A baby at birth is usually disappointing-looking to a parent who hasn’t seen one before. His skin is coated with wax, which, if left on, will be absorbed slowly and will lessen the chance of rashes. His skin underneath is apt to be very red. His face tends to be puffy and lumpy, and there may be black-and-blue marks . . . . The head is misshapen . . . low in the forehead, elongated at the back, and quite lopsided. Occasionally there may be, in addition, a hematoma, a localized hemorrhage under the scalp that sticks out as a distinct bump and takes weeks to go away. A couple of days after birth there may be a touch of jaundice, which is visible for about a week . . . . The baby’s body is covered all over with fuzzy hair . . . . For a couple of weeks afterward there is apt to be a dry scaling of the skin, which is also shed. Some babies have black hair on the scalp at first, which may come far down on the forehead . . . .

—Dr. Spock: Baby and Child Care

What I mean by Female Gothic is easily defined: the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic. But what I mean—or anyone else means—by “the Gothic” is not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear. In Gothic writings fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one definite auctorial intent: to scare. Not, that is, to reach down into the depths of the soul and purge it with pity and terror (as we say tragedy does), but to get to the body itself, its glands, muscles, epidermis, and circulatory system, quickly arousing and quickly allaying the physiological reactions to fear.

Certainly the earliest tributes to the power of Gothic writers tended to
emphasize the physiological. Jane Austen has Henry Tilney, in *Northanger Abbey*, say that he could not put down Mrs. Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*: "I remember finishing it in two days—my hair standing on end the whole time." According to Hazlitt, Ann Radcliffe had mastered "the art of freezing the blood": "harrowing up the soul with imaginary horrors, and making the flesh creep and the nerves thrill." And Mary Shelley said she intended *Frankenstein* to be the kind of ghost story that would "curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart." Why such claims? Presumably because readers enjoyed these sensations. For example, in a work the Shelleys knew well, Joanna Baillie's verse play on the theme of addiction to artificial fear, the heroine prevails upon a handmaiden, against the best advice, to tell a horror story:

\[
\text{... Tell it, I pray thee.} \\
\text{And let me cow'ring stand, and be my touch} \\
\text{The valley's ice: there is a pleasure in it.} \\
\text{Yea, when the cold blood shoots through every vein;} \\
\text{When every pore upon my shrunken skin} \\
\text{A knotted knoll becomes, and to mine ears} \\
\text{Strange inward sounds awake, and to mine eyes} \\
\text{Rush stranger tears, there is a joy in fear.} \\
\text{Orra: A Tragedy (1812)}
\]

At the time when literary Gothic was born, religious fears were on the wane, giving way to that vague paranoia of the modern spirit for which Gothic mechanisms seem to have provided welcome therapy. Walter Scott compared reading Mrs. Radcliffe to taking drugs, dangerous when habitual "out of most blessed power in those moments of pain and of languor, when the whole head is sore, and the whole heart sick. If those who rail indiscriminately at this species of composition, were to consider the quantity of actual pleasure which it produces, and the much greater proportion of real sorrow and distress which it alleviates, their philanthropy ought to moderate their critical pride, or religious intolerance." A grateful public rewarded Mrs. Radcliffe by making her the most popular and best-paid English novelist of the eighteenth century. Her preeminence among the "Terrorists," as they were called, was hardly challenged in her own day, and modern readers of *Udolpho* and *The Italian* continue to hail her as mistress of the pure Gothic form.

As early as the 1790s, Ann Radcliffe firmly set the Gothic in one of the ways it would go ever after: a novel in which the central figure is a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine. But what are we to make of the next major turning of the Gothic tradition that a woman brought about, a generation later? Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in 1818, made the Gothic novel over into what today we call science fiction. *Frankenstein* brought a new sophistication to literary terror, and it
did so without a heroine, without even an important female victim. Paradoxically, however, no other Gothic work by a woman writer, perhaps no literary work of any kind by a woman, better repays examination in the light of the sex of its author. For Frankenstein is a birth myth, and one that was lodged in the novelist's imagination, I am convinced, by the fact that she was herself a mother.

Much in Mary Shelley's life was remarkable. She was the daughter of a brilliant mother (Mary Wollstonecraft) and father (William Godwin). She was the mistress and then wife of the poet Shelley. She read widely in five languages, including Latin and Greek. She had easy access to the writings and conversation of some of the most original minds of her age. But nothing so sets her apart from the generality of writers of her own time, and before, and for long afterward, than her early and chaotic experience, at the very time she became an author, with motherhood. Pregnant at sixteen, and almost constantly pregnant throughout the following five years; yet not a secure mother, for she lost most of her babies soon after they were born; and not a lawful mother, for she was not married—not at least when, at the age of eighteen, Mary Godwin began to write Frankenstein. So are monsters born.

