit of medical educational goals.” (Kirklin)
from the “shrinks” to relate her story: “To adjust the above pattern for my own family picture: one absent and emotionally closed-off mother; one overbearing, invasive, needy father; one strange, anxiety-ridden, hyperactive, aggressive child trying very hard to be an adult.” (Hornbacher 25). Often, as Hornbacher’s memoir confirms, the anorectic’s story is reshaped by the immediate health-care professionals.

Additionally, the anorectic story is reshaped by other discourses that analyse the disorder. For instance, cultural theorists suggest that anorexia is a “metaphor” of our time. Contemporary medicine today defines anorectics as having two distinguishing features – “self-worth judged largely or even exclusively, in terms of shape and weight” (Warell 1310), and “active maintenance of an unduly low body weight” (Warell 1310) Feminist critics such as Susie Orbach theorise that the anorexic woman controls her body in her fierce desire to curb her “neediness – the dreaded cost of femininity” (Orbach). Like most feministic perspectives on anorexia, the centripetal force of Orbach’s argument lies in the institution of the female body and she wields the sword of patriarchy and gender divide to battle the forces of anorexia. Thus, every field contextualizes the disorder from its limited vantage point and therefore, the existing scholarship on anorexia nervosa is as conflicted as the anorexic subject itself.

To bridge the gap between the eating disorder and our understanding of the eating disorder, it is imperative for the anorectic to have a voice in his or her illness story. However, a study of memoirs on anorexia show that the illness experience is fragmented and disjointed. Analysing the accounts of anorectic teenagers, Richard A. O’Connor and Penny Van Esterik assert that their stories are “chaotic”, “regressive” and “rebellious” and their statements refuse to “package their illness narratives” into a coherent form (O’Connor and Van Esterik 9). Thus, O’Connor and Esterik classify them as “chaos narratives” wherein they define the chaos narrative based on Arthur Frank’s model of illness narratives in his seminal work *The Wounded Storyteller.* (1995)

According to Frank, illness narratives can be shelved into three different categories: the restitution narrative, the chaos narrative and the quest narrative. As per his definition, the restitution narrative is that in which the patient returns to his or her previous state of health. This is a story which ultimately recounts the individual’s triumph over the illness and a return to the normalcy of everyday life. (Frank) A chaos narrative on the other hand, “is the opposite of restitution: its plot imagines life never getting better.” (Frank) Finally, a quest narrative is
the story in which the patient journeys through suffering, harbouring the belief that there is something spiritual to be gained from the illness experience. (Frank)

Based on these classifications, Marya Hornbacher’s memoir, *Wasted*, is at once a chaos narrative and a restitution narrative. Read as a restitution narrative, Hornbacher eventually heals and gradually learns to “just fucking deal” (Hornbacher 279) with her illness; the memoir is a success story. As a chaos narrative, the memoir constantly evokes feelings of loss, despair and hopelessness. Despite the negativity of emotions produced upon reading and perhaps writing the memoir, Frank argues that a chaos narrative should be written and heard. He states, “To deny a chaos story is to deny the person telling the story, and people who are being denied cannot be cared for.” (Frank). While reading Hornbacher’s memoir might honour her chaos story, the therapeutic benefits of having written the memoir in the first place are questionable. Instead, the memoir recalls the negative effects of the experiment, “The Pennebaker Paradigm”, a laboratory procedure in which participants are instructed to script out their most traumatic experiences, which had never been disclosed to anyone (Honos-Webb, Harrick and Stiles 304). While certain participants demonstrated that writing about trauma can have various health benefits, it had a negative effect on a few and exacerbated their health conditions. The experiment’s findings suggest that subjects who displayed a prefabricated understanding of their trauma failed to show substantial health improvements. (Honos-Webb, Harrick and Stiles 309). Both Hornbacher’s *Wasted* and Osgood’s *How to Disappear Completely* exhibit a prefabricated understanding of the disorder. To illustrate, consider the following excerpt from Hornbacher’s memoir:

By the time I was five or so, I began to believe in some inarticulate way that if I could only contain my body, if I could keep it from spilling out so far into space, then I could, by extension, contain myself. If I could be a slip of a thing, a dainty, tidy, bony little happy thing, then the crashing tide of self within the skin would subside, refrain from excess, be still. I locked myself in the bathroom, stood on the sink, stared at the body before me, and cried. And then pinched myself hard, telling myself to quit being a baby. Crybaby, I thought. Fat little pig. (Hornbacher 25)

The above paragraph demonstrates that Hornbacher was an astute 5-year-old or quite precocious to realize that her problems stemmed from the way she perceived her body. However, it is more likely that Hornbacher reconstructs every memory to match the anorectic story. This prefabrication neither helps the reader who is trying to understand the disorder nor the writer, in this case, Marya Hornbacher, to experience the catharsis of the writing cure. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that the fragmentary writing in Hornbacher’s memoir brings to light the schizophrenic qualities associated with the ill subject.
According to Hilde Bruch, undernutrition and starvation ultimately leads to alarming symptoms such as “splitting of the ego, depersonalization and severe ego defects”. (Bruch 20). Continuing in this vein, she proposes that continued starvation ultimately leads to borderline syndrome and sometimes even schizophrenia. Thus, the anorexic who has dissociated her body from the self, often writes in a manner that is fragmented and disjointed, or as Isabelle Meuret states, “the disembodied self of the anorexic leads to some sort of schizophrenic writing.” (Meuret 112).

As a direct consequence of the “schizophrenic writing” that is observed in the memoir, which mirrors a facet of the anorectic experience to a certain extent, Hornbacher’s memoir ultimately represents a jigsaw puzzle that is forced together awkwardly. For example, in a chapter which is dedicated towards her experiences as a child, Hornbacher supplements the narrative with scribbled notes from the “shrink’s notepad. The focus of the story keeps shifting from the present to the past and future, without warning. The closed narrative structure of Hornbacher’s memoir does not embrace the fragmented narration of the anorectic patient.

A lyric poem, on the other hand, as Kirmayer suggests, “corresponds more closely to the fragmentary, condensed, but evocative language of the clinical encounter.” (L. J. Kirmayer 9). Furthermore, as Peter Brook’s explains, “Lyric poetry, we feel, strives toward an ideal simultaneity of meaning, encouraging us to read backward as well as forward (through rhyme and repetition, for instance), to grasp the whole in one visual and auditory image” (Brooks). Thus, the spatial construction of a poem does not bind the story it conveys to the depiction of events in the real order. In poetry, memory can start in the present and recall the distant past or alternatively, distance the recent past. This is seen in Glück’s poem, “The Sick Child”:

The Sick Child
- Rijksmuseum

A small child
is ill, has wakened.
It is winter, past midnight
in Antwerp. Above a wooden chest,
the stars shine.
And the child
relaxes in her mother’s arms.
The mother does not sleep;
she stares
fixedly into the bright museum.
By spring the child will die.
Then it is wrong, wrong
  to hold her –
  Let her be alone,
  without memory, as the others wake
  terrified, scraping the dark
  paint from their faces.

(Glück 107-8)

The poem begins with the image of a sick child in its mother’s arms. The dark midnight sky with the flickering stars lend a sombre atmosphere to the poetic setting as we learn the child will eventually die. Here, distant memories from the past are brought closer to the reader and similarly, the present is distanced from the reader.

As demonstrated earlier, Hornbacher attempts to narrate a fragmented, chaotic story in the prose form and thereby presents her reader with a complicated jigsaw puzzle. A similar experience in a lyric form is easier to grasp and understand as its spatial characteristics enable the lyric to accommodate fragmentation, chaos and varying timelines. These features will be discussed further in the following section.

