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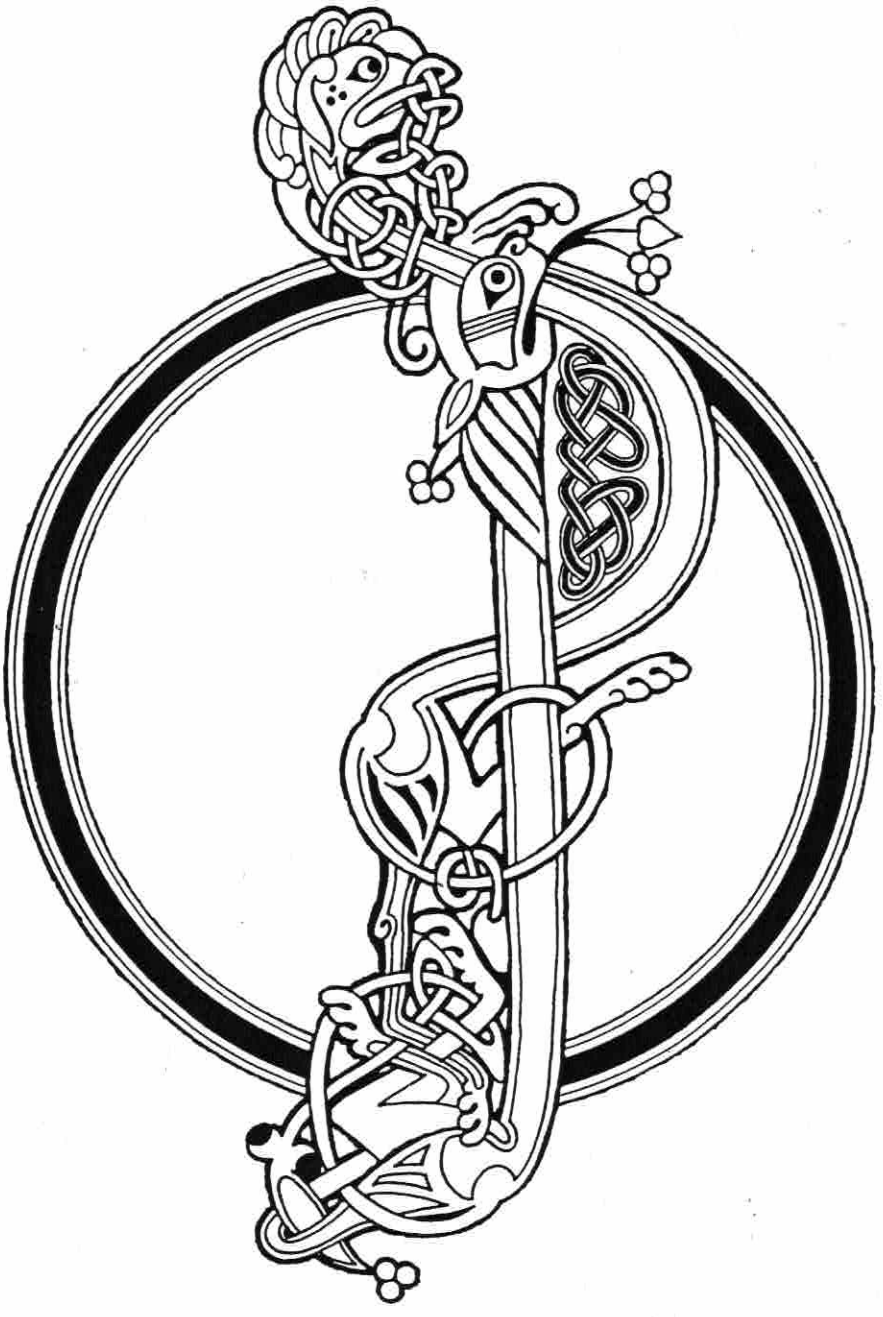
Essays, articles, short stories, poems



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Was James Joyce the Father of (the Architecture of) Deconstruction?

