

*This book has been published with the aid of a
Bicentennial Grant from the Phi Beta Kappa Society*

BLACK CULTURE AND BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

*Afro-American Folk Thought
from Slavery to Freedom*

30TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2007

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further Oxford University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
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First published by Oxford University Press, Inc., 1977
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016
www.oup.com

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 1978
30th Anniversary edition published by Oxford University Press, 2007
ISBN 978-0-19-530569-2 (cloth)
ISBN 978-0-19-530568-5 (paper)

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the first edition as follows:
Levine, Lawrence W.
Black culture and Black consciousness.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
GR103.L48 1978 398.2 77-15492

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the spirit to that space until every seed was picked up; reading the Bible backwards three times provided especially strong protection. These and many similar prescriptions worked as well against the hostile behavior of witches who spent the nights riding their victims.⁷⁸

While it would be possible to extend this discussion into a number of other areas, such as the practice of Voodoo, enough evidence has been reviewed to make it clear that in numerous contexts and ways slaves were able to find their own sources of power and protection. It remains valid, of course, to query the nature and meaning of these alternatives. The slaves, after all, remained slaves, the whites remained masters, and the harsh, exploitative history of the Peculiar Institution continued. If our sole criterion of judgment is physical freedom, then the slaves' sacred folk beliefs had a very limited effect, though they unquestionably encouraged some slaves to escape. If we extend the criterion to material well-being, the effects are greater, for their folk beliefs encouraged and enabled slaves to assert themselves more than they would have otherwise. If we extend it yet further into the more speculative but crucial area of the slaves' psychic and emotional state, the results are more positive still. The slaves' expressive arts and sacred beliefs were more than merely a series of outlets or strategies; they were instruments of life, of sanity, of health, and of self-respect. Slave music, slave religion, slave folk beliefs—the entire sacred world of the black slaves—created the necessary space between the slaves and their owners and were the means of preventing legal slavery from becoming spiritual slavery. In addition to the world of the masters which slaves inhabited and accommodated to, as they had to, they created and maintained a world apart which they shared with each other and which remained their own domain, free of control of those who ruled the earth.

2 THE MEANING OF SLAVE TALES

De buckruh [whites] hab scheme, en de nigger hab trick, en ebery time de buckruh scheme once de nigger trick twice.
South Carolina slave saying.¹

I sometimes think that I learned more in my early childhood about how to live than I have learned since.

Testimony of an ex-slave.²

For the historian interested in slave culture, the use of folk tales parallels that of songs and folk beliefs. Although few black tales were collected until the decades following the Civil War, their distribution was so widespread throughout the South, their content so similar, and their style and function so uniform that it is evident they were not a sudden post-emancipation creation. "All over the South the stories of Br'er Rabbit are told," Octave Thanet reported in 1892. "Everywhere not only ideas and plots are repeated, but the very words often are the same; one gets a new vision of the power of oral tradition."¹ The variations in patterns of mobility, educational and vocational opportunities, cultural expression, and life styles brought about by emancipation produced inevitable changes in black folklore, and they will be examined in later chapters. Still, throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century—and well into the twentieth—

the large body of slave tales remained a vital and central core of Afro-American expression.

As with other aspects of their verbal art, slaves established in their tales important points of continuity with their African past. This is not to say that slave tales in the United States were necessarily African. Scholars will need more complete indices of African tale types and motifs than now exist before they can determine the origin of slave tales with any definitiveness. Comparison of slave tales with those guides to African tales that do exist reveals that a significant number were brought directly from Africa; a roughly similar percentage were tales common in both Africa and Europe, so that, while slaves may have brought the tale type with them, its place in their lore could well have been reinforced by their contact with whites; and, finally, a third group of tales were learned in the New World both through Euro-American influence and through independent creation.²

Unfortunately, extended debate concerning the exact point of origin of these tales has taken precedence over analysis of their meaning and function. Cultural continuities with Africa were not dependent upon importation and perpetuation of specific folk tales in their pristine form. It was in the place that tales occupied in the lives of the slaves, the meaning slaves derived from them, and the ways in which slaves used them culturally and psychically that the clearest resemblances with their African past could be found. Thus, although Africans brought to the New World were inevitably influenced by the tales they found there and frequently adopted white tale plots, motifs, and characters, what is most important is not the mere fact of these borrowings but their nature. Afro-American slaves did not borrow indiscriminately from the whites among whom they lived. A careful study of their folklore reveals that they tended to be most influenced by those patterns of Euro-American tales which in terms of functional meaning and aesthetic appeal had the greatest similarity to the tales with deep roots in their ancestral homeland. Regardless of where slave tales came from, the essential point is that, with respect to language, delivery, details of characterization, and plot, slaves quickly made them their own and through them revealed much about themselves and their world.

The most effective single force in popularizing these tales after the Civil War was the work of Joel Chandler Harris. Beginning with the dialect sketches he published in the *Atlanta Constitution* in the late 1870s—which he brought together in his first volume of tales, *Uncle Remus: His*

Songs and Sayings (1880)—Harris spent much of the remainder of his life deluging his countrymen with Afro-American animal tales, seven volumes of which were published before his death in 1908 and three more posthumously.³ Harris insisted that his tales were not “cooked” but were “given in the simple but picturesque language of the negroes, just as the negroes tell them.”⁴ If one discounts his “character-sketches” of Remus and the other slaves who appear in his books, along with many of his anecdotes and asides, Harris, in his early volumes especially, was faithful to the themes, motifs, and plots of black animal tales. His errors were those of omission more than commission. In the introduction to his second volume, *Nights with Uncle Remus* (1883), Harris asserted that his work embodied “everything, or nearly everything of importance in the oral literature of the negroes of the Southern States.” In fact, the picture that emerges from his work is a relatively frozen one which helped to establish the stereotype that slave tales were comprised almost exclusively of the adventures of Brer Rabbit. Harris did not completely slight other forms of black tales; his ten volumes included a substantial number of explanatory tales and some fifteen supernatural tales, featuring witches, ghosts, and devils. Still, his attention remained centered upon Brer Rabbit and his adversaries.

Harris’ fixed emphasis was by no means a radical distortion of the nature of slave tales. As this chapter will demonstrate, antebellum slaves manifested a central feature of their consciousness graphically and dramatically through the medium of trickster tales featuring the victories of the weak over the strong. Nevertheless, while Harris captured the essence of slave animal trickster tales, his work exaggerated their dominance over the folklore of the slaves. An understanding of antebellum black culture and consciousness demands a consideration of the entire spectrum of slave tales.

SLAVE TALES AS HISTORY

Slave tales were almost totally devoid of cosmological myths which attempt to render factual accounts of all natural and divine phenomena. Something approaching myths of this nature, which Malinowski has defined as characterized by “a retrospective, everpresent, live actuality,” did

of course exist among antebellum slaves, but they were confined almost exclusively to the slaves' sacred songs and sermons; they played little or no role in oral tales.¹ The closest the slaves came to these myths was in their creation legends, which paralleled many of the creation stories of nineteenth-century colonized, Christianized Africans. Some of these were clearly influenced by the ubiquitous Anglo-American myths which insisted that blackness resulted from God's curse on Cain or Ham. Gus Rogers, who had been a slave in North Carolina and Alabama, explained the genesis of his race by referring to the Biblical account of Noah:

God gave it [religion] to Adam and took it away from Adam and gave it to Noah, and you know, Miss, Noah had three sons, and when Noah got drunk on wine, one of his sons laughed at him, and the other two took a sheet and walked backwards and threw it over Noah. Noah told the one who laughed, "Your children will be hewers of wood and drawers of water for the other two children, and they will be known by their hair and their skin being dark." So, Miss, there we are, and that is the way God meant us to be. We have always had to follow the white folks and do what we saw them do, and that's all there is to it. You just can't get away from what the Lord said.²

Other creation legends were more imaginative though hardly less self-denigrating. One, reported as early as 1828 in the *Tarboro* (North Carolina) *Free Press*, told of the Devil attempting to emulate God's creation of Adam. Lacking clay, he went to the swamp and got some mud, using thick, curly moss for hair. When he looked upon his creation he was so disgusted that he kicked it on the shins and struck it on the nose, thus establishing the physical attributes of the black race.³ A later version has the Devil becoming so furious at an ape who refused to answer any of his questions that he turns him into a black man.⁴ In 1878 an aged ex-slave in Louisiana accounted for the pre-eminence of West Europeans by explaining that after God had created all the peoples of the world—Negroes, Chinese, Indians, and so on—He exhausted the mound of earth He was using and so seized a butterfly and an ant, creating a Frenchman out of the former and an Englishman out of the latter.⁵ The importance of such patently white-influenced stories is obvious, but it would be a mistake to assume that slaves invariably took them literally. There are indications that the blacks telling them frequently were aware of their original source. "En dat's how de w'ite man dun 'count fo' de niggah bein' on 'Arth," a black storyteller concluded one such story.⁶

Perhaps more typical, and certainly more original, were stories which

had God begin His creation with the black race. In one version the original colored peoples discovered a body of water that had the power of washing away their dark skin color. Those who reached the water first came out pure white; as the supply was used up the skin color remained darker until the last to reach it were able to dip in only their palms and the soles of their feet.⁷ The assumption of a black creation allowed slaves to stand the white creation myths on their heads. In 1859 a white Baptist preacher, Harden E. Taliaferro, recalled the teachings of Charles Gentry, a black slave preacher whom he had known in the rural North Carolina country in which he grew up in the 1820s. The first men, Gentry insisted, were black: "Adam, Cain, Abel, Seth, was all ob 'um black as jet."

Cain he kill his brudder Abel wid a great big club . . . and God he cum to Cain, and say, "Cain! whar is dy brudder Abel?" Cain he pout out de lip, and say, "I don't know; what ye axin' me fur? I ain't my brudder Abel's keeper." De Lord he gits in airnest, and stomps on de ground, and say, "Cain! you Cain! whar is dy brudder Abel? I say, Cain! whar is dy brudder?" Cain he turn white as bleech cambric in de face, and de whole race ob Cain dey bin white ebber since. De mark de Lord put on de face ob Cain was a white mark. He druv him inter de land ob Nod, and all de white folks hab cum frum de land ob Nod, jis' as you've hearn.⁸

How popular Gentry's version of the creation was is not clear, but it was known at least as early as the opening years of the nineteenth century and remained in circulation well into the twentieth century from Maryland to Mississippi.⁹

Black slaves, then, possessed their own form of racial ethnocentrism and were capable of viewing the white race as a degenerate form of the black. Significantly, precisely the same creation legends were reported from nineteenth-century Africa. Mary Kingsley, who traveled extensively in West Africa in the 1890s, asked a twelve-year-old girl in the Cameroons why she was black and received this succinct reply: "One of my pa's pas saw dem Patriark Noah wivout his clothes." This Miss Kingsley attributed to "the result of white training direct on the African mind." She was more forcibly struck by another story often told to her by Africans which held that after Cain killed Abel he carried the body around with him for years trying to hide it from God, growing gradually white with horror and fear, until observing a crow scratching a hole in the desert he buried the body there, "but all his children were white, and from Cain came the white races, while Abel's children are black, as all men were before the first murder."¹⁰ In mid-nineteenth-century Africa the Englishman

Richard F. Burton heard exactly the same story from "converted negroes."¹¹ Africans, both those who were forcibly taken from their homeland and those who remained to live in a colonized state, were the recipients of the same European racial myths and, it would appear, erected many of the same defenses against them.

Although slave tales included nothing approaching the intricate genealogies and historical narratives common in the African oral tradition,¹² they did contain a historical dimension. The tales slaves related to one another were not confined to fictionalized stories. As Richard Dorson has observed: "American Negroes (and whites) relate local traditions, family history, and personal experiences with as much gusto as any folktale—and sometimes these localized and personalized narratives prove to be folktales in disguise."¹³ This was as true of slaves as of the twentieth-century Negroes Dorson was referring to. In 1876 the South Carolina planter, botanist, and writer, Henry W. Ravenel, set down his childhood recollections of life on his father's plantation which was inhabited by some two hundred slaves. Among his most vivid memories was the time he spent listening to "the old negroes' stories, which they were very fond of telling."

Some (the native Africans) told of the "old country," which they could remember—of the big elephants "as big as this house"—of the lions and tigers, and alligators, and monkeys—of the great snakes, "as big as your body, sir," that could crush and swallow a man or a horse—the story of their capture and march to the coast—of the "middle passage," and other marvellous things about ivory and gold. . . . Then those of the country born could tell the wonderful stories of the old war—of the "red coats" whom they had seen (when the State was overrun by British troops), of the hair-breadth escapes of old master from the British, . . . With these and like marvellous stories they fed my childish credulity, and impressed me with a respect and veneration for their stately forms which I yet retain.¹⁴

Although memories of Africa may have faded as the number of native-born Africans in the United States decreased with the diminution of the slave trade in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they did not disappear entirely. In the 1870s an aged freedman spoke warmly of his African-born grandfather from whom he had learned many of the animal stories he told:

I often yeardy [heard] him tell how 'e was bring ober from Africa in a ship when 'e was a boy. De white man lef' de ship behin' and gone asho' in a small boat; an' when dey meet up wid my gran'daddy an' a whole parcel more, young boys like, all from de same village, dey hire dem wid piece

ob red flannel an' ting for to 'long [go along] wid dem. But when dey git dem on bo'd de ship dey bring dem ober to dis country an' sell dem for slave. Dey bring my gran'daddy to Charleston an' ol' Marse Heywood buy um. When I was a small leetle boy 'e ben bery ol', too ol' for work, an' I use for hab it for my tarsk for min' um. So 'e tell me heap o' dese story.¹⁵

It does not appear to have been uncommon for slaves to refer to their African roots among themselves. "Whilst us was all a-wukin' away at house and yard jobs, de old folkse would tell us 'bout times 'fore us was borned," Paul Smith related as a preface to an elaborate story of how red ships were used to capture Africans.¹⁶ "I used to set on Grandma's lap and she told me about how they used to catch people in Africa," Luke Dixon, who was born a slave in 1855 in Virginia, remembered:

They herded them up like cattle and put them in stalls and brought them on the ship and sold them. She said some they captured they left bound till they come back and sometimes they never went back to get them. They died. They had room in the stalls on the boat to set down or lie down. They put several together. Put the men to themselves and the women to themselves. When they sold Grandma and Grandpa at a fishing dock called New Port, Virginia, they had their feet bound down and their hands bound crossed, up on a platform.¹⁷

Similarly, Shack Thomas, born a slave in Florida in 1834, described how his father would spend hours at night telling him and his brothers about his capture in Africa and his subsequent experiences as a slave in America.¹⁸ African forebears were often referred to with affection and pride:

Pappy was a African. I knows dat. He come from Congo, over in Africa, and I heard him say a big storm drove de ship somewhere on de Ca'lina coast. I 'member he mighty 'spectful to Massa and Missy, but he proud, too, and walk straighter'n anybody I ever seen. He had scars on de right side he head and cheek what he say am tribe marks, but what dey means I don't know.¹⁹

African-born slaves were associated with conjure and magical powers as exemplified in the frequently told stories of Africans who put up with the treatment accorded to them by whites in America as long as they could and then simply rose up and flew back to Africa. In some versions they delayed their escape until they could teach their American-born relatives and friends the power of flight as well. After relating such a story James Moore of Georgia added: "From duh tings I see myself I blieb dat dey could do dis."²⁰

While the testimony of some former slaves indicates a detailed knowl-

edge of the customs, religion, garb, and food of their African ancestors,²¹ for the most part memories of Africa became confined to stories of capture and of the Middle Passage. The scene of history shifted from the Old World to the New. If the testimony of former slaves is any indication, slaves often told stories centering upon their condition and their reaction to it. They recounted anecdotes from their daily lives; they spoke of their religious meetings and conversions; they described and relived whatever pleasures they were allowed or managed to fit in; they remembered the horrors of whippings and other punishments; and, for all their stress on the need for caution, they seemed to take delight and pride in telling stories of relatives and friends who challenged the system by escaping or by directly confronting the master or overseer.²²

The slaves' version of history was largely but not wholly confined to the black world. In the 1880s folklorists in Washington, D.C., discovered a story deeply embedded in the local black oral tradition and "accepted as undoubtedly true by many, if not most, of the colored people over a wide area," which insisted that during his final moments on earth George Washington turned to the friends and relatives gathered around his death bed, "rolled his eyes" and pleaded, "Forever keep the niggers down."²³ The slaves had their own uncomplimentary stories about other white historical figures as well. Andrew Jackson, for instance: "Old General Jackson said before he would see niggers free he would build a house nine miles long and put them in it, and burn everyone of them up. A dirty old rascal; now he is dead and gone."²⁴ Abraham Lincoln emerged more positively in the stories of slaves and freedmen. Charles Davenport, a slave in Mississippi, remembered when Abraham Lincoln "come here to talk with us. He went all through de country just a-rantin' an' a-preachin' about us being his black brothers. De marster didn't know nothin' about it, cause it was sorta secret-like. It sure riled de niggers up and lots of 'em run away." There were similar legends of Lincoln disguising himself and visiting the plantations before the war to view slavery firsthand, invariably leaving the mark of his visit by carving his name on a bedstead or between the leaves of a table.²⁵

Slave versions of history, like all slave tales, were enhanced by the manner of their delivery. The oral inventiveness of good storytellers, who appear to have been relatively common in black culture, was a source of delight and stimulation to their audiences. Their narratives were interlarded with chants, mimicry, rhymes, and songs. "I don't know how they do it," Emma Backus wrote at the end of the nineteenth century, "but they will

say 'lipity clipity, lipity clipity,' so you can almost hear a rabbit coming through the woods. They talk animatedly, especially in the dialogues, and change the voice to represent the different animals."²⁶ Nothing, it seems, was too difficult for a storyteller to represent: the chanting sermon of a black preacher and the response of his entire congregation, the sounds of a railway engine, the cries of barnyard animals, the eerie moans of spectral beings, all formed an integral part of black tales. "The characteristic emphasis of Negro tales, the drawl, and the tricks of speeding up, are difficult to indicate on paper," Elsie Clews Parsons lamented. "Italics and exclamation points are but feeble indicators; and how can one express by printers' signs the significance of what is *not* said?—A significance conveyed by manner or by quietness of intonation, of which a good storyteller is past master."²⁷

In addition, black storytellers would frequently supplement the rhythm and meter of their voices by utilizing their bodily rhythms to act out parts of their stories. Richard Dorson has described this aspect of black tales:

When the rabbit scoots away from the fox, or John runs from the Lord, the narrator slaps his hands sharply together, with the left sliding off the right palm in a forward direction—a manual trademark of the Negro raconteur. To indicate continuous running, rather than a sudden sharp spurt, he drops his hands to his sides, spreads the fingers, and wriggles his wrists in a sideways motion, thus suggesting steady movement. Sometimes the reciter gets to his feet and weaves, writhes, gestures, and groans, to simulate the preacher exhorting his flock, or a witch straddling her victim.²⁸

And through the entire performance the audience would comment, correct, laugh, respond, making the folktale as much of a communal experience as the spiritual or the sermon. Joel Chandler Harris noted that his recitations of tales to black audiences were continually punctuated by cries of "Dar now!" "He's a honey, mon!" "Git out de way, an' gin 'im room!" and by "peals of unrestrained and unrestrainable laughter."²⁹ The sense of immediacy which this audience participation afforded was heightened by the tale-ending formulas frequently employed. It was not uncommon for Sea Island narrators to personalize their stories by closing with the sudden interjection, "Of course I couldn't stay any longer to see any more done," or "I was watching them very close, and I turn aroun'." In nineteenth-century Creole tales from Louisiana, storytellers would use such endings as "and there was such a wedding that they sent me to relate the story everywhere, everywhere," or "As I was there when all that hap-

pened, I ran away to relate it to you." These formulas remained popular throughout the twentieth century. In the 1950s, Sara Hall concluded her account of why the buzzard has a bald head by commenting, "'Bout that time I stepped on a piece of tin, and it bent, and I skated on away from there," and J. D. Suggs ended another story with the observation, "And it was raining, and I had on my paper suit, and I made a short cut home as quick as I could."³⁰

The nature of their content and delivery, then, allowed slave tales to evoke the past and make it part of the living present. In general, however, slaves used their songs and sermons to achieve this end; they tended to devote the structure and message of their tales to the compulsions and needs of their present situation.

OF MORALITY AND SURVIVAL

If slave tales only infrequently dealt with the sacred world, they nevertheless were often infused with a direct moral message. In Africa, tales which taught a moral, either implicitly or explicitly, were widely used for didactic purposes. "While you Whites have schools and books for teaching your children," a Dahomean told Melville and Frances Herskovits, "we tell them stories, for our stories are our books."³¹ This equation of folktales with education was widespread among Afro-Americans during and long after slavery. As late as 1953 Mary Richardson, a seventy-nine-year-old southern black then living in Michigan, told Richard Dorson, "I don't know as I got one year of school if all the days was put together. . . . When it come to 'rithmetic and subtracting I'd get lost, like the dog on the rabbit's tracks. But for a piece or a speech I'd be right up there with the good scholars."³² Slaves told some explanatory tales—why the rabbit has a short tail, why the buzzard eats carrion, why the alligator lives in the river, why the tiger has a striped back, why the frog lives in water, why the dog cannot talk, why the clay is red—but these details never constituted a central part of black folktales; they were always peripheral and incidental.³³ The didactic element in these stories was rarely specific or technical but embodied in the moral of the tale itself. Heli Chatelain's characterization of African folktales in Angola sums up Afro-American tales as well: "The didactic tendency of these stories is . . . essentially

social. They do not teach how to make a thing, but how to act, how to live."³⁴

Among the Dahomeans not every day of the week was devoted to work in the fields. Those engaging in agricultural labor on *Mioxi*, a day when such work was expressly prohibited, were threatened with incurring the wrath of the thunder gods, and the story was told of an ambitious man who while cultivating his lands on *Mioxi* was struck and killed by lightning.³⁵ Precisely the same kinds of stories were told by the slaves and freedmen. Certainly as the black man's control over his own movements and actions increased after emancipation, such stories may have become more relevant and necessary, but they clearly had a purpose during slavery as well. Some of these tales were aimed at those masters who forced their slaves to break the Biblical injunction against working on the Sabbath. Jack Brown, an ex-slave on the Sea Islands, told a tale about an over-worked mule named Jack who complained to its owner about having to work every Sunday. When the owner ran in fright, crying "Great Gawd! I never hear' de mule talk in my life befo'," his dog replied, "Me neither." That, concluded Brown, "broke him of hitchin' up Jack on Sunday an' kyarr'in him to work."³⁶ But such stories could be aimed at the slaves as well, for if they did not have control over whether they worked on Sundays they did have some options about what they did with those Sundays they were given off. One of the most popular of these tales is typified by the Virginia story of a slave who insisted upon fishing every Sunday in spite of the warnings of his family and friends that he would bring bad luck to himself and to them all. (Significantly, his master was indifferent to the keeping of the Lord's day and refused to order him to stop.) One Sunday, after a terrific struggle, he landed an exotic creature with a head like a duck, wings like a bird, a tail like a fish, and a human voice. Dropping his strange catch, the slave ran in fright, only to be summoned by the creature's compelling song:

Come back, Sambo,
Come back, Sambo,
Domie ninky head, Sambo.

The animal then commanded him in successive verses to "Pick me up, Sambo," "Carry me home, Sambo," "Clean and cook me, Sambo," "Eat me up, Sambo," "Eat me all, Sambo," whereupon the slave burst open and the creature emerging whole and alive went back to the river singing:

Don't fish on Sunday,
Don't fish on Sunday,
Domie ninky head, Sambo.⁷

Stories like this, which resembled African moral tales not only in content but also in form—embracing a song sung in a call-and-response pattern—remained popular well into the twentieth century. In the early 1950s the great black storyteller J. D. Suggs told, or rather chanted, almost the identical tale featuring a black fisherman named Simon, and recalled that he had first heard it from his father as a boy in Mississippi in the last decade of the nineteenth century:

After my father told me that I wouldn't even pick up a fish on Sunday. When the rain flooded the pond you could just pick up a fish on t'other side the road. We cooked fish every day it rained. But Sunday we'd go to church. When other boys went fishing Dad would say, "They're just like Simon."⁸

That these stories were taken literally is attested also by an incident that occurred when Margaret Burke, who was born free in North Carolina around 1840, told the same tale in 1917. After she had finished, her fifty-five-year-old daughter commented, "It's sure wrong to go fishin' on Sunday," and related how she had once done so and almost drowned.⁹

Stories which detailed the fate of those who forgot their dependence upon God were common among the slaves and freedmen. A tale told in the Gullah dialect of the Georgia coast pictured a hawk and a buzzard meeting when times were bad and food scarce. The buzzard confided that though he was so hungry he was almost ready to perish he had made up his mind "ter keep on guine, an ter wait on de Lord." The hawk, switching his tail proudly, replied that he was smart enough to earn his own living and that Lord or no Lord he would manage to find food. Pointing below he called out, "You see dat black chicken down yander? Me guine ketch um now fuh me dinner." But the "chicken" turned out to be a sharp-pointed stump, and the hawk, crashing into it, was killed. Several days later the buzzard returned to eat the hawk's carcass and moralized: "Enty me [haven't I] bin tell you eh heap better ter wait on de Lord stidder trus ter you own luck? You wouldn't yeddy [hear] me, an you see wuh happne."¹⁰ Cap Blanks, an ex-slave from Mississippi, recalled the similar fate of a proud lizzard:

One day Brer Lizzud an' Deacon Frawg wuz tryin' ter get thru a crack in a split-rail fence. In dem days Brer Lizzud sot up lak Deacon Frawg do now. Ole Deacon Frawg sez, "Ah'll git thru dishyere crack ef

de Lawd spares me." He tried hit an' squeeze thru all right. Brer Lizzud wuz mo' uppity. Sez he, "Ah'll git thru dishyere crack wedder de Lawd spare me or no." He tried hit, but, kerflip, came a lawg down an' mash him flat. Dat's why de lizzud be flat terday and crawls de dus' on his belly, while de frawg sets up an' hops.¹¹

The moralizing tales of the slave were by no means primarily caught up with an explicitly religious message. The majority of them centered upon everyday human relationships. Mrs. I. E. Edwards recalled that her grandmother, who had been reared in slavery, often told of the buzzard who could soar in the skies higher than any other bird except the eagle, but who still had to come down to earth to get his food. "Our grandmother told us this when she wanted to explain to us how to be kind," Mrs. Edwards commented. "From that she would tell us, regardless of what you might have, don't ever forget to be kind, because we all have to live on the same level."¹² The importance and obligations of friendship were frequently stressed. In one tale a frog trapped in a deep well begs a rattlesnake to aid him and promises to reward him. When he is saved he refuses to fulfill his obligation. Shortly afterwards they meet in the woods and the rattlesnake grabs him. "Yas, I pay yer!!! Yas, I pay yer!! Yas, I pay yer!" the frog cries, but "as Frawg tell dat, Rattlesnake chaw him up."¹³ Other tales ended with such clear moral precepts as: "Eh yent [it doesn't] do, in dis wul, fuh man fuh ceive [to deceive] eh fren." "Anybody wuh gwine back on eh prommus, an try fuh harm de pusson wuh done um a faber sho ter meet up wid big trouble." "Bad plan fur stranger fuh meddle long tarrah people bidness [with other people's business]."¹⁴ Stories featuring the reward of those who dispensed kindness and provisions to the needy and the punishment of those who refused aid or gave only begrudgingly were common.¹⁵

The values and importance of family ties and of the obligations of children and parents to one another played a prominent role in these tales. Disobedient children were dealt with in the story of the chick who disregarded his mother's cry of warning: "Crick, crick, kick, kick, kick!" and was devoured by a hawk. "Dat was de . . . unruly chil' dat wouldn' min' his moder," the storyteller moralized. "De hawk get him. Like we get unruly chillun now."¹⁶ A complementary point was made in the tale told by Georgia coastal Negroes of the eagle who cared for her children until the day when she flew away telling them, "De time come fuh you fuh mek you own libbin. Me feed you long nough. Now you haffer look out fuh yourself." "Do same like Buh Eagle," the story concluded. "Mine you chil-

lun well wen dem leetle; an soon dem big nough fuh wuk, mek um wuk."¹⁷ Children were taught proper manners in such tales as that of the man who saved his daughter from the Devil. Satan, showing his anger and frustration at losing the girl, brought his lower teeth up against his upper lip and made a sucking noise. "Dat's why it's not good for chilrun to suck deir teeth at people," the former slave who told the story pointed out, "'cause de Devil done dat." Portia Smiley reported that in Charleston old Negroes would invariably slap a child who "sucked" his teeth, warning him: "no good will foller you if you do dat. Devil suck his teeth. Devil would foller you 'til you get to heaven's gate. He done mad now, he lost you. . . . Always suck his teeth when he lose a soul."¹⁸

Courting and marriage were the subject of a number of stories. In "Trackwell, Divewell, Breathewell," which Elsie Clews Parsons has judged to be of "undoubted African provenience" because its structure was intended to provoke group discussion, three young men, each with a special power, court a girl who suddenly disappears. Trackwell traces her path to the water's edge; Divewell jumps in and searches the river bottom until he finds her; Breathewell breathes life back into her. Each then claims the woman for his own, arguing as follows: Trackwell: "I am entitled to the woman, because she was los', an' I track her out." Divewell: "Your track didn' done no good, because you couldn' fin' her. . . . I had to dive out in dat ocean, take chance of my life, an' hunt until I foun' her." Breathewell: "All for what you folk have done, the woman is mine, because she was dead, an' I brought life into her again." In this particular version the narrator had the girl's father give her to Breathewell, immediately stimulating debate among the audience: "My belief is, Trackwell should have dat woman." "My belief is, Breavewell should have dat woman. It's hard, but it's fair." More often, the teller of a dilemma tale left its conclusion up to his audience, as in the story of a man whose boat capsizes throwing himself, his wife, and his mother into the water. "Which one you try to save? I ax de question," the storyteller concluded. "Dat a close point," one of his listeners responded. "Wife is lovin', bosom heart to you. Moder still better, she de one dat bring you here. Get anoder wife, kyan' get anoder moder."¹⁹

The importance of parental love and care was touched upon in the Georgia fable of an old bullfrog with a young, attractive wife and "a heap of leely chillun" who on his deathbed asked his friends: "who gwine tek me wife wen de breaf leff dis yer body?" The friends hollered: "Me me.