Comparing the Anorexic Experience in the Memoir and the Lyric

Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning exchanged over 600 letters in a period of 21 months, while keeping their affair a secret from Barrett’s family, before they finally got married in 1846. Interestingly, while Elizabeth Barrett continued to profess her love through letters, she was secretly composing sonnets, which corresponded to the letters she was writing almost every day to Browning. Why then, asks Josie Billington, did Elizabeth Barrett feel the urge to script her experiences in the poetic form when she was already saying similar things in the “live” form in her letters? (Billington 78). Answering her own question, Billington proposes that “poetry can find a place for what can otherwise look so small and transitory in the world – a look, a word, a tone of voice – and give such things their true size and meaning.” (Billington 79). Indeed, every word, every silence, every punctuation is of utmost importance in a poem because of its condensed form. Memoirs on the other hand, fill several pages to demonstrate a singular experience. In this section I compare the anorectic experience in the lyric and memoir and hypothesize that the lyric more suitably accommodates descriptions of the eating disorder, both for the anorexic writer and the reader attempting to understand the disease.
The most apparent characteristic of the memoir that distinguishes it from the lyric is its inherent verbosity. Health care professionals, Scott Murray and Marilyn Kendall recognize a similar problem in illness narratives of patients with heart disease and admit that:

We live in a world full of text, where patient accounts are presented (if at all) as a large block of text, which may be ignored or only skim-read; whereas, if presented as poems, they can be approached more slowly, and heard in the head with attention being given to their patterns of sound, image, and ideas, making for more emotional engagement with what is being said. (Hurwitz, Greenhalgh and Skultans 70)

“Blocks of text” which are sometimes even unrelated, appear throughout the memoir in Marya Hornbacher’s Wasted: A Memoir on Anorexia and Bulimia. To illustrate, the third chapter “The actor’s part”, gives the reader a circuitous account of Hornbacher’s anorexic tendencies from the age of fifteen. Hornbacher first begins by describing her fantasies of achieving a model-thin body. This narrative soon shifts into a fragmented compilation of memories. For instance, she recollects an instance where an overweight woman calls her chubby –

It is not uncommon for people who are overweight to tell thinner people that they’re overweight, too. I didn't know that then. I have since associated cute with chubby. When people tell me I’m “cute,” I hear “chubby,” no matter how far from either I may be. I hear them telling me that I'm still a snub-nosed little girl with big tits and a round ass who's too loud and too intense and entirely too much. That summer, I had decided that “cute” was the last thing I wanted to be. (Hornbacher 91)

This memory briefly ushers in the narrator’s experience with bulimia and this chapter also highlight’s the parent’s wariness in confronting their daughter’s illness. To a large extent, this part of the memoir also record’s Hornbacher’s disappointment in her parent’s ability to counsel here. The narrative changes yet again in the chapter, when Hornbacher begins to describe her student life at her college, Interlochen (Michigan). The following excerpt largely summarizes the temperament and sensibilities of her student life:

A few too many of us fell for the old romantic story of the mad artist, the genius made idiot savant by the swells and falls of music, language, color on canvas, ceaselessly, manically, playing inside his head. We wanted to be that genius, that idiot mad with the world of his mind. A thrum of self-destruction, anger and joy all tangled up, ran through the halls, the roads, the dorms.

We were very hungry. (Hornbacher 103)
It is telling that the lines which describe Hornbacher’s Dionysian tendencies\(^4\) conclude with the lines “We were very hungry.” While these lines do not depict a hunger for food, they make it apparent that the anorectic is always hungry for something. The later part of the chapter largely recounts Hornbacher’s love-hate relationship with food, her peers who suffered with the eating disorder, compulsive work-out sessions and unhealthy binge routines – “seven blueberry muffins, an entire plate of salty mashed potatoes, fourteen chocolate chip cookies.” (Hornbacher 117). Another important part of this chapter is Hornbacher’s eventual collapse due to starvation, which soon leads to therapy sessions. Upon reading the memoir, the reader is lost in a sea of endless description, which is ironically fixated on food: the very thing the anorexic strives to avoid.

On the other hand, a lyric poem compresses the illness experience and provides a montage that conveys the anorectic story succinctly. Consider Carol Ann Duffy’s lyric poem, “The Diet. Here is a short excerpt from the poem –

\begin{Verbatim}

\textbf{The Diet}

The diet worked like a dream. No sugar, salt, dairy, fat, protein, starch or alcohol. By the end of week one, she was half a stone shy of ten and shrinking, skipping breakfast, lunch, dinner, thinner; a fortnight in, she was eight stone; by the end of the month, she was skin and bone.

She starved on, stayed in, stared in the mirror, svelter, slimmer. The last apple aged in the fruit bowl, untouched. The skimmed milk soured in the fridge, unsupped. Her skeleton preened under its tight flesh dress. She was all eyes, all cheekbones, had guns for hips. Not a stitch in the wardrobe fitted. (Duffy 15)
\end{Verbatim}

Here, the poem first starts by recounting the anorexic’s obsession for dieting. It then moves on to the phase of complete starvation, which leads to the subject becoming, “Anorexia’s true daughter, a slip/ of a girl, a shadow, dwindling away” (Duffy 15) in the third stanza. This stanza records the ultimate collapse of the anorexic. The fourth stanza deviates from the previous theme slightly and portrays the anorexic as a “small seed” floating away in the wind, wherein

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\(^4\) Hornbacher herself claims that college was a “Dionysian sort of time.” (Hornbacher 104)
she adapts multiple personalities – that of a drunkard and a drug addict. The consecutive stanzas, five and six continue to record the anorexic’s metaphoric journey in the form of a seed. As she floats away into varied lived experiences, the poem also characterizes the transcendental aspect of anorexia. A study on the transcendental aspects of anorexia shows that anorexics often experience supernatural or paranormal feelings wherein there is a “sensation of ‘going outside of body visions’, of motor and sensory automatism, of unusual perceptions and images, and other transcendental sensations. (Reda 39). The speaker in the poem clearly experiences “out of body” sensations as she floats away into different personas and sometimes, even objects. The last two stanzas show the anorexic “squatting” on the tip of a tongue:

But when she squatted the tip of a tongue, she was gulped, swallowed, sent down the hatch in a river of wine, bottoms up, cheers, fetched up in a stomach just before lunch. She crouched in the lining, hearing the avalanche munch of food, then it was carrots, peas, courgettes, potatoes, gravy and meat.

Then it was sweet. Then it was stilton, roquefort, weisslacker-kase, gex; it was smoked salmon with scrambled eggs, hot boiled ham, plum flan, frogs’ legs. She knew where she was all right, clambered onto the greasy breast of a goose, opened wide, then chomped and chewed and gorged; inside the Fat Woman now, trying to get out. (Duffy 16)

The subject in the poem distinguishes her body from the self and hence, when she eventually succumbs to her bulimic tendencies, she is “inside the Fat Woman now, / trying to get out.” (Duffy 16).

Apart from their latent verbosity, memoirs on eating disorders become how-to guides for the aspiring anorexic. In her essay, “Reading Disorders: Pro-Eating Disorder Rhetoric and Anorexic Life-Writing”, Emma Seaber proposes that certain life stories on anorexia, such as Hornbacher’s *Wasted* (1998) propagate a rhetoric that is pro-anorexia and these life-stories, when read by people who have latent anorexic tendencies, whom she terms disordered readers⁵, simply seek to aggravate their anorexic tendencies (Seaber 489).

