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GIL SCOTT-HERON'S PRESIDENTIAL JEREMIADS

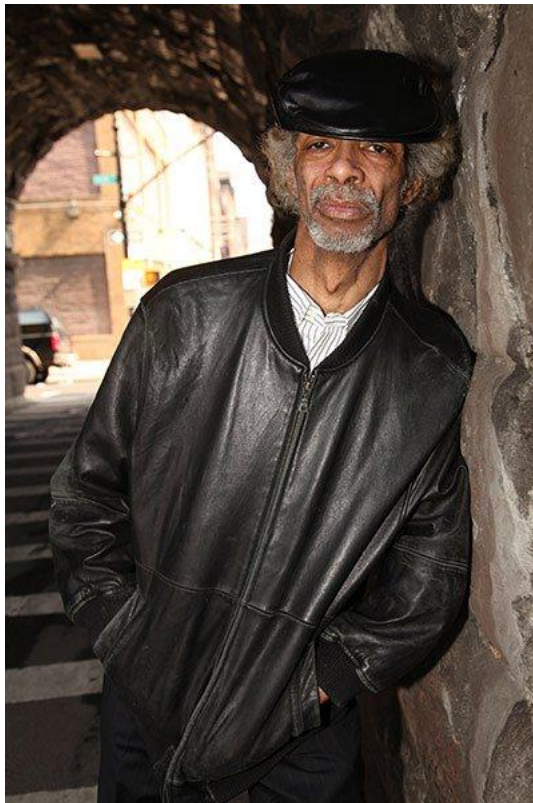
Vincent Dussol

Études Montpelliéraines du Monde Anglophone

Apart from countries under the thumb of authoritarian rulers, it is unusual to find poets and songwriters (or artists in general) paying much attention to the head of state. The United States, however, appears to be an exception.

The talk will first attempt to substantiate this claim, then look into possible reasons for this striking interest in the American presidency among wordsmiths/ artists of the word.

A case in point is provided by the work of Gil Scott-Heron (1949-2011) who in his sung and/or spoken poetry commented profusely on the presidents of his day. Was it because he too had a program for the U.S.A.?



A little over a week from now, the 45th President of the United States will have been elected.

The prospect up until recently that “the Donald” might get first past the post evoked to some, at least superficially, the close of the 1970s when another jokester and former B-movie actor with a very right-leaning record and political agenda entered the White House. I am speaking of course of Ronald Reagan who was regarded by many 1960s progressives as a dangerous man to be entrusted with the job of Commander-in-Chief.

One of the memorable cultural products Reagan’s first election generated was a song entitled “B Movie” written by Gil Scott-Heron. Often hailed as a critical tributary to a river that variously branched out in directions going by the names of rap, slam or the spoken word, Scott-Heron was a real all-rounder who, with *The Vulture* (1970) and *The Nigger Factory* (1972) started his publishing career as a novelist, then went on to become a first-rate songwriter. He had been writing poetry and playing piano from an early age. He died 6 years ago, aged 62, in New York City.

In these days of renewed fame for Bob Dylan and in the context of this talk, it clearly is impossible to skip an anecdote going back to 1974 when, after having stopped performing live for 6 or 7 years, the musician went back on the road for a mega tour with The Band. A high point of every gig, which the audience eagerly awaited, was the acoustic set when Dylan stood alone on stage with his guitar and blues harp to do four or five songs. One of them, two lines in it more precisely, never failed to elicit a huge response from the crowds:

Extract 1: Dylan “It’s Alright Ma”

The song was “It’s Alright Ma, I’m Only Bleeding,” and the two lines went: “Sometimes even the President of the United States will have to stand naked.” Dylan’s song dated back to the mid-1960s; the 1970s topicality of the lines was accidental. However, I believe they tell us something about the existence of a special attention paid by American artists, songwriters and poets to the nation’s president.

What caused the renewed popularity of Dylan’s song at the time was the Watergate Scandal. To refresh your memories, this was after it was found that President Nixon had ordered a break-in at the Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters in Washington so as to have the offices of political opponents’ bugged. The scandal was to lead to the resignation of Nixon as President of the United States on August 9, 1974.

Gil Scott-Heron had written “H2OGate Blues” a year before. “Throughout 1972, [as a resident of D.C.,] Scott-Heron had devoured the *Washington Post*’s coverage [...] of the developing [...] scandal (Baram 111): he debuted “**H2O Blues**” at the Berkeley Jazz Festival in April 1973” (Baram 111).

