TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://www.textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

Writing disorder: the harmful and healing effects of writing in Hornbacher's **Wasted** *and other anorexia memoirs*

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To cite this article: Grange, H. (2021). Writing disorder: the harmful and healing effects of writing in Hornbacher's *Wasted* and other anorexia memoirs. *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses*, 25(2): 1-16.

General editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Julienne van Loon, Ross Watkins & Shady Cosgrove

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Abstract:

A growing body of evidence points to the potential of life writing about anorexia to foster "disordered reading" practices in certain readers (Seaber, 2016), with particular concerns raised about the breakthrough eating disorder memoir, Marya Hornbacher's *Wasted* (1998). With this article, I shift the focus from readers to authors, exploring the positive and negative health consequences of writing as depicted in *Wasted* and three anorexia memoirs by British authors, selected on the basis of their meta-literary reflections.

On the one hand, these memoirists describe various forms of what I term "disordered writing", or writing that is implicated in the perpetuation of illness. On the other, these memoirists accord writing a role in recovery: affording metacognitive insights, it allows them to challenge the "anorexic voice" and nurture a voice of their own. I suggest that in texts that ascribe both harmful and healing effects to writing, the co-ordination of narrative voice has consequences for narrators' reliability. Where the three British memoirists clearly differentiate between experiencing and narrating "I"s, and structure their texts to perform recovery, Hornbacher's highly ambiguous project to "translate" her body leaves ample scope, I argue, for "disordered reading".

Biographical note:

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Keywords: anorexia, eating disorders, memoir, embodiment, recovery

Introduction

In *How to Disappear Completely*, Kelsey Osgood makes a provocative claim about memoirs and other autobiographical writings about anorexia. Not only are such narratives "instructive" for readers living with an eating disorder or at risk of developing one, but "the writer is probably aware of this, and getting something out of it him or herself" (2013, p. 27). Anecdotal evidence of anorexia memoirs harming readers abounds: memoirists themselves report delving into life writing about anorexia for "thinspiration" (eg, Bowman 2006, p. 82; Osgood, 2013, p. 24), and few mouse-clicks are required to find similar testimony online (Thomas et al, 2006, p. 419). Recent survey data, moreover, suggest that reading anorexia memoirs may indeed have detrimental effects on "vulnerable" cohorts (Shaw & Homewood, 2015; Troscianko, 2018).

Osgood's charge that authors set out to lead their readers astray deliberately, however, runs counter to the stated aims of anorexia memoirists. These are invariably altruistic: to give those living with anorexia and their loved ones validation, hope, and a sense of connection (eg, Bowman, 2006, p. xv; Evans, 2011, p. 169), or else to provide a cautionary tale (eg, Hornbacher, 1998, p. 7). Even authors who describe mining other narratives for "tricks" implore their readers *not* to emulate and compete with their eating disordered behaviours (eg, Evans, 2011, p. 19; Tucker 2015, pp. xi–xiii). Increasingly, they strive to tell their tale without resorting to weight, calorie-counts and lurid descriptions or images in a bid to limit triggering potential (eg, Evans, 2011, p. 19; Tucker 2015, pp. xii–xiii). They will tell the story they wish they had been able to read when ill, one which places the emphasis not on illness but on recovery (eg, Bowman 2006, p. 255).

If concerns have been raised about eating disorder memoirs as a genre, discussion has tended towards one work in particular, Marya Hornbacher's *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*. First published in 1998 when Hornbacher was twenty-three, *Wasted* charts the author's troubled relationship with food, sex, and drugs in vivid detail and searing prose that earned her a Pulitzer Prize nomination and launched her career as a journalist and best-selling writer. At the beginning of *Wasted*, Hornbacher writes, "I would do anything to keep people from going where I went. Writing this book was the only thing I could think of" (1998, p. 7). Yet, just as Hornbacher points to the role reading *The Best Little Girl in the World* played in her development of anorexia (1998, p. 43), other memoirists – Osgood included (2013, p. 24) – point to the pernicious effects of *Wasted* on them. Such claims are echoed in pro-recovery spaces on the internet, while in pro-anorexia fora *Wasted* has acquired cult status as "the eating disorder bible" (Johns, 2009, p. 10). Seaber (2016) disagrees with Osgood with regards to authorial intention: Hornbacher did not set out to cause harm. However, she identifies several rhetorical mechanisms in *Wasted* – among them the representation of anorexia as a positive identity category, linking anorexia with intelligence and success, and repeated invitations to the reader to assume an anorexic subject position – that could unintentionally foster what she terms "disordered reading". This she defines as an alternative interpretative mode reconfiguring narratives normatively understood to be negative or cautionary as aspirational (p. 490).

