

ESSAY I

The Baptism of the Gods

SOME TWELVE CENTURIES AGO, the eminent scholar Alcuin of York wrote to an English bishop named Speratus. The tone of Alcuin's letter is friendly, and painstakingly courteous; between the lines, though, it is plain that he feels uneasy regarding Speratus's sense of his pastoral responsibilities. At length a specific concern emerges: it seems that priests under the bishop's authority are being entertained by harpers at their meals. To prefer music to edifying reading is bad enough; but what Alcuin finds most alarming is the fact that these performers recite stories as they play — stories of the pagan past. In his own words,

*Verba Dei legantur in sacerdotali conuiuio. Ibi decet lectorem
audiri, non citharistam; sermones patrum, non carmina gentili-*

um. *Quid Hinieldus cum Christo? Angusta est domus; utrosque tenere non poterit. Non uult Rex celestis cum paganis et perditis nominatenus regibus communionem habere; quia Rex ille aeternus regnat in caelis, ille paganus perditus plangit in inferno. Voces legentium audire in domibus tuis, non ridentium turbam in plateis.*

Let the word of God be read when priests eat together. The lector should be heard there, not the harper; sermons of the fathers, not songs of the pagans. What has Ingeld to do with Christ? The house is narrow: it will not be able to hold them both. The heavenly King wants nothing to do with the lost kings of the pagans, kings in name alone: for the eternal King reigns in heaven, while the lost pagan king groans in hell. Listen to the voices of lectors in your houses, not to the laughter of the crowd in the market-place.²

Wariness with respect to traditions of the pagan past was not, of course, peculiar to the clerical intelligentsia of Anglo-Saxon England: the same attitude can be found throughout medieval Europe. I quote Alcuin's opinions here not because

- 1 No epic or saga devoted to Ingeld has survived; but from allusions in the Old English poems *Widsith* (line 48) and *Beowulf* (line 2064) it appears that he was a king of the Hathobards, defeated in a battle which broke out on the occasion of his betrothal to the daughter of the king of the Danes. Discussion and references in Dobbie, *Beowulf and Judith*, li–iii.
- 2 Wattenbach and Dümmler, *Monumenta Alcuiniana*, Epistola 81, 353–8 (at 357). Internal evidence dates the letter to the year 797. The addressee was long held to be Hygbald of Lindisfarne; for a persuasive rebuttal of this view, see now Bullough, *Anglo-Saxon England* xxii.93–125. I am grateful to David Dumville for bringing this article to my attention.

they were atypical of Christendom as a whole, but because they provide such an apt contrast with certain elements in the religious thinking of the Gaels of Scotland and Ireland, England's neighbours to the north and west. Thus the great Saint Columba, the Irish ecclesiastic who founded the famous monastery of Iona in the Hebrides, seems to have been receptive to just the kind of entertainment which Alcuin was to condemn: the *Vita Columbae* ('Life of Columba') written by his successor Adomnán includes an anecdote in which it is implied that Columba habitually (*ex more*) requested itinerant poets to perform for him.³ Another story, perhaps composed not much more than a century after Columba's death,⁴ goes considerably further in its portrayal of the saint's openness to native culture.

This tale is set on the shores of Lough Foyle, not far from where the city of Derry stands today.⁵ Without

- 3 *Vita Columbae* i.42 (Anderson and Anderson, 76). Columba died in the year 597, and Adomnán's compilation of his *Vita* 'may have been in progress up to c. 700' (Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, 146). By Adomnán's own time Columba himself was the subject of 'certain songs in his praise in the Irish language' (*quaedam scoticae linguae laudum ipsius carmina*), recited even by 'laymen, although they were criminals and shedders of blood' (*quidam quamlibet scelerati laicae conuersationis homines et sanguinari*) (*Vita Columbae* i.1; Anderson and Anderson, 16).
- 4 James Carney assigned this and a related colloquy text 'at latest to the early seventh century', but gave only a sketchy indication of his grounds for this dating (*Latin Script and Letters*, 180–1 n. 19). Although I do not think that the linguistic evidence points clearly to such an early date, the text certainly belongs to the Old Irish period (thus Carey, *Ériu* lii.55–6).
- 5 According to the two manuscripts of the text the encounter took

preamble, we find the saint conversing with a mysterious youth.⁶

'Can dolod-su, a óclach?' ol Colum Cille . . .

'Dodecbad-sa,' ol ind óclach, 'a tírib ingnad, a tírib gnáth, co fesur uait-siu fót forsa mbeba ocus fót fora ngénir fis 7 anfis.'

'Whence do you come, youth?' said Columba . . .

'I come,' said the youth, 'from lands of strange things, from lands of familiar things, so that I may learn from you the spot on which died, and the spot on which were born, knowledge and ignorance.'

Columba chooses to ignore this portentous question, and parries with one of his own: 'Whose was it formerly, this lough which we see?'

Respondit iuuenis: 'Rofetur-sa aní-sin. Ba buide, ba scothach, ba glas, ba tilbach, ba ólach, ba osrach, ba airptech, ba cairptech. Ro giult-sa a mbasa os; ro shenas a mbasa é, a mbasa rón; ro ráth a mbasa cú allaid; imma-rulod a mbasa duine. Ra gabus fo thrib seólaib: seól mbuide beres, seól nglas bádas, seól nderg foa combretha [MSS forcombreth . . . , focombreth . . .] feóili. Ro iachtsat mná díim; acht nád fitir atbarmáthair, cid beras: co lubair fri doíni bíu, co timbach fri marbu.'

place at a spot called Carn Eolairg or Carrac Eolairg. On the location see Hogan, *Onomasticon*, s.vv. 'carn eolairg', 'carrac eolaircc'.

⁶ In what follows I draw on my own edition and translation, *Ériu* lii.60-1.

The youth answered: 'I know that. It was yellow, it was flowery, it was green, it was hilly; it was rich in liquor, and strewn rushes, and silver, and chariots. I have grazed it when I was a stag; I have swum it when I was a salmon, when I was a seal; I have run upon it when I was a wolf; I have gone around it when I was a human. I have landed there under three sails: the yellow sail which bears, the blue sail which drowns, the red sail under which bodies [*lit. flesh*] were conceived. Women have cried out because of me, although father and mother do not know what they bear, with labour for living folk, with a covering for the dead.'

Again at Columba's request, the youth goes on to describe the animals and peoples that dwell beneath the sea. Then,

'Lour co sin,' ol Colum Cille. Atraig Colum Cille, oca ndécsin a muintire, leis for leith dia acallaim 7 dia iarfaigid na rún nemdae 7 talmandae. Óro bátar isin chobrunn, leth lai nó ó oentráth co 'raile, [boí] muintir Coluim Chille oca ndéicsi di etarchéin. Óro glé, co n-accatar talmaidiu docelar erru ind óclach. Ní fetatar cia luid nó can toluid. In tain mboíe a muintir oca guidi Choluim Chille ara foillsiged dóib ní don chobrunn, asbert Colum Cille friu nád coimnacuir cid oenbréthir do epirt do neuch ro ráided fris; ocus asbert ba móu do les do doínib a neraisnéis dóib.

