

**BEING A WOMAN AS A WOUND.
CZECH WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING
ON ANOREXIA NERVOSA¹**

Twenty years ago, Leigh Gilmore noticed that the boom of memoirs and autobiographies coincided with “the age of trauma”². I argue that in post-communist countries an indispensable part of that boom are autobiographical testimonials about eating disorders (ED), especially *anorexia nervosa*³, almost exclusively written by women. The experience of anorexia itself can be strongly connected to trauma understood as a psychic wound that alters and sometimes shatters the self, and is therefore related to the question of one’s identity. Eating disorders are sometimes caused by a traumatic experience but they can also become one. A person that experienced them usually struggles to retell her story, rebuilding her *self*.

This article analyzes autobiographical prose narratives by Czech women authors with experiences of *anorexia nervosa*: Petra Dvořáková’s *Já jsem hlad* [*I Am Hunger*] (2009), Vlastina Svátková Kounická’s *Modrý slon* [*Blue Elephant*] (2010), Martina Jendruchová’s *Už je to za mnou* [*It’s All Behind Me Now*] (2013), Tereza Nagy Štolbová’s *Dcera padajícího listí* [*Daughter of Falling Leaves*] (2014), and Eva Steppanová’s *Anorexie: Hlad po jiném světě* [*Anorexia: Hunger for Another World*] (2017). ED are interpreted through a feminist lens that allows perceiving them as psychic wounds that are not merely a personal but also a political issue.

Feminist researchers of eating disorders propose a rich variety of approaches and interpretations. However, they agree on several aspects: firstly, they emphasize that it is primarily girls and women who suffer from anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating; secondly, they place these phenomena in a broader sociopolitical and cultural context; and thirdly, they place eating disorders on a continuum of “normal” eating – dieting – eating disorders⁴. The obsession with thinness is not

¹ The article is a reworked version of one chapter of my dissertation defended at Charles University in Prague in 2022.

² Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 16.

³ For stylistic reasons I use in the article the notions “anorexia”, “anorexia nervosa” and “eating disorders” interchangeably.

⁴ See Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993; Helen Malson, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa*, New York, Routledge, 1997; Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, New York, Galahad Books, 1997.

considered abnormal in Western society – it becomes abnormal only after a certain point is crossed. Anorexics thus radically embody the norms by which we all live. They embody an ascetic lifestyle as well as the desire for control, self-mastery, power, and freedom – all of which are symbolically linked to a firm, fat-free “masculine” body. Therefore, anorexia, bulimia or binge eating cannot be perceived as merely pathological behaviors of the individual.

Susie Orbach interprets anorexia as a teenager’s rebellion against the female body, noting an important paradox – this rebellion leads (at least for a time) to the embodiment of the ideal of female thinness:

Anorexia reflects an ambivalence about femininity, a rebellion against feminization that in its particular form expresses both a rejection and an exaggeration of the image. The refusal of food which makes her extremely thin straightens out the girl’s curves in a denial of her essential femaleness. At the same time, this thinness parodies feminine petiteness. It is as though the anorectic has a foot in both camps – the pre-adolescent boy-girl and the young attractive woman⁵.

Orbach sees upbringing as an important factor in explaining why women in particular experience “body trouble”. Girls, she argues, are raised in a more puritanical way, and are led to perceive sexuality as something impure, undesirable, wrong or dangerous, which contributes to the disorientation associated with their own corporeality. Moreover, girls are socialized to care for others, taught that they should meet the needs of others (children, men) but not their own⁶.

The author also pays attention to the role of capitalism and consumer society, in which the female body becomes an object of alienation, fascination and desire – both for women and men⁷. Orbach places the increased incidence of eating disorders in a broader socio-cultural context. She argues that several decades ago, similar internal conflicts might have manifested themselves in other ways, but nowadays Western society is characterized by a surplus of food, and therefore certain problems may manifest themselves in food refusal or other specific behaviors connected to food preparation or consumption. Crucial is also the fact that in most households it is still women who prepare food, while at the same time we are reminded every day by advertisements, television, and magazines that food is something dangerous for us⁸.

The implication is that food is good for others, while women themselves should treat it with caution or avoid it altogether. From here there is a short way to serious internal conflicts that in Czech and other post-communist societies have

⁵ Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, pp. 125-126.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 165.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 15. Of course, in the Czech context the role of (late) capitalism and consumer society is beginning to play a vital role only after 1989.

⁸ Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, p. 41.

manifested themselves in their full intensity only at the turn of the 20th and the 21st centuries. Before that, we cannot speak of surplus of food or greater number of advertisements telling us that food is a danger that we should avoid.

The vast majority of feminist scholars who have addressed eating disorders emphasize the role of the mind-body dualism, so central to the Western culture. A long philosophical tradition contributes to the perception of the body as something that stands in the way of knowing the truth, the self, or the soul; something that deceives, hinders, or turns thoughts in the wrong direction. The body is thus constructed as something negative, something to be overcome. For many centuries, it is women, not men, who have been associated with the body, and it is therefore women who are much more likely to experience trouble with their own bodies⁹.

According to Bordo, the obsession with thinness points to deeper problems that have been present in our culture, especially since women began to become more visible in the public sphere and began to aspire to positions that were previously reserved for men. Bordo argues that the ideal of the female body has become leaner and more boyish following periods of increased feminist movement activity. The boyish figure suggests freedom, independence, and may symbolize access to the “men’s world”:

Women may feel themselves attracted by the aura of freedom and independence suggested by the boyish body ideal of today. Yet, each hour, each minute spent in anxious pursuit of that ideal (for it does not come naturally to most mature women) is in fact time and energy taken from inner development and social achievement. As a feminist protest, the obsession with slenderness is hopelessly counterproductive¹⁰.

