

Southern author is finally free to explore the complex humanity of the Negro and Indian. In recent Southern fiction the dark figure has gained markedly in the fullness of his characterization. But in the last two decades racial expression in Southern fiction largely has lost its demonic vision.

Chapter One

Blackness in the Fantastic World of Old Southwestern Humor

Old Southwestern humor, comprised of short stories and tall tales written largely before the Civil War and most frequently in Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana, constitutes one of America's most uninhibited modes of fiction. As Walter Blair describes the Southwestern tales, they were "local, authentic, detailed, zestful; they were distinctly masculine, and they dealt largely with the lower classes."¹ According to Arlin Turner, Southwestern humor's particular expressiveness stems from its unconventionality:

That neither the writers nor the readers of this homely humor considered it literature can be easily demonstrated. And the fact that it originated and existed on a sub-literary level is of very great importance. . . . Thus liberated in considerable degree from the restraints of polite literature, from sentimentality and imitiveness and false elegance, this humor was free to incorporate a realism of materials and language unthinkable in the accepted literary mode of the time.²

Unconventionality still further increased the dimensions of expression in Southwestern humor. As Turner suggests, "One consequence of this greater freedom, accentuated at times by a deliberate rebelliousness, . . . was an audacity of conception and with it a richness of imagery which has given us our nearest approach to indigenous fable and a native mythology."³ This unique variant of local color realism exhibited the capacity to move, with

apparent ease, "from the actual toward the fabulous."⁴ Southwestern humor also displays a complexity which further contributes to its unique place among the expressive modes of its age. With its potential for depicting disorder, it expresses the violence which was integral to Southwestern frontier society. But the Southwestern humorist was ordinarily a professional man. As Kenneth S. Lynn describes him, he was "a lawyer or a newspaper-man, usually, although sometimes a doctor or an actor. He was actively interested in politics. . . . He was well educated. . . . Wherever he had been born, and a few were of Northern origin, the ideal humorist was a Southern patriot. . . . Above all, he was a conservative."⁵ His interests coincided with those of the South's stable middle classes; they required portraying the region as an ordered and self-restrained society. Southwestern humor satisfied both poles of the Southern imagination; it implied order as well as describing violence through the use of an effective narrative strategy, the framework technique. The framework establishes a definitive distance between the self-controlled, gentlemanly narrative voice and the violent content of the tale. In Blair's words:

The circumstances of the telling of the tale were set forth, often with appreciative detail. . . . Then the teller of the tale would be described. . . . Then, in the words of the narrator thus introduced, the tale itself—a reported oral yarn—would be presented. . . . The story itself moved rapidly through its big scene or scenes to its conclusion. At the end, the fireside scene of the opening paragraphs might again receive attention.⁶

In this manner the framework provides an effective temporal spacing; often the tale is set conclusively in the past, and its vanished violence contrasts sharply with the tranquil present. Further, the technique makes possible the transformation of violence into play. "It helped to remove the happenings described by the tale-teller from the realm of harassing reality, to render them less disturbing, more amusing. Recounted in the atmosphere of the

quiet, peaceful fireside, even the most harrowing episodes of a frontier tale might become comic."⁷ As Lynn points out, "By containing their stories within a frame, the humorists . . . assured their conservative readers of something they had to believe in before they could find such humor amusing, namely, that the Gentleman [narrator] was as completely in control of the situation he described as he was of himself."⁸

Spanning much of the range of regional experience, Southwestern humor depicts the relentless violence of hunters, fighters, and squatters with consistent narrative aplomb. Even describing heroic figures such as Davy Crockett and immortal game like the Big Bear of Arkansas, the tall tale maintains a tranquil perspective while through its capacity for "fable" offering an extensive vision of the Southern imagination. But in dealing with the Negro and Indian, Southwestern humor's capacity for fable created a profoundly ambivalent situation. If it were to share the same expressive freedom with which other archetypal figures were portrayed, the image of the Negro or Indian too would swiftly move from realism to fantasy in the tall tale. Yet the racial image contained compellingly powerful subjective associations, the expression of which was taboo in the South. In the next chapter, the effects this situation had upon the treatment of the Indian will be discussed. With the Negro, one response of the humorist was simply to censor the depiction of the black man from his work: Negroes appear in Southwestern tales with an infrequency far out of proportion to their place in Southern life. Another was to employ stereotypes to mask the racial content. Such restrictive techniques are jarringly out of place in this fiction. The choice facing the antebellum Southern humorist was clear: in some way repress the image of the Negro, or through the customary abandon of the tall tale risk the introduction of an unconscious disorder so extensive as to unsettle narrative perspective and transform Southwestern fantasy into an unrestrained expression of the irrational demonic vision.

