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Feminist Auto/biography as a Means of
Empowering Women:
A Case Study of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*
and Janet Frame's *Faces in the Water*

ABSTRACT

Feminism, as a political, social and cultural movement, pays much attention to the importance of text. Text is the carrier of important thoughts, truths, ideas. It becomes a means of empowering women, a support in their fight for free expression, equality, intellectual emancipation. By “text” one should understand not only official documents, manifestos or articles. The term also refers to a wide range of literary products—poetry, novels, diaries. The language of literature enables female authors to omit obstacles and constraints imposed by the phallogocentric world, a world dominated by masculine propaganda. Through writing, female authors have an opportunity to liberate their creative potential and regain the territory for unlimited expression. In order to produce a truly powerful text, they resort to a variety of writing styles and techniques. Here the notions of a situated knowledge and context sensitivity prove useful. There are three methodologies working within situated knowledge, namely, the politics of location, self-reflexivity and feminist auto/biography. All of them regard text as a fundamental tool to signify one's authority, yet feminist auto/biography, a concept widely discussed by the British theorist Liz Stanley, appears to be the most empowering mode of writing. It challenges the overused genre of auto/biography and reconstructs its role within feminist epistemologies, thus creating a favourable environment for text production. The works by Sylvia Plath and Janet Frame can be analyzed from the point of view of auto/biographical empowerment, even though their auto/biographical potential is mainly instinctive. Nevertheless, they help to comprehend the strength of the auto/biographical.

The aim of this article is to “investigate” two novels by these authors, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *Faces in the Water* by Janet Frame,

and their compatibility with Stanley's concept. The paper attempts to answer several questions. Are these novels actual feminist auto/biographies or rather fictional auto/biographies with feminist undertones? What kind of narrative strategy is used to achieve the effect of authority over the text? Last but not least, what is the function of auto/biographical narration in the case of these two novels? The article also explores the idea of writing as a means of regaining control over one's life (with references to the authors' biographies and parallels between their lives and lives of their fictive alter egos).

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FROM "FEMALE WRITING" TO "FEMALE AUTO/BIOGRAPHY"

Contemporary feminism pays much attention to the text as a carrier of new ideas, thoughts and practices. Text enables free and unrestrained expression of the author's truths and beliefs. Text knows hardly any boundaries—it can be almost infinitely deformed, changed, deconstructed. But text may not only contain the meanings which are solidly fixed within a particular field of knowledge. Today's feminism, especially its postmodern branch, develops the idea of a situated knowledge, in which the context of the author and her research, be it social, cultural or philosophical, is hugely important (vide texts by Ruth Frankenberg, Ien Ang, Avtar Brah or Marjorie L. Devault, whose research is always situated in a particular environment). The three methodologies working within situated knowledge, namely, the politics of location, self-reflexivity, and, most of all, feminist auto/biography, regard text as vital in expressing one's authority. Even though traditional discourse still favours the male point of view and tends to situate female writing outside the phallogocentric vision of the world, female authors do their best to reclaim authority over the text. The notion of a feminist auto/biography especially comes in handy in this context as it challenges the overused genre of auto/biography and redefines it within feminist epistemologies. And the range of its functions is wide. Valérie Baisnée indicates that it has become a place in which the female subject not only records personal growth but also tackles certain crucial political issues linked to the position of women in society, and adds that "the autobiography, situated at the border between public and private discourse, and in which the present perspective mixes with that of the past, enables

a registration of . . . changes at both individual and social levels” (12). In a natural way it becomes an influential tool for mastering memories and imagination. The power of auto/biography lies also in its compatibility with two concepts—the notion of *écriture féminine*, the term used for the first time by the French literary theorist Hélène Cixous in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, and the idea of *parler femme*, invented by Belgian feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray.

The concepts of auto/biography and *écriture féminine* seem to share many similarities. Both discuss the importance of body. Both advocate free traversing within generic conventions and transgressing socially imposed borders. Each of them acknowledges the inevitability of fragmentation of the self whilst rejecting the idea of its nature as unitary. Verena Andermatt Conley points out that Cixous’s writings continuously affirm “that I is always more than one, that life is full of springs and that all is enigma, to be discovered, and *that* is the very ‘essence’ of life” (xxii). Last but not least, feminist auto/biography and *écriture féminine* revalorize the role of women and their own authority over the written word in general.

