

Recalling the Dead in Dennis Scott's "An Echo in the Bone"

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One wonders what on earth the first slave found to say to the first dark child he bore. I am told that there are Haitians able to trace their ancestry back to African kings, but the American Negro wishing to go back so far will find his journey through time abruptly arrested by the signature on the bill of sale which served as the entrance paper for his ancestor.

— James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village"

FIRST PERFORMED in the 1970s, but set in the 1930s, Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone* is, on one level, very obviously about the necessity to understand the present in terms of the past. The present yields no meaning without the past. The problem, as Scott recognizes, is that black West Indians have been disenfranchised of a usable past. All that may exist are faint echoes in the bone, deep within, which must now be recovered and made audible. But that is also in itself not enough. The recovered history will be no more than a jumble of sounds if it is not ordered or rather reordered. Sets of relationships are not immanent in themselves. They come into existence through a kind of historical reflection. As Paul Ricoeur says in *Time and Narrative*, "history aims at knowledge, an organized vision, established upon chains of causal or teleological relationships on the basis of meanings and values" (99). Recovery of the past, if it is to lead to perception and understanding, must involve active reconstruction. Such an understanding will not only make the people possess the past, it will also paradoxically free them from possession by the past. It will help break through the cycle of historical necessity that disproportionately determines who they are and what they do. It will help transform them from passive subjects of history to beings in charge

of shaping a different course. It will take them beyond being simple reactors to becoming actors in their own history. Such a complex effort at making history is at the heart of *An Echo in the Bone*.

The framework for the play's action is provided by the Nine-Night ceremony of the dead, a wake-like ritual practiced by many of the syncretist Revival cults of Jamaica, but particularly by the followers of Pocomania. Martha Beckwith writes in *Black Roadways*, "The Jamaican Negroes believe that for nine nights after death, the ghost rises out of the grave and returns to its familiar haunts" (77). As one of the informants reports: "On the last night he visits all his relatives and his associates, overlooks all that are his, and then departs altogether" (Beckwith 77). The ritual is celebratory. Family and friends who have gathered remember the past life at its best. The ritual also aims to free the dead of the past so that the spirit may move onward to the next stage in afterlife. In Scott's play, Crew, for whom this Nine-Night ceremony is being held, is presumed dead by his wife Rachel and it is only through the enactment of this ritual that readers and viewers discover both what has happened and why it has happened. The facts are revealed fairly quickly, for the play does not aim at ordinary suspense. Crew, who farms a smallholding just outside the big estate, has killed the white owner of the estate, and then apparently committed suicide. And if this violent act is not to be viewed as a senseless act of a deranged or drunken man it must be understood in terms of the past, not just the immediate past of this man's life but also that larger past which constitutes the history of black people in the Caribbean.

The use of the Nine-Night ceremony is, of course, a brilliant theatrical choice. Because the phenomenon of spirit possession is central to this ceremony, Scott is able to multiply his cast of characters and to take us back to the past effectively and economically to selected episodes without making the action appear disjointed or incoherent. But it is also the most appropriate choice in terms of the history Scott is making or remaking because it signals at the outset that this history is a *possession* of the black people and very different from the sanctioned colonial accounts. The Nine-Night ceremony is a cultural survival from the African past. The cere-

mony is associated particularly with Pocomania, a local word for Pukumina (Barrett 27). The corruption of the name, as Barrett suggests, is in itself an indication of the colonial establishment's hostility to African survivals because the élites viewed such practices as a sign of mania or dementia. Pukumina evolves as a syncretist religion responsive to the needs of the black populace in blending elements of the Kumina ceremony into Christianity. Kumina, according to Barrett, is derived from *akom* which in the Twi dialect of the Ashanti people means to be possessed. *Ana* is the Twi word for ancestor. Thus, Kumina partakes of the ancestor possession cults of the Ashanti (Barrett 25). Beckwith records the claim that the funeral celebrations would free the dead soul to return to Africa (70-85). Among Jamaicans, the possession crisis associated with practicing such rituals is called *myal* and the rigorous dancing that leads to the state of possession is now known as Kumina. These linkages need to be established because, as Bastide points out, "during the colonial period, myalism became anti-white society" (102). The Nine-Night ceremony, then, is not only evidence of cultural continuities with Africa but is also associated with direct political resistance.

