CHAPTER VII

CHILDREN AND THE PURSUIT OF INNOCENCE

Look on me with your welkin eye. Sweet villain!
Most dear'st! my collop! Can thy dam?-- may't be?
Affection! thy intention stabs the centre.

SHAKESPEARE, The Winter's Tale

Bellow speaks of one such sweet villain in Jerusalem. He is a twelve years Russian boy who plays the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto in E. Bellow does not at all like the music, this 'silvery whickering,' which depresses him; but he is in raptures over the boy, as much as Leontes is over the gallant young prince Mamillius. The boy tucks the violin under his chin, rises on his toes, closes his eyes and begins to play. Bellow recounts:

Yet as soon as the kid begins to play, there are tears in my eyes. This is idiocy. This small Russian boy is putting me on. The rapt soul et cetera is a trick. I try to smile at his fiddler's affectations but my face refuses to obey. I can only think, How did I ever learn to smile such a cheap smile. I'm well rid of it, then, and I sit listening. For five minutes, this boy reconciles me even to the detested Mendelssohn. (JR 74)

All Bellow's men share his ecstasy. The passage brings to mind Citrine's intimacy with Roger and Henderson's passion for the Persian boy. Children are perhaps the most sacred category in Bellow's fiction. Every broken hero turns to the child for emotional security. Children, are his hope and pride in absentia.

And, fatherly affection, as the immortal poet put it a few centuries back, pierces his centre. If the American "emancipation from puritan severity, in the upbringing of children should
be "laid on Spock's doorstep" their deification must be sought in Bellow's novels. Bellow's maternalistic heroes would avidly rummage the The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care and do whatever that is required, besides to keep their children happy. Geraldine Portnoy, Lucas Asphalter's friend writing to Herzog about June and her life with Madeleine and Gersbach comments on the public involvement in child psychology.

I understand the Italians are supposed to be the most child-oriented culture in the West (judged by the figure of the Christ child in Italian painting), but obviously Americans have their own craze about child psychology. everything is done for children, ostensibly. To be fair, I think Madeleine is not bad with June, basically."

In The Victim Asa Leventhal is 'filled with tenderness' (TV 129) towards his nephew Philip. Feeling Mary's absence keenly with a free weekend before him, he asks Elena to send Philip to Manhattan so as to spend some time with him. He takes the boy to a horror movie, to the zoo and worries himself to see him properly humored. His 'pity for children' (TV 129) makes him swear, when he suspects that Elena is insane, that he will go to any lengths to save his nephew. Augie very often dreams about wife and children before he gets married. He tells Clem Tambow that he longs for little children and likes to have "my own little children" (AM 527). The realities of his conjugal life with Stella in an apartment on Rue Francois hit him hard and belie the original enthusiasm which spurred him into marriage.

In disappointment he muses:

Therefore while I knock around on rapides
over falling horizons, over Alps, in steam and
haste, or blast the air in my black Citroen,
smoking cigars and watching the road through
polaroid glasses, it's unborn children I pore
over far oftener than business deals.
I wonder if it's a phase, or what, but sometimes
I feel I already am a father. (AM 609)

Significantly he has no hunger for sex any more. In Rome, when
'a whore' (AM 609) tries to pick him up, he says he is married
and has children. The woman is overwhelmed at the mention of
children and almost cries 'over this error.' Augie's deception
of bambini' is inspired by a scene in Stella's film Les
Orphelines, where Stella pleads with an Italian doctor for a
woman and her baby. "Don't bring up my boys," yells Wilhelm
in Seize the Day and warns Tamkin "Just lay off" (SD 98) when
the latter advises him not to become a martyr to suffering and
to forget about the kids. An astounded Tamkin tries to assuage
Wilhelm: "I was only going to say that they are better off than
with conflicts in the home."

"I'm deprived of my children." Wilhelm bit his
lip. It was too late to run away. The anguish
struck him. "I pay and pay. I never see them.
They grow up without me. She makes them like
herself. She'll bring them up to be my enemies.
Please let's not talk about this." (SD 98)

Whenever he receives an urgent message from Margaret he is "thrown
into a great fear for the children" (SD 110). When Margaret
insists on prompt and timely payment for the upkeep of the child-
ren, as a price for his 'freedom' Wilhelm frets and fumes.

