John Gardner's Grendel and the Interpretation of Modern Fables

ROBERT MERRILL
University of Nevada, Reno

Nothing has become more unfashionable in the last ten years than explication du texte. No doubt in reaction against the New Critics, we have tended to stress "broader" considerations, whether historical, psychological, or philosophical. Sometimes, however, questions of textual interpretation must be faced if we are to avoid the most basic misunderstandings about the works we read and teach. A case in point is John Gardner's Grendel (1971). Gardner is one of our more respected contemporary writers, and Grendel is his most popular work, yet I think this book is usually read in such a way as literally to reverse Gardner's intended meaning. Insofar as Grendel deserves its emerging status, the interpretive problem is unfavorable.

As it happens, however, our problems in reading Grendel are very similar to our difficulties in reading such recent fabulations as John Barth's The Floating Opera (1956), Joseph Heller's Catch-22 (1961), Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five (1969), and many other well-known books in this mode. For reasons I will discuss later, modern fabulators have tended to produce works in which it is essential that we perceive the errors of their basically sympathetic protagonists. If we fail to note these errors, or if we interpret them inappropriately, we are in danger not only of misconstruing the author's meaning but of actually reversing it. As this problem is most acute in Grendel, I think that discussion of this text should provide a natural transition to the more general problem of interpreting modern fables.

I

"If the traditional hero is insane, then, who becomes the modern hero? As John Gardner realizes,

it must be Grendel—the monster who rejects all traditional values of his world needs only a few slight alterations to become a perfect absurd hero. Gardner's novel fits neatly into the category of contemporary absurdist literature."

—Jay Ruud

“What Grendel does is take, one by one, the great heroic ideals of mankind since the beginning and make a case for these values by setting up alternatives in an ironic set of monster values. I hate existentialism.”

—John Gardner

As these two quotations suggest, there is disagreement as to Gardner's meaning in Grendel. Indeed, the quarrel between Gardner and his critics is nearly absolute. Robert Detweiler has written that “Grendel is a retelling of the Beowulf legend from the monster’s point of view that depicts him as a relatively sympathetic character and Beowulf as a psychopath.” W. P. Fitzpatrick has seen Grendel as an “absurdist hero,” comparable to Camus' Caligula, with the following results: “Not only does Grendel challenge our perspective of medieval heroism, but it destroys whatever wisp of the 19th century visionary gleams might remain.” And Michael Ackland has summarized the experience of most readers: “... by the end of the narrative, the reader shares the deterministic insight that marked Grendel’s opening reference to life as being ‘Locked in the deadly progression of moon and stars’.” These and other critics have agreed with Bruce Allen’s assertion that “the meaning is existential,” whereas Gardner has said that he hates existentialism. How are we to account for such a drastic difference of opinion?

At this point it is customary to do one of two things. Either one quotes Lawrence’s famous dictum that we should trust the tale

1 “Gardner’s Grendel and Beowulf: Humanizing the Monster,” Thoth, 14 (Spring-Fall, 1974), 14.
and not the teller, or one dismisses the many quoted critics as wrongheaded or somehow lacking that crucial insight which will clarify everything. I would prefer to do neither. I happen to think that Gardner's version of Grendel is more reliable than that of his critics, but my basic intention is to explain why they have differed so radically. First, however, we must look more closely at the two readings.

The standard reading of Grendel assumes that Gardner chose to retell the story of Beowulf because he wanted to champion Grendel's "modern" point of view. In the first chapter, as if to emphasize the point, Gardner has Grendel repeatedly express his haunting sense of life's meaninglessness. Grendel believes that life is a mechanistic process in which "The sun spins mindlessly overhead, the shadows lengthen and shorten as if by plan," although there is no plan, no order, no organizer: "The sky says nothing, predictably. . . . The sky ignores me, forever unimpressed" (p. 6). It is one of Grendel's central arguments that mankind imposes its hopes and fears on mindless reality, thus establishing an artificial order by means of what Grendel calls "some lunatic theory" (p. 14). Grendel himself is a theorizer, but the difference between him and others is that he knows there is no connection between theory and reality—the heroic ideals that we associate with Beowulf are no more than whistlings in the dark designed to conceal the fact that "The world is all pointless accident" (p. 28).

