Book Review

The Last Holiday: A Memoir

Gil Scott-Heron

New York: Grove Press, 2012

ISBN-10: 0802129013

ISBN-13: 978-0802129017

322 pages

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In 2001, Gil Scott-Heron mentioned the manuscript of this book to *New York Times* reporter Amy Waldman as evidence. He could not possibly have written such a lengthy and complex project, he suggested, if he'd had a drug problem. Several arrests for possession, stints in rehab, and a jail term later, the artist was dead, his book appearing posthumously as a different sort of evidence. More than a decade had passed since Scott-Heron's invocation of the manuscript in his defense, or, if you prefer, denial, and in the interval fans and followers had been as frustrated by the continued nonappearance of the book, which had been announced as forthcoming by a publisher for years, as they had sometimes been by his nonappearance at announced concerts and club dates. In the end, the book is here and the artist is not. The loss of Gil Scott-Heron is one of the great tragedies of contemporary American culture. The book he has left us may be the best book he ever wrote. The distance between the achievement of this book and his death is a sign of what might have been.

Readers of the British edition learn from a brief note that Scott-Heron composed two different versions of his memoir; one in the first person and one in the third. The published book has gone with the first-person version, though it includes one chapter of the other manuscript, in which the artist refers to himself, Prince-like, as "The artist." That same editorial note makes clear that the manuscript had been extensively rewritten at the suggestion of the publisher, and that the book as we read it today was assembled from drafts and fragments, and shaped by Tim Mohr. For some unexplained reason, none of this information was made available to American readers of the first Grove edition of Scott-Heron's volume, though it is available in the Kindle version, which was generated from the Canongate edition. These are not mere scholarly issues; we are dealing here with the last major statement from an important American artist. We can hope that the original manuscripts have been preserved and are being cared for.

The book had its origins in Scott-Heron's sense that Stevie Wonder's contributions to the drive to secure a national holiday in honour of Rev. Martin Luther King had never been accorded their proper measure—hence the title, *The Last Holiday*. And Scott-Heron is surely right on that score. Today's youth have grown up in a world in which even politicians from Arizona, who had resisted the holiday to the bitter end, now give it their full public support. But there was a time when there was no holiday honouring any African American, and Stevie Wonder's touring campaign in favor of the holiday was a powerful factor in bringing the needed pressures to bear on Congress and the state houses. Many will remember the video of Stevie Wonder leading the crowds outside the nation's capitol building in a rousing chorus of "Happy Birthday to You," his song celebrating King and the holiday cause, as the snow fell on the singing masses. In that video, singing along, can be seen Gil Scott-Heron, whose band had opened for Stevie Wonder and Wonderlove on the national tour that serves as the framing device for this memoir. That is in itself a worthy story to tell, and yet we can all be grateful that Scott-Heron decided to use that same framework for the telling of his own life, for it is a life closely interwoven with the political and cultural evolution of the United States in the years leading up to the declaration of King Day.

The book is also, it must be said, a tribute to Scott-Heron's mother. Listeners to his final studio recording heard the poet recite a piece that opens, "Womenfolk raised me and I was full-grown before I knew I came from a broken home" ("On Coming From a Broken Home"). Readers of his introductions to his volumes of poetry and monologues know that it was his mother who spontaneously suggested one of the most memorable lines for his early poem "Whitey on the Moon," and that when he completed his master's degree at Johns Hopkins University, he had the diploma sent to his mother, who had always stressed to him the importance of getting an education. The artist had come from a familial line that had pursued education with the zeal of a Frederick Douglass, and it was important to him that she

know he had not failed in that family tradition. Readers of the new book will learn that his success came in an unusual way. Scott-Heron had dropped out of classes at Lincoln University, one of America's oldest historically black universities, to devote himself to writing his first novel. That book, *The Vulture*, completed when he was just nineteen years old, turned out to be the gateway to many of his other early successes. Its publication opened the door for his first book of poetry, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, an intriguing volume uniting poetry and photography, which in turn became the core of his first recorded album, which included the first version of the piece by which he is most known internationally, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." *The Last Holiday* then details the amazing way that he managed to talk his way into the graduate creative writing program at Johns Hopkins, without having finished at Lincoln. One can just imagine how he was regarded by his fellow students in the writing workshops. Here was a guy their age or younger, taking an MA in creative writing, who already had to his credit a book of poems, two novels, and a couple of LPs on a major national label, one of which had spawned an international hit, one of the first poems ever to become a hit record on pop music radio. And during his time at Hopkins, he and his songwriting partner Brian Jackson were busy preparing the album *Winter in America*, which in its turn produced an even bigger hit, "The Bottle," a song that would grow and morph over the years, as it never left Scott-Heron's performing repertoire, eventually becoming, despite its dire subject matter, a crowd-pleasing sing-along.