What in fact has the experience of giving birth to do with women's literature? In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries relatively few important women writers bore children; most of them, in England and America, were spinsters and virgins. With the coming of Naturalism late in the century, and the lifting of the Victorian taboo against writing about physical sexuality (including pregnancy and labor), the subject of birth was first brought to literature in realistic form by the male novelists, from Tolstoy and Zola to William Carlos Williams. Tolstoy was the father of thirteen babies born at home; Williams, as well as a poet and a Naturalist, was a small-town doctor with hundreds of deliveries to his professional credit, and thus well equipped to write the remarkable account of a birth that opens The White Mule. For knowledge of the sort that makes half a dozen pages of obstetrical detail, they had the advantage over woman writers until relatively recent times.*

* Two very popular women novelists (and Nobel laureates), Pearl Buck and Sigrid Undset, were probably responsible for establishing pregnancy, labor, and breast feeding as themes belonging to twentieth-century women's literature. The miscarriage is a powerful new theme in the hands of Jean Rhys and Sylvia Plath, and the unwed mother's labor inspires a spirited obstetrical chapter ("Don't Have a Baby Till You Read This") in the memoir of the young poet Nikki Giovanni, who has a fine sense of the incongruity of the experience. "'A BABY? BUT I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT HAVING A BABY! I'VE NEVER HAD A BABY BEFORE.' And I started crying and crying and crying. What if I messed up? You were probably counting on me to do the right thing and what did I know? I was an intellectual. I thought things through. I didn't know shit about action."

But Colette's note of skepticism is most worth recalling, because she was the first
Mary Shelley was a unique case, in literature as in life. She brought birth to fiction not as realism but as Gothic fantasy, and thus contributed to Romanticism a myth of genuine originality: the mad scientist who locks himself in his laboratory and secretly, guiltily works at creating human life, only to find that he has made a monster.

It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet... The rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs... His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing... but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same color as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.

That is very good horror, but what follows is more horrid still: Frankenstein, the scientist, runs away and abandons the newborn monster, who is and remains nameless. Here, I think, is where Mary Shelley's book is most interesting, most powerful, and most feminine: in the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences. Most of the novel, roughly two of its three volumes, can be said to deal with the retribution visited upon monster and creator for deficient infant care. Frankenstein seems to be distinctly a woman's mythmaking on the subject of birth precisely because its emphasis is not upon what precedes birth, not upon birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of the afterbirth.

Fear and guilt, depression and anxiety are commonplace reactions to the birth of a baby, and well within the normal range of experience. But more deeply rooted in our cultural mythology, and certainly in our literature, are the happy maternal reactions: the ecstasy, the sense of fulfillment, and the rush of nourishing love which sweep over the new mother when she first holds her baby in her arms. Thackeray's treatment of the birth of a baby in Vanity Fair is the classic of this genre: gentle Amelia is pregnant when her adored young husband dies on the field of Waterloo, a tragedy which drives the young woman into a state of comatose grief until the blessed

to pick and choose for literature among all the ramifications of female sexuality. In La Maison de Claudine she tells of fainting away in horror when, as a young girl, she first came upon a gruesome birth scene in Zola. "Oh, it's not such a terrible thing, the birth of a child," she has her mother comment. "... The proof that all women forget it is that it's never anybody but men—and what business was it of his, that Zola?—who make stories about it."
moment when her baby is born. "Heaven had sent her consolation," writes Thackeray. "A day came—of almost terrified delight and wonder—when the poor widowed girl pressed a child upon her breast... a little boy, as beautiful as a cherub... . . . Love, and hope, and prayer woke again in her bosom... . . . She was safe."

Thackeray was here recording a reality, as well as expressing a sentiment. But he himself was under no illusion that happiness was the only possible maternal reaction to giving birth, for his own wife had become depressed and hostile after their first baby was born, and suicidal after the last; at the time of Vanity Fair, Thackeray had already had to place her in a sanitarium, and he was raising their two little girls himself. So, in Vanity Fair, he gives us not only Amelia as a mother, but also Becky Sharp. Becky's cold disdain toward her infant son, her hostility and selfishness as a mother, are perhaps a legacy of Thackeray's experience; they are among the finest things in the novel.

From what we know about the strange young woman who wrote Frankenstein, Mary Shelley was in this respect nothing like Becky Sharp. She rejoiced at becoming a mother and loved and cherished her babies as long as they lived. But her journal, which has set the tone of most of the discussion of the genesis of Frankenstein, is a chilly and laconic document in which the overwhelming emphasis is not on her maternity but on the extraordinary reading program she put herself through at Shelley's side. Mary Shelley is said—and rightly—to have absorbed into Frankenstein the ideas about education, society, and morality held by her father and her mother. She is shown to have been influenced directly by Shelley's genius, and by her reading of Coleridge and Wordsworth and the Gothic novelists. She learned from Sir Humphry Davy's book on chemistry and Erasmus Darwin on biology. In Switzerland, the summer she began Frankenstein, she sat by while Shelley, Byron, and Polidori discussed the new sciences of mesmerism, electricity, and galvanism, which promised to unlock the riddle of life, and planned to write ghost stories.

Mary Shelley herself was the first to point to her fortuitous immersion in the literary and scientific revolutions of her day as the source of Frankenstein. Her extreme youth, as well as her sex, have contributed to the generally held opinion that she was not so much an author in her own right as a transparent medium through which passed the ideas of those around her. "All Mrs. Shelley did," writes Mario Praz, "was to provide a passive reflection of some of the wild fantasies which were living in the air about her."

Passive reflections, however, do not produce original works of literature, and Frankenstein, if not a great novel, was unquestionably an original one. The major Romantic and minor Gothic tradition to which it should have belonged was to the literature of the overreacher: the super-
man who breaks through normal human limitations to defy the rules of society and infringes upon the realm of God. In the Faust story, hypertrophy of the individual will is symbolized by a pact with the devil. Byron’s and Balzac’s heroes; the rampaging monks of Mat Lewis and E. T. A. Hoffmann; the Wandering Jew and Melmoth the wanderer; the chained and unchained Prometheus: all are overreachers, all are punished by their own excesses—by a surfeit of sensation, of experience, of knowledge and, most typically, by the doom of eternal life.

