

THEMES OF EXODUS AND REVOLUTION IN ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*,
MORRISON'S *BELOVED*, AND DOCTOROW'S *RAGTIME*

Tracy Peterson Turner, B.A., M.A.

Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2000

APPROVED:

James T. F. Tanner, Major Professor and Chair
Thomas R. Preston, Committee Member
John Robert Ross, Committee Member
Brenda R. Sims, Chair of Graduate Studies in English
C. Neal Tate, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse
School of Graduate Studies

Turner, Tracy Peterson, Themes of Exodus and Revolution in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Morrison's *Beloved*, and Doctorow's *Ragtime*. Doctor of Philosophy (English), December 2000, 150 pp., references, 80 titles.

In my dissertation I examine the steps in and performance of revolution through the writings of three Postmodern authors, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and E. L. Doctorow, in light of the model of the biblical Exodus journey and the revolution which precipitated that movement. I suggest that the revolution which began with the Israelites' bondage in Egypt has provided the foundation for American literature. I show that *Invisible Man*, *Beloved*, and *Ragtime* not only employ the motif of the Exodus journey; they also perpetuate the silent revolution begun by the Israelites while held captive in Egypt.

This dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter One provides the introduction to the project. Chapter Two provides the model for this study by defining the characteristics of the Exodus journey, Moses as the leader of the Israelites, and the pattern of revolution established by Michael Walzer in *Exodus and Revolution*. In Chapters Three, Four, and Five, I apply the model established in Chapter Two to the individual texts. In Chapter Six, I draw three conclusions which arise from my study.

My first conclusion is that the master story of the Exodus journey and the Israelites' liberation from Egypt informs all Western literature—whether the literature reinforces the centrality of the master story to our lives or whether the literature refutes the significance of the master story. Second, the stages of revolution present in the

biblical Exodus are also present in twentieth-century American literature. My third conclusion is that authors whose works deal with an exploration of the past in order to effect healing are authors who are revolutionary because their goal is to encourage revolution by motivating readers to refuse to accept the status quo and to, instead, join the revolution which demands change. They do this by asking questions which are characteristic of that which is postmodern—not so much looking for answers as demonstrating that questioning what is, is appropriate and necessary.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. INTRODUCTION—EXODUS AND REVOLUTION: A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE.....	1
2. WALZER’S FIVE STEPS IN THE REVOLUTION PROCESS.....	11
3. ELLISON’S <i>INVISIBLE MAN</i> AS AN EXODUS STORY.....	36
4. MORRISON’S <i>BELOVED</i> AND THE CHANGING FACES OF MOSES.....	71
5. DOCTOROW’S <i>RAGTIME</i> AS AN EXODUS TOWARD THE AMERICAN DREAM.....	106
6. CONCLUSION.....	136
WORKS CITED.....	143

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION—EXODUS AND REVOLUTION:

A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE

In this dissertation I will look at the steps in and performance of revolution through the writings of three Postmodern authors, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and E. L. Doctorow, in light of the model of the biblical Exodus journey and the revolution which precipitated that movement. I suggest that the revolution which began with the Israelites' bondage in Egypt, and which was revitalized in the West by the Puritans to justify their movement to New England, has provided a foundation for American literature since. I show that Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Morrison's *Beloved*, and Doctorow's *Ragtime* each not only employ the motif of the Exodus journey; they also perpetuate the silent revolution begun by the Israelites while captive in Egypt.

As I look through the tables of contents of the anthologies that we use to teach literature to undergraduates, the works chosen to represent the Western canon draw upon or respond to the foundational stories represented in biblical texts: St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the poetry of Donne and Herbert, all demonstrate a reliance upon these foundational stories for the basis of their own. Texts that respond in similar ways are easily found in the Enlightenment and on through the Modern Period.

Some works assert the veracity of those foundational stories; some works refute and/or question that veracity.

Regardless of which position they take, through these works authors indicate just how influential and provocative those stories continue to be. Therefore, to ignore or minimize their influence in the works produced in our postmodern era would be ludicrous, and yet to do just that seems fashionable in current mainstream literary criticism. One reason for this apparent oversight might be that critics assume the influence of these foundational stories and find it unnecessary to *say* so. But another reason exists which I think more to the point, and that is an underlying fear that *saying* so would categorize a critic as one who is unwilling or unable to consider other, what might be termed “less conservative,” critical views. I find this shying away from a particular critical perspective dangerous because it eventually will lead to a gap in the field of scholarly research. And the results of that gap, like the results of events in history, may be seen in their entirety only from a future point in time.

Hannah Arendt states, in *On Revolution*, that “. . . all stories begun and enacted by men unfold their true meaning only when they have come to their end, so that it may indeed appear as though only the spectator, and not the agent, can hope to understand what actually happened in any given chain of deeds and events” (Arendt 46). Rather than waiting to see what unfolded when we have a chance to look back, I suggest that we can read works produced in our own era with an eye to the foundational stories to do two things. First, to see what has already been accomplished on the field of revolution—where they’ve been fought, who the victor was, what worked, and what didn’t; and

second, to see how to proceed in order to attempt to make our own revolutions successful.

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon states that “The challenging of certainty, the asking of questions, the revealing of fiction-making where we might have once accepted the existence of some absolute ‘truth’—this is the project of postmodernism” (48). Whereas in Modernism, truths are thought to exist, whether we agree with them or not, Postmodernism questions not only why these are called truths but also whether they indeed are truths and, if so, what makes them truths. Postmodernism is not so much concerned with determining the truth as it is with exploring ideas from a variety of angles, seeing them from new and different perspectives. All this effort is not an attempt to prove truth as much as it is exploring a new freedom in the ability of being able to question—anything. A term Henry Louis Gates, Jr. uses to identify this sort of exploration and postmodern way of looking at ideas is “Signifyin(g)”: a means by which one changes and reverses upon an idea in order to make it new, to make it express an idea in a unique way, a means to draw out new ideas or expand old ideas. I use the term “reversal” to represent those instances which characterize and embody the postmodern questioning as a means of exploring old ideas.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I define a reversal as that which substitutes, revises, and/or inverts elements of the previous text in order to expand or enhance the meaning of the composite story being told. Reversals employ characteristics of their predecessors, but add or change elements in order to reveal additional or alternative perspectives. Reversals expand meaning, broaden perspectives, and reflect changing conditions that influence the telling of a story. A reversal is not just an elaboration or an

embellishment for the purposes of increasing entertainment value. Rather the purpose of a reversal is to add meaning and to broaden spheres of influence.

Ellison, Morrison, and Doctorow employ reversals upon the biblical account of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt not so much, I believe, for any truths it may hold, nor for whatever its moral value may be. Instead, I assert that these authors employ the story of Exodus as a vehicle to tell their own stories. They may use the story, what Hutcheon calls myths and conventions, in order to perform reversals upon it that result in a questioning of the reason why such myths and conventions exist, to decipher what purpose those myths and conventions serve in society and what ideas they convey. Hutcheon states: "Postmodernist discourses—both theoretical and practical—need the very myths and conventions they contest and reduce; they do not necessarily come to terms with either order or disorder, but question both in terms of each other. The myths and conventions exist for a reason, and postmodernism investigates that reason. The postmodern impulse is not to seek any total vision. It merely questions. If it finds such a vision, it questions how, in fact, it made it" (48). In a country which was founded by a people who drew upon biblical stories as models for behavior and decision making, it seems natural that these authors should choose such stories to question and revise in order to tell a new story—a story of a generation which no longer accepts "truths" as truth simply because they have been handed down for generations.

In this dissertation I will locate reversals on the theme of the biblical Exodus in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Morrison's *Beloved*, and Doctorow's *Ragtime* to demonstrate how these authors weave the revolution which began in Egypt into their own works. The biblical account of the Exodus journey has at its center the band of Israelites involved in

a revolution which takes them on their journey out of captivity in the land of Pharaoh in Egypt and into the Promised Land of Canaan. While many of the Israelites were willing and eager to leave Egypt and head for a better life, some were reluctant. The reluctant ones did not see life in Pharaoh's land as all that bad compared to the unknown of traveling to a new place. They thought remaining in Egypt seemed a much better choice than emigrating. At least they knew they had a place to stay and some food, albeit of poor quality and inconsistent quantity. But the revolution, silently going on for centuries, and Moses' influence prevail and the Israelites set out on their journey—a band of immigrants heading for a new land with a promise that life would be better for them once they arrived there.

Before proceeding to the steps in the revolutionary process, the Israelites' journey out of Egypt, and their arrival in Canaan, I will define key terms I use which are integral to my thesis. Those terms are *Canaan*, *Egypt*, *transculturalization*, *assimilation*, and *the American Dream*. I define *Canaan* as that idealized place that individuals or groups seek. Canaan is not a geographical, physical location (although individuals who are seeking Canaan may—for a time anyway—*believe* that Canaan is indeed a physical reality and location); rather Canaan is a state of mind or a concept which the individual or group has determined will offer more opportunities and more chances for freedom and prosperity than the place where they are currently living.

Likewise, Egypt is not a geographical, physical location. The same individuals or groups may believe that a specific place is indeed the problem or the reason for their current degraded state of affairs. They may believe that being able to physically move out of the geographical location will rid them of their problems; however, inevitably those

problems will travel with them to their new locations—until a change in state of mind occurs which allows them to move out of that Egypt location. Egypt, then, is an ever-present or a continually occurring "place" whenever one becomes dissatisfied with the way things are and begins to desire change in order to experience more opportunities, freedom, or prosperity.

Transculturalization is what takes place among those individuals or groups that have moved from one location to another—again, this does not have to be physical movement. It can be movement spiritually or emotionally. The transculturalizing individual adopts habits, behaviors, or mannerisms of the new location, often intentionally, in order to more naturally fit in with those who inhabit the new location (i.e., Evelyn in *Ragtime*). The transculturalization process may appear to be fully successful, and the transculturalized individual may seem to have successfully integrated into the new location; however, the individual's native background will at some point become an issue, thereby serving to reveal the distance that exists between the transculturalizer and the adopted land. The biblical character Moses is an excellent example of the transculturalized individual. He is successful in his adopted environment (Pharaoh's kingdom), yet he never attempts to hide his native roots though these roots continue to mark him as an outsider.

I use the term *assimilation* to describe the individual who attempts to completely take on the identity and habits of the new location in an effort to deny that he or she was ever anything but of that location. Assimilation is a means to *become* someone else rather than to maintain one's original, native identity. "Passing" may be a term appropriately used in this regard.

I define *the American Dream* as that dream which envisions and promotes America as a land of freedom and a land of opportunity for potential prosperity that no place else on earth seems to equal. The American Dream presents America as the country in which anything can happen: anyone can say what they want to say without fear of reprisals; anyone can achieve wealth and success because all doors are open to all people. This dream also suggests that everyone who comes to America will be treated equally and will have an equal opportunity to succeed—however one defines success. The dream also embodies the motto of the United States: *e pluribus unum*, the concept that all people become one because America itself is a land founded and inhabited by immigrants from around the world. And while individuals from every group have found what they came to America for—freedom, opportunity, prosperity—these individuals are the exception rather than the rule. But their successes help foster the idea that the American dream is still alive and well. Consequently, immigrants continue to flock to America’s shores in hopes of attaining what their native countries cannot or will not offer.

With these definitions in mind, my research identifies the patterns of the biblical exodus in terms of revolution and the steps in the revolution process as identified by Michael Walzer in *Exodus and Revolution*. These steps include oppression, liberation, social contract, political struggle, and new society. I show how the movement of immigrants, in the midst of their own revolutions, from their native lands to what they hope will be the promised land—a land of freedom, opportunity, prosperity, and hope—fits the pattern Walzer establishes. I also show that the promised land the immigrants search for and find (that which is at the end of the revolution’s rainbow) invariably becomes another Egypt for them, and the revolution never ends. They will find

themselves once again oppressed by a Pharaoh or by Pharaonic circumstances, disappointed in the prospects their Canaan held for them, and once again waiting for liberation and then searching for a new promised land. This pattern proves to demonstrate that Canaan, the promised land, and Egypt are not literal geographical locations but instead they are states of mind. And inevitably, Canaan turns into Egypt at some point for each character. In Chapter Two, I apply Walzer's steps to the biblical Exodus. In Chapters Three, Four, and Five respectively I show how this model applies to *Invisible Man*, *Beloved*, and *Ragtime*.

Each of the three novels I discuss displays characteristics of the Exodus motif and has characters who fit the role of the leader of the band of Israelites on their journey from Egypt to Canaan. These Moses characters provide the means and motivation to accomplish two things. First, to set out on the journey to begin with and second, to continue on the journey from bondage to the promised land when the traveling becomes difficult. By weaving the pattern of the biblical Exodus into their texts, these authors have demonstrated not only the timelessness of biblical stories, myths, and conventions; they have also demonstrated the inevitability of revolutions which lead to immigrant journeys. These journeys are not restricted to an age or an era, nor are they restricted to a certain type of people. While the circumstances that precipitated each of the journeys vary, each Exodus journey begins with an event that releases the oppressed people and initiates the start of the journey. Before the journey can actually take place, a leader must emerge who can provide guidance to the masses and maintain focus to 1) start out on the journey, and 2) keep the Israelites motivated when the going gets rough. The essential elements of revolution are consistent in all revolutions: a state of oppression while under the control

of a tyrannical leader; a desire for and attainment of liberation from under that leader's control; an opportunity to form a social contract with other members of the band escaping from the Egypt location; a political struggle that demands more freedom and ultimately more power, more opportunity, more prosperity; and finally, a new society founded upon the desire for freedom from oppression with increasing opportunity and prosperity.

Walzer states that a sixth step in the pattern is essential for the revolution cycle to keep going. That sixth step is the inevitable return of oppression—and then the steps of the revolutionary process and the quest for a new Canaan must begin all over again. How each of the authors handles these elements demonstrates a reversal of some sort on the biblical Exodus and the pattern of revolution established prior to and during that journey.

In addition to locating elements of the Exodus motif in each of these novels, I examine the reversals these authors perform upon specific details of that motif. I analyze, in addition to the overall motif of the journey itself, reversals upon those specific details which allow the Israelites to gain their inheritance of the promised land in the first place. An example of one of these details is what one must possess in order to belong to the band of Israelites to begin with and which allows entrance to the promised land in the end. For example, the Israelites' birthright served as their "carrying papers" that authorize them to enter and possess the promised land. The postmodern reversals that Ellison, Morrison, and Doctorow apply to the Israelites' birthright is giving each of their immigrating characters an item that allows their passage—a sort of payment to Charon to carry them across the river Styx. Since America is a land populated by immigrants from around the world, mere blood heritage is not enough to give one the authority to be here. So Ellison, Morrison, and Doctorow provide their immigrants with items that serve as

carrying papers and authorize or facilitate their entry into Canaan. For Ellison's narrator, ironically, the carrying papers are literally *papers*: seven letters of reference; Tatch's carrying papers are literally paper, too, but this time they are in the form of a book, which he created for his daughter's amusement. Sethe's right of passage is not paper at all but a pair of earrings sewn into the hem of her dress. And the fact that she carries *no* papers, but a pair of earrings instead, is a significant reversal of this detail. Each of these items in some way *proves* the immigrants' right to be where they are—either ironically or in actuality.

While considerable critical analysis has been done on both Ellison's and Morrison's works individually, less has been done on Doctorow's. And none has brought these three authors together and compared them in light of the biblical allusions in their novels. The type of analysis of these authors' works that follows in this dissertation is important for advancing the discussion of how Christian knowledge itself is transculturalized in literature. No longer are we able to assume that our literary influences basically and fundamentally adhere to the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Our culture is hybridized, and the new canon must reflect this hybridization. Ellison, Morrison, and Doctorow are authors whose works are worthy of inclusion in the canon, and my examination of their texts in terms of the Exodus journey and Walzer's steps in the pattern of revolution will serve to secure their place in that new canon.

CHAPTER TWO

WALZER'S FIVE STEPS IN THE REVOLUTION PROCESS

Michael Walzer, in the introduction to his book *Exodus and Revolution*, states the purpose of his work: “to retell the story [of the Exodus] as it figures in political history, to read the text in the light of its interpretations, to discover its meaning in what it has meant . . . to argue . . . that the Exodus as we know it in the text is plausibly understood in political terms, as a liberation and a revolution” (Walzer 7). In the following pages, I focus on the Exodus as a motif for liberation and for revolution in twentieth century literature, particularly the literature of Ellison, Morrison, and Doctorow. Using Walzer’s five steps in the revolution process: oppression, liberation, social contract, political struggle, new society, I show how Exodus provides the model for how to conduct and run a political revolution and that Moses provides the model for the political hero who leads his followers in the revolution.

While some have said that Moses’ actions prefigure that of Christ as the Messiah, Moses makes no such claims to divinity or to being the vehicle through which his followers can find eternal peace. Instead, he knows his purpose—which is to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage and into the promised land. We see this same sense of purpose and commitment in Martin Luther King’s speech “I’ve Been on the Mountain Top.” King closes this speech with words that call to mind Moses’ own words in Deuteronomy as he stood before the Israelites on the brink of entering the promised land:

“He’s [God] allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land” (“I’ve Been” 1969). King and Moses are the political leaders of their revolutions who have a purpose which serves a larger end—to benefit the people. These men are integral to their stories because of the purposes they serve, but they are not central to the stories. The people are the real centers of the stories: “Though Moses plays a critical role in that history [of the people of Israel], the people are central. And Moses’ importance is not personal but political—as leader of the people or mediator between the people and God” (Walzer 12). The Israelites left Egypt because of God’s promise that they would inherit the land of milk and honey. Canaan. Knowing how the Israelites came to be an oppressed people in Egypt will do three things. One: it will fill the gap that Edward W. Said says exists in Walzer’s work: “Walzer spends no time at all on what brought the Jews to Egypt . . . It is quite misleading simply to refer to them as an oppressed people” (91); two: it will set the stage for their departure and journey to Canaan; and three: it will help as we begin to examine some contemporary literature in light of the model of the Exodus. In addition, examining Moses’ background and his character traits will serve to demonstrate his political function as the God-appointed leader of the band of Israelites.

The Book of Exodus tells us that the Israelites first came to Egypt as a small band of only seventy people, all descendents of Jacob who had been living in Canaan, to escape the famine that plagued the land. Jacob sent ten of his twelve sons to Egypt to request relief from the famine. Little did the brothers know that the person to whom they made their request was their own brother, Joseph, who years before they had sold to get out of

their way because he was their father's favorite. Now they found themselves appealing to this same brother to save them from certain starvation. Joseph granted their request and invited them to live in Egypt until the famine was over. By this means the Hebrews arrived in Egypt in the first place.

While in Egypt, the Hebrews grew to a vast population that was industrious and gained prosperity (Exodus 1:7, Whiston 66). However, years went by and the original band of Israelites, along with the then-Pharaoh and the memory of Joseph and his influence died away. The new Pharaoh saw the Hebrews as only a burden upon the Egyptian land, though they performed services in Egypt that the Egyptians did not want to do themselves. In an effort to somehow contain the multiplying Hebrews in Egypt, Pharaoh enforced more and more restrictions upon them and demanded more and more work out of them; this, he hoped, would stop their growth.

Josephus' account of these events, in *The Works of Josephus* translated by William Whiston, tells of a prophecy of a Hebrew child that would be born in Egypt who would take over the kingdom (Whiston 66, *Antiquities of the Jews* 9:2:205). In an effort to prevent this child from being born and becoming a threat to his power, Pharaoh began some political maneuvering. He instructed the midwives to kill all male children born to Hebrew women. Instead the midwives told the king that the Hebrew women gave birth very quickly and they could never get to them before their children were born.

Moses was one of the children born during this time. Amram, Moses' father prayed and received assurance from God that his child was that very child spoken of who would take over Pharaoh's throne and that God would conceal and protect him: "Know therefore, that I shall provide for you all in common what is for your good, and

particularly for thyself what shall make thee famous; for that child, out of dread of whose nativity the Egyptians have doomed the Israelite children to destruction, shall be this child of thine, and shall be concealed from those who watch to destroy him” (Whiston 67). Thus, two opposing forces were set against each other.

As a result of Moses’ parents’ careful planning, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted Moses and presented him to Pharaoh as heir to the throne: “I have brought up a child who is of a divine form, and of a generous mind; and as I have received him from the bounty of the river, in a wonderful manner, I thought proper to adopt him for my son and the heir of thy kingdom” (Whiston 68). Pharaoh did not immediately object; rather, “he took him, and hugged him close to his breast; and on his daughter’s account, in a pleasant way, put his diadem upon his head” (Whiston 68). But the child, Moses, showed his future intentions immediately by throwing the diadem to the floor and stomping upon it! Despite the scribe’s warnings to the king, Moses was raised and educated in Pharaoh’s kingdom. The Hebrews placed all their hope in him, and the Egyptians feared him.

Moses’ accomplishments while living under Pharaoh’s roof included leading the army to victory in battle against the Ethiopians. The soldiers reported Moses’ cunning and intelligence to the king, telling him they feared him even more and that they wanted Moses gone. Pharaoh himself had begun looking for a way to get rid of Moses because he had become increasingly concerned about the safety of his rule. As fate, luck, or chance would have it, the text of *Exodus* tells us that about this time Moses encountered an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Moses helped the Hebrew by killing and burying the Egyptian (Exodus 2:11-13). He then learned that Pharaoh was after his life, so he “took his flight through the deserts, and where his enemies could not suspect he would travel”

(Whiston 70). Thus Moses embarked upon his forty years of exile during which time he learned the leadership skills he would need to lead the revolution which would secure the Hebrews' freedom from Pharaoh. Up to this point in the Exodus story, the Israelites are in the first stage of Walzer's revolutionary process: oppression, and they are preparing to move to the second stage: liberation. In order for this next step to occur, a leader must emerge to make this liberation take place. Moses is that leader.

Moses returned to Egypt after the king who had threatened him had died. The Hebrews welcomed him back and were willing to follow his lead in preparing to leave Egypt. Thus, with this support behind him, Moses approached the king requesting he free the Israelites, but the king refused. At this point, the first of the ten plagues began, each increasing in severity until finally, after the tenth plague, the king agreed to liberate the Israelites, and they departed from Egypt.

The revolution that brought the Israelites out of Egypt was a quiet revolution. Nowhere in the text do we read that the Israelites rose up against the Egyptians; nowhere in the text will we find that the Israelites plotted against the Egyptians. Instead, we are to read the account presented in Exodus as though the Israelites lived with a quiet calmness that their freedom was assured and that it was simply a matter of time before God would bring about their liberation. And when He did, the Israelites finally received Pharaoh's permission to leave and actually departed Egypt. They took with them the wealth of the Egyptians, which the Egyptians gave voluntarily while eagerly encouraging them to leave. No lives were lost—yet; no blood was shed. Michael Goldberg, in his book *Jews and Christians: Getting our Stories Straight*, remarks upon the irony of Israel's bondage: "Originally, Egypt's motivation for holding Israel in bondage had been to prevent some

sort of misfortune from ravaging the land; now, however, Pharaoh's courtiers are appealing desperately to him, 'Let the Israelites go! Can't you see the land is ruined?'" (Goldberg 88). In fact, the whole reason Pharaoh had refused to let the Israelites leave originally was that he did not want the land to be ruined by their leaving. He knew the Egyptians would not work the land as the Israelites had; he was afraid all of Egypt would be lost if the Israelites were not there to protect it. And yet by making the Israelites stay, Egypt suffered the ten plagues and the land was ruined anyway.

While the Israelites reportedly traveled through the desert for forty years before they finally reached the promised land, Walzer firmly points out that the Israelites did not *wander* in the desert as is commonly suggested. Rather, their long journey had a purpose: "The Israelites do not . . . go wandering in the wilderness; the Exodus is a journey forward—not only in time and space. It is a march toward a goal, a moral progress, a transformation. The men and women who reach Canaan are, literally and figuratively, not the same men and women who left Egypt" (12). During this time of desert travel, the Israelites had to agree to a social contract—Walzer's third step in the revolution process. The first portion of the social contract is in Exodus 19:5. God gives Moses the conditions of the contract which he is to tell the Israelites: "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people; for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel" (Exodus 19:5-6). The second part of the social contract consisted of the Ten Commandments and the Laws given in Exodus 20. God then gave Moses instructions for building the tabernacle, altar, etc., which the Israelites were to build for Him. He then

gave Moses the final instructions for the Israelites: “Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel forever” (Exodus 31:16-17). But while Moses was away receiving the conditions of the social contract from God, the people were wreaking havoc back in camp. When Moses came down from the mountain and saw their behavior, he exacted another kind of social contract; he called together all those Israelites who, in spite of their transgressing with an idol, were “on the Lord’s side” (Exodus 32:26). He gave the group of Levites that came to him instructions to go among the other Israelites and “slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor” (Exodus 32:27). In this way, the Israelite band was whittled down so that only the faithful—those who could agree to and keep God’s social contract—remained. At last, however, the people repented and God did covenant with them (Exodus 32).

The fourth step in the process of revolution that Walzer identifies is political struggle. This struggle takes place among the Israelites while they are in the desert and before they reach Canaan. During this struggle, the people continually protest against Moses being in charge and they question why *he* should be the one to lead them. In addition, a portion of the people are again whining and wishing they had stayed in Egypt. Numbers 14:1-4 shows the people ready to choose a leader and head “home” to Egypt! Joshua and Caleb attempt to convince the Israelites to remain, but the Israelites want to stone these two for interfering with their plans.

On the other side, God is fed up with the Israelites’ rebellion and He wants to wipe them out. Moses repeatedly appeals to God not to kill His people (for an example of

his pleas, see Numbers 13:13). Here again we see Moses as a political hero because not only is he concerned for the Israelites; he is even more concerned for God's reputation—which will suffer if God *does* wipe the Israelites out.

Numbers 16 reveals another political struggle wherein the Israelites again rise up against Moses' and Aaron's leadership. This time it is the Levites, who have been given a special task by God—protecting the Tabernacle. They apparently decide that this responsibility is not enough and now they want to be priests as well. These sorts of uprisings to increase power are repeatedly recorded in Numbers.

