

cestors can be continually re-enacted and indefinitely recoverable. By creating sacred time and space, Man can perpetually live in the presence of his gods, can hold on to the certainty that within one's own lifetime "re-birth" is continually possible, and can impose order on the chaos of the universe. "Life," as Eliade puts it, "is lived on a twofold plane; it takes its course as human existence and, at the same time, shares in a trans-human life, that of the cosmos or the gods."⁴

Claude Lévi-Strauss, who found these same cosmological outlooks in South America and Asia, has eloquently expressed the difficulties modern Westerners have in relating to them. As a boy he lived with his grandfather, the rabbi of Versailles, in a house which was linked to the synagogue by a long inner corridor. To the young Lévi-Strauss that long passage was appropriately symbolic: "Even to set foot in that corridor was an awesome experience; it formed an impassable frontier between the profane world and that other world from which was lacking precisely that human warmth which was the indispensable condition to my recognizing it as sacred."⁵ For men and women of traditional societies, such as those the slaves had originally come from, such corridors were absent. This is not to deny that the slaves were capable of making distinctions between this world and the next. Of course they were, and some of their songs do reflect a desire to release their hold upon the temporal present. "Why don't you give up de world?" they sang at times. "We must leave de world behind." Or, again:

This world is not my home.
This world is not my home.
This world's a howling wilderness,
This world is not my home.⁶

But for the most part when they looked upon the cosmos they saw Man, Nature, and God as a unity; distinct but inseparable aspects of a sacred whole.

This notion of sacredness gets at the essence of the spirituals, and through them at the essence of the slave's world view. Denied the possibility of achieving an adjustment to the external world of the antebellum South which involved meaningful forms of personal integration, attainment of status, and feelings of individual worth that all human beings crave and need, the slaves created a new world by transcending the narrow confines of the one in which they were forced to live. They extended the boundaries of their restrictive universe backward until it fused with

the world of the Old Testament, and upward until it became one with the world beyond. The spirituals are the record of a people who found the status, the harmony, the values, the order they needed to survive by internally creating an expanded universe, by literally willing themselves reborn. In this respect I agree with the anthropologist Paul Radin that

The ante-bellum Negro was not converted to God. He converted God to himself. In the Christian God he found a fixed point and he needed a fixed point, for both within and outside of himself, he could see only vacillation and endless shifting. . . . There was no other safety for people faced on all sides by doubt and the threat of personal disintegration, by the thwarting of instincts and the annihilation of values.⁷

The spirituals are a testament not only to the perpetuation of significant elements of an older world view among the slaves but also to the continuation of a strong sense of community. Just as the process by which the spirituals were created allowed for simultaneous individual and communal creativity, so their very structure provided simultaneous outlets for individual and communal expression. The overriding antiphonal structure of the spirituals—the call and response pattern which Negroes brought with them from Africa and which was reinforced in America by the practice of lining out hymns—placed the individual in continual dialogue with his community, allowing him at one and the same time to preserve his voice as a distinct entity and to blend it with those of his fellows. Here again slave music confronts us with evidence which indicates that, however seriously the slave system may have diminished the central communality that had bound African societies together, it was never able to destroy it totally or to leave the individual atomized and psychically defenseless before his white masters. In fact, the form and structure of slave music presented the slave with a potential outlet for his individual feelings even while it continually drew him back into the communal presence and permitted him the comfort of basking in the warmth of the shared assumptions of those around him. Those shared assumptions can be further examined by an analysis of the content of slave songs.

The most persistent single image the slave songs contain is that of the chosen people. The vast majority of the spirituals identify the singers as "de people dat is born of God," "We are the people of God," "we are de people of de Lord," "I really do believe I'm a child of God," "I'm a child ob God, wid my soul sot free," "I'm born of God, I know I am." Nor is there ever any doubt that "To the promised land I'm bound to go," "I walk de heavenly road," "Heav'n shall-a be my home," "I gwine to meet

my Saviour," "I seek my Lord and I find Him," "I'll hear the trumpet sound / In that morning."⁸

The force of this image cannot be diminished by the observation that similar images were present in the religious singing of white evangelical churches during the first half of the nineteenth century. White Americans could be expected to sing of triumph and salvation, given their long-standing heritage of the idea of a chosen people which was reinforced in this era by the belief in inevitable progress and manifest destiny, the spread-eagle oratory, the bombastic folklore, and, paradoxically, the deep insecurities concomitant with the tasks of taming a continent and developing an identity. But for this same message to be expressed by Negro slaves who were told endlessly that they were members of the lowliest of races is significant. It offers an insight into the kinds of barriers the slaves had available to them against the internalization of the stereotyped images their masters held and attempted consciously and unconsciously to foist upon them.