But Mary Shelley’s overreacher is different. Frankenstein’s exploration of the forbidden boundaries of human science does not cause the prolongation and extension of his own life, but the creation of a new one. He defies mortality not by living forever, but by giving birth. That this original twist to an old myth should have been the work of a young woman who was also a young mother seems to me, after all, not a very surprising answer to the question that, according to Mary Shelley herself, was asked from the start: “How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea?”

Birth is a hideous thing in Frankenstein, even before there is a monster. For Frankenstein’s procedure, once he has determined to create new life, is to frequent the vaults and charnel houses and study the human corpse in all its loathsome stages of decay and decomposition. “To examine the causes of life,” he says, “we must first have recourse to death.” His purpose is to “bestow animation upon lifeless matter,” so that he might “in the process of time renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption.” Frankenstein collects bones and other human parts from the slaughterhouse and the dissecting room, and through long months of feverish and guilty activity sticks them together in a frame of gigantic size in what he calls “my workshop of filthy creation.”

It is in her journal and her letters that Mary Shelley reveals the workshop of her own creation, where she pieced together the materials for a new species of romantic mythology. They record a horror story of maternity of the kind that literary biography does not provide again until Sylvia Plath.

As far as I can figure out, she was pregnant, barely pregnant but aware of the fact, when at the age of sixteen she ran off with Shelley in July 1814. Also pregnant at the same time was Shelley’s legal wife Harriet, who gave birth in November “to a son and possible heir,” as Mary noted in her journal. In February 1815 Mary gave birth to a daughter, illegitimate, premature, and sickly. There is nothing in the journal about domestic help or a nurse in attendance. Mary notes that she breast-fed the baby; that Fanny, her half sister, came to call; that Claire Clairmont, her stepsister, who had run off with Mary, kept Shelley amused. Bonaparte invaded France, the journal tells us, and Mary took up her incessant reading.
program: this time, Mme de Staël's *Corinne*. The baby died in March. "Find my baby dead," Mary wrote. "A miserable day."

In April 1815 she was pregnant again, about eight weeks after the birth of her first child. In January 1816 she gave birth to a son: more breastfeeding, more reading. In March, Claire Clairmont sought out Lord Byron and managed to get herself pregnant by him within a couple of weeks. This pregnancy would be a subject of embarrassment and strain to Mary and Shelley, and it immediately changed their lives, for Byron left England in April, and Claire, Shelley, Mary, and her infant pursued him to Switzerland in May. There is nothing yet in Mary's journal about a servant, but a good deal about mule travel in the mountains. In June they all settled near Byron on the shores of Lake Geneva.

In June 1816, also, Mary began *Frankenstein*. And during the year of its writing, the following events ran their swift and sinister course: in October Fanny Imlay, Mary's half sister, committed suicide after discovering that she was not Godwin's daughter but Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter by her American lover. (The suicide was not only a tragedy but an embarrassment to all. Godwin refused even to claim Fanny's body, which was thrown nameless into a pauper's grave.) In early December Mary was pregnant again, as she seems to have sensed almost the day it happened. (See her letter to Shelley of December 5, in which she also announced completion of Chapter 4 of her novel.) In mid-December Harriet Shelley drowned herself in the Serpentine; she was pregnant by someone other than Shelley. In late December Mary married Shelley. In January 1817 Mary wrote Byron that Claire had borne him a daughter. In May she finished *Frankenstein*, published the following year.

Death and birth were thus as hideously intermixed in the life of Mary Shelley as in Frankenstein's "workshop of filthy creation." Who can read without shuddering, and without remembering her myth of the birth of a nameless monster, Mary's journal entry of March 19, 1815, which records the trauma of her loss, when she was seventeen, of her first baby, the little girl who did not live long enough to be given a name. "Dream that my little baby came to life again," Mary wrote; "that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived. Awake and find no baby. I think about the little thing all day. Not in good spirits."

(="I thought, that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption." )

So little use has been made of this material by writers about *Frankenstein* that it may be worth emphasizing how important, because how unusual, was Mary Shelley's experience as a young woman writer. Though the death of one of their babies played a decisive role in the literary careers of both Harriet Beecher Stowe and Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, two of the rare Victorian women writers who were also mothers, both were
about twice Mary Shelley's age when their babies died; and both were re-
spectably settled middle-class women, wives of ministers. The harum-
scarum circumstances surrounding her maternity have no parallel until our
time, which in its naïve cerebrations upon family life (and in much else, ex-
cept genius) resembles the Shelley era. The young women novelists and
poets of today who are finding in the trauma of inexperienced and unas-
sisted motherhood a mine of troubled fantasy and black humor are on the
lookout for Gothic predecessors, if the revival of *The Yellow Wallpaper—*
Charlotte Perkins Gilman's macabre post-partum fantasy—is any indica-
tion. The newborn returns again to literature as monster.

At six months he grew big as six years
... One day he swallowed
Her whole right breast...
... both died,
She inside him, curled like an embryo.
—Cynthia Macdonald: "The Insatiable Baby"

Behind them all stands the original fantasy and the exceptional case of
Mary Shelley. She hurtled into teen-age motherhood without any of the
financial or social or familial supports that made bearing and rearing
children a relaxed experience for the normal middle-class woman of her
day (as Jane Austen, for example, described her). She was an unwed
mother, responsible for breaking up a marriage of a young woman just as
much a mother as she. The father whom she adored broke furiously with
her when she eloped; and Mary Wollstonecraft, the mother whose memory
she revered, and whose books she was rereading throughout her teen-age
years, had died in childbirth—died giving birth to Mary herself.

