CHAPTER VI

PARENTAL HOME: 'A SACRED CATEGORY'

... every reference body has its own particular time

Einstein

In the first critical book, as on 1965, on Bellow, Tony Tanner wrote: "It has often been noted how lonely, insulated, and self-absorbed his main characters are. Where the novels are not actual first-person autobiography by the main character, they remain almost exclusively within a single consciousness."¹ A good deal of this single consciousness, this 'compulsive subjectivism'² is devoted to nostalgia, a deep-seated need for the family of origin. Isaac in The Old System, shunning cards and community and Europe and Israel, gives himself plenty of time for reminiscences. Dr Braun says:

Respectable elms about his house sighed with him for the past. The squirrels were orthodox. They dug and saved. (MM-05 64)

Isaac abandons himself to the hopeless pleasure of thinking about his dead. He visits the graves of their parents and is morbidly concerned about their welfare.

The parents, stifled in the clay. Two crates, side by side. ... Down there, how were they? The wet, the cold, above all the worms worried him. In frost, his heart shrank for Aunt Rose and Uncle Braun, through as a builder he knew they were beneath the frost line. But a human power, his love, affected his practical judgement. It flew off. Perhaps as a builder and housing expert ...

¹Tony Tanner, Saul Bellow (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965) 103.
²Tanner 107
he especially felt his head to be unsheltered. (MM-OS 65)

Dr Braun himself, the storyteller who reminisces his cousin's reminiscences, passionately remembers the sycamore tree beside the Mohawk River and the bird that perched on it. Braun was seven years then and Isaac twenty two. Braun thinks of Isaac as the one 'born to be a man, in the direct Old Testament sense' as 'that bird on the sycamore was born to fish in water' (MM-OS 47). Ijah in Cousins, is like Citrine a cousin crank. Sable (Isabel) blames the divorce on his excessive affection for cousins. She accuses that "the immediate family"—meaning the conjugal family—"threw a chill" (HW-C 286) on his exuberance and that he always turned to his cousins. "I used to think," Sable says "you'd open every drawer in the morgue if somebody told you that there was a cousin to be found." The exchange that follows between Sable and Ijah is interesting. Citrine in the midst of his work, his article commissioned by Life, is suddenly struck by the thought of his old buddy Humboldt. He phones Senator Kennedy's office to say that he has been suddenly called to Chicago and flies to O'Hare. Denise 'strips' but becomes tired in supporting him emotionally. She impatiently tells Citrine: "Oh, you're on that kick again. You must quit all this operatic bullshit. Talk to a psychiatrist. Why are you hung up on the past and always lamenting some dead party or other?" (HG 115). But Citrine knows the reason better.

My friendship with George goes back to the fifth grade and to me such pals are a sacred category. I have been warned often against this terrible weakness of dependency on early relationships. (HG 38)
Such characters as Citrine and Herzog, for whom the past and the family of origin are the staple of emotional sustenance, seem to conform to the Puer aeternus. This archetype, to which Jung's collaborator Marie-Louise von Franz devoted a whole book is 'the eternal youth' who refuses to grow. The redeeming feature in Herzog and Citrine is that they are not given to unnatural sex. Mary, Citrine's eight year old daughter has discovered her father's weakness for 'ontogeny and phylogeny' (HG 72). She plies him with questions about his past. Citrine waxes lyrical even about the coal stove in the kitchen range in his parental home, with 'its dome like a little church;' and how he used to carry up the scuttle and remove the ashes. Mary purposely evokes and manipulates his emotions when she makes him give an account of his mother who did 'cooking, baking, laundry and ironing, canning and picking' (HG 73). And then comes her direct question and the flood of emotions in reply.

"You loved your mother?"

Eager swelling feeling suddenly swept in. I forgot that I was talking to a child and I said, "Oh, I loved them all terribly, abnormally. I was all torn up with love. Deep in the heart. I used to cry in the sanatorium because I might never make it home and see them. ..."