The Southern humorist normally opted for repression. As James H. Penrod points out, either the humorists "displayed reticence to

treat the Negro at all, " or "they assumed a defensive attitude" based upon stereotype.⁹ The black stereotype usually serves a simple narrative purpose: it places the Negro in a conventionally stable, inferior relationship with the white protagonist, and, drawing upon the sentimentalized Southern illusion of devotion between slave and master, it establishes his harmless benevolence. The description of the Negro in John S. Robb's "The Pre-emption Right," collected in *Streaks of Squatter Life* (1846), exemplifies the typical use of black stereotype: the hero's

only companion [was] a negro slave, who was at once his master's attendant and friend. Kelsy and the negro had been raised together, and from association, although so opposite their positions, had imbibed a lasting affection for each other;—each would have freely shed blood in the other's defence. The bonds of servitude were, consequently, moulded into links of friendship and affection.¹⁰

The development of racial description in a short sketch from Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* (1835), however, demonstrates the possibility for greater complexity in the use of the black stereotype. In "The Mother and Her Child," as in many of his tales, Longstreet is satirizing an aspect of white manners, "exhibiting one of the peculiarities of the age,"¹¹ mocking the "gibberish" used with infants. In this case a very unpleasant white mother, "Mrs. Slang," is trying to quiet her baby, whose crying she insistently blames on the child's black nurse, Rose. The interest of the tale lies not so much in the dialogue used with the infant, but in Longstreet's portrayal of the relationship between the two women. At first their association is described with the author's characteristic objectivity. It is cruelly depersonalized. The white subjects the black to continual vilification and beating, coolly administered without even the excuse of passion: in Mrs. Slang's blows "there seemed to be no anger mixed at all" (116). The black has been rendered passive by white domination: "Rose received [her beating] as a matter of course, without even changing countenance under it" (116). The ugly story of slavery seems expressed in Longstreet's italics.

But this antebellum author's objectivity toward the Negro had its limits. Toward the end of the sketch Longstreet seems compelled to recant the implicit condemnation of the white and complicity for the slave. Mrs. Slang, for all of her inhumanity toward the Negro, is partly redeemed by her relationship with her child: repeatedly she is shown in images of motherhood, suckling and soothing her infant. The point of view about the black in turn becomes hostile. Mrs. Slang throws one of her more figurative threats at her slave: "If you say 'Miss Nancy's bureau' to me again, I'll stuff Miss Nancy's bureau down your throat, you little lying slut" (119). Rose makes no response, and the author tells us why: "Here Rose was reduced to a *non plus*; for, upon the peril of having a bureau stuffed down her throat, she dare not repeat the oft-told tale" (119). Longstreet has concluded his story with an exercise in racial dehumanization which considerably surpasses the crude techniques practiced by his white heroine. He has applied to the black one of the most insidious racial stereotypes, that based upon the white's denial of the black's capacity for human reason, his "comic" inability to distinguish between the figurative and the literal. It is a measure of the importance attached to reestablishing conventional antebellum racial attitudes that in order to portray the black in this reassuring stereotype Longstreet sacrifices narrative consistency in his tale, abandoning his rigorously detached satire for the sake of an intrusive conjectural slur on the nature of the black intellect.

In unusually demanding situations the use of stereotype could become almost baroque elaboration. Such an instance occurs in "Samuel Hele, Esq.," a sketch collected in Joseph G. Baldwin's *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi* (1853). Baldwin, a Southern lawyer, makes use of courtroom tactics to apply a twist to the traditional defensive use of stereotype. He appropriates his opponent's stereotypes of racism in the South for an aggressive defense, concealing Southern attitudes toward the Negro behind a grotesque version of Northern abolitionist clichés, particularly the exaggerations "in a very popular fiction, or rather book of fictions" by "Mrs. Harriet S———" ¹² Specifically, the tale

revolves about the attempt of a Southern spokesman, Hele, to drive away a meddling figure of Northern conscience, Miss Charity Woodey, with a parody of her "prejudices" (291). How the concept is executed can be seen in this one example: Miss Woodey questions, "But, Mr. Hele,—do tell me,—do they *now* part the young children from their mothers—poor things?" (300). Hele in turn spins a tall tale of Southern inhumanity:

There was a great feud between the planters on this side of Sanotchie, and those on the other side, growing out of the treatment of negro children. Those who sold them off charged the other sides with inhumanity, in drowning theirs, like blind puppies, in the creek; which was resented a good deal at the time, and the accusers denounced as abolitionists. I did hear of one of them, Judge Duck Swinger, feeding his nigger dogs ~~on~~ the young varminits, as he called them. (300)

The technique does effectively block our view of Southern racial attitudes; by the end of this antebellum tale, unique in that it purports to deal with the abuses of slavery, we know nothing specific whatever of the Southerner's thoughts about the Negro. But the very elaboration in this tale leads to a hint of the reason for the defensive urgency. In preparing for his attack, Hele follows a friend's injunction: "Don't spare brush or blacking, but paint the whole community so black, that the Devil himself might sit for the picture" (293). The metaphor of brush and blacking suggests the blinding purpose of the narrative irony, but in equating total blackness with the devil it also, surely with an unintentional irony, draws its very form from the same unconscious diabolical associations of the black man which it attempts to deny.