In the Czech (and Czechoslovak) context we can observe the popularity of leaner ideal of female body to some degree in the 1920s, following the first wave of feminism, and later, in a much more prevalent form at the beginning of the current century.

Anorexia combines many aspects and interpretations: it is often perceived as a rejection of adulthood and regression to childhood, as a rejection of female identity or female physicality. It can be also viewed as a rebellion against the subordinate position of women in society or as a disagreement with the reduction of women to an object of sexual desire. Helen Malson shows in her work several basic paradoxes in the discursive construction of this disorder. First, it can be constructed as an example of discipline or as a rebellion against it. Second, anorexics are characterized by a desire to disappear, to be invisible to the “disciplining gaze”; at the same time, their emaciated bodies attract much more attention than “normal” (i.e., non-anorexic and non-obese) bodies. Another paradox is that of “self-destruction” and “self-production” – starvation is

⁹ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 159-160.

undoubtedly a form of self-destruction, but it can also form the basis of self-identification. The final aspect is passivity, the passive submission to a destructive process, and at the same time the active seeking out of death¹¹.

The source of this ambivalence is not only that individual experiences differ significantly from one another. Contradictions can also occur within individual bodies and individual stories that set out to make sense of the liminal experience that anorexia undoubtedly is. This, again, links eating disorders to traumatic experiences that are thought to be unrepresentable, beyond language¹². Autobiography itself opens important questions about the possibility of self-representation, and when the self-representation entails trauma these questions and paradoxes are even intensified¹³.

At the same time, autobiographical writing is always a certain way of seeking answers to the question of who I am, a way of discerning one's own place in the world¹⁴, therefore it strives for reducing those paradoxes. Besides, a narrative offers "the therapeutic balm of words", whose power is widely recognized by feminists as well as psychiatrists¹⁵.

Autobiographical narratives on *anorexia nervosa* are distinctly personal, but also firmly anchored in a broader social context, entering into dialogue with cultural representations and interpretations of eating disorders. While visual representations of the anorexic body are not characterized by much variation and reproduce the stereotype of the emaciated, bony, weak, and sad girl, interpretations of the causes of anorexia are quite varied. All of aspects in play are nevertheless connected to a question: "Who am I?". The search for or construction of one's own identity in the texts is carried out on at least two levels: firstly, on the level of the experience of anorexia itself, which is the central theme in them, and secondly, in the act of writing about oneself.

In my paper, I reflect on both moments of the search for or construction of one's own identity: the moment associated with illness and the moment of autobiographical writing. I ask how, in the retrospective narrative, the narrators perceive the connection between anorexic eating practices and their own identity, and also how the process of self-writing itself intervenes in this construction.

¹¹ Helen Malson, *The Thin Woman*, pp. 174-179.

¹² Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography*, p. 6.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

¹⁴ Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska, "Nowsze problemy teoretyczne pisania o sobie. Przykład wypowiedzi autobiograficznych pisarzy polskich ostatnich dziesięcioleci" ["Newer Theoretical Problems of Writing about Oneself. An Example of Autobiographical Statements of Polish Writers of Recent Decades"], *Przestrzenie Teorii*, 2006, 6, pp. 51-67.

¹⁵ Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography*, p. 7.

Why Write?

In their prose, the authors usually give reasons why they decided to write about their life and illness. The motivation to write their own story is twofold: in all the books we find a self-therapeutic moment, while many authors also stress the need to help others and to dispel the prejudices and stereotypes associated with eating disorders.

For example, Michala Jendruchová writes in the preface:

I am writing myself out of pain, I am coming to terms with myself. At the same time, I would like to describe to you, from the perspective of a former patient, the horrors experienced by an anorexic. I would like to bring some light into the lives of those who suffer from this disease and their loved ones, so that they do not lose hope¹⁶.

Along similar lines, Eva Stepanová states:

I cannot serve as an example of a perfect, brave and cured person, nor am I an expert in eating disorder treatment, but I am closer to the problem and to similarly “affected” people. My desire to warn is all the greater, my soul’s urging to help others all the more fervent¹⁷.

The altruistic motivation is not mentioned by the current psychologist and therapist specializing in eating disorders, Tereza Nagy Štolbová, who writes that she feels the need to speak out about what she has kept quiet for many years:

With this book, with the words I say in it about some days of my life, I transcend the long-standing and deep-seated desire to cover with my palms my excessively exposed face – the gateway to my pain and vulnerability – or the desire to be unseen, unheard, and therefore invulnerable...¹⁸.

An attempt to define oneself against the stereotypical media discourse about anorexia is found in most of the narrative. Eva Stepanová sums up this need in the words:

[...] the truth is often somewhere else than the media present to society. [...] the reason to start losing weight does not have to be only the desire for a slim figure. [...] There have been enough books describing anorexia as a teenage girl’s desire for a slim figure and model job. There have been enough stories of weight loss, hair or teeth falling out and subsequent “miraculous” cures with a “live happily ever after” ending. I want you to understand that things can be different. I want you to be able to read

¹⁶ Martina Jendruchová, *Už je to za mnou* [*It’s All Behind Me Now*], Praha, Vyšehrad, 2013 p. 13. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations (from Czech and Polish) are translated into English by the author of this paper.

¹⁷ Eva Stepanová, *Anorexie: Hlad po jiném světě* [*Anorexia: Hunger for Another World*], Praha, Vodnář, 2017, p. 9.

¹⁸ Tereza Nagy Štolbová, *Dcera padajícího listí* [*Daughter of Falling Leaves*], Praha, Triton, 2014, p. 15.

between the lines and not be afraid to name the problem. [...] I want to offer you my perspective and my insights – not only to those who are struggling or have struggled with a similar problem, but also to “ordinary” people for whom the subject is still taboo¹⁹.