A passionate morbid little boy. At school I was always in love. At home if I was first to get up in the morning I suffered because they were still asleep. I wanted them to wake up so that the whole marvellous thing

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could continue. I also loved Menasha the boarder and Julius, my brother, your uncle Julius. (HG 74)

For this reason, for her curiosity to hear 'what life was like way-back-when' (HG 72) Citrine likes Mary better than Lish, 'the mother's child! Miserably, Citrine is removed at the time of his recollection not only from his parental home, but his own conjugal home and children. The pangs of the ancient past and the pains of the more immediate past give him a collective heartache. This is the plight of many others who suffer like this in Bellow's fiction. Bellow says: "We are called upon to preserve our humanity in circumstances of rapid change and movement. I do not see what else we can do than refuse to be condemned with a time and place. We are not born to be condemned but to live." But his hero resists history with violent passion. He clings to the past and refuses to keep step, and is, in fact unequal with the onward rush of time. Reminiscences tumble on the head of the battered hero, thrown into the centre of the conjugal storm. They violently circle, one on the other. Fighting this avalanche Citrine finds it necessary, for practical purposes 'to lay aside these emotional data' for a while, and devote his attention to 'money, checks, hoodlums, automobiles' (HG 74). Lunching at the Oak Room Citrine regrets that he has not brought those 'two old geezers,' Menasha and Waldemar. Menasha might have told him much about his mother, who died when Citrine was 'an adolescent' (HG 348); an adolescent who probably never grew up afterwards. He longs to hear his mother described by a mature man, if such

Menasha was. 'She had come to be a sacred person.' 'Why such keenness for the past?' Citrine wonders. 'Clinically speaking, I guess the problem was hysteria. Philosophically, I came out better. Plato links recollection with love' (HG 348). To Renata, it is odd that an elderly fellow should be so eager to hear reminiscences of his mother. Citrine's brother Julius, who does not remember his mother, also finds his parental obsession curious. Citrine meets his brother before he goes in for surgery. Julius advises him to live in Europe. He also gives him a tip-off to help him augment his income. Citrine does not evince any interest in the idea of buying a house on the Mediterranean but keeps thinking about his brother's fate. He feels that he has to communicate certain 'intimations' to his brother. They are nothing but reflections of the sacred past. 'Our serious Old World parents' Citrine thinks,' certainly had produced a pair of American clowns - one demonic millionaire clown, and one higher-thought clown' (HG 391). He wants to ask Julius if he remembers when the family moved down to Chicago from Appleton and lived in those dark rooms on Rice Street. Julius was obese and Citrine thin. Before he went into 'wood business, father 'slaved' in the bakery, came home and hung his white overalls behind the bathroom door. The can always smelled like a bakeshop and the stiff flour fell off in scales. Mama boiled the wash on the coal-stove and Julius and Citrine went to school. "Do you remember all that?" Citrine tends to ask his brother but refrains. "Well, I'll tell you why I bring it up - there are good esthetic reasons why this should not be wiped from the record eternally. No one would put so much heart into
things doomed to be forgotten and wasted. Or so much love. Love is gratitude for being. This love would be hate, Ulrick, if the whole thing was nothing but a gyp" (HG 392). Citrine however masters these intimations, and his rationale for the past and withholds it all from the millionaire brother, one of the biggest builders of Southeast Texas, who likes to show dynamism even in death. 'I'm not going to lie around' Julius declares. 'I'm having myself cremated' (HG 387). Citrine notes the smack of insensitivity in Julius which is the essence of the ideals of growth and technology.

Such communications were prohibited under the going mental rules of a civilization that proved its right to impose such rules by the many practical miracles it performed, such as bringing me to Texas from New York in four hours, or sawing open his sternum and grafting new veins into his heart. (HG 392)

