

TORN LIMB FROM LIMEN: GREDEL AT THE SPACE BETWEEN

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2009

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To CMD, my everything

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Richard Burt and Jim Paxson for their suggestions for the revision and eventual expansion of this thesis; especially Jim, for tolerating and actually encouraging my many visits to his office. I owe thanks to Christy, my wife and fellow scholar, for being a great sounding board, proofreader, and such an important part of my life—a life made immeasurably better by her presence in it.

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December 2009

Chair: Richard Burt  
Major: English

In the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*, the monster Grendel's attacks on the Danish hall of Heorot have been seen by many critics as motivated by the Danish king Hrothgar's decision to build his hall on the borders between his territory and the meres that Grendel calls home, as well as by the revelry that takes place nightly in the hall, thereby angering Grendel and provoking his horrific assaults. In this essay, I first attempt a justification for reading premodern literatures through the decidedly modern lens of psychoanalysis. Then, I move to a consideration of why we might consider Grendel a legitimate candidate for the psychoanalytic subjectivity codified by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan; in other words, why he cannot simply be written off as "monster" or "beast," for although he is certainly both, he is also something more, something other-than. I attempt to show that Grendel is, in a number of ways, a hybrid: a creature of borders, limens, and thresholds, one who exists, as the title of the essay suggests, in a space between. Having shown why, in part through his inherent liminality, we can consider Grendel a legitimate candidate for subjecthood, I offer a psychoanalytical and phenomenological reading of the possible motivation for Grendel's assaults on Heorot: that he is an abortive version of the "speaking subject" of psychoanalysis, and that he finds himself adrift, unhomed, in language. I use Martin Heidegger's essay "Language" and specifically his reading of Georg Trakl's poem

“A Winter Evening” to show that, linguistically as well as ontologically, Grendel seems to be neither here nor there, but somewhere in the middle. Finally, I read the fight between Beowulf and Grendel with an eye toward phallic signification, and show how Beowulf’s tearing-away of Grendel’s arm can be seen as an instance of both literal and symbolic castration.

CHAPTER 1  
PSYCHOANALYSIS, THE MIDDLE AGES, AND *BEOWULF*

It does not matter if we say that Epicurus discovered the unconscious, that Teresa of Avila discovered the unconscious, or that Freud discovered the unconscious. No one, single discovery marks a historical moment or an epistemological break where, suddenly, the unconscious appears. The unconscious is always already within the speaking subject.

—Erin Felicia Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism* 9

In his insightful essay, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” Carlo Ginzburg illustrates how both psychoanalytic theory and scientific practice have grown out of a conjectural paradigm developed and refined over the course of millenia from the process of *venatic*<sup>1</sup> deduction—in other words, the trace- or sign-reading-and-interpreting skills of the nomadic, paleolithic hunter. He writes,

Man has been a hunter for thousands of years. In the course of countless chases he learned to reconstruct the shapes and movements of his invisible prey from tracks in the ground, broken branches, excrement, tufts of hair, entangled feathers, stagnating odors. He learned to sniff out, record, interpret, and classify such infinitesimal traces as trails of spittle. He learned how to execute complex mental operations with lightning speed, in the depth of a forest or a prairie with its hidden dangers. (102)

The passage serves partly as a metaphor for the linguistic investigations of the listening psychoanalyst. The essay itself is a reminder of the shared roots of psychoanalytic and scientific method and of the ways psychoanalysis can be of value as a *venatic* system, one that still permits its astute practitioners to “reconstruct the shapes and movements” of their “invisible prey.” (Here, Jacques Lacan on the origins of psychoanalysis: “It is obvious that psychoanalysis was born from science. It is inconceivable that it could have arisen from another field” [*Écrits* 192]. Science, in turn, according to Ginzburg, arises out of the conjectural method of *venatic* deduction.) The prey in question—clinically, certain afflictions of the mind; literarily, certain

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<sup>1</sup> “Of or pertaining to, employed in, devoted to, hunting” (*OED*, s.v. “*venatic*”).

lacunae of the text—are given away to the analyst by the tracks and traces left behind by the analysand, psychically constructed and compounded by life experiences, even within the “hidden dangers” of the analysand’s unconscious and the inevitability of countertransference.

Ginzburg connects the literal hunt for sustenance on the hoof conducted through the interpretation of traces with the venatic instincts of the hunter/analyst who listens, the subject-supposed-to-know who sifts through the speech of the analysand for clues pointing the way to his quarry, when he speculates:

Perhaps the actual idea of narration (as distinct from charms, exorcisms, or invocation) may have originated in a hunting society, relating the experience of deciphering tracks. This obviously undemonstrable hypothesis nevertheless seems to be reinforced by the fact that the rhetorical figures on which the language of venatic deduction still rests today—the part in relation to the whole, the effect in relation to the cause—are traceable to the narrative axis of metonymy, with the rigorous exclusion of metaphor. The hunter would have been the first “to tell a story” because he alone was able to read, in the silent, nearly imperceptible tracks left by his prey, a coherent sequence of events. (103)

The analyst proceeds in precisely the way Ginzburg describes. She constructs a thematic narrative of the analysand’s neuroses by reading their “silent, nearly imperceptible tracks” in order to produce “a coherent series of events.” Psychoanalysis, as an inherently venatic, hermeneutical theory, is also precisely the proper tool with which to gather and interpret the traces of literary game—even, dare we say, of the monstrous variety.

Should we set off right away in search of the creature Grendel, that (in)famous moor-strider and eater of men who scithes his way through the first third or so of the long Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, however, we would be getting ahead of ourselves. Ginzburg’s establishment of the conjectural origin shared by both psychoanalytic and scientific theory and praxis, their common ground in the method of venatic deduction, is in itself not enough of a justification for our proposed adherence to psychoanalysis as a literary hermeneutic in our application to medieval studies (specifically, the hunt for the origins of the extreme animosity

that Grendel directs at the Danes within Heorot). Before we attempt a justification through the citation of precedent, however, we might address at least one potential objection. One might consider the focusing of a hermeneutic lens such as psychoanalysis—which, despite its eons-old roots in the methods and skills of the nomadic hunter (if one subscribes to Ginzburg’s theory), is nonetheless essentially a product of modernity, of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—on the literature of the Middle Ages as hopelessly anachronistic. For example, psychoanalyst and philosopher Mladen Dolar notes that while “Freud speaks about a ‘universal’ of human experience when he speaks of the uncanny, . . . his own examples tacitly point to its location in a specific historical conjuncture, to the particular historical rupture brought about by the Enlightenment” (7). Dolar goes on to assert that “in premodern societies the dimension of the uncanny was largely covered (and veiled) by the area of the sacred and untouchable. It was assigned to a religiously and socially sanctioned place in the symbolic from which the structure of power, sovereignty, and a hierarchy of values emanated” (7). With the “Kantian establishment of transcendental subjectivity, of which the uncanny presents the surprising counterpart,” however, “[g]hosts, vampires, monsters, the undead, etc., flourish in an era when you might expect them to be dead and buried, without a place” (Dolar 7). Regarding the genesis of these apparitions, Dolar is emphatic: “They are something brought about by modernity itself” (7).