In this reading Gardner establishes Grendel as a dark but poetic witness in order to comment on man's pretensions to civilization. Grendel has observed Hrothgar's rise to power, for instance, so he offers a sardonic account of how roving bands evolved into savage tribes. Here Grendel's point of view is in dramatic contrast to that of Hrothgar's scop, the Shaper. Where Grendel sees "crafty-witted killers that worked in teams" (p. 31), the Shaper commemorates "the glorious deeds of dead kings . . . his harp mimicking the rush of swords, clanging boldly with the noble speeches, sighing behind the heroes' dying words" (p. 34). Grendel is contemptuous of the Shaper's influence on Hrothgar's men ("Did they murder each other more gently because in the woods sweet songbirds sang?" [p. 49]), yet he concedes that even he is "swept up" by the Shaper's

* John Gardner, Grendel (New York: Knopf, 1971), p. 7. Unless otherwise noted, all future pages references will be to this text.
music (p. 48). Grendel’s observations on the Shaper are thus thought to point up the dangerous allure of art (the Danes are said to have “gone mad on art” [p. 43]), or, in broader terms, to expose the irrepressible human tendency to substitute consolatory myths for unpleasant realities.

As Grendel reports other attempts to explain or justify the Scyldings’ travails, we come to see that what the Shaper does so artfully is indeed a universal practice. The episodes involving Unferth, Wealthow, Hrothulf, and Ork illustrate this widespread desire to rationalize life’s apparent evils by means of saving fictions: that the life of the hero “makes the whole struggle of humanity worthwhile” (Unferth, p. 89); that “Meaning as quality” is a viable philosophy despite life’s quantifiable futility (Wealthow, p. 102); that revolution is a religious activity, amply justified as a visionary alternative to corrupt social norms (Hrothulf, p. 118); that religion is a “sweet fantasy” which offers relief from the crippling structures of “merely rational thought” (Ork, p. 135). Grendel’s role is to qualify or undermine these efforts to establish objective values in a meaningless world. Therefore Grendel humiliates Unferth, nearly kills Wealthow, remarks Hrothulf’s swinish conspiracy with an anarchist, and dismisses Ork and the other priests as lacking any real conviction. In this way Gardner “inverts the perspective of the heroic Beowulf”—an inversion climaxed by his ironic treatment of Beowulf’s victory over Grendel. For most readers, Gardner’s Beowulf is a moral cipher: a “cold-blooded fanatic,” “strangely mechanical, even mad,” a “hired mercenary” who is in reality “a moral monster.” Beowulf triumphs over Grendel only because the monster slips—a mere accident, as Grendel argues. The point is that the legendary Beowulf is for us an unbelievable, certainly an unsympathetic character. The true hero, as we suspected all along, is Grendel himself.

Two crucial assumptions inform this reading of Grendel. The second, that Grendel is a sympathetic and reliable narrator, follows naturally from the first: that Gardner is a “modern” who shares the vision of such writers as Beckett and Sartre. In fact, however, Gardner has said that Beckett is “wrong” and that Sartre is “a

---

5 Fitzpatrick, p. 5.
6 See Detweiler, p. 60; Ackland, p. 61; Allen, p. 527.
handy symbol of what has gone wrong in modern thinking.” The most relevant of Gardner’s pronouncements appear in his recent book on contemporary writing, On Moral Fiction (1978). Throughout this treatise Gardner keeps up a running attack on the very writers with whom he has been associated in most readings of Grendel. He berates “the cult of cynicism and despair,” arguing that an “art which tends toward destruction, the art of nihilists, cynics, and merdistes, is not properly art at all.” Nor does he refer to minor, unrepresentative figures—Mailer, Vonnegut, Heller, and Pynchon are among the many recent writers who are condemned. Such judgments follow from Gardner’s belief that “Great art celebrates life’s potential, offering a vision unmistakably and sentimentally rooted in love” (p. 83). As this would suggest, Gardner’s literary credo is unabashedly traditional; for him art is good “when it has a clear positive moral effect, presenting valid models for imitation, eternal verities worth keeping in mind, and a benevolent vision of the possible which can inspire and incite human beings toward virtue” (p. 18). For this reason, among others, Gardner insists that “again and again the ancient poets seem right, and ‘modern sensibility’ seems a fool’s illusion” (p. 125).

Everything Gardner has written makes it clear that the “nihilistic” reading of Grendel is improbable, but we do not have to rely on general remarks to determine Gardner’s intentions. In a review of Gardner’s critical study of the Wakefield Cycle, Martin Stevens objected to “Gardner’s apparent low esteem for the medieval consciousness,” a view he also found in Grendel, “justly praised . . . as a ‘revisionist’ fiction for its bold, inventive, and keenly humorous perspective of the Anglo-Saxon heroic ideals.” Gardner was sufficiently unhappy to respond in the next issue of American Scholar: “Those who have read Grendel will recognize, I hope, that [Stevens] is quite wrong about the book. My monstrous central character, Grendel, will believe in nothing he cannot logically justify. Scorning the Anglo-Saxon scop who reshapes reality into noble ideals, scorning the great Anglo-Saxon values, he grows


1 Gardner, On Moral Fiction, pp. 126, 6. Page references in this paragraph are to this text.

more and more vicious, more and more helpless, more and more existential until he commits a kind of suicide... I have been as faithful as possible to the Christian spirit of the epic." We should now see what kind of sense the book makes if it is read as Gardner intended.