Citrine spurns remarriage and opts for love and freedom, on the one hand; on the other, he laments the indifference of a business culture to sacred and ancient ties, parental and collateral. Citrine is insouciant, even imimical to the conjugal family but is violently devoted to the parental family. That the one depends on the other and cannot therefore be dismissed, is a source of agony for these loners. Alec Szathmar's phone call from Chicago brings to Citrine's memory his childhood days when as children Szathmar and Citrine sparred in the alley and hit each other in the face until they became winded and dazed. Joseph, the dangling man liberally given to reflections, that is, for ten hours a day in a single room' (DM 10) recalls an incident in his fourth year. Dina, the prototype cruel aunt in Bellow, quarrelled with
his mother. This self-willed woman, with her 'arbitrary ways' (DM 75) took Joseph to the barber and had his curls cut after the fashion of the time, called Buster Brown. Joseph's mother cried when his aunt brought the curls in an envelope and gave them to her. He remembers the family pictures, especially the picture of his grandfather, his mother's father, made shortly before his death. He remembers his high school friend Will Harsch, his kindly-looking father and his wife who called him 'Mephisto.' Henderson has reserved the basement in his conjugal home for reflections of the parental family. He works hard at the violin, pursuing his father's spirit.

Oh, father, Fa. Do you recognize the sounds? This is me, Gene, on your violin, trying to reach you (HRK 30)

He has never been able to convince himself that 'the dead are utterly dead.' He admires rational people and envies their clear heads but he follows memories of his father and mother with hysterical commitment.

I played in the basement to my father and my mother, and when I learned a few pieces I would whisper, 'Mo, this is 'Humoresque' for you.' Or, 'Ne, listen - 'Meditation from' Thais.' I played with dedication, with feeling, with longing, love-played to the point of emotional collapse. (HRK 30)

Henderson is a curious son who realizes the value of his parents long after they are gone. He is even stranger as a husband. He understands the lovable nature of his wife, when he is utterly lost in Africa. When the Arnewi weep at the havoc he has wrought with their water tank, Henderson is emotionally disturbed. He utters a roar 'like the great Assyrian bull' (HRK 146) and thinks
of his father. "In a big gathering my father also had a tendency to become excited," he says. "He once lifted up the speaker's stand and threw it down into the orchestra pit." Later Romilayu digs, revolving the knife blade in the mortar of the death cell and scrapes and scoops, in execution of the escape plan. Henderson tells him unconnected things about his father knowing full well that Romilayu does not follow his ancient history. He tells Romilayu of his conviction that the old guy loved him as well as his brother Dick. This is a lesson he failed to learn when his father was alive. In the end, again, after sending off Romilayu Henderson falls into parental reflections. He remembers how he went away from home, as a boy of sixteen, a college freshman, after Dick's death. He keenly realizes his blazing lapses as a son.

An old man, disappointed, of failing strength, may try to reinvigorate himself by means of anger. Now I understand it. But I couldn't see it at sixteen when we had a falling out.

(HRK 282)

Henderson's father put aside his customary elegance of words and swore at him because Henderson failed to comfort him when his brother Dick died. Subsequently Henderson hitchhicked to Niagara Falls. All these recollections of the parental and conjugal home, now lost to him because of his folly, come crowding into his mind 'as the four propellers were fanning us homeward' (HRK 283)

A close reading of the Quixote tale reveals that Henderson is basically a "family novel." Like Augie March it is deceptively picaresque. The family motif is the overriding concern. The escapades in the two novels, brigandage in Augie March and
gallantry in Henderson are abundantly punctuated with family reflections. The hero's obsession, ever since he lifts Mummah, in an unrepeatable act of pride, and his bid to "stop Becoming" (HRK 162), is the loss of home. When Daifu gives him leave to undertake the act of courage, Henderson thinks he is going to get into "depth" "real depth" (HRK 164); but as soon as the rain rituals begin he realizes that he has blindly knocked himself into a literal morass. The home finally becomes Henderson's quest. Reflecting about his long lost father and brother, Henderson in his flight at last from madness says:

And during this leg of the flight, my memory
die me a great favor. Yes, I was granted
certain recollections and they have made a
sizeable difference to me. ... Something of
benefit can be found in the past. (HRK 282)