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⁵ I retain Seaber’s usage of the term, disordered reader.
Life stories on anorexia, as Seaber attests, become an anorexic’s “thinspiration” and “how-to” guide. “Thinspiration”, usually an anorexic’s source to achieve ultimate thinness, come in many forms, such as message boards on Instagram with pictures of thin women, videos on YouTube which come with prescribed diets and exercises for the anorexic aspirant and so on. Seaber argues that these images visually articulate the “apogee of successful anorexia” (Seaber 502) and claims that Hornbacher’s memoir cannot be the quintessential thinspiration that is stimulated by visuals of skeletal women. Here, I disagree with Seaber and argue that Hornbacher’s intense desire to stay thin, spread across 308 pages in her book, provides more inspiration than pictures, which merely provide visuals of an ideal body. Memoirs, unlike visuals, resonate with thoughts that the anorexic might have had at some point and give the disordered anorexic reader a sense of kinship and support. For example, when Hornbacher attests that “people with eating disorders tend to be both competitive and intelligent. We are incredibly perfectionistic. We often excel in school, athletics, artistic pursuits,” (Hornbacher 136), she glamorizes the disease and gives the anorectic reader a sense of affirmation and pride. Recognizing the potential damage of affirmatory statements like these, Osgood writes:

Nine times out of ten, writing about anorexia beguiles at-risk populations for all the wrong reasons, and the persons writing about his or her own struggle fuels the fire by producing a long hubristic poem, an elegy, an ode to presence gone and missed. An homage. The writers know they’re up at the invisible podium to speak out about their journey to the brink of death (oh, yeah. and back) and they know, too, that the ones listening the closest are the young ones eager to enlist in the starving armies. (Osgood)

While Seaber does not exclusively criticise memoirs, it is evident that like Seaber, Osgood takes issue with the effect of anorexic writings on disordered readers. To illustrate further, Hornbacher’s memoir exhaustively lists out calorie free meals and provides the disordered reader with grocery lists. She even admits that “anorexics have strange shopping lists” (Hornbacher 237). Here is an example –

- Fat-free muffins (1 doz.)
- Sugar-free jelly (strawb.)
- Low-cal bread (wht.)
- Fat-free sugar-free yogurt (12 crtns.)
- Fat-free granola
- Carrots
- Mustard
- Celery
- Lettuce
- Fat-free dressing (French) (Hornbacher 237)
In addition to supplying the disordered reader with unhealthy grocery lists, she also highlights disturbing eating habits that enable miniscule amounts of food to last longer and more importantly, provides her readers with tips on how to eat as little as possible. Consider the following paragraph from the book –

> When five minutes had passed, I would start to skim my yogurt. Try this at home, kids, it’s great fun. You take the edge of your spoon and run it over the top of the yogurt, being careful to get only the melted part. Then let the yogurt drip off until there’s only a sheen of it on the spoon. Lick it—wait, be careful, you have to only lick a teeny bit at a time, the sheen should last at least four or five licks, and you have to lick the back of the spoon first, then turn the spoon over and lick the front, with the tip of your tongue. Then set the yogurt aside again. Read a full page, but don't look at the yogurt to check the melt progression. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Do not take a mouthful, do not eat any of the yogurt unless it’s melted. Do not fantasize about toppings, crumbled Oreos, or chocolate sauce. Do not fantasize about a sandwich. A sandwich would be so complicated. (Hornbacher 255)

The most disturbing part about this passage is that she adopts an instructive tone and invites her readers to adapt her methods, in the phrase “Try this at home kids”. (Hornbacher 255). Furthermore, she proceeds to expand the delight she feels in having discovered a way to make yogurt, decidedly more unappetizing than Oreos and chocolate sauce, more palatable.

Apart from being a How-to guide, Hornbacher’s memoir is also submerged with descriptions of food. Her idiosyncratic obsession for food is in tandem with medical research, which strangely enough, show that anorexics are obsessed with food (Bernstein 308). Thus, the memoir ultimately becomes a report of food that the writer did not eat or alternatively, a journal of calorie intake. Hornbacher admissions of food addictions and tastes are self-explanatory in the following excerpt:

> You want to talk about food all the time. You want to discuss tastes: What does that taste like? you ask each other as you devour your bizarre meals. Salty? Sweet? Are you full? You want to taste some-thing all the time. You chew gum, you eat roll after roll of sugar-free Certs, you crunch Tic Tacs (just one and a half calories each!). You want things to taste intense. All normal approach to food is lost in your frantic search for an explosion of guilt-free flavour in your mouth, an attempt to make your mouth, if not your body, feel full, to fool your mind into satiety. You pour salt or pepper on things. You eat bowls of sugar-coated cereal (no fat). You put honey and raisins on your rice. (Hornbacher 105)

Thus, Hornbacher does indeed discuss food throughout the book. A normal reader finds himself or herself submerged in descriptions of strange food habits while a disordered reader understands Hornbacher’s love-hate relationship with food. These exhaustive descriptions of
food and eating habits are not unique to *Wasted*. In *How to Disappear Completely*, (2013) Osgood examines a plate of food, as she undergoes therapy and approaches it “with caution”:

> I glanced warily at the tray. Chicken, rice, grapes, milk. Whole? Skim? I took a deep breath. Was the anxiety real or was I fabricating it? Maybe if there weren’t so much food. Maybe if it were something different, not rice, all those tiny little grains, all that divisibility. Maybe if it were an apple instead of grapes. Countable. Mass of Chicken. If you make it small, it will be manageable. You can’t look like you’re enjoying it. That would be humiliating. . . For now, though, you’ll approach with caution. (Osgood)

Detailed information of food consumed are common to both Hornbacher and Osgood’s memoirs. Thus, most memoirs about anorexia are intensely preoccupied with food (Ellman 23). Apart from food, both Hornbacher and Osgood are obsessed with their weight, their food intake and the number of calories burnt in a day, all of which form the subject matter for almost every page in the book. Although descriptive, their illness experiences read like obsessive compilations of grocery lists, diet fads and food intake.

A lyric on the other hand, seldom reads like a how-to guide. Instead, the illness experience communicates the emotional distress of the patient. This is not to say Hornbacher’s or Osgood’s memoirs do not convey the hardships and mental trauma of the eating disorder. However, their experiences are lost in lengthy descriptions. As a contrast, consider the anorectic experience in the following poem, “The Deviation”, by Louise Glück:

> The Deviation

> It begins quietly
> in certain female children:
> the fear of death, taking as its form
> dedication to hunger,
> because a woman’s body
> is a grave; it will accept
> anything. I remember
> lying in bed at night
> touching the soft, digressive breasts,
> touching, at fifteen,
> the interfering flesh
> that I would sacrifice
> until the limbs were free
> of blossom and subterfuge: I felt
> what I feel now, aligning these words—
> it is the same need to be perfect,
> of which death is the mere byproduct.
Here, the anorexic experience is neatly captured in a few terse lines. Glück does not engulf her reader with extensive details about her eating practices or her obsession for ultimate thinness. Despite the sparsity of words, the short lyric offers several interpretative layers. Firstly, anorexia takes a hold upon young women when they are young. Secondly, the disgust for maturity and the female body is explicitly portrayed in the lines, “the interfering flesh”. Here, the line “touching the soft, digressive breasts,” juts out prominently from the poetic structure and thus, represent the “digressive breasts” in the lyric form as well. Finally, the last four lines – “I felt/ what I feel now, aligning these words- / it is the same need to be perfect, / of which death is the mere byproduct” conveys the anorexic’s desire for perfection. The lyric, as demonstrated, communicates the illness experience more efficiently because of several characteristics. Of these, I focus on simultaneity and epiphany.

