John Carey

'The Hand the the Angel
Observations on the Holy Book in Early Ireland and Northumbria'

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*Observations on the Holy Book in Early Ireland and Northumbria**

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In an account of the marvels of Kildare, based on his own visits to Ireland in the early 1180s, the Norman cleric Gerald of Wales gave what is probably the most celebrated description of an Irish manuscript:

> Among all the miracles of Kildare nothing seems to me more miraculous than that wonderful book which they say was written at the dictation of an angel during the lifetime of [St. Brigid]. This book contains the concordance of the four Gospels according to Saint Jerome, with almost as many drawings as pages, and all of them in marvellous colours. Here you can look upon the face of the divine majesty drawn in a miraculous way; here too upon the mystical representations of the Evangelists, now having six, now four, and now two, wings. Here you will see the eagle; there the calf. Here the face of a man; there that of a lion. And there are almost innumerable other drawings. If you look at them carelessly and casually and not too closely, you may judge them to be mere daubs rather than careful compositions. You will see nothing subtle where everything is subtle. But if you take the trouble to look very closely, and penetrate with your eyes to the secret of the artistry, you will notice such intricacies, so delicate and subtle, so close together and well-knitted, so involved and bound together, and so fresh still in their colourings that you will not hesitate to declare that all these things must have been the result of the work, not of men, but of angels.[1]

Gerald wrote with notable insight and perspicacity, in words on which it would be difficult to improve today; although in most respects he had little enough sympathy for the Irish and for his own maternal kindred the Welsh, his works repeatedly betray a keen appreciation of

* Based on a lecture given at the Temenos Academy on 26 November 1992.

their achievements in the arts. A particularly significant feature of the passage just quoted is the implicit connection which it makes between the bewildering intricacy of the designs and the sanctity of the book which they adorn, as if a spiritual value inhered in the decoration itself. But what would have been the nature of this value?

Gerald's formation was that of a twelfth-century ecclesiastic: as such, he would have inherited ambivalent attitudes toward the religious use of decorative art. For a sense of this background, we may consider representative passages from the writings of two men who lived earlier in the same century: Suger of Saint-Denis and Bernard of Clairvaux.

Here is Suger, expressing emotions very similar to Gerald's:

> When – out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God – the loveliness of the many-coloured gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither entirely exists in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.[2]

A sharp contrast is provided by Bernard – himself an outspoken critic of Irish religious practices, but here denouncing the extravagances of the Romanesque:

> In the cloisters meanwhile, why do the studious monks have to face such ridiculous monstrosities? What is the point of this deformed beauty, this elegant deformity (*deformis formositas, ac formosa deformitas*)? Those loutish apes? The savage lions? The monstrous centaurs? The half-men? The spotted tigers? The soldiers fighting? The hunters sounding their horns? You can see a head with many bodies, or a body with many heads. Here we espy an animal with a serpent's tail, there a fish with an animal's head. There we have a beast which is a horse in front and a she-goat behind; and here a horned animal follows with hind-quarters like a horse. In short there is such a wondrous diversity of figures, such ubiquitous variety (*tam multa denique tamque mira diversarum formarum ubique*

> *diversitas*), that there is more reading matter available in marble than in books, and one could spend the whole day marvelling at one such representation rather than in meditating on the law of God. In the name of God! If we are not ashamed at its foolishness, why at least are we not angry at the expense?[3]

We may wonder what Bernard would have thought of a manuscript like the Book of Kells, where the very symbols of the evangelists may become fantastic hybrids: an eagle with the head of an ox, an ox with the head of a lion. More generally, the values lying behind Bernard's outburst suggest a more fundamental question: what is the spiritual content of Hiberno-Saxon illumination?

The simplest answer is that we cannot know. No treatise expounding the iconography or aesthetics of early insular culture has survived – and indeed it is likely that none ever existed – nor does any chain of living tradition connect us with the artistic practice of that time and place. The profound reverence accorded to the holy books and to the men who made them, the great effort expended to execute their decoration, and the sanctity of the revealed text itself all testify that this was indeed a sacred art; but we have lost its key. While our interpretations can never attain to certainty, however, a speculative reading of some of the same culture's literary remains may provide us with the material for fruitful and illuminating reflections. It is in the hope of opening a door for such reflections that I have brought together the texts which will be considered in this paper.[4]

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Let us begin by returning to Gerald, who follows his description of the Kildare manuscript with an account of how it came to be written:

> On the night before the day on which the scribe was to begin the book, an angel stood beside him in his sleep and showed him a drawing made on a tablet which he carried in his hand, and said to him: 'Do you think that you can make this drawing on the first page of the book which you are about to begin?' The scribe, not feeling that he was capable of an art so subtle, and trusting little in his knowledge of something almost unknown and very unusual, replied 'No.' The angel said to him:
> 'Tomorrow tell your lady, so that she may pour forth prayers for you

to the Lord, so that he may open both your bodily and mental eyes so as to see the more keenly and understand the more subtly, and may direct your hands to draw correctly.' All this was done, and on the following night the angel came again and held before him the same and many other designs. By the help of the divine grace, the scribe, taking particular notice of them all, and faithfully committing them to his memory, was able to reproduce them exactly in the suitable places in the book. And so with the angel indicating the designs, Brigid praying, and the scribe imitating, that book was composed.[5]

There is a good deal to think about in this quiet little story. It closes vividly with the evocation of a triad: *angelo presentante, Brigida orante, scriba imitante* – the angel who reveals, the saint who prays, and the artist who executes the work. The designs are brought from another world, and without divine grace are beyond the reach not merely of an artist's skill, but even of his comprehension. The intricate abstraction of transmuted initials and dazzling carpet pages may, the story suggests, be sacred not so much because of what it *shows* as because of what it *is*: the adumbration of a heavenly order, disclosed to the prayerful contemplations of the scribe.

