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## **“A Levinasian Reading of *Grendel* by John Gardner, the retold narration of Beowulf Myth”**

*by Negar Basiri*

Novel is the site “where ethics becomes inseparable from the full disruptive power of imagination.”<sup>5</sup> In John Gardner’s famous novel *Grendel*, the monster suffers an unnamable pain. During his quest, he seeks meaning and morals through participation in human existence. The novel is a retelling of the ancient *Beowulf* myth in which the narration is given to the monster antagonist *Grendel* in order to let the other speak. In this article, the novel’s aim for depiction of shift in perspective in and via representation as narration is shown in the light of ethical issues related to the other and *alterity*. In this respect, the novel is analyzed in the light of Emmanuel Levinas’ theory of ethics. Levinas’ phenomenological theory of the other is being practiced in the aspect related to the issue of ethical representation. According to him, aesthetic violence is attempted in and as narration in a text. He assumes a dual stand for art; it can both serve as the tool for ontology and thus unethical and also as a site where transcendence takes place and thus ethical. When the aesthetic object is presented as the adequacy between thought and object, it is named as aesthetic violence. Yet while through unintelligibility, it is given to multiple significations, it is ethical. Levinas’ ethical theories on art are diverged here under three main fields as the disruption of cognitive power named as: questioning of narrative as a mode of knowledge, questioning of the mimetic premise and questioning of ontology as reduction.

### **Narration as a Mode of Knowledge:**

Narration involves the recounting of an alterity or of a past encounter. Andrew Gibson maintains: "the other whom I recount is always in excess of my egoist understanding."<sup>6</sup> Thus my cognitive power is disrupted via this excess and in this way the image and my cognition of it both disintegrate. Besides, the self-assertiveness and confidence that are gained by the *will to identity* or my insistence on preserving everything in my being also disintegrate. As Levinas always uses Pascal's phrase, "I will secure my conviction of my right to a place in the sun" by the force of assimilation."<sup>7</sup> Yet as the self fails in this sovereignty and of capturing the other, the entrance into ethics takes place and it renders itself to responsiveness and responsibility. In this respect, the failure of the narrating subject to have assumed its narrated object as an object of narration marks Levinasian disenchantment of subjectivity. Each mode of narration has its specific ethical distinction because the relation between the narrating subject and the narrated object is defined in distinct spheres. For example, the way an event is narrated by a detached third person omniscient narrator is totally different from the one involved in the story. There is, in fact, variation in the ethical dimension of the novel. Besides, the extent of the narratological knowledge or the zone of the known and the unknown and also what is presented as beyond the frame of knowledge all contribute directly to the novel's ethical dimension. These variations in mode of narration formulated the subject-object relationship in a manner that corresponds to the problematizing of the established thought in the novel.

### **Mimetic Premise and Un-representationalism:**

In fiction, representation and ethics are inseparable. Thus, the novel cannot have an ethical dimension outside of its mimetic zone. In representation, as Gibson remarks, there are two planes; the plane where representation takes place, whether the author's mind, narrator's, reader's or culture or a mixture of them and the plane of the represented and this relation may have complex and various forms. But it remains constant. The fiction in its fictionality cannot be articulated itself as a mode of relation. Hence, ethics cannot reside in a novel rather than in relation to the world presented and the characters as entities. In traditional sense, the mimetic premise was assumed to represent a world with some extent of objective truth in it. This reductive mode of representation taking place in the mind of the author is what Levinas repudiates as *the aesthetic violence*. Yet what makes a novel or an artwork to move beyond this, is the supervening of discourse upon representation and thus destabilizing it. In this respect ethics act as discursive ethics. Although we can never move absolutely beyond the mimetic premise, yet this ethical inter-involvement of representationalism and anti-representationalism counteracts its illusion of an independent and sure premise. The sense of struggle over presentation and the failure of total comprehension is the ethical mission of an ethical narrative. In other words, the texts must reveal the limits and the significance of limits of presentation.

Ethical questions and questions of representation are interlinked in a novel. There is more than one strand of writing in a text that would neutralize the "objective correlative" through the context of particularities. But how the particulars remain in their particularity and are not exploited as the cases of universals? Gibson remarks although "characteristics are embodied in particulars, the relationship implied in embodiment must not be effaced" because the contrary case means the equality of essence and particularity and is thus unethical. In fact, there must be a discourse that

would run against the strong one to maintain a multiple strand of relation between the thought and the object and to materialize the subject in its going elsewhere. The ethical force of a novel is its insistence on the limits of representation and the excessive power of the un-representable or what we name as questioning of the mimetic premise.

