

## “Towards the Uncanny Edge of Language”: Gail Scott’s Liminal Trajectories

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If writing is the act of always seeking more understanding, more lucidity, prescriptive directives have no place in our trajectory towards the uncanny edge of language.

— Gail Scott, *Spaces* (62)

I’ve found another way to pose the question.

— Gail Scott, *Heroine* (51)

### A Word

THIS ESSAY was conceived and substantially completed a few months before the publication of Gail Scott’s most recent work of fiction, *Main Brides: Against Ochre Pediment and Aztec Sky* (1993). Reading it has proven to be yet another journey to “the uncanny edge of language,” for embedded in Scott’s kaleidoscopic narrative is the very interpretive act staged in this essay. At the conclusion of the chapter entitled “Donkey Riding,” a Marilyn Monroe-like character named Norma Jean addresses Lydia, the novel’s focal (and fragmented) consciousness who creates/observes her many doubles from her shadowy corner in a bar on the Main in Montreal:

“You think you’re so tough,” said N.j., waving the placemat in the air. “You don’t even have the guts to call this dream what it really is”:

“*The Perfect Incest Dream.*” (196)

Sections I and II of this essay are about the tough going of our waking hours, section III is about the dream, and section IV is about the dreamer.

[T]he problem with feeling better (calmer) is, it opens space for the inner anguish under.

— Gail Scott, *Main Brides* (130)

Looking over a 1989 interview with Scott, I delight in its characteristic ending. Her parting gesture evokes a dual promise, the promise of vast, as-yet-uncharted territories both within (the self) and without, and a pledge to explore them through writing: “writing is something that operates constantly on the edge of change, and is always opening new spaces” (“On the Edge” 19). “These words excite me so much for writing. . . . Wow,” I mentally exclaim with the diarist in *Spaces Like Stairs* (86). Scott’s words inspire me because of their acknowledgement of the twin realities of need and commitment: the need for change (born out of the experience of crisis), and the commitment to pursue a vision of change. Scott’s daring investigations of crisis and emancipatory prospects partake of a larger contemporary critical and transformative project that is complex and multifaceted. As I read Scott’s works, I hear the voices of fellow travellers, whose words offer the “nurturing,” “stroking,” and “feedback” that we long for and need to “really believe in our project enough to go ahead and do it” (Scott, “On the Edge” 19). Michel Foucault’s words, bell hooks’s, Bronwen Wallace’s. In a particularly moving (perhaps because so uncharacteristically confessional) passage in *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault suggests that an interrogation of accepted modes of being and seeing is not an esoteric luxury but an essential survival strategy: “There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting [and, we might add, living] at all” (8). Hooks writes in *Yearning*: “Our living depends on our ability to conceptualize alternatives, often improvised. . . . For me this space of radical openness is a margin — a profound edge” (149). Writing a year before her tragically untimely death in 1989, Wallace spoke of the continuous process of “*becoming*,” which characterized feminism for her, and of the dual imperatives of questioning and commitment: “strong convictions are a lot like maps. They guide us through the world, certainly, but they have to be checked, constantly, for accuracy. There’s a lot of unknown territory out there; new routes have to be charted, whole countries named” (107).

How to conceive of our destination(s), then? Or, to pose the question differently (replace the territorial figure with the personal figure): not where lies but who resides at “the uncanny edge of language”? I think of two of Scott’s in/conclusive endings (to borrow a term from Elizabeth Meese), which suggest themselves to me less by way of an answer than in the manner of a provocation. As Scott’s feminist at the carnival goes up the last stair of *Spaces Like Stairs* towards tomorrow, she reflects: “She’ll [the heroine] never be Oedipus, or Hamlet. Her words will take her elsewhere. But where? *Towards the mother*? Here, I think, begins the real tragic journey. For it’s more complex than that: it’s a double-sided journey, now towards her, now towards him (i.e. culture)” (132; emphasis added). In a different context, Scott ends a recent interview by saying, “Being a mother is one of the hardest things to talk about” (“Gail Scott” 8). Posed differently, then, the question is no longer Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be . . .”; rather: who have we been? Who/how can we become? And, as for the mother, how can we more fully tell a story that, in summary, might read something like this: “Now she’s gone I carry her inside as she once carried me” (Scott, *Spaces* 19)?

A woman journeys, Scott suggests, along a spiral path; the line that she traces between the space from which she writes and the ones towards which she writes is a coiled, twisted cord: the mother’s and daughter’s lifeline. The blood that courses through it, though, is both poison and balm. By turns foetal and uterine, a woman needs to guard her self, so that it is “Neither walled up nor leaking wildly out” (Scott, *Main Brides* 146), so that it can be born (unto itself) yet give birth (to alterity). And, in order to stay alive, she has to negotiate her way through that space of “inner anguish” that opens every time she tries to “synthesize the inner and the outer” (130, 19), daughter (the present) and mother (the past, but also the future), love and freedom.