At last, however, preparations for the new society (step five in the revolution process) begin as the new generation of Israelites fight for Canaan (Numbers 21). The political struggles continue, though this time they are between the Israelites and the current residents of Canaan and its surrounding areas rather than among the Israelites themselves. By God's providence the Israelites enter Canaan, and Numbers 34 records the boundaries of the promised land and the division of that land among the twelve tribes of Israel. In this section the rules for cities of refuge and for maintaining each tribe's assigned portion of land are established.

The fifth book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy, sets down the particular rules of the new society in Canaan. This book relates Moses reminding the people of what all they have been through in order to get to Canaan in the first place; he instructs them as to how they are to enter the promised land when at last they do; he provides them with the statutes and judgments they are to observe while they are in the land; and he tells them how they are to behave and how their obedience and disobedience will be rewarded. Thus

the new society in Canaan is formed and God's promise to bring His chosen people out of Egypt and into the promised land is fulfilled.

The Israelites who do finally arrive at the edge of the promised land are *strong* people; they have been toughened by their trials and those trials have built their faith. They are no longer the whining, sniveling band that griped and complained that they were thirsty and hungry after only a day or two of their journey into the desert. They have grown into the people God saw fit to inhabit this land of milk and honey known as Canaan.

The text demonstrates to readers that the changes that took place in the Israelites occurred over time; they did not happen immediately. Generations died out and were born while on that forty-year trek. Not only were the people changed in terms of their attitudes and strength of faith; they were changed in terms of literally *who* the Israelites were. Walzer notes from the biblical text that the majority of those who had been in Egypt and who left with Moses died during that forty-year period (Walzer 12). In their place was the new generation of Israelites: children born on the journey and those children whose own children were born on the journey. This was a brand new band that came to the threshold of the promised land and crossed over.

One of the problems with an on-going revolution, such as that of the Israelites which lasted nearly 500 years and was not over when they entered the promised land, is that the participants may forget—or not know—what they are revolting about. Though the Hebrews had longed to be free of Egyptian oppression, not long after crossing the Red Sea and escaping the Egyptians they were complaining because they were in the desert and had very little water and no food. They were so caught up in their immediate

wants that they were unable to see possibilities for the future and took to blaming Moses for their current condition. Josephus tells us that “by fixing their attention upon nothing but their present misfortunes, they were hindered from remembering what deliverances they had received from God, and those by the virtue and wisdom of Moses” (Whiston 79). Arendt notes that the Israelites’ loss of focus is nothing new or out of the ordinary: “all stories begun and enacted by men unfold their true meaning only when they have come to their end, so that it may indeed appear as though only the spectator, and not the agent, can hope to understand what actually happened in any given chain of deeds and events” (Arendt 46). Walzer concurs and adds that the true meaning of any story is only gotten in retrospect: “the story is more important than the events, and the story has grown more and more important as it has been repeated and reflected upon, cited in arguments, elaborated in folklore” (Walzer 7). I summarize Arendt’s and Walzer’s statements in terms of how we view our own place in time: we cannot *see* our own moments of history while we are in the midst of them. We must wait until sufficient time has passed before they will come into perspective in terms of the larger picture—and even then, the “larger picture” we see is still only a small portion of an even larger picture. The Children of Israel, while in the desert, could not see where God was taking them or why. Though they knew intellectually what God was up to, they failed to see or remember it while in the midst of it. That’s why they needed a leader like Moses who could help keep them focused.

Throughout the tale of the Exodus, details about the character Moses reveal why he is appropriate as the leader for this revolution. He keeps his focus and continually refocuses the vision of the people, he asks the people to consider the *why* of what they are

experiencing rather than just experiencing it, and he suggests they find the lessons in their pain that will strengthen them for the future (Whiston 79). And by all textual accounts, his own faith in the mission never fails. His determination to see his cause through—even after he finds out he will die without being allowed to enter Canaan—provides him with the status of political hero. I see him as an Odyssean character in this respect. He is not concerned with his own welfare or gain. Rather he is concerned with the greater good. This is also demonstrated when while in Egypt he led Pharaoh's army to fight the Ethiopians. He had the opportunity then to work against the Egyptians and ensure that at least some of them were slaughtered, but that would have prevented him from reaching the larger goal: freeing the Israelites completely and permanently. Instead of taking *any* opportunity to hurt the Egyptians, he waited for the *right* opportunity to help the Israelites. However, Edward Said says, in his article "Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution: a Canaanite Reading*": "Moses is not an Odysseus who returns home, but a popular leader" (86). Perhaps he is not like the Odysseus who occupies the majority of the *Odyssey*, the one who seeks adventure and enjoys dalliances on the way. However, I see him as Odyssean in terms of what he learns about leadership while in exile (which Odysseus himself essentially was in during that ten-year journey home) and what he is able to give the people as a result of what he learns. I have no trouble envisioning Moses as that Odysseus who anticipates that last adventure when he hungers for setting sail again with his men, even though he has only recently returned home after a twenty-year absence. It is not so much what each of them will receive while on the journey; it is the journey itself that holds their passion. And Moses—like Odysseus—is human and makes mistakes; he made a mistake when he killed the Egyptian out of anger, and he makes a

mistake when he strikes the rock twice (Numbers 20:11-12). The first mistake is what sends him into exile where he ultimately prepares for his big assignment, and the second is what keeps him out of Canaan.

I have worked through the five steps of a revolution as Walzer sees them and applied them to the Israelites in Egypt, during their journey through the desert, and upon their arrival in Canaan. Next I want to discuss some thematic elements and motifs that occur in the biblical account of the Exodus and which also occur in the Puritan literature, slave narratives, and Civil Rights literature which will lead to my discussion of specific postmodern texts in literature. Those themes and motifs are transculturalization, water crossings, and belonging to a community.

In his work, *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition*, Herbert Schneidau addresses the idea of the Hebrews remaining intentionally removed from the Egyptians during the 430 years that the Hebrews lived in Egypt. Though they may have adopted certain elements of the Egyptian culture that would benefit their lives while in Egypt (transculturalizing), they were not interested in attempting to lose their former identities in that culture (assimilating). Schneidau observes: “deep hostility to Egyptian life kept some—the ideological nucleus of the Hebrews—from immersion and disappearance in the population. They kept their character, significantly, by insisting that they were shepherds, ‘for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians’ (Genesis 46:34); they retained their identity at the cost of being stigmatized” (111). The ideological nucleus to which Schneidau refers was not interested in *becoming* Egyptian. They were not interested in attempting to lose their Hebrew-ness nor in denying the facts of their birth and culture. Perhaps this ideological nucleus began their silent revolution by

clinging to the promise God had made to them—that they would inherit the promised land—and by passing that promise on to their children and their children’s children. And this promise made them unwilling (or unable)—for over four centuries—to assimilate into the Egyptian culture. True, they may have adopted elements of their new, and temporary, land; they may have transculturalized by taking on some of the traits and traditions of Egypt, but they refused to deny or hide their background. Walzer agrees: “One might say of the Israelites that they were natural (naturalized) Egyptians as well as rebels against Egyptian bondage and corruption” (39).

The difference between transculturalizing and assimilating is the difference between the two groups of Hebrews that Schneidau is talking about. Perhaps those who were not the ideologues wanted to abandon their Hebrew heritage in order to assimilate into the Egyptian society, to reap the rewards of living in Egypt. Maybe they wanted to be seen as Egyptians for all intents and purposes. Perhaps they did not want to be singled out or to be “othered” and were willing to give up their Israelite-ness in order to avoid being outcasts. We might even be able to call this group of Israelites political chameleons. However for the “ideological nucleus” of Hebrews, avoiding any signs of assimilation was of utmost importance to them. They took the words of God as a literal prescription for not *becoming* Egyptian. Being shepherds was their form of defense against being assimilated into the Egyptian culture. While this group lived in Egypt, enjoyed whatever benefits Egypt had to offer, and no doubt absorbed some of the Egyptian ways and habits of living (transculturalizing), they still maintained the roots of their Hebrew heritage. In this way, they were enabling the beginnings of the silent revolution that would eventually take them out of Egypt.

One of the key events that marked the Israelites' emancipation from Egypt was crossing the Red Sea. This movement from one side of a body of water to the other provided the symbolic as well as physical separation of Israel from Egypt. Once across that body of water and safely on the opposite shore, the Israelites were forever free of their Egyptian oppressors. This freedom was irrevocable. Goldberg notes that water appears at crucial junctures in the Exodus story: "Each time, its appearance [carried] in its wake and signf[ied] an issue of salvation or destruction—a matter of life or death" (38). The element of the water-crossing that the Israelites undertook became such a significant event in terms of the absolute breaking of ties with the oppressor and bonding together as a community that this same motif is seen throughout Western literature. Nicholas Howe, in his work *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England*, enumerates the characteristics of the sea which make it such a significant event in Exodus literature: "The sea [is] the lot of the exile, the sea [is] the scene for the initiation of the hero, the sea [is] a barrier to be crossed by enemies and friends" (83). Howe shows the significance of these water crossings in literature produced after the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt: "No longer seafarers, the Jews have escaped Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and reached land, and preserved themselves as a folc" (78). This *folc* that Howe speaks of is that intricately connected community to which the members belong. They may be connected by genealogy, by shared experience, or by common heritage.

Crossing the sea (or a body of water) provides a form of rebirth that Joseph Campbell suggests in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. At a specific point in the hero's adventure, she must enter the belly of the whale and then emerge reborn; this rebirth—a sort of baptism—enables the heroic figure to complete the journey and bring home the

boon which saves the *folc* (Campbell 91). Works that employ the Exodus motif also employ a water crossing of some sort. Doctorow and Morrison employ a literal water crossing that takes their characters from an Egypt to a Canaan, as I will explore in their respective chapters; Ellison employs a metaphorical water crossing that is equally significant in the course of the work and which I will in due time discuss.

Being part of a band that is preserved as a *folc* is an important element of the Exodus motif. It provides one of the motivations for the journey in the first place. Howe, in discussing what it means to be a *folc*, draws from the Anglo-Saxon poem *Exodus* for his definition: “*folctalu* [‘folk-list,’ list of group members, genealogy] reveals the poet’s belief that the persistence of memory, expressed here by the genealogical record, is the force that defines a people” (78). So having the persistent memory of God’s promise to the Israelites that they were in fact His chosen people and that they would inherit the promised land is not only what keeps them bound together as a unit after crossing the Red Sea; it is also what kept them together throughout their years of captivity and what motivated them to depart as a unit from Egypt when Pharaoh finally gave them permission to leave, even though at times this *folc*-ness seemed to be falling apart (as in the desert during the political struggles).

Though the ancient Israelite journey out of Egypt and into Canaan has been questioned as to its factuality, it has proven a viable model for some groups who turn to it to justify their move toward revolution. The Exodus motif is a useful model for looking at movements of peoples throughout the world and over the following centuries. Arendt says that “war and revolution still constitute [the world’s] two central political issues. They have outlived all their ideological justifications. In a constellation that poses the

threat of total annihilation through war against the hope for the emancipation of all mankind through revolution . . . no cause is left but the most ancient of all . . . the cause of freedom versus tyranny” (1).

A most notable use of the Exodus motif is in the literature of the Puritans as they made their way from England to Holland and then to New England. The sermons of the leaders of the Puritan migration equated the members of the Separatists and nonconformists to the Israelites as they made their escape from Egypt and Pharaoh’s rule. The Puritans took the concept of the Israelites as God’s chosen people destined for the promised land as a literal model for their own migration. Indeed, the leaders of the band of migrants saw themselves as the improved manifestation of the Israelites; if possible, more chosen of God than the Israelites themselves. Thomas Hooker, in his sermon “The Danger of Desertion,” asks: “who would have thought that Jerusalem should have been made an heap of stones, and a vagabond people, and yet we see God hath forsaken them, showing us thereby that, although God will never forsake his own elect ones, yet he may forsake such as are in outward covenant with him” (65). Hooker here suggests that God abandoned the Israelites in Jerusalem because they made only an *outward* covenant with Him. In contrast, Hooker states that the Puritans’ covenant with God was *real* and they, therefore, will not be abandoned. However, Perry Miller observes, in *Errand into the Wilderness*, that “there was always present in Puritan thinking the suspicion that God’s saints are at best inferiors, despatched by their superior upon particular assignments” (10). Miller’s observation raises the following questions: Was the purpose of the sermons to convince a wavering people to continue in their errand? Were the sermons designed to

persuade them that they were chosen, despite their growing concerns that they were indeed inferiors being sent on assignments simply to get them out of the way?

After all, what purpose does it serve to preach sermon after sermon on the same topic if the people don't *need* any bolstering up in that particular area? Why repeatedly affirm the reason they are doing what they are doing if they have no doubts or questions as to the validity of their mission and its goal? Clearly, these Puritans *had* doubts, they *had* fears, and they wondered why they had ever left England to begin with, just as some of the Israelites wondered why they ever left Egypt. Miller addresses this idea in his discussion of the two definitions of "errand" and the views of this concept held in the seventeenth-century.

One view is that an errand is something run by someone of little consequence and which requires little skill because the task is so menial, which would support those Puritans who doubted the integrity of their mission; the other is that of an errand as something of great import which must be performed by someone who is trustworthy and to whom the errand is highly significant and which has lasting consequences. This view is the one the sermons were designed to reinforce; after all, a revolution is an important event that should not be left for mere errandboys to run. If the Puritans could see themselves as among the elect, called out to do something only they could do, then they would continue their revolutionary work with their original conviction and dedication. And part of their justification for doing what they were doing to begin with was to increase their chances to succeed and improve their stations. Arendt notes that: "the conviction that life on earth might be blessed with abundance instead of being cursed by scarcity, was prerevolutionary and American in origin; it grew directly out of the

American colonial experience” (15). Using the Exodus motif, then, for running their revolution made sense. For Walzer, the Exodus “isn’t a story told everywhere; it isn’t a universal pattern; it belongs in the West” (133). America was seen as the land of opportunity for the Puritans—a promised land—as Canaan was seen by the Israelites. America is perceived as this promised land today, as we can see by the myriads of foreign souls who attempt to immigrate into the United States by crossing rivers, by traveling across rough seas confined inside cargo containers, by attempting to row in inadequate boats for hundreds of miles just to reach America’s shores.

Hooker was not alone in his opinion that the Puritans were a vast improvement over the Israelites. John Cotton uses the Israelites as an example of what *not* to do. In his sermon, “God’s Promise to His Plantations,” he holds the Israelites up as an example of bad behavior and fallenness before God. He cautions parents to raise their children in such a way that they will not fall away from the faith: “have a tender care that you look well to the plants that spring from you, that is, to your children, that they do not degenerate as the Israelites did; after which they were vexed with afflictions on every hand” (80). And John Winthrop’s much-quoted sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” testifies to the Puritans to their being the elect as well:

The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of his wisdom, power, goodness, and truth than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when he shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of

succeeding plantations, “the Lord make it like that of New England.” For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill [Matthew 5:14-15]. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. (91)

Thus begins the use of the Exodus motif in literature in America. The next use of the Exodus motif I examine is in the slave religions in America.

Albert J. Raboteau, in his book *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, examines the evolution of religion for Africans and, later, African-Americans. He traces the roots of the various African religions and explores their mutations and adaptations in cultures outside of Africa and in the New World as a result of the exportation of Blacks from Africa as slaves. He draws from the works of E. Franklin Frazier to support his argument: “It is Frazier’s position that the process of enslavement and the passing of earlier generations born in Africa destroyed the culture of the slaves. The vacuum thus created was filled by Christianity, which became the bond of social cohesion. The new worldview which gave meaning to life as Christianity, articulated in the images and stories of the Bible, as accepted by the slaves and celebrated in their spirituals” (Raboteau 52-53). But before the vacuum could be filled it had to be created, and this began long before the slaves set foot on American soil.

Raboteau suggests that “Deculturation began . . . on the other side of the Atlantic, before the Africans even set foot on the slave ships” (53). Partially as a result of intertribal warfare, many Africans were taken from their native tribes and thrust in among

conquering tribes whose beliefs and practices differed from their own (Frazier 1). In order to survive, the captured Africans learned to adapt to the new environment. Then when those same Africans were sold and/or captured into slavery and brought to America they were made to undergo a “seasoning” process which required the prohibition of African languages. Franklin E. Frazier, in his work *The Negro Church*, says: “If by chance slaves who spoke the same African language were thrown together, it was the policy on the part of the masters to separate them” (4). While this one step served to further unsettle and isolate the Africans, and thereby make them adapt to their new conditions quickly, the next method took away any hope that the Africans might find solace with their fellow plantation dwellers whose skin happened to be of similar hue: “‘Salt-water’ (African-born) Negroes were looked down upon by slaves already used to the ways of plantation America, and social pressure was exerted upon them to learn new customs” (Raboteau 53). Frazier affirms: “Apparently from all reports, these new slaves with their African ways were subjected to the disdain, if not hostility, of Negroes who had become accommodated to the plantation régime and had acquired the ways of their new environment” (3). Again, they were made to undergo a deculturation process that not only separated them from all they knew previously, but demanded that they *give up* what they knew and take on an entirely new culture with its own customs and belief systems. The quashing of the native spirit was total. Frazier agrees: “It is impossible to establish any continuity between African religious practices and the Negro Church in the United States . . . the Negroes were plunged into an alien civilization in which whatever remained of their religious myths and cults had no meaning whatever” (6). Raboteau says: “African memories were forgotten, African patterns of behavior and attitudes

toward the world lost their meaning. Slaves had to develop 'new habits and attitudes' in order 'to meet new situations'" (54). They had to transculturalize in order to survive. Frazier notes that many Africans committed suicide during the middle passage and some after they arrived in their new environment, but "The vast majority of the slaves submitted to their fate and in their confusion and bewilderment sought a meaning for their existence in the new white man's world" (10). And they found that meaning in the story of the Exodus which was, ironically, given to them by their oppressors.

In an effort to prevent any potential revolt that might be generated as a result of the Africans practicing their own religions on the plantations, the whites attempted to eradicate any vestiges of African tendencies left in their slaves. Frazier states that "whites were always on guard against African religious practices which could provide an opportunity for slave revolts, and they outlawed such practices" (10). Though slave owners hesitated to teach their slaves about the Bible because laws were in place which forbade teaching slaves to read and write, they also feared "that their slaves would find in the Bible the implications of human equality which would incite the Negro to make efforts to free himself" (Frazier 10). But the whites found enough support for slavery in the New Testament that they decided these fears were unfounded. By acquainting the slaves with the Bible, the whites thought they would instead subdue any rebellious tendencies the slaves may have and keep them more tractably under oppression; what they did instead was give the slaves not only solace, which they found in the scriptures, but also a means of hope. Many of the Africans educated in Christian beliefs saw parallels between themselves and the Israelites under captivity in Egypt. Raboteau cites W. G. Kiphant, a Union Army chaplain, who disapproved of the slaves appropriating the

story of the biblical Exodus for their own story: “There is no part of the Bible with which they are so familiar as the story of the deliverance of the children of Israel. Moses is their *ideal* of all that is high, and noble and perfect, in man. I think they have been accustomed to regard Christ not so much in the light of a *spiritual* Deliverer, as that of a second Moses who would eventually lead *them* out of their prison-house of bondage” and into liberation (311-12). The Exodus story, with all of its trials and disappointments and the eventual victory won by the Israelites, provided hope for the African slaves in America that eventually they would one day be set free: “The story of Israel’s exodus from Egypt helped make it possible for the slaves to project a future radically different from their present. From other parts of the Bible, especially the prophetic and apocalyptic books, the slaves drew descriptions which gave form and, thus, assurance to their anticipation of deliverance” (Raboteau 312).

The Israelites while in bondage in Egypt knew they were God’s chosen people; they knew also that they had the promise of Canaan awaiting them after their release from Pharaoh’s oppression. Though they attained their promised land, it was not without much complaining and periods of regret that they’d ever left Egypt. Their journey to the promised land required that they continue to suffer and die so that those who *did* arrive in Canaan were the most committed to God and the most confident in God’s ability to provide for them. This period of confidence, however, did not ensure that that confidence would continue nor that they would continue to live according to the covenant to which they had agreed.

The Puritans drew upon the story of the Israelites and their captivity in order to justify their departure from the motherland and establish their own realm in New

England. An early reversal they performed upon the story was to see themselves as God's chosen people, of a degree superior to that of Israel's chosenness; this vision of themselves provided the means of argument and the confidence they needed to make their break with England and establish new territories in America which they saw as God's promised land, the New Canaan.

The Africans under bondage of slavery in America drew upon the Exodus story in order to find hope for one day being freed from that bondage and to begin their own silent revolution. For them, the Exodus motif provided the framework to see their masters as Pharaoh and themselves confined in an Egypt from which God promised they would eventually escape. Canaan in this case was, for some, a place—Africa—to which they hoped to return upon being set free either through death or through receiving free papers; and for others a state of being. For this group, Canaan was simply being free: being released from their masters' control, being able to establish *and maintain* family ties, and being able to move about at will. The irony here is that for the white Puritans, America was Canaan; but for the enslaved Africans, America was Egypt. And the European immigrants who came to America in the late 1800s and early 1900s expected America to be their Canaan, too; but the reality was that for the majority it turned out to be yet another Egypt. I demonstrate how this occurs, in Chapter Five when I discuss Tateh in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*.

The model of the Exodus as a revolution provides the framework for the Puritan revolt and their departure from England for New England. This model also works in slave literature and slave religion. Just as the revolution among the Israelites began silently in Egypt, so the same sort of movement began silently in the African slave community in

America. This revolution seemingly culminated with the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. But in reality Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech recalls similar issues with which the Puritan sermons and slave spirituals dealt. The Civil Rights movement was a continuation of the silent revolution begun in the slave cabins.

Contemporary postmodern literature is still dealing with this silent revolution. Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a later manifestation of that same working out of the slave revolt. Invisible Man is free from slavery, yes; but he is now invisible, a nonpresence. The novel, *Invisible Man*, is a revolution treatise against invisibility and for the rights of Black Americans.

Morrison's *Beloved* revives the revolution begun during the era of slavery in order to demonstrate that without unity within the Black community, the revolution *cannot* be successful. *Beloved* is also a reminder to postmodern readers that the revolution is not over; it has not been successfully completed. *Beloved* is also a call to readers who are unaware that a revolution of this sort ever even began, for those who are unaware of its beginnings in slavery, brought through the 1960s and still brewing today. Morrison's work shows us that this slow, subtle revolution *must* continue and Blacks *must* remember the promise of the Exodus (just as the Israelites had to remember it for 430 years) in order to be ready to move when the time is right. This work is also a call to all cultures and ethnicities, and even social groups, to beware of participating in acts of oppression in any form.

Doctorow's *Ragtime* demonstrates along with *Beloved* that the revolt with which we should be concerned is not just a Black/white issue. His work brings together a variety of characters who provide examples of all groups who are subjected to oppression and

who may become involved in the silent revolution and why they are involved. His novel demonstrates the need for revolt across social, racial, and economic lines. His is a call for a revolution of society across the board.

I agree with Hannah Arendt that the revolutions I am describing above and through the literature I use in this dissertation that we are in the midst of a “permanent revolution”: “It was not in our time but in the middle of the nineteenth century that the term ‘permanent revolution,’ . . . was coined (by Proudhon) and, with it, the notion that ‘there never has been such a thing as several revolutions, that there is only one revolution, selfsame and perpetual’” (Arendt 44). Revolution is consistent and ongoing. The players may change, but the revolution is permanent; we will *always* be in a state of revolution until true freedom is consistently and permanently found around the world. In the United States right now the focus (for the past 100+ years) has been on the Black/white issue, but the revolution involves much more than that one issue. It involves economic freedom—across the board; it involves making educational opportunities available and accessible—across the board; it involves ensuring a high quality of life—across the board. The revolution will continue but the players will change, whether the lines are color, ethnicity, income bracket, or something else. The revolution goes on into perpetuity. And literature will continue to reflect, and even help construct, the changing parameters of that revolution and the effects that are being wrought as a result.

CHAPTER THREE

ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN* AS AN EXODUS STORY

“The problem for me is to get from A to B to C. My anxiety about transitions greatly prolonged the writing of my book.” Ralph Ellison, from “The Art of Fiction,” in *Shadow and Act*.

Jong Lee Kun remarks on the vastness of the works of literature which have influenced Ralph Ellison's writing. He comments, in his article “Ellison's Racial Variations on American Themes,” upon “the incredible range of Ellison's allusions. Scholars have noted or demonstrated Ellison's allusions to almost every major writer in the European, American, and African American literary traditions” (421). But Kun asserts that one “invisible” influence remains: that of Ellison's “indebtedness to early nineteenth-century American literary nationalism” (421). I suggest that Ellison's literary influences go beyond even those Kun suggests. While Ellison's works certainly reflect the influence of European, American, and African American literary traditions, as well as early nineteenth-century American literary nationalism, at least one more literary tradition exists to which Ellison is indebted: that of the literature of the Bible, specifically the text of the Pentateuch which tells the story of Moses and the Israelites and their Exodus journey out of Egypt and into Canaan.

The protagonist of *Invisible Man*, the unnamed narrator whom I shall refer to as Invisible Man, is a naïve protagonist who is telling his own story of growth while looking backward over the years he spent naively following other people's beliefs and claiming

them for his own. The book as a whole resembles the biblical book of Deuteronomy in which Moses relates the events which lead up to the Israelites' arrival at the edge of the promised land. Just as Moses reminds his listeners, and later his readers, about the years the Israelites spent in the wilderness, the faithfulness of God throughout their journey, and the covenants they made with God, so too Invisible Man "reminds" his readers about the events that have led up to his first entering and then preparing to emerge from his exile in the coal cellar and return to life above ground. Ellison does this through a series of reversals. According to Ellison's own comments on his protagonist, Invisible Man "must assert and achieve his own humanity; he cannot run with the pack and do this—this is the reason for all the reversals" (Ellison, *Shadow* 179-80). Just one of the reversals upon the biblical text Ellison performs is that of changing the order of telling the events surrounding the Israelites' journey out of Egypt, through the desert, and into Canaan. In the Pentateuch, these events have already been completed while Invisible Man's "Moses story" is just beginning. I call his story a Moses story because Invisible Man is the character in the novel who most closely resembles the biblical Moses and the events of his life which set him up as a leader of the Israelite people in their revolution.