'That is enough,' said Columba. Looking toward his followers, Columba arises and went aside with him, to speak with him and to ask him about the heavenly and earthly mysteries. They were conversing for half the day, or from one day to the next, as Columba's followers watched

them from a distance. When the conversation ended, they suddenly saw that the youth was hidden from them. They did not know whither he went nor whence he came. When Columba's followers were asking him to reveal to them something of the conversation, Columba told them that he could not tell them even a single word of anything that he had been told; and he said that it was better for mortals not to be informed of it.

How are we to interpret this cryptic encounter? The youth 'from lands of strange things, from lands of familiar things', of whom it is not known 'whither he went nor whence he came', is evidently a visitor from the Otherworld of native tradition, the hidden country of the immortals. That such a being should come to a Christian saint in search of wisdom is already noteworthy; but this is only the beginning. For instead of instructing the youth, Columba himself learns from him; and the things which he learns are well outside the usual monastic curriculum.

Columba asks what Lough Foyle used to be; and the youth's reply that it was 'yellow, flowery, green, hilly', abounding in the luxuries of lordship, gives us to understand that a rich kingdom once existed there, swallowed up in some long-past inundation.⁷ How the youth comes to possess this ancient knowledge is the most startling aspect of his speech: he remembers the vanished land from former lives, in which he existed as stag and wolf; since it was lost, he has traversed the waters of the lough as a salmon, and as

7 Other traces of a legend concerning this flood are discussed by Carney, *Latin Script and Letters*, 174-93.

a seal. Columba has, in fact, elicited from him an account of transmigration; and when the youth speaks of having travelled in a ship with three sails — the yellow sail of birth, the blue sail of death, and the red sail of a new body's conception — we may hear echoes of symbolic language once used by the druids in speaking of the journeys of the soul.

It will be obvious, I think, at what a remove Columba stands from Alcuin. Far from closing his ears to the poetry of his people, he listens eagerly to the arcana of the old religion, taking as his teacher a shapeshifting transmigrant. And even though we, like his monks, are denied knowledge of the 'heavenly and earthly mysteries' which this entity relates to him, there is no suggestion that Columba's own world-view is too narrow to accommodate such secrets side by side with the Christian revelation.

The story of Columba and the youth shows a great saint's interest in pagan lore, but does not allow this lore, or its bearer, to come too close to us. The youth is left nameless,⁸ and vanishes back into the unknown without establishing any lasting relationship with Columba; and most of what he says is, as we have seen, concealed. For a warmer treatment of the theme we can look at another Irish story, written roughly two centuries later.⁹

8 As I have argued elsewhere (*Ériu* xlvi.82-3), his identification in the manuscripts as Mongán mac Fiachnai is probably secondary.

9 In citing this tale I follow my own translation in CHA 210-12; for the text cf. my edition, *Ériu* xxxv.101-2.

Saint Finnian of Movilla, an older contemporary of Columba's,¹⁰ is travelling across Ulster spreading the Gospel; one day he is offered hospitality by Tuán son of Cairell, a hermit dwelling in the Mourne Mountains. Recognising that Tuán is more than he seems, Finnian demands that he recount to him all of Ireland's history since its first settlement.

Asbert Tuán fri Finnia, 'Nammuiregar-sa imin les-sin. Is diliu dúnd briathar Déi adcois dún do imrádud.' 'Is cett dait dano,' ol Finnia, 'do imthechta fadéin 7 imthús na Hérend do innisin dún coléic.'

Tuán said to Finnian, 'Do not confine me to that subject; I would rather meditate on what you may have to tell me concerning the word of God.' 'Nevertheless,' said Finnian, 'it is granted to you to tell us about your own adventures, and events in Ireland.'

And indeed it soon becomes evident that Tuán's own adventures, and the whole of the Irish past, amount to the same thing. For he too has existed since ancient times, and in many shapes — stag, boar, cormorant, salmon — and he remembers all that he has seen throughout these transformations. Again, we pick up tantalising hints regarding beliefs and practices which may have been associated with a pre-Christian doctrine of rebirth. At the end of each of his lives, Tuán retires to a specific cave, fasts for three days and nights, and then falls asleep: in his sleep the memory of his

¹⁰ The *Annals of Ulster* place his death in the year 579. Further references to Finnian in Kenney, *Sources*, 390—1.

former existences returns to him, and also the power to assume another form. As I have mentioned, the last of his nonhuman identities is said to have been that of a salmon. There follows a remarkable passage of description:

Fecht and, in tan romba mithig la Dia mo chobair-sea 7 ro mbátar biasta oc mo ingreim 7 romfinnad cach línaige in cach lind, dombert línaige and do mnaí Chairill rí in tíri-sea. Cuman lim dano co ndombeir in fer 7 fomnoí, 7 nom itbend in ben a oenur co mbá ina broind. Cuman lim dano ind airt ro mbá ina broind 7 rl, 7 an no ráided cách ria chéile isin taig 7 a ndorónad i nÉire ind eret-sin. Cuman lim dano amal dománaic labrad amal cach nuídin 7 rofinnaind cach rét dogníthe i nÉre 7 robsa fáith 7 dobreth ainm dam .i. Tuán mac Cairill. Co tánic iarom Pátraic co creitim. Aes már dam i ssuidiu 7 rom baisted 7 ro creites im oenur Ríg na n-uili cona dúilib.

At last, when it seemed to God that it was time to help me, and water-creatures were attacking me, and every fisherman knew me in every pool, I was caught in a net and fetched to the wife of Cairell, the king of this country. I remember then how the man took me and cooked me, and the woman alone ate me so that I was in her womb. I remember then the time that I was in her womb, etc.; and I remember what people were saying to each other in the house, and I remember what was done in Ireland during that time. I remember then how speech came to me, as to every baby; and I was learning everything that used to be done in Ireland. And I was a prophet, and a name was given to me: Tuán the son of Cairell. After that Patrick came with the Faith. I was very old then. I was baptised, and I alone believed in the King of all things, with his creatures.

Host and guest pray together, and then Tuán spends a week imparting his knowledge to Finnian: in the author's words, 'Whatever history and genealogy there are in Ireland, their origin is from Tuán the son of Cairill' (*Nach senchas 7 nach genelach fil i nHéire is ó Thuán mac Cairill a bunadus*).

In this story, then, the saint's informant is not a transient visitor from the Otherworld: not only has he embraced the new religion, but he has dedicated his life to it as a hermit. Especially appealing, and also especially significant, is the eagerness which Finnian and Tuán each display for the knowledge possessed by the other: Finnian refuses to eat beneath Tuán's roof until the latter has gratified his curiosity regarding former times; while Tuán pleads, 'Do not confine me to that subject; I would rather meditate on what you may have to tell me concerning the word of God'. Two crucial, interdependent things are happening here. On the one hand, Finnian's request shows that there is no incompatibility between the old lore and Christian faith, between preaching the Gospel and delving into the pagan past. On the other, his very acceptance of native tradition places it beneath the control of the church. The undying shapeshifter has gone through the waters of baptism; and all that had been the preserve of his age-old memory has entered into the keeping of the monastic schools. Henceforth, it is their books which will be the keepers of the past.

