

A Body Neither for Myself nor for the Other: Hellena¹, a Contemporary Reading of the Case of Ellen West

Thaís Gazotti

Abstract

This theoretical essay offers a phenomenological reading of Ellen West's case in dialogue with a contemporary clinical narrative, Hellena, a young woman diagnosed with anorexia nervosa. Taken together, these narratives illuminate the suffering associated with the disorder as it unfolds through embodiment, identity, and intersubjectivity, revealing anorexia nervosa as the expression of a profound existential conflict in being-with-others. Food refusal, social withdrawal, and the fragmentation of one's relationship with one's own body emerge as attempts to protect the self from the perceived intrusiveness of the other's gaze and desire. Love, as a possibility of being and existing in the world, appears marked by fear, idealization, and bodily withdrawal. From this perspective, anorexia nervosa may be understood as a form of identity reorganization in response to the fragility of the self and the collapse of intercorporeality. Love and the lived body thus become central dimensions for understanding the mode of suffering and existence of those who, paradoxically, seek to preserve themselves from the other and from themselves.

Keywords: Anorexia Nervosa; Phenomenological Psychopathology; Love; Corporeality; Identity.

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Thaís Gazotti

Psicóloga formada (PUCCAMP).
Doutora em Ciências (FMUSP).
Mestre em Psicologia (PUCCAMP).
Aprimorada em tratamento para
Transtornos Alimentares no
AMBULIM (IPq-HCFMUSP).
Especialista em Psicopatologia
Fenômeno-estrutural (FCMSCSP).
Membro da Sociedade Brasileira de
Psicopatologia Fenômeno-
estrutural (SBPFE). Professora
convidada do curso de
Psicopatologia Fenomenológica da
FCMSC-SP.

Contato: thaïsgazotti@yahoo.com

¹ Hellena is a pseudonym adopted to preserve the identity of a patient whose clinical aspects are discussed in this study.

Um Corpo Nem para Mim, Nem para o Outro: Hellena, uma Modernização do Caso de Ellen West

Thaís Gazotti

Resumo

Este ensaio teórico realiza uma leitura fenomenológica do caso de Ellen West em diálogo com uma história clínica contemporânea, Hellena, uma jovem com diagnóstico de anorexia nervosa. As narrativas apresentam o sofrimento presente na experiência do corpo, da identidade e da intersubjetividade, revelando a anorexia como expressão de um conflito existencial profundo do ser-com-o-outro. A recusa alimentar, o isolamento social e a fragmentação da relação com o próprio corpo refletem uma tentativa de proteção frente à invasão do olhar e do desejo pelo outro. O amor, enquanto possibilidade de ser e de existir no mundo, aparece atravessado por medo, idealização e distanciamento corporal. Nessa perspectiva, a anorexia nervosa se configura como uma forma de reorganização identitária diante da fragilidade do eu e do colapso da intercorporeidade. Assim, amor e corpo vivido tornam-se dimensões centrais para compreender o modo de sofrer e existir de quem busca, paradoxalmente, preservar-se do outro e de si.

Palavras-chave: Anorexia Nervosa; Psicopatologia Fenomenológica; Amor; Corporeidade; Identidade.

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Psicopatologia Fenômeno-
estrutural (SBPFE). Professora
convidada do curso de
Psicopatologia Fenomenológica da
FCMSC-SP.

Contato: thaïsgazotti@yahoo.com

Phenomenological The case of Ellen West (Binswanger, 1957) stands as an emblematic contribution to phenomenological psychopathology. Nevertheless, its analysis remains intrinsically linked to the narrative and structural choices adopted by Binswanger in organizing the clinical material. Alternative clinical perspectives—particularly those attentive to interpersonal dynamics and relational structures—may illuminate distinct facets of her experience and generate renewed theoretical reflection on her existential condition.

This study proposes a contemporary phenomenological reading of Ellen West's case, nearly seven decades after its publication, articulating it with excerpts from a current clinical case of anorexia nervosa. The dialogical analysis highlights the convergences in the lived experience of the disorder, particularly concerning the existential pursuit of love and self-recognition.

Love felt through the body and the soul

Loving and engaging in romantic relationships were central themes in Ellen's interpersonal dynamics, as expressed in her poems. Through love, she sought something similar to the warmth of the sun — the most vivid way she could feel alive (Gazotti, 2024). Her romantic relationships experiences fluctuated between her own feelings for the other and the extent to which her family allowed such involvement.

