Winter 2006 Honorable Mention

Aaron Quiggle

Instructor’s Foreword

How does the field of rhetoric shadow the slow gait of human life? How does it transform as we move through shopping malls and airports, wait patiently while we idle in racks of Hawaiian shirts and khaki slacks, fall asleep while we poke at our faces and pinch our bodies in the mirror? And if, in a move of renunciation, we should aim for some other kind of life? If we were to leave the mirror and the popular magazine and the shopping mall, open a book charged with another kind of language, another set of values? Where might rhetoric go? How might it change?

Aaron Quiggle suggests that anorexia is as much a problem of language as it is an ailment of the body. He invents the phrase “the rhetoric of anorexia” to model a renunciation of what is unhealthy in our popular culture. Aaron establishes the problem by drawing on a host of sources, from medical research, to social studies, to a comprehensive analysis of advertisements in Cosmopolitan magazine. On his reading, although the urge to renounce the empty rhetoric of popular culture is rooted in a desire for health, as a project it is destined to failure. For popular culture incorporates everything it can, even its own counter-culture. There does not appear to be a way out, no end to saying, “No.”

Out of this quicksand, an alternative emerges. What kinds of texts, Aaron asks, arise out of popular culture, but nevertheless resist sinking back into the empty rhetoric of magazines like Cosmopolitan? Aaron suggests that the hyperbolic play of language that so marks the novels of Samuel Beckett and James Joyce might offer what is necessary to break the cycle of renunciation.

Brilliantly combining research, creative reading and transformative leaps of mind, Aaron Quiggle reinvents the research essay before our eyes, transforming it into an argumentative art form of his own design. By the end of the essay, he provides us with a new way to discuss modernism and its relation to popular culture: For if anorexia is caused by a dismay with what popular culture has given us, perhaps Joyce and Beckett can give us the nutrition we need. Play without despair, belief without the nothingness of cynicism: What an urgent vision this is.

Scott Herndon
In Search of an Anorexic Rhetoric:
A Theory of Language, Meaning, Society, and Mental Illness
Aaron Quiggle

... you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it’s done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am.
– Samuel Beckett, The Unnamable

The Problem

How do we relate to the body in 21st century America? On the one hand, it appears that through technology we have found and created replacements for the body. Computers and robots do our labor for us. The body seems easily replaceable. But while it has faded in importance in the workplace and our daily lives, the body has come to haunt us. It is estimated that 11 million Americans have an eating disorder of some kind, 25 million more have binge eating tendencies, and over 39 million American women fall into deep depression at one point in their lives (Hoek 34; American Psychiatric Association, Practice Guidelines 90). But though a proportionally smaller number of American women will be anorexic at one point in their lives (5.5 million), perhaps no eating disorder or depressive disease haunts us more, or poses more of a problem, than anorexia (APA, Practice Guideline 31).

I think we will learn something important by investigating anorexia as a kind of rhetoric: a symbolic way of communicating, understanding, and creating meaning. Though it may seem obvious to some, I take rhetoric to be a social construction: the language of anorexia, and the multitude of meanings bound to it, are created, dictated, and materialized by cultures and societies. Understanding the visual and linguistic phenomenon of an anorexic rhetoric is therefore inextricably connected to understanding the rhetoric of society. By conceptualizing anorexia in this way, analyzing a patient and the way her illness speaks sheds light not only on her particular struggles, but also on her culture and the way her culture speaks. The rhetoric of anorexia becomes a profound sociological lens.

There are clear rewards for using this lens. In my investigation of anorexia, I will not only create the framework for investigating the rhetoric of mental illness in general, but also use it as a tool for creating a new kind of literary interpretation. By looking at anorexia as a rhetorical enterprise we can begin to see how modernist works of literature such as those by Samuel Beckett and James Joyce are anorexic in theme. This work will reveal that sociology is not so far from literature and that social change is not so far from literary invention. I want to suggest that our final turn to the dynamics of these particular modernist works of literature reveal the ultimate struggle of anorexia. This final turn to modernism helps us envision an alternate way to think about anorexia: anorexia as a desire to heal. As I will show, Beckett’s The Unnamable and Joyce’s Finnegans Wake approximate a rhetoric of anorexia by repudiating the language of society and trying to formulate a self
in the process. But these rhetorics do not collapse into an anorexic rhetoric. By seeing how these texts manage to avoid this collapse, we can begin to see where the anorexic rhetoric fails. And perhaps we can learn about the anorexic patient herself, looking for better ways to satisfy her urge for autonomy in ways that do not lead to sickness, misery, and death.¹

