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Maxine WALKER

Recovering Celtic Spirituality? Semiotics and *The Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis*

ABSTRACT: To explore an aspect of the contemporary quest to recover 'Celtic spirituality' and to locate sacred landscapes, this paper examines the sea journey of sixth-century St. Brendan and his fellow monks to various islands in the North Atlantic. In speaking the language of the monastery on the islands, St. Brendan reads and interprets the experiences on these islands not as 'sacred' but as a context in which the monastic family continues its rituals. Using St. Brendan's identification of the unknown-sign 'whale' with the known-sign 'island,' studies in semiotics and sign-theories discover the complications in recovering 'Celtic spirituality'. Postmodern fragmentation and cultural discontinuities seem to make such a recovery impossible, but notions of viewing the 'other' as a part of oneself may locate ways to set out again on an open sea toward 'island'.

KEYWORDS: Spirituality, signs, landscape, metonyms, St. Brendan, monastery

Maxine WALKER is an Affiliated Scholar in the Department of Religious Studies, Kenyon College, Gambier in Ohio and Professor Emerita of Literature, Point Loma University in San Diego, California. Her research interests include interdisciplinary studies in religion and literature, liturgy and art. Publications include 'Painting the Question: Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*' in *Contemplations of the Spiritual in Art* (Peter Lang, 2013) and 'The "Sounds of Silence" in Gathered Community: T.S. Eliot and the Church' in *Orthodox and Wesleyan Ecclesiology* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007). She directed the Wesleyan Center for 21st Century Studies and convened themed national and international conferences.

Introduction

> One sometimes gets the impression in looking at the phenomenon that is called "Celtic Spirituality", that what you are encountering is a screen on which is projected many contemporary desires, anxieties and preoccupations, little to do with the past and more especially with the past of these islands (Tracey 2008, 1).

* * * * * *

'Should you not rather inquire about this island?' (*Navigatio*, 1, 2)[1]

After spending Easter on an island with flocks of sheep, early medieval Celtic monk St. Brendan sails on in his curragh to an island where he steps ashore first lest his brothers become afraid of this strange place. Following celebration of mass and preparing a meal, the 'island' moves and sways and sinks much to the dismay of Brendan's companions. St. Brendan on the other hand comforts them, 'Fear not, my children . . . for God has revealed to me the mystery of all this: it was not an island you were upon, but a fish, the largest of all that swim in the ocean . . .' (*Navigatio* 10, 9). In a lecture 'Mapping the Otherworld in Irish Hagiography,' presented at Sarum College on 25 June 2009, Dr. J. Wooding suggested that St. Brendan not only 'names' the fish, *Iasconius*, but he also reads and interprets the signs dotting the ocean landscape to his bewildered seamen. As this ancient Celtic saint sailed from island to island in the North Atlantic, did he and his fellow seamen perceive these islands as 'sacred landscapes' as contemporary spiritual pilgrims do who travel the islands in search of Celtic spirituality? Moreover, how did St. Brendan read and interpret what he experienced on these islands, and is it possible for modern spiritual wayfarers to read and interpret island landscapes in similar ways to recover some kind of authentic Celtic spirituality?

In a recent conversation with several educators commenting on islands they would visit for 'spiritual' renewal, they identified Maui, Crete, Galapagos, Japan, San Juan, Bali, Ireland, Whitby, the Isle of Man, and Iona. In these perceptions, the secular and the spiritual share common conceptual properties about 'islands' in their sign-signifier relationships; whether pilgrim or casual tourist, to name 'island' signifies

[1] All quotes from *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis* are from Moran P (ed.) 1983, *The Celtic Christianity e-library*, Donoghue D (trans.) 1983 *Brendaniana.* Text scanned by Wooding J 29 April 2003 viewed 15 February 2009, http://www.lamp.ac.uk/celtic/Nsh.html, pp. 1-31. Hereafter cited as *Navigatio* in this essay.