Not only did slaves believe that they would be chosen by the Lord, there is evidence that many of them felt their owners would be denied salvation. On a trip through the South, Harriet Martineau recorded the instance of a mistress being told by one of her slaves, "You no holy. We be holy. You in no state of salvation."⁹ "Slaves knew enough of the orthodox theology of the time to consign all bad slaveholders to hell," Frederick Douglass wrote in his autobiography.¹⁰ Some went even further than this. "No white people went to Heaven," a correspondent in the *Southern Workman* noted in 1897, summing up the attitude of his fellow slaves before the Civil War and added, "Many believe the same until this day."¹¹ The fugitive slave Charles Ball insisted that his fellow slaves refused to picture Heaven as a place where whites and blacks lived in perfect equality and boundless affection. "The idea of a revolution in the conditions of the whites and the blacks, is the corner-stone of the religion of the latter," he maintained. "Heaven will be no heaven to him [the slave], if he is not to be avenged of his enemies."¹² One hundred years later a former slave bore witness to Ball's assertion: "This is one reason why I believe in a hell. I don't believe a just God is going to take no such man as that [her master] into His Kingdom."¹³ Martha Harrison recounted how her master, "Old Bufford," who beat her mother savagely for refusing to sleep with him, offered on his death bed to spend seven thousand dollars to pay his way out of hell, "but he couldn'ta got out of

hell, the way he beat my mammy."¹⁴ Another former slave recalled that when her mistress died the slaves filed into the house "just a hollering and crying and holding their hands over their eyes, just hollering for all they could. Soon as they got outside of the house they would say, 'Old God damn son-of-a-bitch, she gone on down to hell.'"¹⁵ Mary Reynolds described the brutality of Solomon the white overseer on the Louisiana plantation where she had been a slave and concluded simply, "I know that Solomon is burning in hell today, and it pleasures me to know it."¹⁶

Whether or not these reactions were typical, it is clear that a great many slaves agreed with H. B. Holloway that "It's going to be an awful thing up yonder when they hold a judgment over the way that things was done down here."¹⁷ The prospect pleased slaves enough to become part of their repertory of jokes. The fugitive slave Lewis Clarke recounted two anecdotes with which the slaves on his Kentucky plantation used to delight each other. The first described the final conversation between a dying master and his slave: "Good-by, Jack; I have a long journey to go; farewell." "Farewell, massa! pleasant journey: you soon be dere, massa—all de way down hill." The second told of a slave's reaction to the news that he would be rewarded by being buried in the same vault with his master: "Well, massa, one way I am satisfied, and one way I am not. I like to have good coffin when I die [but] I fraid, massa, when the debbil come take you body, he make mistake, and get mine."¹⁸

The confinement of much of the slave's new world to dreams and fantasies does not free us from the historical obligation of examining its contours, weighing its implications for the development of the slave's psychic and emotional structure, and eschewing the kind of reasoning that has led one historian to imply that, since the slaves had no alternatives open to them, their fantasy life was "limited to catfish and watermelons."¹⁹ Their spirituals indicate clearly that there *were* alternatives open to them—alternatives which they themselves fashioned out of the fusion of their African heritage and their new religion—and that their fantasy life was so rich and so important to them that it demands understanding if we are even to begin to comprehend their inner world.

The God the slaves sang of was neither remote nor abstract, but as intimate, personal, and immediate as the gods of Africa had been. "O when I talk I talk wid God," "Mass Jesus is my bosom friend," "I'm goin' to walk with [talk with, live with, see] King Jesus by myself, by myself," were refrains that echoed through the spirituals.

In de mornin' when I rise,
 Tell my Jesus huddy [howdy] oh,
 I wash my hands in de mornin' glory,
 Tell my Jesus huddy oh.

