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The Ecosemiosphere: Story and Region in Insular Medieval Literatures

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The Ecosemiosphere: Story and Region in Insular Medieval Literatures
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[accompanying slides accessible at
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[**Slide 1**] Today I'd like to think out loud about the relation of ecocriticism in the

21st century to the developing field of ecosemiotics, which focuses on the cultural side of

biosemiotics, on the relation between culture and nature. In my view ecosemiotics offers

a way forward for environmental criticism in terms of helping to develop

interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks for the field, while also contributing to

integrating structuralist and poststructuralist approaches on the literature side. I'll start by

suggesting that there is a helpful paradigm for this effort emerging in contemporary

physics. While biology provided many metaphors for 20th-century environmental

criticism, the "many worlds" or multiverse models of quantum physics and string theory

today suggest the environmental function of traditions that I'll call ecosemiospheres.

[**Slide 2**] That's a term that I'll use for a kind of networked web of community and

traditions in a particular region, which can take physical form, such as wooded meadows

in Estonia and their relation to cultural narratives of farming and community culture there

across centuries, or the oak savannah and prairie landscapes managed for centuries by

Native Americans in the Upper Midwestern United States and their relation to culture.

Such landscapes illustrate overlapping worlds of particular environments and particular

cultures, and call into question the distinction between the two. The root term

semiosphere for my neologism comes from an important figure in the development of

biosemiotics, Juri Lotman, who used it as a term to mean in effect a kind of world of

meaning formed by the coming together of different organisms each with their own worlds of meanings; for example we might even consider this ASLE conference all together as a kind of semiosphere. What I'm calling ecosemiosphere I'm more specifically relating to landscape as a kind of narrative, symbolic and semiotic tradition in which webs of beings and non-being participate. I'll talk about this using the example of medieval literary traditions of a green world or Otherworld in the British Isles.

Indeed the idea of an ecosemiosphere in ecosemiotics easily relates to Jonathan Bate's literary definition of ecopoesis: That "which may effect an imaginative reunification of [the worlds of] mind and nature," a psychosomatic and experiential inhabiting of nature that is linked to a making of meaning as landscape that goes beyond binaries of pastoral and technological grids (245). Interestingly, the term ecopoesis, sometimes with different spellings, is used in technical fields to indicate the physical engineering or restoration of an ecosystem, such as a wetland, as well as in literature along the lines of Bates' usage, and in environmental philosophy drawing on mind science. The philosopher Evan Thompson uses it in the latter sense to refer to the way in which individual organisms, while developing in their own world of *autopoiesis*, also in that development participate in a larger *ecopoiesis* that extends to the sphere of the earth as a whole and perhaps beyond. **[Slide 3]** Thompson's description is reminiscent of the view of the founder of biosemiotics, the biologist Jakob von Uexküll who described the integration of *Innenwelt* and *Umwelt*, the inward and outward worlds of the organism. This is where the connection with current developments in physics about multiple worlds becomes apparent. The physicist Brian Greene describes how in string theory our three-dimensional reality may be a holographic image from another cosmic surface, and how

quantum physics indicates parallel realities and selves that emerge as we try to define particular locations from larger wave-fields of dynamic process. To borrow terminology from Wendy Wheeler suggesting a parallel with physics in biosemiotics, an ecosemiosphere can be thought of as a "collapse of the wave" into another world by observers, but another world in reciprocal formation and dialogue with environments including narrative traditions of place across multiple generations of human observer-participants as well as non-humans and non-being.

[Slide 4] Let me focus on a specific example from a modern story that leads us to identify an ecosemiosphere that is so familiar to those of us engaged with a literary or linguistic heritage from the British Isles that we may not recognize it as a result. In a summer class called Fantasies of Earth that I'm teaching now we're currently reading parts of C.S. Lewis' fantasy heptarchy *The Chronicles of Narnia*. What has been dubbed Lewis' Narniad draws on models for parallel worlds from early Irish and later early English literatures, the Celtic Otheworld and the early English "green world" literary tradition, in both of which Lewis was steeped as a medievalist and Renaissance scholar and in his Irish upbringing. Lewis also immersed himself in study and practice of pre-Scholastic Christian cosmologies and practices of nature that undergirded the early tparallel world traditions. Born in Northern Ireland and later living in England, he himself was a part of the archipelago around the Irish Sea that helped shape Insular literary traditions of parallel worlds too.

