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Linguistic Monstrosity
Eric Parrish 04'

Gardner's novel, published in 1971, postdates the major writings of Jacques Lacan, while it predates those of Julia Kristeva. In this essay, I attempt to situate *Grendel* between some of the major ideas of these two influential thinkers, while simultaneously using these ideas as the foundation for a discussion of language (and to a lesser extent, image) in the novel. In terms of modes of understanding, image and language come to represent two distinct realms: the imaginary order and the symbolic order. I first discuss Gardner's novel in relation to Lacan's work. Second, I consider the concept of the border as it relates to a Lacanian reading of the novel. Third, I further analyze the novel in terms of some of Kristeva's work. Finally, I consider Grendel's opposition to systems, whether linguistic or socio-political. As a mode of knowledge and power, how does language allow one to control who or what is deemed monstrous? Concomitantly, then, does language *necessitate* the creation of a monstrous-other? In considering this problem, I begin with the assumption that, since difference is inherent in a linguistic mode of understanding, language leads to social hierarchy. It goes without saying that the ramifications of this problem extend well beyond Gardner's novel.

I. Lacan's Mirror Stage and the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real Orders

Gardner's novel allows for a wide range of psychological and philosophical readings, from the Oedipal to the existential. A Lacanian reading of the text, however, works particularly well. Indeed, it is quite possible that Gardner had read and been influenced by Lacan's famous paper, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," presented in 1949, more than twenty years before *Grendel* was published. In this short paper, Lacan outlines the process by which a child moves from a pre-linguistic, pre-conscious state to one in which he or she has both acquired language and become self-conscious. Lacan describes this process as a movement from the imaginary order to the symbolic order, the transition being the mirror stage. There also exists a fourth element (a third order): the real order.

The translator, Alan Sheridan, defines these terms more clearly than Lacan himself does. The imaginary order is "the world, the register, the dimension of images, conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined" (ix). In contrast, the symbolic order refers "not [to] icons, stylized figurations, but signifiers, in the sense developed by Saussure" (ix): "differential elements, in themselves without meaning,

which acquire value only in their mutual relations" (ix). The real order "stands for what is neither symbolic nor imaginary, and remains foreclosed from the analytic experience, which is an experience of speech" (x). The imaginary order, or "[w]hat is prior to the assumption of the symbolic" (x), relates to the real order in that it is real in its 'raw' state" (x). Finally, Sheridan points out that "the 'real' is not to be confused with reality, which is perfectly knowable: the subject of desire knows no more than that since for it reality is entirely phantasmatic" (x). Thus, the real order is the constant, unchanging element in the series; it is "that which is lacking in the symbolic order, the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached, but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the symbolic" (x). Sheridan suggests that language (the symbolic order) links the subject to the real order. Similarly, the image (the imaginary order) links the ego to the real order. In spite of these links, however, the ego and the subject are both separated from the real order, and are therefore defined by a lack, or desire.

The process by which Grendel leaves his mother's cave and discovers the world of men is quite similar to that developed by Lacan. Having acquired language, Grendel reflects upon his earlier mode of understanding, in what Lacan would decidedly refer to as the imaginary order. Grendel describes his mother's love for him: "She loved me, in some mysterious sense I understood *without her speaking it*. I was her creation. *We were one thing*" (17, italics mine). Here, understanding is achieved without speech; Grendel is still un-self-conscious, viewing himself as a part of his mother. Gradually, he grows aware of himself as a being separate from his mother. He learns of his separate identity from her glare: "When her strange eyes burned into me, it did not seem quite sure. I was intensely aware of where I sat, the volume of darkness I displaced, the shiny-smooth span of packed dirt between us, and the shocking separateness from me in my mama's eyes" (17). In seeing his mother's burning eyes, Grendel recognizes her as a separate being, thereby initiating a consciousness of self.