These two tales reflect the ability of the early Irish church to find a place for much — in some cases, startlingly much — of the older beliefs of the people. It is important not to oversimplify: the spirit of rapprochement which I am endeavouring to describe represents only one strand in a

complex culture, full of controversy and contradictions. But it is a notably interesting strand, reflecting a mentality for which I know of no close parallel in medieval Christendom. All across Europe, to be sure, pagan beliefs and practices survived among the common folk, the 'crowd in the marketplace' to which Alcuin scornfully refers. But in Ireland scholars and bishops were also busy with the old traditions, seeking to create a hybrid, composite culture which would be both wholly Irish and wholly Christian. One can perhaps compare these efforts with the adventurous syntheses of Mirandola and Ficino; but I can think of nothing nearer, or earlier, to which to liken them.¹¹

It would be tempting to speculate here as to why it was in Ireland, in particular, that this inclusive mentality emerged: the question is a fascinating one, and well worth discussion, but I could not hope to do it justice in an essay of this scope. Nor can I speak of all of the ways in which that mentality is reflected in early Irish culture: in spells invoking native divinities,¹² in legends attributing the laws of pagan

¹¹ The Irish attitudes discussed in this paper could profitably be compared with the pagan or neopagan elements in compositions pseudepigraphically ascribed to the Welsh poet Taliesin: see Koch, *Mediaevalia* xix.41-73, especially 54-61, 65-6; for a few remarks on a more limited scale cf. Carey, *History of Religions* xxxi.36-8. This material is of the greatest interest, and in urgent need of further investigation. Provisionally, I would suggest that the restricted attestation and recurring anticlericalism of these poems appear to reflect a phenomenon different from the ecclesiastically based strategies of far-reaching and constructive cultural synthesis which we find in early Ireland.

¹² For editions of several of the texts see Stokes, RC ii.112-15; *Ibs. Pal.* ii.248-50, 293; Meyer, *Sitzungsberichte* (1916) 420-2; Meroney,

Ireland to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,¹³ in the faculty of occult vision attributed to professional poets,¹⁴ in the desire of the Christian Irish to secure salvation for their heathen forebears,¹⁵ and in much else besides. Rather, I shall seek to illustrate this many-faceted phenomenon by concentrating on one of its aspects: the treatment of the old gods. Here we find a whole spectrum of attitudes: unquestioning acceptance, scholarly curiosity, pious antagonism, and also the spirit of imaginative reconciliation with which I am primarily concerned.

Anyone who has some acquaintance with medieval Irish literature will have encountered descriptions of immortal

Speculum xx.172–82; Best, *Ériu* xvi.27–32. The most recent translation of a remarkable prayer for longevity, preserved in a Middle Irish metrical treatise, appears in KM 136–8.

- 13 Discussion in Carey, CMCS xix.1–18; and further references there cited.
- 14 The native *imbas* is mentioned side by side with the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the Old Irish treatise known as 'The Caldron of Poesy' (thus Breatnach, *Ériu* xxxii.66–9); cf. Carey, *Ériu* xlviii.48, 57–8.
- 15 Three examples would be the condemnation in 745 of an Irish preacher named Clement who claimed that Christ's harrowing of hell redeemed idolaters as well as believers (Tangi, *Briefe*, 112); the law tract *Córus Béscnai's* allusion to a druid belief that 'Patrick would steal the living and the dead' (*getad Padraig biu 7 marbu*) (CIH 527.28); and an angel's promise to Patrick that 'a shower will fall on you from heaven until it reaches your knees, and it will sanctify all the people of Ireland, both the living and the dead' (*firfid gléss fort de nim co tife glúine 7 bid cosecrad do lucht inna Héirend buile etir biu 7 marbu*) (*Beibú Phátraic*, lines 1371–2; trans. KM 161).

beings with supernatural powers: the *aes síde*, or 'folk of the hollow hills'.¹⁶ Usually thought of as dwelling beneath the earth or under water, they are portrayed as the guardians of territories and the ancestors of royal lineages, controlling the weather and the crops, presiding over the practice of the arts and the frenzy of battle. In other words, they appear as gods; and in fact they are sometimes called 'gods' outright or, somewhat more circumspectly, the *Tuatha Dé* 'Tribes of the Gods', or *Tuatha Dé Donann* 'Tribes of the Goddess Donann'. Occasionally we can compare them directly with the divinities worshipped by pagan Celts elsewhere: thus Lug, the possessor of all skills, is clearly the *Lugus* whose cult is attested on the Continent;¹⁷ while Nuadu, the warrior of the silver arm, can be identified with a god *Nodons* whose temple stood beside the Severn in Roman times.¹⁸ These immortals outlasted even the Middle Ages, surviving down to our own day as the fairies or 'good people' (*daoine maithé*).¹⁹

16 On the background of the word *síd* 'Otherworld dwelling, hollow hill' see Ó Cathasaigh, *Éigse* xvii.137–55; Hamp, *ÉC* xix.141; Sims-Williams, *Celtic Language, Celtic Culture*, 61–2. I have discussed some aspects of the relationship of the *síd* with the Otherworld in *Éigse* xix.36–43 and PHCC vii.1–27.

17 For a useful collection of references see Tovar, BCS xxix.591–9. Some aspects of the scholarly consensus on *Lugus* have recently been queried by Maier, *Ériu* xlvii.127–35; see however more recently Carey, *Celtic Language Law and Letters*, 151–67.

18 For a collection of references see Carey, ZCP xl.1–22; and idem, *Dieux des Celtes*, 99–126.

19 This is only one of many designations which have been recorded. Ó hEochaidh et al., *Síscéalta ó Thír Chonaill* 26–7, give a list of twenty-two terms from Donegal alone, the most common being *bunadhb na gcnoc* 'hill-folk'.

But how could a Christian scholar, recording the tales concerning them in a monastic scriptorium, fit these beings into the framework of his faith? Several explanations of their nature were put forward: it is a testimony perhaps to the vitality of the immortals themselves that none of these rationalisations ever definitively triumphed.

Two such explanatory doctrines can be discussed fairly briefly: they were widespread in medieval Christendom as a whole, and there is nothing surprising about their currency in Ireland. These are *euhemerism* and *demonisation*: on the one hand, the view that — in the influential words of Isidore of Seville — ‘those whom the pagans claim to be gods are held to have been men who lived long ago, and who came to be worshipped after their deaths on account of their lives and merits’ (*Quos pagani deos adserunt, homines olim fuisse produntur, et pro uniuscuiusque uita uel meritis coli apud suos post mortem coeperunt*);²⁰ on the other — to quote the still more authoritative Vulgate Bible — the stark doctrine that ‘All the gods of the heathen are demons’ (*Omnes dii gentium daemonia*).²¹

Euhemerism had been favoured as a means of explaining away the gods since classical times; and it would have been doubly attractive to thinkers who, like the medieval Irish,

²⁰ *Etymologiae* viii.11.1 (Oroz Reta and Casquero, i.718).

