THE ANAGOGIC QUALITIES
OF JOHN GARDNER’S GRENDEL

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the anagogic qualities of John Gardner’s novel Grendel utilizing various Christian theological approaches as well as Gardner’s own theories concerning the nature of literature through his concept of “moral fiction.” The thesis examines key problems at the center of contemporary studies on the relationship between religion and literature that are implicit in Grendel and more explicitly expressed in Gardner’s writings on literary theory. Each issue concerns the existential dilemma faced by post-modern western Christian writers: the difficulty in establishing a viable Christian point of view supported by a sustainable poetics within a secular culture still influenced by the legacy of atheistic existentialism; the perceived inadequacy of exploring religious experience as a correlative to the literary creative process; the paradox of the writer’s role as both creature and creator in an existential universe; and the essentially mystical nature of the process, meaning, and purpose of literary art intrinsic to some religious views of literature and its incompatibility with atheistic existentialism. The thesis argues that Grendel is Gardner’s answer to the contemporary Christian writer’s existential dilemma. Gardner’s novel represents a synthesis of modern/post-modern existentialism and traditional Christian beliefs that
tropes the atheistic existentialist view that “existence precedes essence.” The Christian realist and existentialist theology/philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich provide the metaphysical framework for this argument, along with various approaches to the relationship between religion and literature provided by Dorothy Sayers, Stanley Romaine Hopper, Chad Walsh, Nathan Scott, Giles Gunn, and others. Together, these approaches form the tentative basis of a sustainable Christian poetics that validates Gardner’s theory of moral fiction—exemplified by *Grendel*—thus establishing a religious approach to literature that supports a Christian world view able to meet the needs of the post-modern writer in his struggle with the seeming limits imposed by the continued influence of atheistic existentialism inherent in much of contemporary literary theory.
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INTRODUCTION

John Gardner (1933-1982) was one of the most prolific and controversial writers of his time. His reputation rose with the publication of his first critically acclaimed novel, *Grendel* (1971), which established him as a major writer. *Grendel* was followed by a succession of best selling works that only added to his standing. Later, however, his reputation fell precipitously, following the controversy caused by one of his last major works, a treatise on contemporary literature, called *On Moral Fiction* (1978), in which Gardner argues that “[A]rt is essentially and primarily moral—that is life-giving—moral in its process of creation and moral in what it says.”¹ While the statement by itself was provocative enough for the time, it was his harsh criticism of many of the most celebrated writers of the day that fueled the ensuing controversy. Neither the statement nor the controversy that followed it, however, reveal the full implications of Gardner’s thesis—an unstated belief in the religious foundation of art and literature. It is this assumption most of all that made *On Moral Fiction* so out of tune with its time.

*Grendel’s* success and *On Moral Fiction’s* failure, ironically, are inversely related. One of the reasons *Grendel* was hailed as a great success was because it seemed, superficially at least, like a superlative example of the post-modern, experimental, often negative, cynical, and even nihilistic literature that characterized much of the period in its style, technique, and general philosophical outlook—the kind

of literature that *On Moral Fiction* so harshly criticized years later. To Gardner, however, there was no contradiction between *Grendel* and the views that he would later express in *On Moral Fiction* because the difference between *Grendel* and the works criticized in *On Moral Fiction* lies in its “process of creation” and in “what it says”—its means and its ends—not in its particular style or subject matter, which for Gardner only represents the means, and only that in a limited sense.

The style of *Grendel* employs the same post-modern techniques associated with *metafiction* that were used by many of the writers Gardner bitterly assails in *On Moral Fiction*; while the subject matter of the novel—atheistic existentialism and the dialectic between faith and reason—was more than just its subject: it was also the philosophical/spiritual problem that the novel was designed to address. Gardner utilizes the very same elements of style, technique, and subject matter identified with the “bad art” he criticizes in *On Moral Fiction*. He criticized such art not because of its technique, or even its subject matter, but rather because metafictionist techniques were often used in service of negative and nihilistic worldviews. Gardner also believed that, in the work of many writers, the technique also became its own end. *Grendel* only superficially resembles such works, in that, while it employs the same devices,

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3. Joyce Renwick and Howard Smith, *John Gardner: An Interview* (Dallas: New London Press, 1980), 18. In this interview, Gardner states that “The novel *Grendel*, it seems to me, is about reason and faith. *Grendel* is again and again given the opportunity of believing something which western civilization has held up as a value.” The key word here is “faith.”

purpose serves a different end. The style, technique, and subject matter of *Grendel* are only a means to that end. In addition to this, the views expressed by Gardner’s main character are not the *author’s* views, as was too often the case, Gardner believed, in many of the works criticized in *On Moral Fiction*, but rather the views expressed by popular atheistic existentialism, which Gardner believed was the dominant philosophical influence for much of modern and contemporary literature. It was this element that Gardner criticized in the works of many of his colleagues, not style or subject matter, but attitude and philosophical disposition, in short, the author’s *vision*. Critical reviews of *On Moral Fiction* did not appreciate this distinction. The book was viewed within a narrow context that centered upon basic, traditional ethics, which many critics viewed as simply an expression of Gardner’s “justification of his own moralism.”  


6. Ibid., 533. After criticizing Gardner for his “righteous tone,” Flower states here that “What Gardner misses most in contemporary literature is belief,” without seeming to understand or care what the implications are for Gardner’s argument, if belief were, in fact, the basis of his thesis.

One of the reasons for the critical failure of *On Moral Fiction* was the perception that it was *solely* concerned with ethics. In some ways, Gardner is partly responsible for this misunderstanding: the book is clumsily written and marred by what one critic correctly observed as its avoidance of God as a “first premise” for a theory on
the morality of art and literature. What Gardner did, however crudely, stumble onto in *On Moral Fiction* were the rudiments of a viable proto-Christian poetics that was creatively realized, earlier, in the meaning and purpose of his first successful novel, *Grendel*.

Despite Gardner’s reluctance to openly state that what he calls moral fiction is actually rooted in a Christian world view, *On Moral Fiction* implicitly reflects a belief in God (or *gods*, as Gardner couches it), and that God is, indeed, the unstated “first premise” of his theory. Gardner writes that what true art is about is the “preservation of the world of gods and men.” He freely uses language loaded with religious connotations, speaking of “the soul,” “eternal verities,” “faith,” or even going so far as to quote at length Leo Tolstoy’s “What is Art?,” a polemic in which Tolstoy, as Gardner explicitly makes clear and even amplifies, argues that “the ideal held up in a proper work of art comes from God, was originally revealed in action by the life of Christ the intermediary.” Yet it is still puzzling that while Gardner uses such an explicit statement as Tolstoy’s to support his argument for moral fiction he would not only not acknowledge God as the foundation of his theory, but would at times deny that such an acknowledgement was even necessary, once stating that “I would not insist that the

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9. Ibid., 26-29.
religious impulse of art requires God as its foundation.”¹⁰ In On Moral Fiction, however, he says, “[O]ur quarrel with the moralist position on art comes down to this: we cannot wholeheartedly accept the religious version of the theory because we are uncomfortable with its first premise, God.”¹¹ Despite the religious overtones of the book, he never fully confronts the issue again in On Moral Fiction. Gardner seems clearly conflicted on this point.

A possible clue to Gardner’s conflicting views on the role of religion and God’s place in his theory of moral fiction can be found in his essay “A Writer’s View of Contemporary American Fiction,” an essay that sheds light on this conflict.¹² In this essay, Gardner sets up a “system” to examine contemporary American fiction and to show where he believes writers have gone wrong:

Though most of the writers I plan to mention would dislike my calling them religious, American writers now at work fall into five main groups: (1) religious liberals and liberal agnostics (often indistinguishable); (2) orthodox or troubled-orthodox Christians; (3) Christians who have lost their faith and cannot stand it; (4) diabolists; (5) heretics.¹³

Gardner goes on to explain the evolution of American literature: from the earliest Puritan settlers, who came here escaping religious persecution; to the Puritan’s turn as persecutors of other religious groups, such as the Quakers; to eastern establishment rationalists and transcendentalists; free thinkers without religion who settled the

¹¹ Gardner, On Moral Fiction, 41.
¹³ Ibid., 166.
American west; waves of Eastern European immigrants, who brought their religions with them; and so on.\textsuperscript{14} He then loosely places various writers into each category (often humorously) and explains how each religious (or nonreligious) world view shapes the literature that each writer produces. It does not matter the validity of such an approach to explain American literature; although, some researchers who study the relationship between religion and literature, like Giles Gunn, have commented on “the oddly religious character of the American literary imagination.”\textsuperscript{15} What does matter, however, is that Gardner places himself among the “troubled-orthodox Christians,” which, more than likely, explains his inner conflict as to where to place God in his theory of moral fiction. In addition to this, orthodox Christian writers, troubled or not, share with the apostate, according to Gardner, a certain superficial similarity of style and an affinity for metafictionist technique that only the “perspicacious eye can make out” and in doing so discovers “a world of difference [in that they] use their methods for different ends.”\textsuperscript{16}

The difference that Gardner is referring to between the orthodox Christian (troubled or not) and the apostate is that the apostate actually accepts “the rumor of God’s death.”\textsuperscript{17} The apostate also shows an affinity for “fashionable French existentialist bullshit,” as Gardner indelicately puts it, and emphasizes “the

\textsuperscript{14} Gardner and O’Nan, “A Writer’s View,” 166.


\textsuperscript{16} Gardner and O’Nan, “A Writer’s View,” 172.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 170.
meaninglessness of life.”

The apostate then uses his many metafictionist tricks of narrative and stylistic innovation in an attempt to either prove his predetermined philosophical beliefs, which is often the only point of the work, or writes his story from an *a priori* philosophical stance (an artistically dishonest approach, to Gardner, considering his belief that fiction is an exploratory process of discovery); or the apostate simply settles to wade in the waters of extreme rationalism, self-indulgence, and/or misery, nihilism, and despair, any of which he might consider his existential phenomenological experience; whereas, the orthodox Christian has a far more rooted world view, according to Gardner, and uses his art to affirm the good, or at least, if he is a troubled orthodox Christian—to work out his own salvation. Whichever the case, each is faced by an existential dilemma, and each makes a choice. Moral fiction—for orthodox writers who pursue it—chooses to affirm the good.

In light of this mutual existential dilemma and similarity in style and technique, it is not hard to surmise that *Grendel* may have been praised and *On Moral Fiction* may have been condemned—for the wrong reasons. As stated earlier, many critics simply missed the point—of both works. Both works are inextricably related. Without an approach that includes the basic tenets of *On Moral Fiction*, *Grendel* could not have been written and without *Grendel* (and much of Gardner’s other works, not to mention the works of his many students), *On Moral Fiction* would be nothing more than a clumsy aesthetic in search of a proof. The heart of Gardner’s theory is not just about

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simple ethical or superficial artistic choices, but rather the life and death choices of the soul (from the Christian perspective) that only the ground of all truth can support and, if Gardner is right, the power of art—at its best—can sometimes reveal. *On Moral Fiction* tries to articulate this unpopular truth, and *Grendel* embodies it.

*Grendel* is about ultimate choices—choices of real consequence. Grendel, the man-eating monster from Europe’s oldest vernacular epic, *Beowulf*, is a metaphor for what the post-modern writer (and post-modern man) has become: a word-spinning, conflicted, rationalist pseudo-philosopher, filled with dread, pain, and confusion; a brute, pretending to be a God in a world that will not have one—a world, ironically, of his own making—all the while wondering how things got this way, only to discover that it need not be so. Grendel also, however, realizes that he has a choice. For Gardner, the choice for the writer is between the tendency towards extreme rationalism, despair, and fatalistic nihilism, or searching out the twisted roots of truth and affirming the good through moral fiction.

*Grendel* is the artistic embodiment of post-modern man’s existential dilemma, and moral fiction is the post-modern poetics that informs its creation. This thesis will examine how Gardner achieved this authentic, artistic synthesis of existentialism and Christian theology by focusing upon its anagogic qualities, that is to say, its religious, spiritual, and even mystical (though Gardner would reject the term) process of creation that *On Moral Fiction* insists is of equal importance to what any work of art actually says.
PART I

THE PROBLEM OF POINT OF VIEW
CHAPTER 1
A MONSTER’S POINT OF VIEW

Grendel is the retelling of events found in the Old English heroic age epic poem Beowulf, as it might have been told from the monster’s point of view. Manipulation of point of view is a common feature of much of the fiction of post-modern writers.¹ Gardner believed that this technique was the culmination of the evolution of narrative fiction since the late eighteenth-century and that it represents, as many scholars believe, a turn from the objective—God-like—vantage point associated with the classical tradition towards a more subjective, inward looking, personal perspective characteristic of modern and contemporary literature.² The evolution of literary point of view mirrors that of the evolution of existentialist philosophy: from Kierkegaard’s insight that religion is a personal experience, establishing the subjectivity of truth and the necessity of pain and suffering to reach a religious state of being; to Nietzsche’s view that the will to power is what defines man in an indifferent, Godless universe; to Heidegger’s existentialia, which frees man to question his own existence because existence precedes essence, to find his true identity and fulfill his destiny; to Sartre’s philosophy of negation, the freedom to say, “No,” rejection of the Other, allowing man the freedom to become whatever he wishes to be.³ The parallel to literature is no accident of history.

