

The Book of Kells in *Finnegans Wake*

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I

James Joyce's last work *Finnegans Wake* attracted more and more attention from contemporary critics like Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Ihab Habib Hassan, Julia Kristeva, and Harold Bloom et al.. It is regarded as the forerunner of postmodern literature. Ihab Hassan even declared that the postmodern writers would not distinguish themselves from former writers without *Finnegans Wake* (Hassan 183). However, some details in *Finnegans Wake* could be better explained in medieval aesthetics. In *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce*, Umberto Eco declared that "a medieval rhythm runs unobserved under the entire discourse of the book" (81). He even called James Joyce "the last of the medieval monks" (81). This would bring readers familiar with Joyce naturally to Thomas Aquinas, whose idea influenced young Joyce quite a lot. However, Umberto Eco believes that the Book of Kells is much more important here than Thomas Aquinas. He believed that it was with those medieval works like the Book of Kells that Joyce got a real understanding of the medieval spirit, which helped

him to go further than the high modernism and the neoclassical pursuit of objectivity.

The night life of a family in a small Dublin inn is described in *Finnegans Wake*, which contains several subjects: the father HCE's sin and his trial, the two sons' love of their little sister as well as the battle between them, the story of the mother which connects with a letter scratched out by a hen too. This hen "was scratching at the hour of klokking twelve looked for this entire zogzag world like a goodish-sized sheet of letterpaper" (*FW* 111). This sentence can also be interpreted as this hen "was searching on the hour of twelve o'clock looking for this entire zigzag (polysemous) words [contained in] God-sized sheets of paper [with] letters in them". Joyce implies in *Finnegans Wake* that this letter of the dimension of God or of God's lofty is Ireland's holy book, the Book of Kells. At least it declares on page 122 that this letter "inspiring the tenebrous Tunc page of the Book of Kells" (*FW* 122). The Book of Kells was also buried in the ground like a sealed letter in the history. When it was exhumed centuries later, like the letter scratched out by the hen, it was destroyed and eclipsed in disrepair. The four elderly men abbreviated as MMLJ in *Finnegans Wake* are the incarnation of the four authors of the "Four Gospels". Part of the content of the letter imitates the quaint language that Sir Edward Sullivan used to describe the Book of Kells (*FW* 119-123). Sir Edward Sullivan was a former governor of Ireland (Lord Chancellor of Ireland). His comment on the Book of Kells was published posthumously and became an important book in the study of the Book of Kells. Since the letter scratched out by the hen is also *Finnegans Wake* itself, the interpretation of the letter, or the interpretation of the Book of Kells, is to some extent the interpretation of *Finnegans Wake* too. From this viewpoint, it is very much appropriate for Umberto Eco to analyze the medieval spirit of *Finnegans Wake* with the Book of Kells.

II

Joyce put Homer's *Odyssey* as a parallel in *Ulysses*, while in *Finnegans Wake* he turned to the Book of Kells as a new historical metaphor. Why, then, did Joyce turned to medieval arts? The obvious answer is of course that the Book of Kells has been regarded as the representative of Irish culture. Though Joyce had spent the rest of his life abroad since 1904, he would inevitably turn to Irish culture as resources for his literary creation with all his works writing about Ireland. Joyce said that "[i]n all the places I have been to, Rome, Zurich, Trieste, I have taken it [the Book of Kells] about with me, and have pored over its workmanship for hours. It is the most purely Irish thing we have....Indeed, you can compare much of my work to the intricate illuminations" (Ellmann 545). The Book of Kells is clearly not only his material resource but also his artistic model. Joyce gave *Finnegans Wake* the same sacred status as the Book of Kells, one the mysterious metaphor of the fate of mankind and the other the holy teaching of the life of mankind.