Due to the limited descriptive details about the dynamics of her interpersonal contacts within her romantic and family relationships, much remains open to possible reflection. However, the unfolding of her suffering demonstrates how deeply her relational experiences impacted her individuality and her possibility of being-in-the-world. She describes (Binswanger, 1957):

She feels small and completely forgotten in a world she cannot understand. I feel excluded from all real life. I am totally isolated. I find myself inside a glass sphere. I see people through a glass wall (...). I long intensely to reach them. (...). I stretch my arms toward them, but my hands only touch the walls of my glass sphere.

She begins self-imposed dietary restriction, excessive physical exercise through long walks and horseback riding, presents a depressive mood, is tormented by the idea of being fat, forces herself into significant weight loss, and uses medication to accelerate metabolism. The eating disorder of anorexia nervosa becomes the expression of her suffering in relation to the world and the sense of not being adequate to it. She carries dreams and desires for herself and for her

relationships — such as the desire to become a mother — yet the feeling that the world invades her places her at a distance that leads her to turn inward, where suffering becomes her mode of existence.

In a contemporary reflection in the 2020s, present Hellena, a young woman around 20 years old, close to Ellen's age, also brings, in her story, the love relationship as a central theme. Hellena has experienced two significant love relationships and a lack of understanding within her family dynamics — being close to her mother and sisters but very distant from her father. The onset of her restrictive eating behaviors, excessive walking, occasional purging through self-induced vomiting, and severe depressive mood occurred during her first romantic relationship as a form of self-punishment. Over time, the fear of weight gain became fixed due to relational interactions involving physical-sexual appreciation.

Hellena is followed by specialized mental health professionals and has experienced improvement in her depressive symptoms. However, she continues to struggle significantly in confronting the symptomatic behaviors in relation to her values and her self-relationship. Although she does not exhibit suicidal ideation, she expresses a wish for her suffering to end peacefully during sleep, reflecting a desire for relief without any intention of self-harm. This desire becomes particularly strong when she feels full after a meal or fails to restrict her food intake, Hellena yearns to find someone to share a life with and to build a family. She enjoys the affection she receives from her boyfriend but feels entirely uncomfortable when her body is noticed or desired.

Her greatest discomfort lies in navigating interpersonal relationships: how to deal with the relational expectations of romantic involvement, in which she feels pressured to perform roles she does not desire — even though she enjoys companionship, caring, and being cared for. She also wishes to work but does not believe in her ability to perform complex tasks or engage in greater responsibilities.

The entanglement within intersubjectivity

The expressions of self-experience, of being with the world and of suffering reveal striking similarity between both cases, regardless of time, culture, and sociodemographic characteristics. This expresses how deeply embedded social themes are in relational human existence and how they describe the way individuals

articulate their suffering in the shared world.

“A body not for the other” introduces a phenomenological understanding of the psychopathology of anorexia nervosa. The Other — through interpersonal relations — leads to reflect on what makes intersubjectivity possible and reveals the necessity of intercorporeality, which is closely linked to the conditions of corporeality.

Corporeality is often the primary domain of condition of possibility for observation and intervention in anorexia nervosa. However, it represents only “the tip of the iceberg” of a visible expression of suffering that originates at the level of intersubjectivity. This intersubjective dimension begins with the longing for security, warmth, and recognizing this self who suffers and yet the relationships encountered are experienced as threatening, intrusive, or overwhelming.

A body that does not exist for the other evokes Merleau-Ponty’s (1999) phenomenological distinctions between the body-as-object and being-for-others, as well as Stanghellini’s notion of the “gaze of the other” — that is, being perceived by the other — (Stanghellini & Mancini, 2020), considering that individuals diagnosed with eating disorders often experience themselves as reflections of others’ perceptions (Silva, Teles, Castro, Souza & Bloc, 2025). If it is through this body that the other accesses, recognizes, perceives and causes suffering, the intention to reduce this membrane of contact — the body itself — lies in the idea of protecting oneself from the invasion felt in intersubjectivity, through intercorporeality — via a reduction of intercorporeality.

This relational body shapes subjective experience and world constitution (Bloc & Moreira, 2018), consequently, arises a perception of dissonance between how one feels through the body and how feels within the body. Thus, the loss of intersubjective contact — whether perceptual or emotional — reverberates in relationships with others and with the world (Silva et al., 2025). A functional place is placed for the mode of psychic suffering the intention of the person with anorexia nervosa to reduce his body-object as much as possible so that he minimizes the possibilities of aversive interactions with the Other — as an attempt to make the body as insignificant and self-contained as possible (Gazotti, 2023).

This expresses how corporeality, recognized as a central aspect of eating disorders, enhances our understanding of suffering as inherently connected to intersubjectivity—an element essential for consolidating the experience of

intercorporeality (Bloc & Moreira, 2018). When examining the intentions of both Ellen and Hellena to find romantic love relationships that might provide warmth and beauty as find in nature — as Ellen describes in her poems — requires recognize how intimate intersubjective contact are perceived.