In Lewis' *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lucy enters into a wardrobe in England and comes out the other side into the world of Narnia. But in the prequel, *The Magician's Nephew*, the children Polly and Digory (with others) find themselves a few

times in the Wood Between the Worlds, a peaceful green place of trees and pools that are portals into multiple worlds. In that book, the world of Narnia is brought into being by singing that engages both human and cosmic beings but is led by a non-human figure, the lion Aslan, who is both a type of Christ for Lewis and a figure for nature as a mystery in the reader's experience of the cycle as fairy tale. By the final book, *The Last Battle*, the characters and the readers experience in the story how Narnia is but part of a continuity with England and other lands in mountain ridges that integrate with the Paradise of Aslan's country. This is similar to St. Ephrem the Syrian's description of Paradise as a hollow mountain encompassing us in Creation. Environmental themes also run throughout the series, such as the waking of sleeping trees, the freeing of a river, talking animals, and the equation of colonial oppression with environmental destruction.

[Slide 5] Brian Greene, in his recent book *The Hidden Reality: Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos*, notes how parallel universes in quantum mechanics "resonated with themes of separate lands or alternative histories that were being explored in literature, television, and film, creative forays that continue today" (6). I suggest that this resonance includes the way in these types of story-telling and poetic traditions, both within and without what we think of as literature, can play an important integrative role in human engagement with the environment--indeed a kind of necessity for human development of empathy and an indwelling ethos of place. Lewis' parallel worlds grew in part from his own performative and bodily engagement with patristic Christian writers such as Athanasius and incarnational liturgy and asceticism from non-Scholastic tradition, as well as Irish Otherworld and English green-world literatures. [Slide 6] Those traditions emerged from the pre-Scholastic patristic cosmology of the *logoi* or energies,

willings, deliberations or harmonies of God, perfusing the world with signs, to borrow the semiotician Charles Peirce's terms. The Greek term *logos* itself has ecosemiotic resonance, including a range of meanings including discourse, story, purpose, reason and harmony. The early pansemiotic model of the *logoi* of the *Logos*, most fully stated by Maximus the Confessor, involved uncreated yet sung harmonies or energies that simultaneously formed unknowable essences of all beings and the integrative grace that redeems them by relating them back to the unknowable essence of God, in dialogue with an incarnate personal Creator.

Thus this pansemiotic model of parallel worlds involved a sense and experience of worlds of beings, each with a distinct interpenetrating *logos* or story or harmony, in a larger dialogue of dynamic personal relation with a larger cosmic story or harmony or discourse. All this was described in the mystical patristic texts attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite as a kind of mirroring, personal and dialogic but also asymmetrical in the sense that the mirroring among these different discourses and stories was not interiorized as in a narcissistic mirror of self, but overlapping larger mysteries beyond the self. Such apophatic cosmology has even been seen as a source for Jacques Derrida's poststructuralist notion of deconstruction, which witnesses the incapacity of language and culture to essentialize the dynamic process of personal dialogues with Nature.

Yet at the same time these traditional models of cosmic meaning reflect what Winfried Nöth calls in terms of ecosemiotics a premodeern pansemiotic, identifying life with semiosis. Wendy Wheeler notes, "Retrieving God (or the gods) and a vocabulary of the sacred might be one way of authorizing contemporary claims for the equality of our creaturliness," although she also suggests potential problematic aspects. Lewis' pre-

Scholastic Christian pansemiotics does share much in its pansemiotic effect with other non-modern traditions, whether Taoist or Native American. In these traditions of nature semiosis is not merely analogous in a Scholastic sense, as John Deely has explicated, but overlapping personal dialogues of semiosis that can be as experientially embodied as the meaningful encounter through color of a bee and a flower.