Surely no outside influence need be sought to explain Mary Shelley's
fantasy of the newborn as at once monstrous agent of destruction and pite-
ous victim of parental abandonment. "I, the miserable and the aban-
doned," cries the monster at the end of *Frankenstein*, "I am an
abortion to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on... I have murdered
the lovely and the helpless... I have devoted my creator to misery; I have
pursued him even to that irremediable ruin."

In the century and a half since its publication, *Frankenstein* has
spawned innumerable interpretations among the critics, and among the
novelists, playwrights, and filmmakers who have felt its influence. The
idea, though not the name, of the robot originated with Mary Shelley's
novel, and her title character became a byword for the dangers of scientific
knowledge. But the work has also been read as an existential fable; as a
commentary on the cleavage between reason and feeling, in both philo-
sophical thought and educational theory; as a parable of the excesses of
idealism and genius; as a dramatization of the divided self; as an attack on
the stultifying force of social convention, including race prejudice, for Stephen Crane's *The Monster* must surely be counted among the most powerful descendants of *Frankenstein*.

The versatility of Mary Shelley's myth is due to the brilliance of her mind and the range of her learning, as well as to the influence of the circle in which she moved as a young writer. But *Frankenstein* was most original in its dramatization of dangerous oppositions through the struggle of a creator with monstrous creation. The sources of this Gothic conception, which still has power to "curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart," were surely the anxieties of a woman who, as daughter, mistress, and mother, was a bearer of death.

Robert Kiely's suggestive study of *The Romantic Novel in England* includes one of the rare serious discussions of *Frankenstein* as a woman's work. For Professor Kiely does more than interpret; he also responds, as one must in reading *Frankenstein*, to what he calls the "mundane side to this fantastic tale."

In making her hero the creator of a monster, she does not necessarily mock idealistic ambition, but in making that monster a poor grotesque patchwork, a physical mess of seams and wrinkles, she introduces a consideration of the material universe which challenges and undermines the purity of idealism. In short, the sheer concreteness of the ugly thing which Frankenstein has created often makes his ambitions and his character—however sympathetically described—seem ridiculous and even insane. The arguments on behalf of idealism and unworldly genius are seriously presented, but the controlling perspective is that of an earthbound woman.

The "mundane side" to *Frankenstein* is one of its most fertile and original aspects. Mary Shelley comes honestly to grips with the dilemma of a newly created human being, a giant adult male in shape, who must swiftly recapitulate, and without the assistance of his terrified parent, the infantile and adolescent stages of human development. She even faces squarely the monster's sexual needs, for the denouement of the story hangs on his demand that Frankenstein create a female monster partner, and Frankenstein's refusal to do so.

But more than mundane is Mary Shelley's concern with the emotions surrounding the parent-child and child-parent relationship. Here her intention to underline the birth myth in *Frankenstein* becomes most evident, quite apart from biographical evidence about its author. She provides an unusual thickening of the background of the tale with familial fact and fantasy, from the very opening of the story in the letters a brother addresses to his sister of whom he is excessively fond, because they are both orphans. There is Frankenstein's relationship to his doting parents,
and his semi-incestuous love for an abandoned, orphan girl brought up as his sister. There is the first of the monster's murder victims, Frankenstein's infant brother (precisely drawn, even to his name, after Mary Shelley's baby); and the innocent young girl wrongly executed for the infant's murder, who is also a victim of what Mary Shelley calls that "strange perversity," a mother's hatred. (Justine accepts guilt with docility: "I almost began to think that I was the monster that my confessor said I was. . . .") The material in Frankenstein about the abnormal, or monstrous, manifestations of the child-parent tie justifies, as much as does its famous monster, Mary Shelley's reference to the novel as "my hideous progeny."

What Mary Shelley actually did in Frankenstein was to transform the standard Romantic matter of incest, infanticide, and patricide into a phantasmagoria of the nursery. Nothing quite like it was done in English literature until that Victorian novel by a woman which we also place uneasily in the Gothic tradition: Wuthering Heights.

The first readers of Wuthering Heights were struck as we are still today by the perverse aspects of the novel. "A disagreeable story" about "painful and exceptional subjects," said The Athenaeum, "... dwelling upon those physical acts of cruelty—the contemplation of which true taste rejects." Much as that assessment misses—the strength, the solidity, the moral wisdom of the novel—it still sums up a side of Wuthering Heights that cannot be argued away. Emily Brontë's acceptance of the cruel as a normal, almost an invigorating component of human life sets her novel apart, from its opening pages to its close. Her first narrator, Lockwood, the foppish London visitor to Wuthering Heights who establishes our distance from the central Brontë world, falls asleep at the Heights at the start of the novel and dreams that Catherine—the dead Cathy, Heathcliff's love—is a child ghost outside the casement window, begging to be let in. "Terror made me cruel," says Lockwood; "and, finding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes. . . ."

"Terror made me cruel . . ." Is Emily Brontë a "Terrorist," as the first Gothic novelists were called? Is Wuthering Heights, which Robert Kiely places at the end of a study largely devoted to Gothic novels as "the masterpiece of English romantic fiction," part of the Gothic tradition? Kiely bypasses the question by his use of the term romantic, but, like virtually every other critic of Emily Brontë's work, he is struck by its successful and almost seamless stitching of mystical eloquence, metaphysical profundity, shrewd realism, and moral dignity to the faded paraphernalia of the
Gothic mode. For there are the graveyard lusts and wandering ghosts; the
mysterious founding and tyrannical father; the family doom, repeated
generation after generation; the revenge motif; and the aroma of incest
that persists from the introduction of the bastard Heathcliff to the family at
the Heights, and to the bed he shares with the girl-child Catherine, his
playmate, his sister, his torment, his victim, his beloved, but never his wife.