Another detail seems significant. Saint Brigid comes second in the triad, not first: the place of prayer falls between revelation and realization. This has important implications for the view of inspiration which the tale presents. One need not invoke grace in order to experience the initial vision: that can come whenever and to whomever it will. But to understand what he has seen, and to give it adequate expression, the artist must appeal for God's assistance. True understanding, finally, requires more than a mere grasp of the visible geometry of the designs: the angel tells the scribe to have Brigid pray that God 'may open both your bodily and mental eyes' (*tibi tam mentis quam corporis oculos aperiat*). What the eyes of mind were to discern in the angel's drawings is the riddle which confronts us.

I have dwelt at some length on what Gerald wrote about the book which he saw in Kildare: his words are perceptive and memorable, and can I think help us in our own attempts at understanding. But Gerald was a foreigner, writing hundreds of years after the heyday of illumination in the seventh and eighth centuries: although his opportunities were superior to ours he was like us an outsider, peering in at an idiosyncratic and alien culture. How much did he really understand? And

how faithfully has he passed on to us what his informants told him?

The second question can be dealt with more easily than the first: I see no reason to doubt that Gerald's account of the angel and the scribe reflects a story told to him at Kildare. His versions of Irish legends and beliefs, when they can be compared with analogous native material, are generally accurate and reliable; and indeed in the present case a range of tales from Irish sources parallels Gerald's anecdote in various ways.

Consider for instance the following episode, from the life of St. Comgall of Bangor:

> A youth was learning to write; but no one could teach him, for it could barely be determined whether what he wrote was the work of a man's hand or of a bird's claw (*utrum manus hominis aut ungula avis illud depinxerat*). So matters continued for many days. At last he came to Comgall, and the holy man blessed his eyes and his hands. Immediately his writing improved, so that he surpassed the other scribes; and he was during his life a master and a teacher (*auctor et doctor*) in that art.[6]

Here we have only two members of the triad which we were just considering, but their relationship is the same: again the saint intercedes on behalf of the writer's eye and hand. This story is concerned simply with skill, not revelation, and so it is natural enough that there is no reference to an angel or to the 'eyes of the mind'.

Other elements in Gerald's account find parallels in a secular narrative, written in the eleventh or twelfth century but set in the period before the coming of Christianity to Ireland. In this story the legendary hero Cú Chulainn commands the artisan Mac Enncae to make a shield for him, and to engrave on it a pattern unlike that on the shield of any other warrior in the tribe. Mac Enncae objects that he has already exhausted his ingenuity decorating other shields, only to be told that he will be killed if he fails. Left alone with his predicament, Mac Enncae falls into melancholy. The rest of the story may be given verbatim.

> While he was thus, he saw a man approaching him. 'You are sorrowful', he said. 'I have reason to be', said the craftsman. 'I will be killed

unless I can make a shield for Cú Chulainn.' The man said to him: 'Clean your workshop, and scatter ashes on the floor, until the ash is as thick as a man's foot.' It was done as he said. As Mac Enncae stood there, he saw the man come to him through the opening in the roof. He had a two-pronged forked stick in his hand, and he traced one of the shield's designs in the ashes. That is, 'ash-engraving' is the name of that pattern, as Dubdethba said, 'If I were Mac Enncae, I would engrave it thus'; and he also said, 'It is thus that Dubdethba does'.[7]

Despite its pagan setting, I am struck by the resemblances between this story and the tale of the Kildare manuscript. Again a supernatural figure visits a mortal artist, and the latter protests that he is unable to perform the task enjoined on him. The visitor tells him what he must do in order to succeed, and then returns when these conditions have been met to show him designs which he can now execute faultlessly.

No less significant than the similarities are the differences. The story tells of a craftsman, and of a mysterious being who functions as an angel; but there is no counterpart to the praying saint. Nor is the interval between Dubdethba's two visits a time for asking God to strengthen the artist's skill and understanding; it is used rather to prepare a physical environment in which the desired pattern can be revealed. Mac Enncae needs not skill, but a vision on which to exercise that skill; and he acts almost like his own priest, performing the acts which are needful if the inspiring messenger is to return. Does the presence of a supernatural element in a pagan setting reflect tradition inherited from pre-Christian times,[8] or a 'secularization' of monastic angelology? Either is possible, and both may to some extent be true.

