“In his eyes stood a light, not beautiful”  
Levinas, Hospitality, Beowulf  

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To approach the Other is to put into question my freedom, my spontaneity as a living being, my emprise over the things, this freedom of a “moving force,” this impetuosity of the current to which everything is permitted, even murder.  
—Emmanuel Levinas

AN INFINITE AND UNCONDITIONAL HOSPITALITY

I begin with an ending.¹ In Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida argues that Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy, especially in Totality and Infinity, has bequeathed to us an “immense treatise of hospitality.” According to Derrida, although “the word ‘hospitality’ occurs relatively seldom in Totality and Infinity, the word ‘welcome’ is unarguably one of the most frequent and determinative words in that text.”² At the very outset of Totality and Infinity, Levinas writes about the Other as the “Stranger [l’Etranger]…who disturbs the being at home with oneself [le chez soi].”³ In the wake of this disturbance, the ethical subject “is incapable of approaching the Other with empty hands,” and by way of “conversation” she “welcomes” the Other’s “expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it.”⁴ The welcoming [accueil] of the expression of the stranger-Other is a welcoming of a teaching
[enseignement] that “comes from the exterior” and in which “the very epiphany of the face is produced” (TI 51). This is a “face” that is not a material face, per se—the specific physical visage of a specific person—but is, rather, an “exteriority that is not reducible...to the interiority of memory,” an expression of being that “overflows images” and “breaks through the envelopings” and facades of material form. This face exceeds any possible preconceptions, and calls into question the subject’s “joyous possession of the world” (51, 76, 297). At the same time, because “the body does not happen as an accident to the soul,” the physical face is the important “mode in which a being, neither spatial nor foreign to geometrical or physical extension, exists separately.” It is the “somewhere of a dwelling” of a being—of its solitary and separated being-with-itself.  

While Levinas describes the home, or dwelling, as a site of inwardsness [intimité], from which the subject ventures outside herself (and therefore, the real home is always a rootless, wandering mode of being), he also points out that this inwardsness “opens up in a home which is situated in that outside—for the home, as a building, belongs to a world of objects” (TI 152). The “home” possesses two facades, and thereby, two positions, for it “has a ‘street front,’ but also its secrecy....Circulating between visibility and invisibility, one is always bound for the interior of which one’s home, one’s corner, one’s tent, one’s cave is the vestibule” (156). The home, then, is both the architectural site filled with material furnishings [Bien-meubles, or “movable goods”] that, by its very nature, is “hospitable to the proprietor,” as well as the site of interiority in which the subject withdraws from the elements and can “recollect” herself (157, cf. 153–54). Recollection [recueillement], for Levinas, is a kind of “coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality, an expectancy, a human welcome.” This is a self-possession made possible by the subject possessing a home in which she is able to be welcomed to herself, which welcoming constitutes the condition by which a certain affection for herself is “produced as a gentleness that spreads over the face of things” and makes the welcome of the stranger-Other possible (155). As a result, the ethical self is also a “sub-jectum; it is under the weight
of the universe, responsible for everything. The unity of the universe is not what my gaze embraces in its unity of apperception, but what is incumbent on me from all sides...accuses me, is my affair” (OB 116). The “I” is ultimately the “non-interchangeable par excellence” and also “the state of being a hostage,” and it is only “through the condition of being hostage that there can be in this world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity.”

In Derrida’s view, Levinas’s ideas regarding the welcoming of the enigmatic face of the stranger-Other is a type of hospitality that is “not simply some region of ethics” or “the name of a problem in law or politics: it is ethnicity itself, the whole and the principle of ethics.” More importantly, Levinas’s “infinite and unconditional hospitality” raises the difficult question of whether or not Levinas’s philosophy “would be able to found a law and politics, beyond the familial dwelling, within a society, nation, State, or Nation-State.” How would such an ethics be “regulated in a particular or juridical practice? How might it, in turn, regulate a particular politics or law? Might it give rise to—keeping the same names—a politics, a law, or a justice for which none of the concepts we have inherited under these names would be adequate?”

How, also, might Levinas’s thought be seen as a provocation to “think the passage between the ethical...and the political, at a moment in the history of humanity and of the Nation-State when the persecution of all of these hostages—the foreigner, the immigrant (with or without papers), the exile, the refugee, those without a country, or State, the displaced person or population (so many distinctions that call for careful analysis)—seems, on every continent, open to a cruelty without precedent.”

We might also ask, as Derrida does, how Levinas’s hospitality might mark (or open) an important door [porte] into a dwelling that must ultimately be “beyond the State in the State”? Levinas himself touches upon the question in his conclusion to Totality and Infinity, where he wrote that, in “the measure that the face of the Other relates us with a third party, the metaphysical relation of the I with the Other moves into the form of a We, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of universality. But politics left to itself bears a
tyranny within itself; it deforms the I and the other who have given rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules, and thus as in absentia” (TI 300).

Although the individual subject is ultimately made invisible by the State’s insistence on universality, and therefore hospitality has to define itself, in certain singular situations, against the State, the State nevertheless reserves a framework for it (through various of its institutions, such as citizenship, courts of law, and bills of rights). But although the State, in Levinas’s view, can function as a rational political order that ends exile and violence and endows persons with freedom, the world in which the welcoming of the stranger-Other is possible will always be radically different from the State, which, “with its realpolitik, comes from another universe, sealed off from sensibility, or protest by ‘beautiful souls,’ or tears shed by an ‘unhappy unconsciousness’” (LR 274). And this is why Simon Critchley, following the lead of Levinas’s thought, describes politics as “praxis in a situation that articulates an interstitial distance from the state and allows for the emergence of new political subjects who exert a universal claim.” But we must also understand that “this distance from the state is within the state, that is, within and upon the state’s territory.”

What I offer in this essay is a consideration of Levinas’s philosophy of hospitality in relation to the terroristic figure of Grendel in the Old English poem Beowulf, in order to raise some questions about the vexed connections between ethics, violence, and sovereignty, as well as between ethics and politics, both in the early Middle Ages and in our own time. In the trauma created in the wake of the violent, disturbing, and destructive stranger-Other, how is it possible to welcome this disturbance, to open the door to destruction, to offer hospitality (the very foundation of ethicity)? If the home constitutes the site of recollection (a coming-to-oneself) which is the condition for welcoming (a going-out-of-oneself to the Other), what happens to the ethical project of hospitality when the stranger-Other is actively trying to destroy that home? If, as Levinas argues, the “positive deployment of a pacific relation with the other, without frontier or any negativity, is produced
in language” (TI172), how can we make peace with those who refuse to speak, to contact us, across a great (yet also intimately proximate) distance, with language? In what way does terroristic violence (whether the anthropophagy of a Grendel or a suicide bombing) simultaneously summon and accuse us as those who are “irreplaceable”? How does Grendel, as an exorbitantly exterior (read: monstrous) figure of terrorism, signify and enact a type of violence (even, a type of radical evil) that the State (Heorot) itself simultaneously exercises and punishes?

And finally, in what ways does terroristic violence enact a politics (or, perhaps, more negatively, an *active* political nihilism) that articulates an interstitial relationship that is both distant from and also within the territory of the state?

Most likely written in a tenth to eleventh century Anglo-Saxon monastic setting, that would have been partially structured by its own Christian ethics of hospitality, *Beowulf* takes as its subject an earlier proto-Christian cultural milieu (Scandinavia in the *geardagum,* “the old days”) structured by particular socially-regulated modes of hospitality. Because of this, *Beowulf* reveals many of the fissures that often open up when the moral dictums “welcome the stranger” and “love thy neighbor as (and more than) thyself” run up against the troubling sociopolitical question, “what if my neighbor is also my enemy?” The monstrously disfigured yet still humanized form of Grendel, whom Beowulf describes as an “unknown violence” (*BFF* 276) [*uncuðne nið*], refuses even the possibility of all gestures of welcoming while also calling into question the limits of the ethics (and even, the law) of hospitality that were clearly important in both Anglo-Saxon England and in the world of the poem. Grendel’s violence, in other words, challenges the code of hospitality that founds Hrothgar’s great hall, and by extension, the whole “jural feud” society of Daneland, while it simultaneously expresses a kind of excess of the very same violence that helped build that hall. For Hrothgar’s “wide” reputation and the wealth of his court are the chief byproducts of his and his troops’ “success in war” and “honor in battle” (*64, 65* [*heresped* and *wiges weordmynd*]).
As a figure who bears a supposedly inscrutable hatred, Grendel poses a certain challenge to a society that claims not to know or understand his aggression, while at the same time, this society (Daneland, and by extension, the more broadly delineated warrior culture within which Daneland makes its geographic and ideological purchases) is itself caught up in ceaseless cycles of violent reprisal for which it has devised particular justifications. As a figure of supposedly extralegal violence, Grendel frustrates the self-identity of a society that considers itself just and humane, and that sees no remedy under its usual codes (for example, wergild or gift exchange) for this terrifyingly foreign, yet genealogically related invader. One might argue that Grendel’s ability to terrify rests, to a certain extent, upon the ways in which he brings to vivid life (and death) the obscene rage at the heart of a State that supposedly marks the place of a more ethical community. This ability might also rest upon how his very presence inside the ceremonial dwelling of the great hall of Heorot points to a violent displacement and dispossession that seems intrinsic to the guest-host relationship, especially in the world of a poem where almost all of the violent episodes—between men and monsters, but also between men and men—happen within spaces, whether halls or caves, designated as home. As John Michael has written regarding the current “war on terror” and Derrida’s writing, by way of Levinas, on hospitality, “If the guest has power over the host, the power of a dangerous and perhaps impossible ethical demand, no one can ever be at home anywhere.”