Grendel describes his new self-consciousness: "I observe myself observing what I observe. It startles me. 'Then I am not that which observes!' I am *lack*. *Alack!* No thread, no frailest hair between myself and the universal clutter! I listen to the underground river. I have never seen it" (29). And so, Grendel eventually develops this "frailest hair" between himself and the world. He knows of the underground river, though he has never seen it—he is "[t]alking, talking, spinning a skin" (29), a skin that will separate him from the

world at the same time that it allows him an understanding of it. This "skin" is, of course, language—or what Grendel calls "talking."

It is worth noting that Grendel describes his mother primarily in terms of her eyes. Although she lives in darkness, she is a visual creature; Grendel explains, "Of all the creatures I knew, in those days, only my mother really looked at me.—Stared at me as if to consume me, like a troll" (17). However, the other creatures in the cave also watch him: "on shelves or in hallways of my mother's cave, large old shapes with smouldering eyes sat watching me" (16). Not only is the primary physical feature of Grendel's mother her burning eyes, but she is also bereft of language—she neither speaks nor thinks. Grendel explains, "Not that she thinks. Not that she dissects and ponders the dusty mechanical bits of her miserable life's curse" (11). He also describes her pre-linguistic state:

She'd forgotten all language long ago, or maybe had never known any. I'd never heard her speak to the other shapes. (How I myself learned to speak I can't remember; it was a long, long time ago.) But I talked on, trying to smash through the walls of her unconsciousness. "The world resists me and I resist the world," I said. "That's all there is. The mountains are what I define them as." (28)

Grendel has realized the influence of language on the way he perceives the world, but he does not yet recognize its influence on the way he is perceived. This does not occur until he learns of the Shaper.

Once Grendel has left the cave and come in contact with the Danes—"That night, for the first time, I saw men" (23)—he describes his mother's reaction to his departure: "I was, in her eyes, some meaning I myself could never know and might not care to know: an alien, the rock broken free of the wall" (23). Grendel finds himself trapped between the imaginary order and the symbolic order: "I must have pushed the two boles apart as I stepped up into the place where they joined, and then when I stupidly let go again they closed on my foot like a trap" (18). His immediate reaction is to cry out for his mother. Until this time, Grendel's world has been ordered around the central point of his mother; now, in the world of men, he finds himself in chaos: "each thing trying to detach itself, lift itself out of the general meaningless scramble of objects, but falling back, melting to the blank, infuriating clutter of not-my-mother.... If she were there, the cliffs, the brightening sky, the trees, the stag, the waterfall would suddenly snap into position around her, sane again, well organized" (19).

Instead of Grendel's mother, a bull appears in the distance and "the world snap[s] into position around him, as if in league with him" (19). Grendel's mother has been

replaced with the bull. Rather than the vaginal image of the cave, the bull's horn manifests a phallic image. Grendel is literally penetrated by this phallus: "The tip of one horn had torn me to the knee" (21). Eventually he is surrounded by the inhabitants of the symbolic order, the Danes: "suddenly I knew I was dealing with no dull mechanical bull but with thinking creatures, pattern makers" (27). Grendel also realizes that he shares a language with the men who attack him: "The sounds were foreign at first, but when I calmed myself, concentrating, I found I understood them: it was my own language, but spoken in a strange way" (23). Before he can be killed by the Danes, however, Grendel is rescued and brought back to the cave by his mother. That night, when Grendel's mother clutches him in her sleep, he is unable to bear the thing that once comforted him: "I can't breathe, and I claw to get free" (29). It is at this point that Grendel is drawn to the symbolic order, and attempts to join the world of language and men. Grendel quickly learns to resist the tendency to "tease, torment [his] wits toward meaningful patterns that do not exist" (11). He exists neither in the imaginary order, nor in the symbolic order, but at the border of the two.