Simultaneity of the Lyric Poem

The simultaneity of the lyric form, as per Lawrence J. Kirmayer, contrasts with the temporal structure of narrative, (L. J. Kirmayer 31). He claims that the lyric:

In contrast to the temporal structure of a narrative which typically lays out the causal paths from past events through current experience to future prospects, lyric poetry tends to emphasize simultaneity, evoking a moment of consciousness. (L. J. Kirmayer 31)

Here, the simultaneity of the lyric form refers to its ability to create a timeless present. Instead of providing a timeline and thus, distancing the reader’s encounter with the text, the lyric “emphasizes the time of the discourse” (Morgan 301), to create a sense of urgency among the reader, text and content. To illustrate, Glück’s poem on anorexia, “The Deviation” does not add a timeline to the illness experience. The past, present and the future blend together in 17 sparse lines and the effect is not jarring. Furthermore, for a short period, the poet’s anorectic experience becomes the reader’s experience as well. The “I” of the lyric poem eliminates the distinction between the writer, who experiences the pain, and the reader, who is simply reading about the experience.6 This concept is better understood with reference to Walt Whitman’s lyric sequence, “Song of Myself”. Here, Whitman writes:

6 In his article, “Language of the Lyric”, Jonathan Culler proposes that “lyric language is not relativized to a fictional speaker or narrator. Lyric utterance is about this world rather than a fictional world. And a correlate of this is that with lyrics, unlike novels, where the discourse is attributed to the narrator, the reader can occupy the position of the speaker…” (Culler 162)
I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (qtd in Orr 85)

Whitman urges his readers to become one with his writing and similarly, the subjective “I” in a lyric poem encourages its readers to relinquish their identities for the duration of the poem. Thus, upon reading “The Deviation”, the disordered reader perceives her experience in another “authentic voice within that experience” (Orr 86), that is, the voice in the poem is still embodied in the anorectic frame of mind, as opposed to writers of memoirs, who speak from the perspective of a healed body. For example, Osgood writes her memoir after having recovered from anorexia, and she herself concedes that her memories may not be always be credible. Consider the instance wherein Osgood recollects her habit of pressing her nails into the palms of her hands, a habit which caused two large calluses in the middle of both palms. She refers to this as her “pseudo-stigmata” and conjectures that this habit was largely inspired by her reading of Hornbacher’s Wasted, whose writer also concedes to having a similar, masochistic ritual. At this point in the narration, Osgood is unable to separate her habits from that of Hornbacher’s traits as she cannot fully relive her personal anorectic experience. Instead, her version of reality blends with her readings of Hornbacher’s memoir.

In a moment of self-doubt, she wonders, “Was it possible that I had actually developed this habit after I read Wasted and desperate to mend my history to include seeds of illness, wove it into the narrative of my life so meticulously that now, at this age, I cannot determine what is real and what I have “consciously (term used loosely created?)” (Osgood). The propensity to re-invent the past, a common theme in most memoirs, as Osgood clarifies, is not a conscious decision. Nonetheless, writers of memoirs reappropriate past experiences with the knowledge they did not possess earlier and thus, falsify the self and the experience (Strawson 447). In the words of Galen Strawson:

Telling and retelling one’s past leads to changes, smoothings, enhancements, shifts away from the facts, and recent research has shown that this is not just a human psychological foible. It turns out to be an inevitable consequence of the mechanics of the neurophysiological process of laying down memories that every studied conscious recall of past events brings an alteration. (Strawson 447)

Osgood’s realization that her work is a fabricated version of the past, supplemented with new knowledge, corroborates Strawson’s assertion that the more a tale is re-told and re-examined, the more it moves away from the truth. This concept can be inspected further in the following excerpt from Osgood’s memoir:
Are quirks of language I once thought instinctive just an imitation of Hornbacher’s style? Did the incident in front of the mirror, which I think I remember as traumatizing, really happen at all? And to further this idea, where Hornbacher’s life written and edited in a similar way, she having been attracted to Levenkron’s Kessa, to the icons of the tortured female she quotes so often in her own text? Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Lewis Carroll’s plucky, darling Alice? Poor drowned Ophelia? (Osgood)

By repeatedly questioning her memories and moreover by admitting that her version of the past may be fabricated to imitate Hornbacher’s anorectic story, Osgood proves that life stories may not always capture the complete truth of the experience. This fabrication is a direct result of a linear structure in prose memoirs and the need to provide narrative contexts. Narrative markers such as “Well what happened was … or You see, it all began when…” (Hurwitz, Greenhalgh and Skultans 70), provide context but often dilute the experience.

Conversely, as demonstrated in “The Diet” by Carol Ann Duffy and “The Deviation” by Louise Glück, a lyric poem can capture the illness experience without providing a background or a timeline to the story.

Epiphanies in the Lyric

Apart from simultaneity, the lyric is epiphanic as well. The illness account offered in both, a lyric and a memoir attempt to recreate transformative instances during the ordeal and consequently, the epiphanies that arise thereof. As Frank argues, an epiphany is central to any illness narrative, wherein a person reassesses his or her place in the world. Therefore, it follows that the accuracy of the epiphanies recorded in the lyric or the memoir lend credibility to the writer. However, Anne Hunsaker Hawkins points out that epiphanies refer to a dimension of knowledge that cannot be expressed in the narrative form. According to her,

…… epiphanic knowledge contrasts in certain ways with narrative knowledge. Whereas narrative configures experience as linear and progressive, representing it as the unfolding of a process through time, the epiphanic is sudden, immediate, and total. Moreover, narratives can be told, heard, and understood; for the most part, a narrative is or can be explicit. But the epiphanic refers to a dimension of knowledge that cannot quite be articulated—either to oneself or to others. (Hawkins 41)

Hawkins advocates that medical care professionals should be well-versed with epiphanic knowledge as this will enable them to foster their intuitive faculties. As she states, intuitive knowledge regarding a patient and a disease is “frequently alogical or non-rational (though not
illogical or irrational), and often involves nonconscious mental processes.” (Hawkins 40) . Developing this line of thought, she further states that intuitive knowledge, which is alternatively called tacit or inferential knowledge is poorly understood in biomedicine and herein lies the importance of epiphanies (Hawkins 41). “Epiphanic thinking”, intuition and tacit knowledge, according to her, belong to the same epistemological category as this is “a kind of knowing that is not arrived by analytic reasoning.” (Hawkins 41) In sum, Hawkins proposes that epiphanic and intuitive knowledge is greatly essential to foster a better understanding between the patient and the doctor and thereby proposes that reading and writing haikus offers a way to train the intuitive mind as haikus, like any other forms of epiphany, “do not lend themselves to paraphrase or analysis – they are understood subceptively.” (Hawkins 44) . More importantly, the focus of both an epiphany and a haiku is distilled to a singular emotion, thought or feeling.

Hawkins’ assertions about the haiku are directly applicable to the lyric as a haiku is in itself, a short lyric poem. Thus, going by her hypothesis, the pared down version of the anorectic experience in the lyric is limited to a singular emotion. While writers of memoirs lead their readers to an epiphanic moment, the lyric poem, by itself is an epiphany and hence, more accessible. For example, consider the following excerpt from the poem “Anorexic” by Eavan Boland:

Flesh is heretic.
My body is a witch.
I am burning it.

Yes I am torching
her curves and paps and wiles.
They scorch in my self-denials.

