Kafka's Father, Agnon's Mother, Bellow's Cousins

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WHAT happens in the fictional representation of the family? Fiction is informed by an impulse to generalize, to symbolize, to make the particular somehow exemplary—and often, I would add, exemplary of aspects of existence by no means limited to social institutions and their consequences in individual lives. Thus, a social institution appearing in a fictional text may be neither a laboratory specimen of a general condition nor an individual case study, though it may often oscillate over some ambiguous middle ground between the two. Recall the famous first sentence of *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." It is of course the second clause that is to be the subject of Tolstoy's novel, as it is, indeed, of every novel, for about happy families there is hardly anything to be narrated. But that second clause operates in an odd, unsettling state of tension with the first clause, as if somehow the novel could make sense of the peculiarity of the particular only by setting it against the background of what is universally shared. As we read on, we discover that the Karenins and the Oblonskys are wretchedly unhappy each in their own way, but their unhappiness is, after all, also exemplary, just as the eventual happiness of Levin and Kitty is in certain regards decidedly peculiar. The very assertions, then, about what is typical and what is unique may be reversible, and that instability of the seemingly typical characterizes most fictional expressions of social realities.

In discussing the Jewish family in literature, the question we must ask is what writers make of the family rather than what picture of the actual family we can build by scrutinizing their texts. It does not, for example, seem to me feasible to draw valid general inferences about what has happened to the Jewish family in America by canvassing a sampling of American Jewish novels. An instructive failed project of this sort is an essay published some years ago on the Jewish mother in contemporary American fiction by the neo-Orthodox critic, Harold Fisch. According to Fisch, in the traditional Jewish family the father was endowed with an aura of authority by virtue of the domestic religious system over which he presided. Once belief was eroded and the bonds of observance went slack, the father became a displaced person, powerless, pathetic, figuratively or literally constipated, while the possessive, overbearing, guilt-inducing mother now reigned supreme. In this way, the notorious Jewish mother of American fiction of the 60's was the clear symptom of a social pathology of post-traditional Jewish life.

Like most sweeping sociological generalizations, there is a grain of truth in all this, but I am skeptical about whether it is the sort of truth that would stand the test of statistical analysis. If this is more or less the image we get of Jewish mothers and fathers in, say, the early novels of Philip Roth, we are surely entitled to ask how much of this is typical of second-generation families of the Jewish middle class in the urban centers of the Northeast, how much is attributable to the personal experience of Philip Roth, how much to the generic and formal necessities of the kind of fiction he is writing, that is, a variety of erotic *Bildungsroman* in which the plot of attempted self-discovery through exogamous union needs the possessive, rasping, anaphrodisiac mother as an obstacle to overcome.

What I am proposing to do here, then, is to offer not an overview of the modern Jewish family through the evidence of literary texts but rather some instances of how certain elements of the sociology of the modern Jewish family have been transmuted in fiction. I will focus on three major figures working in three different languages: Franz Kafka, S.Y. Agnon, and Saul Bellow. The three can by no means suggest all that has been made by modern writers of the Jewish family, but they may indicate three cardinal points on the map of possibilities. I will proceed in chronological order, though I do not mean to imply a necessary historical chronology; the sequence will be from fathers to mothers to cousins.

AMONG the writings of Kafka, the primary document on his relation to the family is the *Letter to His Father*, a text of some

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20,000 words that he wrote in November 1919, just five years before his death, and that was never delivered to its addressee. Precisely because the *Letter to His Father* is not a work of fiction, it offers an illuminating instance of how the materials of life are transformed when they are turned into fiction.

