

Gail Scott

Heroine

Coach House Press, 2019 (1987)

REVIEWED BY RACHEL LEVITSKY

Heroine, Gail Scott's first novel, is spoken of as her most conventional.

I chuckled as I wrote that.

True, in later novels her palimpsest of innovative and estranging formal techniques— redacted sentences; fragments; narrative movement along the path of thinking rather than chronology (parataxis); memory as the site of events while the present tense of the novel is physically limited to a local confine (bath, block, bed, café, bed, therapist's office); untranslated multiplicities of language: dialects, vernaculars and official state languages, so that French and English are Frenches and Englishes (and Franglaises); a played abject (and feminine) melancholy as *dwelling* space; the intimate and bawdy details of female sex, desire, wit, hilarity, gossip, and a wry, often rotten attitude towards friends and rivals—all continue, and become ever further defamiliarized in later novels with interventions in syntax, grammar, and typography.

Scott's formal inventions aggregate. Once they appear, they continue to appear; the index grows. I see that in her current writings in her forthcoming *Permanent Revolution*, the conjunction “**and**” has become simply “+”—a technique I first saw used in her 2010 novel *The Obituary*. This is a good example, for such an intervention and rewrite of written language habit calls attention as the others do to Scott's commitment to applying poetic technique to prose and her radical opposition to sustaining relics, an

opposition to the cause of nostalgia, populism, the protestant work ethic and other sundry factors of fascist accumulation.

In other words, even without the + in place of “**and**”, or the eliminated auxiliary verbs—“**I grinning**”—in the present continuous predicates that she begins using in *My Paris* and continues to utilize in *The Obituary, Heroïne*, with its relatively normal looking paragraphs, offers a high bar of experimentation and style, rendered specifically for the novel’s narrative purposes. In preparing to write this review, I asked Gail how long it took her to write *Heroïne*: four years. It is a dense and circular work, for which there exists a plentitude of criticism and exegesis; it was first published thirty-four years ago and has remained foundational. The 2019 reissue includes a marvelous foreword by Eileen Myles where they/Eileen describe reading and writing the foreword sitting in a collective studio and experiencing *Heroïne* as a studio itself, an invitation to write. This week my students certainly also found that true.

For me, some of the best exegetical criticism on *Heroïne* is written by Scott herself. Particularly useful to my approach to reviewing *Heroïne* was the essay, “A Feminist At The Carnival.” In it Scott suggests that a feminist heroine of *modernité* would not be one that overcame odds by beating down patriarchal limitation with her *little man* sword (she reminds us that the heroes Oedipus, Hamlet, and Marcel are all squarely losers). She posits an unresolved resistance, akin to the fragmented and spiraling narrative we find in *Heroïne*. To quote another of her essays, it is in the un-“sutured” “cramped space” between sentences in which Scott writes her narratives. *Heroïne* is as decidedly unresolved and spiraling as it is tightly crafted, and thoroughly arranged as it is, in that little cramped and lively space between the linear fortress of sentences.

In the “Beginning,” which is the name of its first part. the novel opens onto a chapter titled “Sepia,” so we likely imagine we are in a zone of memory, dream, daydream. The first paragraph begins with a Black tourist being scolded for using united statesian coins in a canadian vending machine:

“Sir. You can on-ly put ca-na-dien monee in that machine. No sir. No foreign objects nor foreign monee in that macheen. It’s an infraction, you see.”

The narrator tells us that she’s “lying with her legs up.” In a tub. Thinking about her male lover’s mouth upon her, a mouth that despite being on a man is as uniquely knowing as the mouth of a woman. We learn of a time ten years before, in 1970, when our narrator, the heroine of the novel, and her lover (“my love”) prepared to leave Montréal for Morocco just as the radio announces the ten-year anniversary of the October Crisis, in which the FLQ—the militant arm of French speaking Quebec’s left, separatist movement—had kidnapped the British trade representative. Historically this kidnapping will precede a second kidnapping of the Minister of Labour, who is killed. The killing leads to a state of emergency and invocation of the War Measures Act, suspending habeas corpus and giving the government free reign to arrest anyone associated with the independence left. This series of events, called the October Crisis, begins the spiral of action of *Heroine*. About Gail-the-narrator’s convenient trip to Morocco, Marie, who for us speaks mostly untranslated French, has only disdain. “Marie a-t-elle dit que je ne serai pas au rendez-vous?” Marie is the real Quebecois revolutionary: she is Francophone. Gail, our narrator-heroine, is told by the communist leader M at the café that her Métis grandfather doesn’t place her closer to the central subject position of the struggle.

“You’re English regardless of your blood.”