The poem starts with Gil mimicking the sound of a message rewinding on an answering machine.

Extract 2: “H2O Blues” 1

He just called the White House and this is what he heard: “Click! Whirr ... Click!: ‘I’m sorry, the government you have elected is inoperative .../ Click! Inoperative!’”

Richard Nixon had just been re-elected and had barely started his second term of office. But the way the poem ends suggests more than an inoperative government. It points an accusatory finger at a president whose behavior negates the essence of America’s political identity. The final lines go:

Extract 3: “H2O Blues 2”

And there are those who swear they've seen King Richard (who? who?)
King Richard
(who?)
King Richard
(who?)
King Richard
(who?)

King Richard
(who?)
King Richard
King Richard
King Richard
King Richard- (Yeah!)
Beneath that cesspool-Watergate.

The President acted like a King. (I have evidence (“The President and the King”).)

POWERPOINT 1



Hence the fear and the horror, expressed four times in succession: “Four more years,/ Four more years,/Four more years,/ Four more years of THAT?”

The Shakespearean metaphor is quite clear: America is another Denmark, a kingdom in which something is rotten, with at its head, a reincarnation of Richard III, the king who said: “Conscience is but a word that cowards use” (Act V, sc. III). The president who would be king believed himself to be beyond the reach of human law.

Targeting Richard Nixon/ judging the President, is for Scott-Heron the opportunity to measure how far America has strayed from an ideal/ a dream he still seems to harbor for the country. It appears that the President’s lies have tainted/sullied the nation’s ethics. “America,” says Scott-Heron is now “The international Jekyll and Hyde/ The land of a thousand disguises.”¹

¹ “The cherry tree myth is the most well-known and longest enduring legend about George Washington. In the original story, Ironically, this iconic story about the value of honesty was invented by one of Washington’s first biographers, an itinerant minister and bookseller named Mason Locke Weems. After Washington’s death in 1799 people were anxious to learn about him, and Weems was ready to supply the demand. [...]

Americans like to use the myth as a standard for politicians; presidents from William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt to Richard Nixon, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama have been featured in cherry-tree themed cartoons. The longevity of the cherry tree myth says a lot about both American ideals and Washington’s legacy.”

<http://www.mountvernon.org/digital-encyclopedia/article/cherry-tree-myth/>

Getting toward the end of the song, the speaker draws up a list of politicians. It is meant to give the country food for thought²: “We leave America to ponder the image/ Of justice from its new wave of leaders.” It is, he goes on to say, “An almost endless list that won't be missed when at last/America is purged.” The name concluding the list is “Ronald Reagan.” The idea of a purge reveals hope of restoration to a healthier condition after getting rid of impure or undesirable elements. It did not happen ...

Fast forward to 1981. Ronald Reagan, the former B-movie actor, won the 1980 November election and has taken over from Jimmy Carter at the White House.

“Mandate my ass!” Gil Scott-Heron’s 1981 “B Movie” gets kick-started with the singer’s vigorous denial that the freshly elected president was given any such thing by the American people.

A lengthy introduction follows, beginning with percentages and statistics establishing that Reagan was elected by hardly more than one-fourth of the registered voters. Granted that such figures reveal widespread disenchantment with politics, the question remains: why did these 26% elect a second-rate actor for President of the United States?

Extract 4: “B movie 1”

The speaker ascribes his election to nostalgia. With its power challenged by the first oil-price shock, America is looking back towards a magnified version of what it thinks was its glorious past, a Manichean B-movie world in black and white. Who then can better bring it back than a man who was “the head of the Screen Actor’s Guild,” not incidentally in the glory days of Senator McCarthy, a prominent actor and a doubt-free/proof man who will incarnate in real life these “heroes riding to the rescue at the last minute”? “B’-Movie” consists of two parts: an introduction and “B’-Movie the poem,” a long-running extended metaphor equating the incipient presidential term to a film. The first verses read like credits: in this case, they are rolled *ahead* of the movie: producer, director, screenplay, theme song and of course the one taking the lead role, the major chefs and ingredients of Reagan’s first-term in office, are all advertised in turn in a double-edged pitch making it very clear that this here is deceitful advertising: the president is “A Madison Avenue masterpiece.”³ The speaker isn’t buying what is on offer.

His main point is that America is being fed clichés and that the nostalgia that got Reagan elected is not the right way to draw inspiration from the past, that this brand of nostalgia is “a clear case of selective amnesia.”