At the time of the first chapter Grendel has been at war with Hrothgar for twelve years, so the ensuing narrative is an extended flashback designed to explain how Grendel came to believe that the world is all pointless accident. The crucial episode is Grendel’s visit to the dragon in chapter five. Gardner’s dragon is a remarkable character, given to quoting Sartre, Heidegger, and Whitehead (without acknowledgment), and certain of one basic truth: that ultimately nothing matters. The dragon “knows” this because he is able to see all time at once, rather like Vonnegut’s Tralfamadarians. And what he sees is no cause for celebration. His credo is “Ashes to ashes and slime to slime, amen” (p. 73); life, he argues, is “a brief pulsation in the black hole of eternity” (p. 74). So much for human aspirations! The youthful Grendel is drawn to the Shaper’s ideals, so he protests: “Why shouldn’t one change one’s ways, improve one’s character?” But the dragon will not take the question seriously: “‘Why? Why?’ Ridiculous question! Why anything?” (p. 72). The dragon’s influence on Grendel is decisive, for after visiting his cave Grendel finds that “Futility, doom, became a smell in the air, pervasive and acrid as the dead smell after a forest fire” (p. 75). Grendel’s war with Hrothgar follows, inspired by the monster’s now firm conviction that human values are insubstantial myths designed to get us through the night. The Grendel we meet in chapter one is the product of this encounter, where “the old dragon, calm as winter, unveiled the truth” (p. 20).11

For Gardner, however, the dragon’s “truth” is despicable. “The Dragon looks like an oracle,” Gardner has said, “but he doesn’t lay down truth... He tells the truth as it appears to a dragon—that nothing in the world is connected with anything. It’s all meaninglessness and stupid, and since nothing is connected with anything the highest value in life is to seek out gold and sit on

10 Letter to the editor, American Scholar, 44 (Spring, 1975), 340-41.
11 As Hellen B. Ellis and Warren U. Ober remark, “Grendel has allowed himself to be captured by the dragon’s metaphysics.” See their “Grendel and Blake: The Contraries of Existence,” English Studies in Canada, 3 (Spring, 1977), 94.
it. . . . My view is that this is a dragonish way to behave, and it ain’t the truth. The Shaper tells the truth, although he lies.”

Grendel makes the wrong choice, then, when confronted with “the alternative visions of blind old poets and dragons” (p. 90). The dragon despises mankind for living according to consoling myths, but Gardner believes that “Real art creates myths a society can live instead of die by, and clearly our society is in need of such myths.” Indeed, Gardner has insisted that we should deny “the myth of blind mechanics” in favor of “the myth of connectedness.” If the choice is ours why choose chilly visions of an abandoned world and skies which are forever unimpressed? Why not choose such “myths” as love and courage?

Having made his fatal choice, Grendel proceeds to mock Unferth’s belief in heroism, Wealthoe’s personal integrity, and Ork’s religious theory that good comes from evil. These actions do not so much expose man’s predilection for comforting illusions as they reveal the disastrous consequences of accepting the dragon’s point of view. When he dies, for example, the Shaper is mourned by a female admirer who presents what is obviously a superb image of human dignity. Grendel’s response is to regret never having physically abused the poet: “I should have cracked his skull midsong and sent his blood spraying out wet through the meadhall like a shocking change of key” (p. 146). Grendel should have done this to “prove” that the dragon was right—everything is arbitrary, all values are fictional, nothing matters. In fact, of course, he would only have proven how pernicious the dragon’s influence had been. From his encounter with the dragon to his death at the hands of Beowulf, Grendel acts very much like one of those contemporary writers Gardner has condemned for celebrating ugliness and futility.

Gardner has characterized the Grendel of Beowulf as a “cosmic outlaw,” “a creature of sinnihte, perpetual night.” Of the poem itself he has said, “It is just as clearly, on one level, a celebration of the best possible human being living by the best possible hu–

---


man—perhaps divinely inspired—code."\textsuperscript{15} If we recall that Gardner wanted to be as faithful as possible to the Christian spirit of the epic, we can only conclude that Beowulf is the novel's true hero. Once again Gardner has been admirably clear about his aims: "So I write a book in which there is a dragon who says everything a nihilist would say, everything the Marquis de Sade would say; and then at the end of the book there is a dragon who says all the opposite things. He says everything that William Blake would say. Blake says a wonderful thing: 'I look upon the dark satanic mills; I shake my head; they vanish.' That's it. That's right. You redeem the world by acts of imagination every time you pick up a baby."\textsuperscript{16} The dragon who says all the opposite things is of course Beowulf, whose superiority is not an accident or a matter of physical strength, as Grendel supposes, but rather his commitment to that healthy life of faith which Gardner has so explicitly praised.

