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## IMAGINING KELLS

A Poetic Exploration of the Book of Kells



by

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Illuminated page from the Book of Kells  
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*The Greek letter Chi takes centre stage on the Chi Rho page, Matthew 1.18, 'Christi autem generatio sic erat' ('This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about'). Below the right-hand prong of Chi, the Greek letter Rho, resembling a 'p', is adorned with a human head and curls around an I. Northwest of the black lettering at the bottom, which includes 'generatio', a black otter can be seen (at a high magnification) diving to snatch a fish. To the left of the otter, two cats, mounted by two mice, pin down the tails of two other mice that nibble at the consecrated host. Three golden-haired angels are visible to the left of Chi's longest prong. All life is here – from angels to rodents – and 'panta rhei', 'everything flows', as Heraclitus once said.*

*Book of Kells, folio 34r. By kind permission of the Board of Trinity College Dublin.*

## Imagining Kells<sup>1</sup>

My first proper awareness of the Book of Kells occurred in the 1980s when I was editing a book about the Bible and one of the chosen illustrations was the Kells Chi Rho ‘carpet’ page – an illumination dominated by the Greek letters for Ch and R, which begin the word ‘*Christi*’. Like Keats when he first read Chapman’s translation of Homer, I felt like ‘some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken’. It was as if a match had been dropped into a box of fireworks, or I was looking down on a laboratory of bubbling cauldrons. The letter *Chi* itself – which resembles a curvy capital X – looked as if it was breaking cover and springing naked from a foliage of geometry, its arms curved, its right leg extended, its left leg kicked up behind – running to incarnate itself. Everything was flowing. It was as if I had been given a time-telescope and had caught the moment of the Big Bang.

From then on the Book of Kells, and in particular the Chi Rho page, was lodged in my psyche, biding its time – for I had a strong intuition that one day I would write a poem about it. The book, and the page, seemed to embody the exploration of, or quest for, ultimate truth in a visual form; and this – the attempt of the artist to investigate the great mysteries of the universe – has been my abiding fascination.

As it turned out, the decisive trigger to write about Kells came many years later in 1999, when I received a commission from the UK Poetry Society to write a long poem about ‘a place’. I asked speculatively if a book counted as ‘a place’, and they said it did: the moment was ripe.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on notes I made for a presentation given to the Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin, in March 2015, about writing a meditative poem inspired by the Book of Kells. I am grateful to the Temenos Academy for inviting me to turn those notes into something more substantial. A shortened version of this paper appeared as an essay in *Beshara* magazine, edited by Jane Clark, and I would like to thank her for allowing me to use material from it.

From the outset I had virtually no idea of how I was going to approach the poem. I somehow believed that Kells held a key to great spiritual or aesthetic truths, but I was not sure how to explore it. I felt like Mr Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, poring over material to construct his magnum opus, *The Key to All Mythologies*, a work he never manages to complete. But I had committed myself to the project; I had been paid a commission: the only thing missing was inspiration.

Poetic inspiration by its very nature has to arrive unbidden. But you can try to leave the window open by meditating, daydreaming or entering what Ted Hughes called the ‘sacred trance’, a self-induced liminal state of consciousness that has the quality of daydream, but with an extra element of intention or awareness about it – not dissimilar to Jung’s ‘active imagination’. Yet despite my attempts to enter this state, ideas continued to evade me. Indeed, I could sense that the very desire to write and get to the heart of Kells was probably blocking any flow of creativity. More than once I fantasised about abandoning the project and giving back the commission.

Eventually, during a period of meditative silence, with a blank page on my desk, an idea finally arrived. It was literally staring me in the face in all its blank nothingness: what would it be like for one of the Kells illuminators to suffer from a creative block? Why wouldn’t an artist working more than a thousand years ago experience the same issues of creativity as a contemporary one? This thought immediately helped me to form an emotional connection with the illuminator of Chi Rho. He had his commission, I had mine. At some point he – whoever he was – had to stare at his blank vellum just as I was staring at my paper. What would he have felt? Responsibility? Excitement? Hopelessness? How did the visual ideas come to him?

For an intense period I read about Kells and gazed at the illuminations. I found out that the French Kells scholar Françoise Henry proposed there were three major Kells artists, whom she nicknamed the ‘goldsmith’, the ‘portrait painter’, and the ‘illustrator’<sup>2</sup>. Her terminology conjured up not individual personalities but archetypes, as if Kells was the product, or reproduction, of a divine template. Goldsmith she nicknamed because of his love of orpiment, a yellowish mineral used as a substitute for

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<sup>2</sup> See Bernard Meehan, *The Book of Kells* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), p. 78.

gold leaf. It was he, she believed, who was the creator of the Chi Rho page. My imagination began to make sinuous Kells-like connections with this illuminator. The first thing was to situate him in a time and place, and I looked no farther than Iona, the tiny island off the west coast of Scotland where many scholars believe the creation of Kells was begun in about 800.