²¹ Psalm 95:5. Jerome here followed the Greek of the Septuagint (πάντες οἱ θεοὶ τῶν ἔθνῶν δαιμόνια) rather than the original Hebrew: *elil* means ‘empty, futile’, not ‘demon’. When he later produced a translation of the Psalms based on the Hebrew text, Jerome rendered this statement as *Omnes enim dii populorum sculptilia*; cf. his use of *idola* in the comparable passages at Leviticus 19:4, 26:1; 1 Chronicles 16:26.

were eager not only to reconcile native traditions with Christian teaching, but also to fit these traditions into the sequence of a universal chronology. What is noteworthy in the Irish case is not that euhemerism was adopted, but that it found so tenuous a purchase: it appeared relatively late, allowed the historicised gods to retain many supernatural characteristics, never enjoyed the full confidence of medieval scholars, and had no effect upon the beliefs of the people at large.

The first clearly datable assertion of the mortality of the Tuatha Dé comes from the end of the tenth century;²² and the doctrine assumed its most influential formulation late in the eleventh, in the legendary-historical treatise known as *Lebor Gabála* (‘The Book of Taking’; usually, and less accurately, rendered as ‘The Book of Invasions’). Here the Tuatha Dé are traced back to one Bethach, himself the grandson of a Scythian Greek named Nemed who was one of Ireland’s early settlers. So far, so good; but let us look more closely at how *Lebor Gabála* describes them:

Batar iarum clanda Bethaig meic Iarboneoil Fháda meic Nemid i n-insib tuascertachaib in domain oc foglaim druidechta 7 fessa 7 fastini 7 amainsechta, combtar fortaile for cerddib suíthe gentliucta. Combtar iat Tuatha De Donand tancatar Herind. Is amlaid tancatar i nnélaib dorchaib. Gabsat for slebe Conmaicne Réin la Connacta & ro láset temel tri la 7 tri baidche for gréin.

²² In the poem ‘Ériu co n-uaille, co n-idnaib’, by Eochaid ua Flainn (AD 936–1004), trans. in CHA 246–8; text in *Lebor Gabála* iv.212–19. Eochaid notes that there is uncertainty whether the Tuatha Dé were demons or men, but opts for the latter alternative.

The descendants of Bethach son of Iarbonél Fáith son of Nemed were in the northern islands of the world, learning magic and knowledge and sorcery and cunning, until they were preeminent in the arts of the heathen sages. They are the Tuatha Dé Donann who came to Ireland. It is thus that they came: in dark clouds. They landed upon the mountains of Conmaicne Réin in Connacht. They put a darkness upon the sun for three days and nights²³

If the Tuatha Dé are humans, then, they are humans skilled in magic, coming from mysterious regions, descending upon Ireland out of the sky, wielding power over the radiance of the sun. To attribute mortal ancestry to such potent and uncanny beings seems like little more than a cosmetic device: even among the learned men who were most committed to relegating them to a niche in the distant past, the idea appears never to have carried real conviction. *Lebor Gabála* itself occasionally slips into speaking of them as 'demons';²⁴ and the eleventh-century poet Flann Mainistrech, who devotes a composition of some forty stanzas to demonstrating the mortality of the Tuatha Dé by listing the deaths of as many of them as he can think of, appears to protest too much. In some manuscripts, four further quatrains directly address the stubborn tradition against which Flann is contending:

*Tuath Dé Danann, drong mar ghloin:
cidb adberaid sunn saoihbheolaig*

²³ My translation, CHA 213–66 (at 244); text from LL, lines 1049–55. Cf. *Lebor Gabála* iv.106–9 (also 138–43, 166–71).

²⁴ CHA 260; *Lebor Gabála* v.32–3, cf. 18–19.

*lucht na mbarc is na mbruine
atád a Tír Thairrngoire,*

*Tír Tairngere adberar ann
do bheith ag Tuaitb Dé Danann,
baile bitsheng a mbí brath —
iss é ant iffern iochtarach.*

*Ciadberaid sunn iar soine
saobhsáidbe 7 senchaide
síth ag lucht na dtriost 's na dtreabh,
ní ced lé Criosd a chreidemb.*

*Gidb bé chreides cona anmain
a mbeith a sídhaibh samhlaid,
bbudb bí [a] aitreabh bitsheng bil
iffern cona iltuathaib.*

The Tuatha Dé Donann, a throng like crystal:
though false sages here say
that the folk of ships and of prows
are in the Land of Promise,

The 'Land of Promise' of which it is said
that the Tuatha Dé Donann possess it
is the perpetual, narrow place in which there is
betrayal —
it is the lowest hell.

Though false prophets and storytellers
severally here relate
that the folk of sorrows, of dwellings, have peace (*síd*),
that belief is not allowed by Christ.

Whoever in his soul believes
that they are thus in the hollow hills,
his perpetual narrow evil dwelling
will be hell with its many tribes.²⁵

Here we are very close to the spirit of Alcuin, with his talk of the damnation of pagan kings; but the poet's very vehemence shows how embattled he felt his position to be. In a later manuscript of *Lebor Gabála*, the euhemeristic view is treated with outright scepticism. After mentioning the doctrine that the Tuatha Dé were mortal wizards, the scribe continues

*... Atberaid aroile comad deamna grada ecsamla T.D.D. 7
comad iad-siden dodeachadar do nim aræn risin loinges
dodeachaid Luitcifear cona deamnaib do nibb. Arfæmad chuirp
ærda umpu do millead 7 d'astach for sil nAdaím . . . Tiagaid
thra in lucht-sin i sidaib ocus tiagaid fo muirib ocus tiagaid i
conrechtaib ocus tiagait co hamaide ocus tiagait co tuaitheingtha.
Is as-sin is bunadus doib uili .i. muinte deamain. Ni ruca
genelach na ndaine-sea for cula nocho rofheasidar fir in domain*

²⁵ That these stanzas were not composed by Flann himself is evident from the fact that they are only attached to his poem in one family of manuscripts (*Lebor Gabála* iv.240-1); also from their attestation separately in Dublin, National Library of Ireland MS G1, folios 52v-53r. It is the latter text which is given here.

*olchena ocus dorabadar in sluag-sa uili la firindi mac Milead 7
la tairchedal chreidme Críst.*

... Others say that the Tuatha Dé Donann were demons of a special order, and that they came from heaven along with the banishment from heaven of Lucifer and his demons. They take on bodies of air, to ruin and tempt the race of Adam That people, then, go into the hollow hills; and they go beneath the seas, and they take the form of wolves, and they visit witches and those who turn against the sun. The origin of all of them is the Devil's household. Their genealogy cannot be reckoned back, nor can the men of the world learn it; and that whole multitude was vanquished by the rightfulness of the [Gaels] and by the prophecy of the faith of Christ.²⁶

To *demonise* the immortals was to preserve their status as supernatural beings, but also to conceive of them in wholly negative terms. This suited some, but by no means all. Again, it was a view which never prevailed entirely; and, although it is attested in Ireland earlier than the euhemeristic interpretation, it still first surfaces only relatively late. The first hint of it which is known to me appears in fact in the same story of Tuán which we have already considered, a tale probably written in the latter part of the ninth century.