Ashes in his mouth, not freedom. Give me my
children. For they are mine too. (SD 113)
Henderson narrating how Prince Itelo, defeated in the wrestling match throws himself on his knees and proceeds to place Henderson's foot on his head, suddenly shifts to memories of his little children; the checkers he played with them and how he 'maneuvered to let them win' (HRK 62). In the flurry of his official deliberations as Sungo, he confides to Romilayu his fears about his twins. He even unfolds his plan about them for their future as if he were already back home.

I am all the time worrying lest my two little kids wander off in the woods. We ought to get a dog - a big dog. But we'll be living in town anyway from now on. (HRK 234)

Having listened to Henderson's details about his youngest daughter Alice in Switzerland and his son Edward and his chimpanzee, and his daughter's baby seal, the stewardess in his plane, on his way back home, introduces him to a Persian kid, an orphan going to live with his grandparents in Carson City, Nevada. The stewardess is supposed to turn him over to someone there. Henderson asks her to bring the boy. The boy in his short pants with strap garters is fetched. And instantly the giant, who with his gargantuan will has just rushed "through life on a rampage of compulsive desire" away from the intimacy of children, melts in passion.

This kid went to my heart. You know how it is when your heart drops. Like a fall-bruised apple in the cold morning of autumn. (HRK 261)

"It's bad business" he chides those who are responsible "to ship

a little kid around the world alone" (HRK 281). The boy likes the lion cub and Henderson is delighted to see them together. Later he sleeps on his lap. Thinking of the loss of his own childhood, he exults in the joy of innocence, which for him is now ruined.

As for this kid resting against me, bound for Nevada with nothing but a Persian vocabulary - why, he was still trailing his cloud of glory. God knows, I dragged mine on as long as I could till it got dingy, mere tatters of grey fog. However I always knew what it was. (HRK 285)

He romanticises the glory and power of innocence, looking at the boy's eyes with rapture.

Two smoothy gray eyes moved at me, greatly expanded into the whites - new to life altogether. They had that new luster. With it they had ancient power too. (HRK 285)

When the plane stops in Newfoundland for fuel, Henderson takes the boy out in his arms, wrapping him in a blanket, for fresh air. In the closing lines Henderson expresses the healing power of innocence:

While to me he was like medicine applied, and the air too; it also was a remedy. (HRK 286)

Richard chase praises the "magnificent" end of Henderson the Rain King; and calls "Henderson the bear," "a preposterous clown" who jumps in joy, "paternally carrying in his arms an American child" But Henderson is as much a child as he is a clown. Through-going sex with beauties of the East and West does not anchor Herzog in peace. He is madly in love with his children. The

grasshoppers in Junie's favourite song flash through his memory, in one of his writing fits, when he addresses the editor of the New York Times.

His face wrinkled tenderly at the thought of his children. How well kids understand what love is! Marco was entering an age of silence and restraint with his father, but Junie was exactly as Marco had been. She stood on her father's lap to comb his hair. His thighs were trodden by her feet. He embraced her small bones with fatherly hunger while her breath on his face stirred his deepest feelings. (H 58)

It is a moment of joy for Herzog, set off from his brain-beating febrile letters, to think of little Junie under the tucks of her velvet bonnet, with 'Papa's locke,' the way she relished the nursery rhymes he recited while wheeling her stroller on the Midway. He becomes sober with the thought of the child; an unusual calm descends on him. In innocent joy he abandons malice and wishes his enemies well.

The warm lake wind drove Moses westward, past the grey gothic buildings. He had had the child at least, while mother and lover were undressing in a bedroom somewhere. And if, even in that embrace of lust and treason, they had life and nature on their side, he would quietly step aside. Yes, he would bow out. (H 58)

It is not unusual in Bellow that the hero, who revels in pleasure and freedom when marriage fails, never thinks of the children as good riddance. It kills Herzog to see that he has no role to play in his children's lives except as a visiting father.

