CHAPTER 1

ARCHIPELAGO AND OTHERWORLD

In the early Irish story *Imnann Brain*, whose origins probably trace back at least to the lost eighth-century Book of Druimm Suciata,1 the legendary Irish ruler Bran mac Febail is near home when he hears music behind him. Although he keeps looking back for the source of it, the music always stays elusively behind. He falls asleep finally in its sweetness. When he wakes, he is lying next to a silver branch whose white blossoms are hard to distinguish from the stem. When he takes the branch into the stronghold where his warriors are gathered, suddenly they see a strangely dressed woman, who sings a song of the otherworldly realm Emain and tells of how she has brought from there a silver branch of an apple tree.2 So sweetly she sings of her distant otherworldly island that Bran and a party of men sail off to find it, only to discover in their many adventures that the sea itself is an Otherworld, and that their home cojoins this multidimensional archipelago of elements and beings that ultimately makes it an Otherworld as well. While on his adventure, Bran meets Manannán mac Lir, a sea god who shows him that the ocean is teeming with hidden life. Addressing Bran, Manannán says:

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A m-aigh ní thid
Beannacht thú, Ó chumhacht mé,
An gheallann rud is cinnteach, chomh maith leat.

Sineadh mac Lir
Er sibh é ort a bhfuil an chuimhneachán agat?
An uilleamh i bhféadfadh sé a chur ar a dtús?
Nó an am uaireanta, ní féidir liom a thabhairt.
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St. Beuno's well in rural northwest Wales; native monastic centers associated with the saint probably played a role in compiling the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*. (Author's photo.)
Li na faire fortaí,
goldod moire immé-rai,
rostert buide ocus glass;
is talam nád éconnass.

Lingit ich bricc ass de brú,
a menir find for n-sicci-siu;
it loig, it útain co ndadadh,
co cairedi, cen imarbath...

Mé in maige, lin in tshloig,
taxtir liga co aglaonboidd;
findruth aircit, drep[pla] éir,
táircit fáil tacht imar[líl.

Chluiche n-simin n-inneldag
agdirt fri find-imborbag,
uir is mná mian fo doss
cen peccad cen immar-boss.

Is iar mbarr fedo ro-má
do churcán tar indadr,
fil fid fo mess i-mhí goide
fo braione do becinóé.

Fid co mbaltú ocus tornad
fors-úlif fine fibrólad,
fid cen echorai[e] cen esbad
fors-fil du[illí] co n-óíoth.

Fil dun sóthussach dán[tle}
cen ais, cen förthae n-úíóre
ni-frescam de mbeth anguss,
nín-tánaill int immar-boss.

[An extraordinary beauty it is for Bran
In his coracle across the clear sea:
but to me in my chariot from a distance
It is a flowery plain on which he rides about.

What is clear sea
For the prowed skiff in which Bran is,
That is a delightful plain full of flowers
To me in chariot of two wheels.

Bran sees
multiplicious waves beating across the clear sea:
I myself see in Mag Mon
Red-headed flowers without blemish.
Sea-horses gleam in summer
As far as glances of Bran's eye traverse:
Blossoms pour forth a stream of honey
In the land of Manannán son of Lir.

The sparkle of the expanses that you go over,
The brightness of the sea, on which you row about,
other early Irish narratives recount how a flood covered a kingdom to create the Lough. That antediluvian realm is the homeland equivalent of the overseas prelapsarian Paradise evoked by Manannán: A Paradise lost in historic time but regained in a timeless mythic space.

The shifting borders of this liminal realm are marked not only by geographical features but also by a fluid temporality. Ages have passed while Bran’s companions themselves think they have only been gone for a short time. Their story is now an ancient legend in Ireland. When they sail back, one of Bran’s band attempts to jump back out of the boat to the group’s home shore. To the imagined horror of all, he instantaneously grows older by centuries, and is reduced to dust. Yet there also are numinous beings in the text who span time as well as space. Verses in the narrative meld prophecies of the Incorporation of Christ the Creator God, and of the birth of Manannán’s son Mongán, who reputedly is an historical king of Ulster in the Christian era. Through Mongán’s cosmic kingship and Christ’s divinity, the Otherworld is immanent within human history as well.

Textually the Otherworld also constitutes a multidimensional trope, a multiformal of oral and literary sources probably shaped in part by performance. Immram Brain is one version of a tale associated with an older lost manuscript, and also part of an amorphous body of traditions relating to Bran. It has connections to a larger network of native or Celtic Otherworld narratives, to biblical traditions, and even to analogues in later Welsh narratives and French traditions of the Holy Grail. The immram (‘rowing about’) genre to which the stories of Bran’s voyage arguably belong focuses on exploits in exploring faraway islands, and the genre reached its most popular medieval form in various redactions of the voyages of St. Brendan. The saint encounters a spectrum of Christian ascetic practices on a chain of islands that evokes the native Otherworld. Through the figure of Mongán, elsewhere identified with Finn, Immram Brain is also drawn into the orbit of the Finn cycle of adventure tales concerning the youth-warband of Finn and its eponymous avatar, echoed by names of the modern Fenians and Huck Finn, inhabiting the margins of Irish society and of the Irish countryside.

As suggested by Immram Brain, the realm of the Otherworld in various early narratives from around the Irish Sea extends to physical dimensions besides sea and islands. The watery Otherworld encompasses rivers such as the Boyne, springs and inlets of the sea such as Lough Foyle, and holy wells associated with saints and the waters of baptism. The aerial Otherworld is manifested in the birds in the tree in Immram Brain, who are elsewhere identified with the neutral angels (as in the Navigatio S. Brendani) or the souls of the just (Dá bhóth na naimh), birds often having otherworldly associations in early Celtic narratives, as in the bird troop in Togail Bruidne Dá Derga. The early Irish even imagined the biblical Paradise as being above the world, near the aerial waters of the creation account in Genesis and the clouds in which Christ disappeared and will return. They most famously identified the terrestrial Otherworld with the side or mounds (usually Neolithic mounds specifically identified in Irish topography) that form portals to it in early Irish and later extant early Welsh lore, as will be explored further in the next chapter. Other narratives explicitly incorporate Irish and Welsh topography into the Otherworld. In all these cases, the

Otherworld is a type of overlay or multiplex landscape that integrates aspects of spiritual, imaginative, and natural realms of human life and the physical environment, including wilderness and animals, and that permits shape-shifting as well as transport through time and space. It often is expressed as a mirroring image that is relational, transcendent yet immanent, “a landscape that was, at the same time, reassuringly familiar and hauntingly different,” as the historian Benjamin Hudson puts it. It could support the Irish high kingship and threaten it, reflecting a continuation of pre-Christian beliefs outside of monastic cultural networks, yet in Christian contexts. Historian Robin Stacey Chapman adds, “In few places was the boundary between the sacred and the secular less clear than in the Celtic lands, where the natural beauty of the place was matched only by the relentless meddling of the supernatural beings that inhabited it.” The Celtologist Marie Sjoestedt provided the most memorable definition:

A discussion of the mythological world of the Celts encounters at once a peculiar difficulty, namely, that when seeking to approach it you find that you are already within. We are accustomed to distinguish the supernatural from the natural... The Celts knew nothing of this, if we are entitled to judge their attitude from Irish tradition. Here there is continuity, in space and in time, between what we call our world and the other world—or worlds. Some peoples, such as the Romans, think of their myths historically; the Irish think of their history mythologically; and so, too, of their geography.