To be fair, Dolar is not passing judgment here on the propriety (or lack thereof) of reading premodern literatures psychoanalytically. He does not deny the existence of the uncanny in premodern times, but merely underscores that his interest lies with “the uncanny that is closely linked with the advent of modernity and which constantly haunts it from the inside” (7). Dolar’s claim that ghosts, vampires, monsters, and the undead are “brought about by modernity itself” is

obviously problematic, however, in that these types of supernatural entities are as endemic (if not more so) to premodern societies as they are to modern ones. In only one example that happens to bear on interpretations of *Beowulf* and of Grendel, the Old Norse *draugr*, a barrow-haunting, human-harassing, walking (and talking!) member of the undead, fits comfortably in more than one of Dolar's categories of the uncanny beings brought about, as he claims, by modernity itself. The *draugr* is a *revenant*, the reanimated corpse of a deceased person—in essence, it is a sentient zombie. It possesses the ability to turn living people into fellow *draugar*, which it can then command. While it is a corporeal and not a spectral apparition and it isn't known for drinking blood, the *draugr* does possess the supernatural strength of the vampire or the monstrous creature. Suffice to say, it is of a dimension which would not be wrongly described as “uncanny,” and it's certainly premodern.<sup>2</sup>

The period of the Middle Ages is itself inherently monstrous due to its incongruous fit with “mainstream” historiography, as Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills argue in their introduction to *The Monstrous Middle Ages* via a comparison to *Beowulf* and Grendel:

In the same way that *Beowulf*'s under-valuation as an aesthetic entity coincided with the marginalization of its monsters, so the Middle Ages has traditionally been marginalized by mainstream historiography, regarded, to borrow a phrase from Deborah Youngs and Simon Harris in this volume, as a ‘temporal monstrosity,’ an aberration between antiquity and modernity. At the same time, however, just as Grendel frequents the borders of the Danish moors, the Middle Ages as a period continually threatens to disrupt modernity from its position on the edges of history: if the Middle Ages is popularly imagined as a time full of monsters, then it can also be said to operate itself as a kind of historiographic monster, challenging ideas of modernity as radically different. (3)

We might also note the obvious synecdoche, namely that if the Middle Ages as a period may be considered a “historiographic monster,” then the literature of the period must be somehow

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<sup>2</sup> For more on *draugar*, see William Sayers, “The Alien and Alienated.” For considerations of the *draugr* as a possible analog for Grendel, cf. Michael Lapidge, “*Beowulf* and the Psychology of Terror” 375-377; Philip Cardew, “Grendel: Bordering the Human” 203; Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies* 141, 143-147, 152, 156, 158, and 168-169; Magnús Fjalldal, *The Long Arm of Coincidence*; George Clark, “The Hero and the Theme” 286; and Orchard, *Critical Companion* 124.

monstrous as well. Perhaps, then, it is the radical historiographic alterity—the monstrous quality—of the Middle Ages and its literature, and especially *Beowulf*, that attracts the attention of scholars and critics who interpret texts through a psychoanalytic lens. “But of course,” Louise O. Fradenburg writes, “it is not easy to see psychoanalysis as an analytical discourse profoundly occupied with questions of history or culture, and this is indeed one of the chief reasons for the difficulty of its reception by medievalists” (44).<sup>3</sup>

Fradenburg begins the essay in which the previous quote appears by noting the “troubled and hesitant” reception by medievalists of psychoanalysis as a critical framework with which to approach the period’s literature (41). She sees a few key points of real friction between psychoanalytically inclined critics and the critics engaged with “philological recovery of the medieval past” or with methods of historicist criticism, and particularly with those critics whose antipathy toward a subject “constructed through a history, a narrative, of desire,” as posited by psychoanalysis, is counterbalanced by their own critical priority: the “devotional subject” of Christianity (43). Among these frictions, Fradenburg addresses the complaint regarding the seeming anachronism of psychoanalysis and medieval literature that I note above, and argues that while there are “additional specificities that would seem to restrict its field of application,” psychoanalysis “is not alone in its specificities” (44). Finally, she asserts:

If psychoanalysis, again, takes us straight to the heart of a certain cultural history—the history of the production of suffering and of the incitement, regulation, and renunciation of pleasures—then I would argue that medievalism, with its disciplinary boundary-

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<sup>3</sup> The following truncated paragraph from John D. Niles’s essay “Myth and History” rather effectively illustrates the problem of reception by historicist critics that dogs more contemporary and less traditional critical theories such as psychoanalysis; note in particular Niles’s dismissive, polemical tone: “The landscape of myth criticism is littered with the bones of dead theories. Wherever one looks in this lunar dreamscape, one stumbles across elements of the unreal: weather gods, Terrible Fathers, chaos demons, rites of passage, ritual dismemberments, shamanic dream travel, phallic swords, uroboric wombs, and the like. A dim light suffuses everything with an eerie glow. The aura of the holy is enhanced by the reeking alters dedicated to Jung, Frazer, or other High Gods of modern mythography. The ground is otherwise bare. What a relief to return to that other land of heart’s desire, the landscape of history!” (229).

formations, its ascesis of contemporaneity, its romantic identifications with a deep past, its recent “return to the medieval origins of philology,” not only can but should enter into an engagement with psychoanalysis. (46)

*Beowulf* has been a steady draw for medievalists who, for the last three decades or so, have entered into engagements with psychoanalysis and have, in the words of Seth Lerer, “sought to relocate [the poem] in the shifting canons of contemporary academic debate” (“*Beowulf*” 325). As Fradenburg sees resistance to psychoanalysis coming from those medievalists most committed to a critical preoccupation with the Christian aspects of Anglo-Saxon literature in general, so Lerer recognizes “a rhetoric of salvation” that controls criticism of *Beowulf* in particular (“*Beowulf*” 325). In turn, he extols the potential of contemporary literary theories like deconstruction, semiotics, cultural studies, and psychoanalysis “to rescue *Beowulf* from traditional Anglo-Saxon scholarship and to secure its place in the modern curriculum” (“*Beowulf*” 325).

The projects of several scholars who have undertaken psychoanalytic approaches to *Beowulf* attempt just such a rescue, among various other critical goals. A partial list pertinent to my own project would have to name John Miles Foley, James W. Earl, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. For Foley, Hrothgar and Grendel represent two opposing aspects of the Freudian Father of Enjoyment and Father of Prohibition, while Beowulf himself represents the ego “in a deadly Oedipal struggle” (Niles 223). Earl’s psychoanalytic forays into the poem have included “a stimulating Freudian reading of *Beowulf* as an act of mourning for, and acceptance of, the replacement of the old heroic superego by the Christian one” and a “judicious use of Freudian theory to explain the act and effect of reading the silences and reticence of the text” (Lee 235-236) as well as “[the construction of] a Freudian psychoanalytic anthropology to define the ritual space of the hall in *Beowulf* and in Anglo-Saxon society in general” (Lerer “*Beowulf*” 325). Finally (and of the three, most recently), Cohen brings a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective to

questions of masculine identity formation and embodiment in medieval narrative representation, primarily through a focus on figures of radical Otherness or *extimité* such as the monster and the giant.<sup>4</sup> Cohen's work on the extimacy of the giant, in fact, brings us to a pivotal question, which we will more thoroughly consider in the following chapter: just what *is* Grendel? Is he monster, or man, or some hybrid blending of the two?

Clearly, Grendel is a monstrous creature, a descendant of Cain, a malevolent outsider marked by his difference and destined to haunt the margins of human society.<sup>5</sup> He is the fiendish dark-stalker who, like a moth to flame, is drawn to Hrothgar's jewel with all of its communal revelry and shared warmth: the hall of Heorot. He comes, this mighty hall-thane (OE *healdægnes*, line 142), to wreak havoc on those who have exiled him to the fens and marshes that skirt the cleared and inhabited spaces.<sup>6</sup>

However, we might consider whether Grendel's monstrous identity is quite so firmly fixed. I will argue, as have certain astute critics of the poem, that Grendel is more human in at least some respects than we might like to admit.<sup>7</sup> My interest here is vested in the problem of

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<sup>4</sup> Dylan Evans writes that the Lacanian neologism *extimité*, or "extimacy" in English, "neatly expresses the way in which psychoanalysis problematises the opposition between inside and outside . . . . For example, the real is just as much inside as outside, and the unconscious is not a purely interior psychic system but an intersubjective structure . . ." (58-59, s.v. "extimacy [*extimité*]"). Cohen highlights the medieval giant's extimacy—its decentered alterity comingled with a deeply uncanny familiarity—throughout his book *Of Giants*.

<sup>5</sup> See Ruth Waterhouse, "*Beowulf* as Palimpsest," for a consideration of the manuscript's alteration by Scribe A to change Grendel's proscription "in chames cynne [because of Ham's kin]" to "in caines cynne [because of Cain's kin]," since "Ham (who was the second son of Noah) seemed less relevant than 'Cain' to a reader," especially considering the reference to Abel's killing in the lines that follow (26). Cf. Cardew 190.