This was my starting point: Goldsmith. Chi Rho. Iona, about 800. My poetic antennae began reaching out towards this individual, trying to make psychic contact with him. What was he like? What brought him to Iona? How did he feel before he went about creating one of the most dynamic images of Western art? What pressure was he under to create such an illumination? How did he relate his art to his faith? Did he start with a detail in his mind then expand it, or did he have an overview based on other images he had seen? How much did he improvise?

My questions about him were also questions about myself and my own poetic practice. The relationship between faith and art, for example; the question of aesthetics in relation to sacred objects. Can art lead the creator or beholder to the divine, or does it in fact lead *away* from the divine? On the one hand there is the sacro-aesthetic view embodied in the words that Abbot Suger (c.1081–1151) had inscribed over the door of the abbey church of Saint-Denis in Paris: ‘*Mens hebes ad verum per materialia surgit*’ (‘The dull mind rises to the truth through material things.’). On the other hand there is the view symbolised by the Cistercian statute (c.1145) that states: ‘*Vitreae albae fiant, et sine crucibus et picturis*’ (‘Let the windows be made of white glass without images or crosses.’)<sup>3</sup>. These two different approaches seemed to me to represent, respectively, the classic *via affirmativa* and *via negativa* of the Christian mystics, and I have an affinity with both paths.

Even with a location (Iona) and a protagonist (Goldsmith), I was still struggling to find a way into the poem. My gazing at the Chi Rho page and waiting for a thread to emerge became counterproductive: with its swirls of detail and Escher-like circularities of lines, the page is almost designed to *stop* your eye from resting on it. My staring and reflecting were producing nothing. Then, once again, just as a sense of futility

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Marks, *Stained Glass in England During the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 111.

was setting in, I remembered my first breakthrough: ‘nothing’ would be the theme – that is, the struggle with finding the first spark of the creative act, of making something *ex nihilo*. That seemed promising; but nothing comes from nothing – you cannot write about not writing without putting pen to paper.

I then recalled Paul Klee’s words on starting a work of art: ‘I begin where all pictorial form begins: with a point that sets itself in motion.’<sup>4</sup> It is fine advice for a writer too: in literary terms Klee’s artistic point would be a single word or an isolated idea or image. Begin small and let it expand. Klee also expressed the idea that drawing was a matter of the artist ‘taking a line for a walk’ – something Goldsmith had literally done with extraordinary effect. Could I take a word or a line of poetry for a walk? And, if I did, would it result in something coherent or chaotic? In staring at Goldsmith’s Chi Rho intricacies I was also reminded of the words of the modern Belgian-French poet Henri Michaux, reacting to Klee’s paintings: ‘The complex network of lines appeared little by little: lines living with the little people of dust and dots, crossing crumbs, going around cells, fields of cells, or turning, turning in spirals to fascinate—or to find what had fascinated—umbelliferous plants and agates. Lines walking around ... labyrinth of the eternal return. A line meets a line. A line avoids a line. Adventures of lines.’<sup>5</sup>

With Klee and Michaux looking over my shoulder, I decided to let myself surrender to a single image, thought or word, and hope that it would be the starting point for an adventure of lines. What did keep swimming into consciousness was the word / image ‘Iona’. The island felt solid and reassuring, an anchor in a sea of flux; also, I had first-hand experience of its terrain, having stayed there in the early 1990s. I remember being surprised at how small it was and how its alleged ‘atmosphere of miracle’ seemed palpably true. At night with just the sound of the sea and the patchy appearance of stars, I could have been in St Columba’s era back in the sixth century, an impression maintained in the daytime when I explored the island’s unspoiled fields and its

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Klee, *Notebooks Volume 1: The Thinking Eye*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Michaux, *Darkness Moves: An Henri Michaux Anthology, 1927–1984*, trans. and ed. David Ball (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 316-17.

tucked-away coves. It was relatively easy to dematerialise the late medieval and modern buildings and imagine Columba and his companions huddled in their wooden huts or filing into their oaken church; or grazing their cattle, sowing seed on the west of the island, or hunting for seals.

So there I was, contemplating a blank white page, trying to focus on the island of Iona and feeling that my alter ego, Goldsmith, was also staring at a blank page. Then one morning the first stumbling words appeared on my page, like footprints found in overnight snow. They went like this:

I walk along the path that leads  
past rocky outcrops, nascent brambles;  
waves of oceanic wind  
slice through the frozen twilit sheep.

