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Saul Bellow's Gothic Ontology: *The Victim* and *More Die of Heartbreak*

Saul Bellow would seem an unlikely author to consider within a Gothic context. Critics have tended to claim Bellow as a realist, although one who often challenges the parameters of literary realism. Ellen Pifer, for example, writing in 1990 notes of Bellow that 'while he continues to enlist the conventions of the realist novel, the impact or effect of his fiction is to overturn some of realism's time-honored traditions' (Pifer 1990: 163). Pifer's comments come in the conclusion of her reading of *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987), a novel which while producing recognisably realist treatments of love, money, and emotional responsibilities also edges them with references to Edgar Allan Poe, Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), and the Gothic cartoons of Charles Addams. While Helge Normann Nilsen has claimed that Bellow's second novel, *The Victim* (1947) is written 'within a realist mode' (Nilsen 1979: 183), Erin Mercer, among other critics, has noted that the two principal characters in *The Victim*, Asa Leventhal and his tormentor Kirby Allbee (a widowed womanising out of work alcoholic), constitute a double which draws upon a Gothic tradition that includes Poe's *William Wilson* (1839) and Dostoevsky's *The Double* (1846). Mercer concludes that 'Although *The Victim* seems to be a realist novel, Leventhal's sense of being in a doppelganger story renders the familiar conventions of realism uncomfortably strange' (Mercer 2011: 120). For Sukhbir Singh, Allbee 'approaches Leventhal and stalks him like a ghost in a horror story' (Singh 2019: 288) in a version of New York characterised by seemingly random acts of violence, making the city appear 'nothing short of a Gothic castle or a sprawling moral wilderness' (Singh 2019: 287). This article examines this Gothic presence within both *The Victim* and *More Die of Heartbreak*. It argues that the Gothic is employed by Bellow to explore issues about otherness, ethics, and money, and that the two novels develop contrasting

formations of the Gothic which are employed to explore, respectively, ontology and materialism. As we shall see, *The Victim* flirts with a Gothic language of insanity, doubling, and irrationality and attempts to resolve these issues through an ethical engagement with otherness and ontology which is, ultimately, at odds with its Gothic framework. *More Die of Heartbreak*, however, employs the Gothic to provide moments of epiphany which generate a more sustainable, politically coherent, Gothic vision of the limitations of living in a materialist culture. The relationships between actors and agents, and ideas about ethics and hospitality become key to understanding how these contrasting Gothic presences are developed.

The Victim focuses on Asa Leventhal, a Jewish copywriter for a New York trade journal who is, at the start of the novel, reluctantly looking after his brother's wife and family when his young nephew, Mickey, becomes seriously ill with a respiratory ailment. Leventhal's brother is away working and Leventhal's wife is also away, helping her mother to move house. It is during this period of relative isolation that Leventhal is approached one summer's evening in Central Park by an acquaintance, Kirby Allbee, who holds Leventhal responsible for the loss of his job. This was some time in the past when Leventhal was struggling to find employment (his history of near destitution is referred to) and when Allbee, an associate of Harkavy, a friend of Leventhal's, arranged for Leventhal to have an interview with Allbee's boss, Rudiger, about a possible position on his magazine. The interview goes badly, culminating in Leventhal engineering a row with Rudiger which ultimately leads to Allbee getting sacked for, Rudiger presumes, having deliberately orchestrated such an unpleasant confrontation. Allbee claims that Leventhal had behaved badly at the interview in order to ensure that he lost his job in revenge for a drunken anti-Semitic comment made by Allbee at a social gathering, at which Leventhal had been present, some years earlier. Allbee had queried whether the Jewish Harkavy, who was

entertaining them by singing spirituals and ballads, was culturally entitled to sing such specifically American songs. At one level the novel addresses how the Jewish Leventhal is confronted by anti-semitism and the rage that this often induces in him. He is both a victim of anti-semitism, but also of something possibly more biologically troubling when it is revealed that Leventhal's mother apparently died insane and that Leventhal is concerned that her mental and emotional instability might be inherited.