## II

[T]he line we trace between the space we write from and those we write towards.

— Gail Scott, *Spaces* (51)

“[T]he very best writing,” Scott argues, “has to do with pushing the boundaries of thought as far as you can” (“On the Edge” 17). *Heroine*

and *Spaces Like Stairs* probe and push, never losing sight of the political and personal urgency of this exploration/intervention; what is at stake is individual and collective survival: "It will take the strength of her and all her sisters to write through this dark, confusing place without tipping the balance to psychosis" (*Spaces* 132). It is to this landscape, and to its darker subterranean currents, that I would like to turn.

*Spaces Like Stairs*, a work of fiction-theory, can be seen as a companion piece to *Heroine*, a map of a fictional territory inhabited by (in order of their appearance in the novel) a French-Canadian guard; a black tourist; a narrator (whose name and initials, like the author's, are Gail and G.S.), awaiting an orgasm in a bathtub, her legs up, mourning lost love, trying to tell a story in which the heroine is "a free spirit (although you can taste the fragility of her chances, for self, for love)" (*Heroine* 42); Jon/"my love," the revolutionary leader with the beautiful (feminine) mouth and the trendy political credo of nonmonogamy; some hookers; more comrades; wise, beautiful, woman-loving Marie; the girl with the green eyes (the relaxed woman who gets the man); Sepia (to whom the narrator cannot lie); Her (the mother) of the emaciated face and the blood-stained Kotex; a homeless grey woman, her skirts stained; a shrink from McGill; Anne and the other women at the battered-women's shelter; and others. *Spaces Like Stairs* outlines the contours of this dark, confusing place, a space that serves, Scott writes, as "a conduit across which a writing subject in-the-feminine is constantly in a process of becoming" (Knutson et al. 22). The territory across which this female subject-in-process travels is crisscrossed by boundaries that both constrain and invite transgression: boundaries between French Quebec and English Canada (during that volatile decade between the War Measures Act and the Quebec referendum); between genders, classes, races; between the personal and the collective; between the centre and the margins (Leith 101); between the past (the pull of nostalgia), the present (and its barely bearable pain), the future (and its challenging openness). It is a space rife with tensions between art and life, "between political action — both national and feminist — and the contemplation necessary to aesthetic and theoretical construction" (Irvine 111), between writing and the body, between narrative and poetry, between thinking and feeling, between "ideology and the unconscious" (Scott, *Spaces* 134).

In Scott's writing, lines are drawn over territorial bodies, political bodies, cultural bodies, gendered bodies. Not surprisingly, writing,

like cartography, proves to be less a descriptive activity than an investigative/interpretive one (Monmonier 1). In *Spaces Like Stairs* and *Heroine*, Scott uses language as a speculum (to borrow Luce Irigaray's figure) that allows her to explore the interiority of a female subject: "Surely the assertion of the inner self has to start with language" (*Spaces* 17). The landscape that Scott discovers is marked by temporality and motion, a space as much defined by surfaces and deep structures as by edges, gaps, tears, rips. The structure of uncovered subjectivity reveals a selfhood constituted by a constant negotiation between the three modalities of the female subject identified by Teresa de Lauretis in *Technologies of Gender*. She coins "Woman" to refer to "the *representation* of an [alleged] essence inherent in all women" (9); "women" are "the real, historical beings and social subjects who are defined by the technology of gender and actually engendered in social relations"; "the subject of feminism," distinct from "Woman" but also from "women," is a subject in progress who is "at the same time inside *and* outside the ideology of gender, and conscious of being so, conscious of that twofold pull, of that division, that doubled vision" (10). For Scott, too, the female subject is "in a process of becoming" (*Spaces* 22), both subject to, and engaged in, the deconstruction of "*traditional fictions about women*" (*Spaces* 62). The three reality realms manifest themselves to the narrator of *Heroine* in a dream that she and her shrink interpret early in the novel. There are three birds in the dream: a nightingale "sitting in the long grass in the grey dawn singing a beautiful song representing infinite poetic possibilities for the future"; a painted bird, "trendily attractive, chattering madly," whose song is thin; and a third bird, "Fully developed and a beautiful singer," whose face remains hidden because it sits with its back to the narrator (28). Like de Lauretis's women, the first bird reveals both the darkness of the oppression suffered and the promise of a spirit never wholly crushed; like Woman, the second bird is a fabricated image, a patriarchal death mask through whose cracks female anguish is nonetheless discernible; like the subject of feminism, the third bird could be the "answer to the future" (29).

