“You improve them, my boy!”: Insanity and Self-Discovery in Gardner’s GRENDEL

In John Gardner’s *Grendel*, the title character refuses to accept life’s circumstances, instead rebelling against what he considers an absurd world. Beowulf, the archetypal heroic figure of the age, lives according to the cherished heroic ideals of that world. After hearing Beowulf speak of those ideals, Grendel muses: “The stranger said it all so calmly, so softly, that it was impossible to laugh. He believed every word he said. I understood at last the look in his eyes. He was insane” (142). Earlier, when he hears a young priest enthusiastically preach to the people—“The gods made this world for our joy!” (121; emphasis in original)—Grendel casually remarks: “It does not impress them, one way or the other, that he’s crazy” (121). When, as a frolicking youngster, Grendel’s foot is caught between two tree trunks, a few of Hrothgar’s men happen along and believe him to be an angry spirit killing trees. The men then try to kill a helpless Grendel: “‘You’re all crazy,’ I tried to yell, but it came out a moan” (21). To Grendel, there are plenty of men who, because of their craziness or insanity, are objects of derision. Yet at times, Grendel also encourages the reader to laugh at his own excessive—and, in its own way, crazy—behavior: “‘Ah,
sad one, poor old freak!’ I cry, and hug myself, and laugh, letting out salt tears, he he! Till I fall down gasping and sobbing. (It’s mostly fake)” (2). Later, as the dragon professorially explains the mysteries of the universe, a flumoxed Grendel capitulates:

“[. . .] A piece of rock, on the other hand, impartially attracts the universe according to the law of gravitation. You grant there’s a difference?”

He waited, furious with impatience. I met his eye as long as I could, then shook my head.

It was unfair. For all I knew he might be telling me gibberish on purpose. I sat down. Let him babble. Let him burn me alive. The hell with it. (59–60)

Although Grendel is critical and dismissive of those he considers insane, he is also self-deprecating as per his own behavior, and he thereby comes across not as tragic but as comic.

Because the world seems so crazy, Grendel concludes that life itself has no meaning, value, or truth, even while he desperately searches for meaning, value, and truth. When he hears the Shaper’s song about the creation of the world and about Cain and Abel, Grendel knows it cannot be true:

It was a cold-blooded lie that a god had lovingly made the world and set out the sun and the moon as lights to land-dwellers, that brothers had fought, that one of the races was saved, the other cursed. Yet he, the old Shaper, might make it true, by the sweetness of his harp, his cunning trickery. (47)

The power and creativity inherent in the Shaper’s words and music enable Grendel to believe in the possibility of an unanticipated meaning and truth: “I wanted it, yes! Even if I must be the outcast, cursed by the rules of his hideous fable” (47). Even if it means that he must play the role of Cain, Grendel would accept it, for it would mean that he does have a place in the world, an identity that would give his life meaning.

As Grendel begins to discover the possibility of order in the world, however, the dragon points out that the ordered world of man is actually insane: “They’d map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories, their here-to-the-moon-and-back lists of paltry facts. Insanity—the simplest insanity ever devised!” (55). But the dragon adds that it is Grendel himself who gives meaning and therefore value to that insane world:

“You improve them, my boy! Can’t you see that yourself? You stimulate them! You make them think and scheme. You drive them to poetry, science, religion, all that makes them what they are for as long as they last. You are, so to speak, the brute existent by which they learn to define themselves. The exile, captivity, death they shrink from—the blunt facts of their mortality, their abandonment—that’s what you make them recognize, embrace! You are mankind, or man’s condition [. . .].” (62)
Hence, the significance of Grendel’s alienation is that, through it, he gives value and meaning to Hrothgar’s society. A few nights later, in the midst of his first raid on Hrothgar’s meadhall, Grendel has an epiphany:

I felt a strange, unearthly joy. It was as if I’d made some incredible discovery. . . . I was transformed. I was the new focus for the clutter of space I stood in. . . . I had become something, as if born again. I had hung between possibilities before, between the cold truths I knew and the heart-sucking conjuring tricks of the Shaper; now that was passed: I was Grandel, Ruiner of Meadhalls, Wrecker of Kings! (69)