The question that the novel raises is whether Allbee's grievance is legitimate, notwithstanding the anti-Semitic comment. The question of obligation is clearly signalled as a psychological issue that Leventhal needs to confront, as in the alcoholic Allbee he witnesses the type of social destitution and erratic and irresponsible behaviour that he associates with both his own past and, via inherited insanity, their possible return. In Allbee, as critics such as Mercer note, he sees, horrifyingly, an image of himself. In a scene where Allbee tries to gain entrance to Leventhal's flat, Leventhal for all of his dislike of Allbee 'had a strange, close consciousness of Allbee, of his face and body, a feeling of intimate nearness […] the look of recognition Allbee bent on him duplicated the look in his own. He was sure of that' (Bellow 1978: 133). The Gothic context of uncanniness and the return of the repressed with which it is associated is clearly present here. Allbee is seemingly everything that Leventhal has cast off in his quest for social and financial stability, but which could be jeopardised due to the fragile social and economic world that Leventhal perceives himself to be in. This Gothic doubling is used to articulate a wider question which Victoria Aarons sees as central to the novel and which suggests a way out of this Gothic confrontation; the novel 'asks us to consider the hard questions, not only how to live in this world, but how to live in a world among others' (Aarons 2013: 237). First, however, the novel indicates that it is important to gauge whether these encounters are real or not which is

reflected in Leventhal's initial refusal to accept Allbee as anything other than a bad actor who is simulating a grievance because he is a conman seeking to gain an advantage. On first sight, for Leventhal, Allbee is 'An actor if I ever saw one' (Bellow 1978: 27) whose sense of grievance is 'a stunt […] acting' (Bellow 1978: 36). This attempt to gauge authenticity within the context of acting is subsequently developed in Leventhal's visit to a cinema where he watches Boris Karloff in a horror film, which can be identified as *The Climax* (1944), in which Karloff plays a doctor who, in a jealous rage, has killed his opera singing fiancée only to find her replaced by a figure who seems her very double.[1] Leventhal, finding the film jarring retreats to the lavatory where he encounters a Karloff fan:

> 'The stuff they put Karloff in,' he said. 'A man of his ability.'
>
> 'You like him?' said Leventhal.
>
> 'In his line, he's a genius […] Here he's horsing around. It's an inferior vehicle. Even so, he shines. He really understands what a mastermind is, a law unto himself. That's what he's got my admiration for.' (Bellow 1978: 88-9)

The admiration is for the authenticity of Karloff's performance which, for the fan, demonstrates a perceptive understanding of the psychology of the sadistic hypnotist that Karloff plays. The idea that a horror film permits authenticity is later developed in an extended conversation in a café between Leventhal and others about the nature of film acting. The conversation is led by Schlossberg, an acquaintance of Leventhal's, and is prompted by an evaluation of an actress that an agent, Shifcart, who is also part of the conversation, had discovered. The actress stars as a murderer in the fictitious *The Tigress* (which is a possible reference to *Double Indemnity* [1944])

[1] This is a point also noted by Pradnyashailee Bhagwan Sawai, *Location of Culture in Saul Bellow and I.B. Singer* (Partridge 2015: 88).

who kills her husband for the insurance money. Schlossberg is unconvinced by her performance '"A man is dying at her feet and all she can do is pop out her eyes"' (Bellow 1978: 106). The leads to a discussion about performing authentic emotions, so that illusion becomes real, a view that Leventhal challenges but which Schlossberg transforms into a matter of ontology:

> 'Good acting is what is exactly human. And if you say I am a tough critic, you mean I have a high opinion of what is human. This is my whole idea. More than human, can you have any use for life? Less than human, you don't either' (Bellow 1978: 112-3)

It is noteworthy that many of the performances they discuss involve various forms of suffering within which 'Schlossberg declares the authenticity of the heart's knowledge' (Pifer 1990: 43). The point is that you discover yourself through identification with a role associated with another's suffering. By taking Allbee's suffering seriously (as authentic), Leventhal 'achieves a deeper insight into the performance going on before him and, consequently, initiates a change within himself; he develops a moral standpoint' (Assadi 2006: 88). This moral standpoint is due to his capacity to see how things look from Allbee's perspective. That this is initiated within the context of a discussion of reality, authenticity and acting evokes the importance of the uncanny, a key Gothic category which also reflects on how the unreal becomes real and which also, in Freud's terms, evokes a return of the repressed, because 'the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads us back to what is known of old and long familiar' (Freud 1990: 340). In Allbee, Leventhal sees reflected all his fears of failure and abandonment (Allbee's wife's death clearly taps anxieties that Leventhal has about his currently absent wife), which also draws upon Freud's idea of the double as a key figure of the uncanny, a figure who both is and is not you; a self which it is difficult to accept. There is, however, only so far that this specifically Gothic mode of doubling can, metaphysically speaking, go. Allbee is not, ultimately, simply identifiable