Other details suggest that the story may portray some of the actualities of an artist's creative experience. Mac Enncae is alone, sunk in depression and the fear of death, when his pagan 'angel' first comes to him: such times of darkness and confusion have again and again brought the epiphanic moment, from the first lines of the *Divine Comedy* to Rilke's pacing of the battlements of Duino. And in clearing his work-space, and preparing a surface on which Dubdethba can trace the compass-curves of his 'ash-engraving', the artist allows the revealed images free play, uncluttered by the distractions of habit and anxiety. In much the same way Irish and Scottish poets lay motionless in lightless rooms, or wrapped plaids around their heads, in order to arrange their verses in their minds.[9]

Dubdethba's name means something like 'black smoke': his being is in some way associated with the smoke-hole through which he descends, and the ashes in which he works.[10] It is perhaps also possible to see him as Mac Enncae's daimonic alter ego: there is more than a hint of mutual identification in his sing-song soliloquy 'If I were Mac Enncae, I would engrave it thus; it is thus that Dubdethba does.' The idea that the angel is an aspect of the self is a doctrine far too profound and far-flung to be dealt with here. We may recall the subtleties of certain branches of Muslim angelology;[11] or Eriugena's teaching that 'the angel is made in man, through the understanding of angel which is in man, and man is in the angel through the understanding of man which is established in the angel';[12] or the 'totemic identity' with primordial creatures which forms so important a part of the religious experience of the aboriginal people of Australia.

One more observation can conclude this groping exegesis of the story of Cú Chulainn's shield. The name *Mac Enncae* means literally 'son of innocence'. It recalls the phrase *mac ennac* 'innocent boy', used commonly in ecclesiastical contexts of a lad who had not yet reached the years of puberty and of bearing weapons, perhaps a monastic novice. Such a name seems out of place in a pagan setting: the very words *ennac* and *enncae* are of clerical provenance, deriving from the Latin *innocens*. Whatever the background of the tale may be, this detail gives it a Christian dimension. To the cleared floor of the narrative is added another, implicit prerequisite: a clear mind and conscience. The craftsman must ready himself for inspiration by moral as well as artistic discipline.[13]

Another text couched in pagan rather than Christian terms, but contributing nevertheless to our understanding of the monastic scribal tradition, is an eighth- or ninth-century treatise on the varieties of *ogam*. *Ogam* was an alphabet consisting of notches and lines, developed in pre-Christian Ireland and used for making inscriptions on stone or wood.[14] The treatise attributes its invention to the god Ogma son of Elatha, who appears in other sources as the champion of the immortals – the latter tradition being apparently a symbolic affirmation of the power of the word.[15] The author then goes on to ask 'Who are the mother and father of *ogam*?' and to give the answer 'The father of *ogam* is Ogma; the mother of *ogam* is the hand or knife of Ogma.'[16]

On the one hand the god, on the other his hand or implement: and

the formulation is one which both distinguishes (as the two parents from whose union the script is born) and identifies (for the hand is Ogma's own) the members of the pair. Again the work owes its being to both hand and 'angel', both material instrument and supernatural intelligence; and again the two are seen to be on some level the same. This mingling, to which the *ogam* tract goes so far as to apply the metaphor of a procreative union, provides us with an occasion for pausing to reflect on the nature of writing itself, and how that act might have been perceived by the men who wrote and decorated the holy books.

Every art stands miraculously on the frontier between spirit and matter, making possible – however imperfectly – the incarnation of the mind's contents in the external realm. In every work of art the world's substance is shaped to mirror an unbodied form: a bringing together of the planes of being analogous to the prodigies of alchemy.

Of all the arts, it may be that writing most vividly expresses the tension between the poles it joins. It is not like a carved or painted face, bearing a greater or lesser likeness to what the artist's eyes perceive. The flat, black, silent letters on a page are utterly unlike the words they represent – invisible and evanescent children of the voice – even as words are utterly unlike the objects and ideas which they signify. Who could imagine, before the thing was done, that a word could be grasped or seen? With the very qualified exception of the pictographic scripts, all writing is an abstract art.

This is what the scribe does: to bind and reveal the most insubstantial of mankind's creations in visible permanence. And one who transcribes the Gospels gives a material being to the Word of God, fixes revelations from beyond all worlds within the finite solidity of a codex. The Word is made flesh.

A particularly striking illustration of the idea that writing mediates between the material and immaterial is afforded by *De Abbatibus*: a poem written by an English monk named Aethelwulf early in the ninth century, which sketches the history of a daughter-house of the monastery of Lindisfarne. From the time of its establishment this unnamed community had close links with Ireland: its founder sought advice as to the best site on which to build from Ecgberht, a celebrated cleric living in self-imposed Irish exile; and we are told that one of the monks was an Irishman, a skilled illuminator named Últán. In the poet's words,

> He was a blessed priest of the Irish race, and he could ornament books with fair markings, and by this art he accordingly made the shape of the letters beautiful one by one, so that no modern scribe could equal him; and it is no wonder if a worshipper of the Lord could do such things, when already the creator spirit had taken control of his fingers, and had fired his dedicated mind (to journey) to the stars (*cum digitos sanctus iam spiritus auctor / et accendit sacratam ad sidera mentem*). Now this man came to the cell of the beloved father . . . and moulded the monks in holy living, being of keen intellect, and chaste in feelings, words, body, and mind. He taught the brothers, so that they might seize the lights above (*rapiant ut lumina celsa*), and be zealous to serve God at all times, while they might have this present life in the body.[17]

The combination of skill in writing with the ability to lead and inculcate a virtuous life is itself noteworthy: this is a standard feature of insular hagiography, although the aesthetic factor is not generally emphasized. Even more intriguing though is Aethelwulf's statement that Ultán's excellence in his craft derived from two things: the Holy Spirit's guiding of his fingers, and the zeal of his mind for heavenly light. We are very close to the scribe of Kildare, who needed skill in his hand and the opening of the eyes of his mind in order to copy the figures shown him by the angel: again – and now from within the tradition[18] – we seem to be reading that the illuminator's designs are in some sense copied from the celestial realm. These immortal forms were the 'stars' to which Ultán's mind was turned, the 'lofty lights' which his disciples learned to grasp.