Wishing to move towards the future, the narrator keeps stumbling over a narrative (of her own making) that oscillates between "the interpellation of nostalgia and the distancing of disruption" (Godard 51), between a longing for the lost romance of love and politics and the need to break free of its self-destructive hold. Thus, the heroine's journey is a tightrope walk across a dark abyss of despondency that

threatens to engulf her: “a woman just has to walk the tense line between the sadness (past) and the beauty (future), the better to live now” (Scott, *Heroine* 123). An appreciation of the full magnitude of this task comes with the recognition that there is no simple, straight line, no possible bridge, that (to shift metaphors) the line across the abyss is a river that runs both ways. The female subject bears a double consciousness — of her complicity with an oppressive gender ideology even as she knows that she is “not *that*” (de Lauretis 10). She is caught in a swirl of crosscurrents: past and future, feeling and thinking, feminist consciousness and “the physiological residue of experience (battering, childbearing, love, nuclear waste . . .)” (Scott, *Spaces* 134). Her only way not to “drown or tumble into despair” (25) is to learn to move in more than one direction at a time. That means learning to undo repression, fight denial, and overcome shame so that she may confront who she has been, the better to imagine who she can become. It means using memory to open the floodgates — to give herself/us the permission to “behave excessively, so we can’t bury things or miss the point by failing to undo the contradictions that block the way to deeper cognizance” — while using imagination to project a “*vision* of utopia” where woman can exist “as a whole person” (25; emphasis added).

Scott, like de Lauretis, uses a spatial figure to envision the female subject’s forward movement. Borrowing from film theory, de Lauretis describes this ever-shifting destination as a “space-off”: “the space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible” (26). This space-off, however, is not a promised home, a final destination, the subject’s natural habitat. Rather, what characterizes the subject of feminism is the tension of a pull in contrary directions, a movement between the internalized constructs of an oppressive gender ideology — which she has to scrutinize, the better to exorcise — and emergent feminist counterpractices — which she invents in order to reinvent herself. Scott imagines a similar psychospatial configuration. Her space-off is fiction-theory, a method that explores gaps (between two or more ways of thinking) without attempting to close them; it is thus the antithesis of a bridge. Her plural female subject strives to resist the temptation of the bridge, a temptation “to substitute what others want for that impossible, contradictory grasping towards ‘selfhood’” (*Spaces* 50). What she rejects is a perception of selfhood as unary, as an essential, singular core. For the female subject, subjectivity is process and plural, and its creation/expression is through a writing that seeks to trace the

lines “between the space we write from and those we write towards” (51).

No bridge, no (one) self, no (one) home. The narrator’s transitory existence at the Waikiki Tourist Rooms bespeaks an ambivalence towards the very notion of home that seems to run through much contemporary feminist writing. If feminism is understood as a project concerned with differences *within* political struggles, a commitment to resisting an ideology of sameness that ossifies difference, then it has to be seen as a struggle for coalition; and coalition is opposed, by definition, to home, being characterized by “multiple locations, rather than a search for origins and endings” (Mohanty 87). This is, indeed, Scott’s vision, for she sees the writer constantly taking “wild leaps” across cultural gaps, “translating in two directions. . . . Until she realizes that she has no choice but to try, in her writing process, to leave spaces into which the other, the reader, can read her own difference” (*Spaces* 53). This vision, however, also has its darker side. The narrator’s melancholia in *Heroine* can be seen as the malaise of being “homesick with nowhere to go” (Martin and Mohanty 206), of always being “on the outside edge” (Scott, *Spaces* 87), haunted by the fear of becoming, like the grey woman, homeless. “[N]ot being home,” Martin and Mohanty reflect (196), involves the recognition that home is an illusion of coherence and safety based on exclusion and the suppression of difference, including differences within oneself. This realization, however, coexists with an equally unsettling awareness of the risk and terror inherent in breaking through the walls of home.

Yet, while the narrator is homeless, she is not motherless.

### III

Oh Mama why’d you put this hole in me?

— Gail Scott, *Heroine* (31)

“[F]rom what angle can a person start the story?” asks the narrator, contemplating her heroine’s uncertain fate (Scott, *Heroine* 132). The angle is hard to fix, for where there should be a narrator/heroine there is “such an emptiness” (147); where there should be movement there is a paralysing “*contradiction between (the need for) love and freedom*” (121). Suspended between the sadness of the past and the

beauty of a wished-for future, the present is rendered painfully vacant: “what hurts most of all is being in the space between the two”; and where there should be a story there is only an anguished plea: “*Somebody help me fight*” (120). Unexpectedly, somebody does answer the distress call: “For certain nights She came to me when I needed her” (132).