<sup>6</sup> Citations in Old English are from Frederick Klaeber, *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, eds. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> The ambiguity, the between-ness, of Grendel's ontical status is philologically reflected in some of the Old English words used to describe him in the poem. For example, *eoten*, which means "giant, monster, enemy," needs only to be capitalized and pluralized to become "Jutes" (Clark Hall 107, s.v. "eoten," "Eotenas"). Andy Orchard quotes R. E. Kaske on the gradual slide of the signified beneath the signifier *eotenas* throughout *Beowulf*, which "seem[s] to follow a fairly regular progression from monsters to men—beginning with 'giants' who from their description seem less human than monstrous (112, 421) and proceeding in turn to the anthropomorphic giant Grendel (668, 761), the unidentified giants of Sigemund (883), the 'giants' of Heremod who represent unidentified human foes (902), and

establishing Grendel's subjectivity, in the sense of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory; for if Grendel is nothing but a beast, an animal, a monster, then he cannot also be a subject. In order to be considered a subject, according to Freudian and Lacanian theory, Grendel must have made one crucial developmental progression: he must have entered into the symbolic by way of language. We will return to the question of whether Grendel has in fact made an entry into language later in this essay. Now, however, I would like to briefly review the work of two critics, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Johann Köberl, concerning Grendel's ontogenetic status.

Cohen writes that the monster's transgression, sexuality, perverse eroticism, and outlawry impel us time and again to exile, destroy, or otherwise repress it—but the repressed, “like Freud himself, always seems to return” (“Monster Culture” 16). The threat of this monstrous return is so real and so great that Cohen prescribes some traditional (if metaphorical) preventative measures:

inter the corpse where the road forks, so that when it springs from the grave, it will not know which path to follow. Drive a stake through its heart: it will be stuck to the ground at the fork, it will haunt the place that leads to many other places, that point of indecision. Behead the corpse, so that, acephalic, it will not know itself as subject, only as pure body. (“Monster Culture” 4)

Even in its monstrosity, the monster—in this specific case, the vampire, the revenant, the undead—is a subject, according to the logic of Cohen's wary warning. Through its capacity for return, it recognizes its (inter)subjectivity and can remember, can seek revenge on those who most recently attempted its destruction/repression.

As I have already noted, Cohen's theory of the giant's characteristic Lacanian *extimité*, its “external intimacy” or “intimate alterity,” is at the center of his book *Of Giants: Sex*,

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finally those of the Finn episode who represent human foes identified also as Frisians” (301, quoted in Orchard 168). Of the term *aglæca*, which can mean “wretch, monster, demon, fierce enemy” (Clark Hall 15, s.v. “aglæca”), Orchard writes that by line 2592 of the poem, Beowulf “gradually becomes identified with the figures he fights, described, like them, as an *aglæca*” (*Pride and Prodigies* 168).

*Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (xii). He highlights the importance of the giant's extimacy as a defining characteristic across the works left by a wide array of medieval writers—the homilists, historians, romance-writers, and Chaucer alike (xii). For all of them, the monster seems to exist outside the boundaries of the human “as the limit of its coherence; thus he threatens travelers and errant knights with dismemberment or anthropophagy, with the complete dissolution of their selfhood” (Cohen *Of Giants* xii). But even though the monster by its very nature overflows the borders of humanness, its looks can deceive, for “closer examination reveals that the monster is also fully within, a foundational figure ... an interior trauma that haunts subjectivity” (Cohen *Of Giants* xii). While we might repress the trauma of the monster's intimate alterity, burying our identification with its outsized figure deep within our unconscious, this trauma, like the monstrous subject itself, is bound and determined to effect its return. Unlike the creature itself, however, our traumatic identification with the monster has no heart through which to drive a stake, no body from which to cleave a head, and there is no crossroads at which it may be laid to rest.

Köberl's study, *The Indeterminacy of Beowulf*, finds its way into the poem via the figure of “an even more marvelous creature” than the “water-monsters, giants, Grendel and Grendel's mother, [and the] dragon” faced by the poem's hero; this creature is “a shapeshifter that will never be pinned down: the duck-rabbit” (1).<sup>8</sup> Köberl is here referring, of course, to the curious sketch that to some viewers resembles a duck and to others a rabbit, first introduced into psychological research on perception by the American psychologist Joseph Jastrow in 1899 (not, as is sometimes wrongly claimed, much later by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, born in

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<sup>8</sup> Köberl's footnote here reads: “The relevance of this creature to *Beowulf* criticism is discussed by Alain Renoir, *A Key to Old Poems: The Oral-Formulaic Approach to the Interpretation of West-Germanic Verse* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1988). Renoir stresses the impossibility of seeing both aspects of the duck-rabbit at once” (11n1).

1889) (Kihlstrom). Köberl notes that the duck-rabbit, as an avatar of indeterminacy, is a particularly fitting visual metaphor for *Beowulf* and its scholarship in that the poem “has had its share of different and often profoundly conflicting interpretations on nearly every level of the text” (5). He writes that the argumentative voices “have not been stilled” and “are as clamorous and as far from agreement as ever. ‘It’s a duck!’ ‘No, it’s a rabbit!’” (5).

Köberl’s study of *Beowulf*’s indeterminacy is particularly helpful in trying to ascertain whether Grendel is, at least in part or to some degree, human, or whether he is an entirely demonic (or at least fully bestial) apparition. He gives a thorough review, not fully reproducible here due to its length, of early historicist scholarship on the poem which asserts that such scholars tended to see Grendel as “the demonised personification of an enemy tribe” (16), or of “sea-raiders” (46), or of “bestial hunger” (73), or of “swamp or malaria” (36); as “Beowulf’s shadow self” (37); and as a representative of “chthonic forces” symbolic of “chaotic disorder,” among myriad others (73). Köberl notes some critics’ approach to the question via “psychoanalytical theories, be they Jungian, Freudian, or post-Freudian”; for example, during his three fights with Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon, “Beowulf has been seen as engaging the chaotic forces of his subconscious [sic] ...” (73). Beowulf himself “could be seen more generally as a Christ figure,” with Grendel standing in for “the powers of darkness” (Köberl 75).

Köberl continues his consideration of Grendel’s origins and ontogenetic status in a particularly relevant passage of philological exposition that warrants extended quotation:

Grendel ... is frequently referred to in human terms in the text [of the poem] itself, which, naturally, has lead scholars to attribute to him a greater or lesser degree of humanity. General terms used of him are *wer* (105), *guma* (973, 1682), *rinc* (720), *maga* (978), all with the basic meaning of “man.” His humanity has also been deduced from his final destination: if he can suffer damnation, he must have a soul; if he has a soul, he must be human.

More specifically, Grendel is referred to in terms that, in Old English poetry are used for themes of exile or outlawry. He treads the paths of exile, *wraeclastas træd* (1352); he is deprived of joy, *dreamum / dreame bedæled* (721, 1275); he is an unhappy man, *wonsæli wer* (105); he lives in a joyless abode, *wynleas wic*; as an outlaw, he is the solitary walker, *angengea / angenga* (165, 449); he is a wanderer on the borders, *mearcstapa* (103, 1348); he is a savage outcast, *heorowearh* (1267). Grendel's exile or outlawry can, of course, be seen as figurative: as a demon, he shares the devil's exile from God; as a descendant of Cain, he shares Cain's exile from God and men. It can also be interpreted literally, though: Grendel is a human exile, his monstrosity metaphorical. While no reason for this exile is directly given in the text, it may be inferred to have been particularly atrocious; what turns Grendel into a monster is his refusal to remain in exile, to go away and stay away. It is, however, the dual reading of Grendel as human and monstrous exile that may be most rewarding, since it best explains the fascination of Grendel. His dual nature as man and monster, with the disquieting effect this has on human audiences and their own sense of identity, makes him, in a way, more threatening than even the death-bringing dragon . . . . (96)