In this article, I explore what writers of anorexia memoirs "get out of it", albeit not in the sense intended by Osgood. My focus is not on the effects of memoirs on the *reader*, but on their effects on the *writer* (although, as we shall see, the two are inevitably interlinked).

While the relationship between anorexia and writing has attracted considerable attention from scholars of fiction and auto-fiction (eg Ellmann, 1993; Heywood, 1996; Meuret, 2007), this is an under studied topic, I contend, in scholarship on memoir. “Memoir” is a slippery term. With its popular resonances, it has sometimes been dismissed in literary scholarship as inferior to “autobiography” (Couser 2012, p. 18), although some critics point to metaliterary commentary and writerly text as characteristic of the genre (Smith & Watson, 2001/2010, p. 4; Couser, 2012, pp. 50–51). Here I follow Yagoda in using “memoir” and “autobiography” more or less interchangeably to refer to “a book understood by its author, its publisher, and its readers to be a factual account of the author’s life”, while recognising that “memoir” may cover only a portion of that life (2009, p. 1).

The current memoir boom that began in the 1990s has yielded hundreds of titles on anorexia. Alongside Hornbacher’s *Wasted*, three texts by young British authors are analysed here, selected from a corpus of forty. The earliest of these, first published in 2006, is Grace Bowman’s *A Shape of My Own: A Memoir of Anorexia and Recovery* (the paperback issued a year later was titled *Thin*). After briefly relating her upbringing in the north east of England, Bowman recounts her experiences of anorexia as a teenager and subsequent recovery at university and during her twenties. The second memoir is *Becoming John: Anorexia’s Not Just for Girls* (2011), in which the Welsh-born author, John Evans, interweaves the diary he wrote during a second period of inpatient treatment with his life story through to his late twenties. He provides a long-neglected male perspective of his experience living with anorexia, a topic beginning to receive more scholarly attention (Bartel, 2020). The final memoir considered here, Nancy Tucker’s *The Time in Between: A Memoir of Hunger and Hope*, was published in 2015. It tells of Tucker’s struggles with anorexia during her teenage years, before she “switched” to bulimia at the age of eighteen.

The four narratives examined here are recounted, for the most part, from a perspective after the most critical phase of illness, that is, from a position of relative recovery. Before beginning to read in earnest, the reader is informed by paratexts that Hornbacher has decided “to find her way back” from “reality’s dark side” (1998, blurb on back cover); Bowman’s story comes with “a happy ending” (2006, p. x); Evans “has begun to turn his life around” (2011, blurb); and Tucker is “now on the road to recovery” (2011, blurb). In narratological terms, we expect something akin to a Bildungsroman, the gap between the two voices of the autobiographical person – the (ill) experiencing self and (recovering) narrating self – gradually closing (Couser, 2012, p. 172). These memoirs have been chosen not because they are representative of anorexia memoirs as a genre, but because they reflect to some extent on the role of writing in closing that gap.

I start by examining the representation of anorexia in these memoirs as a silencing of the self by the “anorexic voice”, and the representation of recovery as recuperation of selfhood at the expense of that voice. In the second section, I consider how these authors portray anorexia as a *figurative* form of writing, before examining the role accorded to *literal* writing in giving “voice” to anorexia (what I term “disordered writing”) and fostering a renewed sense of self in recovery. If all four memoirists point to writing’s potential both to harm and to heal the eating disordered author, they differ, I contend, in their co-ordination of narrative voices. As I argue in the final part of this article, this has significant implications for the truth claims of a narrator and the potential of a text to promote “disordered reading” practices.

The self and the "anorexic voice"

At the beginning of *Wasted*, Hornbacher looks back at her experience of anorexia as if watching "a badly scripted action flick" in which she stars as both hero and villain (1998, p. 10). She imagines being held hostage by "[her] double image, the evil skinny chick who hisses, *Don't eat*" (p. 10), later called "the bitch in [her] head" (p. 286). Bowman, Evans and Tucker go one step further than Hornbacher, interpolating short dramatic texts – variously labelled "plays" or "scenes" – that stage dialogues between a villainous Inside Voice expressing eating disordered thoughts and other internal voices that are heroic, but not always strong enough. In all four memoirs, the thoughts attributed to the villain of the piece will be set off typographically through italicisation, not just in dramatic scenes, but throughout the narrative.

