**Self-constructive vs. Self-destructive Mechanisms in the Writings of Anorexics**

Anorexia, a phenomenon that manifests throughout the human body, is one of the most bizarre and severe mental disorders. In spite of no other disturbances in thinking, beyond a distortion of body perception, an intelligent young woman, and often even a particularly intelligent one, starves herself, sometimes to death (Bachar 2001, 11). Those afflicted with the eating disorder of anorexia experience distortions in body perception whereby, despite being underweight, they perceive themselves as overweight and have a fear of obesity (American Psychiatric Association 2013). They engage in behaviors such as reducing their food intake, excessive exercise, laxative use, and vomiting, until they become significantly, frighteningly underweight.

Anorexia is an esoteric act of self-starvation that may arouse revulsion and bewilderment among others, and is often perceived as contrary to human and evolutionary aspirations. Another characteristic that makes anorexia difficult to understand is that it is saturated with paradoxes, one of the main ones being related to the self-experience; although anorexia involves self-destructive behaviors, it also reflects an attempt at self-construction (Bruch 1978).

This article seeks to demonstrate that an interdisciplinary inquiry, combining psychoanalytic, philosophical-linguistic and literary disciplines can make an important contribution to understanding the self-experience of anorexics, and specifically to understanding the simultaneous, paradoxical presence of mechanisms of destruction and construction in the anorexic disorder. In this context, psychoanalytic and philosophical conceptions about the anorexic self are presented, while examining the contribution of each of the disciplines. This will be followed by a linguistic-literary analysis of texts written by anorexics and an examination of the impact of different genres of writing on the mechanisms of destruction and construction and the development of the anorexic self.

1.1. Anorexia Nervosa as a Disorder of the Self: Psychoanalytic Perspectives

Bruch describes anorexia as a disorder of the self. She writes that anorexics “choose the path of self-starvation as part of their search for self and self-directed identity” (Bruch 1980). They “cannot experience themselves as individuals . . . entitled to lead their own lives. As anorexia develops, they feel that the disease is caused by a mysterious force . . . that invades them and directs their behavior . . . (They) speak of feeling as if they are divided, as if they are . . . two people . . . usually the secret but powerful part of the self is experienced as the personification of all who have tried to hide or deny due to being unacceptable to themselves or others,” (Bruch 1978, 58).

Bruch bases her claims on Kohut’s theory of the psychology of the self and Winnicott’s theory of the false self. Kohut and Wolf (1978) coined the term “disorder of the self.” They describe patients with narcissistic disorder, who exhibit a fundamental impairment in self-organization, sense of self, and self-esteem. Kohut and Wolf assert that the healthy self develops in an environment that enables three types of experiences of the “selfobject.” The selfobject is one’s experience of another person (object) as part of, rather than as separate and independent from, the self, particularly when the object’s actions affirm one’s narcissistic wellbeing. The first type of experience pertains to “… those who respond to and confirm the child’s innate sense of vigour, greatness and perfection,” (Kohut and Wolf 1978, 414). The second type of experience involves powerful figures “to whom the child can look up and with whom he can merge as an image of calmness, infallibility and omnipotence,” (ibid.). The third type of experience is with a selfobject that evokes feelings of similarity between the child and him or herself. According to Kohut and Wolf, in the process of healthy development, the inflated images of the self and the other dissipate over time, and the person learns to adapt to the demands of reality. In contrast, people who have not had these experiences may develop a disorder of the self (ibid.).

In addition to Baruch and Kohut, other writers from the self-pathology school argue that among anorexics, a traumatic and ongoing failure in the developmental stages of the selfobject leads to impairment of development of the self and impaired ability to preserve self-esteem and self-adaptive functions. As a result, the anorexic does not believe that she can rely on other people to fulfill her own needs, while at the same time she also erases and negates her inner needs (Geist 1989; Goodsitt 1983). Instead of relying on people to fulfill self-needs, she relies on food and physical activity (Bachar 2001, 16–17).

Winnicott (1954) sees the physical experience as the basis for building the self and the psyche-soma (body-mind) as one inseparable unit. According to him, starting at birth, a baby may, in response to failure in the environment, lose touch with his or her body and needs and find refuge in mental function and the mind. That is, if the mother is not “good enough,” there is overactivity of mental function, and a conflict is created between the mind and the psyche-soma. The mind becomes a substitute for maternal care, the center of life, and the source of creativity. Winnicott’s (1960) article “Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self” connects the psyche-soma to the existence of a true self, which includes in the perception of the connection of the individual to physical experiences. Impaired maternal function creates a split and a false self is created, which is not connected to the body and exists only in the mind (ibid., 144).

According to Bruch, anorexics function through a “false self,” and are unable to distinguish between their needs and those of their parents. In addition, they suffer in terms of diachronic function of the self (that is, the experience of the self as consistent over time), which is manifest as an unstable sense of identity, poor self-image, and difficulties in emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning (Bruch 1982). Recent findings correspond with Baruch’s perspective, linking parental dysfunction in childhood with difficulty in recognizing emotions and integrating them into self-esteem (Granieri and Schimmenti 2014). Others show the link between “insecure attachment” patterns in infancy and the development of anorexia later in life (Blatt and Blass, 1990; Tasca and Balfour, 2014).