Gwine to argue wid de Father and chatter wid de son,
 The last trumpet shall sound, I'll be there.
 Gwine talk 'bout de bright world dey des' come from.
 The last trumpet shall sound, I'll be there.

Gwine to write to Massa Jesus,
 To send some Valiant soldier
 To turn back Pharaoh's army, Hallelu!

"Good news, member, good news member," the slaves sang jubilantly,
 "And I heard-e from Heav'n today."²⁰

The images of these songs were carried over into slave religious experiences. In a small South Carolina town in the 1850s, a white visitor questioned a young slave about his recent conversion experience:

"An den I went to hebben."

"What!" said I.

"An' den I went to hebben."

"Stop, Julius. You mean you had a dream, and thought you went to heaven."

"No, Sah: an' den I went to hebben, and dere I see de Lord Jesus, a sittin' behind de door an' a reading his Bible."

There was no question, the white interrogator concluded, of the slave's "unmistakable sincerity" or of the fact that his fellow slave parishioners believed him implicitly.²¹ "We must see, feel and hear something," an ex-slave exclaimed, "for our God talks to his children."²² During a slave service in New Orleans in January of 1851, Fredrika Bremer witnessed the conversion of a black woman who, transported by religious enthusiasm, leapt up and down with outstretched arms crying out "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" and then, falling prostrate on the floor, lapsed into rigid quiescence. Gradually she recovered consciousness: "she talked to herself in a low voice, and such a beautiful, blissful expression was portrayed in her countenance that I would willingly experience that which she then experienced, saw, or perceived. It was no ordinary, no earthly scene. Her countenance was, as it were, transfigured."²³

In these states of transfiguration slave converts commonly saw and conversed with God or Christ: "I looked to the east and there was . . . God. He looked neither to the right nor to the left. I was afraid and fell on my face. . . . I heard a voice from God saying, 'My little one, be not afraid

for lo! I am with you always.'" "I looked away to the east and saw Jesus. . . . I saw God sitting in a big arm-chair." "I first came to know of God when I was a little child. He started talking to me when I was no more than nine years old." "I seen Christ with His hair parted in the center." "I saw Him when he freed my soul from hell." "I saw in a vision a snow-white train once and it moved like lightning. Jesus was on board and He told me that He was the Conductor." "I saw the Lord in the east part of the world. . . . His hair was parted in the middle and he looked like he had been dipped in snow and he was talking to me."²⁴ For the slave, Heaven and Hell were not concepts but places which could well be experienced during one's lifetime; God and Christ and Satan were not symbols but personages with whom meetings or confrontations were quite possible.

The heroes of the Scriptures—"Sister Mary," "Brudder Jonah," "Brudder Moses," "Brudder Daniel"—were greeted with similar intimacy and immediacy. In the world of the spirituals, it was not the masters and mistresses but God and Jesus and the entire pantheon of Old Testament figures who set the standards, established the precedents, and defined the values; who, in short, constituted the "significant others." The world described by the slave songs was a black world in which no reference was ever made to any white contemporaries. The slave's positive reference group was composed entirely of his own peers: his mother, father, sister, brother, uncles, aunts, preacher, fellow "sinners" and "mourners" of whom he sang endlessly, to whom he sent messages via the dying, and with whom he was reunited joyfully in the next world.

The same sense of sacred time and space which shaped the slave's portraits of his gods and heroes also made his visions of the past and future immediate and compelling. Descriptions of the Crucifixion communicate a sense of the actual presence of the singers: "Dey pierced Him in the side . . . Dey nail Him to de cross . . . Dey rivet His feet . . . Dey hanged him high . . . Dey stretch Him wide. . . ."

Oh sometimes it causes me to tremble,—tremble,—tremble.
 Were you there when they crucified my Lord?²⁵

In 1818 a group of white Quaker students observed a Negro camp meeting. They watched in fascination and bewilderment as the black worshippers moved slowly around and around in a circle chanting:

We're traveling to Immanuel's land,
 Glory! Halle-lu-jah.