The attribution of eating disordered thoughts to an "anorexic voice" has long been recognised as a common feature of the experiences of people with anorexia: in her classic study, Hilde Bruch refers to anorexia's "internal dictator" (1978, p. 9). Such "externalisation" of the eating disordered voice has been advocated as part of some treatment programmes as a means of encouraging separation of illness and self, though not without criticism (see eg, Higbed & Fox, 2010, p. 321; Pugh, 2016; Pugh & Waller, 2017). The memoirists whose writings are studied here chart the onset and development of their illness in terms of the emergence and strengthening of a voice commanding them to restrict their food intake and perform compensatory practices such as over-exercising. Starting softly, it eventually becomes so loud that it "drowned out everything else" (Hornbacher, 1998, p. 69), manifesting as "a constant pressuring, pulsing voice" (Bowman, 2006, p. 26), impossible to assuage (Evans, 2011, p. 29). Tucker hears what she refers to as "The Voice" for the first time at the age of nine or ten while completing a school exercise in biology. Tasked with listing what she wants in life beyond her basic needs, she hears a voice instructing her to write "*I want to be thin*" (2015, p. 22). That voice will proceed to "grow and grow as my physical body shrinks and shrinks" (p. 48). Before long, her wish to become thin has indeed become a need.

The anorexic voice promises a sense of self – and I use this term to designate Niesser's "extended self", the self of memory and anticipation (1988, p. 36) – that is independent from the body. Hornbacher sees this fantasy of disembodied selfhood as the logical conclusion of Cartesian privileging of mind over body; anorexia, she suggests, is "the history of Western culture made manifest" (1998, p. 124). This "attempt to find an identity" (p. 6), however, leads ultimately to a complete dispossession of the self. As the volume of their "internal dictator" increases, memoirists report that their sense of being an "I" diminishes. Bowman is commanded into silence by anorexia (2006, p. 38). As if infected by a virus, her thoughts and words are transformed until all she does is ventriloquise her illness (p. 131). Tucker is likewise reduced to mimicking The Voice, "with its unparalleled ability to push a volley of lies out of my mouth with as much vigour as an expulsion of vomit" (2015, pp. 48–49). Eventually, the experiencing "I" in these memoirs finds itself incapable of distinguishing the anorexic voice from its own sense of self. "The Voice has swallowed the rest of my brain up. It has become me," Tucker reflects (2015, p. 80). "I am you", Evans hears his anorexia proclaim (2011, p. 120).

The use of *narrative* voice by these memoirists neatly conveys the loss of selfhood felt by the experiencing "I". Lejeune suggests that use of the third-person in autobiography should not be considered "an indirect manner of talking about the self", but points rather to the "inescapable duality of the grammatical 'person'" (1989, p. 33). In *Wasted*, however, the third-person can reflect anorexia's promise to confer an identity. Recalling her desire as a fourteen-year-old to use disordered eating to "make up someone new" prompts Hornbacher to shift from first- to third-person, taking us through a day in the life of "the girl" fabricated anew (1998, pp. 85–87). Bowman opts for the third-person for three of the seven sections of her memoir. We will come to her reasons for doing so later on in her narrative in due course, but part one, which tells her story up to age nineteen, appears to mirror "Grace's" own feelings of objectification. As a child she develops a habit of talking about herself "as if she were a third person" (2006, p. 49), as if speaking on behalf of an elderly person wrongly assumed to be unable to speak for themselves (p. 69). For her part, Tucker sticks to the first-person throughout. She stages her disappearance from the text typographically, however: the font-size decreases as she realises that the only solution to her contradictions is "to get smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller" (2015, p. 99).

In her study of *Wasted*'s rhetoric, Seaber notes Hornbacher's prolific use of the second-person, which serves to elide the experiencing "I" with the reader, situating us in an anorexic subject-position (2016, p. 496). Bowman and Evans employ the second-person to different effect. As the anorexic voice comes to dominate the narrated-"I", it ostensibly wrestles control of the narrative away from the memoirist. In sections Bowman titles "Game" and "Game On" (2006, pp. 27–34, 232–235) and Evans's "Anorexia's Call" (2011, pp. 119–120), memoirist and reader are addressed as "you". The only "I" that remains belongs to the anorexic voice.