[Slide 7] The theological writer Nikolaos Ludivikos connects new physics with such pre-Scholastic cosmology behind early Insular otherworlds, in writing that in such pansemiotic tradition the desire of every kind of creature to participate in God, "divine and human alike, abolishes any pyramidal cosmological model, thus making it possible for us to create a new theological/epistemological context for modern physics [that is] too strange to be thought of in terms of the classical, Aristotelian or Thomist, ontological hierarchy...Physics could become the most 'existential' science today, as it no more describes logical but personal, i.e., dia-logical natural structures that bear the image of their relational archetype upon them." We see different emphases between the dialogical analogical and the purely analogical sense of medieval pansemiotics in comparing Geoffrey Chaucer's earthy dialogical tale of pilgrimage in *The Canterbury Tales*, formed in the traditions that Lewis drew upon, and Dante's beautiful but Scholastic *Divine Comedy*. Environmentally speaking we are uploaded into a divinely charged earthy landscape in Chaucer rather than downloading the divine into an interiority of selfhood in Dante.

Lewis' use of parallel worlds, shadowing the early Irish Otherworld, echoes von Uexküll's notion of *Innenwelt* and *Umwelt*, the inner and outer realms of meaning for an organism or species, as well as Lotman's notion of the semiosphere as a realm of

meaning that can be thought of as a semiotic bubble joining smaller bubbles of organismic or species' worlds of meaning. Lewis' model ultimately involves shaping through story a larger experientially lived bubble of meaning or context including earth and region, in which the relation of Narnia and the human world becomes the basis for further affective experience of both a realm of fantasy and our physical lived experience in larger contexts of meaning. Thus Aslan the lion says to children visiting Narnia that he had brought them there so that they could know him better back in their world, and again in secular terms in the story as fairy tale we can think of Aslan as a figure for nature in Heidegger's terms of *phusis*, itself an integration of visible and invisible worlds that is more akin to Timothy Moron's notions of dark ecology as an echo of apophaticism than to conventional modern views of Nature with a capital N. The early Irish Otherworld on which Lewis drew for his stories evoked an energized if dangerous spiritual dimension, associated both with native pre-Christian belief, a kind of aboriginal dreamtime, and biblical notions of Paradise as a hollow mountain in which we live, all entwined with actual physical landscape of Ireland. And indeed Lewis' overlay landscape both connects with England and reflects the geography of his native County Down in Ireland, the geography of whose hills match the mountains in Narnia just as his friend Tolkien's Middle-earth overlays European geography with elvish realms while evoking eco-catastrophe to come. An early but genealogically related example of such overlay landscape involving region as ecosemiosphere is the notion of "desert" as a metonymic image for monastic asceticism, applied in placenames, descriptions and a sense of a way of life to islands and communities around the Irish Sea although originating from Egypt.

Ultimately the Narnia cycle portrays all the realms of earth as interconnected with

Aslan's country, including landscapes inspired by biblical Paradise. Lewis scholar Michael Ward indicates how the seven books of the cycle also purposefully align with early traditions of the seven heavens, planets including the moon and sun. This is a further way in which Lewis' fantasy evokes parallel worlds integrating both cosmology and cultural performance of nature. Astrological and cosmological notions of the seven heavens involved identifying their overlapping influences with qualities of human and non-human behavior and virtues, almost like a kind of series of color overlays of different worlds in our experience. In much the same way the early Irish notion of colors of winds overlapped with early Irish notions of colors of martyrdom, blurring boundaries between human and nonhuman in bodily ways. So too the medievalist Jeffrey Cohen describes astrology and bodily humors as premodern types of what the geophilosopy of Deleuze and Guattari classifies as rhizomic bodies without organs, which in spanning worlds of individual beings also suggest overlapping semiospheres in ecology.

The notion of each being having its own *logos* in the Greek sense parallels Alaskan native notions of *inua* and Great Lakes Indian traditions of the *manitou*. It mirrors Buddhist-like notions of multiplicitous bubble worlds that overlap and to some extend meld with one another, which is not so far from modern ecological notions and again the definition of life as making meaning in ecosemiotics. In this, the liturgical melds with the ascetic, and the chanting of harmonies in communities of poetry and song and story melds with the quasi-mantra-like meditative prayer practice of Christian hesychasm as developed from the desert fathers and mothers who also affected early Irish monasticism. In connection with Insular traditions of literary parallel worlds seen in Lewis' Narniad we find an ecosemiosphere of an archipelagic type. Gilles Deleuze memorably described in

an essay on desert islands the overlay landscape of archipelago, of water, land and air, which he with his colleague Félix Guattari developed further in describing the imaginative milieu of both Europe's Atlantic archipelago and Greek isles. An archipelago exemplifies overlapping environmental worlds, for it is neither primarily sea nor primarily land. In Ireland, traditions of Otherworld grew from quickly shifting Gulf Stream realities of sea and atmosphere, as well as recognition of different worlds and temporalities of non-human beings and cycles of life on land.

