

DARING TO QUOTE FROM GOD

---

COLIN MCCAHERN 1987-1999

---

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Arts in Art History  
in the University of Canterbury

by Keir Leslie

University of Canterbury

2016

---

# Table of Contents

Introduction: 5

Chapter One: 12

Chapter Two: 53

Chapter Three: 87

Conclusion: 108

Bibliography: 115

Figures: 123

*For Michael,*

*who also thought there was something interesting in McCahon*

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my supervisors, Drs Barbara Garrie and Richard Bullen, for their guidance and assistance, and I would like to thank Sophie Davis for her conversation, advice, and cups of tea.

I would also like to thank my parents and Caroline for their support.

## INTRODUCTION

### *Introduction*

Colin McCahon is a core figure in New Zealand art, and New Zealand art history. In this thesis I explore ways of re-reading both McCahon's practice, the historiography of McCahon, and the influence that McCahon has had upon upon later artists.

In this introduction, I will first provide a short account of McCahon's life in order to place it and his practice in a chronological place and time. I then discuss the methods and the limitations of this thesis, before providing an outline of my overall argument.

This thesis is about a range of objects and practices that can broadly be described as post-McCahon. They are "post-McCahon" in the sense that all the objects and practices discussed exist either substantially subsequent to McCahon's career as a practicing artist in the case of *I considered all the acts of oppression* or else, in the case of Tillers and Stevenson, primarily post-McCahon's death. It aims to contribute some novel perspectives on the notion of post-McCahon practice and to treat the "post-McCahon" as a field of practice that includes work "by" McCahon, writing about McCahon, and artistic practices which speak back to McCahon's work.

### *McCahon: life and practice*

It is generally accepted that Colin McCahon was a major New Zealand artist; indeed, it has been argued that he is *the* major New Zealand artist. He exhibited widely during his life, had a successful career at the Auckland City Art Gallery (rising to be Deputy Director), and as a painting lecturer at the University of Auckland. Since his death, he has been the subject of two major international touring shows: *Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys* in 1989, and *A Question of Faith* in 2002, as well as a vast amount of critical literature.

McCahon's work was produced over a long career and covered a wide range of subjects: landscapes, abstractions, Māori mythology, Buddhist sutras, protest art, Christian themes, numbers and words, amongst other things. However, certain themes were consistently prominent in his work, and in this thesis I will particularly focus on the linked themes of God and death. These themes, it has been argued by writers like Gordon Brown and Marja Bloem, were closely tied to McCahon's ongoing interest in religious questions, and perhaps even an ongoing *struggle* between faith and doubt that can be observed in his biography.

McCahon was born in Timaru in 1919. He grew up in the lower South Island, predominantly in Dunedin, where his family regularly attended exhibitions, including at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, and spent time with the art publications in the Dunedin Public Library.<sup>1</sup> At some point in his early life he encountered Cubism, and looking back in 1966 he said that "I at once became a Cubist, a staunch supporter and sympathiser..."<sup>2</sup> While this conversion narrative is vague in place and time, what is known is that he went to the Dunedin School of Art, because friends with the painter Toss Wollaston, and over time began painting increasingly modern compositions. This exploration of ideas used in modernist painting continued, and in 1939 the Otago Art Society refused to hang his submission to the Annual Exhibition, *Harbour Cone from Peggy's Hill* due to its non-traditional technique, prompting a minor scandal.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this controversy, McCahon began to build up a profile as a painter, showing with The Group in Christchurch in 1940, 1943, 1947, and annually from then on.<sup>4</sup> He married Anne Hamblett, also a painter, in 1942 and they had a child, William McCahon in 1943. He moved around the South Island in search of work, eventually settling in Christchurch in 1947 where he

---

<sup>1</sup> Gordon Brown *Colin McCahon: Artist* (Auckland: Reed, 1993) 7. Gordon Brown, *Elements of Modernism in Colin McCahon's Early Work* (Wellington: School of Art History, Victoria University of Wellington, 2004) 11.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, *Elements of Modernism*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> The Group were a loose collective of progressive artists who showed annually at the Canterbury Society of Arts.

worked as a gardener at the Christchurch Botanic Gardens. While he lived in Christchurch, he meet Gordon Brown for the first time. Brown would go on to become the major authority on McCahon's work, as a sort of "authorised" critic. He showed work at the Wellington Public Library, the Dunedin Public Library, the Lower Hutt Public Library, and the Helen Hitchings Library, as well as in London in 1953. He visited Melbourne in 1951, where he meet Mary Cockburn-Mercer, a former cubist. In 1953 he moved to Auckland, where he took on work at the Auckland City Art Gallery.<sup>5</sup>

Over the next decade he built up an increasingly prominent practice. In 1956 he was appointed Keeper and Deputy Director at the Auckland City Art Gallery, and visited America to study contemporary gallery practices in 1958. McCahon gave up his job at the Gallery in 1964 to become a lecturer in painting at the University of Auckland's School of Fine Arts, a job he later gave up in 1971 to paint full-time.