I knew the words were not right – that they were a five-finger exercise. But they had broken the ice. They had at least established a movement, a person – Goldsmith / myself – walking along a path on Iona, and also a season – the frozen sheep made me think of early March.

Most suggestively, the lines had arrived with a four-stress rhythm, tending towards iambic tetrameter, and this, in turn, gave me the idea that the number four was going to be key to the poem. I thought of the four-pronged letter *Chi*, dominating its page; the four evangelists and their four versions of the gospel; and of course the cross. The Chi Rho page also reminded me of Jung's thesis that the number four is a symbol of 'wholeness', as well as his suggestion that mandala images in Tibetan Buddhism, with their square frames enclosing a circle or circles, resembled some of the dream images of his patients. They are, he believed, the visual manifestation of the psyche trying to restore order and balance to chaos and disorientation. In other words, mandalas are instruments of healing: 'In the products of the unconscious we discover mandala

symbols, that is, circular and quaternary figures which express wholeness, and whenever we wish to express wholeness, we employ just such figures.’<sup>6</sup>

The Kells carpet pages are like Celtic mandalas, meditative tools. Time after time a fourfold frame encloses a cornucopia of kinetic images, circles whirling like Hindu swastikas, tendrils of plants creeping everywhere, angels floating in the air, vermin scrapping on the ground, the haunting faces of apostles, saints, churchmen, sometimes as solitary as Hamlet, sometimes crushed together. The accumulative effect of these images is to create a sense of abundant life and an energy that the fourfold frame strains to keep in check; sometimes the frame is broken, or its edges do not quite meet, or there are quirky elements of asymmetry. The lines *seem* to lead the eye towards the centre of some great or ultimate truth; however, when you follow the trail you find yourself going back on your tracks, as in a maze. It’s almost as if the message is: do *not* follow the path; be still; the path will come to you; or, you will find there is no path at all. Truth, as the modern spiritual teacher J. Krishnamurti once said, ‘is a pathless country’, by which I think he meant that whatever trail we follow, we bring ourselves – our history, family, culture and conditioning – with us; what we see and find is predetermined. But truth has no paths leading to it.

The idea of four as the basic pulse of a line of verse hypnotised me. It also led me to a breakthrough concerning the poem itself. I had chosen Goldsmith as my protagonist, but the questions I wanted him to pose, and the tension I wanted him to bear, were already too many and too much for one character. What would happen if I had four characters and four places? This in turn suggested a poem with four parts, each with its own frame, and all four parts framed by the unity of a single book. But who would the other characters be? How would they reflect different aspects of Kells as well as my own inner life? What other places would they be associated with?

It seemed to me I needed a scribe as another character. A writer. Someone confronted by a set of aesthetic, spiritual and existential problems different from those experienced by my illuminator. A writer who was a copyist, not a creator. A scribe located,

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<sup>6</sup> See Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (London: Fontana, 1995), Chapter XI, ‘Life after Death’.



perhaps, at the monastery of Kells (from which the Book takes its name) in the midlands of Ireland, who had perhaps migrated there with others from Iona. The idea grew in its appeal: now I had two creators of Kells – Goldsmith and Scribe – and two locations, Iona and Kells.

To complete the foursome, and to complement the two creators, I decided to have two characters who were *witnesses* of the book. After all, Kells was designed to be looked at as much as read. When the book was ritually held up and displayed in chapel, the intention was to make viewers marvel at it and thereby see the world and themselves in a different light – *sub specie aeternitatis*. A work of art can only reach its final completion when it is witnessed. So there was my initial scheme, configured on the number four: Goldsmith and Iona; Scribe and Kells; and two witnesses linked with two places.

With this provisional plan, I began writing the first draft of Goldsmith, and as I did so I was led into trails of cul-de-sacs and small epiphanies. Sometimes it was like following Ariadne's thread away from the minotaur of negativity; at other times I thought I had picked up the end of Blake's golden string ('Only wind it into a ball, / It will lead you in at Heaven's gate, / Built in Jerusalem's wall'). My character began to take on life and I watched in fascination as he began to exhale visible breath in the icy interior of his Ionan cell. Using a basic four-stressed iambic line – echoing the quaternity I thought would shape the poem as a whole – I gave myself over to the Muse, recalling in moments of optimism the medieval description of St Columba's writing fingers glowing so much they lit up the dark.