by Lindsay Johnston

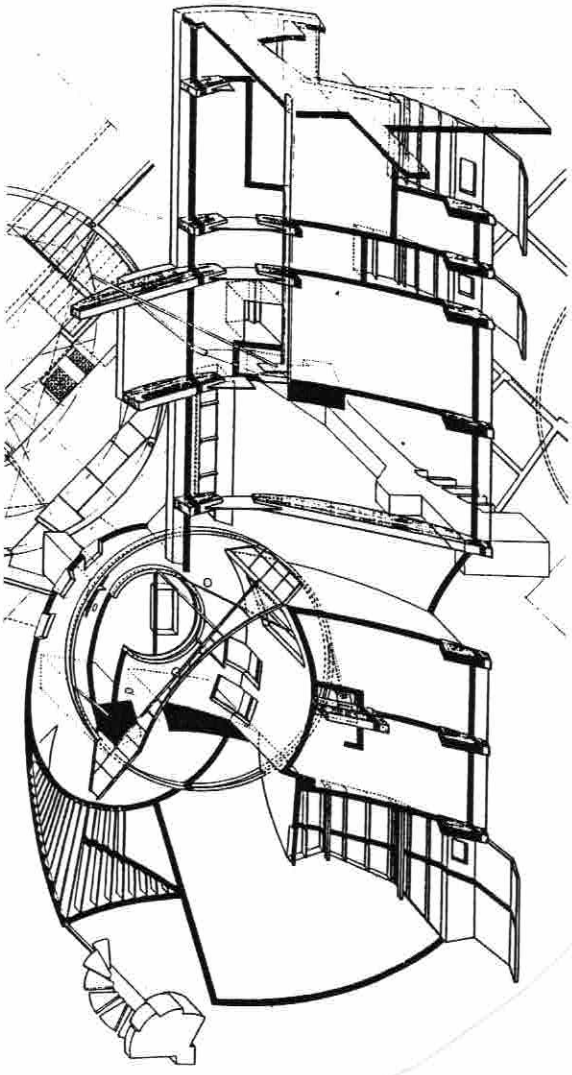
Irish or Celtic culture can be traced from the early buildings of Ireland, some dating from before 3000 BC, through the dynamic graphics of the illuminated manuscripts of the *Book of Kells* and the *Book of Durrow.* Both books emanate from the depth of the Dark Ages, through early Irish philosophers such as John Scottus Eriugena in the ninth century who in turn influenced the fifteenth century German scholastic Nicholas of Cusa, and later through Irish philosophers such as George Berkeley and Charles Usher in the eighteenth century, to the writings of Shaw, Wilde, Yeats and, in particular, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett in the twentieth century.

Richard Kearney, Professor of Metaphysics at University College, Dublin, has postulated in the volume *The Irish Mind* (1985),

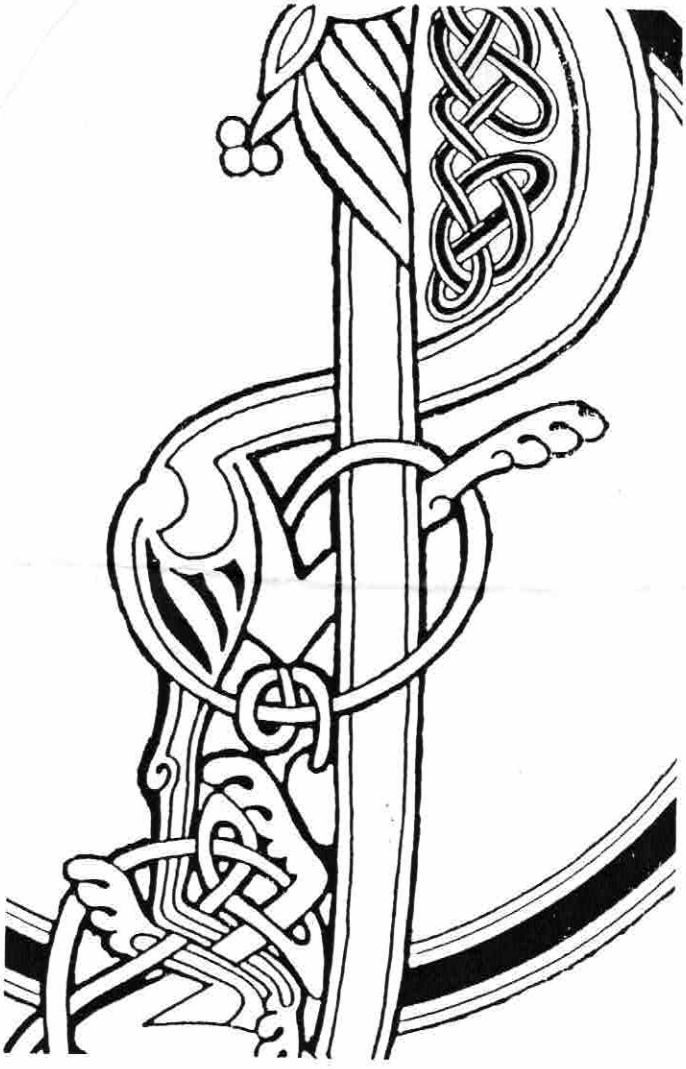
> From the earliest times, the Irish mind remained free, in significant measure, of the linear, centralising logic of the Graeco-Roman culture which dominated most of western Europe. ... In contradistinction to the orthodox dualist logic of *either/or*, the Irish mind may be seen to favour a more dialectical logic of *both/and*: an intellectual ability to hold the traditional oppositions of classical reason together in creative confluence.[1]