### Ontology as Reductive Mode of Language

According to the essentialist moralists, in order for a novel to be moral, is to follow the law of mimetic adequacy, “an art of vivid record.” (*PEN* 56) It meant there must be certainty in and of representation. And moral power comes from moral knowledge, which is the clarity of its moral categories. This way categories exist prior to embodiments and their specific depictions. In fact, the problem is not with embodiment, because no text can be totally realized separate from the world. Yet it is the establishment of particularity of experience realized by the author that gives it ethical dimension. And if the categories come first, that is the reduction and effacement of its very particularity. This is called the break with ontology that Levinas views as essential because ethics has always been thus far required by ontology and cognition. Gibson renounces the totalistic idea of such moral critics as Leavis by implying that “the particular is numinous, pregnant with a significance that both precedes and will outlast it and is not for an instant to be confused merely with the conventions of language in which it is articulated. (56), an ethical novel in its mission is prioritized for what it does not and cannot say or breaks off from saying it. It exemplifies the ethical encounter that is prior to knowledge and brings with it responsibility on the part of the self. This sort of treatment foregrounds the exteriority, complexity and liberty that were neutralized by ontological representation. The play of discourse causes the failure of “englobing or appropriating” or what Levinas names as “ontological imperialism.” One certain tool by which the text is appropriated to established knowledge or break from it, is language. In *Otherwise than Being*,

Levinas marks a distinction between two aspects of language that are interrelated as *the saying* and *the said*. The said is the statement, proposition, or assertion, with the promise of determining the truth or falsity. *The said* is ontological and is continually disrupted by the expression of the saying. The saying, conversely, is both corporeal and sensible exposure to the other person, revealing my inability to resist its approach. It is both verbal and non-verbal ethical relation that cannot be conceived in constative propositions. It is the expressive position in confrontation. “Saying is the non-thematizable ethical residue of language that escapes comprehension, interrupts ontology and is the very enactment of the movement from the same to the other.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Grendel and the Principle of Pluralism**

*Grendel* describes his words as “the tiresome memories of a shadow-shooter, Earth rim roamer, walker of the world’s weird wall.” (*G* 7) In the ethical reading of the postmodern novel *Grendel*, the researcher aims for the analysis of the text as it destabilizes the dominance of cognition and determination through the ruin of representation in respect to narration. To explore the ways in which anti-representationalism reveals itself as the result of the surplus of otherness that exceeds the realm of the same and the self as representationalism. In this study, these basic questions are to be posed for an ethical reading of the novel based on the philosophical theories of Emmanuel Levinas:

Based on the issue of representation and narration as modes of knowledge: In order for the fabrication of an ethics of alterity, how is the text freed from its representationalism? How does the trend of anti-representationalism shift from the disposition of the representational whole? How does the retelling serve for the widening of ethical dimension as multiplicity? How does the

monster as narrator contribute to ethical significance of the novel? How does Gardner change the structure of the story in order to fracture the reader's interpretive will? And based on the questioning of the mimetic premise: How is *Grendel* emblematic of Levinasian subject? How is he de-worlded from the perspective of the known? Does his quest lead him to the hypostasis of the self or a disenchantment with subjectivity?

*Grendel*, a postmodern novel is meta-fiction, fiction about fiction, a retelling of a myth. The plot and the characters come from the ancient Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf, a heroic epic with explicit morals celebrating the great deeds of the warrior Beowulf. The poem depicts the warrior's struggle with three antagonistic totally negative enemies, the monster *Grendel* and his mother and the dragon, whose annihilation serve for the unity and security of the nation. The story exceptionally dramatizes the threat, both discursive and existentialist, of one's life-story telling. The story uniquely demonstrates the stripped-down dialogic of narrative exposure. John Gardner depicts the story from *Grendel's* viewpoint dually as a fearsome beast also as a lonely but intelligent outsider who has considerable similarities to his human opponents. Gardner uses first-person perspective to fill *Grendel* with a voice at once poetic, existentialist in its views to the point of nihilism, atheistic and at times broken, yet somehow loveable. For all its distinct qualities, critics are fascinated by its contradictory possibilities. The novel as a retelling is a repetition. Yet, here the antagonist is given the voice to speak as the other, the outsider and the alienated. The nature of this relation as retelling is ethical as the narrating and the critic of the other. It truly starts from "the sphere of the common" in order to arrive at "the radical anarchy of the divers." The characters, the names and the setting are all familiar patterns so that to be de-familiarized by the emergence of alterity as a *fissure* in the presumed philosophical, moral and textual unity of the ancient myth. From the very beginning, Gardner maintains a minimal relation to what has been preceded by the

myth in the form of drastic irony in the epilogue of the novel for the sake of an ethical fracture of the structure of cognition in the mind of the reader as his interpretive will.