Perhaps inevitably it was only after a first draft of the four parts of the poem that I made my first big u-turn. I showed the draft to a friend who said that the iambic tetrameter was too monotonous and made the different characters too similar.

Another poetic obstacle was the voice of Goldsmith. As his persona emerged on the page – a voice expressing loneliness, stagnation and anxiety at his task of creation – I found that instead of merely listening to him, I wanted to *converse* with him too. I wanted to encourage him and to talk to him about Plotinus and John Scotus Eriugena

and the idea of creating from the archetype, not from senses-derived material, just as I wanted him to show me how to begin a work of art. It felt like a big leap to introduce another persona into this section of the poem – ‘myself-as-author’ – and to create a dialogue with Goldsmith, as if we were two ghosts separated by a thousand years, each intuiting the presence of the other. Yet I had trodden the very Ionan paths that Goldsmith had once walked along; and who is to say that people and atmospheres of the past that are felt in ancient holy places cannot be reversed as intimations of the future?

In this way, the first section became a joint venture between myself and Goldsmith, both of us wondering how to approach artistic creation, both of us caught in the space between idea and action, or inaction. Yet we both had a deep-seated exemplar before our eyes: the opening of the Chi Rho page: ‘*Christi autem generatio sic erat ...*’ (‘This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about ...’). I was re-framing this section of the poem during one spring, and the budding landscape and birdsong outside my window found its way into the poem. Birth was in the air, and at the end of the section birth became a burst of creation for both of us.

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Leaving Goldsmith to work on his glorious page, I then began to concentrate on my next character, the scribe. But which one? Françoise Henry identified three major scribes, whom she labelled rather prosaically as A, B and C, to which was later added D<sup>7</sup>. The one known as A she characterised as being sober and conservative, with little desire to decorate his work. He didn’t sound like the sort of character I wanted. But Scribe B was different. This was a man she had described as an ‘extrovert’ and who seems to have liked using red ink and was fond of filling blank spaces on the vellum with unnecessary repetitions. This was the character I wanted, and to keep the symmetry with the Goldsmith section, I needed another page from Kells as a focus.

I found it in a page that is part of the crucifixion scene in Mark: 15:25. It bears the words: ‘*Erat autem hora tertia*’ (‘Now it was the third hour’). After Scribe B had

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<sup>7</sup> Meehan, *op. cit.*, pp. 78, 80.

completed the text of this page, he found the empty space on it too inviting to resist. He picked a phrase from the opposite page – ‘*et crucifigentes eum dividerunt*’ (‘and crucifying him, they divided [his garments]’) – and copied it (except for the ‘-*runt*’ of ‘*dividerunt*’) needlessly onto the *Erat autem* page. Why did he want to repeat it? His addition has the air of improvisation; the letters look like ribbons caught in the wind and his drawn-out, high-prowed U in *eum* like a longship on the waves.

As I thought about Scribe B and stared at the *Erat autem* page, I began to picture him within a larger context. I imagined him surviving a Viking raid on Iona (such as the one that actually occurred in 806), and of being part of a group of Ionan monks who crossed the seas to Ireland to settle at the monastery of Kells, taking the unfinished book with them. His character began to emerge; someone who knew that God worked in mysterious ways, but whose memory of butchered brethren called into question just how mysterious those ways must be. Someone, in other words, whose faith had been stretched perhaps to breaking point; who, although engaged in the anonymous work of copying words, had had the urge to express his personality and feelings beyond the rows of perfectly formed insular majuscule.

The scribbblings of my first draft of ‘Scribe B’ were in the same iambic tetrameter that I had abandoned in ‘Goldsmith’. When I came to revise the section, I realised the form was too smooth, too literary. It didn’t reflect the edginess of the scribe’s character and his crisis of faith. My rolling tetrameters felt too calm; I wanted something more irregular, more hesitant, spiky or fractured. As I stared out of the window for days on end, a thought eventually appeared: a memory of the anonymous Old Irish texts – brief glosses and poems – that were written in the margins of manuscripts. One of them, for example, is a scribe’s relief at the onset of bad weather:

‘Bitter is the wind tonight,  
It tosses the ocean’s white hair:  
Tonight I fear not the fierce warriors of Norway  
Coursing on the Irish sea.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> From the margin of the St Gall Priscian MS, p. 112, translated here by Kuno Meyer, *Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry* (London: Constable, 1913, 2nd ed.) p. 101.