The Gothic vice of sadism is an extreme and pervasive feature of
Wuthering Heights, though handled by Emily Brontë with a sobriety that
Jacques Blondel aptly describes as “cette dignité dans la violence.” Never-
theless, sadism of a particularly horrid kind, child torture and child
murder, fills the novel with what Wade Thompson has called “a multitude
of insistent variations on the ghastly theme of infanticide.”

In 1847 The Athenæum summed up all this material as “the eccen-
tricities of ‘woman’s fantasy.’ ” We are more familiar with Victorian clichés
about women being by nature (and women writers, therefore, being by
right) gentle, pious, conservative, domestic, loving, and serene. That sort
of comment was received wisdom among the Victorians and is still, rather
thoughtlessly, repeated in our own day. But to confront the long engage-
ment of women writers with the Gothic tradition is to be reminded that its
eccentricities have been thought of, from Mrs. Radcliffe’s time to our own,
as indigenous to “woman’s fantasy.” In Wuthering Heights those female
“eccentricities” must be called by a stronger name: perversities.

Thinking about Wuthering Heights as part of a literary women’s tradi-
tion may open up a new approach to a faded classic of Victorian poetry by
a woman who was in fact, as Emily Bronte certainly was not, gentle, pious,
and conservative: Christina Rossetti’s Goblin Market. In 1859, twelve
years after the Brontë novel, Rossetti wrote her own contribution to the lit-
erature of the monster in the form of a narrative poem. Published in 1862,
Goblin Market quickly became one of the most familiar and best-loved
Victorian poems, and was given to little children to read in the days when
children had stronger stomachs than they do today. Perhaps the last gener-
ation to grow up with Goblin Market was that of Willa Cather, who pub-
lished her first book of short stories a decade after Rossetti’s death, called
it The Troll Garden, and gave it an epigraph from Goblin Market:

We must not look at Goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits;
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots?

The roots of Christina Rossetti’s goblins are themselves mysterious. In
its modest way, her fable was as original a creation as Frankenstein; that
is, as a maker of monsters Rossetti swerved as sharply from her sources in
literary and folk materials as did Mary Shelley. There seems little doubt
that particularly female experiences, in both cases, contributed to the disturbing eccentricity of the tale.

Two little girls, two sisters Laura and Lizzie, seem to be living alone together as *Goblin Market* opens, and running their own household without parents. Their relationship is one of spiritual and physical affection:

Golden head by golden head,  
Like two pigeons in one nest  
Folded in each other's wings,  
They lay down in their curtained bed . . .  
Cheek to cheek and breast to breast  
Locked together in one nest.

Into their neighborhood come goblin men known to all the maids round about as dangerous tempters: they sell fruit which intoxicates and then destroys. One feast upon the goblin fruit and girls turn prematurely gray, sicken, fade, and die young. In verses that seem unquestionably to associate goblin fruit with forbidden sexual experience, Rossetti cites the case of one goblin victim,

Jeanie in her grave,  
Who should have been a bride;  
But who for joys brides hope to have  
Fell sick and died . . .

The goblins themselves are monstrosities of a special kind that Emily Brontë, too, worked with in *Wuthering Heights*. Like Heathcliff, who is set off from the norm by animal metaphors ("a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man," or a tiger, a serpent, a mad dog that howls "like a savage beast" or prowls like "an evil beast [between the sheep] and the fold"), Rossetti's goblins are animal people:

One had a cat's face,  
One whisked a tail,  
One tramped at a rat's pace,  
One crawled like a snail,  
One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry,  
One like a ratel tumbled hurry scurry.

The sinister music here, one of the numerous auditory variations played by Rossetti's apparently simple verse, establishes that these goblins are not lovable little hobbits, but true monsters.

What are monsters? Creatures who scare because they look different, wrong, non-human. Distortion of scale was the first visual effect employed by Gothic novelists in creating monsters, particularly gigantism: well before Frankenstein's outsize monster, Walpole had filled the *Castle of Otranto* with specters of giant stature. But the classically Victorian device
to create monsters was the crossing of species, animal with human. I am thinking of the sneezing pigs, smiling cats, preaching caterpillars, and gourmandizing walruses of Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland*; of Kingsley's *Water Babies*, and Jean Ingelow's Pre-Raphaelite fairy tales; of Melville's *Moby-Dick* and H. G. Wells's *Island of Dr. Moreau*—all fantasies in the Gothic or other modes, with monsters that are animaloid humans.

But there is something more to Christina Rossetti's goblins that suggests to me a specifically feminine Victorian fantasy: that is, that they are brothers. They are not, in so many words, brothers to the sisters Laura and Lizzie in the poem, but a separate breed:

Leering at each other,
Brother with queer brother;
Signalling each other,
Brother with sly brother.

The brothers stand opposed to the sisters as tempters of clearly double intention: to intoxicate them with forbidden fruit, and also to harass, torture, and destroy them. One of the sisters, Laura, succumbs to the goblin song. She buys their fruit with a lock of her golden hair:

Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red.
She never tasted such before.
She sucked and sucked and sucked the more
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;
She sucked until her lips were sore.