In this way, the authors deal with an issue that is central to their identity. In order to find or construct their selves, they necessarily have to define themselves against the interpretative schemes of anorexia presented by various discourses. Nonetheless, while they reject popular interpretations of anorexia that focus primarily on the sickly female body and the desire for a slim, attractive figure, they repeat and internalize other interpretive schemes, namely those that focus on their mental processes and feelings. The desire to be thin is generally considered to be a manifestation of vanity; the explanation of anorexia as a consequence of mental discomfort, a troubled family background, or rebellion against the existing world order is much more favorably received in our society. However, this is not necessarily just an attempt at a more “flattering” interpretation of the illness itself. Since the authors consider the potential reader of the text during the writing process and assume that she will be a person who has experience with eating disorders, they give a socially acceptable key to the interpretation of her own problem as well. This creates a bond of trust, a relationship in which both the reader and the author can feel safe to reveal very intimate details of their lives and work together towards healing.

Happy Childhood

In the books, the authors conceive of their lives primarily in relation to their experiences with eating disorders. Only the actress Vlastina Svátková appears as a celebrity, assuming the general readers’ interest in her life. In other cases, the narrative constantly refers, explicitly or implicitly, to anorexia – even the time of the earliest childhood is reconstructed through the prism of later anorexic experiences. The narratives typically follow the axis of childhood – adolescence – anorexia – struggle with anorexia. More attention is paid to the period of adolescence, where the authors emphasize the experience of the changing female body, female physiology, and especially the recollections of the first menstruation. The “battle with anorexia” is largely won (at least for now) at the time of writing the autobiography. The only exception is Eva Steppanová, although some doubts also exist in the case of Petra Dvořáková.

Furthermore, the authors discuss the impact of anorexia on their behavior towards their loved ones and describe the conflicting feelings at the moment they decided to seek treatment. Healing and the motivation to heal never have a simple

¹⁹ Eva Steppanová, *Anorexie: Hlad po jiném světě*, pp. 9-10.

linear course; on the contrary, the desire to return to “normal life” long coexists in conflict with the urge to remain thin, and especially with the urge to control every gram of consumed food, and, through it, to control oneself and one’s life. Jendruchová, for example, explicitly names this in the passage below, in which these two opposing directions take the form of separate voices. The voice of anorexia is represented by the head, which can be seen as echoing the mind-body dualism:

The head, which remembers how it ruled the body before, counters: “You sinned a lot last night, you should skip breakfast...” No, I must not give anorexia a chance again. [...]

It’s brewing inside me. But I listen to what my body needs. [...]

It’s clear. I won this time. [...]

Lunch is coming up. “You should cheat as you sinned last night and had a big breakfast this morning”, my head tries again. I win again. What does my body say? “I had a perfectly normal breakfast. And now I’m hungry!” And so I listen to it²⁰.

The narrators also repeatedly stress that they had a positive, carefree relationship with their bodies and food in childhood. Stepanová considers herself a gourmand and a big eater – she pays attention to the above-average amount of food she regularly consumed as a child and teenage girl without gaining weight afterwards. Dvořáková writes that she loved to cook from a young age, while Jendruchová recalls eating at her grandmother’s house. Similarly, the authors did not perceive their bodies for a long time as an object that demanded more attention, adjustment or control. Moreover, Dvořáková stresses that she did not experience any split between her body and her own identity in her childhood. The dualism of body and soul that would later characterize her experience of anorexia did not exist then: “The self was the same as the body. I had a strong sense of my own identity”²¹.

The narrators describe their childhoods as mostly happy (except for Tereza Nagy Štolbová); they stress that their parents loved them. However, they often immediately add that they did not know how to express their parental love properly. The leitmotifs of the analyzed books are also the lack of separation between mother and daughter, as well as the controlling mother and the neglectful father. The narrators oscillate between being grateful to their parents for what they have given them and blaming them for their own psychological problems.

The exception is Tereza Nagy Štolbová, who in her pathos-filled book clearly sees the cause of her problem in the absence of parental (mainly maternal) love in her childhood. As a three-year-old girl, she was abandoned by both her parents, yet, in line with her essentialist understanding of gender roles, she feels abandoned

²⁰ Martina Jendruchová, *Už je to za mnou*, p. 92.

²¹ Petra Dvořáková, *Já jsem hlad*, p. 13.

primarily by her mother; she does not reflect much on her father's abandonment. She refers to her position in the world many times as "being cast out of the family": "Since childhood I remember the emptiness of my soul caused by my mother's abandonment and being cast out of the family. I missed my mother, who would protect me through her body"²². Even her surrogate parents did not provide her with the missing affection, which in turn she blames mainly on her stepmother; on the contrary, she can sympathize with her stepfather and tries to understand him.

In contrast to the reproachful and sometimes self-pitying tone of Nagy Štolbová's narrative, other authors attempt to portray their childhood as almost carefree. However, this picture has many cracks.

First Cracks

In many cases, the unproblematic relationship with oneself, and thus with one's own body, began to change only as a result of overhearing a comment by someone close to the girl who suggested that she should control her eating or pointed out her alleged shortcomings. Svátková describes a situation where her mother commented that her legs looked ridiculous in a miniskirt, which changed her perception of her own body:

And so I looked carefully, and sure enough, suddenly there was a different, new image in front of me: I look terrible, my legs are crooked!