There are other associations with this possession by spirits of the dead which make the ritual a particularly appropriate vehicle for recreating history. The dead tell the truth. Indeed, they *reveal* the truth, uncovering what may be obscured or even deliberately hidden. Leonard Barrett describes a personal experience he had of the Kumina ritual as a boy of twelve, and the resonances and implications of this experience are worth recapturing:

This dance was performed because of the sudden death of a schoolmate. . . . All sudden deaths in my community were suspect, but the death of a 12-year-old boy from no apparent physical causes was a serious case for suspecting witchcraft or poison. The gossip went on for days that a known lover of his mother had wanted the boy, who was fathered by another man, out of the way. . . . A well-known medicine man from a neighbouring district, a master of *Kumina*, was present. At about sunset, this medicine man and the mother of my friend . . . began a slow counter-clockwise shuffle . . . [they] danced face-to-face without touching each other. As the tempo became dazzlingly fast, the woman became possessed. . . . Every now and then the mother of the child would utter a chilling

shriek as she continued to move rapidly around and through the circle. Finally, she stood still and in utter abandonment she began to repeat, 'Yes I know, yes I know.' There was a sudden change in the atmosphere and the crowd now became motionless — a sudden change from uncertainty to confirmation. The man who had killed her son had been revealed to her by the ancestors. (26)

This achievement of certainty through possession that Barrett records is an important value in such reclaiming of the past. The events of the past that Scott is presenting to us cannot be verified through written records. They have been deliberately left out from the official histories of the West Indies. They survive as oral history and as a communal memory. In Scott's play, they are authenticated for us as revelations achieved through possession.

In fact, the ceremony in *An Echo in the Bone* begins with an act of remembering that is also viewed as a testifying. Those gathered ask "What him leave with us?" "What is his memory?" Then Rachel says, "All right now, we going to talk about him a little. Who first will *witness*?" (85; emphasis added). The litany of the ritual echoes a testimony in court with its structure of direct questions and answers.

Madam: Who is dead?
 Rachel: A man.
 P: What is his name?
 Rachel: Crew.
 Dream: Where him come from?
 Rachel: Darkness.
 Sonson: Where him gone to? (84)

Memory is an inheritance passed from the dead to the living, from one generation to another. The young would rather bury the past. Brigit counsels her mother-in-law to forget the past: "Why you don't make the dead stay dead?" (78). The older generation insists that it is necessary to "remember what is dead and gone" (107), and they lament this lapse in memory on the part of the young. When Lally asks her grandmother about the song she is singing, her grandmother complains: "you young people don't know a thing about the past" (108).

The whole ceremony is thus a means to remember what might otherwise be forgotten. P, talking about Crew in particular and

workers in cane fields in general, says, "and nobody remember how strong you was. And when they squeeze the canes nobody knows how much blood it takes to make the rum hot and sweet." To which Rachel responds, "I remember, I remember. Thirty years long like three hundred" (86-87). This kind of collapsing of time occurs several times within the play, even outside of those scenes which are specifically set in the past. When Sonson as Crew is re-enacting his frantic effort to escape after he has killed Mr. Charles, he vows, "I not going to jail for this, you hear me! I suffer too long — three hundred years!" (131). The past being remembered is not only the immediate past of thirty years but a whole history of slave labor in the cane fields for three hundred years. Recalling the dead is a way of giving a necessary temporal dimension to the experience of these individual lives. As Ricoeur says, the "entanglement of the narrated present with the remembered past confers a depth" (104).