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an outcropping of land surrounded by water. For this study, 'island' as sacred landscape or an interesting tourist destination is not evident in the relationship between the sign and signifier. Such geographical and topographical locations are neither sacred nor secular; they may become 'sacred' when a landscape has been telescoped through a religion, a ritual, a sacred practice. For example, Philip Coppens in his article on 'Iona' (February 2012, 1) queries whether this small island, deemed one of most holy places in the world is 'due to the pioneering Christianisation efforts of the early Irish missionary St Columba, or the island's sanctity itself?' Modern travel and tourism have increased the popularity of sites that are historically acclaimed as places where divine energy is encountered, and package tours are available for restoration, inspiration, peace and quiet in named sacred landscapes. Such organized journeys as 'Sacred Journeys: Taking Powerful People to Powerful Places' and guidebooks such as *Visiting Sacred Spaces: a 'How-To' Guide* (Colgan 2010) offer opportunities for spiritual connection and personal transformation. Islands become one of many paths to experience a particular or general spirituality in a designated 'sacred landscape.' As such, *recovering* Celtic spirituality as lived on and between Northern Atlantic islands may be a more daunting journey than the ancient voyage on the tempestuous ocean. As Donald Meek (2002, 255) points out:

> "Celtic Christianity" functions largely as an up-to-date "designer spirituality" which has been constructed to meet a range of contemporary needs. . . "Celtic Christianity" . . . has been disguised under a cover of contemporary theory and creativity . . . The modernist message, for the most part, has nothing whatsoever to do with the historical Christianity of the Celtic areas.

'Celtic Spirituality' in popular parlance is frequently equated with sacred landscapes, and third millennium pilgrims and sojourners visiting these rocks, trees, stones, islands, caves, lakes assume they will be charged with the grandeur of God as was St. Brendan. Nigel Pennick (1996, 105) makes the point in *Celtic Sacred Landscapes* that 'according to traditional thinking, islands are inherently sacred, being places cut off by water from unwanted physical and psychic influences. Martyn Smith (2008, 25) notes that 'sacred' is an easy word to use as a default adjective when speaking of an unusual experience in a particular place; however, he contends that a more accurate adjective is 'storied' when making reference to these sites because they are connected to a culturally important narrative.

In the *Navigatio*, the narrative of Celtic monks and their particular monastic practices linked them to the sign-system of the larger early medieval Christian family. How these Celtic monks interpreted the known world reflects their way of seeing, their truths, values, and beliefs as they

constructed and experienced them. The cultural environment of the monastic life as lived approximately between the sixth to the eleventh centuries shaped how Celtic Christians spoke about things they experienced. Now in the twenty-first century, inheriting vestiges of the Romantic world of pantheism, having familiarity with a scattering of well-known Christian symbols, following New Age eco-spiritualism, and often feeling the impulse to escape urban and industrial landscapes, modern Christians often assume that they can experience something otherworldly in the natural world of the early medieval Celtic Christian. The premise of this paper is to consider whether a postmodern wayfarer has semiotic access to this ancient Celtic language of experiencing the divine while island hopping.

Language of the Monastery: Reading the World

Brendan, like the monk Barinthus who begins the narrative in *The Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis*, explores the social and cultural function of signification and communication common to Celtic monks of the sixth century. Unlike other journeying monastics[2], Brendan does not found a monastery on any of the islands he visits; he does not leave his own monastery to live an eremetical existence of a peregrinus; he has not committed some egregious sin and become a penitential; he is searching for an island much like any other sailor of the period because another monk has told him about it.[3] What Brendan does accomplish is to bring the 'language' of the monastery, the linguistic signs learned in the Christian faith of the period, to bear in an understanding of the vast natural world. The islands themselves are not identified as sacred, but monks deemed to be 'holy' men (along with their liturgical practices) read what happens on the ocean and on these islands (Meek 2000, 153).

No single rule shaped a common identity among the insular monasteries, but linguistic and semiotic similarities connected various monastic *familias* (Meek 2000, 107), that is, their use of particular signs and their understanding of how these signs relate to each other in the context of how their world was known, read, and interpreted. Petrilli (2001, 262) calls this a 'semiotic chain of sign processes'. Whereas modernism no longer acknowledges spiritual differences between places, landscapes for Celts meant the outcropping of an inner essence, and for Brendan and his wayfarers, landscapes and islands manifested something akin to the Hermetic maxim, 'as above, so below'. For contemporary semioticians, a

[2] See Woods R. (2000, 58-66), *The Spirituality of the Celtic Saints*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY for examples of disciples who voyaged to found other monasteries.