It seemed to me that when I went out into the street in a short skirt, everyone was laughing and pointing fingers at me. That if I never wore a short dress again, maybe no one would notice my handicap...²³

Although Dvořáková recalls her mother's comment about the amount of food her daughter eats, she does not see it as a turning point in her relationship with food intake:

In my teens I didn't worry about food at all. I ate what I liked and as much as I needed. I didn't worry about my body. But I remember exactly the moment when I first realized that the question of appearance and weight is a part of life. I was eating apple strudel one night before going to sleep. My mom yelled at me not to stuff myself – don't I understand that I'll end up looking like a barrel!? It wasn't justified at all, I was at my optimum weight then. But it was the first time I realized I should be concerned about my body. Still, I don't think that this rebuke from my mom affected me in any significant way, that it was a moment that triggered something pathological²⁴.

²² Tereza Nagy Štolbová, *Dcera padajícího listí*, p. 15.

²³ Vlastina Svátková Kounická, *Modrý slon*, p. 35.

²⁴ Petra Dvořáková, *Já jsem hlad*, p. 23.

In most cases, such hurtful words are heard from the mouths of mothers. This is not surprising in a society where women are socialized to evaluate themselves and other women through the prism of their appearance and to regard physical attractiveness as a guarantee of success or personal satisfaction. In Czech society, this became intensified after the fall of communism – in the 1990s and 2000s women's bodies became a much more sexualized object than ever before. This was reflected not only in a boom of porn industry but also, for instance, in the omnipresence of sexist advertisement, where naked or half-naked female bodies are used to promote anything from a drill and washing machine, to a political party. As Alena Wagnerová noted, “[a]n important, often overlooked aspect of women's equality under socialism was that a woman was not a sexual object (unless she willingly lent herself to the role) and a woman's body was not public property”²⁵. It is only after 1989 that the female body became a commodity and women themselves became sexual objects in an unprecedented measure.

Dvořáková repeatedly mentions her mother's problematic and contradictory relationship to her own physicality and sexuality: her extreme shame at being naked or showing just a bit of bare skin, her hunching over in an attempt to hide her breasts, and her constant complaints about her wide hips and body shape in general. But this shame was also paradoxically accompanied by sexually provocative behaviour: “It seemed to me that she was actually always trying to tease people with her body and appearance, or at least to draw attention to it. I found it incredibly distasteful”²⁶. Moreover, the mother's persona often serves another function: not only does it sow the seeds of insecurity associated with the daughter's physicality, but it also becomes the basis for the daughter's identity construction, which is negatively defined in relation to the mother.

The vast majority of the authors retrospectively see the beginnings of their eating disorders not in the desire for an attractive body, but in the problems associated with family relationships, especially with the relationship with their mothers, but also in the feeling of extreme loneliness, alienation from the world and fear of the unknown. Usually, they are able to point to one specific event or period that triggered the anorexia, but they perceive it only as a point at which something that had been maturing in them for a long time culminated, mainly due to the absence of an emotional background in the family. They felt that they were living in a world in which they did not fit, in a world that seemed alien or dangerous, in which they were unsure of their place. They write about the need for love, the lack of which – or the inability to accept it – was thought to fuel anorexia.

²⁵ Alena Wagnerová, “Co přinesl a nepřinesl ženám socialistický model rovnoprávnosti – aneb nejen jesle a traktoristky” [“What the Socialist Model of Equality Did and Did Not Bring to Women, or Not Only Nurseries and Female Tractor Drivers”], in Linda Sokačová (ed.), *Gender a demokracie: 1989–2009* [*Gender and Democracy: 1989–2009*], Praha, Gender Studies, 2009, p. 18.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

I Am hunger

Food restriction and other anorexic eating habits gradually become the only constant and desirable point in the life of the writers. Thus, they are not only a kind of negative restriction, but also reduce insecurity, filling the void that the narrators believe led to the development of the disorder. The uncertainty of one's place in the world, the uncertainty associated with the inability to answer the question of who I am, disappears. This is followed by identification with anorexia, or with hunger: "Maybe I'm not a person anymore, maybe I'm anorexia. Maybe I am already the hunger, and maybe I am already a piece of something abstract and non-existent [...]"²⁷. The conceptualization of anorexia in the prose is paradoxical: at times, the illness is seen as a way to find one's own identity, to be a person (or more precisely: a woman) and to have a concrete fixed identity. At other times, it is seen as an unwanted intruder that overwhelms the "true self" and does not allow the narrators to be themselves:

Sometimes it's not me acting or speaking, it's anorexia. It's really like I'm one body in two souls. One is completely empty, flat, white. That's me. And the other is anorexia. It's black and strong and sometimes it controls me in what I think that I think²⁸.

In such moments, anorexia is an external force that takes control of the person, takes over their personality, reduces their thoughts to questions about what was (not) eaten or how many grams less/more the scale shows today. It leaves no space or energy to develop other aspects of the personality: "I realize that the illness has completely taken away my whole personality, energy, goals, plans and feelings. I don't feel anything, wish for anything, or think about anything"²⁹.

However, neither of these positions is exclusively positive or negative. Even when the narrator separates herself from her eating disorder and sees it as an alien element, there is not necessarily a redemptive epiphany. Moments of merging with anorexia are similarly ambiguous – complete identification with the illness has many positives. Stepanová, for example, recalls how, through anorexia, she gained a solid identity, a sense of stability, and was able to discern who she was:

[...] when I was on the edge of life and not eating, I was "at least" anorexic. Now I'm not healthy... but I'm not sick either. I'm somewhere in between. I'm not anorexic because I eat. I lost what I had, but I was "at least" anorexic. Now I don't even have that³⁰.

²⁷ Eva Stepanová, *Anorexie: Hlad po jiném světě*, p. 25.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 202.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 202.