The speaker in this poem displays an abject hatred towards her body and the epiphany here is rooted in the very first line “Flesh is heretic” wherein the speaker brings to light the religious dimensions of anorexia. The predominant tone here alludes to a biblical discourse where the speaker “scorches” her desires in self-denial. The speaker in this poem has the luxury of recording her religious epiphany without providing a context and thereby eliminates the need to fabricate a narrative that supports an epiphany.

The importance of the lyric is also recognized in the field of ethnography wherein Laurel Richardson proposes that not every story “fits neatly into a plot.” (Richardson 9). To prove her
claims, she conducts a project wherein she arranges ethnographic notes and stories from in-depth interviews into the framework of a lyric. By transgressing the traditional form of prose narratives that is common to the ethnographic discourse, Richardson conjectures that presenting information in the form of a lyric makes “lived experiences” more accessible to the reader.

Cementing her case about the accessibility of the lyric further, Richardson cites Boroff to reference her claims. As Boroff states “Poems exist in the realm of making (mimesis) rather than of knowing or doing; they are representations of human experience.” (qtd. in (Richardson 9) Boroff goes on to state that the literary devices in a lyric poem such as sound patterns, rhythms, imagery and page layout are consciously or unconsciously, constructed to evoke emotion (qtd. in (Richardson 9) Thus, even if the mind resists knowledge from a lyric, it is instantly “felt” (qtd. in (Richardson 9)

These feelings are inspired by the epiphanies that the lyric presents. Co- incidentally, like Hawkins, who is inspired by the power of epiphanic knowledge in the lyric, Richardson takes a similar route and terms her experimental poems “epiphanies”, a “candid photo” or an “episode” (Richardson 9) and proposes that life-stories are organized around life-changing events and these events become the subject of implied narratives in each of her lyric poems. (She writes 9 different poems wherein she arranges information from each of her interviews into a lyric poem.) Elaborating this concept further, she states that a sequence of implied narratives in the lyric form retell “lived experiences” in a manner that is more accessible to the reader as lyric poems pivot on the realm of feelings and emotions. As she states,

The lyric poem’s task is to represent actual experiences – episodes, epiphanies, misfortunes, pleasures – to capture those experiences in such a way that others can experience and feel them. Lyric poems, therefore, have the possibility of doing for ethnographic understanding what normative ethnographic writing cannot. (Richardson 12)

Thus, just as a prose narrative cannot always capture the length and breadth of an illness experience, it follows that ethnographic prose writings may not always capture a lived experience satisfactorily. Much like ethnography, narrative in medical humanities aim to retell lived experiences and make another world, that is the world of illness and suffering more accessible to the physician and the common reader attempting to understand the illness experience.

Thus, a lyric poem, with distinguishing features such as simultaneity and epiphanic characteristics come closer to describing an illness experience. Having established that the
simultaneous and epiphanic dimensions of the lyric correspond closely to the anorectic experience, the following chapter studies the stylistic choices of an anorexic writer, in the lyric poetry of Louise Glück.

“In the end, the one who has nothing wins”: Towards a definition of the Anorexic Aesthetic in Louise Glück

Critics classify Louise Glück’s body of work diversely. As Daniel Morris points out,

Glück appears to some readers as a feminist, to others a Jew, a postmodernist, a confessionalist, a modernist, a religious author, a mystic, a classicist, a romanticist, a hard-edged emotionalist, a realist, a love poet, an elegant stylist, a blunt poet, a bitter poet, an ecofeminist nature poet, a pagan poet, a cultivated poet, an elegist, a lyric poet, a narrative poet, and an antifeminist poet who raises crucial, disturbing issues about women’s complicity in their own oppression. (Morris 32)

Branching away from these classifications, this chapter examines the stylistic features of her poems and demonstrates that, first and foremost, Glück’s poetics are informed by the aesthetics of anorexia.

Kenneth Burke, in his book, On Symbols and Society, notes that “the poet will naturally tend to write about that which most deeply engrosses him – and nothing more deeply engrosses a man than his burdens, including those of a physical nature such as a disease” (Burke 84). He further suggests that poets have a “vested interest” in their handicaps and the poetic style is borne from the disease itself, so much so that the loyalty to it may “reinforce the disease itself.” His findings are worth quoting at length as he proposes that the writer’s creation mimics their disease and consequently, enables a “nosological” classification of their stylistic devices. He states:

I think we should not be far wrong if, seeking the area where states of mind are best available to empirical observation, we sought correlations between styles and physical disease (particularly since there is no discomfiture, however mental in origin, that does not have its physiological correlates) So we might look for “dropsical “(Chesterton), “asthmatic” (Proust), “phthisic” (Mann), “apoplectic” (Flaubert), “blind” (Milton), etc. The one objection to such a nosological mode of classification is that it leads to a Max Nordau mode of equating genius with degeneracy. This is not the case, however, if one properly discounts his terminology, reminding himself that the true locus of assertion is not the disease, but in the structural powers by which the poet encompasses it. (Burke 85)
Burke’s principle can be applied to texts written by anorectic subjects. Although biographical readings are controversial in literary studies, Louise Glück’s poetry may be productively read through her teenage anorexia. Operating on a similar conjecture, literary critics like Maud Ellman, Leslie Heywood and Isabelle Meuret specifically analyse texts written by the anorectic subject in *The Hunger Artists*, *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture* (1993) and *Writing Size Zero: Figuring Anorexia in Contemporary World Literature* (2007) respectively, both, to better understand the anorectic subject and to develop anorexia as a literary trope. In this chapter, I examine the lyric poems of Louise Glück and define the aesthetics of anorexia in her oeuvre.

Glück’s poems neatly encapsulate the various stereotypes that are attributed to anorexic teenagers, such as troubled familial bonds, the Elektra complex, a revulsion for the female form and an abject need for control and perfection. Given that Glück herself suffered from anorexia and more importantly, penned a poem, “Dedication to Hunger”, which discusses anorexic themes at length, it is no surprise that critics have turned their focus to the anorexic aesthetic in her poetry. Critics continue to look for themes that relate to anorexia, such as self-imposed abstinence, starved female characters and revulsion to female sexuality in poems that are not explicitly related to anorexia, well beyond “Dedication to Hunger”, which is overtly anorexic both, metaphorically and thematically.

However, critics have ignored the contributions of formal elements to the anorexic aesthetic. In this chapter, I argue that the aesthetics of anorexia or minimalism is achieved by her stylistic choices, such as enjambment, disjunction, asyndeton and syntax and these literary devices replace figurative language, metaphors and colourful adjectives. Just as the anorexic strips down her fleshy mass by starvation, Glück adopts a similar principle and abstains from using excessive words. Her lyric form is as skeletal as the anorexic subject. The following section defines key literary terms such as enjambment, asyndeton and syntax and thereby examines their contribution to the sparse lyrical structure in Glück’s poetics.

Enjambment is one of the most important formal features that defines Glück’s poems. For instance, consider “The Racer’s Widow” from her first collection, *Firstborn*.