The letter is based on a ghastly contradiction that seems quite out of control for the writer (unlike his fiction, where contradictions are held in fiercely artful control). Intended as a gesture of reconciliation and, in a peculiar way, as an expression of frustrated filial love, it is one of the most terrible indictments imaginable of a father by his son. The son repeatedly confesses his own weakness, his impotence, his abiding sense of guilt, but through anecdote and analysis he makes painfully clear how the father is responsible for the catastrophe of his son's character. This is a lifelong contest between hopeless unequals: ". . . we were so different and in our difference so dangerous to each other that if anyone had tried to calculate in advance how I, the slowly developing child, and you, the full-grown man, would stand to each other, he could have assumed that you would simply trample me underfoot so that nothing was left of me." The perception of the father is an infantile one that seems never to have been altered by the growth of little Franz to adult proportions: "Sometimes I imagine the map of the world spread out and you stretched diagonally across it. And I feel as if I could consider living in only those regions that either are not covered by you or are not within your reach."

To what extent does any of this reflect the general condition of the Jewish bourgeois family in the Austro-Hungarian empire around the turn of the century? (These are the same time and space, by the way, as those of Agnon's formative years, the Galician Agnon being just seven years Kafka's junior, though his greatest achievements would occur in the quarter-century after the death of his Czech counterpart.) Hermann Kafka, at least on the evidence of his son's letter, was an overbearing bully, a vulgarian, a monster of egotism, and in his modest way something of a sadist. Fortunately, none of these attributes can be referred to the sociology of the Jewish family. Kafka himself, however, does touch on certain notes of social generalization in the letter, and these demonstrate how the fateful peculiarities of individual character may be significantly reinforced by certain elements of shared cultural experience.

The senior Kafka, as part of the vast immigration from *shtetl* to city that took place in Central Europe at this time, was preeminently a self-made man, and the force of self-assertion of this successful new member of the urban mercantile class was of a piece with his penchant for domination within the family: "You had worked your way so far up by your own energies alone, and as a result you had unbounded confidence in your opinion." Hermann Kafka had jettisoned the pious practice of the world of his childhood, retaining only a kind of tenuous and intermittent nostalgia for it that was expressed in little more than perfunctory attendance at synagogue services four times a year. His son of course sensed the emptiness of this vestigial reflex of observance, and in the letter he imagines that, had the religious situation been different, "we might have found each other in Judaism."

Kafka himself stresses the typicality of the predicament: "The whole thing is, of course, no isolated phenomenon. It was much the same with a large section of this transitional generation of Jews, which had migrated from the still comparatively devout countryside to the cities." In the absence of authoritative tradition, the assertive father becomes an absolute arbitrary authority with all the force of the most punitive aspects of the God of tradition. (One sees here that Harold Fisch's argument about the erosion of faith and the obtrusion of Jewish mothers can easily be turned the other way to explain overbearing fathers.) Kafka summarizes this displacement in a single brief statement about his upbringing: "But for me as a child everything you called out at me was positively a heavenly commandment [*Himmelsgebot*]." The child, and the man-child after him, is forever at the foot of a towering Sinai, hearing the words hurled down at him in thunder, but the words frequently change, attach themselves to absurd or trivial objects, and are flagrantly violated by the very person who pronounces them.

In the *Letter to His Father*, all this amounts to an anguished account of the genesis of a neurosis, though, as I have just indicated, there is a sociological as well as a characterological component in the family situation that contributes to the inner crippling of the son. In Kafka's fiction, these same materials are transformed into haunting narrative explorations of the dynamics of living in families, living under political and spiritual constraint, living under the pressure of eternally elusive moral imperatives. That is why we read *The Trial, The Castle,* and the major short stories as great fictions of our dark times, not merely as the record of a cluster of obsessions. What the stories and novels do is to effect a symbolic reconfiguration of the family, the author using his own experience of the post-traditional Jewish family matrix as the means to represent existence under a strictly lawlike, perhaps lawless, authority. Let me try to illustrate this process by some brief comments on the three remarkable stories, all of them written between 1912 and 1914, that constitute a kind of unintended small trilogy on the fate of filiation: "The Judgment," "The Metamorphosis," and "In the Penal Colony."