Another evokes a scribe's distraction from his work by the natural world:

'A hedge of trees surrounds me,  
A blackbird's lay sings to me;  
Above my lined booklet  
The trilling birds chant to me.'<sup>9</sup>

These quatrains feel like spontaneous effusions of monks reined in by monastic discipline and injunctions such as those of Cassiodorus, for whom the task of copying texts constituted a battle against the devil: 'Every word a scribe writes about the Lord inflicts a wound on Satan.'<sup>10</sup> In this way, my lovingly constructed tetrameters were dismantled and, instead, a series of verses appeared resembling scriptural marginals, revealing the story – inner and outer – of Scribe B's state of mind. For example:

'Words copied in rage, blotch.  
Words written in silence  
can still be full of noise.

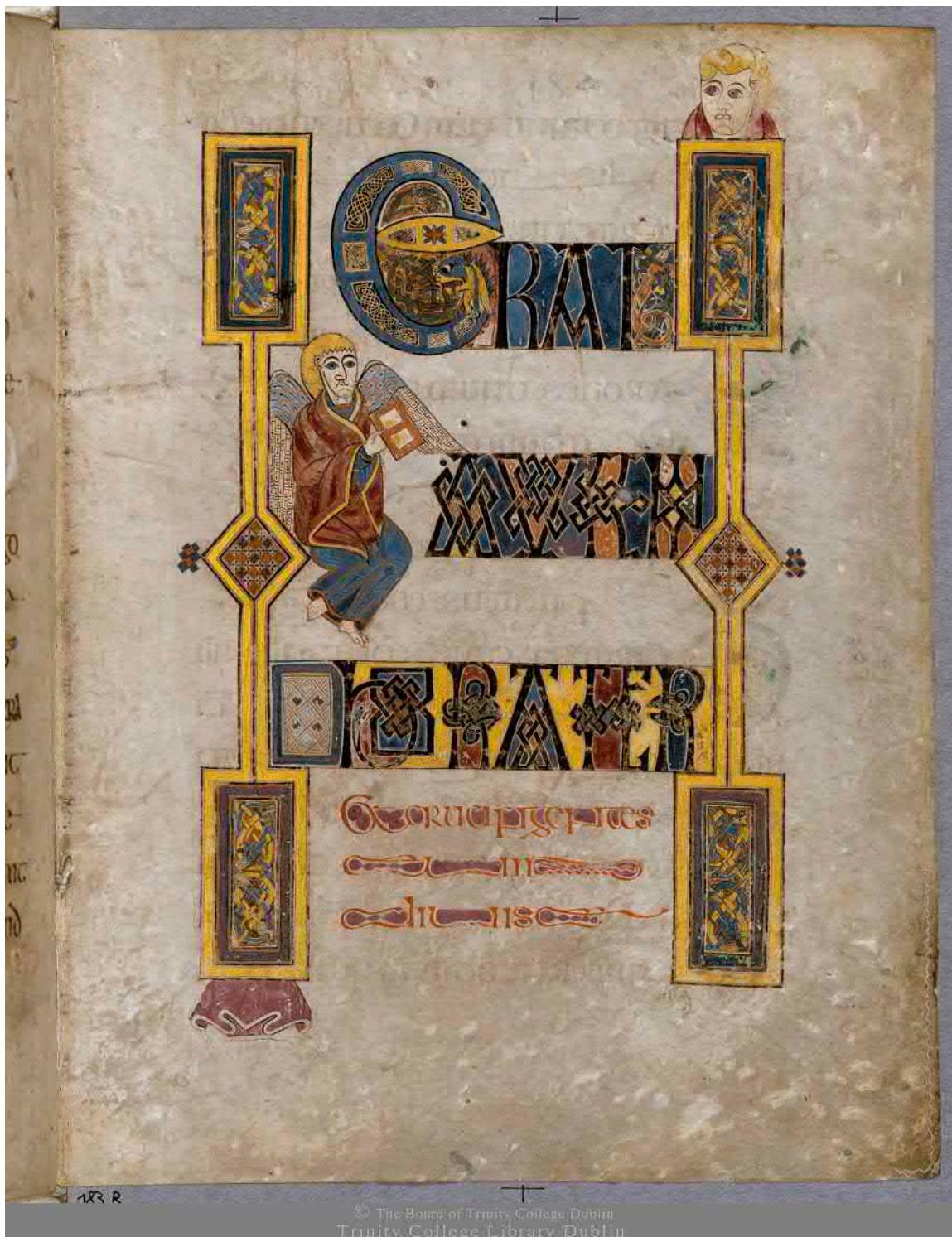
'Outside: wagtails, bees,  
whitethorn, hazel.  
Inside: nibs, liquid soot.'

For a good long while Scribe B became dominant in my life, and the best thing for me to do was listen to him, treating him rather like a rescue dog and hoping he would divulge his past and why he copied '*et crucifigentes eum divide-*' into the empty window in his manuscript.

