

CHAPTER 1

Dreams and Visions

Here is Mary Shelley's account of the genesis of *Frankenstein*:

I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be.... His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handiwork, horror-stricken.... He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes.¹

Strikingly similar in its recounting of the originary vision of a work of fiction is Harriet Beecher Stowe's account of the genesis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, written in the third person:

The first part of the book ever committed to writing was the death of Uncle Tom. This scene presented itself almost as a tangible vision to her mind while sitting at the communion-table in the little church in Brunswick. She was perfectly overcome by it, and could scarcely restrain the convulsion of tears and sobbings that shook her frame. She hastened home and wrote it, and her husband being away she read it to her two sons of ten and twelve years of age.... From that time the story can less be said to have been composed by her than imposed upon her. Scenes, incidents, conversations rushed upon her with a vividness and importunity that would not be denied. The book insisted upon getting itself into being, and would take no denial.²

Both these accounts, written some years after the births of the texts they describe, depict writing women who write themselves into these anecdotes. Both are passive recipients, even victims, of their visions. In each case, the narrating woman doubles

herself in the text: as narrator of what has occurred in the past, she “sees” herself as spectator of a dream vision. Both writers represent the origins of their work by, first of all, objectifying their own earlier “selves”; that is, by deliberately “envisioning” a prior self as a young woman whose status as a writer is uncertain. Both passages, in effect, mime their subject matter, the transcription of a “vision” into language; they re-present the vision of a vision. And both, finally, find it necessary to hide behind the convention of a third person narrative: Stowe, directly; Shelley, beginning in the first person, then creating her male protagonist, who comes to double this younger fictive self. While she lies on her bed with closed eyes, the first vision of Victor Frankenstein looms over her; she imagines him (“the artist”) taking refuge in his bed, doubling her position, where the Monster, doubling her nightmarish vision, looms over him.

The idea of describing the origin of a verbal text as a dream is not new with these writers or unique to women writers. The convention of the dream narrative can be traced back to the Middle Ages, and Horace Walpole began its reestablishment as a convention for describing the origin of a Gothic novel:

Shall I even confess to you, what was the origin of this romance! I waked one morning, in the beginning of last June, from a dream, of which, all I could recover, was, that I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head like mine filled with Gothic story), and that on the uppermost banister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour. In the evening I sat down, and began to write, without knowing in the least what I intended to say or relate. The work grew on my hands and I grew fond of it.³

By locating the origin of a Gothic story in a dream, Walpole establishes a convention of accounting for a text that women writers could usefully adapt in instructive ways. While his account resembles Shelley’s and Stowe’s in some particulars, it differs from theirs in others. Walpole creates neither a third person “cover” for his earlier self nor a double within the text. And while he imagines himself to have been asleep, within the dream he locates himself in an ancient castle, rather than lying home in wait for his vision; by contrast, Shelley and Stowe imagine themselves nowhere but where they are. Also, his emphasis is on what

he saw. He attributes no emotional reaction to himself in his vision, no terror like Shelley's, no "tears and sobbings" like Stowe's, but an immediate need to begin to write.

For Shelley and Stowe, these imagined images are freighted with implications about their positions as women who write. Like the medieval dream convention, but this time with a feminine emphasis, the dream offers an excuse, an explanation, for the production of texts by women writers. How is it that Mary Shelley came to think of and to dilate upon so hideous an idea? As the text of *Frankenstein* itself as well as this dream account suggest, the "hideous idea" was both the monster as a fictional character *in* the text and the monster as figure *for* the text. This double "monster," as if by its own accord, came to her in a dreamlike vision; she was hardly responsible for it herself. How did the little lady Harriet Beecher Stowe come to create a text that, at least plausibly if not accurately, could be called the cause of the Civil War? It came to her in a vision, and at church, too. If the devil had sent one vision, God sent the other; in any case, neither was the making of the woman, who merely accepted and transcribed what was sent to her.

These accounts literalize "vision" as a metaphor for authorial perspective, as an excuse for literary production. Shelley and Stowe need to justify their authorial voices because, as much recent literary theory and criticism has suggested, the position of "artist" is one that has been proscribed for women.⁴ Women more suitably fill the culturally assigned role of the object of a man's gaze, which a man as artist may elevate to the role of the art object. "You *are* a poem," says Will Ladislaw to Dorothea, in one instance of a woman artist's (evidently approving) perception of a man's appropriation of her authorial role, while he assigns to a woman the role of text.⁵ Like Shelley and Stowe, any woman who wishes to write must negotiate ways of circumventing such proscriptions. While Stowe's third person account and Shelley's doubling herself as a character may undermine their own positions as gazing artists, nonetheless, both women must usurp the positions of the gazing male artist if they are to write. They frame and project their apparitions of themselves within the boundaries of a mental space within which they watch and which the reader is also invited to watch.