II. Policing the Border between the Imaginary Order and the Symbolic Order

In his essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Cohen states that each monster is "a double narrative, two living stories: one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing what cultural use the monster serves" (13). Cohen continues, explaining how the monster enforces "the ties between men that keep a patriarchal society functional" (13) and "validate[s] a tight, hierarchical system of naturalized leadership and control where every man ha[s] a functional place" (13-14). The monster successfully polices the border because it "can no longer speak, only signify" (13). The monster is emptied of its previous identity and made to serve a normative function; its individual identity is replaced with a cultural one.

In Gardner's novel, Cohen's model is closely followed. Though communication between Grendel and humans is possible, the Danes (with the two exceptions of Unferth and Ork) view him as incapable of human speech, and therefore monstrous. Indeed, the Dragon describes the Shaper as a sort of border creator, designating a border patrol (Grendel) to minimize doubt and dissent within the border by moving it to the outside. This process transforms doubt into fear. It is this method of converting doubt into fear of the monstrous other that allows Hrothgar's men to collect payment without being questioned. So long as monsters exist, virtually any action can be justified in the name of protection. The Dragon explains this shaping process:

They sense that, of course, from time to time; have uneasy feelings that all they live is nonsense.... That's where the Shaper saves them. Provides an illusion of reality—puts together all their facts with a gluey whine of connectedness.... But he spins all together with harp runs and hoots, and they think what they think is alive, think Heaven loves them. (64-65)

After being rejected from the symbolic order, Grendel decides he would sooner be a monster on the border of this system than be entirely outside of it. He becomes an "earth-rim-roamer, walker of the world's weird wall" (7); he knows that "Behind [his] back [is] the world's end" (11). Grendel exclaims, "I wanted it, yes! Even if I must be the outcast, cursed by the rules of [the Shaper's] hideous fable" (55). While the humans are "system-makers," Grendel also depends on the system to define himself, for he is only an outsider *relative to the system*. Thus, Grendel raids the meadhall and, each time, he sees that "the builders are hammering, replacing the door for (it must be) the fiftieth or sixtieth time" (14). Grendel enforces a social hierarchy each time he breaks down the meadhall door, insofar as his attacks serve to justify the feudal system Hrothgar has created.

III. Kristeva's Abjection, Maternal Authority, and Paternal Laws

Interestingly enough, Gardner's pre-Kristevian novel includes an abundance of blood, one of the "polluting objects" (42) Barbara Creed includes in the abject. Grendel describes the stifling presence of his mother: "I smell my mama's blood and, alarmed, I hear from the walls and floor of the cave the booming, booming, of her heart" (29). When Grendel's mother rescues him from the Danes, the signal of her arrival is "her smell pour[ing] in like blood into a silver cup" (27-28). Even the movement from the imaginary order toward the symbolic order results in the loss of blood (that is, the leaving behind of the abject): "Blood gushed from my ankle and shin" (18). When this happens, one of the Danes inspects the tree where Grendel's ankle has been bleeding: "'It looks like blood,' he said, and made a face" (25). When Grendel is angered by the actions of the Danes, he feels an overwhelming bloodlust: "I feel my anger coming back... my belly growling, mindless as wind, for blood" (9). Blood is clearly connected to the presence of Grendel's mother and to Grendel's opposition to the symbolic order.

Secondly, Kristeva's distinction between maternal authority and paternal laws is significant to the novel. As Creed explains, Kristeva "distinguishes between maternal 'authority' and 'paternal laws': 'Maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body;

it is distinguished from the paternal laws within which, with the phallic phase the acquisition of language, the destiny of man will take shape'" (43). Grendel quite literally sets aside maternal authority when his mother stands in the way of him leaving to attend the Shaper's funeral: "She tries to prevent me. I lift her by the armpits as though she were a child and, gently, I set her aside" (147). Upon leaving the cave, he re-enters the symbolic order and is again confronted by the paternal laws that have designated him as monstrous. In Kristeva's terms, it is the Shaper who, "with the acquisition of language," determines how "the destiny of man will take shape."