It seemed his fate to be the visiting father, an apparition who faded in and out of the children's lives. But this peculiar sensitivity about meeting and parting had to be tamed. (H 287)
How he melts when, with the help of Lucas Asphaltalter, he arranges to take Junie out for a day.

At last he embraced his daughter, and she pressed his cheeks with her small hands and kissed him. Hungry to feel her, to breathe in her childish fragrance, to look in her face, her black eyes, touch her hair, the skin under her dress, he pressed her little bones stammering, 'Junie' sweetie. I've missed you.' His happiness was painful. And she with all her innocence and childishness and with the pure, or amorous, instinct of tiny girls, kissed him on the lips, her careworn, busted, germ-carrying father.

The wonderful conversation that follows between Herzog and the innocent kid is a chapter of radiant beauty in the stormy, vidently amorphous novel of ideas. The little girl still remembers her father's story about the boy with the stars. With critical insight she distinguishes between the father and Uncle Val as story-tellers as he takes her out into the museum to see the chickens hatching. Whereas Gersbach is good at making faces, Herzog is a better story teller. He has, Herzog confesses, 'too much dignity to make good faces.' The baby wants "more and "more", though she remembers every detail, of the story about Rupert's face freckled with stars and Great-grandfather Shpitalnik living in a walnut shell among the bees, Herzog is left "wondering at her, proud of her, thankful" (H 283) too. Like Herzog, Wilhelm and Citrine want the child at least. For children, give them their communion with innocence. Dr Adler is the only male in Bellow's fiction, who, if one could believe Wilhelm's ancient grievances' against his father, tried to 'get rid of' his
children 'when Ma died' (SD 29). Renata and the Senora cunningly dump the child Roger on Citrine so as to pin him down in Madrid before Renata's marriage with Flonzaley. But Citrine is delighted in his company. Even in his intimate moments with Ramona, the sex priestess, Herzog thinks about his children and wonders if he should be near his son Marco in the east or get back to Chicago to have an eye on June. 'These children and I love one another,' he observes. 'But what can I give them?' (H 110). Geraldine Portnoy, goes on to write, after her child psychology bit about the incident when little Junie locked herself up inside Gersbach's car and was shaking and weeping. Gersbach had led her out to the car asking her to play for a while and went back to quarrel with Madeleine. Herzog's heart pounds 'with dangerous thick beats at these words,' he vows 'I'll kill him for that — so help me, if I don't!' (H 107). Ramona does not favor the idea of Herzog living in Chicago. She wants him to come out of his 'masochistic situation' and stop worrying about June. With her own interests in mind, perhaps, she tells him that he "can't take the child from her mother." Herzog reminds her of Portnoy's letter and says he cannot turn the child over to those two.

She's my kind. She has my genes. She's a Herzog. They're mentally alien types (H 203).

It is his inordinate passion for children that brings about the frenzied movement, Herzog's attempt to shoot Gersbach. It is the courtroom scene where the young men and women are tried for the murder of her son, a child of three born to another man. The angry uncontrollable woman, known to have 'epileptoid fits' of rage violently and repeatedly hurled her problem-child,' who
could not be toilet-trained, against the wall and killed him. The lover was watching the crime from his bed. Herzog goes through untold agony.

With all his might - mind and heart - he tried to obtain something for the murdered child. But what? How? He pressed himself with intensity, but 'all his might' could get nothing for the buried boy. ... And what was there in modern, post ... post-Christian America to pray for? Justice-justice and mercy? (H 247)

The violence, the outrage against innocence whirls again and again in Herzog's mind.

He was wrung, and wrung again, and wrung again, again. (H 247).

Herzog associates the heinous couple with Gersbach and Madeleine and the innocent victim his own beloved Junie. The novel, until now cluttered with philosophy and psychology jolts itself with a new impetus, a violent movement towards frenzied action. We find an altogether changed Herzog raring, in his rage, to go.

The next few lines enact the crime once again and the new chapter that follows opens with a fitful dynamism hitherto unknown.

New York could not hold him now. He had to go to Chicago to see his daughter, confront Madeleine and Gersbach. The decision was not reached; it simply arrived. (H 248)

He rushes to Harper Avenue with his father's pistol. Hiding himself he watches the child and pines 'with tenderness for her.'