[3] Meek D. (2000, 171) points out that wandering monks upon the ocean wild was not a particularly Celtic phenomenon; 'its roots lay in the Egyptian deserts'.

sacramental world as reality elsewhere and future is not the starting point in the study of signs. The study of signs—such notions as semantic units, cultural units, semantic fields, register theory—is laid out on a horizontal landscape in both synchronic and diachronic considerations and is shaped by cultural practices and habits. Sign and its interpretant (meaning) are not 'revealed'; meaning is a response, a relationship to opposites and participation in a way of seeing.[4] As semioticist Umberto Eco (1976, 157) puts it, sign production shapes the expression-continuum and a theory of codes provides the rules which *generate* signs as concrete occurrences in communicative discourse.[5]

These codes set up a cultural world linked to ways in which a society thinks and speaks and explains the meaning of its thought with other thoughts. For example, in order to understand Celtic monasticism, it is necessary to conceive of a monastic culture so organized that 'island' and 'whale' as places for both ordinary and extraordinary events can be identified as a part of that cultural background. In the context of Eco and other semioticists' work, sign-vehicle 'island' as well as other signs asserts a complex network of presuppositions and possible inferential consequences. For example, in the *Navigatio* the properties of sign-vehicle 'island' characterize islands dotting the fringe of Celtic lands as they existed for any who braved the North Atlantic: islands with steep cliff walls and unsafe landing places (6, 5); islands with water streaming from fountains filled with fish (9, 7); an island enveloped in a cloud (15, 16); an island remarkably flat without a tree but covered in flowers (17, 19). In chapter nine, the sheep are larger than oxen and populate the island completely, and, although needed for the Easter ritual, the gigantic sheep are placed in a semantic field with all other common well-fed animals. On the island of snow-white birds, Brendan's monastic culture identifies the birds within the semantic field of 'teachers' – informers about ruined creation, festival days, and foretelling. In chapter sixteen, Brendan and companions are nearly devoured by a monster of the deep which in turn is attacked and killed by another sea monster, consequently, the sign 'whale' is set in opposition to both that which is deadly under the ocean and that which can provide a place to celebrate mass.

Telling in our own time, George Lindbeck, Yale theologian, argues in *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984, 35) for a cultural-linguistic approach to

[4] According to Petrilli (2001, 206), 'the meaning of a sign is a response, an "interpretant", that calls for another response, another interpretant. She continues that 'this implies the dialogical nature of the sign and semiosis'.

[5] Eco U. (1976, 157) defines triple process as follows: '(a) the process of shaping the expression-continuum; (b) the process of correlating that shapes the continuum with its possible content; (c) the process of connecting these signs to factual events, things or states of the world. These processes are strictly intertwined.'

religion: persons are located within the language of any particular religion. The authority of the individual is supplanted by authority rooted in the language and cultural life of their community. To be religious, in a post-liberal perspective, is to 'interiorize a set of skills developed by the community through practice and training'. According to Lindbeck (1984, 40) as he unpacks the cultural-linguistic system for contemporary Christians, a *universally* [*sic*] inner experience of the divine is no longer plausible, since all religious traditions are understood to be 'radically … distinct ways of experiencing and being oriented toward self, neighbor, and cosmos'. Although Lindbeck does not reject outright any comparison between traditions, he is unsympathetic to any attempt to show that different traditions 'use overlapping sets of sounds or have common objects of reference' (1984, 41). On the contrary, Lindbeck argues that a good comparison should concern itself with grammatical patterns, with ways of referring, and with semantic and syntactic structures (1984, 42). For instance, to say that all religions teach 'love toward God' is obviously banal and uninteresting, since the utterance is not located within the 'language' of any particular religion. What matters is the pattern or grammar within which the words 'love' and 'God' receive their specific or contrasting meaning. Thus, to say that contemporary sojourners can travel to Iona or other islands known by ancient Celtic Christians and see signs of the 'holy' in the natural world is equally banal. In recovering the language of Celtic monks who traveled to these places, the first task is to think about what the signs were and how these signs had meaning for them.

Recovering insular and continental Celtic languages *per se* continues to challenge linguists, phonologists, and grammarians; but the importance of Celtic languages for studying Celtic culture and Celtic Christianity is crucial both diachronically and synchronically.[6] Meek identifies one perspective: 'languages often transcend historical phases and periods, and survive major upheavals in church and society' (2000, 212). Meek contends that a linguistic anchor is the most secure mooring for use of the term 'Celtic' (2000, 8), but Meek also cautions that the word 'Celtic' has left its linguistic moorings in popular parlance:

> To be "Celtic" is to be trendy, cool, "other" and even marketable. The word moves easily from the market to the monastery, and back again, as secularization takes its toll of even the most hallowed spiritual icons (Meek 2000, 9).

[6] Helpful references are Ball M. and Fife J. 1993 (eds), *The Celtic Languages*, Routledge, London; Borsley R. and Roberts I. 1996 (eds), *The Syntax of the Celtic Languages: A Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge.