However, a careful analysis of the Book of Kells would show that it influences *Finnegans Wake* more than that. The Book of Kells is parodied as a letter scratched out by a hen. Although there are lots of metaphorical animals in the Book of Kells, the hen only appears on page 67 in the Book of Kells. A rooster and two hens are painted below the first line on that page. The words here tell Jesus' parable of the sower¹). At the end of this chapter, the disciples of Jesus interpreted his parable as:

1) "Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower. When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended. He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful." (Matt. 13:18-22)

“He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one.”²⁾ There is no conclusion why the cock and the hens are painted here, though this picture is of much concern in the Book of Kells. Some remarked that the two men fighting in the initial U on the line below might represent the “wicked one” (malignus) who interferes with the seed (Henry 174). Since Joyce had spent days after days pondering a copy of the Book of Kells when he wrote *Ulysses* (Ellmann 559), and since *Finnegans Wake* had clearly been inspired by the Book of Kells too, when Joyce repeated his time to read the Book of Kells during his creation of *Finnegans Wake*, he was very possible to conjure up the motif of the hen while looking at this picture. Taking this picture and the words around it together, the Book of Kells could be regarded as the seeds buried in the ground by God, and the rooster and the hens painted here as men pecking the seeds from the earth. If only the rooster and the hens looking for food could find and dig out seeds from the ground, only men looking for spiritual food could find the truth in *Finnegans Wake*. Holy word is hidden underground and with weeds. One must search them carefully. This also explains the intricate form of *Finnegans Wake* and indicates the way to interpret it: readers must find hidden meaning in between the long-winded lines. The most obvious example of this is the HCE, the three-letter abbreviation, hidden from the start to the end in *Finnegans Wake* and readers must look carefully to find the link between the seemingly scattered fragments.

Many Joyceans interpreted HCE’s sin committed in the Phoenix Park as the original sin of mankind. HCE is regarded as the incarnation of Adam. However, considering the Book of Kells, we can more clearly see the correspondence between HCE and Jesus Christ. In *Finnegans Wake*, HCE has many images, among which the one throughout the book is the salmon. Salmon is also painted from time to time in the Book of Kells and is one of the main symbols of Christ. The text of

2) The interpretation of this part got the help of Professor Liu Qianmei at Department of East Asia, the University of Toronto, Canada on her lecture of “Medieval Religious Art and Aesthetics” at Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan.

the Book of Kells is “Four Gospels”, describing the deeds of Christ, his crucifixion and his resurrection. Similarly, *Finnegans Wake* has four chapters, describing the deeds of HCE, his trial and his resurrection. HCE’s sin not only corresponds to the original sin, but also corresponds to the charges given to Christ by the Pharisees. This may explain why HCE’s sin is not described in *Finnegans Wake*. The only description is the trial and rumor of HCE by the citizens. During the trial different opinions appeared but no conclusion was drawn. In fact in the Passion of Christ, what is important is not the sin committed. Christ must be considered “guilty” and be crucified in order to atone for the mankind. In *Finnegans Wake*, rumors about HCE are related to his execution, bury, the missing corpse, and the legend of the resurrection, which are very similar to the stories in the “Four Gospels”. Therefore *Finnegans Wake* could be read as a modern version of the “Four Gospels”.

Though HCE represents many religious, political, military, physical, spiritual “father” figures and leaders in history, his identity of Christ, with the relating suffer, is one of the central themes in *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce disliked the Christian churches, and even refused to kneel down and prayed for his dying mother, refused to marry his wife Nora in church, refused to have his children baptized, but what Joyce rejected is a set of Christian rituals maintained by the churches rather than the Christian thoughts. It is more like Cranly’s description of Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve” (Joyce, *Reader* 511). If Stephen’s experience were to some extent Joyce’s own experience, Joyce’s antipathy to Christianity had begun in the resentment of some priests, and followed by regarding the Christian belief as a net to his free spirit. However, no criticism of the Bible and its basic idea of the original sin and salvation could be found in Joyce’s works. When Bloom argued with those Irish chauvinists in *Ulysses*, his argument based on the Christian fraternity, which was also the rule of all his behavior that day except for his dream in the brothel. His love to his betrayal wife, his understanding of the seducing lame girl, his sympathy to the dead Pag and his family, all followed the Christian fraternity. Joyce might abandon the identity of a believer, but had not abandoned

the fundamental idea of Christianity. Christian thoughts could even be a basic view for him to understand the world.