That overlapping of semiotic worlds again is asymmetrical in that it is not centered on the human. The model for quantum "many worlds" likewise is asymmetrical in the sense of dealing with a field or wave in a particular focus that evokes parallel worlds from our engagement with the larger field. The holographic parallel world evoked by string theory involves an apparent reality encompassed by another surface or by higher dimensions in relation to less complex ones. Triadic models of meaning-making that undergird ecosemiotics help articulate such cosmic meaning-making in cultural terms.

[Slide 8] Charles Peirce developed the theory of triadic meaning-making basic to ecosemiotics. Peirce's semiosis involves entwinement of Sign, Object and Interpretant in a dynamic relationship that evokes meaning and thus life. For Peirce the Object could be environment, the Sign text or symbol, and the Interpretant context, or what could be thought of as a combination of author and reader in the traditions and contexts in which they shape meaning. To Lewis, the world of Europe's Atlantic archipelago centered on the Irish Sea and informed by biblical, native and subsequent literary cosmologies, forms the Object. The Sign is the Narniad. The Interpretant is the whole context of this Insular parallel world tradition, including its sources and analogues.

Peirce's triadic process of semiosis prefigures Heidegger's explication of the Thing as a place-event. That cannot be objectified, and perhaps in the end we can apply this to text as well. Heidegger wrote that the experience of Thing as place-event involves a coming together of four elements or worlds, namely Earth, Sky, Mortals and Immortals. We can consider Heidegger's poetic terminology of mortals and immortals as together reflecting Peirce's idea of the Interpretant. [**Slide 9**] And Timo Maran lays the groundwork for understanding this ecosemiotically in describing a nature-text as involving the coming together of the four modes of environment, text, author and reader. So the Object in Peirce's terms can also be associated with the environment, or Heidegger's Earth, and the text with the Sign, or Heidegger's poetic Sky, as a kind of sign articulating Earth. [**Slide 10**] Translating this fourfold or tetrarchy from ecosemiotics into ecocriticism, we can think in terms of elements from Lewis' Narnia cycle. Thus the Earth or Object can be thought of as the overlay landscape of Narnia, which ultimately relates Narnia and Aslan's country to the British Isles and to the cosmos at large, seen and unseen. The Sky or Sign can be thought of in relation to metonymic imagery, or physically engaged metaphor, such as Aslan as a figure of non-human animal and as *phusis* in a personified dialogic way. Mortals, the context of our experience as readers, observers, and participants who make meaning, is a part of Peirce's Interpretant and of a sense of plexity of time in an ecosemiosphere, which enables empathetic experience of different dimensions and modes of life, as in the experience by the children in Narnia of different modes of time. Heidegger's mode of Immortals, also part of Peirce's Interpretant, could be considered as the contexts of the author synthesizing the traditions on which Lewis draws, evoking an *ethos* of place in the original root of ethic as

indwelling or inhabitating, connecting a normative habitat including multiple worlds of meaning of Narnia, the British Isles, and Aslan's country, that is non-objectifiable in its multiplicity and its evocation of empathy.

[Slide 11] Thinking of text, landscape, semosis, and ultimately ecology together as ecosemiosphere also can redefine desire as relational, in ways suggested by Deleuze and Guattari and by Julia Kristeva, also suggest that the non-Western sense of desire as objectifying lack may be a social construction. Re-reading Lewis' cycle in light of ecosemiotics in the context of the earlier traditions on which he drew, we also can see how re-imaginning such traditions can help us today in the environmental project of reshaping cultural narratives and behaviors, and building new coalitions, for environmental action. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* in Lewis' Narnia cycle draws most directly on early Irish stories of otherworldly journeys. At the end Aslan says, in words that I gloss here in secular phenomenological terms, "This was the very reason that you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me [*phusis*] here a little [on Narnia] you may know me [*phusis*] better there [in your world]." In other words, both Narnia and our world are coupled with a region of earth, in Heidegger's sense of earth as the hidden side of our world, amid the overlapping worlds of meaning articulated by ecosemiotics.