Meek makes a case that 'Celtic Christianity' is not 'an historically validated entity, but a construct manufactured to meet contemporary needs (2000, 13), and a Celtic Church made in the image of modern sojourners is 'one of the great illusions of our time '(Meek 121). Thus, the notion of a single 'Celtic church' with a concomitant Celtic spirituality embedded in common beliefs, practices, and religious institutions is debatable. Wendy Davies (1992, 12, 20) explains that regardless of the similarities in biblical and patristic learning and possibly a common literary tradition, 'there are times when elements of the clergy were thinking the same thoughts and doing the same things, but the local experience of Christianity varied'. Determining the family resemblances between ancient Celtic language groups and their distinctive ecclesial practices echoes the difficulties in deciding what cultural codes and signs, if any, unite Celtic monks in the early medieval period.

Sign-Referentiality: Vertical and/ or Horizontal

Contemporary scholarship in archaeology, in religious and cultural studies, in the history of Christianity, in the theology of spirituality, and in the myriad patterns of Christian discipleship over the centuries has provided more information about the unity and diversity of thought and practices both within Celtic Christianity and without even though the primary sources remain slim. To follow suit with additional on-going academic work, studies in linguistics and semiotics may be useful in determining how certain landscapes and events generated meaning for Celtic Christians and how these signs influence the contemporary search for a Celtic spirituality. An interesting text to consider for exemplary purposes is the medieval 'best seller' *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis* [the Voyage of St Brendan the Abbot] written sometime in the eleventh-century and which illustrates the semiotic competence of Celtic monks sailing the North Atlantic.[7]

Curiously enough, these monks sailed unaware that they were voyaging in and through Celtic 'sacred landscapes', and if they believed it so, they did not always recognize it when they arrived. What mattered was speaking the language of the monastic life wherever the wind blew. Although liturgist Susan White (1995, 36) argues that Christian theology is often mistaken for talk about ley-lines and mandalas which are intertwined with depth-psychology and semiotics, perspectives from

[7] Extended information on the historical Brendan, *The Navigatio* and its components, and a survey of the manuscripts are found in Selmer C. 1959, pp. xvii-xxxi (ed) *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* in Moore P. 1959 (ed) *Publications in Mediaeval Studies*, Notre Dame.

semiotic theories offered in this essay do not affirm an essentialist Christian worldview.[8] However, such theories may provide some understanding about how cultural context shapes Celtic saints' perceptions of particular objects and places:

> The notion that linguistics might be useful in studying other cultural phenomena is based on two fundamental insights: first, social and cultural phenomena are not simply material objects or events but objects or events with meaning, and hence signs; and second, they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations (Culler 1981, 4).

Such networks of horizontal relations without 'essences' seem contradictory to the held notion of allegory as a way of understanding reality. Thomas O'Loughlin in *Journeys on the Edges: The Celtic Tradition* (2000, 34-42) summarizes early Christian understanding of a sacramental vision of reality in the work of formative Christian writers Augustine, Eucherius, and Cassian as they read the signs of God's handiwork in creation: they read signs as allegory.[9] O'Loughlin points out that in Eucherius' two-tiered world of reality, 'textual sacramentalism', Scriptural images can be decoded to reveal a higher world (2000(b), 40). Continuing the discussion, Cassian's 'reading the world' (influential on early Celtic Christians) was also two-tiered: things of sense related to workings of ordinary life and things of the spirit belonged to the monastic life, 'ascetic sacramentalism' (2000(b), 41). As O'Loughlin puts it, the present world is a shadow: 'this notion of shadow is intimately connected with the notion of sacramentality: the sacrament is perceived now but only as a sign; the reality for which it stands is both future and elsewhere.' (2000(a), 46).[10]

O'Loughlin (1999, 4) uses these perspectives to explicate the narrative *Navigatio*, with the caveat that 'to invoke allegory in the *Navigatio* may be no more than to declare obliquely that we find we cannot accept the tale at first sight within our world view'.[11] To 'decode' the Land of the

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[8] Also informative on sacred space within the Christian tradition are Walker P. 1990, *Holy City and Holy Places*, Oxford and Taylor J. 1993, *Christians and the Holy Places*, Oxford.

[9] Paul Cobley (2001, 13) points out that 'current semiotics represents a resurgence of the immensely fruitful doctrine of signs to be found in ancient and Greek and Latin philosophy'. Augustine, working with ancient work of the Stoics, first identified words as signs and distinguished between natural and conventional signs and how to interpret Scripture.

[10] O'Loughlin (2000(b), 46) says of 'sacrament' and 'shadow' that '... [s]hadow is anticipation, a fore-type, a taster, and a direction-setter for the future towards a higher reality, to which we do not have access ... This notion of shadow is intimately connected with the notion of sacramentality. The sacrament is perceived now, but only as a sign; the reality for which it stands is both future and elsewhere'.