Just as the four memoirs examined here chart the aggravation of anorexia symptoms in terms of an increasingly authoritarian anorexic voice, they represent recovery as the ability to challenge that voice. In the closing pages of *Wasted*, Hornbacher sketches out what "success" now looks like to her: "You eat your goddamn Cheerios and bicker with the bitch in your head who keeps telling you you're fat and weak: Shut *up*, you say, I'm busy, leave me alone" (1998, p. 286). Likewise, recovery, for Evans, means being able to "ignore" the anorexic voice even as it grows louder with weight gain (2011, pp. 106, 116), while Bowman understands it as the ability to "reject" it outright (2006, p. 203), and Tucker the ability to "block … your ears" to it (2015, p. 345). Noting and heeding voices – internal or external – that contest the dominance of the anorexic voice is important here. Bowman, for example, writes of an emerging compassionate voice that asks, simply enough, how she is doing (2006, pp. 248–249). Tucker, meanwhile, registers the return of the "hushed murmur" of her Other Voice, long silenced by anorexia (2015, p. 207), and Evans notes the need to let in "other voices" if he is to make progress during his inpatient stay (2011, p. 36).

"The task of psychotherapy in anorexia", according to Bruch, "is to help a patient in her [sic] search for autonomy and self-directed identity" (1978, p. 143). With the power of the anorexic voice waning, the stage is set for a recuperation of selfhood. Evans defines recovery, in terms echoing Bruch, as "freedom from the thoughts, to make my own decisions, to choose what I want, to be the person I can be" (2011, pp. 37–38). He initially sees this project as a nostalgic one, a bid to return to his "real", pre-anorexic self (p. 81), but comes to realise that that "John" has gone forever, that his recovery must instead be future-oriented (p. 134).

Tucker consistently looks forwards, not back: her search in recovery is for "a new Voice: one entirely your own" (2015, p. 345). For Hornbacher and Bowman, more so than for Evans and Tucker, the recovered self is embodied. They look to the body as the physical foundation for their new selves, in a striking repudiation of Cartesian splitting. Hornbacher's task in recovery is "to understand myself as more than a brain attached to a bundle of bones" (1998, p. 5). She begins her memoir with a primordial yell, as she seizes "strength, weight, voice" from silence and erasure (p. 2). Recovery for Bowman is likewise characterised by a return to the body (2006, p. 240). It will be an act of reincarnation (p. 246).

Anorexia as symbolic writing

In the previous section, I outlined how anorexia memoirists chart the progression of their illness in terms of an "anorexic voice" that promises to confer a sense of self independence from the body. Here, I consider how Hornbacher, Bowman and Tucker – Evans's *Becoming John* is the notable exception – figure this fantasy of disembodied selfhood as an act of writing. For the three women authors, disembodying the self is an artistic act. Hornbacher defines it as a feat of self-creation (1998, p. 231). Bowman initially rebuffs treatment, preferring to be "the artist of myself" (2006, p. 83). Tucker, meanwhile, imagines herself as a hunger artist in a cage, staging her very own disappearing act (2015, pp. 192–193). More specifically, however, the anorexic body is represented in these three memoirs in textual terms, the visual spectacle of the body functioning as a substitute for verbal expression. To use Meuret's term, the body becomes "a carnal text" (2007, p. 54). "The body finds a language to discuss things which cannot be articulated, or which haven't yet been acknowledged or explored," writes Bowman (2006, p. 59). Or, as Hornbacher puts it, "some of us use the body to convey the things for which we cannot find words" (1998, p. 125). There is engagement here, to varying degrees, with feminist discourses that read anorexia not so much as the inscription of patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty on women's bodies (eg, Wolf 1990), but as subversion and renunciation of those ideals through parodic performance. Embodying an extreme version of stereotyped femininity, the anorexic woman "caricatures the messages beamed at all women" (Orbach 1986, p. 30), performing "a form of protest at the social meaning of the female body" (Grosz 1994, p. 40). At least in Hornbacher's case, however, the protest performed through the body is not the subconscious rebellion posited by theorists but a deliberate strategy (note how Hornbacher implies active *use* of the body). Here, the "carnal text" is harnessed as an expression of the individual's sovereignty over their corporeality.

The anorexic body, however, remains (as Heywood has put it) "an unreadable text, a system of signs that refuses to signify" (1996, p. 64). Anorexia may be represented as an act of writing in these memoirs, but it ultimately comes to be figured as its opposite, as an act of wholesale erasure. Physical erasure is initially posited as a prerequisite for Hornbacher to make herself anew (1998, p. 90), but the outcome is the erasure of her sense of self (p. 134). Similarly, "the blank spaces in the mirror where my body had once been" (p. 94) may previously have promised an identity, but they ultimately result only in further blankness: "Now there was no self at all. I was a blank" (p. 266). Bowman writes about lost agency in similarly writerly terms: "I was like a blank sheet on which this illness had inscribed itself" (2006, p. 133).