"The Judgment" is the starkest, the most claus-

tral, of these three grim tales. The power of the story derives precisely from the fact that all of reality has been stripped down to nothing more than the relation between the father and his son, Georg Bendermann. The only scene for action outside the dark rooms where the two Bendermanns live is the bridge from which Georg will fling himself at the end. There are only two other human figures, both of whom exist at the periphery of this world. One is a friend in Russia, who is variously a figment of Georg Bendermann's imagination, an alter ego, a bone of contention between father and son, and an alternative image of a son for Bendermann senior. The other figure in the background is Georg's putative fiancée.

Now, one of the recurrent topics of the *Letter to His Father* is Franz Kafka's inability to marry, which he attributes to his sense of devastating weakness vis-à-vis the powerful paterfamilias whose role he cannot hope to emulate, whose place he does not dare usurp. In the letter, this notion has the status of a symptom and the tonality of a tormented whine. Translated into the narrative invention of "The Judgment," the idea picks up archetypal force: the conflict between the two Bendermanns becomes the immemorial conflict between father and son in which every attempt of the son to take a sexual partner is construed as a betrayal, a thinly veiled project to displace the father and possess a surrogate of the mother. "Because . . . the nasty creature," thunders Bendermann *père*, referring to the fiancée, "lifted her skirts . . . you made up to her, and in order to make free with her undisturbed you have disgraced your mother's memory, betrayed your friend, and stuck your father in bed so he can't move."

The intuitive rightness of invented detail in this symbolic reconfiguration of the family is uncanny: the thigh wound laid bare by the father, which suggests both threatened castration and past prowess in battle; the fact that the father, through the strength of his claimed insight into the son's motives, suddenly grows "radiant" and is able to rise powerfully from bed. The final stroke of the story, a paternal death sentence that the son finds irresistible, is at once the most fantastic and the most symbolically resonant moment of the tale: it carries us back far beyond the Jewish bourgeois familial setting of the Kafkas of Prague into an archaic shadow world of absolute patriarchal authority where the self-assertive impulse of the young is crushed with savage force.

In "The Metamorphosis," the stroke of fantasy occurs at the very beginning, in the famous first sentence that announces Gregor Samsa's transformation into a gigantic insect. Everything thereafter in the novella follows with a harshly realistic logic from that initial fantastic fact. The sense of unworthiness, of rejection, that Kafka articulates in the *Letter to His Father* is startlingly objectified by this conversion of man into dung beetle—a pariah within the family, an object of embarrassment and loathing, and an insuperable obstacle to normal family existence.

The family as institution is more clearly the central focus of this story than of the other two I am considering. Although the trappings of contemporary urban life—the cramped apartment, the economic endeavors of Gregor and his father—are in evidence, this does not finally seem a "representation" of the early 20th-century bourgeois family but rather a narrative study of the delicate hydraulic system of the nuclear family as such. Here, too, we have the rivalry of force between father and son, in which as the son becomes weaker (wounded by an apple embedded in his carapace, he is like an "old invalid"), the father grows in strength, but that relationship is complicated by the crisscrossing lines of connection among all four members of the family. The crippled son futilely seeks refuge from the hostility of the father in the possibility of maternal solicitude; for a while, he imagines that his sister, who is the one given the task of nurturing him, is his secret ally, but this proves a delusion. In the end, it dawns on him that the only way he can serve the family is through his death.

This frightening tale, then, proves to have a kind of happy ending, whatever ironic inferences one might choose to draw about the conclusion. Gregor's death has a redemptive force: with the noisome giant bug at last out of the way, father, mother, and the suddenly blooming daughter can leave the foul atmosphere of their apartment-prison, walk out into the fresh air of spring, think again of action, renewal, and a clean, fresh place to live. To state in shorthand the distance that has been traversed from experience to art, the cramped psychic space of life in the family of Hermann Kafka has been transformed into a scapegoat story—and, alas, all too many families have their scapegoat—where the well-being of the whole is achieved at the cost of the unassimilable individual.