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<sup>9</sup> From St Gall, p. 203, trans. Meyer, p. 99.

<sup>10</sup> Cassiodorus, *Institutiones*, Bk 1, ch. 30: 'Tot enim uulnera Satanas accipit, quot antiquarius Domini uerba describit'. The Latin text can be found on the [digilibt.uniupo.it](http://digilibt.uniupo.it) website.



*Below the formal, intricate and interlocking letters of 'Erat / autem / hora tercia', set out on three descending rows, Scribe B has written in red ink 'et crucifigentes / eum / divise-', also on three rows. Mysteriously, he copied this phrase from the page opposite (not shown); 'eum' and 'divise-' are so protracted that they are difficult to distinguish at first. The letters 'look like ribbons caught in the wind and his drawn-out, high-prowed U in eum like a longship on the waves'.*

*Book of Kells, folio 186r., Mark: 15:25, (c) The Board of Trinity College Dublin.*



The first two parts of my poem concentrated on creators of Kells. To balance them, as outlined above, I wanted to enlist two witnesses of the book, and explore, among other matters, whether sacred art can transform those who come into contact with it. Can art effect a profound change in the self in the way that Simone Weil had a conversion experience on reading George Herbert's poem 'Love (III)'<sup>11</sup>? Was, and is, the Book of Kells just a work of delightful ornamentation, or can it effect a change in us at a mental, emotional or spiritual level?

As I contemplated which witnesses might suit my purpose, I remembered reading how the medieval churchman Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrensis) was once shown an illuminated gospel book in Kildare in about 1185. As I explored this I discovered that some scholars thought it possible he might have been looking at the Book of Kells itself. Even if he hadn't seen Kells, his recorded reaction to this Kildare book indicated it possessed the same astonishing beauty.

With the tentative possibility of Gerald as a witness, I delved into his life and found a complex character. He was born in Wales in about 1146 to a Norman knight named William de Barri; his maternal grandmother was a Welsh princess named Nest (or Nesta), who was regarded as the Welsh Helen of Troy and became the mistress of Henry I<sup>12</sup>. Even as a child Gerald wanted to be a priest – when playing on the beach he would make sand *churches* instead of castles; it's no wonder his father took to calling him 'the little bishop'<sup>13</sup>. Later, after a monastic education and a period of study in Paris, Gerald rose up the ecclesiastic ranks, obsessively hoping he would one day become bishop of St David's in Wales. In 1185 he was ordered by King Henry II to chaperone his son, Prince John, on a tour of Ireland, only about fifteen years after the Anglo-Normans had invaded the country. After his visit, Gerald wrote his *Topographia Hibernica*, a book purporting to describe the geography and culture of Ireland but thought to have had the ulterior purpose of portraying the Irish as barbarians and thereby justifying the invasion of the country.

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<sup>11</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1951) pp. 68-69.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales: A Voice of the Middle Ages* (Stroud: Tempus, 2006), p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> F. X. Martin, 'Gerald of Wales: Norman Reporter on Ireland', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* Vol. 58, No. 231 (Autumn, 1969), pp. 279-292.

Over the following years Gerald repeatedly tried to become bishop of St David's, making three long exhausting treks to Rome to petition the pope in person to argue his case. He failed on each occasion. He finally retired to a monastery, probably at Lincoln, where he longed for a life of peace, prayer and contemplation. Before he ended his days, in 1223, perhaps he reflected on the sentiment expressed by the lines of an Irish scribe, written at the bottom of a gospel book, a few centuries before his time:

'There is a heavy toll  
Involved in journeying to Rome  
And very little gain.

The king you wish to find in Rome  
You'll seek and seek in vain  
Unless he travels in your soul.'<sup>14</sup>

Gerald had the makings of an interesting voice, not least because of his reaction to the Kildare book as well as his reflections on art. Although his *Topographia* sets out to make the Irish sound brutish, he cannot resist showing his admiration for Irish music, describing how Irish harp players 'glide so subtly from one mode to another, and the grace notes so freely sport with such abandon and bewitching charm around the steady tone of the heavier sound, that the perfection of their art seems to lie in their concealing it, as if it were the better for being hidden. An art revealed, brings shame.'<sup>15</sup> His reference to art alludes to Ovid's dictum: 'If art is concealed, it has a good effect. If it can be seen, it brings shame.'<sup>16</sup> Although Gerald directed the remark towards harp playing, it could also be applied to the gospel book he was shown in Kildare. For Gerald, this work was so full of marvels that he declared it had to be the work of angels, not human beings. Perhaps he was swayed by the story told to him

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<sup>14</sup> My version of lines written at the bottom of fol. 23v of the 9th-century gospel book, Codex Boernerianus, and translated by Kuno Mayer, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>15</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John O'Meara (London: Penguin Books, 1982), Book 3, Ch. 94, p.104.