In this study I explore the Otherworld trope in early Irish Sea narratives from a new combination of historical and environmental perspectives. This rereading of the trope in the context of ecology provides the opportunity to query modern definitions of nature through landscape, in order to understand better the reciprocal relation of nature as nonhuman physical “fact” with nature as a constructed human value. Cultures in the pre-twelfth-century Irish Sea province often did not articulate definitions of nature in any discrete modern philosophical or scientific sense. They expressed their experience of nature holistically in theories, practices, and narratives combining theology, asceticism, anthropology, and everyday life. An understanding of landscape as a form of narrative image mediating between the physical environment and human culture and thus crossing conventional boundaries between the biological and the imaginary, the body and the environment, the subjective and the objective, informs this project. This study reads the Otherworld landscape as not only a textual narrative in the modern sense, but also as a non-modern sense as an iconographic narrative in which the text functions as an image based in geography and in what phenomenologists call the “lived body.”

It is through such approaches to landscape, place, and space that environmental literary study, or ecocriticism, finds its most productive entry to early medieval literature, in tandem with environmental philosophy. Examining the Otherworld trope as an embodied reading experience, in the sense of intertextuality connecting geography, ascetic theology, and visual theory, we can come to understand it as embodying a type of cultural symbolism that defines nature intersubjectively, across boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. The
native origins of the Otherworld may well originally lie in prehistoric storytellers reflecting on non-human temporalities, including those of plants, animals, and geology. Yet it became part of a cosmopolitan literary milieu as well.

The time is ripe for such a re-reading of a trope long associated with over-romanticized and anachronistic views of "eco-friendly" Celts, an exotization that obscures its real value as a model for empathetic human interaction with the environment. Historical and literary studies of the past two decades provide a clearer picture of the cosmopolitan contexts of Otherworld narratives. Further, burgeoning fields of environmental literary criticism and environmental philosophy (not to mention medieval landscape studies) afford new vehicles for questioning the nature of the Otherworld to cultural constructions of nature, social interaction with the physical environment, and to sliding linguistic definitions of nature as both an essence and as a dynamic relation between the living and nonliving, and being and nonbeing.

Since much of modern environmental philosophy can be regarded as a gloss on Martin Heidegger's anti-modernist definition of Being as both hidden and appearing, that will be used as a starting point for defining nature in this study, in terms of understanding nature both in bodily terms and as a process found in the dynamic relationship of those hidden and appearing qualities. Likewise, the environmental phenomenologist Edward S. Casey's definition of landscape as the appearing of "place-world," an interactive region mediating between infinite space and experiential place, will be a baseline for this discussion ("place" being defined by Casey as experience of difference in an event linking creative order with cosmological order; "space" being a more abstract universal matrix privileged by modern thinking). Ultimately, the ninth-century Irish philosopher John Scottus Eriugena's definition of nature as including both being and nonbeing, and his cosmic sense of landscape influenced by both non-Augustinian patriarchy and desert asceticism, will be foundational in discussing the Otherworld's own philosophical and empirical contexts. And in those contexts "nonbeing" (meaning that which is not readily apparent or instrumentally at hand, yet omnipresent both as mysterious essence and part of dynamic process) provides a working definition for "spiritual" in relation to nature.

Strange Beauty contextualizes the Otherworld trope in terms of such a philosophical "deep structure" in relation to the literary and environmental milieu of the Irish Sea province. While acknowledging what Jonathan M. Wooding calls "shared common historical and geographical circumstances" of early Irish and Welsh Christian literatures, as well as the persistent influence upon them of the monastic movement originating in the Eastern Mediterranean, it seeks to avoid simplistic identification of a romanticized "Celtic Christianity" with "desert fathers indistinguishable from their Egyptian counterparts." It recognizes that relevant early Welsh literature survives in later or more ambiguously datable forms than early Irish texts. Yet if it is important not to allow ahistorical conceptions to erase distinctive differences among the cultures that constituted the Irish Sea province, it is equally important not to allow any anachronistic sense of monolithic Western Christianity or "the medieval" to erase a sense of distinctive regional Celtic cultural traditions from before the watershed Norman conquests. Examining early medieval intellectual culture around the Irish Sea, for example, reveals a common influence of Cassianite desert monasticism that cuts across ecclesiastical divisions such as the so-called Romani and Hibernens discussed in later chapters, the different emphases in views of nature detected by John Carey between seventh-century writings associated with southern Ireland and texts slightly later from more northern monastic networks, or disparities in material prosperity and survival of early texts between Ireland and Wales. In reading the Otherworld as a trope of the early medieval Irish Sea archipelago, this study relies on new explications by Carey and Hudson (among others) of regional connections and contacts that overcome deep-rooted but anachronistic scholarly binaries of "English" and "Celtic," "Welsh" and "Irish," as well as on religious historian Thomas O'Loughlin's nuanced sense of a "local theology" of early Christianity in the region.

Early Christian monastic communities shaped the literary culture in which Inman Brain was composed, at the intersection of bodily ascetic and biblical concerns with the physical environment of Europe's Atlantic archipelago and its native oral traditions. This was true for the development of the Otherworld trope as a whole in Celtic-language cultures that formed the core of later nations and sub-nations of Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and the continental enclave of Brittany. But these cultures all meshed with larger webs of literary and oral influence in the early medieval era, through Latin texts and by ascetic networks modeled on desert monasticism of the Eastern Mediterranean. Adomnán's late-eighth-century Hiberno-Latin Vite S. Columbae, for example, refers to a spiritual pilgrim wishing to find a desert in the ocean off Scotland. As Wooding notes, "Historical evidence suggests that there was a basic reality to the ideal of the desert in early Irish monastic settlement, as a space unsullied by secular life." But there was more to this milieu than just a desire for separation from urbanity, as the emergence of Antony's Egyptian "city in the desert" and the proto-towns around early medieval monasteries in non-urbanized Ireland both suggest. It advanced positively what we would call today a worldview engaging the physical environment. Earlier Christian perspectives on nature in the Irish Sea province, the formative context of the Otherworld trope, did not involve so definite a distinction between what we would call the natural and the supernatural as in late medieval Europe. Two important early Irish writers, Augustine of Hippo, although the latter's views on grace, the Godhead, and semiotics contributed to later binarizing of those categories. In fact, the linguistic distinction of a supernatural category of life as opposed to the natural only emerged sharply in what is now Western Europe with the flourishing of Scholasticism, shaping "a particular mental geography in which events could be assigned to particular domains, this natural, that supernatural." Earlier philosophy was related to asceticism considered empirical, paradoxically with a stronger distinction between the hidden mystery of God and the apparent physical world, but not between the workings of that divine mystery in Creation and physical nature.

The external image of the desert—adapted to the Atlantic islands—served as focus for early Irish Sea literary culture, rather than the later interiorized Gothic
cathedral and monastic cloister. Athanasius' influential fourth-century Life of St. Antony portrayed the prototypical desert experience, including an emphasis on the synergy of grace and works in asceticism. John Cassian's writings exemplified (and helped transmit to the West) a meld of Eastern Mediterranean asceticism and theological emphases that opposed (especially in Cassian's Thirteenth Conference) the Augustinian separation of nature and grace that later came to prevail in the West. The influence of desert asceticism was especially pronounced in areas around the Irish Sea, where extensive vernacular literatures apparently developed earliest in northwestern Europe. The region enjoyed continued contact with the Eastern Mediterranean beyond the fall of the Western Roman Empire, as Ireland became an economic and cultural powerhouse in the so-called Dark Ages of Atlantic Europe.31

Indeed, the location of Irish Sea lands on the periphery of continental Europe was then a cultural advantage, both in terms of relative isolation from large-scale upheavals on the continent, and access to trade routes by sea. Ireland seems to have been Christianized from western Britain, which exhibited, especially in north Wales, claims to cultural continuity from the old Roman province that were uniquely enduring in the lands of the old Western Empire. Anglocentric historiography going back to the scholar (and learned propagandist) Bede suggested that monastic cultures in this region were cut off from developments in the Western church. Yet they actually were cosmopolitan in their formative orientation to native, Latin, and Eastern Mediterranean traditions. The cultural combination of insular identity and connectivity parallels aspects of the doubled landscape of the Otherworld itself, as well as of the trope's geographical doppelgänger, archipelago.