Me me. Me me." Then he inquired, "Who er you gwine mine me leely chillun?" There was a long silence followed by cries of "Yent der me [not me]. Yent der me. Yent der me."²⁰ The plight of such children was demonstrated in detail in the tales of the wicked stepmother who starved her husband's children, making them smear grease on their hands and mouths so that their father would think they had eaten. When he discovered the truth, she was severely punished.²¹ Of course, a natural parent—in these tales invariably the mother—could betray the child as well. Easily the most grisly black tale of this period is an Afro-American version of a commonly known European tale of the murderous mother who, after eating the possum her husband brings home for the entire family to share, becomes frightened and kills and bakes one of her children, serving it to the husband at dinner. While eating, the husband is informed of the murder, either by a bird who flies in and sings of the crime or by the child's spirit which sings:

My mother killed me.
My father ate me.
My brothers buried my bone
Under a marble stone.

Again the mother is severely punished, usually by death, and again the father emerges as the chief protector and avenger of his children.²²

The moral inconstancy and overweening pride of women was a recurrent theme. A widow, on the very day she is having her husband's body rowed across a river to the cemetery, is serenaded by the boatman:

Don' min' de man dat's dead an' gone, but
min' de man dat rowed de boat a-sho'!

and marries him the next day.²³ Another series of stories focused upon the envy of a woman whose friends' husbands all brought home raccoons and possums to eat but whose own mate constantly returned from the hunt empty-handed. Driven to desperation by his wife's nagging, the husband kills the family dog and brings home its carcass disguised as that of a raccoon. Only after his wife and children have consumed the animal and call for the dog to eat the bones does the husband reveal his secret, singing:

Eat Tommy meat,
Suck Tommy bones,
Call Tommy heah.
Oh, yeah, Rover, yeah!

"She mus' have a raccoon, because her neighbor have one," a storyteller moralized. "Woman want somet'in' above his means."²⁴ More often than not, female pride and egocentricity are punished sternly. In one popular tale a proud woman who could find no suitors to her taste is tricked into marrying the Devil, who takes her off to Hell.²⁵ In a South Carolina version, a beautiful young lady vows not to marry any man who has a scratch on his back. A tiger turns himself into a man, marries her, and carries her back to the swamp. She finally escapes with the help of a fearless black man named Sambo, whom the tiger tells, "I only married um for le' um know dat a woman isn't more dan a man." The girl's mother greets her upon her return with the same message: "Daughter, I tol' you so. I tol' you dat you always speak too venomous. God had nebber made a woman for be head of a man."²⁶

The caveat against undue pride and self-assertiveness was not confined to women. Throughout these tales there runs a perpetual reminder of the fate of those who forget who they are and aspire too high. A North Carolina tale told of "Ole Brer Terrapin" who went through life "a-grumbling and a-fussing, 'cause he have to creep on the ground. When he meet Brer Rabbit, he grumble 'cause he can't run like Brer Rabbit, an' when he meet Brer Buzzard he grumble 'cause he can't fly in the clouds like Brer Buzzard, an' so grumble, grumble, constant." Finally the animals could stand his complaints no longer and agreed that he should be taken high in the air and dropped to his death. Readily agreeing to go for a ride in the clouds, he ascends on the backs of a succession of birds from the crow to the eagle until he is taken so high he becomes frightened and begs to be let down, but the eagle, flying higher and higher, refuses. As he is about to fall off, he remembers a spool of thread in his pocket. Tying one end to the eagle's leg he lets himself down, "and you never hear old Brer Terrapin grumble 'cause he can't run or fly, 'cause the old man he done fly that yer day to satisfy hisself, that he did, sure's yer born, he did fly that yer day."²⁷

The same message came through clearly in two other tales found throughout the South. The first, "Fatal Imitation," concerns a monkey who consistently annoyed and embarrassed his owner by imitating everything he did. Finally the owner decides to use the monkey's penchant for imitation to destroy him. One day while shaving he notices the monkey watching him intently. When he finishes, he turns the razor blunt side outward and draws it across his throat.

Sure enough, when he gone, the monkey git the bresh and rub the lather all over he face, . . . When that monkey through shaving he draw the razor quick 'cross he throat, but he ain't know for to turn it, and he cut he own throat and kill hisself.²⁸

A second series of stories focuses upon older people (generally women) who try to win much younger mates and are rewarded invariably by humiliation or death.²⁹ These tales remained popular well into the twentieth century. In 1920, Lendy Hutto, a black schoolchild in Aiken, South Carolina, summed up their collective message in a succinct story:

One time Buh Wolf ax Buh Rabbit, "How come you got such a short tail?"—" 'Cause Gawd put it on, an' he didn' mean fur me to have any long tail."³⁰

Acceptance of one's lot and identity may indicate either impotent resignation or a growing sense of autonomous independence. Stories like these contained the seeds of both attitudes—attitudes which created an uneasy duality in black thought for a century after emancipation.

I have dealt in some detail with the moralistic tales of the slaves and freedmen because their existence has been too generally ignored or slighted. They contain material of importance for a comprehension of Afro-American consciousness in the period of emancipation. They helped to reiterate and complement the slaves' religious values. They were utilized to inculcate a vision of the good and moral life by stressing the ideals of friendship, cooperation, meaningful activity, and family love. Their denigration of the aggressive woman and their tendency to celebrate the father as the family's chief protector and provider must be taken into account in any reformulation of our understanding of familial patterns and male-female relations among Afro-Americans. But as important as they were, they cannot be seen in isolation. The situation of the slave and freedman made survival a paramount concern, and it is not surprising that this need gave a practical cast to much of their folklore. It was this perhaps as much as feelings of Christian humility that led to the stress on the pitfalls of aspiring too high. It was dangerous for black men and women to forget who or where they were, and this danger constituted a motif running through Negro tales.

There can be no question that a substantial number of slaves sincerely believed in the values of the religion they embraced and in part refashioned. But their situation frequently made those values a luxury they

could not afford to indulge. This certainly is the message of John Hill's recollection of the fate of runaways on the Georgia plantation where he had been a slave.

They had dogs to trail 'em with, so they always cotedched 'em, and then the whipping boss beat 'em most to death. It was awful to hear 'em holler-ing and begging for mercy. If they hollered, "Lord, have mercy!" Marse Jim didn't hear 'em, but if they cried "Marse Jim, have mercy!" then he made 'em stop the beating. He say, "The Lord rule Heaven, but Jim Smith rule the earth."³¹

Had slaves internalized this lesson on a mass scale then the Peculiar Institution truly would have produced the Sambos whom nineteenth-century whites and their twentieth-century descendants so liked to romanticize. But slave religion and folktales make it clear that the mass of black men and women seldom took this message too literally. A story told by Texas blacks recalled a plantation on which slave prayer meetings were forbidden. Ignoring this injunction whenever they could, the slaves would meet secretly in the woods near the big house. During one of these illicit meetings the master returned to his plantation earlier than usual and heard the slave elder, Uncle Peter, praying: "Oh, Lawdy, cum git us! Oh, blessed Savior, lay Yo' han's on us! Oh, *Master*, cum give us Yo' blessin's." Crying, "I'll come and get you all right," the master ran out into the circle of slaves and began whipping Peter. "Oh, Massa," Peter cried, "Ah didn' want yo' blessin's! Yuh's killin' Uncle Peter! Ah didn' call 'massa'; Ah called '*Master*!'"³²

However clearly slave religion may have taught its adherents to distinguish between the eternal power and justice of the "Master" as opposed to the short-run temporal power of the "Massa," the latter still had to be dealt with. This need structured both the form and the content of slave tales. Although the repertory of slave tales included many types diffused into it from Euro-American culture in the midst of which Afro-Americans lived, European *Märchen*—the magical fairy tales so popular among American whites—were rarely represented. Tales such as "Rumplestiltskin," "Cinderella," "Jack, the Giant Killer," and "The Devil's Daughter" were occasionally told, but rarely have they constituted a standard element in Afro-American tales. Wherever found they were always more typical of young Negroes after emancipation than of older ones who themselves experienced slavery.³³ At first sight the absence of these tales from Afro-American lore is surprising. Stith Thompson has defined the

Märchen as a tale which "moves in an unreal world without definite locality or definite characters and is filled with the marvelous. In this never-never land humble heroes kill adversaries, succeed to kingdoms, and marry princesses."³⁴

Ostensibly, such tales should have had a direct appeal to down-trodden and powerless nineteenth-century Negroes. That they did not is another testament to the realism that pervaded black folktales. Writing of African folktales, Paul Radin has argued: "in the main, little romanticism is found in African myths and definitely no sentimentality. It is emphatically not a literature in which wish-fulfillment plays a great role, not one where we can assume that the hero will triumph at the end or that wrongs will always be righted."³⁵ Largely the same generalization can be applied to Afro-American folktales. The slaves' plight was too serious, their predicament too perilous, for them to indulge in pure fantasy and romanticism. Certainly, wish-fulfillment and transference were important elements in the slaves' trickster tales, but even here they were tailored to the slaves' peculiar needs and never were permitted to obscure the reality of their situation.

Similarly, while the slaves' didactic tales attempted to inculcate elements of proper conduct and righteous living, they were also filled with strategies for survival. An excellent example is the common story of the slave who meets an animal—usually a frog or a turtle—who could speak. Rushing to inform his master of this miracle, the slave brings him back to hear the creature for himself, although the master warns him he will be punished if he is lying. The animal remains mute before the white man and the slave is severely beaten. Only when the master departs does the animal speak again saying: "ah tol' yuh de othah day, niggah, yuh talk too much." In an equally popular version, the slave discovers the head of a skeleton, which tells him, "Mouth brought me here. Mouth's goin' to bring you here." Ignoring this warning, the slave prevails upon his master to come and witness the wondrous talking skull. When the master is greeted only by silence from the lifeless head, he kills the slave to whom the skull now turns and says: "Didn't I tell you Mouth was goin' to bring you here?" The concluding lines of these widely told stories repeated one message over and over: "It's bad to talk too much." "I told you something that got me here would get you here. You talk too much." "I told you tongue brought me here and tongue is what brought you here." "Live in peace; don't tell all you see."³⁶

There is abundant evidence that the slaves thoroughly assimilated this

lesson. Even their friends and defenders testified to the slaves' duplicity and secretiveness. The Methodist minister John Dixon Long, whose opposition to slavery led him to emigrate from Maryland to Philadelphia in 1856, noted:

The inevitable tendency of servitude is to make a slave a hypocrite toward the white man. If you approach him from the stand-point of authority, you will never get an insight into his real character. He is exceedingly shrewd. . . . Let a slave once know or suspect that you are seeking to "pump" him, and if you don't meet with your match for once, then I am mistaken. . . . You must catch him at work. Listen to his songs while seated on his ox-cart hauling wood, or splitting rails. You must overhear his criticisms in the quarters.³⁷

Laura Towne, one of that early band of New England whites who flocked to the Sea Islands during the Civil War to work with the newly liberated slaves, concluded after a short residence on St. Helena Island that "the negroes are pretty cunning." She described a praise house meeting she attended in May 1862, during which "good old Marcus," one of the black elders, exhorted his fellows to "be jus' like de birds when a gunner was about, expectin' a crack ebry minute."³⁸ "Jes like the tarpins or turtles," is the way W. L. Bost characterized himself and his fellow slaves on a North Carolina plantation. "Jes stick our heads out to see how the land lay."³⁹

These deeply ingrained attitudes and strategies remained long after slavery to plague white folklorists attempting to collect slave lore: "tarpins or turtles," they were to discover, did not make the most cooperative subjects. "Curiously enough," Joel Chandler Harris complained in 1880, "I have found few negroes who will acknowledge to a stranger that they know anything of these legends; and yet to relate one of the stories is the surest road to their confidence and esteem. In this way, and in this way only, I have been enabled to collect and verify the folklore in this volume." In the introduction to his second volume, Harris described in detail how he obtained his stories. Infiltrating a group of black workers who were resting, he began to tell several animal tales in dialect, thus stimulating his audience to join in with stories of their own.⁴⁰ He was able to collect black tales, then, only by speaking the idiom of his subjects; only, in short, by becoming black himself, however temporarily. Some forty years later, Elsie Clews Parsons was told by James Murray, in whose house she was living while collecting black folklore, that if she had

chosen to live with a neighboring white family he would have told her no stories "fo' no money, not fo' a week. We pay dem [whites] fo' what we git, an' dey pay us. We don' boder wid dem, an' dey don' boder wid us. We wouldn' tell riddle [tales] befo' dem, not even if we was a servan' in deir house."⁴¹ As if to verify this statement, Lydia Parrish's black cook on St. Simon's Island off the Georgia coast worked for her for fifteen years, from 1912 to 1927, before she revealed that she could sing the old slave songs her employer was so avidly seeking. "When I periodically ask why, in all those years, she never told me she could sing, she smiles quizzically, but says nothing," Mrs. Parrish noted. "I am convinced that the average Negro enjoys intensely knowing something the white man does not, and the exquisite delight he derives from realizing that the white man has been bested in a little game makes up for any loss or indignity he may be obliged to endure."⁴²

The difficulty whites had in persuading blacks to reveal their folklore was, appropriately enough, the product of that lore itself. It took Mrs. Parrish three winters of residence on St. Simon's Island to hear her first slave spiritual, nine winters to witness her first ring shout, and more than a decade to see and hear other forms of black folklore, in part because slaves and their descendants had used their tales so effectively to teach the advantages and necessity of reticence and caution. The lesson was repeated endlessly in black aphorisms: "A smart redbird don't have much to say." "De fox wants to know how de rabbit's gittin on." "De mousetrap don't go to sleep." "Don' crow tel yuh git out o' de woods; dey mought be, uh beah behin' de las' tree." "Long talk catch run 'way niggah." "Everything good to hear is not good to talk."⁴³

"Persons live and die in the midst of Negroes and know comparatively little of their real character," Charles C. Jones complained in 1842. "They are one thing before the whites, and another before their own color. Deception towards the former is characteristic of them, whether bond or free, throughout the whole United States."⁴⁴ Almost a century later Duncan Clinch Heyward, the son of one of antebellum South Carolina's largest rice planters, observed: "I used to try to learn the ways of these Negroes, but I could never divest myself of the suspicion that they were learning my ways faster than I was learning theirs."⁴⁵ The most important single mechanism produced by antebellum blacks to create this frustration among the whites and enhance survival among themselves was their cycle of trickster tales.