While metaphorical slips such as Baldwin's hint at the existence of repressed racial associations, the use of black stereotypes normally served as an effective shield against further expression. Even as tensions in the South neared the breaking point with the approach of the Civil War and, as Lynn points out, "the Southern humorists were less and less able to control ugly realities by means of [sentimental] myth,"¹³ the image of the Negro is still

constrained in Southwestern humor. All of the Southerner's regional affiliations demanded that the tensions implicit in the racial question be concealed. Consequently, some influence transcending cultural inhibitions was necessary before the fear and violence which underlay the antebellum vision of the Negro could find expression. Full depiction of the black man in the pre-Civil War South demanded both a sensitivity to the region's cultural forces and a freedom from its restraints upon their depiction. Among antebellum authors, this condition occurred most dramatically in the work of Henry Clay Lewis, who wrote under the pseudonym of Madison Tensas, the Louisiana Swamp Doctor.

Although one of the lesser known of the Old Southwestern humorists, Henry Clay Lewis's tales of medical school in mid nineteenth-century Kentucky and of doctoring in the Louisiana bayous have received considerable recognition. Franklin J. Meine included one of Lewis's tales in his pioneering *Tall Tales of the Southwest* (1930). In *Native American Humor* (1937), Blair placed the Louisiana Swamp Doctor stories among the foremost Old Southwestern fiction. Lewis's tales were reprinted frequently in his own time, notably in T. C. Haliburton's *Traits of American Humor* (1852). As his biographer, John Q. Anderson maintains, most of Lewis's stories were "well within the mainstream of frontier humor. . . . [They] attempted to portray as accurately as possible the peculiarities of character, attitude, and atmosphere of a specific region or locality."¹⁴ But, as his collectors realized, Lewis also had the capacity to invest his traditional Southern subject matter, the drunken Indians, itinerant preachers, Virginia aristocrats, bear hunters, and squatters with an imaginative vitality which sometimes gives them a dimension beyond the limits of local color realism. In Lewis's tales realism, as it does in the best of Southwestern humor, carries the potential for intuitive regional fable.

While Lewis's affiliations clearly lay with the South, prompting him to spend his entire life there, to favor Whig politics, and when he could, to keep a Negro body servant, Lewis was a Southerner only by adoption. He was the son of David and Rachel Salomon

Lewis, a Jewish family who claimed ties with Benjamin Disraeli. As a Jew in the antebellum South, Lewis was something of an outsider. At the same time he adopted antebellum Southern values, he was inherently distanced from them. As Anderson suggests, "Lewis's not belonging in the society to which he aspired made him a shrewder observer than most of the lesser humorists of his time" (69). In other words, many of the restraints upon expressing regional taboos were less meaningful to Lewis and tended less to cloud his fiction. One of the inhibitions Lewis did not fully share with his fellow Southwestern humorists was that upon the expression of the Negro. Lewis was one of the few Southern humorists to treat the black man in his fiction extensively and often without stereotype.

The specific characteristics of Lewis's personality compounded the effects of his independence from conventional antebellum inhibitions. An extraordinarily unsettled childhood—in which Lewis lost his mother at six, was abandoned by his father, forced by ill-treatment from one brother to stow away on a river steamer, led by another brother's bankruptcy to work in the cotton fields—seems to have made him seriously unstable. As a doctor, Lewis's instability is legendary: according to Anderson, there is a "story still current in Madison Parish that he was a carefree, reckless, and hot-blooded young man" (52), a "local tradition that Lewis was a reckless young man given to taking chances" (57). When practicing medicine in Richmond, Louisiana, Lewis was convicted of assault and battery; the court record reads: "The State vs Henry C. Lewis: For assault & battery. This case was taken up to be tried—the Defendant plead guilty" (51). Lewis's lack of self-control sometimes may have reached dimensions resembling schizophrenia. Violence in his fiction attains monumental proportions. Moreover, again and again Lewis's darker autobiographical tales give evidence of a blurring of primary psychological distinctions, momentary failures of the capacity to demarcate the boundaries of the self, as in this frenzied outcry in the midst of a medical school brawl: "I had finished giving a lick all round and could hardly keep from pitching into the mirror to whip my reflection, I

wanted a fight so badly" (87).