However, it does not follow that Joyce would reconstruct the Christian theology in *Finnegans Wake*. It does not mean that he would return to the Middle Ages and reconstruct the medieval theology either. Joyce extremely respected the Italian atheist philosopher Giordano Bruno and built the worldview in *Finnegans Wake* primarily on Bruno's dialectics. This worldview shows his skepticism to Christianity, or rather, shows his ambivalent attitude to it. Therefore, the interpretation of the Book of Kells in *Finnegans Wake* should not confine to the literal meaning of the Four Gospels. Using the Book of Kells as a parallel to *Finnegans Wake* does not indicate Joyce's reaffirmation of the teachings in the Four Gospels. The Book of Kells in *Finnegans Wake* should be understood more as a symbol of the medieval art and aesthetics. Though the medieval aesthetics can not be separated completely from the teachings of Christianity, there are two different levels of medieval aesthetics: one is completely limited to the teachings of Christianity; another is the medieval aesthetics influenced by Christian thoughts, which keeps the spirit of Christianity but does not fully abide by the teachings. Joyce apparently accepted the latter.

III

Umberto Eco remarked that "the Middle Ages were still, and always would be, his [Joyce's] vocation and destiny" (79). The "Middle Ages" here could also be understood from an aesthetic point of view. Umberto Eco listed the medieval aesthetic characteristics of *Finnegans Wake* in his *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce*, such as "The medieval meandertale is the model of the labyrinth upon which Joyce constructed his book" (79); "It was from these Middle Ages that Joyce developed the taste for etymology...Here Joyce learned that once one verifies a causal resemblance between two words, the resemblance

becomes a profound necessity which finds an essential kinship not only between the terms but between the two realities” (80); “The technique of concealing the figure of HCE under 216 different verbal disguises is also medieval” (81); “it utilizes any assertion as a demonstration of the eternal truth” (81). Though Joyce’s truth is no longer the one that those medieval monks and schoolmen adhered to, the medieval belief of eternal truth let Joyce to put eternal truth in *Finnegans Wake*, rather than faithfully recording the historical moments.

As to the Book of Kells itself, what influences *Finnegans Wake* most are the lines and patterns which are of rich connotations. Some of those lines and patterns in the Book of Kells are serious religious images, and some are humorous secular patterns. These rich images and patterns entangle together to construct a rich world. It is the aesthetic world of the Book of Kells that gives Joyce a model of the entire human world in *Finnegans Wake*. *Finnegans Wake* is as heterogeneous and rich as the paintings in the Book of Kells. The beauty and variety of the heterogeneous and rich world in *Finnegans Wake* result from the richness and variety which form an important part of the medieval aesthetics.

The pictures in the Book of Kells are numerous and diverse. Except for the allegorical meanings that most Biblical manuscripts have, drawings in the Book of Kells have a highly decorative style, with the unique spiral and knot-work ornaments in Celtic culture. Patterns in the Book of Kells are rich and intricate, highly variant, but the basic patterns can be found in the earlier Celtic manuscripts, such as the gill pattern in the Book of Durham. Even so, the Book of Kells is considered “the best example of this vitality and creativity, which are so necessary to a living and growing tradition” (A. Meehan 58).

The vitality and creativity of the Book of Kells first comes from the richness of its patterns and colors. Different from the large “blank” parts in classical Chinese paintings, the images in the Book of Kells are extraordinarily dense, even to the extent of cumbersome, according to the Chinese view. The text has been decorated to every detail. Even the simplest part can contain equally rich layers of patterns. Give the only picture of Our Lady in the Book of Kells as an example. The picture

is surrounded by a rectangular frame. The frame itself is filled up with the unique animal spiral patterns in Celtic art. Careful identifying could find at least lions and snakes. The colors are red, green, blue, and yellow, with many changes. Having decorated in this way, the painters did not stop at the picture frame itself still. In the lower right part of the frame a small picture was put into, composed of six Celtic male heads, identities unknown, estimated to be ordinary men. This small picture likes a small window open on the whole holy religious world, a “picture-in-picture” or the “abyss structure”, bringing the audience from the holy world to the secular world behind.