Because Grendel’s almost senseless aggression also encloses a kind of insistence on his own murder as the only possible end to that aggression, Grendel refuses conversation with Hrothgar and his Danes, and with Beowulf and his Geats, in order to forcefully open a way out of his solitude onto the plane of a certain futurity (his own death), but also out of a history beyond the judgment of those who would “translate” him into a battle trophy. For in that moment when Beowulf and his Geats return to Hrothgar’s court with Grendel’s severed head, which they have to drag by its hair across the floor of the great hall (“be feaxe on flet borene / Grendles heafod”; BFF 1647–48), the “terrible” and “splendidly-made spectacle” (1649–50) [geslic and witesoon wretlic]
of that head, upon which everyone gazes, is a marvel (and spoil) of alterity which, as Levinas would say, “gleams like a splendor but does not deliver itself” (TI 193). Seth Lerer has argued that Beowulf’s killing of Grendel can be viewed as a “rite of purification” or “sacrificial act” by which Heorot is “cleansed” (1176) [Heorot is gefalsod], with the return of Grendel’s severed head to Heorot serving as the “token” or “sign” (1654) [tæcne] of that purification.19 Further, by delivering Grendel in parts, the monster’s body “may remain as parts, safe in their symbolism and inactivity.”20 But I would argue that there is something not completely benign or inert in the spectacle of Grendel’s head being dragged across the floor of Heorot; whether it is tied to the rafter beams or left on its “slaughter-pole” (1638) [wælstenge], in the words of Jeffrey Cohen, “it smears the formal structure of the symbolic network with its obscene presence—its pleasures, delights, and destructions.”21 It also marks the space of an “unhappy consciousness” that puts into question, paraphrasing Levinas, the freedom of the Danes as a moving force, the impetuosity of their current to which everything is permitted, even murder.22

In Alterity We Can Find an Enemy: A Note before Proceeding

According to Howard Caygill, in his book Levinas and the Political, “the question of the political consistently troubles Levinas’s thought.” I must note here, before proceeding, a somewhat irresolvable yet important tension between Caygill’s understanding that, for Levinas, “it is irresponsible to speak of peace without war, or to imagine a peace that is but a cessation of war: war is inextricable from peace, violence is inextricable from ethics,”23 and Simon Critchley’s assessment (which is also a hope) that Levinas’s ethical thought offers a route out of the impasse of deconstruction’s undecidability (which is, nevertheless, ethical in its “hesitations”) to an “ethics [which] is ethical for the sake of politics—that is, for the sake of a new conception of the organization of political space.” For which, according to Critchley, the “leitmotif...is a verse from Isaiah 57, cited in Otherwise Than Being: ‘Peace, peace, to the neighbor (le prochain) and to the one far off (le lointain).’”24
It was precisely because of a statement that Levinas made in a 1982 radio interview after the massacres in the Chatila and Sabra camps in Israeli-occupied Lebanon, described by Caygill as revealing “an unsentimental understanding of violence and power,” that compelled me to try to delineate some of the tension between Levinas’s insistence on the subjection of the “I,” as hostage, to the Other, and the idea, espoused in this radio interview, that sometimes the Other can be the enemy. In short, Levinas was asked by his interlocutor, Shlomo Malka, “you are the philosopher of the ‘other.’ Isn’t history, isn’t politics the very site of the encounter with the ‘other,’ and for the Israeli, isn’t the ‘other’ above all the Palestinian?” Levinas responded that, “in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong” (LR 294).

In Caygill’s view, Levinas’s response here “opens a wound in his whole oeuvre,” and Levinas’s “view of the… problem of ‘knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust’ uncharacteristically reduces the problem of ethics to knowledge.” At the same time, Levinas’s last words in this same interview, that a “person is more holy than a land, even a holy land, since, faced with an affront made to a person, this holy land appears in its nakedness to be but stone and wood” (LR 297), indicate, in Caygill’s words, that “ethics seems once more to prevail over politics and the state.” In Critchley’s reading of Levinas, totalizing politics, which would stand in the place of the “holy land” invoked above (as opposed to the singular person) “is always associated with the fact of war,” which “means both the empirical fact of war, which, Levinas claims, ‘suspends morality’ …and the Hobbesian claim that the peaceful order of society is founded on the war of all against all.” And therefore, in Levinas’s own words, “It is not then without importance to know if an egalitarian and just State in which man is fulfilled …proceeds from a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all, and if it can do without friendship and faces” (OB 159–60). But for Critchley, Levinasian ethics is ultimately “a reduction of war (which…is not a complete reduction),” primarily because of Levinas’s insistence, especially in Otherwise Than Being, on the “third party” [le tiers].

which always shows further that “the Other is too incomparable, the neighbor, to be visible in the possiblities of a charitable person.”

There is a need to accumulating ethics to politics, to go against the proximate answer that whereby Levinas’s question of the infinite spirit and the infinite spirit is consequently the polity is of the alteration as the need of a family’s friend of the second. Levinas’s ethics begins in the ἀθέτησις, not the polis-dweller of the polity.”

THE DEFINITION

To define ethics, Levinas might begin by saying that give rise to the law, and ᾑθήναι, the foreigner, the juridical being (871–992), and the Danse Macabre (899–924).

Given that we are in the national level
which always “troubles” the ethical relation to the Other, primarily because “the other is from the first the brother of all other men” and the neighbor “that obsesses me is already a face, both comparable and incomparable, a unique face and in relationship with faces, which are visible in the concern for justice” (OB 158).

There is a direct “passage,” then (as opposed to an impasse) from ethics to politics in Levinas’s thought, in Critchley’s view, which “is synonymous with the move from responsibility to questioning, from the proximity of the one-for-the-other to a relation with all others whereby I feel myself to be an other like the others and where the question of justice can be raised.”

In this scenario, social space “is an infinite splintering, or fragmentation, of space into spaces where there is consequently a multiplication of political possibilities,” and “the just polity is one that can actively maintain its own interruption or ironization as that which sustains it.”

Such a just polity would have great need of a political philosophy, such as Levinas’s, of the multiple (of the second and third persons), and, as Critchley writes, “If philosophy begins in wonder, then political philosophy—the reflective activity of polis-dwelling beings—begins in wonder at the fact of human plurality.”

The troubling question of violence, of course, always remains.

THE DEFEAT OF SOME AND THE (DUBIOUS) VICTORY OF OTHERS

To Derrida’s question regarding how Levinas’s ethics of hospitality might be regulated in a juridical practice, or whether or not it could give rise to a law, early English law codes, such as those of Ine, Alfred and Æthelstan, demonstrate some of the ways in which the figure of the foreigner, stranger, or lordless man, held a prominent place in the juridical system of Anglo-Saxon England. In the law codes of Alfred (871–99) drafted after the treaty with Guthrum in 886 (referred to as the Danelaw), and modified by Edward the Elder (Alfred’s successor, 899–924), it is stipulated that

Gif man gehadodne oððe ælþæðode þurh enig ðing forráede æt féo oððe æt feore, þonne sceal him cyng beon—oðdan eorl dær on lande—7 biseop ðere þeode for þæg 7 for mundboran, buton he
elles oðerne hæbbe; 7 bete man georne be ðam þe seo daed sy Criste 7 cyninge, swa hit gebyrige; oðde þa daede wrecce swide deope þe cyn-
ing sy on beode.33

[If any attempt is made to deprive in any wise a man in orders, or a stranger, of either his goods or his life, the king—or the earl of the province—and the bishop of the diocese shall act as his kinsmen and protectors, unless he has some other. And such compensation as is due shall be promptly paid to Christ and the king according to the nature of the offence; or the king within whose dominions the deed is done shall avenge it to the uttermost.]