The connection between Beowulf and the dragon is made by Beowulf himself as he takes physical control of Grendel. His first words are an exact repetition of the dragon's despairing description of life as a random movement of atoms: "A meaningless swirl in the stream of time, a temporary gathering of bits, a few random specks . . . Additional refinements: sensitive dust, copulating dust . . ." (p. 170; see pp. 70–71). This startling parallel suggests that Beowulf's long speech to Grendel is a conscious refutation of the dragon's beliefs:

As you see it (the world) is, while the seeing lasts, dark nightmare-history, time-as-coffin; but where the water was rigid there will be fish, and men will survive on their flesh until spring. It's coming, my brother. Believe it or not. Though you murder the world, turn plains to stone, transmogrify life into I and it, strong searching roots will crack your cave and rain will cleanse it: The world will burn green, sperm build again. My promise. Time is the mind, the hand that makes (fingers on harpstrings, hero-swords, the acts, the eyes of queens). By that I kill you. (p. 170)

In this eloquent speech Beowulf accuses Grendel of "murdering" the world by denying his own deep but non-rational connections with it. Beowulf's "promise" is that spring will indeed come again,

\textsuperscript{15} "Pulgentius's Expositio Vergiliana Continentia and the Plan of Beowulf: Another Approach to the Poem's Style and Structure," Papers on Language and Literature, 6 (Summer 1970), 254, 247, 262.

\textsuperscript{16} Bellamy, pp. 177–78.
so long as the human mind (imagination) keeps faith with itself, as it has in the exemplary acts of the Shaper ("fingers on harp-strings"), Unferth ("hero-swords"), and Wealthow ("the acts, the eyes of queens"). Grendel's denial of life's "strong searching roots" has produced that very rigidity he mistakenly perceived as inevitable.

Beowulf's message is indeed Blakean, which should surprise no one familiar with Gardner's other writings. Gardner's Blake is a poet who stands for the redemptive power of the imagination—Gardner's own theme, as he once told John Howell.17 Blake's message, as Gardner and many others have understood it, demands that we reject the dictates of pure reason (Urizen) and heed instead the creative impulses of the imagination (Los or Orc). Grendel, however, "will believe in nothing he cannot logically justify." This is to say that Grendel accepts the Urizen-like authority of the dragon. It should now be apparent that this nihilistic rationalism is what Gardner wants to caution us against by means of Grendel's negative example. Indeed, Gardner's point is that the logical and despairing Grendel is all too representative. Though we may protest (like Grendel himself), we moderns have become monstrous precisely to the extent that our assumptions parallel those of the Beowulf-poet's—and John Gardner's—Grendel.

II

Why have Gardner's intentions remained hidden from so many of his readers? I think the answer lies in the nature of his intentions. Gardner has acknowledged that he is a "philosophical" novelist, one whose principal materials are the major ideas of the twentieth century; he has gone so far as to concede that a work such as Grendel is "indifferent to novelistic form." But he has also said that he does not like fictional characters who are the "bloodless embodiment of ideas"; such characters should be "subjects for the artist's open-minded exploration of what he can honestly say." In the same spirit, Gardner has admitted that his own characters like to preach—"they prattle on endlessly, all on different sides"—but insisted that he does not start out knowing which side of the

17 See Howell, p. xi.
argument will become his own. I believe there is a real question as to whether Gardner's several aims can be reconciled. He wants to present a benevolent vision of the possible which can inspire and incite human beings toward virtue, but he does not want to include "obvious" clues as to his own philosophical preferences. His confident assumption is that he can perform the fabulator's task without establishing clear authorial norms. The critical reception of Grendel suggests that this assumption is somewhat naive.