"SOME GO UP AND SOME GO DOWN": THE ANIMAL TRICKSTER

Although the range of slave tales was narrow in neither content nor focus, it is not surprising or accidental that the tales most easily and abundantly collected in Africa and among Afro-Americans in the New World were animal trickster tales. Because of their overwhelmingly paradigmatic character, animal tales were, of all the narratives of social protest or psychological release, among the easiest to relate both within and especially outside the group.

The propensity of Africans to utilize their folklore quite consciously to gain psychological release from the inhibitions of their society and their situation has already been described in Chapter 1, but it needs to be reiterated here if the popularity and function of animal trickster tales is to be understood. After listening to a series of Ashanti stories that included rather elaborate imitations of afflicted people—an old woman dressed in rags and covered with sores, a leper, an old man suffering from the skin disease yaws—which called forth roars of laughter from the audience, the English anthropologist R. S. Rattray suggested that it was unkind to ridicule such subjects. "The person addressed replied that in everyday life no one might do so, however great the inclination to laugh might be. He went on to explain that it was so with many other things: the cheating and tricks of priests, the rascality of a chief—things about which every one knew, but concerning which one might not ordinarily speak in public. These occasions gave every one an opportunity of talking about and laughing at such things; it was 'good' for every one concerned, he said." Customs such as these led Rattray to conclude "beyond a doubt, that West Africans had discovered for themselves the truth of the psychoanalysts' theory of 'repressions,' and that in these ways they sought an outlet for what might otherwise become a dangerous complex."¹

Certainly this was at the heart of the popularity of animal trickster tales. Whether it is accurate to assert, as Rattray has done, that the majority of "beast fables" were derived from the practice of substituting the names of animals for the names of real individuals whom it would have been impolitic or dangerous to mention, there can be no question that the animals in these tales were easily recognizable representations of both spe-

cific actions and generalized patterns of human behavior. "In the fable," Léopold Senghor has written, "the animal is seldom a totem; it is this or that one whom every one in the village knows well: the stupid or tyrannical or wise and good chief, the young man who makes reparation for injustice. Tales and fables are woven out of everyday occurrences. Yet it is not a question of anecdotes or of 'material from life.' The facts are images and have paradigmatic value."² The popularity of these tales in Africa is attested to by the fact that the Akan-speaking peoples of the West Coast gave their folk tales the generic title *Anansem* (spider stories), after the spider trickster Anansi, whether he appeared in the story or not, and this practice was perpetuated by such New World Afro-American groups as the South American Negroes of Surinam who referred to all their stories, whatever their nature, as *Anansitori*, or the West Indian blacks of Curaçao who called theirs *Cuenta de Nansi*.³

For all their importance, animals did not monopolize the trickster role in African tales; tricksters could, and did, assume divine and human form as well. Such divine tricksters as the Dahomean Legba or the Yoruban Eshu and Orunmila did not survive the transplantation of Africans to the United States and the slaves' adaptation to Christian religious forms. Human tricksters, on the other hand, played an important role in the tales of American slaves. By the nineteenth century, however, these human tricksters were so rooted in and reflective of their new cultural and social setting that outside of function they bore increasingly little resemblance to their African counterparts. It was in the animal trickster that the most easily perceivable correspondence in form and usage between African and Afro-American tales can be found. In both cases the primary trickster figures of animal tales were weak, relatively powerless creatures who attain their ends through the application of native wit and guile rather than power or authority: the Hare or Rabbit in East Africa, Angola, and parts of Nigeria; the Tortoise among the Yoruba, Ibo, and Edo peoples of Nigeria; the Spider throughout much of West Africa including Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone; Brer Rabbit in the United States.⁴

In their transmutation from their natural state to the world of African and Afro-American tales, the animals inhabiting these tales, though retaining enough of their natural characteristics to be recognizable, were almost thoroughly humanized. The world they lived in, the rules they lived by, the emotions that governed them, the status they craved, the taboos they feared, the prizes they struggled to attain were those of the men and women who lived in this world. The beings that came to life in

these stories were so created as to be human enough to be identified with but at the same time exotic enough to allow both storytellers and listeners a latitude and freedom that came only with much more difficulty and daring in tales explicitly concerning human beings.

This latitude was crucial, for the one central feature of almost all trickster tales is their assault upon deeply ingrained and culturally sanctioned values. This of course accounts for the almost universal occurrence of trickster tales, but it has not rendered them universally identical. The values people find constraining and the mechanisms they choose to utilize in their attempts at transcending or negating them are determined by their culture and their situation. "It is very well to speak of 'the trickster,'" Melville and Frances Herskovits have noted, "yet one need but compare the Winnebago trickster [of the North American Indians] . . . with Legba and Yo in Dahomey to find that the specifications for the first by no means fit the second."⁵ The same may be said of the slave trickster in relation to the trickster figures of the whites around them. Although animal trickster tales do not seem to have caught a strong hold among American whites during the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, there were indigenous American tricksters from the tall, spare New Englander Jonathan, whose desire for pecuniary gain knew few moral boundaries, to the rough roguish confidence men of southwestern tales. But the American process that seems to have been most analogous in function to the African trickster tale was not these stories so much as the omnipresent tales of exaggeration. In these tall tales Americans were able to deal with the insecurities produced by forces greater than themselves not by manipulating them, as Africans tended to do, but by overwhelming them through the magnification of the self epitomized in the unrestrained exploits of a Mike Fink or Davy Crockett. "I'm . . . half-horse, half-alligator, a little touched with the snapping turtle; can wade the Mississippi, leap the Ohio, ride upon a streak of lightning, and slip without a scratch down a honey locust; can whip my weight in wildcats, . . . hug a bear too close for comfort, and eat any man opposed to Jackson," the latter would boast.⁶

It is significant that, with the exception of the stories of flying Africans, mythic strategies such as these played almost no role in the lore of nineteenth-century slaves; not until well after emancipation do tales of exaggeration, with their magnification of the individual, begin to assume importance in the folklore of Afro-Americans. Nor did the model of white trickster figures seem to have seriously affected the slaves, whose own

tricksters remained in a quite different mold—one much closer to the cultures from which they had come. In large part African trickster tales revolved around the strong patterns of authority so central to African cultures. As interested as they might be in material gains, African trickster figures were more obsessed with manipulating the strong and reversing the normal structure of power and prestige. Afro-American slaves, cast into a far more rigidly fixed and certainly a more alien authority system, could hardly have been expected to neglect a cycle of tales so ideally suited to their needs.

This is not to argue that slaves in the United States continued with little or no alteration the trickster lore of their ancestral home. The divergences were numerous: divine trickster figures disappeared; such important figures as Anansi the spider were at best relegated to the dim background; sizable numbers of European tales and themes found their way into the slave repertory. But we must take care not to make too much of these differences. For instance, the fact that the spider trickster retained its importance and its Twi name, Anansi, among the Afro-Americans of Jamaica, Surinam, and Curaçao, while in the United States Anansi lived only a peripheral existence in such tales as the Aunt Nancy stories of South Carolina and Georgia, has been magnified out of proportion by some students. "The sharp break between African and American tradition," Richard Dorson has written, "occurs at the West Indies, where Anansi the spider dominates hundreds of cantefables, the tales that inclose songs. But no Anansi stories are found in the United States."⁷ The decline of the spider trickster in the United States can be explained by many factors from the ecology of the United States, where spiders were less ubiquitous and important than in either Africa or those parts of the New World in which the spider remained a central figure, to the particular admixture of African peoples in the various parts of the Western Hemisphere. Anansi, after all, was but one of many African tricksters and in Africa itself had a limited influence. Indeed, in many parts of South America where aspects of African culture endured overtly with much less alteration than occurred in the United States, Anansi was either nonexistent or marginal.⁸

What is more revealing than the life or death of any given trickster figure is the retention of the trickster tale itself. Despite all of the changes that took place, there persisted the mechanism, so well developed throughout most of Africa, by means of which psychic relief from arbitrary authority could be secured, symbolic assaults upon the powerful could be

waged, and important lessons about authority relationships could be imparted. Afro-Americans in the United States were to make extended use of this mechanism throughout their years of servitude.

In its simplest form the slaves' animal trickster tale was a cleanly delineated story free of ambiguity. The strong assault the weak, who fight back with any weapons they have. The animals in these tales have an almost instinctive understanding of each other's habits and foibles. Knowing Rabbit's curiosity and vanity, Wolf constructs a tar-baby and leaves it by the side of the road. At first fascinated by this stranger and then progressively infuriated at its refusal to respond to his friendly salutations, Rabbit strikes at it with his hands, kicks it with his feet, butts it with his head, and becomes thoroughly enmeshed. In the end, however, it is Rabbit whose understanding of his adversary proves to be more profound. Realizing that Wolf will do exactly what he thinks his victim least desires, Rabbit convinces him that of all the ways to die the one he is most afraid of is being thrown into the briar patch, which of course is exactly what Wolf promptly does, allowing Rabbit to escape.⁹

This situation is repeated in tale after tale: the strong attempt to trap the weak but are tricked by them instead. Fox entreats Rooster to come down from his perch, since all the animals have signed a peace treaty and there is no longer any danger: "I don' eat you, you don' boder wid me. Come down! Le's make peace!" Almost convinced by this good news, Rooster is about to descend when he thinks better of it and tests Fox by pretending to see a man and a dog coming down the road. "Don' min' fo' comin' down den," Fox calls out as he runs away. "Dawg ain't got no sense, yer know, an' de man got er gun."¹⁰ Spotting a goat lying on a rock, Lion is about to surprise and kill him when he notices that Goat keeps chewing and chewing although there is nothing there but bare stone. Lion reveals himself and asks Goat what he is eating. Overcoming the momentary paralysis which afflicts most of the weak animals in these tales when they realize they are trapped, Goat saves himself by saying in his most terrifying voice: "Me duh chaw dis rock, an ef you dont leff, wen me done . . . me guine eat you."¹¹

At its most elemental, then, the trickster tale consists of a confrontation in which the weak use their wits to evade the strong. Mere escape, however, does not prove to be victory enough, and in a significant number of these tales the weak learn the brutal ways of the more powerful. Fox, taking advantage of Pig's sympathetic nature, gains entrance to his house during a storm by pleading that he is freezing to death. After warming

himself by the fire, he acts exactly as Pig's instincts warned him he would. Spotting a pot of peas cooking on the stove, he begins to sing:

Fox and peas are very good,
But Pig and peas are better.

Recovering from his initial terror, Pig pretends to hear a pack of hounds, helps Fox hide in a meal barrel, and pours the peas in, scalding Fox to death.¹²

In one tale after another the trickster proves to be as merciless as his stronger opponent. Wolf traps Rabbit in a hollow tree and sets it on fire, but Rabbit escapes through a hole in the back and reappears, thanking Wolf for an excellent meal, explaining that the tree was filled with honey which melted from the heat. Wolf, in his eagerness to enjoy a similar feast, allows himself to be sealed into a tree which has no other opening, and is burned to death. "While eh duh bun, Buh Wolf bague an pray Buh Rabbit fuh leh um come out, but Buh Rabbit wouldnt yeddy [hear] um."¹³ The brutality of the trickster in these tales was sometimes troubling ("Buh Rabbit . . . hab er bad heart," the narrator of the last story concluded), but more often it was mitigated by the fact that the strong were the initial aggressors and the weak really had no choice. The characteristic spirit of these tales was one not of moral judgment but of vicarious triumph. Storytellers allowed their audience to share the heartening spectacle of a lion running in terror from a goat or a fox fleeing a rooster; to experience the mocking joy of Brer Rabbit as he scampers away through the briar patch calling back to Wolf, "Dis de place me mammy fotch me up,—dis de place me mammy fotch me up"; to feel the joyful relief of Pig as he turns Fox's song upside down and chants:

Pigs and peas are very good,
But Fox and peas are better.

Had self-preservation been the only motive driving the animals in these stories, the trickster tale need never have varied from the forms just considered. But Brer Rabbit and his fellow creatures were too humanized to be content with mere survival. Their needs included all the prizes human beings crave and strive for: wealth, success, prestige, honor, sexual prowess. Brer Rabbit himself summed it up best in the tale for which this section is named:

De rabbit is de slickest o' all de animals de Lawd ever made. He ain't de biggest, an' he ain't de loudest but he sho' am de slickest. If he gits in

trouble he gits out by gittin' somebody else in. Once he fell down a deep well an' did he holler and cry? No siree. He set up a mighty mighty whistling and a singin', an' when de wolf passes by he heard him an' he stuck his head over an' de rabbit say, "Git 'long 'way f'om here. Dere ain't room fur two. Hit's mighty hot up dere and nice an' cool down here. Don' you git in dat bucket an' come down here." Dat made de wolf all de mo' onrestless and he jumped into the bucket an' as he went down de rabbit come up, an' as dey passed de rabbit he laughed an' he say, "Dis am life; some go up and some go down."¹⁴

There could be no mistaking the direction in which Rabbit was determined to head. It was in his inexorable drive upward that Rabbit emerged not only as an incomparable defender but also as a supreme manipulator, a role that complicated the simple contours of the tales already referred to.