In the early English law codes in general (beginning with the seventh century laws of Ine and extending through the eleventh century reign of Cnut) the stranger is most often referred to as eldeodige (alien person) or feorcumen man ("man who comes from afar," or "foreigner"), and occasionally the word gest (guest) is also used, with the term gestliðnesse (guestliness) denoting "hospitality." Clearly, the displaced person without specific kinship or local group connections, held a special status within Anglo-Saxon England, and Alfred’s law, cited above, could even be said to denote a space of legal welcoming of the displaced person into the domestic kin-dwelling and protection of the State. In the law codes of Cnut (1020–23) we can even see the codification of a moral concern for the treatment of strangers, where it states that "he who pronounces a worse judgment on a friendless man or a stranger from a distance than on his own fellows, injures himself."34

But in the law codes of Æthelstan (924–39), we can see how the legal welcoming and protection of the stranger also belies a fear of the individual who is too foreign, too displaced, or too unwilling to be attached to the state through a locally-circumscribed domicile:

Ond we cwædon be þam hlafordleasan mannum, ðe mon nán ryht æt-
begytan ne mæg, þæt mon beode ðære mægbe, ðæt hi hine to folcryhte
gehamette 7 him hlaford finden on folgemote. 7 gif hi hine ðonne
begytan nyllen oðde ne mægen to þam andagan, ðonne beo he syþpan
flyma, 7 hine lece for ðeof se þe him tocume.35

[And we have declared respecting those lordless men from whom no
law may be obtained, that the kin should be commanded to domicile
him to common law, and find for him a lord in the district meeting.
And if they will not or cannot produce him at the appointed day, then he is afterwards a fugitive outlaw, and let anyone slay him for a thief who can come at him.]

Even earlier, in the law codes of Ine (688–725), we can see that the status of the foreigner was ultimately precarious:

Gif feorcund mon oððe fremde butan wege geond wudu gonge 7 ne hrieme ne horn blawe, for ðeof he bið to profianne, oððe to sleanne oððe to áleisanne.36

[If a man from afar, or a stranger, travels through a wood off the highway and neither shouts nor blows a horn, he shall be assumed to be a thief, and as such may be either slain or put to ransom.]

The line separating the sacred foreigner whose body and possessions should be protected from the person who is available to be killed (by anyone, no less) precisely because he either does not signify his presence or refuses the invitation into the State’s dwelling, is very tenuous here. One could say that all of the law codes cited above are predicated, in the final analysis, upon the State’s desire both to regulate and contain immigrants and disenfranchised persons (as well as eliminate them when they cannot be contained), and also to profit from them through fees of protection and taxation. The “fate of the foreigner in the Middle Ages—and in many respects also today,” as Julia Kristeva writes, “depended on a subtle, sometimes brutal, play between caritas and the political jurisdiction.”37

Anglo-Saxon law codes point to a legally-codified ethics of care for the stranger-Other who is both threatened yet also threatening in his singularity, and they likely arise from a society that we know, from its imaginative and other literature, was deeply concerned with the protocols of hospitality. And these protocols—in the absence of the law, or beyond the law’s reach—functioned as the important means whereby those who were Other to each other could communicate, without hostility, in spaces of common dwelling, whose doors, whether barred or open, marked the threshold between the “inside” of the communal dwelling from the “outside” of the stateless forest. Importantly, the very idea of the extralegal was enclosed within the Anglo-Saxon legal
definition of the fugitive as one who was *exlex*, or *utlah* ("outlaw"). According to Michael Moore, "The forest was the proper haunt for such figures, ranging far from the houses and protection of the village. No food or lodging was to be offered to the *utlah." Further, "These criminals, conceived of as demonic creatures outside the boundaries of humanity, were pushed away from the society, absolutely excluded from the shelter of the community and its legal world and suffering what amounted to 'civil death'."38 As Moore writes, such "acts of exclusion helped to form the community as a legal subject: the law was made by and for the village or kingdom, at the same time enclosing and defining it" and "the concept of outlawry was fundamental to establishing the inner, safe circle of communal law and royal power."39 The medieval social community, then, had need of an extralegal outside in order to define itself as *bounded*, while at the same time, because of certain moral imperatives, rooted either in Christian belief or more archaic rituals of hospitality, and also for the purposes of strengthening its numbers (both human and economic), that community had to also leave a door open for the welcome of the stranger-Other.

In the realm of Old English poetry, as Hugh Magennis tells us, a "concern with ideas of community and of the relationship of individuals to communities is widely evident."40 Further, Old English poetic texts often "raise unsettling questions" about "received notions of community," which are reflected in the antithesis between the corpus's positive images of "warmth and security," especially of feasting and drinking in secular halls, and the reverse images of "dislocation and alienation," as we get in *Seafarer*, *Wanderer*, and *The Ruin*.41 The Anglo-Saxon hall — both real and poetic — is an especially conflicted site, as both tribal seat and the *civitas* (or State) itself, for it is not only the place where a community gathers, happily and in supposed concord, around a meal and drink, but is also "the seat of business, of political brokering and conflicts, where power...[is] exercised."42

Themes of ordered authority and the betrayals of that authority are, fittingly enough, often played out in the hall, and this is especially so in *Beowulf*, where the poet describes Heorot at one point as "filled with friends within" who do not, "*as yet practice treachery*" (*BFF*1017–19).
One could argue that the gestures of welcoming in *Beowulf*, which are clearly the primary instrument of the ethicopolitics of the world of the story—from the coast guard’s welcome of Beowulf and his men into Daneland (237–57, 287–300, and 316–19), to Hrothgar’s servant’s welcome of them into Heorot itself (333–39), to Hrothgar’s initial welcome of Beowulf (457–90), to Wealhtheow’s bearing of the banquet feast cup to Beowulf after he has killed Grendel (1216–31), to Hygelac’s rewelcoming of Beowulf into Geatland (1975–98)—are all fraught with the anxiety and tension that always arises when ideas of sovereignty (whether of the individual, the family/tribe, or the larger polis-state) come up against an ethics of hospitality that is supposed to transcend those sovereignties. So, for example, when Beowulf returns after his adventures in Daneland to Hygelac’s court, Hygelac commands his hall to be cleared for the “foot-guests” (1976) [*fædegestum*] to whom he offers “earnest words” and “cups of mead” (1980) [*mealgum wordum* and *meodusecnum*], one of which his daughter bears directly to Beowulf (1981–83).

Yet Hygelac also reminds Beowulf that he had “mistrusted” (*BFF* 1994) [*side ne truwode*] his adventure all along and had asked Beowulf to “let the South-Danes themselves make war with Grendel” (1996–97) [*lete Sud-Dene sylfe geweordon / gude wið Grendel*]. By letting Beowulf know of his *not having faith* in Beowulf, Hygelac opens up a line of tension within his rewelcoming home of the “local hero,” who clearly understands the challenge (and possible peril) of not properly receiving Hygelac’s hospitality, when he concludes his story of his exploits in Hrothgar’s country by telling Hygelac,

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“ac he me (maðma)s geaf,
sunu Healfdenes on (min)ne sylfes dom;
dā ic ēc, beorncyning, bringan wylle,
estum geywan. Gen is eall ēt ēc
lissa gelong; ic lyt hafo
heafódmaga nefne, Hygelac, ēc.”
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[2146–51]

[but he gave treasures to me, / the son of the Half-Danes, according
to my own judgment, / that I to you, king of men, wish to bring, / to
bestow willingly. On you, still, is all / joy dependent; I have few / near
relations, Hygelac [except for] you.]
In other words, Beowulf has to reassure Hygelac, through his hospitable (and loving) language and his gifts, where his loyalties as a warrior (and citizen of Hygelac’s Geatland) ultimately lie.

In the case of Wealtheow, as the wife of Hrothgar and hostess of the table of the Danish hall, it is her duty to give to Beowulf, following Grendel’s defeat, both wine and gifts and to wish him good health and prosperity, and she does so, but not without also voicing her concern that Beowulf will always be kind in deeds to her sons (“Beo þu suna minum / dædum gedefe,” BFF 1226b–27a). Wealtheow’s anxiety over her sons’ future may very well be predicated upon her fear that her husband has gone too far in his hospitality and gratitude by having already spoken of Beowulf as a son [sunu] in his mind [ferfe] to whom he would give everything he is able to give (946b–50).