Occasionally the dancers paused to blow a tin horn. The meaning of the ceremony gradually dawned upon one of the white youths: he was watching "Joshua's chosen men marching around the walls of Jericho, blowing the rams' horns and shouting, until the walls fell."²⁶ The students were witnessing the slaves' "ring shout"—that counterclockwise, shuffling dance which frequently lasted long into the night. The shout often became a medium through which the ecstatic dancers were transformed into actual participants in historic actions: Joshua's army marching around the walls of Jericho, the children of Israel following Moses out of Egypt. The shout, as Sir Charles Lyell perceived in 1845, frequently served as a substitute for the secular dance. It was allowed even where dancing was proscribed—"Hit ain't rilly dancin' 'less de feets is crossed," "dancin' ain't sinful iffen de fooks ain't crossed," two participants explained—and constituted still one more compelling feature of black religion. "Those who have witnessed these shouts can never forget them," Abigail Christensen has written. "The fascination of the music and the swaying motion of the dance is so great that one can hardly refrain from joining the magic circle in response to the invitation of the enthusiastic clappers, 'Now, brudder!' 'Shout, sister!' 'Come, belieber!' 'Mauma Rosa kin shout!' 'Uncle Danyell!' 'Join, shouters!'"²⁷

The thin line between time dimensions is nowhere better illustrated than in the slave's visions of the future, which were, of course, a direct negation of his present. Among the most striking spirituals are those which pile detail upon detail in describing the Day of Judgment: "You'll see de world on fire . . . see de element a meltin', . . . see the stars a fallin' . . . see the moon a bleedin' . . . see the forked lightning, . . . Hear the rumblin' thunder . . . see the righteous marching, . . . see my Jesus coming . . .," and the world to come where "Dere's no sun to burn you . . . no hard trials . . . no whips a crackin' . . . no stormy weather . . . no tribulation . . . no evil-doers . . . All is gladness in de Kingdom."²⁸ This vividness was matched by the slave's certainty that he would partake of the triumph of judgment and the joys of the new world:

Dere's room enough, room enough, room enough in de heaven, my Lord
Room enough, room enough, I can't stay behind.²⁹

Continually, the slaves sang of reaching out beyond the world that confined them, of seeing Jesus "in de wilderness," of praying "in de lonesome valley," of breathing in the freedom of the mountain peaks:

Did yo' ever
Stan' on mountun
Wash yo' han's
In a cloud?³⁰

Continually, they held out the possibility of imminent rebirth: "I look at de worl' an' de worl' look new, . . . I look at my hands an' they look so too . . . I looked at my feet, my feet was too."³¹

These possibilities, these certainties were not surprising. The religious revivals which swept large numbers of slaves into the Christian fold in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were increasingly based upon notions of individual, volitional conversion and, in the words of one southern minister, "a free salvation to all men thro' the blood of the Lamb." They were based on a practical and implied, if not invariably theological or overt, Arminianism: God would save all who believed in Him; Salvation was there for all to take hold of if they would. This doctrine more and more came to characterize the revivals of the Presbyterians and Baptists as well as those of the more openly Arminian Methodists.³² The effects of this message upon the slaves who were exposed to and converted by it are illustrated graphically in the spirituals which were the products of these revivals and which continued to spread the evangelical word long after the revivals had passed into history. "What kind o' shoes is dem-a you wear? . . . Dat you can walk upon de air?" slaves asked in one of their spirituals, and answered by emphasizing the element of choice: "Dem shoes I wear am de gospel shoes; . . . An' you can wear dem ef-a you choose." "You got a right, I got a right," they sang, "We all got a right to de tree ob life."³³

The religious music of the slaves is almost devoid of feelings of depravity or unworthiness, but is rather, as I have tried to show, pervaded by a sense of change, transcendence, ultimate justice, and personal worth. The spirituals have been referred to as "sorrow songs," and in some respects they were. The slaves sang of "rollin' thro' an unfriendly world," of being "a-trouble in de mind," of living in a world which was a "howling wilderness," "a hell to me," of feeling like a "motherless child," "a po' little orphan chile in de worl'," a "home-e-less child," of fearing that "Trouble will bury me down."³⁴