The same is true for Dvořáková, for whom fasting was most often associated with positive feelings. First, it brought order, certainty, and predictability to her life: “Starvation is very strongly linked to a feeling of inner insecurity and threat. To a feeling of limitlessness. If there is a lack of fixed points and certainty in life, anorexia readily begins to replace them”³¹. Restricting food becomes a repetitive and repeatable routine, but at the same time it is firmly linked to a specific outcome – weight loss. Thus, it brings predictable consequences, and its meaning is graspable: “Food became the only area of my life where I saw a result and a clear link to how it works”³². Through not eating, at least one area of the narrator’s life was fully under her control.

Besides stability, self-starving gradually took on other positive meanings. During the course of anorexia, the narrator began to associate it with values such as purity, beauty, exclusivity, strength, and success. In contrast, she perceived eating as a failure and food as something disgusting and dirty³³. Similarly, Tereza Nagy Štolbová writes about feelings of purity and emptiness, invulnerability, strength and control over who she is³⁴. For both authors, over time, hunger became synonymous with truth, as it made the narrators’ outward appearance begin to reflect their inner state of mind:

The longer I starved, the more this form of being in the world and in my body grew through me. [...] My starvation was just a continuation of the homelessness and lovelessness that I have experienced throughout my life³⁵.

Finally, the body lives as the soul lives. It was important for me to feel that this was how my life was true. To eat was to enter into a lie, to do something that was not true³⁶.

Dvořáková gradually became addicted to hunger – it enabled her to live without lies, but it also provided her with “performance satisfaction” and gave her a sense of control. For her, hunger was a stable point and a certainty in the midst of the chaos of her son’s leukemia, dissatisfaction with her marriage, and remorse over her love affair with a Catholic priest. It seemed to be a point on which to build one’s own identity: “Hunger shaped my consciousness, defined who I was, it was my identity. And no one wants to destroy their identity. I was afraid that if I started eating, I would lose my direction in life, I wouldn’t know who I was”³⁷.

In an attempt to overcome anorexia, Dvořáková begins to search for other foundations of her identity and tries to define the boundaries of the “I”. For her,

³¹ Petra Dvořáková, *Já jsem hlad*, p. 127.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 89.

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 89-90.

³⁴ Tereza Nagy Štolbová, *Dcera padajícího listí*, pp. 130-134.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p.128.

³⁶ Petra Dvořáková, *Já jsem hlad*, p. 90.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

autoeroticism is a keyway to find her own integrity and build her identity. Autoeroticism becomes a way of escaping from a marriage in which the narrator does not feel happy, but also a way to build or find a new identity. Gender is a key part of this identity, and not only for Dvořáková.

I Am (Not) a Woman

The way in which the author of *Já jsem hlad* searches for her “female identity” is strongly influenced by the aforementioned reading of the Jungian psychoanalyst and poet Clarissa Pinkola Estés. In her *Women Who Ran with Wolves* we observe a kind of reappropriation of an essentialist, strongly biologizing understanding of femininity. Here, wildness, fearlessness, and a close connection to one’s own body become a force to restore women’s forgotten courage and free them from the shackles of cultural and social norms. In the excerpt quoted at the end of the previous subsection, Dvořáková juxtaposes concepts such as “body”, “femininity”, and “nature”. For her, autoeroticism becomes a means of constructing her own female identity, which would have clear boundaries, give the desired security and safety, and whose source lays in oneself (as a bodily being), not someone or something external.

Across all the books analyzed, the changes that the authors have undergone in their perception of their gender since childhood are evident, and these changes follow a very similar pattern. Some of the authors verbalize them directly, while in others they are visible only in hints.

For all of the authors, adolescence is a key period, but in retrospect, they also look at their childhood through a gender lens. They perceive starvation as a kind of protest against growing up and becoming an (adult) woman. They stress that they did not fit into the “girl world”³⁸, or they see themselves as a creative, impulsive, spirited, and opinionated child who liked to tinker but without being “boyish”³⁹. We observe here the authors’ attempt to emphasize that their appearance, and especially their behavior, did not fit the model of a “good, quiet, modest little girl”. However, they reflect this only retrospectively in adulthood. They present childhood as a period in which gender difference was not important to them, they did not know that gender could be a meaning-making and normative category. As a result, they could behave spontaneously, and their temperament was not suppressed by gender norms.

The period of adolescence, when the individual undergoes significant physical changes and is exposed to new social expectations, brings a significant change. These relate to norms of behavior and to the relationship with oneself. In this

³⁸ Tereza Nagy Štolbová, *Dcera padajícího listí*, p. 71.

³⁹ Petra Dvořáková, *Já jsem hlad*, p. 12.

period, the authors mention the experience of the first menstruation and the intensely observed physical changes as determinants. The authors also began to perceive womanhood as something defined primarily by the body, evaluating it as undesirable. Being a woman began to mean “having feminine curves” and, above all, bleeding regularly and having to be ashamed of this bleeding and of oneself. Importantly, however, the narrators’ shame only emerges as a consequence of their families’, especially their mothers’, reaction to their first menses. In almost all the books, the mother acts as the person who teaches her daughter that monthly bleeding must be hidden and cannot be talked about.

Gradually, the daughters internalize the embarrassment and shame they observe in their mother, and the object of these emotions eventually becomes the entire rounded body they perceive as synonymous with femininity at puberty. Suddenly, they are different in outward appearance and physiology from the boys with whom they lived in the same world in childhood. Now they look and act differently. Restricting food thus becomes a way of prolonging childhood and postponing the sexual difference in time:

I don’t want to be a woman. I don’t want to be healthy. I want to be “healed” but not healthy. There’s a difference between the two. I would like to have children one day, but I can’t imagine myself in the role of an adult. The idea of getting my period again one day drives me absolutely insane. I hate the blood coming out of my body, it’s disgusting to the max. Same with noticeable breasts. Is it really me, or is it anorexia already?⁴⁰

Denying oneself nutrients is also an opportunity to punish one’s body and oneself as a woman. In fact, the authors imply in various ways that an anorexic woman is not a full woman. Jendruchová enumerates the steps she takes to recover and to become “a full woman again”⁴¹. For her, healing, which includes the practice of hormonal yoga, is a path back to womanhood. Tereza Nagy Štolbová writes about aversion to the female body and to adult women in general:

I used to hide my body under baggy clothes. I avoided the world of women and mothers. Both provoked a deep resentment in me, activated by memories of the wounds this world had brought me. I distrusted women and did not want to belong to them⁴².