The dragon was right, then, but it should be noted that just as Grendel defines life for Hrothgar’s people, Hrothgar’s people define life for Grendel. They give meaning and purpose to his life. “I am hardly blind to the absurdity,” Grendel admits. “Form is function. What will we call Hrothgar-Wrecker when Hrothgar has been wrecked?” (79). Of course, Hrothgar-Wrecker himself is wrecked at novel’s end. As Beowulf has Grendel in his deathgrip, Grendel must (heroically) keep from being overwhelmed by the “illusion” associated with Beowulf: “I jerk my head, trying to drive out illusion [. . .] Grendel, Grendel, hold fast to what is true!” (148). Fittingly, Gardner has Grendel paraphrase St. Paul: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5.21). Through the auspices of the dragon, as well as his own observations of and interactions with society, Grendel has learned the truth—that there is an interdependence, however tenuous, between himself and society—but he must “hold fast” to that truth even as society attempts to destroy it.

As he is dying, Grendel understands that Beowulf’s victory does not symbolize order over disorder. Indeed, Grendel has learned that order and disorder depend on one another. Instead, Beowulf’s victory “was an accident. [. . .] Blind, mindless, mechanical. Mere logic of chance” (152). This is the absurd logic of accident, for it is by accident that Grendel learns the truth he has been seeking but knew all along: One must strive toward the truth in a world gone insane, even after one confirms the world’s insanity and, therefore, the accidental character of life. After all, Grendel views even his own death as accidental: “Poor Grendel’s had an accident,’ I whisper, ‘So may you all’” (152; emphasis in original). The fact that Beowulf accidentally defeats Grendel does not qualify or diminish the significance of what Grendel has learned, that there is value, meaning, and truth in life, his own as well as the lives of his adversaries. Just before he dies, Grendel asks: “Is it joy I feel?” (152; emphasis in original). If so, what kind of joy? The joy of defining Hrothgar’s society and being defined by it? The joy of knowing Beowulf’s victory was an accident? Or simply the joy of life itself?

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The Grand Delusions of Hughes’s THE JAGUAR

Ted Hughes reveals the true focus of “The Jaguar” quite late in his poem, when he compares the eponymous beast’s defiance to that of a “visionary [in] his cell” (line 17). The simile is an inverted one: The jaguar is actually the much extended vehicle, whereas the poet/artist is the unobtrusive tenor; like that caged jaguar, he denies reality and persists, single-mindedly, to sing of the ideal. He preaches to an uncomprehending audience that “stares mesmerized / As a child at a dream” (10–11).

Such a reading makes “The Jaguar” a companion piece to Hughes’s “Famous Poet.” In the latter, the simile’s vehicle and tenor maintain their standard proportions; as the title indicates, the poem deals with a very important person whom it leaves reduced and debased by his celebrity:

As a Stegosaurus, a lumbering obsolete
Arsenal of gigantic horn and plate
[. . .]
To blink behind bars at the zoo. (37–40)

The jaguar, on the other hand, represents the obscure poet of genius—similarly trapped behind those bars, but feral and smoldering still. That the “famous” poet should occupy seven stanzas (before metamorphosing into a stegosaurus in the final one), while the obscure one is relegated to a single line, seems both logical and painfully ironic.

The irony does not stop there. On its surface, the poem is an ode to the ferocity of that feline, unvanquished as it is by its captivity: “His stride is wilderness of freedom: / The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel” (18–19). These lines are usually taken at face value, and the reader comes away comforted by the triumphant tone of that final stanza. It is a mistake, however, to take the poem’s exultation at face value; we need to look past the surface gloss of the moment captured by Hughes. If the jaguar now strides as boldly as Blake’s tyger, we must remember that the latter was not captive. We must ask ourselves what that jaguar will be like six months, a year, or two years later. By extension, we must wonder how the visionary of the poem’s...