². Ibid., 182. One of the scholars that Gardner credits with this insight is Leslie Fielder.
Ever since Aristotle corrected Plato’s error concerning the nature of *mimesis*, the development of philosophy has been inextricably intertwined with the development of literature in the Western world. In addition to this, the separation of literary art from other forms of art and even from other forms of writing privileges literature as a philosophical activity, according to Aristotle, as he states in chapter 9 of the *Poetics* when comparing the difference between history and poetry:

The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with meter no less without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.

Aristotle’s observation suggests that philosophy has a much larger role in the shaping of literature than may be the case with other activities, as in the case of history; therefore, the development of narrative fiction—which is an evolution of point of view from the objective to the personal vantage point, mirroring the development of existentialist philosophy—should surprise no one. It is merely a reflection of the role that philosophy has always played in the shaping of Western literature. In addition to this, the soul searing experience of two terrifying World Wars in the first half of the twentieth-century made it all but inevitable that existentialism would become the dominant philosophical influence on modern culture. The question, philosophically, is what

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aspects of existentialism are present in contemporary literature and are its arguments still valid. As the example of Plato and Aristotle demonstrates, philosophies come and go with the advent of new approaches to old problems. Part of the popular appeal of existentialism in the twentieth-century is that it seemed to reflect the world as experienced by those who lived through a terrifying period of political, social, and even religious upheaval—a period it seemed to have been born to define. What about now? Does existentialism, more specifically, popular atheistic existentialism, really explain human experience? Does it reflect the true nature of human reality? These are the questions posed by John Gardner’s novel *Grendel*.

The protagonist of Gardner’s novel, the monster Grendel, is an existentialist. He narrates his own story, which begins with what he calls “the twelfth year of my idiotic war.” Grendel’s “war” is with humanity. He is both fascinated and repulsed by men. At first he wishes to join them, but soon realizes that he can never be part of their world and eventually comes to hate them. He does not, however, see himself as part of the animal or natural world, either. He sees himself isolated from everything, even from his own mother, who has lost the ability to speak that he has somehow retained. He has contempt for his fellow creatures, plaintively asking the sky, “Why can’t these creatures discover a little dignity?” to which there is no reply. He is frustrated, angry, and full of self-loathing, calling himself a “Pointless, ridiculous monster crouched in the shadows,”


7. Ibid.
stinking of dead men, murdered children, martyred cows.”

He is, however, aware of his potential represented by a dark chasm, below the cliffs, that serves as a constant reminder to him that “I could die.”

He even dismisses this reminder, however, by rationalizing that the bowels of the chasm can not “snatch” him “unless, in a lunatic fit of religion, I jump.”

Grendel’s dark chasm symbolizes both his eventual death and his existential choice. The full responsibility for both, as he sees it, rests with him. The reference to a “lunatic fit of religion” identifies Grendel as an atheistic existentialist.

When the reader meets Grendel, he is near the end of a long chain of experiences that he relates to the reader in flashbacks, often in stream of consciousness fashion, that chronicle the events of his life and eventual death. Grendel takes responsibility for his murderous actions without apology or excuse and without any appeal or justification for his acts, other than the solipsistic belief that he alone exists:

I understood that the world was nothing: mechanical chaos of casual, brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears. I understood that, finally and absolutely, I alone exist. All the rest, I saw, is merely what pushes me, or what I push against, blindly—as blindly as all that is not myself pushes back. I create the whole universe, blink by blink.—An ugly god pitifully dying in a tree!

The passage is more nihilistic than existentialist, but Grendel is at the end of his journey.
when the novel begins. Gardner demonstrates that atheistic existentialism ends in a form of nihilism and absurdity when taken to its logical conclusion. Paul Tillich has said that “This is the ontological character of the state described in classical theology as the *bondage of the will.*”\(^{12}\) It is a state that ends in “estrangement” from others and “even being itself.”\(^{13}\)

This form of nihilism is born of the rejection of the *Other,* that is, other objects of consciousness, which includes all other entities that are not the self because for atheistic existentialism the possibilities of consciousness are threatened by the *Other.*\(^{14}\) The “ugly god pitifully dying in a tree” is a triple reference: it is a foreshadowing of Grendel’s eventual death; a blasphemous reference to the death of Christ on the cross; and it is also an allusion to Jean Paul Sartre’s novel, *Nausea,* as we shall soon see. This last reference is of particular importance because the solipsism, “I alone exist,” is also attributable to Sartre, even though, as Paul Strathern points out, Sartre “escapes the strictest solipsism” by stating that “Consciousness (nothingness) has an object (being).”\(^{15}\) That qualification aside, Grendel is, nonetheless, a Sartrean existentialist.

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13. Ibid., 146.


To John Gardner, Jean Paul Sartre was the symbol of “what has gone wrong in modern thinking” because, though Sartre was not the first existentialist, he was the most popular, especially among those for whom existentialism was as much a fashion as it was a philosophy. Popular existentialism, like popular Freudianism, were to Gardner “discredited gospels” that, nonetheless, continue to have an influence on society. With the publication of Nausea, in 1938, Jean Paul Sartre became the most famous spokesman for existentialism and an international celebrity.

Gardner’s allusion to Sartre’s novel in Grendel, is a reference to what Strathern calls “a celebrated passage” in Nausea, in which the main character, Roquentin (a thinly disguised Sartre), “confronts and ‘experiences’ the root of a chestnut tree. In an even more profound way than when one’s face loses its familiarity in the mirror, for Roquentin the particularity of the chestnut tree becomes utterly alien and yet absorbing.” In Nausea, Sartre describes the scene this way: “It no longer had the inoffensiveness of an abstract category; it was the glue of actuality, this root was molded in existence . . . the diversity of things, their individuality was only an illusion, a veneer. This veneer had melted, giving way to moist solidity, monstrous and chaotic—nude, fearfully and obscenely nude.” The passage was intended to

17. Ibid., 24.
demonstrate the absurdity of reality and how consciousness is the only key to existence: the quintessential existential experience.\(^{20}\) Strathern points out, however, that it was under the influence of mescaline and its hallucinogenic effects that Sartre first encountered the vision of the chestnut tree root he later described in *Nausea*.\(^{21}\)

Gardner also uses imagery and symbolism associated with trees throughout *Grendel*. Two distinct occasions involve the possibility of Grendel’s death: the first occurs when Grendel makes his solipsistic statement that “I alone exist,” which is made after he gets his foot caught in the crack where two tree trunks join and fears that he will die after being attacked by a passing bull; the second occurs following his fatal encounter with Beowulf. Like Sartre’s Roquentin, Grendel has his own unique, fully conscious existential experience, but it does not lead to a realization of the “monstrous” “absurdity” of Roquentin’s reality, but instead, a moment of meaning and clarity:

> I am weak from loss of blood. No one follows me now. I stumble again and with my one weak arm I cling to the huge twisted roots of an oak. I look down past stars to a terrifying darkness. I seem to recognize the place, but it’s impossible. ‘Accident,’ I whisper. I will fall. I seem to desire the fall, and though I fight it with all my will I know in advance that I can’t win. Standing baffled, quaking with fear, three feet from the edge of a nightmare cliff, I find myself, incredibly, moving toward it . . . some monster inside me . . . moving me slowly to my voluntary tumble into death . . . I no longer feel pain . . . *Is it joy I feel?*\(^{22}\)

Leading up to this fateful moment, Grendel observes that “Every rock, every tree, every crystal of snow cries out cold-blooded objectness. Cold, sharp outlines, everything


\(^{21}\) Ibid., 41.

\(^{22}\) Gardner, *Grendel*, 173.
around me: distinct, detached as dead men. I understand.”

The experience is the complete opposite of Roquentin’s existential experience in Sartre’s Nausea. Grendel’s reaction or recognition, expressed as “joy,” and the “desire” to fall, reflect what Paul Tillich considers the expression of a natural human concern: “Man is ultimately concerned about his being and meaning. . . . Man is infinitely concerned about the infinity to which he belongs, from which he is separated, and for which he is longing.”

Grendel has reached this place not through any merit of his own, but through grace.

It is also significant that the roots of the tree that Grendel “clings to” as he dies are those of an oak and not the “monstrous” “long snake, rotting at my feet” of Sartre’s chestnut tree. The oak was worshipped as a sacred tree by the ancient Celtic Druids. Later, it was incorporated into Christian symbolism as a symbol of Christ; it was believed to be the tree from which the cross was made. It was also viewed as a symbol of the Virgin Mary, which is also significant, because as Grendel realizes his impending death after his battle with Beowulf, he calls to his mother, “Mama, Mama! I’m dying!,” preceding the experience of his final moments at the foot of the oak. Also, Grendel’s mother saves him in his first encounter with men, an event that follows his encounter


24. Tillich, quoted in Modern Christian Thought, 141.


27. Ibid., 18.
with the bull, while Grendel’s foot is still stuck between the two trees, after the bull
gives up its attack and departs. The Christian imagery here is unmistakable:

And then, just when I was sure I was finished, a shriek ten times as loud as mine
came blaring off the cliff. It was my mother! She came roaring down like
thunder . . . Then her smell poured in like blood into a silver cup, filling the
moonlit clearing to the brim, and I felt the two trees that held me falling, and I
was tumbling, free into the grass. [emphasis added]

The allusion to the cup of the Eucharist in this passage involving Grendel’s “salvation”
from the men who are about to kill him prefigures, ironically, the loss of blood which
Grendel suffers after his encounter with Beowulf, which is a reversal of the “pouring
in” simile Gardner employs here. Grendel’s eventual death is due to this blood loss,
which, ironically, also leads to his moment of existential clarity. The “two trees” from
which he is freed are also a subtle allusion to the Cross, which is a combination of two
pieces of wood, one vertical and one horizontal. The “moonlit” clearing in which this
takes place is also noteworthy. The Virgin Mary is often depicted with the moon at her
feet. These images all come together in the death of Grendel, but at his death, his
mother does not come to save him, and his atheistic existential experience becomes a
religious existential experience. What was mocked figuratively by Grendel when he
was saved by his mother from the warriors becomes reality for him paid for in real
blood, his own and, for the Christian, that of the God he mocks. His experience is both
physical and metaphysical. It is a synthesis of the material and the spiritual, the finite

29. Ferguson, Signs and Symbols, 25.
encountering the infinite, the presence of which, in the words of Chad Walsh, “only negates the negations.”

Gardner does more than simply allude to Sartre’s *Nausea* and its solipsistic view of the world, he tropes it, reversing its meaning by taking one of its most celebrated passages, Roquentin’s experience of the chestnut tree, and making it the moment of *spiritual* truth for his own Sartrean antihero’s existential journey.

Ironically, Gardner was able to achieve this effect because existentialism is not a completely “discredited gospel,” which Gardner knew when he criticized Sartre, whom he also credits with having at least some “right answers.” In addition to this, as Giles Gunn has pointed out, many modern theologians, like the aforementioned Paul Tillich, have adopted theological approaches that address modern man’s existential dilemma. Gunn credits Tillich’s correlative approach to theology with showing how “the existential analysis of the human dilemma ultimately finds its answer in the Christian belief about Jesus as the Christ.” While Grendel does not exactly become a Christian (as far as we know), the Christian imagery and symbolism that Gardner uses throughout the novel makes that, at least, a possibility. Gardner leaves Grendel’s *eternal* fate, if a monster is granted to have such, up to God and the reader. The seeming ambiguity of *Grendel’s* ending allows the reader to make his own choice, which may be why some readers have chosen to misread the novel as Grendel’s tumble into a kind of existential


33. Ibid., 27.
oblivion of nonbeing. Such a reading may explain why reviews of the novel were so overwhelmingly favorable, given the tenor of the times. But such a reading also seems to run counter to the internal logic of the symbols presented in the novel. Or, perhaps, the critics understood it perfectly well, but prefer their religion dressed up as fashionable literature. Whatever the actual case, *Grendel* is about redemption.