1.2. Nervous Anorexia: Self-Destruction or Self-Establishment?

Anorexia embodies a paradox in that the same thoughts, actions, and habits that destroy the self and may lead to death, simultaneously reflect an attempt at self-survival or self-establishment. That is, through the destruction of the body, the anorexic tries to save her soul and understand her self. Psychoanalytic conceptions offer a variety of explanations for this paradox. Some link anorexic self-destruction to the failure to succeed in the process of separation-individuation. For example, Lane argues that the self-destruction in anorexia is a response to the lack of separation and boundaries between a mother and her daughter. The symbiosis between the anorexic and her mother does not allow her to direct aggression toward her mother, and so she subconsciously directs them towards her own body. Thus, the destructive behaviors of the anorexic are simultaneously an unconscious attack against her mother and herself (Lane, 2002).

Malson presents a complex view of anorexic self-destruction, claiming that it embodies self-punishment resulting from the perception of the self as unclean, hated, without value, not worthy of nourishment, and therefore deserving to be punished and starved. However, she also attributes to these behaviors a constructive quality, and argues that they express a process of “negative self-construction” (Malson 1998, 161–162). That is, they simultaneously reflect mechanisms of self-destruction and self-construction.

Malson draws on Bion’s (1957) concept of paranoid-schizoid stage fragmentation to describe self-extinction in anorexia. She describes a mechanism of disintegration, through which focusing on the minute details of life leads to fragmentation of difficult emotions into units so small that they lose their meaning. In this way, the person distances herself from experiences that threaten the self. Malson argues that anorexics focus on seemingly meaningless details, such as calories or grams, and this can be seen as “an attempt to erase meaning from one’s life, as an avoidance of any meaningful subjectivity,” (Malson 1998, 169).

Another complexity is expressed in the perception of anorexic behaviors as defense mechanisms. According to Malson, the softness and fluidity of body fat obscure the boundaries of the body and the separation between the self and the world; therefore, being fat represents the absence of self-definition and identity. Thus, anorexia can be seen as a defense mechanism against the experience of one’s identity being blurred or “swallowed up.” This perspective considers the anorexic’s attempt to demarcate and enforce boundaries both as a defense mechanism and as an attempt to define identity; an attempt at self-establishment (Malson 1998, 148). “Anorexia becomes a mechanism of coping through self-destruction” (ibid., 168). That is, anorexic behavior is paradoxical, simultaneously reflecting an attempt at self-destruction and a desire for self-establishment (ibid., 142).

As Malson summarizes this paradox: Anorexia “simultaneously reflects an identity that satisfies every need, as well as the absence of identity. Anorexia is ‘something to be’, but without it the individual is ‘nothing’, a ‘shell’” (ibid., 148). While the mechanisms of self-destruction are clear (it is easy to see how ongoing starvation behaviors destroy the physical-mental self), the mechanisms of self-construction require special explanation. Anorexia evokes feelings of autonomy and individuality and thus contributes to the development of the experience of the self. However, the mechanisms that evoke these feelings are not clear, giving rise to the question: Does anorexia have unique characteristics and mechanisms that give a sense of identity and lead to self-establishment?

Dewey’s theory of self is proposed here as an explanation of the ways in which anorexic mechanisms are used for self-establishment. Two main concepts in his theory contribute to this explanation:

a. Perception of physical habits as an integral part of the self;

b. Seeing human habits as inseparable from a social-environmental setting.

1.2.2 Physical Habits and the Anorexic Self

According to Dewey, physical embodiment is expressed through habits, which are an organism’s acquired patterns of activity (Dewey 1922, 21 MW 14:21). Dewey sees habit as a means of “building the self” (ibid. 14:21) and a mode of communication between individuals and their world. In his view, the interaction people have with the world is through the “habitual body” (Granger, 2001). That is, adopting a new set of physical habits (destructive as they may be) is a process of construction. Thus, the “anorexic habitual body” and its intense bodily actions – vomiting, purging, fasting, etc. – reflect a process of organization and creation of personal meaning. Anorexic habits are not only defense mechanisms; the anorexic body becomes the self.

Dewey coined the term: “plasticity of the self” (Dewey 1922, 36 MW 14:36), according to which the creation of the self is concerned with breaking old habits and creating new ones (Garrison, 1998). In his words: “The . . . evolving self . . . meets new demands and situations along the way, and adapts and recreates itself. In this process . . . the need to choose between the focus of interest of the old and the fluctuating and emerging self is repeated . . . and exists in every . . . period of life,” (ibid.). According to Granger (2001), “although it is tempting to seek refuge in the habitual self when we encounter unsafe and unstable environments . . . our ongoing existence inevitably throws us into situations that prevent us from activating our habits in their normal paths.” The process through which a person seeks to adopt new habits is made possible through the “plasticity of the self.”

The personal background of anorexics often includes traumatic events and crises, such as sexual assault, parental divorce, etc., which their existing set of habits may not be able to address. Thus, the set of anorexic habits can be seen as an attempt to establish a self that can deal with traumas, after the existing set of habits failed to cope with them. As will be discussed in the next section, Dewey’s philosophy contributes to the understanding of the anorexic self not only in its conceptualization of the importance of bodily habits for self-construction, but also in its emphasis that the self develops through interaction with the social environment.