Andrew Benjamin defines “the event of alterity” as “a difference within repetition which displaces and deconstructs the given. It is the event that is plural and complex. This event does not efface or even overcome the given but causes the reworking of the former in being repeated.”<sup>9</sup> Gibson adds this “repetition can be understood as interpretation, as repetition by difference which renders the work of art as the site of “an-original heterogeneity” (*PEN* 24). The external as well as the internal elements of a novel must be oriented in a manner to counteract any possibility of it having a single meaning or as representation of a totality and refusing as to be a mold for identity and identification. *Grendel* is a narrator in its recounting of an alterity. He is after cognition or ontology; to know himself and his position, the universe, and the ultimate truth. The monster-narrator’s journey can be interpreted as Levinas’ idea of *de-worldedness*, an escape from the self-satisfied being towards the other in its absolute sense what Levinas names as “desire for the invisible”. Besides, his journey refers to the idea of subject hood that its incompleteness is intrinsically a projection towards the future. The subject in its conceiving of the alterity of the other tends to go elsewhere from the confinement of its home (*chez soi*) towards elsewhere and in that respect essentially ethical:

The metaphysical desire tends else entirely, towards the absolutely other...as commonly interpreted need would be the basis of desire, desire would characterize a being indigents and incomplete or fallen from the past grandeur. It would coincide with the consciousness of what has been lost; it would essentially be nostalgia, a longing for return. But this would not even suspect what the veritably other is. The metaphysical desire does not long for a return, for it is a desire for a land not of our



birth, for a land foreign to every nature, which has not been our fatherland and to which we shall never betake ourselves. The metaphysical desire does not rest upon any prior kinship. It is a desire that cannot be satisfied.”<sup>10</sup>

*Grendel's* journey starts with his apprehension from the reduced vision of the world, the existence of his mother as the force of self-sameness, had imposed on him. “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... We were one thing, like the wall and the rock growing out from it.-or so I ardently, and desperately affirmed.”(17) The security bestowed to him by the adequacy of the same and the encompassing figure of the mother gets problematic as he feels the journey to the exterior other:

Being young, unable to face these things, I would bowl and hurl myself at my mother and she would reach out her claws and seize me, ...she would smash me to her fat limp breast as if to make me part of her flesh again. After that, comforted, I would gradually ease back out into my games. (17)

The ostensible “common sphere” loses its foundation and is deprived of the security as the permanent knowledge. Being cut from the mother’s bond and repetition of encounters insistently fissure the identity and identification and ultimately leads to dissolution. Besides, from the outset, *Grendel* reveals his distrust with language, the language of the said. He is after identification, yet he is quite aware that his language imprisons him within its comprehensive force. His journey is an *exodus* from *the sphere of the common*. This starts as his perception evades from the known of his world which was the figure of his mother. Things after things tried, cynical and cruel, to foist itself off at my mama’s shape-a black rock balanced at the edge of the cliff, a dead tree casting a long-armed shadow, a running stag, a cave entrance, 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. More emphatically, *Grendel*, the de-worlded monster extracted from the perspective of the world with established assumptions, has problems with the possibilities of identification. Identification happened in different levels and is practiced through ontology. In other words, it is the fundamental ontology that is re-examined by the monster. His will to identity starts from his selfhood and continues to art, people, philosophy, and death. Basically, the cognitive will of the monster-narrator is disrupted in interval sequences as it passes its different stages of confrontation from pre-reflective total sensation towards generalization and thus his leading to the domain of cognition and consequently its disintegration. Ontological indeterminacy and instability reveal itself in *Grendel's* encounters. As McHale states "An ontology is a description of a universe not the universe. It means, it may describe any universe, potentially a plurality of universes."<sup>11</sup> The universe where *Grendel* inhabits belongs to the fantastic proper. The fluctuation or wavering between natural and supernatural, ancient world of the myth and the postmodern obsessions of *Grendel* are at the service of addressing fundamental ontological questions. The story is narrated in the form of de-familiarization by means of which *Grendel* puts distance between men as readers and *Grendel* as a monster narrator.<sup>12</sup> Pre-identified as the antagonist, the accused, the third party, due to Novel's allusive context, he is the first to be encountered with his full exteriority to the reader through the ethical encounter since he is presented face-to-face with the reader. Duly, the novel exactly in its outset (the title suggests) puts the reader's expectations at risk. "Gardner invents a character whose qualities include the range of human emotions, including conscience and apprehension of ethics, the desire for debate of higher ideas, and the desire to communicate on many levels, including artistic."<sup>13</sup> The first words of the monster protesting against the ignorance of the ram of its environment jeopardizes the reader's expectation. Held captive by a pair of old tree trunks, *Grendel* the child encounters a bull in the