I suggest that Invisible Man's Moses story is just beginning because at the point he is telling his story, Invisible Man is still in exile. He has not yet returned to Egypt after learning the lessons of leadership he needs in order to lead the Harlemites out of their Egyptian bondage. He learns these lessons while in exile in the coal cellar as Moses learned his while in exile among the Midianites. His story begins with telling readers what precipitated his time in exile. Though the story Invisible Man tells provides the background readers need to understand his character in the novel, this story can also be

seen as a propaganda medium designed to support Invisible Man as the best choice for Harlem's new Moses. If this is the case, then since the revolution has been ongoing, it has reached a point where the people are ready for a leader who will show them the way out of their bondage. Their revolution has received some guidance and some semblance of organization by the Brotherhood and the other Black speakers it has employed (i.e., Tod Clifton); but the real revolution which Invisible Man will likely lead will be more focused, more purposeful, and probably more successful because of what he has learned while working for the Brotherhood and from the years he spent failing to discover who he was. The events Invisible Man relates up to the physical end of the novel set the stage for him to emerge as the chosen leader of the revolutionary movement in Harlem. He will be Harlem's Moses, himself an immigrant from another land (the South) essentially raised into his manhood in the land of the Pharaohs, which is Harlem itself—so long as the Brotherhood controls it.

What prepares Invisible Man to be Harlem's Moses is his willingness to use himself as an example of how *not* to behave, and his willingness to expose his own weaknesses as a means to help others overcome their own. Ellison states: "In the Epilogue the hero discovers what he had not discovered throughout the book: you have to make your own decisions; you have to think for yourself . . . The hero's invisibility is not a matter of being seen, but a refusal to run the risk of his own humanity, which involves guilt . . . It is what the hero refuses to do in each section which leads to further action" (*Shadow* 179). The further action of which Ellison speaks provides the basis of the consequences Invisible Man suffers and which ultimately prepare him for his Moses mission in Harlem. Ellison's strategy to relate Invisible Man's actions and consequences

is to employ the sort of reversals which I discussed in my introduction: reversals in which authors draw from other texts and then reverse upon the events in the text in order to enhance the message of the story. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. provides five slave narratives in his work, *Signifying Monkey*, which demonstrate the concept of signifyin(g) of which he speaks. Each of these narratives takes elements from those which precede it and change those elements. By making these changes (reversals), the meaning of the story changes and is enhanced—thereby furthering the potential impact of the story and reflecting changes which have taken place. I find a similar pattern of reversals in Ellison's work. The reversal to which I will now refer is that which Ellison makes upon the character, Moses, in the Exodus story. I will use Michael Goldberg's term and refer to the Exodus story as the *master* story.

The master story of the Exodus could be said to be *about* Moses, but the story of Moses is a useless story unless we have God's promise to the Israelites, their oppression in Egypt, and their move to revolution to which to relate it. Though Moses plays a significant role in the master story of the Israelites, and even though Moses dominates the events recorded in the Pentateuch, the story is not *about* Moses; he is just one part of the larger story the Pentateuch tells.

While the focus of the Exodus and desert journey is on the Israelites as a whole, Ellison performs a reversal upon the Pentateuch by making the story *about* Invisible Man rather than about the Harlemites specifically and Blacks in general. The master story of the Israelites is about the oppression they, as a people, suffered while under Pharaoh; it is about how their liberation as a group was secured from Egyptian authority. The portion of the story that tells of their actual departure from Egypt and their journey in the

wilderness was about *a people* learning obedience, being purged, and preparing to enter Canaan. One of the reversals I see modern texts performing on the biblical master story is that the modern texts are about the *individual*, not about a people as a whole. The focus of the lens narrows from the view of a group as a whole, as in the Exodus story, to the view of the individual, as we see in *Invisible Man*. Ellison says in an interview included in *Shadow and Act* that “All novels are about certain minorities: the individual is a minority. The universal in the novel . . . is reached only through the depiction of the specific man in a specific circumstance” (170). Thus, Ellison’s reversal is to use this narrow lens to view an individual in the larger group, and to use that individual as a means of relating to the whole group.

One way in which Ellison narrows the lens is by showing readers that the Brotherhood would still exist without *Invisible Man*; Harlem and the racial strife during the 1950s would still take place without *Invisible Man*; but his novel *Invisible Man* would not exist without *Invisible Man*’s presence. And this, too, demonstrates Ellison’s reversal upon the Bible and modern texts. The reversal which Ellison performs upon the biblical text has his novel presenting the story of the individual which the biblical text de-emphasizes. While Moses appears to be central to the text, he truly is not—except as the individual whom God uses to secure the Israelites’ release from Canaan. We see when God denies Moses entry into Canaan that Moses is important to the story but not essential for its completion. Moses accepts, apparently without argument, that he will not be allowed to enter Canaan. I cannot imagine *Invisible Man*—after his exile in the coal cellar—quietly accepting that he will not be allowed to partake of the boon. The *Invisible Man* who emerges from the cellar is no longer one who will accept blame for someone

else's wrongdoing. He no longer will simply roll over and allow others to use him as their scapegoat. Invisible Man's new assertiveness is apparent in Ellison's introduction to the novel. Here Ellison tells readers that Invisible Man intruded upon him while he was writing another story: "I was most annoyed to have my efforts interrupted by an ironic, down-home voice that struck me as being as irreverent as a honky-tonk trumpet" (*Invisible* xv). He had not intended to write a novel about this character, but the character showed up and would not leave until the novel was written: "as I tried to visualize the speaker I came to relate him to those ongoing conflicts, tragic and comic, that had claimed my group's energies since the abandonment of the Reconstruction. And after coaxing him into revealing a bit more about himself, I concluded that he was without question a 'character'" (*Invisible* xviii-xix). And unlike the character of Moses in the Pentateuch, who is, as I said earlier, an accessory to the story and not the reason *for* the story, Invisible Man *is* the reason for Ellison's story. And perhaps having this character present satisfies in us some personal element missing in that master story.

Yet even modern texts are about the whole even though the focus may be on the individual. Readers can learn from the one how the whole could function. The individual is a microcosm of the unit. The "type" character embodies *all* the failings of the group. And Invisible Man performs this function in Ellison's novel. And even in using this type character, Ellison is modeling upon previous texts. The Puritans' revolt in America which resulted in westward expansion was motivated by elevating the individual over the group. The American Dream is not satisfied simply by putting one's feet on America's shores. The American Dream, for freedom, opportunity, and prosperity, continued for the Puritans even after they gained their liberation from England. But to remain in the east

with the land becoming crowded and limited opportunity for owning land led the settlers to move westward, to find new places and new spaces. While on the one hand this movement could be seen as benefiting the group—by finding new resources, spreading out, and increasing opportunities for commerce—it is easy to read this movement as individuals wanting more for themselves and leaving the group behind. Both views are valid.

The advantage Ellison has by telling Invisible Man's story as that of an individual's personal quest is in the reader's ability to empathize with the character without feeling as though one's own failings are being thrown in one's face. Ellison's choice of telling this story in the first person removes any opportunity for finger-pointing at the reader. And what Invisible Man demonstrates by telling the story of himself as a naïve boy, hungry for power and a leadership position, is that because of his prolonged naivete and his unwillingness to think for himself, he failed in his early attempts at leadership. Through this story of himself, Invisible Man demonstrates that one cannot be a leader simply because one *desires* to be a leader; rather, leadership skills must be learned, and the most effective way to learn to lead is by 1) looking back at past mistakes and noticing the reasons for those mistakes, and 2) modifying behaviors which allowed those mistakes to occur in the first place. Ellison is clearly adapting the story the Book of Exodus tells about Moses and his rise to the position of leader of the Hebrews and mediator between God and Pharaoh. Making the story personal by having Invisible Man tell about himself is one of Ellison's reversals of this biblical text.

Ellison's reversals provide a comedic quality which the biblical account does not have. Robert O'Meally sees the young Invisible Man as a slapstick comedian in his

attempts at leadership. In his introduction to *New Essays on Invisible Man*, O'Meally states: "Like a slapstick comedian, Invisible Man finds that his efforts to stop being 'run' fail conspicuously; indeed, they consistently produce effects in comic opposition to those he intends" (15). Examples of these comic oppositions to which Invisible Man is subjected are his attempt to give his graduation speech and having to do so with a mouth full of blood, his driving tour with Mr. Norton that was supposed to win Mr. Norton's confidence and support but which instead ends with Invisible Man being kicked out of school, and his attempts to help unify the community of Harlem which instead spark a race riot. Each event is undertaken with good intentions and pure motives, but each event ends in disaster precisely because Invisible Man is naïve and has yet to find his own place within the system, or to discover his own identity. Similarly, Moses had good intentions when he killed the Egyptian who was beating the Hebrew; but his actions had a reverse effect, and he was forced to flee Egypt.

Whereas Moses is presented as a humble man of outstanding leadership abilities, Invisible Man provides a stark contrast to Moses by repeatedly relating instances of his quest for power and respect. I see this as Ellison's effort to hold Invisible Man up as a model for how *not* to behave if one aspires to be a leader. But one could also read this as an ironic reversal: Invisible Man could be seen as relating these instances as a means to excuse his foolish behavior; however, this sort of reading would completely undermine his suggestions in the Epilogue that he has finally learned responsibility. Reading this text as an example of the former rather than the latter, his repeated examples of his failings can be synthesized into proverbial sayings: while the fool does that, the wise man does this. For example, while the fool blindly trusts those whom he upholds as heroes and fails

to see them as they really are, the wise man examines those whom he would chose as heroes, to see if they are truly deserving of that title. If not, he moves on to find another hero. While the fool refuses to know and understand his own mind, the wise man seeks first to know himself before jumping on the bandwagons of others. Both proverbs show Invisible Man's behavior as that of the fool.

Invisible Man gives us example after example of this type of proverb pattern in his pre-exile life. Critics suggest that all his foolishness results from his extreme naivete. I suggest that Ellison provides these examples to serve as reversals which enhance the story of a young man's loss of innocence and his growth toward maturity and disillusionment. Valerie Smith comments upon Invisible Man's naivete in her article, "The Meaning of Narration in *Invisible Man*": Invisible Man "does not (or will not) recognize the Brotherhood's mistreatment of him. He is as innocent of Brother Wrestrum's accusations as he was of Bledsoe's. As he did in the president's office, the protagonist initially explodes when he hears of his punishment. But he accommodates himself yet again to the will of his superior so that he will not be forced to question the institution's ideology" (38). Smith suggests, then, that Invisible Man's naivete is a *chosen* response. He resists learning or paying attention to the events around him because it is easier to live that way than if he were to see events for what they actually were. Invisible Man *should* be able to see the events he is currently involved in through the lens of what he has experienced previously at the hands of Dr. Bledsoe; but he chooses blindness instead and refuses to do so, thereby delaying his inevitable disillusionment. His motive for choosing blindness and acquiescing in the face of persecution results from the fact that he is so desperate for power that he trusts those whom he sees as capable of giving

him that power. Smith would concur with this idea; she suggests that rather than seeing his reassignment as a punishment, he instead *chooses* to read it as a demonstration of the Brotherhood's faith in him. I contend that instead of his acquiescence proving to the Brotherhood that he is capable of a leadership position, he instead demonstrates just the opposite: that he is not at *all* ready. Again referring to the life of Moses, we see Moses as a responsible individual given charge of armies and battles in support of Pharaoh's kingdom. Yet a misplaced action—killing an Egyptian in order to defend a Hebrew—demonstrates Moses' lack of readiness to assume the role God has planned for him. Instead, he is forced to flee Pharaoh's kingdom and live among another people while his leadership skills are refined.

Rather than blame Invisible Man for his repeated blunders and his prolonged naivete—a character flaw about which he has yet to do anything, we'd be better served to understand this character by understanding the *why* of his chosen path to acquiesce and his willingness to comply with whatever is thrown his way. Invisible Man's grandfather's deathbed confession influenced how Invisible Man chose to conduct his life. His grandfather, with virtually his last breath, told Invisible Man's father, and all within hearing distance, that he'd been feigning compliance for years with whatever the white man said in an effort to gain a modicum of power. Grandfather's advice to his son and grandson is to “‘overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open’” (Ellison, *Invisible* 16). Though Invisible Man was confused by his grandfather's confession that he'd been a traitor his whole life, he was in a subconscious way made a co-conspirator in his grandfather's war by overhearing his confession. His grandfather had been participating

in a silent revolution ever since he'd been freed from slavery, a revolution that involved feigning obedience to the whites in power: "I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction." And he advises Invisible Man to "Live with your head in the lion's mouth'" (Ellison, *Invisible* 16). This advice provides a partial explanation for Invisible Man's willingness to do whatever his white oppressors tell him to do. Invisible Man was plagued by his grandfather's confession because he was not sure what his grandfather had meant by his words. As a result, "It became a constant puzzle which lay unanswered in the back of my mind. And whenever things went well for me I remembered my grandfather and felt guilty and uncomfortable. It was as though I was carrying out his advice in spite of myself. And to make it worse, everyone loved me for it" (Ellison, *Invisible* 16). His confusion, then, results from 1) his assumption that someone else would define his identity (Ellison, *Invisible* 15), 2) never understanding his grandfather's true meaning though being told that whatever that meaning was, it was treacherous, 3) being constantly considered an example of good conduct—which he related back to his grandfather's behavior which he defined as treachery (Ellison, *Invisible* 17) and feeling treacherous for behaving well, and 4) doing right while thinking doing right was really doing wrong but fearing to do the opposite because that then would be doing wrong, which would really be doing right in his grandfather's eyes but would be wrong to the white man.

Up to the point of going underground, Invisible Man has acquiesced and complied, overcoming them with yeses as his grandfather had instructed him; but he had yet to begin undermining their authority. He had not yet grasped that part of his

grandfather's admonishments, probably because he could never ask questions about his grandfather's meaning. His own parents were so shocked by the old man's statements that his words overshadowed the fact of his death.

Invisible Man's shock at his grandfather's confession caused his world to rock in terms of appearances versus reality: "Grandfather had been a quiet old man who never made any trouble, yet on his deathbed he had called himself a traitor and a spy, and he had spoken of his meekness as a dangerous activity" (Ellison, *Invisible* 16). What a startling revelation for a young boy who had probably idolized this grandfather. With this in mind, his confusion as a young man is more easily understood; but the fact that he refuses to grow out of his confusion until *much* later is more difficult to understand, though he confesses his own naivete: "I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself" (Ellison, *Invisible* 15). This statement summarizes the loss and confusion most of us experience in our youth. That Invisible Man confesses this about himself gives him a transparency which prepares his story to become a text from which readers can learn—much as Moses' life has been used as a model for learning leadership skills.

Evidence continues to point toward Ellison's reversal upon the character of Moses in presenting Invisible Man as a character who represents a Moses figure for the Blacks of Harlem. John F. Callahan points to a piece of this evidence in his essay "Frequencies of Eloquence: The Performance and Composition of *Invisible Man*." Callahan sees Invisible Man as a failed orator who turns to writing when words fail him: "the narrator is

a failed orator. Because he is unable to communicate directly with those he meets in American society, Invisible Man abandons the oral tradition in favor of a ‘compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white’” (55). What makes Invisible Man’s failed orality so reminiscent of Moses is that Moses, too, failed as an orator. He had a speech impediment that kept him from speaking confidently in public. When God commanded Moses to return to Egypt and be the leader and spokesman for the Israelites before Pharaoh, Moses’ immediately tried to get out of the task: “‘O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant; but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue’” (Exodus 4:10). As a result, God sends Aaron to serve as Moses’ mouthpiece. Thus Moses, while the leader of the Israelites, had to employ an alternate means by which to communicate with those he led. Rather than writing his words down and giving them to the Israelites (we know what happens later when Moses attempts to give the written word to the Israelites—the tablets upon which God had written His words were smashed to bits) as Invisible Man gives his written word to his audience, Aaron is the mouthpiece, the middleman in the process. And only (centuries) later are the events of Moses’ story committed to the written word. Ellison reverses upon the Exodus story by removing the middleman and going straight to the written word. Callahan notes that “Unlike his speeches, which he delivers in the world and presently reconstructs as a writer, his narrative addresses no audience waiting to be moved to particular action on a specific occasion” (61). His words instead lie dormant until picked up and read by the audience. In their dormancy, they have no power, no influence. It is only in the act of being read that his words have any potential for influence. But even then , his potential for influence is not guaranteed. The narrator has a particular reader—a

narratee—in mind, one who is interested in his personal plight, who can learn from Invisible Man’s experience of lack of self-knowledge and lack of identity. The reader is another step removed from Invisible Man’s potential realm of influence because he or she may not have similar concerns, may or may not be receptive to Invisible Man’s plight. But the narratee *is*, and that is what Invisible Man counts on. Yet, Invisible Man is not interested in engaging his narratee in conversation about the topics of lack of identity and lack of self-knowledge while relating the events of his pre-exile days. Rather he is more interested in a forum for telling his story.

Callahan suggests that until Invisible Man becomes ready for eloquence, his text does not invite conversation: “In his Prologue, Invisible Man does not seek conversation; responsible voices might talk back to him, disagree with him, belittle his point of view, question his motives, undermine his vulnerable, evolving self. Only in the Epilogue . . . is he ready for response, for conversation, ready to risk verbal acts of intimacy” (60).

Readers of the Pentateuch will note several instances where Moses engages in conversation and even debate. In the majority of these instances, the debates are with God himself. Moses does not have this same type of verbal reluctance—even though he uses a mediator when talking to Pharaoh and the Israelites because of his speech impediment—that Invisible Man has. And I suggest the key to why this may be is that all of the recorded instances of Moses’ debates occur *after* he has emerged from exile and has learned the lessons that bring him to maturity there and prepare him for his leadership role.

I suggest that the reason Invisible Man does not invite conversation with his readers until the Epilogue has to do with the very same reason Moses went into exile: he

had to learn those leadership skills and prepare for those “verbal acts of intimacy” that Callahan sees him ready to engage in once he emerges from the coal cellar. His impromptu speeches could at first be perceived as verbal acts of intimacy, but in fact they are not because he is not interested in engaging in dialogue with those to whom he gives the speeches. And he is not conveying his feelings or thoughts in those speeches. Instead, he is merely spouting what the Brotherhood has written in pamphlets and responding to the crowd with what he *thinks* they want to hear. And when he does come close to becoming intimate with the crowd by telling them that he wants to confess to them—a very intimate act—Brother Jack steps forward and cautions him against crossing the boundaries the Brotherhood has set up: “‘Careful now,’ he whispered. ‘Don’t end your usefulness before you’ve begun’” (Ellison, *Invisible* 345). Invisible Man is censored by the Brotherhood and kept within the realm of speech-giving they deem safe, which cuts off any opportunity for entering into verbal intimacy with his hearers at the Harlem stadium. As Moses learned his leadership skills in exile, so Invisible Man learns his skills for intimate conversation in exile through the act of writing. In exile, also, he becomes aware of the mistakes he made while questing for power for its own sake and what it could do for *him*, rather than how he could use the power to benefit others.

Invisible Man’s intention is to use the Brotherhood as his forum to gain fame and to become part of the big action. This is evidenced when he is to give his first Brotherhood speech. Invisible Man is upset that he is to be the last of several speakers: “‘Why did *I* have to come last? What if they bored the audience to death before I came on! I’d probably be shouted down before I could get started” (Ellison, *Invisible* 334). However, as he blindly trusted Bledsoe to give him good letters of recommendation, so

he trusts the Brotherhood to do right by him as well. He determines to trust them rather than his own instinct: “Anyway, I had to trust them. I had to” (Ellison, *Invisible* 334). The double imperative “had to” suggests Invisible Man’s dependency upon those he sees as authority figures. He *had* to trust them because he *wanted* to trust them. He wanted so badly to believe they were trustworthy, because he thinks himself *untrustworthy* because of his grandfather’s early admonishments. Therefore, his need to trust the Brotherhood is intended to erase the lack of trust he has in himself. Callahan says, “The top is not the mountain top; he [Invisible Man] wants to make it in American society and, like Bledsoe, will use others, black and white, to climb the mountain” (73). I see this as another reversal Ellison performs on the character of Moses. Moses, from the accounts we read, is not at all portrayed as a power-hungry leader—though it would be easy to imagine him this way because of the potential for power that he has. Whatever hunger for power he may have had has been tempered by the reality of God’s power to determine his future. Moses is aware of the higher power for which he works. Invisible Man assumes that those in the Brotherhood possess this power. It is not until the race riot in Harlem that he realizes the Brotherhood’s lack of power. And in the Epilogue he finally is coming to the understanding of the power in being true to oneself and one’s convictions. The story Invisible Man tells is about finally becoming aware of the necessity to “Know thyself” and realizing that while in the Brotherhood he had been just a pawn; he had misinterpreted the Brotherhood as being *the* power when in reality the Brotherhood is itself just another pawn.

Clearly Ellison draws upon the biblical text in order to find the model for his protagonist. The reversals he performs reveal Invisible Man as a Moses character to

which readers can more easily relate. And the process of growth through which Invisible Man goes provides a tongue-in-cheek look at some common mistakes while at the same time providing readers some motivation to avoid those same types of errors. Whether Ellison set out to provide an educational treatise comparable to the Proverbs is not for me to say; however, when read as I suggest, this novel definitely fits that description.

But *Invisible Man* is not limited to merely an educational treatise. This novel can also be read as a continuation of the model for revolution which I discussed in Chapter Two. Walzer identified five stages in the revolution process: oppression, liberation, social contract, political struggle, and new society. I locate all five stages of this pattern of revolution in Ellison's work, and in this section I will now discuss the reversals Ellison performs upon those stages.

In his essay "Ellison's Masks and the Novel of Reality" Thomas Schaub states that "Ellison's novel may be read as a story about the world of a character whom we know as Invisible Man, but the novel fails to substantiate its own vision unless we shift our attention from the reality the story is 'about' to the reality of the story" (151). I suggest that what Schaub means is this: the story is "about" a young man's quest for identity—what Ellison calls "*the American theme*" (*Shadow* 177)—and all that he experiences throughout that quest, but it is not just about *any* young man's quest for identity. *Invisible Man* is no stock coming-of-age story, but it *is* a coming-of-age story: that of a young *Black* man raised in the South who emigrates to the North after World War II, during the advent of Civil Rights, and to the city of Harlem. And that is what the reality of the story is: the reality is of the lostness and oppression of an individual who represents a race. As I cited earlier, Ellison states that the universal in the novel is

reached through the depiction of the individual in individual circumstances (*Shadow* 170). Martin Luther King's "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech reinforces Ellison's design that Invisible Man represent a group rather than an individual. King seems to speak the character of Invisible Man when choosing the form of revolution that the oppressed need to participate in, in order to accomplish their goal of addressing the problems they have been grappling with throughout history, the very same problem Invisible Man is grappling with: that of identity and not only discovering that identity but also making it known in order to effect change:

we have been forced to a point where we're going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history, but the demands didn't force them to do it. Survival demands that we grapple with them. Men, for years now, have been talking about war and peace. But now, no longer can they just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence." ("I've Been" 1963)

The realities with which Ellison deals in *Invisible Man* are the realities facing an entire nation but shown to the reader through the eyes, ears, and voice of one individual character. Those realities include the arrogant assumption by whites of their own supremacy while posturing themselves as supporters of Blacks but who then turn right around and *use* Blacks as stepping stones for whites' own version of what it means to promote the oppressed's cause, whether the oppressed agree or not; the revolution taking place in the Black community in order to combat this sort of perverted action and to gain a foothold for freedom in more than just name; the need for continual reminders to

Blacks that they have a revolution to engage in, that the revolution is ongoing and they must join in a communal effort in order for it to be successful, that those involved in the revolution must remain united with a common goal for which to fight, or the whole war will be lost; that the search for and attainment of identity is part of the revolution; that the revolution is a long process and that those involved in it today may feel that they are losing battles but must be reminded that they will ultimately win the war.

This last reality, that of losing in order to win, is one of the characteristics of a "silent" revolution. Moses and the Israelites repeatedly lost battles against Pharaoh. Battle was engaged each time Moses approached Pharaoh to request that the Israelites be allowed to leave Egypt. Each time, however, Pharaoh said no. As a consequence of his actions, Pharaoh and his people suffered the ten plagues. Though the Israelites did not engage in any active battle against Pharaoh, their stalwart commitment to being free and to return to Canaan—and their refusal to merely accept their situation as unchangeable—became their battleground in the silent revolution. They did not undermine the Egyptian people by refusing to work the land or refusing to perform their duties; they did not go about attacking Egyptians whenever they had the opportunity. Instead, they did as they were instructed by Pharaoh's henchmen. Their compliance with Pharaoh's edicts probably gave the impression they were malleable and reduced to accepting the terms of their existence under Pharaoh's rule. But their means of revolution became keeping the promise alive that they would one day be returned as a free people to Canaan and teaching that promise to their children and their children's children, that they were the chosen people who would ultimately be victorious. At last their battle with Pharaoh was won when he allowed the Israelites to leave, thereby giving them their liberation.

The stages of the revolution changed from oppression and liberation to social contract and political struggle once the Israelites had left Egypt and entered the desert. At this point, the Israelites no longer had Pharaoh with whom to do battle; instead they entered into power struggles almost daily with Moses, first wanting food, then wanting water, then demanding new leadership. Their battles were ultimately with God and, while God granted them each of the material things they wanted, He won the war by having only the newly formed and vastly revised band of Israelites enter Canaan. Leonard Deutsch, in his essay titled "*Invisible Man* and the European Tradition," sees this pattern of losing battles in order to win the war at work in the developing character of *Invisible Man*: "The hero triumphs through his failures. He loses each of the battles of the novel: against his provincial community, Norton's college, Emerson's paint company, and Brother Jack's pseudo-Brotherhood, but he wins the war . . . the hero loses repeatedly in the short run, precisely so he can win the longer race" (103).

Keeping in mind that if *Invisible Man* represents the situation of the whole and not the individual, we can trace the stages of revolution present in the Israelites' story in *Invisible Man's* story. The first stage in Walzer's pattern of revolution is oppression. *Invisible Man* is oppressed as a young Black boy in the early post-slavery South when the debate rages between Booker T. Washington's admonishments to remain in one's place and be the best blacksmith possible and W. E. B. DuBois' encouragement for Blacks to become educated and professional in order to attain true freedom and equality. In his own family, *Invisible Man's* grandfather confesses feigning compliance while in reality undermining the white man. His father, however, will hear none of this form of rebellion and attempts to shield *Invisible Man* from the corruption his grandfather spews. Later,

Invisible Man is oppressed by double-talking white men who invite him to the battle royal for one purpose—to give a speech—but who have him battling boys of his own age and race for their entertainment; he is then “rewarded” with a scholarship to an all-Black college in which the president of the institution is a double dealing Black man who oppresses him further in order to secure the future of the college rather than protecting the students the college was founded to educate.