1.2.3. The Anorexic-Social Self

Dewey asserts that habits are formed through an organism’s interactions with its environment, and that the organism’s merging with its environment is so inherent to its existence that its habits cannot be understood or addressed without the environmental context (Dewey 1922, 15 MW 14:15; Dewey 1985, 180 LW 1: 180). Individuals develops certain habits because they are rooted in the society and culture in which they live (Sullivan 2001, 35).

Feminist writers have pointed to the influence of society on the development of anorexic habits, arguing that anorexia is a response of women to their place in a society that is dualistic and patriarchal in nature (Bordo 2004; Malson 1998). However, the position of feminist theory is one-sided, emphasizing the impact of the rule = society, on the individual = anorexic women, without addressing the ways in which the individual may influence the rule. According to Dewey, while the influence of society on the individual is well-discussed, “the power (of the self) to change previous traditions” is often ignored (Dewey 1922, 46 MW 14:46).

In this age of the internet, when every individual can present an agenda on blogs and social networks, it is important to examine how individuals affect the society in which they live. Thus, in examining the mechanisms of constructing the anorexic self, how the self affects the environment must also be considered.

The proliferation of online communication in recent decades has led to anorexics no longer feeling alone and perceived by their environment as ill and distorted, but rather as selves within an emerging community. This situation is unique with regard to anorexia, in that online communities of anorexics, often referred to as “pro-ana,” feature content that helps members reach the anorexic ideal, from patents for weight loss to photographs and images that display the desired thinness. Like many communities, the pro-ana community upholds characteristics and habits that community members are expected to assimilate and display, such as certain eating and fasting habits, reaching a target weight, etc. In addition, this society provides emotional support, as community members share emotional and personal difficulties and are listened to and encouraged by other members.

Following Dewey, Garrison (1998) coined the term “social self-creation.” With respect to anorexic disorder, this term indicates the existence of two parallel processes. In the first process, the individual anorexic self is formed through interaction with the broad environment (e.g., family, peer group, place of residence, etc.). In the second parallel process, the anorexic influences the creation of a new and more limited community of anorexics. This self-creation, emerging from interaction with a community that encourages anorexic habits and gives them meaning, can explain the difficulty anorexics face in giving up anorexic behaviors. Accordingly, by renouncing anorexia, they would lose their sense of achievement and independence, along with losing the sense of belonging to a community that they perceive as strengthening and supportive.

In addition to seeing the self as evolving through the assimilation of habits and interactions with the social environment, Dewey sees the self as evolving in a process of reflection and self-criticism. He argues that as human beings, we are not witness to a completed cosmos, but rather are creative participants in an unfinished and incomplete work (Garrison 1998). When existing habits fail, reflection is the only alternative to capriciousness and irrational freedom: “Thinking needs to be creative in order to set new goals,” (Dewey 1985, 185 LW 7: 185). Among people suffering from anorexia, the development of reflection and self-criticism can occur along two main axes:

a. Psychotherapy, in which an investigation of personal experiences and interpersonal relationships takes place.

b. Creative work, in which intensive writing activity takes place among those suffering from or recovering from anorexia.

The next section examines the mechanisms of construction and destruction in the writings of anorexics, as well as the implications of writing in various genres on the establishment of the anorexic self.

2. Writing, Self-understanding and Self-establishment among Anorexics

People with anorexia write. They write blogs, autobiographies, prose, and sometimes poetry. To date, dozens of autobiographies by people with anorexia have been published in English alone. There are dozens of blogs on the internet describing anorexic habits, as well as extensive writing on social media platforms. Writing poetry about anorexia is less common, but there are a number of poets who suffered from anorexia and touch on the disease in their writing, among them the poets Anne Sexton and Louise Glück.

Interestingly, this widespread phenomenon of written expressions of anorexia rests primarily on the visual-physical dimension and is characterized by a great deal of concreteness. The gap between the difficulty anorexics experience in using language, and the widespread expression of anorexia in verbal media, makes the study of the linguistic use of anorexics a fascinating topic of study.

2.1 The Narrative Self: Autobiographies and Self-establishment among Anorexics

The stories people tell about their lives and the lives of others include a broad configuration of narratives through which individuals construct, interpret, and share experiences: “For we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope … by narrative,” (Hardy 1968, 5). The narrative structure contributes to the establishment of the sense of self, to being an integral whole, with attributes of stability and continuity over time. “In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives,” (Bruner 1987, 15).

The prevailing position in narrative research regarding construction of the self supports Dewey’s view of the relationship between the self and society. For example, Kerby argues that the human self is not “behind the actions of the narrative . . . the prenarrative social fabric of the story serves as the basis from which, throughout the story, our self-reflections are formed . . .” (Kerby 1991, 51–52, 56). That is, the language of narrative and of self-construction are intertwined and inseparable. Although Dewey’s work paves the way for seeing the self and society as interrelated and inseparable, he hardly addresses the role of language in these relationships. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, places language at the center of mutual influence between the self and society.