The form of Lewis's tales also may have been influenced by the disorder of his personality, since it does not share the stability customary in Southwestern humor. As has been discussed, normally the humorist distinguished carefully among himself, his narrator, and the violent material he described. These distinctions were essential to the effective use of the framework technique. In Lewis's case the lines of separation among author, narrator, and persona are obscure. Lewis is a young swamp doctor, recently graduated from medical school; his narrator is a somewhat older swamp doctor, describing the experience of a young swamp doctor from medical school through practice in the bayous. Anderson points out how closely allied Lewis's writing is with his life. The stories are all either fully or partly autobiographical. One result of the blurring of narrative distinctions is the unusually intimate subjective tone of the tales; Lewis's stories are punctuated with emotional outcries, personal confidences, searches for meaning. With the narrowing of narrative distance also came a weakening of narrative control. As do the other humorists, Lewis extensively relies upon the framework to contain the violence he treats. But for Lewis the framework is not always effective. At times, in some of the more ghastly tales, the appearance of temporal separation provided by the framework fades, and, as the sense of the rising violence in which the persona is involved becomes immediate, the author is driven to jarringly abrupt and unreasonable endings in order to place his subject material back in safe perspective.

Instability in narrative control created an explosive situation when combined with Lewis's uninhibited approach to racial description. With the Negro, Lewis was treating material which conveyed a far greater content of disorder than that encountered in his nonracial subjects. Not distinguishing between subject matter, Lewis employed his especially unrestrained descriptive style with the black man, often stressing data which was totally repressed by other humorists. As in Lewis's other tales, the sense of violence in the racial stories becomes quite vivid, as the framework perspective blurs. Yet with the narrowing of narrative distance, an addi-

tional dimension of meaning emerges in the violence of these racial sketches. Again and again, the persona displays surprise at an inexplicable, deeply felt influence exercised upon him by the black figure. The expression of such intuitions about the Negro's profoundly irrational characteristics triggers a disruptive spiral in Lewis's narrative, introducing an additional component of disorder which in turn leads to a more abandoned subjective depiction of the black man. This unstable situation takes the capacity for fantasy fundamental in Southwestern humor to an unduplicated extent, and consequently produces an incomparable vision of the Negro's demonic role. But unchecked, the spiral also holds the potential for an ultimate destruction of narrative form commensurate with the limitless irrationality conveyed through the dark image that the tales express.

Racial treatments in Lewis's fiction display a progression of irrationality, reaching a crescendo of disordered fantasy in the tale written shortly before his death, appropriately titled "A Struggle for Life." In the story, "The Curious Widow," several factors limit the Negro's disruptive influence. Primarily, the narrative depicts a passive black figure; this tale of medical school days involves only the face sliced from a dissecting room subject, the corpse of a Negro murderer. It is diabolical enough: "Every feature was deformed and unnatural; a horrible harelip, the cleft extending half way up his nose externally, and a pair of tushes projecting from his upper jaw" (117). But the object lacks the full import of blackness; its owner "was one of that peculiar class called albinos or white Negroes" (117). Moreover, the narrative directs the destructive associations of the face away from the persona. It is used by the persona to frighten the landlady of his boarding house, to retaliate against her for prying through his belongings. This factor, together with the temporal distance of the anecdote in the Swamp Doctor narrator's history—it occurs early in his medical school career, "during my first course of lectures" (116)—lends the framework separation a special effectiveness. Yet, once the face is separated from the Negro's corpse, the

persona's first action implies the force of its subjective connections. He compulsively separates himself from it, hiding it beneath multiple layers of concealing material: "Having procured a yard of oilcloth, we sewed it to the face and then rolled it carefully up; tying this securely, we next enveloped it in a number of wrappers, fastening each separately" (117). The tactic is of course intended to block the racial object from the person's sight. Vision, however, is precisely the area where the Negro's unconscious associations are most actively perceived. Concealed even further, the face still influences vision. Indeed, in spite of the figure's apparent passivity, in this area it manifests a powerful force: "I endeavored to sleep; but that hideous face, which we had locked securely in a trunk, kept staring at me through its many envelopes" (118). Its disruptive effects upon the persona are marked; he becomes "nervous and irritated" (118). In Lewis's racial fiction, such a state of emotional agitation may signal the start of the characteristic spiral of disorganization. In this tale, though, the narrative distance is reasserted; the persona with a telling ferocity redefines his intent to direct the disorder away from himself: "My heart, at this last reflection, became immediately barred to the softening influences, . . . and I determined in all hostility to *face* her [to use the face against her]" (118).