Invisible Man is oppressed by the letters which Dr. Bledsoe provides him as a supposed means of introduction into the better world of the North, but which in fact turn prospective employers against him. While at first he believes he is being liberated when the Brotherhood employs him as their spokesman, he once again discovers that he is being oppressed when he is used as a display piece by the Brotherhood to put forth their falsely humanitarian agenda to the Harlem community.

Liberation comes for Invisible Man in small ways at varying stations along the track of his travel from his home town in the South to Harlem in the North, and then into his coal cellar. Small liberation comes with the scholarship the white men award him after his speech following the battle royal. This liberation gives Invisible Man the opportunity for formal education, and he aspires toward a position with great power and influence. Another small liberation occurs when Invisible Man emerges from the subway in Harlem and witnesses the Black policeman directing traffic. This vision gives him hope that he has arrived in a place where indeed opportunities *are* equal and Black men *can* have authority and power. A third small liberation takes place when he is hired by the Brotherhood and given money enough to settle his debts and to improve his lifestyle to some degree. This liberation again reinforces his hope that he will attain his dream of

being a powerful figure in a position that commands authority. But the most significant liberation occurs when Invisible Man realizes what the Brotherhood has actually done in Harlem, how it has manipulated not only Invisible Man but all the people of Harlem and has actually caused more problems than it has solved. This liberation leads to his life under ground in the coal cellar where he is then liberated from his lack of identity. And at the end of the novel, he is about to embark on a new liberation when he proclaims himself nearly ready to emerge from under ground and rejoin life above ground as a leader in the revolution against oppression.

Invisible Man, as a representative for a people, forms a social contract following each of his liberation moments. In the first instance, following the battle royal and when he is giving his practiced speech to the group of jeering white men, the social contract follows his “mistaken” use of the word “equality” in place of “responsibility.” I include here the portion of the text which relates:

“Social Responsibility, sir” I said.

“You weren’t being smart, were you, boy?” he said, not unkindly.

“No, Sir!”

“You sure that about ‘equality’ was a mistake?”

“Oh, yes, sir,” I said. “I was swallowing blood.”

“Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand. We mean to do right by you, but you’ve got to know your place at all times.” (Ellison, *Invisible* 31)

In this section of the text, Invisible Man enters into his first social contract—he agrees to remain in his place. No more talk about equality because, as he is made to understand

clearly by the white man, equality of Blacks with whites is completely out of the question. He is certain to get the scholarship if only he does not attempt to move outside the realm which the white men ascribe to him and his "kind." All bets are off if Invisible Man's side fails to remain in their place.

He enters into another sort of social contract when he begins working for the Brotherhood. They will give him money, a job, a place to live, an office to work from, *important* responsibilities—all if he will take the name they give him and speak on the topics of which they will teach him—all in the name of helping the Blacks of Harlem achieve a better position in society. Names become an important part of the text, and Ellison plays up Invisible Man's lack of identity by his obvious lack of a name and by the names he *does* use in the text.

The first time the reader is given any knowledge of Invisible Man's name is when he eats a yam he purchases from a street vendor. In this instance, Invisible Man assumes a comical name in response to the vendor's comment that he is an "old-fashioned yam eater." Invisible Man's ironic response is a play on the name God calls himself in response to Abraham's desire to know God's name. Invisible Man says: "I yam what I am," (Ellison, *Invisible* 266). The act of eating a yam and re-acknowledging his southern heritage awakens in Invisible Man an awareness of how he has denied himself and his heritage in order to become what he believes others wanted him to be. He realizes he has always been what others thought he should be, thought what others have thought, and accepted others' attitudes in order to keep his own life simple: "I would have to weigh many things carefully before deciding and there would be some things that would cause quite a bit of trouble, *simply because I had never formed a personal attitude toward so*

much. I had accepted the accepted attitudes and it had made life seem simple" (emphasis mine) (Ellison, *Invisible* 266-67). This desire to know himself and to form his own attitudes is the beginning of his political struggle. And the realization that he has been a chameleon in terms of his affinities prompts a change in how he identifies himself to a crowd just three pages later.

Upon the heels of his moment of self-awareness, he encounters a crowd in the street who are witnessing the eviction of an elderly couple. The crowd is merely standing around shouting at the men who are hauling the couple's furnishings out of their apartment. One of the bystanders suggests that the crowd should "beat the hell" out of those who are doing the evicting. Another of the bystanders agrees that they ought to stop the movers but thinks none of the crowd has enough nerve to do so. The first man disagrees: "There's plenty nerve . . . All they need is someone to set it off. All they need is a leader" (Ellison, *Invisible* 268). While witnessing this scene, Invisible Man is incredulous that this sort of event, dispossessing, can take place in the North; and his incredulity causes suspicion on the part of the other men in the crowd. In response to their question "Who the hell is you?" Invisible Man adopts a name even more god-like than that of the "I yam" name. His response is hostile and intended to discourage any more questioning or aggression from the men: "I am who I am" (Ellison, *Invisible* 269).

This proclamation of a name even closer to that which God calls Himself precedes his impromptu speech given on the steps to the couple's building. I see connections between Invisible Man's taking this god-like name and his assuming the role of leader the protestors say they need to stop the eviction from taking place. Invisible Man is hungry for responsibility and power. Accepting his previous behavior as that of a

chameleon—changing his attitudes, behaviors, etc., to suit those he deems in power—and realizing he has no personal attitudes provides the springboard which prompts him to step up to the role of leader this crowd says they need. This action has the potential to give him a forum to express who *he* believes he is and to espouse his own philosophies. However, this event backfires because instead of taking the time to learn who he is and what he believes, he claims the leadership role before he is ready for it. Consequently, the people refuse to listen to him, they beat the police officer, and they begin what the police see as the makings for a riot. His initial intent in this speech is to stop any violent action on the part of the crowd; he urges them to be peaceable and law abiding in order to accomplish their aims of stopping the dispossession. Though he implies god-like qualities with the name he uses to identify himself, he does not have a god-like command of the crowd. Instead of his words calming the crowd, the crowd surges toward the police officer barring the way. Invisible Man is thrown to the ground and the policeman is pummeled by the angry mob. Invisible Man again attempts to corral the angry mob with his words, and this time he succeeds in getting the mob organized into some action—that of moving the couple's furniture back into their apartment over the protests of those moving it out; but instead of being able to persuade the mob to do as he originally suggested, he tailors his words to suit the mob's mood, calling for them to *peaceably* move the couple's belongings into the building. In this way, he harnesses the energy of the crowd which is now bordering on hysteria. His original intention—which failed—was to motivate the crowd to act peaceably and follow the law in order to lodge their protests. But when he saw this tack was failing, he modified his speech in order to *appear* in control when actually only directing the crowd in the way they were going anyway. This

action reinforces his lack of independent thought and demonstrates his chameleon nature when he sways with the wind in terms of his affinities. He is engaged in a political struggle here, but in large part that struggle is with himself. The reason his speech and these events attract the attention of the Brotherhood is because he has inadvertently demonstrated his willingness and ability to adopt the agendas of others and promote them successfully, while giving the appearance of being the one with the idea in the first place. In this area, he is not at *all* suited to the name "I am who I am"; instead he is much more suited to the name "I am who you think I am": a political chameleon who changes according to where he believes the source of potential power lies.

The fact that Ellison refuses to identify his character by a first, middle, and/or last name is in keeping with the character's characterization of himself; he does not know *who* he is. To give himself a name would be to give himself an identity, and until he becomes willing to know himself he cannot know who he truly is. He is not only invisible to the white people he encounters on the street; he is also invisible to himself. He is willing to take whatever name is given him because he assumes that adopting the name will also give him an identity. And he notes this ironically as he learns that his Brotherhood name is getting around. The foolish Invisible Man interprets his spreading fame as his finally receiving the respect he believes he deserves: "I almost laughed into the phone when I heard the director of Men's House address me with profound respect. My new name was getting around" (Ellison, *Invisible* 379). He then goes on to muse on this strange event: "things are so unreal for them normally that they believe that to call a thing by name is to make it so. And yet I am what they think I am" (Ellison, *Invisible* 379).

The most significant social contract to which Invisible Man becomes engaged is the one he forms with himself. In this contract, he commits to self-discovery, to resolving for himself his grandfather's confusing words and the role they play in his past, present, and future; he commits to teaching himself, while teaching his readers, how to be a leader of his people, how to continue the revolution in order to continue on the road to freedom from oppression for all people, and how to convey *his* ideas to others rather than just parroting the ideas of others, as he did while involved in the Brotherhood.

It is at the point of his emergence from the coal cellar when Invisible Man will engage in the most meaningful political struggle in the formation of his new society as a result of his silent revolution. When he emerges, it will be as the self-proclaimed leader of his people. He will have to overcome the people's memories of him as a spokesman for the Brotherhood; he will have to instill in the community of Harlem a sense of confidence in his ability to lead them in the revolution against oppression and toward liberation. He has seen and been involved in varying degrees of political struggle while in the Brotherhood: Brother Jack's struggles *for* Invisible Man *against* other members of the Brotherhood who question his adequacy for the job they give him; Brother Tarp's struggles against the model after whom Invisible Man should pattern himself (though the verbiage advocates Booker T, Tarp installs a portrait of W. E. B. DuBois in Invisible Man's office); the Brotherhood's struggles with Tod Clifton about political strategy and ideologies; and ultimately the Brotherhood's struggle with powers even higher than itself which cause it to essentially abandon its operation in Harlem. At the point of his emergence from the coal cellar, Invisible Man has the resources from which to draw to see what will make the new society successful; he has, we hope, learned how to be an

effective leader by observing both those who have succeeded and those who have failed—drawing lessons from each of their methods in order to formulate his own methods which will be successful in leading toward building a new society in and for Harlem. And evidence that Invisible Man has learned from the lessons of others as well as those which he himself has experienced is present in the Epilogue: “I’m an invisible man and it placed me in a hole . . . and I reluctantly accepted the fact. What else could I have done? Once you get used to it, reality is as irresistible as a club, and I was clubbed into the cellar before I caught the hint. Perhaps that’s the way it had to be; I don’t know. Nor do I know whether accepting the lesson has placed me in the rear or in the *avant-garde*. That . . . is a lesson for history” (Ellison, *Invisible* 572). The tone of the Epilogue indicates a less rambunctious warrior, one who is more settled, more willing to consider all the information before making any decisions. The tone is much more akin to that of Moses than the early Invisible Man. This change in tone also indicates that Invisible Man has *learned*. He has learned about himself and his own failings as a leader; he has learned the destructiveness of saying “yes” when he does not mean it (Ellison, *Invisible* 573); he has learned how sick he can become when he tries to live without convictions, as a chameleon changing to meet others’ expectations.

I project that the new society which the emerging Invisible Man will have a hand in forming will be one based on honesty and conviction, of doing what is right at the right time, and of knowing one’s own mind. Invisible Man recognizes that his main failing as a man and as a leader was that he did not know himself: “my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone’s way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So after years of trying

to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an *invisible* man” (Ellison, *Invisible* 573). Accepting his invisibility and adopting that invisibility as an identity is an act based on facing his reality: the failings of his past and his vision for the future.

Declaring himself an invisible man and putting that down on paper for all to see is yet another reversal which Ellison performs with his text. By doing so, Invisible Man is essentially creating for himself a certificate of freedom which frees him from the oppression imposed upon him by Dr. Bledsoe, the Brotherhood, and his own lack of identity. Prior to claiming in writing his identity as an invisible man, the papers he had possessed (those given him by Dr. Bledsoe) were only those which served to keep him in bondage. To make his migration, Invisible Man received from Dr. Bledsoe, the president of his college, letters of introduction and was told to seek his fortune in New York in order to earn the money he needs to return to college the following year. Ellison performs two reversals here, the first of which is that slaves escaping from the South did not have papers in their possession with which to secure their freedom should they be stopped on their way North. At some point the slaves might receive forged free papers, but they did not legally possess them as Invisible Man does. The second reversal is upon those immigrants, whether freed slaves or, later, European immigrants, who did possess papers authorizing their movements. Ironically, most slaves and most European immigrants who did possess papers were unable to read those papers which authorized their entry into the new land. Ellison’s reversal upon this concept is that Invisible Man is also unable to read the letters Dr. Bledsoe sends with him. But his inability to read these letters is not because he cannot read the language in which they are written, which was true for most slaves and European immigrants; rather he cannot read these letters because he is

adhering to a code of honor that, in his innocence, he stridently upholds: Dr. Bledsoe has told him not to open the letters, and so—because he blindly trusts Dr. Bledsoe—he keeps his promise . . . until he discovers that Bledsoe has betrayed him.

Armed with his letters of introduction, the narrator embarks upon his new life in a new land being led by his vision of earning enough money to return to college in the South. His hopes are similar upon his arrival in New York to the hopes which those immigrants to the United States have when they first arrive on her shores: hopes for prosperity, opportunity, freedom, success—all elements associated with the American Dream and having reached the promised land. And Invisible Man does see indications of Blacks being successful and having opportunities in the North, such as the Black policeman directing traffic.

Unfortunately, the narrator realizes neither prosperity nor opportunity, freedom nor success in the form he had originally conceived. Instead, his wealth comes in the form of enlightenment about the realities of human nature, political posturing, and the fact that the color of one's skin can determine one's opportunities: their availability and their limitations. His wealth also comes in discovering his identity and learning to take responsibility for himself and his actions. In a double-edged way, what he had thought would be his Canaan (the college in the South) turns into Egypt when Bledsoe expels him. Then the land of opportunity which Bledsoe promised him in the North appears that it will indeed be a Canaan for Invisible Man, yet that too turns out to be another Egypt after his experiences in the Brotherhood. After these experiences, his period of exile in the coal cellar gives him the opportunity he needs for self-discovery and for learning self-reliance. The time he takes while in exile to reflect and come to terms with himself

prepares him for returning to the Egypt of Harlem as the new Moses for the people. In *Shadow and Act*, Ellison's essay "The Way It Is" demonstrates Harlem's similarities to life under Pharaoh in Egypt for the Israelites. His essay records his interview with a widowed mother of three, Mrs. Jackson, who is attempting to support herself and her children while living in Harlem. Mrs. Jackson, in response to a friend's suggestion that she move out of Harlem in order to better her situation, says: "I told her it wouldn't do no good to move 'cause anywhere they let us go gets to be Harlem right on. I done moved round too much not to know that'" (291). Mrs. Jackson's experiences support the idea that each time we think we have arrived in Canaan, in time it begins to resemble Egypt again. Ellison's reflections upon Mrs. Jackson's comments reveal Harlem, though in the North—the land of the free—to have the same forms of oppression found in Egypt: "that's the way 'it really is' for her and many like her who are searching for that gate of freedom. In the very texture of their lives there is confusion, war-made confusion. And the problem is to get around, over, under and through this confusion" (Ellison, *Shadow* 291). But Ellison says in another essay, "Harlem is Nowhere," that "if Harlem is the scene of the folk-Negro's death agony, it is also the setting of his transcendence. Here is it possible for talented youths to leap through the development of decades in a brief twenty years, while beside them white-haired adults crawl in the feudal darkness of their childhood" (Ellison, *Shadow* 296). Yes, Harlem represents, and *is*, the land of opportunity and freedom—Canaan—for some; but it still has its giants that need to be conquered. It does contain milk and honey, but all is not simple and pure and easy just because of the arriving there. At one and the same time, then, Harlem can be someone's Canaan while being someone else's Egypt.

This movement from Egypt to Canaan, departing from one locale to begin life in another with the hopes that it will provide the hoped-for freedom and opportunity of a promised land, is a long-established pattern that Ellison employs. Ellison notes, in his essay about Mahalia Jackson, that movement from South to North is “the classical pattern of Negro migration” (Ellison, *Shadow* 215). And another classical element of this migration pattern is that of crossing water. This classical element is present in the Exodus story when the Israelites were forever freed from the Egyptians upon crossing the Red Sea. Symbolically, the Mason-Dixon line serves as a Red Sea crossing for those traveling from South to North. Slaves escaping from the South to the North were in free territory upon crossing the Mason-Dixon line. Their goal was to reach that line because it symbolized the attainment of irrevocable freedom, though we’ll see in Chapter Four when I discuss Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* that this was not necessarily the case. However, the significance of this crossing was marked by ceremonies, celebrating its meaning in the hearts of those who sacrificed everything for freedom. Roi Ottley states in his history of Harlem, *New World A-Coming*, that: “Solemn ceremonies were held as [the migrants] crossed the Mason-Dixon Line. Men stopped their watches to begin a New Day in the North. Amid tears, the migrants sang the old familiar songs of deliverance” (34). Invisible Man’s movement toward that symbolic water crossing is marked by his departure from his college in the South, yet for him it is not a movement of joy but rather one of sadness: “In less than five minutes the spot of earth which I identified with the best of all possible worlds was gone” (Ellison, *Invisible* 156). Invisible Man now experiences a fearful anticipation of moving into the unknown. Here Ellison performs yet another reversal, this time on the migration pattern of Negroes that I quoted earlier.

Rather than seeing the South as a place of oppression, Invisible Man at this point still sees the South and the college as his number one opportunity for achieving his goals of power and position. Whereas the slaves escaping North celebrate as they reach and cross the Mason-Dixon line knowing that they have reached free soil, Invisible Man's attitude toward his Northerly migration is one that could be equated to his being a part of a chain gang which is forced to move further South to a land that affords no opportunity for freedom at all. This ironic reversal points up Invisible Man's true naivete about the events which have brought him to this juncture. Through it, I hear Ellison comment upon those Israelites and slaves who chose to remain in bondage because they either feared the journey to freedom or had decided that a life of oppression was acceptable if they were still able to have their immediate needs met by their oppressors. Ellison, here, is pointing out the tragedy of complacency and the effects of that complacency on the silent revolution. He does this by showing how the individual can betray the group's success when the individual does not recognize, or will not concern himself with, the state of the whole but instead chooses to focus on his own fear of the oppressor and his desire to have his immediate needs met, even though doing so requires that he remain in bondage. King quotes from the parable of the Good Samaritan in order to show the importance of thinking beyond one's own fears and needs and instead looking to the needs of others, working together as one in order to effect change. King says that instead of asking "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" we should ask "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" ("I've Been" 1967-68). The Exodus revolution was not just about the Israelites getting out of Egypt and being free of Pharaoh's demands any more than the individual slave's escape from the South was simply about freeing himself.

Both of these movements were about securing a free place in history for each groups' descendants; it was about making that security last for generations; it was about creating a model for freedom that would be adopted by ages and generations of people, who would pattern their own revolutions after it which would continue to demand and secure that freedom.

Invisible Man learns much while in his coal cellar exile. He learns and accepts his true identity as an invisible man. He learns leadership skills through his reflections upon his earlier years. He learns to begin to engage in conversation with others through his reflections. And his reflections take the form of the written account of his life and actions which his audience will read and to which they will respond. As Moses learns while in exile to govern vast numbers of people by delegating authority and setting up systems of justice, Invisible Man learns while in his exile how to run a silent revolution. His opportunity to do so comes in the form of undermining the Powers That Be by literally stealing power from the Monopolated Light & Power. He realizes his absolute freedom while living underground in a coal cellar, wiring the walls and ceiling of his abode with light bulbs. He is waging a war upon the resources of the oppressor, silently and over a period of time, which will eventually lead to some form of victory for the whole. King advocated a similar approach when promoting the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. He saw the power in economic resources. While Invisible Man is waging his war by drawing down the power of Monopolated Light & Power, King suggests the power of the boycott in order to effect change: “Always anchor our external direct action with the power of economic withdrawal . . . collectively we are richer than all the nations in the world, with the exception of nine . . . the Negro collectively is richer than most nations of

the world. That's power right there, if we know how to pool it'" ("I've Been" 1965-66). King is suggesting that the real fight in the silent revolution is fought with the weapon of money, and that where those involved choose to spend their money can either be supporting or hurting the cause of the revolution. King says: "We don't have to argue with anybody. We don't have to curse and go around acting bad with our words. We don't need any bricks and bottles, we don't need any Molotov cocktails" in order to effect change ("I've Been" 1966). Perhaps King saw his model for this nonviolent approach to revolution in Invisible Man. Invisible Man does not encourage war; he is not violent. He simply fights the revolution with the resources he has at hand: pen and paper . . . and light bulbs.

CHAPTER FOUR

MORRISON'S *BELOVED* AND THE CHANGING FACES OF MOSES

"I write out of ignorance. I write about the things I don't have any resolutions for, and when I'm finished, I think I know a little bit more about it. I don't write out of what I know. It's what I don't know that stimulates me." Toni Morrison in an interview with Claudia Tate (Tate 130)

In his book, *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong states: "Literacy can be used to reconstruct for ourselves the pristine human consciousness which was not literate at all" (15). Trudier Harris, in her essay, "*Beloved*: Woman, Thy Name is Demon," writes "Just as the word can bring forces not of this world to life, *sound*, the pre-word condition we might say, can have equally effective consequences. It is sound that eventually drives *Beloved* out of 124 just as it has been the word that has made her flesh. Words . . . are an active force in the novel (and they have just as much shaping force as hands)" (143). All critics agree that it is Morrison's skill with words that works the magic that is *Beloved*, magic in the literal sense in terms of the woman-child *Beloved*'s presence, and also magic in the figurative sense in terms of what Morrison's tale-put-in-words does to readers' hearts and minds as a result of reading the work. And Morrison does reconstruct the human consciousness of illiterate ex-slaves in order to allow readers to see a world we cannot otherwise know.

Through the text of *Beloved* we experience as closely as possible one woman's struggle to be free from oppression—literally and figuratively, and we come face to face with the realities of slavery which revisionist history has attempted to hide from us. In

“The Site of Memory,” Morrison discusses her research of slave narratives that resulted in the novel *Beloved*. Morrison states: “Whatever the style and circumstances of these [slave] narratives, they were written to say principally two things. One: ‘This is my historical life—my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race.’ Two: ‘I write this text to persuade other people—you, the reader, who is probably not black—that we are human beings worthy of God’s grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery’” (“Site” 104-05). *Beloved*, then, advances that demand for the recognition of the humanity of Blacks and the abandonment of any possible tendency toward slavery and oppression by giving readers the internal narrative of this woman, Sethe, and her community and their sufferings while enslaved and on their journey to be free.

Yet while the text revolves around Sethe, we are not reading about just one woman who experienced a unique struggle; instead we are reading about a woman who represents an entire people who have been oppressed in monstrous ways. We are reading about that people who have the potential to emerge victorious from their oppression . . . but with a caution for which we must look back to the Bible to understand.

The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt and oppressed by Pharaoh, and they were eventually granted liberation by God via Moses. But the Israelites did not learn all that they were to have learned during that first 430 years of bondage. Instead they were returned to bondage in the Babylonian captivity because they let their guard down and did not do all that God had instructed in order to remain free. As a result, the twelve tribes of Israel were divided and suffered not only bondage by outside forces, the Babylonians, but a form of bondage by having their community and collective power

destroyed by that division. While *Beloved* speaks of an oppression that occurred at one particular point in history, like the story of the Israelites in Egypt, it does not speak of an oppression that was defeated once and for all and which is guaranteed never to occur again. Instead, *Beloved* speaks of an on-going oppression as a result of the horrendous treatment of Blacks while in slavery and the effects that treatment continues to have after Emancipation, an oppression that operates on at least two levels and of which I will speak later; and the work warns of the threat of the inevitable return of that oppression and how the people it chooses to oppress must learn to recognize and then combat that oppression in order to survive. It also is a text teaching those who are the potential oppressors how to avoid committing acts of oppression. In this way, Morrison's work is a decidedly political document for which she makes no apologies. In her essay, "Rootedness: The Ancestor of Foundation," Morrison states: "If anything I do, in the way of writing novels . . . isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything . . . It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time" (344-45).

One way in which Morrison instructs her readers about their own potentialities is through refusing to downplay what she relates as the realities and the horrors of slavery. She notes from reading slave narratives that "Over and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, 'But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate.' In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they 'forgot' many other things . . . there was no mention of their interior life" ("Site" 110). Morrison notes that the reason the writers of these narratives pull up short is to avoid alienating those who were their

audience at the time: whites who were potentially influential in promoting the cause of abolition. If the authors of these narratives offended or repulsed their readers in any way by describing the true horrors they experienced as slaves, they ran the risk of thwarting their desires to expose slavery as an aberration and harming the abolition movement. Keeping their internal lives under wraps was one means by which slaves kept the reality of their existence from view. Morrison refuses to keep up the façade begun in the slave narratives. She says that “Along with personal recollection, the matrix of the work I do is the wish to extend, fill in and complement slave autobiographical narratives” (“Site” 119-20). bell hooks, in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, comments upon the importance of this filling in: “To look back, not just to describe slavery but to try and reconstruct a psycho-social history of its impact has only recently been fully understood as a necessary stage in the process of collective black self recovery” (209-10). In *Beloved*, we are thrust fully into the internal lives of surviving ex-slaves and forced to confront the truth of the abominable conditions from which we are only too recently removed. Also, we are forced to see that the oppression continues in spite of the fact that slavery as an institution has ended. The oppression, as a result of experience and memory, continues to haunt just as *Beloved* haunts 124.

Yvonne Atkinson, in her essay “The Black English Oral Tradition in *Beloved*: ‘listen to the spaces’,” suggests that it is the aural quality of the Black English oral tradition that allows for the flexibility and power of Morrison’s text. It is a “powerful tool that allows [Morrison] to create meaning within her text and to create a community that can include both the readers and the characters of *Beloved*” (257). Morrison’s use of the oral tradition ensures that “voices of Blacks will not go unheard. She commissions Black

voices, using their language and language systems to tell their own stories of oppression from the point of view of the oppressed” (Atkinson 258). Morrison’s tale of a woman ostracized from her community for committing an act the community felt too heinous (even in the conditions under which it was perpetrated) is a multilayered text that speaks at once to listeners on each layer. And this multilayered design, along with the oral qualities of the text, causes *Beloved* to linger in the mind of the reader and encourages multiple readings which allow the many layers of the text to be revealed. And it is through peeling back the layers to discover what is on each one that readers become involved in the community of *Beloved*.