Wittgenstein proposes the term “language-play” to describe the ways in which words acquire their meaning (PI §7). According to Wittgenstein, the meaning of particular words or phrases is created from the actual use made of them and within the person’s social context. That is, Wittgenstein points to the need to understand the action of language in order to expand our understanding of human existence. If we want to gain insights about a person’s self, we must understand how that person uses language in the environment in which he or she lives. Thus, some argue that his later philosophy deals with the human self, and reflects the attempt to reveal the forms of representation inherent in our patterns of thinking and behavior; the never-ending struggle with myths and fantastic images that language produces (Ashkenazi 2012, 30, 34). In essence, one cannot explore the self as an entity that is separate from the language, society, and activities of the individual.

Osgood describes the ways in which language enchants us (PI § 109) in relation to the anorexic image (Osgood 2014). She cites the *The Beauty Myth,* in which Naomi Wolf describes the “perfect” anorexic: a ballerina dancer, who was an “anorexic ideal” and “left suddenly” (Wolf 2002, 206). According to Osgood, the use of this phrasing produces an image of a “slow pirouette.” “She did it,” Wolf writes, “she eluded gravity,” (ibid.). Osgood argues that “Wolf’s one very subtle mistake here is that while the tone may evoke pity, the image is a beautiful and invigorating one. Who doesn’t want to fly?” (Osgood 2014, 49). According to Osgood, “We attempt to debunk the myths of anorexic by couching its intricacies and impurities in pretty language that describes a graceful kind of suffering, a spiritual kind. . .” (ibid.).

Wittgenstein’s claim of the “magic of language” is part of the concept of meaning as a dynamic and interactive process in which embodied agents respond to each other and to situations in the environment in a practical, vivid, and ongoing manner (Shotter 2001, 174). Thus, we do not seek an object that is long-lasting in nature (PI §435), but rather strive to understand the ways in which we construct the relationship between ourselves and our environment. We seek to reach a more complete understanding of the picture of our lives (Shotter 2001, 176), and we can achieve this if we trace how language operates (PI §109). Wittgenstein sees construction of the self as a narrative process based on our ability to change how we view things (PI §144), and to describe the story of our lives. Thus, the narrative self is perceived as being in a state of ongoing, endless activity.

Wittgenstein’s ideas about the importance of language in the process of constructing the self can be illustrated through an analysis of autobiographies written by anorexics. Osgood, for example, describes the first evening that she was hospitalized in an eating disorder ward: “When she sat next to me, she circled her thigh with her hands and stared at mine. I lifted my feet off the floor to make the space between my legs look bigger (to make me look thinner). If I were older, and less captive to the system of comparisons offered by anorexia, I would have told her she is ridiculous,” (Osgood 2014, 62).

Osgood describes her behavior during her illness alongside her current point of view in relation to these actions. That is, she presents a change in her way of seeing things, and creates a movement between the experience as her anorexic self and the experience of her present self, thus demonstrating how narrative writing creates meaning and changes the self-experience.

A similar shift in narrative can be found in Marya Hornbacher’s autobiography *Wasted*: “One evening I showed up for dinner . . . I looked at my mother and she opened her mouth and screamed . . . My father said: What happened to your eyes? . . . I leapt towards the mirror . . . I looked: my eyes seemed to be filled with bloody tears. I had ruptured all my blood vessels while vomiting in the afternoon . . . I screamed and ran to my room. Looking back, I can say: here. Here my life was split in two. . . at that moment the outside world began to fade and recede until it became a background . . . it did not look that way then. The feeling was more like that of a bad day, an event that almost happened – I was almost caught. Sometimes I think how different my life could have been if I had done what should have done that day: confess . . . I did not understand. That night I vomited once more, afraid my eyes would explode. But it was more important to get rid of dinner,” (Hornbacher 1998, 63–64).

Hornbacher alternates between her present perspective and her previous perspective, examining possible alternate scenarios of her life story. This movement expresses the place of language and narrative in the process of development and change in the experience of the self. These examples reveal the personal narrative as a dynamic and interactive agent in self-formation. In contrast to the emotional outbursts that characterize the anorexic, a retrospectively written narrative is characterized by movement and continuity. While the anorexic is unmeshed in the present, and halts her physical and emotional development, the language of the narrative leads to growth and development.

Following Wittgenstein, Donald Spence writes about the influence of the present on the perception of past events, and links the construction of the self with the construction of a life story (Lemberger, 2010, 105). Spence (1982) calls this construction “narrative truth,” meaning that the truth is embodied at the level of narrative and story, not necessarily at the level of history. He argues that no historical story stands in “one-to-one” conformity with the “facts” of the clinical encounter, and actually it is a process of conversion of one story into another story, which is not devoid of context and theorizing. Lemberger (2010) points to the similarity between Spence’s and Wittgenstein’s positions with respect to the possibility of interpretation according to a general rule. According to Wittgenstein, we do not have the ability to interpret a word or a sentence and the process that we call interpretation is, in fact, conversion: “It is appropriate to call ‘interpretation’ the conversion of one expression of the general rule into another,” (PI §201; Lemberger 2010, 106, see p. 82). That is, writing autobiographical narrative can be viewed as an ongoing process of conversion, in which past events are expressed from the present point of view, without being able to separate present perceptions and thoughts from the “facts” of the past.