as a repressed aspect of Leventhal's fears, fears which Leventhal can lay to rest by engaging with them through Allbee. Allbee resists this type of psychic incorporation because his persistent anti-Semitic remarks (the comment to Harkavy at the party is only the beginning of a litany of such remarks), and his dissolute life are not aspects of a hidden self that Leventhal can accept as belonging to him, despite his impoverished past and some ostensible fears about the effects of his mother's mental health. The Gothic doubling becomes replaced with an alternative focus on the nature of Leventhal's new 'moral standpoint' (Assadi). The introduction of ethics diverts the narrative away from the Gothic by placing an emphasis on ideas of duty, rather than formulations of a Gothic Dionysian condition implied by the drunken and womanising Allbee.

Andrew Hadfield has noted that the ethical questions raised by *The Victim* are diverse, 'At what point can one talk about suffering and be authentic? And […] to whom does one owe responsibility? Mankind, one's family, anyone one has wronged, or, one's people (whoever they are)?' (Hadfield 1999: 43). Leventhal is clearly torn between a range of responsibilities, to his ailing nephew, to his Jewish culture, and to the persistent Allbee (who is both anti-Semitic and has little interest in Leventhal's family problems). The writings of Emmanuel Levinas help to clarify what Leventhal's obligations are, and they also help to explain why the Gothic narrative, centred on overcoming otherness through a form of uncomfortable acknowledgement, falls away in the novel, even while it retains a structural presence as the issue of doubling becomes pushed into the background.

For Levinas, the other awakens within us a requirement that we respond to their suffering. This impulse is inherent, which is demonstrated by how suffering mobilises a pre-existing empathy. Confronting the other thus provides the encounter which reveals the subject to be an ethical human. Or, as Schlossberg would have it, seeing the truth articulated within the

otherness of acting ‘is what is exactly human’. This means that otherness must retain its status; it cannot be dialectically resolved into some unity intended to bring self and other together (a potentially Gothic solution). Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) argues that ‘What is absolutely other not only resists possession, but contests it, and accordingly can consecrate it’ (Levinas 2015: 38). The self therefore needs the other as a precondition for behaving ethically. Ning Dong has advanced a reading of the novel which elides doubling with an approach indebted to Levinas. Dong acknowledges that for Levinas the encounter with the other represents an encounter with the divine because ‘Others have absolute external infinity and transcendence’ (Dong 2014: 152). Dong attempts to reconcile this with the idea of the Gothic double in which ‘Allbee’s face tells him that Allbee is the same as him’ (Dong 2014: 153). The novel, however, suggests that Allbee retains his essential otherness (and so is not ‘the same as him’) in which the face, for Levinas, presents itself as a radically othered form of transcendence. This transcendence invites compassion and peace, so that ‘The epiphany of the face is ethical’ (Levinas 2015: 38), because we know that we cannot dehumanise the other to the point where they can be objectified (and for Levinas, murdered). The other thus brings out the best in us, not the worst, which undermines the ostensibly Gothic framework which structures the hostile encounter between Leventhal and Allbee.

For Levinas one is obliged to be hospitable to the other, who is a type of refugee that one should admit into the private world of the home. Levinas argues that the home is, to a significant degree, representative of the projected needs of the ego which surrounds the subject with the objects of comfort. This is a place characterised by possessions and intimately associated with the owner who possesses the property, whose material authority is challenged by the infinite and transcendent nature of the other who ‘can contest my possession only because he approaches me

not from outside but from above' (Levinas 2015: 171). A higher world is evoked by the other who might, given this context, appear as both a troubling *and* liberating guest. Such issues about the home in *The Victim* superficially evoke the terms of Freud's argument about the uncanny, the 'homely' and the 'unhomely' which for him become elided in moments of uncanniness as the home becomes the place, not of safe domestic comfort, but as the generator of dangerous sexual secrets. It is clear in *The Victim* that Allbee repeatedly wishes to get into Leventhal's home. Allbee first gains entrance to Leventhal's flat without proper invitation:

> To enter without a knock or invitation was an intrusion. Of course the door was open, but it was taking too much for granted all the same not to knock. Leventhal thought there was a trace of delight in the defiance of Allbee's look. 'I *owe* him hospitality, that's how he behaves,' passed through his mind. (Bellow 1978: 60, italics in original).