The existential choice that Gardner presents is not only Grendel’s but also the reader’s. Like many existential novels, *Grendel* forces the reader to honestly examine his own condition, which is an area in which some critics, like Chad Walsh, believe that existentialism has made a significant contribution:

> They [existentialist writers] express man’s agonizing sense of aloneness in a world where God is dead, and society is just one solitary figure after another, bumbling around in the darkened confusion . . . But to picture such a world is not a retreat from society; rather, it is an attempt to understand it. The physician who says, ‘I’m afraid it looks like cancer,’ is a realist, not an escapist."34

As Walsh’s statement indicates, existentialism, like Christianity, forces man towards what Paul Tillich has called, “the courage to be.”35 The crucial difference for Gardner and Tillich, however, is that one can only find such courage rooted in the ground of all being, twisted though those roots may seem, like Grendel’s oak. It took Grendel’s death for him to find that kind of courage, but it only took *Grendel*’s author a change of point of view, to look out at the world through his rivals’ eyes, to see what the “monsters” see, bidding them that they someday do the same.


CHAPTER 2

THE SHAPER AND THE DRAGON

The two characters who have the greatest influence on Grendel’s existential journey are the Shaper and the dragon, foil characters, who each have an influence on the young monster. Grendel voluntarily submits to these influences. He is pleased and dismayed by the effect that the Shaper and the dragon have upon him and strangely compelled to seek out both. The Shaper represents the power of art and its ability to educate the emotions, as Aristotle might put it.¹ The dragon represents extreme, fatalistic rationalism. Though influenced by both, Grendel continues to follow his own path, learning from the Shaper the paradox that the truth can be a lie well told, and from the dragon, the paradox that extreme rationalistic truth is a fatal lie.

Grendel’s first encounter with The Shaper leaves the young monster completely baffled by the old, blind harpist’s ability to transform the ruthless, brutal King of the Scyldings, Hrothgar, into a noble and worthy leader of the perpetually warring tribes of Northern Europe—by only the power of his songs.² Before the Shaper arrived, Grendel had witnessed the sheer savagery of endless seasons of war and mayhem through which Hrothgar and his confederates gained control over their rivals; yet, somehow, the Shaper’s songs reinvent that history.³ The Shaper also nearly reinvents Grendel, who is so moved, at one point, he attempts to make peace with the warriors, only provoking

² The Shaper is a *scop*, an Old English poet or bard.
them to attack him, which further alienates him. Grendel knows the truth of Mankind’s brutal history; yet, he somehow also believes the Shaper’s version of events. For Grendel, the Shaper is a liar, who plays his moving songs for favor and “for a price.” Grendel, nonetheless, is still often moved by the power of the Shaper’s art.

Gardner writes in *On Moral Fiction* that “Art, in sworn opposition to chaos, discovers ‘by its process’ what it can say. That’s art’s morality.” Considering the tribal chaos that existed before Hrothgar’s consolidation of power, he and his Scyldings do possess a kind of virtue, given the extreme conditions of the Dark Ages. In *On Moral Fiction*, Gardner speaks of a moral foundation of “relative absolutes,” a kind of preliminary foundation, or as Marilyn Edelstein restates it, a “contingent foundation,” that may later give way to a more absolute foundation. The Shaper’s praise of Hrothgar and his ancestors rests upon such a contingency. Hrothgar and his people are indeed flawed, but the peace and prosperity he brings to the land is praiseworthy. Grendel says of the Shaper that “He knew his art. He was king of the Shapers. . . . That was what had brought him . . . to Hrothgar’s famous Hall.” Hrothgar needed the best of the Shapers to preserve his newly won consolidation of power. The Shaper simply affirms the good.

5. Ibid., 42.
The Shaper is able to reshape events because of his superlative artistry, which helps the Danes to establish the beginnings of a civilization. The Shaper, therefore, is not a “liar,” but rather a skilled artist who uses his art for the betterment of his people. His purpose, as Gardner has stated, is to “affirm the good,” to remind the people of the chivalric values of loyalty, courage, and honor and to exhort them to respect Hrothgar, who has provided for them through his conquests, albeit in brutal and barbaric fashion.

The Shaper’s art is a practical one, an art that serves its time and its place. This is one of the points that Gardner emphasizes in *On Moral Fiction*: art is not a set of idealistic prescribed rules, or mere self-expression, but an approach that “seeks to improve life, not debase it. It seeks to hold off, at least for a while, the twilight of the gods and us.” The Shaper’s role, similar to that of a King, a philosopher, or any other leader within a society is to keep at bay the inherent anxiety that attends the human condition. Reinhold Niebuhr has said of this state of perpetual anxiety:

The statesman is anxious about the order and security of the nation. But he cannot express this anxiety without an admixture of anxiety about his prestige as a ruler and without assuming unduly that only the kind of order and security which he establishes is adequate for the nation’s health. The philosopher is anxious to arrive at truth. He is never as completely in possession of the truth as he imagines. . . . Man is afraid to face the problem of his limited knowledge lest he fall into the abyss of meaninglessness.  

Leaders of nations face the same existential anxiety as the ordinary individuals who make up the society. Niebuhr believes that this anxiety is born of the paradox of

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“freedom and finiteness,” being both “limited and limitless.”¹¹ This condition, however, need not, as Niebuhr points out, degenerate into self-destruction, though it eventually does, due to the “occasion for sin” it provides.¹² The Shaper’s job is to remind the people of those values that have established them as a people to keep the culture alive for as long as possible. What Grendel sees as “lies,” Hrothgar and his people see as contingent truths, the potential to inspire a people to build and maintain a society.

Grendel sees the effects of the Shaper’s art on the Scyldings, as Hrothgar’s power increases and civilization takes root, and in a fit of anger, born of envy and despair, succumbs to the temptations of the dragon, who has been an unseen influence all of his life. Upon hearing the Shaper’s story of creation and learning that he belongs to the “dark side,” a member of the “terrible race God cursed,” Grendel reaches the depths of despair, after coming out into the open, pleading peace and friendship to the warriors, only to be attacked by them. He escapes. Soon after, he visits the dragon.

The dragon is a fatalistic rationalist, who can see the past, present, and future. He spends his time alone in his cave counting his treasure. His awareness of everything makes him seem god-like. In some ways, his philosophy resembles that of Alfred North Whitehead’s *Process and Reality* without, however, Whitehead’s belief in an Aristotelian, “eminently real unmoved mover.”¹³ The Dragon knows everything that has

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¹² Ibid., 182-186.

happened and will happen. His view is that everything is connected by process, interrupted by wrinkles in time, followed by apocalypse that, in turn, becomes part of the process, in an endless, meaningless, interconnected cycle of apocalypse, followed by a repeat of the process.

Grendel does not understand or care much about what the dragon says because he is still, at the time, under the influence of the Shaper, but dares not reveal his thoughts out of fear. The dragon informs Grendel that his place in the world is to improve man by stimulating him as a “brute existent” against which man can measure himself.\textsuperscript{14} He also tells Grendel, “You \textit{are} mankind, or man’s condition.”\textsuperscript{15} Unbeknownst to Grendel, the dragon has also placed a charm on him, where no weapon can harm him. When Grendel later discovers this, it does not take him long to become the nihilistic creature we meet at the beginning of the novel.

Grendel comes to realize that not only is he living in a world without God, he is also living in a world without heroes. Part of Grendel’s attraction to the Shaper’s art was its celebration in song of the heroic deeds of Hrothgar’s Danes and their ancestors, but after Grendel visits the dragon, and his later realization of his invulnerability to the weapons of the Scyldings, Grendel’s final descent into nihilism is complete in his humiliation of the young warrior Unferth, whose pathetic attempt at chivalric heroism ends with Grendel’s refusal to kill him, lest he validate the young warrior’s belief in the

\textsuperscript{14} Gardner, \textit{Grendel}, 73.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
redeeming value of heroism, which Unferth sees as providing the only meaning that the world has to offer:

No man above us will ever know whether Unferth died here or fled to the hills like a coward. Only you and I and God will know the truth. That’s inner heroism. . . . Except in the life of a hero, the whole world’s meaningless. The hero sees values beyond what’s possible. That’s the nature of a hero. It kills him, of course, ultimately. But it makes the whole struggle of humanity worthwhile.\textsuperscript{16}

Grendel destroys the young man’s hope for honor in battle by cynically carrying him back to Hrothgar’s Meadhall after he falls asleep in Grendel’s cave, exhausted by his futile attempt to kill the monster. Unferth becomes disillusioned by this humiliation.

The result of Grendel’s treatment of Unferth is that it allows Grendel to reason that there are no values of any kind and that the entire world is meaningless and that he alone exists. Before this final step into complete solipsism, however, Grendel also has to reject the two figures that had the greatest influence upon him, the Shaper and the dragon.

After dismissing Unferth’s notions of heroism as meaningless, Grendel adds, “So much, also, for the alternative visions of blind poets and dragons.”\textsuperscript{17} The ironic contrast of “blind poets,” who literally see nothing, yet, figuratively, see much, and “the dragons,” who literally see everything, but again, figuratively, see nothing emphasizes the contradiction between art and rationalism, emotion and reason, and the paradox that the vision that each supplies somehow gives meaning to existence. For the Shaper, it is

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  \item \textsuperscript{16} Gardner. \textit{Grendel}, 88-89.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 90.
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to acknowledge and affirm the good through his song and his stories; for the dragon, it is contentment with his fatalistic view of the universe and counting the treasure in his lair: they represent the spiritual and material aspects of existence, fractured fragments from the whole of existence. In addition to this, while the artist may, indeed, be compromised by “pay,” as Grendel believed the Shaper was, and while rationalism leads to a selfish, fatalistic view of the world, as it does in the case of the dragon, both the Shaper and the dragon, nonetheless, like Unferth, represent a belief in something, which is untenable for a soul like Grendel, who has reached the state of what Tillich calls sinful estrangement: “Parts of the self overtake the center and determine it without being united with other parts. A contingent motive replaces the center which is supposed to unite the motives in a center but it is unable to do so.”

Without the influence of either emotion or reason, Grendel becomes the “cursed” creature of the dark side the Shaper told of in his songs. Grendel does have a brief relapse after he encounters the beauty of Hrothgar’s young queen, Wealtheow, but overcomes it after an ugly attack upon her at the Meadhall. Grendel sums up his transformation by describing himself as being “born again,” observing that “I had hung between possibilities before, between the cold truths I knew and the heart-sucking conjuring tricks of the Shaper; now that was passed: I was Grendel, Ruiner of Meadhalls, Wrecker of Kings!”

18. Tillich, quoted in Modern Christian Thought, 146.
Empowered by his horrific epiphany, Grendel terrorizes the Scyldings like never before, becoming even more isolated—alone—completely alienated. He also becomes bored with the lack of challenge in his dominance of the Danes. Curiously, he relieves his boredom by sitting in the center of the ring of gods “musing” on them. Tillich has observed that those in a state of sinful estrangement seek salvation, often, without even being consciously aware of it. Grendel does become excited by the arrival of strangers led by a large powerful looking man, eerily familiar, and who strangely enlivens him, despite Grendel’s growing awareness that this strange man is also quite dangerous.

A blind, infirm, old priest, Ork, happens upon Grendel among the statues of the gods. Grendel humors himself, by pretending to be “The Destroyer,” a major deity of the Scyldings. The old priest is shaken and falls to his knees. Grendel then asks Ork, “Tell us what you know of the King of the Gods,” in an effort to amuse himself, but he is shaken when the old man’s answer leaves him at a loss of what to do next:

He is the eternal urge of desire establishing the purposes of all creatures. He is an infinite patience, a tender care that nothing in the universe be in vain. . . . Such is His mystery: that beauty requires contrast, and that discord is fundamental to the creation of new intensities of feeling. Ultimate wisdom, I have come to perceive, lies in the perception that the solemnity and grandeur of the universe rise through the slow process of unification in which the diversities of existence are utilized, and nothing, nothing is lost.

Grendel is momentarily stunned and unable to respond to the old priest’s words.


His encounter with the old priest gives Grendel just a fleeting glimpse of hope that is quickly forgotten, but reemerges in a series of dreams both waking and sleeping, where Grendel finds himself staring into an abyss, on the precipice of a cliff, clinging to the twisted roots of an oak, occasionally accompanied by vaguely remembered encounters with the stranger, the leader of the Geats, who has come to the aid of Wrothgar—to kill the monster. Grendel senses that this is not their first encounter.