This community, that of the characters as well as that of the readers, is the heart of the story in *Beloved*. Not only does the text provide a historical word picture of events under slavery previously kept under wraps because of their sheer atrocity, it also gives readers an inside look at the humanity of the slaves who were thought to be less than human; in addition, the text reveals the gaps left by post-Civil War assumptions: all people are now free and equal because slavery is “officially” ended. The text demonstrates the fallacy inherent in those assumptions because it reveals the bondage ex-slaves remained in as a result of their experiences while in slavery. Robert Holton observes, in his article “Bearing Witness,” that in *Beloved*, “the past returns, demanding the attention of the present in the compelling memories of slavery recounted by the various characters, in the after-effects that to some degree determine the horizons bounding their lives” (85). It tells of the inability to love—which is the true testament of liberation—and the effects that inability has on the community. The text provides ancestral memory where those memories have been lacking. It speaks to twenty-first

century minds—of all hues—demanding that this sort of inhuman crime never take place again. In the final chapter of William Andrews’ and Nellie McKay’s *Toni Morrison’s Beloved: A Casebook*, a conversation between Barbara Christian, Deborah McDowell, and Nellie McKay is recorded. In that conversation, Barbara Christian likens the text to a work of jazz: “when I use the word layers . . . I mean [Morrison’s] adeptness at weaving language . . . I actually think of it as rhythms on top of rhythms, like you get in chords in jazz” (Andrews 207). And like a jazz composition, different components of the work are designed to speak to different areas of the mind, calling different attitudes and emotions to the surface. And that jazz composition, with its different components, works together to create a seamless piece of art that serves to transport listeners out of their immediate surroundings into a place where they experience sensations more deeply, emotions more sharply, thoughts more clearly, and see images previously unimagined. This is what Morrison does with her text and how she pulls her readers in, to become a part of the community of which she speaks.

In keeping with the model I established in Chapters Two and Three, I will now look at *Beloved*—in all of its multifaceted and multilayered beauty—in terms of the reversals present in it upon the biblical account of the Exodus as well as upon slave narratives that precede *Beloved*. In addition, I will locate Walzer’s five stages of revolution in the work. As I will demonstrate, *Beloved* can be read as a treatise for revolution because, as Carolyn Denard proposes, in her essay “Beyond the Bitterness of History: Teaching *Beloved*”: “Both black and white [readers] can use the code of ethics revealed in the development of the black community in this text as a representative example of the best that is human in the individual” (46). By seeing this example, readers

can begin to see—or re-see—where they may be failing in their own ethical views. And perhaps if they see this, they will be motivated to correct the wrongs and refuse to accept any longer the oppressive acts that have become status quo. Idealistic perhaps, but indeed a way to promote a silent revolution that results in change for the better.

One of the most striking and obvious accounts of reversal between the Exodus motif and the institution of slavery is the means by which the Africans came to be enslaved to begin with. In contrast to the Israelites who moved voluntarily to Egypt and began their tenure there as an honored people who gradually, over 430 years, arrived at the oppressed state in which we read of them upon their liberation, Africans did not arrive voluntarily on the continents that enslaved them. Once enslaved they were not at any time a revered people, nor were they allowed to remain together to keep their histories and traditions alive. A motto appropriate for the oppressors' goal of mastering this people is "divide and conquer." By separating family units and forbidding common languages to be spoken, the whole fabric of community among Africans was destroyed. They were no longer *a people*, yet their oppressors continued to refuse to look at them as individuals; instead Blacks were a commodity to be exploited. Eventually community groups were formed—as tenuous as they were under the conditions—and Blacks did, to some extent, band together under the umbrella of a common religion taught them by their masters. Contrary to the intentions of the oppressors who taught them this religion, the slaves found comfort in the story of the Hebrew bondage and the promise that God would one day free His people. Albert Raboteau, in *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, states that "'Preachings,' or religious meetings, served as occasions for the recruitment of slaves and for plotting and organizing the insurrection" (147). These

slaves who banded together at these religious meetings saw their plight as similar to that of the Israelites and began working toward their own emancipation.

The institution of slavery in America itself performs another reversal upon the Exodus story in that the people under slavery in these later centuries were not convinced or nor promised that they would be freed *as a people*. Instead, their liberation came by ones and twos and small bands finding their way North, eventually via the underground railroad. There was not *one* Moses to plead their case and lead them quietly and peacefully away from Egypt, and they never received Pharaoh's permission to depart. Instead there were multiple Moses characters who arranged for and led these escaping individuals to freedom. And while the entire band of Israelites left at once in security and safety in broad daylight, the escaping slaves left most often under the cover of night and in tremendous fear lest they should be caught. Their flight was individual, personal, and violent. They had no guarantees that they would arrive at their Red Sea (the Ohio River) much less be divinely aided in crossing it, and they did not live in complete freedom once they *were* across. But those who took the chance to escape did have hope and a desire for freedom that drove them to take whatever chances were necessary in order to reach the relative safety of the North. Raboteau states: "they kept hope alive by incorporating as part of *their* mythic past the Old Testament exodus of Israel out of slavery. The appropriation of the Exodus story was for the slaves a way of articulating their sense of historical identity as a people. That identity was also based . . . upon their common heritage of enslavement" (311). Raboteau goes on to suggest that the slaves found meaning and purpose for what they were made to endure through the Exodus story: "Exodus functioned as an archetypal event for the slaves" (311). And Morrison performs

a reversal upon this archetypal event while at the same time adding to actual slave accounts in *Beloved* through the escapes of Sethe, Halle, the Pauls, and Sixo from Sweet Home. The reason for her reversal becomes clear in the light of Linden Peach's comment in his book, *Toni Morrison*: "A preoccupation with unearthing narratives which have been hidden by or buried within other narratives is integral to the structure of *Beloved* in which there are two interrelated levels of occlusion: the white distortion of black experience and the suppressed subconscious. The latter is pursued in the novel at the level of the individual . . . Sethe, but also at the level of white America's need to confront what it has done to black people and to itself" (94). This "adding to" that Morrison accomplishes via *Beloved* serves to reveal the occlusions, to bring back to the light of day and to a level of visibility as much of the truth, in all its ugliness that was a part of slavery, to expose it for what it actually is. By revealing these occlusions, Morrison is making a call for revolution to all her readers, demanding that they remove their blinders and begin to see the truth and act upon it.

As the Israelites knew their departure from Egypt would be as a group, leaving no one behind, so the Pauls, Halle, Sixo, and Sethe planned their escape from Sweet Home as a group. They planned to leave together, along with Sixo's Thirty-mile Woman, by prearranged signal from an agreed upon meeting place. All plans were set, but when the actual time came for that departure—when the signal was given—their plans went awry. Sethe, heavy with her fourth child, was milked and then beaten by schoolteacher's pupils; Halle did not show up; Paul A could not be found; and Paul D was captured along with Sixo when Schoolteacher and his men found them with Thirty-mile Woman in the creek bed. After Paul D's capture, Sethe could wait no longer for Halle, so she sent her children

on ahead and then left on her own after telling Paul D she was going to do so. Morrison's story of a well-planned escape of a band of slaves gone awry reverses upon the biblical account of the organized departure of Israelites while at the same time she relates the horrors of what an actual slave escape was like. By doing so she expands upon the story and fills in the blanks left by the slave narratives, confirming the chaos of slavery while reinforcing the humanness of individuals thought to be less than human.

In Chapter Three, I traced the stages of the revolution in Ellison's *Invisible Man* and found each of them clearly and succinctly displayed. Morrison's work, while a revolution document, focuses primarily on the first and second stages in Walzer's model for revolution: the oppression of and need for liberation of an oppressed people. The other three stages of the revolution (social contract, political struggle, new society) are present in the text, though liberation takes center stage. The constant presence of the liberation, and thereby oppression, stage is easily explained by the nonlinear style in which events in the novel are related. Morrison deals with the quest for liberation—as she does with the other aspects in her novel—as a many-layered topic, showing that liberation is not as simply got as supposed by the Emancipation Proclamation. Instead after a liberation of some kind occurs, oppression returns or continues, thereby turning Canaan into Egypt over and over again. Susan Bower, in her article “*Beloved* and the New Apocalypse,” states that “The typical format of the slave narrative is to trace the story of the individual's life in slavery, escape, and the journey to freedom . . . What Morrison reveals is that the process must be repeated twice: first to leave physical enslavement by whites and the second time to escape the psychological trauma created by their brutality” (215). Morrison presents one level of this psychological trauma in the

scene when Baby Suggs first recognizes, after being released, that her hands are her own and that the pounding within her chest is *her* heart (Morrison, *Beloved* 141). So also Sethe must recognize that she now belongs to herself. David Lawrence notes in his article “Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh” that “This striving to claim ownership links Sethe’s own horrifying story to the story of the entire community. Central to the pursuit of self-ownership is the articulation of a self-defining language that springs from the flesh and blood of physical experience and that gives shape to the desire so long suppressed under slavery” (235). Upon this liberation and reclaiming of herself *everything else hinges*. Were it not for Sethe’s escape and Paul D’s survival, this story could not be told.

One aspect upon which liberation hinges—as many critics note when discussing *Beloved*—is the presence or absence of love. Without love, liberation is impossible: “The physical escapes of both Sethe and Paul D create the patterns for the psychological escapes: archetypal journeys of courage, descents into almost certain death, and rebirths into beauty and freedom” (Bower 215). And Morrison demands that we acknowledge the power of love and the role it plays in terms of liberation in the revolution process. In an interview with Gloria Naylor, Morrison tells of the story of Margaret Garner, who provided her inspiration for *Beloved*. Garner, an escaped slave, attempted to kill her children to prevent them from being recaptured by the slave catchers: “A woman loved something other than herself so much. She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself. That the woman who killed her children loved her children so much; they were the best part of her and she would not see them sullied. She would not see them hurt. She would rather kill them, have them die” (Naylor 584). The relationship between Sethe and Paul D continually brings the power of love into focus and equates the

ability to love with the ultimate in freedom: “[Paul D] knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, *that* was freedom” (Morrison, *Beloved* 162). And Morrison states that “the point is that freedom is choosing your responsibility. It’s not having no responsibility; it’s choosing the ones you want” (Naylor 573). To determine to love is accepting responsibility for that love, which Sethe does with her children. Denard notes that “The novel progressively becomes a story about the ability, the willingness of those who were not beloved, to love” (43). By choosing to accept responsibility for loving, Sethe also accepts responsibility for her act of murder, which in turn results in attaining one form of liberation—liberation from Schoolteacher’s type of slavery, which is violent and degrading.

Freedom for Paul D and for Sethe is the ability to love. And they can only be free to love and be loved in return after they have been liberated from their lingering psychological oppression. For Paul D that lingering oppression is represented by the tobacco tin in his chest where he has tucked away all that is good and all that is bad: “It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, Schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open” (Morrison, *Beloved* 113). For Sethe, that oppression remains alive and well through the guilt of her deed with Beloved and her refusal to accept the memories: “Paul D convinced me there was a world out there and that I could live in it. Should have known better. *Did* know better. Whatever is going on outside my door ain’t for me. The world is in this room. This here’s all there is and all

there needs to be’” (Morrison, *Beloved* 182-83). While Sethe was free of Schoolteacher, she was not free from that next layer of oppression—the psychological—because of her constant fight to restrain the memories.

Sethe and Paul D’s ability to love could only come with the healing of their wounds, brought on by their years of inhuman treatment at the hands of white men. And yet, this inhuman treatment was not brought about *only* by the hands of white men. It was also propagated within their own communities which resisted loving too deeply or too much for fear of losing what they loved—a carryover effect of slavery when they knew their children and loved ones could be whisked away from them without their knowledge or consent and sold as so much livestock. Ella’s advice to Sethe as she comes for Sethe at the sty, clearly states the community’s sentiments regarding love: “‘If anybody was to ask me I’d say, “Don’t love nothing.””” (Morrison, *Beloved* 92). Yet Sethe refuses to adopt Ella’s attitude because “Sethe’s motivation before and after the killing of her child is a desire to love” (Denard 42).

The Israelites while in Egypt endured pharaonic oppression for 430 years because they maintained their cultural and spiritual identity as God’s chosen people. They passed on their identity to their children and their children’s children and kept their culture and God’s promise alive by continually remembering who they were and where they came from. Those handed-down memories and their commitment to the Promise kept them culturally united and prepared for the day when God would arrange for their freedom. In contrast, Sethe and Paul D’s (and the community’s) refusal to remember their history and their ancestors’ history resulted in their divided community and their inability to love.

In order to locate an ability to love, Sethe and Paul D had to be willing to remember all that they had suppressed in order to survive the pain and horror of slavery. But even that was not enough. In addition they had to be willing to remember all that their ancestors had endured as well, in order to move out of that place of "little love" to the place where Big Love was even a possibility. And in order to make that move, they needed the push which Beloved's spirit provides. Karen Fields states, in her article "To Embrace Dead Strangers: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," that Beloved "resides with them as Need itself—need for human connection, for warmth, for identity, for stories and on ad infinitum through all the things one human can willingly give to another, and more than that" (160). The girl Beloved symbolizes the Black culture's need for connection, for truth, for peace, for memory, for freedom. She is integral to the revolution process because she is the motivator. She acts as a Moses character because she is the one who moves Sethe to think about her past; she is the one who allows Paul D to open up to love again; she is the one who forces Denver to leave the front porch; because of her presence the community comes back together to help Sethe.

Beloved's role as a Moses in Sethe's life revolves around her forcing Sethe to remember. Sethe's life had been about not remembering in order to avoid the pain of rememory. And yet once Beloved arrives she insists that Sethe relive and share the long-suppressed memories: "It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable" (Morrison, *Beloved* 58). Sharing stories with Beloved "became a way to feed her" (Morrison, *Beloved* 58), and in the process of feeding Beloved these memories Sethe was forced to face the life she had

created for herself as a result of the life she had experienced at Sweet Home and before. Sethe is forced to remember Nan and Nan's words about Sethe's mother. In this shocking memory Sethe understands that her act of killing her crawling already? baby girl was an act reminiscent of her own mother's act, yet the difference between the two is that Sethe's act was motivated by love and possession while her Ma'am's act was motivated by hatred and retaliation. A psychoanalytic reading might suggest that Sethe's act of murder was not her *own* act, an act she performed at will, but rather an act motivated by her past and collective memory. Peach notes that "Sethe's healing and rebirth can only begin when she has knowledge and understanding of the absent narratives. The novel hinges upon what is called rememory, the basic concept of which is that memories have a physical existence beyond the minds of the individuals in whom they originate: it is possible to bump into and inhabit another person's memory" (101). Sethe remembering Nan's story about Sethe's mother causes Sethe to rememory her own conversation of sorts with her mother. In this way, a portion of the narrative is filled in for Sethe, and she is forcibly moved out a bit from her refusal to remember.

Beloved inspires rememory in Denver as well as in Sethe. Through telling the story of her own birth to Beloved, Denver not only relates what she knows but begins to experience what she does not know as well: "Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked" (Morrison, *Beloved* 78). Via the storytelling and Beloved's presence, Denver begins experiencing a part of the past she has no memory of. Yet this past comes alive for her and she experiences a portion of what that oppressive life in slavery was like—a life she never experienced because she was born essentially free and never lived as a

possession of white men. This reconstruction of memory begins to construct for Sethe and for the community the ancestral memories that will bind them together as a people, as the Israelites' memories bound them together. And the eventual reuniting of the community will allow for the revolution to take place that will refuse any longer to tolerate any sort of oppression, as we will see later when the community ostracizes Paul D because of his relationship with Sethe.

By Morrison's focusing the text of her novel on the liberation component of the revolution process, she is performing a reversal upon the biblical Exodus. The bulk of the biblical account of the Israelites' time in Egypt, the desert, and then at the edge of Canaan, revolves around the promise that they are God's chosen people and that He would surely free them from their captors. And while they spent 430 years under the oppression of the Pharaohs in Egypt, once they are liberated the text goes right on to relate their tensions and struggles while in the desert. No time is given to celebrating their liberation. In contrast, Morrison's novel is a revolution treatise because it prepares the community (both of readers and characters) to celebrate that liberation and shows how to attain a degree of healing where such a celebration becomes possible.

Indeed, the celebration which Baby Suggs hosts upon Sethe's arrival at 124 is an attempt at celebrating her liberation; but the events which quickly follow on the heels of that celebration without doubt demonstrate that this party was *not* a celebration of liberation. Instead it was a reminder that the inhabitants of the town surrounding 124 were not truly free at all but still lived under the oppression of the white man, whether in actual physical reality or in their own minds. The opulence which Baby Suggs provides at the party-turned-feast grates upon the community because they view in retrospect Baby

Suggs' generosity as her assuming a role that does not belong to her. The wealth of food available at the banquet—twelve pies, five turkeys, new peas out of season, fresh cream, ice *and* sugar, all sorts of breads (Morrison, *Beloved* 137)—make the community angry. How does she, a crippled ex-slave, have the right—much less the means—to provide this incredible array of foods in such abundance? Not only has Baby Suggs committed this seeming act of heresy, but she also was *bought* out of slavery by her own son *and* she lives in the only two story house in their community. All of Baby Suggs' differences begin to stack up in the light of day, and the community becomes angry: “it made them mad. Loaves and fishes were His powers—they did not belong to an ex-slave” (Morrison, *Beloved* 137). As a result of their anger and resentment, this community stood by silent and sullen, looking on without a murmur, while the slave catchers approached 124. This event in the novel is the point of political struggle in the revolution process. Prior to the celebration, Baby Suggs had been the acknowledged leader of the community. Her home was where messages were left and picked up; her home was where one could come to rest or to join in conversation. 124 was the hub of the community with Baby Suggs at its center. After the too-big party, Baby Suggs resigns her position and steps down as matriarch not only because of Sethe's action but also because of the community's refusal to come to their aid by warning them of the slavecatchers' approach.

While Sethe's act of killing crawling already? baby girl in one sense secures her freedom, she remains in bondage: first in the jail cell with Denver, then in her community because she is ostracized by her neighbors, and lastly in her home and mind because she is haunted by the ghost of her dead child. She of all the women, though not free in her mind or in the eyes of her community, is the *most* free of her white oppressors because of

her act of murder through which she has been deemed unfit for slavery. The narrative states that: “Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim . . . now she’d [Sethe] gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who’d overbeat her and made her cut and run . . . Suppose you beat the hounds past that point thataway. Never again could you trust them in the woods or anywhere else” (Morrison, *Beloved* 149). However, she is still not free of their oppression through memory. Sethe attains her literal freedom through the murder of Beloved, a reversal upon Moses’ own actions in Egypt. But her figurative freedom will take at least eighteen years in exile to attain.

I see these events with Sethe as Morrison’s reversal upon the biblical account of the event when Moses kills the Egyptian who had been fighting the Hebrew (Exodus 2). Moses witnesses the Egyptian beating the Hebrew and, in order to help the Hebrew, Moses kills the Egyptian and buries him in the sand. Later, when Moses encounters two Hebrews fighting, he attempts to intervene. The Hebrews ask Moses if he intends to kill one of them, too, in order to end the argument. Moses realizes that his act of killing the Egyptian has been misunderstood. While he performed that action in order to aid his fellow Hebrew, he is now suspected by the Hebrews as willing to kill them, too, in order to maintain peace. They did not see his act as one meant to champion the Hebrews specifically; instead they saw the act as Moses’ willingness to kill in order to solve disagreements. As a result, Moses goes into exile when he learns that Pharaoh is after him because he has deemed Moses a threat to his power.

During his exile, Moses was essentially “free” while among the Midianites. He held a position of responsibility while governing the people, and he married and had

children. Yet he was not truly liberated because he was not among his own people, nor was he performing the leadership duties for which he was being prepared. His exile was a period of waiting and growing until that point when he could rejoin his people.

The reversal which Morrison performs based on this incident results in Sethe's exile as a result of killing Beloved in order to save her. Sethe's murderous act was not against a member of the oppressors; rather it was against a member of her own group. Like the fighting Hebrews who question whether Moses' next violent act will be against one of them, Sethe's action demonstrates that her violent action is not restricted to the oppressors. In fact, the narrative account of how Denver was born has already demonstrated that she will not perform violent acts against those who represent the oppressors (anyone with white skin) and that she will actually revere them instead. She has done this by naming the baby Denver after the white girl, Amy Denver, who helped deliver the child.

Morrison reverses further upon the text by the type of exile into which Sethe goes. Unlike Invisible Man's exile where he *chooses* to live underground in a coal cellar away from people and Moses' exile among the Midianites who accept him as a leader, Sethe's exile is one which allows her to remain *in* her community but without allowing her to be involved *with* the community. For her actions the community surrounding 124 ostracizes Sethe, and she and Denver are left to live for the next eighteen years in an isolated environment haunted by the spirit of her dead daughter. Sethe makes her isolation clear when Paul D arrives at 124: "I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms" (Morrison, *Beloved* 15). The price Sethe pays for the sacrifice of her daughter continues to mount and, in contrast

to Moses' exile in which he begins a family, Sethe's exile becomes more and more complete. Her two sons run away because of the spirit haunting their home and also because of the knowledge that their mother is capable of killing her children. Baby Suggs, holy, loses her faith in the power of grace and chooses to die. Once she and the boys are gone, only Sethe and Denver and the spirit are the remaining inhabitants of the once-vibrant 124 Bluestone Road. In this way, Sethe's exile from her community is made complete.

Sethe at first appears to be the Moses character in *Beloved*. She is the one who escapes from Kentucky to Ohio by herself, and who rescues her four children from slavery in the process. She is the one who arrives at her mother-in-law's home determined to reclaim the three children she sent before her while carrying the newly-delivered child tied to her chest. She is the one who performs a shocking action which in turn secures her freedom—permanently. She is the one bold enough to love so big that she has the confidence and feels she has the right to perform the shocking act of killing her child. All of these events set Sethe up as the character who might seem to most closely resemble Moses and his revolutionary leadership which guides the Israelites away from Pharaoh and out of Egypt. The reversals Morrison performs with Sethe as the Moses character demonstrate that one does not need to be forced away from home in order to be in exile. Sethe's story shows that the exiled individual can remain at home and still be subjected to that exile. It also demonstrates that one's own "kind" can be the ones to enforce this sort of exile simply because one has a different point of view or perspective from which one operates. However, a closer reading of the text reveals Sethe as a character so tortured by her past, so bound up in her determination not to remember,

that she remains in bondage and unable to move out of her self-imposed exile and position of stasis. This becomes clear when the narrator says, “To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay. The ‘better life’ she believed she and Denver were living was simply not that other one” (Morrison, *Beloved* 42). It appears that her period of exile will be in vain because, contrary to Moses’ experience in exile, Sethe is not learning during this period: “Those twenty-eight happy days were followed by eighteen years of disapproval and solitary life. Then a few months of the sunsplashed life . . . Was that the pattern? She wondered. Every eighteen or twenty years her unlivable life would be interrupted by a short-lived glory?” (Morrison, *Beloved* 172). Sethe appears destined to remain in a desert holding pattern.

Instead of representing or exhibiting the characteristics of Moses, Sethe more closely resembles the Israelites who thought that remaining in Egypt would be a much better choice than risking what little they did have for the promise God had in store for them. However, not all of the Israelites were so completely cowed by their circumstances. Remember those who refused to surrender their heritage, who refused to assimilate into the Egyptian community in order to have a chance at an easier life. Sethe proves to be more like the complacent Israelites than the faithful remnant. It is only by working through the layers of the text that readers realize that Sethe is *not* the Moses in the novel; instead, she is an Israelite in bondage and who is content to remain there. But, like Moses in the Bible, the other Moses figures in Morrison’s text refuse to let Sethe remain in Egypt forever. Paul D’s arrival at 124 sets in motion the long process of moving Sethe out of bondage and into the promised land.

Many characters in Morrison's novel alternately assume the Moses role for Sethe, though none can keep that role for long because each is dealing with their own ghosts that keep them from inhabiting the Moses role fully. In his book *Toni Morrison and the American Tradition*, Herbert Rice states that Paul D's and Baby Suggs' stories "emphasize what Sethe's story does: the loss of humanity that slavery entails. Like Sethe, Paul D and Baby Suggs are divided selves. They do not know the intimate details of themselves—their names, their hands, their hearts, their past. Slavery has stolen vital parts of themselves" (109). I suggest that this loss of humanity is why each can only represent the Moses character for a short time and in a limited capacity. Because of their loss and inability to know the intimate details of their lives and pasts, they are unable to remain leaders because they still have so much to learn about themselves; they need their own Moseses to guide them on the process of discovery. I also suggest an advantage to the presence of multiple Moses characters in Morrison's work: that advantage is that readers are more able to accept and feel akin to a character who can be Moses-like *at times*, and less than Moses-like at others. The concept of having multiple Moseses may help us understand the larger-than-life biblical Moses by seeing a bit of Moses in ourselves at times and understanding that we each need our own Moses at others.

The most influential in the role of Moses to Sethe is Paul D because he attempts to set Sethe's world right by removing the spirit of crawling already? baby girl and offers her an opportunity to join her life with his. He is, in essence, offering her a chance at freedom by inviting her to join with him. However, neither is yet ready for that sort of liberation because each has yet to learn to love. The potential is there, as readers see when the narrative shows three shadows holding hands on the way to the carnival and

with the more approving glances of Sethe's neighbors when she is with Paul D (Morrison, *Beloved* 47). But this liberation and life together must be held at bay until love has been released and liberation secured.