Allbee is an alien presence in Leventhal's home but the emphasis is placed on the debt owed to hospitality, also acknowledging the other place that Allbee represents when he makes the accusation that '"You've never been in my place"' (Bellow 1978: 61), which merges the literal with the ontological. Places and states of being are, to follow Levinas, elided in such an encounter which identifies an obligation on the host to provide hospitality as a way of engaging with the suffering posed by the other. Leventhal responds to Allbee's comment with '"It's a peculiar statement to begin a visit with", which is countered by Allbee satirically pointing out '"It is the height of politeness to admire the host's house. And the contrast between us should please you very much"' (Bellow 1978: 62), implying a burden that is placed on the guest, which is to know their place as an outsider. Later, Leventhal accepts Allbee into his home and is confronted by the repeated mess he leaves behind. Tensions escalate when Allbee brings home a

woman to spend the night with and Leventhal, away that night, returns and confronts them the following morning.

Allbee superficially appears as a Gothic double who menacingly ghosts Leventhal's life. He insinuates himself into Leventhal's home and defiles it with mess and sex (he sleeps with the woman in Leventhal's marital bed). If there is recognition here it is only because Allbee represents a set of behaviours that Leventhal has left behind and which return as some repressed memories or anticipated fears. However, the issue of otherness is retained in Levinas' sense and this emphasis on obligation negates the Gothic presence of Allbee by turning his vices into virtues because they call into being the obligation to help which Allbee insists upon.

The extent to which the putative Gothic framework, based on doubles and Allbee's haunting of Leventhal, appears in its most complex and insistent form is in the relationship between host and guest. Luke Thurston's theorising of the ghost story is relevant here. He argues:

> that one of the defining scenarios inherited by the ghost story from the Gothic tradition offers a way of thinking about this convergence of the living, and the undead: namely the curious relation between host and guest (with each of those terms an etymological cousin of 'ghost') (Thurston 2010: 3)

For Thurston such ghosts exist beyond legibility and radically pose questions about 'the meaningful structure of discursive notation' (Thurston 2010: 5), and while this has a Derridean edge to it, it also reflects Levinas' position on the inherent alterity of the other, which for Thurston, and indeed Levinas, cannot simply be seen as 'a symptom of some ideological or pathological distortion, but rather […] open onto the question of a fundamental ontology' (Thurston 2020: 5). Ivana Noble and Tim Noble have explored how Levinas' and Derrida's ideas

of hospitality can be placed in dialogue because for Derrida 'radical hospitality is a gift that transforms human nature and deconstructs self-interest' (Noble and Noble 2016: 61). The ghost represents a symbolic guest who transforms the host's idea of how they live within their world. The ghost/guest radically decentres the idea of the ego (and the home as a place projected from the ego's need). All of this leads to freedom because the host has unshackled themselves from their own needs by addressing the needs of the other.

To read *The Victim* through Levinas' ethical philosophy is critically productive as it explains why Leventhal decides to help Allbee, when the latter is such a difficult guest who seems to be unwilling to change his behaviour. The point is that it makes Leventhal a better person, one who cares for those who are ill in his family and who at the end of the novel, caring for his heavily pregnant wife, Mary, during a trip to the theatre, seems to have let go of many of the negative emotional impulses which held him back from fully engaging with the needs of others. In the final chapter it is noted, after he and Allbee have gone their separate ways, that for Leventhal:

> Things went well for him in the next few years. The consciousness of an unremitting daily fight, though still present, was fainter and less troubling. His health was better, and there were changes in his appearance. Something recalcitrant seemed to have left him; he was not exactly affable, but his obstinately unrevealing expression had softened. His face was paler and there were some grey areas in his hair, in spite of which he looked years younger (Bellow 1978: 230).

It is a position that is to a degree challenged when Leventhal sees Allbee, whom he had not seen for several years, at a theatre. Allbee arrives at the theatre with a fictitious well-known actress, Yvonne Crane, and their arrival attracts much attention from the theatre goers queuing outside.

The scene is set for a reworking of the theme of acting which the novel had earlier explored in relation to what it means to be 'human'. Just prior to meeting Allbee again, Leventhal ponders on how social and personal success resembles where you might get to sit in a theatre, because your ticket determines whether you end up in the best or the cheapest seats. This allocation of seats might run counter to where you really should be entitled to sit, so that:

> with his ticket, a man entitled to an average seat might feel too shabby for the dress circle or sit in it defiantly and arrogantly; another entitled to the best in the house, might cry in rage at the usher who led him to the third balcony (Bellow 1978: 231)

Leventhal is uncomfortable with this as it suggests that life is fundamentally unjust, because these tickets are allocated by an accident of birth, 'at the start of life, perhaps even before' (Bellow 1978: 231) and because the analogy suggests that what is important in life is your place in a social hierarchy whereas, for Leventhal, there should be more to life than this.