The reader knows that the “stranger” to whom Grendel refers is Beowulf, though he is never named in the novel. But this is not the Beowulf of the vernacular elegiac poem named after him, which provides the source material for Gardner’s novel. This Beowulf is a Christ-like figure who appears to Grendel to be otherworldly in both appearance and manner. This is significant. Although the original poem was written by a recently converted Christian Englishman, he was writing about the pagan warrior culture of the Danes and Swedes, trying to remain true to its oral tradition and its pagan context that pre-dates the establishment of Christianity in northern Europe, but as Joseph Campbell has pointed out, “[O]ne of his great points seems to have been that God, the Christian deity, had had care for those old warrior folk, far though they were from Jerusalem.”23 Campbell goes on to observe that, though the original story was Christianized by the transformation of the monsters of the Celto-Germanic tradition into the descendents of Cain, the poem’s ending with the funeral of Beowulf (which is not a part of Gardner’s novel) has “nothing of the Christian spirit: no thought of sin,

forgiveness, or Heaven, but the old Germanic virtues only of loyalty and courage, pride in performances of duty, and, for a king, selfless, fatherly care for his people’s good,” which the *Beowulf* poet, one could argue, stressed as the contingent foundation upon which Christianity was able to build *its* foundation.24

The Christianization of the story of Beowulf through the demonization of the monsters, who were not originally represented as spiritually or morally evil in the oral tradition of the ancient Celts, but were transformed by an “age already of mixed traditions,” as Campbell notes, redefines these creatures as beyond redemption, even though they were seen in their own cultural context in a way similar to that of the dragon’s view of Grendel in Gardner’s novel as the “brute existent” that man measures himself by and improves himself against.25 Campbell, however, goes even further than this view of the possible role of the monsters in ancient Celto-Germanic culture:

It is thus even possible that originally in the *Beowulf* saga the monsters were conceived not as fiends but as the guardians of natural forces, to be not killed but *quelled* and integrated. In fact, their residence in the Land below Waves suggests an association with those chthonic powers that have always been recognized as dangerous and frightening yet essential to all life. And in the subsequent adventure, of Beowulf against Grendel’s dam, a sense pervades the scene rather of nature’s terrible wonder than moral evil and crime.26

In a sense, *Grendel* completes the story of the original *Beowulf* by creating a monster that, despite its modernization, is in *spirit*, in some ways, more in tune with what the original pagan story might have been than its Christianized version. It is the monster of


25. Ibid., 114.

26. Ibid., 118.
this lost raw material of a story that is to be killed, or to use Campbell’s words quelled and integrated, by the Christ-like Beowulf of Gardner’s novel, not the beyond redemption ancestor of Cain of the poem that has come down to us, which would be a literal interpretation of the myth, the poem, and the novel as though all are dealing with actual historical events instead of metaphors. In all three cases, each artist is merely attempting to preserve something worth preserving, as J.R.R. Tolkien said of Beowulf:

In Beowulf we have, then, an historical poem about the pagan past, or an attempt at one—literal historical fidelity founded on modern research was, of course, not attempted. It is a poem by a learned man writing of old times, who looking back on the heroism and sorrow feels in them something permanent and something symbolical.27

In similar fashion, Gardner also wants to preserve the achievements of the past, but he also wishes to preserve what is of value to the present, which is also at risk, as well.

Grendel is about redemption, not just the redemption of the meaning of the symbolic monsters of the original Beowulf, which provide only a part of a contingent foundation to root the novel’s story, but the redemption of the real monsters of the present—atheistic rationalistic nihilists, who threaten not only the legacy of Beowulf, but that of human culture and society itself, in Gardner’s view. Grendel is a metaphor for this modern/post-modern world view and its destructive power. Gardner goes back to the oldest literary work in the English tradition to demonstrate how point of view affects the meaning of a work, not just stylistic point of view as to what vantage point from which a story is told, but the philosophical and religious point of view of the

writer: his *vision*. Gardner’s manipulation of point of view goes much further than simply allowing Grendel to tell his own story for mere artistic interest; it is done, also, to affirm truth. By Christianizing Beowulf instead of Christianizing the monsters, as the *Beowulf* poet had done, Gardner frees Beowulf to quell a new kind of monster, a monster called *modern man*, born from the very literary tradition that *Beowulf* began.

Just before the arrival of the Geats with their strange leader, the Shaper dies. Grendel witnesses his death and broods over the fact that he did not take advantage of the opportunities he had to kill him; yet, he still attends the old, blind poet’s funeral and is affected by his death, lamenting, “End of an epoch, I could tell the King. We’re on our own again. Abandoned.”28 Grendel’s mother tries to warn him not to go to the funeral, making strange sounds that Grendel can barely make out, but understands as “*Beware the fish.*”29 He ignores her warning; he has lost all feeling for her and considers her insane.

Beowulf is associated with Christian symbols and imagery in several descriptions of him in the novel. Grendel’s mother’s warning, “*Beware the fish,*” incorporates the most obvious reference, since the fish is a symbol of Christ. Grendel, too, remarks that “He had no more beard than a fish.”30 He also observes that as Beowulf talks, “I found myself not listening, merely looking at his mouth, which moved—or so it seemed to me—independent of the words, as if the body of the stranger

29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 154.
were a ruse, a disguise of something infinitely more terrible." The word *infinitely* as well as Beowulf possessing a body that may not appear to be what it actually represents is a reference to the incarnation. *Infinitely* also refers to a specific interpretation of the incarnation, that of Hellenistic and Platonist influenced Christianity, which Reinhold Niebuhr writes, reconciles the finite with the infinite:

> For it [Hellenistic and Platonist Christianity] the problem of human existence is not primarily the problem of sin but the problem of finiteness. Its concern is to prove that God can speak to man and make Himself known . . . This type of Christianity does not give a Greek or Platonic answer to the problem of time and eternity but it is Greek in regarding this problem as primary. The answer which it gives is a triumph over Greek dualism . . . the assurance His final word to man is not one of judgment but of forgiveness and mercy.

The eventual confrontation between Grendel and Beowulf promises to resolve Grendel’s existential dilemma in all of its dimensions. Perhaps, it is for this reason, despite his growing fear, Grendel strangely looks forward to his meeting with the odd leader of the Geats, boasting like the true Scylding he once wanted to become, “I’ve broken the backs of bulls no weaker than he is.” He fears Beowulf, nonetheless.

Grendel’s last attack on Hrothgar’s Meadhall is over before it really even begins. He does get to eat one of the Geats, but when he grabs the second, it is Beowulf, who grabs Grendel’s arm in return and then, at least to Grendel, appears to grow wings and has fire in his eyes, and mouth, and the words that he whispers to Grendel are those of the dragon. Beowulf mentions in his litany of words, whispered into Grendel’s ear,

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“fingers on harpstrings, hero-swords, the acts, the eyes of queens. By that I kill you.”

The dragon, The Shaper, Unferth, Wealthow all represent values and choices that Grendel rejected throughout his life: reason, emotion, heroic courage, and beauty; any one of which would have given his life at the very least a contingent meaning that could lead to an awareness of greater meaning if empowered by faith. Beowulf slams Grendel into walls, tables, and the floor to affirm the reality of things and then makes him “sing” about them: just as Beowulf embodies the rationality of the dragon, he also embodies the creative power of the Shaper; he reconciles all of the contradictions of dualism and affirms the reality of the world from which Grendel has alienated himself. As Niebuhr has written, the incarnation gives “assurance that the gulf between the finite and the eternal, between man and God, between history and superhistory is not unbridgeable.”

This is why Gardner makes his Beowulf a Christ-like figure. What worked for a pre-Christian pagan society is of little use to a post-modern secular society estranged from the roots of its Christian origin.

Finally, Beowulf rips off Grendel’s arm, sending the monster running into the darkness of the woods to the precipice that has been waiting for him all of his life that represents his existential choice, as he reaches, finally, for the twisted root of the oak that has haunted his dreams. The joy that Grendel feels before his voluntary tumble into death is the final affirmation of the ultimate reality of truth, beauty, courage, and finally, grace. From this new point of view, there is no mention of lunacy.

34. Gardner, Grendel, 170.

35. Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, 144.
PART II

THE PROBLEM OF PROCESS
CHAPTER 3
THE CREATOR AND THE CREATURE

From the Christian point of view, Man is a created being in a created universe. This is at the heart of the problem for the contemporary Christian writer who must contend with a post-modern culture still influenced by the legacy of popular atheistic existentialism. While there are and always will be writers who write from a Christian perspective, the problem of point of view remains, and it creates a unique challenge for the Christian writer because he must now justify his faith rather than simply use it as an \textit{a priori} point of departure, a burden not shared by the secular writer of whatever world view, due to the secularization of modern culture and the inherited traditional view of literature, which is now wholly secular, as well. Moreover, the problem of point of view leads to the problem of \textit{process} for the Christian writer in that the inherited view of what literature actually is and how it is produced determines to a great extent what kind of literature is produced, how writing is taught and practiced, which works are judged worthy or unworthy, and the standard by which such judgments are made.

The secularization of the traditional view of literature has even colored the views of Christians, even notable Christian writers, like C.S. Lewis, who, when considering the question of the relationship between Christianity and literature, writes: “The rules for writing a good passion play or a good devotional lyric are simply the rules for writing tragedy or lyric in general: success in sacred literature depends on the same qualities of structure, suspense, variety, diction, and the like which secure success
in secular literature.”¹ This much is true, but Lewis goes on to say that, “Boiling an egg is the same process whether you are a Christian or a Pagan.”² This analogy for the artistic process is only partly true in that there are great works of literature by both Christians and Pagans and that a great work of literature by a Christian would certainly share certain literary characteristics with a great work by a Pagan, but it begs the question as to what makes a great work of literature great, whether it be by a Christian or a Pagan, and by what process each achieves greatness.

What Lewis is wary of in his defense of the standards and practices of the inherited view of literature is the notion that a work of literature’s success or failure might be confused with “its obedience or disobedience to Christian principles.”³ To Lewis, and correctly so, the two are not the same. Lewis’s fear is that the standards of literature may be inappropriately subjugated to misapplied Christian ethics, the lamentable history of which—usually ending in censorship and book burnings—is what John Gardner calls, “A fool’s morality.”⁴ This is a valid concern, if the question were one of ethics. As a critic and literary historian, Lewis is also being honest in that he knows that there have been many Pagans, apostates, heretics, madmen, and the like, throughout history, who have, nonetheless, produced great works of art and literature. If

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2. Ibid., 2.

3. Ibid.

one were to make the ridiculous claim that only Christians are capable of great works of art, even a cursory acquaintance with the history of art would quite easily disabuse him of that notion. This, however, is not the issue. What Lewis’s comments reveal is the belief in the neutrality of the literary process and the belief that the literary work, once produced, will either rise or fall by only its literary merits, as though what we call literature is self-justifying. From the Christian point of view, this position is untenable because such a view privileges literature as accountable only to itself as though it and it alone exists. This view, taken to its logical conclusion, is tantamount to a kind of artistic solipsism that does not acknowledge any claim upon the work of art outside of itself: “Art for art’s sake,” a view that Lewis rejects, despite his unwitting contribution to what makes such an argument possible. 5 It is also the prevailing ethos of contemporary art.

Lewis’s “boiled egg” analogy is also false on the grounds of simple logic because it is not the Pagan nor the Christian who actually boils the egg, but rather heat and water, governed by the laws of physics, which by extension—from the Christian point of view—are in accordance with the processes of God; whereas, the work of literature, or any work of art, is created by a human being and in a fashion that is not analogous to the boiling of an egg; that is, the paper, pen, word processor, etc., which are analogous to the pan, water, and heat, do not actually write the novel, play, or poem in the same sense that the water and heat boil the egg: the writer writes the novel, play, or poem. In view of this, Lewis’s analogy only applies to part of the process. The

complete literary process is quite different than the process of boiling an egg; but like the process of boiling an egg, the literary process is at the same time independent of whether the writer is a Christian, a Pagan, or an atheist. In that respect to Lewis’s point, he is correct; there is no difference between the Christian view and the traditional view on that aspect of the literary process because the process itself is independent. It simply exists in the same way as the laws of physics. The question is, “what is the creative process?” Before answering that question, however, it is necessary to first examine the origin of the problem.

The problem of process for the Christian writer is that the governing aesthetic that determines literary success or failure is divorced from not only Christian ethics, a problem that moralists have complained of for years regarding the arts, but it is also divorced from our understanding of what literature is and how it is produced. The technical aspects of literary art, which is what Lewis confuses with the entirety of the process, are the same for all writers, but as the critique of Lewis’s “boiled egg” analogy demonstrates, the instruments or medium used to produce a result are not the same as what the process is in producing that result, depending on what is produced and how it is produced; e.g., the paint, brushes, and canvas are not the painting. For the Christian, what is of importance—whatever the process of artistic creation—is that it is a process that exists within a created universe by a creative God, and that this creative process exists in some relation to the creativity of the universe and the God who created it. This is the heart of the matter. That non-Christians may participate in this process makes no
real difference; it is no different than the circumstance addressed in Matthew 5:45. Lewis’s Pagan/Christian analogy tells us nothing about this process; however, there is a Pagan/Christian comparison that is of use in understanding the problem of process for the Christian writer.

Dorothy Sayers traces the confusion reflected in Lewis’s “boiled egg” analogy to a failure to reconcile Christian theology with the Pagan origins of Western aesthetics:

[T]he extraordinary confusion of our minds about the nature and function of Art is principally due to the fact that for nearly 2,000 years we have been trying to reconcile a pagan, or at any rate a Unitarian, aesthetic with a Christian—that is, a Trinitarian and Incarnational—theology. . . . We have not tried to reconcile them. . . . We have merely allowed them to exist side by side in our minds; and where the conflict between them became too noisy to be overlooked, we have tried to silence the clamour by main force, either by brutally subjugating Art to religion, or by shutting them up in separate prison cells and forbidding them to hold any communication with one another.