In the ubiquitous tales of amoral manipulation, the trickster could still be pictured as much on the defensive as he was in the stories which had him battling for his very life against stronger creatures. The significant difference is that now the panoply of his victims included the weak as well as the powerful. Trapped by Mr. Man and hung from a sweet gum tree until he can be cooked, Rabbit is buffeted to and fro by the wind and left to contemplate his bleak future until Brer Squirrel happens along. "This yer my cool air swing," Rabbit informs him. "I taking a fine swing this morning." Squirrel begs a turn and finds his friend surprisingly gracious: "Certainly, Brer Squirrel, you do me proud. Come up here, Brer Squirrel, and give me a hand with this knot." Tying the grateful squirrel securely in the tree, Rabbit leaves him to his pleasure—and his fate. When Mr. Man returns, "he take Brer Squirrel home and cook him for dinner."¹⁵

It was primarily advancement not preservation that led to the trickster's manipulations, however. Among a slave population whose daily rations were at best rather stark fare and quite often a barely minimal diet, it is not surprising that food proved to be the most common symbol of enhanced status and power. In his never-ending quest for food the trickster was not content with mere acquisition, which he was perfectly capable of on his own; he needed to procure the food through guile from some stronger animal. Easily the most popular tale of this type pictures Rabbit and Wolf as partners in farming a field. They have laid aside a tub of butter for winter provisions, but Rabbit proves unable to wait or to share. Pretending to hear a voice calling him, he leaves his chores and begins to eat the butter. When he returns to the field he informs his partner that his sister has just had a baby and wanted him to name it. "Well, w'at you

name um?" Wolf asks innocently. "Oh, I name um Buh Start-um," Rabbit replies. Subsequent calls provide the chance for additional assaults on the butter and additional names for the nonexistent babies: "Buh Half-um," "Buh Done-um." After work, Wolf discovers the empty tub and accuses Rabbit, who indignantly denies the theft. Wolf proposes that they both lie in the sun, which will cause the butter to run out of the guilty party. Rabbit agrees readily, and when grease begins to appear on his own face he rubs it onto that of the sleeping wolf. "Look, Buh Wolf," he cries, waking his partner, "de buttah melt out on you. Dat prove you eat um." "I guess you been right," Wolf agrees docilely, "I eat um fo' trute."¹⁶ In some versions the animals propose a more hazardous ordeal by fire to discover the guilty party. Rabbit successfully jumps over the flames but some innocent animal—Possum, Terrapin, Bear—falls in and perishes for Rabbit's crime.¹⁷

In most of these tales the aggrieved animal, realizing he has been tricked, desperately tries to avenge himself by setting careful plans to trap Rabbit, but to no avail. Unable to outwit Rabbit, his adversaries attempt to learn from him, but here too they fail. Seeing Rabbit carrying a string of fish, Fox asks him where they came from. Rabbit confesses that he stole them from Man by pretending to be ill and begging Man to take him home in his cart which was filled with fish. While riding along, Rabbit explains, he threw the load of fish into the woods and then jumped off to retrieve them. He encourages Fox to try the same tactic, and Fox is beaten to death, as Rabbit knew he would be, since Man is too shrewd to be taken in the same way twice.¹⁸

And so it goes in story after story. Rabbit cheats Brer Wolf out of his rightful portion of a cow and a hog they kill together. He tricks Brer Fox out of his part of their joint crop year after year "until he starved the fox to death. Then he had all the crop, and all the land too." He leisurely watches all the other animals build a house in which they store their winter provisions and then sneaks in, eats the food, and scares the others, including Lion, away by pretending to be a spirit and calling through a horn in a ghostly voice that he is a "better man den ebber bin yuh befo." He convinces Wolf that they ought to sell their own grandparents for a tub of butter, arranges for his grandparents to escape so that only Wolf's remain to be sold, and once they are bartered for the butter he steals that as well.¹⁹

The many tales of which these are typical make it clear that what Rabbit craves is not possession but power, and this he acquires not simply by

obtaining food but by obtaining it through the manipulation and deprivation of others. It is not often that he meets his match, and then generally at the hands of an animal as weak as himself. Refusing to allow Rabbit to cheat him out of his share of the meat they have just purchased, Partridge samples a small piece of liver and cries out, "Br'er Rabbit, de meat bitter! Oh, 'e bitter, bitter! bitter, bitter! You better not eat de meat," and tricks Rabbit into revealing where he had hidden the rest of the meat. "You is a damn sha'p feller," Partridge tells him. "But I get even wid you."²⁰ Angry at Frog for inviting all the animals in the forest but him to a fish dinner, Rabbit frightens the guests away and eats all the fish himself. Frog gives another dinner, but this time he is prepared and tricks Rabbit into the water. "You is my master many a day on land, Brer Rabbit," Frog tells him just before killing and eating him, "but I is you master in the water."²¹

It is significant that when these defeats do come, most often it is not brute force but even greater trickery that triumphs. Normally, however, the trickster has more than his share of the food. And of the women as well, for sexual prowess is the other basic sign of prestige in the slaves' tales. Although the primary trickster was occasionally depicted as a female—Ol' Molly Hare in Virginia, Aunt Nancy or Ann Nancy in the few surviving spider stories²²—in general women played a small role in slave tales. They were not actors in their own right so much as attractive possessions to be fought over. That the women for whom the animals compete are frequently the daughters of the most powerful creatures in the forest makes it evident that the contests are for status as well as pleasure. When Brer Bear promises his daughter to the best whistler in the forest, Rabbit offers to help his only serious competitor, Brer Dog, whistle more sweetly by slitting the corners of his mouth, which in reality makes him incapable of whistling at all. If Rabbit renders his adversaries figuratively impotent in their quest for women, they often retaliate in kind. In the story just related, Dog chases Rabbit, bites off his tail, and nothing more is said about who wins the woman.²³

More often than not, though, Rabbit is successful. In a Georgia tale illustrating the futility of mere hard work, Brer Wolf offers his attractive daughter to the animal that shucks the most corn. Rabbit has his heart set on winning Miss Wolf but realizes he has no chance of beating Brer Coon at shucking corn. Instead, he spends all of his time during the contest singing, dancing, and charming Miss Wolf. At the end he sits down next to Coon and claims that he has shucked the great pile of corn. Confused, Wolf leaves the decision up to his daughter:

Now Miss Wolf she been favoring Brer Rabbit all the evening. Brer Rabbit dancing and singing plum turned Miss Wolf's head, so Miss Wolf she say, "It most surely are Brer Rabbit's pile." Miss Wolf she say she "plum 'stonished how Brer Coon can story so." Brer Rabbit he take the gal and go off home clipity, lipity. Poor old Brer Coon he take hisself off home, he so tired he can scarcely hold hisself together.²⁴

In another Georgia tale the contest for the woman seems to be symbolically equated with freedom. Fox promises his daughter to any animal who can pound dust out of a rock.

Then Brer Rabbit, he feel might set down on, 'cause he know all the chaps can swing the stone hammer to beat hisself, and he go off sorrowful like and set on the sand bank. He set a while and look east, and then he turn and set a while and look west, but may be you don't know, sah, Brer Rabbit sense never come to hisself 'cepting when he look north.

Thus inspired, Rabbit conceives of a strategy allowing him to defeat his more powerful opponents and carry off the woman.²⁵

In the best known and most symbolically interesting courting tale, Rabbit and Wolf vie for the favors of a woman who is pictured as either equally torn between her two suitors or leaning toward Wolf. Rabbit alters the contest by professing surprise that she could be interested in Wolf, since he is merely Rabbit's riding horse. Hearing of this, Wolf confronts Rabbit, who denies ever saying it and promises to go to the woman and personally refute the libel as soon as he is well enough. Wolf insists he go at once, and the characteristic combination of Rabbit's deceit and Wolf's seemingly endless trust and gullibility allows Rabbit to convince his adversary that he is too sick to go with him unless he can ride on Wolf's back with a saddle and bridle for support. The rest of the story is inevitable. Approaching the woman's house Rabbit tightens the reins, digs a pair of spurs into Wolf, and trots him around crying, "Look here, girl! what I told you? Didn't I say I had Brother Wolf for my riding-horse?"²⁶ It was in many ways the ultimate secular triumph in slave tales. The weak doesn't merely kill his enemy: he mounts him, humiliates him, reduces him to servility, steals his woman, and, in effect, takes his place.

Mastery through possessing the two paramount symbols of power—food and women—did not prove to be sufficient for Rabbit. He craved something more. Going to God himself, Rabbit begs for enhanced potency in the form of a larger tail, greater wisdom, bigger eyes. In each case God imposes a number of tasks upon Rabbit before his wishes are fulfilled. Rabbit must bring God a bag full of blackbirds, the teeth of a rat—

tnesnake or alligator, a swarm of yellowjackets, the "eyewater" (tears) of a deer. Rabbit accomplishes each task by exploiting the animals' vanity. He tells the blackbirds that they cannot fill the bag and when they immediately prove they can, he traps them. He taunts the snake, "dis pole *swear* say you ain't long as him." When Rattlesnake insists he is, Rabbit ties him to the stick, ostensibly to measure him, kills him, and takes his teeth. Invariably Rabbit does what is asked of him but finds God less than pleased. In some tales he is chased out of Heaven. In others God counsels him, "Why Rabbit, ef I was to gi' you long tail aint you see you'd 'stroyed up de whol worl'? Nobawdy couldn' do nuttin wid you!" Most commonly God seemingly complies with Rabbit's request and gives him a bag which he is to open when he returns home. But Rabbit cannot wait, and when he opens the bag prematurely "thirty bull-dawg run out de box, an' bit off Ber Rabbit tail again. An' dis give him a short tail again."²⁷

The rabbit, like the slaves who wove tales about him, was forced to make do with what he had. His small tail, his natural portion of intellect—these would have to suffice, and to make them do he resorted to any means at his disposal—means which may have made him morally tainted but which allowed him to survive and even to conquer. In this respect there was a direct relationship between Rabbit and the slaves, a relationship which the earliest collectors and interpreters of these stories understood well. Joel Chandler Harris, as blind as he could be to some of the deeper implications of the tales he heard and retold, was always aware of their utter seriousness. "Well, I tell you dis," Harris had Uncle Remus say, "ef deze yer tales wuz des fun, fun, fun, en giggle, giggle, giggle, I let you know I'd a-done drapt um long ago." From the beginning Harris insisted that the animal fables he was collecting were "thoroughly characteristic of the negro," and commented that "it needs no scientific investigation to show why he selects as his hero the weakest and most harmless of all animals, and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox."²⁸

Harris' interpretations were typical. Abigail Christensen noted in the preface to her important 1892 collection of black tales: "It must be remembered that the Rabbit represents the colored man. He is not as large nor as strong, as swift, as wise, nor as handsome as the elephant, the alligator, the bear, the deer, the serpent, the fox, but he is 'de mos' cunning' man dat go on fo' leg' and by this cunning he gains success. So the negro, without education or wealth, could only hope to succeed by stratagem." That she was aware of the implications of these strategies was made evi-

dent when she remarked of her own collection: "If we believe that the tales of our nurseries are as important factors in forming the characters of our children as the theological dogmas of maturer years, we of the New South cannot wish our children to pore long over these pages, which certainly could not have been approved by Froebel."²⁹ In that same year Octave Thanet, in an article on Arkansas folklore, concluded, "Br'er Rabbit, indeed, personifies the obscure ideals of the negro race. . . . Ever since the world began, the weak have been trying to outwit the strong; Br'er Rabbit typifies the revolt of his race. His successes are just the kind of successes that his race have craved."³⁰

These analyses of the animal trickster tales have remained standard down to our own day.³¹ They have been advanced not merely by interpreters of the tales but by their narrators as well. Prince Baskin, one of Mrs. Christensen's informants, was quite explicit in describing the model for many of his actions:

You see, Missus, I is small man myself; but I aint nebber 'low no one for to git head o' me. I allers use my sense for help me 'long jes' like Brer Rabbit. 'Fo de wah ol' Marse Heywood mek me he driber on he place, an' so I aint hab for work so hard as de res'; same time I git mo' ration ebery mont' an' mo' shoe when dey share out de cloes at Chris'mus time. Well, dat come from usin' my sense. An' den, when I ben a-courtin' I nebber 'lowed no man to git de benefit ob me in dat. I allers carry off de parties' gal, 'cause, you see, Missus, I know how to play de fiddle an' allers had to go to ebery dance to play de fiddle for dem.³²

More than half a century later, William Willis Greenleaf of Texas echoed Baskin's admiration: "De kinda tales dat allus suits mah fancy de mo'es' am de tales de ole folks used to tell 'bout de ca'iens on of Brothuh Rabbit. In de early days Ah heerd many an' many a tale 'bout ole Brothuh Rabbit what woke me to de fac' dat hit tecks dis, dat an' t'othuh to figguh life out—dat you hafta use yo' haid fo mo'n a hat rack lack ole Brothuh Rabbit do. Ole Brothuh Rabbit de smaa'tes' thing Ah done evuh run 'crost in mah whole bawn life."³³

This testimony—and there is a great deal of it—documents the enduring identification between black storytellers and the central trickster figure of their tales. Brer Rabbit's victories became the victories of the slave. This symbolism in slave tales allowed them to outlive slavery itself. So long as the perilous situation and psychic needs of the slave continued to characterize large numbers of freedmen as well, the imagery of the old slave tales remained both aesthetically and functionally satisfying. By ascribing ac-

tions to semi-mythical actors, Negroes were able to overcome the external and internal censorship that their hostile surroundings imposed upon them. The white master could believe that the rabbit stories his slaves told were mere figments of a childish imagination, that they were primarily humorous anecdotes depicting the "roaring comedy of animal life." Blacks knew better. The trickster's exploits, which overturned the neat hierarchy of the world in which he was forced to live, became their exploits; the justice he achieved, their justice; the strategies he employed, their strategies. From his adventures they obtained relief; from his triumphs they learned hope.

To deny this interpretation of slave tales would be to ignore much of their central essence. The problem with the notion that slaves completely identified with their animal trickster hero whose exploits were really protest tales in disguise is that it ignores much of the complexity and ambiguity inherent in these tales. This in turn flows from the propensity of scholars to view slavery as basically a relatively simple phenomenon which produced human products conforming to some unitary behavioral pattern. Too frequently slaves emerge from the pages of historians' studies either as docile, accepting beings or as alienated prisoners on the edge of rebellion. But if historians have managed to escape much of the anarchic confusion so endemic in the Peculiar Institution, slaves did not. Slaveholders who considered Afro-Americans to be little more than subhuman chattels converted them to a religion which stressed their humanity and even their divinity. Masters who desired and expected their slaves to act like dependent children also enjoined them to behave like mature, responsible adults, since a work force consisting only of servile infants who can make no decisions on their own and can produce only under the impetus of a significant other is a dubious economic resource, and on one level or another both masters and slaves understood this. Whites who considered their black servants to be little more than barbarians, bereft of any culture worth the name, paid a fascinated and flattering attention to their song, their dance, their tales, and their forms of religious exercise. The life of every slave could be altered by the most arbitrary and amoral acts. They could be whipped, sexually assaulted, ripped out of societies in which they had deep roots, and bartered away for pecuniary profit by men and women who were also capable of treating them with kindness and consideration and who professed belief in a moral code which they held up for emulation not only by their children but often by their slaves as well.