For the authors anorexia was an escape from oneself as a woman. But what did “being a woman” mean to them? What exactly were they rejecting? The authors gradually discovered new connotations of the word “woman” that were no longer limited to specific physicality. They then often interpreted their healing as an understanding and acceptance of a “true womanhood” that they had previously

⁴⁰ Eva Stepanová, *Anorexie: Hlad po jiném světě*, p. 203.

⁴¹ Michala Jendruchová, *Už je to za mnou*, p. 90.

⁴² Tereza Nagy Štolbová, *Dcera padajícího listí*, p. 130.

either rejected or misunderstood. But this “true womanhood” did not necessarily mean the same thing to everyone.

In Dvořáková’s case, it is the aforementioned wildness, the untameability, which she fully realized through reading *Women Who Ran with Wolves*. The reappropriation of the essentialist perception of womanhood ultimately helps her to defy the social norms of a good housekeeper and a smiling wife who takes care of the household and the children. It provides her with a tool that allows her to define herself even against the expectations of her husband:

I think he saw in me a princess, not only in appearance but also in character. A good doll with long hair. Nice and smiling. He didn’t want to see my inner savage. He overlooked it, and so I suppressed it and hid it too. I wanted to be a good and exemplary wife. He didn’t want my extravagance and I rejected it for him. I wanted to be orderly. I wanted to conform to his idea. I was convinced that’s what I was supposed to be. I didn’t know that the real femininity was hidden in the savage in me. And that if I suppress the savage, I suppress the real woman, I suppress my nature⁴³.

Through her identification with the archetypal *la loba*, Dvořáková can overcome the limitations of the social perception of the female role, reject her husband’s expectations, define herself in opposition to her own mother, and return to the way she perceived herself as a child, at a time when she did not have to correct her character according to imposed gender norms. Nevertheless, for her, femininity remains closely linked to a specific physicality, which she no longer rejects, but rather perceives as almost sacred, thanks to her reading of Estés. She considers childbirth and postpartum complications to be the moment of “female initiation” – for through them she was able to directly experience the pain and filth that she believes are defining for women⁴⁴.

Tereza Nagy Štolbová and Vlastina Svátková also perceive the experience of childbirth and motherhood as a kind of milestone in their lives and in their way of understanding what it means to be a woman. However, these experiences have different functions for them. For the author of *Dcera padajícího listí*, childbirth was pivotal in that it changed her attitude towards her own body:

For the first time in my life I began to notice my body with joy. A dark period of self-harm and hatred directed against my body was over. [...] My body made possible the miracle of conception. My body is good. It can receive love and be loved. Even by me⁴⁵.

⁴³ Petra Dvořáková, *Já jsem hlad*, pp. 61-62.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

⁴⁵ Tereza Nagy Štolbová, *Dcera padajícího listí*, p. 153.

The experience of motherhood replaces the space that starvation used to fill. Through motherhood, her hunger for love is satisfied; and she can finally become a woman⁴⁶.

While Dvořáková emphasizes the connection of childbirth and motherhood with a kind of original wildness, for Nagy Štolbová these experiences provide self-love based on the traditional role of women as mothers. The necessity and ability to provide love to someone else (a son) becomes more significant than finding maternal love for oneself in the outside world. For it is through the necessity and ability to care for her own child that she finds this within herself.

Both authors' interpretations of these experiences are quite unambiguous; they fit into a project of a comprehensive grasp of one's own life, which, despite various digressions, has a linear development and tends towards wholeness. The situation is different for Vlastina Svátková, for whom the question of what it means to be a woman returns many times. Just as in the case of previous authors, the experience of childbirth helps her to accept her own body⁴⁷, but the role of mother and wife is often at odds with her specific idea of an emancipated woman. Svátková's narrative is built on contradictory discourses. On the one hand, there is an exacerbated heteronormativity and an acceptance of the perception of women as submissive homemakers and wives:

Lately I haven't been writing or creating much, I felt empty... With my son in my arms, I fought for my rights. I grumbled that I was the one who had to do everything [at home]. That I was a maid and no one appreciated it. That I hadn't received a flower in a long time. That he [= her husband] wouldn't take a plate under his food, showing his indifference. That he doesn't desire me, that he must have another woman, that he doesn't help me and talks rubbish, that he has dashed all my hopes and dreams... Full of anger, despair, and remorse, I looked at my son's face, which was squealing like a chick seeking safety. In his face I saw my reflection, when as a child on my knees I begged my parents not to fight anymore... [...]

I saw the past and found the strength to change the present. Tears streamed down my face and washed away all pride, the desire to fight and win over my man. I put on a sexy dress, used red lipstick for the first time, and began to vacuum up the crumbs left on the floor by my husband. Instead of reproaching him, I stroked his hair and told him I was proud of him⁴⁸.

This perception of the woman as a housewife who maintains order in the home while still keeping her body beautiful and attractive to the male gaze appears relatively late in Svátková's narrative. In fact, the author links her eating disorder to her denial of the traditional female role and identification with the emancipated, independent woman. The second – and contradictory – discourse on which her

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 154.