But these feelings were rarely pervasive or permanent; almost always they were overshadowed by a triumphant note of affirmation. Even so despairing a wail as *Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Had* could suddenly have its mood transformed by lines like: "One morning I was

a-walking down, . . . Saw some berries a-hanging down, . . . I pick de berry and I suck de juice, . . . Just as sweet as de honey in de comb." Similarly, amid the deep sorrow of *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*, sudden release could come with the lines: "Sometimes I feel like / A eagle in de air. . . . Spread my wings an' / Fly, fly, fly."³⁵ Slaves spent little time singing of the horrors of hell or damnation: Their songs of the Devil pictured a harsh but almost-semicomical figure (often, one suspects, a surrogate for the white man), over whom they triumphed with reassuring regularity:

The Devil's mad and I'm glad,
He lost the soul he thought he had.³⁶

Ole Satan toss a ball at me.
O me no weary yet . . .

Him tink de ball would hit my soul.
O me no weary yet . . .

De ball for hell and I for heaven.
O me no weary yet . . .³⁷

Ole Satan thought he had a mighty aim;
He missed my soul and caught my sins.
Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!

He took my sins upon his back;
Went muttering and grumbling down to hell.
Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!

Ole Satan's church is here below.
Up to God's free church I hope to go.
Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!³⁸

For all their inevitable sadness, slave songs were characterized more by a feeling of confidence than of despair. There was confidence that contemporary power relationships were not immutable: "Did not old Pharaoh get lost, get lost, get lost, . . . get lost in the Red Sea?"; confidence in the possibilities of instantaneous change: "Jesus make de dumb to speak. . . . Jesus make de cripple walk. . . . Jesus give de blind his sight. . . . Jesus do most anything"; confidence in the rewards of persistence: "Keep a' inching along like a poor inchworm, / Jesus will come by'nd bye"; confidence that nothing could stand in the way of the justice they would receive: "You kin hinder me here, but you can't do it dah," "O no man, no

man, no man can hinder me"; confidence in the prospects of the future: "We'll walk de golden streets / Of de New Jerusalem." Religion, the slaves sang, "is good for anything, . . . Religion make you happy, . . . Religion gib me patience . . . O member, get Religion . . . Religion is so sweet."³⁹

The slaves often pursued the "sweetness" of their religion in the face of many obstacles. Becky Ilsey, who was sixteen when she was emancipated, recalled many years later:

'Fo' de war when we'd have a meetin' at night, wuz mos' always 'way in de woods or de bushes some whar so de white folks couldn't hear, an' when dey'd sing a spiritual an' de spirit 'gin to shout some de elders would go 'mongst de folks an' put dey han' over dey mouf an' some times put a clof in dey mouf an' say: "Spirit don talk so loud or de patterol break us up." You know dey had white patterols what went 'roun' at night to see de niggers didn't cut up no devilment, an' den de meetin' would break up an' some would go to one house an' some to er nudder an' dey would groan er w'ile, den go home.⁴⁰

Elizabeth Ross Hite testified that although she and her fellow slaves on a Louisiana plantation were Catholics, "lots didn't like that 'ligion."

We used to hide behind some bricks and hold church ourselves. You see, the Catholic preachers from France wouldn't let us shout, and the Lawd done said you gotta shout if you want to be saved. That's in the Bible.

Sometimes we held church all night long, 'til way in the mornin'. We burned some grease in a can for the preacher to see the Bible by. . . .

See, our master didn't like us to have much 'ligion, said it made us lag in our work. He jest wanted us to be Catholicises on Sundays and go to mass and not study 'bout nothin' like that on week days. He didn't want us shoutin' and moanin' all day 'long, but you gotta shout and you gotta moan if you wants to be saved.⁴¹

Slaves broke the proscription against unsupervised or unauthorized meetings by holding their services in secret, well-hidden areas, usually referred to as "hush-harbors." Amanda McCray testified that on her Florida plantation there was a praying ground where "the grass never had a chance ter grow fer the troubled knees that kept it crushed down," and Andrew Moss remembered that on the Georgia plantation where he grew up all the slaves had their private prayer grounds: "My Mammy's was a ole twisted thick-rooted muscadine bush. She'd go in dar and pray for deliverance of de slaves."⁴² Even here the slaves were often discovered by the white patrols. "Den dey would rush in an' start whippin' an' beatin' de slaves unmerciful," West Turner of Virginia reported. ". . . an' do