"In the Penal Colony" presents more complications of narrative elaboration than our two other stories, and I can hardly offer a serious interpretation of it in this rapid overview. Like so many Kafka texts, it has been read in very divergent ways: as a theological tale about the transition from the Old Dispensation to the New; as a political fable, uncannily prescient of the concentration-camp universe; as a psychological study of the insidious dialectic between sadism and masochism; and much more. The point I want to stress is that it is precisely through the symbolic reconfiguration of family experience that such a multiplicity of readings becomes possible—because the family, after all, is the matrix of our psychological lives, of our political, moral, and theological imaginings.

In contrast to both "The Judgment" and "The

Metamorphosis," no literal family is present here. The setting is a kind of Devil's Island somewhere in the tropics, whose unique system of retribution is the brainchild of a now-deceased Old Commandant. The explorer who comes to witness the operation of the terrible torture machine, explained in such loving detail by the officer in charge of it, provides a zone of mediation and distancing absent in the other two stories: when he pushes off from the shore in his boat at the end, whipping away the outstretched hands of a soldier and a prisoner with a heavy knotted rope, we get a sense that he—and all of us with him—is literally putting behind him the nightmare world of the Old Commandant.

And yet, this distanced, fabulous world of perfectly programmed punishment is fraught with familial energies, energies one sees expressed on a much lower plane of signification in the *Letter to His Father*. The relationship between the Old Commandant and the officer is manifestly one of father and son, and the officer, in attempting, however futilely, to replicate the dead Commandant, is a kind of Hermann Kafka under the aspect of eternity, or at least, under the aspect of political morality. "My guiding principle is this," he tells the explorer, "guilt is never to be doubted." At the end of the story, the failed authoritative father will try to become the submissive son, stripping himself and placing his own body under the teeth of the dreadful Harrow.

The notion of divine commandment, *Himmelsgebot*, which was the young Franz Kafka's sense of his father's words, here undergoes a grotesque transmogrification, for this is a story about supposedly revelatory, indecipherable inscriptions. When the explorer confesses that he can't make out the labyrinthine tracings on the paper the officer shows him, the officer comments, "It's no calligraphy for schoolchildren. It needs to be studied." In the end, the machine that is to inscribe the injunction of justice on the body of the transgressor goes haywire, and the redemptive revelation of the language of the law turns into sheer mayhem.

The three stories, then, mark a course of growing elaboration and imaginative transformation of the familial materials: from the symbolic confessional mode of "The Judgment" to the fantasy and expiative ritual of "The Metamorphosis" to the invented exotic world of "In the Penal Colony," where the writer's personal awareness of an overpowering father and his perception of the displacement of tradition in his own home produce a fable that resonates in multiple registers, leading us to reflect on the failed project of perfect justice, the stubborn human need for punishment, the abuses of political authority, the historical transition from an era of harsh retribution, the breakdown of revelation, the threat of the indecipherable that subverts any confident use of language.

ON THE surface, it might seem that the case of the Hebrew writer, S. Y. Agnon, is incommensurate with that of Kafka, for Agnon's fictional world is so much more varied in topic, genre, and tone. In over sixty years of literary activity, Agnon produced cunningly artful imitations of pious tales, nostalgic reminiscences of his childhood, subtle psychological studies of contemporary types, panoramically realistic novels (though the realism is always tinctured with something else), satires, a whole spectrum of symbolic fiction, and also some dreamlike expressionistic stories that in fact have been compared with Kafka. But beneath this variety of literary kinds, one detects a family constellation only a little less obsessive than that encountered in Kafka. For Agnon, it is the looming figure of the mother rather than of the father that constantly overshadows the existence of the son.