In the 1970s and 1980s he was increasingly acknowledged as one of New Zealand's foremost painters, although he still felt the sting of early rejections, like the 1939 scandal. His health deteriorated in the early 1980s, and it became clear he was suffering from dementia. He had had long-term mental health problems (including alcoholism) prior to this point and there is some indication these exacerbated his decline. He died in 1987.

#### *Theories, methods, and limitations*

This thesis uses a wide range of theoretical sources. Putting aside art historians, in my first chapter I draw on the work of Roland Barthes on the death of the author, T J J Altizer, Richard Rubenstein, Lloyd Geering and Ernst Kantorowicz on the death of god,<sup>6</sup> and I bring these two approaches into a close connection and bring them to bear jointly upon *I considered all the acts of oppression*. In

---

<sup>5</sup> This chronology, and this section in general, draws heavily on Brown's *Colin McCahon: Artist*, particularly the chronology given on pages 212-16.

<sup>6</sup> Authors are inconsistent on capitalisation, but I use the lower case *g* for *god*. I have not altered case in quotations.

the second chapter I make use of Fernand Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Francis Moretti on notions of the world system, while Epeli Hau'ofa, David Craig and James Bleich look at the place of the Pacific within those world-systems. Harold Bloom and Michael Baxandall discuss the action of influence on artists, and I use their theoretical insights to help understand aspects of Michael Stevenson's practice in relation to McCahon. The last chapter introduces comparatively less new theoretical apparatus: Bloom and Baxandall on influence again, before an excursion into post-structuralist thought requires a consideration of the way Jacques Derrida draws upon negative theology. The theologian Catherine Keller investigates this aspect of Derrida, and I exploit her work to help deconstruct arbitrary binaries between post-modernist or post-structuralist thought and theological analysis.. Each of the sources used will, of course, contribute to the development of the overall argument, and this is not just an excuse to browbeat the reader with an increasingly improbable parade of names and quotes. The superficial dangers in this interdisciplinary attitude and method are clear — a hodgepodge of eclecticism without any central core.

However, even the notion of being “put to some kind of use” is problematic, as Grant Kester points out in his critique of this kind of “subcontracting” in his essay “The Device Laid Bare”.<sup>7</sup> For Kester, this pattern of the use of theory is that the art writer will present a theory, give a “straightforward exegesis”, reducing it to a set of “notional principles” before merely presenting it alongside the object at stake, “as if their sheer coexistence within the space of the essay constitutes meaningful evidence of their analytic co-relevance”.<sup>8</sup> He goes on to attack this mode as precluding any substantial engagement with the theoretical structures being brought into play. The art writer will generally not have the background, skills, or interest required to vividly convey the depth and nuances of the theoretical sources, let alone apply any sustained critique or challenge to the claims of the theorist.

---

<sup>7</sup> Grant Kester, “The Device Laid Bare: On Some Limitations in Current Art Criticism”, in *e-flux* 50, at [http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-device-laid-bare-on-some-limitations-in-current-art-criticism/#\\_ftn4](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-device-laid-bare-on-some-limitations-in-current-art-criticism/#_ftn4)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Kester's critique is a convincing intervention, and poses real problems for an art historian working in inter-disciplinary spaces. Balancing the conflicting requirements of theoretical discussion, explication, and application is a challenging process. I have no pretensions to be a theologian, or a literary scholar, or have any contributions to make to political geography. Nevertheless, I have purposefully chosen to attempt to engage a broad and inter-disciplinary array of thinkers, in order to situate the field of post-McCahon work within a broader set of contexts.

At the same time, I am not abdicating my responsibilities to the disciplinary traditions from which I draw. It is my aim to navigate between the demands of art history and theology, literary deconstruction, or political geography (as the case may be) in such a way as to enrich those disciplines to a certain extent, and to provide a certain amount of nourishment back in return. And by engaging with the *structure* of these theories, as I do throughout, but particularly in Chapter Three, I hope to avoid flattening them out in a stereotyped set of claims. I also hope that by bringing these theoretical approaches into close contact with the objects and practices involved here, I will open up new perspectives not only on those objects and practices, but also the theoretical approaches.