Hospitality, therefore, is not just a form of charity in this world, but a form of politics—a politics, moreover, that has its breakable limits, evidenced by the poem’s multiple digressions into stories about violence erupting within the very site of reception that makes hospitality possible at all—the hall itself. Therefore, in both the story of the battle at Finnsburg told by Hrothgar’s scop after Beowulf has defeated Grendel (BFF 1071–1159a) and also of the destruction of Heorot itself by the Heathobards, first foretold by the poet (81b–85) and then later predicted by Beowulf with great creative embellishment (2032–69a), we hear about the murder of guests in the halls of their former enemies, who have invited them there to share food, drink, and gifts (including women exchanged as brides), ostensibly to smooth over past enmities—enmities which obviously percolate very closely to the surface of the structures of hospitality designed to ameliorate them.

It is significant, as mentioned above, that when Beowulf first arrives in Daneland, he asks Hrothgar to allow him to “cleanse” or “purify” Heorot (BFF 432b) [Heorot falsian]: no hospitality, or politics, is possible while Heorot is polluted with the blood of Hrothgar’s subjects, many of whom have also abandoned the hall to sleep (and therefore, to reside) elsewhere (138–43), meaning that not only the hall itself, but also the space of sovereignty it marks, has been deserted. The Danish community, thanks to Grendel’s relentless violence, has no viable or pure culture, or even a supposedly gerrmit,” of Daneland’s culture, is clear again and again, for Frisians and Danes and so forth, that it inhabits halls with each other and the communities desire perpetual motion, the tasks of alterity, and who is uniquely

In this scene, literally blows up the supposedly peaceful (and to the extralegal within it), and the isolated (yet also by Heorot’s “little piece of a culturally supported Carolyn Ander... does not rid the (repressed) people so that the suffering about the bouts of

Prior to the “grim ghost” [wylf], live in
viable or pure center, no gleaming building with which to signify its supposedly generous heart. But even without Grendel’s desecration of Daneland’s chief ceremonial and communal space, the poem makes clear again and again in all of its asides regarding the feuds between Frisians and Danes, Danes and Heathobards, Geats and Swedes, and so forth, that it is the men themselves who stain the floors of their halls with each other’s blood and who also burn the structures of their communities down to the ground. As a result, the poem keeps in perpetual motion what Levinas defined as one of the more distressing tasks of alterity: defining “who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust.”

In this scenario, Grendel himself can be seen as someone who literally blows open the doors that separate the domicile of the supposedly peaceful State (Heorot) from everything that it has abjected to the extralegal outside of that domicile (and yet is also interstitial within it), and in his terrifyingly excessive aggression, he is, finally, that isolated (yet also heroic?) figure that Levinas might say was produced by Heorot’s “virile virtues,” as well as the signifier of a politics that transgresses the State, through terror, in order to *transfix its gaze*. For even when Grendel has been partitioned and then reduced to only his lifeless head, he continues to signify as the material excess of a type of violence the State can never do without and of which it will always have difficulty divesting itself. Grendel’s head remains, finally, inside the hall where, in Cohen’s words, in can continue to function as “the ‘little piece of the real’ that symbolization excludes: it is everything culturally suppressed in order for ‘culture’ to come into being.” As Carolyn Anderson writes, “the banishment of Grendel and his Mother does not rid the world of Heorot or *Beowulf* of disruptions. The abject (repressed) persistently encroaches on and disrupts the symbolic order, so that the subject is always in process, on trial, and always insecure about the boundaries of identity.”

Prior to their violent ends at the hands of Beowulf, Grendel, a “grim ghost” (*B.F.F.* 102) [*grimma gast*], and his mother, a “mighty mere-wife” and “sea-wolf” (1519, 1599) [*merewif mihtig* and *brimwylf*], live in a landscape which is wild and supposedly unlivable, yet
is also situated at the very margin, or border, of the so-called civilized world—specifically, Daneland, whose chief symbol Heorot is upheld by the poet as the “best of all houses” (146) [huse selesf]. Because Daneland’s primary symbol, the hall, is architectural—it is a thing made and built by human design and therefore articulates human identity—it stands in stark contrast to the fen paths, dark headlands, and burning mere that mark the monsters’ territory (1357–72). One could argue that the hall is not just a metonym for Daneland (and for its authority), but is, in fact, Daneland itself, for the poet shares no details regarding any village or cultivated fields or other outlying areas that would surely have attached to such a monumental seat of political and cultural power. There is something peculiar about this glittering and golden world whose light shines over many lands (“lixte se leoma ofer landa fela,” 311): the only things that really constitute Daneland are the shore that separates it from the rest of the world, the horn-gabled hall, the paved stone road leading to and away from the hall, the blood and flesh-splattered trail that leads to the monsters’ mere, and the outland territories of the monsters who are “out there” somewhere.\(^{47}\) This calls to mind Cohen’s argument that the monster always resides in a place “that is doubly dangerous” because it is simultaneously ‘exorbitant’ and ‘quite close’.”\(^{48}\) And similar to the world evoked in *King Lear*, in which there are really only two places—the inside of the houses of degenerate power and the outside with its “all-shaking Thunder” and “House-less heads”—*Beowulf*’s world is partitioned between a sick and ruined civitas and a menacing wilderness.

Grendel is the chief border crossed between these two worlds—a “fiend from hell” [*feond on helle*] who, in 12 winters of crafting crimes [*fyrene fremman*] and making murderous incursions into Heorot, has become not only Daneland’s chief terror, but also its chief terrorist (*BFF*101). Many of the descriptions of Grendel within the poem point to his supposedly inherent unknowability, which both fascinates and frightens. He is a “powerful ghost” (86) [*ellengæst*], a “giant” (761) [*eoten*], a “dark death-shadow” (160) [*deorc deapscua*], a “soul killer” (177) [*gastbona*], a “secret hatemonger” (275) [*deogol deðhata*], a “hell-secret” (164) [*helrunan*], and perhaps most importantly, because it is repeated so often, a “terror,” or “one who plays with [or fights] the
law” (159, 425, 433, 592, 646, 732, 739, 816, 989, 1000, and 1269) [agleca].

Although Grendel is definitively strange and monstrous and evil, the poet also tells us that he and his mother are descended from Cain (104–14, 1260–68), and therefore they share a human kinship with the other characters in the poem, while also bearing the mark of Cain’s pathology. As Ruth Melinkoff reminds us,

Grendel and his mother not only are plainly fleshly creatures but also clearly are more human than beast. Although the poet was sparing with physical descriptions, he provides some vividly revealing details: arms and shoulders (835a, 972a, and 1537a), claw-like hands (746–48a, 983b–90), a light shining from Grendel’s eyes (726b–27) and his head dragged by the hair (1647–48a). … Evil monsters, yes, but with human forms, flesh and minds.

Although Grendel never speaks within the poem, and therefore could be construed as being bereft of a rational or human consciousness, the poet refers often to his mental states. As Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe has pointed out, when Grendel first approaches Beowulf after bursting into Heorot in the dead of night, “he is angry ([ge]bolgen, 723; yrremod, 726), his heart laughs (mod ablog, 730), he shows intent (mynce, 731), and he thinks (þobte, 739).”

Hrothgar and his Danes, and Beowulf and his Geats, see Grendel and his mother as thoroughly Other than themselves, yet, as Carol Braun Pasternack has pointed out, the language in the poem often belies the lines of difference that supposedly separate men from monsters, and thereby also reveals what might be called the poem’s “political unconscious”:

Agleca characterizes Grendel and the dragon and aglacwif Grendel’s mother, but agleca also characterizes Sigemund (893a), both Beowulf and the dragon together (2592) and, in two instances, ambiguously either Beowulf or his monstrous opponent, in the first possibly Grendel (739a) and in the second possibly mere-monsters (1512a). Klaiber struggles in his glossary to keep a clear distinction between hero and opponent, identifying the same term as, on the one hand, “wretch, monster, demon, fiend,” and on the other, “warrior, hero.” But, as George Jack recognizes in his edition, “fierce assailant” indicates the common ground for all the referents.
Further, Pasternack explains that “The *aglec* are also *wrec* and this word and etymologically related terms point even more clearly to an oral-heroic paradigm in which hero and opponent fall within a single concept, the fierce outsider.” O’Keeffe has also remarked that the significance of the term *rinc* (“man” or “warrior”) as it is applied to Grendel “is underscored by the number of the times the poet uses the word as a simplex or as part of a compound in the description of Grendel’s actions in the hall [when he fights Beowulf]. ‘*Rinc manige* (728), ‘*magorincARIO heap*’ (730), ‘*slæpende rinc*’ (741), and finally of Beowulf himself, ‘*rinc on ræste*’ (747) confirm Grendel’s connection with the men in the hall.”