[11] O'Loughlin (1999, 2-4) provides a helpful summary of scholarship following J.F. Kenney's reading of the *Navigatio* as an allegory of the monastic life.

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Promise of the Saints, a vision of Paradise, as seen by both Barinthus and later Brendan and a destination to which all monks aspire, requires a 'downward' translation. In the paradisiacal vision, allegorical code works from the sublime vision down to the ordinary (theological discourse) whereas an allegorical reading of a story set in the created world requires a 'lateral shift in meaning' (1999, 10).

The question then arises whether an allegorical reading provides sufficient interpretative value to link ancient and postmodern sea travelers. 'Lateral reading' has postmodern promise. Umberto Eco in *The Poetics of the Open Work*, points out that allegory is endowed with a kind of openness: 'the reader of the text knows that every sentence and every trope is open to a multiplicity of meanings which she must hunt for and find' (1989, 5). However, Eco (1989, 6) also notes that the author controls the interpretative solutions within four allegorical tiers, and the cosmic matching paradigm confirms the interpretation, a vertical reading almost impossible for contemporary readers.[12] In contrast, Zhang Longxi (1994) 'Historicizing the Postmodern Allegory,' proposes that allegory is the figure best suited for the postmodern condition with its fragmentation, discontinuities, and 'cultural breaks'. Signification, formerly binding sign and signified in a relationship is characterized by a slippage of the signifier from the signified, creating a sort of gap. In turn, given the subsequent dissonance of all verbal forms, allegory works to reveal that dissonance. Citing Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man, Longxi argues that allegory holds in tension the gap between objects and concepts. Unlike 'symbol' that unifies two things (overcoming ontological 'gaps'), allegory acknowledges the gap between the subject and the object.

If language as a social construct is incapable of transcendence, unable to represent or mime the Transcendent, powerless to coincide with empiric reality, allegory "honestly discloses" that dissonance (1994, 217). Longxi contends that the allegorical sign only refers to another sign that precedes it thus becoming always a break without ever full coincidence. At first read, it appears that Longxi is attempting to resurrect allegory from early Christian interpretations of sacred texts and places and give it some interpretive credibility in a postmodern context. Perhaps this is the case, but if as Longxi states that 'allegory is the figural nature of all language', then allegory may be '[a] simulacrum for the cultural break that speaks specifically of the contemporary Western society' (1994, 217).

> [If earth] speaks to us not in any language familiar to linguists, but as a kind of "coding trickster with whom we must learn... to converse"- how are we to interpret what it says (Haraway 1989, 4)?

[12] Eco (1989, 6) cites Dante's Thirteenth Letter on the author's control of the interpretation.

St. Brendan and his companion monks seem to know their world primarily through the narrative structure of allegory (pre-Longxi!), but the dilemma is that allegory, the language of a closed text for modern wayfarers, suggests restricted interpretations. Yet, as suggested earlier, the signs and meanings within the *Navigatio* remain a continued process of decoding and deferring, something like the islands forming stepping stones in metonymic bridges. In *Surfaces: A History,* Joseph Amato (2013, 12) suggests that surfaces—the back of whales, the monastery, island topography and landscapes—'enwrap humans'. Amato's point is that narration, explanation, and speculation connect humans to surfaces and 'the dialectics between made surfaces and surfaces that define their makers' (2013, 13). Language employed to read and interpret the one set of surfaces on one day, the 'following day will bring us another book of them to break forth. The membranes of life are not static' (2013, 237).

The seeming univocality of Brendan's voyage to the Land of Promise of the Saints becomes the multivocality of contemporary wayfarers headed to the Land of Promise of the Saints. Who can speak of Brendan's success in landing at this final destination, Ultima Thule, the final Sign?[13] Eco (1989, 21) might describe Brendan's journey as an open work or a work in movement, a work to be completed; it is a work, although organically completed, 'open' to a 'continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover and select in her act of perceiving.' So it is/was for the ancient travelers themselves. In Frederick Buechner's telling of the mariner's wonder at finding themselves worshipping on a whale's back- the whale's eye, the whale's roar, the whale's quaking, the name of the whale spoken in broken syllables—'Jass,' 'Cone,' 'Yuss'—the parts never reveal the whole creature (1988, 116). Jasconius, even for the glory of God, cannot bring his tail to his mouth. In this way, the whale is factually and creatively coded 'island' because each sign becomes an interpretant of the other in a kind of mock circularity. Clearly, metonymic chains do not have a natural kinship between the metonymizing terms but are culturally coded, and metonymic mapping is an assumption for understanding language codes of the monastery on the open sea (Steen 2005, 3).