My method has certain theoretical limitations. The theological stance that I adopt is a western, predominantly masculine stance. It does not engage heavily with McCahon's use of Māori and Asian religious traditions. My theoretical sources also tend to be white, male, and academic, the three artists I discuss in depth are white men, and similarly, I am personally writing from the position of a male pākehā atheist. These gaps are problematic, and this standpoint is not universal. These limitations are real and important, and it is easy to imagine that there are *other* theologies of McCahon, other economies of McCahon, and other contexts for his practice and his legacy.

### *Argument*

In Chapter One, I argue that the painting generally titled *I considered all the acts of oppression* has been broadly misread through the lens of McCahon's personal faith. A range of prior authors have

fixated on the question of McCahon's belief or disbelief in such a way as to avoid the deeper theological issues that *I considered* raises. I believe that an approach based on these theological issues, which relate to the nature of God and the realities of oppression and suffering, produces more rewarding readings of *I considered*. This also avoids the problems that arise for biographically-oriented readings from the circumstances of the painting's posthumous discovery in an unfinished state. The theological approach I adopt draws on the work of Richard Rubenstein and T J J Altizer on the "death of God" and emphasises the importance of radically re-reading orthodoxy in order to create novel theological stances that align with lived experiences. Consequently, using this theological approach, I argue that *I considered all the acts of oppression* embeds a revisionist understanding of God.

The exhibition "After McCahon: Some Configurations in Recent Art" was staged at the Auckland Art Gallery in 1989. Curated by Tina Barton, it looked at a range of Australian and New Zealand artists who existed in certain relations to McCahon: Stevenson and Tillers featured in *After McCahon*, alongside eight others. As Barton put it, "'after'" does not just "designate that which literally follows on from but as well, it denotes a particular transaction between 'master' and pupil; an act of homage and a desire to emulate: to learn from and to outdo."<sup>9</sup> Chapters Two and Three take that exhibition as a point of departure, and a loose inspiration. Two of the artists from that exhibition, and their relationship both to McCahon and the structural concerns underpinning McCahon's cultural role, are subjected to a deeper examination.

The second chapter looks at the work of the New Zealand artist Michael Stevenson (1964-). Here, I will position Stevenson's practice as containing a set of responses to McCahon's legacy. I start by looking at the way McCahon was understood by contemporary and later writers to be 'distant' and 'belated', and therefore distortionary and misunderstanding of modernism. This trope is then contextualised in two ways: first, by a discussion of Michael Baxandall and Harold Bloom's theories

---

<sup>9</sup> Christina Barton, *After McCahon: Some Configurations in Recent Art* (Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1989) 1.

of influence, and secondly by a discussion of New Zealand's peripherality as a cultural and economic tropes. I then discuss the ways Stevenson's early work very literally psychologises the pathologies of influence, and particularly an oedipal relationship with McCahon, and the ways his later work engages with cultural and economic narratives of peripherality, particularly an understanding of peripherality as creating a distorted, belated society.

In Chapter Three I read closely two texts by the New Zealand art writer Wystan Curnow: his work on McCahon and his work on the Australian artist Imants Tillers (1950-). I use these texts, and the background I have built up in the preceding chapters, to argue that the death of God, the problem of distance, and the anxieties of influence are three analogous theoretical structures, and that the supposed opposition between a deconstructive, post-modern approach and a religious analysis is fictional. Instead, as with *I considered all the acts of oppression*, theology offers a rich range of analytic tools that can be brought to bear on such a dry post-modern, quotational practice. I will demonstrate that the theoretical constructs developed to articulate *I considered...* and the relationship between Stevenson and McCahon can be usefully applied to Tillers' practice, a practice which itself investigates many of those issues. These tools are not in opposition to the post-modern, appropriative nature of Tiller's practice, but are instead sympathetic and aligned with it.

Taken together, this thesis argues for a non-biographical approach to McCahon's work, and the importance of a theoretically and contextually informed method which does not attempt to privilege a construct of the "artist's voice". It suggests that revisionist analyses are both in keeping with McCahon's own practice, and provide a way to establish a continuum of critical inquiry that runs between McCahon's practice, writing about McCahon's practice, and into the work of post-McCahon artists like Tillers and Stevenson. It demonstrates that artists and art writers continually construct and reconstruct both themselves and their predecessors.