If Leventhal questions the idea of a theatre of life, Allbee's association with acting also brings back into focus the idea of performance as a type of social acting, rather than as an expression of an ontological reality. Initially Leventhal is struck by Allbee's successful appearance: 'Allbee looked more than moderately prosperous in the dinner jacket and the silk-seamed formal trousers', prompting the observation, '"Yes, he's gone places,"' (235). However:

> On nearer sight, Allbee did not look good. His colour was an unhealthy one. Leventhal had the feeling it was the decay of something which had gone into his appearance of well-being […] A smell of whisky came from him (236).

The dissolute Allbee has not changed much at all and appears to be only superficially successful. He describes Yvonne Crane as '"not the drawing card she used to be"' (236), while he is working in radio advertising. A sense of tired resignation characterises Allbee which contrasts

with the calmer and more emotionally attentive figure that Leventhal has become. Allbee notes at the very end that he is resigned to his lot in life, '"I'm not the type that runs things […] I'm the type that comes to terms with whoever runs things"' which prompts Leventhal to raise the question, '"what's your idea of who runs things?"' (238), as Allbee disappears to find his seat.

Leventhal's final question brings back into focus his understandable anxiety that, yet again, he is confronted by anti-semitism which keeps alive the possibility that he will always be a victim of some sort. The novel is ultimately focused on the ethical transformation of Leventhal and the lack of transformation in Allbee. Leventhal can be regarded as having benefited in trying to help Allbee as it has made him conscious of a world consisting of others and their needs and his metamorphosis is because of, rather than despite, Allbee's inability to develop. His essential otherness is what is required to enable Leventhal to become aware, in Levinas' terms, that the other is a precondition for leading an ethical life and for this to happen the other needs to retain their essential alterity. Allbee's journey is quite different as he seeks to appear socially and economically successful, and this requires a surrender to social pressures that are beyond the ontological dramas confronted by Leventhal, who notes that an impression of 'decay' haunts Allbee precisely because the demands on his 'appearance of well-being' have required the sacrifice of any meaningful inner life. To that extent Allbee can be read as a victim of a materialist society. The point the novel wants to explicitly make is that an encounter with the immoral can lead to an ethical life. How these considerations relate to the Gothic narrative framework, which as we have seen, has encouraged critical readings that see the novel as about demonic doubles, requires further examination.

The proximity of the double suggests a form of psychological claustrophobia and it is noteworthy that Leventhal's life, early in the novel, is characterised by a pervasive, stifling

atmosphere of claustrophobia. New York is described as 'On some nights […] as hot as Bangkok' (9), with Leventhal repeatedly feeling the consequences of an oppressive heat as be negotiates the often packed interiors of subway trains. These literal feelings of uncomfortable confinement reflect the weight of burden he feels at the start in having to make the medical arrangements for his ailing nephew. Leventhal feels trapped by spaces and by unwelcome responsibilities. His evening walk in Central Park offers no respite because 'The park was even more crowded than before, and noisy' (26). It is at this point that Leventhal becomes conscious of 'not merely being looked at but watched' (27), and so we are introduced to Allbee. This sense of being watched is a key theme in the novel and is established in the prefatory quote from De Quincey which notes (in a drug inspired vision) that 'the sea appeared paved with innumerable faces, upturned to the heavens; faces, imploring, wrathful, despairing faces that surged upward by thousands' (7). These are faces associated with suffering but they also suggest that the power of the gaze is allied to a potential loss of agency and contributes to Leventhal's feelings of claustrophobically being hemmed in by the presence of others. It is also an issue which underpins subsequent debates in the novel about scrutinising film performances for their hints of human authenticity. Leventhal, in these terms, goes from an object to be looked at to one who develops his own, increasingly benign, way of looking at the world whereas Allbee ultimately represents a shallow performance of social and economic success.