But Scott-Heron had been directly involved in America's racial struggles long before writing any of the pieces for which he is justly famed. As a youngster he was one of a small band of black students who integrated a brand new, previously all white, Jackson, Tennessee junior high school, Tigrett. Scott-Heron had been following the news of *Brown v. Board of Education*, and had been talking about it with his friends and family. Still, it was unexpected when his mother came into his room one evening (from her look, her son thought he was in some sort of trouble) and asked him if he wanted to go to Tigrett. Then she announced that he could start the next morning. Thus began the young writer's sojourn in mostly white schools, broken only by his amazingly productive time at Lincoln. Having moved to New York, Scott-Heron's abilities brought him to the attention of his teachers, one of whom raised the possibility of his enrolling at the exclusive Fieldston Academy. Of that conversation, Scott-Heron writes that he learned, "You had to be very careful about joking with white folks. They took everything especially themselves, very seriously. And at the same time, they resented a brother taking himself the same way" (81). Scott-Heron learned enough of that lesson to navigate American society successfully, but he never did give up joking with white folks, witness "Whitey on the Moon."

When his MA work at Hopkins was completed, Scott-Heron found himself at something of a crossroads. The songs he was writing with Brian Jackson were meeting with growing success; they had been covered by such established artists as LaBelle, Esther Phillips, and The Intruders. Jackson wanted to make a career as a recording artist, but Scott-Heron still thought of himself primarily as a writer. For a time, he was able to have it both ways. In the part of his memoir that will probably come as the biggest surprise in the book to many readers, Scott-Heron notes how much he had enjoyed teaching his composition courses during his time at Hopkins, and reveals that his greatest ambition was to be a novelist and to teach at the college level. A chance meeting on a train with memoirist Lesley Lacey led to an opportunity to fulfill that ambition by taking a position in the creative writing program at the then-nascent Federal City College in Washington, DC. For the next couple of years, Scott-Heron balanced the duties of a full-time faculty member with a growing career as a touring recording artist who had responsibilities to his band mates. But as his artistic career grew, time pressures became increasingly difficult to manage. Clive Davis, freshly ejected from Columbia Records, signed Gil Scott-Heron, Brian Jackson, and their Midnight Band to his newly-formed Arista label, and more hits and touring opportunities followed almost immediately. Eventually, he took a leave of absence from his teaching duties at Federal City College, which soon merged with two other schools to become the University of the District of Columbia, and he never returned from that leave. We learn from his memoir that Scott-Heron regarded his brief time as a college teacher as among his most productive. "I think I was a better song writer when I was teaching" (177), he writes in retrospect, and anyone who has listened to *Winter in America* is likely to agree, no matter how wonderful many of the later songs proved to be.

That much of the story takes up fully half of the book, so that the sections detailing the King Holiday tour and subsequent events speed by as rapidly as the cities on the tour must have sped by for Scott-Heron and his band. But even at warp speed, the writing that made Scott-Heron such a compelling artist is evident in every chapter. Speaking of the last days of the Black Power movement and the collapse of other liberatory, grassroots efforts, he writes, "They separated the fingers on the hand and gave each group a different demand; we lost our way. Separated, none of us

seemed to know to watch out for COINTELPRO" (291). Not only is this characteristic of Scott-Heron's lyric instinct (so often absent from the rhyming of some later rappers), but also it builds masterfully on one of the most noted phrases from Booker T. Washington's infamous Atlanta Exposition address. This is just the sort of thing that enlivened Scott-Heron's classroom teaching, and attracted so many close listeners to his songs and monologues. This is exactly the kind of work that we find in classics like "H2O Gate Blues," "We Beg Your Pardon America," and the ever-evolving meditation on "Bluesology" with which Scott-Heron opened so many of his performances, usually delivered from behind his faithful sidekick, the Fender Rhodes piano. "I could get sick of L.A. from anywhere" (293), he writes with his trademark wit, recalling how he would sit in his mother-in-law's living room reading Steven King novels.

There is a great deal that is missing from the narrative, and this will disappoint some. We learn little of the dissolution of his marriage to actress Brenda Sykes, even less of his falling out with Brian Jackson, and nearly nothing of his decades-long battles with drugs. But those aren't central to what Scott-Heron was doing with this book, and there is a biography in the works that no doubt will answer all those questions. When we come to the close of *his* book, we read a self-judgment that is as "gut wrenching" (293) as Scott-Heron found those King novels, passages in which he admits that the mothers of his children were probably better off without him. It had to be a hard realization, and it is not one that excuses his behavior. His mother returns at the end: "In the empty attic that was my mother's son's head, I saw that her direct moments of criticism protected me from more than the obvious 'selfish' that she once handed me so plainly that I was aggravated by her clarity" (315).

If, as is evident in his final understanding of himself, Scott-Heron never learned to love in the way the women in his family had loved him, he took from his mother's example the gift of clarity. In the end, it was not enough to save him, but the clarity found in so many of his lyrics, and so clearly shown in this book, is something from which we may all draw lessons, even if we are sometimes aggravated that we must learn them.

Works Cited

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