Extract 5: “B movie 2”

² To quote but one example: “Richard Daley, imperial Napoleonic Mayor of Chicago/.who took over from Al Capone and/ Continues to implement the same tactics.”

³ “America's political elites are appropriately slimed with comedic horror: Casper Weinberger, Defense Secretary is "the defensive"; Secretary of State, Alexander Haig is "Atilla the Haig"; George Bush, Vice President is "'Papa Doc' Bush." And the star of the movie, Ronald Raygun, "is "Bogart tough," a "Madison Avenue masterpiece," and a "cotton candy politician."” (Gilmore).

In a January 7, 1982, review of the poem, *Los Angeles Sentinel* critic Bill Lane wrote: “He [the author] has taken a bitter commentary comparing and contrasting the U.S. leadership to others, to promises, to aims, to people, everything” (quoted in Gilmore). It is the idea of measuring up to promises that interests me here. Significantly, Arista Records, Scott-Heron's label, sent copies of the song to all members of Congress upon release. What better proof that it was meant as a message about the national ideal?

Reverse to 1976 for more Scott-Heron on the American presidency: this is taken from “Bicentennial Blues,” written as a response to the Bicentennial celebrations. Scott-Heron sees the moment fit for reckoning: the song is Gil’s most thorough review of American presidents, presidents to be and president-size “henchmen” as he calls them, the likes of Henry Kissinger. This is 1976, a year of historical importance but the way it is being turned into a massive commercial event makes Gil speak of “a year of hysterical importance.” In the song-poem, the presidents are called in the dock one after the other for their personal contribution to the country’s “failure to live up to its promise” (Baram 149). Not even George Washington, the first one of them chronologically, is safe from criticism. But in Scott-Heron’s view, 1976 is hardly set to be a better example than 1776. The tenant of the Oval Office is Gerald Ford, the former vice-president who took over from cheater Richard Nixon. Having for president someone that was not elected (from August 1974 to Jan. 1977) rankles with Scott-Heron. As for the immediate future at the time Gil Scott-Heron writes – this is exactly 40 years ago – it consists of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, still muscling up, who will become president 4 years later. Some of the poem’s words about Reagan will find their way into the later “B-movie” in due time. Here is the poem again:

Extract 6:

Halfway justice
Halfway liberty
Halfway equality
It's a half-ass year

And we would be silly in all our knowledge
In all our self-righteous knowledge
When we sit back and laugh and mock the things that happen in our lives
To accept anything less than the truth
About this bicentennial year
And the truth relates to 200 years of people and ideas getting by

It got by George Washington
The ideas of justice, liberty and equality
Got cold by George Washington
Slave-owner general
Ironic that the father of this country
Should be a slave owner

The father of this country a slave-owner
Having got by him
It made it easy to get by his henchman
The creators of this liberty
Who slept in the beds with the captains of slave ships
Fought alongside black freed men in the union army
And left America a legacy of hypocrisy
It's a blues year

Got by Gerald Ford
Oatmeal man
Has declared himself at odds
With people on welfare, people who get food stamps
Day care children, the elderly, the poor, women
And people who might vote for Ronald Reagan

Ronald Reagan, it got by him
Hollyweird
Acted like a actor
Acted like a liberal
Acted like General Franco when he acted like governor of California
Now he acts like somebody might vote for him for president

It got by Jimmy Carter
Skippy
Got by Jimmy Carter and got by him and his friend the colonel
The creators of southern-fried triple talk
A blues trio
America got the blues

It got by Henry Kissinger
The international godfather of peace
A piece of Vietnam
A piece of Laos
A piece of Angola
A piece of Cuba

A blues quartet
And America got the blues

The point is that it may get by you
For another 4 years
For another 8 years
You stuck
Playing 2nd fiddle in a blues quartet

Got the blues looking for the first principle
Which was justice

It's a blues year for justice

It's a blues year for the San Quentin 6
Looking for justice

“Get by” in the sense of “being ignored” and “succeed at a level of minimal acceptability or with the minimal amount of effort.” Too many presidents ignored facts that should have remained incompatible with the national ideal. Scott-Heron reckoned that those African Americans who experienced segregation, [...] had fought for their freedom, and [like him], succeeded on their own terms [were] [...] the only die-hard Americans” [Baram 149]. He stated: “We are the only ones who carried the process through the process. [...] We are the ones who marched, we’re the ones who carried the Bible, carried the flag, went through the courts” (149).