Spence emphasizes the difficulty of relying on historical truths in the process of creating a life story (Spence 1982). An example of this is found in Raviv’s autobiography, in which she tries to use her parents’ memories to trace the first years of her life: “In the story of my life there is always my mother’s wild imagination and hyperboles and my father’s emotional detachment and rationale,” (Raviv 2010, 13). “My mother says I was born a few days earlier, and my father says I was born a few days later” (ibid.). Her parents’ conflicting interpretations are also described in relation to the crossed eyes (strabismus) with which she was born, which she links to eating difficulties in infancy: “She [my mother] says she would put me in a high chair and lay down wall-to-wall plastic because as soon as the spoon approached me I would throw it. She was convinced that because of my crossed eyes I saw double, and the sight of a spoon full of food coming from both directions would terrify me. My father says it had nothing to do with my crossed eyes. He says there was never wall-to-wall plastic,” (ibid., 13–14). These examples illustrate the difficulty of relying on historical truth in creating the narrative of the self, and show how the simultaneous existence of contradictory “narrative truths” can lead to confusion and difficulty in creation of the self, leading the anorexic adolescent to seek a defined and clear sense of self – a concrete self in which there are numbers, weights and a clear goal to strive for; the “anorexic self.”

Thus, anorexia is characterized by emotional outbursts and developmental problems, leading to the erasure of subjective aspects of the self-experience. Creating an autobiographical narrative allows anorexics to move between different time points and perspectives during the disease and contributes to understanding and establishment of the self.

2.2 Self-establishment of the Anorexic in Poetry: The poems of Anne Sexton and Louise Glück

The current prevailing trend among scholars is to view writing poetry as a therapeutic act (Cohen 1990, 183–187). At the same time, there is a high prevalence of mental pathologies and self-destructive behaviors among writers, especially poets (Lester and Terry 1994). Bearing in mind the insight that a central paradox in the anorexic self-experience is that the same thoughts and habits that destroy the self coexist as an attempt at survival and self-establishment, I will analyze the mechanisms of self-destruction and self-construction among anorexics.

This analysis examines the following questions:

a. Does writing poetry lead to self-establishment or does it reinforce the tendency to self-destruction among poets with anorexia?

b. What are the poetic features that express the mechanisms of destruction / construction in anorexic poetry?

The poetry of Anne Sexton and Louise Glück will be used to examine these questions.

Anne Sexton (1928–1974), was an American poet who committed suicide at the age of 46, and from her autobiographical background and poems, it seems that as a child she was sexually abused by her father. Sexton suffered from anorexia, depression, and extreme mood swings. She was among the group of confessional poets who worked in the second half of the twentieth century, writing about traumatic and pathological personal experiences, which until then had been considered taboo and inappropriate in poetry (Gloverman in Sexton, 2015, 175–177; 178–193).

Louise Glück (1943–) is an American poet who won the Nobel prize in literature in 2020. Although she belongs to the generation after Sexton, there is an overlap in the style and content of their writing; the poetry of both is personal and tormented, dealing extensively with the themes of madness and death. Critics have widely noted that their poetry reflects a sense of low self-esteem, submission, self-destruction and, self-loathing (Mitgutch 1984). These qualities and characteristics are dominant in the anorexic’s experience of self, and are embodied, in a variety of ways, in the poetry of these two poets.

In their writings, Sexton and Glück use *ars poetica[[1]](#footnote-1)* to express self-disintegration and self-destructive mechanisms. In the poem “The Inlet,” Glück describes an unbearable experience of despair and writes: “Words fail me … I know what’s slipping through my fingers … but this riddle has no name,” (Glück 2012, 58).

Glück’s words indicate that language and writing, which are often used for emotional strength, are unable to play this role in her current mental state. In this poem, the lack of control over words and language is as a metaphor for her experience of herself in the world: an experience of physical disintegration and lack of support.

In her poem “The Silence,” Sexton makes use of a similar metaphor:

I am filling the room  
with the words from my pen.  
Words leak out of it like a miscarriage.  
I am zinging words into the air  
and they come back like squash balls. (Sexton 2000, 181).

In this poem, the experience of disintegration and lack of self-control is described as the loss of the most internal, personal type of creation; a miscarriage, in which “words” do not only describe passive disintegration, but play an active role in destroying the body. The combination of an attack directed at the body and body that is disintegrating in an uncontrollable way is consistent with the self-destructive mechanisms in anorexia. The anorexic actively attacks and breaks down her own body (through the use of laxatives, vomiting, etc.) for the purpose of weight loss, but also experiences unwanted physical breakdown as a result (e.g., weakness, hair loss, and more).

In Glück’s poetry, feelings of disgust towards the body are described as a motive for the destruction of the self and the body. The poem “Dedication to Hunger” is an example of this:

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 (Glück 2012, 141).

In this poem, the experience of disgust and repulsion regarding the body stands alongside the anorexic longing for perfection and leads to the complete destruction of the self, to death.

Sexton and Glück’s poetic styles embody destructive despair, morbidity and an experience of self-disintegration. However, a number of questions remain:

1. Did writing about destruction and disintegration actually strengthen the mechanisms of self-destruction of these poets?
2. Does writing about difficult and traumatic events lead to being overwhelmed emotionally and self-destructive behavior, or does it evoke emotional processing mechanisms and thus contribute to developing the self?