In order to undertake a social study of anorexia, I will turn to one of America’s enduring arbiters of popular imagination – *Cosmopolitan* magazine. What can a common household magazine like *Cosmopolitan* reveal about the nature of anorexia? I examined the representation of body image in the advertisements of thirty-six issues of *Cosmopolitan* magazine from 1973, 1987, and 1998, looking for evidence of how our society’s conception of the ideal body has progressed into a diagnosable anorexic body. As I will show, these advertisements’ obsession with dieting and weight loss, which are in themselves symptoms of anorexia, become more pronounced over the decades, reinforcing an anorexic ideology (Robertson 2). This trend appears to be complemented by several recent studies which have also examined the development of the ideal body in other American glamour magazines. But these studies are often problematic. For instance, one study investigated the change in body dimensions of *Playboy* models, showing that “there was a significant fall in weight [and] . . . the bust and hip size decreased, indicating a trend toward a more ‘tubular’ . . . body shape” (Morris 593). There is an inherent and misleading difficulty here. This study clearly demonstrates a significant change in the figure of the ideal woman for men. It does not, however, necessarily show that this is an example of society’s ideal. A man’s conception of the ideal body ought not be equated to a social conception of the ideal body. Given that *Cosmopolitan’s* stated mission is “to help contemporary women achieve their goals and live fuller, more glamorous lives,” I believe this magazine will stand as a more accurate reflection of America’s conception of the paradoxically ideal and contradictory body than a magazine such as *Playboy* (Absolute Magazines).

**An Understanding of Anorexia**

I have to puke my heart out too, spew it up whole along with the rest of the vomit, it’s then at last I’ll look as if I mean what I’m saying, it won’t be just idle words.

– Samuel Beckett, *After the Final No*

As a medical problem, anorexia has been studied from many angles. Some, such as the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) have defined the illness in terms of its symptoms. For example, someone is diagnosed as anorexic if they weigh less than 85% of their expected weight as indicated by their height and age, if they are intensely fearful of gaining weight or being fat, if their body weight or shape overly affects their sense of self-worth, if they purge their food, or if they binge eat (DSM 544-45). The problem with such a conception of anorexia is that it understands the illness only in terms of its symptoms – symptoms which the illness itself causes. In other words, symptomatic studies foreclose the etiology of anorexia. Not surprisingly, many in the medical field have argued that anorexia is a physiological disease with a genetic etiology (Wade 469-71).

Others have left genetics and biochemistry behind and attempted to understand the etiology of anorexia as a fundamentally cultural problem, arguing that it is a socially bound

¹ Anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness. Twenty percent of anorexics die within 20 years of having this illness. Forty percent never recover (American Psychiatric Association, *Practice Guideline for the Treatment of Patients with Eating Disorders* 25).
disorder, and the increasing prevalence of anorexia is due to the change in the ideal female body. These researchers have argued that the dramatic change in the form of the ideal female body is not only closely tied to a drastic increase in disordered eating and anorexia, but that “the increase in prevalence of dieting behaviors [is] related to th[e] shift in size of fashion models towards a thinner ideal” (qtd. from Champion 214; King, 341; Ogden 172).

One group of scholars has combined etiology with the study of sociology and physiology, arguing that although anorexia is a medical syndrome, it is a culture-bound disorder, “a collection of signs and symptoms which is restricted to a limited number of cultures primarily by reason of certain of their psychosocial features” (Keel 747). This position is closer to my own. But while it helps us begin to link the social and psychological factors in anorexia, the cultural position does not work hard enough to understand what is linguistic about this illness.