Köberl ends the passage by quoting Joseph L. Baird's assessment of Grendel as a being who "straddles the gulf, looms among the shadows in man-shape, lays claim to kin with man . . . and commands identification of man and monster. It is by such identification that the exile Grendel, stalking the twilight zone between man and monster, becomes so potent a force in the poem" (381, qtd. in Köberl 97). Köberl's examination of *Beowulf*'s indeterminacy, of its constantly shifting duck-rabbit quality, finds a natural locus in the figure of Grendel and serves to illustrate what has been one of the many overarching cruxes of the poem's criticism: 'Grendel's a monster!' 'No, he's a man!'<sup>9</sup> Cohen's discussion of the giant's *extimité*, Köberl's textual references, and Baird's observation that Grendel is neither purely monstrous nor purely human but "straddles the gulf" between the two and thereby "commands identification" as both, all provide support for the platform on which we shall proceed: that Grendel, though a monstrous exile, is not automatically and unequivocally exiled from (human) subjectivity by the fact of his monstrosity.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, while Seth Lerer sees Grendel as "a kind of anticreature, one whose semihuman form belies his deeply inhuman nature" ("Hrothgar's Hilt" 602), Michael Alexander writes that "Grendel and his mother . . . are . . . the descendants of Cain, the first-born human being, a fratricide. So the monsters are human; they are us" (xxix).

CHAPTER 2  
TORN LIMB FROM LIMEN: GRENDEL AT THE SPACE BETWEEN

Grendel comes alive in the reader's imagination as a kind of dog-breath in the dark, a fear of collision with some hard-boned and immensely strong android frame, a mixture of Caliban and hoplite.

—Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A Verse Translation* xxix-xxx

Even as a paradigm for all his monstrous literary and cinematic Grendel-kin, Grendel is yet a paradox, for none will ever be so intangible and yet so utterly, brutally solid as he.<sup>1</sup> Despite his ample presence in the text of *Beowulf*, much has been made of Grendel's mysterious quality.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the unknowable (and thus unrepresentable) elements that make up his genealogy, physiology, and history, he casts a spell across the ages, beckoning those who would attempt his representation, who would hang flesh of their own creation upon his skeletal frame. This is no task for the dilettante, however; as Cohen reminds us, "the monster retains a haunting complexity. The dense symbolism that makes a thick description of the monsters in ... *Beowulf* so challenging reminds us how permeable the monstrous body can be, how difficult to dissect" ("Monster Culture" 19).

Psychoanalysis doesn't cut the Gordian knot that is the mystery of Grendel's sinewy body. In fact, if anything, it only cinches the knot a bit tighter, perhaps weaving a few more strands around it before doing so. But psychoanalysis might help clarify even as it complicates. Part of the difficulty in any attempt to pin down Grendel, to hold him to any static interpretation, as Köberl has pointed out, is his indeterminacy. Part and parcel of Grendel's indeterminacy is his liminal quality: he exists on the border, always between one state or condition or location and

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<sup>1</sup> The chapter epigraph from Seamus Heaney, the consummate translator-poet, captures this odd between-ness and yet simultaneity—Grendel as a menacing dog's hot panting in the pitch-black night, Grendel as hybrid of Caliban (Shakespeare's wild man is not coincidentally chosen, I'm sure, because his name is a near-anagram of "cannibal") and armored Greek foot soldier—quite nicely, I think.

<sup>2</sup> Andy Orchard notes that Grendel is the poem's third-most frequently named character, after Beowulf and Hrothgar (*Critical Companion* 169).

another. Psychoanalysis allows us to study Grendel as subject rather than simply as monstrous, implacable Other, and perhaps in the process we may be able to catch the occasional solid glimpse of him as he flickers in and out of view across the divide. We will try to look at Grendel from the place at which he looks back at us, the place outside of his mere in which he seems most at home—namely, the trope of the threshold. Then, we will examine the circumstances of Grendel’s dismembering at the hands of Beowulf, and weigh the relative phallic signification of perhaps the most striking image of the poem: that of Grendel’s arm, torn from his body even as he is torn from the poem’s tropic thresholds, fleeing back to his brackish mere and death. Now, however, we move to a consideration not only of the trope of the threshold as it bears on the monstrous, the poem that is *Beowulf*, and on language itself—but also Grendel’s place, and perhaps his very incarnation, within that trope.

The thresholds that demarcate wakefulness from sleep, dreamless sleep from dreaming, and life from death are but three of the myriad limen that Grendel embodies, or at least marks as his territory. He glides up to the doorway of Heorot in the dead of night, when all those inside slumber; the sleepers only awaken when they are already in his grasp, as though in the grip of a nightmare so terrifying it is fatal to the dreamer.<sup>3</sup> The unfortunates he catches in his grip move rapidly from the sleep of the living to the sleep of death. One threshold is particularly important from the perspective of psychoanalytical and phenomenological readings of Grendel: the threshold of subjectivity, or the divide between the subject and the non-subject. In the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud and even more so of Jacques Lacan, language plays a crucial role in the entry into the symbolic, a requirement for subjecthood. Before we arrive at a

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Slavoj Žižek tells us that there is “a name, a perfect name, for fantasy realized: it’s called ‘nightmare.’ ... Of course, it is always sustained by an extreme violence” (*Pervert’s Guide Part 3*).

place where we might consider this particular threshold, we must first consider those other thresholds that are the nightmare called Grendel's stalking grounds.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes that the monster is a dangerous figure in part because it is “a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions,” and that the monster dwells at an epistemological demarcation, a “horizon ... [that] might well be imagined as the visible edge of the hermeneutic circle itself” (“Monster Culture” 6-7). In essence, then, the monster operates at the very threshold of that which we may know. So we can glimpse the monster at or across this hermeneutic edge, but we cannot get close enough to thoroughly examine it. Even if we were able to pin down the monster and perform a thorough examination of its form, we would most likely find ourselves confronted with a distinction-smashing creature of utter indeterminacy *à la* Jastrow's duck-rabbit. According to Cohen, the monster “is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within” (“Monster Culture” 7). The monster is therefore the liminal meeting-point and interpenetrative manifestation of our unconscious anxieties and our conscious fears of the unknown. “From its position at the limits of knowing,” Cohen writes, “the monster stands as a warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes”; it thereby serves “to call attention to the borders that cannot—*must* not—be crossed” (“Monster Culture” 12, 13, emphasis Cohen's). The monster is the ward or guardian of the fantastic and the imaginary, those areas at the edges of the metaphysical cartographer's map that have yet to be explored and inscribed.

Perhaps the only place where Grendel fits in comfortably is within the trope of the border, limen, or threshold. In his essay “Grendel: Bordering the Human,” Philip Cardew argues not only for Grendel's place *at* the threshold, but that Grendel *is himself* a threshold: “In many ways, both literal and metaphorical, he is a liminal being, a being of margins and peripheries,

poised between two worlds. ... it is hard if not impossible to say exactly what he is—a troll, a giant, a misshapen human, a fiend from Hell, or something else entirely” (189). Cardew points out that throughout the poem, Grendel is given over fifty “titles” (the term is Tolkien’s), phrases and kennings by which he identified, and that “[t]he corpus of titles indeed demonstrates his liminality” (189).<sup>4</sup> One of those titles, *mearcstapa*, which Cardew translates as “famous treader of the borderland,” indicates that “Grendel is physically liminal in another way” (Cardew 190).<sup>5</sup> The wild moors, fens, and marshes he holds are uncultivated, desolate grounds. Grendel, himself a liminal being, therefore inhabits a liminal space. He is not landless, not an unhomed wanderer, but even the lands over which he rules are marginal (Cardew 190). “And although Grendel is *wer* [man],” Cardew tells us, “he is also *eoten*, *þyrs*, *wiht*, and *feond* [giant, thurs, wight, and fiend]” (190, brackets Cardew’s).<sup>6</sup>

From Grendel’s epistemological and physical liminality we can transition to the liminal quality of his psychoanalytical and philological representative position. We should now consider whether Grendel has in fact made an entry into the symbolic through language, which, it might be argued, is the ultimate requirement of one’s consideration as a Lacanian speaking subject. I would like to anchor the following discussion by first turning to another treatise on the subject at hand, Martin Heidegger’s essay “Language.” Heidegger’s thought experiment on the nature of language begins by asserting that, as human beings, “[w]e are always speaking, even when we do

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<sup>4</sup> These titles do not include the occasions when Grendel is actually called by his name.