More to the point of Grendel’s troublingly intimate exteriority, or extimacy, he is simultaneously the “elsewhere ghost”, “elsewhere guest”, and “elsewhere host” (BFF807) [*ellorg gast*], as well as the “fierce house-guard” (770) [*rebe renweardas*], “angry guest/host” (2073) [*gast yrre*], and the “hateful hall-thane” (142) [*healdegnes hete*] who Hrothgar calls “my invader” (1776) [*ingenga min*], pointing to his complicit status with those who lie sleeping in the hall at night, and whom he kills and ingests during his visits there. It would appear that somehow, if even on an unconscious level, Hrothgar recognizes that Grendel is somehow his and the Danes’ personal nightmare, and even the poet mentions, at lines 152 and 154–55, that Grendel “had fought for a long time against Hrothgar” and “wanted no peace with any man of the Danish troop.” Carolyn Anderson, in her analysis of the word *gast* in the poem, “which appears initially to binarize a social relationship into one of hosts and guests,” has shown how “the word’s Sanskrit root *ghas* ‘to consume,’ highlights its deconstruction as a differentiating marker of the most intimate of social categories.” Further, there is in the poem “an apparent opposition between the terms *gast*, ‘ghost, spirit, demon’ and *gisti*, ‘guest, stranger, visitor.’ This opposition collapses in some passages, suggesting that Beowulf and Grendel view each other similarly, and are even indistinguishable at times.” Finally, since the word *gisti* also has “etymological relations” with “fury, anger” and its roots *gheis* and *ghois “fear and amazement” appear “with cognate sense” in *geisa “to rage” and Gothic *ugaisian “to terrify,”
there may be some kind of original link between the roots *ghas “to consume” and *gheis “fear,” where the first term “would note what is expected from a social relationship, the offering and consumption of food, while the second would encompass the possible excesses of the guest who destroys.”

So, while on the one hand the Danes can claim not to know or understand Grendel, part of his ability to terrify them might be partly rooted in Hrothgar’s recognition that somehow and in some way, Grendel’s violence is recognizable as a kind of “death-shadow” of the very same violence that founded his own hall and might also have a more materially palpable cause that attaches to specific persons or specific places. That Grendel’s feud with Hrothgar’s court is somehow personal, and that its original cause might somehow be rooted in Daneland’s ostentatious display of its wealth and power in its most visible articulation—the golden keep of Heorot itself—is further evidenced in the lines, early in the poem, that Grendel “sorrowfully endured his time in the darkness, [and] suffered distress, when he heard each day the loud rejoicing in the hall, the music of the harp, and the clear song of the poet” (BFF 86–90) [earfoðlice / þrage geþolode, se þe in þystrum bad, / þæt he dogora gewham dream gehyrde / hludne in healle; þær wæs hearpan sweg, / swutol sand scopes]. One of the reasons Grendel may be particularly angry about this music is the subject matter of the song itself—God’s creation of the world (91–98)—for Grendel, as one of the deformed or “harm-shaped” creatures spawned by Cain, likely has a special grievance with God, and also with any men like Hrothgar and his Danes who appear to have been blessed by God. One visible sign of this blessing, aside from the Danes’ material wealth, is the fact, as the poet tells us in lines 168–69, that because of God, Grendel could not approach nor touch Hrothgar’s “gift-seat,” nor could he “know” God’s “mind” or “love.” Although the poet does not say so directly, we can assume that Grendel assumes that he is not, never was, and never will be welcome in the hall and the field of unwelcoming that the hall radiates might be part of what undergirds his rage against the Danes. Perhaps, too, Grendel simply hates all who are foreign _to him_ and recognizes no sovereignty except his
own, which sovereignty, moreover, he asserts through the elimination of all others whom he perceives to be in his way. This raises the troubling question, too, of how Levinas’s unconditional, or peaceful, hospitality can ever be possible in a world that has need of the idea (and force) of sovereignty.

When Beowulf first arrives in Daneland and is explaining to the coast guard why he is there, he reveals, as mentioned above, that he and his men have heard of the “unknown violence” (BFF276) [uncudone nið] that threatens the country of the Scyldings, and he wishes to offer Hrothgar counsel as to how he might vanquish this “I don’t know what kind of ravager” (274) [sceadona ic nat hwylc]. It could be argued that it is not fair to say that the Danes have not properly recognized Grendel as belonging, in some fashion, to their world (if even as a type of structural excess), for Grendel stands in stark contrast to more identifiable human enemies—the Frisian or Heathobard who has been invited to dinner and is quietly seething over old grudges, and whose killing sword is always close at hand. These are enemies whose worst motives are understood and even anticipated. Yet it is precisely this more familiar enemy that Beowulf identifies as the ultimate cause of the undoing of Heorot when he returns to Geatland and explains his adventures in Daneland to Hygelac. In his speech, lines 2000–2162, which constitutes a second telling of his exploits (the first having been already given to us by the poet), Beowulf, either through an amazing prescience or a smart reading of social cues he witnessed while at Hrothgar’s court, explains to Hygelac that Heorot will eventually be destroyed by a failed alliance with an old enemy, the Heathobards, through an arranged marriage between Hrothgar’s daughter, Freawaru, and Ingeld, the son of Froda, chief of the Heathobards. Indicating to Hygelac that these kinds of alliances rarely hold, Beowulf states, “Often, after the fall of princes, in a short while the deadly spear flies, even if the bride is good” (2029–31) [Oft seldan hwær / æfter leodhryre lytle hwile / bongar buged, þeow seo bryd duge].

In a strikingly creative moment, Beowulf then imagines the marriage dinner itself, still in the future, when the Heathobards will welcome the
Danes into their hall to celebrate the wedding and, for all their good intentions, will eventually be galled by the sight of all the Danes in their glittering ring-mail, which the Danes wrested from the dead bodies of the Heathobards on the battlefield (BFF2032–40). Because the desire for vengeance always wins out over the desire for reconciliation (and even, sex), violence naturally erupts, regardless of the protocols of hospitality that have been designed to avoid (or at least smooth over) such violent impulses. The poem speaks often of these seemingly ceaseless cycles of tribal violence and their horrific aftermath; the image of Hildeburh in the Finn and Hengest digression, watching the heads of her son and brother melt as their bodies are being consumed on their funeral pyre, blood bursting from the gashes in their bodies (1120b–22a), is a signature moment in this respect. But many of the characters do possess some prescience about this cycle, and they even have social codes to contain it somewhat. Some might argue, then, that Grendel is somehow worse than these familiar enemies because he represents an abdurately opaque type of mythical or archaic violence that will always be worse than anything the men can do to each other. More terrifying still, he cannot be fought with conventional weapons. When Beowulf requests that Hrothgar allow him to fight Grendel, he mentions that he has heard that Grendel, “in his dark thoughtlessness, does not care for weapons” (434) [for his wonhydum wæpna ne receð], and therefore Beowulf resolves to fight him without sword and shield (437–40). Further, when Beowulf and Grendel are struggling together in hand-to-hand combat in Heorot, and Beowulf’s men rush to defend Beowulf with their “ancestral swords” (795) [ealde lafe], the poet tells us that,

Hie þæt ne wiston, þa hie gewin drugon,  
heardhigende hildemegas,  
ond on healfa gehwone heawan þohton,  
sawle secan: þone synscadan  
ænig ofer eordan irenna cyst,  
guðbilla nan gretan nolde;  
ae he sigewæpnum forsworen hæfde,  
ecca gehwylcre.

(798–805)
[They did not know, when they began the fight, / hard-minded warriors, / thinking to swing [their swords] in every direction, / to seek his soul, that [not any of] the best of iron blades, / of any over the earth, nor any war-sword, / could greet that sin-shadow, / for he had forsworn battle weapons, / all sword-edges.]

Additionally, when Beowulf cuts off the head of Grendel’s already-dead body with the ancient giant sword [eald sword eotenisc], he finds hanging on the wall of Grendel’s mother’s cave (and with which he has also killed Grendel’s mother), the poet tells us that the blade of the sword burned up and melted due to Grendel’s “too hot” blood (1558, 1615–17), indicating once again the difficulty of penetrating Grendel’s body with conventional weapons. Ultimately, Grendel does not answer to standard forms of combat, which we can imagine contributes to his ability to terrorize. In this respect, Grendel appears to be pure, menacing alterity: he does not talk, walk, or fight “straight.”