"Suck" is the central verb of *Goblin Market*; sucking with mixed lust and pain is, among the poem's Pre-Raphaelite profusion of colors and tastes, the particular sensation carried to an extreme that must be called perverse. I am suggesting not that *Goblin Market* belongs to the history of pornography as a Victorian celebration of oral sex, but that Christina Rossetti wrote a poem, as Emily Brontë wrote a novel, about the erotic life of children.

Gorged on goblin fruit, Laura craves with all the symptoms of addiction for another feast, but craves in vain, for the goblins' sinister magic makes their victims incapable of hearing the fruit-selling cry a second time. However, the other sister, Lizzie, who through strength of character has resisted the temptation to eat the goblins' fruit, can still hear their cry. Lizzie sets out to buy of the goblins in order to save her fallen sister, who, "dwindling/Seemed knocking at Death's door."

Lizzie's venture in redemption opens up the question of the spiritual implications of *Goblin Market*, for it is, of course, as a Christian poet that Christina Rossetti is best known. In the view of C. M. Bowra and others, she is one of the finest religious poets in the language, and, until recogni-
FEMALE GOTHIC

The introduction came to Gerard Manley Hopkins (who read her with admiration), she was widely accepted as the greatest religious poet of the nineteenth century. Most of her poems (there are about a thousand) are Christian poems of remarkable fervor and orthodoxy, but not all of them—not, in my opinion, Goblin Market, which, if it were in conception a Christian work, would surely be resolved by an act of piety. Rossetti would have Lizzie save her sister through some ceremony of exorcism, a prayer, at least an act symbolizing her own essential purity. What Rossetti does give us at the end is something quite different, for it is in a spirit of heroism rather than of sainthood that Lizzie engages fully with the goblin experience:

She goes to trade with the goblins:

At twilight, halted by the brook:  
And for the first time in her life  
Began to listen and look.

The goblins rush to greet her:  
Hugged her and kissed her:  
Squeezed and caressed her.

They force their fruit upon her, urging her to “Pluck them and suck them.” But when Lizzie makes clear her intention to buy and carry off the fruits to save her sister, without tasting them herself, the goblins become enraged and attack her:

Grunting and snarling...  
Their tones waxed loud,  
Their looks were evil.  
Lashing their tails  
They trod and hustled her,  
Elbowed and jostled her,  
Clawed with their nails,  
Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,  
Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,  
Twitched her hair out by the roots,  
Stamped upon her tender feet,  
Held her hands and squeezed their fruits  
Against her mouth to make her eat.

But Lizzie keeps her mouth clenched tightly shut. Though the goblin attack turns even nastier and crueler, she resists, survives, and runs home to Laura to offer herself physically—it is the most eloquent, most erotic moment in the poem—to her sister. For Lizzie bears away not only cuts and bruises from her battle with the goblin brothers; she is also smeared with the juices of their fruit. “Laura,” she cries,
"Did you miss me?
Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me;
For your sake I have braved the glen
And had to do with goblin merchant men."

Laura responds: "She kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth." The effect is at first disastrous (loathing, bitterness, feverish fires in the blood) but at last Laura's cure is complete and permanent. Rossetti concludes with a sober envoy: "Days, weeks, months, years/Afterwards . . ." Both sisters, she says, grow to a maturity which includes marriage and motherhood. In reality Christina Rossetti remained a spinster, and her sister Maria, to whom Goblin Market was dedicated, became an Anglican nun.

That some kind of biographical fact or event lies behind Goblin Market has been a matter of general agreement among Rossetti scholars, starting with William Michael Rossetti, who edited his sister's poems. I find the usual biographical speculations ingenious but not wholly satisfying; I can also go only part way with the standard reading of Goblin Market as a poem about the divided self, for it makes too little of the two sisters theme that Rossetti handled with particular intensity. Not only in Goblin Market but in many other poems Christina Rossetti presents symbolic oppositions by means of a pair of sisters; sometimes, as in "Noble Sisters" or "Sister Maude," they are rivals in love or hostile to each other's passion.

Who told my mother of my shame,
Who told my father of my dear?
Oh who but Maude, my sister Maude,
Who lurked to spy and peer.

Rossetti brings a special, hissing vigor to the sisters-in-opposition theme which, not surprisingly, is pervasive in women's literature, at least from Sense and Sensibility to Middlemarch. Its most neurotic variation can be found in Harriet Martineau's Deerbrook; its most dramatically symbolic presentation in Lélia, where George Sand opposes a sister courtesan to her intellectually frigid heroine.

Laura and Lizzie, in Goblin Market, may very possibly symbolize profane versus sacred love, or weak sensuality versus strong reason. But to say that as criticism is no more illuminating than to say (as has been said) that Heathcliff is the Id, and Catherine the Ego. A purely symbolic interpretation of Wuthering Heights and Goblin Market makes them out to
be a sort of Tennysonian "Two Voices," or something different from what they are in fact: perverse and also realistic works in the Victorian Gothic mode. It was a mode to which I suspect both Emily Brontë and Christina Rossetti had access through fantasies derived from the night side of the Victorian nursery—a world where childish cruelty and childish sexuality came to the fore.

In one important respect their formation was similar: both women grew up in a family of four siblings male and female, bound together in a closed circle by affection and by imaginative genius, as well as by remoteness from the social norm. Several Victorian women writers—the Brontë sisters and Christina Rossetti among them—derived a valuable professional leavening from starting out as infant poets, dramatists, or tellers of tales with an audience of enthusiastic and collaborating siblings. That not only much of the technical expertise but also some of the material of their adult work derived from the nursery circle should not surprise us. Quentin Bell's recent biography of Virginia Stephen, a girl in another family of talented, like-minded sisters and brothers, allows us at least to speculate openly on the sexual drama of the Victorian nursery. (Though Mr. Bell does not, for me at least, settle the question of the factual component in Virginia Woolf's memories of fraternal incest, to the reality of a sister's incest fantasy he brings important evidence, if evidence be needed.)