forest. The bull repeats slamming the tree to protect a calf. He fights with *Grendel* as “he would have fought against an earthquake or an eagle.” (21) Here, he learns of the bull’s fighting as instinctual and there is no place for emotion or purposes but there is only the mechanical process or predestined routine. Here starts the twelfth year.” And also begins the twelfth year of my idiot war...the pain of it! The stupidity! I understood that the world was nothing, a mechanical chaos of casual brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears” (22). He is presented rather as an anachronistic existentialist who puts into examination the whole thought of western philosophy and ontology. As Howell maintains “*Grendel* is a hero who partakes of the contemporary fiction of the absurd” and who refuses “to accept the values of law and order in the face of the chaotic and meaningless universe.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Grendel, Language and Ontology:**

Levinas in his theories of language assumes the priority of signification over the signified. Signification is a system that disrupts the relation between the established thought (that is the signified) and its representation in the image. *Grendel* is disoriented so as to foreground a new system of signification in the form of disruption of the binaries of good versus evil and protagonist versus the antagonist. In fact the narration in the story presents the reader with different systems of signification via explicit reference to the ancient myth to present intriguing problems as the result of inherent dissimilarities, through the shift in focalization and re-focalization both on the part narration in relation to the myth and in presentation of other agents like the shaper and the dragon ,on the issues projected as ontological implications (the narrated object) and most evident in his problem with the language.” Talking, talking, spinning a spell, pale skin of words that closes me in like a coffin.” (G 15) As it belongs to fantastic proper and wavers between natural and

supernatural, the novel can be interpreted in terms of ontological skepticism. The fluctuation between natural and supernatural takes the text towards ontological questions addressed in the text. The residue of the supernatural over the natural reveals the unknown or unseen saying within the said. Centrally in his confrontation with shaper and the dragon, *Grendel* as the outsider, unidentifiable to the set categories of the said, foregrounds the disruption of signification. In fact, his participation in the experiencing of *the alterity* leads to his exoticism rather than cognition.

### **The Shaper, The Memory Scratcher:**

The novel's third episode is quite emblematic of the encounter with the non-other. It is the revelation of the concept establishment on the part of *the same* as it masters over *the other* through the power of art. The shaper is commented upon by *Grendel* as the manipulator of reality or considered as the agent of narrative manipulation. The realm of *saying* is being suppressed in the speech of the shaper. This power over *the saying* by *the said* is best dedicated to him through the force of fictional construction in and of artistic maneuvering. What appears in shaper's speech is the procedure of concept making as it manifests itself in the form of *the said*. In this sense, there is the concept first and then language or expression. It is what Levinas names as *dedire* (*unsaying*) or *redire* (*re-saying*) of the saying. This process of *saying* as it is being reduced to *the said* is to be surveyed upon in relation to language and violence. The same as what Newton in *Narrative Ethics* views of The Ancient Mariner, *Grendel* "does not narrate by stating a proposition, but rather by staging a performance a 'saying', a proposing and exposing of the self. He does not answer, he "stories" not a noun by a verb both transitive and reflexive."<sup>15</sup> The novel is in fact the story of storytelling. In the same way in Newton's words, "the shaper is the grip of narrative compulsion" (4). He has a thematic orientation to price paid for overcoming language. Categorized as the artist,

the shaper is a storyteller who fascinates *Grendel*. He grips others by his compulsive storytelling and compel them: he “blends them to his will”, they “cannot but obey” (4). The story he narrates is fabricated via an armature of reduction as intersubjective relation. In the beginning, the shaper confines *Grendel* in his tale and his choking narrative space. By eliciting comprehension, the shaper practices in the form of narrative seizure. His art, in Levinasian terms, serves as the tool for ontology, when the aesthetic object is presented as the adequacy between thought and object, and named as aesthetic violence. Respectively, the enchantment of *Grendel* in his encounter with the shaper is partly due to his (the shaper’s) power in concept construction. For a while, the shaper is considered as the one who can solve the inaccessibility of total representation and proximity. He is shown as the narrator of Hrothgar’s story or in a better sense the one who acts as the agent of retelling of reality. As *Grendel* compares his own witnessing of the war, he finds the shaper’s version magnificent and fascinating.” The wars began, and the war songs and the weapon making. If the songs were true, as I suppose at least one or two of them were, there had always been wars, and what I’d seen was merely a period of mutual exhaustion.” (G 34)