Finally, Creed points to Kristeva's argument that "historically, it has been the function of religion to purify the abject but with the disintegration of these 'historical forms' of religion, the work of purification now rests solely with 'the catharsis par excellence called art'" (46). Curiously, Gardner's modern addition to the *Beowulf* epic fits this formula. Within Hrothgar's kingdom, religious rituals are seen as acts of showmanship; even the priests doubt the value of the rituals they perform. Gardner writes, "No one in the kingdom believes that the gods have life in them" (128). Instead, people turn to the aesthetic ritual of storytelling performed by the Shaper. It is the Shaper's poetic (and propagandistic) reworking of the past—accompanied by harp—that genuinely interests Hrothgar's people. Even Grendel is seduced by the Shaper's convincing words:

Even to me, incredibly, he had made it all seem true and very fine. Now a little, now more, a great roar began, an exhalation of breath that swelled to a rumble of voices and then to the howling and clapping and stomping of men gone mad on art. They would seize the oceans, the farthest stars, the deepest secret rivers in Hrothgar's name! (43)

The Shaper is in fact described as a sort of Anglo-Saxon version of Homer, "a blind man.... carrying a harp" (40), who controls the collective memory of the past and influences the beliefs of an entire group of people "for a price" (42). Brilliantly, Gardner has made this "memory-scraper" (46) blind; unable to see images, he must rely on language to order the world. This master of language—of the symbolic order—is entirely removed from the imaginary order; he is physically unable to perceive the world as image. This opposition between the burning eyes of Grendel's speechless mother and the powerful words of the sightless Shaper is the embodiment of Lacan's opposition between the imaginary order and the symbolic order, which is itself linked to Kristeva's conflict between maternal authority and paternal laws.

IV. Grendel as System-Destroyer

In her essay "Beowulf as Palimpsest," Ruth Waterhouse points out that, "The wide-ranging nature of the attack of such an Other upon individual and society and even upon the natural milieu... has been more and more narrowed in more recent monsters, but in *Beowulf* it is presented as being much more fundamentally against the structure of society and culture" (35). Thus, Grendel's attacks are not merely an act of violence, but "a threat to the whole fabric of society" (35). Waterhouse's comments apply to Gardner's novel as well. As Gardner portrays him, Grendel is opposed to "the structure of society and culture" at the same time that he is conscious of his need for this opposition to be sustained. Without it, he cannot define himself.

Grendel's opposition takes several forms. One of the most apparent is his mockery of religion; Waterhouse makes reference to Grendel as a monster "that perverts the central rite of Christianity with the eating of the body and blood of members of the [semi-Christianized] society" (34-35). In Gardner's novel, Grendel mocks Ork, an elder priest with poor vision, by becoming the voice of the "King of the Gods" (131) or "the Destroyer" (130), as he is known to the priests. Grendel manipulates the symbolic order by giving a voice to one of the gods; interestingly, only the priest who is unable to see falls for the ruse. This priest relies entirely on speech (that is, language), rather than image, for understanding. Thus, Grendel is able to use speech to manipulate the elderly priest's perception of the outside world.

For Grendel, what is truly monstrous is the "mechanical chaos" in which he lives: "Something is bound to come of all this. I cannot believe such monstrous energy of grief can lead to nothing" (123). Grendel knows that Hrothgar, with the aid of the Shaper, has wrought a system in which "the formation of knowledge and the increase of power regularly reinforce one another in a circular process" (Foucault 224). This hierarchical system arises from the differential nature of language. Kristeva explains the origin of this differential mode of understanding: "The child's first so-called holophrastic enunciations include gesture, the object, and vocal emission.... [these enunciations] separate an object from the subject and attribute to it a semiotic fragment, which thereby becomes a signifier" (40). This act "constitutes an attribution, which is to say, a positing of identity or difference, and... it represents the nucleus of judgment or proposition" (40). Thus, judgment—the attribution of value—is inherent in language. It is for this reason that Grendel is a rim-walker, occupying the border of the symbolic order, and opposing a system in which the mode of understanding itself leads to social hierarchy.

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