Grendel embodies Gardner's fictional theories almost perfectly. Gardner himself is anything but the bloodless embodiment of an idea. We end by feeling, as Helen Ellis and Warren Ober have remarked, that Grendel resembles Milton's Satan in his capacity to engage our sympathies: "Indeed, by the time of Grendel's fatal combat with . . . Beowulf, the reader has long since surrendered to the fascination of Gardner's lovable, 'pointless, ridiculous monster.'" This is Gardner's intention, of course. His rhetorical strategy is first to seduce us into identification with Grendel, then to reveal the terrible consequences of believing what Grendel believes. He wants to surprise us into virtue, or at least self-examination, by challenging our most basic assumptions. The greater our initial identification with Grendel, the greater our shock and self-recognition at the end. As Wayne Booth was the first to point out, however, first-person narration is a wonderful device by which to achieve reader identification but ill-suited to establish an ironic perspective on one's narrator. When the protagonist narrates his own story, it is difficult to work into the text sufficient clues that he is in many ways unreliable, even wrong. At what point in Grendel do we become aware that Grendel's seductive point of view is inadequate? The novel's reception suggests that most of Gardner's readers never reach this point.

The problem is that Gardner's complex form encourages his readers to identify with a character they must ultimately reject—a most difficult fictional maneuver. If this problem were unique to Grendel, it would be of interest only to students of John Gardner. In fact, however, Gardner's strategy resembles that of many modern

---


19 Ellis and Ober, p. 90.

fabulators, most of them American. The relevant works include Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Albert Camus' *The Fall* (1956), Barth's *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* (1958), Heller's *Catch-22*, Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1963), Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), and Gardner's *The Wreckage of Agathon* (1970). These books all share the rhetorical intention so cryptically embodied in *Grendel*: the desire to impress upon us the great value of our lives despite the worst that can be said (or shown) about the modern condition. Their authors faced a common problem in trying to translate this desire into persuasive fiction: how does one make such a point to an audience which cannot be expected to share this faith? How does one show a sophisticated reading public that its cynical beliefs are the problem itself, not a "realistic" response to the problem? The fabulators cited above have responded to this narrative quandary by adopting the rhetorical structure of Gardner's *Grendel*. Formally speaking, the result has been a distinguished series of negative *exempla* which have been misread in ways which recall the example of *Grendel*.

By glancing at three representative texts, I hope to clarify the nature of this common problem in interpreting modern fables. Barth, Heller, and Vonnegut have been less explicit about their intentions, so I will have to depend rather more on my own understanding of their works to make my point; what they have said, however, confirms their essential agreement with Gardner's beliefs and fictional methods. It is therefore somewhat ironic that Gardner himself has attacked two of these writers as "nihilists." Gardner's criticisms were not directed at the works I will be discussing, but I think that his failure to recognize Heller and Vonnegut as common spirits testifies to the trickiness of the form in question. (It may also expose Gardner's limitations as a critic, of course—limitations remarked by almost all reviewers of *On Moral Fiction*.)

Barth's first novel, *The Floating Opera*, should remind us of *Grendel* itself, for it too is a first-person account in which the narrator offers an extended explanation of how he came to nihilistic conclusions about the world. Like Grendel, Barth's narrator, Todd Andrews, is an intelligent, witty, and persuasive figure, one whose observations seem thoroughly reliable. As Todd calmly assesses our chances of ever discovering objective values, we naturally come to
share his skepticism. Indeed, though we are surprised by Todd’s
decision to commit suicide, announced with such great serenity at
the beginning of the book, we proceed to work our way through
more than 150 pages of his narrative without supposing that we
are sharing the observations and conclusions of a moral monster.
At the end, however, when Todd nonchalantly sets in motion a
suicide plan which will kill the other 699 passengers aboard The
Floating Opera, including his friends the Macks and their daughter
Jeannine (quite possibly Todd’s child), the effect is like the one
Gardner intended in Grendel. The “logic” of Todd’s position is
totally compromised, as we are suddenly confronted with the con-
sequences of acting on behalf of nihilistic beliefs.

The method and plan of The Floating Opera are similar to
Gardner’s but Barth manages to avoid the extreme interpretive
problem I have described above. For one thing, Barth’s method is
not quite so radical, as he does keep us somewhat distanced from
his dispassionate narrator. The most crucial difference is in the
conclusion, however. Todd’s actions in response to his philosophical
“discovery”—i.e., that “nothing is intrinsically valuable”21—are
no less logical than Grendel’s, but they are so outrageous as to be
morally unacceptable. Grendel kills Hrothgar’s men, it is true, but
this is in the context of violent conflict; he threatens to kill Weal-
theow but finally allows her to live; his final thoughts about the
Shaper remain thoughts, however ugly. Todd’s decision to murder
699 people is a much less ambiguous resolution. In this crucial
respect The Floating Opera is a less subtle book, one which employs
a similar strategy but does so rather more clearly.