Formative geographic and social developments on the archipelago in this era shaped the background to the decentralized Otherworld trope. But, paradoxically, cosmopolitan development of monasticism and churches around the Irish Sea also took a rural and decentralized turn, cut off from the old metropolitan center of the archipelago by the fall of the Roman province in Britain. The continental core of Western Europe by contrast saw greater ecclesiastical focus on redeveloping old Roman urban centers: A synthesis of native and Christian social systems shaped what historian T.M. Charles-Edwards calls competing "multiplicity of hierarchies of status" in early medieval Ireland, which was the most prosperous and well-attested of the early literary cultures around the Irish Sea. There was no discrete political system distinct from these social networks. At any given time there could be scores of leaders bearing royal titles, in a patchwork of realms ranging from localized clans to regional dynasties with islandwide ambitions. A "mandarin class" or scholarly elite bridged powerful clan families and monastic communities.46 The latter included clusters of lay families in their outlying grounds, and balanced geographically and genealogically between local and regional secular social networks. Famously, the sixth-century Irish St. Columba (Colum Cille) was a member of one of the powerful Uí Néill dynasties of northern Ireland and wielded influence on royal networks in both Ireland and Scotland while presiding over Iona and its network of monasteries straddling the Irish Sea.

Historian Donnchadh Ó Corráin helpfully surveys the decentralized yet complexly interwoven social and natural landscapes mirrored in the Otherworld trope:

In Ireland of the eighth and ninth centuries and before, there were expanses of upland wood, and great bogs covered large areas of the country. The woodlands were not stable: they advanced and retreated in response to human activity, prehistoric and historic. Most woods were privately owned, managed for large timber, and coppiced and pollarded for small ones [and used for] pannage and rough grazing for animals, wild fruit and nuts for human consumption. The bogs were used for peat and summer pasture. Literary and legal sources convey the impression that large woods were scarce...Great clearances had taken place in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, and a growing population led to extensive colonization and a remarkable extension of arable farming in the very early medieval period...Ecclesiastical foundations and monastic towns of varying sizes dotted the countryside. Some were tiny, in remote and barren parts of the country, on islands and headlands, while others were small churches in settled farming areas, each with its lands and circular enclosure, and little different in outward appearance from secular settlements. In the rich lowlands and river-valleys there were large monastic towns such as Trim and Lismore, while other houses, great and small, occupied the fertile islands of the central bogsland. The settlements of farmers were scattered thickly where land was at all suitable for cow or plough. In one area of Cavan, for example, there is evidence for an early Irish farming settlement for every hundred hectares; in other areas, settlement was twice or three times as dense. The remains of some 40,000 ringforts, roughly contemporary with one another, still dot the landscape, and archaeologists are agreed that the vast bulk of them are the farm enclosures of the well-to-do of early medieval Ireland...the total may have been 50,000 or more.47

The remains of so many farmsteads from a population probably averaging under five hundred thousand in this period highlights its decentralized social landscape. Appropriately for an archipelago that by geographic definition is both in and out of place in relation to land and sea, monastic sites in this topography themselves tended to be in places that were both geographically liminal and socially linked to varied clan networks. Ascetic traditions of exile-journey coexisted with an emphasis on "being in place" in both Irish and Welsh monastic texts. Families living in monastic proto-towns, clan connections of monastic leaders, and the spiritual families of the monasteries themselves formed kinship networks that melded sacred and secular in the inclusive but still alternative worlds of monastic centers. Geographic space overlapped in a deep way with personal landscape of place. Just as the sea served simultaneously both as connector and divider, so too the culture’s imaginative sense of place was dynamic (however much social roles may not have been), contrary to modern conceptions of place as fixed and of a knowable infinite space as dynamic.48 Multiple social overlay networks of kinship, semi-communal farming neighborhoods, clientage, small kingship, and large dynastic alliances of power and obligations were deeply entwined with the monastic and ecclesiastical. In contrast, the evolution of distinctly articulated and centralized ecclesiastical and political systems...
in Christian Anglo-Saxon and later Frankish kingdoms involved power articulated in more colonial terms. In early medieval Ireland, some 4,000 churches are attested or evidenced by remains dispersed across the island. That’s perhaps 1 church per 120 persons.\textsuperscript{53} Most probably were unable to accommodate such a crowd. But all were interwoven in the landscape’s competing hierarchies, in and between which monastic communities were the literary centers and cultural brokers that ultimately produced the Otherworld trope as an overlay landscape of their own.

The Desert in the Archipelago

Older forms of monasticism endured and evolved in the Irish Sea province to become a foundational influence on the Otherworld as a literary trope. Hudson notes that these communities involved organizational and ascetic emphases that, by the era of the Norman Conquest and the beginning of the Crusades, “were, in some respects, relics of an age long past for most of Western Christendom.”\textsuperscript{49} New centralizing native dynasties and conquerors in western Britain and Ireland by the eleventh and twelfth centuries treated them as outmoded, portraying older native communities as lax, secularized, irregular, and disorganized by contrast with, say, Cluny and the Cistercians. The rising kingdom of Scotland, for example, purposely supplanted older Irish monastic influences as part of its political program. Native traditions did not serve the interests of the new political and ecclesiastical masters of an expansive Western Europe as well as those of burgeoning newer monastic forms. (The hybrid Gallo-Frankish church in the Merovingian era had relied more heavily on Irish monasticism, by contrast.)\textsuperscript{41}

The foundational importance of the image of the desert or its equivalent in natural landscape (attested by Irish places with “desert” names, and the strikingly remote physical beauty of many Irish Sea monastic sites) was a key difference. In the Life of St. Antony, St. Athanasius described Antony’s response to the desert or wilderness, which was paradigmatic for early Irish Sea monasticism. Told by a heavenly voice to go to the inner mountain in the desert, Antony questioned how he would find his way alone.

And immediately there were shown to him Saracens who were about to travel that route . . . they eagerly welcomed him. After journeying three days and three nights in their company, he came to a very high hill. Below the hill there was water—perfectly clear, sweet, and quite cold, and beyond there were plains, and a few untended date palms. Then Antony, as if stirred by God, fell in love with the place, for this was the place the one who had spoken with him at the riverbank had designated . . . Even the Saracens themselves, perceiving the zeal of Antony, would make it a point to travel that way and would joyfully bring loaves to him . . . At first, however, when the beasts in the wilderness came for water, they often would damage his crop and his planting. But gently capturing one of the beasts, he said to all of them, “Why do you hurt me, when I do you no injury? Leave, and in the name of the Lord do not come near here any longer” . . . and thereafter many [people seeking wisdom and healing] visited him.\textsuperscript{12}

Antony reportedly called the atmosphere of this “wilderness” refuge as essential to an ascetic as the sea for fish: “Just as fish perish when they lie exposed for a while on the dry land . . . we must rush back to the mountain [in the desert], like fish to the sea—so that we might not, by remaining among you, forget the things within us.”\textsuperscript{43} So the remembering of the things within depends on being in the desert mountain. In early Irish poetry, some extant verses express a similar ascetic delight in a connective natural environment, such as this one:

Dá marcaí fíadh dé,  
fomchaim loid linn—lám na mba  
hús mo lebròn in lìchn  
fomchaim trèocht inna n-én.