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The elements have merged into solicitude.
Spasms of violets rise above the mud
And weed and soon the birds and ancients
Will be starting to arrive, bereaving points
South. But never mind. It is not painful to discuss
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His death. I have been primed for this,
For separation, for so long. But still his face assaults
Me, I can hear that car careen again, the crowd coagulate on asphalt
In my sleep. And watching him, I feel my legs like snow
That let him finally let him go
As he lies draining there. And see
How even he did not get to keep that lovely body. (Glück 22)

In this poem, it would seem as though the widow, if it can be assumed that she is the speaker of the poem, can finally talk about the accident that killed her husband. The first line is a complete syntactic unit, while the lines that follow are enjambed sentences. Complete syntactic units are those sentences in a poetic line that are punctuated and imbue the lines with a sonic decorum. Conversely, enjambed sentences are run-on lines, where the syntax crosses over to the next line without punctuation. Enjambed sentences, according to Robert Pinsky, cause a disturbance in the poem where the “syntax tries to speed up the line” (Pinsky) and the “line is trying to slow down the syntax” (Pinsky). The opposing force between the line and the syntax produce enjambment. While enjambments do not necessarily speed up the line, (Longenbach 88) they create a disturbance in the sonic patterns of the poem. For instance, in Glück’s poem, “The Racer’s Widow”, the fifth sentence, “South. But never mind. It is not painful to discuss” (Glück 22), is not end-stopped and is therefore an enjambed sentence.

That the enjambment intersects a line that coolly proclaims, “It is not painful to discuss”, “His death” emphasizes the pain the speaker invariably feels: this enjambment occurs after a period of forced calm, wherein the speaker describes the landscape with detached precision. Here, this enjambment represents a suppressed quiver, as enjambments, by Longenbach’s definition, disrupt the sonic pattern in the poem. Thus, the enjambment reinforces the change in tone in the fifth line, when the speaker begins to describe her husband’s death. In a similar vein, Robert Miklitsch advocates that the loose run-on sentences with their violent enjambments, “mimic the speaker’s involuntary recollection, and cathartic recreation, of the ‘scene of pathos’.” (Miklitsch 3). Thus, enjambments masquerading as a form of silence in this poem recreate the tragic scene and thereby, enable Glück to maintain an austere diction, stripped of adjectives and figurative language.

An asyndeton is much like an enjambed sentence, in that it represents a run-on sentence. However, the similarity ends here. An asyndeton, a word which originates from a Greek verb,  

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7 I say detached precision as the tone in the first five lines of the poem simply narrates a landscape, which is admittedly bleak and suddenly discusses death.
literally means to bind together (Warren 308). It is that which is unbound, unconnected and unlinked (Warren 308). A run-on sentence, that moves from one topic to another can also be defined as an asyndeton or as per Rosanna Warren’s definition, “run-on sentence: clauses flow forward without the boundaries of conjunctions or periods.” (Warren 310). The effect of asyndeton in Glück’s poem, “The Sensual World”, from the volume, The Seven Ages, Warren argues is speed and compression (Warren 312). Here, the poem is first set in the present and suddenly moves to the future. To illustrate, consider the following verses from the poem –

I call to you across a monstrous river or chasm
to caution you, to prepare you.

Earth will seduce you, slowly, imperceptibly,
subtly, not to say with connivance. (Glück 420)

After issuing a warning that is rather dire in tone, the poetic mood suddenly becomes retrospective, wherein the speaker eats stewed plums and stewed apricots, in her grandmother’s kitchen.

I was not prepared: I stood in my grandmother’s kitchen,
holding on to my glass. Stewed plums, stewed apricots –

the juice poured off into the glass of ice,
And the water added, patiently, in small increments,

the various cousins discriminating, tasting
with each addition –

aroma of the summer fruit, intensity of concentration:
the colored liquid turning gradually lighter, more radiant,

more light passing through it.
Delight, then solace. My grandmother waiting.

to see if more was wanted. Solace, then deep immersion.
I loved nothing more: deep privacy of the sensual life,

the self disappearing into it or inseparable from it,
somehow suspended, floating, its needs

fully exposed, awakened, fully alive –
Deep immersion, and with it

mysterious safety. Far away, the fruit glowing in its glass bowls.
Outside the kitchen the sun setting. (Glück 420)
The above verses then, are meditative and peaceful in tone. Furthermore, it would seem as though the speaker is almost hypnotized by the changing shades of the coloured liquid. As it turns lighter and becomes more radiant, the speaker blissfully watches her self disappear into nothingness. Like the solid block of ice. Like the colored liquid. This metaphor entrances the reader, as well, and like the speaker in the poem, the reader becomes ensconced in the “mysterious safety”: the “mysterious safety” of being nothing or alternatively, the “mysterious safety” of being everything. After these verses, the reader is rudely dislocated from this hypnotic trance.

I was not prepared: sunset, end of summer. Demonstrations of time as a continuum, as something coming to an end, not a suspension; the senses wouldn’t protect me, I caution you as I was never cautioned: (Glück 420)

The above lines are bleak and harsh and the speaker cautions the invisible addressee (you), in the present. From this point forth, the asyndeton stops (Warren 313) and the poem shifts into the future again. Here, without providing a timeline, conjunctions, articles or pronouns, Glück seamlessly moves through timelines and emotional planes. An asyndeton in Glück’s poem, as demonstrated in this poem, can be perceived as an interstice in the poem as it drifts through different timelines, via silences or “white-spaces”. Glück has always preferred “white-spaces” and “silences” and the poet herself declares her partially towards gaps in a poem in the following quote:

As a reader, consequently as a writer, I am partial to most forms of voluntary silence. I love what is implicit or present in outline, that which summons (as opposed to imposes) thought. I love white-space, love the telling omission, love lacunae, and find oddly depressing that which seems to have left out nothing. (Glück 29)

Her careful syntax crafted by techniques such as enjambment, asyndeton and disjunction have enabled her to create a minimalistic or anorexic aesthetic. Her lyrics, without poetic embellishments such as figurative language and adjectives strive to deliver a skeleton of the speaker’s story in verse form; it is ultimately the reader’s job to supplant the thin lyric structure with meaning.
An example of Glück’s spartan syntax is demonstrated in the following excerpt from the poem, “Brown Circle”:

My mother wants to know why, if I hate family so much, I went ahead and had one. I don’t answer my mother. What I hated was being a child, having no choice about what people I loved. (Glück)

While this poem blatantly states facts, the enjambments mislead the reader and veer away sharply into an uncomfortable silence. To illustrate, consider the lines “I went ahead and / had one. I don’t”. In these two lines, just as the mother is not given an answer, the reader similarly wonders about Glück’s choice to have a family as the poetic speaker does not provide clarity on the issue. Her simple syntax belies the complexity and nuances of her poems.

Another example of her minimalistic syntax is seen in the poem, “Still Life”:

Father has his arm around Tereze She squints. My thumb is in my mouth; my fifth autumn. Near the copper beech the spaniel dozes in the shadows. Not one of us does not avert his eyes

Across the lawn, in the full sun, my mother Stands behind her camera. (Glück)

The subject of the poem is a preserved memory: a photograph. Recollections of childhood for the poetic persona come in the form of vignettes. Much is invisible, or more accurately, left to the reader to interpret. The reader voyeuristically looks on as the poet strews clues and suggestions across the lines, such as the brightness of the sun, the warmth of the father’s embrace, the warm colours of autumn and the structural attempt in the poetic framework, to distance the mother. Both “Brown Circle” and “Still Life” demonstrate Glück’s prowess with words and her command over syntax. Her lines are cryptic and terse and in a sense, she displays
an ascetic control over words. Like the anorexic carefully proportioning her food intake, Glück appropriates words and grammar carefully in each sentence and thus, her fondness for a minimalistic aesthetic mirrors the anorexic’s desire to achieve a skeletal body.

Making a similar observation, Spiegelman reflects that “issues of control, the kind that Glück has described with regard to eating disorders, have influenced every stylistic decision she has ever made.” (Spiegelman 187). Thus, Burke’s nosological classification of a writer’s form and style based on their diseases holds true for Glück’s poems as her poetic style emerges from an anorectic way of thinking: she revels in the art of attaining a minimalistic aesthetic.