Tuán, in his enumeration of the settlements of Ireland, identifies the immediate predecessors of the Gaels as 'the Tribe of Gods and Un-gods — whose origin the men of learning do not know; but they think it likely that they

²⁶ From the third-recension copy of *Lebor Gabála* in the Book of Lecan, folio 277 ra 43-b 6; cf. *Lebor Gabála* iii.154-5.

belonged to the exiles who came from heaven' (*Tuatha Dé 7 Andé dona fes bunadus lasin n-oes n-eólais; acht ba dóich leo bith din longis dodeochaid de nim dóib*).²⁷ This brief statement encapsulates much of the shifting complex of opinion which I am trying to describe. The gods are given a place in history — for this as well, as it happens, the story of Tuán is our earliest source — but it is suggested that they were not men but fallen angels. Even this suggestion, however, is advanced only tentatively: in the end, the 'men of learning' do not know their origin.

To summarise: euhemerism and demonisation, two Christianising devices of unimpeachable orthodoxy which were disseminated throughout Europe, were taken up in Ireland only relatively late, and never properly took root there. In the centuries which elapsed between the time of Saint Patrick and the arrival of the Vikings — generally thought of as the Golden Age of Irish piety and learning — there is no sign of them.²⁸ What can this mean?

It does not mean that the Irish were ignorant of these theories: the writings of Isidore — not to mention the Bible! — were well known and highly regarded in Ireland from an

²⁷ CHA 212; *Ériu* xxxv.102.

²⁸ Thus, to cite one particularly striking example, *Tírechán* in his account of the missionary journeys of Saint Patrick provides no such gloss on the phrase 'men of the hollow hills, or of the earthly gods' (*uiros side aut deorum terrenorum*) (CHA 198; cf. Bieler, *Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, 142–3). Here, if anywhere, one would think that the context called for an attempt to explain away the native immortals; but *Tírechán* goes no further than to suggest that the sight in question could also have been interpreted as an illusion (*fantassiam*).

early date;²⁹ and the same ideas could be found in other works which circulated there.³⁰ Nor does it mean that the immortals were simply ignored: they already figure prominently in some of the earliest Irish literature known to us. Indeed, such oblivion would have been difficult: there is evidence that the druids managed to survive into the eighth century, and were still preaching a doctrine of transmigration in the seventh;³¹ and rituals explicitly honouring the old gods continued to be performed for centuries thereafter.³² The answer, or answers, must be different, and subtler.

Let us look again at Tuán's statement that men of learning thought it likely that the immortals 'belonged to the

²⁹ On the early circulation of Isidore's writings in Ireland see Hillgarth, *Peritia* iii.1–16; but note the cautionary observations of Smyth, CMCS xiv.69–102.

³⁰ Thus Augustine was a vigorous proponent of euhemerism (*De ciuitate Dei*, vii.18, 26; CCSL xlvii.200–1, 208), as well as of the view that demons pass themselves off as gods (*ibid.*, e.g. x.10–11, 16; xxi.6; CCSL xlvii.283–6, 289–91; *ibid.* xlviii.766–8). For Satan assuming the forms of Roman deities in the widely-read *Vita Martini* by Sulpicius Severus, see the citation from that work below.

³¹ On the legal status of the druids in Christian Ireland see Kelly, *Guide to Early Irish Law*, 60–1. A remarkable allusion to contemporary druidic teaching, in a text written in Ireland in the year 655, is discussed at 57 below.

³² In a text probably written after the accession of Brian Bóruma (died 1014) there is a reference to 'women and the rabble' (*mná ocus daescarsluag*) praying to 'the fairy Mongfhind' (*Moingfinne bansídaide*) on the night of Hallowe'en (O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, i.330–6 (332)). Also on Hallowe'en, one Gilla Lugán is said to have entered the megalithic tomb of Newgrange in 1084, seeking oracles from the immortal Oengus Óc (Stokes, *Annals of Tigernach*, ii.416–17).

exiles who came from heaven'. Is it significant that they are not called demons outright? A similar ambiguity may lie behind the passage that I quoted earlier, which speaks of them as 'demons of a special order', who 'came from heaven along with the banishment from heaven of Lucifer and his demons'. What might such a special category be?

An answer is provided by *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* ('Saint Brendan's Voyage'), perhaps written in Ireland as early as the eighth century.³³ Here we are told how Brendan and his monks came, in the course of their search for the earthly paradise, to an island populated by beautiful white birds. Brendan prayed to God to reveal to him the nature of these creatures, and shortly thereafter one of them addressed him in a human voice:

Nos sumus de illa magna ruina antiqui hostis, sed non peccando in eorum consensu fuimus. Sed ubi fuimus creati, per lapsum illius cum suis satellitibus contigit et nostra ruina. Deus autem noster iustus est et uerax. Per suum magnum iudicium misit nos in istum locum. Penas non sustinemus. Hic presenciam Dei possumus uidere, sed tantum alienauit nos a consorcio aliorum qui steterunt. Vagamur per diuersas partes aeris et firmamenti et terrarum, sicut alii spiritus qui mittuntur. Sed in sanctis diebus atque dominicis accipimus corpora talia qualia nunc uides et commoramur hic laudamusque nostrum Creatorem.

We belong to the mighty downfall of the ancient Enemy, but did not sin by joining in their company. But when we were created, our own ruin was occasioned by his fall, together with his followers. But our God is just and true.

33 For this dating see David Dumville, *Studi Medievali*, 3rd ser., xxix.87-102.

Through his great judgment he has sent us to this place. We do not suffer punishments. Here we can behold the presence of God, save that he has banished us from the company of those who remained faithful. We wander through the various regions of the air and firmament and earth, like other emissary spirits. But on holy days, and Sundays, we assume bodies such as you see now, and linger here, and praise our Creator.³⁴

The birds seem, then, to be 'half-fallen angels': expelled from heaven, because they did not side with the Lord; but only as far as the earth, since they were not guilty of actual rebellion. Although excluded from the fellowship of the celestial angels, they are still wise, benevolent, and blessed beings.

I think that there is little reason to doubt that these creatures are to be identified with the folk of the hollow hills — also for the most part invisible, yet often appearing to mortals in the form of birds.³⁵ Indeed, the idea that the fairies are half-fallen angels, dwelling in earth and air and

34 *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* §11 (Selmer, 24). This episode may have been inspired by a scene in the *Vita prima Sancti Brendani*, in which the saint resuscitates and baptises a giant woman belonging to an undersea race. Although her people are portrayed as hoping for 'the universal resurrection' (*resurrectionem communem*), the text makes no attempt to account for them in terms of Christian categories (Plummer, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* i.135).