Even the gossamer picaresque veil that cloaks the family motif in Henderson and Augie March drops off in the turbulent 'domestic novels' like Seize the Day, Herzog and Humboldt's Gift and the short stories The Old System and What Kind? Whatever Herzog's protestations about its healing power, sex purges just some of his neurotic nonsense. However violently pursued, it does not solve the problems of the embittered loners. For their soul's comfort they have to turn to certain sacred categories: the past, the parental home. Herzog digs and burrows into the past, which is his bolt-hole for emotional sustenance. He thinks of Nachman, his childhood playmate on Napoleon street, nearly forty years back, his unlucky father, his sad mother, Aunt Zippora, Uncle Yaffe, the distant dimly-lit kitchen, the cold stove, its ashen dust, its grates... oh, his ancient times, as Herzog says romantically
remoter than Egypt. 'Do not deceive yourself, dear Moses
Elkanath,' Herzog warns himself, 'with childish jingles and
Mother Goose. Hearts quaking with cheap and feeble charity or
oozing potato love have not written history' (H 83). But this
cautions is of no avail. His mind moves in a whirling ecstasy
and plunges him into personal, emotional history. What Herzog
ultimately constructs is a catalogue of family troubles, and
not his vaunted Romanticism project. Finally he is found sitting
pretty on piled-up personal troubles. Brimming with boyhood
memories he writes to Nachman, his childhood playmate in the
razzle-dazzle street of lion-bearded homosexuals and makes
learned digs at Marxism as well as American culture.

I don't know how American you've become
since the old days in Canada - you've lived here
a long time. But I will never worship the
fat gods. Not I. I'm no Marxist, you know.
I keep my heart with William Blake and Hilke.

(H 139)

Nothing provides more food for thought for Herzog than the
parental home and the past. His memories have a veritable
emotional power. It makes people flee sometimes. Nachman
chose to run once on eighth street on sighting Herzog.

But I, with my memory - all the dead and the
mad are in my custody, and I am the nemesis
of the would-be forgotten. I bind others to
my feelings, and oppress them. (H 141)

Ravitch, Nachman's uncle or just a landtsman worked at the fruit
store near Rachel Street in 1922. He sat drunk on the freezing
stairs in the Napoleon Street house and sobbed and sang.
alone, alone, alone Solitary as a stone...' (H 141). Moses was sharing his bed with Willie and Shura. Mother Herzog prodded father to help Ravitch in. It amused the boys to watch Father Herzog coaxing him to get on his feet. 'It was family theatre' (H 142). In his frequent bursts of temper father used to slap the boys with both hands, asserting the ancient power of fathers over sons, the power of life and death. Father Herzog failed repeatedly: first in Petersburg as onion-merchant, and was convicted for his illegal residence. Then he got off to Canada, bought a piece of land in Quebec and failed as a farmer; then failed as a baker, again as a jobber; and then as sack manufacturer and junk dealer. All this life flits through Herzog's mind: the rotten, toylike street and the bootlegger's boys reciting ancient prayers; 'to this Moses' heart was attached with great power.' 'All he ever wanted was there' in Napoleon street. Beautiful as it is, the romantic description of the family is puzzling. Augie waxes lyrical in the same way in his axial lines lecture about the family.

My ancient times. Remoter than Egypt. No dawn, the foggy winters. In darkness the bulb was lit. The stove was cold. Papa shook the grates, and raised an ashen dust. The grates grumbled and squealed. (H 145)

It is doubtful if any other writer at any time has elevated drab domestic scenes to such exalted beauty. The clang of the stove, sounds like the music of the spheres in the love-starved mind. Moses reminiscing reaches boyhood and is still staring, standing behind Helen, at the swirling pages of Haydn and Mozart. Herzog will never outlive this ancient music. He is doomed to live with the past, in the past and is never supposed to grow and come to
grips with the present and to step, eventually into the future. Maybe he is blessed.

Oh, the music! thought Herzog. He fought the insidious blight of nostalgia in New York-softening, heart-rotting emotions, black spots, sweet for one moment but leaving a dangerous acid residue. (H 147)

Time bolts at Herzog's door. There is no saying what Einstein, who gave this additional dimension to the three-dimensional universe, will make of this stoppage. Herzog is so violently given to the past and relives every scene with Aunt Zippora and uncle Yaffe; with Shura who delivered bottles and pasted labels, with the aunt-abused mother, with the beaten, bleeding father. Maintaining that Herzog is at once a traditional and radically experimental novel, urging a return to romantic values, Chavkin says: "Because of the range of tone and the complex time scheme involving memories within memories, Herzog can be confusing, but the work becomes logical when one recognizes its basic form: a secular romantic meditation that depicts the gradual process of the psyche coming to terms with its anxiety."5