Diagnosing The Anorexic Aesthetic in Louise Glück’s Poem, “Dedication to Hunger”

The aesthetics of minimalism seem to have always intrigued Glück. In her book, Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry, she recalls that, even as a five-year-old, she was fascinated by the possibilities of context. She writes, “What I responded to, on the page, was the way a poem could liberate, by means of a word’s setting, through subtleties of timing, of pacing, that word’s full and surprising range of meaning.” (Glück, Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry 4). Moreover, her preoccupation with the aesthetics of minimalism is evidenced in her essay, “Education of the Poet” where she declares, “I liked scale, but I liked it invisible. I loved those poems that seemed so small on the page but swelled in the mind: I didn’t like the windy, dwindling kind.” (Glück, Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry 5) Given her love for minimalism and her experience with anorexia as a teenager, it is hardly surprising that scarce lyrics and the poetics of anorexia are the predominant features in her work. Keeping in mind the theoretical framework of stylistic devices developed in the earlier chapter, the following section will perform a diagnostic analysis through close reading, on the poem, “Dedication to Hunger”, from the volume Descending Figure, and attest that the aesthetics of anorexia in this poem are achieved by syntactical choices. I choose the poem, “Dedication to Hunger”, as its primary subject is anorexia and is hence, appropriately suited for a diagnostic interpretation through a formal analysis.

Spiegelman, who is well versed with aspects of the lyric poem asserts that above all, a poem is “just a bunch of sentences” (Spiegelman 171). Indeed, a poem is simply a bunch of sentences,
sculpted into a poetic frame through various stylistic choices such as rhythm, metre, grammar, enjambment, caesura and so forth. The following sections analyse the stylistic devices that enable Glück to uphold a minimalist or anorexic syntax.

As witnessed in most of her poems, the language and syntax in Glück’s poems are relatively plain and straightforward. Simple vocabulary and syntax by themselves, can be viewed as literary techniques in Glück’s opus. The importance of plain diction is observed by the character Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot’s book, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), where she explains “If we use common words on a great occasion, they are the more striking, because they are felt at once to have a particular meaning, like old banners or everyday clothes hung up in a sacred place.” (Eliot 1197). Indeed, upon viewing common words in poems which record stories of tragedy, war, suffering, illness and pain, their significance is magnified at once, “like old banners or everyday clothes hung up in a sacred place.” (Eliot 1197).

Like Maggie Tulliver, Glück uses “common words” to describe anorexia in the poem, “Dedication to Hunger.” Here, the eating disorder becomes both the metaphor and the central theme of the poem. Comprised of five parts, this poem traces the various stages in an anorexic’s life. The first part, “From the Suburbs”, presents a young girl’s troubled relationship with her father. The second part, “Grandmother” is a critique of male superiority and female passivity. In the third part, “Eros” Glück makes overt hints at sexual molestation and incest. The fourth part, “The Deviation”, arguably the most important sequence in this poem, firstly, presents an anorexic teenager’s frustration with the “interfering flesh” of her “soft, digressive breasts” and secondly, compares the anorexic’s need for perfection to a poet’s need to create and produce a verse that is “aligned” perfectly. The final part, “Sacred Objects” thematises renunciation into an anorexic’s need for transcendence.

The following section performs a diagnostic analysis on the first two parts, “From the Suburbs” and “Grandmother”.

*From the Suburbs*

They cross the yard  
and at the back door  
the mother sees with pleasure  
how alike they are, father and daughter –  
I know something of that time.  
The little girl purposefully  
swinging her arms, laughing
her stark laugh:

It should be kept secret, that sound.
It means she’s realized
that he never touches her.
She is a child; he could touch her
if he wanted to. (Glück 124)

As in most of Glück’s work, the poem’s title directs our gaze instantly to the setting in which her story unfolds (Cates 464). In this poem, the title indicates that the poem is set in a pleasant, suburban landscape. The lines that follow, “They cross the yard/ and at the back door/ the mother sees with pleasure/ how alike they are, father and daughter” deepen the significance of the suburban landscape as it demonstrates a typical familial set up. A father and daughter, it would seem, are engaged in a pleasant conversation while the mother looks on, smiling at her little family. However, these lines break up abruptly with a dash. As mentioned earlier, silences in Glück’s poem indicate a missing link.

The enjambed line that follows, “I know something of that time” is retrospective in tone and therefore, shifts to the past. The poem rapidly surges to the present in the three lines that follow and we are told: “The little girl purposefully/ swinging her arms, laughing/ her stark laugh.”

The adverb “stark” is a strange word to describe a little girl’s laugh. The Oxford dictionary website defines stark as that which is “unpleasant or sharply clear”, (Oxford Dictionary) and thus, the girl’s stark laugh infuses a tone of sharpness of unpleasantness to the poem and thereby, startles the reader’s auditory and visual senses.

There is a decided silence after the girl’s stark laugh as it is punctuated with a colon. A colon, according to OED and Dr. Johnson is:

COLON. n. 1. A point [:] used to mark a pause greater than that of a comma. Its use is not very exactly fixed, nor is it very necessary, being confounded by most with the semicolon. It was used before punctuation was refined, to mark almost any sense less than a period. To apply it properly, we should place it, perhaps, only where the sense is continued without dependence of grammar or construction; as, I love him, I despise him: I have long to trust, but shall never forbear to succour him.

—Samuel Johnson

A Dictionary of the English Language (1755) (qtd in (McGiness 54)

As per this definition, the colon impels a pause in the poetic pace and then, the sense of the girl’s laugh haunts the second stanza in the poem, where the first line, a complete syntactic unit declares, “It should be kept secret, that sound.” Since these lines occur after a significant pause, dictated by the colon, it would almost seem as though the speaker is whispering these lines,
with resignation. The lines that follow continue the sense of resignation and bitterness as the speaker states “It means she’s realized/ the he never touches her. / She is a child; he could touch her/ if he wanted to.” The lines reveal the speaker’s sense of disappointment, from the present and the past and although the last syllables of the lines fade away into oblivion, the speaker’s sense of despondency and distress are left with the reader as the poem offers no resolution. Instead, as a thematic analysis would suggest, the poem is a story of how anorexia first started in the young girl and the speaker. The girl’s distance from the mother is introduced to the reader from the very beginning and her desire to abandon her feminine qualities is stressed in the lines, “the little girl purposefully/ swinging her arms”. Here, she imitates her father and thereby further separates herself from her mother and that which is considered feminine. The father, on his part, does not touch the girl. This indicates that he is not affectionate. Dysfunctional familial relations, in this case, the speaker’s relationship with the father seem problematic and research indicates that troubled familial bonds cause anorexia during a child’s formative years (Cole-Detke and Kobak 286). Thus, this poem effectively demonstrates that the speaker’s anorexic temperaments began at a very young age.

_Grandmother_

“Often I would stand at the window –  
your grandfather  
was a young man then –  
waiting, in the early evening.”  
That is what marriage is.

I watch the tiny figure  
changing to a man  
as he moves towards her,  
the last light rings in his hair.  
I do not question  
their happiness. And he rushes in  
with his young man’s hunger,  
so proud to have taught her that:  
his kiss would have been  
clearly tender.  
Of course, of course. Except  
it might as well have been  
his hand over her mouth. (Glück 124-5)
A dysfunctional parent-child relationship then leads to the second part of the poem, which records a troubled marriage. Here, too, Glück resorts to stylistic devices such as a dash, enjambments and silences to relate the story behind the Grandmother’s marriage. The poem first begins with the Grandmother’s voice in the first stanza and then shifts to the Granddaughter’s voice in the second stanza.