Ecosemiotics and Early Literary Traditions, Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment 2011

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Ecosemiotics—cultural side of biosemiotics, relation of nature and culture
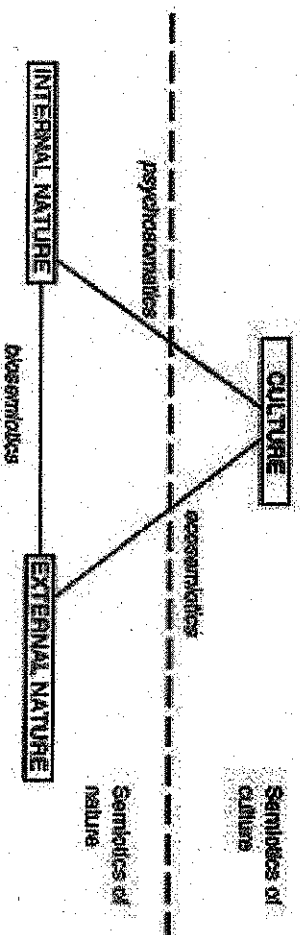
(chart from Kalevi Kull)

Ecosemiosphere—community of meaning expressed in practice/experience of landscape

(derived from Juri Lotman's semiosphere as a community of overlapping worlds of meaning, such as an eco-region)
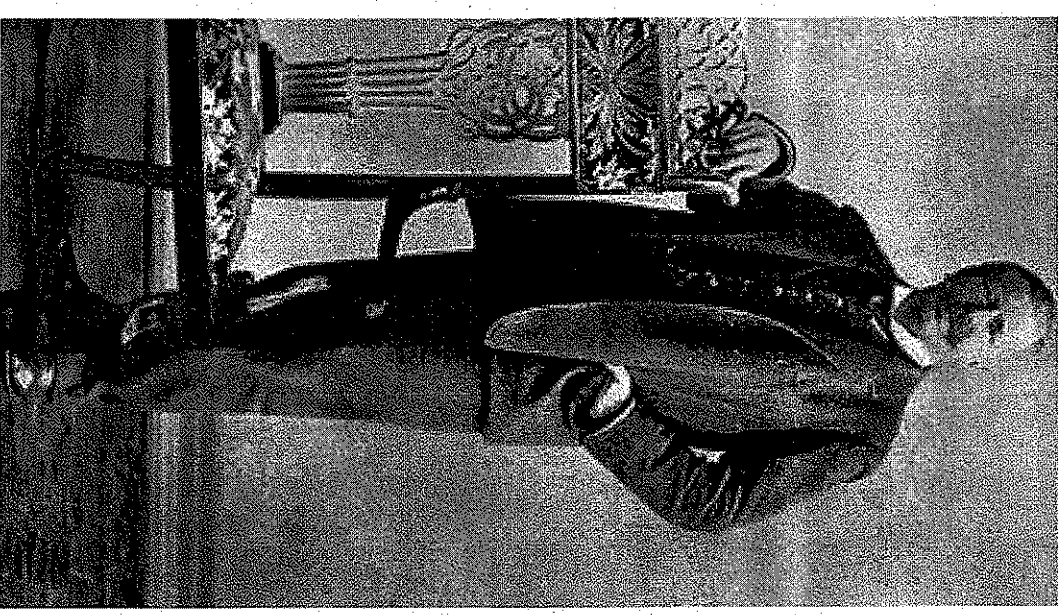
Wooded meadows in rural Estonian culture
Oak savanna and prairie in Upper Midwest native American cultures
"Otherworld" landscapes in the British islands

←autopoiesis and ecopoiesis/ecopoesis
(Evan Thompson)

Innenwelt and Umwelt→
(Jakob von Uexküll)