The magnificent pre-Celtic great burial mound and passage grave, 100 meters in diameter, at New Grange on the River Boyne in Ireland is one of the earliest extant buildings in the world. Dated at 3250 BC, it predates the Egyptian pyramids by five hundred years. This massive construction is full of *both/and*, and brings together the opposites of an uncanny rational cosmic understanding — the sunrise on the morning of the winter solstice shines through a slot over the entrance to illuminate the chamber at the centre of the mound — and intricate free-form spirals and motifs carved in the base stones, full of artistic gesture and imagination.

Nearly 3000 years after New Grange, Plato, following from Socrates, initiated the great Graeco-Roman tradition of *either/or* which has dominated western civilization since. Plato draws a 'Divided Line' which sections off the correct vision of knowledge, *episteme*, from the false vision of mere opinion, *doxa*. He places reason in the highest section of the Divided Line and imagina-



Eric Owen Moss. Lawson-Westen House. c. 2000 AD



Detail from the illustration from the Book of Kells

tion in the lowest. Whereas reason, *nous*, is accredited with the capacity to contemplate truth, imagination is relegated to the most inferior form of human opinion — what Plato calls *eikasia* or illusion. Only reason can access the transcendental Ideas. Imagination reflects only the things of our sensory world and is denounced by Plato as an agency of falsehood.[2]

The spiralling intricate motifs first demonstrated at New Grange recur in more elaborate and inventive form during the so-called Dark Ages, after the great eras of Greece and Rome, in the illuminated manuscripts of the *Book of Durrow*, dating from about 600 AD, and the *Book of Kells*, dating from about 800 AD. The dynamic of these motifs has been identified by Irish anthropologist Liam de Paor as counter classical and anarchic and full of imagination and the personal gesture of their creators.

> The order comes from within: this is the key to what is 'Celtic' in Irish art of the early Christian period. It cannot be imposed by T-square and set-square, nor marked off by numbers like the layout of a Roman camp, nor even guided by a development of harmonic modules like a Greek entablature: it spirals out from the heart of the design; it expresses neither essence nor being but constant becoming, and the artists must have as fully engaged in every veering line as in the planning of his overall design ... The *Book of Kells* is rightly famous as a supreme product of the final phase of this art. As difficult, and in some ways as alienating to the modern consciousness, as *Finnegans Wake*, it repels and fascinates because its order, barely controlling an explosive anarchy, allows us to glimpse the chaos at the heart of the universe which our own Romanized culture is at pains to conceal.[3]

At the same time as the Celtic scholars and artists were constructing the *Book of Kells*, a ninth century Irish scholar, John Scottus Eriugena, held,

> ex-centric and unconventional ... theories which transgressed the orthodox mainstream of Roman realism.[4]

One of Eriugena's theories was his insistence upon the pivotal role of man's free and creative intellect — Eriugena's system has been variously referred to by such modern writers as Shaw and Joyce. Joyce specifically championed Eriugena's heretical subversion of logic-centred philosophy in a lecture delivered in Trieste in 1907.