Scott writes in the opening essay of *Spaces Like Stairs*: “I used to live in a triangle. Mother, God and me” (17). In *Heroine* the narrator adopts and feminizes the mode of address used to refer to the divinity to speak of her mother: She, Her. Still, an awareness of her presence in *Heroine* came to me only gradually, creepingly. Then I was taken aback by a recognition of an eerie affinity between Her of the blood-stained Kotex and the nameless grey woman, whose stained skirt and stockings the narrator obsessively notices. Now I see Her and her double, the grey woman, at every turn of the story. Silent witnesses, they are constant reminders of a drama of seduction and betrayal that is also a narrative of origins. Mother and bag lady, alike stained by female fluids, they are icons of the lacks we live by: love, freedom, and (as women in this society) our female bodies. Scott’s epigraph to *Heroine*, from Umberto Eco, is wisely chosen: “We use signs and the signs of signs only in cases where the things themselves are lacking.” I offer the following passage from *Heroine* as one version of that story of origins:

Marie looks in. . . .

“Dis-moi pas que c’est ici que tu restes.”

Sepia, that’s the tyranny of intimacy. My mother made the same mistake. Always waiting on the verandah after dances at the crossroads back in Lively. Her moon was in Cancer. Once She was stricken, She smelled of soaked Kotex. At night the dogs spread the black napkins over the snow. Anyway, following the love in the parked car, we kids hurried home beetling down the dirt road. . . .

“All I got was a rip in my skirt. Honest Mom.”

But from the verandah She looked at me sadly with brown eyes that were growing a white haze over the pupils. I felt so terrible I couldn’t make Her happy, I started planning my departure. When, at dinner, I said “Montréal” the whole family winced. Then Lucie McVitty, the old maid across the street who watched me coming home at night through her lace curtains, gave me the address of a niece in Westmount. As she handed me



the piece of paper torn off Boyd's General Store calendar with the cute little red-cheeked girl biting on an apple, she whispered:

"Watch out, white iris stems fade quickly, when uprooted."

Then she shut the door.

Coming up to the city, it was winter. I straightened and smiled to myself, thinking of freedom. Two hookers were standing on the corner under magnificent Japanese umbrellas outside the bus depot. (43)

This is a mininarrative shot through with the sights and smells of female sexuality: the sexuality of the adolescent and of the mother, of the lesbian and of the old maid, of the prostitute and of the mythical Eve (biting the apple). Framed by Marie (whose soft breasts the narrator, in the novel's opening pages, recalls touching) and the two hookers, it presents several modalities of female desire: forbidden, forbidding, repressed-voyeuristic. Marie's words focus this narrative for us: "Please tell me this is not where you are staying." I read: please tell me this is not what has become of you, a woman who has lost her self, her self-love: "On dirait que tu n'a plus d'amour-propre" (16). How to understand this loss of self, the narrator's terrible "darkness" (26), the heroine's "melancholy" (115)?

In the beginning, so the story might go, there is female flesh and the ontological lack that it can't help betraying; the wasted uterine lining that we call menstrual blood is an inescapable reminder of our accidental, chance existence. Hence (perhaps), our fear of her procreative sexuality: black (napkins) over white (snow). But the plot thickens. The same placental matter constitutes the bond to an other that is both the most vital one that we will ever know and the very one that we have to sever to remain vital. Hence (perhaps), our tormented need for her love ("I couldn't make Her happy"), a need that can never be satisfied, for what was a peaceful coexistence for the embryo inside the mother's womb (Rouch 40) becomes "the tyranny of intimacy" for the individuated self. Hence our flights from her and our dreams of freedom. Yet what we seek in freedom is the ecstasy of an impossible love: "the illusion of perfect fusion" (Scott, *Heroine* 11), which is the foetus's prerogative; the euphoria of being "loved by two" (Scott, *Heroine* 104), which is the jealous child's fantasy of being the sole object of love for both mother and father.

And so, a two-, three-, or four-term contraption called desire.

Scott instructs us: "you can write a story almost as you'd record a dream" (*Spaces* 74). I would like to read her story as one might

interpret a dream, allowing the dense and multilayered language to move us from manifest to latent (or suggested) content. For the narrator of *Heroine*, it is through memory and dreams that the pieces of a kaleidoscopic puzzle come together. Two of the pieces are strangely dark yet illuminated: a daughter, her inner self “shining bright and dark,” and her mother, “a wonderful gold light shining out of her dark brown eyes.” Add another piece and “She’s leaning against our future father who’s in a dark uniform” (132). Once the introduction of the cast of three has taken place, the drama begins to unfold. It is perhaps one of our oldest stories, that of triangular desire. In the first act we witness the daughter’s rage over her mother’s unfaithfulness to her in seducing the father and her guilt over that murderous rage: “he [an uncle] said I killed her with my wildness” (132). In the second act we witness the mother’s rage over her daughter’s unfaithfulness to her, her seduction — and betrayal — of the father/“young officer”:

[in a dream] I answer the ringing phone again and Her cameo says I’m paying for unfaithfulness to my young officer. My love that is too much. I show Her my eye which is turning black and blue. And the blood vessels bursting around my cheeks. There was a moment of silence. Then Her cameo concedes:

“Okay, I see what you mean.” (133)

The third act of the drama of triangular desire is a story within a story: the daughter, accused of having too much love — the forbidden love for the father — shows her mother her bruised self and is understood or, at least, *believed*: “Okay, I see what you mean.” Scott’s meaning, and the narrator’s desperate need for her mother’s affirmation — “I even prayed to her and she answered in a dream” (132) — send me to another scene of recognition, Sylvia Fraser’s moment of truth with her mother in the concluding pages of her incest memoir: “I feel overwhelmed with gratitude and hence with love. I am believed! . . . Thank you, mother. Thank you for believing me” (237; I also note that *My Father’s House* bears the same date of publication as *Heroine*). The dark secret of *Heroine*’s family romance, hidden in its textual folds, comes to light when we piece together corresponding passages from *Heroine* and *Spaces Like Stairs*. The assembled narrative bears testimony to what remains unspoken in the novel. I take my cue here from Scott: “by letting language take us where it will, we tend to uncover things we intended to repress” (*Spaces* 23).

Such rhetorical repression is at work, I believe, in the following passage from *Heroine*, in which an image from a childhood photo interrupts the flow of the narrator's account of the two central/precipitating events of her story, namely her departure from home and her falling in love with a man whose spotted tiger's eyes remind her of her father's:

Starting at the Sudbury bus station and moving forward. The music's playing. I'm wearing a brown-and-white checked coat. A little hicky but good quality. She always taught me to put the best foot forward. In that early photo even though Daddy's still an ordinary miner, I look like a prince's daughter. A handknit coat and matching beret over white dress and fluffy slip. He's crouching there beside me. Looking so proud. I can't help it. Even though the camera's about to click I start jumping up and down in ecstasy shouting Daddy Daddy. All the adults are laughing. (39)

What is the knowledge stored/hidden in this photograph? This question opens a Pandora's box out of which crawl many more questions, doubts, suspicions. Does the photograph explain the merging of the identities of father and lover in the scene that immediately follows the above passage (to which I will return), a resemblance that is later reinforced: "Your eyes have tiger spots like Dad's" (117)? Could it explain the narrator's flight from one tiger-eyed man into the arms of another, only to sink into that black hole, that bottomless pit within her that makes her turn in desperation to her mother: "Oh Mama why'd you put this hole in me?" (31)? Can it explain the narrator's crisis of rage and neediness and its most alarming symptom: "*Sometimes I get so unhappy I can't talk anymore*" (121)? Do we glean from the photograph an explanation of the narrator's (guilty?) dream in which her mother catches the narrator's lover (a stand-in for the father?) with another woman (the daughter as the other woman?)? Is the mother in the dream indeed dared by the daughter-as-the-other-woman to accept the sexual nature of that (father-daughter) relationship: "You might as well know, for a long time there has been sexual tension between us" (68)? Does the photograph attest to that (the secret that she shares with Daddy?) which the narrator speaks of only obliquely, as in this reported conversation overheard in a washroom in the Ottawa bus station (on her journey away from home)?

“Where’s Daddy?[]” A little girl’s voice.  
“In the men’s. Don’t do that or you’ll get a slap.[]”  
“You’ll get swallowed.”  
I put my finger on mine, too. . . . (34)

We recall a similar scene that frames the opening of Fraser’s incest memoir: a childhood poisoned, the guilty party spared (father is elsewhere — in “the men’s” — safe in a man’s world), the mother’s displaced anger: “Filthy, Filthy! . . . Don’t ever let me catch you doing such a dirty thing again!” (6–7).

Indeed, searching Scott’s emblematic photograph for clues, it is difficult not to think of that other princess in another revealing photograph. In *My Father’s House* Fraser recalls a recurring image of herself in childhood photographs, Daddy’s princess with her clothes “exhibiting what might be called seductive details: . . . a jaunty ribbon, a trailing slip, the lace edge of a pair of panties” (225). Fraser, too, asks of that excited face: “Tell me, little girl, what do you still know that I don’t know?” (225).