C.S. Lewis and Narnia
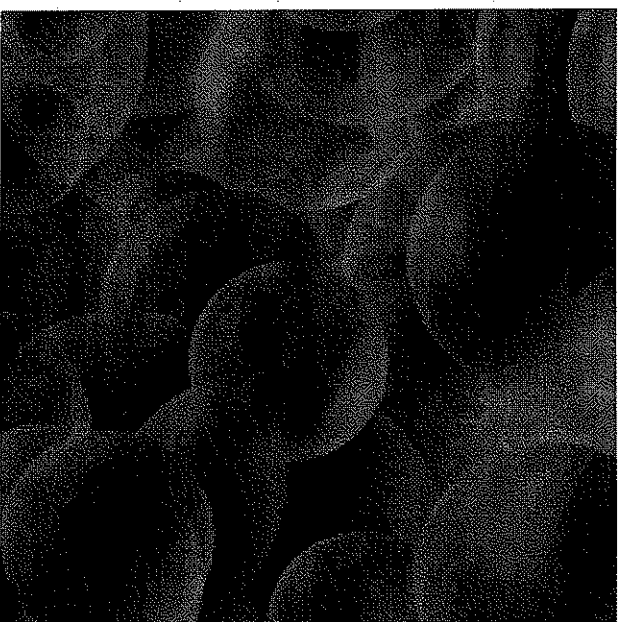
Brian Greene and "multiverse"/ "many worlds" theories of physics
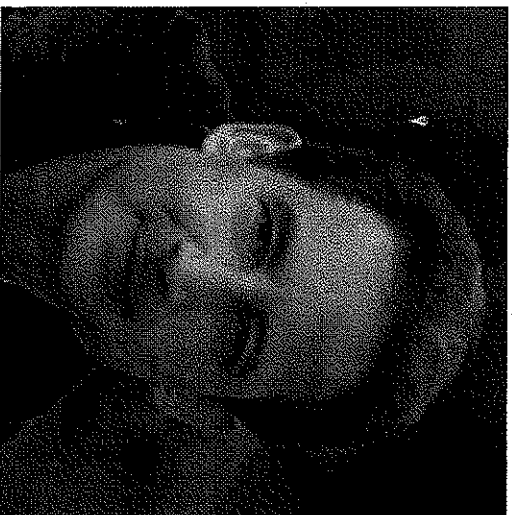
Patristic Christian "Pansemiotics"

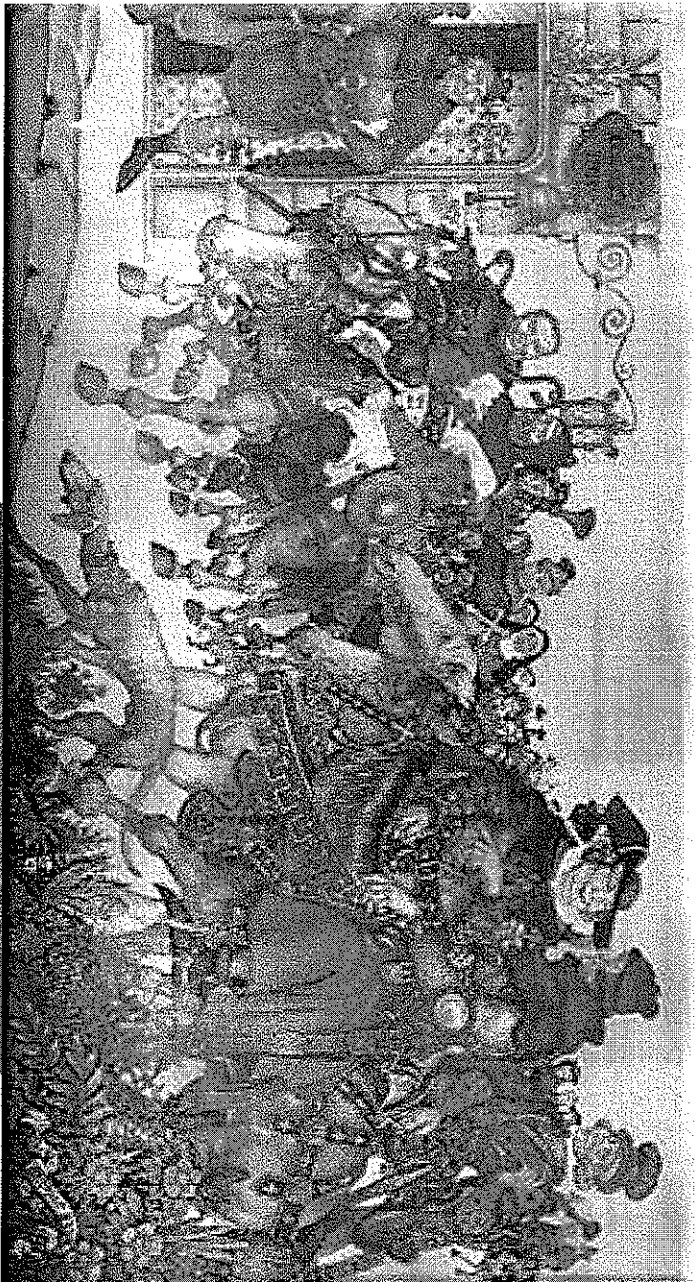apophatic theology/cosmology= essence is unknowable, we know/experience energies