## Chapter One

### ***I considered all the acts of oppression and the death of god.***

#### *Introduction*

*I considered all the acts of oppression*<sup>10</sup> (likely 1981-3) has been described, poetically, as “McCahon’s last painting”.<sup>11</sup> The painting was found face down in McCahon’s studio after his death, was hung behind his coffin at his funeral, and despite being unsigned, undated, and “probably unfinished”, it has been treated as fully part of his oeuvre, both by the McCahon Trust, key critics, and the general art world.<sup>12</sup> Thematically, it is a bleak painting: a transcription of a lament from the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes. This is a painting where McCahon comes to face death and god in a sustained manner, as Wystan Curnow says in a different context.<sup>13</sup>

The painting is physically large, nearly two meters by two meters, and consists of acrylic paint on an unstretched canvas. Typical of late McCahon, it is a formally restrained work. The painting depicts a crude grid and hand-written text on a black ground. The text is a series of verses from the New English Version translation of the Book of Ecclesiastes: specifically, verses 4:1-6. The grid is simple, divided into half vertically, and then into four unequal horizontal bands. The text runs from upper left to lower right of the canvas, reading: “I considered all the acts of oppression / here under the sun; I saw the tears of the oppress/-ed / and I saw that there was no one to comfort them. / Strength was on the side of their oppressors / and there was no one to avenge them.” Then, “I counted the dead happy / because they were dead, happier / than the living who were still in life. More fortunate / than either I reckoned man yet unborn, who had not / witnessed the wicked deeds

---

<sup>10</sup> *I considered all the acts of oppression*, c. 1981 - 1983, synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas, 1964 x 1810 mm, see Figure One. It is often considered part of a series including three other works from the same period: *The emptiness of all endeavour* (1982); *Is there anything of which one can say, Look, this is new?* (1982); and *I applied my mind* (1982)

<sup>11</sup> As in the title of the book *Colin McCahon: The Last Painting* (Auckland: Peter Webb Galleries, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> “I considered all the acts of oppression”, Colin McCahon Trust online catalogue, accessed 20th of April, 2016, <http://www.mccahon.co.nz/cm000169>.

<sup>13</sup> Wystan Curnow, *I Will Need Words: Colin McCahon’s Word and Number Paintings*, (Wellington: National Art Gallery, 1984) unpaginated.

done / here under the sun. / I considered all toil and / all achievement and saw / that it comes from rivalry / between man and man. / This too is emptiness and / chasing the mind. / The fool folds his arms and wastes away.” Opposite this cell, the corresponding space on the left is left black. In the bottom right “Better one hand full and / peace of mind than both / fists full and toil that is chasing the wind.” Finally, in the bottom left, “Here again I saw emptiness under the SUN with out son or brother toiling endless yet never”. The text itself is frank about the suffering and injustice of the world.

In this chapter I will discuss this late work of McCahon’s in the light of death of god theology. The bleakness of *I considered...* is traditionally read, given McCahon’s faltering physical and mental state, as an expression of a personal loss of faith in god. However, based on the strategies at work in the painting itself and drawing on T J J Altizer’s notion of god’s *kenosis* or self-humbling, I argue that this should be read as a public, theological statement around the *nature* of god: not as a sovereign immanent omnipotent creator, but as an emptied out, humbled presence in the world, suffering alongside us. Drawing on the textual evidence of this highly textual painting, those attitudes revolve around a political concern for the injustices of the world coupled with a lack of confidence in a sovereign god to resolve those injustices, either here or in an afterlife.

Much prior work by a broad range of both New Zealand and overseas art historians like Gordon Brown, Francis Pound, and Marja Bloem,<sup>14</sup> attempts to read the painting in a way that either reveals or reflects knowledge about McCahon’s private mental states. The mental states that are seen as particularly important are his faith or doubt, and his depression. However, I will demonstrate that it is more productive to avoid such attempts and instead focus on a discussion of the object itself. Readings that focus on the public evidence of the paintings and emphasise the public issues at stake offer a valuable avenue of attack, and allow for a richer engagement with the

---

<sup>14</sup> Gordon Brown, “The speaker, the painter, the discursive dialoguer” in *Colin McCahon: The Last Painting* (Auckland: Peter Webb Galleries, 1993) 13-17, Francis Pound, “Endless yet never: death, the prophetic voice and McCahon's last painting”, *ibid*, 3-12, and Marja Bloem, “Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith”, in Marja Bloem and Martin Browne, *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2002) 13-28.

painting itself. This approach is informed by the work of Roland Barthes, particularly the essay “The Death of the Author”.<sup>15</sup> The particular circumstances of *I considered* – a posthumous discovery that sits in a difficult position between finished and un-finished, painting and non-painting – also provide a strong argument against excessively biographical readings. I will argue that it is possible to read this painting as a post-McCahon object. Once the attempt to discern McCahon’s private beliefs is abandoned, I return to the text of the painting to discuss an alternate reading that focuses on problems of injustice and oppression that lie at the heart of the text. This reading eschews personal, psychological and spiritual pre-occupations for public, political, and theological arguments.