Although these researchers are right to investigate the causes of anorexia, they miss the complete picture, for they ignore so many of the dynamics of what I have termed the symbolic life of anorexia, which is defined by the individual’s attempt to form an internalized language for herself.

In this paper, I want to analyze the symbolic life of anorexia in a holistic sense – as a psychological, social, and rhetorical problem. Both the symptomatic and causal approaches to our primary question on the nature of anorexia fall short, I think, of a holistic understanding of the illness. Though they rightly observe its social significance, they neglect to ask how something becomes socially significant in the first place. The form of their research cannot ask the question: How is it that a society expresses its body ideal? One of the ways society does this is undoubtedly through language. The rhetoric of image and text in magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* helps create, through visual and written language, the conception of the ideal female body. Anorexia is indeed an illness caused by social values, but these values are assuredly archived, maintained, and reproduced by language (as I think the symbolic worlds of all mental illnesses are). Therefore, an investigation which comprehends anorexia as a mere societal problem will miss the very root of the illness. To understand anorexia we must also understand how it is involved in the use, creation, and understanding of language itself. To understand the illness of anorexia we must understand the interplay of physiology with the rhetoric of anorexia.

### Towards an Anorexic Rhetoric

*What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? . . . But it is quite hopeless. . . . And at the same time I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never.*

– Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*

An anorexic rhetoric can be defined by an inherent contradiction, a paradoxical ambivalence. On the one hand, an anorexic rhetoric is an empty rhetoric, a null set. In this light, *Cosmopolitan* is an anorexic rhetoric *par excellence*. This empty rhetoric is the rhetoric of a girl looking in a mirror at her naked, disfigured body, only to think that she is fat. This girl looking in to the mirror does not see what she is; she sees only what she is not. ‘Fat’ takes on a peculiar form. She is fat, more than enough, only by her emptiness, her not being enough. Like her, we become obese by feasting on emptiness – in our sitcoms, in our magazines, in our mirrors. The anorexic rhetoric therefore demonstrates our
un-fulfillment and suggests that we will all be fulfilled by possessing some meaningless shampoo, or pair of shoes, or dress, or car. Or more precisely the anorexic rhetoric is a paradox defined first by its emphasis on meaning being external. This first step is a rhetoric of consumption, consumption of materials and, more profoundly, consumption of meaning embodied within the materials. Then comes the next step; in its secondary phase the anorexic rhetoric becomes a rhetoric of renunciation. It is a kind of purging rhetoric of defiance, one which refuses to digest the prescribed meanings of advertisements and of society it has swallowed. The secondary phase recognizes that these cultural meanings give no genuine feeling of meaningfulfulness and it is in this sense that a twenty-two year old woman suffering from anorexia complains that “there’s no meaning . . . there’s no meaning . . . there’s no meaning” (Robertson 56). In the rhetoric of consumption, she must try to formulate meanings for herself by adopting the dictated meanings of society. But in the rhetoric of renunciation she must create her own meanings by what is left in her own control: purging what she feels is an empty set of social meanings and attempting to formulate a self, an autonomous subject, an ‘I,’ by delving into an inner space now emptied. This rhetoric of renunciation is a sort of ascetic rhetoric in that it creates meaning and thus the self by turning its back on culturally dictated meanings.

I want to suggest that it is the rhetoric of consumption that is the problematic phase, whereas the rhetoric of renunciation, the attempt to turn objects into subjects, is a meaningful endeavor. The problem is, however, that the tightening grip of capitalism, the pervasiveness of Hollywood dreams and Cosmopolitan images and values have made it nearly impossible to succeed in avoiding the rhetoric of consumption without lapsing into the rhetoric of anorexia. The difficulty lies in the fact that to create a self, to give meaning to oneself, to formulate a language for oneself, one must ingest the language of one’s society. The language of society, or more particularly of popular culture, has created an ideology grounded on notions of emptiness and sameness. This ideology is an infinitely expansive entity that seeks to incorporate everything around it – especially those beliefs and motivations that at first seem resistant. In gradually popularizing and trivializing these countercultural beliefs and motivations until they become as empty as it is, the ideological web of sameness effectively eliminates the significance of the notion of difference. This reduction of difference has profound implications. It effectively eliminates the subject and her ability to individuate. Individuation depends upon the difference between the self and the world. We become ourselves by pushing up against the world and it is at these moments of conflict where we and the world stand at odds with one another that we become ‘selves.’ We become individuated by being other than the subjects and objects around us.