Island Hopping on a Horizontal Landscape

In examining planes of metonymic expression Eco (1976, 267) provides a helpful example: in making the sign of the cross two twigs will work but

[13] Ian Bradley (rpt. 2003, 80) suggests that '[e]mbedded deep in the Celtic psyche ['language' *sic*] was the sense that it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive'.

for a medieval king a cross of gold, precious stones, large and weighty is needed for those materials are charged with cultural signification. Signs and their interpretants—meaning- form the expression-continuum code. This code in turn organizes the cultural units 'island' and 'monastic liturgical life' in the *Navigatio* to include multiple signs. When Barinthus launches this tale about the far away Land of the Promise of the Saints, he uses semiotic codes that identify the monastic life and its spiritual battles already faced at Ardfert – Brendan. These codes Brendan knows. With semiotic competence (Eco 1976, 241), Barinthus explains this strange place that stimulates Brendan to undertake a journey to the same islands. Even as Brendan approaches the visionary place, fog separates the island of delights from the Land of the Promise of the Saints, Brendan must be able to correlate the known code about experienced monastic life to the unknown content of a visionary place.[14] As O'Loughlin suggests, since the limitations of material space and time are removed from the Land of Promise of the Saints, it does not share the same universe as known places (1999, 12), and thereby will need to be coded. Re-stated in semiotic concerns: '... the producer of the sign-function [Brendan] must select a continuum not yet segmented and propose a new way of organizing (of giving form to) it in order to *map* [sic] within it the formal pertinent element of a [known] content-type' (Eco 1976, 245). The signification system of Celtic monks read 'islands' (whether whale or a visionary place) similar to denoted islands and in perceptual structure.[15]

Cynthia Bourgeault in *Monastic Studies* (1983, 112-14) notes that the Land of the Promise of the Saints is constructed as a real place with island topography even as the dimensions of space and time are presented in contradictory ways. Mysteriously, Brendan must journey seven years to get there whereas Barinthus arrives after an hour's voyage. The time axis works in a similar pattern as the liturgical cycle, celebrated throughout the

[14] O'Loughlin describes how Brendan's voyage is read as a series of places and given meaning by the holy man Barrind ('Barinthus' in Wooding and cited such through this essay). The three islands in the seven year circular journey are *signs*: [Ireland] the everyday active life; Mernoc, Island of Delights showing in space and time the contemplative life; and the Promised Land of the Saints, eternal liturgy (2000(b), 93). O'Loughlin points out that this reading of islands is a threefold division of the sign—*sacramentum tantum, res tantum, res et sacramentum* (2000(b), 95) and that the *Navigatio* is a series of pictures with scriptural echoes of visions of Jerusalem (2000, 193, 19).

[15] Elizabeth Rees (2000, 9) points out that Brendan's voyage was set in the context of real expeditions: '[They] were probably undertaken by various monks who traveled far in their light curraghs: they settled in the Orkneys and Shetlands, where islands named "Papa" recall the monks who lived and prayed on them. There were Irish monks on the Faroes in about 720; Norse sagas relate that Vikings found their books, bells and croziers in Iceland, which the Irishman Dicuil described as an island named Thule with a frozen sea to the north.

many islands, and geographical realism are held in tension. Arrival at the Land of the Promise of the Saints is both a matter of seven-year faithfulness to the cycles of daily offices, to the appointed feasts and fasting, to the celebration of Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas and also the to the ardors of the horizontal and linear sea voyage with its many exotic and strange discoveries, wanderings and landings. The *Navigatio* represents a deliberate attempt to hold together and to unfold both a geographical and a liturgical reality (Bourgeault 1983, 112). The structure of the semantic field holding these two realities together determines how Brendan and his companions recognize both experiences. The islands, in particular, the Island of Paradise, to which they are sailing, are places that can be reached through the holy life shaped by the language of the monastery even when they do not know where they are going.

Geographical realism ('island') and liturgical reality ('divine presence'), within a system of cultural units, exist in opposition to each other and circumscribe each other. Since signs are named by means of another sign—what semiologists call unlimited semiosis—signs themselves become signs *ad infinitum*. In this understanding, the 'truth' is handed along in an infinite series (Eco 1976, 69). In turn, Eco evocatively surmises whether this deferral of signs, if not the final Sign, is in fact the entire semantic field (1976, 69). In an interesting kind of way, Jacques Derrida's notion of '*différance*' might be viewed as the 'ocean', i.e., spaces between the islands as each island is defined by the one just left and the one ahead. Spaces between words defer meaning; Derrida's play of differences is not inscribed once and for all in a closed system (1981, 27). As philosopher Robert Corrington puts it, 'signs are always on the move; ... signs have *ordinal* locations within a world that simply does not admit of an ultimate transparency, even for the divine' (2000, 90). In like manner, Brendan queries the abbot when the lamps in the church are never consumed, 'How can a spiritual flame thus burn in a material substance?' (11, 15).

