Trouble With History

*History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it— and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it.*
— Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

For Barthes, here, history is transported, or perhaps replaced, by a photograph of his mother. The photograph — and its version of history — excludes him not (only) because he is not in it, or because his mother is dead, but because he does not remember her outfit. It is clothing before him. His mother in the photo cannot conceive of him.

Does the song know we are there? Does trouble recognize us, or merely occupy our minds? Can we conceive of a song without hearing it in our heads? There is no trouble that is not called. Awareness is existence. *No troubles* is a negative value positively rendered. It is equal to *Trouble, trouble, I’ve had it all my days,* just as *They’ll wash your troubles, your troubles, your troubles away* is an accumulation. Trouble is history, and history is hysterical. The borrowed song is evidence of our nonexistence. The song comes before us, carries past us. We sound out trouble as we take it in. We absorb the sign of our absence, asserting ourselves as such. *I’m not there* is also a negative value positively rendered.

This is the trick of history, the illusion of historicization. *Not there* is not here. To historicize is to assert that one exists — an hysterical claim. The Trouble Song sings trouble away, then, as it sings before the self. Rather than sing the song here, the singing *I* transports itself to the song. *No troubles,* no self, and vice versa.

So the Trouble Song without “trouble” is a wish fulfilled, already happened. The “Trouble” Song is neutered, or imagines itself so. This is the lie of the present: Now is neutral, a free wheel between past and future. If the “Trouble” Song is demystified language, all surface, the broken spell, it is a reassertion of (it) self. It is a pathetic *I was there* that trades the past for the present, or puts the present away. It is the failed cover, the thin wrap under which the self appears to gleam. It is a false preservation.
It is a desperate attempt at meaninglessness, a willful forgetting. The Trouble Song makes the singer disappear; the “Trouble” Song makes the song disappear. Neither succeeds in making trouble go away.

Trouble is not the word, it is the singing. Unspoken language has no magic. Speech cannot act without us, but words can make us disappear. *I was there* is a sleight of hand that reveals *But now I’m gone*. In *Nausea*, Sartre is translated by memory: *The record is scratched; perhaps the singer is dead*. If Gil Scott-Heron has died, have your troubles, your troubles, your troubles washed away?