The new language of society effectively expunges difference. In a recent issue of US Weekly, for instance, we open the magazine to a picture of a famous Hollywood actor playing with his child. “Stars – they’re just like us” the tagline reads (Davis 28). This article neglects to mention the huge discrepancy in pay between this actor and us, the fact that he probably spends much less time with his family than most fathers, the fact that he doesn’t hold a nine to five job, that he has the paparazzi ceaselessly waiting for him to falter. In other words, the notion of difference is transformed into a notion of sameness, and it is this notion that stands at the heart of our social life. A peculiar paradoxical dynamic thus emerges. The rhetoric of renunciation and its devaluation of popular culture arises and gains power only at the moment when sameness becomes the only option the rhetoric of consumption can provide. In other words the rhetoric of renunciation and its devaluation
of the external exist only because of such an emphasis on the rhetoric of consumption. If we are to understand an anorexic rhetoric as both an affirmation and a rejection of socially dictated meaning we must first explore how our popular culture gives, creates, and understands its meanings: how it creates and becomes a rhetoric of consumption.

The Age of Meaninglessness

Why? It is a set of a swigswag, systomy, dystomy, which everabody you ever anywhere at all doze. Why? Such me.

– James Joyce, Finnegans Wake

In *Autism and the Crisis of Meaning*, published in 1996, sociologist Alexander Durig argues that we live in a society vacant of meaning. This crisis of meaning, he argues, is “our society’s creation” and “most pressing social problem” (13). Capitalism and technology have emphasized external values and have neglected the fact that we ourselves are meaning, we constitute meaning, and we give meaning to things (214-15). For Durig, meaning is not only imposed on us, but we are also agents in imposing meaning on the world. Capitalism’s agenda of what is meaningful and what is not has created a biased and inherently judgmental definition of normality, a definition that necessarily excludes most people from it (xi). Manifestations of technology and popular culture, such as *Cosmopolitan* magazine, idealize this impossible normality. An ideal which is by definition unattainable. And yet the failure to achieve the status of the impossible ‘normal’ leaves one feeling empty and alienated. In order to restore meaning in a world obsessed with external and meaningless trivialities, which have been disguised as meaningful elements of a fulfilling life, we must look to our inner space and construct our meanings from within. This is precisely what the rhetoric of renunciation struggles, and so often fails, to accomplish. And this is exactly how it sometimes collapses into an anorexic rhetoric.

The anorexic rhetoric desperately tries to protect itself by creating meaning from within. It tries to find meaning within itself but it does not posses the linguistic tools necessary to create meaning and, therefore, a self. Nineteenth century philosopher Condillac argued that the mind (or the self) is “contingent upon language processes” (198). I want to suggest that the self depends not only on processes of language but on nutritive processes of meaning. What matters is not the form or fact of language as such, so much as the meaning embedded within it. So if what we care about is language as a form of meaning, or more precisely, if we are to look at language as the primary means for communicating meaning, we must first investigate how advertisements in *Cosmopolitan* communicate or fail to communicate meaning.