Aethelwulf goes on to relate that Ultán eventually died and was buried. After his body had been for some time in the earth, the brethren decided to exhume his remains so that his bones could be placed in a reliquary. The poet continues:

> Then the bones were washed, and the remains were carried in clean vestments in the light of the sun. Suddenly two birds came in the beams (*cum luce*) and settled on the cloths. The backs of both these awe-inspiring creatures shone, various colours mingling in them (*uario permixto colore / terga ueranda nitent*). Modulating songs with their beaks, they sang beautifully to the wondrous joy (*miranda ad gaudia*) of all, and they also covered the skull of the holy man

with their wings.

Thus they ceased not all the day to offer this pious office to the bones, and to pour forth songs with very lovely music, until the sunlight removed all moisture, and dried the remains from water.

When the bones were at last enshrined, 'Then the musical birds mingled with the lofty clouds, and kept out of men's sight for ever more.'

The many-coloured, sweetly singing birds which appear 'suddenly, with the light' (*cum luce repente*) evidently belong with the radiant and often angelic bird-flocks familiar from Irish visions of Heaven and of the secular Otherworld;[19] I find it striking that, of all the saintly men whose deaths are described in *De Abbatibus*, it is only Ultán who is thus honoured by celestial messengers. Might it be because in his life his work had attained to some reflection of their beauty – for beauty is all the message that they bring?

Ultán's bones were the instrument of a miracle before they were enshrined. One of the monks, near death from an illness, told another of the brethren to '... run and bring from the tomb the father's hand, with which he once had it granted him to paint the Lord's mystic words (*pingere quo domini meruit iam mistica uerba*), that I may avoid the present danger by making a sign with it, or that at least Christ may deign to wash away my sins by the merits of the saint.'

And indeed the 'divine virtue' of the hand heals him instantly of his sickness. Here, with the concreteness of legend, the ideas which I have been sketching are made tangible. Both hand and angel are present in this story, even when the scribe himself is dead and departed. Each mediates between heaven and earth: the birds as spiritual presences made physically manifest; the skeletal hand which once traced holy pictures as the material vehicle of God's energies.

The same elements appear yet again in a passage from a life of St. Gregory the Great. Gregory, a saint much venerated in England for having sent the first mission to the pagan English in 597, was also an important figure for the Irish, who claimed with magnificent audacity that his father had come from County Kerry. Traditional iconography shows him in the act of writing, with a dove speaking into his right ear: this is the Holy Spirit, said to have come to him in that guise to inspire him when he was writing his homilies on Ezekiel.[20] Here is the form given this anecdote by the Irish:

> It is related that an angel of the Lord was always at Gregory's right hand, and that it was he who used to chant in his ear, and to dictate every pronouncement which he uttered. And it is related that the light of the sun, and the shining of every other light, could be seen shining through the holy Gregory's hands as if through glass, such was their radiance and etheriality.[21]

The divine bird has become the inspiring angel; as I have mentioned, revelatory, psalm-singing, angelic birds are common in Irish tradition. And again, the descent of the spiritual is complemented by the transfiguration of the material: the writing hand becoming, in a wonderful image, a sort of window to the light of heaven.

Consideration of the ways in which writing mediates between matter and spirit should be informed by awareness of another circumstance, one from which we have been distanced by our adoption of paper and, more important, by the myriad ways in which our economy secludes us from the sources and methods of production. Each vellum codex was the fruit of violence, violence upon no paltry scale. Every bifolium of a large-leafed manuscript cost the life of the calf from whose skin it was made: an animal usually in the first months of its life, which would be stunned and then slowly bled to death to ensure the colourlessness of the capillaries in the skin. In the case of the Lindisfarne Gospels at least 129 calves, butchered doubtless not far from the scriptorium walls, went to provide a surface on which to write Christ's good news.[22]

A vivid awareness of the link between violence and the written word is reflected in an Old English riddling poem preserved in the Exeter Book:

> An enemy ended my life, deprived me of my physical strength: then he dipped me in water and drew me out again, and put me in the sun, where I soon shed all my hair. After that, the knife's sharp edge bit into me and all my blemishes were scraped away; fingers folded me and the bird's feather often moved over my surface, sprinkling meaningful marks; it swallowed more wood-dye and again travelled over me leaving black tracks. Then a man bound me, he stretched skin over me and adorned me with gold; thus I am enriched by the wondrous work of smiths, wound about with shining metal.[23]