Such framing of accounts specifically as spectacles is an artistic gesture recurrent within the works whose geneses they recount, as it is in Gothic novels generally. Gothic fiction is frequently described as having a particularly "visual" quality. In these novels, the reader is frequently called upon to witness scenes specifically framed *as* scenes, sometimes through the perspective of a character, at other times through a narrator. Often a character becomes a "scene" in offering herself (usually but not always it is a female character) for the reader's gaze. The reader may be doubled by a character who acts as spectator, who presents a perspective through which actions or objects become legible, perhaps through what a character says and does, perhaps through a physical imprint of an emotional or psychical state. And while the author assumes the perspective of gazing artist, the image of a woman is often written into the text as object but one which, through its disruption of the course of the narrative, may threaten the authority of that gaze.

Coral Ann Howells has argued that in Gothic novels,

as readers we are consistently placed in the position of literary voyeurs, always gazing at emotional excess without understanding the why of it.... The springs of these emotions elude us, so that we can only look on with appalled fascination as floods of feeling rush through the characters distorting their physical features with alarming rapidity.*

In her account, such terms as "sensational, theatrical and melodramatic" to characterize these texts are intended not as pejorative but as descriptive, of a particular style of suggesting emotions and actions, a style expressly visual in its reliance on gestures and pictorial effects. The reader/voyeur of "Gothic" novels (historically defined as having been written between 1790 and 1820 in England) holds a position nearly equivalent to that of the audience of a play, in part (as she argues) because these novels tended to textualize eighteenth-century notions of Shakespeare.⁷

I think that the terminology here is absolutely right especially because of the eroticism implicit in the notion of "voyeurism." I wish to stress these sexually charged implications, for this structure of seeing and looking, with its erotic implications, is gender coded. Because of the conventional gendering of the relationship

between a spectacle and spectator (that is, the conventional masculine coding of the position of the spectator), Gothic use of visions is centrally implicated in the preoccupation with gender issues that these novels typically evince. The gendering of Gothic representation is related to its special visual quality and not only to imagery that allows for a thematics of such issues as female sexuality and maternity. This set of images assumes a position in a formal structure where the dynamics suggest a special relationship with the thematic "content."

But if the gaze is male, what happens when the writer is female?⁸ If she can speak only from a masculine-coded perspective, where (if anywhere) is there room for subversion, for alterity? Is it even possible for a woman to speak "as a woman"? My answer is, yes, that the shadow games played within the visual structuring of this mode makes this absence, as it were, visible.

I wish to examine how such visual structuring suggests the gendering of these texts, to look at such issues as who or what becomes a spectacle, who sees it, where the narrator and reader are situated in relation to both spectacle and spectator, and what these relationships imply about gender. Howells's description of the reader as a "literary voyeur" is particularly apt in view of the sexual thematics of these novels. I wish to investigate what it means to be a "literary voyeur," in terms of the gender coding of the literary and the voyeuristic. I want to suggest, first of all, that the Gothic novel's relationship to drama is part of a pattern of tropes written into the text and related to a fiction of presence and visibility that all novels employ but that carries a special significance here. Second, this pattern plays on notions of spectacle and erotic ways of looking which foregrounds sexual difference as an issue in these novels, an issue complicated further by the female signatures that these texts bear.

The idea that the gaze is male has been elaborated in art and film criticism, much of this discussion in response to an article by Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."⁹ An assumption which I am making here is that, while (as recent art criticism has acknowledged) art must be translated to verbal discourse in order to be accessible to criticism, so too does a reciprocal process take place: fictional discourse deliberately attempts to create "pictures," especially "Gothic" and Gothic-marked narra-

tive, which repeatedly attempts to defy the boundaries of its own genre both by summoning visual texts and by structuring itself as scene. The translation from one medium to another is neither automatic nor complete; and as Mulvey warns, her own argument is specific to film. Even so, narrative film and novels both tell stories; both aspire to suggest a continuity which must necessarily patch its own inevitable gaps.