The relationship between actors and agents draws upon, as noted earlier, explorations of the relationship between the real and the unreal as they appear in the uncanny. These might feel like doubled terms, ones played out in the close psychological tensions between Allbee and Leventhal. This conflict, superficially, can also be related to the issue of seeing and blindness that Freud's essay on the uncanny attributes to a symbolic castration anxiety in E.T.A

Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' (1817), which reflects fears about Oedipal emasculation. To read *The Victim* in this way is to construe it as about a battle between different but linked formations of masculine authority, a reading permitted by the presence of a type of Gothic doubling. The problem is that this approach cannot be squared with a reading which concludes, to follow Levinas, that the other stays in its place, undefeated, unassimilated, and fundamentally unknown. The Gothic falls away at this point as it provides a purely psychological explanation for what the novel wants to establish as a broader ontological issue relating to ethical obligations and the positive transformations which they engender. The Gothic, as it were, provides a false way of seeing as Allbee and Leventhal cannot be coherently contained within an uncanny framework of the double. The Gothic establishes the initial terms under which they meet but is then relinquished in pursuit of an argument about seeing, acting, and ethics. The tone of the novel, as it reflects Leventhal's initial feelings of rage and paranoia evokes a Gothic sensibility, but one which is banished in Leventhal's transformation. The Gothic only goes so far in establishing connections, moods, and forms of identification, although it does identify the dissolute Allbee as a type of louche Gothic villain who represents the appearance of social and economic success and the novel's representation of him suggests a critique of the pursuit of a shallow materialism. The topic of materialism is given more explicit treatment in *More Die of Heartbreak* where, as we shall see, the Gothic is employed to generate a way of reflecting on how the principles of a materialist culture have permeated models of emotional affect.

The issue of seeing and being seen which structured the power dynamics between Allbee and Leventhal is reworked in *More Die of Heartbreak* on a structural and conceptual level which has implications for how the Gothic is employed in the novel as a way of seeing. The novel centres on the professional activities and private life of Benn Crader, an eminent professor of

botany at a midwest American university. His activities are recorded by his nephew, Kenneth Trachtenberg, an assistant professor of Russian literature at the same university. Trachtenberg, who idolises his uncle, is a frequently unreliable narrator, 'a deluded intellectual' (Safer 1993: 204), with a complicated personal life (parent of a young child but not in a relationship with the mother, who finds him too intellectually intense). Trachtenberg looks up to Crader because he regards him as having an original way of looking at the world. Trachtenberg notes the power of his uncle's gaze:

> There were times when you felt the power of *looking* turned on you. The eye sockets resembled a figure of eight lying on its side and this occasionally had the effect of turning you topsy-turvy and put strange thoughts into your head – like: This is the faculty of seeing; of seeing *itself*; what eyes are actually for (Bellow 1987: 14, italics in original).

The figure of eight on its side conjures the symbol for infinity, which suggests the profound range of this gaze. For Trachtenberg this explains why Crader is such an original scientist, but it is also intended to convey the superior way in which he sees through the superficial appearance of material reality (both scientifically and economically conceived). This capacity to see beyond a scientifically measurable world is reflected in a comment that Crader had made to the media about the dangers of radiation (after Three Mile Island and Chernobyl). His response that '"It's terribly serious, of course, but I think more people die of heartbreak"' (p. 87) relates to Crader's 'perception of two invisible yet deadly forces' (Pifer 1990: 156), the measurable danger of radiation poisoning and the scientifically immeasurable 'lethal condition of "heartbreak"' (Pifer 1990: 156). This penetrating visionary gaze stands in contrast to how Leventhal was looked at by Allbee in *The Victim* where there are tensions between actors and agents which in the later novel are replaced by a focus on how literature, cartoons, and film provide Crader with emotional

insights that, for him, constitute moments of epiphany. Revealingly these texts, and other media forms, are all associated with the Gothic.

It is notable how the novel addresses idolatry as a form of misseeing. At one level it is clear that Trachtenberg's idolatry of Crader leads him to overlook the many instances where his behaviour is often erratic, as when he repeatedly finds himself in emotionally challenging situations with women, which he escapes from by accepting invitations to speak in parts of the world far from America. For Trachtenberg, the problem is that Crader idolizes women because he tends to see them as like Poe's heroines, who are both beautiful and in need of protection. Crader marries the wealthy heiress and Gothically named Matilda, because 'Uncle was perfectly willing to see her as she preferred to be seen', which is like the figure of Helen from Poe's poem 'To Helen' (1831). The opening stanza of Poe's poem reads:

> Helen, thy beauty is to me
> Like those Nicéan barks of yore,
> That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
> The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
> To his own native shore. (ll. 1-5)

The poem reflects the ambition of the well-travelled and restless Crader to settle down, or as Trachtenberg notes 'to go back to that damn Poe poem, that he was a weary, way-worn wanderer' (54), looking for a home. The call to a return to the home of one's 'native shore', is later played out in relation to a rundown but once lavish apartment that Matilda owns in the Roanoke, a type of grand stately home. The distance between the idolatry and the reality is what drives Crader's disappointment with his marriage, when he is encouraged by Matilda and her father to sue his uncle, who morally and possibly legally owes Crader money after selling off

cheaply some property owned by Crader's deceased parents. Their property was sold as part of the will's deposition, but the uncle benefited from the sale because it enabled a property development that he had an economic interest in. The money would be used to renovate the apartment and enable Matilda to hold soirées appropriate to her social position.