Maximus the Confessor and texts attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite:
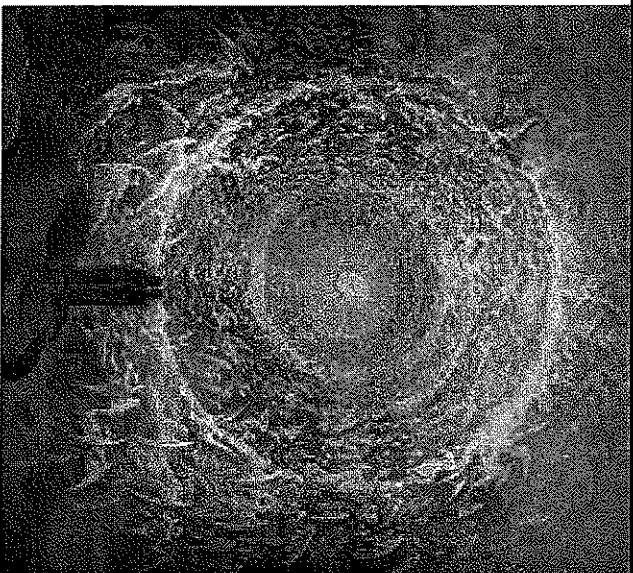Nature as the logoi (plural) of the Logos
logos=word, purpose, reason, harmony, discourse, story...

(Maximus identified the logoi of creation with uncreated divine energies;
Dionysius described as "willings")
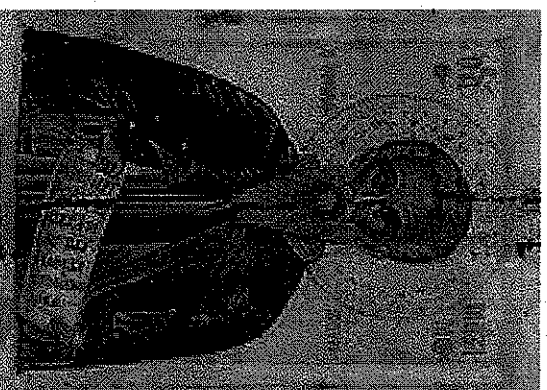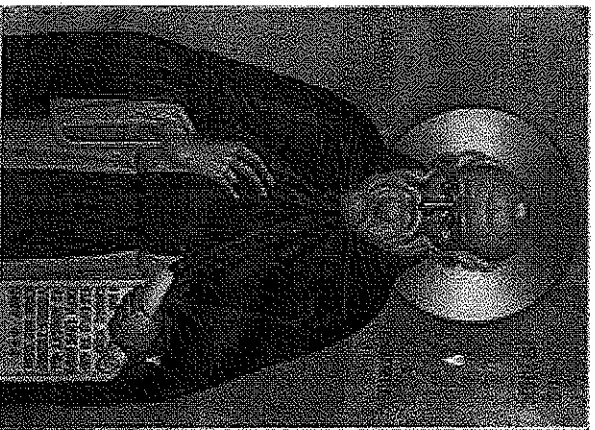
Chaucer and Dante's pilgrimage tales