When we look at Paul D as a Moses figure, we see his arrival at 124 as that of the exiled individual arriving in the land of the Midianites (Sethe's community) and seeking refuge there. Later, he seeks to join with Sethe as Moses joined with Jethro's daughter. Jethro's daughter is not one of Moses' *people*, yet he enters into relationship with her. The reversal Morrison performs here is that Paul D, in his time as the Moses character, enters into relationship during his exile period, but his relationship is with a woman who is *more* his people than the people among whom he or Sethe lives. Paul D, a slave of the Garners in Sweet Home at the same time Sethe was, specifically set out looking for Sethe when he finds her in Cincinnati. He moves into her home and chases the haint away (or so he thinks) and begins to set up a life with Sethe and Denver. Paul D's initial promise to Sethe, what makes him most Moses like, is his willingness to help bear the burden of her memories: "'Jump, if you want to, 'cause I'll catch you, girl. I'll catch you 'fore you fall. Go as far inside as you need to, I'll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out'" (Morrison, *Beloved* 46). Though he cannot maintain his original promise because of his own bondage in memory, he does set in motion her willingness to remember. And after he deals with his own fears and tobacco tin, he is able to return to her as a Moses and is prepared to continue with her on their path to love and liberation: "'Sethe,' he says, 'me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow'" (Morrison, *Beloved* 273). Jan Furman states, in her article "Sethe's Re-memories: The Covert Return of What Is Best Forgotten," that "The remedy is to remember, but to build

strength and not weakness from these unsettling recollections” (270). Together Sethe and Paul D have the potential to build this strength that will free them from their psychological oppression and allow them to be truly liberated, and thereby able to love.

Besides Sethe and Paul D, Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid are two other Moses characters in *Beloved*. Both are highly visible and highly influential characters. It is through Stamp’s involvement that the waters part and the captives are brought safely to the other shore. As the Israelites were brought across the Red Sea by divine intervention, the workings of the underground railroad must have seemed divinely engineered to the slaves who traveled by it and reached safety as a result. Stamp is the initial contact escaping slaves had with freedom, and without him they would not make it across that body of water that separated them from their dream. However, Stamp recognizes his limitations as a leader after he has revealed The Misery to Paul D. Though Stamp loves Denver and feels himself responsible for saving her life because he “snatched the baby from the arch of its mother’s swing” in the woodshed the day Sethe killed Beloved (Morrison, *Beloved* 149), he becomes aware of his limitations and ability to lead when he finds himself unwelcome at 124. He begins to realize he should have considered Sethe’s feelings and that he may have usurped her rights in being the one to reveal her story to Paul D: “Maybe he should have thought of Denver, if not Sethe, before he gave Paul D the news that ran him off, the one normal somebody in the girl’s life since Baby Suggs died” (Morrison, *Beloved* 170). However, it is Stamp’s pride that keeps him from being able to maintain or reassume his Moses role. Stamp’s history of always being welcome in a home as a result of his participation in each escaping slave’s quest for freedom gave him perhaps an elevated view of himself in the community. When he finds himself

barred from 124, his pride keeps him from knocking on the door: “Rather than forfeit the one privilege he claimed for himself, he lowered his hand and left the porch” (Morrison, *Beloved* 172). And this pride is what also causes him to forfeit his role as Moses: he cannot lead or help Sethe if he will not approach her.

Prior to her resignation as spiritual leader, Baby Suggs clearly inhabits the Moses role when she teaches the community members to love and claim their bodies, and to own themselves rather than to be owned by the white man. She is the one who offers them freedom to cry, to laugh, to dance; she leads them in the Saturday ritual in the clearing that cleanses them of their pain and suffering. She tells them that “the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (Morrison, *Beloved* 88). Harris states that by telling them about the need to imagine grace, Baby “solidifies the notion that their fate is in their own hands. Like their slave ancestors who took to their feet and the woods, they must carve out for themselves a space and a place to be” (Harris 147). She leads them from emotional and spiritual oppression into liberation and sets them up in preparation for claiming their promised land: “Baby Suggs becomes a communal poet/artist, the gatherer of pieces of her neighbors’ experiences and the shaper of those experiences into a communal statement” (Harris 147).

But Baby Suggs cannot remain the Moses for Sethe and the community. As a result of the community’s reaction to the too-lavish feast for Sethe, Baby’s role as spiritual leader and guide for the community comes to an end. She no longer sees herself as the one qualified or gifted to lead her community because of the actions that have taken place at her home: the baby girl’s death and the community’s withdrawal. Baby

Suggs left her role as spiritual leader voluntarily after the baby's death, and Harris says this choice "undercut her role as an ancestor figure. To give up voice for silence returns Baby Suggs to the passive, acquiescent role that defined her character during slavery and indeed makes her a slave to life rather than a master of it" (Harris 148). Rather than remaining an influential figure who shapes not only the novel but also the community's individual destinies, she "chooses instead to become an object for contemplation by her neighbors and the readers. By abdicating her creative role, Baby Suggs descends from the legendary status that has defined her to become just another victim of slavery" (Harris 148). So Baby Suggs leaves the active role of the Moses figure behind and succumbs to death as a means to escape her return to oppression. Though she no longer plays the role of Moses, her influence remains despite the fact that she is no longer present dispensing wisdom and guiding enslaved feet to dance with joy and pain.

Baby Suggs' voice is the voice Sethe wishes for during her long exile, and Baby Suggs' healing touch leaves an emptiness within Sethe that cannot be filled. Sethe "wished for Baby Suggs' fingers molding her nape, reshaping it, saying, 'Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield'" (Morrison, *Beloved* 86). And Sethe would relinquish her weapons under Baby Suggs' soothing influence of "words whispered in the keeping room," though that was not enough to sustain her (Morrison, *Beloved* 86). Baby Suggs' words and influence remain alive for Denver, too, as she hears Baby Suggs' voice encouraging her to leave the porch of 124 and venture out among her neighbors. When Denver is fearful as to what she will find beyond the porch, Baby Suggs' voice assures her that all the horrors are there. And

when Denver asks what to do, knowing she is defenseless, Baby Suggs tells her: “Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on” (Morrison, *Beloved* 244). Furman suggests that Morrison “no doubt is giving her readers the same advice” (270), thereby calling them to continue on in the revolution against oppression: know it is there but live your life in such a way as to dismember oppression rather than encourage it. Denver’s leaving the porch and entering the community begins her period of playing the Moses role at 124 and in the community in an attempt to save Sethe from the clutches not only of Beloved but of memory as well.

Denver assumes her stint in the role of Moses reluctantly and only as a matter of self-preservation. While at first she feared Sethe and desired to protect Beloved from her mother’s deadly hand again, Denver finally comes to realize that it is not Beloved who is in danger but Sethe. Beloved has become the pharaonic presence who demands more and more of Sethe while giving her less and less with which to work in order to fulfill Beloved’s requests. Sethe literally eats nothing but crumbs in an effort to fulfill Beloved’s desire for food: “If the hen had only two eggs, [Beloved] got them both” (Morrison, *Beloved* 240). She also does whatever she can to satisfy Beloved’s desire for entertainment and for explanation. Beloved is consuming Sethe, and if Denver fails to intervene Beloved would most likely accomplish her mission. As a result, Denver takes over as protector and provider by leaving the porch of 124 and arriving at Lady Jones’s house with a request for help, though she does not consider getting rid of Beloved in order to solve the problem: “The job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved . . . Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go

ask somebody for help” (Morrison, *Beloved* 243). As a result of Denver’s willingness to assume this new role, Ella is able to enter the role of Moses in executing Sethe’s final release from *Beloved*.

Ella, in conjunction with Stamp Paid while working on the underground railroad, had served in a Moses role when guiding escaping slaves to safe houses. She was instrumental twenty years previously in bringing Sethe to Baby Suggs’ home from the sty where Stamp had left her after crossing the Ohio River. When Denver reaches out to the community for help, Ella along with the other women of the community remember their roles in not only Sethe’s life but also in Baby Suggs’ life and how they, too, benefited from her big heart. Denard states that “All these characters are motivated in their anger, their guilt, and their forgiveness by the black community’s code of ethics. Slavery gets none of them off the hook, and they must answer to themselves and their community before they finally achieve forgiveness and are able to move forward” (44). The years of their ostracizing Sethe seem to have come to an end when Denver brings to mind all that had transpired, and “the personal pride, the arrogant claim staked out at 124 seemed to them to have run its course” (Morrison, *Beloved* 249). As a result, Ella is able to think through the events and the rumors and call the community to action: “It was Ella more than anyone who convinced the others that rescue was in order” (Morrison, *Beloved* 256); thus, a new social contract was formed. And it is Ella’s holler that calls Sethe and *Beloved*, hand in hand, to step out of the house and which moves the women to surround Sethe and prevent her from stabbing Mr. Bodwin with the icepick. What motivated Ella to be able to move into the Moses position was her own experience at the hand of her white master and his son and the child he had fathered: “The idea of that pup coming

back to whip her too set her jaw working, and then Ella hollered” (Morrison, *Beloved* 259). And as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, it is words, as Trudier Harris states, that are the active force in the novel. Those words—or simply sounds—have the power in this oral novel to exorcise demons and prevent murders. And as a result of the women banding together to prevent another murder from taking place, a new society can begin to form.

The fifth stage in Walzer’s revolution process, the creation of a new society, is anticipated in the epigraph to Morrison’s novel. This epigraph is taken from the New Testament epistle to the Romans, 9:25: "I will call them my people, who were not my people; and her beloved, who was not beloved." This portion of scripture refers to the Old Testament book of Hosea, 2:23: "I will sow her unto me in the earth; and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them who were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God."

The epistle to the Romans, from which Morrison takes her epigraph, is a letter written by the apostle Paul in approximately AD 56 or 57. With this letter, Paul is attempting to settle a dispute over how one attains and maintains salvation: whether salvation is by faith alone—which is the gospel Paul preached; by grace and law—as the Judaizers believed; or by a grace which allowed the "believers" to continue to live a life of sin as they chose—as the antinomians taught. Rather than try to force one doctrine or another down the throats of the disputers, Paul relies in his letter upon a cross-examination of the gospel itself to determine the answer to this question. This chapter, and the epigraph Morrison uses, becomes most relevant to a discussion of revolution in terms of its reference to the book of Hosea when one understands that the name Hosea

means salvation and is found throughout scripture in various forms. Hobart Freeman states, in *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, that Hosea is "the equivalent to Joshua, the successor to Moses; to Hoshea, the last king of Israel; and in its Greek form to Jesus" (176). The answer to the question of how one attains and then maintains salvation comes in Romans 9:16: "So, then, it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy." And in 9:18 Paul says of God: "Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth." And Paul asks a question to bring home his point: "What if God, willing to show his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction; And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had before prepared unto glory . . . ?" (Romans 9:22-23). Paul's point, then, is that God sees the larger picture and uses events in order to accomplish His purposes. God no more caused Hosea's wife, Gomer, to be unfaithful than He caused the Israelites to be persecuted and taken into captivity by Pharaoh. However, because He is an omniscient God and knew these events were going to occur, He used them and the suffering associated with them in order to accomplish His purposes. Likewise, God did not ordain or engineer the Diaspora and the enslavement of Blacks, but He was and is able to use the event.

Paul next writes the passage from Hosea (Romans 9:25); and Morrison quotes Paul in her epigraph. Later in Romans, 11:11-36, Paul continues his argument when he tells the Christians not to boast of their position in God's kingdom because they are merely *grafted* on to the trunk of Israel and could just as easily be cut off again (11:21). The point is that in order for the Gentiles to survive—since they are merely the branches

and not the trunk of the olive tree—they are dependent upon the trunk for life. And that trunk is the Jews. Morrison's novel extends this metaphor to make Blacks the trunk onto which whites (and all others) are grafted. By doing this, she shows that Blacks are to other people as Jews are to Christians: Blacks are the chosen people in *Beloved* just as the Jews are the chosen people of the Bible.

So how does this biblical grounding of the epigraph help us understand the novel and better know to whom it is speaking? Paul's case, which he set before the Judaizers and the antinomians, argues for salvation through faith. He calls to the readers of his letter to examine their own motivations for teaching either the strict law-abiding doctrine of the Judaizers or the more liberal doctrine of the antinomians. His point is that if his audience examines the gospel of Christ as he suggests, they will no longer be able to pervert the doctrine for their own gain, and that they no longer will be able to make it more difficult for the followers of Christ to actually *follow* Christ—or to be misled by misappropriated doctrines. Paul's argument is calling for a response from his readers; he is asking that they examine their own motives, their own lives, and that they come back into line with the teaching of the gospel as Christ intended.

Morrison's novel has the same purpose as that of Paul's letter to the Romans: Morrison is attempting to effect a healing of the division among and between the races, just as Paul was attempting to effect a healing among and between the religious groups of his day. If we examine the novel as a text that parallels God's admonishment to Hosea to raise up children whom He will at first reject and later redeem, then Morrison places the Africans and their experience of slavery as parallel to that of the Israelites' experience while in slavery under Pharaoh and in the desert while waiting to enter the promised land.

The after-effects of this experience eventually led to the civil war and the separation of the twelve tribes of Israel. Morrison's epigraph, when read in the way I suggest, at once calls readers to see Sethe, Baby Suggs, Beloved, Denver, and Paul D as the children of Gomer, Lo-Ruhamah, and Lo-Ammi: representatives of a rejected, outcast, and unloved people who had been abused by Pharaoh, held captive, and mistreated for decades and then separated from their tribe to live in a divided kingdom as a result of civil war; a people still struggling with the after-effects of their abuse and mistreatment, and misguided into idolatries and away from their god.

Morrison also calls her readers to identify themselves with the characters and situations she creates in her novel. Either we are Sethe, Baby Suggs, Paul D, etc., experiencing the torments of the white oppressors; or we are the white oppressors forced to look at ourselves and our behavior for the abomination that it is. James Baldwin, in his work *The Fire Next Time*, states that "if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it" (21). And what Morrison's work points up is that this forced seeing comes from knowing our traditions; otherwise, we cannot change our futures.

The response, of course, for the oppressors should be one of shame-faced repentance and lamentation for the incredible injustice man is capable of perpetrating upon man through oppression. For the oppressed, the response should be one of a rising up, a bonding together that a people surviving a heritage of pain and degradation are able to find beauty and love and comfort, as well as the temerity to survive, in the most unspeakable of circumstances—but an additional response should be a recognition that

Blacks also rejected the unity that they had by virtue of being one people; this division among Blacks is an allusion to the biblical civil war between the Northern and Southern Israelites.

Morrison shows us this division in *Beloved* when the town Blacks turn their backs on 124 Bluestone Road and then upon Paul D. Sethe, Baby Suggs, Denver, and the ghost of Beloved are members of the community until Baby Suggs throws the too-big party to welcome Sethe and her children to her home. Baby Suggs' show of opulence is too much for the community; and while they partake of that opulence, it causes the community to no longer see the inhabitants of 124 as like them. As a result, the town Blacks turn away from Sethe and Baby Suggs and withhold the community from them; this rejection is what ultimately causes Baby Suggs' death. Likewise, the community refuses to take in or offer Paul D a home after he leaves 124 because, via Ella, they claim not to know his people and, therefore, cannot trust him (Morrison, *Beloved* 186). Jane P. Tompkins, in her essay "Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History," states that "Stowe's image of a utopian community as presented in Rachel Halliday's kitchen is not simply a Christian dream of communitarian cooperation and harmony; it is a reflection of the real communitarian practices of village life, practices that had depended upon cooperation, trust, and a spirit of mutual supportiveness" (99). Baby Suggs' kitchen had been this communitarian picture of harmony until the Misery and the community's rejection of her and her family. That rejection is the fracture within the Black community which sounds the return of oppression because the revolutionaries have lost their focus and are now fighting among themselves rather than fighting the enemy.

Sethe and Baby Suggs had communitarian support prior to the celebration, but not after the celebration, and certainly the support was not there for Sethe after Baby Suggs' death. Hence, the inhabitants of 124 are to the town Blacks as Blacks are to other people, and as the Jews are to Christians. The suffering that Sethe and her family, and Paul D, experience as a result of this division, though, is only for a time; for as the Apostle Paul continues with his grafted branches metaphor in his letter to the Romans, he states that the Gentiles "should [not] be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved" (11: 25-26). Hence, the suffering that Jews experienced at the hands of the Gentiles and that Blacks experience at the hands of whites will eventually end and they will be raised up and called beloved.

Morrison, through the novel *Beloved*, shows the "what could have been" if Israel and Judah had healed the division between them. Denard comments that "as Morrison has shown in the writing of *Beloved*, what lies beyond the bitterness of the history revealed in this novel is a people trying desperately, triumphantly, dangerously even, to forgive and to love" (46). Morrison shows this explicitly in the novel when the women from the community surrounding 124 Bluestone Road come back together to stop Sethe when she attempts to attack Mr. Bodwin. At the point where the women come to Sethe's aid, the community has the potential to heal and the ability to move forward. This moment did not take place for Judah and Israel; instead, they were each taken back into captivity because they were not strong enough individually to withstand the enemy.

Using the tribes of Israel as her metaphor, Morrison is showing what can happen if today's tribes of Israel—the various races—can come together: that healing will be able

to take place, but only if we reunite. *Beloved* is a revolution treatise which shows readers the importance of bringing communities back together in order to avoid ending up like Judah and Israel: ultimately taken back into captivity, thereby forced to repeat the pattern of bondage, division, and war until communities get it right.

CHAPTER FIVE

DOCTOROW'S *RAGTIME* AS AN EXODUS

TOWARD THE AMERICAN DREAM

“At a certain point . . . when your mind is organized and you’re attuned to whatever your subconscious is doing, you become a kind of magnet for your own experiences and reading, and things in the air become relevant. On the basis of that, you’re led from one thing to another. You see a picture in a newspaper, or you’re walking through some stacks in a library and you see a title of a book, and in some peculiar, mystical way, things just happen to come up when you need them . . . That’s what I would call research.” E. L. Doctorow, quoted in Paul Levine’s “The Writer as Independent Witness,” pp. 62-63.

In Chapter Three, I traced the Israelites’ oppression and liberation from Egypt, as well as their social contract, political struggle, and the formation of a new society in Ellison’s novel, *Invisible Man*. As I demonstrated in that chapter, *Invisible Man* readily lends itself to the application of Walzer’s five steps in the revolution process as identified in the biblical story of the Israelites and their exodus from Egypt. In Chapter Four, I traced these same steps in Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*. While all five stages of revolution are present in *Beloved*, I noted that Morrison’s emphasis is on the liberation stage, that becoming liberated and taking hold of that liberation is next to impossible for the inhabitants of the Black community surrounding 124 Bluestone Road because they are not free of the oppression of memory. Though free of the legal bonds of slavery, these Blacks are still enslaved by their lack of communal story and by their refusal to remember their pasts. However, the novel ends with a hope for the formation of a new society because the individuals have come back together in an effort to remember and to

heal. In this chapter, I demonstrate that E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* is a revolution treatise along the same lines as *Invisible Man* and *Beloved*. *Ragtime* also follows the pattern of revolution that Walzer identifies in his study of the biblical Exodus; however, the difference between *Ragtime* and *Invisible Man* and *Beloved* is that the characters in *Ragtime* remain stuck in the oppression stage of the revolution and have yet to even hope for liberation because they, in the case of most characters, are unaware that liberation has not already come. Doctorow's novel is a revolution treatise for precisely this reason: it shows readers how we have been duped into thinking, by the hype of the American Dream, that those of us who live in America *do* live in the land of milk and honey, that we *can* have all that we strive for, and that everyone *will* have a chance to obtain the success and prosperity for which they hope, regardless of their ethnicity or skin color. What Doctorow's novel does, and what makes it a document for revolution, is show that Canaan is actually just another Egypt for those who came to America's shores looking for the Promised Land. The novel provides a backward-looking view that reveals the fallacy of the Dream. This backward-looking vision may cause readers' eyes to be open and watchful, helping them to pay attention to what is only propaganda while checking for the truth.

My reading of *Ragtime* from a perspective of revolution is a unique approach to the novel. Other critics of *Ragtime* have focused their studies on the similarities between ragtime music and the narrative structure of the novel. For example, Rodgers, Williams, Parks, Ostendorf, and Saltzman comment upon the incongruent shifts that take place between the narrator's descriptions of the social outings and parades that take place and the abuses the blue collar workers are made to endure, both in their living and working

conditions. Arthur Saltzman notes, in his essay “The Stylistic Energy of E. L. Doctorow, that “Our easy appreciation of social outings and parades . . . is abruptly undercut by the eradication of Negroes and immigrants from the picture, since their sufferings must be neglected in order to preserve the sentimental façade” (91). Saltzman goes on to say that “It is the interplay between these two conflicting visions of America, the charmingly nostalgic and the bitterly ironic, that creates a complex pattern symbolized by the metaphor of ragtime music” (91). John G. Parks, in his work *E. L. Doctorow*, discusses the method in which ragtime music is played in order to comment upon Doctorow’s narrator’s use of ragtime as a means to tell his story: “Ragtime music is characterized by its syncopated rhythm—the treble hand on the piano accenting second and third beats of a measure, improvising as it were, and the bass hand playing a steady, precise, and regularly accented beat. The effect is a consequence of the mixture of the formalized and the improvised” (58). The use of ragtime as the “beat” to which the story is told captures the confusion and tension of the Progressive Era. Parks notes the “repetition colliding with change, convention with innovation. The nervous driving energies of ragtime reflects an age never quite realizing itself, never quite gaining control of the many forces of change to which it gave birth” (58). This pattern of “repetition colliding with change” is a dominant force throughout *Ragtime*.

In addition to the technique of playing ragtime music, David Emblidge, in his article “Marching Backward Into the Future: Progress as Illusion in Doctorow’s Novels,” notes a central motif of history repeating itself in three of Doctorow’s novels, *Ragtime*, *Welcome to Hard Times*, and *The Book of Daniel*: “This motif is the idea of history as a repetitive process, almost a cyclical one, in which man is an unwilling, unknowing pawn,

easily seduced into a belief in ‘progress’” (397). Parks suggests the effect of a narrative that shows the repetitiveness of history and what we might learn from this sort of forced looking backward: “In a real sense . . . the novel is a product of a warning read back into history after a terrible catastrophe—in this case, World War I, the ending of American innocence and the real entry of America into the twentieth century” (60-61). Some critics see this repetitive history as a sort of assembly-line process by which the novel is produced. In his article, “E. L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative,” Geoffrey Harpham observes: “*Ragtime* gives the appearance of having been produced by a narratological assembly line” (89). Barbara Estrin concurs. With the advent of Ford’s assembly line, the whole twentieth century changed. And with that change came a change in philosophies. Estrin notes in her article “Recomposing Time: *Humboldt’s Gift* and *Ragtime*” that: “*Ragtime* examines the philosophy of interchangeable parts as an economic and psychological construct. The book’s central thesis turns human beings into cogs on the wheel of time” (21).

Along with the metaphor of ragtime music and the repetition of history, the assembly line process is reinforced throughout the novel via the concept of interchangeable parts. This concept is most obviously viewed in the events surrounding Coalhouse Walker’s car when he demands that his car be restored to its original condition using factory-produced parts. This concept is also viewed more obscurely in the changing concept of the American family when Father and Mother’s family is changed from its WASP origins to that of the melting pot family after Father’s death when Mother marries the Jewish immigrant, Tateh. The New American family is then composed of Mother, Tateh, little Boy, little Girl, and the Black infant: “Tateh, the widower-father of

an immigrant Jewish family who has pulled himself up from poverty, marries the widowed Mother of the WASP Westchester clan. The new family thus formed has three children, one black, one brown-eyed Jewess, and one blue-eyed blonde” (Estrin 22). Yet this is the *only* melting pot Doctorow allows to exist. Stephen Cooper comments, in his article “Cutting Both Ways: E. L. Doctorow’s Critique of the Left,” that Doctorow uses “textbook language so often employed to create and perpetuate the myths of America,” but Doctorow “destroys those myths, especially the myth of America as the melting pot where anyone with determination can succeed” (118). Families may be blended and culturally mixed, but the lie of the American Dream of opportunity remains intact as long as we live in an oppressive society where equal opportunity is denied to the members of that society.

Critics have also noted the mythic qualities of Doctorow’s work. Cooper notes that Doctorow’s first novel, *Welcome to Hard Times*, “challenges traditional myths about the American frontier” (113). He states about *Ragtime* that “Doctorow provides a clever critique of the [American] myth without losing sight of its basic appeal and the problems that appeal causes for radical critics and reformers” (Cooper 120). And while these critics discuss the myth of America as it relates to *Ragtime*, David Garrison, in his article “Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*,” demonstrates how Doctorow’s *Ragtime* parallels Ovid’s work: “While virtually all critics of *Ragtime* have mentioned its mythic qualities, none has yet examined Doctorow’s elaboration of classical myths from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*” (103). He makes the case that evidence of Ovid’s work shows up repeatedly throughout *Ragtime*: “Doctorow . . . does not follow Ovid’s storylines exactly . . . He alludes to Ovid; he creates characters that correspond to those in the

Metamorphoses; he develops an ironic tone that closely resembles that of Ovid's poem; he makes use of Ovidian plot patterns and linking techniques; and above all, he concentrates on the theme of change" (Garrison 115). Garrison notes that Ovid "is sometimes in the foreground and always in the background of *Ragtime*, sometimes overtly in the text and always covertly in the texture of the novel" (115).

Garrison makes his case for Doctorow's patterning *Ragtime* after Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Rodgers, Williams, Parks, Ostendorf, and Saltzman make their case for ragtime music as the metaphor after which Doctorow crafted his work. Now I make *my* case for Doctorow's work following the pattern of the Israelites' oppression in and exodus journey out of Egypt and their deliverance into Canaan as recorded in the biblical books of the Pentateuch.

In *Ragtime*, America clearly represents the Egypt of the Pentateuch. Doctorow's novel reveals his view that the capitalist society that America is oppresses all lower social stations and not just people of color. These people of lower stations, regardless of their skin color, represent the Israelites while under the oppression of Pharaoh. While in *Invisible Man* the pharaonic presence is represented by Dr. Bledsoe and the Brotherhood and in *Beloved* by slavery and Schoolteacher, capitalism is the evil pharaoh that oppresses the masses, particularly immigrants, in *Ragtime*, and this oppression is propagated by the American Dream. The immigrants who came to America did so with the hope of finding their dreams of freedom, opportunity, and prosperity fulfilled here. They are told that by working hard, they can gain whatever prosperity they desire. However, that "working hard" is primarily in blue collar jobs in factories, which pay minimal wages and which keeps the immigrants confined to abysmally poor housing with

every member of the family required to work merely to survive. Tateh, Mameh, and little Girl's story represent the typical immigrant experience in this era. Doctorow's novel, by using the metaphor of ragtime music as its underlying rhythm, puts in stark relief the rich and well-heeled American on one side and the impoverished and starving immigrant on the other. The purpose of employing this dichotomy is to show the realities of a society under capitalism in order to reveal that society as not the Canaan the immigrants had hoped for, but rather another Egypt.