It would be surprising if these dualities which marked the slaves' world were not reflected in both the forms and the content of their folk culture. In their religious songs and sermons slaves sought certainty in a world filled with confusion and anarchy; in their supernatural folk beliefs they sought power and control in a world filled with arbitrary forces greater than themselves; and in their tales they sought understanding of a world in which, for better or worse, they were forced to live. All the forms of slave folk culture afforded their creators psychic relief and a sense of mastery. Tales differed from the other forms in that they were more directly didactic in intent and therefore more compellingly and realistically reflective of the irrational and amoral side of the slaves' universe. It is precisely this aspect of the animal trickster tales that has been most grossly neglected.

Although the vicarious nature of slave tales was undeniably one of their salient features, too much stress has been laid on it. These were not merely clever tales of wish-fulfillment through which slaves could escape from the imperatives of their world. They could also be painfully realistic stories which taught the art of surviving and even triumphing in the face of a hostile environment. They underlined the dangers of acting rashly and striking out blindly, as Brer Rabbit did when he assaulted the tar-baby. They pointed out the futility of believing in the sincerity of the strong, as Brer Pig did when he allowed Fox to enter his house. They emphasized the necessity of comprehending the ways of the powerful, for only through such understanding could the weak endure. This lesson especially was repeated endlessly. In the popular tales featuring a race between a slow animal and a swifter opponent, the former triumphs not through persistence, as does his counterpart in the Aesopian fable of the Tortoise and the Hare, but by outwitting his opponent and capitalizing on his weaknesses and short-sightedness. Terrapin defeats Deer by placing relatives along the route with Terrapin himself stationed by the finish line. The deception is never discovered, since to the arrogant Deer all terrapins "am so much like anurrer you cant tell one from turrer." "I still t'ink Ise de fas'est runner in de worl'," the bewildered Deer complains after the race. "Maybe you air," Terrapin responds, "but I kin head you off wid sense."³⁴ Rabbit too understands the myopia of the powerful and benefits from Mr. Man's inability to distinguish between the animals by manipulating Fox into taking the punishment for a crime that Rabbit himself commits. "De Ole Man yent bin know de diffunce tween Buh Rabbit an Buh Fox," the storyteller pointed out. "Eh tink all two bin de same animal."³⁵ For black slaves, whose individuality was so frequently denied by

the whites above them, this was a particularly appropriate and valuable message.

In many respects the lessons embodied in the animal trickster tales ran directly counter to those of the moralistic tales considered earlier. Friendship, held up as a positive model in the moralistic tales, was pictured as a fragile reed in the trickster tales. In the ubiquitous stories in which a trapped Rabbit tricks another animal into taking his place, it never occurs to him simply to ask for help. Nor when he is being pursued by Wolf does Hog even dream of asking Lion for aid. Rather he tricks Lion into killing Wolf by convincing him that the only way to cure his ailing son is to feed him a piece of half-roasted wolf liver.³⁶ The animals in these stories seldom ask each other for disinterested help. Even more rarely are they caught performing acts of altruism—and with good reason. Carrying a string of fish he has just caught, Fox comes upon the prostrate form of Rabbit lying in the middle of the road moaning and asking for a doctor. Fox lays down his fish and hurries off to get help—with predictable results: “Ber Fox los’ de fish. An’ Ber Rabbit got de fish an’ got better. Dat’s da las’ of it.”³⁷ Brer Rooster learns the same lesson when he unselfishly tries to help a starving Hawk and is rewarded by having Hawk devour all of his children.³⁸

Throughout these tales the emphasis on the state of perpetual war between the world’s creatures revealed the hypocrisy and meaninglessness of their manners and rules. Animals who called each other brother and sister one moment were at each other’s throats the next. On his way to church one Sunday morning, Rabbit meets Fox and the usual unctuous dialogue begins. “Good-mornin’, Ber Rabbit!” Fox sings out. “Good-mornin’, Ber Fox!” Rabbit sings back. After a few more pleasantries, the brotherliness ends as quickly as it had begun and Fox threatens: “Dis is my time, I’m hungry dis mornin’. I’m goin’ to ketch you.” Assuming the tone of the weak supplicant, Rabbit pleads: “O Ber Fox! leave me off dis mornin’. I will sen’ you to a man house where he got a penful of pretty little pig, an’ you will get yer brakefus’ fill.” Fox agrees and is sent to a pen filled not with pigs but hound dogs who pursue and kill him. Reverting to his former Sabbath piety, Rabbit calls after the dogs: “Gawd bless yer soul! dat what enemy get for meddlin’ Gawd’s people when dey goin’ to church.” “I was goin’ to school all my life,” Rabbit mutters to himself as he walks away from the carnage, “an learn every letter in de book but d, an’ D was death an’ death was de en’ of Ber Fox.”³⁹

Such stories leave no doubt that slaves were aware of the need for role

playing. But animal tales reveal more than this; they emphasize in brutal detail the irrationality and anarchy that rules Man’s universe. In tale after tale violence and duplicity are pictured as existing for their own sake. Rabbit is capable of acts of senseless cruelty performed for no discernible motive. Whenever he comes across an alligator’s nest “didn’ he jes scratch the aigs out fur pure meaness, an’ leave ‘em layin’ around to spile.”⁴⁰ In an extremely popular tale Alligator confesses to Rabbit that he doesn’t know what trouble is. Rabbit offers to teach him and instructs him to lie down in the broom grass. While Alligator is sleeping in the dry grass, Rabbit sets it on fire all around him and calls out: “Dat’s trouble, Brer ‘Gator, dat’s trouble youse in.”⁴¹ Acts like this are an everyday occurrence for Rabbit. He sets Tiger, Elephant, and Panther on fire, provokes Man into burning Wolf to death, participates in the decapitation of Raccoon, causes Fox to chop off his own finger, drowns Wolf and leaves his body for Shark and Alligator to eat, boils Wolf’s grandmother to death and tricks Wolf into eating her.⁴² These actions often occur for no apparent reason. When a motive is present there is no limit to Rabbit’s malice. Nagged by his wife to build a spring house, Rabbit tricks the other animals into digging it by telling them that if they make a dam to hold the water back they will surely find buried gold under the spring bed. They dig eagerly and to Rabbit’s surprise actually do find gold. “But Ole Brer Rabbit never lose he head, that he don’t, and he just push the rocks out the dam, and let the water on and drown the lastest one of them critters, and then he picks up the gold, and of course Ole Miss Rabbit done get her spring house.”⁴³ It is doubtful, though, that she was able to enjoy it for very long, since in another tale Rabbit coolly sacrifices his wife and little children in order to save himself from Wolf’s vengeance.⁴⁴

Other trickster figures manifest the identical amorality. Rabbit himself is taken in by one of them in the popular tale of the Rooster who tucked his head under his wing and explained that he had his wife cut his head off so he could sun it. “An’ de rabbit he thought he could play de same trick, so he went home an’ tol’ his ol’ lady to chop his head off. So dat was de las’ of his head.”⁴⁵ All tricksters share an incapacity for forgetting or forgiving. In a North Carolina spider tale, Ann Nancy is caught stealing Buzzard’s food and saves herself only by obsequiously comparing her humble lot to Buzzard’s magnificence, stressing “how he sail in the clouds while she ‘bliged to crawl in the dirt,” until he takes pity and sets her free. “But Ann Nancy ain’t got no gratitude in her mind; she feel she looked down on by all the creeters, and it sour her mind and temper. She

ain't gwine forget anybody what cross her path, no, that she don't, and while she spin her house she just study constant how she gwine get the best of every creeter." In the end she invites Buzzard to dinner and pours a pot of boiling water over his head, "and the poor old man go baldheaded from that day."⁴⁶ At that he was lucky. When Rabbit's friend Elephant accidentally steps on Rabbit's nest, killing his children, Rabbit bides his time until he catches Elephant sleeping, stuffs leaves and grass in his eyes, and sets them on fire.⁴⁷ Hare, unable to forgive Miss Fox for marrying Terrapin instead of himself, sneaks into her house, kills her, skins her, hangs her body to the ceiling, and smokes her over hickory chips.⁴⁸

The unrelieved violence and brutality of these tales can be accounted for easily enough within the slave-as-trickster, trickster-as-slave thesis. D. H. Lawrence's insight that "one sheds one's sicknesses in books" is particularly applicable here. Slave tales which functioned as the bondsmen's books were a perfect vehicle for the channelization of the slaves' "sicknesses": their otherwise inexpressible angers, their gnawing hatreds, their pent-up frustrations. On one level, then, the animal trickster tales were expressions of the slaves' unrestrained fantasies: the impotent become potent, the brutalized are transformed into brutalizers, the undermen inherit the earth. But so many of these tales picture the trickster in such profoundly ambivalent or negative terms, so many of them are cast in the African mold of not depicting phenomena in hard-and-fast, either-or, good-evil categories, that it is difficult to fully accept Bernard Wolfe's argument that it is invariably "the venomous American slave crouching behind the Rabbit."⁴⁹ Once we relax the orthodoxy that the trickster and the slave are necessarily one, other crucial levels of meaning and understanding are revealed.

"You nebber kin trus Buh Rabbit," a black storyteller concluded after explaining how Rabbit cheated Partridge. "Eh all fuh ehself; an ef you listne ter him tale, eh gwine cheat you ebry time, an tell de bigges lie dout wink eh yeye."⁵⁰ Precisely what many slaves might have said of their white masters. Viewed in this light, trickster tales were a prolonged and telling parody of white society. The animals were frequently almost perfect replicas of whites as slaves saw them. They occasionally worked but more often lived a life filled with leisure-time activities: they fished, hunted, had numerous parties and balls, courted demure women who sat on verandas dressed in white. They mouthed lofty platitudes and professed belief in noble ideals but spent much of their time manipulating, oppressing, enslaving one another. They surrounded themselves with

meaningless etiquette, encased themselves in rigid hierarchies, dispensed rewards not to the most deserving but to the most crafty and least scrupulous. Their world was filled with violence, injustice, cruelty. Though they might possess great power, they did not always wield it openly and directly but often with guile and indirection. This last point especially has been neglected; the strong and not merely the weak could function as trickster. Jenny Proctor remembered her Alabama master who was exceedingly stingy and fed his slaves badly: "When he go to sell a slave, he feed that one good for a few days, then when he goes to put 'em up on the auction block he takes a meat skin and greases all around that nigger's mouth and makes 'em look like they been eating plenty meat and such like and was good and strong and able to work."⁵¹ Former slaves recalled numerous examples of the master as trickster:

There was one old man on the plantation that everybody feared. He was a good worker but he didn't allow anybody to whip him. Once he was up for a whipping and this is the way he got it. Our young master got a whole gang of paddy-rollers and hid them in a thicket. Then he told old man Jack that he had to be whipped. "I won't hit you but a few licks," he told him, "Papa is going away and he sent me to give you that whipping he told you about." Old man Jack said, "Now, I won't take nairy a lick." Young master took out a bottle of whiskey, took a drink and gave the bottle to old man Jack and told him to drink as much as he wanted. Old man Jack loved whiskey and he drank it all. Soon he was so drunk he couldn't hardly stand up. Young Mars called to the men in hiding, "Come on down, I got the wild boar." They whipped the old man almost to death. This was the first and last time he ever got whipped.⁵²

Slave tales are filled with instances of the strong acting as tricksters: Fox asks Jaybird to pick a bone out of his teeth, and once he is in his mouth, Fox devours him; Buzzard invites eager animals to go for a ride on his back, then drops them to their deaths and eats them; Wolf constructs a tar-baby in which Rabbit almost comes to his end; Elephant, Fox, and Wolf all pretend to be dead in order to throw Rabbit off guard and catch him at their "funerals"; Fox tells Squirrel that he had a brother who could jump from the top of a tall tree right into his arms, and when Squirrel proves he can do the same, Fox eats him.⁵³ Tales like these, which formed an important part of the slaves' repertory, indicate that the slave could empathize with the tricked as well as the trickster. Again the didactic function of these stories becomes apparent. The slaves' interest was not always in being like the trickster but often in avoiding being like his victims from whose fate they could learn valuable lessons. Although

the trickster tales could make a mockery of the values preached by the moralistic tales—friendship, hard work, sincerity—there were also important lines of continuity between the moralistic tales and the trickster stories. Animals were taken in by the trickster most easily when they violated many of the lessons of the moralistic tales: when they were too curious, as Alligator was concerning trouble; too malicious, as Wolf was when he tried to kill Rabbit by the most horrible means possible; too greedy, as Fox and Buzzard were when their hunger for honey led to their deaths; overly proud and arrogant, as Deer was in his race with Terrapin; unable to keep their own counsel, as Fox was when he prematurely blurted out his plans to catch Rabbit; obsessed with a desire to be something other than what they are, as the Buzzard's victims were when they allowed their desire to soar in the air to overcome their caution.

The didacticism of the trickster tales was not confined to tactics and personal attributes. They also had important lessons to teach concerning the nature of the world and of the beings who inhabited it. For Afro-American slaves, as for their African ancestors, the world and those who lived in it were pictured in naturalistic and unsentimental terms. The vanity of human beings, their selfishness, their propensity to do anything and betray anyone for self-preservation, their drive for status and power, their basic insecurity, were all pictured in grim detail. The world was not a rational place in which order and justice prevailed and good was dispensed. The trickster, as Louise Dauner has perceived, often functioned as the eternal "thwarter," the symbol of "the irrational twists of circumstance." His remarkably gullible dupes seldom learned from their experience at his hands any more than human beings learn from experience. There was no more escape from him than there is escape from the irrational in human life.⁵⁴ The trickster served as agent of the world's irrationality and as reminder of man's fundamental helplessness. Whenever animals became too bloated with their power or importance or sense of control, the trickster was on hand to remind them of how things really were. No animal escaped these lessons; not Wolf, not Lion, not Elephant, indeed, not the trickster himself. Throughout there is a latent yearning for structure, for justice, for reason, but they are not to be had, in this world at least. If the strong are not to prevail over the weak, neither shall the weak dominate the strong. Their eternal and inconclusive battle served as proof that man is part of a larger order which he scarcely understands and certainly does not control.

If the animal trickster functioned on several different symbolic levels—

as black slave, as white master, as irrational force—his adventures were given coherence and continuity by the crucial release they provided and the indispensable lessons they taught. In the exploits of the animal trickster, slaves mirrored in exaggerated terms the experiences of their own lives.