Sayers’s observation is insightful on the incongruous relationship between the inherited tradition of Western art and the religious view of art that she believes is responsible for the confusion that has always been a part of any discussion on the relationship between religion and art. She goes on to say, “If we commit ourselves to saying that the Christian revelation discovers to us the nature of all truth, then it must discover to us the nature of the truth about Art among other things.” The argument is sound; yet, Christian artists are still reluctant to question the premises of the inherited tradition. One

6. Matt. 5:45 AV. “For he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust.”


8. Ibid.
of the reasons artists are reluctant to challenge the foundation of Western aesthetic theory is that part of the process in the creation of works of art involves a proper understanding and use of the tradition within which all artists work. Gardner addresses this aspect of the creative process in *On Moral Fiction*:

No writer imagines he exists in a literary void. . . . [W]riters would not be what they are if they didn’t have a liking for books. . . . [The] writer has a literary tradition in mind, and part of his purpose is to be—besides interesting and original—true to the tradition (or anyway steadily aware of it). . . . The medium of literary art is not language but language plus the writer’s experience and imagination and, above all, the whole of the literary tradition he knows.9

Gardner’s words are carefully chosen here. He does not say that tradition is the most important aspect of the *creative process*, but that it is “above all” the most important aspect of the *medium* of literary art. Before this statement, Gardner describes the process by which a work of literature is created (which will be discussed in the next chapter). The reference to tradition in the above quote appears at the *end* of this description as “one last check on fiction’s honesty.”10 In this last section, Gardner is addressing *understanding* of form, genre, and stylistic features of various aspects of the tradition, not a blind *allegiance* to any particular aspect of tradition. Like Dorothy Sayers, Gardner seems to believe that “The great artists carry on with their work on the lines God has laid down for them, quite unaffected by the aesthetic worked out for them by philosophers.”11 For Gardner, tradition is a part of the process of discovery.

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10. Ibid., 123-124.

What is most interesting about the Christian’s reluctance to challenge the basis of Western aesthetic theory is that the Greeks, Plato in particular, based their aesthetic theories, in part, on their own religious belief system.\textsuperscript{12} In Book X of the Republic, for example, God plays a major role in Plato’s formulation of art as imitation.\textsuperscript{13} Also, his assertion that poets have no place in the Republic, except as writers of hymns to the gods and in praise of leaders, also indicates the influence of religion in Greek aesthetic theory.\textsuperscript{14} So it is not that religion has never been involved with the formulation of aesthetic theory, but that the West has favored a Greek philosophical foundation—a Pagan foundation—over a Christian foundation. Fortunately, Sayers is correct, most artists, especially great ones, do not produce their works in consultation with theory of any kind; however, the education of artists and the influence of tradition does in many ways shape the kind of work that is produced as T.S. Eliot has stated in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “No poet, no artist of any kind, has his complete meaning alone. . . . [Y]ou must set him for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principal of aesthetic, [emphasis added] not merely historical criticism.”\textsuperscript{15} While Eliot does quickly point out after this statement that this judgment by comparison is “certainly not by the canons of dead critics,” he does, nevertheless, go on to state that the standards of the past have a bearing on how new works are created and judged. In

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Sayers, “Towards a Christian Aesthetic,” in \textit{The New Orpheus}, 6-11.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Plato, “Republic, Book X,” in \textit{The Critical Tradition}, 21-29.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 21.
\end{itemize}
addition to this, Eliot’s invocation of an “ideal order” of canonical texts that make up the tradition suggests a Platonic influence; it reflects an idealistic, mystical view of literature:

[W]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between old and new.16

As David Richter has pointed out, the origin of this “ideal order” of texts is never explained by Eliot, nor does Eliot ever explain how something that is “complete” in and of itself can be “modified,” yet remain complete.17 The influence of Plato is at work here. Richter suggests that what Eliot attempted to convey is the idea that “art is, or at least ought to be, essentially impersonal: that the tradition writes itself, as it were, using the poet as a catalyst for converting emotion and thought into poetry.”18 This is a kind of Platonic mysticism. Despite Eliot’s emphasis upon novelty and originality as a basis of assessing the worthiness of the newly created work and its fitness for inclusion into this ideal order, the preexisting status of that order assures that the new text, in whole, or in part, assumes the essence of the legacy of the Greek aesthetic tradition.


18. Ibid.
Dorothy Sayers believes that Christians should look to the doctrines of their own tradition for the basis of a Christian aesthetic because the idea of creation—novelty, originality, and the creative process itself—according to Sayers, is the most important contribution of Christianity, not the Greeks, to an understanding of the nature of art:

This word—this idea of Art as creation is, I believe, the one important contribution that Christianity has made to aesthetics. Unfortunately, we are apt to use the word creation and creativeness very vaguely and loosely, because we do not relate them properly to our theology. But it is significant that the Greeks had not this word in their aesthetic at all. They looked on a work of Art as a kind of techne a manufacture. Neither, for that matter, was the word in their theology—they did not look on history as the continual act of God fulfilling itself in creation.19

Sayers’s observation suggests that the inherited view of art that focuses on its technical aspects and confuses it with the entirety of the creative process may have been a result of the Greek view that art is not created, as such, but rather composed, constructed, or assembled, or as David Jones says, represents a “fitting together.”20 Jones, however, sees this “fitting together” as part of a complete process. He believes that art “concerns a means or process, a means by which is achieved a ‘perfect fit’.21

Some Christians, however, like Denis de Rougemont and C.S. Lewis, reject the notion that man can be in any way creative or able to produce anything that can be considered original or new. De Rougemont goes so far as to say, “No one can prove that a man creates something, because no one can know the totality of existent things with

21. Ibid., 29.
their structures and their rapports.”

Lewis goes even further, stating that “If I have read the New Testament aright, it leaves no room for creativeness even in a modified or metaphorical sense.” Others, like Chad Walsh, however, embrace the idea of human creativity, arguing that the Christian artist “can honestly see himself as a kind of earthly assistant to God . . . carrying on the delegated work of creation, making the fullness of creation fuller.” Niebuhr affirms the creativity of man and considers freedom its foundation. He warns, however, that it is also man’s temptation, due to the anxiety caused by the “human situation itself,” which is rooted in the relationship between temptation and the inevitability of sin. Niebuhr considers creativity, nonetheless, a positive response to man’s anxiety. Tillich ties the creative process “in all of its forms” to God’s omnipotence as the power to resist non-being “in all its expressions.”

Sayers’s Trinitarian approach to aesthetics is itself a “trinity” in that it involves a three part creative process that includes experience, expression, and recognition. She bases this formulation upon traditional Christian theology and what it says about how God creates: God creates out of a boundlessness without conditions, i.e., that God

26. Ibid.
27. Tillich, quoted in Modern Christian Thought, 147.
creates *ex nihilo*, “out of nothing”; He creates through the second Person, his Son, who is continuously begotten; and it is through the *image* of the Son that God, the Father, is known to Himself; and that this process is “an eternal creative activity.” 29 Sayers emphasizes the word *image* and distinguishes it from *imitation* and sees this as the crucial difference between what a Christian approach to aesthetic theory might be when compared with the inherited Greek mimetic tradition. Her central point is that a “copy” or an “imitation” is not the same as an “image,” especially in the Christian sense that “Christ is the *express image* of His [God’s] person—something which, by being an image, expresses that which it images.” 30 What is *imaged* has its own unique existence.

Sayers’s formulation consists of “the unknowable reality in experience; the image of that reality known in its expression; and power in the recognition; the whole making up the single and indivisible act of creative mind.” 31 She considers the artistic process the artist’s “imaging forth” a work that the reader, audience member, viewer, listener, etc., depending upon the art form, can then personally engage with, once the work is “incarnated” in a material “body,” the work of art. 32 The artist’s *imaged* experience leads to “recognition” of an experience that the recipient had “never understood, never formulated or expressed . . . never known as a real experience . . . as


30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 16.

32. Ibid., 13.
if a light had been turned on inside [them].” Sayers says of this process, “This is the *communication of the image in power*, by which the third person of the poet’s trinity brings us, through the incarnate image, into direct knowledge of the in itself unknowable and unimaginable reality.” Just as God, the Father, is known to Himself through the image of the Son, man is known to himself through the image of his art.

For Sayers, the creative process is a recreation of the incarnation as the communication of truth in power of an authentic human experience “imaged,” i.e., created by the artist. There are similarities between Sayers’s Trinitarian approach and the Wordsworthian romantic view of poetry as “the overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquility.” The difference between Sayers’s Trinitarian approach and the romantic view of literature, however, is that what the artist recollects, or “images,” is not emotion, but experience itself. Even by the standards of atheistic existentialism, experience is real; emotion caused by experience, only its byproduct. For the romantic, the emphasis is upon the poet’s emotional response to his experience; whereas, in Sayers’s Trinitarian approach, the emphasis is upon the recognition of shared human experience, a kind of celebration—of truth. As Iris Murdoch has written, “the doctrine of the Trinity is a celestial aesthetic celebration of internal relations.”

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34. Ibid., 16.


It is ironic that C.S. Lewis also uses the doctrine of the Trinity to explain not a Christian approach to the artistic process, but to reinforce the traditional Greek view, albeit from a more Christian perspective. As always, careful not to disturb or exploit the orthodoxy of doctrine, Lewis sees in the Trinity not Murdoch’s “aesthetic celebration of internal relations,” nor a continuous creative process that man shares in through art, but rather a “hierarchical ladder, and the mode in which each lower rung receives it [original divine virtue] is, quite frankly imitation.”\(^{37}\) Lewis uses St. Paul’s metaphors about the hierarchy of relationships of authority.\(^{38}\) He comes to the conclusion that “the highest good of a creature must be creaturely—that is derivative or reflective—good.” He elaborates on this point:

\[W\]e should get as the basis of all critical theory the maxim that an author should never conceive himself as bringing into existence beauty or wisdom which did not exist before, but simply and solely as trying to embody in terms of his own art some reflection of eternal Beauty and Wisdom. Our criticism would therefore from the beginning group itself with some existing theories of poetry against others. It would have affinities with the . . . Homeric theory . . . the Platonic doctrine of a transcendent Form partly imitable on earth . . . .\(^{39}\)

Lewis argues that Christian writers should abide by the traditional mimetic approach to art: reflecting transcendental “forms” that may not exist\(^{40}\); instructed by the “theories” of pre-Christian and even pre-classical Greek primitive man; and, in short, adhering to the doctrines of Pagans. A program, no doubt, that Lewis would have difficulty with, if

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38. I Cor. 11:3 RSV. “But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.”

39. Ibid., 9-10.

40. If such forms do exist, then they were revealed to the Greeks through God’s sovereignty.
applied to anything but art; e.g., if it were suggested as an approach to reorganizing British government, or as an approach to the reformation of the Church of England! Lewis’s allegiance to the Greeks, however, is not unusual. Just as we are all in a sense “Freudians,” “Darwinists,” and even “existentialists,” we are all also Greeks.

The hegemony of the Greek aesthetic tradition and the failure of Christians to address its inadequacies appropriately where it is wanting is the root cause of the problem of process for the Christian artist. This however, is not the only problem, nor the most serious, for as Malcolm Ross has pointed out, “The fact is that the Christian tradition is the charitable captor of all traditions. It is all things to all men.”41 This is the reason why the Greek tradition has enjoyed such a long relationship with Christian culture, as any trip to the local art museum readily attests. While the hegemony of the Greek tradition has compromised the Christian view of art towards its technical aspects, the most serious problem of establishing a Christian approach to the arts is in the failure to embrace the actual Christian promise: a personal encounter with God. The reason why Lewis’s Greeks as well as other Pagans, atheists, madmen, malcontents, rogues, sinners, and Saints can all be creative geniuses (a phrase that Lewis despised) is because the true artistic process is one of vision as well as skill and technique, infused with passion, and, most important, touched by God. Suppose that Sayers is right. Suppose God shares creativity with man, in some limited capacity, through the arts and

that it is a continuous act that allows “fulfillment in history.” And suppose that Walsh’s idea that the artist is a kind of “earthly assistant to God” is nearer to the truth of the true role of the artist in human society. If God wills for an artist to “image forth,” to use Sayers’s words, a painting, a novel, or a symphony, if a Christian does not, can not, or chooses not to do so, in His omnipotence, might not God use anyone who avails himself or herself to the task at hand? If art is of historical consequence, then the history of art has already answered that question. This is why there have been non-Christians who are great artists. The problem of process is not just about aesthetic theory so much as it is about spiritual availability. The artist who opens himself to the creative spirit of the Author of Creation becomes a participant in God’s creativity; the creature becomes a creator, not The Creator, but a creator, nonetheless. The main reason that Christians shy away from this approach to art is that it suggests one of the most controversial subjects in all of Church history: mysticism. As we have seen, however, there is already Platonic Greek mysticism in the inherited tradition. Reinhold Niebuhr has written that “The only metaphysical system which can be compared with the Biblical idea of Creator and creation, in terms of the dimension of depth which it assigns to the world, is the system of mysticism.” 42 Yet, it is at this point that we must temporarily part company with this thoughtful realist theologian, because Niebuhr also says that “Mysticism . . . is also in sharpest contrast to the Biblical concept of Creator and creature.” 43

42. Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, 135.
43. Ibid.
CHAPTER 4

MORAL FICTION AND THE MYSTIC VISION

The problem of process for the Christian writer is not resolved simply by solving the problem of point of view, nor in merely understanding the artist’s role as God’s delegate, as a participant in the creative process to help fulfill God’s plan for creation in history. In order to carry out this role, the Christian writer also needs to have clear vision in order to do his work; and to do this, he must be guided by God in such a way that the vision is not compromised by the other aspects of the creative process, like its means, medium, or the inherited tradition that should only inform the process, as discussed in the last chapter. Clarity of vision can be achieved by carefully balancing the artistic process and not allowing any one aspect of it to dominate the overall creative process. This process is intrinsic to what John Gardner calls, moral fiction.