Writing disorder: disordered writing?

Anorexia is alternately treated as a figurative act of writing and one of erasure in these memoirs, but the relationship between illness and writing is also explored on a more literal level. On one hand, anorexia is represented as "the enemy of writing" (Waldman, 2015). Hornbacher attributes her inability to engage in "real writing, my own writing", to a loss of selfhood: "I'd lost the sense of first-person, the sense of being in the world that writing requires. I guess I had nothing to say for myself" (1998, p. 261). Sworn to secrecy by the "voice" of her illness, Bowman stops writing in her journal, resolving "to hold on to her words with all the power that she can muster" (2006, p. 26). For her part, Tucker finally puts down her pen after realising that her writing had "spooled into nothing but a line of gibberish" (2015, p. 203). Evans reveals that his anorexia "had a brilliant time with this book, telling me at every turn that it's boring, that no-one will read it" (2011, p. 167). If he carries on writing, it is not without "blood marking the paper" (p. 74).

On the other hand, anorexia and writing are portrayed as mutually sustaining. Two forms of writing that harm the author – what I term "disordered writing" – can be identified in these texts. The first links food restriction to creativity and productivity. Hornbacher and Tucker, for example, embrace the belief that writing is hampered by eating. Tucker heeds The Voice's warning that "*food just clogs up your brain*" (2015, p. 73), while Hornbacher falls for "the old romantic story of the mad artist" (1998, p. 104), longing to become an author "who feeds only on her thoughts" (p. 88). Moreover, with chapter epigraphs and frequent quotations from the likes of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich, *Wasted* repeatedly engages with what Waldman has called anorexia's "perverse literary tradition" (2015) – one that associates creative genius with bodily transcendence. The results are "wild, manic poems in the dark" in the case of Hornbacher (1998, p. 181), and for Tucker, "reams idealising starvation, verbally raging at those who pushed food and, by association, recovery upon me, iterating and re-iterating evidence supporting my certainty that happiness lies at the bottom of an empty stomach" (2015, p. 307).

Picking apart what they call Kafka's "permanent obsession with food" in his writings, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that "to speak, and above all to write, is to fast" (1975/1986, p. 20). Speaking disrupts eating – the mouth otherwise occupied – but writing, they contend, "goes further in transforming words into things capable of competing with food" (p. 20). This brings us, then, to a second form of "disordered writing": if, as we have seen, some anorexia memoirists *fast in order to write*, some follow Kafka and *write in order to fast*. Hornbacher reflects on the ways in which she uses reading to "stave off the world" (1998, p. 28), literally so during inpatient treatment, when she constructs a barrier of books that her therapists are keen to dismantle (p. 198). Writing comes to serve a similar purpose in these texts (with the exception of Evans's memoir), contributing to the construction of the anorexic's "alternate reality [and] strapping it in place" (Waldman, 2015). Asked to submit a food diary to her dietician, Bowman "will create another world", elaborating on the truth in order "to keep her out", writing herself more time "to get away from her" (2006, p. 96). Tucker takes to writing reviews for meals she only pretends to eat. She keeps them well hidden, but is nonetheless convinced that they lend credence to "Other Nancy", the alternative persona she cultivates to persuade others she is embracing recovery (2015, p. 204). Hornbacher, finally, takes cruel delight in deceiving her psychiatrist with poems she has written:

> I brought her poems about my health. My connection to the earth, my relearning of the rhythms of the blood and breath. Blah blah blah. I laughed as I wrote them. I was and am bored to tears by such schlock. Goddesses and wombs and the feel of new dirt in my hand, yah-da-yah-da-yah-da. She was deeply touched. (1998, p. 168)

Expose the truth in writing rather than use it to maintain the fiction of recovery, and food restriction is still the outcome in *Wasted*. Confessing her "sin" to writing prompts Hornbacher to impose further "penance" (1998, p. 86). The punishment she prescribes, on the model of medieval women mystics, is starvation. It is a logic that some readers have suspected Hornbacher applied to the writing of *Wasted* as a whole. At the time of its publication, Hornbacher was reported to have been rehospitalised following her "re-immersing" in her narrative (Goldsmith & Widseth, 2000, p. 32). One early reviewer describes *Wasted* as "among other things, a covert love letter to the eating disorders which sustained her, and, in turn, a new way of sustaining them" (Mead, 1998). With her prescription of penance, at any rate, Hornbacher establishes a relationship between "disordered writing" and anorexia that is redolent of Serres's symbiotic parasite: "The work parasites me, and I parasite it" (1980/2007, p. 132).