In Agnon's case, we know lamentably little about the specific circumstances of the Czaczkes (his original family name) ménage in turn-of-the-century Buczacz, and considering the almost total neglect of serious literary biography by Hebrew scholarship, we are not likely to find out much before the last remaining witnesses will have vanished. But if the actual etiology of Agnon's imagination of the family may be inaccessible, the pattern articulated in his stories and novels is itself eloquent. In Agnon's world of origins, the mother reigns, the father is strangely recessive or actually absent. Occasionally, she is seen as a thinly veiled object of erotic yearning, like the mother of Yitzhak Kumer, the protagonist of *Just Yesterday* (1946, still untranslated)—he recalls her last lingering kiss and in that recollection recoils in guilt from attachment to another woman; or like the mother of Jacob Rechnitz in the symbolic novella "Betrothed" (1943), who is confused in her son's mind with the mother of his fiancée, whom in turn he eerily confounds with her own daughter.

A Simple Story (1935, now finally released in English*), the novel that is Agnon's masterpiece of psychological realism, offers the most clear-cut instance of domination by the mother as against attraction to the mother. Tzirel Hurvitz, a strong-willed, self-assured, grasping shopkeeper—a kind of fictional soul-sister to Hermann Kafka—possesses her son without ever having really nurtured him: she blocks his way to the poor cousin who is the woman he longs for, marries him off, out of social and economic calculation, to a woman he does not want, enlists him despite himself in the family business, and is ultimately responsible for his attempted escape into madness. (These are, let me note, strictly observant Jews, like Agnon's own family: one hardly needs Harold Fisch's thesis of the breakdown of traditional patriarchal author-

* Translated and with an Afterword by Hillel Halkin, Schocken, 246 pp., $14.95.

ity to explain the baleful eminence in some writers of the Jewish mother.)

As the related fates of Hirshl Hurvitz in *A Simple Story* and Jacob Rechnitz in "Betrothed" suggest, powerful or powerfully desired mothers in Agnon tend to make weak sons, and the passivity, the debility, the impotence of Agnon's male figures have long been observed by critics. This kind of protagonist is prominent as early as "The Hill of Sand" (1920, but based on a story written in 1911, when Agnon was only twenty-three), with its touch-me-touch-me-not central character wandering through a labyrinth of castration symbols, and as late as the posthumously published novel *Shira* (1971), the story of a hopelessly blocked scholar alternately mothered by his prematurely aging wife and obsessed by his domineering, elusive, weirdly androgynous mistress. (Both these works are untranslated.)

The examples I have touched on illustrate how Agnon could spin, out of his own obsessive concern with mothers and sons, a long series of variations on a single psychological type, or, if we stress relationship rather than character in these fictions, a series of studies of the psychopathology of erotic life. Nor is the psychopathology of the erotic by any means limited to the overtly modernist phases of Agnon's writing, as we may infer from the disquieting story of an unconsummated marriage in "The Scribe's Legend" (1919), an ostensibly pious tale where the values of piety are ironically subverted from beginning to end. If, as I argued at the outset, a fictional representation is never just a case study, what is finally most arresting about Agnon's preoccupation with these family materials is his ability to address through them a range of large questions involving the cultural and spiritual predicaments of our century. This is evident, among the works I have already mentioned, in *Just Yesterday*, "Betrothed," and *Shira*, but I would like to follow a little more closely the move from family to culture and history in another text, the 1951 novella "Edo and Enam," which I think is one of Agnon's most original symbolic fictions.*

"EDO AND ENAM" is a story about the mystique of archeology and the quest after lost civilizations, and as such would not at first blush seem to have a great deal to do with families. A lonely scholar, Dr. Ginath, becomes famous by deciphering the hitherto unknown language of Edo and by publishing the beautiful Enamite hymns, said to stand as the missing link at the very dawn of human history. In the course of the story, it emerges that his source for both the language and the hymns is a somnambulistic woman named Gemulah who has been brought to Jerusalem as a wife from her exotic mountain homeland by Gabriel Gamzu, an antiquarian discoverer of rare books and manuscripts. The symbolism of this strange and evocative tale has been expounded all too many times in Hebrew criticism (and, often, in all too allegorical a manner). Rather than add my own voice to the chorus, I should like to comment on how the familial concerns define the lines of the symbolic picture, give it coherence and dimension.