35 For other examples of such transformations see the tales *Aislinge Oengusso* §§12-14 (Shaw, 59-63), *Compert Con Culainn* §§1-2 (van Hamel, 3-4), *Serglige Con Culainn* §4-7 (Dillon, 1-3), *Tochmarc Étaíne* §III.15 (*Eriu* xii.184), and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* §§7, 13 (Knott, 3, 5).

sea, survived in Irish folklore into the twentieth century.³⁶

I have observed that the euhemeristic and demonising positions are both entirely orthodox. But the doctrine of half-fallen angels, which opens up the possibility of seeing the immortals as supernatural beings who are not evil, is not so. Christian doctrine holds that, once an angel sins, it is lost forever — 'What death is to men, falling is to angels' (ὅπερ ἐστὶ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ὁ θάνατος, τοῦτο τοῖς ἀγγέλοις ἢ ἔκπτωσις) in the words of John of Damascus³⁷ — that any sin in an angel is a mortal one.³⁸ How then could angels do penance? An English monk of the thirteenth century, in a poem fiercely critical of *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani*, fastened gleefully on this point of dogma:

. . . *His fabellas addit plures, non cessando fingere:*
demonas saluandos fore, laudes Deo soluere.
Quod est nimis inimicum fidei catholice.
Recta quippe fides habet, quod, ruente principe,
nullus nisi periturus secum posset ruere.
Iste uero magne parti locum cedit uenie.

. . . [The author] adds more fables, not ceasing to invent: demons are to be saved, and offer praise to God. This is utterly hostile to the catholic faith. For true faith holds that, when the leader fell, none fell with him who was not destined to perish.

³⁶ See e.g. the instance in Ó hEochaidh et al., eds, *Síscéalta*, 34–5; further references 373.

³⁷ *De fide orthodoxa* ii.4 (PG xciv.877C).

³⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* i.2 q. 89 a. 4 (Caramello, i.408–9).

But this fellow grants to many of them a place of pardon.³⁹

Again, none of this theology was unknown in Ireland: we find discussions of the unpardonable character of angelic sin throughout the period with which these essays are concerned.⁴⁰ Sometimes, though, Irish thinkers ventured to bend the rules.

Their first inspiration for doing so may have come from the Gallic author Sulpicius Severus, whose life of Saint Martin of Tours was widely read and much imitated in Ireland.⁴¹ Sulpicius describes how Satan used to appear to Martin in the form of one or another of the Roman gods. There follows an account of an argument between the saint and a demon, the latter denying that certain sinners could be saved:

Testabantur . . . Martinum diabolo repugnantem respondisse constanter antiqua delicta melioris uitae conuersatione purgari, et per misericordiam Domini absoluendos esse peccatis qui peccare desierint. Contra dicente diabolo non pertinere ad ueniam criminosos, et semel lapsis nullam a Domino praestari posse clementiam, tunc in hanc uocem fertur exclamasse Martinus: 'Si tu ipse, miserabilis, ab hominum insectatione desisteres et te factorum tuorum, uel hoc tempore cum dies iudicii in proximo

³⁹ Plummer, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* ii.293.

⁴⁰ Augustine Hibernicus, *De mirabilibus sacrae Scripturae* i.2 (PL xxxv.2153–4, trans. KM 55); *Liber de ordine creaturarum*, cap. viii.5 (Díaz y Díaz, 136–8); text and (presumably later) commentary to 'Dubthach's Judgment', trans. KM 141.

⁴¹ Thus Clare Stancliffe gives it as her opinion that Sulpicius was known to Cogitosus, Muirchú, and Adomnán, three of the principal hagiographers of seventh-century Ireland (*Le septième siècle*, 88); and a copy of the *Vita Martini* was included in the Book of Armagh, one of the most venerated of medieval Irish manuscripts.

est, paeniteret, ego tibi, vere confisus in Domino Iesu Christo, misericordiam pollicerer.'

[His monks] bore witness . . . that Martin always replied, opposing the devil, that old sins could be cleansed by conversion to a better life, and that those who ceased sinning would be absolved of their sins by God's mercy. And when the devil contradicted him, saying that the guilty had no hope of pardon, and that no clemency could be extended by the Lord to those once fallen, then Martin is said to have cried out in these words: 'If you yourself, wretch, were to cease from persecuting men, and were to repent of your deeds now, as the Day of Judgment approaches, then truly I, trusting in the Lord, could promise you the mercy of Christ.'⁴²

If even a devil from hell could hope to redeem himself, might other spirits not find a place in the divine mercy?

Whatever its background, the doctrine of the half-fallen angels bears striking witness to the desire of the Irish to find not just any niche, but an exalted one, for the deities of their forefathers. To this end they were prepared to stretch the limits of accepted dogma — and it is especially intriguing to find them doing so *before* resorting to more conventional strategies. But even this explanation of the immortals was not the first that was put forward, nor was it the most remarkable. To this we can now turn.

⁴² *Vita Martini*, xxii.3–5 (SC cxxxiii.300–2); for the anecdote's contemporary theological background see Van Andel, *Vigiliae Christianae* xxxiv.278–87. In the Book of Armagh, the story appears on folio 199 r–v. This episode, and another from Sulpicius's *Vita*, inspired a similar story about the Irish saint Mo Ling, translated KM 202–4.

The earliest collection of Irish stories known to us was contained in a manuscript called the Book of Druimm Snechtai: this was last heard of in the seventeenth century, but several references to it in other sources make it possible to reconstruct its contents with some confidence. The manuscript appears to have been put together in the eighth century, and several of the pieces which it included may go back to the seventh: although it was evidently written in a monastery, its compiler exhibits a keen interest in the lore of the immortals.⁴³ The story of Columba's meeting with the Otherworld youth, probably the oldest text at which we have looked so far, seems to have been one of the Book of Druimm Snechtai's tales; we shall now consider another, *Echtrae Chonnlai* ('The Adventure of Connlae').

This opens on the hill of Uisnech, traditionally held to mark the centre of Ireland.

Lá ro boí Condla Rúad mac Cuind Chetchathaig for láim a athar i n-uachtor Usnig, co n-acca in mnaí i n-étuch anetargnaid 'na dochum. Asbert Condla, 'Can dodeochad, a ben?' or se.

*'Dodeochad-sa,' for in ben, 'a tírib beó,
áit inna bí bás nó peccad na imorbus.
Domelom fleda búana can rithgnom.
Cáincomrac leind cen debaid.
Síd mór i taam:
conid de suidib nonn ainmnigther áes síde.'*

One day when Connlae the Red, son of Conn of the Hundred Battles, was beside his father on the top of

⁴³ For a recent discussion of some aspects of the manuscript, with references to earlier scholarship, see Carey, *Ériu* xlvi.71–92.

Uisnech, he saw a woman in strange garments approaching him. Connlai said, 'Whence do you come, woman?'

'I come from lands of living folk,' said the woman, 'where there is no death nor sin nor transgression.

We consume everlasting feasts without labour.

There is concord among us without strife.

It is a great *síd* in which we are;

so that because of this we are called *aes síde*.⁴⁴

With a subtle artistry, the author here weaves a counterpoint of pagan and Christian images and phrases. The encounter on a hilltop between a prince and an unknown supernatural woman recurs in legends from Ireland, from Wales, and indeed from Iceland;⁴⁵ and Connlai's question 'Whence have you come, woman?', recalling the 'Whence have you come, youth?' with which Columba greets his mysterious informant, invokes a standard formula to indicate that the visitor is indeed a dweller in the Otherworld.⁴⁶ Thus far, we are anchored securely in the world of Celtic narrative, in a tradition whose roots stretch back into the pagan past.