<sup>5</sup> J.R. Clark Hall defines it “march-haunter” (*A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* 231, s.v. “mearcstapa”).

<sup>6</sup> The *þyrs* (thurs) is a type of giant who lives in the marshes, who “is presented as a rapist and a woman-killer, and [from whom] the sense of sexual threat ... is marked in Old Norse tradition” (Cardew 200-201). (We might posit that a “sense of sexual threat” is philologically embedded in the very name of the *þyrs*, as similar as it is to the word “thyrsus,” which the *OED* tells us is “[a] staff or spear tipped with an ornament like a pine-cone, and sometimes wreathed with ivy or vine branches; born by Dionysus [Bacchus] and his votaries” [s.v. “thyrsus,” brackets in definition]; the thyrsus, as a phallic signifier born by the god of the bacchanal and his followers, is an emblem, then, of orgiastic potency.) Cardew reminds us that “Beowulf says at line 426 that he intends to hold *ðing wið þyrse* [a meeting with the thurs]” (200).

not utter a single word aloud, but merely listen ...” (187).<sup>7</sup> A bit further on, Heidegger theorizes that language *itself* speaks—“that is, when it becomes clear what speaking is” (188). He continues:

To reflect on language thus demands that we enter into the speaking of language in order to take up our stay with language, i.e., within *its* speaking, not within our own. Only in that way do we arrive at the region within which it may happen—or else fail to happen—that language will call to us from there and grant us its nature. We leave the speaking to language. We do not wish to ground language in something else that is not language itself, nor do we wish to explain other things by means of language.

(188-189, emphasis Heidegger’s)

A strange aphorism: we must enter into the speaking of language by *not* speaking. Only by remaining silent, by listening, may we “arrive at the region” within which we have a chance—and only a chance, as Heidegger makes clear, not at all the certainty—“that language will call to us ... and grant us its nature.” We must *hear the call of language* if it comes; we must not obscure it with our own flood of words. *If* we remain silent, *if* the call issues forth and *if* we do in fact hear it, we may “fall into the abyss” denoted by the sentence, “Language speaks” (Heidegger 189). If we do fall into this denotative abyss, Heidegger writes, “we do not go tumbling into emptiness. We fall upward, to a height. Its loftiness opens up a depth. The two span a realm in which we would like to become at home, so as to find a residence, a dwelling place for the life of man” (189-190).

Or for the life of the monster. Does Heidegger not describe exactly what happens to Grendel? Grendel the silent—Seth Lerer writes that he is “a creature of mute anger” (“Hrothgar’s Hilt” 602). As are all his *eoten* (giant) cousins, for as Cohen points out: “If the giants can speak, their voices are unrecorded” (*Of Giants* 34). Grendel, who waits and watches

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Freud: “‘speech’ must be understood not merely to mean the expression of thought in words but to include the speech of gesture and every other method ... by which mental activity can be expressed” (“Claims” 176).

from the shadows. Grendel, who *hears the call of language* in the creation-hymn of Hrothgar's scop as it drifts over the mist-bound fen:

A bold demon who waited in darkness  
wretchedly suffered all the while,  
for every day he heard the joyful din  
loud in the hall, with the harp's sound,  
the clear song of the scop. He said  
who was able to tell the origin of men  
that the Almighty created the earth,  
a bright and shining plain, by seas embraced,  
and set, triumphantly, the sun and moon  
to light their beams for those who dwell on land,  
adorned the distant corners of the world  
with leaves and branches, and made life also,  
all manner of creatures that live and move. (lines 86-98)<sup>8</sup>

The poet tells us here that every day since the construction of Heorot has been completed, Grendel has heard, amongst the noise of general merrymaking, "the harp's sound, the clear song of the scop." We cannot be sure if the *Beowulf* poet's *summa* of the creation hymn sung, Cædmon-like, by the scop of Heorot is meant for the sole benefit of the poem's intended Christian audience, or if the audience is to understand that Grendel hears the "clear song" *and understands it as language* (whether or not he can interpret the scop's message is another question). One might argue that it is both of these things.

If Grendel is mute, as Lerer posits, then he cannot actually acquire spoken language; his ability to do so is broken or was never programmed in the first place, perhaps due to his kinship with Cain and his exile from both God and men. In hearing the scop of Heorot sing the creation myth, he is not only confronted with the power of the God who cast him into outer darkness, but he is also *hurled into language* in the psychoanalytical sense. In Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the male child is hurled into language by the primal father's resounding

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<sup>8</sup> All translations in the remainder of the essay are from R. M. Liuzza's *Beowulf* (Ontario: Broadview, 2000) unless otherwise noted.

“NO!” of prohibition that bars his access to the mother’s body. The NO! of the father—the word which signifies the walling-off from the son of the thing he desires utterly (i.e., to be the phallus for the mother)—constitutes the child’s abrupt entry into the symbolic, the relation of signifier to signified. The threat of symbolic castration by the father as punishment for his sexual desire of the mother—in other words, that the father will show his phallus, forcing the child to realize that he and his own are hopelessly inadequate to satisfy the mother’s lack—perpetuates the child’s Oedipus complex, and he enters into a rivalry with the father (Evans 127-129 *passim*, s.v. “Oedipus complex [*complexe d’Oedipe*]”).<sup>9</sup>

But Grendel’s paternity is a mystery, as Hrothgar tells Beowulf: “in bygone days he was called ‘Grendel’ / by the local folk. They knew no father, / whether before him had been begotten / any more mysterious spirits” (lines 1354-1357). This is not to posit, of course, that Grendel has never had a father, but simply that he has no father of which any of Hrothgar’s people are aware. Grendel has only ever been glimpsed in the company of his mother. We might speculate, then, that for him access to his mother’s body has never been barred, that he has never known Freud’s Father of Prohibition. It follows that, should this be the case, he has not been hurled into language—*until*, that is, he hears the scop of Heorot sing his verses.

Michael Alexander writes that the “serene hymn of the Cædmon-like poet to the creative achievement of Heorot, in indoor Eden, a *yard* within the *middanyear*, seems almost to provoke the irruption of Grendel into the poem” (xlii). Grendel cannot acquire spoken language, although he hears the scop’s song and enters the symbolic through language; he cannot find a residence, a dwelling-place, a home in language, and so drifts, unmoored and unhomed, in the

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<sup>9</sup> In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud, referring to Ferenczi’s analysis of “little Árpád,” writes that the “totemic interests” of the child “did not arise in direct relation with his (E)dius complex but on the basis of its narcissistic precondition, the fear of castration. But any attentive reader of the story of little Hans will find abundant evidence that he, too, admired his father as possessing a big penis and feared him as threatening his own” (161).

symbolic. He has begun to become Lacan's barred subject, divided against his own subjectivity by language. He would not be unique in this respect, for all subjects are thus split. Grendel, however, still cannot himself speak, and neither can he speak himself.

We consider, in the present analysis, the scop's words to be the immediate cause of Grendel's wretched suffering, rather than the music or the revelry overflowing from Heorot. After all, "[t]he public celebration of social unity is the sharing out at the feast of food, drink, gold, and above all, of words: its antithesis is Grendel's grinding and swallowing of his enemies, uncooked, in silent, solitary, nocturnal, cannibalistic joy ..." (Alexander xliii). Perhaps he feels the ache of the exile in the face of the communal and familial warmth of the hall, and perhaps this contributes to his wretched state. I argue, however, that his suffering stems primarily from his prematurely thwarted entry into the symbolic. Because of his inability to reproduce the language he hears, Grendel becomes an abortive version of the Lacanian reasoning subject divided against itself by unreason.

