

HEROINE
by Gail Scott
Coach House Press, 1987.
Toronto

"A remarkable oversight" is how Craig Owens prefaces his re-vision of a Laurie Anderson performance piece. The second glance in his essay "Postmodernism and

that post-modernism may be another masculine invention engineered to exclude women."

While this may be the case in American postmodernist debates, it is certainly not an accurate description of Canadian theorizing about post-modernism, where there has long been recognition of the validity of Owens' hypothesis that feminist insistence on non-

Canada, *Le désert mauve* by Nicole Brossard, *Ana Historic* by Daphne Marlatt, and especially in this case, *Heroine* by Gail Scott, reminds us once again of the pertinency of this linking of these discourses of critique. The dialogue between anglophone and francophone feminists in Canada and Quebec has been the only point of contact between these two literatures. It has stimulated the most innovative writing of the last decade and with the impressive roster of young women whose first books are appearing on the appropriate small press lists this year, promises to do so for several more years.

Among the more active participants in this dialogue is Gail Scott, bilingual journalist and co-editor of *Tessera*, a bilingual journal of feminist theory and experimental writing. For a number of years she has participated in a theory discussion group along with other prominent feminist writers, Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, Louise Cotnoir, Louise Dupré, Daphne Marlatt, France Théoret and Betsy Warland. Through their talks, theoretical articles and texts, this discussion has been shared with an audience stretching across the continent. These years have already published texts announcing their resistance to the line, to any party line, but especially to the line of narrative. With its insistence on temporality as causality, so grammars of minimal narratives instruct us, narrative emplotment is entrapment. The narrative line catches readers making them accept as inevitable and hence as natural that which is constructed, fabular. With their focus on the endings of marriage or death, the plots of fictional narrative — especially the "heroine's plot," as Ellen Moers has called it, the marriage plot of the realist novel — are deadly traps for the independent feminist reader and writer. She must resist the line,

Brossard's writing, writing as research in her words, is a writing of resistance. In *L'amèr, où le chapitre effrité* (*These Our Mothers: Or the Disintegrating Chapter*, 1975, 1983), she developed a theory of sexual difference as relational difference, deconstructed the master fictions through which the reality of women's lives has been constructed, and disrupted the line. Chapters disintegrate as the text circles around five discrete moments: "Strategic

wound or suspended meaning—combat." "Fiction begins suspended mobile between words and the body's likeness to this our devouring and devoured mother." In this suspension, the sentence is also disrupted, syntax abandoned. Brossard works on language deconstructing its gendered plot(ing) and opening multiple new meanings through her work on the material signifier. In *Spare Parts* (1981), Gail Scott focuses on short narrative sequences which are further broken up in resistance to the line when individual sentences or paragraphs fly off in new directions as in the surrealist *cadavre exquis*. Such syntactic and narrative discontinuity is reinforced by an exploration of the fragmented female body. The excessive and detached parts are both grammatical and corporeal, the title of the collection foregrounding the ruling metaphor of this phase of feminist exploration of language and meaning.

In her new book, Scott extends her resistance in new directions particularly into the problematics of the referent in the creation of the "reality effect." She risks the line in exciting new ways. *Heroine* is the most important feminist fiction yet to emerge in English Canada and in its short life has already attracted enthusiastic audiences. (The first printing sold out almost immediately.) Part of the pleasure for the reader lies in the possibility for nostalgic reminiscence on the left wing political and intellectual scenes of the seventies which the narrator evokes in bits and pieces of exceptionally vivid detail while she negotiates a rite of passage, trying to make sense of her life and orient herself in a new direction. The narrative remains in suspension, however, between the rhythm of Marxist political action, legacy of the open love affair with a left wing leader where passion has died, and the shadowy promise of feminist sororality held out by a friend, Marie, who urges the narrator to participate in demonstration in support of abortion. In suspension between them, the narrative questions Marxism's marginalization of the "woman question" and feminism's lack of a coherent theory to ground praxis.

Nostalgia is a trap, though. With the recall of the politics and café scenes of the seventies, the "reality effect" is strong and compels the reader's identifica-

tion. The referential images seems destined to overwhelm feminist or feminist films. *Woman*, Lizzie Borden and by Diane Kourys v of love scenes rein dominant narrative love which the film defamiliarize. *Scott* the risk of the referent. However, oscillating interpellation of n distancing of disru fiction keeps the r seesaw.