Still, it is necessary to pose some essential questions first. Is there a feminist auto/biography as such? Could a distinct example of this genre be consciously produced? It is difficult to answer these inquiries as no clear definition of this concept can be provided, because the whole issue of self in auto/biography, not to mention the undertones of the word “feminist,” is quite complex. In her influential *The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*, Liz Stanley tries to explain the term and name some characteristic features of this particular literary genre. Obviously, one should be aware of the distinction between biography, i.e., writing about somebody else’s life, and autobiography, standing for writing about the life of oneself (hence Stanley merges these two into a unitary concept of auto/biography, thus underlining its fluidity and indeterminacy). Both of these, however, need to meet certain criteria to be analyzed in the context of feminism. Liz Stanley is perfectly aware of this. Moreover, she brings caveats to any definition of auto/biography, such as the selective nature of memory, the conventionality of the form, the usage of fictive devices blurring the perspectives on described events, or the problem of self as subject matter. She also raises another important question, namely, what exactly makes a feminist auto/biography. “[I]s the fact that a text is feminist authored or about a feminist subject sufficient to define it as feminist auto/biography? Is the form or structure of what is written . . . not just the subject who forms the bones of its content, actually different from any other auto/biography?” (Stanley 247). And even though Stanley does not provide her readers with easy answers, she lists several features that could be found in a feminist auto/biography. These include challenging

conventional forms, playfulness, and rejection of a linear mode of presenting events. A good feminist auto/biography ought not only to recreate the genre in an exciting and unconventional way, but also to transgress the boundaries within different genres and relate more to the readers. Nevertheless, it would also be impossible to talk about a distinct feminist auto/biography without four fundamental elements: anti-realism, anti-spotlight stances, contingency, and location in a particular ideological context (that is, within feminist ideological practices). The inclusion of these “regulations” may result in the creation of a noteworthy feminist auto/biography (therefore Liz Stanley refers to Kate Millet’s *Sita* and *Flying* as the illustrations of unconventionality of auto/biographical writing). Stanley also does not fail to underline the importance of the text itself, not only in the dimension of the female authorship or presence of a female protagonist.

Auto/biographies, both written and spoken, are intertextual, but within this there is a primacy of everyday life and its concrete material events, persons, conversations. ‘Bio,’ the narration of the material events of everyday life, is the crucial element in theorizing and understanding both ‘auto’ and ‘graph,’ albeit, regarding written (but not spoken) auto/biography, that the only way readers have of relating to this is through ‘graph,’ as through the writing (Stanley 246).

The potential author of a distinct feminist auto/biography is expected to refer to “graph” as the carrier of a wide range of meanings. But “graph,” the physical side of the writing process, may also aid in maintaining control over the final product of the creation process. It is especially precious in the case of female authors who treat the actual, physically existing text as a means to regain power over their lives.

SYLVIA PLATH ON THE TERRITORY OF TEXTUAL AUTHORITY

Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* can be considered a suitable example illustrating Stanley’s theories. At the same time it would be rather risky to call this novel a strict feminist auto/biography (the way Stanley comprehends it) as the production of a feminist text was not the author’s aim. Thus it might be safer to view *The Bell Jar* as a fictional auto/biography, containing, however, several feminist traces. The novel becomes an original piece of writing where elements of the author’s life are transformed into a convincing story (after Federman 100).

In Plath’s case, autobiographical elements could already be found in her poetry; “Lady Lazarus” or “Daddy” express her suicidal tendencies, her complicated emotional life, and allude directly to her strong feeling of guilt caused by her Austrian origins (after Connie Ann Kirk’s biography