<sup>16</sup> Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* (II. 313): '*Si latet, ars prodest: adfert deprensa pudorem.*'

about the book's creation: that a monastic scribe, the night before he was due to paint a page of the book, saw in his dream an angel, who showed him a tablet engraved with various images, including silver circles enclosing gold threads, with lines crossing between the circles. The angel asked the monk if he could copy what he saw, and on receiving a 'no', told him to pray to St Brigid. The following night, the monk found he was able to paint the angel's tablet: beauty, we are led to believe, is not 'original invention' but consists of copying the archetype.<sup>17</sup> I could sense reflections about sacred art emerging from this story that would snake back to themes in the first two sections, and which would potentially reach forward to the final one.

So Gerald became the dominant voice of the third section, and Kildare was the place. All I needed was a Kells page as a focus. Which one might have affected Gerald the most, stirring up conflict between his devotion to scholarship and spirituality, and his ecclesiastical ambitions? I mused on this for a while, and the idea of *temptation* kept recurring. One particular Kells page then insisted on my attention: The Temptation of Christ, who is depicted on a stylised Temple of Jerusalem, confronting the devil. Gerald's life was one long battle against temptation – by the world, by ambition and ecclesiastical power. Self-righteous, self-publicising, self-pitying, he was a man who needed to experience the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. Perhaps the astonishing piece of sacred art he saw in Kildare had had this effect on him? I decided to let this question ferment in my mind and see what would happen.

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<sup>17</sup> O'Meara, *op. cit.*, Book 2, Chs. 71-72, pp. 84-85.



*Crowned with a halo and surmounted by two angels, Christ, atop a stylised depiction of the Temple of Jerusalem, is tempted by a scrawny-looking Satan to jump off the temple to demonstrate that the angels will save him (Luke: 4.9–13). Recent research has shown that at some point the figure of Satan was cut by about twenty small incisions, perhaps indicating that a scribe or reader of Kells took to heart the advice of Cassiodorus that ‘Every word a scribe writes about the Lord inflicts a wound on Satan’.*

*Book of Kells, folio 202v., (c) The Board of Trinity College Dublin.*

For the fourth and final part of the poem, I decided to introduce a contemporary voice as a witness, someone who goes on a pilgrimage to see Kells in its display room in Trinity College Dublin; someone whose modern sensibility would make a contrast with Goldsmith, Scribe B and Gerald but would be connected with them by his witness. What would he have to say about the book? Would his reaction to the pages be similar to that of Gerald of Wales? Which page would he see?

This final section weighed heavily on me because I had lived with the poem for so long – about 19 years, on and off – that I didn't want it to end. My various drafts down the years had reflected my prevailing mood and world view; the poem developed or stagnated as I did. Also, as well as being a section in its own right, the final part had to encapsulate the themes of the previous three sections and be a keystone, just as 'Little Gidding' draws together the threads in Eliot's previous three Quartets.

As days, weeks, months went past, I mused on how the Book of Kells had altered in my perception; and also how the perception of it by modern witnesses must be significantly different from those seeing it a thousand or even a hundred years ago. For a start, modern witnesses have to contend with catching glimpses of copies of Kells before seeing the actual work; in the Trinity College gift shop there are postcards, calendars, key-rings, jigsaws, mouse mats, colouring books all offering second-hand and edited versions of the book. This made me think about the banalisation of art, as well as a theme in the first section – the Neoplatonic ideal that the artist should keep a steady eye on the source or archetype of his or her object of creation. Also, I kept returning to the Cistercian view of art as a distraction. For me, the apophatic voice – which, taken to an extreme, would result in silence instead of music, blank canvasses and pages instead of paintings and poems – is always lurking; not quite strong enough to stop me having a go at writing poetry, but effective enough to make me frequently wonder whether any artistic endeavour has the validity its creators invest in it.

Other themes returned to this final section too. One was the notion of 'home' – I have always been struck by the moment when Rilke entered Toledo for the first time and found the city felt so familiar that it was as if he was putting on an old coat. Another was the ideal of pilgrimage favoured by Irish saints known as *peregrini*, who set out in



coracles without oars, letting a divinely-guided wind guide their course. Pilgrimage without an end in view seemed to me like Krishnamurti's 'pathless country'.