Yet even Barth’s version of a negative exemplum has produced
critical uncertainty, if not confusion. Occasionally Todd’s actions
have been silently endorsed, as when John Stark ignores what Todd
does as a character and emphasizes his function as an “artist”:
“Despite all his self-consciousness, Todd never realizes that his role
as author by itself makes his life meaningful.”22 More often, recent
critics have sensed that there is something wrong with Todd’s
behavior, but they have been reluctant to draw moral conclusions.
Enoch Jordan has remarked that Barth’s ending forces the reader

p. 136.
“to re-evaluate his responses to Todd’s philosophy,” but Jordan declines to spell out what this revaluation would involve.23 Others have chosen to question Todd’s physical and mental condition rather than his philosophy, suggesting, in their respective readings, that Todd suffers from venereal disease or schizophrenia.24 In effect, these critics have diagnosed Todd’s nihilism as a symptom rather than as an error. Instead of seeing Todd as wrong, they have preferred to see him as sick. They have been unwilling to confront his decision at the end as the logical conclusion to his philosophizing as well as to his story—indeed, two of them have gone so far as to assume that Todd knew his suicide plan was physically impossible.25 I believe that all such readings derive from the fact that Barth is not “present” in his own narrative to assure us that Todd’s actions are indeed monstrous. Confronted with an urbane, intelligent narrator whose views mirror our own, we have proceeded to “explain” his aberrations or even to embrace them.

Heller’s Catch-22 is not a first-person narrative, so it might seem to be a different case altogether. In fact, however, Heller’s novel involves much the same problem as Gardner’s or Barth’s. As David Richter has shown, Catch-22 is artfully constructed to expose the ultimately serious nature of the military bureaucracy (read: any bureaucracy), a system which initially seems so comical.26 By the time we reach the Eternal City chapter, some forty pages from the end of the book, this funniest of novels has ceased to inspire any kind of laughter; we have seen the skull beneath the skin in too many horrifying ways. Finally we get to the very guts beneath the skin, in the form of Snowden’s entrails, and we get his famous secret as well: “The spirit gone, man is garbage.”27 This turns out to be a fairly positive “secret,” however, for it implies that man does possess a spirit worth defending. Indeed, it is in defense of this spirit that our hero, Yossarian, finally refuses

to fly additional missions or to be returned to the United States as part of a deal with Colonel Cathcart, his commanding officer.

Yossarian’s decision to desert, so curiously positive in its implications, completes a narrative pattern strikingly similar to that which informs *Grendel* and *The Floating Opera*. Once again we have an extremely sympathetic protagonist whose perceptions and conclusions seem exemplary. Once again the perceptions involve life’s deadly chaos, while the conclusions are basically quietistic. From the time he flies over Ferrara twice, losing one of his planes as a result, Yossarian knows the terrible truth about the war in which he has been forced to participate—that it can be fatal to anyone at any time. And he knows as well that the military is unconcerned with this truth, unconcerned with justice, unconcerned with anything save the appearance of efficiency and “success.” Yet Yossarian persists in drawing the wrong conclusions. He always seems to be protesting against the system’s injustices, as when he stands naked to get his medal for going over Ferrara twice, or when he moves the bomb line to delay the mission to Bologna, or when he criticizes Milo Minderbinder. Yet Yossarian’s protests are symbolic gestures—nothing less but nothing more. He continues to fly Cathcart’s missions and to tolerate Milo—as if there were no essential connection between his rebellious gestures and the nature of his world. Indeed, this is the assumption which unites Grendel, Todd Andrews, and Yossarian. Each believes that he can do nothing to influence his absurd world; at best he can thrust a disgusted finger in the air, as Grendel does, or pursue reason to its logical end, as Todd does, or make his feelings known through symbolic acts, as Yossarian does. Such is the absurd hero’s “fate” in an absurd world. But these heroes are wrong, as each book is structured to reveal. Yossarian is wrong when he acts as if he had no choice but to suffer the constraints of the system. When he deserts, Yossarian finally does something that will affect the system: he ceases to serve it. Heller’s implication is that effective action is possible if we are prepared to accept responsibility for our acts.28

The ending of *Catch-22* has been misread in a number of ways. Jean Kennard speaks for many others in defining Heller’s world as absurd in both the philosophical and commonplace meanings of

---

the term: "There is no talk of love or even of close friendship in the book; the pleasures of life are purely physical—food, liquor, sex—just as the only real horror is physical pain and ultimately death." 29 Those who deplore this point of view have tended to see Yossarian as acting irresponsibly to save his own overvalued skin. Those who find this point of view more sympathetic have tended to see Yossarian as acting out the logical consequences of his philosophy. "In an absurd universe," Frederick Karl paraphrases, "the individual has the right to seek survival . . . one's own substance is infinitely more precious than any cause." 30 I think that both groups err in perceiving no significant change in Yossarian's point of view at the end. Those who do see this change have been hard put to define it. They have spoken in general terms about Yossarian's spiritual growth, but they have not seen that Yossarian's growth is away from the views he espoused earlier—including the view that one's own substance is infinitely more precious than any cause. They have therefore missed the true source of Yossarian's superiority: his discovery that there are greater horrors than physical pain and death, specifically that death of the spirit which would attend collaboration with the Colonel Cathcart's of his world.