THE SLAVE AS TRICKSTER

"Slaves have their *code of honor*, and their *tricks of trade*," the Reverend John Dixon Long wrote in 1857. "The colored people reason as rationally on some questions as we do. Their conceptions of justice and right are not very different from those of white men. They say: 'We do the work; we raise the corn and wheat; and part of it is justly ours.'"¹ To improve their lot, to effect a rough sort of justice, and to protect themselves from some of the worst features of the slave system, slaves translated many of the tactics of their animal trickster tales into their own lives. Like Brer Rabbit, slaves learned to maneuver as well as they could from their position of weakness. The practicality and realism at the core of the slave aphorism, "White folks do as they pleases, and the darkies do as they can," was repeated in proverb after proverb: "A smart man ain't gwine to buck 'gin a mud-hole; he walks 'round it eb'ry time." "It don't make much diffunce whar de rain comes fum, jes' so it hits de groun' in de right place." "'E yent matter 'bout de road so long as 'e kah you to de right place." "All de jestice in de wul' ain't fastened up in de cote-'ouse." "Yuh mought as well die wid de chills ez wid de fever." "Better not laugh too quick at de runt pig." "Little axe cut down big tree."²

The meaning of these teachings was made painfully apparent to Laura Towne almost as soon as she arrived in the Sea Islands to work with the freedmen during the Civil War. "We need patience," she complained on April 28, 1862:

One day I came downstairs to make a cup of tea for an unexpected guest. No fire and no wood. No possibility of getting wood, as it was raining hard. No butter. Old Robert was sick and had the key to the dairy, and was away off somewhere; just as it was at breakfast, when we had no milk, and Robert was away at "the pen," . . . Hominy gone. Sent Lucy to ask Susannah why and where she had taken it. It came. . . .

I told Rina to come up and do our room and have not seen her since. Just now Aleck was idle and I sent him for wood to the pines with a little mule. I told him not to whip it. He yelled and doubled himself up with laughter, and lashed it before my eyes until quite out of sight, shrieking with laughter and paying no heed to my calls.³

The work habits that drove Miss Towne to distraction were not new to the freedmen among whom she lived but had been endemic in slavery. "So deceitful is the Negro," a Georgia planter complained, "that as far as my own experience extends I could never in a single instance decipher his character. . . . We planters could never get at the truth." Slaves were, a North Carolina planter agreed, "a troublesome property," as James Hammond discovered graphically when his bondsmen stole and killed one hundred of his hogs in a single year alone, and as Charles C. Pinckney acknowledged when he estimated that 25 per cent of his rice crop was pilfered annually. The tactics slaves resorted to in order to resist the compulsions of their situation would have been familiar enough to the creatures of their animal tales. The records left by nineteenth-century observers of slavery and by the masters themselves indicate that a significant number of slaves lied, cheated, stole, feigned illness, loafed, pretended to misunderstand the orders they were given, put rocks in the bottom of their cotton baskets in order to meet their quota, broke their tools, burned their masters' property, mutilated themselves in order to escape work, took indifferent care of the crops they were cultivating, and mistreated the livestock placed in their care to the extent that masters often felt it necessary to use the less efficient mules rather than horses since the former could better withstand the brutal treatment of the slaves.⁴

Many former slaves were completely candid about these behavior patterns and almost unanimous in defending them. "They didn't half feed us either," Robert Falls of North Carolina remembered. "They fed the animals better. They gives the mules the roughage and such, to chaw on all night. But they didn't give us nothing to chaw on. Learned us to steal, that's what they done. Why, we would take anything we could lay our hands on, when we was hungry. Then they'd whip us for lying when we say we don't know nothing about it. But it was easier to stand when the stomach was full."⁵ Referring to the slaves on his plantation, one former slave asserted: "These darkies didn't get no fresh meat unless they stole it."⁶ Jake Green, a slave in Alabama, told the folk story of a master who boasted to a traveler that his slave John "ain't never told me a lie in his life." The traveler bet one hundred dollars to fifty cents that he could

catch John in a lie. The next morning after breakfast, he put a live mouse in a covered dish and instructed the master to inform John that he could eat whatever food was left over but that he must not open the covered dish. The white men left and when they returned the master asked John if he had obeyed his orders. John swore he had, but when the traveler lifted the cover off the forbidden dish the mouse was gone. "See dere," he said triumphantly, "John been lyin' to you all de time, you jes' ain't knowed it." "An," Green quickly added, "I reckon he right, 'caze us had to lie."⁷ These attitudes were repeated again and again: "Of course they'd [the slaves] steal. Had to steal. That the best way to git what they wanted." "Those white folks made us lie. We had to lie to live."⁸ The same message was reiterated long after slavery in the postbellum anecdote about the old black preacher who discovered that some members of his congregation were claiming to have donated more to the church than they actually had. "De trouble wid you," he admonished them, "is dat de white man done been dealin' wid you so long, some uv you gittin' real tricky."⁹

In these attitudes we can begin to perceive the mechanism that slaves erected to help reduce the tensions between their universal ideals and their worldly needs. Although slaves were forced by their situation to create their own practical set of values and norms of behavior, these did not necessarily replace those of their heritage, their religion, and of the outside society but rather were used to "neutralize" them. In their work on the "techniques of neutralization," Gresham Sykes and David Matza have demonstrated that deviation from certain norms may occur not because they are rejected but because a given situation may accord precedence to other norms. "Norms may be violated without surrendering allegiance to them," Matza has written. "The directives to action implicit in norms may be avoided intermittently rather than frontally assaulted. They may be evaded rather than radically rejected. Norms, especially legal norms, may be neutralized. . . . Most if not all norms in society are conditional. Rarely, if ever, are they categorically imperative."¹⁰

Thus it was possible for slaves to rationalize their need to lie, cheat, and steal without holding these actions up as models to be followed in all instances, without creating, that is, a counter-morality. In their dealings with whites the conditions permitting the application of their moral values were frequently absent. Not only did their masters deny them the fruits of their labor but the whites themselves practiced theft far more serious than that of the blacks. "Dey talks a heap 'bout de niggers stealin'," Shang Harris told an interviewer. "Well, you know what was

de fust stealin' done? Hit was in Afriky, when de white folks stole de niggers jes' like you'd go get a drove o' horses and sell 'em."¹¹ The Gullah preacher Brother Coteney articulated a common feeling when he asked in one of his sermons: "Ef buckra neber tief, how cum nigger yer [here]?"¹² Black children imbibed these attitudes at a tender age. An officer of one of the Aid Societies led the following discussion in a Louisville school in 1866:

Now children, you don't think white people are any better than you because they have straight hair and white faces?

No, sir.

No, they are no better, but they are different, they possess great power, they formed this great government, they control this vast country. . . . Now what makes them different from you?

MONEY. (Unanimous shout)

Yes, but what enabled them to obtain it?

Got it off us, stole it off we all!¹³

The masters were guilty of more "devilment" than stealing: "Look at old N. that lived on the other side of us. He forced nearly every decent looking slave woman he had. Williamson County is full of half white children he got by his slaves."¹⁴

It is unlikely that these attitudes completely relieved slaves of all feelings of guilt. In this respect their animal trickster tales may have served as a convenient channel for whatever guilt slaves felt about having to adopt modes of behavior which were proscribed both by their African heritage and their new religion. Rabbit's frequent transgressions of the moral frontiers, his egregious acts of violence and pure malice, can be seen not only as an expression of the slaves' fantasies or an object lesson concerning the irrationality of life, but also as a projection of the slaves' inner anxieties. But on the whole the evidence indicates that the slaves' strong convictions regarding the injustice they suffered at the hands of whites, who themselves were guilty of hypocrisy and gross immorality, were sufficient to allow them to relax or neutralize their normal standards and mores in certain situations. Touring antebellum Virginia, Frederick Olmsted noted: "everywhere on the plantations, the agrarian notion has become a fixed point of the negro system of ethics: that the result of labor belongs of right to the laborer, and on this ground, even the religious feel justified in using 'Massa's' property for their own temporal benefit. This they term 'taking,' and it is never admitted to be a reproach to a man among them that he is charged with it, though 'stealing,' or taking from

another than their master, and particularly from one another, is so."¹⁵ "They think it wrong to take from a neighbor, but not from their master," Lewis Clarke wrote of his fellow slaves. "The only question with them is, 'Can we keep it from master?' If they can keep their backs safe, conscience is quiet enough on this point. But a slave that will steal from a slave, is called *mean as master*. This is the lowest comparison slaves know how to use: 'just as mean as white folks.' 'No right for to complain of white folks, who steal us all de days of our life; nigger dat what steal from nigger, he meaner nor all.'"¹⁶

Slaves recounted their tactics in a number of the songs they sang:

O some tell me that a nigger won't steal,
But I've seen a nigger in my corn-field;
O run, nigger, run, for the patrol will catch you,
O run, nigger, run, for 'tis almost day.

I fooled Old Master seven years,
Fooled the overseer three.
Hand me down my banjo,
And I'll tickle your bel-lee.¹⁷

But for the most part tales were the vehicle through which slaves rehearsed their tactics, laughed at the foibles of their masters (and themselves), and taught their young the means they would have to adopt in order to survive. To this day much less is known about the slaves' human trickster cycle than about their animal trickster stories. Precisely because these tales dealt with slaves and masters instead of rabbits and wolves and were in many respects more open and direct, slaves and freedmen guarded them more closely. A number of these tales were collected in the years following emancipation, but it has not been until the twentieth century that more and more of them have come to light. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the continued and perhaps enhanced popularity of human trickster stories after slavery is proof that they were primarily a postbellum product. These tales mirrored the behavior patterns of large numbers of slaves so closely and were so important a part of the repertoire of ex-slaves that they clearly had their origins in the years before freedom.

Frequently tales of this type were based upon actual occurrences which through constant retelling were in the process of becoming part of black folklore. Lizzie Williams told of her father's adventures when he was away from his Alabama plantation one night without a pass and saw a patrol coming his way:

He know if dey finds him what dey do. So Pappy he gets down in de ditch and throw sand and grunts like a hog. Sure 'nough, dey thinks he a hog and dey pass on, 'cept one who was behind de others. He say, "Dat am de gruntin'est old hog I ever hear. I think I go see him." But de others dey say: "Just let dat old hog alone and mind you own business." So dey pass on. Pappy he laugh about dat for long time.¹⁸

Many years after emancipation, Henry Johnson still remembered his craving for one of his master's turkeys which the slaves were forbidden to eat. Succumbing to temptation, he lured a turkey to his cabin, twisted its neck until it was dead and then ran to inform his mistress that one of the birds had died: "She said, 'Stop crying, Henry, and throw him under de hill.' I was satisfied. I run back, picked dat old bird, taken all his feathers to de river and throwed dem in. Dat night we cooked him. And didn't we eat somethin' good! I had to tell her about dat missin' bird cause when dey check up it all had to tally, so dat fixed dat."¹⁹ A fellow ex-slave remembered an old slave on his plantation who became so angry at one of the steers he was plowing with that he took a rock and knocked it on the head. "He dragged him a little way off and told me to run to the house and tell the boss that one of his steers was awful sick. They never did know why that steer died. My mistress tried in every way to make me tell her what happened to cause the steer to die but the old man had warned me not to tell."²⁰ Another former slave recounted the way she acted when asked to brush the flies away from her elderly, sick mistress: "I would hit her all in the face; sometimes I would make out I was sleep and beat her in the face. She was so sick she couldn't sleep much, and couldn't talk, and when old master come in the house she would try to tell him on me, but he thought she meant I would just go to sleep. Then he would tell me to go out in the yard and wake up. She couldn't tell him that I had been hitting her all in the face. I done that woman bad. She was so mean to me."²¹ West Turner spoke of Gabe, a fellow slave whose job it was to mete out punishment on the plantation: "Ole Gabe didn't like dat whippin' bus'ness, but he couldn't he'p hisself. When Marsa was dere, he would lay it on 'cause he had to. But when ole Marsa warn't lookin', he never would beat dem slaves. Would tie de slave up to one post an' lash another one. 'Cose de slave would scream an' yell to satisfy Marsa, but he wasn't gettin' no lashin'."²²

It did not take much for such relatively common events to become embroidered into more elaborate and fanciful tales. Josie Jordan, born a slave in Tennessee, recalled a story her mother told her about a stingy master

who fed his slaves so poorly that "they ribs would kinda rustle against each other like corn stalks a-drying in the hot winds. But they gets even one hog-killing time, and it was funny, too, Mammy said." The day before seven fat hogs were to be killed, one of the field hands ran to the master and told him, "The hogs is all died, now they won't be any meats for the winter." When the master arrived on the scene he found a group of sorrowful-looking slaves who informed him that the hogs had died of "malitis" and acted as if they were afraid to touch the dead animals. The master ordered them to dress the meat anyway and to keep it for the slave families. "Don't you all know what is malitis?" Mrs. Jordan's mother would ask while she rocked with laughter. "One of the strongest Negroes got up early in the morning, long 'fore the rising horn called the slaves from their cabins. He skitted to the hog pen with a heavy mallet in his hand. When he tapped Mister Hog 'tween the eyes with that mallet, 'malitis' set in mighty quick. . . ."²³

The cycle of stories featuring the relations of a slave trickster, often named John, and his master were based upon the kinds of incidents related in these factual and pseudo-factual tales, but by removing them from the realm of the immediately personal it allowed storytellers even more scope for their imaginations and their psychic needs.²⁴ The most widely diffused tale of this type, found in a variety of cultures, captured the essence of the entire slave trickster cycle. By eavesdropping outside his master's window, learning his plans for the next day and then anticipating them, and by hiding things and then "discovering" them when his master was looking for them, John convinced his master that he was omniscient and won a privileged position on the plantation. One day the master boasted to a group of his fellow slaveowners of John's powers. The other whites were dubious and wagered a large sum that they could prove John's fallibility. On the day of the contest they hid something in a barrel and called upon John to reveal the barrel's contents. The reluctant slave, fearing that at last his careful deceptions were to be discovered, desperately walked around and around the barrel, tapped it, put his ear to it, and then in despair confessed, "Marstah, you got dis here coon at las!" His choice of language saved him for when the barrel was removed to reveal a raccoon inside, John's master won the bet, and John was amply rewarded, sometimes by freedom itself.²⁵ In John, slaves created a figure who epitomized the rewards, the limits, and the hazards of the trickster. He could improve his situation through careful deception, but at no time was he really in complete control; the rewards he could win were limited

by the realities of the system within which he existed, and the dangers he faced were great. Time and again the more elaborate schemes of the slave trickster failed, and he saved himself only by last minute verbal facility and role playing—two qualities which these stories emphasized were crucial for all slaves to cultivate.