After a long-detailed description of what had been narrated by the shaper, *Grendel* reveals the other side of this juxtaposition as to emphasize what Levinas names as fabrication in the artwork through unethical tools of forced representability and magniloquence. The shaper:

Sang-or intoned, with a harp behind him-twisting together like sailors’ ropes the bits and pieces of the best old songs.....he knew his art.....he would sing the glory of Hrothgar’s line and gild his wisdom and stir up his men to more daring deeds, for a price. He sang of battles and marriages, of funerals and hangings, the whimpering of beaten enemies, of splendid hunts and harvests. He sang of Hrothgar, hoarfrost white, magnificent of mind...Even to me, incredibly, he had

made it all seem true and very fine. Now a little, now more, a great roar began, an exhaustion of breath that swelled to a rumble of voices and then to the howling and clapping and stumping of men gone mad on art. They would seize the oceans, the farthest stars, the deepest secret rivers in Hrothgar's name! Men wept like children; children sat stunned. It went on and on, a fire more dread than any visible fire (*G* 43).

Levinas in *Otherwise than Being* points to this manipulative power of art as it is exercised for the sake of confinement and un-ethicality:

Art is the pre-eminent exhibition in which the said is reduced to a pure theme, to absolute exposition, even to shamelessness capable of holding all looks for which it is exclusively destined. The said is reduced to the beautiful, which supports western ontology.<sup>16</sup>

This figuration on the part of the shaper for the sake of rendering the beautiful by the force of containment and sufficiency contributes to the power and affectability in the realm of the known and the concept rather than the pre-reflective cogito. He describes his total enchantment of the shaper's appropriation of the thought and the image in his (shaper's) representation of human history, while on the other hand his commentaries depict his metaphysical struggle itself, the sight of his witnessing on top of a tree of whatever was being sung and reordered by the shaper:

I too crept away, my mind a swim in ringing phrases, magnificent, golden, and all of them incredibly, lies. What was he? The man had changed the world, had torn up the past by its thick, gnarled roots and had transmuted it, and they, who knew the truth, remembered it his way and so did I. (*G* 43)

Shaper's manifestation of truth can also be interpreted in Levinas' reference to magniloquence. He names magniloquence or rhetoric as one form of non-essential and of ruse, exhortation, violence and unfairness, "the coinciding of revealer and the revealed in the face, which is accomplished in being situated in height with respect to us" while rhetoric aims at the omission of reciprocity as to foreground the force of *the said* as it talks "about" rather than "to" the recipient as it is realized in here the reconstruction of the past (*TI* 67). In the case of fascination with the shaper's talk, he maintains a thematic relation with the object rather than a metaphysical one. Duly, the shaper's art contributes to Levinas' idea of *Being-for-itself* rather than *Being-in-itself*. *Grendel* describes the shaper, "He takes what he finds," I said stubbornly, trying again. And by changing men's minds he makes the best of it. Why not? But it sounds petulant: and it wasn't true, I know he sang for pay, for...the honor of a famous king's hand on his arm. If the idea of art were beautiful, that was art's fault, not the shaper's. A blind selector, almost mindless: a bird. Did they murder each other more gently because in the woods sweet songbirds sang? "The projected possible" the shaper makes of history "suggests a value system worth emulating" and as Roland Nutter maintains, Unferth's position would affirm the basic intuition of his statements about heroism and the artistic vision that led him to emulate the heroic ideal<sup>17</sup>, the same as Gardner's view in *Moral Fiction* that art "designs visions worth trying to make fact."<sup>18</sup>

### **The Dragon, the other Synthetic Figure:**

The representational implications in the novel are foregrounded as the relation between the narrating subject and narrated object gets new forms through the shift in the perspective and thus augments the ethical dimension of the novel. The formation of subject-object relationships and their problematizing in each encounter reconstitute the extent of narratological knowledge.