Fonmchaim cóin mian—mèdair mas—  
hi mh-bro glas de dindgaibh doss.

deòd, nóinchoinniu colma,  
caisneobhsaim fo roidh r(ios).

[A hedge of trees surrounds me, a blackbird's lay sings to me,  
praise I shall not conceal.

Above my lined book, a meter of the birds sings to me, lovely chant.

Clear-throated cuckoo sings to me in blue-grey-green cloak from fastness of bushes.

The Lord cherishes me; well do I write under the woodland.]

Early “Celtic nature poetry” has been reared by recent scholarship with more nuancing than earlier romantic interpretations, in ways further suggestive of a distinctive literary geography of desire.\textsuperscript{46} In these early texts scholars now see delight in nature as often not articulated simply, but with terror at the chaos of nature mixed with awe at the transcendent divine, alongside experience of both an immanence of the divine and an intimate sense of place in landscape.\textsuperscript{47} The “distance-yet-engagement” of nature in such poetry reflected the embodying of a mystery in the intermingling and elemental dynamics of the archipelagic world, no matter how much Irish exegetes nonetheless focused on finding natural explanations for discrete phenomena. Apophatic theology, asceticism, and iconography conjoined with region and with native traditions to shape a sense of the ultimate essence of the real being of the world as unreachably and unpossessable—but empirically engageable through energies of life and divine grace melded synergetically with the world like fog and rain and sea and wind in the Gulf Stream environment. A resulting geography of desire, by which is meant sustained desire for relation with the Irish Sea environment embodied in narratives of topography and Creation as a whole, involved a definition of desire embodying cosmically connected creativity rather than that of transcendent lack and possessiveness typical in the later West.

Another textual example of this complex relation of asceticism to the environment is found in an early medieval Irish prayer attributed to St. Patrick. It invokes both connections to elements of the physical world and to Christ who is contextualized in bodily relations constituting place, interweaving personal place and a sense of the grace of divine energies moving in nature.
and landscapes, as in Celtic and desert hagiography. Changing notions of space affected views of sexual difference as well, amid urbanization. A “broad womanless space” became imagined as part of an increasingly abstract view of the physical world, without the sense of place that Irigaray describes as embodying also experience of sexual difference, or the early Irish Sea Otherworld. The shift to a paradigm of male interiority also affected linguistic theory, which changed from assumptions that words iconographically flow into the signified, to later medieval theories emphasizing how humans instrumentally form words to signify objects. This evoked a different consciousness of temporality as well as of space and symbol. By the twelfth century, Latin writers increasingly distinguished their own “modernity” from ancient times.

Historian Caitlin Corning describes six distinctive regional aspects of early medieval Christian communities in Ireland, reflecting not a static “Celtic church,” but a dynamic and heterogeneous regional culture, which helped to shape the Otherworld’s literary milieu. They were: (1) The role of powerful abbots, who unlike their contemporaries on the Continent, controlled large networks of churches and regularly attended church synods” accompanied by influential scholars and authorities. (Such a conciliar model of ecclesiology likewise is suggested, though not proven, by very limited evidence from the early Welsh church, and Bede’s account of British-Celtic bishops seeking counsel from a hermit). (2) An emphasis on going into exile for God, some evidence for which is also reflected in early Welsh hagiography. (3) An early focus on regular personal confession (in the context of an ongoing relation to a spiritual guide), traceable in part to evidence of post-Roman British penitentials (e.g., that of the Cambro-Latin Gildas), as well as to a Cassianic-style monastic heritage. (4) A rural and decentralized orientation. (5) Regular use of nonclerics to manage day-to-day church and monastery operations, reflecting mixed lay-clerical populations and indigenous inculturation of monasticism. (6) An emphasis on Antiochene or detailed historical scriptural exegesis. The latter explicates scripture and the natural world in physically literal symbolism. It also helped shape a multiplicitous and enumerative writing style, based partly on biblical models linking mystery and physicality in cultural narrative, echoed in both Irish and Welsh texts. This style, while not exclusive, contributed to an emphasis on physical nature in early Irish exegesis and poetry. It relates to how the early Irish adapted biblical themes into a type of “Irish Old Testament,” paralleled also as we shall see in Welsh in the Mabinogi. The literary Otherworld largely formed one result of that project.

There is also an additional political category of difference that this study adds to Corning’s list, of importance to the Otherworld trope. The early Irish church did not embrace any native Celtic version of the German comitatus, or war band, to the extent that ecclesiastical cultures in other Western European countries did from the Carolingian era on. There was not an experience of the Church passing in effect into the hands of an elite identifying itself as a conquering racial group suppressing a native population, as in Frankish, Anglo-Saxon, and Anglo-Norman realms. In a foundational Irish Sea text c. 500, the Cambro–Latin De Excidio Britanniae, St. Gildas railed against native Welsh warlords. Irish Christian writers, who in some ways adapted native traditions more effectively than other
cultures, in this case preferred to condemn the native institution of the wandering fían band, as Charles-Edwards notes, "not just for its violence, but also for its explicit paganism," although it was Christianized in elegy in later tales of Finn. For monastic cultural brokers in the early medieval Irish Sea zone, over-privileging warrior culture in texts could be a threat to the decentralized system that they sought to mediate, however entwined they themselves were with secular elites. The satire of warrior ethics in the central early Irish narratives of the Táin Bó Cúailnge illustrates this, as do monastic-brokered restrictions on warfare such as the Cláín Adomnáin. Perhaps the Otherworld trope originated in literary form in part as an attempt to erase and then Christianize the hypermasculine institution of the war band in a new narrative of landscape, without assimilating and accommodating that institution within the church. This occurred in literary cultures emphasizing a "native" identity that had not experienced to the same extent post-Roman migration and disruption, amid communities with experiential ascetic norms (and perhaps enduring matrific landscape factors of native patriarchy), by contrast with Germanic cultures organized around migratory ethics and hypermasculine Odinic war cults. Early Welsh literature, such as the Mabinogion (discussed in the next chapter) and so-called saga poetry, also strongly seemed to bring into question warrior ethics perhaps identified with conquering Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman regimes.

Early monastic communities from the Irish Sea realms wrote from these contexts the distinctively non-Augustinian geography of desire already mentioned. That narrative geography interwove nature and grace—self, landscape, and the divine—in techniques of asceticism, literature, and visual art. This is evident in how early monastics wrote incorporated the sea as a productive dimension of otherworldly space (whether as a portal for exile or as a place to stand in prayer), together with outdoor-oriented processions and ascetic practices, agricultural and pastoral work, and the spatiality of their texts and manuscript production, such as the Book of Kells, which were all creative of an intensely cosmically interactive type of cultural geography (the environmental intertextuality of the manuscripts to be examined in future chapters). In this they followed the so-called energy theory of ascetic asceticism, the likely influence of which on the Otherworld trope is explored further in chapter three. That combined theological-cosmological theory was implicit in psychosomatic techniques promoted by Cassian in his Conferences, practices that in the East became known as hesychasm, graphically evident in the early Irish martyrdom colors. Chapter four will argue that these color-practices combined apocalyptic belief in the unknowability of the essence of God with a focus on the activities or energies of God experienced both in the body and in the Irish Sea environment.