Semantic Aspects of whale, a Moving Island

The semantic properties of one sign becoming the property of another sign appropriate a new code. Eco says (1976, 66) 'every attempt to establish what the referent of a sign is forces us to define the referent in terms of an abstract entity which is only a cultural convention'. This notion is particularly evident in how Brendan interprets 'whale' in the narrative. For example, 'whale' denotes a cultural unit even if it is translated into French 'baleine' or German 'walfisch'. To determine whether mammal or fish, the culture must set the sea creature in a given semantic field in which 'whale' is either opposed or interconnected to 'fish' or 'mammal'

(Jakobson-Halle cited in Eco 1976, 114).[16] Within the semantic field of the Christian monk Brendan-turned-sailor, 'whale' includes size and function to connote 'island', some kind of mass surrounded by water that is large enough to gather on for prayer, for building a fire, and that can be located again. However, Brendan analyzes the cultural unit 'whale' in such a way that its explicit semantic property of large-solid-mass-surrounded-by-water does not, in the text itself, amalgamate to the sememe [basic unit of meaning as well as the ultimate sojourners' goal] 'paradise', but rather coalesces to the rhythm of the liturgical year within the temporal world. The *Navigatio* is a linear voyage and a circular one, and 'island' possesses the semantic properties for both. *Concentric space*, *linear space*, *and ritual space* fuse the monastic understanding of 'island'. The question remains: can modern sojourners to 'islands' recover that understanding, now perceived as 'sacred landscape' or places for recovering 'Celtic spirituality'?

Twenty-first century pilgrims standing on an island will never believe it to be a whale, but will their linguistic engagement with 'island' be 'signed' with monastic ritual and liturgy? Sociolinguists point out, as human semiotics systems change, that the focus must be on what is represented and how. What is pushed to the foreground? For Brendan the sign-vehicle 'island' can best acculturate and educate the companions and his readers about this moving mass in the waters. His linguistic choices are appropriate to the family that is using it, the *muintir* (Irish, 'family'). Language variation according to the way it is used (register theory), characterizes families. As O'Laoghaire (1996, 225) notes, Brendan uses family language with the fourteen monks, and such a 'register' acknowledges established kinships as well as monastic hierarchy and persuasive rhetorical questions:

> Dearly beloved fellow-soldiers of mine, I request your advice and assistance, for my heart and mind are firmly set upon one desire ... I have in my heart resolved to go forth in quest of the Land of Promise of the Saints, about which Father Barinthus discoursed to us. What do you think? What is your advice? (2, 3).

No advice is forthcoming but obedience: 'we are, therefore, ready to go with you, whether unto life or unto death...' (2, 4). They will sail toward the west, toward what they know, an island: 'the sign carries the history of its making, and in that it carries the history and the meaning of the social group in which it was made' (Kress, 2001, 81).

[16] In chapter 16, Brendan and companions are nearly devoured by a monster of the deep which in turn is attacked and killed by another sea monster, consequently 'whale' is set in opposition to both that which is deadly and that which can provide sustenance.

'*Signing the land': Sacred Landscapes*[17]

Oft-cited scholar of religion Mircea Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959, 20) characterizes sacred places as numinous manifestations given by the sacred itself; the religion believer moves away from ordinary time and space and participates in sacred power that has broken through into the human world. Cultural geographers note that sacred places and landscapes are social productions; sacred space, frequently contested, is imbued with cultural presuppositions and marked by social differences. Sociologist Rob Shields (cited Ivakhiv, 60) calls this *social spatialization*: 'a site acquires its own history, partly through its relation with other sites, it acquires connotations and symbolic meanings'. Adrian Ivakhiv suggests another perspective on sacred space in regards to how persons affix themselves to a place:

> [As] people live in particular places, their activities, including their attempts to "anchor" their own views of the world in the landscape "orchestrate" those places in particular ways. The interaction between the local and the global and between (agency and structure) ... is mediated by signs and symbols, images and narratives, and by circulating meanings, desires, and power (2001, 4).