From where she lies, with her legs up in the tub of her ragged Seville Street Wakiki Tourist Room “bed-sitter”—a kind of apartment I think united statesians would call an “efficiency”—her active mind addresses the ten years of the 1970s. Gail speaks to “Sepia,” who has become a character who receives Gail’s direct address to memory and dreamlife. Gail speaks to “my love,” her primary lover of the Morocco trip, who is tiring of her and her demands. He’s romancing a “green-eyed woman” after decreeing a state of polyamory for his relationship with Gail. And Gail speaks to Marie, who is sometimes there with Gail in the bed-sitter and sometimes not. Marie is often scolding of Gail, over the grimy state of her bed-sitter, on the sad state of her feminist psychology and in response to her repetitive musings toward writing a hypothetical novel that never seems to get started. Except that of course we are reading it.

Gail, revealed as anglophone and white with a suppressed Métis ancestry, is spied upon by and spoken to by the Black tourist, who sees the city also as foreign country, who like Wim Wender’s angel perched on the Berlin’s Winged Victory angel or Jeremy Bentham’s prison panopticon sentinel, has a panoramic view of Gail’s present and remembered sepia city from above Montreal’s Mount Royal, a Frederick Law Olmstead-designed park that looks over the city. He is quiet but not without judgment. His Black moniker reminds Gail to think about Blackness, to study race more rigorously. As he is scolded for being unitedstatesian, for being a tourist (sign of gentrification, this is 1980), and no doubt for being Black, he too scolds Gail:

“The Black tourist says: ‘You tell me: how would you treat me in a novel? Among other things, I bet at every mention you’d state my color.’”

The Black tourist, my love, and Marie scold Gail, but nothing is as harsh or loud as the criticism Gail lobs at herself for her inability to come to terms with her lost centrality to her lover’s desire. Her own hunger can’t be set

aside. “Oh, Mama, why’d you put this hole in me?” is one of the novel’s many refrains, phrases or sentences that architect the novel by repetition. Our character Gail is a feminist and a revolutionary and she’s supposed to be more ‘modern.’ She can’t get there, to the there of being modern according to “my love’s” definition, but, to the exasperation of Marie and her therapist, nor can she give up trying. The suffering, and the abjection within it, persist.

In the “Ending” (Part III), of the novel, Gail and ‘my love’ are at the height of their revolutionary activity and the apotheosis of their liberated polyamory. Gail is getting ready to sleep with N, anxious about the wager (she knows there isn’t really an equals sign) with ‘my love.’ She thinks on repeat, “This affair will improve my revolutionary image.” She succeeds in taking a lover. She rebels finally against my love who for some time hasn’t been loving her well enough. The Black tourist has succeeded against being racialized, and is now “the tourist.” The heroine is finally committing to her novel. We see her opening a black notebook and claiming time in which to write in it. Claiming time for writing indicates to her comrades that she has “left the left.” Perhaps most importantly to we who love avant-garde prose, Gail is becoming our heroine not only because she is writing her novel but, she is able to write it because “she’s learning how to write over the top of things. Whatever that means.”

She finds a letter to her lover sent by a rival. We learn that my love’s name is Jon. He becomes Jon.

The bird dream of the beginning becomes a fish dream of the ending.

This is transformation, so we know we are in a novel. And yet, we are reassured that this change is not triumphant—our heroine’s condition of abjection is not disavowed, ejected. In this late exchange between Marie and Gail, Gail defends her free display of the impossibility of existing as a free woman:

“Gail,” she says. “Tu ne prendras pas en mal ce que je fais te dire?”

‘What ?’

‘J’ai compris ce soir qu’est-ce qui est tragique dans la vie d’une femme. Je l’ai vu très clairement chez-toi.’

‘What ?’ (As nonchalantly as possible.).

‘Tu sembles incapable de faire concorder la vie dont tu rêves avec celle que tu vis maintenant. You almost said it earlier. It’s as if the words or maybe even the syntax have to be invented to close the space between what you’re living now and future possibilities.’”

Gail’s responds slightly defensively with something about the inescapability of the tragedy of “modern times.” Marie says women have to be careful, avoid the morass of getting stuck in dream monologues, keep their gaze frontal. Gail then gives up:

“Yeah, well, I learned long ago how to deal with that to see the way of any situation, a person just keeps checking her performance from all the angles.” (137)

Our heroine, still in her tub, has had it with being that careful, appearing to be so good.

By positioning Gail into that tub, with her legs up for the duration of the novel, Scott writes into her heroine’s story a refusal, Anne Boyer’s iconic poetic/feminist NO, against the law of an entitled masculinity which wouldn’t recognize Gail’s heroism. In her refusal, she insists that neither will it be graced with the tragedy it engineers, the one that Marie’s gritty feminism frets over. Gail Scott implants her heroine in the no-where

abysmal dwelling of an abjection which may be torturous, but it is alive, and *associated* with all that lives in the darkness of desire, the noisy spilling-over city, undomesticated and free. The last line of the novel is a gesture, offering this untamed future possibility to

“She—”