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Untitled (R. Budd Dwyer)

Lisa Naftolin

REVIEWS

Feminism" in Hal Foster's anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic* is prompted by Owens' belated recognition that the performance is an enactment of sexual difference. The most significant development in contemporary culture in nearly every field of activity during the past decade, he ultimately concludes, has been the emergence of a feminist practice with a corresponding energetic feminist production. This is grounded in a critique of the high modernist tenet of the autonomous nature of the aesthetic from the feminist understanding that all meaning is socially constructed. Theories of post-modernism, Owens continues his *mea culpa*, have neglected or repressed this production: "The absence of discussions of sexual difference in writings about post-modernism, as well as the fact that few women have engaged in the modernism/post-modernism debate, suggest

hierarchical difference is an "instance of post-modern thought." Especially in Quebec feminists have played an important role in theorizing post-modernism through their intervention as editors of the prominent periodicals *La nouvelle barre du jour* and *Spirale* of which, respectively, Nicole Brossard and Gail Scott were founding co-editors. The feminist editor of *Island* and *Periodics*, Daphne Marlatt, fulfilled a similar, if less lauded, function in English Canadian writing. Feminism in these milieux has been seen as the salient feature of post-modernism through its deconstruction of binary oppositions and its critique of the master narratives of Western culture, indeed its critique of all narratives and all totalizing theories. The publication of new fictions by these leading feminists and postmodernist writers of francophone and anglophone

tion. The referential power of images seems destined to overwhelm feminist critique as in the feminist films *Working Girls* by Lizzie Borden and *A Man in Love* by Diane Kourys where the images of love scenes reinscribe the dominant narrative of romantic love which the films set out to defamiliarize. Scott's novel runs the risk of the referent as well. However, oscillating between the interpellation of nostalgia and the distancing of disruption, the fiction keeps the reader on a seesaw.

Memory is purely fictive, a word-being called "Sepia," with whom the narrator engages in monologue. The temptation to empathize with the character is further undermined by the narrative framing. The narrator is seated in a bath in a rooming house on the Main trying to plan out a novel, struggling with the difficulty of creating a positive heroine in a context where symbolically women do not exist. Through its meditation on the negative image of women — "she looks instinctively for her own reflection in a store window, But it's too dark to see clearly" — the fiction offers a critique of representation intertwined with a critique of patriarchal domination of the symbolic. The mimetic element in the novel is undercut by the processual hermeneutic of the narrator's self-reflexive discussion of her difficulties of writing, of the problem of gaining enough distance from her character. Maybe this would be easier if she got out of the bath she wonders.

But the "reality effect" is also undercut by a blurring of levels of narrative. The only dialogue the narrator has in the text is with her heroine in a confounding of fiction and reality on the level of the text; this foregrounds and defamiliarizes the tendency for the reader to enter into dialogue with the fictional narrator. This is further encouraged by the blatant overwriting evident in the intrusion of the autobiographical contract in a work of fiction: both the author of *Heroine* and the aspiring fictional writer in the bathtub are named Gail. This deconstruction of the fictional conventions might have been further emphasized with numbers as used for dramatic texts with such embeddings, Gail I and Gail II. The constructed and aleatory aspects of the narrative are also laid bare through two other narrative devices — the grey

woman who inexplicably appears on the Montreal streets to both narrator and heroine, and the black tourist whose bird's eye view through the telescope on the top of Mount Royal is the opening scene of the novel. His progress through the city provides the frame for each chapter. This panoramic view presents the city in which desire is inscribed in every reflective surface, shop window or mirror-like wall; desire in which the narrator's future creates itself as she lies in her rooming house in the heart of the city. (In this aim to write woman into the city, into the polis, we hear echoes of the project of Brossard's *French Kiss*). But the black tourist has no story to tell, does not engage with the characters, remains an inexplicable figure undermining our attempts to effect closure and make sense of the narrative. Closure is resisted also in the parodic reworking of the heroine's plot which lays bare its grammar: the heroine does not choose a marriage partner, but is chosen. Even more passive is the heroine of Scott's novel within a novel; she is the epitome of negativity. Needless to say *Heroine* is an ironic title.