The essayist of *Spaces Like Stairs* fleshes out for us the enigmatic premonitions of *Heroine’s* narrator. The repressed knowledge of incest/seduction surfaces in the fiction-theory of *Spaces Like Stairs*, its uncovering facilitated, perhaps, by the essay’s emancipatory and transgressive potential: “*it’s precisely where the poetic and the personal enter the essay form that thought steps over its former boundaries*” (106). Even so, it is not until the concluding pages, and only under the cover of an imminent exit and the guise of a tentative “prologue (working material)” (108), that the essayist finally dares to step over former boundaries and offer a fuller disclosure:

IT happened one night. what happened? more important how to write it? the movie starred Claudette Colbert and Rock Hudson. in the black arch of starry sky the moon shone. or, in the morning mist two lovers kissed and, and . . . IT transpired. but what was IT? naturally she the audience saw IT other than he the audience did. he’s one, on the inside looking in. she’s herself and Claudette at the same time. as Rock takes her in his arms the freckled hands of several men float by. Daddy’s too. shhh. that was nothing. what were we doing? I don’t know Mommy because I don’t know what you call it. fun in the tub? seeing stars in the back yard? I wanted Mommy to change my bed but he came. Daddy daddy cries the little girl in the new

coat jumping up and down beside the . . . smiling man while a camera draws the line between acceptable (what you see) and unacceptable seduction.

(the young Freud said: incest creates hysteria in women. but he had so many patients with that ailment he got embarrassed and had to change his theory. still, the question rests: for the little girl as for every woman where's the language line to separate real caring from exploitative seduction?) (108–09)

As I pull out thread after thread from the narrative fabrics of the novel and the fiction-theory, a knot forms (Where? Where Scott's dream-work begs to be unravelled? In the pit of my stomach?). I reread: "the freckled hands of several men float by. Daddy's too. shhh. that was nothing." And then I remember: "Shhh. Watch the depression" and "Marie m'a dit: 'Tu as payé de ton corps.' Shhh. Reminiscences are dangerous" (Scott, *Heroine* 25, 16). I have often wondered about the tone (comforting? cynical? parodic?) of this self-addressed shhh, which, like some preverbal refrain, punctuates the narrator's retrospective ruminations. I can better appreciate one of its functions now: to block out the "dangerous" knowledge that (as Marie puts it) she had paid with her body for Daddy's love and that (when that happened) both Mother and language itself abandoned/failed her. Shhh blocks out the memory of Daddy in her bedroom, screens out the reason why, in the photograph, the little girl "cries" while her father is "smiling." Shhh guards the knowledge that links Daddy with depression and explains the destructiveness of her infatuation with his avatar, another unfaithful lover: "the more I felt your love the harder it was to breathe" (Scott, *Heroine* 19).

Seduced by the phallus/prince, mother and daughter act out their tragic roles. Jane Miller's observations in *Seductions* are helpful here. Miller seeks to understand the particular power dynamics that underlie women's experience in a predominantly male and heterosexual culture based on inequality. She draws on Antonio Gramsci's understanding of hegemony — the institutions and strategies of control in class society "through which those in power elicit and receive the consent of those they govern" (Miller 22) — to explore the destructive effects of the unequal relations between women and men. These go deeper than women's dependencies on men, for it is "women's apparent *acquiescence* in many of the conditions of those dependencies" that makes this power configuration particularly insidious (22; emphasis added). Miller sees inequality as setting the

stage for what is arguably one of the most effective forms of domination: seduction. Seduction depends on passivity and responsiveness in the seduced, which spell out the consent of the seduced to the exercise of such powers as the seducers possess (powers that, in an unequal society, are denied to the seduced): sexual, verbal, political, intellectual powers. Luce Irigaray, in her lyrical and anguished exploration of the mother-daughter relationship in "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other," spells out the devastating consequences of this surrender for a female subject caught in the vicious cycle that seals the fates of mothers and daughters alike. Having paid with her self for her surrender (to the phallus), the mother nourishes her daughter "with lifelessness" (64), seeking to fill her emptiness with her daughter's presence, using her daughter to forget her own "obliviousness of self" (65). Exiled from herself, abandoning her daughter to "competent men" (62), the mother's legacy to her daughter is a "hemorrhaging" (63), empty self that can only exist through the mediation of another. The daughter laments: "I, too, a captive when a man holds me in his gaze; I, too, am abducted from myself. Immobilized in the reflection he expects of me" (66). Dressed up for/offered up to Daddy/the prince by Mommy, the daughter experiences an ecstasy that is the intoxication of the seduced, the infatuation of the powerless.

Returning to the scene that follows the passage about the photograph, we note that, in the narrator's imagination, not surprisingly, the figures of Daddy and "my love" easily merge, appearing almost interchangeable. Men with spotted tiger's eyes, they claim, and are invested with, knowledge, power, sexuality. In turn, the narrator's acceptance of their powers leaves her bereft of her knowledge, her sexuality, her power. Here the interweaving of a childhood memory and a recollection of the narrator's first meeting with "my love" captures the betrayals and self-betrayals that plague female desire. Challenging Jon's Marxist framework, the narrator is silenced by his confident, absolute claim to knowledge of the real: "Marxism is the ultimate form of realism" (Scott, *Heroine* 40). The seductive yet self-crushing effect that his totalizing and self-assured stance has on the narrator is reinforced by a childhood memory: "My father's eyes were spotted, too. Only hungrier. Eyeing me with them after we went berry picking once, he said: 'You're too romantic; you'll have to learn to be more realistic.' I didn't really know what he meant" (40). Her version of the real invalidated (more echoes of the incest narrative?), the female subject internalizes submission and learns to seek the

pleasures of surrender. Later she invests her lover with the powers that Daddy had taught her could never be hers; "Later, my love," the narrator wistfully comments, her memory work having completed the circle, "I began to think of you as an extra window on the world. Helping me figure out what real is" (40).