Working from the Freudian notion that the image of woman speaks castration, Mulvey discusses the male gaze of the camera.¹⁰ In film, she argues, Woman is the bearer of meaning, not the maker of meaning, while Man bears the look which interprets her image. Film offers the male-coded spectator two opposed structures of looking: one, scopophilic, produces pleasure by offering a person as an object of vision which will induce sexual pleasure. This structure demands that the object of sight be recognized as "other," the bearer of an erotic identity different from that of the spectator. The second is narcissistic and offers identification with the image—thus the male spectator is generally offered a male protagonist with whom to identify. But as Mulvey notes, these two structures are contradictory, the first being a function of sexual instinct and the second of libidinal cathexis of the self (that is, a [mis]recognition whereby the reflection becomes introjected). Spectacle and narrative tend to split because the first of these is associated with stasis; the second, with action. And in fact, in Mulvey's account the woman's image freezes narrative action in moments of erotic contemplation; it suggests a gap in the narrative that must be patched over.

But, always speaking castration, this image threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. As escape from the threat that the sight of the woman always conveys, the (male) spectator has two choices. The first reiterates and intensifies the scopophilia which described one half of the original structure of looking; the object is isolated, glamorized, overvalued, and fetishized—and thus made reassuring. The object is detached from the linear time of the narrative and appears in stopped action. The second alternative, like the narcissism in the originally described structure of seeing, takes place in linear time and demands a narrative. Mulvey suggests how the fetishized image of the woman threatens precisely what film and novels have in

common, their narrational quality. A woman's image often, typically, threatens film with exposure of its incoherence.

Like films, novels are often haunted by the fetishized presence of a woman; and Mulvey suggests a way of reading this presence as a pressure on narrative, acting to disrupt or advance it. But while Mulvey works from the premise that the films she discusses were usually made by men, what about novels, which are often written by women? If we take seriously the notion that the law of language is under the sign of the father, as well as the much-documented historical, sociological reality that writing was the province of men, even a woman writing is implicitly coded masculine. But do the male-defined structures of representation which women must adapt leave any room for expressing their own desires? Essays by Freud, some of which lie behind Mulvey's observations, offer some suggestions as to where a woman might locate herself within the structure of looking and seeing. Three in particular—"The 'Uncanny,'" "A Child is Being Beaten," and the fragment "Medusa's Head"—locate women at different points in this structure.

In "The 'Uncanny,'" Freud assigns no gender to the gaze itself; it suggests certain consequences of gazing for men and for women.¹¹ In Freud's reading of E. T. A. Hoffmann's story "The Sandman," while the eyes of the castrating father are of central importance, Freud also characterizes women to be not only the object of a gaze but gazing subjects; and the gaze of women and girls evidently threatens him. Evidently the female gaze, as well as the woman's body that forms the object of the man's gaze, is frightening, something to be avoided, perhaps disallowed or repressed. To relieve the anxiety it creates in men, the woman's gaze must be sacrificed to the woman's role as object and to the man's gaze.

According to Freud's account, however, it is not the women themselves but the repressive process that produces the uncanny (it's also not the uncanny that produces repression); and what inscribes the repression is its return.¹² The painted women that frighten Freud in the red-light district are uncanny because of their repeated appearance; but female sexuality itself—a woman's genitals—is, Freud suggests, by its nature so *heimlich* as to be *unheimlich*. Like a woman's genitals, the prostitutes are reminders of

female sexuality, though they suggest not women's desire but women's availability to men. Freud suggests that a woman's sexuality, as the object of a *man's* gaze, is by its nature always a "return," always a reminder of his "homely" origins. A woman's gaze and a woman's sex are both uncanny, terrifying; implicitly, they are also near equivalents, both suggesting terrible power over men.

Toward the end of "The 'Uncanny,'" Freud differentiates between two stories in which appear a severed hand. While one (by Hauff) produces an uncanny effect, a story by Herodotus does not. Freud accounts for this dissimilarity in affect in terms of the reader's identification. But the issue of identification is decidedly marginal in this essay, where Freud assumes the (masculine) perspective of the reader to be close to his own—in opposition to that of the gazing women he describes. However, in the essay "A Child Is Being Beaten," this issue of identification, with its relationship to otherness and sexual desire, becomes central.