These questions have elicited differing and conflicting responses among theorists who study the interaction between psychology and literature. According to Horvath, the genre of confessional poetry was created as an attempt at self-construction, but it fails because many of the confessional poets, including Sexton, eventually committed suicide (Horvath 2002, 1–3). Horvath believes that the confessional poets relived past traumas by addressing them in their writing, and this led to their self-destruction (ibid., 11).

In contrast, others argue that confessional poets’ suicides do not prove that poetry is what undermined their mental health. Lester and Terry assert that writing poetry provides the poets with a beneficial catharsis and contributes to achieving a cognitive distance from internal conflicts. According to these authors, the high analytical capabilities required for writing poetry help individuals observe and explore the self. Thus, they conclude that writing poetry helped these poets survive longer than would have been possible without it (Lester and Terry, 1994). Support for this can be found in the poems themselves. The poems that will be presented here demonstrate how the use of symbolic images serves as a communicative mechanism that contributes to self-creation. Sexton’s “Double Portrait” is one example of this:

I am thirty this November.

You are still small, in your fourth year.

We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,

flapping in the winter rain,

falling flat and washed. And I remember

mostly the three autumns you did not live here.

They said I’d never get you back again.

I tell you what you’ll never really know:

all the medical hypothesis

that explained my brain will never be as true as these

struck leaves letting go (Sexton 2000, 28).

In this poem, presented as a letter to her daughter, Sexton describes an experience of self-awareness. The symbolic image of the shedding leaves is described as self-revelation, which she experiences as more accurate than any medical diagnosis. The metaphor of the falling leaves illustrates the ability of a symbolic image to capture and organize the experience of self. In addition, the symbolic image contributes to development of the self because it allows the transformation of an intrapsychic experience into an interpersonal experience. The image of falling autumn leaves can be imagined by almost anyone and is largely universal. Thus, one can see use of this image as an attempt to create a shared dialogue and understanding with a wide readership.

Another way in which the symbolic image is used to draw the reader closer to the poet’s emotional experience is to create a spatial perspective. For example, the poem “Dedication to Hunger” presents a symbolic image of an anorexic girl lying prone on her bed and experiencing her body as invasive and disgusting. The reader can visualize the posture of the anorexic body and adopt her spatial point of view, thus empathically connecting to her emotional experience.

Consistent with Dewey’s assertion that the ability to act in the world through dialogue and interaction with the environment is essential for self-development, symbolic images that contribute to the dialogue between an anorexic poet and her environment can be seen as a poetic device that contributes to her self-establishment. Williams (1997, 103) describes anorexia as a “no-entry syndrome” characterized by closure and obstructing attempts of approach from the environment. Therefore, the ability to produce interpersonal dialogue is even more significant for poets suffering from anorexia. In contrast to the anorexic form, which arouses shock and resistance from the social environment, the use of poetic and symbolic tools allows the anorexic to create an alternative form that invites interpersonal dialogue, thereby contributing to the development of a more flexible and healthy self.

Although writing poetry did not seem to lead to self-healing for Sexton and Glück, they nevertheless used it as a tool for self-establishment, rather than self-destruction. Poetry contributes to self-establishment because it strengthens the anorexic’s ability to communicate with her environment. As Sewell wrote, “. . . while the clinical anorexic is inevitably on the side of silence . . . poetry, like speech, moves beyond the confines of the body and the self, and through figure, theme and form, can articulate what the anorexic cannot say,” (Sewell 2006, 51).

* 1. The Anorexic on the Internet

The psychodynamic perspective interprets the diverse nature of cyberspace as a new dimension of human experience, and as an extension of the intrapsychic world (Margherit and Gargiulo 2018). There are a variety of online platforms for writings, such as blogs and websites, indicating how new technologies have changed the way people relate to reality and establish themselves (ibid.). There are dozens of online blogs, forums and social media communities where anorexics write. These sites can be divided into two general types: pro-ana (pro-anorexia) sites and pro-recovery sites. This section will examine the ways in which writing on these sites activates mechanisms of self-destruction and/or self-construction.

2.3.1 Anorexia as Self-destruction: “Pro-Ana”

Starting in the 1990s, a “pro-ana” community developed and people began creating websites that present anorexia as a lifestyle choice, glorifying the anorexic identity, and denying the idea that anorexia is a disease involving suffering (Margherit and Gargiulo 2018). This community has sparked a heated discussion in the scientific community. The impact of pro-ana sites on the self-establishment aspect of anorexia is controversial. Some argue it provides a platform for self-destructive behaviors among anorexics and poses a danger to healthy girls and women exposed to these sites, which some argue have the power to trigger anorexia among vulnerable individuals (Ferguson and Klebanoff, 2014). Others contend that these sites provide social and emotional support (Yeshua-Katz and Martins 2013), and contribute to self-establishment and identity acquisition (Bates, 2015; Hammersley and Treseder, 2007) by allowing anorexics to authentically express themselves in an accepting and non-judgmental environment. Analysis of the characteristics of writings and use of language on pro-ana sites will serve as a platform for discussing this controversial issue.