Such synergy of ascetic struggle melded grace (the energies) with free will in tegen or deification to shape this distinctive ascetic landscape. The believer-struggler in ares (bodily spiritual exercise) potentially could engage with the uncreated divine energies and become one with them, ultimately as "a god" in Pauline terms. The energies are manifest in a complex integration of the external world and internal memory. They manifest what one religious scholar called a "sparkle in creation" transfiguring nature. Early Irish rules on monasticism in fact used a term cibeleoir for a contemplative hermit or anchorite, in-place in Insular "desert" exile, which meant "spark of the contemplative life." Such hermits and spiritual guides, usually out of the limelight of history, held a special place in early Christian traditions of western Britain and Ireland, reflected in early Irish law. Bede and Gerald of Wales described their continuing distinctive role in Celtic-speaking lands, their practice is reflected in the Irish chronicles of violent martyrdom. Nor was the cultural geography of such "desert" asceticism confined to eremitic monasticism. Traditions identify cave-refuges with hagmatic monasteries at Glendalough in Ireland and Whitcomb in Scotland.

Early saints' lives, chronicles, texts of monastic rules, poetry, and exegesis help outline this distinctive cultural geography around the Irish Sea, but personal experiences of it in many ways seem lost. A surviving regional culture of desert asceticism on the island-like peninsula of Mount Athos in Greece provides a potential analogue, however. The modern British monastic elder Sophrony (Sakharov) famously described the intersection of different layers of time, memory, and extra-temporal on the Aegean peninsula's rocky landscape in the life there of his own elder (now recognized as a saint) Silouan (1866–1938), with whom he lived in the 1930s. "He finds his deep heart," Sophrony wrote of Silouan's long period of prayer alone or in a small community there, "reaches the profound spiritual, metaphysical core of his being and forever looks into it and sees that the existence of mankind is not something alien and extraneous to him but is intrinsically bound up with his own being." That empathy, extended from his coastal hermitage to the world at large, echoed St. Columba's purported description of seeing the cosmos in a single ray of sun. Sophrony wrote of Silouan:

His prayer reached out beyond the bounds of time, and all thought of the transitory phenomena of human life, of enemies, vanished... The breathing changes and becomes constrained, or to use a better term, serene... The mind, the heart, the body to its very bones are all contracted into this one point. The mind, divested of all images, contemplates the world; the heart immaterially lives the sufferings of the world, and in the heart itself suffering reaches its utmost limit. The heart—or rather, the whole being—is overwhelmed by weeping, is engulfed in tears... the mind in an act of intuitive synthesis being aware of everything simultaneously. Meanwhile the soul hovers on that brink where one may at any moment lose all sense of the world and of the body...".

In Elder Zosima in The Brothers Karamazov, Fyodor Dostoevsky presented traditions of desert asceticism adapted to Russian forests as a kind of cosmic participation (paradoxically linked to losing the world in the Heideggerian sense of habitual or instrumental human reality). This explained why when Dostoevsky's characters "begin to save themselves," they "kiss the earth and 'water it with their tears.'" Patristic writers earlier described more precisely the engaging liminality between worlds noted by Sophrony and Dostoevsky, with the sense of the "brink" described in Silouan's practice echoing an early Irish description of St. Brigit as perched like a bird on a cliff between this world and another. The "prayer beyond the bounds of time" as framework for the desert-in-the-archipelago involved experiencing (empirically, it was claimed) a fourfold
overlay landscape of time-space, from which arises the frame for the Otherworld trope. Paralleling Heidegger’s fourfold paradigm of place as event (to be explored in the next chapter in relation to specific early Irish Sea texts), this ascetic landscape involved overlapping temporal, extra-temporal, and nontemporal modes of life, overlaying the same physical geography. These included: (1) human time of social norms, (2) natural time of the nonhuman physical world especially emphasized in early medieval Celtic narratives, (3) eternity in the hidden spiritual world, and (4) the everlasting unknown of divine energies flowing through both the hidden and the apparent world. Interpreting Silouan’s experience as described by his translator Sophrony, the theological scholar Georgios I. Mantzaridis writes: “So it is that eternity exists within time, while at the same time enveloping it and creating a new reality where temporal dimensions are transcended and the fullness of the life in Christ is made manifest.” This double-folded experience of landscape, distinct from Scholastic and modern approaches to understanding nature, helped to shape a dynamic, quasi-ecological sense of region that resists delusions of being able to possess the world, while blurring boundaries between human and nonhuman, body and idea.

The greatest articulation of this empirical theology emanating from the Irish Sea zone came in Eriugena’s ninth-century biblical exegesis, written in Charles the Bald’s Francia but drawing on experience of Irish monasticism and ideas from Greek patristic texts that he adapted to Latin discourse. His Physiopoeia described an analogous emanation of power in place through what he called seer’s folds of nature that were also theopanies. Those were in effect the energies of God, or, as Eriugena called them in creatively adapting Augustinian cosmological vocabulary following his Irish predecessor Augustinus Hibernicus, the primordial causes and their effects in theopanies. In Eriugena’s synthesis, the divine essence is always a mystery. But God is experienced in theopanies or emanations always running through the physical Creation, both constitutive of and interactive with human imagination and the world, simultaneously transcendent and immanent. In this hyper-dimension of environment-as-process, figured as an alter ego mode of nontemporality touching earth but energized by the divine, we find philosophical and ascetic analogues to the Otherworld. Together with native traditions and old gods lingering in stories, these Christian contexts helped shape a literary landscape in-between subject and object, in ongoing empathetic if sometimes dangerous engagement with spiritual forces melding in Creation.

The embodied desert practice and theology behind the trope highlighted this radical engagement of nonbeing with the known cosmos, articulated by Eriugena. Its andesis, or “knowledge of something by what is unlike, or even contrary” in articulating nature, emphasized the emptying of God and the human itself into nature through kenosis, so that divine creativity lived through self-emptied creature. In this privileging of a hidden but entwined nonbeing as Other, nature could not be objectified in knowledge. If Augustine emphasized the association of nonbeing (as that which does not exist) with evil, Eriugena stressed the inclusion of nonbeing in nature. Both Greek patristics and desert asceticism emphasized nonbeing as natural as well. This alternative Christian view figured evil as a lack of self-realization or “missing of the mark” in which the Fall was “ancestral sin,” not the transmitted blame of Augustinian “Original Sin,” but the shared challenge of a world objectified by demonic forces through past human choices. Translating the non-Augustinian view into modern cinematic terms, the Fall effected The Matrix. Further, the psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva posits behind these distinctions an emphasis in non-Augustinian theology shaping a spiritually erotic view of the cosmos: God desiring humanity and Creation and vice versa.

A de-centered eroticism extending to Creation as a whole in desert asceticism stemmed from articulating in theology and practice a sense of the Trinity expressing a dynamic and mysterious engagement between energies of reality, symbolism, and phenomena. In the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed developed in the fourth century, the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father, even as the Son is begotten of the Father. Uncreated divine energies in nature emanated from this de-centered divine essence, as in the landscapes of Otherworld cultures. But, drawing on Augustine’s writings, the Latin church later would adopt a formula in which the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father “and the son” (filiusque) together, a version officially promoted by the Carolingian and Anglo-Saxon churches in the early Middle Ages. The Father and the Son became identified more closely and the focus of divine energies became more centralized in Augustinian notions of grace, which were reimagined as a creative force inserted into the world by God and identified with a centralized church. The Holy Spirit, associated with connections in the symbolic realm between the divine and nature, became the instrument of a Father-Son combine. By contrast, in the non-Augustinian formulation, Kristeva writes that the kingdoms of God was defined through germinial, floral, nutritional, and erotic metamorphoses that imply, beyond the cosmic energy theory often viewed as specific to the East, the openly sexual fusion with the Thing at the limits of the nameable...the Spirit merges with the two other centers and, by the same token, endows them, beyond their value as distinct identities or authorities, with an asexual, breathtaking, and certainly also sexual depth, where the psychological experience of loss and ecstasy finds its place.