In "Language," Heidegger writes that should we seek an encounter with the speaking of language, we would be best to seek it in that which is spoken (191). Not just anything that is spoken will suffice in order to produce such an encounter, though, for "most often, too often, we encounter what is spoken only as the residue of a speaking long past" (192). (If we have *Beowulf* in mind, our ears might prick up.) Heidegger goes on to assert that we should not "pick just any spoken material at random" in order to foment a true encounter with the speaking of language in what is spoken, but that we should find something that is "spoken purely"; and "[w]hat is spoken purely," he tells us, "is the poem" (192).

Heidegger selects Georg Trakl's "A Winter Evening" to illustrate the speaking of language in what is spoken purely:<sup>10</sup>

Window with falling snow is arrayed,  
Long tolls the vesper bell,  
The house is provided well,  
The table is for many laid.

Wandering ones, more than a few,  
Come to the door on darksome courses.  
Golden blooms the tree of graces  
Drawing up the earth's cool dew.

Wanderer quietly steps within,  
Pain has turned the threshold to stone.  
There lie, in limpid brightness shown,  
Upon the table bread and wine. (192-193)

We will conduct a parallel reading of Trakl's poem, considering it as an immediate prelude of sorts to the encounter within Heorot between Grendel and Beowulf, in light of certain of Heidegger's observations on the nature of language, the poem, and thresholds throughout the remainder of his essay.

While there are certainly prominent Christian elements to "A Winter Evening"—the tolling of the vesper bell in the first stanza, the second stanza's "tree of graces," and the allusion to the Last Supper in the final stanza—we might set aside their significance as such in order to consider the poem as a condensed prelude, as it were, to the fatal meeting between Beowulf and Heorot's (formerly) most powerful and violent hall-thane. We know from the first stanza that the house, much like Hrothgar's hall, "is provided well, / the table is for many laid" (192). It stands as a bastion against the cold of the winter evening, a warm, inviting space that provides

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<sup>10</sup> Heidegger notes that the fact of Trakl's authorship is inconsequential for the purpose of hearing the speaking of language in what is spoken: "Who the author is remains unimportant here, as with every other masterful poem. The mastery consists precisely in this, that the poem can deny the poet's person and name" (193). Again, we might find ourselves reminded of *Beowulf* and its poet, who has literally been "den[ied in] ... person and name" by the poem itself.

shelter and sustenance for those within. Heidegger points out, in language that cannot help but strongly recall the situation as it stands early in *Beowulf*, that the second stanza presents an abrupt contrast to the first: “While many are at home within the house and at the table, not a few wander homeless on darksome paths. And yet such—possibly evil—roads sometimes lead to the door of the sheltering house” (194). So Grendel has arrived. He waits outside the door. We might consider the tree of graces mentioned in the next line (outside of its Christian context, of course) as, perhaps, Hrothgar himself, the staunch and benevolent ring-giver from whom all comforts—gold, mead, patronage, feasting, home—flow to the *comitatus* inside his hall.

We must now attend to Heidegger’s notions of “speaking” and “calling” as they bear on “A Winter Evening” and on his broader theory of language, for we have arrived at the threshold of our own interpretation of Trakl’s poem as it relates to and reflects the early events of *Beowulf*. After an initial, brief foray into Trakl’s poem, Heidegger returns to his consideration of what it means to say that language speaks within it. He writes that the poem, in speaking, names things—“snow, bell, window, falling, ringing”—and that its naming of things does not “merely deck out the imaginable familiar objects and events . . . with words of a language . . . . This naming does not hand out titles, it does not apply terms, but it calls into the word. The naming calls. Calling brings closer what it calls” (196). To speak a thing is to name it; to name a thing is not simply to apply a word to the form of a thing, to wrap its thinging with a word, but to issue forth a call to a thing, a thing which then approaches and ultimately *comes into* the call of the word. Speech, the name, the call, brings the thing to and into the word. Calling brings closer what it calls. “The calling here,” Heidegger tells us, “calls into a nearness. But even so the call does not wrest what it calls away from the remoteness, in which it is kept by the calling there. The calling calls into itself and therefore always here and there—here into presence, there into

absence” (196). The calling itself exists at a limen, a threshold, projecting both outward and inward, drawing the thing closer and yet holding it at bay. Heidegger continues:

In the naming, the things named are called into their thinging. Thinging, they unfold world, in which things abide and so are the abiding ones. By thinging, things carry out world. Our old language calls such carrying *bern, bären*—Old High German *beran*—to bear; hence the words *gebaren*, to carry, gestate, give birth, and *Gebärde*, bearing, gesture. Thinging, things are things. Thinging, they gesture—gestate—world. (197)

In its calling of things into their thinging, the call not only bids things to come, but also “commend[s] them to the world out of which they appear” (Heidegger 197). The naming call, therefore, “names not only things. It simultaneously names world” (Heidegger 197).

As the things brought closer by the calling-here—brought into the very words of their calling even as they remain remote, distanced by their calling-there—bear the world which they unfold in their thinging, so the world, in return, “grants to things their presence,” according to Heidegger: “Things bear world. World grants things” (199). But world and things do not simply coexist alongside each other. Heidegger writes:

They penetrate each other. Thus the two traverse a middle. In it, they are at one. Thus at one they are intimate. The middle of the two is intimacy—in Latin, *inter*. ... The intimacy of world and thing is not a fusion. Intimacy obtains only where the intimate—world and thing—divides itself cleanly and remains separate. In the midst of the two, in the between of world and thing, in their *inter*, division prevails: a *dif-ference*. (199, emphasis Heidegger’s)

In the intimate interpenetration of thing and world, world and thing, in their traversing of the middle that both separates and binds them, there is the division of what Heidegger calls their ‘dif-ference.’

Grendel is named, called into his thinging, by the *Beowulf* poet directly after he retells the creation song of Heorot’s scop: “oð ðæt ān ongan / fyrene fre(m)man, fēond on helle; / wæs se grimma gæst Grendel hāten [one began to work his foul crimes, a fiend from hell. This grim spirit was called Grendel]” (lines 100b-102). He is brought closer to the hall by and through

language: by it in the sense that he has been hurled into it by the scop's song (which harrows him in his inability to reconcile with the *Spaltung*, or split of his subjectivity, due to his inability to speak), and through it by the calling of Grendel into the word of his own name by the *Beowulf* poet. This distinction, of course, plays with temporality; the former is clearly synchronic, occurring within the timeline of the poem's action, while the latter is an instance of diachronic metapoesis. They nonetheless work in tandem to simultaneously draw Grendel closer to the doors of Heorot—and closer to the audience.

'Grendel' is the word, the name, into which the thing that roams the wild lands in darkness is called. If he is *a thing*, any thing, he is *the Thing* (*das Ding*), which, in Lacan's thought, is "the thing in the real," that which is impossible for us to imagine (Evans 204-205, s.v. "Thing [*chose*]"). This is Grendel as the Lacanian big Other—not the reflected, specular image of the little other, but the Other of "radical alterity, an other-ness which transcends the illusory otherness of the imaginary because it cannot be assimilated through identification" (Evans 133, s.v. "other/Other [*autre/Autre*]"). It is Grendel's radical Otherness—his *Ding*-ing, so to speak—that keeps him remote in the calling-there, preventing his identification and assimilation. Unfortunately for the sleepers of Heorot, however, this is the only way in which he is remote; for he has been called, and he has come, and he now stands at the threshold of the hall.