Although largely unrecognized in his own time, Eriugena's influence spread over several centuries, and the fifteenth century German scholastic Nicholas of Cusa recommended his students to study the writings of Eriugena. Nicholas of Cusa's *coincidentia oppositorum* and doctrine of *complicatio* challenged the Graeco-Roman elevation of reason over imagination and afforded the opportunity of opposites to coexist on equal terms.[5]

Other philosophers who followed Eriugena and Cusanus and held 'ex-centric and unconventional views', and who had later influence on, among others, James Joyce, were Nicolas Copernicus (1478-1543), Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), and Giambattista Vico (1688-1744). In the eighteenth century Eriugena's tradition of 'ex-centricity' continued in Irish philosophy through George Berkeley, Charles Usher and Edmund Burke.

Such 'ex-centricity' was complemented in the literary work of Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) and was continued in the literary world of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century by Irish writers. Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was 'burned at the stake' of Victorian moral values for his outrageous eccentric social behaviour. William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was closely associated with the great Irish cultural revival at the turn of the century and its ethnocentric romantic and, eventually, revolutionary movements; and in his later years wrote in *The Vision* on mysticism and on issues of objectivity and subjectivity, presenting a system of diagrams, using gyres.[6] James Joyce (1882-1941), who knew and was helped by Yeats,[7] also came in contact with the great Celtic revival and with figures such as Patrick Pearse (one of the leaders of the Easter rising of 1916), Maud Gonne and Lady Gregory. Joyce considered Yeats 'too old' and possibly insufficiently *avant garde*, but he was interested in his system of gyres which possibly related to Joyce's influence from Vico whose cycles form the structural basis for *Finnegans Wake*. Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), who was a friend and confidant of Joyce during the 1920s in Paris, went on to take up the mantle of Joyce, winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969.

It is the writings of James Joyce and, in particular *Finnegans Wake* (published in 1939), that has presented to the post-modern world this alienating anarchy, this *other*, of Irish-Celtic culture and way of thought which challenges the 'mainstream of hegemonic rationalism' of Graeco-Roman culture. In his book *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce*, Umberto Eco elaborates the influence that ancient Celtic culture had upon Joyce[8] and identifies the role of Joyce in the connection of the Medieval and modern or post-modern worlds, suggesting that Joyce 'was the node where the Middle Ages and the *avant garde* meet'.[9]

Only a few years before Eco's *Chaosmos* was first published in 1962, the French philosopher of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, spent a year in 1959 on a scholarship in the United States 'reading' *Finnegans Wake*. In 1980 Derrida made his first explicit reference to Joyce in *La Carte postale de Socrate a Freud et au-dela*, published in English in 1987 as *The Post Card*.

> I followed all the Babelian indications in Finnegans Wake and yesterday I wanted to take the plane to Zürich and read out loud sitting on his knees, starting with the beginning (Babel, the fall, and the Finn-Phoenician motif, *'the fall (bababadalgh) [...]. The great fall of the offwall entailed at such short notice the pftjschute of Finnegan [...] Phall if you will, rise you must: and none so soon either shall the pharce for the nunce come to a setdown secular phoenish* ...) up to the passage on Gigglotte's Hill and the Babbyl Malket toward the end, passing through *'The babbelers with their thangas vain have been (confusion hold them!) [...] Who ails*

tongue coddeau, aspace of dumbillsilly? And they fell apong one another: and themselves they have fallen ...' and through *'This battering babel allower the door and sideposts ...'* and the entire page up to *'Filons, filoosh! Chercons la flamme! Fammfamm! Fammfamm!'* through that passage that you know better than anyone (p.164) and in which I all of a sudden discover *'the babbling pumpt of platinism,'* through that other one around the *'turrace of Babbel,'* the entire passage about Anna Livia Plurabelle, translated in part, in which you will find things that are absolutely unheard of; and that everything that comes around *'A ans aa ab ad abu abiad. A babbel men dub gulch of tears.'* or around *And shall not Babel be with Lebab? And he war. And he shall open his mouth and answer: I hear, O Ismail ... and he deed ...'* up to *'O Loud ... Loud ... Ha he hi ho hu. Mummum.'* I draw out of the text, as one says of actors, at least up to *'Usque! Usque! Usque! Lignum in ... Is the strays world moving mound of what static babel is this, tell us?'* [10]

It is, however, in the transcript of a lecture, 'Two words for Joyce', given by Derrida at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1982, published in the volume *Post-structuralist Joyce,* that Derrida fully acknowledges the influence of Joyce on his own work.