In the fourth act of the drama of triangular desire, neediness and obsession threaten to devastate the female subject. "I felt so needy," acknowledges the narrator (51), and Marie wisely recognizes the nature of that predicament: "You're stuck in the past. . . . Il faut choisir. Car une obsession est une hésitation au point d'une bifurcation" (20). Indeed, her lover's nonmonogamy pushes the narrator to the edge of a precipice, to the brink of hysteria, precisely because it throws her back into the familiar/familial triangular space; Scott comments, "the pain was in her before the love story ever started" (*Spaces* 93). His promise of love is belied by his unfaithfulness, which reactivates the old yearning and rage in the narrator. Throughout the novel, two similar affective configurations are superimposed, intricately entangled. The emotional matrix is the same: an all-consuming yearning for an other whose rejection and absence both intensify that yearning and make it intolerable, self-crushing. The identity of the other oscillates: now it is the mother, now it is the lover. This is how the story goes:

Still, my love, I wonder do I look good because your arms keep me from *bleeding* all over town in search of love? Like I was before.

Oh Mama why'd you put this hole in me?

Stop. . . . Cut the melodrama. . . . (Scott, *Heroine* 31; emphasis added)

And this is who the story's heroine is: a self haemorrhaging from internal bruises, deserted by Mommy and violated by Daddy. A woman desperately seeking to fill the void with a love that will restore the lost maternal touch and affirm her being:

Before you ["my love"] put your hands on my face nobody ever touched me like that. I used to sit close to Her on the verandah. . . . The air was so intense with heat it became a screen. Reflecting the *bleeding* hearts growing by the sidewalk bigger and bigger.

I said: "Mom, I'm scared."

She answered (without even looking): "Then get down on your knees and pray to the Lord." (35; emphasis added)

Bleeding, bleeding, the narrator, in her tormented desire for an unfaithful lover, compulsively reenacts the daughter's rage and longing: the anger and yearning that are perhaps equally directed at an absent mother (who withdraws her touch, her gaze, her love, her protection) and a father who in seducing betrays. Fraser's hard-won insight into the nature of her equally self-destructive infatuation with a married lover provides an instructive gloss: "it wasn't so much passion that tempted me but compulsion that drove her [the self who remembered the abuse]" (154). The narrator's story, too, is of forbidden desire — whether for the mother or the father — of a love that is always already threatened by the presence of a possessive rival and marred by jealousy: "whenever we're together she's there too whether or not she's mentioned" (Scott, *Heroine* 126). The narrator admits: "I craved the music of a trio" (96). This linking of the familial triangle with the amorous triangle (narrator—"my love"—the girl with the green eyes; narrator-N-his girlfriend) haunts the narrative with the persistence of a coded dream message. The narrator repeats Marie's view that her obsession and dependency are only a displacement "of some deeper trauma," of "*some earlier love*" (52, 89). She repeats Dr. Schweitzer's observations on the radio regarding female depression as related to being "stuck between some inner vision (the desire for a lover's touch and what it represented, *which maybe wasn't a lover's touch at all*) and the outer world" (148–49; emphasis added).

The twin anxieties generated by the triangular family romance — fear of seduction and betrayal by the father and abandonment by the mother — resonate throughout the narrative, perhaps colouring most significantly the narrator's relationships with "my love" and Marie. The narrator recalls Marie's disloyalty with sadness and resentment: "When I got pneumonia she didn't mother me" (161). By identifying with the mother who failed her, moreover, the abandoned daughter becomes a bad mother herself (and to herself): lacking in self-love, she is too empty to mother others. Scott writes in *Spaces Like Stairs*: "Mother and me. Simulated in the same skin. The vicious-circle search for boundaries in the memory-mass of borrowed phrases. Like and dislike. Her warmth. Her (frightened) love. Her (my) inadequate breast" (18). In *Heroine* the fear of maternal abandonment is projected onto the brief yet disquieting stories of inadequate mothering that flash across the narrative screen like so many distress signals.