The first line “Often I would stand at the window -” breaks up abruptly with a dash. This seemingly innocuous dash can have several meanings in the poetic context, as has been demonstrated extensively in the Dickinsonian oeuvre\(^8\). In the poem “Grandmother”, the dash in the first line and the third line can have varied interpretations – they create a dramatic pause, they lay further emphasis on the lines or alternatively, they mimic a thought trailing off into the past. The second line, “your grandfather” mirrors an after-thought as it recedes quietly into the poetic structure. In the last line, the grandmother conclusively states, “That is what marriage is.” Here, this line is not enjambed, unlike the first four lines in the poem and thus, stands apart as a complete syntactic unit. The second speaker of the poem, the granddaughter emerges in the next stanza. Here, the first three lines in the second stanza are enjambed lines –

I watch the tiny figure changing to a man as he moves towards her (Glück)

The run-on sentences here hurtle along like the tiny figure changing into a whole, as he moves towards the grandmother. The theme of violence and patriarchy is then introduced in the poem, yet it is only implied that he kissed her forcefully. Here the granddaughter declares that she does not “question their happiness”, while the whole poem, on the contrary is reflexive in tone and inspects the marriage her grandparents shared. Succinct and terse phrases such as “That is what marriage is”, “I do not question their happiness” and “Of Course, Of Course” in the already compact poetic structure are then, individual self-contained units in the poetic whole and act as signposts of reality. In a sense, these clipped phrases correspond to Glück’s notion of anorexia: “The tragedy of anorexia seems to me that its intent is not self-destructive, although its outcome so often is. Its intent is to construct, in the only way possible when means are so

\(^8\) For example, Heather McHugh suggests that Emily Dickinson’s dash is not definable and a “suspense of a punctuation.” Similarly, Joy Ladin perceives the dash as a pause and declares that Dickinson was “the first and perhaps most radical experimenter with such pauses in American poetry.” There are however, critics on the other end of the spectrum who argue that Dickinson’s dashes indicate mental breakdown or a mere idiosyncratic habit.
limited, a plausible self.” (Glück, Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry 11-12). These phrases of self-negation are rooted in self-denial and attempt to eliminate the self. Studies have also demonstrated that anorexics lack an identity of their own (Bruch 349). These phrases pivot on the Grandfather’s understanding of the marriage and thereby, gain an identity, albeit a contrasting one, through his perspective of the marriage. On a more abstracted level, these phrases also demonstrate the effects of patriarchy on the anorexic and highlight the aspects of self-suppression and muted desires. Thus, the poem, “Grandmother”, like the anorexic, is austere and clean, with self-contained phrases pivoting on the premise of self-negation.

A formal analysis of this poem suggests that stylistic devices in the poem act as a substitute for excessive words. Through interstices and gaps, Glück effectively conveys that which cannot be transmitted through words and consecutively, maintains a sparse and austere lyric structure.

**Conclusion**

*And so, the poet may come to have a ‘vested interest’ in his handicaps; these handicaps may become an integral part of his method; and in so far as his style grows out of a disease, his loyalty to it may reinforce the disease.*

- Kenneth Burke (Burke 84)

Just as Glück’s experiences with anorexia impress upon the minimalist aesthetics in her poetry, Caterina Eppolito also explains that the restriction of words in poetry resembles the anorexic’s restriction of calories. In her essay, “Food for Thought”, she writes:

> Poetry is as full of forms as anorexia is filled with rules. Just as there were self-restrained rules to eat only certain foods, there were poetic forms using rhyme and metre that ruled out certain words and allowed others. Certain formal forms, like the sestina or the sonnet, had such strict, regimented patterns that it seemed crazy to try to imprison my emotional expressions within them. (Berlin 118)

This is not to say that every writer who expresses himself or herself in the poetic form is anorexic. However, both Eppolito and Glück take refuge in varied facets of poetry and ultimately sublimate their anorexic tendencies in the lyric. Nonetheless, despite having a similar background in illness, Glück and Eppolito have their own distinctive styles. Yet, minimalism is central to both these poets. A similar yet disparate anorexic aesthetic is observed by several critics in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Amongst these, literary critic Heather Kirk Thomas
comments that “less was more for Dickinson, and this triumph of renunciation informs her poetry with a minimalist’s art” (Thomas 222). Thus, every anorexic poet develops an anorexic aesthetic that is at once, analogous and distinctive.

This thesis limits its scope to a formal analysis of the poetry of Louise Glück and thereby reveals that the aesthetics of minimalism in her work is achieved by literary devices such as enjambments, asyndeton and a careful syntax. A further thematic and formal analysis of Glück’s work will help refine the anorexic aesthetic in her work as the poet herself admits that each new book of poetry starts in a “conscious diagnostic act, a swearing off” (Glück, Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry), from the work that precedes it. Reflecting on the process of change in her work, she states in an essay, “What I wanted after Descending Figure, was a poem less perfect, less stately” (Glück, Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry). By shrugging off perfection, she consciously decides to divest herself and her work from anorexic sensibilities. This change is clearly evident in poems composed after Descending Figure, a work comprising anorexic themes. For instance, analysing Glück’s style and form in The Triumph of Achilles (1985), a volume that follows Descending Figure, literary critic Don Bogen notes that “Language is looser, embracing the casual, as well as the concise.” (qtd. in (Dodd 188). Thus, examining the changes in her writing style further will help us define anorexia as a literary theme.

As this thesis demonstrates, Glück’s lyric poetry, the characteristics of the lyric correspond closely to an illness experience like anorexia. Here, I highlight lyric characteristics such as simultaneity and epiphany. Future research could look into the mimetic and ekphrastic dimensions of the lyric as well. Another approach would be study a book like Cardboard: A Woman left for Dead (1989) by Fiona Place wherein she captures the protagonist’s experience in both prose and poetry in the same book.

Alternatively, Rene Girard offers the idea that the anorexic’s desire to be thin is simply rooted in mimesis and suggests that our literature is “suffused with the spirit of anorexia” (Girard 18). Discussing cultural trends in arts and humanities, he proposes that every generation is preoccupied with the ideal of radicalism and revolution. His conjecture is worth quoting at length here as it is central to the “anorexic logic” that exists in society today. He quips:

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 new generation, a new batch of iconoclasts boasts that they are the sole revolutionists, but they all really imitate one another and the more they try, the less they can get away from imitation. (Girard 17)

While this thesis does not follow this line of thought, an anorexic aesthetic in literature can be derived from Girard’s hypothesis. This principle is applicable to the poetry of Louise Glück as well as her earlier work is mimetic, in that it takes its inspiration and to a certain extent, imitates the writing styles of poets such as Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman and Robert Lowell (Morris 134). She adapts various elements from these poets into her own work and creates a style of her own.

Finally, in this thesis, I also delineate the relationship between literature, therapy and medicine. Positioning myself alongside scholars such as Kenneth Burke, Laurence Kirmayer, Rita Charon and Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, whose research elaborates the benefits of poetry therapy, I have demonstrated that the lyrics allow the health care practitioner to gain a deeper understanding of anorexia and consequently, provide health benefits to the disordered anorexic writer.

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9 Explaining his hypothesis, he states that “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 loses their coherence and even the words themselves, which may be replaced by a significant, or better still, an incoherent jumble of letters.” (Girard 18)
Works Cited


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