Father Herzog had borrowed from moneylenders when Zippora refused to help him, and had loaded a truck with whisky cases with Voplonsky. Before they reached Rouses Point, they were hijacked, beaten up and left in a ditch. In his blood-stained clothes, with a gap in his teeth he entered the dark kitchen and, related his entire life story, commencing from the fourth year of his study. He wept bitterly. The kitchen was like a cavern and 'we were like cave dwellers' (H 153). Of his father, Herzog

reflects:

As he did this, he began to cry, and the children standing about him all cried. It was more than I could bear that anyone should lay violent hands on him — a father, a sacred being, a king. Yes, he was a king to us. My heart was suffocated by this horror. I thought I would die of it. Whom did I ever love as I loved them?

The intellectual thus gives himself away. Primitive family passion is writ large on his brow. Herzog is essentially child, the son he always wants to be. Sex and knowledge and all such self-deluding pursuit does not endure. Herzog, brooding with clouded eyes, writes just a few lines to Nachman. Then he stops. He knows that all this torrential ancient history cannot have the same 'intensest' significance for Nachman who has heard it all ten times a year both from Herzog and his mother.

So we had a great schooling in grief. I still know these cries of the soul. They lie in the breast, and in the throat. The mouth wants to open wide and let them out. But all these are antiquities — yes, Jewish antiquities originating in the Bible, in a Biblical sense of personal experience and destiny. (H 155)

In this singleminded pursuit Herzog loses count of time.

'Glancing at his watch, Herzog, with an appearance of efficiency or purpose, failed, anyway, to fix the time in his mind.' (H 162)

He has spent a whole day scrawling a few letters. For all this loss of time and activity, perhaps, he tries to make up later in a violent burst of anger as he goes to shoot the lovers and rescue the child. But one cannot do justice to time through sudden frenzied activity in the procrastination-bound Hamlet
style. Herzog's idle reflection, like Hamlet's delay is, however, not an empty category. It is profound knowledge, as Nietzsche sees it: "It was an insight which hindered action by stripping the veil of illusion from the terrible truth, the terror or the absurdity of existence." The poignancy of Herzog's reflections is in direct proportion to the time of the demise of his childhood joy. Like Citrine he is reflecting about two big losses: the first is the parental home and the next, in the more immediate present the conjugal home. The first loss is a natural consequence of time. The second loss is as much a result of Madeleine's arrogant exercise of power as it is of Herzog's abdication.

The stove is an enduring symbol of ancient ties in Bellow's fiction. It crops up in the reminiscences of Dr Braun in _The Old System_. As a student at Rensselaer Polytechnic he used to visit Aunt Rose. 'The great black-and-nickel stove, the round table on its oak pedestal' (MM-OS 53) is deeply embedded in his memory. Dr Braun savours reminiscences of ancient kitchens as he sips coffee in his neat kitchen, with the 'blud-and-white Dutch dishes cups hanging, saucers standing in slots. It is another empty, academic thoughtful life, veering around sacred memories and seedy existence. Dr Braun has given up his afternoon to "the hopeless pleasure of thinking affectionately about his dead" (MM-OS 52). Again as in _Herzog_ the time frame melts as the present merges into the immediate past which in turn dissolves with the ancient past. Dr Braun thinks of Isaac, - Isaac twenty two, Braun seven - and his reflections of the past. For the

uninitiated this must be a terrible journey down the endless
vistas of time, reaching the far-off reminiscences of an elder,
who is himself dead and gone a long time.

And since he (Isaac) belonged to no societies, never
played cards, never spent an evening drinking, never
went to Florida, never went to Europe, never went
to see the State of Israel, he had plenty of time for
reminiscences. Respectable elms about his house
sighed with him for the past. The squirrels were
orthodox. They dug and saved. (MM-OS 64)

Cousin Isaac a patriarch caught in a web of computations, mort-
gages and turn-around money still said psalms at building sites
and worried about his parents in the grave. He visited the
cemetery regularly.