Heller endorsed this reading in one of his note-cards for Catch-22: "In making the decision to desert [sic], Yossarian accepts the responsibility he now knows he has to the other men. As he says, he is not running away from his responsibilities, but to them." 31 Heller was no doubt thinking of the ending when he referred to Catch-22 as "a liberal book" and "an optimistic novel with a great deal of pessimism in it." 32 Described by a close friend as "an ultra-liberal," 33 Heller believed at the time he wrote Catch-22 that evil is a human creation, the product of human institutions which need to be recognized for what they are and changed. He has therefore remarked that Yossarian's "acceptance" of Milo is crucial to his

29 Number and Nightmare (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1975), p. 45.
meaning, for this non-action reinforces "the theme of insanity accepted without any eye-blinking." \(^{34}\)

What unites Heller's critics is their unwillingness to dissociate the author from his protagonist, especially the Yossarian who is depicted early in the book. For over 400 pages we are encouraged to admire Yossarian and to share his point of view; then, in the final fifty pages, a significant reversal alters both his perspective and our own. After attending so long to our hero's apparently admirable sanity, many readers overlook the belated change in Yossarian or find it unconvincing. The analogous problem in *Grendel* involves the role of Beowulf. Here the novel's philosophical hero makes his first appearance in the last fifteen pages. After sharing Grendel's point of view for the first 150 pages, readers find it difficult to accept the abrupt introduction of a character who represents the author's ultimate values. Yet the drastic shift in perspective at the end of both *Grendel* and *Catch-22* follows naturally from each writer's desire to shock us into recognition of our unhealthy beliefs. The problem is therefore inherent in the form of each work.

My final example, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is perhaps closest to *Grendel* in its philosophical burden. Like Gardner, Vonnegut is concerned with the problem of quietism, a philosophy rooted in the common conviction that modern life is beyond the influence of responsible individuals. Like Gardner, Vonnegut creates a sympathetic protagonist who adopts a deterministic philosophy in order to make sense out of life's apparent randomness. Vonnegut's "hero," Billy Pilgrim, learns this philosophy from the Tralfamadorians, as Vonnegut makes playful but significant use of the conventions of science fiction. Because his earlier life was so desperate, and because he achieves such magnificent serenity after his conversion, Pilgrim's "religion" is extremely tempting; certainly we are made to feel the immense attraction of the Tralfamadorian point of view (so similar to the dragon's). Further, the novel's narrator, "Kurt Vonnegut," obviously sympathizes with Pilgrim and is drawn himself to the comforts of quietism. Indeed, the function of Vonnegut's persona is to acknowledge just how tempting it is to believe, with the Pilgrims, that there is nothing to be done about life's injustices. By the end of the book, however, Vonnegut

\(^{34}\) "An Impolite Interview with Joseph Heller," pp. 290, 293.
wants us to see the terrible consequences of giving in to such beliefs. He illustrates these consequences in two parallel episodes very reminiscent of a scene in Grendel. Recall that when Grendel asks the dragon why he shouldn’t try to alter his character, the dragon replies: “‘Why? Why?’ Ridiculous question! Why anything?” (p. 72). When Billy Pilgrim is captured by the Tralfamadorians, he inquires of his captors: “Why me?” The Tralfamadorians reply: “Why you? Why us for that matter? Why anything?” This makes perfect sense to the Tralfamadorians, who believe that there is no logic—no why—to anything in life. In all its ugliness, life simply is. Later, one of Billy’s fellow prisoners is beaten gratuitously by a German guard. “Why me?” the prisoner asks. “Vy you? Vy anybody?” the guard answers.35 This parallel suggests that to adopt the Tralfamadorian point of view is to encourage just such brutal excesses. As both Gardner and Vonnegut realize, men and women insist on their ability to advance the good and restrict the bad. Indeed, they must do this whether they are in a position to act effectively or not. Otherwise, in a very real sense, they will cease to be men and women. They will be monsters such as Grendel or automatons such as the Tralfamadorians and Billy Pilgrim.36