From this point through the denouement, the persona remains entirely an observer to the destructive effects of the racial encounter. He successfully tempts the widow to open the sinister package. As she does so, the extent of the subjective dimensions of its contents is implied, for the narrator suddenly intrudes to discuss the widow's later death, and relates this "grandest and most awful mystery of our nature" (119) to the opening of "the last envelope of the mysterious package" (119). Her final portrayal does suggest if not death, then a radically destructive disorganization of the self. About to complete the unwrapping, she seems distorted by grotesquely distended organs of sight, as if her personality had become dominated by the approaching racial vision: "There she stood with spectacles buried so deeply 'neath her brows as almost

to appear a portion of her visage" (120). As she uncovers the object, viewing "its awful hideousness upon her extended palm—the fiendish tushes protruding from the parted lips—still wearing the agony of the death second—and the eyes enclosed in their circle of red" (120), the widow appears entirely overwhelmed by her vision. She "gazed upon its awfulness in silence as if her eyes were riveted to it forever" (120). The "hellish countenance" (120) finally seems totally to disorient consciousness: the widow "broke into a low laugh. . . . Her laughter was becoming hysterical. We spoke to her—shook her by the shoulder—but still she laughed on, increasing in vehemence and intensity. . . . [Her laughter grew] fiercer, faster, shriller than before" (120-21). The persona, using medical rhetoric for authority, defines the effects of demonic vision: "She is gone demented" (121).

With the narrative depicting such profound irrationality, disorder again edges to dominate the tale. The widow's hysteria attracts a mob: "In rushed the crowd—a full charge for the room" (121). But at this critical point the effects of a stable narrative form tell, for "ere they had time to . . . make a demonstration" (121), the widow's hysteria is suddenly cut off. The humorous perspective is reasserted in a manner which, if somewhat unlikely, effectively transforms the disorder into joke. The widow is made to give an explanation of her frenzy which redefines the meaning of the racial encounter and relieves it of all its threatening associations:

The widow ceased her laughter and putting on an expression of the most supreme contempt coolly remarked: "Excuse me, gentlemen, if I have caused you any inconvenience by my unusual conduct. I was just *smiling aloud* to think what fools these students made of themselves when they tried to scare me with a dead nigger's face when I had slept with a drunken husband for twenty years!" (121)

Equating the hideous Negro face with an everyday source of domestic irritation brings the story from the archetypal to the mundane, and together with the effortless reestablishment of the framework's temporal distance—"The crowd mizzled; and we, too, I reckon, between that time and the next upheaving of the

sun" (121)—restores order to the narrative.

Many of the mitigating circumstances which limited racial expression in "The Curious Widow" are absent in "Stealing a Baby." While the Negro in this tale is still passive, his form is now complete: in his medical school morgue the persona discovers a dead "infant a few weeks old lying by the side of its dead mother" (154). Although tiny, this figure fully displays the quality of blackness; with a portentous joke its color is related to disorder: "They were both so black in the face that I would have suspected foul play, had it not been accounted for by the fact that they were Negroes" (154). Most important, the disruptive associations of the Negro here are not directed away from the persona. The medical school student takes the baby specifically for his own use, as an object to dissect, and carries it intimately concealed near his body to a meeting with a wealthy girlfriend, where through an accident it is uncovered. Since the Swamp Doctor narrator is relating the account of a personally influential occurrence much nearer to the narrative present, during his "last course of lectures previous to graduation" (151), it must be assumed that the control customarily obtained through the framework by a temporally distanced narrative voice has lessened authority in this tale. Somewhat unstabilized, the narrative in "Stealing a Baby" is more congenial to expressing the unconscious racial associations of its apparently innocent black figure.

The narrative instability is reflected in the unusual disorder which characterizes the persona's consciousness in this tale. Even before encountering the black infant, we find him "becoming suddenly very faint" (153). In this weakened state, he is especially vulnerable to the figure's powerful unconscious influence. When he sees the black corpse he feels an irresistible attraction to it, which is depicted with a lack of inhibition that presages the depth of racial expression in the tale: "I strove to depart, but something formed a bond of association between that dead nigger baby and myself, which held me to my place with my gaze riveted upon it" (154). In the earlier, more controlled narrative, the suggestion of an intimate relationship between persona and black

figure triggered a sharp defensive reaction, and the intent to direct the disruptive associations away was immediately reaffirmed. Here, with the persona's vision as deeply influenced by the black object as was the widow's—now *his* "gaze [is] riveted upon it"—some slight attempt to distance the figure occurs. He again moves to conceal it from sight: "I rolled it, tenderly as if alive, into as small a space as possible, and [tied] it up in my handkerchief" (154). But the distancing impulse is tellingly ineffectual, indicating that a spiral of unconscious motivation already has been set in motion. Instead of acting further upon it, the persona undermines the strategy of spacing by compulsively placing the package under his cloak. This reinforcement of the relationship's dangerously intimate direction seems to commit the tale to disorder, for the black figure's presence close to the persona's body heightens his disorientation sharply. It "unnerved me completely," he reveals, "and gave me such a tremor as would have passed for a creditable ague" (154).