This analysis shows that objectification of the body is a core mechanism of self-destruction, and is expressed in a number of ways:

1. Use of imperative and concrete language:

“Choose one food a day, such as an apple. Cut it into four pieces. Eat one for breakfast, one for lunch, another for dinner, and you have one piece left as a snack.”

“Two tablespoons of vinegar before a meal helps to pump the fat out.”

“Eat six small meals a day, spaced every three hours. Fifty calories each, six times a day, that comes out to only 300 calories.”

According to Margherit and Gargiulo (2018), the widespread use of concrete terms and numbers relating to food and weight (calories, pounds, etc.) reflects the close link between anorexic identity and its symptoms. Such imperatives encourage the anorexic to treat her body as an object or as a number, leading to objectification of the body. The anorexic is required to count, divide and cut until the body is no longer experienced as having needs and desires. She deals with splitting and disintegration until she identifies with the symptom, and erases the self.

1. Use of commandments aimed at punishing the body and arousing feelings of disgust and hatred towards it:

“Eat in front of the mirror naked, damn it, and see how much you want to eat then.”

“Hit your stomach whenever it rumbles too loudly.”

Some of the commandments are presented in the format of the Ten Commandments:

“Do not eat without feeling guilty.”

“Do not eat fatty foods without punishing yourself later.”

1. Attributing superior qualities to the identity of “ana”

Statements such as “I have always found something pure in ‘ana’” or “I have always been the pure ‘ana’” are common on these sites, as are statements with a religious tone, such as “I believe in wholeness and strive to achieve it” or “I believe in salvation through starvation.” The use of words such as, “purity,” “salvation,” and “perfection” expresses the anorexic aspiration for being “superhuman.” However, this aspiration detaches her body from its materiality and vulnerability and thus, from its humanity. Her body becomes an object; an object that can be “perfectly” controlled.

Analysis of the language use of pro-ana sites reveals that another way to build an ideal anorexic self is to create a hierarchy of eating disorders. Pro-ana sites reflect the belief that some members have higher moral foundations compared to others. Ana is represented as the ideal self, ranked in the upper tier. “Mia” (bulimia) is ranked next. Other eating disorders[[2]](#footnote-2) are at the bottom of the hierarchy (Giles 2006).

The characteristics of language and discourse on pro-ana sites show that anorexics have a rigid and divided worldview, not only in relation to their bodies, but also in relation to people around them. In addition to the differentiation between and ranking of eating disorders, community members create rigid and impenetrable boundaries from those who are perceived as imposters and “wannabes.”[[3]](#footnote-3) For example:

“There’s this girl . . . that you can honestly say does NOT!!! have an eating disorder . . . you can tell through . . . her silly posts on the subject.”

Question: “Hey I’m new here . . . Anna with tendencies to Mia . . . trying to lose 20 pounds, need some tips . . . I was thinking of going on a ‘water fast’ . . . say every two weeks for two days . . . is that okay? And if not? Please give me tips . . .”

Response: “If you were a real anorexic, then you would not need someone to tell you what to do . . .”

The dynamics between the identities of ana and wannabe expresses the attempt to defend oneself against the “other,” and to understand the self as hermetic. According to Giles (2006), the practice of determining who deserves to be called “ana is at the heart of being pro-ana.”

Writing on pro-ana sites reflects an attempt to establish an individual self within a group, and to establish a collective online identity consisting of dozens or even hundreds of individuals. Although belonging to a social community is expected to strengthen one’s ability to communicate with others, in the case of pro-ana groups, the same pathological mechanisms that make it difficult for the anorexic to communicate with her environment are also activated within the online communication. The identification, categorizing, dichotomy, and aggressive condemnation of those who threaten ana’s “pure” identity reflect schizoid-paranoid and primitive defense mechanisms of splitting and projection, generally attributed to early developmental stages (Durban and Roth, from Klein, 2013, 24–25).

In addition, one can think of the social self that is reflected in pro-ana communities as an attempt at self-establishment through enmeshment.[[4]](#footnote-4) The community is not composed of a group of individuals, but of “replicated selves.” Members of the pro-ana community strive to be identical and work towards the same goal. There is no separation or distinction between them; they are one. Similar to the enmeshment that characterizes the anorexic’s family, community members are unwilling to accept differentness among girls who wish to join the community, and thus any attempt to communicate with the “other” fails. Thus, although the enmeshment in these sites is mobilized as an attempt to build and strengthen the sense of self, it actually reinforces the rigidity and paranoid aspects of the anorexic experience, thus creating an obstacle along the path to self-establishment.

2.4 Separation from Ana and Self-construction

In recent years, members of the anorexic community have also been operating pro-recovery websites, revealing completely different dynamics from those presented on pro-ana sites in relation to self-definition and self-establishment. In contrast to the imperative and concrete language used on pro-ana sites, on recovery sites, references to self are characterized by abstract and metaphorical language that promotes processes of self-exploration and emotional contact. As one blogger writes: “Who am I? I am a young woman who has recovered from anorexia . . . I feel so vulnerable and remember my feeling of shame . . .” Another blogger uses metaphorical personification and describes anorexia as a male character: “Who am I without ED?[[5]](#footnote-5) When I struggled with my eating disorder, this was a question that preoccupied me a lot.”

