accepting the fantastic: from the familiar
to the fantastic-uncanny

introduction

The previous chapter demonstrated how a pious legend concerning Brendan’s saintly deeds had existed before the Navigatio Sancti Brendani abbatis and that the text was probably composed to establish Brendan as an impressive figurehead for monasteries and churches that were dedicated to him. None of the manuscripts of the Vita Brendani and the Betha Bréinnain date from earlier than the fourteenth century and most of them have been conflated with the tale of Brendan’s journey to the Terra repromissionis sanctorum as described in the Navigatio. Conversely, the number of surviving manuscripts of the Navigatio is a testament to its popularity. Even though both versions are Christian narratives, the fact that both the Navigatio and the A.N. Voyage invoke fantastic imagery suggests that, with the composition of the Navigatio, the genre moved from hagiography to an adventurous voyage containing marvellous imagery. That said, as both versions contain didactic passages, it is important that the narratives do not immediately launch into fantastic imagery, as this would make the scenes presented become implausible and unbelievable, potentially belittling the religious message. Instead, both narratives begin with elements that would be familiar to their respective audiences, whether that audience is ecclesiastical or secular Irish, or courtly Anglo-Norman. This chapter considers the elements of the fantastic in the first third of both the Navigatio and the A.N. Voyage, using, as its starting-point, Todorov’s discussion of the fantastic and Freud’s essay on ‘The “Uncanny”’. In the first third of both versions, each scene receives a plausible explanation even though some encounters are initially presented as supernatural. It considers the opening decription

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1 See Kenney, Sources; Sharpe, Medieval Irish Saints. See also my discussion on pp. 46–50. For lists of the manuscripts of the Vita Brendani and the Betha Bréinnain see Burgess and Strijbosch, The Legend of St Brendan, pp. 4–12.
of Brendan’s heritage in the *Navigatio* (which contrasts with the details presented in the A.N. *Voyage*). This chapter discusses feelings of claustrophobia related to the confinement in the coracle and predetermination concerning the fates of one of the late-coming (supernumerary) monks and uncanny silence of the Deserted Citadel in which one of the supernumeraries dies after stealing. This chapter examines two examples of enormous creatures (an island populated by large sheep and a giant fish that is mistaken for an island). Finally, it considers the portrayal of the angels that sided with neither God nor Lucifer during the battle described in Revelation. In particular, this chapter examines the movement of the narrative from the mundane features, which each audience would recognise, to the gradual introduction of elements of the uncanny, as both versions move towards the fantastic.2

**Todorov’s model**

Tzvetan Todorov originally published *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* in French in 1970. This study is widely regarded as establishing a foundation for the study of fantastic literature.3 In his analysis, Todorov seeks to identify structural features common to fantastic texts in order to define the fantastic as a literary genre. He suggests that fantastic literature must fulfil three conditions:

First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader’s role is so to speak entrusted to a character… the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as ‘poetic’ interpretations.4

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3 Originally titled *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Todorov’s study of the fantastic is not without its critics. They include, for example, Rosemary Jackson, who observes that there is a ‘reluctance to relate to psychoanalytic theory’ in Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981), p. 61. Also, Neil Cornwell suggests modifications to Todorov’s linear model; see Neil Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 38–39. Todorov’s model is shown below with details on how each subcategory represents the *Navigatio* and the A.N. *Voyage* on p. 73.  