Writing in anorexia memoirs is by no means represented exclusively as disordered, however. In *Reconstructing Illness*, Hawkins suggests that, "for many if not most authors of pathography, the act of writing is experienced as a part of their healing" (1993/1999, p. 167). The healing potential of writing may be resisted or denied in anorexia memoirs. Hornbacher, for example, is evidently riled by suggestions that composing her memoir has been in any way "therapeutic" (1998, p. 275). For her, there is no catharsis in disclosure (p. 275); any quest for tidy explanations for the onset of her illness proves futile (p. 279). Something with which Tucker seems to concur, given the theories she surveys in sections titled "Why? Take One" and "Why? Take Two", both of which end pointedly with "Me" (2015, pp. 95–99, 325–328). Hornbacher does nonetheless view writing as contributing to recovery in one sense. She points to journaling as an act of self-confrontation:

> In my journal … it soon became impossible to avoid myself. There were only so many ways I could describe, in my frantic scribbles, all the ways in which everyone was wronging me, all the ways in which I was certain I was right and they were wrong, before it became painfully obvious even to me that I was lying. All of my grandiosity, my arrogance, my holier-than-thou attitude, my loud voice, my hard-edged don't-touch-me-fuck-you sneer, was a lie. Everything about me, in fact, was a lie. (1998, p. 204)

If writing allows Hornbacher to expose the mendacity of her "loud voice", Bowman and Tucker likewise suggest writing affords them the sort of metacognitive insights regarding the self that are the target of psychotherapies developed for the treatment of anorexia (see eg Pugh, 2016). Tucker transcribes The Voice and The Other Voice in a bid "to expel them; to physicalise them" (2015, p. 291). Bowman, meanwhile, links writing to the recuperation of her self. At the end of part one of her memoir, written, as we have seen, in the third-person, she explains that "the very act of telling this secret story has sparked the regeneration of lost thoughts and feelings. I can now hear my voice" (2006, p. 77). Part two, titled "This is I", marks a fitting shift to the first-person (p. 80).

A key component of the memoirist's recovered selfhood, moreover, is their identity as a writer. Finding a publisher for his text gives Evans, for example, "a feeling that surpasses anything anorexia ever offered me" (2011, p. 166). Writing, for Bowman, "showed I had an interest in something beyond my relationship with food. I was motivated again, I had a passion for something – writing – and I realised I was able to locate a sense of myself from this, instead of from the empty hollow I had been living in" (2006, pp. 261–262). Hers is not simply a story *of* survival, she reflects, but one that proved crucial to her extratextual survival (p. 261).

Narrative voice

Thus far, this article has mapped out the ambiguous status of writing in anorexia memoirs: illness is figured both as an act of writing and as an act of erasure, and, on a literal level, writing can both harm and heal the writer. This ambiguity has prompted some readers of eating disorder memoirs to reflect on the trustworthiness of narrators. Meuret, for example, asks whether anorexia memoirists who have previously used writing to mislead "are still lying about their existences" (2007, p. 178). Brien, for her part, wonders why such narratives, with their "many instances of subterfuge, deception, dishonest, deceit and fabrication", have generally managed to escape recent "scandals" surrounding authorial credibility in other forms of memoir (2013, p. 13). Both Meuret and Brien conclude that readers continue to place trust in narrators because memoirists write in confessional mode. For Meuret, writing offers authors "an opportunity to settle old scores with the past" (2007, p. 178), while for Brien readers heed their claims that "this is the truth as I saw, and now see it" (2013, p. 14). It could be countered, hastily, that confession itself can be implicated in illness maintenance (as discussed above in relation to *Wasted*). There is, however, a more important argument to be made here. Confession narratives, as Couser has noted, presuppose a clear distinction between experiencing and narrating "I"s (2012, p. 9). My aim in this final section is certainly not to accuse any memoirist of lying, but rather to consider why some memoirs – in this case Hornbacher's *Wasted* – appear to have lent themselves more readily than others to "disordered reading". The answer, I contend, lies to some extent in the co-ordination of narrative voices.