In "A Child Is Being Beaten," Freud begins by taking up again instances of gazing young girls; but here he suggests how this gaze ceases to be female and how masochistic identification works. Here, Freud at first notes that his study is based on six cases, only four of which are female; but later the male patients drop out of his account. In the course of his account, he establishes that the character in the fantasy with whom the subject identifies changes gender identity as the subject clarifies her own point of entry into the fantasy and simultaneously removes herself from sexuality.¹³ In a wonderfully efficient instance of psychic economy, what happens as the child moves from Stage 1 to Stage 2 of her neurosis is that the girl who constructs the "beaten child" fantasy establishes for herself what seems to be an ungendered position as spectator, from which she can retain sexual gratification through identifying with a boy and simultaneously can punish herself for constructing such fantasies. One effect of the process is that masochistic fantasy comes to replace sexual identity.¹⁴ But it also offers a model for a girl to assume the role of spectator, one that operates by a different process than the operation for spectatorship through the eyes of a man that Mulvey describes.¹⁵ The girl looks, but in assuming the role of spectator she ceases to be a girl and identifies with the imaginary boy

at whom she looks. This essay is especially significant because it suggests that while a girl might be the spectator, she cannot hold both that position and also that of object of vision, nor can she retain her own gender identity while looking. A girl can look, but there is still no "female gaze" here; and what she sees is a boy as object, with whom she nonetheless identifies.

If "A Child Is Being Beaten" conveys the complexity of a girl's assumption of the spectator role, "Medusa's Head" makes apparent its inverse: the implications of the woman in the role of object. Here, the gaze is clearly that of a man. As in "The 'Uncanny,'" where Freud persistently averts his eyes from the women whose presence he reports,¹⁶ in "Medusa's Head," Freud here also diverts his gaze, this time from the Medusa. Like Perseus in the myth, Freud looks at the Medusa only as reflected; Freud sees the Medusa only in the reaction of the man who gazes at her. Here, in contrast with "The 'Uncanny'" and "A Child Is Being Beaten," the woman is entirely an object, terrible and threatening. Paradoxically, she both embodies the threat of castration and evokes its defense both in the "petrifying" effect she has upon the spectator as well as in her snaky tresses, a "multiplication of penis symbols."

All Gothic fiction might be said to employ a kind of sado-masochism. Both film and literary criticism have recognized this dynamic in suggesting some degree of continuity between Gothic novels and contemporary narratives of violence to women, particularly slasher films.¹⁷ But an important difference stems from the media themselves: novels really have no equivalent to that insistent eye of the camera, which imposes a more or less consistent point of view. In Gothic novels, perspective is vaguer, diffused through different "eyes"—the narrator's own and those of various characters—and thus offers various vantage points to the narrating voice, diffuse, de-centered, moving. Although many of the films that have been the object of feminist inquiry achieve a kind of coherence through the presence of a seeing eye (a coherence that patches over the incoherence suggested by the disruptive female body the same film may fetishize), these novels are more obviously incoherent. I mean this incoherence less as a negative aesthetic trait than as a distinctive feature that reveals the double, even duplicitous, position of the author, and that offers

that position to the reader. Like the girl watching her whipping-boy stand-in, the reader of these novels must sometimes occupy a double position. This double stance must be problematic—in the girl's fantasy, she identifies with a boy and holds an ungendered role as spectator—at the same time that it offers the liberating possibility of undermining the conventional spectator's role. Sometimes, of course, a woman writer may clearly assume a masculine perspective which she invites the reader to share—as, for example, in George Eliot's early fiction, in much of the fiction of Willa Cather, or, as I will demonstrate, in Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*. But the writer's role read in terms suggested by "A Child Is Being Beaten" need not be read simply as a man's role.

The Gothic structure of looking and being-looked-at offers certain "covers" for the coding of women within the text, because its plot often revolves around the issue of seeing and hiding. The main attraction and *raison d'être* of Gothic cathedrals resembles that of the Gothic structures of their literary counterparts: both contain secrets and mysteries within their innermost parts, with which they entice the spectator/reader. The Gothic architectural spectacle hides its theological mysteries under the cover of opulent display. Playing upon the notion of spectacle with which the cathedral issues its invitation to people, churches make use of literal veils and enclosures—for example, the veil that hides the tabernacle, or the tabernacle itself—as well as of sacramental symbols which both hide and make available the theological mysteries they represent. The sacramental outward sign becomes not only a cover; it also provides access to what it covers. Gothic novels also make extensive use of visual patterns of veiling and hiding, both on a verbally explicit level and structurally, also as a way of simultaneously hiding and giving form.¹⁸

Like the uncanny, a "Gothic moment" is a moment of (mis)recognition, where hiding from sight and revealing become indistinguishable from one another. Reflexively, it meditates on the problem of representation in terms especially appropriate for suggesting the double role of a woman writer. Its Gothic vision doubles the artist's vision of the text, at the same time suggesting what representation lacks. Sometimes a Gothic vision (in the sense of dream or hallucination) and artistic "vision" (in the sense of the author's idea of what she is about) completely merge.

And the absence at the center of such texts may be discerned as maternal, in part because it conjures those mother texts which it re-sees.¹⁹