Every reader of Dickens knows the importance of a sister to a brother struggling to resolve the extreme Victorian separation between the purity and the desirability of womanhood. But to Victorian women the sister-brother relationship seems to have had a different and perhaps even greater significance—especially to those women, so commonplace in the intellectual middle class, who in a sexual sense never lived to full maturity. The rough-and-tumble sexuality of the nursery loomed large for sisters: it was the only heterosexual world that Victorian literary spinsters were ever freely and physically to explore. Thus the brothers of their childhood retained in their fantasy life a prominent place somewhat different in kind from that of the father figures who dominated them all.

Little sisters were briefly and tantalizingly the equals of little brothers, sharers of infant pains and pleasures that boys quickly grew out of, but that girls—as Maggie Tulliver bitterly tells us—clung to despairingly at an inappropriate age. Women authors of Gothic fantasies appear to testify that the physical teasing they received from their brothers—the pinching, mauling, and scratching we dismiss as the most unimportant of children's games—took on outsize proportions and powerful erotic overtones in their adult imaginations. (Again, the poverty of their physical experience may have caused these disproportions, for it was not only sexual play but any kind of physical play for middle-class women that fell under the Victorian ban.)
I was recently reminded of Christina Rossetti's goblins while reading two very different documents: Freud's lecture on symbols, where he says that small animals often appear in dreams to symbolize little brothers and sisters; and The Diary of Alice James. This last is a witty, poignant, and distinctively American document by the sister of Henry James the novelist, William James the philosopher, and also of Garth Wilkinson and Robertson James. "I wonder what determines the selection of memory," Alice James wrote in 1890, near the end of her life:

... why does one childish experience or impression stand out so luminous and solid against the, for the most part, vague and misty background? The things we remember have a first-timeness about them which suggests that that may be the reason of their survival. I must ask Wm. some day if there is any theory on the subject. . . .

Alice James then went on to record her memory of being conscious for the first time "of a purely intellectual process": her brother Henry, when he was about thirteen (and she was seven or eight) said something witty and original which delighted and stimulated her. The James children, in Europe for the summer, had taken an excursion with their governess: a boring, dusty, and non-memorable trip, except for Henry's mock and the drive that began the day. "A large and shabby calèche came for us into which we were packed, save Wm.; all I can remember of the drive was a never-ending ribbon of dust stretching in front and the anguish greater even than usual of Wilky's and Bob's heels grinding into my shins." Not only intellectual but also physical stimulus of a surprisingly trivial kind lodged her brothers in a sister's adult memory.

In his introduction to the diary, Leon Edel comments on the teasing that Alice James knew as a girl, on the "usual petty indignities small boys have in reserve for baby sisters." He cites the phrase "greater even than usual" from this passage as one that "sums up whole chapters of childhood history." Chapters perhaps as well of women's writings, for even the civilized James boys, in their role as kicking, pinching, scratching little brothers, are potential goblins, perhaps potential Heathcliffs in their rough and uninhibited physicality.

The puzzles of Wuthering Heights may best be resolved if the novel is read as a statement of a very serious kind about a girl's childhood and the adult woman's tragic yearning to return to it. Catherine's impossible love for Heathcliff becomes comprehensible as a pre-adolescent (but not presexual) love modeled after the sister-brother relationship. The gratuitous cruelties of the novel thus are justified as realistic attributes of the nursery world—and as frankly joyous memories of childhood eroticism.

Emily Bronte's view of childhood comprised nature and freedom, but not innocence; this may well be the particularly female component of her
romanticism. The children in her novel are brutes, little monsters of cruelty and lust, like Christina Rossetti's goblins; but they are to her, nevertheless, the most real, the most fascinating of creatures. The wonderful childhood journal of the dead Catherine that Lockwood stumbles on at the start of the novel opens to us a world of mean brutality, but also palpitating vitality; it shocks us as it shocks Lockwood into his dream of Catherine's ghost outside his window, the ghost of a child begging to be let in. It is as a child that Catherine first appears in the novel, and as a child that she prays to return to earth when she is dying.

Critics of *Wuthering Heights* have wondered why Catherine should want to return to such a childhood as she experienced at the Heights, for it seems to have been made up of hatred, brutality, and random cruelty. Yet in her dying delirium she cries out against her adult state, against being "Mrs. Linton, the lady of Thrushcross Grange, and the wife of a stranger; an exile, an outcast . . . from what had been my world. . . . I wish I were a child again," she cries, "half savage and hardy, and free . . . and laughing at injuries, not maddening under them! Why am I so changed?"

To make my point about the female imagination, and its delight in the remembered brutishness of childhood, I have taken the liberty not only of adding italics but of tampering with that quotation. For what Catherine actually cries is not "I wish I were a child again," but "I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free. . . ."

The savagery of girlhood accounts in part for the persistence of the Gothic mode into our own time; also the self-disgust, the self-hatred, and the impetus to self-destruction that have been increasingly prominent themes in the writing of women in the twentieth century. Despair is hardly the exclusive province of any one sex or class in our age, but to give visual form to the fear of self, to hold anxiety up to the Gothic mirror of the imagination, may well be more common in the writings of women than of men. While I cannot prove this statistically, I can offer a reason: that nothing separates female experience from male experience more sharply, and more early in life, than the compulsion to visualize the self.