The parents, stilled in the clay. Two crates, side
by side ... Isaac was concerned about his
parents. Down there, how were they? The wet,
the cold, above all the worms worried him. In
frost, his heart shrank for Aunt Rose and Uncle
Iraun, though as a builder he knew they were
beneath the frost line. But a human power, his
love, affected his practical judgement. It flew
off ... Perhaps as a builder... he especially
felt his dead to be unsheltered. (MM-OS 65)

All the reminiscing protagonists of Bellow set out to defeat time.
As Citrine says:

Nothing is momentous enough to rouse him. Decades
of calendars drop their leaves on him just
as the trees dropped leaves and twigs on Rip. (HG 294)

They do not care a rap for the present and when they have to get
down to it, they do it against their will and engage in fitful
self-defeating acts. In the midst of their flurry they again
ruminate and travel backward. What they love most is star-
gazing. It is these fiery objects which give them a true sense
of life. They have passed from Euclid's simple fixed time-world
to Einstein's sprawling, mind-boggling universe where the un-
changing Newtonian time frame is a rap. And that accounts for
the contempt of their conjugal present and mortal time which is
just a speck amid the phenomena, the life and death of stars.
Braun nonplussed by the death of the dear cousins ultimately sees
nothing in gargantuan emotions of Isaac and the inflexible will
of Tina. Death effuses out all significance. This awareness
prods him to the stars, which he views from his dark companionless
kitchen.

These things cast outward by a great begetting
space billions of years ago. (MM-05 81)

The agony of a brief life, a worldly interlude is finally wiped
out by the epic proportions of cosmic events. Herzog seeks the
comfort of stellar company in his time-abhorred existence in the
Berkshire, lying in his abandoned marriage bed. Whereas Dr
Braun stands fixed, marvelling at the message of the stars, Herzog
has absorbed the grand truth in his daily life. For him light
travels at its own pace, the speed of light, to enable men to
look at their mirrors, shave and preen. Loss of parents, conjugal
life, its successes and failures and the like do not ultimately
crush him because he has learnt much more weighty truths. Like
Dean Corde, worried about Minna's health as she ascends Mount
Palomar has certain cosmic certainties, to turn to in distress.
That is the power of the 'cold out there' in the star-studded
void; its potential to cancel everything merely human' (DD 305).
Living in a four dimensional expanding cosmos that resulted from
a three-dimensional fireball, Bellow's beleaguered heroes turn a
few leaves in scientific cosmology to see as Dr Braun does, the
cataclysmic event, 'the begetting spasm,' that occurred around
15\times10^9 years ago. They further try to pry into the timeless
time that existed before this event. If time travel were to
become a reality Bellow's Braun and Herzog would fly straightway
into King Arthur's court. Ijah in Cousins is another crank who
is up against the onward rush of time. For him sometimes sleep
is out of the question. So he goes to make strong coffee, to
sip and think, lying down in one of his Syrian corners, 'in
proximity to the smooth lighted moon surface of the Outerdrive
to consider what I might do for Cousin Scholem' (HW-C 275).

Inconmi is not a word I apply to the sharp
thrills of deep-night clarity that come to me.
During the day the fusspot habits of a lifetime
event real discovery. I have learned to be
patient for the night hours that harrow the
nerves and tear up the veins - "lying in restless
eastasy." To want this, and to bear it, you
need a strong soul. (HW-C 275)

Shawmut in Him with His Foot shares with Citrine and Herzog the
strength of reflections and family sentiments. He too has a
brother, like the brothers of the predecessors; these three do
not set such store by the otiose parental family. They are too
worldly-wise to engage in delusions. Of Brother Philip, Shawmut
says.

Family sentiment was not his dish. All that he had
was for the new family; for the old family, nix. (HW 36)

7 J.T. Frazer, Some Reflections on Time, Science and Man,"
1971 Britannica Yearbook of Science and the Future, 98.
But unlike Julius who efficiently runs a patriarchate, Philip is scared of his wife.

Philip wanted to impress his wife ... Out of terror, he wanted to make her rich. She told him she was all the family he needed. (44)

Victims or victors, the brothers of the broken men lead a life in step with time and care for the conjugal home. But our celebrated solitaries, in their lifelong loyalty to the parental home of love and affection, abdicate power, and discard the conjugal home as cess-pit. They defy history. Shawmut living on memories, repeatedly expresses doubts, like Citrine, as to whether his brother remembered at all about the parental home.