For Crew, the dead man, the Nine-Night ceremony will provide both a homecoming and a departure. When Sonson, Crew's elder son, has become possessed by his father's spirit and now speaks as the returning dead, he remarks on the difficulty of coming home: "Such a long way I had to go to find you . . . All the way home. Going home so fast so far, the heart inside me was like a drum smelling the ground in the moonlight. Home" (87-88). In Scott's metaphor, remembering the past is a way of coming home. Or to put it another way, without memory, without history, a human being is unrooted. Alex Haley's account of his recovery of his own ancestry, later published in fictionalized form as *Roots*, emphasizes how oral history provides the means of finding home, a notion central to black formulations of history in the Americas. Haley visits a *griot*, one of the traditional oral historians of Africa:

The old man, the griot . . . began now to tell me the ancestral history of the Kinte clan as it had been told down across the centuries, from the times of his forefathers. It was as if a scroll was being read. It wasn't just talk as we talk. It was a very formal occasion. . . . The old man sat in a chair and when he would speak he would come forward, his body would grow rigid, the cords in his neck stood out and he spoke as though there were physical objects coming out of his mouth. He'd speak a sentence or so, he would go limp and relax. (15)

We may note here that the description of the *griot's* performance shows it to be ritualistic, almost like the act of possession. When the *griot* gets to the details about Kunta Kinte, Haley is able to confirm that this is the same story he has heard from his grandmother. Then follows a ceremony of reconciliation with his people in Africa ending with a prayer: "Praise be to Allah for one long lost from us whom Allah has returned" (17). Aided by the memory of the oral historian, Haley has come home. Coming home is also the object or *telos* of the oral history relived by the characters in Scott's play.

This recovery or acquisition of home that will validate the present lives among the blacks is ironically contrasted with the failure of the colonial masters similarly to find or claim a home. Mr. Charles, the absentee owner of the estate, tells Rachel that in returning he has "come home." Their interchange is revealing. Rachel asks, "You staying long, Mr. Charles?" Mr. Charles insists that he has come back "[f]or good. I've come back to my people" (117). The events of the play underscore the spuriousness of such a claim because for Mr. Charles it is a matter of owning not belonging. He confesses that it is the memory of his sexual escapade with Rachel, another dimension of his sense of ownership, which has brought him back "home." He blames his estrangement on his dead wife, and Rachel rebukes him sharply: "How you speak ill of the dead like that?" (118). The white history of exploitation, treating the slaves as objects and making fine stuff out of their labour, thwarts the possibility of the island becoming home for the white masters. As the owner of another great house shown us in one of the historical vignettes remarks, "[this island] works its way into your blood like the drums, and you think it's yours. It belongs to you, you sweat for it and love it and form it to what you want . . . but you stay a stranger" (124). This man has used the land; he has sexually used and abused the slave woman who looks after him. Such attitudes and such a past alienate him, as he himself recognizes, making it impossible for him to claim the island as a home. When Emancipation comes, he decides to leave.

Narrative history, the telling of the untold story, as Ricouer points out, is closely linked with a quest for personal identity (74). Even more to the point, Gordon Rohlehr argues that in "[t]ruly

creative writing about the West Indian past and present" (here he cites poets like Césaire, Walcott, and Brathwaite; novelists like Carpentier, Naipaul, and Lamming; and historians like Gouveia), "it has always been a question of trying to understand self, of self-knowledge" (81). In *An Echo* as well, this enterprise of recreating history is a means of discovering and affirming a sense of self. Here, history's existential function of defining who you are is associated with restoring the sense of belonging to a place, a group, and, most particularly, to one's self. That is, Scott implies, recovering history will allow people to take control of their destiny so that they may take possession of their selves. One of Scott's recreations from the past is an episode from the life of a Maroon community of runaway slaves. A white slave owner has been chasing a runaway in the Jamaican hills near a Maroon settlement. He is separated from the hunting party of men and dogs. He is lost, his ankle twisted, when he is discovered by two Maroons. Through this slave owner's haughty questioning of the Maroons, Scott establishes the three fundamental questions the blacks must answer if they are to recover their sense of self: "What's your name?" "Where you come from?" "Who you belong to?" (102).