of Plath). However, it is crucial to analyze Plath's poetry in the context of challenging textual forms and exertion of authority over the production of a written form. Eileen M. Aird emphasizes how her poems, especially those from the *Ariel* period, envisage a "Paradise of autonomy and recognized identity, an image of completeness" (201), thus corresponding with the concept of unity of text and body. For Plath, a poem is not a mere textual structure consisting of subjects, verbs, objects, and predicates, but rather a live being, whose existence goes far beyond obvious references and metaphors. The text is a value in itself, a treasure to cherish, a product resisting separation from its author (such an approach is adequately reflected in "In Plaster"). Christina Britzolakis notes that "the language of Plath's later poems undoubtedly draws upon the 'flashy' naturalistic idiom of contemporary American speech," adding that "this change of stylistic register cannot be seen merely in terms of liberation from a tradition-bound academicism," but rather from a viewpoint of "making it new, of renewing and paring down the language of poetry" (136). Yet even the power of the text and the language cannot escape control, for this unlimited freedom may result in an eventual conflict between the form and the content.

The poems help us to comprehend a complicated Plath-text relationship. However, the author's traumas and feelings are even more prominent in *The Bell Jar*.¹ Plath describes here the life and various experiences of Esther Greenwood, yet most of the events taking place in the novel may be traced back to episodes from Plath's own life. Esther, the author's fictional incarnation, fights with heavy depression, tries to kill herself several times, and finally enters a mental hospital where she undergoes shock treatment. The reader not only observes the slow process of Esther's emotional and mental collapse, punctuated by her suicide attempts, but also accompanies her during her painful and initially fruitless therapy. All of this can be found in Plath's actual biography.²

What is then so challenging about this novel? Which elements of a feminist auto/biography does it contain? Does Sylvia Plath (or her fictional alter ego) succeed in reclaiming control over the body of her text (and through this, her physical body, as well)? The whole text is the reflection of the many traumatic experiences of the female protagonist—the

¹ Even though this particular novel achieved a cult status, thanks to its successful construction of a protagonist, not to mention the excellent use of technique and style, Plath "did not feel it was an adequate book [and] was agitated by the reviews" (Ames 172).

² In 1953 Plath was hospitalized for depression and treated with electroshock therapy. Lois Ames, in the bibliographical note to *The Bell Jar*, quotes a fragment of her diary describing this period as "[a] time of darkness, despair, disillusion—so black only as the inferno of the human mind can be—symbolic death, and numb shock—then the painful agony of slow rebirth and psychic regeneration" (208).

difficult fight with depression, the suicide attempts, and finally, the loss of a friend who successfully took her life. Esther loses control over her self on different levels—her body and mind cease to cooperate, therefore the text gains authority as the most reliable witness of her pain. It also helps her to re-establish herself and rebuild her self-esteem until she can eventually say: “I [am] my own woman” (Plath 182). Esther becomes estranged from her physical body, but regains control over the body of the text. Obviously, Esther’s capabilities never go beyond fictive experiences, as she succeeds in describing her existence, simultaneously encountering many obstacles in the attempt to portray similar experiences of her fictional alter ego, the heroine of her unfinished novel. Her strength appears to lie more in the auto/biographical than in the fictional.

The Bell Jar meets many of the criteria established by Stanley. Plath’s work challenges the conventions of a typical auto/biography. The author discards a linear way of presenting the events—memories of the past intertwine with recent occurrences without causing unintelligible chaos. She also includes elements of meta-writing. The female protagonist, a young writer, creates the personage of Elaine (mentioned in the previous paragraph), very reminiscent of herself:

Elaine sat on the breezeway in an old yellow nightgown of her mother’s waiting for something to happen. It was a sweltering morning in July, and drops of sweat crawled down her back one by one, like slow insects. Inertia oozed like molasses through [her] limbs (Plath 99).

Sylvia Plath writes about Esther writing about Elaine, and all three follow a similar emotional pattern. Writing in the auto/biographical mode is the first step in achieving authorship over the text and enables the author to use fictive devices, but in such a way as not to obliterate the whole image of one’s experience. By means of creating the character of Esther Greenwood Sylvia Plath transgresses the role of a mere author or biographer. She translates real-life experience into fiction and still remains credible to the readers, thus forming a very strong bond with them (which is compatible with Stanley’s ideal of a reader-friendly auto/biographical writing). What is more, Plath uses the auto/biographical form to tame the demons of overwhelming reality. The paper takes on a therapeutic role, becoming a sponge absorbing problems. It is also a continuation of the body, an integral part of her existence. Plath pays much attention to the human body (ugly bodies, sick bodies, bodies of newly born babies) and the body takes the role of a reflection of the text, which undergoes a striking transformation—from a chaotic structure into a more coherent creation. Juxtaposing the imagery of babies with the production of the text seems very reminiscent of