As in the animal stories, the acquisition of food was a primary goal for the slave trickster. In a popular tale, a slave steals some chickens and is cooking them when his master enters his cabin, is informed that the slave is cooking a possum, and decides to wait and share some of it. After an hour of clever delays on the slave's part, the master loses patience, uncovers the pot and discovers the chicken. "Wal," the slave says quickly, "dey wuz 'possums when Ah put 'em in dar. Ef dey's chickens now, Ah's gwine th'ow 'em away."²⁶ In another version, related at the turn of the century by a black woman whose father heard it from his grandfather, a slave on the Hammond plantation in Georgia, the slave, hard-pressed by the master to carve the non-existent possum up, announces in desperation: "Dis possum am done to a tu'n. Mus' be all dat good spittin' we done." When the master expresses surprise, the slave explains: "Spittin'. Us nighuhs allus spits in possum gravy. Makes de meat mo' tenduh. Aunt Janie done spit in it; Uncle Amos done spit in it; de chilluns done spit in it; an' I spit in it myse'f fo' er five times. You wants nice big piece, Massa?" The latter, rushing from the cabin, cries out, "That's the most disgusting habit I ever heard of. You're a pack of damned savages."²⁷

In a South Carolina story, a slave named Jack eats the leg of a baked chicken he is to serve to his master and a guest and turns the chicken on its side to hide the missing limb. When the white men finish the top side and turn the chicken over, they discover the loss and are told by the slave, "Must be one-legged chicken, suh. I has seen plenty of one-legged chickens." The next day, riding through the plantation the master and the slave come across some chickens on the road standing on one leg and huddled up to keep warm. "See, Doctor, dat been what I was talking 'bout," Jack tells his master. "All dem chicken one-legged." His master looks carefully at the chickens and says, "Sish!" whereupon they all put down their other leg. "Well, Doctor," Jack quickly counters, "if you had say 'Sish' to de chicken on de dish, he would hab stick out 'e odder leg, too."²⁸ In a Virginia tale a young slave is instructed to cook a duck for Sunday dinner. While preparing it he tastes first one wing, then the other, and by the time the master and the preacher return to eat, the duck is entirely consumed. Watching his master sharpening his knife for the coming feast, the

desperate slave turns to the preacher and whispers, "He is sharpening his knife to kill you." The preacher begins to run and the slave shouts to the master, "There he goes with the duck!"²⁹

In other tales the slave trickster had less luck. In a story which long remained popular, John was in the practice of giving big parties for all the slaves whenever his master took his annual trip North. One year the master came back early to check on his slaves, disguised himself as a slave by rubbing soot on his face, and observed the festivities. While the slaves happily consume his food and liquor and smoke his cigars, John shouts:

Joy yourself, joy yourself,
Master's gone to Philly-Me-York.

During the course of the evening the master's sweat gradually dissolves his disguise until John at last recognizes him and cries out in despair, "Oh marster, is dat you. Oh marster, is dat you! Aint dat you, oh marster? Um gone!"³⁰ An old slave named Dinna has been stealing her master's chickens for years until he discovers her one day cooking them and singing:

Massa, ain't you glad your old game-hen
Been on the roos' so long?
But Ah got 'em in the pot at las'.

When she is finished, the master sings his own song:

Aunt Dinna, ain't you glad my old game-hen
Been on the roos' so long?
You got 'em in the pot at las'.
But Aunt Dinna, ain't you sorry
You got my old game-hen in the pot,
For Massa gwine to cut your back at last.³¹

These tales, too, paralleled real life situations. In 1899 R. R. Moton related a story told to him by an old, toothless man who as a slave used to get out of work periodically by claiming he had a toothache. One day the master appeared with a pair of pincers and pulled out twenty of the slave's teeth and a piece of his jawbone as well. "I ain't niver had no mo' teefache from dat day to dis, dat I ain't," the old man told Moton.³²

For all the limitations imposed upon slave tricksters and all the hazards they faced, it is not difficult to understand the pleasures slaves derived from their exploits. In spite of the role playing and subservience forced upon them and the defeats they often suffered, slave tricksters continually made the whites look foolish and always seemed one step ahead of them. In a widely told tale a master boasts of a deer he shot through the foot and

eye with only a single bullet. When his friends prove to be incredulous, he turns to his slave and commands him to tell how he did it. Thinking fast, the slave explains that the deer was brushing a fly out of his eye with his hind foot when the white man fired his shot. After the others have departed, the slave tells his master: "Mossa, me willin fuh back anyting you say bout hunt an kill deer, but lemme bague you nex time you tell bout how you shoot um, you pit de hole closer. Dis time you mek um so fur apart, me hab big trouble fur git um togerruh." "Tell yo' lies a li'l' closer togedder f'om now on," the slave instructs his master in another version.³³ In a Georgia tale a newly purchased slave asks his master why he spends so much time sitting and doing nothing while the slaves have to work. The master assures him that he is not loafing but working with his head making plans and studying about things. One day the master comes upon his slave in the field sitting in the cotton and resting. When he inquires why the slave is not working, the latter informs him that he too is working with his head. Pointing to three pigeons on a tree limb, he asks the white man how many would be left if he shot and killed one. Any fool can answer that, the master replies indignantly, "two." "No mossa, you miss," the slave tells him. "Ef you shoot an kill one er dem pigeon, de odder two boun fuh fly way, an none gwine leff." "De buckra man bleege fuh laugh," the storyteller concluded, "an eh yent do nuttne ter de New Nigger case en glec eh wuk."³⁴

In many of these tales the slaves prove to be superb thieves and frequently win their freedom by betting their masters they can steal the very clothes off their backs and then through elaborate maneuvers accomplish the task.³⁵ Slaves received not only vicarious triumph from their human trickster stories but also quite frequently explicit instruction, as in the tale of the slave who asked his master: "How much Christmas kin I have?" and was informed that he could celebrate until the back log in the fireplace burned out. Cutting a black gum log, the slave rolled it in the ditch and let it remain for several days until it was well soaked. Then he rolled it out so that it would dry on the outside. Christmas morning he put the log in the fire, where it burned for seven days, giving the slave an entire week of leisure.³⁶

In some stories slave tricksters would occasionally try out their wiles on their fellow slaves. One would boast to another that he had put his hand under his mistress' dress or cursed his master with impunity. The other would try the same thing and be beaten severely, only to be told by the trickster that he had not said anything about the mistress being in the dress

when he put his hand under it or the master being present when he cursed him.³⁷ Only rarely do these stories picture slaves stealing from one another. In a story sharing many elements with the animal tales, a slave puts a possum on to cook and goes to sleep. Just when the possum is done, a friend visits the cabin, eats the possum, scatters its bones around the hearth, and greases the sleeping slave's mouth and hands. When the latter arises, he finds his possum gone and concludes it was stolen until he notices the bones on the floor and the grease on his hands and mouth. "I mus' 'a' done it! I mus' 'a' done it!" he exclaims. "Well, all I got to say is dis: ef I did git up an' eat dat 'possum while I was 'sleep, he sets lighter on my stomach an' he gibs me less consolation dan any 'possum I ebber eat sence I was born!"³⁸

For the most part, however, the trickster's art as depicted in these tales was saved for the benefit of the whites and was seldom practiced upon members of his own group. Slave tales document the distinction many slaves made between "stealing" which meant appropriating something that belonged to another slave and was not condoned, and "taking" which meant appropriating part of the master's property for the benefit of another part. In a commonly told story, an old slave, Uncle Abraham, invites his black preacher, Brother Gabriel, to eat with him on Christmas Eve. The preacher is uneasy about the roast pig and potatoes on the table since he knows they must have been stolen and refuses to eat until his host says grace and makes a confession before him. With little hesitation, Abraham prays: "A Lord, dou . . . taught dy sarvents dat it want no harm fur ter take de corn out er de barril and put it into de kag. De barril 'longs to de marster and de kag 'longs ter de marster, dar-forth it aint no diffunce when de darkie take de marster's pig out er de pen an put it into de darkie, case de darkie 'longs ter de marster, an de pig pen 'longs ter de marster." "All right, Brer Abe, dat all right," Brother Gabriel announces. "Less be gwine ter dese yere good nugs."³⁹

The slaves' animal and human trickster tales shared a number of common elements: They placed the same emphasis upon the tactics of trickery and indirection, took the same delight in seeing the weak outwit and humiliate the strong, manifested the same lack of idealization, and served the same dual function which included the expression of repressed feelings and the inculcation of the tactics of survival. Their greatest point of departure was that human trickster stories were more restricted by the realities of the slaves' situation. It was in their animal trickster tales that slaves expressed their wildest hopes and fears. The human trickster might win his

victories, but they were always less spectacular than those of his animal counterpart—triumphs of the spirit more than of the flesh. He could outwit his master again and again, but his primary satisfaction would be in making his master look foolish and thus exposing the myth of white omniscience and omnipotence. True, he could and did attain some material prizes: rare foods, extra leisure, fine clothing, trips to the city or town, occasionally even freedom. But these were insignificant compared to the material victories attained by the weak in the animal tales: the death of the oppressor, the love of the oppressor's woman, the inheritance of the oppressor's material empire. John could outsmart his master; Brer Rabbit could replace him and in this way give flesh and substance to the ethereal promises of slave religion. But if Rabbit won greater victories he was also forced to become more like his oppressor than the human trickster was ever allowed to. If there was any moral advantage accruing to him it was that he started from a much lower vantage point, but in the end he was as ruthless, as unmerciful, as corrupt as those who sought to control him. In the more conscious and more realistic world of the human trickster stories, slaves never enunciated either these heights or these depths. The exploits of the human trickster functioned as a carefully constructed rationale for the actions slaves found themselves resorting to. They described patterns of behavior which more often than not could with some modification be incorporated into the slaves' own life; they were largely free of ambiguity or tensions; and more than any other form of Afro-American expressive culture they clearly depicted the possibilities and the limits of slave existence.

It can be argued that by channelizing the bondsmen's discontent, reducing their anxieties, and siphoning off their anger, slave tales served the master as well as the slave. In a sense of course they did, and the fact that tales and songs were often encouraged by the masters may indicate a gleaning of this fact on their part as well. But in terms of the values they inculcated, the models of action they held up for emulation, the disrespect and even contempt they taught concerning the strong, the psychic barriers they created against the inculcation of many of the white world's values, it would be difficult to maintain that they should be viewed primarily as a means of control. What the tales gave to the masters with one hand they more than took back with the other. They encouraged trickery and guile; they stimulated the search for ways out of the system; they inbred a contempt for the powerful and an admiration for the persever-

ance and even the wisdom of the undermen; they constituted an intra-group lore which must have intensified feelings of distance from the world of the slaveholder.

SLAVE TALES AND THE SACRED UNIVERSE

The practical, naturalistic universe of the slaves' trickster tales, pervaded by a dominant duplicity and ruled by bodily appetites and immediate needs, would seem to have had little in common with the sacred universe developed in the slaves' spirituals. Yet there are important points of continuity. The slaves' ready identification with animals in their tales revealed not merely a strategy for disguising their inner emotions from the whites but also a tendency to see themselves as part of a unified world in which Man, beasts, spirits, even inanimate objects, were a natural part of the order of things. Slave tales no less than slave songs or folk beliefs were fashioned within this world view and derived much of their substance and meaning from it. Equally revealing is the similar emphasis both spirituals and tales placed upon the need for the assertion of the weak against the strong and the belief that although the latter may control the earth their power is neither irrevocable nor permanent. This dynamic faith in the possibilities of transcendence and the certainties of change made the expression of a tragic sense as rare among Afro-American slaves as it was among their African ancestors.¹

These fundamental similarities should make it clear that for all their differences in tone and spirit slave songs and slave tales were not separate expressions of diametrically opposite attitudes but parts of a continuum in which slaves gave conscious and unconscious voice to a relatively well-integrated and consistent world view. Lévi-Strauss, using the analogy of contrapuntal music, has maintained that, just as the various voices in a piece of music may go their own ways but still be held together by their relationship to each other, so the various levels and conceptual systems existing in a group's folklore may be seen as transformations "of an underlying logical structure common to all of them." The different levels of consciousness within a myth, he argues, "cannot be separated out by the native mind. It is rather that everything happens as if the levels were pro-

vided with different codes, each being used according to the needs of the moment, and according to its particular capacity, to transmit the same message."²

Similarly, the folk beliefs of slaves were expressed on different but complementary levels. The unremitting system of slavery made its subjects not merely idealists who created a sacred universe which promised change and triumph, allowed them to reach back to relive the victories of the past, and drew them into the rich future where the justice and goodness that had been experienced before would exist again; it also made them realists who understood the world as it operated in the present. To have acculturated their children exclusively to the world view proclaimed by their religion would have signified an impracticality that slaves rarely showed. The universe held promise and hope, but it was also dominated by malevolence, injustice, arbitrary judgment, and paradox which had to be dealt with here and now. Their tales prepared the slaves to do this by identifying the forces which shaped their lives and by giving prescriptions for overcoming or at least surviving them. At no point did slaves allow romanticism to dilute their vision of the world. The trickster was often celebrated, to be sure, since in his victories slaves could experience vicarious joy. But he was portrayed in hard and realistic terms. Slave tales anticipated Lord Acton's dictum about power corrupting but would have added to it the now familiar corollary that impotence too corrupts. Slave tales taught tactics for short-run survival and maintenance but held few illusions concerning the costs of survival or the ways in which the world as it was constituted distorted the victim as well as the oppressor. Ultimate hope and faith in miraculous and permanent transformation were compartmentalized in the slaves' sacred world view, which complemented rather than competed with their practical assessment of their temporal condition.

Aesthetically, slaves undoubtedly derived great pleasure from all forms of their folk culture. Functionally, however, these divergent levels of expression operated in very different ways and served distinct needs. Viewed in isolation they each reveal only one aspect of the slaves' consciousness. But slaves did not experience or create the various parts of their folk culture in isolation. On any given evening slaves might transcend their temporal situation by singing their sacred songs of hope, attempt to control it by putting into practice one or more of their varied store of folk beliefs, and understand it and its immediate imperatives by reciting some of their tales. All three were essential parts of the slaves' life. Their sum did not add up

merely to an instrument which allowed slaves to survive their situation, but more importantly it added up to a cultural *style*. Perhaps at no other point in United States history is the term *Afro-American* a more accurate cultural designation than when it is applied to black Americans in the mid-nineteenth century. The essence of their thought, their world view, their culture, owed much to Africa, but it was not purely African; it was indelibly influenced by the more than two hundred years of contact with whites on American soil, but it was not the product of an abject surrender of all previous cultural standards in favor of embracing those of the white master. This syncretic blend of the old and the new, of the African and the Euro-American, resulted in a style which in its totality was uniquely the slaves' own and defined their expressive culture and their world view at the time of emancipation.