Her face was the Herzog face, the large dark eyes his eyes, the nose his father's, Tante Zipporah's his brother Willie's nose and the mouth his own. Even the bit of melancholy in her beauty - that was his mother. It was Sarah Herzog, pensive, slightly averting her face as she considered the life about her. (H 263)
The quote betrays the smack of patriarchy in Herzog; he is pained to see that June has to lean entirely on the distaff side, though she has inherited so many features from the paternal line. That the little girl, on whom he has set his heart should be entirely lost to him is indeed tragic. Herzog's tumultuous rage subsides at the sight of Valentine bathing little Junie, 'affectionately and with grumbling smiles. He dips water in her toy boats and rinses her back as she squels and twists.

The hated traits were all there. But see how he was with June, scooping the water on her playfully, kindly ... Then Gersbach ordered her to stand, and she stooped slightly to allow him to wash her little cleft. Her father stared at this. A pang went through him, but it was quickly done. (H 264)

Herzog watches his own emotion, his impulse for murder dying.

There were two bullets in the chamber ... But they would stay there. Herzog clearly recognized that. ... The human soul is an amphibian, and I have touched its sides. (H 265)

Gersbach, in fact, maintains a good record with children. He makes faces not only for June but humors his little son Ephraim. He lights the Chamukah candles for him, garbles the Hebrew blessing and then dances with him. It is a sad sight, witnessing the abrupt ending of the pleasure trip Herzog undertakes for the sake of his child, as he ends up in the police station after the car accident. Herzog does not make much of his problem with the police but is only concerned about June's sensibilities. He tenderly apologizes to the child. 'Papa's sorry, 'sweet heart... *Next time we'll go see the dolphins. Maybe the sharks were bad luck' (H 301).
Almost all Bellow heroes travel to the past in pursuit of innocence, their own childhood days. Even the septuagenarian Sammler is not an exception to the passion: 'devotion to children,' 'the regular American worship of kids' (H 273). Sammler keenly remembers how he played truant and fell through the ice and was saved by a bigger kid. He loves his memories of childhood and believes that all kid stuff will continue for all time.

It will simply continue. Another six billion years before the sun explodes. Six billion years of human life! It lames the heart to contemplate such a figure. Six billion years.

Sammler believes that he is in need of these memories of innocence. He tells Wallace, as Emil drives towards New Rochelle.

'Well, I need them. Everybody needs his memories. They keep the wolf of insignificance from the door.' (MSP 152)

Immediately after their arrival, Wallace goes somewhere in the New Rochelle house to search, perhaps, for the hidden money. Sammler, left alone goes to the second floor. The moon rinses the house and the curtains foamed like peroxide. As he moves about in the kitchen he feels the chain mail of the fire screen and is reminded of Shula's fondness of fires. Then he passes to the second floor recalling how he and Shula the little five years kid played hide-and-go-seek in London thirty-five years ago. He remembers to have fared admirably in the game, talking aloud to himself.

Is Shula in this broom closet? Let me see. Where can she be? She is not in the broom closet. How mystifying! Is she under the bed? No. my, what a clever little girl. How well she hides herself. She's simply disappeared.' (MSP 154)
It is a splendid scene that juxtaposes in the mind of a lost old man two burning vignettes: angelic innocence and its degeneration through time into unbridled guile. "At his splendid best," writes Times Literary Supplement, "Mr Bellow is a mixture of Forster and Camus. The extraordinary music of his style enables him to confront basic problems with un-fashionable directness." He is now here in New Rochelle after his phone talk with Govinda Lal, pleading for the restoration of his moon manuscript which has consumed three hard years of composition.

Sammler's mission is to search for Shula and the manuscript. Sammler later comes to know that Shula stole the papers for an opportunity to meet Govinda Lal. He is delighted to mull over the memories of the innocent child who has now lost her trail of glory and turned salacious. He continues:

> while the child, just five years old, thrilling with game fever, positively white, crouched behind the brass scuttle, where he pretended not to see her, her bottom near the floor, her large kinky head with the small red bow- a whole life there. Melancholy. (MSP 154)

Sammler sighs. It is a wholesome life of innocence. The child however has grown into a middle-aged thief. What follows is Sammler's most important discovery. In the midst of these ruminations Sammler hears the sound of water, a slight movement in a full tub, a wallow; and also smells soap and eau de cologne. Groping in the dark he finds the electric switch and turns it on. To his amazement and utter disbelief, he runs into Shula wallowing in the tub like a whale.