> With this admiring resentment, you can stay on the edge of reading Joyce — for me this has been going on for twenty-five or thirty years — and the endless plunge throws you back onto the river-bank, on the brink of another public immersion. ...In any case, I have the feeling that I haven't yet begun to read Joyce, and this 'not having begun to read' is sometimes the most singular and active relationship I have with this work.
>
> ..... that is why I never dared to write on Joyce.
>
> ..... so, yes, every time I write, and even in the most academic pieces of work, Joyce's ghost is always on board.
>
> ..... *La Carte Postal* is haunted by Joyce. ..... this haunting invades the book, a shadow on every page.[11]

In the mid-1970s the American deconstructionist architect Bernard Tschumi expressed his interest in and reading of James Joyce. Jennifer Bloomer, a former student of Tschumi at that time, relates that Tschumi referred to *Finnegans Wake* as one of 'the greatest works of twentieth century architecture.'[12] In *Cinegramme Folie, le Parc de la Villette,* Tschumi recounts a project undertaken with students at the Architectural Association in London in 1977 entitled *Joyce's Garden,* where the literary text of *Finnegans Wake* was used as the program for a project involving a dozen contributions by different students on a site at London's Covent Garden. A precedent to the winning *Parc de la Villette* design in Paris, this project used the intersections of an ordinary survey grid to mediate between the mutually exclusive systems — the literary program and the architectural text.[13]

Underlying the obscurity of the connection between Joyce's text and the Covent Garden or *Parc de la Villette* projects, Tschumi was probably informed by the use by Joyce of the *both/and* extremes of ordered reason and chaotic imagination in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake.* Particularly in *Ulysses,* Joyce used the structure of Homer's epic poem, the 'Odyssey', to construct a scaffold or network structure to sustain the wanderings of Stephen Daedelus (Odysseus).[14]

It is well known that Tschumi and Derrida collaborated on the *Parc de la Villette competition,*[15] and that both Tschumi and another American deconstructionist architect, Peter Eisenman, drew heavily on Derrida to form their architectural strategies.[16] Reference to Cartesian geometry as a framework for *Ulysses* may have been a direct influence through the reading of Joyce, or an indirect influence through the reading of Derrida, on Eisenman's exploration of the contortion of grids. The more complex, intricate and anarchic *Finnegans Wake* is constructed less on a Cartesian grid but on the basis of rotating circles inspired by Giambattista Vico and Giordano Bruno.[17]