Cixous's comparison between writing and birth giving. Cixous underlines how much text production relates to female physicality. Plath recreates this image to describe the struggle in daily routines. On the whole, in *The Bell Jar* life and fiction mingle together and remain in a state of constant flux. Giving Esther a chance to restore harmony in life, Sylvia Plath attempts to transplant the character's decision into real life. Yet this process cannot be continued infinitely—Esther reflects Plath's life, but Elaine is unable to take that role any further.

The auto/biography appears within the constraints of another auto/biography. Moreover, the recurrent motif of a bell jar, descending and engulfing the main heroine, refers to Plath's life itself and is a clever, compelling metaphor. The novel ends with the optimistic vision of Esther escaping the title trap, which stands in stark contrast to the events that followed afterwards—Plath's gassing herself soon after the publication of the novel.³ Susan R. Van Deyne makes a valid point about this particular clash between life and prose: “[b]ecause the poems and novel that have made Plath's name come to almost all her readers as posthumous events, her work has inevitably been read through the irrevocable, ineradicable and finally enigmatic fact of Plath's suicide. The challenge for her biographers has been to puzzle out the relationship not merely of her life to her art, but of her art to her death” (3). Nevertheless, taking the conflicting real/fictional events aside, it seems the text has the capacity to prevent the bell jar's descent, especially for someone to whom “the world itself is the bad dream” (Plath 193).

The Bell Jar also goes beyond normal generic literary divisions. The novel derives from both biography (observing life from a distance) and autobiography (the usage of first person narration), but it also comprises newspaper headlines, imagined dialogues, and flashbacks. It is riveting and engaging for those readers who build an emotional bond with Esther and support her in her uphill battle with depression. Last but not least, it abolishes the assumption that the form of a diary utilizes its author's creativity best.

What about the feminist context then? Why is *The Bell Jar* not really a feminist auto/biography? Is the female authorship or female protagonist sufficient to classify it as such? The novel certainly contains several elements that could be viewed as feminist. Esther spurns the roles that society wants to impose on her. She rejects the “feminine mystique,” refusing

³ Her suicide was the result of many factors—disenchantment with the man she loved (Ted Hughes), financial insecurity, health problems, and harsh weather conditions at that time in London. Philip J. Baker describes Plath as a person with “mood disturbance” and suicidal tendencies (195).

to become simply a good mother or a wife. Instead, she demands the right to express herself freely as a writer (as a result, she does not take a course in shorthand because it would demean her and limit her potential). In this respect Esther challenges social and cultural conventions, choosing a challenging form to describe her existence (the narration she uses reflecting the fragmentation of her mind). Moreover, *The Bell Jar* definitely meets the basic tenets of a feminist auto/biography espoused by Stanley—it is anti-realist in its disruption of a linear method of presenting events. It is contingent, as it textually recognizes the fragility of facts and arguments. It is also anti-spotlight, as it refracts attention from a single unique subject (Esther's life is in the centre, but it is often interpreted through the lives of others). At the same time, it is not possible to claim that the novel is composed by textually located feminist practices. When Plath wrote the novel the second wave of feminism was at the early stage of development, hence it is hard to estimate its influence on the author. Even though Sylvia Plath's writing obviously predates the discussion about the impact of the distinct feminist auto/biography, her writing (not to mention the life narrative of her fictional impersonation) goes in the direction of the feminist auto/biography model. This is a tangible proof that the auto/biographical effect of empowering the female author may appear in the least expected circumstances.

In the case of Esther Greenwood, the text's value should not be exposed to any limitations. This may explain why Plath's heroine feels trapped in the suffocating atmosphere of *Ladies' Day*—"the big women's magazine that features lush double-page spreads of Technicolor meals, with a different theme and locale each month" (Plath 21). Imposing thematic restraints on the text itself degrades the creative potential of the author; therefore, it is essential to free oneself from all possible constraints in order to voice one's message.