One of the qualities of *Ragtime* that makes it reminiscent of the Israelites' condition under pharaoh in Egypt is the novel's emphasis on the stage of oppression in the revolution cycle; the stage of revolution we see in *Ragtime* is oppression without hope of liberation; this is the first reversal we see of the biblical text. Throughout the Book of Exodus and the story of the Israelites' oppression while in Egypt, the text constantly reiterates the promise God made to the Israelites: that they would eventually be free. The immigrants and those under oppression in *Ragtime* have no such promise to fall back on for reassurance. Instead what we see reiterated in the text is the American Dream as the lie of capitalism that draws the poor, the tired, and the hungry to America under the belief that they will be allowed an opportunity to have a better life. Instead, the immigrants discover that the oppression they sought to escape in their own countries is larger than life in America; they discover that the dream of owning, inventing, and experiencing are generally reserved for those of the dominant class: the white Anglo-Saxon protestants (WASP). In his article "Tales of Obscene Power: Money and Culture, Modernism and History in the Fiction of E. L. Doctorow," David Gross observes: "The illusions which Doctorow's historical vision seeks to uproot and destroy are those which would deny

money's power or attempt to see that power as anything but cruel and destructive. Thus in *Ragtime* we get a strange mixture of lyrical evocations of a supposed 'simpler era' with a bitter debunking of such illusions, illusions that would ignore the historical realities which decree that time is money" (129). This bitter debunking and ragtime beat are revealed in the first pages of the novel.

The novel opens with a vision of the ideal WASP family living in New Rochelle, New York. This ideal family is composed of a generically named Father, Mother, and little Boy. Among the other family members are Mother's Younger Brother and Grandfather. The namelessness of these characters is important because it exemplifies the unimportance of the individual and denotes that this story is about *all* American WASP families, not just one family in particular. Instead, what is important to note is that these are wealthy white people who live a life of ease bought on the back of patriotism—a belief in America as *the* place to be and be from. The narrator tells us that "The best part of Father's income was derived from the manufacture of flags and buntings and other accoutrements of patriotism, including fireworks. Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900's" (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 3). The population of New Rochelle, made up of other people who looked and behaved as Mother and Father did, enjoyed the finer things in life, like parades, concerts, political picnics, and social outings (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 3). Curiously, Doctorow's narrator notes immediately after the description of this leisurely lifestyle of Americans living the American Dream that "There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants" (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 3-4). This statement joltingly reinforces the WASP belief that America—unpolluted by skins of other colors—is the land of the free and the privileged. Doctorow has a reason for wanting to startle his readers and to do so

he uses the principles of ragtime music to put the WASP family in the position of pharaonic oppressors in the novel. Berndt Ostendorf notes this principle in his article “The Musical World of Doctorow’s *Ragtime*.” In this article, Ostendorf discusses characteristics of ragtime music which make it appropriate for the novel: “The overall organizing principle is, as in ragtime, a system of contradictions, most abstractly between being and becoming, or between metamorphosis and stasis” (584). This system of contradictions is fully on display by the collision between this seemingly idyllic life of Father and Mother’s family and their community and the slipped-in statement about the lack of Negroes and immigrants present in that community. That contradiction is reinforced later in the novel when, as Father is sailing off on the *Roosevelt*, he sees a shipload of immigrants sailing toward America:

A while later the *Roosevelt* passed an incoming transatlantic vessel packed to the railings with immigrants. Father watched the prow of the scaly broad-beamed vessel splash in the sea. Her decks were packed with people. Thousands of male heads in derbies. Thousands of female heads covered with shawls. It was a rag ship with a million dark eyes staring at him. Father, a normally resolute person, suddenly foundered in his soul. A weird despair seized him . . . Yet aboard her were only more customers, for the immigrant population set great store by the American flag.

(Doctorow, *Ragtime* 11-12)

Not only are there now immigrants in America, but Father returns to a home which houses Negroes—Sarah and her infant—as well as entertains them when Coalhouse Walker comes on his courting visits to Sarah. As much as Father might experience

despair at the thought of an America full of immigrants, he also recognizes the boon this immigrant population will bring to his business. While later we will see that Father cannot adjust to this change in America and the demands for change it places upon his own life, America nevertheless is changing and requires change of her inhabitants.

As we discover through the course of the novel, all of the characters have been on a journey between being and becoming, between metamorphosis and stasis—a process similar to that of the Israelites while making their way across the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land. Father and Mother's unaware America has been forced to become aware of her immigrant inhabitants and to acknowledge their presence. The American family caught in stasis, represented by Father, has been forced to endure a metamorphosis and to accommodate itself to a changing nation, represented by Mother. Parks suggests that "In one sense, *Ragtime* is about the death of the father, of patriarchy, at least of a certain kind. By the same token, it signals the emergence of woman into the new equation of the twentieth century. The voice and influence of Emma Goldman is strong throughout the novel, speaking for the freedom of women from physical and economic and political servitude" (69). Father's assumptions that he could venture off on voyages of discovery and return to a home that remained unchanged over his year long absence are proven false assumptions and demonstrate the naivete of his patriarchy. Not only is he changed by his experiences, but Mother is changed by hers. No longer does she grudgingly submit to Father's sexual desires. Instead she becomes the instigator and one of those women who thrusts her hips while engaged in the act. During his year-long absence to the Arctic circle, she discovers herself to be a shrewd business woman capable of making decisions and cultivating success without her husband's assistance. In addition to a business savvy

and sexually aggressive wife, Father also discovers a new child living in his home—and a Black child at that!—along with the child’s (unwed) mother. Father is unwilling, or unable, to adapt to these changes—though he appears to try when he champions Coalhouse Walker’s case before District Attorney Whitman; however, he never truly moves beyond his traditional patriarchal self, which represents stasis. At his death, the narrator says of Father: “Poor Father, I see his final exploration. He arrives at the new place, his hair risen in astonishment, his mouth and eyes dumb. His toe scuffs a soft storm of sand, he kneels and his arms spread in pantomimic celebration, the immigrant, as in every moment of his life, arriving eternally on the shore of his Self” (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 269). After Father’s death, Mother marries Tatch, the Jewish immigrant who is the one character in the novel who *does* achieve the American Dream. With the death of the patriarchal family and the birth of the culturally mixed family, represented by Tatch and Mother’s union, Garrison notes the presence of Ovid’s influence: “Using the Latin poem about change as a touchstone, Doctorow outlines the sea changes in American society: the rigidly-controlled patriarchal WASP family gives way to a new kind of American family formed by an immigrant man, a liberated woman, and [three] children, one of whom is an adopted black child” (106). Represented by this new union, the previously traditional American family undergoes a metamorphoses and changes looks, becoming a new version of itself. I liken this new version of the American family to that of the new band of Israelites formed while traveling for forty years in the desert before reaching Canaan. This emerging family took time to form.

Along with the change in the construction of the American family, changes also take place in the construction of traditional patriotism. Mother’s Younger Brother—an

employee of Father's flag and fireworks factory—uses his skills as a fireworks designer to begin designing ordnance and bombs. Through Younger Brother we see the third stage of revolution, political struggle, taking place. Younger Brother represents this stage through his patriotism gone awry with the realization of the fallacy of the American Dream. While Father is the preeminent patriot and explorer living the American Dream, Younger Brother, through his association with Coalhouse Walker and his band, recognizes the lie which is behind the promise of the American Dream, and his political struggle becomes that of rebelling against the Powers That Be who represent the oppressors, namely those who, like Father, insist on holding down people of color, represented by Coalhouse Walker. Emblidge notes the perception versus the reality inherent in the concept of the American Dream. Father is a “manufacturer of patriotic materials like flags, bunting, and fireworks . . . But it is Doctorow's incessant cleverness which converts this symbol of stable patriotism into its own opposite. Ironically, Father's own brother-in-law . . . learns to make bombs at the fireworks factory and later trains and supplies a band of revolutionaries” (405). The contrast this struggle brings to light is represented by the struggle between Father and Younger Brother. Father, while living the American Dream, is miserable and bored. He continually seeks adventure because he has nothing else to do or for which to live. He has no causes for which to fight. He has no beliefs for which to die. In his work *Understanding E. L. Doctorow*, Douglas Fowler calls Father a “decent man,” emblematic of *all* decent men who have no cause upon which to stand, who strive to accomplish the American Dream as if that is all there is to live for: “as the story opens [Father] has succeeded in the business of life just as Ben Franklin and Thomas Edison and Abe Lincoln indicated a penniless young American male should

succeed” (60). Father lived the American Dream, and yet he died miserable and unfulfilled, separated from Mother and little Boy. Younger Brother, on the other hand, lived passionately and died with flare while teaching a band of revolutionaries in Emiliano Zapata’s army to make bombs. However, Father’s business benefited from Younger Brother’s passion because, as payment for the years he spent living under Father’s roof, Younger Brother left behind plans for seventeen ordnance devices which would allow Father’s business to produce those devices to be used in World War I.

Cobbett Steinberg, in his article “History and the Novel: Doctorow’s *Ragtime*,” states that “Most of *Ragtime*’s characters are caught between imprisonment and desperate motion, between captivity and flight, between claustrophobia and agoraphobia. Like many characters in American fiction, their problem is finding a pattern, a meaning that does not imprison” (130). This is the second reversal Doctorow performs on the story of the Exodus. What Steinberg notices is that those striving for the American Dream—freedom, opportunity, success—actually become imprisoned by their quest. The Dream, ironically, is *not* the epitome of freedom; instead it is a circular race which cannot be won. And while those involved in the race are running it, they are unable to see that the race is not only pointless but that it is also a lie; it does not exist to begin with *because* it cannot be won. In contrast, while the Israelites were held captive under Pharaoh’s rule, they appeared to remain steadfast in their assurance that God would ultimately free them. They performed their duties without vacillating in their purpose even though at the point of departure from Egypt some were hesitant to go.

However infrequently it may actually happen, Doctorow does include that occasional success story of an immigrant who does in fact achieve the elusive American

Dream. In *Ragtime*, that immigrant is Tateh. Doctorow has been questioned as to the integrity of his convictions that a capitalist society is indeed an oppressive one when he has a character in his novel, Tateh, achieve great wealth and success while having that same character turn his back on his fellow laborers. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, recorded in McCaffery's essay "A Spirit of Transgression," Doctorow defends his character, Tateh: "I was making an observation in my treatment of him, that very often a man who begins as a radical somehow . . . by a slight change of course can use these gifts to succeed under the very system he's criticizing. Very often this happens without his losing his sense of himself as a radical" (45). Saltzman notes regarding the improbability of this success: "That Tateh manages to save himself and his daughter from defeat, and to succeed miraculously in the film industry, does not minimize Doctorow's criticism, for Tateh's luck emphasizes the unpredictability and the infrequency of dreams being realized" (94). Cooper notes that "Doctorow uses the mythic West to expose the myths of capitalism" (113). He suggests that "If we look at Doctorow's whole career . . . we will find that a skeptical attitude toward reform and progress is the rule rather than the exception" (Cooper 114). Thus, the fact that, in a novel that refutes capitalism and exposes the American Dream as a lie, a poor immigrant who came to America for the express purpose of achieving the American Dream actually does so is not incongruent with Doctorow's scorn of capitalism after all because of this skepticism.

From reading Doctorow's text, we can easily see capitalism as that element which causes oppression and which gives life in America the characteristics that call to mind the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt. Reading *Ragtime* as an extension of that ancient story requires that we identify a Moses character who can lead the oppressed people out

of their oppression. In *Invisible Man* and *Beloved* I identified various Moses characters who served to help guide the Israelite characters out of their Egyptian bondage. However the third of Doctorow's reversals upon the biblical text reveals itself by the fact that in *Ragtime* no Moses characters are readily apparent. I suggest that this is the case because, in terms of Walzer's model of the stages of revolution, the novel remains in the stage of oppression. The Israelites remained in bondage in Egypt for 430 years during the later part of which their leader, Moses, emerged and secured their liberation. Since *Ragtime* remains in the oppression stage no apparent leaders have yet emerged who can guide the Israelites to freedom. By the end of the novel, however, little Boy is the best choice for the emerging Moses character because it is at this point that the reader discovers he is the narrator of the tale. Little Boy's role is to reveal the truth about the American Dream which has been hidden by patriotism, capitalism, and the myth of that dream. Peter Freese, in his article "Doctorow's 'Criminals of Perception,' or What Has Happened to the Historical Novel," states: "The optimistic vision of the upwardly mobile Tateh and the pessimistic view of the declining Wasp family exist side by side and are kept in abeyance by a narrator who presents the events open to such contradictory evaluations as devoid of any intrinsic direction and as entirely arbitrary" (357-58). Yet, the fact that the narrator reveals himself to be little Boy removes that arbitrariness that Freese notes; consequently, the narrator does provide direction because he reveals the fallacy of the American Dream and exposes the problems inherent in a capitalist system that oppresses immigrants and nonwhites. This revelation calls readers' attention to the incompatibility of the promises of the American Dream and the realities immigrants face upon coming to

America. This revelation also is what sets little Boy up as the Moses character for this version of the Israelites' story.

While America had been (and is still) touted as the land of freedom and opportunity, by telling us the story of his representative WASP American family little Boy reveals the nature of the capitalist society which Doctorow wishes to expose and the problems inherent within that society. Fowler states: "Doctorow's central intention seems to be to depict the invasion, from below and within and without, of a smug and secure American WASP family, circa 1908-1915, a family which is a microcosm of American self-conception at about the turn of the century" (58). The result of this intention, via the narrator who serves as Moses, is to guide readers away from being deluded by the prospects of success in a capitalist system and into a revolution that would expose capitalist lies and work toward championing a new view of the future based on true equality and opportunity, which ultimately will lead to the liberation of those held captive by the system.

Ragtime's call to revolution is most clearly seen through the story of Coalhouse Walker and the fact that he owns an automobile, what Garrison calls "that centerpiece of the American Dream" (110). It is this ownership of an automobile that thrusts Coalhouse into his battle against racism and injustice and which inspires a revolution to take place. Parks has this to say regarding Coalhouse's possession: "Owned by a proud black man, who 'didn't act or talk like a colored man,' the car reveals the virulent connection of racism and class in American society. The injustice transforms an artist into a revolutionary, whose stance leads to the dissolution of Father's family" (66). Coalhouse's adamant insistence that his car be restored to its original condition after the men at the

Emerald Isle Volunteer Fire Department have defiled it makes him an unwitting participant in the revolution which demands social injustices be eradicated from American society. The individual acts performed by Coalhouse and his gang, and the events that take place in the novel, are not necessarily “revolutionary” or significant in terms of advancing a revolution—except or until they are brought together by the author and viewed from a distance by the narrator and reader. When the acts are brought together, they are seen as a tapestry which reveals that they can become steps in the revolution process. This view-from-a-distance of the historical events that little Boy’s telling of history reveals demonstrates the necessity of working together to make revolution happen. We can only see the events as historically significant in retrospect. Likewise, we can only see them as revolutionary in retrospect when we look at them in terms of how they affected history, people, and the revolution process. This is one area in which repetition collides with change. Either we can view history as a repetitive process, over which we have no control, or we can learn from the repetitions which have taken place in history—along with their results—and effect change. Effecting change is what requires revolutionary tactics and involvement because it is far easier and less disruptive to leave the process alone.

The revolution in which Coalhouse is involved is a response to the racism portrayed in the novel by the actions of Willie Conklin and the Emerald Isle Volunteer Fire Department. Cooper notes: “The destruction of Coalhouse Walker’s car by Willie Conklin and his eventual destruction by white society are presented matter-of-factly, and this very flatness of presentation highlights the horror of the racism in this society” (118). (This horror on one hand and flatness on the other is also a reiteration of the ragtime beat

in the novel.) Little Boy, as narrator and Moses figure, uses this flat presentation as a means to bring to the surface a slowly emerging awareness of the fallacy of the American Dream. The treatment Coalhouse receives at the hand of Conklin and his cronies should be enough to make obvious the need for a social revolution that would eradicate this sort of treatment of one human being by another simply based upon the color of one's skin. However, Coalhouse does not necessarily take up the cry for an entire society based upon the treatment to which he is subjected. The narrator makes clear to us that in the midst of his circumstances the would-be revolutionary does not see himself as such. Instead, he sees what his own needs are and devises a way in which to have them met. Though Coalhouse is joined by a band of Black youths who attempt to help him see the larger revolution of which he is a part, Coalhouse either is unable or refuses to work for the larger cause. Cooper notes "while his followers were turning his cause into a crusade for social justice, Coalhouse sticks to his simple demand for personal justice—the restoration of his car by Willie Conklin" (118). Two questions the reader might ask at this point are: Does Coalhouse's small goal help the cause of the larger revolution? Is there any hope that the group, Coalhouse, could or would survive the man Coalhouse's death? The answer to both questions is, No. "Coalhouse gets his car fixed, but the wider ambitions of his followers are thwarted. He makes a deal to save his followers, a deal they object to because it denies their revolutionary ambitions and focuses on Coalhouse's car. His followers escape to a life underground, ineffective resistance, while Coalhouse stays to be gunned down by the police" (Cooper 118-19). What our narrator is telling us from his Moses position in *Ragtime* can be clearly seen through Coalhouse Walker's refusal to join the larger revolution: individuals have the power to make or break a revolution. If we

fail to see the larger vision, if we remain so focused on our individual desired outcomes and disregard the potential to serve the larger cause in each situation, then we may effectively be closing down the avenue through which larger social change can take place. Because of Coalhouse's tunnel vision and by his remaining so focused on his personal desire to have his automobile restored for reasons of personal vengeance, he effectively killed a revolution in progress.

While the reader is pondering the reason why Coalhouse was unwilling to join in the revolution that would help effect a change in social injustice, Doctorow is leaving the reader to discover his reasoning for Coalhouse's inaction. What the reader comes to find out is that the reason Coalhouse does not partake in the revolution is because Coalhouse does not believe that he is not free: "It occurred to Father one day that Coalhouse Walker Jr. didn't know he was a Negro. The more he thought about this the more true it seemed . . . He seemed to be able to transform the customary deferences practiced by his race so that they reflected to his own dignity rather than the recipient's" (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 134). Coalhouse has insistently bought into the lie of the American Dream that says he can be free and equal in any society in the country. He is unaware, even though he is treated unjustly by both the men at the firehouse and by the justice system, that the American Dream—which he has achieved outwardly by his natty clothing, precise speech, and shiny new car—is not his to have in reality. Even up to the point where he takes over J. P. Morgan's library, Coalhouse insists upon receiving justice and being treated fairly by the WASP capitalist system. His final demand, after the visit from Booker T. Washington, is no longer for Willie Conklin's life but only for Conklin to restore and return his automobile. That is all the justice Coalhouse desires and all the

farther he expects his revolution to go. His young followers, however, had higher hopes and are disappointed and angry that Coalhouse decides to end this affair with the return of his car. These revolutionaries needed a leader, and they thought they had found him in Coalhouse Walker Jr. However, Coalhouse knows he is not the Moses figure these revolutionaries need and refuses to pretend to fill that role. Ostendorf suggests “Walker’s subsequent behavior in the novel, the sequence of incidents leading to the bombing of the fire stations and the wiring up of J. P. Morgan’s library . . . may be taken as an objective correlative—in present day terms—of the deep symbolic hurt and anger of urban blacks” (594). This hurt and anger is clearly displayed by the men’s response in the text when Coalhouse tells them that their stand-off will end with the return of his car: “Either we all ought to go free or we all ought to die. You signed your letter President of the Provisional American Government. Coalhouse nodded. It seemed to be the rhetoric we needed for our morale, he said. But we meant it! Younger Brother cried” (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 246). Thus, through the story of Coalhouse Walker, Doctorow demonstrates the oppression inherent in the capitalist system and which is inescapable without a major societal reform. In order for this reform to take place, a revolution must occur that will bring about awareness and effect change.

Henry Claridge, in his article “Writing on the Margin: E. L. Doctorow and American History,” states that “The story of Coalhouse Walker . . . is held ‘inside’ another story, that of Tateh, a socialist Jewish immigrant who goes from silhouette artist to film-maker, and whose upwardly mobile life (away from working-class radicalism toward the American dream) provides a check and a foil to Coalhouse’s bleaker tale” (16). Tateh is perhaps the only character in the novel who discovers, as he is attempting

to achieve it, that the American Dream is a lie, and yet he *does* achieve it. This discovery leads to his and his daughter's leaving their slum home in New York and heading north to Boston and beyond. Without a specific destination in mind, Tateh and his daughter set out riding the public trains as far as they will carry them. When one train reaches the end of its line, he and his daughter simply get on another train and continue riding, eventually arriving in Lawrence, Massachusetts. This time of travel on the train systems again calls to mind the period the Israelites spent traveling in the desert. Lawrence, Massachusetts, seems to be the Canaan to which the Israelites, Tateh and his daughter, finally arrive. However, though it seems to be the home and opportunity Tateh is looking for, he only finds more misery and hardship. While at first he supports the strike and creates signs for the strikers to carry, Tateh discovers that the battle between the blue collar workers and the factory owners is apparently hopeless. In an effort to escape the police action against the striking workers in Lawrence, he and his daughter once again ride the trains in an attempt to leave their hopelessness behind. While reading a newspaper account of the riots they had just escaped, Tateh realizes the strike—though begun with good intentions—will not change the situation of the workers, nor will it combat the ills the working class poor suffer under capitalism. The narrator relates what Tateh read in the newspaper and his reaction to it: “An editorial called for an investigation of the outrage by the Federal Government. So that was it, the strike would be won? But then what? He heard the clacking of the looms. A salary of six dollars and change. Would that transform their lives? . . . Tateh shook his head. This country will not let me breathe” (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 108). Here Tateh's Canaan again is seen as Egypt and his hopes for a prosperous future seem lost. At this point the narrator suggests that Tateh no longer can remain

committed to the cause of the working class: “Tateh began to conceive of his life as separate from the fate of the working class” (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 108-09). But this perception of his fate as no longer connected to that of the working class proves to open up for him the opportunity which will land him right in the middle of the American Dream.

Interestingly, it is at his most hopeless point—when he has no money left to buy food and seemingly nothing left to sell—that Tateh gets his break into the American Dream. By selling the moving picture book he created for his daughter’s enjoyment to the proprietor of the Franklin Novelty Company, Tateh receives a contract to make more books which ultimately leads to his vast wealth and to his adopting the title of Baron and becoming a film maker. Tateh’s story is beyond doubt a rags-to-riches story in the finest Horatio Alger style. Garrison notes that “Tateh’s transformation is perhaps even more total than [Benjamin] Franklin’s, for he eventually becomes a titled personage, the Baron Ashkenazy” (109). Tateh’s assumption of this title is a step in his transculturalizing process. He adopts a title that will allow him to live in the land of foreigners and be accepted as one of them. Ironically, he adopts a foreign title in order to be able to do this. Apparently this title gives him some credibility he would not have any other way. Yet at the point that he and Mother marry, his title, or lack of it, no longer has any bearing: “[Tateh] said I am not a baron, of course. I am a Jewish socialist from Latvia. Mother accepted him without hesitation” (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 269).

Thomas G. Evans, in his article “Impersonal Dilemmas: The Collision of Modernist and Popular traditions in Two Political Novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Ragtime*,” states that “like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Ragtime* is the story of the political

education of a family. In their demands for social and economic justice, Tateh and Coalhouse Walker bring the inequities of American life to the attention of the middle classes—as represented by the New Rochelle family to which they bind themselves” (78). The stories of Coalhouse Walker and Tateh’s family are inextricably tied up with the story of Father and Mother and their WASP family. Therefore, the political education takes place in all three families involved. Coalhouse learns he is no more free in this post-slavery society than his ancestors were just a generation or two before; Tateh learns the reality of the fallacy of the American Dream, the ineffectiveness of socialism, and the advantages of capitalism; the New Rochelle family learns that the traditional patriarchal family unit and Victorian mores are a thing of the past and that their lives involve more than their comfortable income and home. Mother finds her passion both sexually and for the abandoned Black infant, as well as discovering her capabilities as a business woman; Father learns the meaninglessness of his travels and that life does not revolve around him, that he is merely a replaceable part of the system; little Boy learns the value of neglected things and finds his voice in maturity as the narrator of this tale. And the new unions that are formed as a result of these intertwined families form the new generation of Israelites that have the hope of entering the Promised Land, which will spawn a revised version of the American Dream.

Parks states: “*Ragtime* may be called a comedy of history. While many people die, it ends in a marriage symbolizing some new and rich possibilities for America’s future, after its innocence is lost” (56). Parks further suggests that “The marriage of Tateh and Mother at the end represents a new historical composition, which points to a pluralistic American future, and is perhaps the only composition worthy of survival” (69).

Regarding the new historical composition which must take place in America, Freese notes that “this process of de- and recomposition implies an overall development of American society from a strict division of Wasps, Jews and Blacks at the turn of the century into a new ‘melting’ of ethnic groups after World War I” (357). On the topic of the changing and blending of families represented in the novel, Saltzman notes that “The cast of characters separates and recombines in new and exciting ways, strengthening our faith in some complex system of contingency and interdependence” (97). That in this new family a child of color is smoothly included into the fold, Fowler comments: “The very existence of the ‘schwartz child’ in Tateh’s triptych is in fact one of the novel’s most crucial plot devices and the fulcrum of its moral scheme” (74), because this “new” American family includes *all* races and ethnicities—even nonwhite. This is the point at which, in the stages of revolution, the formation of new society, Walzer’s fifth stage, can take place.

Thus we find present in *Ragtime* Walzer’s stages of revolution, though they are slightly reordered from their presentation in the Exodus. Clearly, the entire novel reflects a country under siege of oppression. Liberation does not take place for the whole community, whereas it does for the band of Israelites. But the new family formed by Tateh and Mother, with their ethnically diverse children, does indicate a level of liberation has been reached—at least for some families. The fourth stage of revolution, political struggle, is clearly presented by the story of Coalhouse Walker, and the third stage, social contract, is implied in that same story by the fact that this group of men joined together to fight Coalhouse’s cause. Finally, when read as a treatise for revolution,

Ragtime itself can become the means by which a new society is formed, thus completing the stages of revolution.