*Grendel's* being-in-the-world is juxtaposed with the shaper's and the Dragon's intentionality. The Dragon's intentionality accordingly aims for the disruption of cognitive power as an agent in the confrontation with the foreign and singular. Though he is presented again as a totalistic figure, his negating of negation of the prevalent, well-absorbed reductive ideology of the shaper can be emblematic of a rather *otherwise-than-being* of an alterity. He makes an explicit point about the people's pattern making for the sake of intelligibility. "Men," he said, then left a long pause, letting scorn built up in the cave like a venom in his breath. "I can see you understand them. Counters, measurers, theory makers." All pigs eat cheese//Old Snaggle is a pig / If Snaggle is sick and refuses to eat, try cheese. Games, games, games!" He snorted fire. "They only think they think. No total vision, total system, merely schemes with a vague family resemblance, no more identity than say, 'spider webs.'" (64)

The projection of skepticism within the shaper's thought of totality is presented in the mouth of the dragon, another pattern maker, yet in the form of neutralizing the prior dominant discourse with a wider scope of narration. The dragon with his nihilistic vision is set in opposition to idealistic vision of the shaper. The dragon breaks the confident and secure representational zone of the shaper by claiming to have experienced the past, the present and the future. The dragon as the narrating subject is extended throughout time, space and knowledge in comparison to the shaper's. In the same way the narrated object of the dragon is whole humanity's action and its interpretation while the shaper just talks of the temporal event of Hrothgar's time. Levinas applies his idea of face-to-face relationship to the notion of time. In this respect, he gives a rather tripartite realization of time as synchrony, diachrony and anachrony. According to Huchens, "first, there is synchrony, in which a single self-strives to empower itself over time by remembering the past, perceiving the present and predicting the future, not only within its own experience, but across the



range of all temporal possibilities in history. Second, there is diachrony, in which the entry of the other person introduces a past and a future the self cannot remember or predict. And third, there is anachrony, the past, present and futures of all the others, whether dead, absent or unborn, in which the self cannot share.<sup>19</sup> The dragon appears to *Grendel* as a god-like philosopher obsessed with meaning of life and question of time and space. He is shown as being dominant over space and time when he claims; he knows “the beginning, the present, the end.” (G 62) John Howell in *Understanding John Gardner* remarks that Gardner’s dragon is a synthesis of medieval art, William Blake, J.R.R. Tolkien, Walt Disney and as in the Sunlight Dialogue, L-Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*.<sup>20</sup> Besides, he is the objectification of the ideas of Jean Paul Sartre. In the fantasy realm of the novel, the dragon appears an all-comprehensive figure within his speech is inserted rich intertextuality. Prominently, His speech reiterates Jean Paul Sartre’s idea of solipsism. “I understood that the world was nothing, a mechanical chaos of casual brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears. I understand that finally and absolutely I alone exist. All the rest, I saw is merely what pushes me, or what I push against, blindly-as blindly as all that is not myself pushes back. I create the whole universe, blink by blink-an ugly god pitifully dying in tree.” (21-2) This perception parodies Sartre’s passage on solipsism in *Being and Nothingness*. In this way, there is a play of significations that each signified concept is substituted by its counterpoint through parody or irony of allusion and other-referentiality. On the other hand, he refers to Whitehead’s spiritual connectedness. For the sake of contradicting the shaper’s vision, the dragon refers to Whitehead’s idea of connectedness and process. “a single fact in isolation is the primary myth required for finite thought, for thought unable to embrace totality.”<sup>21</sup> The same way the dragon states, “Simple facts in isolation and facts to connect them-ands and burs-are the *sin-qua non* of all the glorious achievement. But there are no such facts. Connectedness is the essence of

everything.” (G 64). He calls the shaper’s vision of reality as a “gluey, mosaic of juxtaposed facts, rather than a total, organic whole” (64) and dismisses his connection of facts in isolation as forceful and by his artistic tools of storytelling. And at times he become the Nietzsche of the novel. When *Grendel* quotes the shaper that “the greatest gods made the world” the dragon sets upon: “Ridiculous! What god? Where? Life force, you mean? The principle of process? God as history of chance?” (77) In this way there is a play of significations that each signified concept is substituted by its counterpoint through parody or irony of allusion and other-referentiality. Gardner shows the dragon as a synthetic figure in order to give him a universal man’s dimension. He is presented as an all-comprehensive figure and thus bestowed with the vision of all times and spaces. This accredits him the mastery of knowledge. In other words, he is represented as the speaking history of mankind particularly of western ontology. In Levinasian terms, the dragon can be understood as the embodiment of the gigantic history of time as synchrony. His reminiscence of the past and his perception of future is presented as the “objective” time and history over which he had dominancy; that is, “that one could move through history by means of a play of memory much as one might move through one’s own past,” according to Hutchens (L 68). The dragon is presented as if to comprehend the totality of temporal events from the vantage point of an omniscient mind. The dragon is the outsider sitting on his reaches who does not participate in the events and is just viewing from a vantage point. His knowledge of time is not a form of experiential relationship with time or Levinas’ face-to-face, but he is the omniscient totalizing figure who accordingly aims for comprehension of thought and mastery over knowledge. The past, present and the future for which he gives a totalistic existential view are unrepresentable to *Grendel* because they were never fully presented. His prophecy of the future is his assimilation by experience of present thought or rather an expectation as an event in the present. In the same way,