Such observations provide possibilities as to why the language of the sixth-ninth century Celtic Christians on Iona and on Iasconius is frequently misunderstood or 'misspoken' by eco-spiritual geographers, New Age pilgrims, and even by Christians linked in and through Biblical narratives, narratives which are no longer a single unified metanarrative.

> Once language, discourse, and interpretation are seen as constitutive components of the meaningful world which we inhabit, it becomes more difficult to presume a direct connection between a community of people and a single truth about the world (or about a landscape) which is somehow epistemologically privileged over others (Ivakhiv 2001, 233).

Anthropologist Paul Taçon notes the difficulty in describing a landscape when the social actors, their language, and their experiences are long gone:

[17] (Taçon 2002, 1)

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> [I]n one sense, there is no such thing as a landscape but rather jumbles of components ordered and bounded though human thought, choice, and experience. The choice of which elements, places, and spaces are included in particular landscapes is, in turn determined by our perceptions and conceptions... (2002, 122).

Embedded stories in communities about sacred places and landscapes, as a result, highlight ways that peoples recover a bit of the original beliefs and meanings. Regarding these narrative efforts, Belden Lane (1992, 4-13) makes telling arguments that undoubtedly questions of place are also questions of spirituality. However, such interrogatives require a hermeneutic of suspicion—'a warning that ultimately God stands beyond all places and times, beyond all the brokenness of human language' (1992, 12). Scholarship on signification, although not unwilling to acknowledge moments of divine presence, argues for 'alterity' as a way to construct that which is not like us. Alterity escapes from the subject-object relation and produces an internal dialogization of the word. Landscape, as sign, becomes 'sacred' as the human encounters the 'other' but recognizable as part of oneself. Thus, in the context of early Celtic Christianity, Brendan's linguistic identification between 'island' and 'monastery', and the physical and ritual engagement with both says something about how modern sojourners might recover 'Celtic spirituality'. If 'otherness' is recognized within oneself, (or the modern wayfarer in this case), then it can be exposed to dialogue, and dialogue avoids the closure of power (Levinas in Cobley 2001, 153).

Joseph O'Leary in 'The Spiritual Upshot of *Ulysses*' (1989, 306) offers one possibility for dialogue. In this piece on contemporary Celtic Christianity, O'Leary makes a case for James Joyce's revolt against Catholicism as 'resistance to the imposition of definition on the texture of life and its expression' (1989, 312). In the context of this Irish writer's work, O'Leary argues that the literature of Modernism marks out the space and 'defines the parameters of a spiritual quest that unites believers and unbelievers, yielding a *lingua franca* more comprehensible to literate adults than any sacred scripture'. However, that is the problem: is such a *lingua franca*, a unifying language of modernism with its rational project of arguing for the essentialist aspects of spirituality, capable of embodying Celtic spirituality in modern seekers?

The 'cultural break' of the postmodernists, characterized by discontinuity and ambiguity, most clearly manifests itself in contested sites where Celtic monks once lived and prayed. Curiously though, as Ivakhiv points out, the social-psychological/social constructionism of the postmodern spiritual marketplace fitting into the culturally shaped notions of 'co-spiritual' does not fully explain why some places persistently attract New Age and traditional Christians alike. Ivakhiv

attributes this attraction to places where persons bodily 'engaged' with the shapes of the rocks, the colour of the stones, flora and fauna—islands--that seems 'to *c*all' for some sort of interpretation (2001, 212-13). The islands that dot Celtic lands, then and now, are not sacred places but are places where monastic language was spoken 'to kindle a fire in others' (Casey 2006, 42). Seven years the ancient monks plied oars to reach the islands; seven years their voices sang the Divine Office on strange outcroppings in the ocean; seven years they faced hunger and thirst. Their bodies were engaged with the monastic language they spoke on every island.

'He Embarked Once More and Sailed Back Through the Darkness Again'

Semiotic theory is as old as ancient Greek and Latin philosophy; however, the resurgence of semiotics in a postmodern world may be fruitful in the struggle with signification and communication as linguistic identities rise and fall. The semiosic capacity is present in all cultures and contributes some understanding of how modes and codes of communication reflect a culture and in turn shapes it. Whether modern travelers can recover a distinctive Celtic spirituality seems a most arduous and complicated task after this brief foray into semiotics. On the other hand, noticing how semiotics works poses the question whether 'island' for St. Brendan and for twenty-first century spiritual pilgrims is a sign that can be translated from one signification system to another, and whether it can also develop inferentially and metonymically the possibilities suggested by 'island'.

> At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, *our island home* [*italics* mine].
>
> --*The Book of Common Prayer*

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