The contemporary world of "Edo and Enam" is one of epidemic homelessness, where houses are simply unavailable, or are broken into, or are threatened with destruction. The theme of the destroyed house is pervasive in Agnon's fiction, but here it is correlated with the theme of disrupted conjugality. The paradigm is provided in an anecdote about a certain Günther and his bride who have been married for over a year but, unable to find an apartment, live in separate rented rooms, meet at bus stops and park benches, and, one concludes, have had no opportunity to consummate their union. Near the end of the story, we learn that the marriage between Gemulah and Gamzu is also unconsummated: "I am no married woman," Gemulah proclaims to Ginath when the two are discovered together by Gamzu, "ask him if he has ever beheld my naked flesh." Not even adultery is fulfilled: Ginath's relation to Gemulah, as much as she passionately longs for another order of intimacy, is the cool connection of self-interested amanuensis to informant. As for the Greifenbachs, the couple in whose home Ginath lives, there are no indications in the story about their conjugal arrangements, but, after ten years of marriage, their union remains without offspring. Finally, the narrator himself, though a husband and father, is separated from his wife and children during the main time sequence of the story and so participates, albeit temporarily, in the general pattern of disrupted conjugality.

What has happened, in short, is that the psychological theme of the weak son, erotically impaired by Oedipal guilt or by maternal domination, has been projected here onto a global scale and translated into non-psychological terms. It is a preeminent instance of what I referred to in the case of Kafka as the symbolic reconfiguration of family materials. The novella gives us a world of ineffectual males, either incapable of or unwilling to achieve conjugal consummation. In the thematic confrontation of modernity and the archaic, this universal slackening of the sexual bond serves as an apt image of a culture that has lost its élan, its sense of direction and purpose, its faith in its capacity for self-perpetuation.

Against this contemporary panorama of failed relations between the sexes, the story offers two ironically unattainable alternatives, one mythic and the other archaic. In the long dialogues between Gamzu and the narrator, mention is made a couple of times of the perfect conjunction between male and female in the heavenly constella-

* Both "Betrothed" and "Edo and Enam" are available in English (*Two Tales*, Schocken).

tions, or, according to the Kabbalah, between the angels of the *Shekhinah*, the female aspect of the Godhead, and the angels of the *Kudsha Brikh Hu*, the male aspect of the Godhead. In a still more pointed antithesis to the flaccid males of the contemporary scene, Gemulah's archaic world is marked by a practice in which the suitor, emulating the biblical story of the seizure of the young women of the tribe of Benjamin, must forcibly "snatch" his bride from all rivals. The contrast between modern exhaustion or sterility and archaic vitality is emphatically clear.

"Edo and Enam," however, is more intriguingly ambiguous than my account of it so far would indicate. In her archaic realm, Gemulah is a nurturing mother (she nurses the injured Gamzu back to health when, blinded, he stumbles into her land); in contemporary Jerusalem, she is, to her husband, alternately an invalid daughter, a dangerous she-demon, an elusive object of desire. But the most devious ironic turn of the tale is that the whole vision of an archaic realm of vital origins proves to be illusory. The language of origins Gemulah speaks is revealed as a concoction, less language than idiolect, a project of secret intimacy shared solely by daughter and father, from which the exogamous suitor, the male outsider, Gamzu, is excluded.

At the heart of the archaic, then, we discover a kind of incestuous circularity that generates still another version of sexual exclusion. Language itself, instead of being anchored in history or, according to Gamzu's kabbalistic perspective, in the cosmos, is fictive; and the Oedipal aspiration of modern culture to return to the source can attain no more than the pseudo-archaic, the flirtation with an immemorial vitality proving to be a seduction by death.