In Western culture, the church has often provided guidance to the artist, and the monumental splendor of Christian art that graces museum walls, concert halls, and library shelves all over the world reflect the glory of divine inspiration. But just as there is confusion and division within a fractured fallen world, there is also discord within the church. One of the areas of conflict that has always sharply divided the church involves the role of mysticism. Another area that has also been a source of controversy, despite its service to the church, ironically, is art, particularly, visual art; other forms of art, from dance to music to literature have also come under church sanction at various times in church history, as well. What art and mysticism have in common is an
uncompromised, uncontrollable element of spontaneity, unpredictability, and creativity that is often threatening to the comfortable conventions of established religion, but the vision that each has given to the church has helped the church to fulfill its mission. It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the history of the relationship between the Christian Church and its mystics. Patrick Grant’s summation of the reasons for the difficulty of this relationship will suffice:

Understandably, the church has often been uneasy with its mystics, because when false they are dangerous, and when true they are also dangerous because they are likely to proclaim the institution’s inadequacy. For their part, the mystics are often uneasy with ecclesiastical authority, and anxious to avoid heresy.¹

Similar observations could be made about any number of Christian artists throughout the centuries long relationship between art and the church: Michelangelo, Caravaggio, and El Greco are a few that come to mind. Putting the two together—art and mysticism—no doubt, would compound this uneasiness, but there is no need to do so, because the two visions, though similar, serve very different purposes and have different ends. The creative process, what Gardner calls, moral fiction, emphasizes the means of its process, the creative act; while religious mysticism emphasizes its end, which is union with God.

Gardner writes that “Moral fiction communicates meanings discovered by the process of the fiction’s creation.”² He says that this process is driven by a mode of


thought that “abstract logic cannot match” and that “the writer makes discoveries which, in the act of discovering them in his fiction, he communicates to the reader.”

This process culminates in what Gardner calls, “the fictional dream,” which leads to the “queer experience of falling through the print on the page into something like . . . an imaginary world . . . real and convincing.” Patrick Grant writes of the spiritual vision of St. Augustine that “For St. Augustine, the world of the book is co-extensive with the book of the world, and both direct us towards God.” Grant also believes, however, that there is a distinct difference between the mystic vision and the literary vision:

The mystic’s experience is distinct from the poet’s because the mystic is concerned, not just with the work of art produced, but with producing his life as a work of art dedicated to God. Mystics of course are alive in the world and amidst the manifold being the poets affirm, so that the mystic’s ‘art,’ like the poet’s, cannot be reduced to a set of themes. The mystic, however, traverses the world’s multiplicity to unite with the Absolute that gives rise to it, and is beyond words.

It could be argued that the writer of moral fiction is concerned far more than “just with the work of art,” but Grant’s main point, that there is a distinct difference between the literary vision and the mystic vision does cohere with the reported experiences of both religious mystics and artists. Grant does concede, however, that there is a symbiotic relationship and that the difference is one of ends, not means. This distinction is crucial.

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4. Ibid., 112.
5. Grant, *Literature of Mysticism*, 34.
6. Ibid., 35.
7. Ibid., 31-34.
because the purpose of the artistic vision is one strictly of means; it is a part of the creative process, the result of which is incarnated in the work of art. As Dorothy Sayers points out, the work of art is the incarnation of authentic human experience. For the artist, this authenticity is confirmed by the artistic creative process itself.

The concern of theologians, like Reinhold Niebuhr, who view mysticism as involving the negation of God through the mystic process of “emptying of the self” and his assumption that the mystic believes that “the natural world is evil or illusory,” is unfounded in the case of the artist. There is no contradiction between the artist’s creative approach as active participant in the creative process and the traditional views of the church regarding the relationship between God and creation. Niebuhr’s concern centers upon the “provisional deification of man, since [mysticism] believes that God is identical with the deepest level of human consciousness.” The artist, however, is only the delegate through which God’s creativity operates, not His repository. The training, skills, personality, temperament, i.e., the human individuality of the artist, is left intact. The artist’s relationship to God as a creature within creation, where “the full height of human spirit can be measured, the unity of its life in body and soul maintained and the essential meaningfulness of its history in the finite world asserted, and the limit set for its freedom, and self transcendence,” is maintained, which is Niebuhr’s main concern.

The relationship of the Creator to the creature is undisturbed and, if anything, is

10. Ibid.
enhanced, due to the artist’s obedience to the will of God. The creative process places
the artist in a position to fulfill his potential as an artist in God. As Thomas Merton has
written, creativity is part of man’s purpose for being:

> Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation
> of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny. We are free beings and sons
> of God. This means to say that we should not passively exist, but actively
> participate in His creative freedom, in our own lives, and in the lives of others,
> by choosing the truth. To put it better, we are even called to share with God the
> work of creating the truth of our identity.\textsuperscript{11} [emphasis Merton’s]

There can be nothing more fulfilling for an artist than to work with the Creator in spirit
and in truth. Instead of the threat to the artist’s perception of his ontological status,
leading to grave sin and error, as Niebuhr fears for the religious mystic, the artist gains a
greater awareness. What Patrick Grant has said about religious mystics may also be true
of the greatest artists, “[T]he highest mystics insist that their special knowledge is an
illumination, or completion, of the ordinary knowledge which we all share, and not its
negation.”\textsuperscript{12} Similarly, Gardner writes that “What art opens up for us is ‘the real.’”\textsuperscript{13}

The process of artistic creation, what Gardner calls moral fiction, is one of
gradual realization. Whether one reads one of Gardner’s books on craft or analyzes one
of his novels, as we saw with Grendel, one can see continuous movement towards some
indefinable goal. While a cynic might view Gardner’s process as no different than what
many good writers do (which is part of Gardner’s point, the key word being good), the


\textsuperscript{12} Grant, \textit{Literature of Mysticism}, 5.

careful eye will notice that every step of the way everything is weighed and balanced against a standard that can not seemingly be attained but rather struggled towards, similar to the struggle of the religious mystic, as if the struggle itself imparts its own virtue, a kind of validity through its own epiphanies, which are imparted to the resulting work of art.\textsuperscript{14} This process reflects Gardner’s belief that contemporary artists do not struggle the way that they have traditionally. He believes that “Art is original and important as it is precisely because it does \textit{not} start out with clear knowledge of what it means to say.”\textsuperscript{15} He bases this belief upon the study of successive drafts from works of earlier great writers, like Leo Tolstoy.\textsuperscript{16} The process is one of creative discovery, a probing search for meaning. A byproduct of this search is the revelation of values, the ethical component that can not be forced, but discovered through the creative process itself. Gardner writes of this ethical aspect of the creative process:

We recognize true art by its careful, thoroughly honest search for and analysis of values. It is not didactic because, instead of teaching by authority and force, it explores, open-mindedly, to learn what it should teach. It clarifies, like an experiment . . . [M]oral art tests values and rouses trustworthy feelings about the better and worse of human action.\textsuperscript{17}

There is no predetermined moral agenda, which leads to the didacticism of propaganda, but rather a harnessing of whatever the fiction brings forth through the activity of its own creative process. The process itself justifies the values reflected in the work of art.

\begin{itemize}
  \item[\textsuperscript{14}] Gardner, \textit{On Moral Fiction}, 122.
  \item[\textsuperscript{15}] Ibid., 13.
  \item[\textsuperscript{16}] Ibid., 108.
  \item[\textsuperscript{17}] Ibid., 19.
\end{itemize}
In addition to this search for meaning, Gardner’s approach seems also to be an attempt to integrate, synthesize, or transcend discordant elements within the tradition of Western literature itself, without partiality to what can generally be called, the centuries old dialectic between idealism (rooted in classicism) and naturalism (intrinsic to both realism and romanticism), which Niebuhr believes is at the heart of modern man’s confusion and inability to understand himself and the true nature of his existential circumstance. There is also neither partiality, nor indifference, towards Gardner’s own post-modern age; he embraces it, only criticizing its excesses, which is the true purpose of *On Moral Fiction*. Technique, also, seems to be regarded only in service to the art, never as an end in itself. The emphasis is upon open-minded inquiry through the artistic process, probing to find self-affirming truth, indifferent to ideology, or *a priori* assumptions.

Throughout this probing process, Gardner seems to be searching for the elusive, seemingly unattainable quality we call *truth*. The entire process is one of discovery of what the work can say truthfully. The artistic process, for Gardner, is a process of gradual recognition through association, in short, a process of metaphoric and symbolic reasoning. It is the rhetorical power of metaphor and symbolism and their ability to *create* and carry meaning that is at the heart of Gardner’s approach to fiction. The nomenclature of the world, what we *name* things, makes up signified reality, long before we encounter the larger abstract ideas of *truth*, *beauty*, or *goodness*. In *On Moral Fiction*, Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, 21.
Fiction, Gardner states that “before we can get to the great idea of True . . . we must first stare thoughtfully and long at a tree, Old English treow, the ‘deeply rooted’ idea.”19 This is why Gardner’s Grendel utilizes so much symbolism involving trees and why the novel’s protagonist “clings” to the twisted roots of the oak at the end of the novel. The novel is about the true nature of reality and man’s existential dilemma. The symbol of the tree, particularly the oak, because of its association with Christianity and ancient Celto-Germanic culture, as we saw in chapter 1, gives it a conflated meaning, especially when contrasted with the chestnut tree that figures so prominently in Sartre’s Nausea.

Metaphor and symbolism, combined with other stylistic elements, like imagery, setting, etc., form a complex structure, or matrix, that carries or is even able to create meaning. This is the novelty and creativity of what Gardner calls moral fiction. For Gardner, metaphor “becomes reality when we read,” and affirms Aristotle’s observation that what is of greatest interest to the reader is “characters in action,” since we respond to characters in fiction as “real people,” who share our common humanity.20 These characters are more than mere verbal constructs; we respond to them in much the same way that we respond to real people in real situations.

Gardner also emphasizes contrast—opposites—that create dynamic tension: for example, mimetic plausibility through causality leading to sometimes contrasting, abrupt, surprising, and even contradictory, choices of action; the rediscovery of

20. Ibid., 113.
consonance between seeming opposites, like the rediscovery of the poetry of prose, or the prosody of poetry; there is also the use of seemingly conflicting rhetorical strategies, e.g., atheistic existentialism and traditional Christianity, as in *Grendel*; the transcendence of paradoxes and the synthesis of dualities, as we also saw in *Grendel*; one moment the classical impulse may be dominant, the next moment the naturalistic, or the modern; or there may be some hybrid synthesis that crosses several genres, forms, and styles from the traditional conventions of fiction or the heroic epic to classical myth to even elements from contemporary popular culture and media, like cartoon imagery or the use of the third person limited dramatic voice of film, sometimes in the very same novel or even in the very same paragraph. All of this experimentation and exploration is in search of that hidden quality we call meaning. Stanley Romaine Hopper has said of late modern and post-modern writers such as Gardner:

> The contemporary literary artist participates radically, even agonistically, in the deep revision of the Western consciousness that is going on all about us. He is thrust, by the nature of his calling, into that resonating void between that which has ceased to be and that which is not yet: and there, like Eliot’s penitent in the place ‘where three dreams cross,’ he suffers his ambivalent beseeching—‘And let my cry come unto Thee.’