The third stanza of the poem begins, for Heidegger, with an "emphatic calling": "Wanderer steps quietly within" (201). The line "calls the entering wanderer into the stillness. This stillness ministers over the doorway" (Heidegger 201). Then comes the line which Heidegger tells us "speaks all by itself in what is spoken in the whole poem": "Pain has turned the threshold to stone" (201). Heidegger then explains the function and significance within the

poem (and, of course, within language itself) of pain, of the threshold, and of its transformation to stone in the following passage, stunning in its elegant parataxis:

The threshold is the ground-beam that bears the doorway as a whole. It sustains the middle in which the two, the outside and the inside, penetrate each other. The threshold bears the between. What goes out and goes in, in the between, is joined in the between's dependability. The dependability of the middle must never yield either way. The settling of the between needs something that can endure, and is in this sense hard. The threshold, as the settlement of the between, is hard because pain has petrified it. But the pain that became appropriated to stone did not harden into the threshold in order to congeal there. The pain presences unflagging in the threshold, as pain. ... Pain is the difference itself. (202)

The threshold of the doorway of Heorot, that world which Grendel bears even as it calls him into his name and grants him his Thinging, must "sustain the middle" of their meeting and interpenetration. Pain is the difference itself. Beowulf becomes a part of the world of Heorot, however. The pain Grendel has visited upon the hall over the course of twelve winters, the pain which he himself experiences as Beowulf grips him with the strength of thirty battle-hardened warriors; this is the pain that turns the ground-beam of the hall to stone, allows it to bear the doorway through which Grendel enters. Pain is the difference, the extimacy, the calling-here and the calling-there. It remains there, in the ground-beam, the threshold, even as Grendel's arm is torn from his body, even as he breaks away from his calling and the world of Heorot, and even as he crosses life's limen into death.

As we move from Grendel's locus in the threshold or limen to his removal from it (and life) by Beowulf, and before we investigate what I am calling 'the signification of the phallus' in the Beowulf-Grendel encounter and beyond, we might briefly review what is meant, in psychoanalytic theory, by the term 'phallus,' not to mention its 'signification.' Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis note that contemporary psychoanalytic literature has tended to distinguish between 'penis' and 'phallus': "the former denotes the male organ in its bodily reality, while the latter lays stress on the symbolic value of the penis" (312, s.v. "Phallus"). We

might justifiably ask what specifically is meant by ‘symbolic value.’ Laplanche and Pontalis reply:

First, it would be mistaken to assign a specific allegorical meaning to the phallus-symbol, however broad it might be (fecundity, potency, authority, etc.). Secondly, what is symbolised here cannot be reduced to the male organ or penis itself, in its anatomical reality. Lastly, the phallus turns out to be the meaning—i.e. what is *symbolised*—behind the most diverse ideas just as often as (and perhaps more often than) it appears as a symbol in its own right (in the sense of the schematic, figurative representation of the male member). . . . we might conclude that what really characterizes the phallus and reappears in all its figurative embodiments is its status as a detachable and transformable object . . . .  
(313, s.v. “Phallus,” emphasis Laplanche and Pontalis’s)

For Lacan, the signifier of the phallus, which is itself “the image of the penis” (*Écrits* 696), “can play its role only when veiled” (*Écrits* 581). The signification of the phallus is effective only if the signified is absent from the scopic field; accordingly, the phallus “is negativized [i.e., it constitutes, for the subject, a positivized lack] where it is situated in the specular image” (Lacan, *Écrits* 696, my brackets). Lacan writes that “[t]he phallus is the signifier of this very *Aufhebung*, which it inaugurates (initiates) by its disappearance” (*Écrits* 581). The *Aufhebung* is a Hegelian term. Its root is *aufheben*, which H. B. Nisbet notes “is normally translated as ‘to supersede’ when it is used in its technical sense (which itself encompasses the meanings ‘to remove (or cancel)’, ‘to raise’, and ‘to preserve’)” (xlii). It can also mean “to overcome” (Nisbet xlii). The phallus-as-signifier is therefore the catalyst that initiates the phallic *Aufhebung* which, as Lacan tells us here, is only fully present in (the) absence (of its signified). Is the signified of the phallus, the male genital—the penis? In one sense, yes; but in a more complex sense, the phallus-as-signifier is a presence unto itself rather than simply the symbol of the male’s generative capacity or of any individual’s sexual organ. This is to say, for example, that the king’s scepter is more a phallic symbol of his status as monarch and the power attached to that status than one of his royal member. But perhaps the simplest and most

readily graspable description of phallic signification belongs to Arkady Plotnitsky, who notes that if the Lacanian phallus is the image of the penis, then the phallic signifier is in fact “the *image* of the phallus—the image of the image of the penis” (110, emphasis Plotnitsky’s).

Where do we then find phallic signification in the Beowulf-Grendel encounter? Where do we begin to look for it? Perhaps more importantly, where should we *not* look for phallic signification—that is to say, how do we avoid interpreting false phallic signifiers in the encounter between Beowulf and Grendel, as well as its prelude in the poem (as, of course, such prelude bears specifically on the physical/psychical encounter between the hero and the monster)? The first of these false signifiers of the phallus is perhaps the most obvious: the sword. Swords are frequently mentioned and sometimes described in detail in the poem, and at least one scholar has employed semiotic theory to argue for their multivalent signification throughout *Beowulf*.<sup>11</sup> We might be sorely tempted to consider the sword as a prominent signifier of the phallus in the poem, especially if we are aware that, according to James Campbell in his history of the Anglo-Saxons, the finely gilded, ‘pattern-welded’ battle-swords of the type that appear in *Beowulf* were rare treasures of the powerful. As Campbell writes, “spears and knives are common in Anglo-Saxon graves, [but] swords are not common, and the really good, pattern-welded swords, such as could shear armor, are rarer. That is to say that, however many men may have been liable to serve in a war, the best equipment was confined to those who were royal or noble” (55). Beowulf apparently carries a pattern-welded sword as his primary weapon (see lines 669-670; 672-674), but his Geats, who also carry swords, seem to favor long-arms: “their spears stood, / the gear of the seamen all together, / a gray forest of ash” (lines 328-330).

However, one thing swords do *not* signify in the poem—or at least in the encounter between Beowulf and Grendel, and immediately beyond it—is the phallus; first of all, because

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<sup>11</sup> See Gillian R. Overing, “Swords and Signs: Dynamic Semeiosis in *Beowulf*” 547-586 *passim*.

Grendel cannot be cut by a sword, for “no sword, / not the best iron anywhere in the world, / could even touch that evil sinner, / for he had worked a curse on weapons, / every sort of blade” (lines 801-805). Secondly, because, although he does not know that Grendel is charmed against blades, Beowulf reminds Unferth during their verbal sparring match that the monster has discovered “that he need fear no feud, / no storm of swords from the Victory-Scyldings, / no resistance at all from your nation ...” (lines 595-597). So not only is the sword bereft of phallic signification because Grendel is magically protected from it, but also because none of the Danes is warrior enough to wield it (or any weapon) efficaciously against him. Finally, Beowulf himself eschews the use of a sword in his upcoming battle with Grendel: “I consider myself no poorer in strength / and battle-deeds than Grendel does himself; / and so I will not kill him with sword, / put an end to his life, though I easily might ...” (lines 677-680). Although he is unaware that he could not actually kill Grendel with a sword, Beowulf still opts to lay aside his primary weapon, simply because Grendel is known to carry no weapons and Beowulf wants to meet him heroically, on even terms. During the grappling-match between Grendel and Beowulf, the Geatish thanes rush to the aid of their lord and hack at the creature with their “old blade[s],” but of course, to no effect (line 795).

If the sword is not the signifier of the phallus, that signifier is not to be found amongst the trappings of Hrothgar’s kingship, either. Consider the example of the king’s scepter, or Žižek’s example, from *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, that “the king’s crown is his phallus” (*Part 3*). But no; these fail the test of phallic signification as well. Grendel has occupied Heorot every night for twelve long years, and we learn early on in the poem that in such time he has thoroughly supplanted Hrothgar as the phallic, paternal authority: “So he [Grendel] ruled, and strove against right, / one against all, until empty stood / the best of houses” (lines 144-146).