The Trinitarian difference parallels C.S. Peirce’s later contrast (in an alternative to Saussurian linguistics) between a dyadic objectifying semiotic and a triadic participatory semiotic, the latter forming today an important basis for the emerging field of ecosemiotics.

Eriugena articulated the earlier triadic Trinitarian formula and emphasis, paralleling his “energy theory” and background in early Irish Sea monasticism. It was reflected also in the original creeds of the Stowe Missal (the earliest extant Hiberno-Latin texts for church services) and suggested by early Irish writing, while enduring in a more general way in desert ascetic practices of synergy with divine energies and in literary adaptations of the native Otherworld. The Holy Spirit was particularly associated with nature, as is suggested in a ninth-century Byzantine ecclesiastical verse, roughly contemporary to the Stowe Missal: “By the Holy Spirit, the streams of grace are flowing, watering all
of the creation, granting life upon it." So the Trinitarian shift also reflected and
affected cultural views of nature. It marked a marginalizing of nature in relation
to individual human cognition in Western European culture. Kristeva notes that
the shift toward the filioque in the later medieval West (promoted early on by the
reforming Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury, then Charlemagne, and later
popes at Rome).

had the advantage of providing a basis for the political and spiritual authority of
the papacy on the one hand, and on the other for the autonomy and rationality of
the believer's person, identified with a Son having power and prestige equal to that
of the Father. What had thus been gained in equality and therefore in performance
and historicity had perhaps been lost at the level of the experience of identification,
in the sense of a permanent instability of identity. Difference and identity, rather
than autonomy and equality, did on the contrary build up the Eastern Trinity,
which consequently became the source of ecstasy and mysticism.83

Difference with identity, a combination of terms used earlier to describe the
geographic character of an archipelago, implies a sense of identity as empathy,
embracing difference of the Other in identification that shapes self relationally.
This links Kristeva's psychoanalytic and theological discussion to that of envi-
ronmental phenomenologists working today in neural mind sciences, such as
Evans Thompson, whose studies will be explored further in this chapter, and to
discussion here of the Otherworld.85 The implicit definition of self as empathy in
the early Trinitarian paradigm relates to the concept of self-realization in deep
cology by involving again an alternative, relational sense of desire. In the early
medieval context, that different sense of desire helps to explain the immanent
tooavoid of the Otherworld in the landscape and of the landscape in the
Otherworld—or landscape as interactive Otherworld.

The Trinity being the ultimate model for human psychology and cultural semiotics in early Christian literary cultures, the earlier creational model also involved a
distinctive entrainment of the divine reality and the symbolic environment in
culture. The intersubjective realms of the Real (the inarticulable support of sym-
monic reality in psychoanalytic theory) and the Symbolic (the realm of language)
were more closely entwined than psychological norms today would allow.87 As
Jorge Luis Borges put it, in terms of Scandinavian mythology that also emerged
into literacy in this early medieval Christian milieu, "Thurin was not the god of
thunder, he was the thunder and the god."88 That semiotic entrainment of the
categories of Real and Symbolic can be seen in the Book of Kells, and in the
Otherworld narratives and their relation to physical topography. As will be
discussed further, such patristic "ecosemiotics" literally based the Christian views of
time of Maximus the Confessor and his later acolyte Eriugena, in their cosmic
language of the Logos as the energies of God. In such cultural semiotics,
the Incarnation became cosmically transformative through theos "—relating
spiritual, bodily, and environmental realms.

By contrast, adoption of the filioque became a symptom of the high-medieval
fusion of the Real as the Father with the Son as the Imaginary (a mirror-like
image of selfhood). This produced a powerful new model of subjectivity, while

marginalizing the third intersubjective realm of the Symbolic. This shift marked
the basis for modern Western individualism in strengthening a sense of the inter-
ior reality of human subjectivity, accompanied by a highly problematic ethos of
dominance over the physical world. The filioque required a concomitant objec-
tification (and separation) of the Symbolic as the Holy Spirit to build up its
new subjectivity, amid the instability of identification (empathy) Kristeva notes.
Words became less relational realities vis-à-vis the physical world, and more
instrumental technologies for human manipulation of that environment, presag-
ing further technologies to come. This accompanied a conceptual objectification
of nature, which in effect became constructed as a simulacrum for human cogni-
tion to read. It was an important step in the development of modern science
that found its aesthetic parallels oddly in the interiorized virtual reality of the
Gothic cathedral and Dante's Commedia, and a linguistic signifier haunted "by
the implicit lack of that which it represents."89

The earlier sense of self and desire shaping the Irish Sea cultural contexts of
the Otherworld had involved a different sense of body, physicality, and ritual.
Patristics scholar Andrew Louth describes how Christian cultures before the
twelfth century generally held a sense of the human body as a microcosm and
image of the cosmos, rather than the expression of human inwardness that the
body became contemporary with the filioque's official adoption in the West.90
The earlier perspective again involved no bodily separation of the supernatural
and the natural. Earlier, Christian ritual of the Eucharist, centered on the body
of Christ, embodied "the ancient sense of the mystery as an action."91 Later, by
the time of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the Eucharist was labeled as a
real and not symbolic transformation, setting up two contrasting categories.92 It
was objectified and drawn into binaries of subjective versus objective experience
that had not existed earlier to the same degree. A transformative role of the
priest became prominent vis-à-vis the epiclesis of the Holy Spirit in the ritual.
Early medieval asceticism by contrast resonates with a spatial "practice of place"
meaningful to anti-modernist religious scholars today, in which miracle is an experi-
ence of the integrity of the world, and mystery an interactive bringing-together
of worlds of environment and the human "ritual body."93

The cultural paradigm shift of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries marking an
end to the old Irish Sea literary region did not occur in a physical vacuum.
Culturally implicated environmental change contributed to and reflected the
shift. The later Middle Ages saw a rise in meat consumption, especially beef,
accompanied by large-scale permanent conversion of woodland to arable land
in northern Europe, a break from previous Mediterranean patterns of cyclical
land use. The result of the latter change was a rise in alluviation and soil erosion.
In addition, expanded Eurasian land clearances paralleled the rise of more cen-
tralized large-scale polities in northwestern Europe (as will be explored further
in chapter six). Those clearances in turn may have contributed to the warming
trend that overlapped and encouraged the "Twelfth Century Renaissance."94

Prior to this period, during the development of the Otherworld trope, archae-
ological and manuscript remains from early medieval Ireland document an intense
overlap of social, personal, and spiritual place in regional landscape contexts, one
that embodied itself textually. Subsequent Western culture distinguished sharply between nature as cognitively understood essence and nature as experienced physical environment. But religious scholar Douglas Burton-Christie observes how an early medieval "monasticizing" of landscape, including the overlapping networks mentioned earlier, involved no clear privileging in ascetic pavis of "either the unlettered or the philosophically sophisticated," the "natural" or the cultural in effect. What was essential was "the kind of relationships that existed between them."96 That emphasis extended to inclusion of native traditions in law and literature in early medieval Christian literatures around the Irish Sea, and the hybridizing of them with biblical and classical textuality. Sometimes the results were startling, as in Irish and Latin codicils to the twelfth-century Book of Leinster's version of the Táin Bó Cúailnge at the end of the old milieu:

Bendacht ar chech ón mebrighé go hindfacs Táin am síl sea 7 ná tuille cruith aile fáiri.
Sed ego qui scripsi hanc historiam aut cœriss mfabulam quibusdam fidem in hac historia aut fabula non accommodo. Quasdam enim inibi sunt præstigmata demonum, quasdam autem figmenta poetica, quasdam similia uero, quasdam non, quasdam ad deletionem stultorum.
[Latin] A blessing on every one who shall faithfully memorise the Táin as it is written here and shall not add any other form to it.
[Latin] But I who have written this story, or rather this fable, give no credence to the various incidents related in it. For some things in it are the deceptions of demons, others poetic figments; some are probable, others improbable; while still others are intended for the delection of foolish men.97