What happens in the family, as Agnon perceives it, turns out to be homologous with what happens in culture, but in the larger arena the consequences seem more portentous. At the very end of the tale, the narrator tells us that after death, a writer's soul shines out in his work for anyone with eyes to "make use of its light." This presumably will be the case with Ginath's publications. But, remembering the ultimately fictive basis of Ginath's discoveries, the deceptive lunar luminosities with which they are associated, we may also recall an earlier remark by the narrator about the alluring light of the moon: "Happy is he who makes use of its light and comes to no harm."

THE family in the fiction of Saul Bellow unsettles the nice symmetry of our instances from Kafka and Agnon and so provides a salutary reminder that there are very different possibilities for turning perceptions of the family to literary purposes. The crucial distinction between Bellow and the two earlier writers is that he is chiefly interested in the extended family, not in the nuclear family. Although he began his career in the 40's with *Dangling Man* in a stark modernist mode (Dostoevsky-*cum*-Kafka), from the early 50's onward his novels and stories have encompassed not isolated individuals and overmastering parents but a welter of disparate, squabbling, ambivalently loving siblings, uncles and aunts, cousins near and distant.

This attraction to familial sprawl is inseparable from the zest, the panoramic sweep, and the element of formal looseness in Bellow's fiction. Nothing he has written exhibits the tightness, the inexorability of "In the Penal Colony," or "Edo and Enam," but it may well be that such formal rigor in fiction is dependent upon the imaginative concentration on the tight four-square zone of the nuclear family, and any reaching beyond those limits entails a certain untidiness. Bellow himself seems perfectly aware of the opposition in this regard between his work and that of the moderns. In his recent story "Cousins" (from which I will draw all my examples), the narrator, Ijah Brodsky, reports his ex-wife as having explained his fascination with collateral relatives in the following terms: "Her opinion was that through the cousins . . . I indulged my taste for the easier effects. I lacked true modern severity. Maybe she believed that I satisfied an artist's needs by visits to old galleries, walking through museums of beauty, happy with the charms of kinship, quite contented with painted relics, not tough enough for rapture in its strongest forms, not purified by nihilistic fire." In modernists like Kafka and Agnon, one indeed sees true modern severity, the purging fires of nihilism. Bellow at his best offers a more human warmth, and instead of the intensities of rapture, a compound of wry amusement, curiosity, puzzlement, compassion.

As fiction moves from the nuclear family to the larger network of relatives, the whole enterprise of symbolic reconfiguration is set aside. There is nothing symbolic about Bellow's cousins and aunts and uncles, no implication of multiple registers of meaning. The Jewish immigrant extended family draws him because it offers such a splendid sampling of human variety, and it is the extravagant particularity of individual character that engages him. But the simile Ijah Brodsky tries on for size, of visiting old galleries, undersells his own and his author's activity as a cousin-watcher, for the impulse is anthropological, in the older, philosophical sense of the term and therefore also ultimately metaphysical.

In the story "Cousins," the language of zoology and, in particular, of evolutionary theory abounds in the characterizations of the relatives: species, forms of life, extinct types, kinds of creatures, and so forth. What range of possibilities for humanity is manifest in these individual figures, known more or less intimately as members of the same family, belonging, as the narrator notes, "to the same genetic pool, with a certain difference in scale"? At one point, Brodsky is led to speculate—

and it is a notion that underlies a good deal of Bellow's fiction—that each human being is born with something that deserves to be called an original self, not reducible to common denominators, not explicable through general patterns and external determinants. That would provide a metaphysical warrant for the cognitive seriousness of Bellow's scrutiny of disparate individuals in his fiction: "The seams open, the bonds dissolve, and the untenability of existence releases you back to the original self. Then you are free to look for real being under the debris of modern ideas, and in a magical trance, if you like, or with a lucidity altogether different from the lucidity of *approved* types of knowledge."