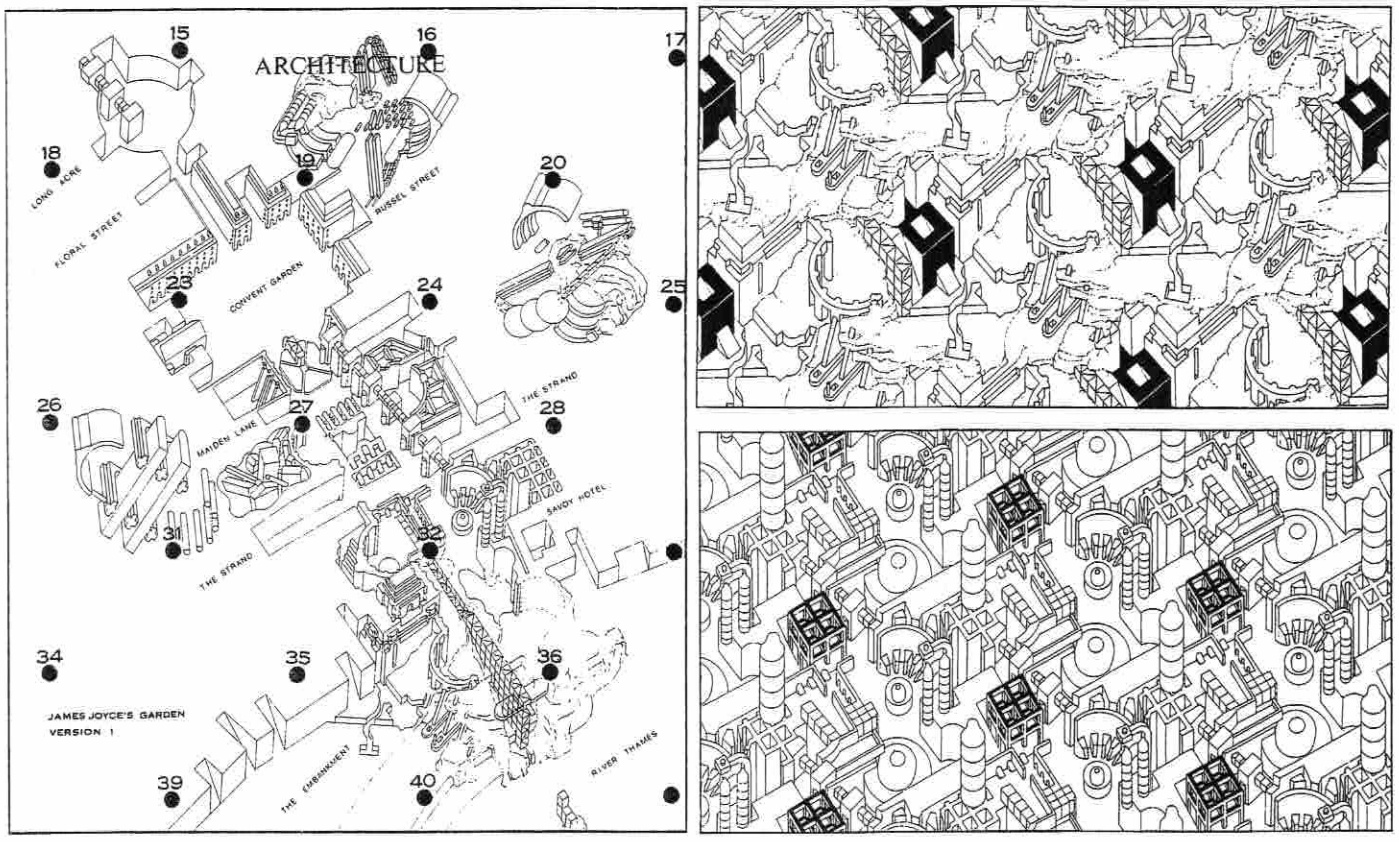
While the structure and texture of the *Wake* has been related to the intricate spiralling of the illuminated texts of the *Book of Kells,* Jennifer Bloomer in her book *Architecture and the Text (S)crypts of Joyce and Piranesi* parallels the *Wake* to the inventive three-dimensional architectural illustrations of Piranesi.[18]

American deconstructionist composer and writer John Cage used chance and exploration of the Chinese *I Ching* (Book of Changes) to initiate deconstructed music. He also saw potential to challenge even the structure of *Finnegans Wake,* which he considered had kept the old structure or 'sintalks', into which Joyce had put the words he had invented. Cage went on to produce a book of 'mesostics', *Writing Through Finnegans Wake,* a random selection of words from the *Wake,* drawn from a reading of the text, page by page, resulting in a 'collage' of 'verse' based on Joyce's words and sequencing.[19] Cage then created a piece of deconstructed music, *Roaratorio,* incorporating a reading from his 'mesostics' from the *Wake* superimposed on the playing and singing of unconnected traditional Irish airs and ballads.[20]

It was however Margot Norris, as early as 1974 in her major work *The Decentred Universe of Finnegans Wake: A Structuralist Analysis,*[21] who carried out one of the first post-structuralists assessments of *Finnegans Wake,* dealing with it as a 'decentred text' and demonstrating how it 'functions deconstructively by refusing the reader any stable, central position for a reading of the text'.[22]