Why should a songwriter pay so much attention to his country’s presidents? To cut the answer very short: because there is in the United States a standing belief in the president’s power to keep the national ideal alive.

POWERPOINT 2

This in a country where a popular myth associated the presidency with a commitment to the truth: you must know the story about George Washington: the legend has it that when “Washington was six years old he received a hatchet as a gift and damaged his father’s cherry tree. When his father discovered what he had done, he became angry and confronted him. Young George bravely said, “I cannot tell a lie...I did cut it with my hatchet.” Washington’s father embraced him and rejoiced that his son’s honesty was worth more than a thousand trees.”¹



In what other democratic country would you find a website entitled “Hail to the Chief” featuring 70 songs about American presidents?⁴ So it is not surprising to find that American poets and songwriters have written

⁴ <http://www.avclub.com/article/hails-to-the-chief-70-songs-about-american-preside-22806>

about or to presidents with other intentions than just criticizing them. Remember Walt Whitman's long farewell poem to Lincoln "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed," Chicago poet Carl Sandburg writing a biography of same Lincoln, Woody Guthrie's songs about Roosevelt⁵ and his achievements in "Dear Mrs. Roosevelt," a song that Dylan chose to perform at a memorable concert. More examples include "Langston Hughes's "Dear Mr. President" (271-272) or folk-rock band The Byrds singing "He Was a Friend of Mine," following John Kennedy's assassination. The same event prompted Gil Scott-Heron to entitle his 4th album "Winter in America" since, he said, the killing of JFK was "the day that started the Winter in America."

POWERPOINT 3 ("Captain America")

Since earliest times, emperors and kings have employed minstrels and poets to chant their feats of glory and sing their praises. But it only takes a quick comparison with other national traditions to verify the existence of a special kind of well-meaning interest in the nation's president among American artists.

Think of the mountain-size sculptures of four American presidents at Mount Rushmore. Could it be that it is the huge power held by the occupant of the Oval Office that accounts for that tradition of artists picking American presidents for a subject, occasionally turning them into folk heroes? I hold the opposite view i.e. that this special relationship is traceable to American democracy. The democratic ideal is what makes citizens feel entitled to a conversation among equals including with the president.

To go further and back to Gil Scott-Heron's "B-movie," the American nation as a whole has a special relationship to "election." It was of course a religious notion strongly present from inception; even the Puritan theocracy set great store by actual human elections. Important sermons were preached on election days. "Election" then morphed into various concepts such as Manifest Destiny or the theory of American exceptionalism

A Presidential election is the ultimate ritual for American democracy: glorious but also filled with danger. Here is W. Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*:

"I think, after all, the sublimest part of political history, and its culmination, is currently issuing from the American people. I know nothing grander, better exercise, better digestion, more positive proof of the past, the triumphant result of faith in human kind, than a well-contested American national election" (954).

"I will not gloss over the appalling dangers of universal suffrage in the United States" (*Democratic Vistas* 930).

⁵ *The Life, Music and Thought of Woody Guthrie, A Critical Appraisal*, John S. Partington ed., 2011.

The President is therefore the precious or dangerous end-product of the process. Consciousness of the possible perils was always there: “The [very] first election-day sermon we have warns the Puritan settlers against their apparent desire to choose ‘a captain back for Egypt’” (SB 6).

This leads me to the view that Gil Scott-Heron’s presidential or president-related poems and songs can be described as American Jeremiads in the sense Sacvan Bercovitch gave to the phrase.

Right from the 17th century, election days were ones when sermons were given, assessing the state of America: “Cotton Mather’s election-day sermon of 1689 discusses America’s prospects through a parable of the Fighting City and the Godly City” (SB 89). That is what, according to Bercovitch, defines an American Puritan jeremiad: a form of sermon whose function “was to create a climate of anxiety that helped release the restless ‘progressivist’ energies required for the success of the venture” (SB 23). “[L]ament was a strategy for prodding the community forward, in the belief that fact and ideal *would be made* to correspond” (SB 61). Like the biblical prophet Jeremiah, the Puritan preacher “both laments an apostasy and heralds a restoration” (SB 31). To use Puritans’ idiom: “precisely when “the soule seeth the flashes of hell, [then] God intends to doe good to a man” (SB 52).