I provide a short account of death of god theology in order to acquaint the reader with this body of theory, particularly the way it re- and mis-reads orthodoxy. In so doing, I discuss the way this body of practice centres on the tragedies and atrocities of the twentieth century, a centring which mirrors *I considered all the acts of oppression’s* focus on injustice and power. T J J Altizer argues that god, in the incarnation, fully empties himself into the world and thereby “dies” as an omnipotent, immanent sovereign. Lloyd Geering’s career provides a local analogue to the American school of radical theology, and I discuss the way in which Geering’s experiences in the mid-sixties can be seen to exemplify a local spirit of radicalism in theology.

I also discuss those aspects of post-1990 scholarship on McCahon that do advance theological arguments, particularly theological arguments of the death of god, as a way to read McCahon’s work. I explain how my approach will differ, and in what ways I feel those approaches fall short or could be usefully extended. Finally, I suggest some possible reasons why they have failed to garner significant enthusiasm in the field.

I then return to the painting itself, and offer an account of the formal strategies of the painting drawing on the preceding theoretical discussions. The processual innovation of kenosis provides

---

<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, in *Image - Music - Text* (Fontana: London, 1977), 142-147.

an illuminating parallel to the “emptying out” at play in *I considered all the acts of oppression*. The pared back, liminal, marginal painting echoes the humbling, kenotic gesture of the incarnation and crucifixion. Further, these ways of reversing, wilfully *mis-* and *re-* reading orthodox biblical texts offer a parallel to the way *I considered all the acts of oppression* quotes a traditional text in such a way as to radically challenge orthodox readings.

When this is read alongside Altizer and Rubinstein’s discussion of the problem of god in an unjust world, it prompts a reconsideration of god’s nature not based on internal psychological arguments about McCahon’s loss of faith in his old age, but rather based on a contextual reading of the painting and the theological debates of the post-war period. In this analysis, *I considered all the acts of oppression* is a revisionist text, which reconsiders the nature of god and suffering, and does so in a structurally post-modern manner.

#### *Exhibition history and previous scholarship*

McCahon’s “last painting” has received sustained popular and academic attention. This writing tends to prioritise McCahon’s use of religious texts as a question of faith, in opposition to “post-modern quotationalism”, and within this dynamic to position *I considered* as a failure of faith in the face of impending mortality. In this telling it becomes a counterpoint to the affirmation of faith embodied in earlier religious works. In so doing they prioritise and emphasise questions of McCahon’s personal, psychological faith over the possible political and theological problems posed by a painting like *I considered all the acts of oppression*, and minimise the contribution that “post-modern quotationalism” can make to theological understandings.

The painting was first exhibited at McCahon’s funeral at St Joseph’s Church in Grey Lynn in 1987.<sup>16</sup> Subsequently, in 1993 it was the subject of a book published by Peter Webb Galleries titled *Colin McCahon: The Last Painting*, with contributions by Peter Webb, William McCahon, Francis Pound, and Gordon Brown; a publication that accompanied the painting’s sale at auction at Webb’s

---

<sup>16</sup> *Colin McCahon: The Last Painting*, unpaginated

for \$511,750, a then record for McCahon's paintings.<sup>17</sup> It was also part of the McCahon survey exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, *A Question of Faith*, in 2002. Taken together, these showings positioned the painting within the canon of McCahon's work, and particularly within the strain in his work dealing with religious issues.

In the publication accompanying the painting's sale at Webb's, *McCahon: The Last Painting*, William McCahon places the painting in the context of McCahon's death, telling the story of the family's discovery of it in his studio, facedown on the floor, and subsequent display at McCahon's funeral.<sup>18</sup> Brown and Pound contribute more traditionally art historical texts, although Brown's text also dwells upon McCahon's personal circumstances.

Brown's text "The Speaker, the Painter, the Discursive Dialoguer" returns to many of Brown's preoccupations around McCahon's painting: his placement of Christian events in New Zealand, his concerns with death, and the need for a viewer of any one of McCahon's paintings to have some knowledge of McCahon's other work to build up a deeper knowledge of McCahon's symbolic language. But Brown also emphasises a psychological dimension: the way in which these paintings can be seen as a personal reflection, an expression of a decaying spirituality. For Brown, McCahon grapples with his own mortality, his own loss of faith, his own failures as a human - the alcoholism, the fading mind - and this *deeper*, more secretive reading comes after, supersedes, the first face-value reading.<sup>19</sup>

In his essay, Pound starts by saying he will outline the "adoption of the voice of prophetic suffering in McCahon's art".<sup>20</sup> The general outline of this story is well-known, but what has "not often been

---

<sup>17</sup> *A Question of Faith*, 235.