The Rhetoric of *Cosmopolitan*

*You are what you have.*

– John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

What is it that *Cosmopolitan* has been saying to us all of these years? There must be a subtle power to its message or else it would not stop so many people on the way to their morning coffee, or grab the attention of so many businessmen traveling home from a business deal, or captivate so many parents waiting for their child’s little league practice to end. It works, in a way, by proposing that we become something by buying something. In other words, the advertisements in *Cosmopolitan* implicitly suggest that without possessing that which is advertised one is deficient and incomplete. Publicity creates glamour;
publicity creates a “sense of being envied” (Berger 131). To become something is to have something. It is now so easy to see what we have found so elusive about this magazine for so long. What is not attractive about these ideas? Phenomenology is, in its essence, reduced to passivity. *Cosmopolitan* and its advertisements offer us a world in which we can become something by simply reading its words before we fall asleep at night, or at a traffic light, or in the grocery store line. The cultivation of a self does not depend upon intellectual curiosity or a heightened level of self-awareness. The self feels nourished by looking at an advertisement and buying its product. Such a view is easy and comforting, but this ease and comfort do not come without a price. In order for advertising to work effectively it must situate itself in the consumer’s anxiety. If the consumer were not already anxious, fearful that she is deficient, advertising would be ineffective. What becomes so inherently dangerous about this advertising is that it offers the illusion of fulfillment. The consumer finds it difficult to abandon these illusions because advertisements give her a language which creates a rhetorical world where these illusions have value. At a certain point, popular culture becomes so all-encompassing that the consumer finds that she cannot escape these illusions because she has no other language with which to do so. The only language she has is the language that she has been given, the one she has received and accepted through popular culture. This way of communicating, of creating meaning, of using language is the rhetoric of consumption.

**The Ideal Body and the Effectiveness of Advertising in Cosmopolitan**

*And things, what is the correct attitude to adopt towards things? And, to begin with, are they necessary? What a question.*

– Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*


Fig. 2. Italian Trade Commission, advertisement, *Cosmopolitan*. July 1987: 37.

Fig. 3. Fruit of the Loom, advertisement, *Cosmopolitan*. July 1998: 56-7.

Now it is time to look at the magazine itself, to listen to what it has to say, in the privacy of our bedrooms, in airports, on waiting room tables. The portrayal and significance of the ideal body in *Cosmopolitan* has drastically shifted over the last thirty years. I want to suggest that by analyzing its advertisements for hair products and skin creams we can
gathers insight into the ways in which “popular women’s magazines may influence attitudes in the general public concerning body image, dieting and anorexia” (Robertson 15-16). In 1973, women were bigger and had larger breasts (Morris 593). But less of the body was depicted and when it was it was well clothed. The effectiveness of the advertisement depended little on the depiction of the model and more on the name of the product and the language used within the advertisement to sell the product, which effectively exacerbated the reader’s anxieties and fears.

The very first advertisement in the July 1973 issue of *Cosmopolitan* pitches a cover-up stick called ‘Erace’ (see figure 4). There are two headshots of the same girl, one without the aid of the stick and another with it. The pictures are hardly distinguishable. What sells the product is not the girl’s stunning figure, which we never see, but rather the name and tagline of the product which situates itself in the reader’s anxiety. “Erace . . . because we all have something to hide” reads the motto. It is not merely that we all have blemishes and tired lines; it is that we all have sinned and possess dark secrets. ‘Erace,’ thus not only erases the various imperfections of one’s face, but it cleanses one’s soul, it redeems.

The rhetoric of a second advertisement similarly argues that ‘pH plus,’ a skin cream, not only cleanses and softens the skin, but also softens and purifies the soul (see figure 5). The top half of this one page advertisement is a picture of a middle-aged, fully dressed woman looking out into the distance, contemplative, distressed, unfulfilled. The bottom half of the page is a vita for the product. “Individuality,” it reads, “inside me there’s a person.” The woman in the picture looks the way she does because she is missing a part of herself, the part that can be found by buying this skin care product. The final line reads, “It’s partly for your skin, and partly for your soul.” What is obvious in both of these advertisements is that they are not selling their products as such, they are selling an internal state of being, which their products ambiguously symbolize.

The advertisements from 1973 illustrate a particular phase in the rhetoric of consumption. Each advertisement is alike in that beneath them all there lies a common message – if you have this product, if you consume this product, you will be fulfilled, you will have meaning. This rhetoric relies on an already existing assumption, an empty assumption, which claims that without these external meanings you are severed from meaning altogether.