As soon as the woman begins to speak, however, all of the expectations of the tale's original audience would have been challenged or overturned. For the language which she

44 *Echtrae Chonnlai* §1: text from LU, lines 9992-9; cf. McCone, *Echtrae Chonnlai*, 127-36. The translation closely follows that in Carey, CMCS xxx.44. In the two paragraphs which follow, I summarise the analysis offered in pages 44-7 of that article.

45 For Welsh and Irish parallels see Carey, CMCS xxx.42-4; cf. Sims-Williams, *Celtic Language, Celtic Culture*, 67, where analogues are cited from Icelandic literature.

46 Discussion in Mac Cana, *Ériu* xxvi.38-40.

uses is unmistakably ecclesiastical in tone: it is heaven and paradise which are characterised elsewhere in Irish literature by 'life without death', 'joy without sorrow', and 'peace without strife'; and when she says that she comes from 'lands of living folk', she borrows the Biblical phrase 'land of the living' which came to be used as a synonym for the Christian hereafter. Her home's freedom from death, sin, and toil exempts it from the curse of Adam, who was told after he had transgressed that 'In the sweat of your face you will eat bread, until you return into the earth from which you were taken. For you are dust, and to dust you will return'.⁴⁷ In closing she puns ingeniously on the Irish word *síd*, which means 'hollow hill' or 'Otherworld dwelling' but also 'peace' — in this case, evidently, the peace that passes understanding.⁴⁸

The placing of such a speech in the mouth of such a figure would have spoken clearly to the story's first readers or hearers: the immortals of native tradition exist in a state of grace, free from original sin. Other stories belonging to, or deriving from, the Book of Druimm Snechtai make the same assertion. In *Immram Brain* ('The Voyage of Bran'), the sea-god Manannán is made to say that

*Fil dún, ó thossuch dúile,
cen aíss, cen forbthe n-úire.*

47 Genesis 3:19.

48 On the senses of *síd* see Ó Cathasaigh, *Éigse* xvii.137-55; cf. note 16 above.

*Ní frescam de mbeth anguss —
nín táraill int immarbuss.*

We are, since the beginning of creation,
without age, without earthly decay.
We do not expect to grow feeble —
the Fall has not touched us.⁴⁹

And in *Tochmarc Étaíne* ('The Wooing of Étaín') the immortal Midir recites a poem which contains the verse

*Atchiam cach for cach leath,
7 nícon aice nech;
teimel imorbuis Adaim
dodonarcbeil ar araim.*

We see everyone on every side,
and no one sees us;
it is the darkness of Adam's sin
which prevents our being counted.⁵⁰

In other words, the state of fallenness which shuts us out of Eden also conceals the immortals from our eyes.

Who are they, then? A further indication comes from yet another of the Druimm Snechtai texts, in this case a

49 *Immram Brain* §44 (Mac Mathúna, 40).

50 *Tochmarc Étaíne* §III.10: text from Bergin and Best, *Ériu* xii.180-1; trans. CHA 149.

fragment dealing with the Gaelic conquest of Ireland. The poet Amairgen encounters the tutelary goddess Banba:

Atbert Lebur Dromma Snechta cor iarfaig Amairgen dia cenel. 'Do chlaind Adbaim dam,' ar si. 'Cid cenel do maccaib Næ duit?' ol se. 'Am sini-sea anas Næ,' ol si. 'For rind sleibe ro ba-sa isin dilind.'

The Book of Druimm Snechtai said that Amairgen asked concerning her race. 'I am descended from Adam,' said she. 'To which lineage of Noah's sons do you belong?' said he. 'I am older than Noah,' said she. 'I was on the peak of a mountain in the Flood.'⁵¹

These undying, unfallen beings are, therefore, descended from Adam — a branch of the human race which somehow escaped the contagion of the Fall, with all its dire consequences. This is the oldest attempt to find a Christian identity for the Irish gods, and is one for which I know of no analogues elsewhere.⁵²

Midir, Manannán, and the woman who addresses Connlae are portrayed in a state of blessedness; and the Otherworld

51 From the portion of the Book of Fermoy now bound as part of Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS D.iii.1 (671), folio 14 vb 33-7; cf. *Lebor Gabála*, v.34-5 (with other versions of this passage at 52-5, 78-9).

52 This interpretation of the evidence was first put forward by Carey, *Capuchin Annual* (1969) 165; I have tried to develop it somewhat in Carey, *Ériu* xxxviii.73-9. The Irish Bible commentary *Pauca problemsmata de enigmatibus* (probably of the eighth century) likewise speaks of 'another race of Adam. . . which [God] created before he sinned' (*aliud genus Ade. . . quod creavit antequam peccasset*), dwelling in the 'underworld' of the southern hemisphere (*Pauca problemsmata* §133; MacGinty, 54). For the identification of the southern hemisphere with the Irish Otherworld see Carey, *Speculum* lxiv.1-10.

which they inhabit is an Irish version of the Garden of Eden. Although they can have found no encouragement for doing so in any earlier authority, the men who devised this explanation for their old gods had found a way in which they could see all of the preternatural powers and capacities with which tradition credited the immortals as reflecting, not devilish trickery and evil magic, but the perfection of human nature as God had first created it. It is an idea of brilliant originality, startling boldness, and beautiful simplicity.

A few of this concept's further implications may emerge from reflection upon another of the speeches in *Echtrae Chonnlai*. The immortal woman says:

[I] n-all suide saides Condla
 eter marbu duthainai,
 oc idnaidiu éca uatbmair.
 Totchuretbar bii bitbbi.
 At gérat do dainib Tethrach,
 ardotchiat cach dia
 i ndálaib t'athardai,
 eter du gnathu inmaini.

Upon a cliff's edge is Connlae's seat
 among the impermanent dead,
 awaiting fearsome death.
 Ever-living living ones summon you.
 You are the darling of the folk of Tethra
 who see you every day

in the assemblies of your native place,
 among the dear folk whom you know.⁵³

Here the first lines present us with a contrast between the 'ever-living living ones', or immortals, and the 'impermanent dead', or normal humanity. I am reminded of Heraclitus's famous dictum that immortals and mortals live each other's death, and die each other's life:⁵⁴ from the standpoint of the Otherworld, what we consider to be life is not life at all. This difference in perspective is rooted in a different relationship to time. For us, to live is to grow and change: only in death are things immutable. But for the gods, true life lies beyond all changing, and that which shifts and fades can barely be said to exist, let alone to live. Only the eternal has life in this sense: we, whose existence moves always towards an end, are dead already. The precarious fragility of our mortal state is masterfully conveyed in the woman's opening image: Connlae, for all his grandeur as the king of Ireland's son, sits upon the edge of a cliff.

Again, words spoken by an emissary from the Otherworld are entirely at home in the spirituality of the Irish church. Thus the symbol of the precipice recurs in the first line of an early hymn: 'Victorious Brigit did not love the world: she perched in it like a bird on a cliff' (*Ní car Brigit buadach bith/síasair suide coin i n-ailt*).⁵⁵ Saint Columbanus of Bobbio was

53 *Echtrae Chonnlai* §9 (LU, lines 10026–9; cf. McCone, *Echtrae Chonnlai*, 166–72). On the emendation proposed in the first line of this passage see Carey, CMCS xxx.54 n. 59.