Much of American literature (which now includes songwriting, does it not?) could be described as variations on the Puritan jeremiad, “simultaneously lamenting a declension and celebrating a national dream” (Stephenson). “The question in these latter-day jeremiads, as in their seventeenth-century precursors, [is] [...] the old prophetic refrain: ‘When is our errand to be fulfilled? How long, O Lord, how long?’” (SB 11). Compare with the end of Scott-Heron’s “H2O Blues”: “Four more years of that?”

Very recent echoes of the jeremiad as America’s preferred artistic self-scrutiny are found in Bruce Springsteen’s *Born to Run*, his just published autobiography in which he states that his great theme is “the distance between the American dream and American reality” (qtd. in *Economist* Oct. 1st 2016, 74) or Ta-Nehisi Coates in *Between the World and Me* writing to his son: “I propose to take our countrymen’s claims of American exceptionalism seriously, which is to say I propose subjecting our country to an exceptional moral standard” (Coates 8).

Where Scott-Heron comes especially close to the American Puritan jeremiad is in his associating it with elections and president-elects or presidents-to-be, their personalities and policies.

The corpus of his “presidential” songs is not limited to the samples of the corpus previously quoted. To continue,⁶ “B-movie” was given a sequel when Ronald Reagan ran for re-election with “we don’t need no Re-Ron” for a leitmotif and the movie metaphor extended further:

⁶ To the examples I deal with in what follows should be added a dismissive allusion to LBJ (“Small Talk at 125th and Lenox,” 70); and a merely historical one to F.D.R in “The New Deal” (107), a poem claiming that a “New Deal” is possible for the 1970s.

Extract 7 (“Re-Ron”)

A Re-ron, the late late show,
A black and white flick from ages ago.

Reagan has won himself a new nickname with his aggressive “Latin Plan”:

He's the gladiator invader of Grenada!
There's millions more for El Salvador
and he's up to his 'Keisters' with the Sandinistas!

B-movie’s “Macho-man” is now “Nacho Man.”

Ethics remains center stage in Scott-Heron’s assessment of the president’s performance: “Obscuring wrong and right./ He says he’s defending some bullshit while he’s picking a fight” (*Now and Then* 13-16).

The equation of America with its president may be clearest in “We Beg Your Pardon, America,” also a sequel, this time to “H2O Blues.” The title is a play on words. It expresses outrage: the song condemns President Ford’s pardon of Richard Nixon barely one month after his resignation⁷;

Extract 8 “We Beg Your Pardon, America”¹

We beg your pardon America
We beg your pardon because somehow the pardon did not sit correctly
What were - what were the causes for this pardon?
Well now they had "flea bite us"
Rats bite us, no pardon in the ghetto
They had national security, but do you feel secure with the man who tried to steal America
back on the streets again?
What are the results of this pardon though?
Because remember, when there's causes, there's results
and the results is always deeper still
We now have Oatmeal Man

but America is also being asked for forgiveness since this pardon and the state of the nation in general, so remote from what it was meant to be, reflect poorly on America, give it a bad name, so to say. Another name for Scott-Heron’s Puritan jeremiads could be his own kind of state-of-the union addresses:

Extract 9 “We Beg Your Pardon, America”²

⁷ Ford granted Nixon a "full, free, and absolute pardon" on September 8, 1974.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Nixon#Pardon_and_illness

“We beg your pardon America,
We beg your pardon once again
because we found out that seven out of every
 ten Black men
are behind bars,
(and that seven out of every ten Black men never went to the ninth grade
Didn't have 50 dollars and hadn't had 100 for a month when they went to jail
So the poor and the ignorant go to jail while the rich go to San Clemente.”

The portrait of President Ford, nicknamed “Oatmeal Man” for his blandness is devastating:

Extract 10: “We Beg Your Pardon, America”¹ again (not from the beginning, though)

We now have Oatmeal Man

Anytime you find someone in the middle,
Anytime you find someone who is tepid,
Anytime you find someone who is lukewarm,
Anytime you find someone who has been in Congress for 25 years
and no one ever heard of him, you've got
 Oatmeal Man.

Oatmeal Man, straddling uncomfortably
yards and feet of barbed wire.
It's hard to live in the middle all the time

Oatmeal Man, the man who said
you could fit all of his black friends
in the trunk of his car and still have room
for the Republican elephant
Oatmeal Man: there was no crime he
 committed

Oatmeal Man says that, America,
In 1975 your president will
be a 1913 Ford.