The answer to the riddle is of course 'a book': the gold cover suggests a book for liturgical use. It may well be no more than coincidence, but I nevertheless find it suggestive that the process of making a book, as here described, should in various ways resemble the treatment accorded to the remains of Ultán in *De Abbatibus*. In both there is a sequence of death, burial or immersion, exposure to the sun, and enshrinement; and at the same point in the sequence where the riddle places the covering of the page with a bird's quill, Aethelwulf describes the heavenly birds covering Ultán's skull with their wings. Is there in fact an implicit homology here, identifying the bones of the scribe with the books which he wrote? It can only be a hesitant suggestion, but the idea has attractions. It adds a further dimension to our understanding of the birds: brilliant plumage and beautiful songs, their two distinctive traits, can both be associated with the pen, a feather which pours forth words. And what of the likening of hallowed remains to the stretched skin of a slaughtered calf? Perhaps in both cases the pain and destruction of mortality are redeemed by an opening into a higher realm, and by the promise of resurrection.

Even the holiest of books, then, was inextricably enmeshed in the bloodstained mortality which it summoned its readers to transcend. Reflection on this paradox may, I think, further our understanding of the manuscripts themselves. A question which has preoccupied me as I have looked at the great illuminated Gospels has been the significance of their use of animal and human ornament, first appearing in the *Book of Durrow* (written probably early in the seventh century), and used with increasing inventiveness and extravagance thenceforward.

Its historical origins seem relatively clear. Like spiral designs and ribbon interlace, animal ornament is ubiquitous in early insular metalwork. Some instances are known from pre-Christian Ireland, but the knotted beasts most characteristic of medieval decoration had Anglo-Saxon and perhaps Frankish jewelry as their point of departure, while the greater flamboyance and contortion to be seen in the *Book of Kells* should probably be associated with developments in Merovingian illumination. But the tracing of influences, important though it is, should not distract us from the problems posed by the Gospel books themselves. When the animals appear there, is there a reason for their presence?

I would like to suggest that the book's ornament echoes its being.

The book is an artifact made of the skins of slaughtered creatures, the product of prolonged toil conditioned at every point by peculiarities and limitations of material and technique; but it is also the vehicle of the Holy Spirit, silently uttering mysteries from beyond time and space. There may be an analogous mingling of struggle and sublimity in its decoration, which shows innumerable animals writhing and biting, together with elaborate abstract patterns whose harmony of balance suggests an immutable perfection. But these two elements are not merely juxtaposed. They are fused; and here I think we may discern a potent symbolism.

For all the turmoil of the entangled, bent, contending bodies is a consequence of their subordination to a higher pattern: when we step back from the animals we almost lose them in the elegant calm of panels, spirals, and sweeping curves. And the pattern itself is subordinated to the holy text, especially on the pages which bear the great illuminated capitals.

Such a view of things may disturb us, as we are disturbed when Plotinus compares the creatures suffering in his divinely ordered cosmos to a tortoise trampled beneath dancing feet. And indeed both visions are terrible ones – as must any vision be which seeks to find a place for both beauty and horror within the sphere of Providence.

These reflections can be illustrated by considering three examples of animal ornament, from the three great Gospel books of the Hiberno-Saxon tradition: the *Book of Durrow*, the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, and the *Book of Kells*.

We may begin by looking at the carpet page which introduces Saint John's Gospel in the *Book of Durrow* (Plate 2). A disk of ribbon interlace occupies the middle of the page, and in the middle of that disk there is a small roundel marked with a cross. All around the central space are borders filled with beasts, loosely and almost dreamily entwined. This is the only animal ornamentation in the book and, as noted above, the earliest specimen known in an Irish manuscript. Stylistically the beasts most closely resemble creatures found in Anglo-Saxon jewelry, but art historians are generally agreed that they have more formal coherence than their Germanic models.

Three elements are present: animals; abstract patterns of a type found elsewhere in the manuscript; and the symbol of the Christian God. Whether by coincidence or design they are arranged concen-

trically, and can be read almost as a diagram.

At the centre is the white roundel of the Deity. Three more white roundels disposed around it, themselves bearing cruciform designs and joined together by a single white rim running within the outer, yellow one, may represent the persons of the Trinity or perhaps (if the central cross is taken specifically to represent the person of the Son), the energies of Godhead.

The interlace corresponds to the angelic realm of the divine ideas, situated both outside God (ranged around the central roundel) and latent in his mind (contained by the white rim and the three outer roundels). Like the rim and roundels it consists of inanimate, abstract form; and its three colours are arranged in three overlapping triangles, reflections of the triangle whose corners the outer roundels define. But its colours also link the ribbon with the beasts on the borders, as does its woven entanglement: its timeless geometry is the celestial model for the confusions and conflicts of the world below. It gives the appearance of multiplicity, but all its twistings and turnings are the path of a single strand.

A blank separates the disk from the beasts. It is a gap which separates a circle from a square: shapes which in many traditions denote respectively heaven and earth, eternity and time, infinity and finitude. But, as we have seen, the very entanglement of the creatures reflects the more harmonious intricacy within the disk; and a link of another kind may connect the square border with the fourfoldness of the central cross – emblem of the saving anomaly of the incarnate Absolute.