The interpretive problem with Slaughterhouse-Five is roughly the same as with the books already discussed. The objective evidence of the text is supposed to persuade us that the Tralfamadorian philosophy, as reflected in such characters as General Rumfoord, is humanly unacceptable. Yet the seductions of this philosophy, so clearly dramatized in Pilgrim and acknowledged by “Vonnegut” himself, are rather more obvious to most of Vonnegut’s readers. Even such excellent critics as Alfred Kazin and Tony Tanner have agreed that “The main idea emerging from Slaughterhouse-Five seems to be that the proper response to life is one of resigned acceptance.”37 As it happens, Vonnegut has rejected this “idea” on many occasions. He has said that he believes writers should be

36 For a full development of this argument, see my article (with Peter A. Scholl), “Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five: The Requirements of Chaos,” Studies in American Fiction, 6 (Spring, 1978), 65–76.
"agents of change" and that he admires George Orwell "almost more than any other man." 38 "I like Utopian talk," he once remarked, "speculation about what our planet should be, anger about what our planet is." 39 This liberal spirit is reflected in his advice to a class of Bennington graduates: "Military science is probably right about the contemptibility of man in the vastness of the universe. Still—I deny that contemptibility, and I beg you to deny it." 40 Slaughterhouse-Five is a book in which Vonnegut acknowledges man's contemptibility and then begs us to deny it. The book is therefore much like Grendel, The Floating Opera, and Catch-22. For those who come to perceive the author's ultimate drift, there is an extraordinary shock of recognition which effectively questions the reader's most basic values. For those who fail to note the shift in meaning, there is unthinking acceptance of a philosophy more or less the opposite of the author's. Such are the exquisite dramatic values, but also the risks, of the rhetorical form practiced by each of these writers.

This form seems to be a distinct tradition in modern fiction. Modern fabulators have incorporated numerous novelistic techniques into the rhetorical form of the fable, believing that their fictions would benefit from the dramatic (often visceral) effects made possible by the devices of the modern novel. 41 In Grendel, for example, the techniques in question are those by which Gardner gave dramatic life to his narrator. I have tried to show that other fabulators have used similar techniques for similar ends. They have done so to enliven their works, but also to resolve what might be called the modern fabulator's dilemma. Committed to presenting an honest account of life's apparent chaos, as perceived by such sympathetic observers as himself, he has also been committed to a personal vision of life's possibilities which is anything but despairing. 42 The narrative pattern I have described is an ingenious attempt to do justice to both commitments. In fully rendering his protagonist's perception of chaos, however, the fabulator has made it all but impossible to present his alternative vision with comparable

38 Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons (New York: Delacorte, 1974), pp. 237, 94.
39 Bellamy, p. 206.
40 Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons, p. 165.
41 This is one of Richter's major arguments in Fable's End.
42 I say "he" because all of the fabulators who employ the form I am discussing are men. Flannery O'Connor is the most important female fabulator of our time, but her works do not follow the pattern I have outlined.
dramatic force. His dilemma has been that he could not choose one commitment or the other—not if he would be true to his observations and his vision. Instead, he must render both in as realistic a form of the fable as anyone has yet written. The resulting negative exempla constitute a brilliant but misunderstood chapter in the history of modern fabulation.

A few final remarks. I have referred to the dilemma of modern fabulation, but my use of the term was a touch imprecise. A dilemma involves two unattractive alternatives, whereas modern fabulators, in developing a highly dramatic version of the fable, have achieved effects quite beyond the scope of such earlier practitioners as Bunyan, Swift, Johnson, and Voltaire. In saying this I do not mean to imply that modern fabulators are superior. After all, they have sacrificed complete intellectual clarity in order to achieve their dramatic effects. Nor do I mean to suggest that their rhetorical form is altogether original. Unreliable narrators have existed through the ages, and works such as "A Modest Proposal" are clear enough analogues. In the nineteenth century several major novelists focused on unreliable, nihilistic protagonists, as in Melville's Pierre, Lermontov's A Hero of Our Time, and Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground, Crime and Punishment, and The Brothers Karamazov. In our own time, however, this strategy has emerged as a dominant one, informing an unusual number of works. Moreover, these more recent books have differed from their nineteenth-century precursors in being conscious fables, something like a formal cross between Candide and The Brothers Karamazov. This comparison between nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts might be extended, but it is not my purpose here to write a history of this form. Instead, I would like to close by emphasizing that these recent fables are a good deal more optimistic than modern fiction is usually alleged to be. Only by continuing to misread these works can we maintain the critical cliché that ours is a literature of despair.

43 I would like to thank Peter J. Rabinowitz for pointing this out to me and supplying some of the examples.
44 I wish to thank the Research Advisory Board of the University of Nevada, Reno, for a summer grant which supported the writing of this essay.