The main part inside the frame is also divided into two layers. The inner layer is the Son and the Virgin sitting on the throne. The back of the throne is decorated with the unique bird-shaped spirals in Celtic art. The aura of Our Lady is filled with decorative patterns and colors too. In the outer layer are four angels, with different shapes and colors, occupying the four corners of the main picture. On the central top is the heaven. In most Biblical pictures, heaven is blank because of its sanctity, while in the Book of Kells, this semicircular heaven is also richly decorated with the unique lion spiral. Similarly, the painters will not leave the left and right sides of the main part undecorated and put two semi-circles with humanoid spiral inside there. The composition of this picture is completely different from the Chinese pursuit of the pure theme. The aesthetics of the paintings in the Book of Kells is to incorporate things as much as possible, to incorporate the rich world in one picture.

The rich animal and human patterns in the Book of Kells also obey the characteristic style of incorporating the extensive world in one work. There are not only religious symbolic animals, such as snakes, salmons, phoenixes, doves which are the symbols of Christ, and angels, cows, lions and eagles which are the symbols of the four gospels, but also cats, mice, dogs, rabbits, flying moths, lizards, sheep, rooster and hens, etc.. Some researchers believed that these animals appeared in the book because they were much common in the monastery and the monks were easy to use them as prototypes (B. Meehan 74). Regardless of the intent, the emergence

of these non-religious images in the Book of Kells makes the book a world both holy and profane.

There are not only rich images in the Book of Kells, the patterns change frequently too. Even the letter “&” has more than 20 kinds of writing (A. Meehan 90-98). Although the difference might result from different painting hands, these changes also reveal the pursuit of variety. Considering that this is a Gospel book telling eternal truth, this change is especially important. It shows a different understanding of the eternal truth and indicates the efforts of the painters to bring the eternal being and the changing world together.

This richness, intricateness, change as well as the combination of the holy and the profane in the Book of Kells reflect an important aesthetic idea contained in the medieval religious arts. The Medieval art has not abandoned all worldly beauty and simplified the life into the effort of going to the heaven as many thought. Instead, it looks for a sense of awe and sublime in richness, in order to display the wholeness and sacredness of God. What is important to the painters of the Book of Kells is not to bring the viewers the aesthetic pleasure, but the feeling of the sublime in the sense of awe.

The richness, intricateness, change, as well as the combination of the holy and the profane in the Book of Kells have been fully represented in *Finnegans Wake*. I have made detailed illustrations to these features on four levels in my *Book of Freedom: Reading Finnegans Wake* and will only give a brief summary here.

The most complicated part in *Finnegans Wake* is the self-made words which include almost 50 languages. The main components of the self-made words are the portmanteau words, transformed words, combined words and nomenclatures which are used ungrammatically and arbitrarily. Joyce created these new words to give one word as much meanings as possible. The potentiality of infinite explanation makes the book a literary world richer than all the usual ones.

As to the narration, Joyce created a loquacious narrator in *Finnegans Wake* completely different from any one in his early works. Here Joyce turned the objective ‘showing’ to the narrator’s ‘telling’, turned the narrator remaining behind

the text into a stylistic ‘story-teller’. Using the almost tedious narrative technique of repetition, enumeration, description, cliché and successively negation and modification, he made the narrative in *Finnegans Wake* ‘the runs (or throws) of speech’, and as rich as possible.

Finnegans Wake has a sequentially cycling structure on the whole basing on Vico’s view of a sequentially cycling history. This view of cycling history makes the individual transcends the limit of the special time and space he lives and obtain the feeling of the universality and the eternity. At the same time, Joyce built the poly-dimensional and intersecting time-roads with the intricate relations of chapters, paragraphs and sentences by making the identities and the meanings in *Finnegans Wake* poly-dimensional. Joyce also digressed deliberately from the logical relations of paragraphs and sentences to create another space outside the closed text. All of these give the text an open and undetermined structure.

After all these, Joyce created a style “collideorscape” (kaleidoscope) (14) in *Finnegans Wake* by the collages of parts of different genres and by the carnivallike transfer between different genres.