Insofar as blacks have either slave names given by the owner or are often not even given the dignity of a name but referred to merely as "boy" or "girl," they must in some fashion rename themselves. In the episode set in a great house just before Emancipation, the aging and sick estate owner irritably asks the doctor who is attending on him: "Where's the girl?" The doctor asks: "What's her name?" And he is told: "Name, what name. Girl, that's her name" (123). There are no African names surviving in the present; nor is there any suggestion that these people will repudiate their Anglo names. But the names Scott gives his cast of characters — Rachel, Brigit, Sonson, Jacko, P, Madam, Dreamboat, Stone, Crew, Rattler — do suggest that through a process of amalgamation and transformation, the old names have become the people's own.

Personal identity has been denied the slaves because they have been viewed as chattel. Scott vividly recreates this aspect of the past through an episode set in an auctioneer's office in 1831. Two young black women up for sale are paraded in front of a prospec-

tive buyer and their valuable features noted: "please make note, the wide hips, the breasts just filling out. . . . Calves, well muscled" (99). The inspection is completed by the buyer who gets up to feel the shape of the woman, "presses on her jaws to make them open. Runs his hands up between her legs" (100). Remembering this history fuels the need to recover pride in self. When we are back in the immediate past, Brigit explains her decision to marry the younger son Jacko because he, unlike the wilder, rebellious, unsettled Sonson, will give her a *place*. "Is time for me to close the door on me own house, even if its only a room in your husband yard, till my man make his own place" (114-15). She asserts her pride, and the pride of the dispossessed in this instance resides in their ability to say no: "I don't have anything but I have a right to answer no. . . . I not breeding for any man just because of pleasure. I is not an animal, I is a human being" (115). Brigit's assertion of pride gathers resonance by being juxtaposed with the history of the Maroons, for significantly the episode of the Maroons precedes this enactment of the present. In that remembered past, we have seen a runaway slave being hunted like an animal. In fact, the white estate owner when caught by the Maroons pretends that he has been hunting wild pig. Yet when he asks, "Who you belong to?" the proud answer he receives is: "I don't belong to anybody" (102). Not being owned by anyone else, he affirms, is a prerequisite to belonging to one's self.

Brigit's need to have her place is hauntingly echoed later in the play by Crew's desperate need to keep his place. When his land becomes sterile because of the diversion of the stream to the estate, Rachel suggests that they leave to start again in town. For Crew, to give up the place is to give up his history.

Is a history behind every foot of it. . . . I trying to tell you, and I don't have the words to tell you, I am like a dumb man trying to tell you what happen to him. I only can trace the line from here to there, and this end is where them bring my great grandfather, here, and this is me. If you take away the line from the ground, I am nothing. I am nobody! (128)

The thread, the line, that connects him to his past, that makes his history, also gives him his identity. It is not merely his livelihood but also his place, his history, which is being taken away from

him and that is why he reacts so violently to this dispossession. His sense of inarticulateness, his sense of himself as someone without words, is a recurring metaphor in the play. He and his people have been denied a voice, and recreating the past allows them to recover this voice because the act of narrating history brings perception and understanding. Appropriately, Sonson who stands disinherited because of his father's dispossession of place will literally find his voice by being possessed of Crew's ghost. He will recover his self by reliving the past. The end of the play sees him precariously hanging on a chain, an emblematic prop dominating the backdrop of the action, which he negotiates safely with the help of his community who have healed themselves through this active recalling of the past.

The present of the play's action is 1937 when Crew's family and friends gather for the Nine-Night ceremony. The past that is carefully selected for representation takes us back to a slave ship in 1792, an auctioneer's office in 1820, the maroons in woods near an estate in 1833, and a Great House in 1834. Interspersed in this historical past of the community are also scenes from the more immediate past of the initial cast of characters from Crew's circle. Thus, there are scenes that take us to Crew's house four years ago, to Crew's field a week earlier just before the killing, to a shop in the village two days ago where people discuss the killing, and Rachel, already sure that Crew is dead although his body has not been discovered, extends invitations for the ceremony. The scenes from the immediate past are necessary to establish the sequential causality of events although quite deliberately they are not presented sequentially. The scenes from the communal past are somewhat chronological in their appearance but since they are interspersed with scenes from the immediate past and since there are deliberate gaps in chronology, these too appear discursive rather than sequential.