The intercorporeality of romantic relationships deepens the encounter and the permeation of the self by the other. Ellen chooses distance from her romantic relationship, relinquishing her desire to become a mother, while Hellena withdraws corporeally due to disgust and discomfort with sexual intimacy, giving up her wish to marry someday.

“A body neither for myself” reflects the person’s struggle with being oneself. The pursuit of romantic relationships invites the encounter that bring warmth and comfort, yet the encounter remains deeply unsettling as they cross the boundaries of the self. For individuals with anorexia nervosa, difficulties in intersubjectivity disrupt being one’s-body and impair a structured identity development. Their suffering can be linked with the process of identity reorganization — given their struggles to appropriate their own lived experiences (Silva et al., 2025).

Therefore, it becomes common for individuals with anorexia nervosa to lose the ability to recognize themselves apart from the restrictive behaviors and thoughts maintaining a minimal, insignificant body and the resulting social isolation. Thus, “being-anorexia-nervosa” may become an alternative identity — a viable mode of existence that protects the self from invasive relationships with the Other (Gazotti, 2023).

Love in disproportion

Among individuals with anorexia nervosa, is observed a narrowing of their shared world, interpersonal relationships, and the possibilities of unfolding in time toward a strengthened sense of identity. Although not universal, many demonstrate a persistent questioning of love throughout their lives.

Corporeality becomes the ultimate expression of suffering rooted in intersubjectivity, suffocating an already fragile identity that is confined to the immediacy of its pain and self-doubt. From this existential experience, it is possible to reflect on the capacity to love within space, time, and intercorporeality (Becher,

2024). However, when intercorporeality—which is inherent to relational interactions—is weakened or absent, the sexual-body is excluded from the encounter, and therefore, sexual-love as well. What remains, as in hyper rationalization and intellectualization, is the subject as an idea — the idea of love preserved in its romantic construct.

In individuals with anorexia nervosa who still maintain the intentionality of being-with others, a romantic desire persists. Yet without the body, the intended love cannot be realized, this dynamic resonates with contemporary technologically mediated relationships in which people may relate only through ideals, without any embodied presence.

For both Ellen and Hellena, romantic relationships are central to their search for the true meaning of love — finding an Other who is intentionally for them and becomes a possibility for being themselves. However, for both, the pursuit is for affection-love, at the expense of sexual-love. Relational exchange remains within the realm of ideas and intentionality, eliminating the material dimension of relational existence — the domain of the sexual being, as presented by Merleau-Ponty (1999).

(...) and love is the sculptor of one's individual biography, in the sense of authentic self-realization. Most of the time, the number of true loves in one's life corresponds to the number of radical changes in oneself, shifts in identity and life projects, and reorientations of one's system of personal values. In sum, to love is to temporalize oneself. (Becher, 2024).

To love enables engagement with core structures of existence — space, time, body, interaction, and being. It fundamentally provides meaning to existence, unfolding historically in the constitution of identity. When love remains only at the level of intentionality, the person continues to exist merely as an idea — as Ellen wished to remain alive (Binswanger, 1957). In contemporary terms, this dynamic may evoke an affective-romantic asexuality. Over time, however, it may lead to an aromantic asexuality, emerging from the impossibility and fragility of being oneself in a relational world.

Conclusion

This phenomenological reading of Ellen's case in parallel with Hellena's case makes it possible to understand that the suffering in anorexia nervosa surpasses the boundaries of corporeality and is inscribed at the core of intersubjectivity. The body becomes the field in which a profound experience of disconnection is expressed:

disconnection from the Other, from the world, and especially from oneself. Ellen and Hellena, separated by almost a century, embody the same existential dilemma: the search for love as a possibility of being — while simultaneously fearing the self-dissolution that embodied love might demand. They both desire the warmth of relationship yet fear the bodily surrender that concretizes the encounter. Affective love persists as an idea — a possible refuge in the face of the perceived threat of sexual love and of embodied contact with the Other.

In this sense, anorexia nervosa may be comprehended as an attempt at identity reorganization in the face of the collapse of intercorporeality. The person seeks to preserve themselves in a minimal body to reduce the intensity of a world that wounds them. However, in restricting themselves, they also restrict love, time and their own becoming.

The challenge faced by Ellen and Hellena reflects a broader human existential tension: finding a possible way to be loved and to love without this representing the annihilating of the self. Is it within this tension — between the longing to be recognized and the fear of being invaded — that the existential drama of anorexia nervosa is revealed: it becomes a struggle for the persistence of the self amid the essential vulnerability of existing with the other.

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