So if the phallus is not, in the context of Grendel's encounter with Beowulf, the sword or the scepter, crown, or other bit of kingly signifying regalia, then what is it? As I have already noted, Grendel has supplanted Hrothgar's phallic authority by taking control of his hall at night. Hrothgar, the so-called "protector" of the Scyldings ("*helm Scyldinga*," line 371) is anything but; Grendel has made him into a weak king. The poet tells us early in Grendel's reign of terror that Hrothgar's warriors have taken to sleeping in the outlying buildings, which Grendel apparently does not enter. We should understand from the subtlety with which the poet delivers the lines that this is most unusual (Liuzza points out in a footnote to the lines that "[u]nder normal circumstances the men sleep together in the hall, ready for battle [1239-50]" [57n2]) but also that those warriors should not be in any way considered shirkers or deserters:

Then it was easy to find a thane  
who sought his rest elsewhere, farther away,  
a bed in the outbuildings, when was pointed out —  
truly announced with clear tokens —  
that hall-thane's hate; he kept to himself afterwards  
farther and safer, who escaped the fiend. (lines 138-143)

The onus of protection is placed upon the lord of the hall. While his remaining thanes may pay Hrothgar lip service, they understand intrinsically and demonstrate by their physical actions that their Protector can no longer protect them. He has, in effect, been symbolically castrated by the silent usurper, Grendel.

But this castration, this irruption of the Real, will be reciprocated; for as Lacan writes, the Real is that which always comes back (*SII* 49). The true phallic signifier is that instrument of Grendel's with which he terrorizes the denizens of the hall. The *Beowulf* poet will later note, as Beowulf himself affixes the trophy in place under the eaves of Heorot where all can gaze upon it, that its powerful signification is undeniable. This trophy is, of course, Grendel's arm: "It was a

clear sign, / when the battle-brave one laid down the hand, / arm and shoulder — there all together / was Grendel’s claw — under the curved roof” (lines 833-836).

Now I do not suggest that the poet, in affirming the status of Grendel’s arm as “a clear sign” (*tācen sweotol*), is thus affixing the status of a specifically *phallic* signifier to the arm even as Beowulf affixes the arm to the hall. But the poet does note that the arm signifies and does so clearly. The talismanic property of the arm for the poet and his audience is manifold: it is a wondrous encapsulation, a magical metonymy, of Grendel’s grisly bloodlust and fearsome destructive power. It is both a memorial for those who have met their death literally at its hand and a memento mori for those lucky enough to escape its clutch (but not enough to ultimately escape the clutches of death itself). It is an affirmation of the hero’s ability to overcome the odds and vanquish the terrifying thing that prowls in the dark, and by virtue of this is also a warning-sign to any Other(s) who might deign to bring war to Heorot—a warning-sign that fails spectacularly, we note, actually *drawing* harm to the hall-dwellers when Grendel’s mother arrives to reclaim it. As the poet affirms by way of a statement that is characteristically, deceptively simple: “there all together was Grendel’s claw.” Time does not erase any of these properties. Grendel’s arm is and should be all of these things for us, too. However, Grendel’s dismemberment is also both a literal and symbolic castration, the fatal consequences of his perverse *jouissance*.<sup>12</sup> His arm is therefore the signifier of the phallus in the first third or so of *Beowulf*—and an image of the phallus *par excellence*.

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<sup>12</sup> The meaning and place of the term *jouissance* (or ‘enjoyment’) in Lacan’s thought is fraught with complexity. Evans writes that “in 1960 ... Lacan develops his classic opposition between *jouissance* and pleasure ... . The pleasure [sic] principle functions as a limit to enjoyment; it is a law which commands the subject to ‘enjoy as little as possible’. At the same time, the subject constantly attempts to transgress the prohibitions imposed on his enjoyment, to go ‘beyond the pleasure principle’. However, the result of transgressing the pleasure principle is not more pleasure, but pain, since there is only a certain amount of pleasure that the subject can bear. Beyond this limit, pleasure becomes pain, and this ‘painful pleasure’ is what Lacan calls *jouissance*; ‘*jouissance* is suffering’ (S7, 184). The term *jouissance* thus nicely expresses the paradoxical satisfaction that the subject derives from his own symptom, or, to put it another way, the suffering that he derives from his own satisfaction (Freud’s ‘primary gain

Consider first the import given to *gripping* and *grasping* in the poem, both as concerns Grendel and as does not, leading up to the confrontation between Grendel and Beowulf. We can chart its progressive appearances in translation:

- In Grendel's first strike on the hall, he "grasped on their pallets / thirty warriors" (Michael Alexander, lines 121-122)
- Hrothgar exclaims that Beowulf is known to possess "thirty / men's strength, strong in battle, / in his handgrip" (lines 379-381)
- Regarding his impending clash with Grendel, Beowulf boasts, "with my grip / I shall grapple with the fiend and fight for life, / foe against foe" (lines 438-440)
- Recounting his battle with the sea monsters during his swimming match against Breca, Beowulf says that one monster dragged him to the bottom, "gripped me fast / in his grim grasp" (lines 554-555)
- Beowulf boasts that he will "entirely fulfill the wishes" of the Danes to be free from Grendel's terror, "or fall slain, / fast in the grip of my foe" (lines 634-636)
- When Beowulf seizes Grendel, the monster recognizes at once that he has never met a man "with a greater handgrip" (line 753)
- Grendel, unable to break free of Beowulf, "knew his fingers / were held in a hostile grip" (lines 764-765)

These instances of gripping and/or grasping are demonstrations of power, the same power—initially afforded to Grendel, but then assumed by Beowulf—that constitutes the authority and power projected by the signification of the phallus; that is to say, the phallic power is constituted in the poem not by any authority of office (such as Hrothgar's kingship, which is powerless in the face of Grendel's assaults) but by the ability to grip or grasp (in other words, to exercise physical control over) an enemy. On these grounds alone, we might be able to successfully argue that Grendel's arm, in its capacity to grip and grasp, is the signifier of the

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from illness'). ... Lacan states that *jouissance* is essentially phallic; '*Jouissance*, insofar as it is sexual, is phallic, which means that it does not relate to the Other as such' (S20, 26)" (91-92, s.v. "*jouissance*"). For an illuminating discussion of the relation between castration and *jouissance*, see Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* 99-101.

phallus—except that an arm, as it is a part of the body and is not ordinarily detachable, would not exhibit one of the fundamental characteristics that Laplanche and Pontalis ascribe to the phallus, namely that it have the status of “a detachable and transformable object” (313, s.v. “Phallus”; see above). We might compare notes here with Žižek: “you are not phallus, you possess phallus. Phallus is, as it were, something attached to you [and that can be detached from you] ...” (*Pervert’s Guide, Part 3*, my brackets).

As Grendel’s arm is detached, so is his phallic power; that power is bequeathed to the one who holds the signifier of the phallus in his grasp, namely Beowulf. Beowulf dismembers Grendel in an act of castration both literal and symbolic, thereby assuming the role Grendel’s absent father. He becomes both the Father of Prohibition who punishes transgression and also the Father of Enjoyment who enters into his own *jouissance* (the poet tells us that after the battle, Beowulf “rejoiced in his night-work, / his great courage” [lines 826-827]). The arm’s capacity to function, to borrow and recontextualize the words of the poet, as “a clear sign” of the phallus is now evident. Beowulf effectively transforms and transfers the phallic power he obtains from Grendel by detaching the latter’s arm to none other than Hrothgar, the “rightful” possessor of signified phallic authority due to his position as ruler of his people. Beowulf effects this transfer and transformation of power by hanging Grendel’s arm from the roof of Heorot. The act restores the lost phallic signifier of Hrothgar’s kingly authority:

Then in the morning was many a warrior,  
as I have heard, around that gift-hall,  
leaders of the folk came from far and near  
throughout the wide land to see that wonder,  
the loathsome one’s tracks. (lines 837-841)

The retainers who had been driven to the outlying buildings by Grendel’s attacks are now drawn back to the hall (they come from near), if only to gape at the massive limb that had once been so

threatening, now merely a harmless curiosity due to Hrothgar's permitting Beowulf to intervene in the Scylding's affairs. Additionally, travelers from other kingdoms are drawn to the hall in order to bear witness to Grendel's impressive footprints.

Grendel, as I note above, remains for us an enigma. He exists at an epistemological threshold, a space between what we know and what we do not, what we can and what we cannot. I have endeavored to shorten that gap, to draw closer to him, and to meet him in that space between.

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