The “resonating void” to which Hopper refers is the break down of meaning carried through the signs, symbols, and beliefs of a culture. The post-modern writer is left, as

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it were, to try to construct and generate meaning through exploration and discovery to the very limits of language and art. This process of creative discovery is at the heart of Gardner’s approach to fiction. Fresh metaphors are needed and the depths of expression are explored to find a new vision. Hopper considers this, in the words of Northrop Frye, the anagogic phase of literature. Frye says of this phase, “When poet and critic pass from the archetypal to the anagogic phase, they enter a phase of which only religion, or something as infinite in its range as religion, can possibly form an external goal.”23 This is why Gardner, in search of new signs, new symbols, new metaphors, new rhetorical strategies, new patterns of meaning, created Grendel.

The anagogic phase of literature is where the spiritual vision traditionally associated exclusively with religious mysticism meets the artistic vision. As Kenneth Burke and Stanley Romaine Hopper have pointed out, and as our earlier delineation between the mystic vision and the artistic vision suggests, our preconceived ideas about what mysticism is has clouded our understanding of the true nature of the artistic vision.24 For Burke and Hopper, the primary concern of the artistic vision and the creative process in their relationship to the mystic vision centers upon communication and rhetoric.25 The concern with these two aspects of discourse is because the problem

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25. Ibid., 95-96.
of communication originates from the breakdown of meaning that Thomas Fawcett attributes to the collapse of the symbolic language of religion in a “demythologized culture.”

This demythologization, Fawcett observes, is why atheistic existentialists, like Jean-Paul Sartre, consider history “a dialogue between man and an absent God.”

In short, the anagogic phase of literature, at least for the Christian writer, attempts to reestablish the presence of God in the dialectic of cultural history.

John Gardner’s Grendel, like all true works of art, is the incarnation of the creative process that provides a rhetorical framework within which the dialectic of history is reestablished. Just as modern Christian theologians, like Paul Tillich, reconcile modernist existentialism and Christian theology by reestablishing God as the ontological ground of all being, thus rendering the existentialist claim that existence precedes essence moot, Gardner reconciles modern man’s existential dilemma, but goes even further, by transcending the limit imposed by the claims of atheistic existentialism facing the contemporary Christian writer by creatively asserting that the intrinsically Christian essence of the literary creative process itself completely reverses the existentialist claim that existence precedes essence in the creation of the Novel, something “new,” “original,” that, by definition, does not already exist, yet whose essence is preexistent as part of the divine creative process itself, carried out through the agency of the true artist, empowered by the artistic vision of the creative process that

27. Ibid., 278.
Gardner calls moral fiction. From the Christian point of view, every true work of art either wittingly, or unwittingly, reverses the atheistic existentialist claim that existence precedes essence because the essence of all true art is rooted in God’s ongoing creative process, part of which is delegated to the human artist for fulfillment in human history, by establishing the true work of art as part of the dialectic of history itself.

For the Christian writer, the new is rediscovered among the ruins of the old. Meaning is rediscovered amidst the shattered icons of signs and symbols of a dying culture. There is no expectation of a new religion or a new conception of the God of Christianity that will lead to new truth. The Christian revelation of truth is complete in the person of Christ by definition, just as the Novel is a new creation—by definition. Man’s relationship to the divine revelation of truth through Christ, determined by the human choice of the acceptance or rejection of grace through faith, or its absence, affects only man’s perception and not the fact of the true nature of reality. Christian redemption implies an awareness of absolute truth that precludes any new truth; it promises only deeper and greater awareness of truth as revealed through Christ. The willful ignorance, or sinful estrangement, of man does not determine nor alter this reality. The absolute is not accountable to the contingent, just as the infinite is not bound by the limitations of the finite. God does not need man; man, however, like all of creation, does need God. The limits imposed by God’s sovereignty as revealed through Christian truth in the Person of Christ is also the line of demarcation between God’s creativity and man’s creativity. God’s creativity is infinite, yet, paradoxically, complete;
while man’s creativity is finite, i.e., bound by the reality of God’s creation; yet, paradoxically, God’s creation is fulfilled in human history, in part, through the agency of the artist as God’s delegated, to use Chad Walsh’s words again, “earthly assistant.”

As we saw in chapter 3, for the Christian, creation is an ongoing continuous process; therefore, man can not reach his full measure, which would include his creativity, absent of God. Ironically, the creative process itself recreates, or restores, God as the center of the dialectic of human history through art and literature as the fountainhead of all meaning, just as the Christian theologian restores God as the ontological ground of all being.

The one-sided dialectic to which Sartre condemns history does not have to be and, indeed, is not the fate of the true artist, nor the necessary fate of modern man. Each must choose. Gardner explores and reveals this difficult truth in Grendel by examining the question of the nature of man’s existence against the claims of atheistic existentialism and the claims of traditional Christianity. The choice that is offered to Grendel, who is, just as the dragon states, “man or man’s condition,” is the choice that the reader must make: to accept the free gift of God’s grace in order to regain communion with the Source of all being; or remain in a perpetual state of alienation by self-imposed sinful estrangement.

In the end, what is left to the Christian writer is actually greater than what has been lost through the break down of signs and symbols and their perceived inability to

meet the needs of modern society. Traditional conceptions of the Christian truth have failed modern man because of the absence of faith, not the absence of God. The artistic vision, like the mystic vision, restores man’s awareness of God’s truth. What God avails is a deeper and more meaningful expression of faith through authentic human experience, which is and always has been available to mankind, once he understands, in the words of Niebuhr, that “he is understood primarily from the standpoint of God, rather than the uniqueness of his rational faculties or his relation to nature. He is made in the ‘image of God.’”

29 It is not the inadequacy of God that causes problems for modern man, but the inadequacy of man. The artist, like the mystic, affirms this truth.

John Gardner’s *Grendel* is a metaphor for modern man’s self-imposed estrangement from God. Like the monster Grendel in Gardner’s novel, the extreme rationalism of modern man has left him alienated and isolated from truth due to his own failure to accept God’s grace through faith, which is and has always been, from the Christian perspective, the only available means for man to come to terms with the truth of the nature of his existence. The artist, like the mystic, is privileged to encounter and share with the rest of humanity the mysteries of this ultimate truth by the unique vision that each is given. Both visions, though compromised by controversy and misunderstanding throughout Western history, even within the church itself, are the free gifts of God to mankind that can be better understood if accepted by the very same faith that makes such visions possible.

PART III

THE PROBLEM OF POETICS
CHAPTER 5

MORAL FICTION AS CHRISTIAN POETICS

The problem of process for the contemporary Christian writer, as we have seen, is due, in part, to the inadequacy of an inherited tradition that is based upon a secularized Greek Pagan aesthetic, emphasizing the technical aspects of how art is produced and that also determines what art is, while de-emphasizing the creative process inherent to Christian beliefs as revealed by the doctrines of the Trinity and creation that emphasize creativity as an ongoing continuous process. The problem of process is further complicated by the reluctance of the church itself to recognize its own visionaries, whether they be mystics or artists, due to the fear that such unpredictable and mysterious agencies may somehow undermine the hegemony of the church by offering alternative, corruptive, or competing views of truth, even though, in each case, the mystic vision and the artistic vision, historically, have often aided the church in its attempt to fulfill its mission by creating new rhetorical strategies in order to communicate the meaning of God’s truth to an increasingly alienated, secular world.

The disenfranchisement of the Christian religious view of literature that has traditionally served as the underlying foundation that provides the very context for the prehension of literature has allowed reductionist theories of art and literature, such as Formalism, New Criticism, Structuralism, post-Structuralism, and the various brands of Deconstructionism, to replace older literary and aesthetic theories that de-emphasized the autonomy of the text, or work of art, favoring a more objective view, which sees art,
especially literary art, in its expository function as an expression of extrinsic reality.¹

Nathan Scott has written extensively on this subject:

[T]he contemporary critic has come to see poetic meaning not as a function of the relationships between the terms of the poem and some reality which is extrinsic to them, but rather as a function of the interrelationships that knit the terms together into a total pattern that forms the unity of the work. Our way of stating this distinctive character of poetic language is to say that its terms function not ostensively but reflexively, not semantically but syntactically—by which we mean that . . . in poetic discourse they lose their distinctive character, as they fuse into one another and are modified by what Cleanth Brooks calls ‘the pressure of the context.’²

The result of these modern and post-modern critical approaches to literature, due to their emphasis upon structural linguistics, semiotics, and immanent critique, which form the basis of a de facto modern/post-modern poetics of literary theory, is the disenfranchisement of even the possibility of any objective meaning because of the regressive nature of an endless series of reductive qualifications that all but render language itself as incapable of transmitting even the most basic ostensible meaning.

This state of affairs, compounded by the demythologization of Western culture, coupled with the dominance of the philosophy of atheistic existentialism in the twentieth century, has crippled literature from fulfilling its anagogic function as a palliative against what Niebuhr considers the inevitable destruction of human culture, ironically, due to the very freedom and creativity that makes human culture possible.³


² Ibid., 144.

³ Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, 251.
From the Christian point of view, modern/post-modern reductionist aesthetic theories accelerate cultural decline by removing all traces of God from any serious discussion of human history. The death of God (Nietzsche, Sartre, and others) leads to “the death of literature” (in Alvin Kernan’s famous phrase in response to deconstructive theory and the rise of alternative media) and, eventually, the death or end of history itself (prefigured in Hegel and Marx, among others, popularized and later redefined in post-modernism by Fukuyama, among others). In each case, the dialectic of history is reduced to competing philosophical views of materialism and/or political theories of what constitutes democratic society, with each view expressing some aspect of the age-old debate between rationalism and naturalism.\(^4\) The absence of the religious viewpoint in these philosophical approaches to history (with the possible exception of Hegel, who deifies both reason and history in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Philosophy of History*), limits both history and man to finite material reality, whereas, the Christian view of man as “made in the image of God,” whose essence, according to Niebuhr, is the very freedom that he seeks to preserve through his rationalistic socio-political materialist or naturalist philosophies, is exalted by God in his uniqueness and individuality and is enabled, through acceptance of God’s grace and through God’s will, to “stand outside” himself by transcending his finite, material existence.\(^5\) The atheistic existentialist view of modern/post-modern man is incapable of such transcendence, and

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\(^5\) Ibid., 58.
much of the art created from this viewpoint, governed by a wholly secular aesthetic, often reflects this limitation in relativism, cynicism, and even nihilism, which Gardner condemns as “bad art” in *On Moral Fiction*.6

The reestablishment of the presence of God in the cultural dialectic of human history is essential to the establishment of a truly Christian *poetics*. The problem, however, is whether such a poetics is either necessary or even desirable, given the troubled history of the relationship between the church and the arts and the hegemony of secular democratic pluralism, which seeks to protect both religion *and* the state from the historic tendency of each to intrude upon the rights of the other and upon the rights of the individual citizen in a democratic society. Secular democracy is at the heart of modern thought and culture. The problem of poetics is similar to the problem of political governance in a pluralistic society for the Christian, in that, at what point does the need for moral guidance and ethical reform allow for the open acknowledgement of essentially religious foundational beliefs and practices?

As we have seen, the inherent nature of the legacy of the classical Greek tradition is itself, at least in part, based upon religious and even mystical assumptions. It is also, however, rooted in the freedoms extended by democracy which, ironically, played a major role in both the extraordinary achievements of ancient Greek culture, yet also contributed to its eventual decline. Because of the modern secularization of the inherited Greek tradition, modern/post-modern man is not consciously aware that the

very foundation of Western aesthetics is itself rooted in an ancient debate that did not ignore the impact of the religious view, but did not completely assimilate it either. The contemporary difficulties inherent in any discussion of aesthetic theory began with the unresolved conflict between traditional Greek religion and its tenuous relationship to the state and the arguments advanced by Greek philosophers and writers, which forced religion into a perpetual reactionary position that it still finds itself in today.

The religious roots of classical Greece lie buried beneath the silent ruins of the Parthenon, mute witness to a long ago demythologized culture. It is a symbol of the paradox at the heart of classical Greek culture and a cautionary reminder of the limits of democratic political idealism. It is the temple to Athena, goddess of wisdom, patron goddess of the most powerful Greek city state that bears her name, Athens, and was built at the height of classical Greek culture in the fifth century B.C.E., the *age of Pericles*. It was during this period that democracy was established, inspiring the Western imagination for more than two millennia; yet Athens is also the place that witnessed the trial and execution of one of its greatest citizens, Socrates, for “injuring the city by not acknowledging the gods . . . and by corrupting the young,” in part, to provide an explanation for the cause of plague, famine, military defeat, and civil strife, suffered by the Athenians during this period, even though Socrates embodied the values that the Greeks revered most: virtue, reason, and freedom of enquiry through philosophical discourse.\(^7\) It was, however, this very freedom, the freedom of speech,

made possible by Greek democracy, ironically, that led to the great philosopher’s death.
As Kenneth Dover points out, “[T]olerance wilts under pressure.” Disease, foreign and
civil war, starvation, and an overall loss of faith in both the gods and their own political
way of life led to the need for an explanation of the loss of Athenian dominance. The
 teachings of Socrates became a convenient scapegoat as the reason for Athens’s cultural
decline, and the multiple tragedies of disease, war, and famine were viewed as
punishments inflicted by the gods.