Now, as the sketch nears its climax, description increasingly resembles disoriented fantasy. Carrying the black infant, the persona meets his fiancée. The first glimpse of her confirms the direction taken by vision in the tale. Formerly she had seemed beautiful; now an image of diseased sight is projected upon her: her features are "red as an inflamed eye" (155). Disorientation extends to the sense of foundation; the pavement is covered "with a thin coat of ice, making the walking for pedestrians very insecure" (155). Into this unstable setting rush violently conflicting figures. From one side comes "the lady's father accompanied by a man that bore a marvellous resemblance to the city marshal!" (155). From the other with "a growl, a loud yell, bow-wow-wow! and with mouth distended like an alligator, . . . a huge bulldog sprang at us" (156). Totally disoriented, the young couple whirl and fall, "cross and pile, our inferior extremities considerably intermingled" (156).

In the midst of the disorder, the black figure appears again. But in this disorganized setting it seems sharply altered from its formerly innocent appearance: "My cloak flew open as I fell, and

the force of the fall bursting its envelope, out in all its hideous realities rolled the infernal imp of darkness" (156). With the ordinarily repressed racial associations now subject to expression, its "hideous" overtones now its "realities," the rhetoric describing the black infant fairly reverberates with Satanic imagery. The impression of active influence displayed by the figure stems from its relationship with primordial evil; it bursts into view with "the force of the fall." The influence it exerts is dangerously irrational; it seems "impish," with a dark and "infernal" meaning. The sense of disorder conveyed by the Negro appears sufficient to produce an effect upon narrative form. For in concluding the tale the narrator intrudes into the story, but not in the conventionally reassuring manner characteristic of the framework. Instead he seems compelled to enlarge the results of the racial encounter, insisting that his contact with the Negro ruined his chances for a stable life as "the happy head of a family" (156), and led to his present disoriented condition, denoted by his "haggard features and buttonless coat" (156, 158). This tale, extensively depicting the Negro's association with unconscious disorder, ends with an ominous distortion of the defensive forms of narration.

Yet in spite of the far-reaching implications of the outburst in "Stealing a Baby," there are limits to its narrative disruption, a fact which suggests a final component of restraint in the tale. The order inherent in the medical school setting appears to have exerted an inhibiting influence upon the story. The last narrative restraints in Lewis's fiction fall away, however, in a context free of social organization, deep in the swamp.

The meaning of the swamp for Lewis is surely open to conjecture: he was drawn to practice there almost immediately after medical school, and he gave his narrator the title of the Louisiana Swamp Doctor, and the name of Madison Tensas, combining Madison Parish and the Tensas River, which ran through the heart of the bayou country. With its ceaselessly shifting borders of land and water, its confusion of spatial and temporal boundaries, the bayou seems a congenial environment for Lewis's unstable personality. The resemblance is ominous: in reinforcing an existing

weakness in distinguishing between primary phenomena, the swamp contributes to a further erosion of the capacity for self-control. It is known that Lewis's recklessness reached fatal proportions in the bayou; his death at twenty-five occurred there when he ignored all reasonable restraints and leapt with his horse into a raging stream. In view of the disruptive role the swamp played in Lewis's life, it seems clear that the place exerted a similarly unsettling influence in his autobiographical writing.

"Seeking a Location" describes the sinister influence of the bayou's disorder upon point of view in Lewis's fiction. Initially in this tale, the swamp seems dangerous. The young persona, on a journey into the bayou to establish his medical practice, sees threat everywhere. On a river steamer, he finds himself "seated over twenty thousand kegs of powder" (179), and recognizes the dimensions of the subterranean danger: it would reduce him to "one of the finest instances on record of molecular disintegration" (179). The road into the bayou too is fraught with warning: it is "over knee-deep in mud and dotted with the bones of deceased oxen" (181). Once inside the bayou, the persona is repeatedly subject to the "considerable force" (182) of the swamp current, "impelled" by it toward submerged trees, to "almost certain death" (182), drawn beneath the surface "head and ears under the muddy waters" (182). But with these helpless immersions, a telling shift occurs in the persona's point of view about the swamp. After being "thoroughly drenched" (182), he begins to have "better luck" (183) in the bayou. A strangely violent baptism seems to have taken place, the extent of which is implied by a complete transformation in appearances: "Laying off my cloth, I donned a suit of 'swamp broadcloth'—yellow linsey—which clove to my proportions as if it were an integral portion of my frame" (183). The persona has abandoned his conventional point of view and assumed that of the swamper in which the imperative primordial forces no longer pose a threat. At the end of this tale the swamp's disordered quality defines the point of view; it has become "integral" to the narrative identity.