the past he talks about to *Grendel* is “*irrecuperable*” and is so past to be relived and experienced. In Levinasian terms, the dragon claims to have access to an anachronistic vision of time, that is, to have comprehended all times lived by man, for the sake of crediting his speech with a much wider dimension in comparison to shaper’s and *Grendel*’s himself. While this access he credits himself with, is the exact false credulity of man which Levinas calls synchrony or forceful time comprehension. Subsequently, *Grendel*’s own encounters can be interpreted as the force of diachrony; “the aspect of time that ‘breaks up’ temporality despite the self’s effort to recuperate what is lost through failure of memory and prediction” (*L* 69). Levinas views,

In the temporalizing of time the light comes about by the instant falling out of phase with itself-which is the temporal flow, the differing of the identical is also its manifestation. But time is also the recuperation of all divergences, through retention, memory and history, nothing is lost, everything is presented or represented, everything is consigned and lends itself to inscription or in synthesized...with time lost, ...where the being of substance comes to pass, there must be signaled a lapse of time that does not return, a diachrony refractory to all synchronization, a transcending diachrony. (*OB* 9)

Dragon’s claim for mastering the time is synchronic, the time of his subjective experience is presented as objective and absolute, legitimate enough to give a reductive absolute knowledge of the world due to its comprehensibility. In fact, the dragon’s technique of omnipresence in time and space is another force of narration in order to make the otherness of the *immemorable* and *irrecuperable* past of the other be comprehended as the experience of the self and respectively to prescribe a totalistic formula of ontological knowledge. The dragon dismisses the shaper’s vision of reality as a “gluey,” mosaic of juxtaposed facts, while he substitutes another “gluey”

connectedness of past, present and the future for the sake of philosophical intelligibility. Under the Dragon's influence, *Grendel* projects himself as the "brute existence" by which humanity learns to define itself. "He is a force," the Dragon says, "which drives humanity to poetry, science and religion" (73). Here, it is *Grendel* as the alterity that overflows cognition and whose confrontation causes the disruption of order and light. He is viewed as a darkening of "the sphere of the common." (*PEN* 99)

### Beowulf, the Death Figure

McHale notifies that in postmodernist novel, death is more typically functional: it sets stories going and bring them to an end. Death often marks the limits of representation, defining death as the ontological boundary. "Every ontological boundary is an analogue or metaphor of death. So, foregrounding ontological boundaries is a means of foregrounding death, of making death, the unthinkable available to imagination" (*PF* 231). In *Grendel*, death becomes the only unthinkable idea. For defining postmodern fiction, Mchale remarks, "it stimulates death: it produces simulacra of death by way of confrontation between worlds, by means of transgression of ontological levels, or via vacillation between different kinds and degrees of reality (232)." Throughout *Grendel*'s narration as a journey towards self-identity, there exists a kind of self-erasure, the journey towards the other. He becomes the excluded middle, the hollow which evades the persistence of the self. Each encounter becomes an encounter with face, the unknowable. He is both observer and contributor: "I observe myself observing what I observe...it startles me, then I am not that which observes" (29). In fact, he is there as the one who tries to recount others' representations and the resolution of the novel to have culminated in his death marks the ruin of representation by the shaper, the dragon, and the others as agents of the self. As mentioned above, death is the symptom of the limit of representation. The process of representation by figures of