All my walls are lost in mirrors,  
whereupon I trace  
Self to right hand, self to left hand,  
self in every place,  
Self-same solitary figure, self-same seeking face.  
—Christina Rossetti: "A Royal Princess"
From infancy, indeed from the moment of birth, the looks of a girl are examined with ruthless scrutiny by all around her, especially by women, crucially by her own mother. "Is she pretty?" is the second question put to new female life, following fast upon the first: "Is it a boy or a girl?" Whatever else may have changed in the experience of women, Maggie Tulliver is in this respect still with us, and George Eliot's memories of the ugly intellectual's girlhood still give us the horrors, Gothic or otherwise. I am reminded of something she told Edith Simcox late in life, in explanation of her preference for men over women: "When she was young, girls and women seemed to look on her as somehow 'uncanny' while men were always kind."

Women writers have, in any case, continued to make monsters in the twentieth century, but not so often giants or animaloid humans as aberrant creatures with hideous deformities or double sex: hermaphrodites. "Freaks" is in fact a better word than monsters for the creations of the modern female Gothic: "a horrid sideshow of freaks," to use the phrase T. S. Eliot hoped would not be applied to *Nightwood*, for he considered Djuna Barnes's novel of 1936 a masterpiece, rather "Elizabethan" than Gothic in its "quality of horror and doom." *Nightwood* no longer seems so impressive a work, but Djuna Barnes's material—macabre fantasy interfacing lesbians, lunatics, Jews, spoiled priests, artists, noblemen, transvestites, and other masqueraders—has remained attractive to women writers. It reappears in the tales which Isak Dinesen called Gothic, with a special quality recognized by Carson McCullers as a "freakish brilliancy."

No writer of our time worked more seriously with Gothic forms or created more haunting monsters of ambivalence than Carson McCullers herself. Sometimes, like Dinesen, whose work she admired, McCullers put distance between herself and the freakish by means of folk-tale fantasy, as in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*. It tells of the love of a huge man-woman, hairy-thighed and muscled like a prizefighter, who loses her heart to a greedy little hunchback of uncertain age and mysterious provenance.

McCullers cloaks with humorous tenderness her unsentimental perception of the freakish self as originating in female adolescence. McCullers is at her best with creatures poised on a sharp, thin line between opposites: of sex, of race, of age. Her finest work is her second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), which interweaves in a kind of dance of doom a small group of officers, servants, soldiers, and wives. They are also lovers and murderers, impotent homosexuals and gentle perverts, gluttons, idiots, artists, and nymphomaniacs. McCullers' cast of characters here are as humdrum and as horrifying as their setting: that numb nightmare of the void, an army post located somewhere in the South.
It has long been a critical commonplace to explain the Gothic strain in Carson McCullers, who came from Georgia, as belonging to the Southern American Gothic school of which William Faulkner is the notorious advertisement. But there is abundant evidence of McCullers’ participation in a tradition at least as feminine as regional. In Reflections in a Golden Eye she seems to have drawn from Isak Dinesen ideas for the relationship between Alison and her Filipino servant Anacleto: between a woman who is wife, mother, and queen (yet has neither husband, child, nor subjects) and a grotesquely devoted servant of another race, perhaps a homosexual, certainly a gifted, sensitive, ridiculous, mad, dwarflike creature, as diminutive as a monkey or a child. (Compare the Kamante material in Dinesen’s Out of Africa.) More recently, this recognizably feminine theme has surfaced again in the grotesque love triangles of Penelope Gilliatt: the treatment of the male homosexual as an object of frustrated maternal love.

It was at the Museum of Modern Art's retrospective Diane Arbus exhibition that the Female Gothic aspect to Carson McCullers' work struck me most forcibly. For Arbus's photographs of freaks—her drag queens, lesbians, circus people, adolescents, lunatics, dwarfs, and the rest—look as if they might have been designed to illustrate McCullers' fiction. Not only the subject matter, but the tone of Arbus's work recalls McCullers: the cold intimacy, the fear which suggests, in objective terms, the haunted and self-hating self. There is that visit to the circus in The Member of the Wedding where the girl stands riveted before the booth of the Half-Man-Half-Woman, with the fascinated horror of the Arbus camera eye: “she was afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you.”

No reference either to women writers or to their monstrous creations was made by Freud in his study of Gothic horror, called in English "Freud on the Uncanny." But Freud does refer there to the perception of the female genitals as monstrous—an idea used by Robin Morgan in the title poem of her recent collection, called Monster (1972). Freud locates this perception not in female but in male fantasy, or more precisely, as the Morgan poem indicates, puerile fantasy: she presents a little boy's view (presumably the poet's infant son) of the naked female body. The poem seems to me to have nothing to do with the long and complex traditions of Female Gothic, where woman is examined with a woman's eye, woman as girl, as sister, as mother, as self. Robin Morgan's gifts lie elsewhere, in polemical verse, as for example the crackling "Arraignment" in the same collection: her "J'accuse" directed toward the men in the life, in the suicide, and in the afterlife of Sylvia Plath.

It was Plath herself, with her superb eye for the imagery of self-hatred, who renewed for poets—Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Erica Jong, and
many others—the grotesque traditions of Female Gothic. Her terror was not the monster, the goblin, or the freak, but the living corpse:

O my enemy.
Do I terrify?

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.

—Sylvia Plath: "Lady Lazarus"