Was any of this in the artist's mind? Again, who can say? But let us remember that this page faces the opening of the Fourth Gospel. As we look at it, we may call to mind the familiar words:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him: and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life: and the life was the light of men. And the light shone in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

Next, let us consider a carpet page from the *Lindisfarne Gospels* (Plate 3). All of the script and illumination in this manuscript are the work of one remarkable man: Eadfrith, bishop of Lindisfarne from 698 to 721. Eadfrith was an Englishman; but Lindisfarne (like its unnamed off-

shoot celebrated in *De Abbatibus*) was a monastery shaped by Irish influence: it had been founded by missionaries from Iona in 635, and had only shifted its allegiance from Iona to Canterbury a generation before Eadfrith became bishop. His work is perhaps the supreme expression of Hiberno-Saxon artistic unity; later products of the Lindisfarne scriptorium, although full of interest, reflect a progressive dilution of the insular vision.

Lindisfarne uses the same stock of motifs as Durrow; but here they are deployed with far more technical mastery, and are moreover combined rather than simply set beside one another. Again we see white roundels bearing crosses – the central roundel, however, bears not a cross but an eight-lobed rosette – but now a larger cross fills the entire page. And this cross is in fact made of twining beasts, as is the background against which it is set: beasts bent, curled, and knotted far more elaborately than the animals of Durrow. Ribbon interlace appears on this page also, but only in panels and figures set around the border: the most ambitious interlacing is that of the animals themselves. The three levels arranged concentrically on the Durrow page are present here almost as aspects of one another: the animals are the substance of the pattern, the pattern is the substance of the cross. The dazzling multiplicity of the design is resolved in an essential unity – and that unity is defined by the central Christian symbol, the cross which brings together earth and heaven, torment and beatitude, death and God.

Lindisfarne is without question the most formally sophisticated of the insular Gospel books: Eadfrith worked with a meticulous precision, and a sense of integrating symmetry, which never waver through hundreds of pages. The book's microcosm is a world of consummate order, subjugating its flocks of interwoven birds and beasts to a serene geometry; and every curve of every pattern displays the artist's total mastery of his techniques. The execution of such a work was surely a feat of spiritual as well as of artistic discipline; that this was in fact the case seems confirmed by the fact that Eadfrith, the insular illuminator whose surviving work displays the closest approximation to perfection, introduced deliberate irregularities into his designs. There is an example on this page, more easily discernible in enlarged detail. The bodies of the elongated beasts change colour at a single joint, portrayed in a single way throughout the lower portion of the page. On the left, however, the joint has been replaced by a triple spiral – a tiny variation, surely intentional on the artist's part (Plate 4).

Finally, let us turn to the *Book of Kells*, and the 'Incarnation page' which opens Matthew's Gospel with an extravagant, glorified *Chi-Ro* (Plate 5). The style here is less disciplined, but also richer, than that of Lindisfarne: an explosion of inventiveness which fills the page and almost sweeps away the letters which it ornaments. The spirals and grids and living creatures of earlier Hiberno-Saxon art are here again, but so is a new decorative element: the human being. Human forms are scattered throughout the design: angels stand stiffly along the left of the *Chi*; disembodied heads stare from the *Rho* and from atop a pile of spirals on the upper edge of the page; little men, almost indistinguishable, huddle knee to knee in the rectilinear border at lower right.

Here, and throughout the manuscript, the identity of the creatures is not wholly circumscribed by the patterns which entrap them. They struggle, stare, and grimace, feeling and suffering as individual entities among the harmonies they cannot see – one is almost tempted to suggest that an existential quality can be discerned in the illumination. I do not wish to make too much of this, or to read too much into it; but it seems to me that the men who decorated the *Book of Kells* – at work perhaps just as the Vikings first descended upon the monasteries of the shores and islands – had a sense of the tension between fallen mortality and the perfection of the ideal which Eadfrith's masterpiece does not convey. The artistry of Kells is supremely beautiful; but there is room in it as well, in a way which does not I think appear before, for the bizarre, the anguished, and the humorous.

It is in these terms, perhaps, that we can best approach the pictures of animals at the bottom of the page (Plate 6). The little black shape below the *I* is an otter with a fish in its mouth; to its left, two mice tug at a communion wafer, watched by two cats on whose backs perch two more mice. The wafer is a little white disk marked with a cross, such as we saw in the centre of the St. John carpet page in the *Book of Durrow*: but now it is not surrounded by an elegant tracery of interlace, and separated by a void from beasts which writhe on the periphery; nor do we find, as in Lindisfarne, that the cross is a shape dominating all else, to whose lines the creatures docilely bend and conform. No: tiny and helpless, the flesh of God has tumbled into the depths, to be gnawed by vermin. What can be the point of this apparent blasphemy, nestled at the foot of one of the most splendid realisations of the monogram of Christ ever to be executed by a human hand?

The mice are only acting according to their nature. The hunger

which drives them is the same as that which makes the cats prey upon them, the otter upon the fish. That this is the import of these juxtapositions appears to be confirmed by the incidental decorations on another page, where another picture of a mouse stealing a wafer while a cat looks on is followed, a few lines below, by a picture of a dog attacking a rabbit (Plate 7).