Early on in the poem, the poet notes that Grendel’s feud with the Danes was perpetual, that he would never make peace with any Danish man, he would not consent to settle the feud in any manner or by any payment, and he was not regretful about his murders (BFF 136, 152–58), all of which give to Grendel the status of a kind of unknown horror who apparently comes, again, from “I know not where.” But I would argue that this reading of Grendel belies what Hrothgar himself tells Beowulf about who Grendel is and where he comes from. Because it is only the poet who tells us that Grendel and his mother are descended from Cain (and this happens in two definitive instances at lines 102–14 and 1260–68), and therefore it is only the poet who acknowledges Grendel’s genealogical link to the human world, it is important, I think, to look closely at how Grendel’s chief enemy, Hrothgar, describes and perceives him. A key passage for understanding this—perhaps the key passage—is the somewhat lengthy speech Hrothgar makes to Beowulf (1322–82) after Grendel’s mother has burst into Heorot and killed Æschere, Hrothgar’s most beloved warrior, rune counselor, and shoulder companion (1325–26). First and foremost, it is clear that Hrothgar understands that the “hand-slayer”
(1330) [handbanan] had a comprehensible motivation for her murder: “She revenged that feud when you [Beowulf], last night, killed Grendel” (1333–34) [Heo þa fede wrec, / þe þu gystran niht Grendel cwealdest], and further, she “would avenge her kinsman” (1339) [wolde hyre meg wrecan]. At the same time, Hrothgar describes Grendel’s mother in somewhat oblique terms as a “wandering slaughter-host” (1331) [melgast wæfre] who goes “I know not where” (1331) [ic ne wat hweoder] with her plundered body.

But then, in a striking reversal, Hrothgar shares with Beowulf some very specific details (albeit, borrowed from the hearsay of “land-holders among my people,” but also from counselors; BFF 1345–46) about who, exactly, Grendel and his mother are, and where they live. In what could even be called slightly excitable tones, Hrothgar explains that some people have seen “two similarly huge borderers, holding the moors, elsewhere ghosts” (1347–49) [swylce twegen / micle mearcstap-pan moras healdan, / ellorgastas], one of whom could “clearly” (1350) [gewislicost] be seen “shaped as a woman” (1351) [idese onlicnes], and the other, “harm-shaped, tread the exile-path in the form of a man, although he was much bigger than any man” (1351–53) [oder earmsceapan / on weres wastmum wrec-lastas tred, / nefne he wes mara bonne enig man oder]. Most important, I think, is that Hrothgar knows this “ghost” has a name, Grendel (1354–55), and that he has no father—given that this is a world in which patrilineal succession is so important, one could argue that Grendel’s fatherlessness adds one more layer to his dimension of frightening and unsettling uncanniness, while at the same time, the assumption that he should have a father (and is strangely lacking one) denotes that he is believed to be, like the Danes, a kin-defined person. Finally, in this same speech, even though Hrothgar claims that Grendel and his kinswoman “guard a secret land” (1357–58) [Hie dygel lond / warigeæd], he then goes on, in shades of increasing hysteria, to describe in very precise detail this “wolf country”: there are fens, windy cliffs, mountain streams under dark bluffs, a flood under the earth, a lake with overhanging branches and frost-covered trees, and at night, strange fires on the water (1357–76).
In Hrothgar’s emotional speech to Beowulf, we see that the margins of the world in which the Grendelkin live are sublimely secret and treacherous, yet also geographically recognizable (and therefore, navigable). Likewise, Grendel and his kinswoman are both dark shadows, but also corporeally material and even humanlike. It is fairly obvious that Hrothgar is afraid of the secret, yet familiar country in which Grendel and his mother live (otherwise, why has he not already launched some kind of counter-offensive there, or traveled there himself to survey the obstacles?), perhaps because he realizes that the difference of this landscape is, as Cohen writes, “arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential,” just like the bodies of the monsters, or the bodies of the men who sleep within Heorot’s high walls. As René Girard has written, “Difference that exists outside the system is terrifying because it reveals the truth of the system, its relativity, its fragility, its mortality.” Grendel’s and his mother’s anthropophagy is very apt in this scenario because it both absorbs the warrior’s body “into that big Other seemingly beyond (but actually wholly within, because wholly created by) the symbolic order that it menaces,” and also disperses the warrior’s being, like so many pieces of flesh, into the wilderness (a kind of anti-Heorot, the space where no hospitality, no State, and no law is thought to be possible). In fact, one of the most terrifying sights for Beowulf and his men when they seek out Grendel’s mother in her underwater den, is the spectacle of Æschere’s severed head sitting on a cliff beside the burning and blood-swelled waters of the mere (BFF 1417–21), and later, when he returns home, Beowulf tells Hygelac how upset the Danes were that they could not properly burn Æschere’s body on a funeral pyre (2124–26). The memory of Æschere’s body having been both ingested and also discarded, almost as trash, along the tracks of the stateless forest, serves as a frightening rebuke to the idea that anyone could ever be safe, at home, from the enemy.

By leasing Beowulf, as it were, to destroy Grendel and his ilk, Hrothgar is admirably doing everything he can to stop terror from enveloping and decimating his culture, to be sure, although it does raise the difficult question, posed by Derrida, “What difference is there
between, *on the one hand*, the force that can be just, or in any case deemed legitimate (not only an instrument in the service of the law but the practice and even the realization, the essence of *droit*), and *on the other hand* the violence that one always deems just?"® Grendel is so terrifying ultimately because, for the hospitable warrior-*polis* of Heorot, as Cohen writes, the "maintenance of order...is achieved only by the repression of those [murderous] impulses Grendel embodies,"® but which nevertheless were once necessary for the founding of Heorot, which then becomes the "law" that keeps violence in check through its alliances, man-payments [*wergild*], diplomacy, and when necessary, controlled reprisal. But as Robert Gibbs notes, "the positivity of law depends on a singular [violent] event, a revolution or war," as well as upon the reiteration of that violence through the coercion that preserves the maintenance of the State.® And what puts the law in question (or peril) is the stranger-Other, such as a Grendel, for whom conformity is out of the question and whose violence appears to have no restraint.®

Grendel reserves for himself the privilege of murder that, typically, only the State (Hrothgar) can authorize, and similar to the suicide bomber who can never be caught or punished because he is already dead (and there will always be another to die again in his place), Grendel holds the place of a sacrificial violence to which the only response is either fear and resignation or the unleashing of a force of the State that operates outside of the usual laws, such as a Beowulf (who is a "special force"). Indeed, it is precisely in Beowulf's "grappling" with Grendel in Heorot (*BFF*745b–818a), when it is difficult to tell where Beowulf ends and Grendel begins, and when Heorot literally resounds with Grendel's "wailing cry" (785) [*wealle wop*] as Beowulf is ripping Grendel's arm and shoulder from his body (or Grendel is ripping himself away from Beowulf's grip), that we can glimpse the fluctuating structuration of violence that, tragically, has always undergirded this world. This is where we also see, following Levinas, that the Other, "in the hands of forces that break him, exposed to powers, remains unforeseeable" (*TI*225).
GOING WITHOUT KNOWING WHERE

According to Levinas, “The privileged role of the dwelling does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition, and in this sense its commencement” (TI 152). Without the dwelling, what Levinas calls “recollection” — the “coming to oneself . . . which answers to a hospitality, an expectancy, a human welcome” — is not possible. It is not possible to know, of course, if the underwater mere where Beowulf meets Grendel’s mother in combat functioned, in that way, as Grendel’s dwelling. But because of what we can imagine to be Grendel’s belief that Heorot mocks him, and even denies him welcoming access, and because his home — to which he drags himself to die, leaving blood along the trail, after Beowulf has defeated him — is designated ahead of time by the Danes as everything that is unhome-like, Grendel exists outside the State as the figure of the extralegal and is therefore beyond his own and others’ “recollection.”

Beowulf’s murder and postmortem decapitation of Grendel represents what might have been for Grendel, if he could have been conscious of it, a devastating double-dispossession, especially when we consider that Beowulf first drives Grendel out of the “high hall” that is the home of those who are supposedly blessed by a God whose regard Grendel cannot “know” or “love” and by whose architecture Grendel obviously feels mocked and excluded, and then later, to add insult to injury, Beowulf desecrates Grendel’s body by slicing off his head in the “roofed hall” (BFF 1515) [hrofsele] of his mother.69 And this is a head that, tellingly, will take four men to haul it along the horse path back to Heorot (1634–39), where, after being dragged across the floor to where the nobles are sitting on the benches, it becomes a spectacle for awe, as well as a trophy (1647–50). The building of Heorot was made possible through the spoils of war, and Grendel’s severed head is the most visible marker of the monstrous, outsized rage necessary for founding that hall as well as the signifier of the violent coercion necessary for maintaining the law of the hall that, in the final analysis, is not predicated as much upon an ethics of hospitality as it is upon a force of exclusion that makes hospitality for some (as opposed to all) possible.
But for the Danes, or even Beowulf and his men, even to pause to consider how they might substitute for or subject themselves to a Grendel, to face him, as it were, without intermediary (Levinas’s face-à-face sans intermediary), would be to contemplate a justice that literally stands beyond the social totality (Heorot itself) that makes thinking possible. It would be to go “where no clarifying—that is, panoramic—thought precedes, in going without knowing where” in order to a grasp a “pluralism” that can never be totalized and without which peace can never be accomplished, but only when we understand peace as something that “cannot be identified with the end of combats that cease for want of combatants, by the defeat of some and the victory of others, that is, with cemeteries or future universal empires” (TI 305–06). It may be, as John Caputo has written of Derrida’s reflections on the possible politics that could be founded by Levinas’s hospitality, that “Unconditional hospitality requires a politics without sovereignty,” and also a “community without community, a city without walls, a nation without borders…where the decision procedure for administration is based on a holy undecidability between insider and outsider.” And what would result would be a type of “holy hell” that “is the stuff of sacred anarchy.”