I was saved from ultimate indecision regarding this last section by knowing I had to choose a Kells page for this character – whom I tentatively named 'Scribbler' – as well as a place. Once again I studied the illuminations, and once again a page thrust itself forward: the opening of John's gospel, '*In principio erat verbum*' ('In the beginning was the word'). A beginning for the ending of the poem had a feeling of full circle about it; and with '*verbum*' referring not only to a manuscript 'word' but an organising principle of consciousness and life – as the original Greek λόγος does – the page felt propitious.

As the final section got under way, Scribbler duly makes his way towards Trinity College on a winter's day, close to Christmas. Needless to say, his experience is different from that of Gerald's, but one that has an equally profound effect: his sudden exposure to the Kells page, under pressure from a queue of people behind him, results in an explosive absorption of what he sees. Afterwards he sets out into the wintry streets of Dublin, letting his feet take him wheresoever they will, so that he can assimilate the experience. He later attempts to write about *In Principio*, trying to resist the type of sentiment expressed by the 17th-century French Jansenist, Jean Hamon: 'It is incomparably easier to love if one remains silent than if one talks. The care of searching for words greatly obstructs the movement of the heart.'<sup>18</sup> However, faced with the awfulness of the blank page – just as Goldsmith had been – he begins to doodle a face. His scribbles turn into a female face, and in that spontaneous present time which doodling epitomises, he finds himself materialising a figure who eventually finds a voice. All he can do is listen to her dictation and surmise what sort of entity, or energy, or being, has arrived on the page. He calls her 'Verbum', for want of a better name, and her words stir Scribbler into a whirl of thoughts – about art, the trajectory of life, pilgrimage, fate, and the divine – that eventually bring a final silence to the voices jostling to be heard throughout the four sections of the poem.

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<sup>18</sup> Jean Hamon, *Traité de Piété*, 1689, ii, p. 467, quoted in Henri Brémond, *Prayer & Poetry: A Contribution to Poetical Theory* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1927), p. 200.



*An unidentified melancholic figure sits on top of the words, 'In principio erat verbum', which begin John's gospel. The column on the left edge forms the I of In and also doubles as the left-hand vertical of N. The blue, right vertical of N also doubles as the stem of P, centre right; and the diagonal linking the two uprights of the N is made from the circle, cross and circle beneath the topmost figure. The letters that follow – R, I, N, C are shown as mostly beige serpentine figures tangled in decoration; the blue seated figure, far right, looking as if he's playing the C as a harp, is another I. Below these letters, PIO ERAT VERBUM are shown in black on two rows. Book of Kells, folio 292r., (c) The Board of Trinity College Dublin.*

As a postscript, I should say that this account of writing about Kells is only a sketch of what was an intermittent process of creation over nearly twenty years. As all artists will probably affirm, the *making* of the art is the thing; the end result is bound to disappoint, because the medium is never equal to the subject matter in hand. A 'tree' is never a tree. But 'for us there is only the trying,' as TS Eliot said. Artists carry on in the hope that their creative endeavour will cleanse the doors of perception and reveal the Infinite. The way of art, however, may not be the royal road to ultimate truth. The *via negativa* of the mystics might be the road less travelled, but it could also be the one that in its disentanglement from the world is best able to lead us to Otherness. And it may not be a path at all. As Verbum whispers in the ear of Scribbler:

'Remember this: I do not have  
a name or face, or form,  
and words and paint prolong the lie  
that I can be depicted: I am beyond  
all sense of what 'beyond' can mean.  
To know me you must close your eyes  
and leave the road of affirmation,  
the road of thinking and imagining:  
just be a pilgrim to yourself,  
alert, not knowing where to go,  
but trusting in your ignorance  
and travelling inward all the time.  
Watch out for clues and signs – observe  
how spirals of your thoughts curl round,  
the interlace of hopes and fears  
feed off each other endlessly,  
watch circles of your good intentions  
revolving ineffectually,  
the nibbling mice of jealousy  
and hissing serpent of resentment –  
just watch your convoluting self

proliferate without your intervening  
until it dies away to nothing  
but silence and a glowing stillness,  
as a stone exudes warm summer light;  
and in that pregnant emptiness  
you may just glimpse me  
but only unexpectedly  
like half a glance at sunshafts  
erupting in a neighbouring field;  
and if you see me you've become  
the unstained love you sought in me –  
then who is who?  
The eyes through which you see are mine.'





**'Tunc crucifixerant xpi cum eo duos latrones'**

*('Then they crucified Christ along with two thieves'). Matthew 27:28.*

*The Book of Kells, folio 124r. (c) The Board of Trinity College Dublin.*

**Easter 2021**