This discursive, non-sequential arrangement of scenes has several implications. By violating the tyranny of chronological memory, Scott has made us aware that the history he is recreating has been subjected to a deliberate process of ordering. Such an ordering, Hayden White suggests, is true of all narrative history.¹ Nevertheless, Scott's presentation of events clearly highlights the

fact that here we have a deliberate attempt to make sense of the past. The historical reflection implicit in all attempts to create history is thus made explicit. In his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," Roland Barthes argues that "the 'reality' of a sequence lies not in the 'natural' succession of actions composing it but in the logic there exposed, risked, satisfied" (124). The digressive structuring of Scott's narrative forces the readers to look for this logic or teleological underpinning which will provide a key to meaning. The moving back and forth between two sets of pasts, the more immediate past in the lives of this particular cast of characters and the more distant historical past, sets up a deliberate dialectical tension which signals and then invites critical self-consciousness. No viewer or reader of Scott's play, then, can escape the awareness that these historical reconstructions aim at understanding both the past and the present as well as the interrelations between the past and the present. Furthermore, in recalling the past through recalling the dead to relive moments of their lives before us, Scott gives his history an immediacy not available in ordinary historical accounts. We have in Scott's recreations of history a remarkable combination of immediacy and analysis. Scott's fictional history fulfills the fictional contract that Martin Price defines in terms of games and models: like a game being played in front of us, recreated events are contingent and temporal and so experienced by us. But they are also experienced as models which are essentially retrospective: "we move from immersion to reflection, from temporal anxiety to spatial comprehension" (20). The history is depicted both as an area of experience and an object of knowledge.

What, then, is the logic uncovered by Scott's recreations? What meaning is conferred on West Indian history through the choice and ordering of these episodes? For Scott, the history of West Indian blacks begins with tribal memories of the bitter migration in slave ships. As Derek Walcott affirms when reflecting on "The Muse of History," this "degraded arrival must be seen as the beginning, not the end of our history" (6). Scott offers two perspectives on this beginning — that of the colonial whites and slave traders and that of the slaves themselves. In this slave ship episode, for a white crew member at his watch in the crow's nest, swaying

and squinting in what he regards as a hostile sun, these journeys of the middle passage have taken their toll. He dreams of escape, hoping to avoid the descent into animality of other crew members who spend it all on grog. His escape will also be a new beginning on the islands: "If I add my share for this venture, I could buy me a young black and settle in the islands. Hire her out maybe. Then retire for a quiet old age, and nothing to do" (88). In Scott's play, the prop on which this fellow sways is the rusty chain hanging from rafters, the same chain on which Sonson will later sway when having become Crew through possession he enacts Crew's paralyzing fright after having killed Mr. Charles and his attempts to escape by climbing a tree. This juxtaposition will remind us that the telos of this beginning for many blacks has been a life of unremitting labour sometimes leading to early death. Within this scene of horrifying brutality on the slave ship, Scott includes another little drama. A white woman has come aboard to observe the blacks — for she too is on her way to the islands — so that she can sort out for herself "conflicting reports from various writers" on "the nature of the creatures" (91). These various written reports are the basis of the official colonial histories that Scott's representation wishes to substitute by a history remembered and now created by the blacks themselves. It is no accident that this woman carries a volume by Bryan Edwards whose *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British West Indies*, published at the end of the eighteenth century, became the authorized version of history from the colonial perspective.

In offering the other perspective, Scott isolates three crucial aspects of this beginning. The slaves have, of course, been violently wrenched from home, place, and community, but now in being thrown together with members of different tribes, they become, and doubly so, "strangers in a dark place" (90). The loss of voice which prompts such reconstructions as Scott's has, as we know, been aggravated by loss of language. Loss of language and loss of community make it difficult to keep the memory alive. Scott gives the most graphic rendering of this imposed muteness that haunts the black West Indian. One of the young slaves has his tongue cut off for using his mouth to spit on the Bosun, the only language of rebellion when there is no language. The Bosun has just ordered