But how to imagine such an anarchic state of affairs into administrative being? Or, to put the question another way: surrounded by so many bad deaths, both in the poem but also in our own troubled times, how to make way, hopefully, for its shining arrival?

Although Grendel can’t dine anymore on the beautiful bodies of the Danes, cracking their bones and gulping them down in chunks, nor does the light, which the poet calls “unbeautiful” (BFF727) [unfåger], any more shine through his eyes, his head, suspended in the hall in a moment of Anglo-Saxon time, can keep watching them. He can keep gaping and warning as what Levinas would have called, not a face, but a façade “whose essence is indifference, cold splendor, and silence.” Likewise, Aeschere’s head, left behind along the cliff beside the burning lake where Grendel’s mother discarded it (1421), is also watching and warning. These, finally, are the faces of Beowulf that overflow the boundaries of all images and call into question the nature of the proper
relationship of violence to justice, and even to the sovereignty of the State. As the expressions of persons “brutally cast forth and forsaken in the world” (TI 152), and along with Heorot itself, once it is destroyed, they are also the “somewhere”s of dwellings that can no longer open to themselves, but only to those of us—here, in the present—who are willing to behold them with wonder, and even, with trembling. Only then, is justice, and perhaps peace, possible.


**Notes to Joy, “Levinas, Hospitality, Beowulf”**

1. This essay has been with me, troubling my thoughts and study, for over three years now, and many have been the readers and friends involved in its evolution. I want to thank, especially, Roy Liuza, Bruce Gilchrist, and James Earl for their invaluable comments on early drafts. I want to also thank Ann Astell and Justin Jackson for giving me the opportunity to present a protoversion of this essay at Kalamazoo in 2004, for their generous invitation to be a part of this volume, and for their helpful comments for revision through several redraftings. Finally, I thank the external reviewers for their helpful suggestions, especially for the references to the work of Howard Caygill and Simon Critchley. Any remaining errors are entirely my own. The title of this essay is taken from the description of Grendel, in Beowulf, as he is striding from the fens toward Hrothgar’s hall, Heorot, bearing “God’s anger” (711) [Godes yrre]. All citations of the poem are from Fr. Klaeber, Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg [BFF], 3rd ed., with supplements (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1950). All translations are mine and are cited parenthetically by line number.


3. TTI39. Levinas uses both *aumrui* and *aumtre* in his writings, the first to denote “the personal other,” and the second to denote, “otherness in general, or alterity.” It has been the habit of Levinas’s translators to use the uppercase “O” for the first (“Other”) and the lowercase “o” for the second (“other” or “otherness”). On this point, see TO 30n3.

4. TTI50–51. For Levinas, the role of language in the relationship whereby the subject *opens to* (or *reaches for*) the Other is extremely critical, for the “positive deployment of the pacific relation with the other, without frontier or any negativity, is produced in language. Language does not belong among the relations that could appear through the structures of formal logic; it is contact across a distance, relation with the non-touchable, across a void” (172).

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16. [Note: There appears to be a missing reference here.]
5. *TI* 168, 172–73. For Levinas, hospitality is literally the “home open to the Other,” and it is the first condition, as it were, for the encounter with the Other who calls the subject into question *in her own home*. See *TI* 168–74.

6. *OB* 117. To those who would criticize Levinas’s ethics as too abstract or even impossible (how, for example, can one person really be expected to submit themselves to a kind of hostagelike “sub-jectum” to the entire universe?), we must keep in mind, I would argue, that this “sub-jectum” is type of posture (a type of leaning toward) that a singular individual can adopt in a particular time and place, and Levinas was well aware of how it is “the little act of goodness [la petite bonté] from one person to his neighbor” that is “the sole refuge of the good in being” (*IRB* 206–07). Goodness, then, is not accomplished all at once in the world when everyone is all of sudden completely and unreservedly for-the-Other-before-themselves, but in those smaller singular moments when “the human interrupts the pure obstinacy of beings and its wars.” This goodness, which is “little” and passes from one person to another, as in that moment when a soldier gives comfort to the enemy by a small gesture, such as bringing him water or touching him gently, is ultimately “fragile before the power of evil,” and yet is the only means available for ethical attention since goodness can never be “a regime, an organized system, a social institution” (*IRB* 207, 217–18).


8. Ibid., 20. It has to be admitted that, on one level, Levinas’s philosophy may be inherently apolitical. As Richard Wolin writes, “Levinas’s quasi-mystical veneration of Otherness… resembles an ‘epiphany.’ But it is nearly impossible to translate an epiphany into meaningful political action. As an experience of transcendence, an epiphany cannot be made into an object of legislation” (“Heidegger Made Kosher,” *The Nation*, Feb. 20, 2006. Available at http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060220/wolin/). But I would also argue that the question of whether or not Levinas’s ethics of hospitality could ever found a law, or a state, is best left as an open question, and furthermore, if the question is not left open, certain political discourses, such as those centering upon international human rights, would have a much more narrow field of play.


10. Ibid., 64.

11. Ibid., 75–76.


13. Ibid., 113.

14. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas writes that, in substituting oneself for the other, “I am summoned as someone irreplaceable” (114).

15. In his book *Infinitely Demanding*, Critchley distinguishes two types of nihilism: “active” and “passive.” Whereas both see the world as meaningless, the passive nihilist “simply focuses on himself and his particular pleasures and projects for perfecting himself,” and “in a world that is all too rapidly blowing itself to pieces,” he “closes his eyes and makes himself into an island,” while the active nihilist “tries to destroy the world and bring another into being” (4–5).
16. The dating of Beowulf, as a work of either oral or textual art, or as some hybrid between the two, has a long and contentious history that I do not wish to address here. For the purposes of this essay, I assume a composition date congruent with the most probable date of the unique extant manuscript itself, which everyone agrees is circa 1000 CE. For those more interested in the debates over the dating question, see The Dating of Beowulf, ed. Colin Chase (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981); Kevin Kiernan, Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 13–63; and Roy Michael Liuzza, “On the Dating of Beowulf,” in Beowulf: Basic Readings, ed. Peter Baker (New York: Garland Press, 1995), 281–302.

17. Much of John Hill’s work with the poem has been aimed at establishing how the episodes of blood feud, which are seemingly so endemic in Beowulf’s world, are not necessarily “dismaying” evidence of a society that cannot control (or legislate) violence, but are rather “socially acute meditations on the prospects for settlement, for accomplished and extended community,” as well as “meditations on the dynamic of group reformation...once lethal violence undercuts a prior accommodation” (John M. Hill, “The Ethnopsychology of In-Law Feud and the Remaking of Group Identity in Beowulf: The Cases of Hengest and Ingeld,” Philological Quarterly 78 [1999]: 97). In Hill’s view, revenge for past or current injuries in Beowulf’s is often “juridical” and feud is therefore “jural.” On this point, see also John M. Hill, The Cultural World of Beowulf (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), and The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000). Similarly, in their essay “Civilized Rage in Beowulf,” Thomas L. Wymer and Erin F. Labbie argue that “controlled” or “highly ritualized” rage “is useful to the development of social relations and the nation” (Heroic Age 7 [Spring 2004]. Available at http://www.heroicage.org/issues/7/labbie%26wymer.html).


20. Ibid., 740.


22. In Totality and Infinity, Levinas writes that, to “approach the Other is to put into question my freedom, my spontaneity as a living being, my emprise over the things, this freedom of a ‘moving force,’ this impetuosity of the current to which everything is permitted, even murder” (303).


24. Simon Critchley, The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas, 2nd ed. (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999), 223. It is important to note here that, for Critchley (and also for myself), political space needs to be under-
stood as a “factual, ontic, or empirical terrain, on which politics is conceived as an activity of questioning, critique, judgment, and decision; in short, as the creation of antagonism, contestation, and struggle—what one might call the battle over doxa” (236).