⁴⁷ Vlastina Svátková, *Modrý slon*, pp. 98-102.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 142-143.

narrative rests is a specific form of liberal feminism, which comes to the fore in the repeatedly varied confession, “For many years I ‘fought’ for my women’s rights”⁴⁹. The author reflects many times on her earlier belief that “a woman must be stronger than a man, tough, resolute, unyielding. A woman must fight a man, fight for her rights, her pride and a good life, or she will live it all unhappy and disappointed like my mother”⁵⁰. Gradually, she concludes that for a long time she did not understand what it meant to be a woman: “I felt I was a strong woman, and yet I was far from knowing what it was to be a WOMAN: gentle, kind, smiling, wise, praising, caring, hospitable, generous, mysterious, modest, loving, feminine...”⁵¹.

What Dvořáková had to break away from as the cultural shackles that bind “true womanhood” is, for Svátková, the essence of womanhood. In *Modrý slon*, she describes her journey to this realization, yet for all her attempts at linearity and consistency, we find here significant cracks, “failures” to live up to that conservative ideal. Svátková writes that she learns the role of mother, housekeeper, and wife, but at the same time often fails, which leads her to remorse⁵². Her efforts are inconsistent, as she often overlooks the unattainability of this ideal. She repeatedly argues that the ideal of the emancipated woman, which she has followed for most of her life, is flawed and that true womanhood can only be realized in the role of a caring wife and mother.

Relational Character of Writing and Identity

All the authors struggle with their own gender – social expectations and norms connected to being a woman lead them to a problem of defining themselves as persons. They try to construct a stable identity for themselves but fail as long as they construct it in the spirit of the abstract Western stereotype of the person as an autonomous actor, completely independent of interpersonal relationships, isolated from social influences and uninfluenced by biological forces. Only the recognition that the subject is not a disembodied mind, but someone who experiences desire, feels emotions, and whose identity is always relational, offers a chance for success.

Overcoming anorexia thus requires a radical change in the understanding of what it means to be oneself. It requires acknowledging a greater interconnectedness with the world around, but also with one’s own body, one’s own emotions, feelings, and fears. It entails a rethinking of all the relationships one finds oneself in: to oneself, to one’s body, to family, to loved ones, to friends.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 142.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 153.

Also, to hunger itself, which, as an absence, can no longer fulfill the role of substitute or basis of identity that it used to fulfill. It no longer provides the basis for any bonds and relationships; it hides an emptiness and inertia. Thus, refusing food (and often sex as well as other forms of intimacy) does not lead to a productive delineation of the boundaries of the self. Instead of autonomy, independence, and power, it ultimately offers isolation and alienation. Moreover, the depletion caused by hunger and lack of nutrients sooner or later makes it impossible to live a fulfilling life, placing one in a kind of in-between space that is neither life nor death: "I wanted to live, but it seemed that I could not live with anorexia because I was at the end of my strength, and at the same time I could not live without it"⁵³.

The experience of anorexia has thus led all the authors to extreme isolation. Paradoxically, this opened up the possibility of rethinking the many relationships in which they found themselves. It made them seek a balance between autonomy and the external, the potentially hurtful and unpredictable, which enabled them to start building their own identity on firmer foundations than hunger and absence.

Dvořáková explicitly names this process. She gradually abandons the construction of her own identity as independent of the outside world. She begins to realize that the *self* is always necessarily and unavoidably situated in multiple relationships. At the same time, she is reassessing her faith:

The essence of Christianity is only closeness with God, entering into intimacy and a true relationship with him. [...] I have come to know that confession, the sacrament of reconciliation, is purifying. But not for purity itself, but precisely because of the bond that can be created between man and God⁵⁴.

Purity here is no longer a goal that ultimately isolates a person from the world but becomes a means of establishing a relationship with what is external to the person – in Dvořáková's case, a relationship with God.

The process of autobiographical writing itself is also essential to the processing of the anorexic experience, as it helped the authors to name their own emotions, fears, attitudes, and to reinterpret diverse relationships or pasts. Moreover, it allowed them to establish interpersonal connections in several ways. First, almost all of the authors address someone close to them in their prose and try to symbolically establish a dialogue: for instance, Nagy Štolbová included fragments addressed to her mother, Dvořáková included letters or messages to an unspecified Joss. Second, writing prose with the intention of publishing it presupposes the existence of a reader, which establishes another kind of relation. Authors have to trust their readership to some extent, which feeds back to them and also has implications in extra-literary practice.

⁵³ Petra Dvořáková, *Já jsem hlad*, p. 93.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

In addition, the writing process that resulted in the publication of prose also became the starting point for a new identification – identification as a writer. For Petra Dvořáková, *Já jsem hlad* was her second published book, the first one, *Proměněné sny [Dreams Transformed]* (2006) receiving the prestigious Magnesia Litera Prize, and today she is a very prolific writer associated with the acclaimed publishing house Host. Tereza Nagy Štolbová was the only one who later chose a career not as a writer but as a therapist, a profession that strongly influenced the vocabulary and psychoanalytic approach of her book. Michala Jendruchová later published other prose pieces, all of which draw heavily on her own experiences with eating disorders and whose main characters deal with issues related to the acceptance of their own bodies and its needs. The actress Vlastina Svátková also continues to write, and her writing shows a strong tendency to pass on her experiences to women who suffer from problems with self-acceptance. The youngest of the authors, Eva Stepanová, has not yet published another text, but – as her Facebook profile suggests – she is an aspiring teacher of creative writing.

The process of autobiographical writing helped the authors to understand formative experience retrospectively. Moreover, based on extra-literary sources such as interviews or Facebook posts, the fact that their texts were published and found an audience from whom they subsequently received feedback, can be seen to have brought them important empowerment. It gave them the feeling that someone needed them, that they could be of help – and it was with this intention that they originally embarked on writing.