that from henceforth there will be only one voice, that of the white rulers. He has screamed at one of the slaves and has been reminded by another crew member, "They don't know what you are saying, Bosun!" And he has shouted back, "They'd better learn to hear *the voice*" (92; emphasis added). Scott underscores the continuing muteness of blacks by giving the role of the rebellious slave in the slave ship to Rattler, the mute drummer at the Nine-Night ceremony. Rattler, capable of making only rattling sounds from his throat, can nevertheless make his African drums speak for him. And this is Scott's second chosen emphasis. Despite the voicelessness imposed on the blacks, they will find a voice. "If we stay here longer," says one of the captured on the slave ship, "we'll learn to speak the same tongue. All the tribe" (89). In fact, in the first instance of possession at the ceremony, Rattler's drum speaks even when he is not beating it. It is as if the act of recalling the dead is a powerful talisman that miraculously endows the community with its voice. Third, Scott's rendering of the slave ship episode reminds us that here, at this most horrible beginning, the slaves learn how to survive in spirit even when the body is violated. "Do not weep for her, my brother," one slave tells another whose pregnant wife has been dragged away, presumably dead or dying. Her spirit has already departed, so the indignities suffered by the body can be ignored. "Once the house is empty, what happens to it is of no importance" (90). If one learns to ignore the violations to the body in this instance one may also learn to ignore subsequent violations by keeping the spirit intact and apart. When this same bereaved husband fears that the "Gods are dead or gone away. Or too far to hear what we speak," a woman on the ship counsels otherwise (90). The Gods will survive the middle passage too. Once again, appropriately, this woman's role is played by Rachel who honors the past through the Nine-Night ceremony, who refuses to forget the dead despite the urgings of the young: "Ma, what you doing this for? Why you don't make the dead stay dead?" (78).

The second historical episode in the auctioneer's office shows one of the consequences of learning to speak with the tongue of the masters. Some of the slaves have internalized the value system of their rulers. They may even willingly participate in the system for whatever meager privileges they can achieve. The horror of this

auction is intensified by having a slave carry on the transaction on his master's behalf, and even join in the brutal evaluation of physical features of the two young women up for sale. This is even a profounder loss of self than we saw in the slave ship episode. Scott seems to suggest that a dissociation of sensibility may well have taken place and that the other self, suppressed or hidden, still exists beneath. The persona who speaks the master's language may sometimes well be a mask. One of the slaves being sold is dumb from birth, his birthright, his voice, has been denied him. In order to please the prospective buyer, the slave expresses himself in writing, a more obviously *learned* skill, saying precisely what the defenders of slavery, the colonial writers of history, had claimed — that the institution of slavery was a benevolent patriarchy most suited for these ignorant, childlike Africans who do indeed respond to this favor with gratitude and loyalty. "My dear sisters," he writes to the two women being sold,

give thanks now to the Lord for your good fortune. . . . One of you shall be assured shelter, kindness, and the blessing of a full womb. . . . The other . . . may in time rise to the respect and affection [given] . . . the housekeeper in a great-house such that . . . she is answerable only to the master, whose needs she shall see to with loyalty and good grace. These are opportunities seldom given to poor creatures such as we are. . . . Show thanks and willingness therefore, and learn quickly the ways of christian children. (100)

But we do not hear the slave's own voice and this muted voice may speak very differently.

Appropriately, the Maroon episode succeeds this one, thus juxtaposing the voicelessness and degrading accommodations of slave society with the jaunty, brash, and ironic responses of the Maroons to the white estate owner. The estate owner offers a free pardon in lieu of being shown the way home. "Pardon . . . For what?" he is asked, and then is reminded that despite rewards no Maroon is ever caught: "Chu, all that money and nobody can get it! You looking to catch some of it Busha?" (103). In the previous episode, the white man's language had become a means as well as an expression of the suppression and distortion of the inner selves of the blacks. In this episode, this language itself is an instrument of freedom, a supple tool for self-expression. The white man threatens and the

Maroon responds, "Sticks and stones will hurt my bones" (105). The white man taunts that this is "A white man saying, Sambo." To which comes the answer echoing Caliban: "A black day for you when you taught us your tongue, Busha. All the tribes coming together, under the one language. The word is freedom, and one day the whole country going to stand up and shout it out" (106).