The choice of techniques used to introduce the notion of exerting authority over the body of the text is also significant. The usage of the auto/biographical mode is just one of the main components to gain autonomy through writing. This notion is compatible with Cixous's statement that a "[w]oman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (347). To liberate one's voice, the author creates a distinct written self (fictive or not) that gains control over the matter of the text. The author of the text naturally wields power over her production and amplifies this potential through introducing powerful characters who also possess such control. Plath does this skilfully, holds the reins of the narrative through her literary alter ego, Esther Greenwood, a being functioning on manifold levels—a separate fictional being and a character "constructed through the perception and recollection of

others” (Evans 84). Even though Esther seems to crumble under the pressure of strong personalities around her (her mother, her boyfriend, other men she meets), she manages to preserve some space for her special needs. The strong relation to the text is one of the decisive factors. Esther tells the story of her apprenticeship in the beauty magazine, difficulties in complying with the standards manufactured for women, and, eventually, her mental collapse caused by the discrepancy between her vision of happiness and the harshness of post-war life. The reader is provided with a minute account of these occurrences and her emotional life.⁴ Despite being at times somewhat detached from her experiences, Esther keeps a firm grasp over her story, which helps her survive confrontation with an unfriendly world. Mary Evans points out that Esther “assume[s] a capacity for action which is apparently free of the control of others” (86). The narrator proves that she can free herself not only from the constraints imposed by “significant others . . . peer groups, institutions, [and] . . . a normative culture” (Evans 83), but also from the pressure of the text. She fails to write her own novel, but her life narrative resists outside influences and flows steadily unobstructed. Esther wants to become a real self, not just a product of others’ expectations. In order to achieve this, she has to classify herself within the matter of her narrative. At this point, she makes an important transition—keeping command over the text enables her to reaffirm control over her body and mind. She liberates herself through writing as it aids her in finally declaring “I am, I am, I am” (Plath 199).

FACING THE AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL IN JANET FRAME’S NOVEL

A discussion of auto/biography as both an empowering technique of writing and a tool to regain one’s own territory within the male-dominated world of literary practices can be extended to other authors. A similar approach to written forms of expression can be found in novels by New Zealand author Janet Frame. Frame, who wrote a series of strictly auto/biographical books (*To the Is-land*, *An Angel at my Table*, and *The Envoy from Mirror City*), also wrote a few novels in semi-auto/biographical tone, deeply rooted in real-life events and personal traumatic experience.⁵ In the 1940s Frame was diagnosed with schizophrenia; however, years later, psychiatrists in London confirmed that this diagnosis was incorrect (Ross 425). Philip J. Baker refers to her mental illness in terms of psy-

⁴ Her partnership with her boyfriend, Buddy Willard, collapses. Moreover, Esther is unable to build a relation with other men (with a young sailor or with Irwin, the first man she sleeps with) or friendship with other girls (she cannot communicate with fellow trainees at *Ladies’ Day*).

⁵ Janet Frame’s two sisters drowned and her brother suffered from epilepsy (Ross 425).

chosis and a deep sense of isolation (244). Nonetheless, since adolescence she spent many years in various New Zealand psychiatric institutions. As a result of these events, she grew up with a strong feeling of separation and marginalization. “[H]er need for [isolation] seems initially to have grown out of negative personal experience, it is encouraged by her reading and by her ambition to become a writer. It is, moreover, reinforced by the local cultural and literary climate. Isolation, both on geographical and on a social level, is frequently thematized in the New Zealand literature”⁶ (Oettli-van Delden 74). *Faces in the Water* explores this dissociation, and offers a graphic depiction of a long chain of mental collapses, nervous breakdowns, and long stays in mental institutes. But the novel goes far beyond a record of the traumas of everyday existence in hospital and transfer from one ward to another. It is also a successful attempt to “investigate” the body of a text, to invoke its potential to tame the demons that were born by overbearing therapy, electric shock treatment and threat of lobotomy. At some point the text becomes a means of reconciliation with suffering. Confinement in the asylum leaves a deep scar in the protagonist’s mind, who neither pretends it never happened, nor distances herself from these events.

