

The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

E. Miller Budick

The situation of women in the modern world is clearly a major concern of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (see Allen 160-78 and Whittier 127-46). Less obvious is how the book might embody a feminist aesthetic, that is, how it might define, as a solution to the sociological and psychological problems of women, a language and an art competent to secure women, especially the female writer, against male domination. In her essay on "Women's Literature," Elizabeth Janeway suggests that to be distinct from men's literature women's literature must constitute "an equally significant report from another, equally significant, area of existence" (344-45). Hence, some of the major themes of women's literature: madness, powerlessness, betrayal and victimization. Though not exclusively feminine, nonetheless these situations frequently arise from the situation of women as women (Janeway 346). Equally important to women's literature, however, is a unique literary language and form. Marjorie Perloff's "'A Ritual for Being Born Twice,'" for example, focuses in Laingian terms on *The Bell Jar*'s "attempt to heal the fracture between inner self and false-self . . . so that a real and viable identity can come into existence" (102). It touches on many female issues. The title itself expresses a female motif. But it does not establish a specifically feminist context. As Erica Jong puts it, "the reason a woman has greater problems becoming an artist is because she has greater problems becoming a self" (qtd. in Reardon 136), which means not just integrating the masked self and the genuine self, but also, as Joan Reardon explains in her analysis of Jong, "in coming to terms with her own body," expressing herself in her "own diction . . . images and symbols" (136).¹

In her introduction to *The New Feminist Criticism*, and in her two contributions to the volume, Elaine Showalter describes how, in recent years, attention has shifted from the treatment of women in male fic-

tion to the reconsideration of the act of writing and what feminist critics have variously called the “politics of language” (Furman), “sexual poetics” (Gilbert 31), or “sexual politics” (Rigney). Feminist critics, argues Showalter, have recognized not only that “women writers had a literature of their own, whose historical and thematic coherence, as well as artistic importance, had been obscured by the patriarchal values that dominate our culture,” but, more radically, that there existed a “female aesthetic . . . that came out of a specific female psychology.” French feminist criticism especially has emphasized “writing in the feminine,” “a radically disruptive and subversive kind of writing” that is “connected to the rhythms of the female body and to sexual pleasure” (*New Feminist* 5-6, 9; cf. Jones, “Inscribing” and “Writing”).

In the following pages I will argue that Plath not only perceives the world in terms of competing male and female languages, but that she herself attempts to write in the feminine. The text precisely locates the sources of what Susan Coyle has labeled Esther’s “alienation” from language (163; cf. Aird 91). And it points toward the need for a female language that can overcome that alienation. Plath does more than construct her novel out of uniquely female experiences concerning specifically female themes. She creates a literary form that simultaneously reflects the inherent femininity of a woman’s experience and then transforms that reflection from a static, potentially suffocating presentation of archetypes or traditional images of femaleness into a dynamic process of feminist discourse. Resisting the dangerous lure of the womb-like consciousness and desire for retreat that may well inhere in female sexuality, and to which her text gives full expression, Plath avoids some of the major pitfalls of traditional female writing. She spins a self-propelling and other-directed “thread” (258) of discourse that is sexually aggressive as well as procreative. Plath’s text, I believe, demonstrates a pattern of artistic growth whereby intuitive and spontaneous, self-protective, and often self-destructive forms of female response are converted into an independent aesthetic sufficiently strong not only to withstand the pressures of the dominant male language but