One of the oldest functions of narrative is thus manifested here, namely its ability to unify, to bring together what is scattered and dispersed⁵⁵. That unification takes place on at least two levels. Firstly, it is that ability to establish a relationship between the narrator and the audience (or the readership), an interpersonal bonding. Secondly, the unification takes place at the level of the construction of one's own story and self, as narrative identity theories remind us:

Narrative provides continuity and coherence to the subject's identity and, due to its temporal character, enables the person in the story to connect the different phases of life. Storytelling is not merely a representation of identity, but much more the creation of identity in the narrative act itself⁵⁶.

This tendency towards continuity and coherence is also the reason why we can perceive a certain degree of simplification of the ambivalence associated with

⁵⁵ Anna Pekaniec, *Czy w tej autobiografii jest kobieta? Kobięca literatura dokumentu osobistego od początku XIX wieku do wybuchu II wojny światowej [Is There a Woman in This Autobiography? Women's Personal Documentary Literature from the Early 19th Century to the Outbreak of World War II]*, Kraków, Księgarnia Akademicka, 2013, p. 96.

⁵⁶ Klára Soukupová, *Autobiografie v kontextu teorie pozicionality [Autobiography in the Context of Positionality Theory]*. Dissertation, Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy, Ústav české literatury a komparatistiky, 2019, pp. 27-28.

anorexia in the analyzed narratives. In many cases, anorexia itself can be interpreted in terms of trauma, i.e., as a powerful psychosomatic experience which can alter memories and challenge the continuity of the individual. The autobiographical writing helps to rebuild this continuity.

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BEING A WOMAN AS A WOUND. CZECH WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING ON ANOREXIA NERVOSA (Abstract)

In postcommunist countries, there has been a rise in autobiographical testimonials about eating disorders (ED), mostly written by women. Women also make up the majority of people suffering ED, especially *anorexia nervosa* – a disorder that reflects an ambivalence about femininity and is closely linked to capitalism, consumer society and social inequalities. In neoliberal capitalism, thinness takes on certain moral qualities such as self-control, moderation, and independence. *Anorexia nervosa* can be seen as an exaggerated performance and embodiment of those qualities that, on a psychic level, are

linked to trauma: on the one hand, traumatic events might trigger it; on the other hand, the experience of ED itself is often traumatizing. In my article, I look at how this traumatic experience is transformed through writing. The process of autobiographical writing helped the authors to name their own emotions, fears, and attitudes, and to reinterpret various relationships or past events. Moreover, it allowed them to establish interpersonal connections in several ways. Firstly, almost all the authors directly address someone in their prose and try to symbolically establish a dialogue: e.g., they include fragments addressed to their mother or a close friend (Petra Dvořáková, Tereza Nagy Štolbová). Secondly, writing prose with the intention of publishing it presupposes the existence of a reader – another kind of relation is therefore established. Moreover, the writing process that resulted in the publication of autobiographical prose also became for most of the authors the starting point for a new identification – identification as a writer. This is another type of relation that is established within oneself. Through the establishment of relations and identifications, then, writing becomes an important part of healing.

Keywords: eating disorder, *anorexia nervosa*, neoliberal capitalism, autobiography, writing as healing.

A FI FEMEIE CA O RANĂ. SCRIERI AUTOBIOGRAFICE ALE AUTOARELOR CEHE DESPRE *ANOREXIA NERVOSA*

(Rezumat)

În țările postcomuniste, a crescut numărul de mărturii autobiografice – scrise în special de femei – despre tulburările de alimentație. Femeile reprezintă, de asemenea, majoritatea persoanelor care suferă de tulburări de alimentație, în special de *anorexia nervosa* – o tulburare care reflectă o așa-zisă ambivalență a feminității și care este strâns legată de capitalism, de societatea de consum și de inegalitățile sociale. În capitalismul neoliberal, însușirea de a fi slab/subțire dobândește anumite conotații morale, fiind asociată cu autocontrolul, moderația și independența. *Anorexia nervosa* poate fi văzută ca o performanță exagerată și o întruchipare a respectivelor calități care, la nivel psihic, sunt, de fapt, legate de traume: pe de o parte, evenimentele traumatiche pot declanșa această boală; pe de altă parte, tulburarea de alimentație este adesea traumatizantă. În articolul meu, analizez modul în care această experiență traumatizantă este transformată prin scris. Procesul de scriere autobiografică le-a ajutat pe autoare să-și numească propriile emoții, temeri și atitudini, precum și să reinterpreteze diverse relații sau evenimente din trecut. Mai mult, le-a permis să stabilească legături interpersonale în mai multe moduri. În primul rând, aproape toate autoarele se adresează direct cuiva și încearcă să stabilească, în mod simbolic, un dialog: de exemplu, ele includ fragmente adresate mamei sau unui prieten apropiat (Petra Dvořáková, Tereza Nagy Štolbová). În al doilea rând, scrierea de proză cu intenția de a o publica presupune existența unui cititor – astfel, se stabilește un alt tip de relație. Mai mult, procesul de scriere care a dus la publicarea prozei autobiografice a devenit, de asemenea, pentru majoritatea autoarelor, punctul de plecare pentru asumarea unei noi identități – cea de scriitoare. Acesta e un alt tip de relație, care se stabilește în raport cu propria interioritate. Prin configurarea unor relații și a unor noi identități, scrisul devine, deci, un proces de vindecare.

Cuvinte-cheie: tulburare alimentară, *anorexia nervosa*, capitalism neoliberal, autobiografie, scrisul ca vindecare.