The text is strewn with emblematic instances of maternal neglect, of mothers too needy themselves to be loving or even responsible caregivers: the woman on the train to Vancouver who left her children alone at home (29); the narrator, who lets the little Chilean girl, Marilù, sleep alone in a tent despite a warning about bears (80); the abused woman at the women's shelter who smokes pot while her little boys carry on (148); the Guatemalan woman who did not know how to protect her little girl from abductors (153). Thus, the little girl falls prey to the predatory male. In the second half of the book, a skeletal plot unfolds: "Running hard, the little girl in the yellow raincoat enters the park. . . . Far behind drifts a sandwichman, his boards clacking something like 'dare-to-bare, dare-to-bare'" (118).

This plot, too, is triangular: as the little girl crouches to pee in the park, and the sandwichman (an avatar of the child-molesting breadman in Fraser's *Pandora*?) awaits among the branches, the grey woman passes through, oblivious (126). Alone, frightened, pursued, the little girl "runs through the dark. At each breath her heart leaps painfully into her mouth" (131). As the novel approaches its open-ended conclusion, however, an opening appears through which the little girl can escape. And, in escaping, rescue her mother: "soon they'll be together" (179). In the novel's concluding scene, multiple reconciliations take place: the mother joyously hugging her lost girl (181-82); the narrator resolving to talk to the grey woman (her mother's double); the narrator finally being reconciled to herself and able to see "her reflection in a window," an image that has eluded her (183). Instead of a triangle, the prospect of women locked in an embrace, engaged in dialogue, looking at themselves without fear.

A sort of homecoming, yet "the heroine feels that old desire for a terrible explosion" (183).

#### IV

[A] frame within which to reinvent herself, *yet spin free*.

— Gail Scott, *Spaces* (131)

In the end, Julia Kristeva suggests, our various journeys — cultural, political — inescapably lead back "to the only continent we [have] never left: internal experience" (234). Scott's writing relentlessly explores this interior space, where personal history meets political conviction, where our investment in social struggles is inseparable

from the traumas and passions that have shaped us as individuals. The narrator's salvation in *Heroine* lies in her compulsion to uncover these connections, to open the floodgates, to face up to contradiction, denial, shame.

An exemplary instance of Scott's daunting endeavour involves the daughter's relation to the mother. At first fleeing from the fear of repeating her mother's life (*Spaces* 25), the daughter learns another way to pose the question, to which the answer is "Now she's gone I carry her inside as she once carried me" (19). Needing to invent a new syntax that will close the gap "between what you're living now and future possibilities" (*Heroine* 130), the daughter learns to draw strength from her mother, whose lessons are that there is no escaping the tension between love and freedom, that the price of autonomy is separation, and that their contradictory pull is the very spirit of life. It was her mother's lifelong theological mission, the essayist Scott writes, that taught her to be suspicious of transcendence, a suspicion that "has led me to place myself (in writing) between certain expectations of my feminist community and my desire to be excessive" (*Spaces* 129). In *Heroine* the relationship with the mother, which is in part also the heroine's relationship with herself, is an element of the "knot (the pea) felt by the princess under all those mattress layers" (*Spaces* 128). And so the mother's legacy to her daughter is a rich one. It instructs her about the history of her present, about the past that informs and shapes the present, by drawing her to the unconscious, to those "areas of repression in the mind, the darkest corners, that, if worked through, lead to fascinating places" (129). And it incites her to seek her future by following the call of her desire, "regardless of where that desire will take her" (103).

The mother whom the daughter wishes for is yet to be fully imagined. To bring her into life, we will have to continue exploring new forms of the imaginary. To paraphrase Marie in *Heroine*, by our own words we may start to live (172). And by new images, perhaps, such as the one offered by H el ene Rouch, who proposes that we replace the familiar developmental paradigm, which posits infantile fusion followed by rupture and loss, with an understanding of the mother-child diad modelled on the mediating role of the placenta in pregnancy:

On the one hand, [the placenta is] the mediating space between mother and fetus, which means that there's never a fusion of maternal and embryonic tissues. On the other hand, it constitutes

a system regulating exchanges between the two organisms, not merely quantitatively regulating the exchanges . . . but also modifying the maternal metabolism: transforming, storing, and redistributing maternal substances for both her own and the fetus' benefit. (39)

Placental economy can provide us with a relational model characterized by both differentiation and a mutually enhancing respect for "the one and the other" (41). This is indeed the wish that Scott leaves us: a hope for the bonds that sustain yet liberate, for a solidarity that empowers both the individual in her difference and the collectivity in its shared undertaking. The little girl's dream is still the feminist's:

she wanted both the legitimizing community, and for that community to cast no moral judgements on the free flow of her desire, of her imagination. For the more radical she was (the more she wished to dangle dangerously on the edge of meaning) the more she, who exists only negatively in the symbolic, needed a frame within which to reinvent herself, *yet spin free*. (Scott, *Spaces* 131)

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