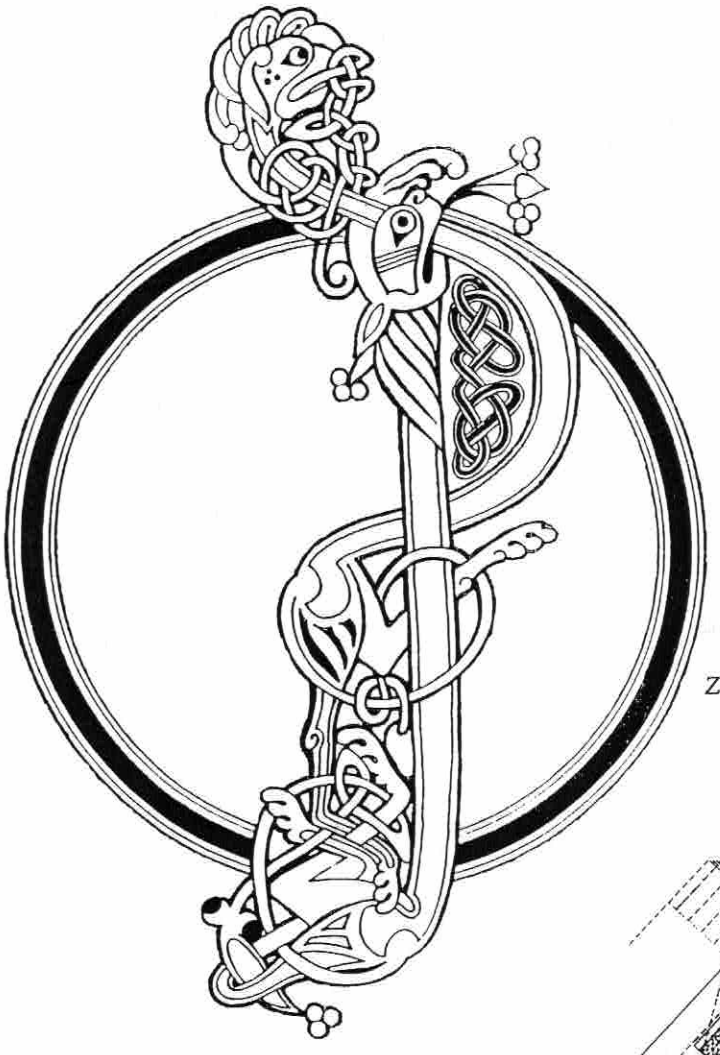
This brings me to an interview that I had with the architect Eric Owen Moss, also associated with the deconstructionist movement, at his office in Culver City, California on 9 June 1993. What follows is an extract from the transcript of the recorded interview.

> Part of the idea for me is that whenever I start to think I know how to do it — how to design it, what it should look like, how we should build it — I raise the hypothesis 'That's not right'. ... The premise is to be suspicious of what you do.
>
> I am interested in that process, metaphorically, where there is some conviction, some strategy, some