The vision is essentially the same as that which can be read in the earlier manuscripts, but here an attempt is made to grasp it in its darkness and in its depth: to show the painful paradox of spirit embodied in a fallen world, and to evoke the full salvific absurdity of the Incarnation. Making due allowance for a multitude of vital differences, I am reminded of the bitter faith which underlies the nightmare drolleries of Hieronymus Bosch; stepping away from the visual arts, and closer to the ineffable, we can think of the cosmic vision which brings peace to the agony of Job.

How can a book contain a voice? How can words mean? How can we be both mortal and immortal, our eyes straining for the invisible? How can Infinite Perfection be born as a man, subject to limit and the victim of our fallenness? These mysteries are aspects of one another, culminating in the questions which stand at the heart of Christianity. It is doubtful whether we can grasp the answers while we still live in division and separation, but we can contemplate the symbols which contain them. The riddling beauty of the holy books is one such symbol, glossed by the legends which surround their making. Guided by his angel, the hand of the scribe traced the eternal harmony.

NOTES

1. Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John O'Meara (Harmondsworth, 1982), p.84; text in John O'Meara, ed., 'Giraldus Cambrensis in Topographia Hiberniae: Text of the First Recension', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 52C (1949) 113–78: pp.151–52.

2. Erwin Panofsky, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and its Art Treasures* (Princeton, 1946), p.63, p.65; cited in Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven, 1986), p.14.

3. Eco, pp.7–8; text in *Sancti Bernardi Claraevallensis . . . Opera omnia* (Paris, 1632), p.992.

4. Cf. Martin Lings, *The Quranic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination* (1976), p.73 n.35: '. . . nor does this chapter claim, by putting certain trains of thought into the minds of its readers, to be reproducing the mental processes of the pioneers themselves. Inspiration tends to fold up thought; and all that the following paragraphs can presume

to do is to note some of the more obvious relevancies of Qur'an illumination to the Book it illuminates, in the knowledge that sacred art is Providentially, by definition, the most strictly relevant art in the world.'

5. Gerald of Wales, pp.84–85; text in O'Meara, 152.

6. Charles Plummer, ed., *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1910), 2.13; my translation.

7. R. I. Best, ed., 'Cuchulainn"s Shield', *Ériu* 5 (1911), p.72; my translation.

8. A case could be made for the hypothesis that Gerald's story itself has pagan antecedents. There was a goddess Brigit, in all likelihood the forerunner of the Christian saint: she as remembered as having been the mother of 'the three gods of skill', and was a patroness of poets, physicians, and metalworkers. Might Gerald's version have evolved from a narrative in which Brigit was herself the deity invoked, not merely the saintly intercessor? This can of course be no more than speculation. It should be noted however that customs which seem to reflect the cult of the goddess Brigit still survived in Kildare in Gerald's day; he is in fact our main authority for them.

9. References in T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1946), pp.323–25.

10. In certain respects Dubdethba is reminiscent of the salamander which appeared to Benvenuto Cellini's father: the elder Cellini saw it in the depths of a fire as he sat beside the hearth singing and playing the fiddle (Thomas Roscoe, trans., *Memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini* (London, 1847), pp.6–7). Sequence and context are very different; but the association between artistic performance and the apparition of some kind of fire spirit is a striking feature of both stories.

11. See for instance the discussion of Ibn 'Arabi's encounter with his angel in Mecca in Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of 'Ibn 'Arabī*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, 1981), pp.278–81.

12. Eriugena, *Periphyseon*,, trans. John O'Meara (Montréal and Washington, 1987), p.428.

13. In the same spirit, rectitude of conduct was seen in medieval Ireland as being necessary for the practice of poetry. A list of the 'fourteen streams of poetry' comprises 'propriety and integrity, history and genealogy, inspiration and incantation, metre and judgment, "chewing of pith" [a divinatory ritual] and abundance of instruction, purity of hand and wedlock, purity of mouth and learning' (R. I. Best *et al.*, eds., *The Book of Leinster*, vol. 1 (Dublin, 1954), p.124; my translation).

14. An authoritative treatment is now available: Damian McManus, *A Guide to Ogam* (Maynooth, 1991).

15. For comparative evidence in support of this interpretation see the brief discussion in my 'The waters of vision and the gods of skill', *Alexandria* 1 (1991), pp.163–85: pp.175–76.

16. George Calder, ed., *Auraicept na n-Éces* (Edinburgh, 1917), p.272; my translation.

17. This and the quotations from the same poem which follow are taken from A. Campbell, ed. and trans., *Aethelwulf De Abbatibus* (Oxford, 1967), pp.18–23.

18. One piece of evidence that Irish traditions survived in this monastery until Aethelwulf's time is his use of the hybrid phrase *castra beorum* to refer to Heaven: the meaning is evidently 'dwellings of the living', the second element having been borrowed from the Irish *Tír na mBeó* 'Land of the Living'. For discussion see D. N. Dumville, '*Echtrae* and *immram*: Some problems of definition', *Ériu* 27 (1976), pp.73–94: pp.81–82.

19. For a wide range of examples see the references in H. R. Patch, *The Other World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1950), pp.27–59, pp.107–8; cf. the account of how the archangel Michael used to visit St Brendan in the form of a sweetly singing bird, at

which he 'could not look . . . because of the sunny rays that were around it', Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., in *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford, 1890), pp.xiii–xv. For reflections illuminating the basis of this symbolism see René Guénon, 'The language of the birds', in Jacob Needleman, ed., *The Sword of Gnosis*, 2nd ed. (London, 1986), pp.299–303.