**Otherworld and Geography**

The Otherworld trope extended the geography of the Irish Sea province into an archipelago of varied temporalities on land as well as across the sea. This included manmade Neolithic mounds, which originally were old passage chambers and burial and ritual sites. They became portals to the Otherworld in stories such as the early Irish tale *Tóchar Éadain*, which will be explicated further in this regard in the next chapter. In such layers of landscape the Otherworld was a kind of wormhole of imagined memory connecting to earlier dimensions of time. The Irish *Mesa Ulad* (dating in earliest extant form to the twelfth century) describes in fantasy-historical terms in its opening the defeat of the Tuatha Dé Danann, in which the shamanistic poet-leader Amairgen of the Milesians (identified with the Gaels in the medieval understanding of the tradition) divides Ireland in two, the underground given to the resident Tuatha Dé Danann, and the aboveground to the invading sons of Mil. Those peoples coexisted somewhat uneasily in the landscape, the ancients providing the newcomers with wives according to one tradition, while sometimes aiding and sometimes disrupting human society.98 Irish and Welsh Otherworld texts also described antediluvian realms, now underwater, associated with an ancestral past also close to nonhuman nature, Paradise, biblical eternity, and everlasting divine energies (paralleling the ascetic "fourfold" described earlier).99 Throughout this fantasy geography, there is a sense of what John Carey (to whose preeminent work on the Otherworld and early Irish cosmology this study stands in debt) describes as existence "beyond the mortal conditions of sequence and duration,"100 in what another commentator calls a spiritual realm "beneath, within, alongside and beyond the visual landscape."101

In this the Otherworld had associations with a wide range of geography, topographical and human. Carey notes that use of the Hiberno-Latin *oich* as a word for the Otherworld suggests that the term "could be applied to the realm of the immortals and the dead, a nether region corresponding to the side [fairy mounds] of vernacular tradition," evoking "an idea that the supernatural reality revealed by journeys beneath or across earth or water is essentially unitary," expressing a mythic deep structure of the culture.102 But Carey defines the Otherworld in early Irish literature generally as "supernatural dwelling-places [of legendary immortal beings] closely associated with the realm of nature...reached by going beneath earth or water."103 He also notes, following that description, the association of the Otherworld with art, in terms of music and artifacts of treasure, "the imagination as expressed in narrative." From this realm, "The spring of poetic inspiration rose...flowing forth into Ireland by various channels."104 In other connections of the trope to human society, Alaric Hall, in his study of elves and related otherworldly beings in northwestern Europe, describes how such figures generally seem to have functioned as natural though magical beings, reciprocal mirrors of human life setting limits to human behavior.105 By contrast with Icelandic and Irish texts, these beings tended more often to become demonized in politically and ecclesiastically centralized Anglo-Saxon literary cultures.106 Explanations of Otherworld denizens as demons in Irish texts, Carey notes, occur relatively later in early Irish literary history, as only one among several vibrant interpretations. Such beings were often conflated with deities portrayed in biblical terms as fallen or antediluvian human beings.

The backdrop for these beings lay in sea, sky, lakes, coastline, clouds, and mixed interior lowlands and highlands, which then as now ran together and separated continuously amid the dynamic weather patterns of the Gulf Stream, undoubtedly contributing to the shaping of such cultural geography.107 Travelers today often impressionistically experience that elemental fluidity when viewing early "Celtic" monastic sites where the sky meets the sea, at places such as Iona, Skellig Michael off Kerry, or St. Ninian's Cave on the Galloway coast. The medievalist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen brilliantly advances an archipelagic paradigm of simultaneous identity and difference involving culture and ethnicity in texts from the northwestern European sites.108 An essay by Deleuze that Cohen draws upon, "Desert Islands," evokes in its title early Insular monasticism and its roots in the ethos of the desert fathers.109 Islands for Deleuze are a continual reminder of elements in flux in the world, a "double movement" of earth and sea, of separation and creation (much like shifting sands and horizons in the desert), which humans want to forget because of the unsettling ramifications for any discrete sense of identity.

This archipelagic sense of bridging elements experientially is conveyed by Gearóid Ó Domhnaill's description of an Atlantic storm off Ireland, in
the prefatory note to his translation of medieval accounts of St. Brendan's sea travels:

What I can best liken it to is being among the Himalayas except that the mountains are moving, not regularly, but criss-crossing one another in tumultuous frenzy, running one across the breaking, white-foamed top of others... One lives in a virtual white-out, stung and blinded by spray... the auditory cacophonous assault that limits the ability to think... Finally, the harassment and brutalization of one's senses enters into one's very consciousness so as to create a virtual out-of-body experience where one is benefic of all but the moment of the experience. Relatives, friends, familiar land places are no more. They are stripped from your consciousness. There is only you and the forces of nature. You have been stripped of civilization, of culture; you are left with the most primal instinct of survival. In this state you are one with the first human beings that tried to make sense of a new existence into which they had been thrust.109

It was in this physical environment that monastics on islands such as Iona engaged in ascetic practices that included standing in natural bodies of water while praying for extended periods. Lay people perhaps too embraced ascetic-penitential "martyrdom" described by the color term glas, which also named the wind from the otherworldly southwestern direction of the sea, a grey-blue-green "color of sky in water."110 In perhaps the greatest Hiberno-Latin hagiographical text, Adomnán's Vita Columbae, Columba exercises physical perception and spiritual guidance across dimensions of earthly space, and converses with angels and apostles, all while, according to the earlier Irish poem Amnu Colum Cille, working as an ascetic scholar (and scion of a regional Irish royal family) who studies and practices ways of Eastern Mediterranean monastics in exile for God, on an island off the ruggedly beautiful cost of Scotland and Ireland that framed the hagiography.111 The Otherworld of the Ulster and Irish Mythological Cycles of stories overlaid the Irish landscape just as the biblical Paradise was envisioned as somehow atop the earth in Hiberno-Latin cosmological writing, amid the lower aerial waters of the cosmos that melded with the sea. Regions in Irish culture were associated with symbolic compass directions and color codes linking the winds and ascetic practices, as explored in chapter four. In Wales, a spatial scheme linked the four gospels with geographical areas and stories of the land, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Holy places of saints such as Brigit's Kildare added to these distinctively multilayered and metatextual post-Roman cultural landscapes.