27. Ibid., 194. Such a triumph in Caygill’s view of Levinas’s thought always involves violent struggle.
29. Ibid., 221.
30. Ibid., 220.
31. Ibid., 238.
32. Ibid., 239.
35. The Old English is here cited from *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, 129; the translation is mine.
36. *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, 42–43. Ine’s law echoes very closely the earlier law of the Kentish king Wihtred (c. 690–725) that stipulates, “If a man from afar, or a stranger, quits the road, and neither shouts, nor blows a horn, he shall be assumed to be a thief; [and as such] may be either slain or put to ransom” (*The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, 31).
41. Ibid., 3.
42. Ibid., 13.
43. Early on in the poem the poet notes that Hrothgar commanded the building of Heorot as a place where he would “give to all, young and old, such as God gave to him” (71b–72) [call gedelan/geongum on ealdum, swylc him God sealed].
44. In his conclusion to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes: "Situated at the antipodes of the subject living in the infinite time of fecundity is the isolated and heroic being that the State produces by its virile virtues. Such a being confronts death out of pure courage and whatever be the cause for which he dies. He assumes finite time, the death-end or death-transition, which do not arrest the continuation of a being without discontinuity" (306–07). On the psychological operations of terror in association with the figure of Grendel in the poem, see Michael Lapidge, "*Beowulf* and the Psychology of Terror," in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period: Studies in Honor of Jess B. Bessinger, Jr.*, ed. Helen Damico and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute, 1993), 373–402.


47. I want to thank Bruce Gilchrist for initially pointing out to me the sparseness of the landscape and architectural features with which Daneland is described in the poem. As Gilchrist himself puts it, "Daneland is only the hall and two narrow horse-path strips of land—one to the ocean, one to the mere. There are some descriptions of celebratory horse riding, but nothing outside the paths. Aristocratic reality ends here and so do viable targets for Grendel’s violence" (Bruce Gilchrist to Eileen Joy, April 5, 2004, email communication). Additionally, James Earl has written that the "peculiarity of the world of *Beowulf*...lies in what is not there. Except for the *burhs* where men go to sleep, we hear nothing of the village or the people outside the hall...The poem shows us the world of the hall from the inside and seems totally indifferent to the rest of the world outside" (James W. Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994], 116).


49. The meaning of the word *agleaca* has stirred controversy among Old English scholars, and has been taken to mean, variously, a monster, a warrior, a devil, God, and a force of nature. Most translations of *Beowulf*, following Klaeber, have posited "monster" or "demon" when the word denotes Grendel. Roy M. Liuzza, in his recent verse translation, has used, alternatively, "ravager," "evil beast," "loathsome creature," "monster," "horrible creature," and "awful warrior," among others, but Liuzza also points out that the OE *agleaca* literally means "awesome one" or "terror," and that its translation in his edition is "admittedly tendentious" (R. M. Liuzza, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* [Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000], 75, n. 1). Alexandra Hennessey Olsen has suggested that an *agleaca* is one who violates a natural or moral law ("The Agleaca and the Law," *American Notes & Queries* 20 [1982]: 66–68).

50. It should be noted here that although descendancy from Cain does lend to Grendel and his mother a human genealogy, according to the poet, it also means that they are what has been "awakened" and born as a result of Cain’s exile: "giants
and elves and bearers of distress, and likewise the gigantic ones” (111–13) [Panon
untysdras ealle onwocon, / eotenas ond ylfæ ond orcenæs, / swyleæ gigantæs].


and the Limits of the Human,” Texas Studies in Literature and Language

53. Carol Braun Pasternack, “Post-Structuralist Theories: The Subject and the
Text,” in Reading Old English Texts, ed. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1997), 186.

54. Ibid., 186.


56. In his writing on the figure of the monster in Old English literature, Jef-
frey Cohen uses the term extimité, or extremity, to describe the “intimate alterity
of human identity: “its inescapable self-estrangement, the restless presence as its
center of everything it abjests in order to materialize and maintain its borders. To
be fully human is to disavow the strange space that the inhuman, the monstrous,
occupies within every speaking subject” (Cohen, “The Ruins of Identity,” Of
Giants, 4). Extimité is a term borrowed from Lacan, explained by Jacques Alain
Miller as designating “in a problematic manner the real in the symbolic.” More
simply put, extimité names the state of affairs whereby the exterior is always present
in the interior, and further, extremity “is not the contrary of intimacy [but]… the
intimate is Other—like a foreign body” (Jacques Alain Miller, “Extimité,” in
Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society, ed. Mark Bracher
et al. [New York: New York University Press], 75).


58. The translation of these lines has been much disputed; my reading follows
the lead of Roy Liuzza who takes up in his translation a suggestion made by Fred
C. Robinson in “Why is Grendel’s Not Greeting the gifistol a wrec micel?” in Words,

59. It is worth noting here that almost all of the so-called “digressions” in
the poem, such as the Finn and Hengest story (1070–159), as well as Beowulf’s
account, just prior to fighting the dragon, of the seemingly perpetual hostilities
between the Geats and Swedes (2426–89), concern themselves with feuds that
never be settled, except by vengeance, which in turn begets more vengeance,
and so on and so forth. While I am mindful of John Hill’s cogent and often
extralegal or something that can always be better replaced with some other form
jurally definitive,” I am also persuaded of nonlethal settlement, but rather, can be
in Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages, ed. Clare A. Lees
60. See, again, John Hill, “Ethnopsychology in Beowulf.”

61. Much critical energy has been expended on Grendel’s possible meanings on allegorical, symbolic and “deep structural” levels (in other words, on his role as sign and signifier, as opposed to “creature” or “animal”), and more recently, explanations that take a psychoanalytic approach (and even, an ethnopsychoanalytic approach) are prevalent. According to Hill, Grendel’s lawless murders and acts of cannibalism have “savage roots [that]…go deeper than early Oedipal hostility toward siblings, working into an earlier psychological stage of anger: oral aggression organized out of the primal rage that follows the first loss (the breast)” (The Cultural World of Beowulf, 124). In “The Ruins of Identity,” Jeffrey Cohen offers a Lacanian and Kristevan reading in which Grendel is a type of giant who represents a dangerous return to jouissance, and who also haunts the periphery of the warriors’ identity, or “architecture of selfhood,” from which he has been abjected. Further, Grendel’s and his mother’s dwelling, often swollen and swirling with blood, represents an “extime trauma” that “lurks at the center of subjectivity, ensuring that the process of becoming human is also the process of becoming monstrous” (1–28).

62. Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 12.


68. Levinas’s hospitality, of course, would not be able to succeed within any model of conformity; indeed, it depends on the appearance and welcoming of the nonconformist.

69. Andy Orchard has pointed out that Grendel’s mother’s mere is described in “human, almost homy terms” (Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the ‘Beowulf’-Manuscript [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995], 30), and Cohen has written that her underwater cave is “just another version of Heorot” (“The Ruins of Identity,” 27).

71. Simon Critchley provides one possible answer with the Levinasian “ anarchic meta-politics” delineated in his book *Infinitely Demanding.*

72. TI 193. In book 11 of his *Libri Etymologicarum*, Isidore of Seville wrote that “monstrosities, monstra, are named from an admonition, monitus, because they point out something by signaling… what may immediately appear” (quoted in John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981], 112).

**NOTES TO KAUFMAN, “THERE IS HORROR”**

1. Drawing inspiration primarily from the Old Testament, where Moses likens himself to a mother carrying an infant at her breast (Num. 11:12) and God similarly describes himself as a mother, bearing the Israelites in his bosom, conceiving them in his womb (e.g., Isa. 49:1, 15, and 66:11–13), Christian exegetes, teachers, and preachers of the Middle Ages pictured Jesus as a nursing mother and themselves either as suckling infants or as mothers feeding at their breasts the babes entrusted by God to their instruction. Medieval commentators on the Lukan phrase “the bosom of Abraham” understood it as unabashedly feminine and maternal in its origins, traceable back to the feeding of the unborn in the womb, the nursing of the infant at the breast, and what Francis Gigot terms “the universal custom of parents to take up into their arms, or place upon their knees, their children when they are fatigued, or return home, and to make them rest by their side during the night (cf. 2 Kings [1 Sam.] 12:2; 3 Kings [1 Kings] 3:20; 3 Kings [1 Kings] 17:19; Luke 11:7).” See Francis E. Gigot, “Abraham, the Bosom of,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia,* 15 vols. (New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1913), I:55–56. I thank Ann Astell and Justin Jackson for noting this Lukan passage.