It is portentous then, that in Lewis's last story, "A Struggle for

Life," the persona has now become the Swamp Doctor, a personality at home in the swamp's disorder. As such he is hardly distinguished from the somewhat older Swamp Doctor narrator, who tells us he still enjoys living in the bayou. The narrowed narrative distance and the disorganizing swamp setting from the start give an intensely subjective tone to the description. A Negro appears on the edge of the bayou. He seems the culmination of the grotesque progression seen in the two previous tales: "He was a Negro dwarf of the most frightful appearance. His diminutive body was garnished with legs and arms of enormously disproportionate length. His face was hideous—a pair of tusks projected from either side of a double harelip" (245). But there is one further crucial step; this black figure is alive, and accordingly all the overtones of racial destruction in the earlier tales take on a grimly explicit quality. The persona's first impression describes a black figure in which diabolical malevolence is activated by physical bestiality: "Taking him altogether, he was the nearest resemblance to the orange-outang mixed with the devil that human eyes ever dwelt upon" (245).

The entrance into the swamp triggers the subjective spiral latent in Lewis's fiction. The pair almost immediately become lost. The bayous are deepening with the spring floods, night is falling, and the persona's vision becomes characterized by a disturbing unreliability: "There, far from human habitation, my only companion a hideous dwarf, surrounded with water, and the night draped darkly around, I lay, the cane leaves for my bed, the saddle for my pillow, the huge fire fighting up the darkness for a space around, giving natural objects a strange, distorted appearance" (249). The deepening subjectivity touches all the persona's perceptions. Sounds too seem distorted: "The night [is] vocal with discordancy" (249). Normal lines of demarcation in his consciousness blur; "the light sank mingling with the darkness" (249), and he hallucinates: "I gazed and started involuntarily. Had I not known it was an owl surrounded with moss that sat upon a stricken tree, I would have sworn it was the form of an old man, clad in a sombre flowing mantle" (249).

In a literal way, the disorder of the controlling point of view is projected upon the black man in this tale. As the persona grows disoriented, with apparent inadvertency he pumps the dwarf full of strong brandy. This has the effect of inducing in the Negro a "wild . . . exhilaration in his manner" (247). Such characteristics are in polar contrast to the normally controlled darky stereotype, a fact marked by the persona upon the dwarf's first drunken action: "'Give me a dram,' he said very abruptly, not prefacing the request by those deferential words never omitted by the slave when in his proper mind" (250). The rhetoric is significant; seen so totally removed from the customary forms of servility, the Negro seems out of "his proper mind." It takes hardly a step to find insanity in the image of this "freed" black man; the dwarf is soon "aroused to maniacal fury" (251). The mad Negro is an image seldom encountered in antebellum fiction, and with reason, for to the Southern imagination insanity for the black was unrelieved; it connoted totally irrational abandon.

A marked increase in the racial imagery's formidable intensity reveals how radical a step the expression of black insanity is for the Southern writer. Racial hatred, lurking in descriptions of the Negro but rarely voiced, erupts: "'To my surprise he retorted, 'D—n you, white man, I will kill you ef you don't give me more brandy' '" (250). Most tellingly, the dwarf's eyes, traditionally a barometric symbol of a figure's narrative role, now evidence a deeply unconscious content. They display the light and fire which characterizes the most intuitive expressions of archetypal power: the Negro's "eyes [were] flashing and sparkling with electric light" (250). The persona again marks the subjective status of the black dwarf, defining the meaning of the radiant imagery: "'His eyes [were] fixed upon me with a demonic expression that I shall never forget'" (250).