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"Rev. of Mr Sammler's Planet, Times Literary Supplement 9 July 1970: 749."
The enormous tub was only half occupied by her short body. The soles of her white feet, he saw, the black female triangle, and the white swellings with large rings of punlish brown. The veins
Yes, Yes, she belonged to the club. The gender club. This was a female. (MSP 155)

It is a shocking discovery within seconds of the idyllic reminiscences of innocent childhood. The child, who was once exuding innocence is now a member of the gender club. It is a smarting injury on Sammler's sensibilities. He draws on his capacious memory of a golden age for a douch against the cankerous afflictions of the Marilyn Monroe age but is rudely jolted.

In Humboldt’s Gift Cantabile asks Charlie to shut the door and confides to him a plan. They could, that is, pretend to kidnap one of Citrine's kids. Citrine could pay the ransom and Cantabile would stow it in Cayman Islands for Citrine's benefit.

On hearing the plan, Citrine casually borrows Cantable's's Magnum and points it at him. "I'll certainly use this on you," Citrine says, if you try any such thing." He can bear anything, like Wilhelm, but nothing against his children. He regrets:

That he made such suggestions to me was, I recognized, my own fault. The arbitrary can become the pets of the rational. Cantabile seemed to recognize that he was my pet arbitrary. (MSP 184-185)

Heading for New York with Citrine, in his bid to find out about Humboldt's will Renata charges that Citrine lectures whenever she tries to talk to him. Apologetically Citrine replies:

I know you think I'm talking too much, but am excited, and I feel remorseful about the children besides. (HG 310)
Renata pulls him out of his "tragic bind" assuring him that his kids will have their Christmas fun and Roger too will have a marvellous time with his Milwaukee grandparents. "How children love that square family stuff," she says "I'm very fond of Roger," Citrine adds to the sentiment. "He's an engaging kid."

Renata assures: "He loves you too, Charlie" (HG 310). She banks on this mutual affection when she later dumps the boy on Citrine. While Citrine is waiting for Renata at the Ritz, the Senora moves in with Roger, Renata's son. She informs him that she is going to have Christmas with Citrine.

On Christmas Day, thinking of my own girls, I felt quite low. I was glad to have Roger there and kept him company, reading him fairy tales and cutting and pasting long chains from the Spanish newspapers. (HG 412)

A little later Citrine understands that it was a plan that the Senora has masterminded to keep him in Madrid and prevent him from bursting in on Renata and Flonzaley in Milan. When Citrine comes back from antique shops and art galleries he finds Roger in his room on the settee with his feet resting on his packed bag. His grandma has left the kid behind along with the charges due to the Ritz where every bite costs a fortune. She has checked out. The innocent boy Roger asks a jaded Citrine for chocolate. Citrine reflects:

There was someone whose desire I understood. He desired his Mama. We desired the same person. Poor little guy, I thought, as he peeled the foil from the chocolate and filled his mouth. I had a true feeling for this kid. He was in that feverish beautiful state of pale childhood when we are beating all over with pulses - nothing but a craving
defenseless greedy heart. I remembered the condition very well. (HG 423)

With his assets nearly reduced to a third by his presents, gourmet dining and Renata's cloak, Citrine moves into the Pension La Roca with an inventive tale. He says that his wife died of leukemia and that his wallet was stolen on a bus. In the pension he looks after Roger, feeds him and fusses over him; and discovers in himself 'the mothering habits of American men' (HG 426). In Roger's company Citrine becomes 'quieter' in spite of the trying circumstances.

And even as I wept I glanced at the clock and realized that Roger would be back from his walk in fifteen minutes. We were supposed to play dominoes. Suddenly life goes into reverse. You're in first grade again. (HG 433)

Citrine tries, in keeping with 'the mothering habits of American men' (HG 426), to understand Roger's desires, and reads fairy tales to him. He spurns Miss Rebecca Volsted who goes on 'breathing down' his neck. He walks in the Retiro holding Roger's hands.