What does this enterprise of trying to fathom human variety through collateral relatives have to do with the Jewish family? It is a commonplace that in Western urban societies the extended family has long been in a state of dissolution, and it is obvious that such vestigial forms of it as persist are by no means limited to Jews. Nevertheless, Bellow has his Ijah Brodsky propose that in Jews the corrosive effects of modernization, the devastation of genocide, have produced a certain instinct of reversion to the pre-modern familial system: "Jewish consanguinity—a special phenomenon, an archaism of which the Jews, until the present century stopped them, were in the course of divesting themselves. The world as it was dissolving apparently collapsed on top of them, and the divestiture could not continue." It is hard to say whether statistical evidence could be mustered to support this assertion, but it does seem to have an intuitive rightness. The Jewish family, like other kinds of family, is inevitably flung out to all points of the compass in the centrifuge of contemporary life, yet one may detect surprising tugs back to the center, perhaps especially over the last decade, as we enter the second generation after that most terrible collapse of the modern world on the Jewish people.

In any case, the literary treatment of the family, as I have been arguing all along, has very little to do with statistics because the writer does not report social institutions but picks up hints from them which he imaginatively elaborates into a certain vision of human possibilities or, we might add, of impossibilities. When the terms the writer works with are drawn from the tightly looped psychosexual circuits of the nuclear family, what he does in one way or another is to derive from the family a defining model of relations between man and woman, strong and weak, old and young, man and God, individual and authority, nature and culture, present and past. I am not enough of a determinist to believe that everything the writer sees is distorted into the image of the family, but we do, after all, internalize our childhood families, and that predisposes us to see things in a certain way, to integrate them according to certain patterns, perhaps at times even to glimpse underlying principles that might otherwise escape us. The extended family, by contrast, as the example of Bellow suggests, offers immediate access to the endless heterogeneity of human types.

The bulging familial grab-bag of Bellow's story —hoodlum, lawyer, businessman, cabdriving philosopher, vulgarian, aesthete, introvert, female powerhouse—is something many of us experience in our own extended families. The fact that Bellow chooses to begin his catalogue with a criminal is instructive. For the law-abiding citizen, the criminal may often seem alien, someone who has stepped to the other side of a fatal dividing line; but the criminal in the family confronts us with kinship, reminds us that this, too, is a permutation of the human stuff we are made of and in these physical lineaments we are faced with hints of ourselves.

IF, as I have intimated, there is some complicated linkage between the nuclear family and symbolism, there would seem to be a connection between the extended family and what we call realism in fiction. This is not to suggest that the great realists deal only with the extended family (Zola often does, Dickens usually does not), but rather that they typically show the nuclear family to be implicated in larger familial and social contexts. By contrast, the creators of modern symbolic fiction conjure with an enclosed, imploded nuclear family.

The two modes of fiction, to be sure, rarely exist as pure entities and can combine in a variety of ways; but for our present purpose, I would define realism as the fictional invention, based on close observation, of people whose principal interest for us is the peculiar heft of their individuality, not their capacity to serve as conduits to some higher plane of signification. The generalizing impulse of fictional mimesis is in this case more implicit than explicit, operating mainly in that pondering of divergent human possibility to which we are invited. "Human absorption in faces, deeds, bodies, drew me toward metaphysics," Bellow has his Ijah Brodsky say.

The Jewish family is not exactly "portrayed" in Bellow's fiction, but it provides him a special opening for contemplating through particulars humanity at large. The realist and the symbolist, then, arrive at the threshold of metaphysics by very different routes. But it is there, finally, that they both bring their familial concerns, for what the imaginative writer seeks to uncover in the recesses of family life is not a sociological schema but the secret hints of meaning about what we are and where we are headed.