In keeping with the theme of the Exodus motif, two specific elements—water-crossings and the presence of traveling papers—are either present or reversed upon in *Ragtime* as they were in *Invisible Man* and *Beloved*. While the Israelites crossed the Red Sea in order to make their escape from Egypt, so too the characters in *Ragtime* encounter their own versions of the Red Sea. Some of these encounters result in successful crossings while others do not. Tateh's water-crossing is most clearly related to that of the Israelites because it is a literal water-crossing that results in freedom, while Doctorow performs reversals upon the crossings which Coalhouse Walker and Father make.

Tateh arrived in America from Europe via ship crossing. He, Mameh, and little Girl are just a few of the thousands of immigrants who left their European homes to travel to America in search of opportunity. Each of these immigrants arrived on America's shores after making a long crossing from their homelands. In *Ragtime* those homelands were Italy and Eastern Europe. The reversal upon the biblical crossing that Doctorow performs here is that instead of crossing the Red Sea and finding freedom from Egypt, the European immigrants were instead virtually imprisoned on Ellis Island; during their time there, the immigrants were subjected to the impatience and power of the immigration officials: "These officials changed names they couldn't pronounce and tore people from their families, consigning to a return voyage old folks, people with bad eyes, riffraff and also those who looked insolent" (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 13). This must have been the first indication to these immigrants that the country they thought was to be their Canaan was in fact just another Egypt. Even among the immigrants themselves there was

fighting that separated the large group of immigrants into their separate ethnic groups, thereby dividing any strength they could have had as a group of united immigrants into individual factions who warred against each other rather than against the forces which kept them impoverished to begin with. This calls to mind again Martin Luther King's admonition to Blacks to remain united in order to effect change because the white man's goal was to keep Blacks fighting among themselves in order to ensure they would not fight against the white man (King, "I've Been" 1963-64).

While Tateh's water-crossing was successful in that he remained in America and was able to achieve the American Dream, Coalhouse Walker's water-crossing failed. Doctorow performs a reversal on the biblical water-crossing motif in Coalhouse Walker's story at the point when Coalhouse is stopped on the road in front of the Emerald Isle Volunteer Fire Department by Willie Conklin and the other fire fighters. Previously, Coalhouse had been able to pass that stretch of road without interference by the firefighters, though they had watched him jealously with each passing: "In the many times he had gone this way the Emerald Isle volunteers would be standing and talking outside the firehouse, a two-story clapboard building, and as he drove past they would fall silent and stare at him. He was not unaware that in his dress and as the owner of a car he was a provocation of many white people" (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 145). On the particular day the firemen pulled the fire wagon in front of his car to block it from going forward and piled ladders and hoses behind it to keep Coalhouse from going in reverse, the road became a symbolic Red Sea and Coalhouse was prevented from crossing it. Instead, his car ends up defiled and submerged in a pond and Coalhouse himself becomes barricaded

within J. P. Morgan's library which has been wired with dynamite. Coalhouse knows as a result of his failed water-crossing that his life and revolution will end.

Father's water-crossing is another interesting reversal of the Israelites' experience because he is already located in Canaan—America, and crosses water in order to leave it on an adventure to discover the North Pole with Admiral Peary. At the point when Father leaves on this adventure, his home life is good and he is a satisfied business man. However, as he and the other explorers leave America's waters on the *Roosevelt* they pass a ship teeming with immigrants heading for the safety of America's shores. This is the first indication to the reader that Father's journey will have results other than those he anticipates. Upon his return from this journey, he comes home to a house which now protects a Black infant and its mother; he also comes home to an assertive and professionally savvy wife and a son who is no longer a child. Father realizes that the life he left behind when he went on his adventure with Peary no longer exists. Instead, "[h]e wandered through the house finding everywhere signs of his own exclusion" (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 91). To both Father and Mother "[I]t was apparent . . . that this time he'd stayed away too long" (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 92). As a result of his prolonged absence, his water-crossing becomes one of crossing out of freedom into a bondage of isolation from family and community. Thus in Father's case, the Red Sea crossing to attain freedom is reversed upon and actually results in his Canaan becoming an Egypt because he no longer feels he fits in.

Besides water-crossings, many of the immigrants carry either literal or symbolic traveling papers which allow them access to their new homelands or play a role in their water-crossings. Tatch's traveling papers, as he journeys up and down the east coast

trying to find a home for himself and his daughter, are at first the money which represents his life savings and which he carries secreted on his body. After the money runs out, his traveling papers become the pages of the book that he created for his daughter's entertainment. These literal papers serve, through their sale to the Franklin Novelty Company, to grant him access to the American Dream.

Father's traveling papers are his journals into which he has recorded the events of his journeys. However, these journals do not serve to gain him entrance anywhere upon his return. Father had recorded his adventures faithfully in his journals in order to preserve them and to share them with others upon his return to America. As Father was presenting what he had meant as gifts of treasures for his family—a polar bear skin for Mother, walrus tusks and Esquimo carvings for little Boy, he also pulled out “notebooks of his journals, their covers curling at the corners, their pages stiff as pages that have been wet; a signed photograph of Commander Peary; a bone harpoon tip; three or four tins of unused tea—incredible treasures in the North”; but at home in New Rochelle, these items become “the embarrassing possessions of a savage” (Doctorow, *Ragtime* 92). Instead of his journals being things of value and a means of admission into places of renown, Father sees them through the eyes of his loved ones and finds them worthless.

Coalhouse Walker's traveling papers are not papers at all but his mannerisms and behaviors. His precise speech and style of dress are purposefully adopted as his means to gain entrance into a new society. And while his behavior is deemed appropriate for his profession as a musician, outside of that profession they are viewed as affectations and attempts to assimilate into the white culture. It is for this reason that the men of the Emerald Isle Volunteer Fire Department pick Coalhouse out as a target of their animosity

to begin with. Coalhouse has been able to achieve what these light-skinned men had hoped to achieve upon immigrating into America but which they had as yet failed to do. While Coalhouse's behavior had allowed him to become a welcome member in the parlor of Mother and Father's home while courting Sarah, that same behavior had become the scourge which reminded the Fire Fighters of their own failure to attain the American Dream which they had come to America to possess. Thus, they struck out at him in order to put balm on their own wounds.

As I have demonstrated through my examination of *Ragtime*, the pattern of the biblical Exodus and the five stages of revolution are present in Doctorow's novel. When read as I suggest, this novel can clearly be seen as a treatise that calls for revolution against capitalism, which is the Egypt that the Israelites (immigrants) find themselves in as oppressed and enslaved people who are miserable and without opportunity. Ironically, the immigrants who left their own countries and came to America to take part in the American Dream of opportunity, freedom, prosperity, and equality instead found themselves under a system of oppression similar to that which they had tried to escape. Cooper succinctly describes two of the forms of capitalism which immigrants faced in America in the early twentieth century as "racism and cultural tunnel vision" (117). In an interview with Richard Trenner, recorded in an essay entitled "Politics and the Mode of Fiction," Doctorow says, "in this country the reference has to be the Constitution; and the political analysis, Marxist or otherwise, will have to develop from just such elemental biblical perception from what we are in our mythic being, not from what Europe is" (Trenner 52). That elemental biblical perception to which Doctorow refers is not ignoring some forms of stealing while condemning other forms, not justifying some types of

murder while prosecuting others. His caution and call to revolution is: don't ignore the tree for the forest or the individual for the society. Stealing and murder are still wrong, whether they are done by an individual or by a governmental body in the name of justice (Doctorow may bring up recent events surrounding the Elian Gonzalez case as an example here). Regardless of who is performing the injustice, injustice is injustice—whether to whites, immigrants, Blacks, or to whomever. The American Dream is based on the promises made in the Declaration of Independence. If we ignore the Declaration of Independence and fail to remember the promises in it—and still promote the American Dream as available to everyone—then we are a country based on a lie and which selectively points out injustice while ignoring much more heinous crimes. This is Doctorow's call to revolution. Doctorow suggests that we instead strive for Plato's definition of justice: "Plato defined justice as the fulfillment of a person's truest self" (Trenner, "Politics" 55). In order to ensure this sort of justice can take place, Doctorow suggests what would have to occur first: "We would build on what we already have, we would go out in the barn (which is the Constitution) and tinker. And it's the failure to recognize *that* which has always brought programmatic radicals up short in this country" (Trenner, "Politics" 55). The failure of revolution occurs when we fail to recognize the premise upon which America was founded in the first place: a desire for freedom. Reading *Ragtime* can help us remember this premise.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation, I have discussed the five stages of the revolution process and the presence of those stages in the literature of three twentieth-century American authors: Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and E. L. Doctorow. In particular I have located each stage in the revolutionary process in *Invisible Man*, *Beloved*, and *Ragtime*. In doing so, I have demonstrated how these authors have performed reversals upon the biblical text of the Exodus journey which informs their novels. As I stated in the introduction, these reversals are not performed simply for their entertainment value nor for merely academic reasons; rather they serve to enhance the meaning of the master story according to each author's individual intentions.

In addition, my study of these three novels has shown the inevitable presence of the Israelites' Exodus journey from Egypt to Canaan in twentieth-century American literature. While these are only three texts from an entire century's worth of literature, they demonstrate the compelling presence of the master story—whether the authors accept it in its entirety or whether they rework it in order to make it representative of their own version of the story. Either way, these works show that postmodern authors are asking questions about their role in that master story and how that story shapes their own lives. As Linda Hutcheon states, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, the goal of postmodernism is not to answer those questions as much as it is to pose the questions so

that they can be pondered from many directions (48). Whether the asking of the question leads to an answer is not as important as simply *asking the question*. The works for my dissertation are postmodern because, while they incorporate elements of biblical narrative, they use those elements not as a means to convey biblical meaning but as a means to question the myths and conventions which have been passed down and accepted through the ages. They impose reversals upon the biblical story in order to tell their own stories. The meanings conveyed by the authors, when they choose biblical motifs for their works, are no longer limited to the meanings ascribed to them in the traditional biblical sense; instead they convey the varying messages that are dependent upon popular culture and personal perspective.

Through their adaptations of the master story Ellison, Morrison, and Doctorow are performing a reversal upon the substance of the American Dream. Their works show that we are *all* immigrants on journeys from our own personal Egypts to our own personal Canaans. By virtue of the means by which America was founded—immigrants from Europe settling the land—everyone who inhabits the United States is an immigrant; and each of the “native” groups that have been formed within the United States, whether Southerners or Northerners, Black or white, or any other label or combination, are a conglomeration of immigrants who have immigrated and transculturalized to form each of these groups. And while one may be a member of a group, one is *still*—regardless of how long one has been a member—an immigrant.

The reversals these novels perform on the story of the Exodus is to show that the Exodus was not *one* journey; it was not limited to the Israelites coming out from under the thumb of the Egyptians. Instead, the Exodus is a continual movement of which each

of us—immigrants that we unavoidably are—is a part. They also perform reversals on the concept upon which America was founded: a land of opportunity and freedom for all. Instead of being one large cohesive group where everyone has the potential to become someone of note, these authors explode the Dream and show how liquid being “American” is: Sometimes we join the group that is on the Exodus, and we move together as one from Egypt to Canaan; other times we must face our Exodus alone. And regardless of where we find ourselves, a revolution is taking place.

In addition to acting out the master stories in their works, Ellison, Morrison, and Doctorow are transforming the master story by reversing upon it in order to make the story their own, to find a way to *own* the story. In the process of doing so, they transform the story for *us*: as a result of reading their works, these transformed stories may change how we perceive the master story ourselves. Their stories may even help us come to terms with the master story if before we have rejected it or refused it in some way. As Michael Goldberg suggests in *Jews and Christians: Getting Our Stories Straight*, the reason for the reworking of the master story may be to keep it alive as a model: “the Exodus as a master story serves as a model, a guide, for suggesting how we are to go on from here. It thus not only relates some past events in the life of one particular people, but simultaneously holds out a vision of how the life of all peoples may be sustained . . . in the future” (127). Michael Walzer would agree. In his work, *Exodus and Revolution*, he notes the relevance of the biblical Exodus journey to the twentieth-, and now twenty-first, century: “The Exodus is an event cut to a human scale, and so it echoes not only in the literature of the millennium but also in historical and political literature. If we listen

closely to the echoes, we can 'hear' the Exodus as a story of radical hope and this-worldly endeavor" (Walzer 17).

Part of the reason the Exodus story needs to be continually reworked is the same reason revolutions need to keep occurring: not everyone was freed through that first Exodus. Instead many Israelites did not *want* to leave Egypt. They desired to remain by the Egyptian fleshpots, even though they could not enjoy the meats cooked within those pots. They were reasonably comfortable in Egypt and knew from whence their next meal would come. The conditions were not ideal but they were livable—except for the fact that the Israelites' liberation was guaranteed by God. The Israelites needed to be reminded that God had guaranteed them their liberty and that He would ensure they attained it.

However, the liberation the Israelites did eventually attain freed them from Egypt but did not guarantee them entry into the Promised Land. Hannah Arendt, in her work *On Revolution*, suggests why this may be: “The inescapable fact was that liberation from tyranny spelled freedom only for the few and was hardly felt by the many who remained loaded down by their misery. These had to be liberated once more, and compared to this liberation from the yoke of necessity, the original liberation from tyranny must have looked like child’s play” (69). So while the children of Israel were liberated from the tyranny of Pharaoh, they were not liberated from the yoke of necessity until after their forty-year desert experience and the purging of the people. Even then, their liberation was not final . . . and neither has ours been.

My study of the stages of revolution and the Exodus motif in American literature leads me to draw three conclusions. First, the master story of the Exodus journey and the Israelites' liberation from Egypt informs all Western literature—whether the literature

responds to the master story as a means of reinforcing its centrality to our lives or whether the literature responds to the master story as a means of refuting its significance. Either way, as I have demonstrated here, its presence is evident and its influence is readily apparent.

Second, the stages of revolution which Walzer identifies as present in the biblical Exodus are present in twentieth-century American literature as well. As I demonstrated in Chapters Three, Four, and Five each of the stages of revolution (oppression, liberation, social contract, political struggle, and new society) can be located in the texts. The fact that these stages are present supports my first conclusion, that the Exodus master story unavoidably informs twentieth-century American literature. In addition, the presence of the five stages of revolution reiterates the fact that the original revolution (that of the Israelites against Pharaoh and Egypt) was not completed once and for all. Instead, the final stage in the revolution cycle—the return to oppression, which Walzer says must be present in order to complete the cycle—is inevitable, thus making the need for continuing or recurring revolution essential.

The need for recurring revolution leads to my third conclusion: authors whose works deal with an exploration of the past in order to effect healing are authors who are revolutionary; they are authors whose goal is to encourage revolution in the sense of motivating readers to refuse to accept the status quo and to, instead, join the revolution which demands change and which demands that the community come back together in order to draw its strength from the group. They do this by asking questions which are characteristic of that which is postmodern—not so much looking for answers as demonstrating that questioning what is, is appropriate and necessary.

One of the reasons that asking the questions becomes so important is directly related to Walzer's stages of revolution. Ideally, after attaining the fifth stage, the formation of a new society—or of attaining Canaan—all should be well. However, as we discover in the biblical model (and as Walzer points out) in order for the revolution cycle to be completed, oppression must return (133). After all, it is a *cycle* and not a linear progression. The reason literature that calls us to revolution is necessary is precisely because of this return to the oppression stage. Had the revolution of the Israelites in Egypt been completed after the fifth stage, the formation of a new society, then we would have no need to further discuss oppression or the need for liberation. However, because the revolution cycle is precisely that, a *cycle*, the Israelites did again become oppressed and did again require liberation. The cycle that the Israelites' underwent sets up the model for the continuing need for and call to revolution which has occurred since.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his essay "The Master's Pieces: On Canon-Formation and the Afro-American Experience," states that "It is clear that every black American text must confess to a complex ancestry, one high and low . . . but also one white and black. There can be no doubt that white texts inform and influence black texts (and vice versa), so that a thoroughly integrated canon of American literature is not only politically sound, it is *intellectually* sound as well" (187). This thoroughly integrated canon of which Gates speaks includes more than simply Black and white texts; it includes texts from all ethnicities represented by the immigrant culture that America is. And the influence is deeper and goes back farther than simply white text informing Black text or Black text informing white text. The informing goes back to and comes from those ancient master stories which have provided the foundation for all cultures. Those ancient texts,

particularly that of the Exodus journey and its representation in the Bible with which I have dealt here, not only inform the literature that follows it, but that literature has in return informed the master story through each author's interpretation of and reversals upon that master story. By virtue of revising and rewriting the story of the Exodus, our authors are creating new versions of an old story; and these new versions bring out new aspects of that old story which cause us to reconsider that master story, to ponder and question it, and to see how it fits into our own version of the tale. In this sense, we are postmodern readers who are asking the text questions—not so much in hopes that we will find answers but simply because we have the freedom and the ability to pose the questions.

Perhaps Ellison, Morrison, and Doctorow found the Exodus story too cumbersome or rigorous as it stood through antiquity and as represented in the Bible. By reversing upon it and acting it out differently in their novels, perhaps these authors have found a way to live with it, a way to give the story its own life in their works. No longer, then, is it a “story” but an actual working out of events in order to be freed from bondage, a way to reenact the Passover in order to save oneself from the inevitable destruction Egypt experienced—a way to salvation . . . however one defines it and for whatever purpose it serves.

WORKS CITED

- Andrews, William L., and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. New York: Viking, 1965.
- Atkinson, Yvonne. "The Black English Oral Tradition in *Beloved*: 'listen to the spaces.'" *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*. Ed. Barbara H. Solomon. New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1998. 247-60.
- Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dell, 1962.
- Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1975.
- Bower, Susan. "Beloved and the New Apocalypse." *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*. Ed. David L. Middleton. New York: Garland, 1997. 209-30.
- Boyarin, Daniel. *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990.
- Bradford, William. "Of Plymouth Plantation." *The Puritans in America*. Ed. Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985. 51-58.
- Callahan, John F. "Frequencies of Eloquence: The Performance and Composition of *Invisible Man*." *New Essays on Invisible Man*. Ed. Robert O'Meally. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988. 55-94.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1973.

- Claridge, Henry. "Writing on the Margin: E. L. Doctorow and American History." *The New American Writing: Essays on American Literature Since 1970*. Ed. Graham Clarke. London: Vision P, 1990. 9-28.
- Cooper, Stephen. "Cutting Both Ways: E. L. Doctorow's Critique of the Left." *South Atlantic Review* 58.2 (1993): 111-25.
- Cotton, John. "God's Promise to His Plantations." *The Puritans in America*. Ed. Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985. 75-80.
- Cushman, Robert. "Reasons and Considerations Touching the Lawfulness of Removing out of England into the Parts of America." *The Puritans in America*. Ed. Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985. 41-44.
- Delbanco, Andrew. *The Puritan Ordeal*. Harvard UP, 1989.
- . "The Puritan Errand Re-Viewed." *Journal of American Studies*, 18 (1984): 359-60.
- Denard, Carolyn C. "Beyond the Bitterness of History: Teaching *Beloved*." *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Ed. Nelley Y. McKay and Kathryn Earle. New York: MLA, 1997. 40-47.
- Deutsch, Leonard. "*Invisible Man* and the European Tradition." *Approaches to Teaching Ellison's Invisible Man*. Ed. Susan Resneck Parr and Pancho Savery. New York: MLA, 1989. 96-101.
- Doctorow, E. L. *Ragtime*. New York: Random House, 1974.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 1947. New York: Vintage-Random, 1990.
- . *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House, 1953.
- Emblidge, David. "Marching Backward Into the Future: Progress as Illusion in Doctorow's Novels." *Southwest Review* 62.4 (1977): 397-409.

- Estrin, Barbara L. "Recomposing Time: *Humboldt's Gift* and *Ragtime*." *Denver Quarterly* 17.1 (1982): 16-31.
- Fields, Karen E. "To Embrace Dead Strangers: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Mother Puzzles: Daughters and Mothers in Contemporary American Literature*. Ed. Mickey Pearlman. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1989. 159-70.
- Fowler, Douglas. *Understanding E. L. Doctorow*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1992.
- Frazier, Franklin E. *The Negro Church in America*. New York: Schocken Books, 1974.
- Freeman, Hobart E. *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*. Chicago: Moody, 1975.
- Freese, Peter. "Doctorow's 'Criminals of Perception,' or What Has Happened to the Historical Novel." *Reconstructing American Literary and Historical Studies*. Ed. Gunter H. Lenz, Hartmut Keil, and Sabine Brock-Sallah. New York: St. Martin's, 1990. 345-71.
- Furman, Jan. "Sethe's Re-memories: The Covert Return of What Is Best Forgotten." *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*. Ed. Barbara H. Solomon. New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1998. 261-71.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- . "The Master's Pieces: On Canon-Formation and the Afro-American Experience." *Reconstructing American Literary and Historical Studies*. Ed. Gunter H. Lenz, Hartmut Keil, and Savine Brock-Sallah. New York: St. Martin's, 1990. 169-91.

- Glaude, Eddie S. "Exodus and the Politics of Nation." *Race Consciousness: African-American Studies for the New Century*. Ed. Judith Jackson Fossett and Jeffrey A. Tucker. New York: New York UP, 1997. 115-35.
- Goldberg, Michael. *Jews and Christians: Getting our Stories Straight*. Nashville: Abingdon P, 1985.
- Gross, David S. "Tales of Obscene Power: Money and Culture, Modernism and History in the Fiction of E. L. Doctorow." *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations*. Ed. Richard Trenner. Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review P, 1983. 120-50.
- Harlan, David. "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature." *American Historical Review*. 94.3 (1989): 581-609.
- Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. "E. L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative." *PMLA* 100.1 (1985): 81-95.
- Harris, Trudier. "*Beloved*: Woman, Thy Name is Demon." *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*. Eds. William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. 127-57.
- Heimert, Alan, and Andrew Delbanco, eds. *The Puritans in America*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985.
- Heinze, Denise. *The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness": Toni Morrison's Novels*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1993.
- Holton, Robert. "Bearing Witness: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*." *English Studies in Canada*, 20.1 (1994): 79-90.
- Hooker, Thomas. "The Danger of Desertion." *The Puritans in America*. Ed. Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco. Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1985. 62-69.

- hooks, bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End P, 1990.
- Holy Bible*. King James Version. Ed. C. I. Scofield. New York: Oxford UP, 1969.
- Howe, Nicholas. *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1989.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. "I Have a Dream." *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Paul Lauter, et al. Vol. 2. Lexington: Heath, 1990. 1959-62.
- . "I've Been to the Mountaintop." *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Paul Lauter, et al. Vol. 2. Lexington: Heath, 1990. 1962-69.
- Kun, Jong Lee. "Ellison's Racial Variations on American Themes." *African American Review* 30.3 (1996): 421-39.
- Lawrence, David. "Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*." Ed. David L. Middleton. *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*. New York: Garland, 1997. 231-46.
- McCaffery, Larry. "A Spirit of Transgression." *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations*. Ed. Richard Trenner. Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review P, 1983. 31-47.
- McKay, Nellie Y. and Kathryn Earle, eds. *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison*. New York: MLA, 1997.
- Middleton, David L., ed. *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*. New York: Garland, 1997.
- Miller, Perry. *Errand into the Wilderness*. Cambridge: Belknap, 1956.

- Morey, Ann-Janine. "Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison: Reflections on Postmodernism and the Study of Religion and Literature." Ed. David L. Middleton. *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*. New York: Garland, 1997. 247-68.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Plume, 1987.
- . "The Site of Memory." *Inventing the Truth*. Ed. William Zinsser. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. 101-24.
- . "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." *Black Women Writers*. Ed. Mari Evans. London: Pluto Press, 1985. 339-45.
- Morton, Thomas. "New English Canaan." *The Puritans in America*. Ed. Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985. 48-50.
- Naylor, Gloria, and Toni Morrison. "A Conversation." *Southern Review* 21 (1985): 567-93.
- O'Meally, Robert, ed. *New Essays on Invisible Man*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988.
- Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- Ottley, Roi. *'New World A-Coming.'* Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1943.
- Parks, John G. *E. L. Doctorow*. New York: Continuum, 1991.
- Peach, Linden. *Toni Morrison*. New York: St. Martin's, 1995.
- Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford, 1978.
- Rice, Herbert. *Toni Morrison and the American Tradition*. New York: P. Lang, 1996.

- Said, Edward W. "Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution*: a Canaanite Reading." *Grand Street* 5.2 (1986): 86-106.
- Saltzman, Arthur. "The Stylistic Energy of E. L. Doctorow." *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations*. Ed. Richard Trenner. Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review P, 1983. 73-108.
- Schaub, Thomas. "Ellison's Masks and the Novel of Reality." *New Essays on Invisible Man*. Ed. Robert O'Meally. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988. 123-56.
- Schneidau, Herbert N. *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1976.
- Shepard, Thomas. "The Sound Believer." *The Puritans in America*. Ed. Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985. 33-36.
- Smith, Valerie. "The Meaning of Narration in *Invisible Man*." *New Essays on Invisible Man*. Ed. Robert O'Meally. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988. 25-53.
- Steinberg, Cobbett. "History and the Novel: Doctorow's *Ragtime*." *Denver Quarterly* 10.4 (1976): 125-30.
- Tate, Claudia, ed. *Black Women Writers at Work*. New York: Continuum, 1983.
- Tompkins, Jane P. "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History." *Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Pantheon, 1985. 81-104.
- Trenner, Richard. "Politics and the Mode of Fiction." *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations*. Ed. Richard Trenner. Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review P, 1983. 48-56.

Vejvoda, Jaroslav. "The Swelling Exodus." *Literature in Exile*. Ed. John Glad. Durham: Duke UP, 1990. 78-83.

Walzer, Michael. *Exodus and Revolution*. New York: Basic, 1985.

Winthrop, John. "A Model of Christian Charity." *The Puritans in America*. Ed. Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985. 81-92.

Wood, Gordon S. "Struggle Over the Puritans." *New York Review of Books*. 9 Nov. 1989. 26-34.

The Works of Josephus. Trans. William Whiston, A. M. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988.