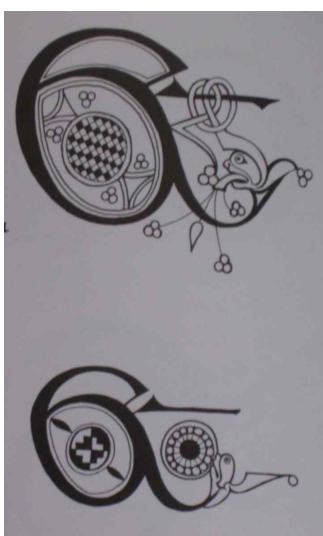
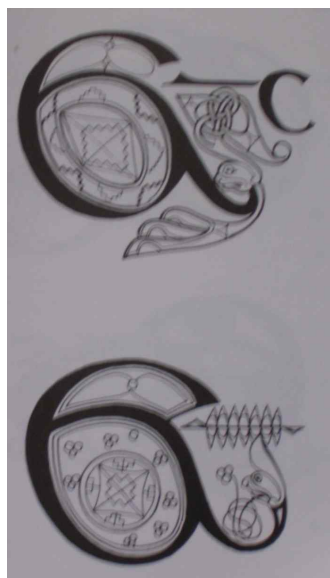
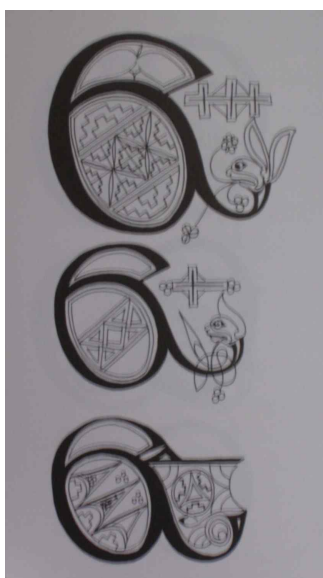
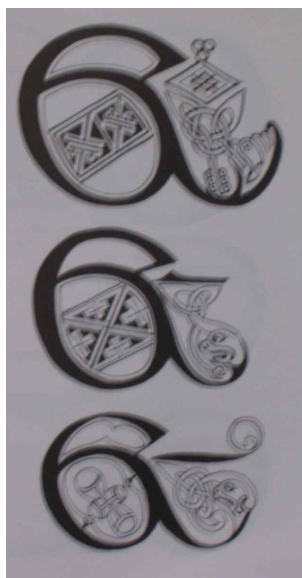
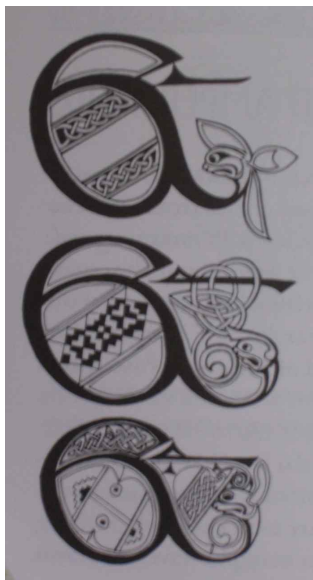
I believe that what Joyce pursues in *Finnegans Wake* is to create a rich universe, not to purify the reality according to the neoclassical principle of harmony and beauty; “Joyce not only tries to create an art world in *Finnegans Wake*, but also a real universe. His creation is not an artificial world similar to a garden or a park, but the Nature itself. In a garden, the landscape is purified, compressed, transformed, and orderly arranged according to aesthetic principles. However, a real masterpiece should be similar to the real Nature” (Dai 125). In fact, different from Joyce's early works, especially different from his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Finnegans Wake* conveys a sense of medieval sublime and awe, which could be found in the Book of Kells too. As an important source of these aesthetics, the Book of Kells should not be ignored in the *Finnegans Wake* study.

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<Illustrations>



AbstractThe Book of Kells in *Finnegans Wake*

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The Book of Kells is not only a leitmotif in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, but also a thematic and an aesthetic source of it. The two hens painted in the Book of Kells inspire both the hen described in *Finnegans Wake* as well as the idea of hidden truth which leads to the difficult style of *Finnegans Wake*. The connection between these two books indicates the connection between HCE and Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the richness and variation of *Finnegans Wake* could better be understood with the rich and varied decorations in the Book of Kells, which shows an aesthetic difference from that of high modernism.

■ Key words : James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, the Book of Kells

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