totality and comprehension are re-oriented in a new context by the emergence of the last figure, Beowulf. *Grendel* describes him like this; “He had a strange face that, little by little, grew unsettling to me: it was a face, or it seemed for an instant, from a dream I had almost forgotten. The eyes slanted downward, never blinking, unfeeling as a snakes. He had no more beard than a fish” (G 154). His identity and symbolism are equally emblematic. Gardner ironically echoes the traditional symbolism of Beowulf as a Christ figure, the fish; an old symbol for Christ. *Grendel’s* mother warns him to “beware the fish” (G 149). Yet having recurrently observed that Beowulf’s mouth whispers the words of the dragon, previously associated with Sartre, beginning with “a meaningless swirl in the stream of time...” (170). The novel stresses this thematic antithesis by these opposing images. In addition, Beowulf repeatedly echoes William Blake, sometimes to Christ and sometimes dramatizes the thematic opposition in the same *Orcian* figure. Gardner mentions that Beowulf “says everything that William Blake would say.” (UG) In this trend, the superficial resolution of the novel, culminating in the death of *Grendel*, the figure of interruption, is problematized by the emergence of the stranger who kills him. Irresolute identity and paradoxical symbolism of Beowulf sets him in the same artistic phase of *exceedance* (First mentioned by Levinas in *On Escape*). The savior figure who comes for reconstitution of order and integration is an anarchic figure. His speech is the site of struggle between the saying and the said. His emergence contributes to the interruption of being, the eternal duration of an *entre-temps* that is darkening the ultimate resolution that neutralizes the eternity of the concept and as Maurice Blanchot views, *Grendel’s* death becomes the deferring of an end, “the impossibility of identity in the glissement of separation, is the impossibility of death as disappearance.”<sup>22</sup>

After being badly caught by Beowulf, *Grendel* is once again back near the oak tree where he started his journey towards the other. There is the symbolic dichotomy of wall and oak tree

prevalent in the story. The novel is structured in the interaction of two central motifs; the image of the oak tree and the wall. As his mother is the principle of the known, the oak tree is for him the initiation of departure from the known and the realization of the exteriority of the other. When *Grendel* was trapped in the oak tree, he decided that he was in his mother's eyes "an alien, the rock broken free of the wall". After she saved him, he tried unsuccessfully to "smash through the walls of her consciousness." (G 28) The same imagery recurs in the end of the novel when Beowulf again symbolically smashes the wall of *Grendel's* consciousness by cracking his head against the Meadhall. *Grendel* imagines or hears Beowulf speaking "you make the word by whispers, second by second. Are you blind to that? Whether you make it a grave or a garden of roses is not the point. Feel the wall: is it not hard?" (171) Then Beowulf smashes *Grendel's* head again and forces him to sing of the walls. And again, when Beowulf rips his arm, *Grendel* flees to the night again trapped in the roots of the oak tree and whispers again "I cling to the huge twisted root of an oak. I look down past stars to a terrifying darkness" (173). These two motifs enrich the multiplicity of interpretation as they both are symbolic and allusive referents to other texts. The roots of the oak trees have anagogic significance, reminiscent of Christ figure and also are the context for Sartre's depiction of his solipsistic idea as the protagonist of his novel starts his existentialist journey by contemplating the roots of an oak tree. *Grendel's* mind is cut between the clash of the same and the other and his resistance to resolution which is to lead him to the established thought of the known. Beowulf asks him to feel the wall, as mother and as integrity. The seeming resolution of admittance over the security or the one unitary known is problematized here where *Grendel* is placed musing with himself near the oak tree as the symbol of separation and disunity or the call towards the other. Besides, the identity of Beowulf is problematic as both savior and destroyer. In another level, *Grendel's* quest towards the other and multiplicity can be interpreted in two way;

First, as the hypostatic self who is like “Ulysses in that it travels where it will, in order to return to itself, constructing delusions as it goes, ignoring alternative routes hitherto unexplored.” (L 43)

This reading is supported by the manipulative emphasis of Beowulf over the wall and his life-affirmative utterances over reconstitution of order and regeneration, while *Grendel's* dying near the oak tree disrupts this totalistic idea of returning to his mother and the same.

### **Conclusion:**

*Grendel* is studied as the alien monster in his quest, restoring things back to their fundamental strangeness through his de-familiarity, a-historicism and difference. The monster as the singular and presumed antagonist of the myth, breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual. Within the context of dialectics of shaper/dragon, the wall/the oak tree and the unknown hero of the poem Beowulf, *Grendel* is the immobilized shadow, the eternal duration of an interval that disrupts the eternity of concept. He happens as the interval over the ancient myth, not as the reproduction or representation of its image as a retelling, but rather as a withdrawal from it. His strangeness does not comprehend in itself the mold of the known as the same and as the ultimate. In a more fundamental level, he is the interval over the totalistic vision of its writer to have assumed a Sartrean failure leading to nihilism as a critique of philosophy. What is the ethicality of this vision? Levinas answers “*pour une critique philosophique.*”

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