Regressive
Circle up the wagons
to defend
yourself from nuclear attack
Oatmeal Man, reminiscent of 1964's AuH₂O, Gold Water
Thank god he didn't win.
But Oatmeal man didn't win
Did you vote for him? I didn't vote for him.

Despite their extremely negative assessments of the “state-of-the-covenant, G S-H’s presidential songs attest to “an unswerving faith in the errand” (SB 6). The lists of evils and failings are meant to be “*corrective*, not destructive” (SB 8).

Interestingly, “Work for Peace,” a song inspired by the First Gulf War and Operations “Desert Shield” and “Desert Storm”⁸ and Scott-Heron’s last presidential song, opens on the indictment of yet another president but ends on a call for the people to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps without bothering anymore about presidents and politicians. It is as if the lengthy negative assessment had purified the atmosphere enough for it to be possible to look toward a brighter future and re-invent America’s sacred covenant as history’s (or God’s) chosen nation, rededicate the nation to the cause of peace :

Extract 11:

Back when Eisenhower was the President,
Golf courses was where most of his time was spent.
So I never really listened to what the President said,
Because in general I believed that the General was politically dead.
But he always seemed to know when the muscles were about to be flexed,
Because I remember him saying something, mumbling something about a Military Industrial
Complex.
Americans no longer fight to keep their shores safe,
Just to keep the jobs going in the arms-making workplace.
Then they pretend to be gripped by some sort of political reflex,
But all they're doing is paying dues to the Military Industrial Complex.
The Military and the Monetary,
The Military and the Monetary,
The Military and the Monetary.
The Military and the Monetary,
get together whenever they think it's necessary,
They turn our brothers and sisters into mercenaries, they are turning the planet into a
cemetery.
The Military and the Monetary, use the media as intermediaries,
they are determined to keep the citizens secondary, they make so many decisions that are
arbitrary.
We're marching behind a commander in chief,
who is standing under a spotlight shaking like a leaf.
but the ship of state had landed on an economic reef,
so we knew he was going to bring us messages of grief.
The Military and the Monetary,
were shielded by January and went storming into February,
Brought us pot-bellied generals as luminaries,
two weeks ago I hadn't heard of the son of a bitch,
now all of a sudden he's legendary.
They took the honor from the honorary,
they took the dignity from the dignitaries,
they took the secrets from the secretary,
but they left the bitch in obituary.

⁸ That is when American presidents almost started leading the country back to “Egypt” (adapted from SB 119), the Middle-Eastern inferno which American war-mongering presidents largely contributed to creating.

The Military and the Monetary,
from thousands of miles away in a Saudi Arabian sanctuary,
had us all scrambling for our dictionaries,
cause we couldn't understand the fuckin vocabulary.
Yeah, there was some smart bombs,
but there was some dumb ones as well,
scared the hell out of CNN in that Baghdad hotel.
The Military and the Monetary,
they get together whenever they think it's necessary,
War in the desert sometimes sure is scary,
but they beamed out the war to all their subsidiaries.
Tried to make So Damn Insane a worthy adversary,
keeping the citizens secondary,
scaring old folks into coronaries.
The Military and the Monetary,
from thousands of miles in a Saudi Arabian sanctuary,
kept us all wondering if all of this was really truly, necessary.
We've got to work for Peace,
Peace ain't coming this way.
If we only work for Peace,
If everyone believed in Peace the way they say they do,
we'd have Peace.
The only thing wrong with Peace,
is that you can't make no money from it.
The Military and the Monetary,
they get together whenever they think it's necessary,
they've turned our brothers and sisters into mercenaries,
they are turning the planet, into a cemetery.
Got to work for Peace,
Peace ain't coming this way.
We should not allow ourselves to be misled,
by talk of entering a time of Peace,
Peace is not the absence of war,
it is the absence of the rumors of war and the threats of war and the preparation for war.
Peace is not the absence of war,
it is the time when we will all bring ourselves closer to each other,
closer to building a structure that is unique within ourselves
because we have finally come to Peace within ourselves.
The Military and the Monetary,
The Military and the Monetary,
The Military and the Monetary.
Get together whenever they think it's necessary,
they've turned our brothers and sisters into mercenaries,
they are turning parts of the planet, into a cemetery.
The Military and the Monetary,
The Military and the Monetary,
We hounded the Ayatollah religiously,
Bombed Libya and killed Qadafi's son hideously.
We turned our back on our allies the Panamanians,

and saw Ollie North selling guns to the Iranians.
Watched Gorbachev slaughtering Lithuanians,
We better warn the Amish,
they may bomb the Pennsylvanians.
The Military and the Monetary,
get together whenever they think it's necessary,
they have turned our brothers and sisters into mercenaries,
they are turning the planet, into a cemetery.