<sup>18</sup> *Colin McCahon: The Last Painting*, unpaginated

<sup>19</sup> "the nature of a dialogue between what appears to be obviously stated and a partly hidden, yet very personal tragedy" — Brown, "The Speaker', The Painter", 13.

<sup>20</sup> Pound, "Endless yet never", 3.

attended to, or not often well, is the specifically prophetic nature of the texts McCahon chooses.”<sup>21</sup> This choice, Pound argues, “has often been regarded as if it were accidental”, and as if McCahon could have used some other sources to much the same effect. Indeed, there is a “tendency among some critics” to treat McCahon’s use of biblical text as “merely a detached form of post-modern quotationalism”. Pound rejects this: for him the texts are both meant to be “read for their meaning” and are “in a special sense ... autobiographical”.<sup>22</sup> In Pound’s argument, McCahon used the voice of a prophet for a range of reasons. One is that this guise was one that cultural nationalism demanded of its poets and (by extension) painters; another was his own personal religious conviction.

Pound admits that McCahon might be a type of modernist, but he was painting in the second half of the twentieth century, and Pound therefore argues that he suffers from a sense of belatedness, “nothing new left to do”.<sup>23</sup> This belatedness is both temporal and consequently “peculiarly post-modern”, as well as physical, “the feeling of a person gazing from the outside, from the periphery, from a country physically separated” by distance from the “centres of modernity”.<sup>24</sup> (A motif I will return to in Chapter Two.) Alongside this formal sadness, there is a personal sadness and a biographical sadness in McCahon’s loss of faith. *Victory Over Death II* contained a “confident claim and grand affirmation” that is “here cancelled out”. This is a failure and a change that is linked to McCahon’s struggle with public opinion, alcohol, and depression. Finally, the painting is related to McCahon’s impending mortality: the empty black rectangle on the lower left is an “last, impossible attempt”, an attempt to “represent the unrepresentable: death.”<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 12.

Together these essays present a carefully constructed narrative about McCahon, his practice, and this painting's place within that practice. Brown and Pound straddled the nationalist/anti-nationalist divide in New Zealand art history, with Gordon Brown and Hamish Keith's recent *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting*<sup>26</sup> codifying an essentially nationalist approach to New Zealand art history while Pound was, at that time, developing the critique of nationalist historiography that would eventually become *The Invention of New Zealand*.<sup>27</sup> By pairing texts by two authors from quite different historiographical backgrounds, the publication cannily bridges that divide, and makes a claim for McCahon's - and this painting's - centrality to any art history of New Zealand. Beyond that nationalist/revisionist divide, there is a generational and methodological divide. Brown is a modernist, while Pound draws heavily on post-modern and post-colonial art historical strategies. However, between them they construct a narrative that centres around McCahon's personal journey and his personal demons.

Following these two closely-tied showings in the late 80s and early 90s, *I Considered all the Acts* was part of the McCahon survey exhibition put on by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, *A Question of Faith*, in 2002. This exhibition, which subsequently toured in New Zealand and Australia at the Wellington City Gallery, the Auckland Art Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, and the National Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, was the largest and last of the major McCahon retrospectives to be mounted.<sup>28</sup> As the title indicated, *A Question of Faith* framed McCahon within a primarily religious context. The catalogue featured contributions from the curator, Marja Bloem of the Stedelijk, the Stedelijk director Rudi Fuchs, William McCahon, Murray Bail, and Francis Pound. Pound's text, "Endless Yet Never: Death, the Prophetic Voice, and McCahon's Last Painting", is essentially the same as his text of the same name for *Colin*

---

<sup>26</sup> Gordon H Brown and Hamish Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839-1980: New and Revised Edition* (Auckland: William Collins, 1982).

<sup>27</sup> Francis Pound, *The Invention of New Zealand: Art & National Identity, 1930-1970* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> "Colin McCahon: A question of faith", Wellington City Gallery media release dated December 2002, accessed 20 April 2016 from <http://citygallery.org.nz/news/colin-mccahon-question-faith>.

*McCahon: the Last Painting*.<sup>29</sup> *I considered all the acts of oppression* is the last painting in the *A Question of Faith* catalogue, and by virtue of being the only painting to receive the attention of an entire essay in Pound's text, becomes the apotheosis of McCahon's work.