If all four memoirs studied here are marked by shifts between experiencing and narrating "I"s, the texts by Bowman, Evans and Tucker – and here we come to a key difference between these and *Wasted* – can be considered "dual" narratives in the sense ascribed to them by Hawkins: those shifts are fundamental to their structure (1993/1999, p. 160). For the most part, these narratives are focalised through the experiencing "I". The default tense for Bowman and Tucker is the historic present, which, as Eakin puts it, has the effect of "conceal[ing] the present of the autobiographical act" (1999, p. 149). The bulk of Evans's "life story" is comprised of diary entries written during his second inpatient admission. These core narratives in which the experiencing "I" is foregrounded are then glossed by the narrating "I". Bowman and Tucker interrupt their narratives with reflective chapters that search for origins and explanations. Evans, for his part, supplies prefaces and contextualising notes to his diary, but also alternates a week's worth of entries with a chapter taking up the story of how he came to be in hospital for a second time, told, for the most part, from the perspective of the present of narration.

In the concluding pages of *A Shape of My Own*, Bowman reveals her narrative *modus operandi*. It is of relevance to Evans's and Tucker's texts, too. Some anorexia memoirists have told their story "from the outside", she suggests, while others narrate "from right inside it where the voice of the illness is a powerful manipulator of the truth" (2006, p. 259). Her memoir constitutes an attempt to do both:

> The first, reflective, outside angle gives context but, coming from so far away, it can only repeat tired explanations and curiously observe something from the edge. The inside view can be a dangerous one which leaps off the page and seems to shout proudly about its power. Other anorexics might be triggered by it being let loose in such a way – even though that is not its intention. It needs the reflection to temper it, to show it where it went wrong, to allow it to sit against something more removed from its self-absorption. (pp. 259–260)

By telling their stories from the "inside" of illness, but reflecting on them from a position of relative recovery, these memoirists seek to discourage readers from emulating the eating disordered behaviours they detail. There is also a sense here, however, in which reflective writing contributes to recovery by allowing these authors to escape their own "inside view". Bowman goes on to explain her use of the third-person (still in the historic present) in the fourth and fifth sections of her memoir: "If I couldn't be my own subject then I would be an object, one which I could pull apart and deconstruct and piece back together again from afar" (p. 260). She adopts an "outside angle", that is, to rediscover a sense of self.

The dramatic texts interpolated into these memoirs serve to bring their broader narrative structure into sharper focus. Staging themselves in thrall to the anorexic voice in these scenes is a way for authors to assert distance between experiencing and narrating selves; it establishes Bowman's "outside angle". Likewise, by glossing and reflecting on their narratives told from the "inside", memoirists demonstrate development of their own critical voice, no longer silenced by the voice of anorexia. These are memoirs, in other words, that perform recovery through their very structure.

It is important to note that these memoirists seek to problematise unrealistically straightforward conceptions of recovery. Recovery is not as simple as flicking on a switch, Evans reminds us (2011, p. 147). It is not "a straight streak", writes Tucker (2015, p. 345), who describes (and resists) the pressure to end her account before it becomes too "messy" with her turn to bulimia (pp. xii–xiii). Recovery's end point, moreover, is elusive; a much longer project than tackling symptoms alone (Bowman, 2006, p. 200), potentially the work of a lifetime (Evans, 2011, pp. 16, 64), it is "ongoing. Perpetual. Without a clear-cut end" (Tucker, 2015, p. 344). For all the warnings about the fragility and provisionality of recovery, however, these memoirs, at least in narrative terms, ultimately conform to the "comic plot" characteristic of life writing more broadly (Couser, 2012, pp. 44–45). At the end of Evans's text, the reader witnesses a self fully emerging, "John" is finally liberated from his quotation marks (Evans, 2011, p. 168), while Tucker frees herself as she lets her story go (2015, p. 346). They may not consider themselves fully recovered, but – "consciousness of this continuing creation of the self accompan[ying] the creation" (Olney, 1972, p. 44) – they nonetheless stage a self in the act of becoming. Bowman, meanwhile, reacts against the doom-laden tales she has read in magazines alleging that full recovery from anorexia is

impossible to achieve. She imagines a better ending for herself (2006, p. 222), and in writing her memoir she claims to have found it (p. 259). Hers is not simply a case of staging the triumphant emergence of an "I", but of staging an "I" so powerful that it no longer denies past selves but reintegrates them into the present (p. 261). Bowman presents her true recovered self as a palimpsest.

