

ARTS & LETTERS

Bosch, like his contemporaries, compared this procedure to the agony of hell.

Bosch's wildest images incorporate alchemical devices. The beaker-shaped fountain of life in the central panel—whose neck culminates in a blooming pinnacle of buds and veined tissue—is one of many alchemical “marriage chambers” represented.

Bosch, writes Dixon, believed in a benevolent God, the ultimate Healer. He painted *Garden* to express his faith that the road to salvation was through science combined with Christian devotion.

The Literature of Nightmare

“The Gothic Origins of Science Fiction”
by Patrick Brantlinger, in *Novel: A Forum
on Fiction* (Fall 1980), Box 1984, Brown
University, Providence, R.I. 02912.

Gothic romances, set in “sinister Italy or wicked France” and drenched with madness and demonism, and science fiction such as Arthur C. Clarke's interplanetary *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) share more than just their perches on the fringes of “respectable” literature.

Both defy the primacy of reason that began during the Enlightenment in 18th-century Europe. And both portray reason carried to extreme to make their point. But they differ, says Brantlinger, professor of English at Indiana University, in the scale of the mayhem they depict.

Gothic writers focus on internal disaster and psychological disintegration. Employing unreliable narrators (such as the opium addict of Edgar Allen Poe's “Ligeia”) and filling their stories with claustrophobic dungeons, secret passageways, and coffins, they chronicle the “inward journey” into madness and death—usually of a highly educated individual. In Mary Shelley's famous 1818 tale, for example, Dr. Frankenstein pushes science (reason) too far. Yet the chaos caused by his monster seems to affect only the good doctor, his family, and friends. In science fiction, the damage inflicted by technological progress pervades all of society and threatens to wipe out individualism itself. Witness the hi-tech dictatorship of George Orwell's *1984* and the treacherous computer “Hal,” of *2001*.

In Gothic tales, the message is that the irrational will conquer the rational. The villain-hero is often in league with the devil or endowed with supernatural powers. In science fiction, people are also dehumanized, but powerless—“sub-natural.” The Gothic protagonist may be a vampire or necrophiliac; the super-technicians of later fiction sap people of life by subordinating them to machines. Invasions from outer space are simply demonic possessions of another kind.

“When Aristotle fails,” the well-known science-fiction author Isaac Asimov has said, “try science fiction.” But to demonstrate reason's pitfalls, science fiction, like the Gothic novels of old, extrapolates too far. As Asimov's colleague, Ursula K. Le Guin wrote in 1976, “Almost anything carried to its logical extreme becomes depressing.” The true monsters, suggests Brantlinger, are the authors' imaginations.