I don't want to sound like no late night commercial,
but it's a matter of fact that there are thousands of children all over the world
in Asia and Africa and in South America who need our help.
When they start talking about 55 cents a day and 70 cents a day,
I know a lot of folks feel as though that,
that's not really any kind of contribution to make,
but we had to give up a dollar and a half just to get in the subway nowadays.
So this is a song about tomorrow and about how tomorrow can be better. If we all,
"Each one reach one, Each one try to teach one".
Nobody can do everything,
but everybody can do something,
everyone must play a part,
everyone got to go to work, Work for Peace.
Spirit Say Work, Work for Peace
If you believe the things you say, go to work.
If you believe in Peace, time to go to work.
Can't be waving your head no more, go to work.

It may be about time to comment on Gil Scott-Heron's choice of the spoken word. Surely the likeness to the Puritan jeremiad becomes even more striking if you think of Scott-Heron's presidential songs as a form of preaching, of sermon. An essential message meant to be delivered suffers no delay. You will have noticed the clever and satirical use of a facile rhyme to convey total conformity alignment of the "monetary" with the "military"...

*

The call, in "Work for Peace," for each and everyone to get to work makes me imagine Gil Scott-Heron as a man with a program.

What, judging from what his poems and songs tell us, would his platform have looked like?

- Sensitivity to environmental issues

What kind of song would Gil Scott-Heron have written on Pdt. Obama's departure from the White House? A eulogy or a satire? Assuredly, the part of his legacy he would not have failed to take into consideration is the outgoing President's environmental record. Going by the rawest of web search, African-Americans' concern with environmental issues has not been a priority with this ethnic group, unlike Native-Americans. Here

again, Scott-Heron is a noteworthy exception: nature and human ecology were always included in his picture and he was “glad to see James Watt go,” he says in “Re-Ron.” “We Almost Lost Detroit” (56) is about a nuclear accident. In “H2O Blues”, the criticism of the war in Indochina includes environmental considerations: “Ecological Warfare!/ Above all else destroy the land!” “Winter in America” (63) looks at defiled nature as the ever-pristine criterion of a lost innocence. Gil Scott-Heron, like his inspirer Langston Hughes, wrote about rivers.⁹

- “Black Lives Matter”: clear focus on the improvement of black people’s condition; but no facile excuses (See “Coming from a Broken Home”). Race is invoked and the way African-American history is told is challenged: “Black History” (22-23), *Black History Month* Tour (with Stevie Wonder, 7, 22-23 + *The Last Holiday*) often against a larger picture.

- A less invasive foreign policy: stand taken against US military and economic imperialism. In Scott-Heron’s songs, U.S. foreign policy (as “neighborhood bully” on the American continent) is called into question in relation to presidents: for example the military-industrial complex booming under Eisenhower in “Work for Peace.” Scott-Heron’s achieved post-mortem international fame when “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” (1971) went viral during the Arab Spring turned into a call for action against authoritarian regimes.

- An aesthetic message: “Message to the Messengers.” Critical of the verbal excesses of rap and of the poor ethics it too often puts across.

- Despite his disenchantment with politicians, he would have called for people not to give up on politics.

Not a postmodernist. He may be ironizing through history, but is *not* interested in underlining the Hegelian ironies of history. History matters: so does an analytical, informed opinion.

A critic writes: “His rare public voice [...] kept the faith sparked in the Sixties. His urban blues poems push its sensibility into the Seventies, giving the lie to the common notion that this decade is politically passive, dead time” (Ballard, Notes to cd “The Mind of Gil Scott-Heron”). “In a July 1975 column for *Ebony* magazine, ‘Lost in the Shuffle,’ Scott-Heron lashed out at those African Americans who had grown apathetic. ‘We have allowed ourselves to be transformed, verbally, from the conscience of America and the

⁹ Black people shown to be on the side of nature: would minds prone to suspicion deconstruct the idea as “racialist”?

World, as we projected in the '60s, to "re-invisibles" of the 70s" (Baram 145). Politics as the pre-condition for *not* going back to the square one of the invisibility made famous by Ralph Ellison.