The ways in which Bowman, Evans and Tucker co-ordinate experiencing and narrating "I"s stand in stark contrast to Hornbacher's. She may frame her illness experience with medical and psychiatric discourses and supplement her story with her parents' versions of events, particularly where memory fails her, but she readily contests that frame from within. Sections titled "Interlude" and "Present Day", moreover, reflect on her tale from the perspective of the present narration, but shifts in tense and between experiencing and narrating "I"s occur persistently within chapters. As Craig comments, *Wasted* "moves back and forth in time, seemingly at random" (2014). Most importantly, rather than dwell on discontinuity, Hornbacher emphasises continuities between past and present. Even as she no longer "qualif[ies] as an eating-disordered person" (1998, p. 180), at least from the perspective of the medical establishment, she catalogues the eating disordered behaviours in which she continues to engage in the present of narration (eg, pp. 54–55, 192, 288–289).

Like the other memoirs discussed here, *Wasted* seeks to challenge reader expectations of a simple recovery narrative:

> You expect an ending. This is a book; it ought to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. I cannot give you an end. I would very much like to. I would like to wrap up all loose ends in a bow and say, See? All better now. (Hornbacher, 1998, p. 275)

Instead of staging the emergence of a self at the end of her narrative, however, Hornbacher foregrounds the body. *Wasted* constitutes a translation of "a material object, a body, into some arrangement of words" (p. 275). The "loose ends" of the above quotation, Hornbacher suggests, *are* her body (pp. 275–276). Orbach writes that, in recovery from anorexia, "the body needs to be transformed from being experienced as an object – alienated and despised – to an expression of self" (1986, p. 153). The relationship between self and body in *Wasted*, however, remains profoundly ambiguous. With her act of "translation", has Hornbacher finally forged an embodied self – brain and bones reconciled – or does she perpetuate disembodiment, body *displaced* by text?

At the end of *Wasted*, Hornbacher deliberately situates her narrating-"I" on a threshold. Having dwelt longer in the "netherworld" than in "this material one", she resigns herself – and her readers – to liminality:

> You never come back, not all the way … You never come all the way out of the mirror; you stand, for the rest of your life, with one foot in this world and one in another, where everything is upside down and backward and sad. (1998, p. 285)

If recalling her experiences of illness was akin to watching a film in which heroic self and villainous anorexia fight it out (p. 10), writing *Wasted*, Hornbacher suggests, has felt like "dubbing in voices and adding Technicolor" (p. 279). The authors of the other anorexia memoirs considered here find their own voice, or at least claim to, in writing about their

anorexia. Perhaps the same is true of Hornbacher. Given her threshold position, however, it is not surprising if some readers find that, with all her dubbing and colouring, it is the villain's voice she has embellished.

Conclusion

Writing, in the four anorexia memoirs analysed here, is represented as neither exclusively harmful nor exclusively healing for the author. On one hand, it is implicated in the development and maintenance of anorexia. These memoirists engage to varying extents in "disordered writing", starving in order to write and writing in order to starve. On the other, writing is linked to recovery. Hornbacher might protest to the contrary, but she and the other authors considered here do represent writing as conducive to recovering health, a means of challenging the anorexic voice and finding a voice of their own. Do we question the reliability of narrators for whom writing paradoxically both harms and heals? In the case of the memoirs by Bowman, Evans and Tucker, I would suggest not. The clear delineation between experiencing and narrating "I"s in these works persuades us that, if writing was once a tool for self-harm, it is its healing potential that they harness in the present. Moreover, through their very structure – core narratives focalised through the experiencing self that are framed with reflective writings rooted in the present of narration – these memoirs *perform recovery*. In *Wasted*, by contrast, whether intentionally or not, Hornbacher keeps us guessing whether, at any given moment, she writes for good or for ill. Her translation of the body into words can simultaneously be interpreted as the construction of an embodied self and a further act of bodily erasure.

Early in her own anorexia memoir, Kelsey Osgood writes that "there has to be a way to [talk about eating disorders] productively, to shift the language we use, to defy the conventions of the narrative so that prospective anorexics are repelled and not drawn to the idea of illness" (2013, p. 35). She may not be right: Osgood herself has been criticised for glamourising anorexia even as she exposes others for doing so (Gregory, 2013). I am not suggesting that the memoirs discussed here are safe for all readers, that they are somehow immune to "disordered reading" practices. There are surely ways to talk about anorexia, however, that are more productive than others. There are reasons, after all, why *Wasted* has so often been cited as a source of "thinspiration". Writers (and their editors) can cut out the calorie counts and dispense with the lurid covers. They can avoid the adverse rhetorical strategies Seaber (2016) identifies in *Wasted*. To reduce the potential of their texts to foster "disordered reading", however, they may also need to be more careful about how they co-ordinate narrative voice.

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