A Clairol hair-coloring advertisement encapsulates well the various aspects of the advertising philosophy discussed in the previous section (see figure 6). This advertisement shows three pictures of a brown haired thirty year old woman. Each picture is cropped so that we are unable to see even the entirety of her face. There is no idealized body.
here; there is no body at all. How, then, does this advertisement function? It functions by situating itself in the realm of the reader’s anxiety and self-doubt. “The 7 fears of hair color are gone!” the advertisement reassures us. It then lists our seven fears and shows us how this hair coloring foam can alleviate them. It is important to notice, however, that the fears the advertisement mentions are not fears about hair but fears that we will not be loved and that we are essentially worthless. This turn is indicated by the title of the hair-coloring product itself: ‘Loving Care.’ ‘Loving Care’ is meant to be purchased not only to alter your hair color, but to alleviate your deep-rooted feelings of inadequacy. It is as if, the advertisement claims, this product will give you the loving care your parents were never able to give you as a child.

The clearest instance of this dynamic can be shown by a foam-in hair conditioner also by Clairol (see figure 7). This advertisement, like the others, shows two headshots of a girl both with and without the hair product. The product title is, in itself, a potent metaphor – ‘Happiness.’ With this hair product “she can have happiness.” Without it, she has “another case of ‘the drabs,’ . . . dull, drab, or graying hair, which leads to (sob) depression.” The second symbolic displacement in this advertisement, albeit more hidden, is that the pronoun ‘she’ denotes ‘you.’ It is not merely that “she can have happiness,” but that ‘you can have happiness’ if you have this product. This penultimate advertisement is grounded in three presuppositions. First, you need happiness because you are not happy already. Second, happiness is a commodity that can be possessed; you can have it. And, finally, meaning and happiness come from outside yourself.

By the time we arrive at *Cosmopolitan*’s 1987 issues, the way in which the advertisement functions and its portrayal of the female body has drastically changed. No longer does the effectiveness of advertisements rely on various metaphors symbolizing the meaningless state of one’s soul. Instead, the metaphorical language of the 1973 issues have been condensed into a stronger and more concrete language, that of the body itself. Consumers are asked to associate a skin or hair product with an ideal body. External meanings no longer need to be disguised as internal ones. All meanings have been condensed into the language of body image. And the image of the body, too, has changed: the advertisements feature whole figures instead of mere faces, and the bodies of the models that are shown are much thinner, have much smaller breasts, and wear much less clothing.

A ‘Natural Silk’ shampoo advertisement from the July 1987 issue of *Cosmopolitan* gives very different reasons to buy their product than those of 1973 (see figure 8). The product’s name is rather trivial by comparison. Alberto Natural Silk doesn’t offer happiness; it doesn’t even...
offer loving care. What it does offer is a gorgeous, lean, and half-naked body. This is now enough! To have a body like this \textit{is} to have happiness and loving care. Alberto is, thus, hardly selling a hair product. It is selling a body, a body which is equated with meaning.

A ‘Verve’ body spray is similarly advertised in this same July 1987 issue of \textit{Cosmopolitan} (see figure 9). The advertisement shows a young colorfully dressed man playfully and flirtatiously spraying what we assume is ‘Verve’ onto a tall, slender, smiling woman. What is so effective about this advertisement is that the playfulness and bliss on these models’ faces communicates a certain ambiguity: is it ‘Verve’ that gives them this feeling of genuine satisfaction, or is it instead one another’s physical company? In other words, ‘Verve’ doesn’t itself claim to give you this joyfulness, but what it does do is associate itself with playful and beautiful bodies. Because we have so much invested in the body already, the advertisement is effective.

By the time we get to the 1998 issues of \textit{Cosmopolitan}, the modeled woman is thinner and taller. Shampoo and lotion advertisements, like those of 1987, show the entire figure of the woman. But the half-naked models of the 1987 issues have lost the remainder of their clothes. The models are now completely naked and only their beautifully shampooed hair covers their unexposed bodies. Many other advertisements depict sexually explicit relationships. The advertisements no longer sell an ideal female body, they sell the body as a sexual object. Sexuality is equated with meaning.

An advertisement for ‘Pantene Pro-V’ depicts a naked, young, and slender woman, bent over, holding her long blonde hair as if to dry it out (see figure 10). We do not even see her face. The model is posed. This advertisement lacks the motion of many from earlier years. There are no condensed metaphors as there were in 1973. And the complex language of playfulness and happiness that the body symbolized in 1987 too seems to have disappeared. It is the body that sells, and not the body as exuberance or vitality or love. It is the body as sex, but sex in an evacuated context: as objects for mere intercourse.