54 Fragment 62; in Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, i.71.

55 *Thes. Pal.* ii.327, trans. KM 164.

obsessed with the contrast between time and eternity, between change and permanence: punning on the Latin words *vita* and *viva*, he denied that mortal life was anything but a road, leading to the eternal life beyond the grave.⁵⁶ In what is perhaps his most penetrating meditation on the subject, he speaks of temporal existence as having the shadowy, fugitive quality of a dream: 'I am what I have not been, and will not be; and every hour I am something else, and never stand still' (*Quod enim sum non fui, et non ero, et unaquaque hora aliud sum, et numquam sto*).⁵⁷

I have spoken of eternity as lying beyond the grave, following in this the lead of Columbanus when he speaks of the 'road' of mortal existence as leading to a true dwelling elsewhere, where we will at last behold 'all things together in one' (*tota simul in uno*). But this of course is only true for us in our fallenness; and even here grace can grant it to some chosen ones that, as Columba's biographer has him say, 'the mind's limits being miraculously loosed, they clearly and most plainly behold the whole of the earth, together with the circuit of the ocean and the heavens, in one single moment, as if beneath a single ray of the sun' (*totum totius terrae orbem, cum ambitu oceanici et caeli, uno eodemque momento quasi sub uno solis radio, mirabiliter laxato mentis sinu, clare et manifestissime speculantur*).⁵⁸

Eternity is always present at the heart of time — or, to express the same thought in other language, Eden is always present at the heart of the fallen world. Indeed the earth's

⁵⁶ *Columbani Opera*, 84–6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁸ *Vita Columbae* i.43 (Anderson and Anderson, 78). On this passage's debt to the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great see Brüning, ZCP xi.250.

state of suffering is, as Saint Paul tells us, its pain as it labours to bring forth the paradise hidden within it;⁵⁹ while the Irish theologian Eriugena asserts that Eden is identical with 'human nature made in the image of God' (*humanam naturam . . . ad imaginem Dei factam*).⁶⁰

This conception of the universal immanence of the eternal, concealed from us only by our own corrupted vision, strikingly recalls the Otherworld of native Irish belief, ubiquitous and yet invisible. When the woman tells Connlae that the 'folk of Tethra', the dwellers in the waters and the hollow hills, 'see you every day in the assemblies of your native place', she is saying that the 'ever-living living ones' are always in our midst, though unperceived: the journey to the 'lands of living folk' leads through spirit, not through space.

Other texts considered above make the same point. It is implicit in Midir's statement

We see everyone on every side,
and no one sees us;
it is the darkness of Adam's sin
which prevents our being counted.

And when the immortal Manannán tells the mortal Bran that the Fall has not touched his people, the setting of their encounter profoundly enhances the significance of these words. For the two experience the same reality in wholly different ways: what to Bran is the fluid, ungraspable wilder-

⁵⁹ Romans 8:22.

⁶⁰ PL cxxii.822A; *Periphyseon* iv.206–7.

ness of the tossing ocean is to Manannán a rich and paradisaical plain, a sinless kingdom of inexhaustible abundance. Time and eternity coinhere, divided only by 'the darkness of Adam's sin'.⁶¹

The radical idea that the old gods are unfallen humans survived in Ireland throughout the Middle Ages. Some six centuries after the story of Connlae's supernatural encounter was composed, he and his immortal lover appear in another tale: here she identifies herself as a daughter of Adam, and says that her home is the western counterpart of Eden.⁶² As we have seen, though, this view of the gods had as time passed to share the stage with others: some more cautious, some definitely hostile. One story, *Serplige Con Culainn* ('The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn'), contains some of the most lyrical descriptions of the Otherworld in the Irish language, but closes on a sour note:

Conid taibsiu aidmillti . . . la háes sídi sin. Ar ba mór in chumachta demnach ria cretim, 7 ba bé a méit co cathaigtis co corptha na demna frisna doinib 7 co taisféntais aibniusa 7 díamairi dóib, amal no betis co marthanach. Is amlaid no cretea

61 The discussion in the last few paragraphs follows the same general lines pursued in Carey, *Temenos* xiii.101–11.

62 O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, i.349–50: 'This is one of the four paradises of the world: the island of Daleb in the south, and the island of Ercandra in the north. . . and Adam's paradise, and the island in which you are . . . My name is Veniusa, and I am a daughter of Adam; for we, his four daughters, dwell in these four secret magical lands' (*Is é-so cethramad parrthas in talman do shunnrad .i. inis Daleb i ndeiscert in talman ocus inis Ercandra i tuaiscert in talman. . . ocus parrthas Adaim ocus int ailén atáithi-se . . . Ueniusa m'ainm ocus ingen do Adam mé; ár ceithri hingena atám isna ceithrib tírib diamra dráidechta*).

dóib. Conid frisna taidbsib-sin atberat na hanéolaig síde 7 áes síde.

That was a ruinous apparition wrought . . . by the people of the *síde*. For before the coming of the Faith the demons had great power, and it was so great that they did bodily battle with humans, and revealed delights and mysteries to them, as though they were eternal. And so they were believed in. And so the ignorant call those apparitions *síde*, and people of the *síde*.⁶³

But this harsh verdict did not go unchallenged. The compilation *Scél na Fír Flatha* ('The Tale of the Pledges of Sovereignty'), reflecting on the significance of another visit to the immortal country, seems to react directly against such attitudes in its own conclusion:

Acht adberaid na becnaidi cach uair no taisbenta taibsi ingnad dona righflathaibh anall — amal adfaid in scal do Cbund, 7 amal tarfas Tír Ibairngiri do Chormac — conidh timtírecht diada ticedh fan samla-sin, 7 conach timbhírecht deamnach. Aingil immorro dosficed da chobair, ar is firindi aignidh dia léntais, air is timna rechta ro foghnad doibh.

But the learned say that whenever a wondrous apparition was revealed to royal princes in olden times — as when the phantom spoke to Conn, and the Land of Promise appeared to Cormac — that it was a divine visitation which came in that semblance, and not a devilish visitation. It was an angel which used to come to their assistance, for they

63 *Serplige Con Culainn* §49 (Dillon, 29); cf. my discussion in *Ulidia*, 78–9.

were faithful to the truth of nature; for the precept of the Law was served by them.⁶⁴

Here, in closing, we have a still more audacious defence of the deities of the old religion, unique so far as I know in the literature. They are guardian angels, the messengers of God. The pagan Irish, we are to understand, were not devil-ridden or deluded, 'for they were faithful to the truth of nature'. And it is with the truth of nature, and its place in Irish thought, that the next chapter will concern itself.

⁶⁴ *Scél na Fír Flatha* §80 (Stokes, *Irische Texte* iii.1.202). Stokes based his edition on the copy of the text in the Book of Ballymote; for better sense, I have replaced Ballymote's *foghnamb* with *foghnad* from the Yellow Book of Lecan.