The concluding stanza of Poe's poem focuses on Psyche as the wanderer's guide:

Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche

How statue-like I see thee stand,

The agate lamp within thy hand!

Ah, Psyche, from the regions which

Are Holy-Land! (ll. 11-15)

Trachtenberg reflects on some hints from Crader that while Matilda might be Psyche, she was not Eros, and also concludes that 'Poe's Psyche was all marble, and represented Ideal Beauty. The Poe lady was there to be contemplated, not embraced – Beauty in contemplation' (142-3). However, for Crader this contemplation becomes increasingly freighted with a type of vampiric menace when at breakfast 'Before she spoke, and as her mouth was opening, Crader noticed how sharp her teeth were' (143). Daniel Fuchs has identified Matilda as 'a vampire seductress and manipulator, who lines her husband up for sacrifice to Mammon' (Fuchs 1991:166), whereas Elaine B. Safer sees her 'as an ogre or some other phantasmagoric creature' (Safer 1993: 213). What Matilda Gothically symbolizes requires Crader to see her in a certain way.

The idea of Matilda as a fallen idol is framed within the context of what objects mean within a material culture obsessed with money and status. Crader becomes conscious that the reasons why Matilda married him were due to his social standing as an eminent professor and because of a potentially lucrative lawsuit that he could bring against his uncle which could help

refurbish the Roanoke apartment. Their marriage unites them in a form of unhappiness which for Crader is captured by a Charles Addams cartoon of Morticia, dressed as a witch, sitting on a cemetery bench with her husband. The cartoon is captioned:

> "Are you unhappy, darling?"
>
> "Oh yes, *yes!* Completely." (10, italics in original)

Trachtenberg notes that Crader has become obsessed by the cartoon 'and wanted to discuss it elaborately' (9), because, reading beyond the humour, he sees that the cartoon '"goes to the fundamentals"' (10). For Crader, if love makes people unhappy '"why does everybody persist? If love cuts them up so much, and you see the ravages everywhere, why not be sensible and sign off early?"' (11). In *The Victim* Leventhal becomes defined by the emotional commitments that he makes to his extended family and to his wife. There, love becomes a means of engagement, whereas in *More Die of Heartbreak* it is the cause of misery and alienation. As we have seen, *The Victim* sets up and then moves beyond a Gothic framework, whereas *More Die of Heartbreak* suggests, via Crader, that it is a form which addresses 'the fundamentals'. Crader also distinguishes between Gothic forms, and by doing so brings back into focus a narrative about the pernicious influence of a material culture, when he asserts that Addams should be seen as a cultural critic, whereas the films of Hitchcock, especially *Psycho*, should be seen as cultural product. For Crader, Addams '"isn't manipulating anybody. Unlike Alfred Hitchcock […] From Hitchcock you get a product. Addams works from his own troubled mind"' (10).

What the Gothic makes visible in *More Die of Heartbreak* is the material world of money and objects that Crader seemingly has little interest in, in part because he implicitly sees the insidious way in which the attitudes of a money based economy have come to inhabit cultural frameworks which would once have generated feelings of emotional fulfillment. Love has

become corrupted because it too has been influenced by this money principle. Trachtenberg regards this influence as a type of propaganda familiar from Stalin's Russia and the Nazi regime, and his conclusion is just as applicable to the capitalism of late twentieth century America:

> Canny habits of mind are widely distributed. Outer forces inject themselves into us, penetrating the very nervous system. When the individual discovers them inside his own head, their appearance seems to him entirely natural and what these forces say he can truly understand […] Voices, live or taped, approach from the air and speak to you, or for you. (22)

It is a view of cultural transmission which has links to Bellow's views on Hitchcock.