In *Faces in the Water* Janet Frame, just like Plath in *The Bell Jar*, constructs her fictive alter ego. Istina Mavet recalls events from the Cliffshaven and Treecroft institutes. She does not avoid shocking details and her narrative is tense; fear of lobotomy, the peculiar behaviour of the sick, antipathy between stern nurses and distrustful patients—these elements strengthen the narration and endow it with drama. Istina exists on the borderline between sanity and madness. She takes the concurrent roles of a suffering subject and a careful observer who writes to keep firm grasp of reality. Yet at the same time she confesses in her final words:

I looked away from [other patients] and tried not to think of them and repeated to myself what one of the nurses had told me, ‘when you leave hospital you must forget all you have ever seen, put it out of your mind completely as if it never happened, and go and live a normal life in the outside world.’ And by what have I written in this document you will see, won’t you, that I have obeyed her? (Frame 253–54).

⁶ The sense of isolation is also present in *The Bell Jar*. Esther’s suffering stems from the strong feeling of not belonging and being unable to maintain any closer personal relations. It is amplified by her inexperience—she is unable to write her own novel due to lack of basic knowledge about life: “How could I write about life when I’d never had a love affair or a baby or even seen anybody die?” (Plath 99).

Istina implies that her narrative, tangible proof of her physical and mental experiences, is also a burden. She has an ambiguous attitude towards her own narrative—it paradoxically releases and relieves her innermost thoughts and feelings whilst simultaneously amassing a heavy load for her shoulders. This ambiguity makes Frame's novel even more intriguing. The author uses certain technical devices to hold the attention of the reader, and in this respect her novel follows the grain of Liz Stanley's auto/biography (even though it departs from it in particular ways, too). Despite the relative linearity of narration, Janet Frame resorts to several other techniques to challenge her reader, like her uncompromising approach to punctuation (she often refrains from using any punctuation signs at all) or very long sentences. The words that end *Faces in the Water* are crucial if one wants to comprehend the complexity of this narrative. The text surpasses "the restoration of reason and . . . [underlines] the loss of the compound personality that is alive in the madhouse and is characterized by prodigious empathy with the world" (Delrez 23).

The narrative transgresses the reminiscent or therapeutic function. "This could be seen as simply furthering the historical readings of women's writing as emotional and somehow uncontrolled rather than the intellectual response of the artist" (Unsworth 26). Through writing, Frame (and at the same time Istina) defends her subjectivity. "Frame presents a world in which interpretation of events and therefore the reality of individuals is entirely dependent on point of view and consequently cannot be seen as objective" (Unsworth 28). Istina Mavet, just like Esther Greenwood, longs for a development of her own voice and handles the text as a tool to shape and liberate it. "[She] . . . tries to find her subject position by comparing herself to others, by anxiously seeking signs of acceptance or rejection in the behaviour of the people around her. She cannot take her stand because she is completely dependent on the reactions of others" (Reif-Hülser 191). In Frame's novel Monika Reif-Hülser observes "a passionate desire to be seen, to be heard, to be recognized [T]he possibility [not only] to recapture or to negate, but also to love and to understand and thus transcend isolation" (181). Istina admits:

I will write about the season of peril. I was put in hospital because a great gap opened in the ice floe between myself and the other people whom I watched, with their world, drifting away through a violet-coloured sea where hammer-head sharks in tropical ease swam side by side with the seals and the polar bears. I was alone on the ice (Frame 10).

Istina appears to write to reconstruct her identity (she worked as a teacher, but mental instability shattered her classroom persona) and to

bridge the gap that had grown between herself and others. Text becomes a means to overcome isolation, discordance, friendlessness.

But through writing Istina also resists the incessant implications of her madness. Text offers her a possibility to underline that her stay at the hospital for “loonies” (as she calls it herself) was a serious mistake and an abuse of power. Still, there exists a strong bond between her narrative and lack of sanity.

There is an aspect of madness which is seldom mentioned in fiction because it would damage the romantic popular idea of the insane as a person whose speech appeals as immediately poetic; but it is seldom the easy Opheliana recited like the pages of a seed catalog or the outpourings of Crazy Janes who provide, in fiction, an outlet for poetic abandon (Frame 12).