An advertisement for ‘Lubriderm’ similarly shows the torso of a naked woman, arms covering her breasts (see figure 11). Her head is cropped by the top of the page. We cannot see her eyes; there is no window into her soul. But we do not care about her eyes nor her soul. We care about our eyes and where they place their attention. They shoot to the center of the page locking onto the model’s cleavage. The body is not a metaphor here.
There is no meaning trapped inside. The meaning is embodied in her flesh and hidden between her arms. To have this lotion is to become this object of attention, of admiration, of lust. It is as if it were saying: ‘when you have this lotion all eyes will be on you.’ Eyes of envy, eyes of desire.

A Theory of Literature

Lone wild goose, not drinking, not feeding,
flies crying, calls out his longing for the flock.
Who pities his lonely form,
lost from the others in ten-thousand-layered clouds?
I gaze to the end of gazing, still seem to hear him;
so great my sorrow, I seem to hear him again,
while crows in the field, wholly unconcerned,
go on as before with their raucous cawing.

– Du Fu, The Selected Poems

Now that we have examined the rhetoric of consumption, I want to explore the corresponding rhetoric of renunciation as we move towards understanding the nature of the anorexic rhetoric. Unlike the rhetoric of consumption, which is so easy to understand because it stands there on the page, the rhetoric of renunciation is difficult to understand because it is defined by a sort of nothingness, a type of silence. It is the quiet reader’s response, the sound of pages turning. Whereas the rhetoric of consumption has a form with no content, the rhetoric of renunciation has content without a fixed form, for we are asked to digest its emptiness ourselves. In this way, the emptiness of consumption emerges in an infinite array of forms. The meaning embedded within the anorexic rhetoric of renunciation does not and cannot reside in the content of language itself because the language we have is expunged, repudiated, foresworn. Meaning instead lies within the space that remains after the discharge; the meaning emerges only once this language has been absented. “Women [anorexics] may create meaning in the space (difference) between words, rather than in the words themselves” (Robertson 74).

The anorexic rhetoric of renunciation reveals its salvation and cure even as it expresses its sickness. The mysterious epigraphs at the beginning of each section of my paper serve as instances, I want to argue, of a rhetoric of renunciation that does not collapse into anorexia precisely because it envisions a counterculture of language and consumption. Samuel Beckett’s The Unnamable and James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake are rhetorics of renunciation in that they reject the conventions of popular language and the meanings attached to it. But they help create a new history, a kind of canon that slowly helps us realize what might be forever unrealized without their example: the potentiality of literature itself to create the closest thing we have to an autonomous self unbound to the language, meanings, and objects of society – a self created by the very process of writing.

The task of the anorexic rhetoric, and one which narrowly escapes the fate of anorexia, are quite similar. We can see this in Beckett’s The Unnamable as it attempts, like an anorexic rhetoric, to find and create a self, an ‘I,’ by rejecting the objects and language of society. The ending passage of The Unnamable makes this point strikingly clear.

. . . you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it’s done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the
door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am. (Beckett 414)

What Beckett is trying to do in this passage, and in the text itself, is to move from object to subject by formulating a self. This attempt is demonstrated by the repeated occurrences of the object ‘me’ and the subject ‘I.’ In the course of this sentence, the object becomes the subject. When “it opens” it won’t be me as object, “it will be I” as subject and this ‘I,’ no longer constrained by pre-established meanings, exists in an unnamable silence, “it will be the silence, where I am.” This goal is, as I noted throughout my paper, close to that of an anorexic, or an anorexic rhetoric. It is an attempt to leave behind the language and objectified meanings of society and create a self. It is a rejection of the advertisements in *Cosmopolitan* which suggest that you are a self only when you are an object, but it does not end in cynicism or nihilism. If it avoids emptiness, it does so by envisioning an alternate hermeneutics, a new possibility of meaning – a meaning that exists in the space between words. It escapes the collapse of anorexia by creating a language which produces meaning in alternate ways. Similarly, a woman suffering from anorexia can be said to envision an alternate production of meaning, one encapsulated by the rejection of food. The problem is, however, that food does not stand as *other* in the same way that silence does; food is incapable of enlivening the difference expunged by the rhetoric of consumption. French theorist Julia Kristeva remarks:

> I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself . . . “I” am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death . . . During that course in which “I” become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. (Kristeva 3)

What is so interesting about Kristeva’s thinking is that it is not meant to explain an anorexic, it is meant to explain a woman. For Kristeva, to be a woman is to implicitly recognize that becoming and escaping oneself are effectively the same process. In this way, affirmation, the process of becoming depends upon rejection and negation. Food, with its sociological and anthropological history, becomes a condensed, concrete site for a symbolic rebellion. Food, the rejection of it and what it means, becomes the *thing* that allows these women to reject the abstract ideology that has become popular culture. But unlike Kristeva, Beckett and Joyce offer us a means to transcend the limits of this ideology and establish an ‘I’ by inventing a new malleable, ever fluxing language. This language provides a rhetorical form necessary for formulating a self, a form that manages to resist the allure of the emptiness that is popular culture. Beckett recognizes that to escape the binds of popular culture a vehicle or a form is necessary; a *thing* is not enough. This is what an anorexic fails to realize. An anorexic attempts to become a self by using an object (food) as an escape, but all things can be incorporated in the structure of popular culture and in this way food fails to operate as an emancipatory vehicle. In other words, an anorexic fails to find a form. Beckett and Joyce offer us this new form. Whereas the symbolic rebellion of an anorexic takes place in destruction and agony, the rebellion of Beckett and Joyce takes form in a generative language – for everything that it rejects it offers infinitely more.

We can see this alternate conception of renunciation in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, too. In *The Finnegans Wake Experience*, Roland McHugh argues that much of Joyce’s text is bound by, in philosopher’s Giordano Bruno terms, an ‘identity of opposites.’ Meaning in *Finnegans Wake* has this very same contradiction as the valuation of meaning contained within the anorexic rhetoric. “Its words are often susceptible to two alternative
constructions which contradict one another” (McHugh 20). Joyce’s language continually contradicts itself, creating possibilities of meaning by reinventing a language which has exhausted itself. Though this linguistic problem of meaning (one that Joyce runs up against again and again in the course of his novel) is exactly the same predicament of the anorexic rhetoric, its urge for invention reveals an alternative, a potential escape into language.

The Ethics of Anorexia

But how can they know he suffers? Do they see him? They say they do. But it’s impossible.
Hear him? Certainly not. He makes no noise.
– Samuel Beckett, The Unnamable

If the anorexic rhetoric is so common in the healing space of literature why is there so much stigma regarding anorexia, which is defined by the very same rhetoric? Or in other words, why can we not recognize the urge to heal in anorexia? Is it that in some sense the anorexic sees something that we do not, that in some deep inversion they are the healthy and we are the sick? But this cannot be so. We know the physiology of anorexia, and it does not give way, or it gives way to death so easily. The anorexic subject is, in all reality, killing herself. This is what is repeatedly observed, acknowledged, and studied by so many psychiatrists, psychologists, news anchors, popular magazines, and talk show hosts. But what they do not notice – perhaps they are too afraid to notice – is the inherent duality of anorexia as a physical and mental phenomenon. Anorexia is not only a nihilistic stance, purging itself of all values, but it is at the same time a linguistic urge to meaning. The doctors are too quick to observe the rhetoric of consumption (although they often neglect to observe its linguistic origins, the psychological and social battle it wages) and equate its correction by food and therapy. I am suggesting that in order to understand the etiology of anorexia, to diagnose it, and to treat it causally we must focus on something else. Only by understanding anorexia as a rhetorical activity can we understand where it fails along the way, and only then can we offer other linguistic tools, histories, and alternate modes of consumption for formulating an autonomous self in a less self-destructive way. And in doing so, we can do what we have been too afraid to admit – that the anorexic can teach us our own failures in meaning and values. In this way, the supposedly therapeutic relationship of ‘doctor’ and ‘patient,’ ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ can morph into a more profound relationship – ‘human’ and ‘human.’
Works Cited