... this little Roger could very nearly convince me that up to a point the soul was the artist of its own body and I thought I could feel him at work within himself. (HG 442)

He forgets all about Renata's unconventional erotic exercises and is absorbed in the innocence of her kid. He explores the state of innocence with his theories.

In early childhood this invisible work of the conceiving spirit may still be going on. Pretty soon little Roger's master-building would stop and this extraordinary creature would begin to behave
in the most ordinary or dull manner or perniciously, like his mother and grandma. (HG 443)

This pristine innocence is what Humboldt used to call "the home-world," wordsworthian, Platonic, before the shades of the prison house fell (HG 443). When Cantabile presses him to fly with him to Paris at once to establish the authorship of Caldogre, Citrine tells him that he cannot leave the kid. An irritated Cantabile chides: "Don't act like a granny about that kid" (HG 458). When the Senora takes the boy, as she leaves for Chicago, Roger begins to cry. Unable to calm him the lady accuses him of corrupting him, with chocolates. She says: "You've bribed the boy with sweets." Citrine persuades Roger to go with grandma and assures him that he will meet him in Chicago soon.

"Adios, Roger..."

I was threatened by tears myself. I left the lobby and walked toward the park. The danger of being struck by speeding cars, masses of them battering from all directions, prevented me from shedding more tears. (HG 473)

At the pension he takes time to readjust himself. Miss Volsted is still standing by to do 'the humane thing' for him and Citrine is 'demoralized enough to take her up on it.' (HG 473). The thought of his own children never fails to bother him. He continually analyses his self.

Perhaps I had more basic, ultimate reasons for going off with Renata, leaving two little girls in dangerous Chicago, ... (HG 294)

Rogin in A Father-to-Be has an encounter with his yet-to-be son in a surrealist\(\)ic vision and feels bound to him through all existence. "It seemed to Rogin that each child was in love with its own muff and didn't even see the other, but it was one of his
foibles to think he understood the hearts of little children" (MM-FB 142). He jumps a span of forty years and looks at his son. But he is disappointed because his son, no longer an innocent child but a full-grown man has a "fundamentally bourgeois face" (MM-FB 144). And for a cheerless child, he is not prepared to grind day and night at the peril of his identity. Bellow's heroes pallid with wisdom still have difficulties in growing up. They are dedicated at once to sex and children. It is not necessarily to be viewed as a strange blend of polar traits. They are not irreconcilable. The heroes are just nature's children celebrating the primacy of passions. What is remarkable is their equal addiction to ideas. And interestingly they cry like babies. Citrine weeps like a child when Renata shuts him out. Tommy cries copiously and convulsively when he is pushed upon his exhausted resources. "When the money vanishes," Time notes, "Tommy reverts to childhood, finds release by sobbing hysterically at a stranger's funeral." If the lineaments of their tempestuous lives make them despair, the communion with innocence makes them jump as Henderson does. Bellow's childlike heroes are not panoplied against guile, especially the female variety. That is why they tend to stay away from marriage and family. However they review their stand and make bold to come back into the pale for the sake of the children. Thus Citrine, in spite of his insular aversion to matrimony decides to marry Renata for the sole purpose of living with his little girls and Renata's son. Herzog who has once and for all dismissed marriage from his scheme of living has plans for his children, Marco and

June. There is no saying how it will all pan out. But they are certainly more concrete than the Insect Iliad project Herzog thought of for June. Now he thinks about: "The patrimony of his children - a sunken corner of Massachusetts for Marco, the little piano for June painted a loving green by her solicitous father" (H 330). Wilhelm has lost; Ada is going to have a child; Augie runs home from Naples in his love for unborn children; Henderson flies homeward repenting all the way his folly of abandoning wife and children and going out into a mad world.

There is nothing programmatic about the concern for children in Bellow, though there is considerable sharing of the consciousness raised in 1946 by Benjamin Spock's Bible-like best seller. Children serve an artistic purpose in the stories. In the scrimmage of the personal lives of the solitaries, when everything, including sex palls after a time, the children help.