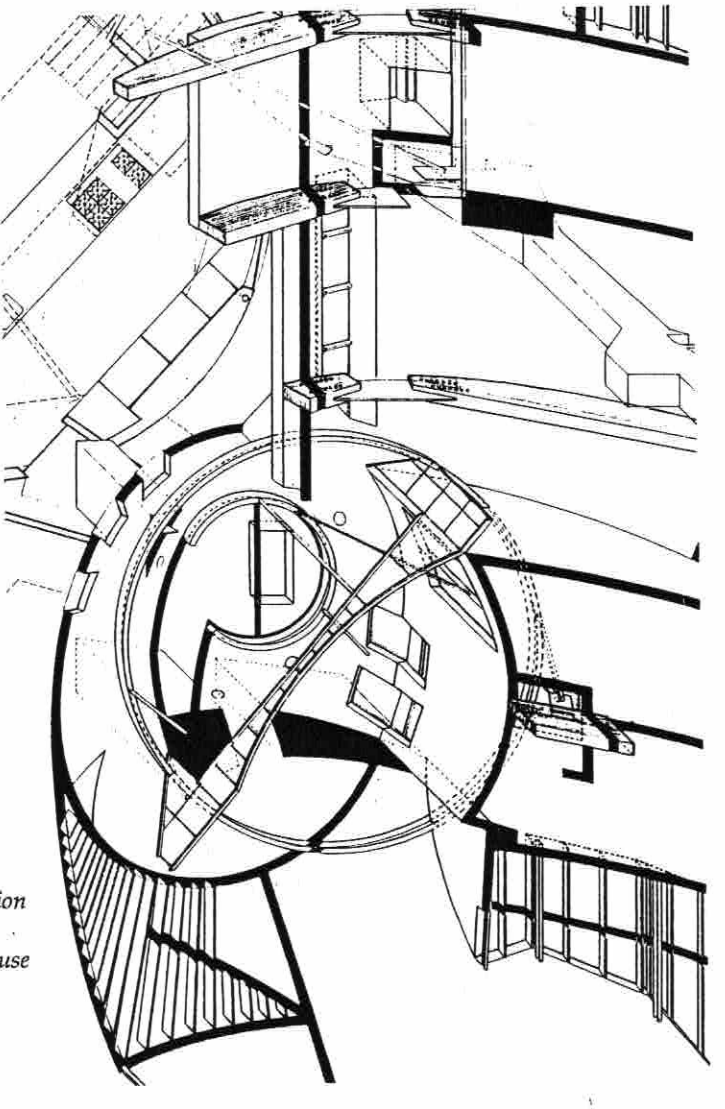


Bernard Tschumi's Architectural Association project Joyce's Garden. 1976-77

Illustration from page 308 of Finnegan's Wake (1939)



Zoomorphic Illuminated Manuscript Book of Kells *c. 800 AD*



Detail from the illustration

by Eric Owen Moss of the Lawson-Westen House

idea, for making things and simultaneously some doubt about the ability of anyone to really understand and to say 'This is the way things are'.

This didn't come from me, *it came from Nicholas of Cusa, it came from a lot of other people, it came from some of your Irish guys, it comes from Mr Joyce, it comes from Mr Beckett, who do a couple of things simultaneously in very different ways.* What Joyce is trying to do — this is my reading of it — is to wrap his arms round the whole fucking thing, this is what a life is, this is what it means to be alive, it includes everything ... all these complicated things go on simultaneously.

So somebody tries to write that, to put that into the process of a narrative in literature which is no longer linear. Someone like Joyce has many lines, and they are running in all directions, and the lines aren't necessarily sequential in time. It is so infinitely complicated, and Joyce tries to find a way of giving that a sort of structure.

In *The End of Architecture,* Moss says, 'Is architecture didactic? Yes and no, simultaneously. Schizophrenia is a cure, not a disease'.[23] Umberto Eco writes of Carl Gustav Jung's analysis of Joyce's manifestation of schizophrenia in his early review of *Ulysses:*

> Jung noticed that the discourse of *Ulysses* seems, at first glance, like the monologue of a schizophrenic. But ... Jung realised that schizophrenia here assumes the value of an analogical reference and should be seen as a sort of 'cubist' operation where Joyce — as all modern artists — dissolves the image of reality in an extremely complex picture, where the tone is set by the melancholy typical of abstract objectivity.
>
> In this operation, warns Jung, the writer does not destroy his own personality, as the schizophrenic, but rediscovers and establishes its unity by destroying something else. This something else is the classical image of the world.[24]

So here is a 'deconstructivist' architect of the late twentieth century, concerned about architecture as a writing of the NOW, who has, with many others, recognized that the mainstream logic-centred ways of seeing the world are outmoded — ways that have grown out of the great culture of Greek philosophy that separated right from wrong, good from bad, ugliness from beauty, and set up rule-dominated frameworks for thought and action. On the fringes of western Europe another culture persisted through the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages to the present day: the Celtic culture, which represents the remnants of an earlier great European system of thought which may, indeed, have connected with the great civilizations of the Orient. It may be that this Celtic culture gave place to non-linearity, to paradox, to *both/and* as well as *either/or,* to two thinks at a time — the complex weaving themes of a traditional Irish tune, the complex swirling motifs of the *Book of Kells,* the anarchic texts of Joyce. It may be that Jacques Derrida has made contact with this great culture and that 'deconstruction' is the philosophical movement that will finally neutralize the 'hegemony' of Graeco/Roman 'logocentrism'. It may be that this neutralization will allow the *sean-nós,*[25] or old knowledge, of many other indigenous cultures in the world to be listened to again. Perhaps 'deconstructivist' architecture is not less but more coherently structured, and that it can be reasonably postulated that the emergence of deconstruction philosophy is a 'Finno-Phoenician' resurrection of ancient Celtic culture after 2000 years of Graeco-Roman culture and subsequent 'endarkenment'. Perhaps the Irish are the fathers of deconstruction! ❑

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23. Moss, Eric Owen. 'Out of place is the One Right Place', in *The End of Architecture?* Noever, Peter, (Ed.) Prestel Verlag (for MAK-Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna) Munich, 1993. p 62.
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25. *sean-nós.* Term in the Irish language meaning 'old knowledge' or 'the old way', especially associated with traditional balled singing in the west of Ireland.