20. The earliest literary record of the image appears in Bertram Colgrave, ed. and trans., *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great by an Anonymous Monk of Whitby* (Cambridge, 1968), chap. 26: 'So it is said that a certain member of Gregory's household who was very intimate with him saw a white dove resting upon the man of God while he was engaged in writing these homilies on Ezekiel.' A slightly fuller version is given in material added to Paul the Deacon's life of Gregory, edited in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 75, pp.57–58.

21. J. Vendryes, ed., 'Betha Grighora', *Revue Celtique* 42 (1925) pp.119–53: p.138; P. Grosjean, ed., 'Quelques textes irlandais sur Saint Grégoire le Grand', ibid. 46 (1929) pp.223–51: p.239; K. Meyer, ed., 'Von Gregor dem Grossen', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 12 (1918) pp.367–74: p.372; my translation. In rendering *séime* as 'etheriality' I differ from Vendryes, who understood the passage to mean merely that Gregory's hands were emaciated; for the sense suggested here cf. the Royal Irish Academy's *Dictionary of the Irish Language* s.vv. 'séim', col. 147.13–21; 'séime', col. 147. 70–73; 'séimide', col. 148. 18–25. One Irish scribe used the corresponding adjective to describe the sun flickering on the margins of the manuscript on which he was at work: K. Meyer, 'Neu aufgefundene altirische Glossen', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 8 (1912) pp.173–77: p.175.

22. For a concise description of many aspects of vellum preparation see Kathleen Ryan, 'Holes and flaws in medieval Irish manuscripts', *Peritia* 6/7 (1987–88) pp.243–64. The estimate of the number of calves is that of Janet Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels* (Oxford, 1981), p.27.

23. Cited by Backhouse, loc. cit.; text in George Philip Krapp and Elliot van Kirk Dobie, eds., *The Exeter Book* (London, 1936), p.193, lines 1–14.

Notes on the plates

1. THE BOOK OF DURROW (Dublin, Trinity College MS 57), carpet page, folio 3v.

This ornamental page probably stood at the head of the Gospel according to Matthew. The border is a skilfully executed example of interlace, a motif of Mediterranean derivation; but the spiral patterns dominating the central panel reflect the survival into the Christian period of the La Tène tradition of pagan Celtic art. The juxtaposition of the two styles – and the use of La Tène elements to decorate a book of the Gospels – serve as a particularly striking illustration of the way in which the Irish remained rooted in their inherited culture at the same time that they embraced the new religion.

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2. THE BOOK OF DURROW (Dublin, Trinity College MS 57), carpet page, folio 192v.

This page stands at the beginning of the Gospel according to John. The decorative use of knotted animals, borrowed from Germanic art, appears here for the first time in an Irish manuscript. Further discussion of the design, and suggestions regarding its possible symbolism, are provided in the text.

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3. THE LINDISFARNE GOSPELS (London, British Library MS Cott. Nero D. iv), carpet page, folio 26v.

This page introduces the Gospel according to Matthew; of all the carpet pages in this manuscript, it is that in which zoomorphic ornament most fully permeates the design.

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4. THE LINDISFARNE GOSPELS (London, British Library MS Cott. Nero D. iv), detail from the preceding page.

An example of the irregularities which Eadfrith deliberately introduced into his ornament: in the array of animals which provide a background to the central cross, a double spiral replaces a joint at lower left.

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5. THE BOOK OF KELLS (Dublin, Trinity College MS 58), 'Incarnation initial', folio 34r.

Here, as in other insular manuscripts, a special page marks the beginning of the account of Christ's conception at Matthew 1:18. To the repertoire of La Tène spiral patterns, interlace, and knotted beasts, human figures and angels are now added. The magnificence of the page as a whole is offset by images of mortality: two moths face each other at upper left; and other devouring animals appear in the lower border.
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6. THE BOOK OF KELLS (Dublin, Trinity College MS 58), detail from the preceding page.

At right, an otter seizes a fish. That the fish is here (as elsewhere in the manuscript) a symbol for Christ appears to be confirmed by comparison with the curious group on the left: two mice, their tails gripped by cats, fight over a eucharistic wafer.
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7a and 7b. THE BOOK OF KELLS (Dublin, Trinity College MS 58), details from folio 48r.

Again, parallelism serves to identify the passion of Christ with the violence of nature. In the margin of a single page, a mouse's theft of the host is juxtaposed with a dog seizing a rabbit.
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8. THE BOOK OF KELLS (Dublin, Trinity College MS 58), illuminated initial from folio 26r.

Use of the triskel or triple spiral, a figure already found carved on the walls of the Neolithic tomb at Newgrange (*c.* 3000 BC), was continued by Celtic artists both before and after the coming of Christianity (instances in Plates 1, 5 above): an example with terminals ending in the heads of birds is found on a bronze disk of the first or second century AD. Here, in a brilliantly understated display of the Irish synthesis of native and Christian cultures, the dynamic of the triple spiral is fused with that of the Roman uncial *A*. Note that the heads of the dragons evolve and come alive if the eye follows the sequence of the spiral's counter clockwise rotation.
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