Bellow's antipathy to Hitchcock initially appeared in an essay on 'The Mass-Produced Insight' (1963), which also functions as a critique of a psychological didacticism that he regarded as fostered by the horror film which, in America, during the 1960s replaced the moral clarity of the Western with 'a popularized Freudianism' seemingly more appropriate to 'this present age of upheaval and disarray' (Bellow 2016: 141). He notes that, using a language of indoctrination similar to that employed by Trachtenberg in his account of propaganda, that 'The public have been properly trained' to read the signs that will lead to 'psychological illumination' (142), before identifying *Psycho* as an egregious example of Grand Guignol masquerading as psychological insight. The problem that Crader wrestles with is that *Psycho*, in one telling scene, does appear to produce an insight into Matilda.

Before marriage a bored Matilda suggests that they go to the cinema and see *Psycho*, a film that Crader had already seen and detested for the reasons noted above in Bellow's essay. For Crader the film did not improve on a second viewing, and he tells Trachtenberg, '"It was a phony. I hated it. I hate all that excitement without a focus. Nothing but conditioned reflexes

they've trained you into"' (Bellow 1987: 232). However, the scene where Norman Bates dressed as his mother, waiting to attack the hapless detective making his way up the stairs, evokes for Crader the figure of Matilda, 'The person seen from the rear was Matilda. This was conclusive as it was quick' (233). Trachtenberg notes that what horrified Crader was:

> that a bad movie should set him off like this – cynical Hitchcock camp laced with sexual inversion – that the message of his heart should be released by this box-office crap. What did this tell a fellow about his heart – that it was activated by trash? (234)

Crader's horror that his emotional reflexes have become culturally conditioned does not override the fact that the film has given him an insight into Matilda. Specifically the horror of the scene evokes the idea of the violated home which we had witnessed in *The Victim*. Leventhal is conscious that Allbee makes attempts to enter his flat and ultimately he takes him in under an obligation of hospitality. The old-fashioned home of the Bates is a more demonstrably Gothic space which is dementedly protected by Norman Bates in the guise of his mother. Hospitality is not an option - even the motel becomes a murder scene. Matilda's fixation on renovating the Roanoke identifies materialism as the essential horror that Crader wants to work against. It is noted, for example, that his old family home had been pulled down in a real estate deal and replaced by a building which includes 'the Burke and Hare National Bank' (200). Later, Trachtenberg argues that Poe's romantic imagination struggled against emerging discourses of rationality and by 'capitalist development – let's not leave out capitalism' (209). The problem that Crader confronts is that horror films '"are phony, but my heart beats faster nevertheless"' (260), as feelings of emotional anxiety become generated by what he had earlier dismissed as 'product'.

What is horrifying for Crader is the encroachment of the material world on the psyche (Poe's Psyche perhaps) which construes love as a social contract framed by material interests that make the world both devoid of genuine affect and emotionally disorientating to idealist thinkers such as Crader. In this instance the Gothic is both a sign of cultural decline and an insight into that decline: both symptom and diagnosis. It leaves Crader to return to his restless life when after marriage he sends Matilda to Brazil on their honeymoon, while he disappears on a research trip to the North Pole. In the end there is no home for him to return to because hospitality has become meaningless, rather than fulfilling, as it does in *The Victim*, a positive ontological obligation. Leventhal ultimately finds a way of living in the world, finds a place he can belong to and even Allbee's closing, quite possibly anti-Semitic comment, suggests that he also knows his place in the world. *More Die of Heartbreak* develops the Gothic as a way of establishing the reasons for why the world's materialist accommodations look so threatening. The loss of love is not replaced by the transcendence of the Gothic that we witnessed in *The Victim*, but identifies the causes of the horror of living in a materialist culture.

Bellow's use of the Gothic in both novels is indicative of how he addresses issues about ontology, social contracts, and psychological conditions, which suggest, in the later novel, the horror of trying to live in a world largely devoid of genuine emotional affect. To a degree the shallow materialism associated with Allbee in *The Victim* is given explicit Gothic treatment in *More Die of Heartbreak*. For all of Bellow's dismissal of popular horror as peddling little more than cod psychology, ultimately *Psycho* in *More Die of Heartbreak* provides an insight into a problem of materialism which it both reflects and for which it has no obvious solution. Crader, who becomes somewhat addicted to horror films and thrillers says to Trachtenberg that the problem is '"Nothing makes sense, except your heart racing and you get a kind of prickly heat

under the arms and even between your toes. What's that for?"' (261), because in the end there is no solution, only a pervasive Gothic ambience which is manifested in materially corrupted models of love. Ultimately, the emotional ties which bind in *The Victim* are materialistically undone in *More Die of Heartbreak*.

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