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Istina, despite her combat with depression, possesses a capability to produce text, going beyond down-to-earth presentations of illness, and enriching her narrative with intertextual references to literary classics, eg. the works of William Shakespeare. The textual power of other texts translates directly onto Istina’s textual being. Close contact with literature helps her write her own narrative, and it also fills in the void between herself and “normal people.” Hence the feeling of desperation when one day she is denied an opportunity to look at fresh volumes brought to the hospital library.

There I had been standing . . . when suddenly a library had appeared just outside the window and a tweedy fairy godmother had not denied my request to look inside. But the villain arrived and turned me away because I had not the status necessary for people who view shelves of books. I was a patient and could not be trusted; I was a child and would not grasp the content, the essential meaning, of the books (Frame 241).

Here Istina touches upon another crucial element of daily reality in a hospital, namely, treating patients not as independent entities but as infantile beings with no intellectual capacity. The written words, both in the form of a book and one’s own narrative support Istina’s struggle to overcome the stigmatization, develop her own territory, and escape a simplified classification of her as a mad woman.⁷

Frame’s/Istina’s narrative relates to Helen Cixous’s observations and advice. In her influential treatise *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous says

⁷ There is a Gothic quality to Istina’s situation. She resembles a Gothic damsel in distress who has to withstand the pressures of the unfriendly collective villain, embodied by the hospital employers and society (who try to prove she is insane without looking further into her real mental condition).

that “[a] feminine text cannot fail to be more subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written, it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments—there’s no other way. There’s no room for her if she’s not a he? If she’s a her/she, it’s in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow the law, to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter” (357). To Istina Mavet writing is also more than subversive—it goes beyond an ideological masculinity and abolishes the “institution” of male writing. It is more than a woman’s attempt to free her forces through the process of narrative creation. It is writing to remain sane, to endure the reification she undergoes due to her mental instability. “The carefully constructed image of Janet as a writer is in fact used by Frame to conceal the Implicit Author. In the guise of Janet she attempts to present an acceptable public image of herself as someone who was unjustly certified as insane, but who managed to overcome this social victimization through writing” (Oettli-van Dalden 89–90).

Faces in the Water may be intriguing from a textual standpoint, but it also encountered criticism of certain aspects of its construction, for example the accumulation of facts describing the daily existence of patients (vide reviews by Joan Stevens). Simone Oettli-van Dalden refers also to the conflict between the external and internal worlds presented by Frame, resulting in a “blurring of the boundary between fact and fiction” (90). Yet, it would be unfair and patronizing to analyze this novel simply as a disjointed collection of haphazardly placed trivia and overlook its intertextuality and technical mastery. In this fictional auto/biography Frame presents a fascinating cultural construct and locates her protagonist in a challenging textual context. Once again the auto/biographical is used instinctively, but the result is inspiring and productive.

AUTO/BIOGRAPHY AS A TOOL TO RECLAIM ONE’S AUTHORITY OVER THE TEXT

To conclude, it is possible to write a distinct fictional auto/biography that resists classification as a feminist auto/biography, yet still possesses some of its qualities; one which empowers and endows its author with means to control the text production process and freely express strength. Stanley states that “whether these possibilities come to fruition as actualities depends upon how willing—not how able—feminist auto/biographers and writers about auto/biography are to put into practice feminist principles and precepts, and how concerned readers are to demand that they do” (Stanley 255). Writing may become a tool to bridge the gap or break the silence in which women, both as gendered beings and authors, are situated. Writing may actually contribute to making the female voice heard

(Jones 83). The production of a text may involve a feeling of pleasure, *jouissance*. It may also serve as a way to escape the overpowerment of the phallogocentric world (or maybe even phallogocentric as the world keeps revolving around the male aspect of writing), the world dominated and determined by men's laws. Last but not least, success lies where the author is able to overcome "[the] 'anxiety of authorship'—a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a precursor [in the male-oriented world of literature], the act of writing will isolate or destroy her" (Gilbert and Gubar 23). *The Bell Jar* and *Faces in the Water* as texts push the boundaries of female writing, and their protagonists resist fixed identity categories. Maybe this is not enough to acquire the label of feminist texts, but definitely sufficient to merit acclaim.

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