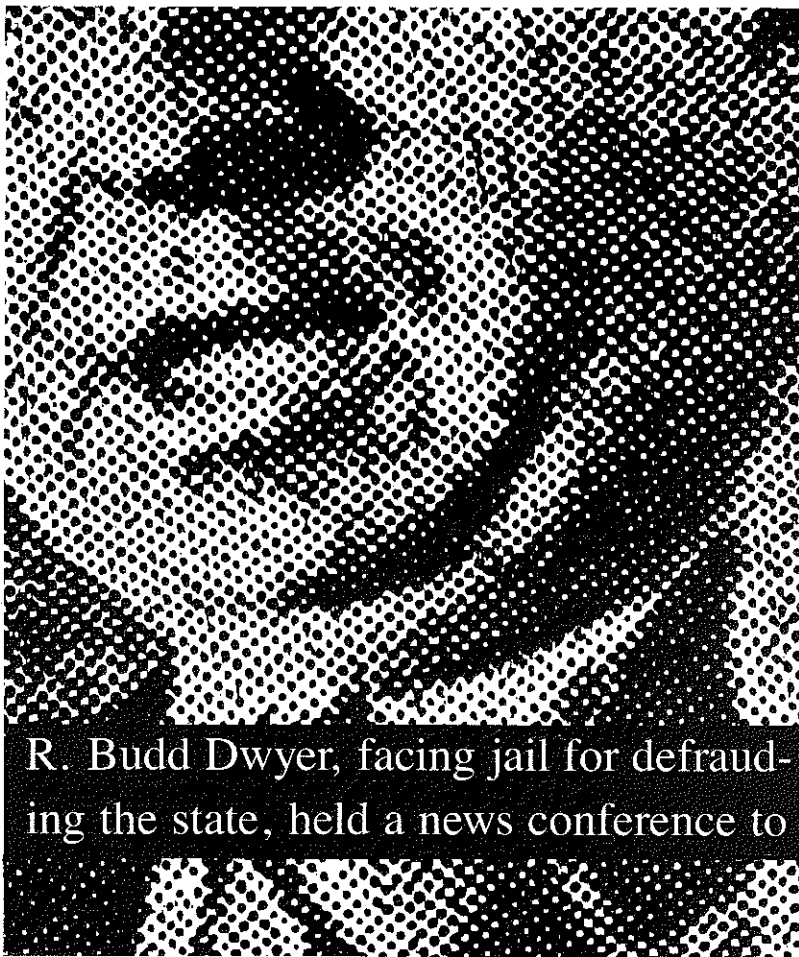
Although the past is fictive and the future unrepresentable, the present of narration is lucid. Scott's prose is densely textured as a poem, indeed like a poem it echoes and reechoes, structured not around the temporal sequence of clauses but around repeated segments which allow the work to take shape in the mind's ear. This clashes with the emphasis on detailed visual imagery which creates the scintillating surfaces of the novel. Everything is illusion. In the same way the extraordinarily rich symbolic imagery clashes with negativity to create further paradoxes which disrupt linear logic. Scott's fiction also disrupts linguistic norms with its mixture of English and French. Such a novel, needless to say, does not end. The final selection entitled "Play It Again, S" invites us to think associatively through this collage. It breaks off after a list of sentences stating what she thinks or she does (183) in mid sentence with the word "She —."

To herald this as the most outstanding work of the year as one is tempted to is perhaps premature in light of the forthcoming works promised by several major avant garde woman writers. However, it

will be hard for them to surpass the brilliance of Scott's writing in her critique of representation and of narrative.

Barbara Godard is the editor of *Gynocritics/Critiques: Feminist Approaches to The Writing of Canadian and Quebec Women* (Toronto: ECW, 1987). She is also the translator of Nicole Brossard's *Lovhers, Montréal: Guernica Press, 1986*.

would be built upon the bulldozed bones of the politically embarrassing "free-wheeling and unconventional life style" of the mostly lower class Milton-Park residents. But, amazingly enough, her saga ends with a "roomer's dream, a planner's dream, an organizer's dream — an urban success. Local democratic and cooperative (albeit middle class) participation succeeded in saving and eventually renovating 597 out



R. Budd Dwyer, facing jail for defrauding the state, held a news conference to

THE MILTON-PARK AFFAIR Claire Helman Montreal: Vehicule Press.

The affair that Claire Helman recounts — the Milton-Park neighbourhood's 20 year battle to exist in Downtown Montreal — is more than just an affair of the heart. Using a descriptive narrative, the author highlights one developer's attempt to crawl into bed with the Sugar Daddy of Montreal, former Mayor Jean Drapeau. Ms. Helman begins with Concordia Estates' seduction of the seemingly willing civic administration vis a vis La Cité, a nightmare of rampant urbanization — 6 blocks of office towers, luxury hi-rise apartments, and

endless strips of exclusive specialty shops. These concrete monoliths would not only increase tax revenues, but they of a possible 852 units. Plenty of hard work as well as all-important trilevel state support, transformed Milton-Park into Canada's largest ever housing co-operative. To be honest, Ms. Helman chronicles for us a not-so-pretty reality. Her account intrigues as well as informs the reader about the effects that unchecked uses of power have upon quality of life in a neighbourhood like Milton-Park. The author, who perceives this urban setting to be a "safe, diversified, low-rental district with a pleasurable degree of interaction among residents, correctly emphasizes how any corrupt power base — whether it be developer or citizen — could and would dismantle the Milton-Park