The last historical episode and the present of the play provide the bridges to this freedom. The scene in the Great House takes place on the night of Emancipation. We note the sickness of the old man, a metaphor for the decay of the old order. The language and the voice of the blacks have a new note of self-assertion, new, that is, in the context of service to the masters. When the old man screams "[l]azy bitch" at the young girl who tends him, she hurls back: "Sick-sick." Yet she is compassionate too, urging the young visitor to talk to the old man because "[h]e's dying" (121). In the background, the drums beat incessantly, speaking a different language, remembering and anticipating a different order. However, although Emancipation brings freedom from slavery, it does not bring self-rule. The white man is still in charge, even in the 1930s, the play's historical present. The people gathered for the wake begins to reflect on their own life. Stone remembers how Crew had urged him to settle down. "For what? I ask him that, you see. I watch how the big land-owners they corner up with their own and sell the sugar back to us for four times what it cost us to raise." For Stone, things have not changed any with Emancipation, though P insists that "[w]e free now, Stone. That is a big change" (109).

The big change Stone is seeking does actually begin in the 1930s. An already vulnerable economy crumbled further under the impact of the Depression in the United States. There were sporadic strikes, demonstrations, and riots. Scott's action takes place in 1934 and 1937, both years memorable for unrest and discontent. There were strikes in Jamaica in 1934 and in 1937, and in Trinidad the oil industry's workers were mobilized by the fiery speeches of Uriah Butler who spoke emphatically for the rights of blacks. Strikes spread from oil to cane workers; violence ensued; troops were called. Alexander Bustamante and Norman Manley in Jamaica, Grantley Adams in Barbados, Robert Bradshaw in St. Kitts — new leaders — emerged from the people and the poor

were no longer willing to suffer in silence. Scott's play makes no direct reference to these events, but the suffering of the poor here too has erupted in bloodshed, and we hear rumblings and complaints from the characters. And the issues clearly are not only of economic exploitation. It is a matter as well of self-respect. It is not enough to have freedom when, as Brigit says, there is "no respect." How, she asks, can anyone "live easy without respect?" (109). We may remember, as well, that it was the unrest of the 1930s which led to the transformation of the old Crown Colony system of little or no representation in the Legislative Council to full representation based on universal suffrage, and, finally, to independence.

Now that West Indians can reclaim their past and write their own histories, what — Scott's play both asks and answers the question — will (should) be the nature and the object of such representations of the past? Scott has recreated the past from the perspective of the subjugated rather than the victorious, the non-privileged rather than the privileged. This history of pain and suffering can become, as Walcott characterizes it, "that Medusa of the New World" (2), petrifying and weighing down those who must now remember it and confront it. The past may become a burden. It may be necessary to possess the past in order to function in the present but it is equally necessary not to become possessed by the past. Through his metaphor of spirit possession, Scott is able to suggest the dual aspects of possession. The dead are reclaimed but finally they must be sent away. Not only must the spirit of the dead be released to journey on, the spirit of the living who have been possessed by the dead must also be released so that they can make a future for themselves that is their very own. At approximately the middle of the play, when three of the four historical episodes have been enacted, the company gathered for the wake has drifted into a talk of the hopelessness of their situation. When Dreamboat — idle, a little shiftless, living parasitically on others — is reproved for drinking "too damn much," he responds: "Aye, man, what a man to do? You work sun up to dark, and the money come in trickling and go out like the river washing down in spate. . . . You laugh a little, drink a little" (108). Then Stone remembers Crew's advice to "get [himself] a little piece of land." "For

what? I asks him that. . . . You think things change any?" (109). When the victimization of the past weighs heavy on the present, it becomes difficult to conceive of a future: "I fraid to see into the future. It looking too much like what gone before" (110). Again, in the metaphor of the play, "the spirit [is] on [their] back," and unless these individuals can both remember the past and avoid being ridden by the past, they cannot come into their own.