He would have seen eye to eye with Whitman on this point, when, in *Democratic Vistas*, the author of *Leaves of Grass* writes:

It is the fashion among dilettantes and fops (perhaps I myself am not guiltless,) to decry the whole formulation of the active politic in America, as beyond redemption, and to be carefully kept away from. See you that you do not fall into this error. America, it may be, is doing very well upon the whole, notwithstanding these antics of the parties and their leaders, these half-brain'd nominees, the many ignorant ballots, and many elected failures and blatherers. It is the dilettantes, and all who shirk their duty, who are not doing well. As for you, I advise you to enter more strongly into politics. I advise every young man to do so. Always inform yourself; always do the best you can; always vote" (DV 966).

In his poem "Nicaraguan Journal," Chuck Miller, the poet I will talk about in my Monday lecture, reports this conversation with a Sandinista farmer at the conclusion of which he is entreated to pass on a message to the U.S. president:

"tell Mr. Reagan," and here he reminded me of my
grandfather
who had also been an illiterate farmer
and who would speak with a strange respect and even
awe
when he spoke of presidents or leaders [...]

and you thought of the naivete in the assumption
that we could actually approach our president
and speak to him human to human, or that he
would have any interest in our impressions,
or care about what we thought
(Miller 1988, 89)

Unlike Miller, G. Scott-Heron seems to have believed in some possibility for America to fix the dream by pointing its failures to the highest authority available: the president of the United States. In doing so, he was availing himself of and revisiting the existing tradition of the American jeremiad.

*

To close the circle, I want to go back to Bob Dylan and to the attempt (by the head of Columbia Records) to brand Gil Scott-Heron as "the black Bob Dylan." Understandably, Gil resented the labeling, stating: "Dylan couldn't sing and I could" (Maram 127). Interestingly, the *New York Times* noted in a March 1971 feature, that "[s]oon after Gil's first album was released in early 1970, Dylan's next album, *New Morning*, featured

‘two monologues set to music in precisely the style used by this wave of powerful, socially committed black artists’ such as Gil” so that “the influence may have flowed the other way” (Maram 127).

*

To introduce question time:

I do not know how you would describe the tradition in the Czech Republic. In France, the more famous examples of songs featuring presidents or addressing them are generally antagonistic, challenging the president’s authority. Possibly in Victor Hugo’s wake, French wordsmiths have tended to keep at a critical distance from the head of state: Boris Vian’s “Le Déserteur” written during the first Indochina War features a first-person speaker telling the president he is not going to answer the call of the draft and that he is ready to die if force is used to make him comply. During the 20th-century’s last two decades, Renaud, an extremely popular songwriter at the time and initially a supporter of President François Mitterrand who had been elected on a Left platform, wrote a handful of songs that repeatedly questioned the president’s commitment to the Left. The relationship to the function is more distant. I cannot imagine a proud French father in front of his baby boy’s cradle exclaiming: “he’s going to be President of France.” I have heard this prediction issuing from very liberal American lips...

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Addendum: G S-H’s method and rhetoric

The systematic use of history: comparing the state of the nation (present and past) with what it was meant to be involves paying much attention to history. Bob Dylan’s “With God on our Side” is the perfect example.

Scott-Heron’s rhetorical strategies include:

- Irony: 88-89 make a telling example, through nicknaming of presidents
- Paronomasia (punning), a device highlighted by Czech linguist Roman Jakobson as present in “I like Ike,” a slogan devised for Eisenhower’s presidential campaign is used extensively by Scott-Heron. “So Damn Insane” (Saddam Hussein) as the man US generals tried to make into a worthy adversary (30). Punning on artificially stressed syllables: “the accent on the dupe” (10); “*Con*-stitution” in “Winter in America” (30). “Piece”/”peace” (98-99). The delivery serves the irony.
- Satirical facile rhyme (29) to convey total conformity alignment of the monetary with the military.
- Movie-like politics: Kinekphrasis of Reagan the actor (16). Mock cast of characters?
- The choice of the spoken word: a form of preaching? To deliver the more essential messages?

- Catalogues: G S-H's long political songs or poems: like "states-of-the-covenant" addresses, the Puritans' political sermons. "Ancient checklist-making covenant" (Stephenson 2010). "The predictable catalogue of declension" (SB 56) in Puritan jeremiads and G s-H's songs. Admonitions. Thundering of G S-H's moral complaint.

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See: <https://southernspaces.org/2011/deep-cane-southern-soul-gil-scott-heron>