C.S. Peirce:
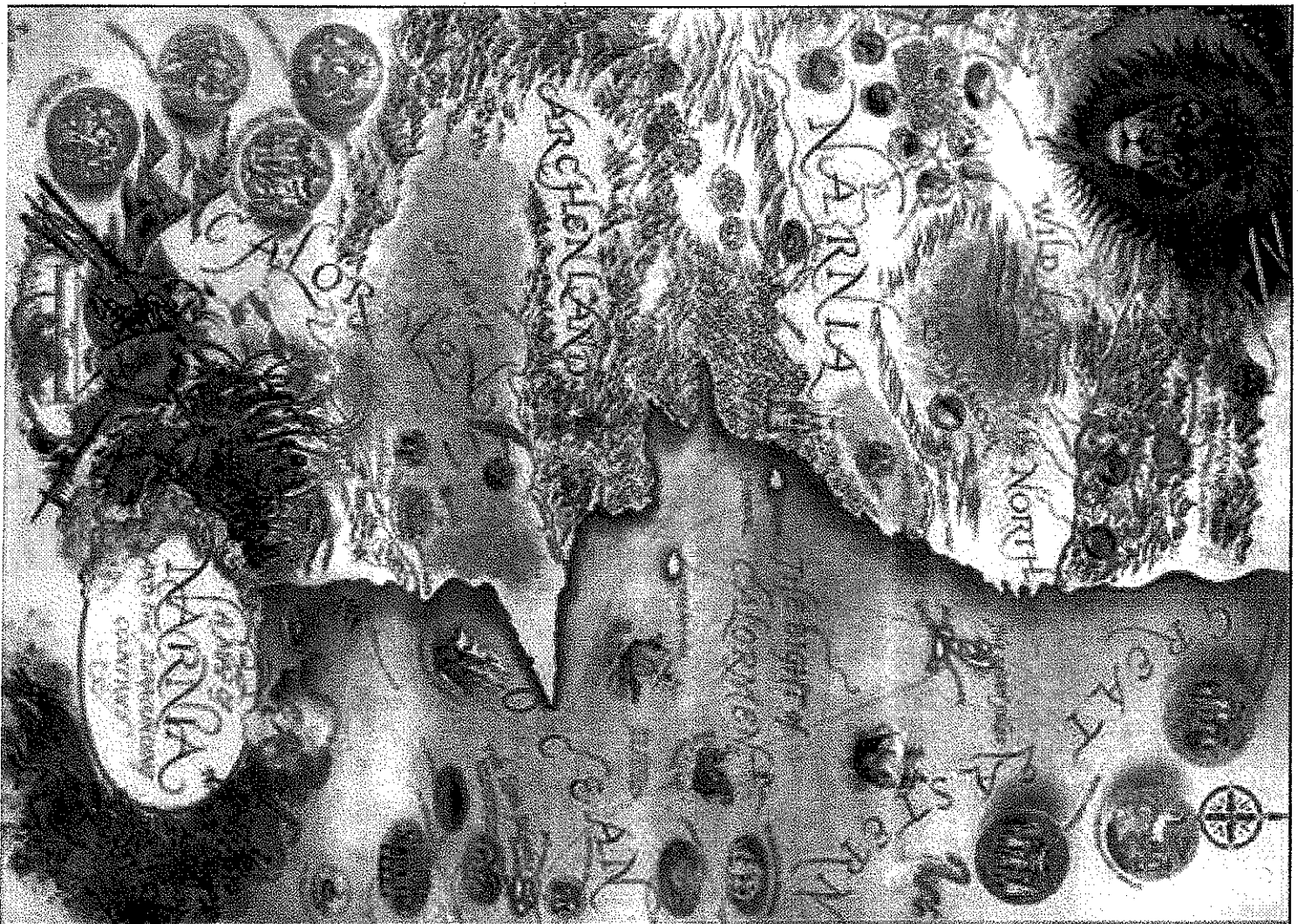
Sign --- Object
          \   /
        Interpretant

Timo Maran--

Nature-Text (glossed by Peirce's terms)

Text (Sign) --   Author

\   \ (Interpretant)

Environment (Object) Reader

(combining Maran's nature-text with Heidegger's fourfold of the Thing or place-event)

Text (Sign)/**Sky** --- Authorial contexts/
Metonymic   **Immortals**
Symbolism   *Ethos of In-dwelling*

Environment/**Earth** --- Reader contexts/
Overlay *landscape*   **Mortals**
     Plexity of Time

Aslan as figure of dark ecology? A phenomenological gloss

"This was the very reason that you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me [*phusis*] here a little [on Narnia] you may know me [*phusis*] better there [in your world]."