One need only listen to contemporary conservative critics on the decline of
modern Western culture, heir to the Greek tradition, to see that, while we may not put
philosophers, artists, and intellectuals to death anymore, there is still the recurring
problem of the revival of religious fundamentalism that views the excesses of modern
liberal democracy as the root cause of cultural and social ills, just as in ancient Greece.
Artists are sometimes even singled out as examples of corruptive influences upon
society, as the case of Robert Mapplethorpe and the resulting attempt by congressional
conservatives to cut funding for the National Endowment for the Arts several years ago
demonstrates. While religious-based criticism of the excesses and abuses of freedom
within a democracy is often correct in its assessment of cultural ills, as many believed it
was in the case of Mapplethorpe, it is also often wrong, leading to the oppression of


photographer Robert Mapplethorpe was tried for obscenity charges for homoerotic photographs displayed
at a Cincinnati art gallery. Mapplethorpe was acquitted, but conservatives in the U.S. Congress
subsequently sought to cut funding to the National Endowment for the Arts.
censorship, disenfranchisement, and suppression of legitimate voices of dissent even within the church itself.\textsuperscript{10}

Despite the apparent need for a Christian poetics, the historic tendency of religion, even Christianity, to compromise the freedom of expression necessary to the creative process, in order to address essentially religious concerns, makes the establishment of such a poetics potentially dangerous to the very nature of artistic expression—its self-affirmed, self-evident integrity—that only religion, ironically, can ultimately preserve, if the Christian belief that Christ is the source of all truth is, indeed, the truth. In order to do that, however, Christians must learn how and when to trust the artistic vision in a way that it seldom has, historically, just as the Church has been at times reluctant to acknowledge the contribution of its mystics. Also, just as Christians can see the virtue of modern democracy as an improvement over earlier socio-political systems of government, like religious monarchy, for example, despite its secular character, Christians need also to see the virtue of the artistic vision, especially when it is controversial, because, as stated earlier, the artistic vision offers a way to see God’s truth from a different point of view, like Gardner’s \textit{Grendel}, a work of \textit{moral fiction} that reconciles and transcends discordant elements within the Western tradition by affirming the Christian view of the nature of existence. Gardner would not have been able to do

\textsuperscript{10} Berger, \textit{A Theory of Art}, 107. There were also many who believed that Mapplethorpe’s work was, indeed, art and that even if it wasn’t that the state had no right to censor artistic expression, no matter how offensive it may be to some. Berger writes of the expert witnesses’ prevailing argument in Mapplethorpe’s defense, “That juries are willing to listen is touching testimony to the continuing prestige of Art.” Critic Robert Hughes, however, remarked that the expert witness testimony represents “the kind of exhausted and literally de-moralized aestheticism that would find no difference between a Nuremberg rally and a Busby Berkeley spectacular, since both, after all, are examples of Art Deco choreography.”
this, however, had he not incorporated the valid questions raised by modern existentialism, which seems antithetical to Christianity, by exploring the depths of its arguments \textit{creatively} through the process of what he calls \textit{moral fiction}. Gardner did not need any other guiding aesthetic; he only needed to trust the integrity of the creative process itself, which, as we saw in chapter 3, is rooted in God’s creativity through the doctrine of creation, in Sayers’s view, and is reflected within the work of the true artist.

What is needed is not so much a Christian \textit{poetics}, which is more of a tool for the critic than the artist to begin with, as discussed in chapter 3, but rather an artistic \textit{approach} that reflects the essence of Christianity—a personal encounter with truth. A truly Christian poetics would only expose the methodology and approach used to evoke such an encounter, just as this thesis has attempted to make the case that John Gardner’s \textit{Grendel} is a profoundly Christian work of fiction, a case that could only be made by understanding Gardner’s approach to fiction and correlating it with aspects of Christian experience and beliefs, like the mystic vision and the doctrines of the Trinity and creation, utilizing the insights gleaned from Christian critics, whose job it is to reconcile the tools of criticism to Christian truths. One could argue that the very heart of Christianity is about reconciliation and finding truthful correlatives to create greater communication of God’s truth, not the bludgeoning effects of \textit{rule}, whether they be the tyranny of political rule or the hegemony of cultural rules governing art and aesthetic theory. John Gardner’s \textit{moral fiction} emphasizes the creative process itself as the only true measure of the validity of a work of art. It is its own \textit{poetics}. 
CHAPTER 6
THE PURPOSE OF LITERATURE

When considering the purpose of literature, the first question usually asked is, “What is literature?” A better approach, however, as Karol Berger has suggested in dealing with the question of “What is art,” might be, “What is the function of literature” and “What is literature for?” For John Gardner, the answer to both questions is the same; it is simply love: “[I]t seems all but self-evident that it is for the pleasure of exercising our capacity to love that we pick up a book at all.”

Gardner’s seemingly simple assertion becomes more profound upon further analysis. For the heart of the Christian message itself is that “God is love,” and the purpose of that love, as Gardner suggests, is indeed, “self-evident.” It simply is. It has not only the courage to be, in Tillich’s words; it is the ground of being itself, which is Tillich’s main point. That rationalism demands a reason for love shows the inadequacy of rationalism as the purpose or basis of human existence. It also demonstrates the primary reason why, in the words of Stanley Romaine Hopper, “Our heritage of Wisdom, so to speak, has vanished from our ways of thinking and seeing.”

3. I John 4:8, NIV.
4. Tillich, in Modern Christian Thought, 143-152.
We have replaced *wisdom*, which is born of either conscious experience, or experienced consciousness, being fully aware and in the *presence* of the moment, with reason, which is born of abstract thought, or thought abstracted, the paradoxically *irrational* demand of rationalism to, on the one hand, make sense of the moment that has passed, leading to regret (the tragedy of human history), or to compound the problem by anticipating what has not yet come, leading to baseless fear and anxiety in an attempt to avoid despair (the modernist obsession with the future). Wisdom experiences the world as it *is*, while reason fashions a world of its own making, without ever realizing that *what* it is actually making is a projection of its own regrets, fears, and unavoidable anxiety and despair, as Niebuhr has observed.6 Wisdom embraces love like a familiar old friend, while reason is suspicious of love, as one would be of a stranger, always questioning motives or denying claims of affection. Even some of our most sensitive artists have failed to grasp the simplicity of the unpretentious dignity of love. W.H. Auden, for example, has written that “No artist, *qua* artist, can understand what is meant by ‘God is love’ or ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor’ because he doesn’t care whether God and men are loving or unloving . . .”.7 Gardner writes that artist’s are more “embarrassed” by the word *love* than by the word *morality*, adding that “it’s a word no aestheteician ought to drop from his vocabulary.”8


For John Gardner, the very nature of love is such that it is “the single quality without which true art cannot exist.”

Gardner’s insight, though appearing simplistic to the point of being sentimental, is, nonetheless, theologically profound in that the existential character of the true artist’s creation of a work of art is that it is a shared, unselfish, counterintuitive, other directed activity that influences consciousness by consciousness and gives courage and meaning to existence, or being; whereas the atheistic modern/postmodern artist, like Sartre, sees the other as a threat to both consciousness and being itself. The contrast between Gardner’s view of love being existentially rooted in the active interest of interaction with the other as the very purpose of the artist’s existence and Sartre’s view that the very purpose of existence is the perpetual avoidance of the other, is strikingly similar in character to William Blake’s poem, *The Clod and the Pebble*, where Blake uses I Corinthians 13, commonly referred to as “the love chapter,” to examine the difference between the spiritual nature of love and the finitude of reality in how man actually experiences love:

Love seeketh not itself to please, / . . . (l.1)
Contrasted by. . .
Love seeketh only Self to please, / . . . (l.9)

The difference between Blake’s romantic, naturalistic view and Sartre’s rationalistic atheistic view is that Blake, as a romantic, is unafraid of the word love; he tries to come


to terms with its reality and tries to understand its complexities and contradictory aspects, while Sartre avoids it, just as he avoids the “gaze” of the other, because the very acknowledgement of love negates the existentialist view that existence precedes essence, in that, love presupposes an object of love, which establishes the other as an objective reality, an essence, that becomes an object of consciousness. This is significant because the romantic view of religion also questions the claims of Christianity, as Blake’s poem, “The Clod and the Pebble,” demonstrates, but where the existentialist sees absurdity, the romantic sees, in the words of Wordsworth, “infinite complexity”\textsuperscript{12}:

\begin{quote}
‘Love seeketh not Itslef to please,  
Nor for itself hath any care;  
But for another gives its ease,  
And builds a Heaven in Hell’s despair.’
\end{quote}

5 So sang a little Clod of Clay,  
Trodden with the cattle’s feet;  
But a Pebble of these metres meet:

10 ‘Love seeketh only Self to please,  
To bind another to its delight;  
Joys in another’s loss of ease,  
And builds a Hell in Heaven’s despite.’\textsuperscript{13}

Though aware of the inherent self-interest of human motives, the romantic never completely succumbs to the temptation to reduce contradiction of the Christian view of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} William Wordsworth, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads,” in \textit{The Critical Tradition}, 292.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Blake, “The Clod and the Pebble,” in Norton, 89.
\end{itemize}
love to “bad faith” the way that Sartre does, explaining away human sentiment and feeling, such as love, in terms of denial and even “self-negation.” Indeed, much of Blake’s work tries to reconcile *contraries*, whether it be *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, or *The Human Abstract*, among others. In each of these works, Blake attempts to show complexity and the paradoxical nature of reality; he does not merely contrast the processes of nature with the rational constructs of Christian theology, which he finds out of tune with the *experience* of life, but instead creates a complex structure where nature serves as a guide by which man may observe *natural* logic with which the process of repentance begins and ends with the renewing of the mind. The last stanza of Blake’s poem, “The Human Abstract,” illustrates the point: “The God of the earth and sea, / Sought thro’ Nature to find this Tree, / But their search was all in vain: / There grows one in the Human Brain (In 21-24).”

The “tree” to which Blake refers is the tree of humility, watered by the tears of a repentant heart, stated earlier in the poem, which is often overcome by doubt, fear, and deception. The tree is also a symbol of Christ and the reference to the “vain” search for a “suitable” tree is replaced by the Christ within, whose consciousness grows within the “brain,” or becomes a part of man’s psychological/spiritual make-up. These are all


redeeming qualities of romanticism with which a Christian would not have much
disagreement; however, the fundamental flaw of romanticism is its ability to raise
questions and cast doubts, but an inability to provide a solution that goes much beyond
feeling. Feelings of heroic loneliness, despair, and the constant striving for self-mastery
are not that far from the prevailing disposition of most existentialists, without all the
histrionics.

One of the problems of romanticism is that it often remains within what Blake
calls “. . . the dismal shade/ Of Mystery” (ll. 3, 14), brooding, pondering, and dwelling
upon such contradictions to the point that there is never any true reconciliation,
synthesis, or transcendence of circumstance, or situation and, failing to offer a solution,
is then given over to oversimplification and mischaracterization of the rationalist claim,
as Niebuhr points out, especially concerning idealism.16

The Christian writer shares the romantic’s concerns about the limitations and,
indeed, dangers presented by extreme rationalism, especially in its threat to our basic
humanity, which is, as Gardner suggests, is at its heart, rooted in love, not reason. The
Christian, however, is also concerned about the threat of romanticism, which, in born
opposition to rationalism and its handmaiden, the classical impulse, threatens man no
less, by depriving him of the opportunity to explore the complete depths of his being
that is informed by both impulses. The purpose of literature is to find the balance
between these twin impulses and then to transcend them to reveal something greater.

CONCLUSION

The tree of life is in many ways more than just a metaphor. Throughout this study we have come back time and time again to the significance of this most enduring of symbols, the tree, in all of its manifestations: it is the deeply rooted idea from the old English word treow, which also means true; it was the doorway to the world of the spirit for the ancient Celts; it provided the wood for the cross of Christ; it rooted itself in the brain of William Blake; and for John Gardner, it helped a monster of epic proportions to find the courage to be by accepting the “gift” of grace and death. All of these enduring, uplifting, manifestations of the role of the tree all lead to one very important question, perhaps the most important question of all: if the tree is such a positive and enduring symbol of the permanence of our truths, then why did a tree make Jean-Paul Sartre, or rather Roquentin, nauseous?

John Gardner wanted to know the answer to that question, so he wrote a novel from the point of view that he thought would give him the best vantage point of the issue. So he chose one of the most horrific monsters of all time, Grendel, as his stand-in for the monstrosity known as atheistic existentialism and its leading man, Jean-Paul Sartre. But then, like magic, the creative process took over and transformed a horrific monster, we don’t know which one, into a being that is a little more human and, therefore, worthy of at least a small measure of respect, or at least our compassion. This is the power of John Gardner’s moral fiction and the importance of his novel, Grendel.
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