Narrative description at this point is committed to expressing an irrationality so extensive as to begin to defy articulation. Under the burden the form of the Negro's image seems to distort: "'I will kill you,' he again screamed, his fangs clashing and the foam flying from his mouth, his long arms extended as if to clutch me and the

fingers quivering nervously" (250). In the two previous tales, the suggestion of such an unstabilizing influence was sufficient to provoke a counter movement toward order in the narrative. In "The Curious Widow" such an impulse involved the transformation of threat into joke in a manner congenial to the Southwestern humor medium. This controlling impulse occurs here too, but in a weakened form. The persona tries to laugh off the danger: as the dwarf "slowly approached me to carry his threat into execution" (251), the vision "presented something ludicrous, and I laughingly awaited his attack" (251). The reaction is ineffectual; in fact it leads to the final step in the process of disorganization. The approaching violent physical contact between black and white it allows constitutes the ultimate taboo in the Southern imagination; as that inhibition falls, so does the last barrier to unconscious expression. The contact brings a hopeless sense of envelopment: "'With a yell like a wild beast's, he precipitated himself upon me. Evading my blow, he clutched with his long fingers at my throat, burying his talons in my flesh and writhing his little body around mine strove to bear me to earth'" (251). The embrace is entirely malevolent, the force seems irrationally limitless; engulfed by it the persona experiences a sense of inexorable dissolution: "'A mountain, heavier than any earth's bosom holds, was pressing upon my breast, slowly crushing me to fragments'" (251).

Descriptive forms seem to have reached their limits in depicting this Southern nightmare. The persona's perceptions become dominated by a curious quality, turning inward. He hears his own pulse: "'Tis wild singing was in my ears like the ocean wave'" (253). Most closely focused on the demonic black figure, the forms of vision waver, dissolve, and are overcome by a shapeless diabolical radiance: "'My eyes met his. . . . All kinds of colors first floated before my eyes and then everything wore a scintled, intensely fiery red'" (251). Finally, overwhelmed by the boundless malevolent force, the persona is destroyed: "'I ceased to breathe. I was dead. I had suffered the last pangs of that awful hour'" (253); "'I lay dead—dead as mortal ever becomes'" (254). The narrative continues, with a feeble attempt at justification: "'Still in that coffin

amidst those writhing worms would have been the immortal mind, and still would it have thought and pondered on till the last day was come. For such is the course of soul and death, as my interpretation has it" (253). But the confusion of the logic suggests the fate of narrative reason in the face of transcendent disorder: this expression of life-in-death displays the evidences of a profound breakdown of rational narrative form. A gauge of just how unhindered by the normal restraints of form the narrative has become at this point occurs in the final, horrified exclamation of the scene. It is in this state that the persona at last makes the identification of the demonic black man's most intimate psychological function. Seeing the drunken black dwarf fallen amidst the raging campfire, the swamp doctor blurts: "Great God! can that disfigured, half-consumed mass be my evil genius?" (255).

As the tale concludes the persona returns to life. The phenomenon apparently is intended to reestablish credibility for the narrative voice and make possible the invocation of the traditional framework perspective. The narrator steps in to tell us that the dwarf has incinerated himself in his drunken frenzy, and that, led out of the swamp by the mule, he has never "looked again upon the place" (255). But the framework technique primarily draws its authority from a simple assumption of reason in the narrative voice. In this tale the narrator himself has been the victim of the fatal encounter with the black demon. The illogic has introduced a fundamental irrationality into the narrative voice, depriving it of the stable associations necessary for distancing the violence it has related. Facing the obsessive disorder involved in the full expression of the Negro demon, the otherwise effective capacity of the framework to restore order has been undermined. The significance for the Southern writer is unmistakable: even the most apparently stable narrative form in his fiction exists in inverse proportion to the intensity of his expression of the demonic vision.

Chapter Two

Demonic Vision and the Conventions of Antebellum Southern Fiction

In contrast to the situation in Southwestern humor, the extent of racial expression in the antebellum Southern novel seems staggering. The humorists, sketching limited areas of regional color, had the option to select material of a noncontroversial nature. Usually that meant they simply avoided racial expression. But the novelists in one way or another wrote in the service of their society's fundamental dream, the happy plantation. Wistful about the plantation, or critical of its inefficiency, the novelists all were obligated to deal with the bedrock of its economy, the black slave. At the same time, in demonstrating the society's resilience against outside threat, the novelists found a reason for extensive treatment of the Indian. In its commitment to racial expression, the antebellum Southern novel, mostly written during the three decades before the Civil War in the Tidewater South by men such as John Pendleton Kennedy and William Gilmore Simms, offers a vast field for exploring the large-scale effects of demonic vision.

In an era when public statement was subject to powerful censorship, when, as Charles G. Sellers, Jr. puts it, "the South's best minds resolutely quashed their doubts, . . . [and] crisis-tossed editors and politicians took refuge in positive and extreme positions,"¹ the expression of a taboo as basic as racial demonism suffered severe distortion. Primarily of course the depiction of an internal racial threat as extensive as that suspected from the black man was anathema. It was imperative to present the Negro as contented and, above all, harmless. Especially with the approach