I started to talk about our sister Chink, thinking my only expedient was to stir such family sentiments as might have survived in this atmosphere where the Spanish moss was electronized by rock music ... I recalled that we had heard very different music on Independence Boulevard. Did Philip remember that Kramm, who drove a soda-pop truck... could accurately pitch a case filled with bottles into a small opening at the very top of the pyramid? (NW 39)

It is inconceivable for the likes of Shawmut that anybody could care to forget all this. They continually shore up the ruins. Bellow now leads us for splendid culinary visions from Napoleon Street to Independence Boulevard.

Our kitchen on Independence Boulevard had once been filled with such cockatoo cries, mostly feminine. In the old days the Shawmut women would sit in the kitchen while giant meals were cooked, tubs of stuffed cabbage, slabs of brisket. (NW 50)

In that cage of 'operatic women-birds' Shawmut had learnt as a kid to shriek to be heard. Shawmut remembers his young mother who
is now ninety four and nothing more than a vegetable heap. She does not remember him as he feeds her. He still hears in his 'mind's ears' the cries he made as a boy when his mother washed his hair with a bulky bar of castile soap dressed him in a pongee suit and kissed him ecstatically. 

These were events that might have occurred just before the time of the Boxer Rebellion or in the back streets of Seiena six centuries ago. Bathing, combing, dressing, kissing—these now are remote antiquities. There was, as I grew older, no way to sustain them. (HW 51)

So that is the refrain. Every broken hero has his music. But that invariably belongs to the past. There is virtually no music in the present. All music emanates from their memory, their little cuckoo-clock, and as its sweet, gentle peals swirl, our heroes peak and pine in ecstasy.

The one and perhaps the only one who is worried about the future in Bellow is Sammler. He is concerned about the passage of time and our insouciant reaction to it.

And what of Weil's Time Traveller, when he found himself thousands of years in the future? He fell in square love with a beautiful Eloi maiden. To take with one, whether down into the depths or out into space and time, something dear, and to preserve it—that seemed to be the impulse. (MSF 110)

Sammler is sad that men should dally over their impulses without caring to redefine our goals against the onrush of time. None the less, the future has no meaning for the other characters who Count for something in Bellow. They seem to reverse Ortega Y
Gasset's dictum: "Man has no nature: what he has is history." They are so thoroughly given in spite of their "ideas," to the passions: sex, dead parents and children. At the thought of children, they bestir themselves and plan, but vaguely and without purpose. Also their predicament, under the steel heel of their wives, is such. They are denied a role in the lives of their children. They never have an opportunity therefore, to break away from the past and forge meaningful links with the world. Bellow's stargazers, Braun, Herzog and Henderson fly back in ancestor worship and peer into the star-filled firmament. It is curious but true that the light that long ago left distant stars and galaxies at 186,000 miles per second is just now reaching the earth. Proxima Centaur, the nearest star to the sun looks as it was four years ago, and the distant galaxies as they were billions of years ago. What do Bellow's heroes do with such immense spans of sprawling geologic time, neglecting their brief mortal time, which has, as Bellow says in his Skidmore college interview, become more valuable because of our rationalism, and lack of faith in eternity? Why, they are communing with their ancestors, the stars; for, human beings are literally star-children. Because in fact, everything in our bodies, with the exception of hydrogen, has been produced in thermonuclear reactions within stars. "Peering into the heavens then is like looking back into time, and some of the stars that astronomers see may no longer exist. Truly, as Andre Schwarz-Bart wrote in The Last of the Just: Our eyes register the light

8 Gasset, qtd. in Newman, Saul Bellow and History, 13.
of dead stars." Dead stars, however, do not at all matter to the Bellow heroes; truly, they are what they want because, in their fifties and sixties they are still 'hung up' on their dead parents. For the beleagured Bellow hero sex is not a never-failing prop; the parental home is a much more snug bolt-hole; but nothing and nobody is more salubrious than the child.