The need to be free of the burden of the past is here very different from the revolt against stultifying traditions that haunts late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western literature. Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda* speaks of the incubus of the past and James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus speaks of history as a nightmare from which Western man must awaken. Scott's characters are not repudiating tradition, at least the tradition that is their own. Their problem is to reclaim the tradition and then to come to terms with the nature of this tradition. The divided nature of this tradition makes the confrontation and the acceptance problematic. The past is not only history from the black perspective hitherto suppressed, but it is also, to some measure, history from the colonial perspective hitherto privileged. Does the reclaiming of one necessarily mean a complete denial of the other? If West Indians cannot accept their dual inheritance, Scott seems to argue, concurring with Walcott, then they may be trapped either in the paralysis of victimization or in the postures of recrimination, hatred, and revenge. In the episode of the Maroons Scott enacts these choices. Sonson, in the role of one of the Maroons, wants to kill the captured white man. Jacko, representing the other, asks: "You going to kill and kill till the whole island run red, and then what?" Sonson responds, "Then we can start again" (105). But as Jacko realizes, it is impossible to begin anew, to wipe out one element of the past. It may be self-defeating on a practical level: "They not going to stand for it. As long as we hunt and keep in the hills they will leave us to hide. But the whole island will blow up if it look like we can molest the landowners and get away with it" (104). And it may be even more self-defeating on a psychological and spiritual level because to do so is to deny the divided inheritance of West Indians. "I white too," Jacko reminds the estate owner in this scene, and this is something of which he must remind himself as well.

When we shift to the present of the last scene, Jacko and Sonson, who have been hostile to each other, are now reconciled. On a superficial level, this hostility is over Brigit who has chosen Jacko over Sonson. But then Brigit's choice is based on her perception of different attitudes and responses. Jacko will provide her with a home. Jacko deliberates; his actions are based on perception and understanding whereas Sonson's unsettled and unsettling behavior stems from too emotional and unthinking a reaction. To become trapped in unthinking violence and rejection, says Brigit, is to prove the masters' evaluations of slaves, the white men's perceptions of history: "The white man is right after all. Is only brute force can make us change our ways! Is only blood that people like us understand, is only revenge that satisfy us" (133). The reconciliation between the two brothers signals the need to incorporate both responses, both energetic self-assertion and considered acceptance. To do that is to reclaim the past fully and to be free of its nightmare. It is a way to redeem the present and save the future. Sonson, possessed by Crew's spirit, is hanging on the chain that has bound them in slavery, ready to jump off and reenact Crew's suicide. His saving in the play is achieved through a bold denial of the determinism of history. Sonson as Crew is persuaded that he has not really killed Mr. Charles, that his thinking he has done so is a delusive nightmare of the sun and the heat. He can take off his soiled shirt, don a clean one, and cleanse himself. The ritual of possession, through remembering history, has both explained the present and also shown that such events need not repeat themselves, that the past need not obsessively determine the future.

The last words of the play are spoken by Rachel:

Sometimes is not a good thing to cry too long. My man is dead yes. But not all the crying in the world going to bring him back. And I fraid to lose what leave. We is here, don't is so? And tomorrow the sun going come up the same as ever. No matter what is past, you can't stop the blood from drumming, and you can't stop the heart from hoping. (136)

She is the one who had convened the Nine-Night ceremony to recall the dead, and she is the one who will let the dead depart. She asks Rattler to continue playing his drums. The mute have found their voice. This is both the drumbeat of the past and the beat

of the heart that hopes for the future. The ritual ends, finally, on a note of celebration.

By inserting his historical recreations into an ongoing fictional narrative, Scott is able to free himself from some of the constraints of normal historical writing. He can be episodic and fragmentary. But this is not merely freedom *from* but also freedom *to*. He is free to select, to highlight, and thus to offer understanding that retains the immediacy of direct perception. And in offering us the structuring operations of what Ricoeur calls *emplotment*, Scott has shown us that history is a created text. It has been created by others in the past to suit their needs. It must be created anew in the present to fulfill the needs of those who have been denied a history of their own.

NOTE

- ¹ See particularly "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory" in *The Content of Form* and "Interpretation in History" in *Tropics of Discourse*.

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