Fuchs' and Bloem's Foreword starts by asserting that McCahon is the "first New Zealand painter of major international importance", who divides New Zealand art into "before" and "after" McCahon, but despite this remains "almost unknown" beyond New Zealand and Australia. They lament the way that artists from "small countries" lack profile, so that "first-rate" Dutch or New Zealand artists may have less of a reputation than a "second-rate" German or American artist. They argue that this is made worse by New Zealand's geographic distance from the centres of the art world, meaning that McCahon lacks the fame he deserves. The exhibition at the Stedelijk, it is hoped, will function to remedy this, and bring McCahon to a European and American international audience.<sup>30</sup>

Fuchs' note furthers this line of thought: perhaps McCahon's absence from the canon can be explained by virtue of his work being "too outlandish", too far beyond " 'proper Modernist style' ", or perhaps he was too provincial, a "peculiar character [...] from the periphery". This is reflected in the words he uses to describe McCahon's work: "dark, visionary ... overwhelming ... strange, obsessive ... powerful and inescapable ... magical ... evocative ... wonderful". These problems prevented the "hard centre of Modernist dogma" appreciating such an artist.<sup>31</sup> But this will, he hopes, be resolved now: now that we can appreciate artists like Edvard Munch, Asger Jorn, and Joseph Beuys, we can appreciate an artist like McCahon, who manages to both give "New Zealand a powerful visual identity" and "explore and communicate through the medium of painting the universal questions and concerns of humanity".<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Bloem and Browne, *A Question of Faith*, 51-64.

<sup>30</sup> Marja Bloem and Martin Browne, "Preface", in *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Rudi Fuchs, "Colin McCahon: A Note", *Ibid*, 11-12, 11.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

In her essay, Bloem argues that the predominant view among New Zealand art writers is to treat McCahon's use of religious motifs as a "post-modernist" gesture by projecting a "secular, humanist, liberal position" onto McCahon's work, reducing his spiritual explorations to "a type of intellectual exercise".<sup>33</sup> Other writers, she argues, erase McCahon's religion in an attempt to protect his modernity. Bloem posits that the obsession with religious material is seen as damaging to McCahon's modernity, and that it is seen by New Zealand art historians as inserting a note of regretful eccentricity and crankiness. Therefore, in order to protect McCahon's reputation, and particularly to avoid his reception in the sophisticated, secular centre as a provincial crank, nationalist and post-nationalist critics have down played his religious beliefs and their centrality to his practice. In curating *A Question of Faith*, Bloem states she had to resist pressure from "various parties in New Zealand" who were "primarily [concerned] to present a slick, sophisticated Modernist" who would sit comfortably within the international scene, "and by extension, whom they seemed to hope would reflect well on New Zealand and its other artists".<sup>34</sup> Against this, Bloem positioned *A Question of Faith* around "McCahon's own journey through life and art", and the way that "landscape and religion" are consistent aspects of his work.<sup>35</sup> For Bloem, McCahon's work embodies a set of struggles about faith and doubt, one embedded within McCahon's personal biographical journey.

Bloem and Fuchs are echoing an argument made by Alexa Johnstone in the catalogue for *Gates and Journeys*.<sup>36</sup> Johnstone, the lead curator, suggests in her essay "God-talk — McCahon and Theology" that McCahon's religious themes are a "*skandalon*",<sup>37</sup> or stumbling block, for viewers of of McCahon's work, who might see "his religious content disturbing, puzzling, or an

---

<sup>33</sup> Bloem, "Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith" 14.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Alexa Johnston "God-Talk: McCahon and Theology", in Michael Gifkins (ed.), *Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys* (Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1988) 55-68. *I considered* was not included in *Gates and Journeys*, but would have been known to Alexa Johnston at the time of writing of the catalogue, as would the similar works of the early 1980s.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 55.

embarrassment”.<sup>38</sup> She advances the claim that “[w]riters who see religious ideas as fundamentally intellectually flawed” use certain public pronouncements by McCahon that he was not a Roman Catholic, and could not “call himself a Christian” to position McCahon as a disinterested observer. This “attitude” is for Johnstone an “illustration [of] a widespread Western phenomenon of which contemporary theologians are well aware”. Indeed, this phenomenon turns out to be a general disenchantment, not an active disbelief but simply “incomprehension and boredom” — a phrase taken from the dust jacket of Ronald Gregor Smith’s *The Doctrine of God*.<sup>39</sup> Again, McCahon’s religious content is juxtaposed against a secular world that resists these flashes of faith and inspiration, and that finds religion awkward and inappropriate.