Recent "Irish Sea studies," crystallized in Benjamin Hudson's collection of that title, articulate "the Irish Sea as a region with distinctive and unifying features."112 Hudson's work in particular helps us to picture its complex and dynamic histories in relation to geography, after the formative era of the Otherworld trope but during the flourishing of extant texts that carried it forth ultimately into modern literature. In that period, from 900 to 1200 CE, the lagoon-like but often physically turbulent central sea became the focus of vibrant trade, not only between surrounding islands, but on an axis between Iceland and Spain, as it earlier had been to Mediterranean trade. Ireland was in many ways the hub of wealth when for a time the sea became a "Scandinavian lake." The vibrant hybridity of early medieval Christianity and Norse paganism, seen in the slightly later flowering of Icelandic literature, also from a peripheral archipelago position, shows partial analogues with literature of the Celtic realms: an emphasis on landscape, externally realized self, and otherworldly elements.114 But during the latter part of Hudson's period of study, changes in economy and culture and the emergence of the new West marginalized this Celtic-Scandinavian Irish Sea zone. While Hudson notes how the tenth and eleventh centuries saw the rise of proto-urban centers there, accompanying increased mercantilism, by the end of the eleventh century the region had begun to be more a source of raw materials for Western Europe than of manufactured goods as in the past.115 A new continental-based perspective defines the area's crafts as somewhat old-fashioned—along with its monasticism and more decentralized organization of land.116 Yet the combination of distinctive literary culture and dynamically relational geography that helped shape the Otherworld trope arguably preserved it as a form of cultural resistance to the rising hegemony of a new Western European grid of dominating space. The interiors of the sea region, including the "bewilderingly irregular" midlands in Ireland and Wales' fractal valleys and divided coastlands, lacked a central fertile river basin to provide a nucleus for proto-national consciousness. They instead provided the geopolitical analogy to the literary Otherworld trope of the estimated eighty-some stories of the Ulster Cycle, and other related Irish tales as well as the Welsh Mabinogi cycle.117 In the Irish landscape, central grazing areas and "sacred zones" or belts of monasteries marked shifting spheres of influence among paramount dynasties. As social historian Nerys Patterson notes, "The linch-pin of the political economy was therefore the control of wilderness," the latter itself forming an analogue perhaps to the Otherworld.118 Each of the four quarters of the legendary pentarchy of ancient Irish kingdoms was geographically based on an upland massif, whose hill fringes were the basis for early farming that seems to have expanded more to the interior with new ploughs and crops at the time of the spread of Christianity. An increasing squeeze on borderland "sacred zones" that housed monasteries during the Early Middle Ages brought increasing pressure on liminal lands and transhuman grazing resources associated with them. There was a certain distinctive combination in this Irish landscape of rootlessness and intense localization, noted by geographer J.H. Andrews, reflecting indefinite boundaries in sea, loughs, land, and sky.119 To some extent this was arguably the case across the Irish Sea in Wales as well, amid displacement of native Celtic British culture to western highlands and valleys near the Irish Sea.

By contrast, in the Anglo-Saxon cultural zone a more continental geographic orientation emerged, with more hegemonic (and ultimately homogeneous) ecclesiological and political contexts as a result. Despite some similar influences from desert monasticism, such orientation and contexts shaped an alternate and "newer" cultural landscape, explored further in chapter six.120 As Jennifer Neville notes, "For the Old English poet, the representation of the natural world helps to create the context of helplessness and alienation that motivates the seeking of God. For the Irish poet, the representation of the natural world creates the context of wonder and joy that surrounds the seeking of God."121
As Western European culture emerged with a continental orientation, the archipelagic focus of the Irish Sea world was repositioned as peripheral by the self-described mainstream of Frankish and Anglo-Saxon cultures. Yet if the Otherworld trope developed there amid O’Loughlin’s early “local theology” of Christianity, the trope’s survival beyond that immediate context suggests also its cosmopolitan roots and quasi-environmental relevance of a broader nature. Its influences on Middle English literature and what the critic Northrop Frye termed the “green world” of Elizabethan English textuality, and even on twentieth-century fantasy, suggest what Frye would have termed archetypal aspects of human experience engaged by the trope. Even so, with drastic man-made changes to Europe’s Atlantic archipelago and other global ecosystems, a more hegemonic and global virtual reality threatens the survival of this enduring trope today. It arguably now faces erasure more certain than that of the Norman conquests in the then-new Western Europe (never completely controlling of memory, text, and landscape)—by both modern appropriation of and disdain for ancient cultural difference in our “disenchanted” globalizing world, amid which early medieval Irish Sea cultures seem to be one of Arnold Toynbee’s lost world civilizations. Even contemporary fantasy fiction arguably now moves in directions more and more toward a virtual reality of multiple worlds and instrumentalist nonhuman being, disconnected from earth in cyberspace evermore distant from geography.

The Otherworld and Philosophy

The impending extinction of this imaginary realm as a sense of landscape is ironic, given the way the trope in effect puts a relational “face” on nature, evoking human ethical responsibility for landscape relevant to current discussions in environmental philosophy. The phenomenologist Emmanuel Lévinas in response to the brutalities of the mid-twentieth century developed an “ethic of alterity,” which argued for a numinous image of “the face” of a speaking human being as the necessary focus for evoking moral responsibility from another human, in recognition of the other as a speaking and living being rather than an object. In this, Lévinas anticipated somewhat the emphasis on empathy today in efforts to connect environmental philosophy with neuroscience, notably in the work of philosopher Evan Thompson. Thompson, engaging in what he calls neurophenomenology, in fact uses biological and brain-research narratives to extend Lévinas’ sense of the face to the nonhuman, a project also of animal studies. This extension involves changing notions of “comprehending of the other” to “experiencing the other,” and going beyond definitions of the other as a speaking subject in the conventional modern sense of language, to an ecosomatic sense of subject incorporating the nonhuman. Thompson argues that the ecosystem or ecological region, not the organism, is the basic unit of evolution, an idea with resonance in Eriugena’s theophanie anthropology, which defines the human by its participation in a larger context of nature. Thompson cites brain studies that suggest how having a receptive “precognitive” perception of environment in mind (such as an environmentally engaging narrative of landscape)

can contribute to richer mental experience of and neural development in physical encounters with the earth and other beings. Following research on neuron mirrors, Thompson and others see mental development as environmentally experiential rather than discretely and individually cognitive.

The Otherworld and inhabitants of its intra-cosmic dimension, in hollow hills and misty waters of the Irish Sea zone, in this sense put a face on nature, having extended in effect Lévinas’ ethic of alterity to nonhuman beings, nonbeing, and landscape, long before modern environmental philosophy. This shaping of a face for place as a dynamic landscape (in line with ecology), rather than an object (as on a GPS matrix), connects the psychological landscape of the Otherworld with visual Christian iconography of the early medieval era and the Maximian-Eriugena cosmic semiotic of logos. In these, image is experienced as relation, a connection that Eriugena emphasized in describing interactive fantasy-theophanies as the dynamic of nature itself. In early Irish Sea otherworldly narratives, place is a nexus of connective energies—divine, human, and what might be called environmental—with ethical meaning. In the Irish story Tecmarc Elain, the otherworldly mounds in the landscape form a network of resistance to the objectifying military power of the high kingship, as two lovers flee into the land from the king by transforming into swans. In Immram Brain, a traveler experiences the sea (usually a metaphor of alienation in Western literature) as a transformative place full of life with fields and communities. And, in the so-called first branch of the Welsh Mabinogi, respect for the otherworldly dimension of the land and its beings integrates human rule with the land. These early otherworldly narratives oddly fulfill the criteria for “ecocentric” literature, as defined by the pioneering environmental literary studies scholar Lawrence Buell: (1) featuring a “nonhuman environment” as a presence that suggests “human history is implicated in natural history,” (2) in which “the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest,” (3) “human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation,” and with (4) “some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant.”

The ecological face is articulated philosophically from early Irish Sea backgrounds by Eriugena. He describes Nature as including both being and nonbeing, and earth (terra, land or region) as a “mystic name” signifying the restored wholeness of nature in theophany or divine manifestation. He opens his Periphyseon by stating:

As I frequently ponder and, so far as my talents allow, ever more carefully investigate the fact that the first and fundamental division of all things which either can be grasped by the mind or lie beyond its grasp is into those that are and those that are not, there comes to mind as a general term for them all in Greek is called φύσις [physis] and in Latin Nature.

From the standpoint of later Western intellectual history, until the emergence of modern ecology, the inclusion of nonbeing in nature remains a radical move, one exemplified in story form by the Celtic Otherworld. Eriugena’s philosophical definition of nature in this way includes both the seen and the unseen, and the