Unlike pro-ana sites on which the anorexic self is “swallowed” by the body and there is no distinction between anorexia and the woman, pro-recovery sites present the separation from the anorexic identity as part of the healing process and self-establishment. One way to do this is to make a distinction between the “diseased self” and the contemporary or “healthy self.” As several bloggers write:

“Who am I? I am no longer the same lost girl. I am free.”

“A key component in recovering from anorexia . . . is the thought that your healthy self will cure the self with the eating disorder”

“I noticed that I have two parts of myself, during the struggle with anorexia . . . a significant part of my recovery process was to identify them, and through an ongoing dialogue to strengthen the healthy self.”

Another way to achieve separation from the disorder is use of metaphors and personification, that is, externalizing anorexia and perceiving it as a different person. It should be noted that there is also personification on the pro-ana sites, through the presentation of the personified character of Ana. However, while on pro-ana sites, personification is used to create identification between the symptom and the self, in sites that promote recovery, anorexia is humanized as an external character, contributing to moving away from the disease. An example of this is referring to the eating disorder as Ed. One blogger presents Ed as an abusive lover from whom she must separate: “I have never married, but I am happily divorced. Ed was abusive . . . and domineering . . . I hated him, but I could not leave him. Ed convinced me that without him I was unimportant and inconsequential. He said he cared for me and worked for my personal good, but was always angry with me. He promised things that never existed. When I hit the bottom physically and mentally, I finally decided to divorce him . . . Ed and I don’t even talk anymore.”

Another way to distance and separate oneself from anorexia is by conceptualizing it as an external entity that has taken over the self, as in these bloggers’ words:

“I am a survivor of an eating disorder . . . I was enslaved to it for 25 years . . . I was a prisoner of my own body . . .”

“. . . my mind was kidnapped. If you have never had the experience of being taken over by a mental illness, then it is impossible to understand . . .”

Thus, the way in which the mechanisms of fragmentation and projection work on pro-ana sites is the opposite of how they work on sites that encourage recovery. On pro-ana sites, fragmentation and projection exist as schizoid-paranoid mechanisms leading to rigid separation between the self and the other, and pathological identification between the symptom and the self. In contrast, pro-recovery sites allow the anorexic to look at both parts of the self as belonging to her, and to investigate their impact on her life in an introspective and integrative way.

The transition from the perception of anorexia as an integral part of the self to its perception as a destructive “other” from which one must be separated uses using metaphorical and abstract language. This represents development of the ability to symbolize (Segal 1979, 133) and a movement from a paranoid-schizoid stance to a depressive stance (Durban and Roth from Klein 2013, 24–25). In sites that encourage recovery, the anorexics’ self-establishment is encouraged.

In conclusion, while pro-ana sites attempt to establish a strong and glorified social self that is supposed to lead to self-development, in practice they embody a variety of mechanisms that actually lead to self-destruction. On pro-recovery sites, however, a completely different picture emerges. The anorexic no longer experiences herself as persecuted and threatened, and manages to create a distinction between the self and the other, using symbolic mechanisms that contribute to self-development.

1. Conclusion

This article addresses the question of whether anorexia contributes to self-establishment or leads to self-destruction? The psychoanalytic conception of anorexia is that of a paradoxical disorder that expresses a pathological attempt at self-establishment, which in turn leads to self-destruction. However, this does not explain the mechanisms by which the anorexic tries to establish herself. This article has shown how an interdisciplinary investigation that combines psychoanalytic, philosophical-linguistic, and literary analysis contributes to the elucidation of the mechanisms of destruction and construction in anorexic disorder, while examining the impact of different types of writing on these mechanisms.

Dewey’s theory of self contributes to the concept of anorexia as a unique phenomenon, which simultaneously combines mechanisms of self-destruction and self-construction. His perception of human habits as being inseparable from the process of self-establishment and from the social environment of the individual highlights the constructive mechanism of anorexic habits. While these lead to the destruction of the body and mind, they also reflect the attempt to define a self living in a particular society.

It has been suggested that while various genres of writing, such as narrative and poetry contribute to anorexics’ self-establishment, online writings can influence self-establishment in two opposite ways, depending on the type of website. Writing on pro-ana sites is characterized by the concretization and splitting that can contribute to self-destruction. Writing on recovery-promoting sites, like artistic genres of writing, is symbolic and abstract, thus contributing to self-establishment. Thus, an analysis of writing across the various genres shows that (apart from writing on pro-ana sites) writing promotes the ability for integration, symbolization and mental flexibility, thus contributing to the self-establishment of the anorexic individual.

1. A term referring to a process of dealing with the creation of art, especially poetry. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. EDNOS (Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified) is a diagnostic category in DSM V, [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The nickname “wannarexic” describes girls who want to be anorexic and try to adopt anorexic habits and lifestyle, but do not meet the criteria of anorexia as a disorder (Hoffmann, 2018). The term unifies into one word the desire to form an anorexic identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Minuchin coined the term “enmeshed family” in reference to families of anorexics in which family members have difficulty distinguishing between their personal needs and the needs of others (Minuchin, Baker, and Rosman 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ED = eating disorder [↑](#footnote-ref-5)