Maud Ellmann. *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993. pp. xii, 136. $19.95.

Maud Ellmann queries in this text a common theme in fiction and critical theory—the removal of the self from society for the purposes of writing—while she investigates the correspondences and the salient differences between patterns of food denial or consumption and the production of writing. Ellmann describes her "hunger artist":

> The mission of the hunger artist is to incarnate the emptiness that instigates the circulation of the gift. This absence generates the flow of food and letters and all the other objects of exchange that move through subjects in pursuit of their mysterious trajectory. It is not compassion, then, that forces us to meet the faster's wishes, but the systems of exchange that implicate us in his fate because they override the boundaries of the self. (110-11)

Thus Ellmann's study foregrounds a precarious subjectivity that, in her view, is formed from infancy onward through a process of consuming food in generative social contexts. Her notion of the self is founded on "regulation of the orifices" into which the other, in the form of food, enters the body, and the body, in the form of waste, is expelled into otherness (105).

The text is divided into four segments of a progressively unfolding argument: Chapter One, "Autophagy" (fasting); Chapter Two, "Gynophagy" (which concerns developmental relationships between appetites and knowledge); Chapter Three, "Sarcophagy" (complicities of writing and starvation); and Chapter Four, "Encryptment" (how prison contributes to the arts of disembodiment).

The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment implicitly welcomes the challenges, using a wide range of eclectic materials that speak to Ellmann's subject. Her spectrum of relevant sources includes fiction writers, popular culture contributors such as Naomi Wolf, modern poets, and an impressive reading of critical theorists, in addition to the historical discussion of the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike.

Analysis of writings by Joyce, Yeats, and Kafka supports Ellmann's illustration of a pervasive cultural model, since Romanticism, of self-denial for the purposes of producing good literature. For example, Ellmann unravels the thread of aestheticist assumptions in Romantic and modern cultural economies in the following analysis of Yeats's *The King's Threshold*: "the poet has to starve his flesh to feed the words that fatten the decendants of his readers, in order to redeem the bodies of posterity" (61). Such Romanticist claims stand opposed to the explicitly phallic premises of Lacan.

The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment also situates, then expands the view of, fasting particular to twentieth-century American culture—Jane Fonda slenderness—while working Lacan's theory of containment of cultural problems as concern female lack. In Ell-

mann's view, "[t]he present book . . . argues for the need to substitute a more encompassing poetics of starvation for the phallic poetics of desire" (27).

The notion of lack in contemporary cultural theory is redressed in order to broaden the discussion to a consideration of food and language as succouring existential hunger. At one point, Ellmann seems to offer the family meal as a model of satisfied verbal and gustatory appetites, as she refers to David Herlihy's definition of the family as "a group of people who eat together." However, her exposition also recognizes how changeable are these conservative traditions (80).

Specific insights offer a politicized reading of the ways in which we construct our relationships to food and writing. Imprisonment puts additional force on the already pressured relationship between writing and starvation. *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* resonates especially when Ellmann draws her comparisons between the Irish Long Kesh hunger strike of 1981 and the plot of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa.* Her portrayal of the convergences between the two dramas casts the most light on her central problematization of the concern with food denial and writing.

Ellmann's investigation into the conduct of the strike is thorough and masterful as she teases out accounts based on communications smuggled out of prison in the orifices of people's bodies. She draws a fine line among historical facticity, cultural stereotyping, and subtle psychoanalytic argument while she makes excellent use of a range of materials, such as the edited strikers' communications or works of Freud or Susie Orbach (best known for *Fat is a Feminist Issue*). Ellmann's interpretation of the striking process foregrounds the modesty of the strikers' demands (the right to wear civilian clothes, to have the opportunity for education, and to refuse to do prison work, among other similar requests) and perpetuates the strikers' dark choice to let their few smuggled words and dead bodies speak, in effigy, their opposing desire to England. Ellmann concludes: "We do not starve to write but *write to starve*: and we starve in order to affirm the supremacy of lack, and to extend the ravenous dominion of the night" (27).

Readers will take pleasure in Ellmann's own dance through the field of metaphors concerning self-starvation, while the text literally produces the circumstances she articulates, writing as surfeit over the void. In addition to working into her text an abundance of relevant poetic and literary sources, Ellmann admirably uses metaphor. In this regard, her text could be both a literary and critical contribution. "Gynophagy," for example, demonstrates the eloquence with which she describes the physical grounding of relationship: "to refuse food would be to deny the other at the cost of the annihilation of the self: it would be to sever the umbilicus of intersubjectivity" (55); and in "Encryptment," she writes:

> If eating . . . is imprisonment, self-starvation seems to represent the extirpation of the other from the self. Yet starving also keeps the other *in* and fortifies the stronghold of the ego, lest the ghosts within the self should break out of their tomb. (95)

Maud Ellmann's text will be significant within the growing library of work concerning anorexia nervosa, because of its rigour and spirit of intellectual adventure, its delving into class and Irish nationalist difference from English hegemony, its reconfiguration of the parameters of self-help, its positing of selfhood in relationship to words and food, and its construction and politicization of the intrinsic social relationships between words and food.

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Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993. pp. x, 258. $15.95 pb.

It eludes no literary scholar's observation that in recent years the interest in ethnic/minority literature has increased dramatically. Among recent attempts to offer a general approach to Asian American literature, Cynthia Sau-ling Wong's study counts as one of the most extensive and insightful contributions. Drawing on various works on culture, minority discourses, and critical theory, Wong presents an erudite and elegant account of Asian American literature, spanning texts as diverse as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior,* Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club,* Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine,* Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart,* Frank Chin's *The Year of the Dragon,* Hisaye Yamamoto's *Seventeen Syllables,* and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (of Canada). Wide ranging in its scope, Wong's book addresses a variety of critical, political, and aesthetic concerns and thus functions as a very useful road map for the beginning student of Asian American literature while providing a concise source of reference for specialists in the field.

In her well-documented study, Wong first outlines the exact field of her research: she aims at a "thematic study of Asian American literature. But perhaps even more important, it is a book about the reading of Asian American literature as a critical project within the academy" (3). As Asian American literature has gained increasing recognition, the fundamental question of "how Asian American literature is to be read" also arises (4). Although Asian American literature figures prominently in recent critical scholarship, most critics have had little to say about it as literature, stressing instead its political and sociological context. Wong, however, in her sophisticated analysis based on close reading, argues that Asian American literature demands—and rewards—attention to questions of *inter*textual as well as *con*textual readings. The intertextuality of Asian American literature is estab-