Johnston’s argument is more sophisticated than Bloem’s, in that her theology is better placed, and she makes it clear she wishes to avoid a simple biographicism.<sup>40</sup> Certainly, in her quotation of the blurb of *The Doctrine of God* we seem to be at the edge of the death of god, and indeed this was one of the issues at hand in *The Doctrine of God*.<sup>41</sup> Still, although Gregor Smith was an advanced theologian, he rejected the notion of the “death of god”; for him the “real audacity does not consist in declaring that god is dead, but in daring at all to take that name upon our lips.”<sup>42</sup> Gregor Smith’s book and the accompanying texts by Allan Galloway seem to provide a map through which Johnston navigates her way in the world of theology. He discusses Paul Tillich and Martin Buber, and so does Johnston. In particular, her use of the concepts of transcendence and grace seem to be influenced by Gregor Smith’s similar utilisation to cut the “gordian knot” of secularity.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>40</sup> “rather than debate what colin mccahon believed, or his commitment to the life and work of faith, it seems more useful to me ...” — Ibid, 59.

<sup>41</sup> Ronald Gregor Smith, *The Doctrine of God* (London: Collins, 1970.)

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>43</sup> E. L. Mascall, “The Doctrine of God”, *Religious Studies* 7 no. 1 (March 1973): 72-73.

And so instead of a radical angle on the notion of god, Johnston advances a set of liberal pieties. Despite her desire to discuss McCahon in “relation to ideas and concepts current in Western theological thought”, the most recent primary publication she refers to is Gregor Smith’s 1970 book (then two decades old), and the bulk of her theological discussion is dedicated to the early-twentieth century, modernist thinkers Tillich and Buber, not McCahon’s contemporaries like Altizer or Geering — despite Geering’s appearance on pages 10 and 39, while Altizer and his colleague Paul van Buren feature repeatedly in the index<sup>44</sup>. For Johnstone, McCahon delights in god, like the Psalmist. Her McCahon exists within the questioning tradition of the Christian *faith*, and while Johnston is willing to push this into a curious, rational, discursive space, it remains a discussion of McCahon as a religious figure. In this discourse, and the religious is constituted *as opposed to* the secular, rather than an analysis of McCahon within the context of the secular *and* the religious. It also minimises the extent to which a radical, post-modern theology can resolve the tension between “quotationalism” and religious thematics.

*Gates and Journeys* was a major survey exhibition from 1989 originating from the Auckland City Art Gallery and travelling to the National Gallery, the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, the Robert McDougall in Christchurch, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Following closely on from McCahon’s death in 1987 and capping off the Auckland Art Gallery’s centenary season, this show represented the apotheosis of McCahon: “one of the major figures of late-twentieth century art”, as the director Christopher Johnstone states.<sup>45</sup> It is hard to understand how Bloem, curator of a major McCahon survey, can be arguing against the “predominant view” when her argument closely mirrors that made by the curator of the last major McCahon survey. Surely if there is anywhere we would expect to find the predominant, canonical view, it is in these canonical texts? It is interesting that this orthodoxy continually insists on its heterodoxy and it is equally telling that neither author identifies any particular writer as holding these naively post-modern views. While to some extent Johnstone’s reticence can be explained by the likelihood that one of those naive post-modernists is

---

<sup>44</sup> Gregor Smith, *The Doctrine of God*, 10, 39, and 187-192.

<sup>45</sup> Gifkins, *Gates and Journeys*, 9.

Wystan Curnow, a co-curator of *Gates and Journeys*, no such politesse can explain Bloem's vagueness.

Highly biographical strains of argument are not unique to these 'semi-official' texts, published in close conjunction with, and appearing alongside those by, the McCahon family. In an article for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Religion and Ethics section, the Australian art historian Rex Butler (who has delivered the Gordon H Brown Lecture on *McCahon in Australia*), takes us through a potted biography of McCahon, from the Timaru birth, the Dunedin call to paint, and the wanderings in the Canterbury and Nelson fields to the enshrinement as the grand old man of New Zealand painting in bush-clad Titirangi, before the slow descent into dementia. This biographic story culminates in *I considered all the acts of oppression*, a title which "tells us everything we need to know about McCahon's state of mind at the time he painted them"<sup>46</sup>, and reveals "McCahon finally losing faith in both God and himself".

The structuring of a discursive field, through *A Question of Faith*, *Gates and Journeys*, and *Colin McCahon: The last Painting*, around the two polarities of religion and post-modernism, and McCahon's faith or failure of faith is deeply problematic. The focus on faith or lack of faith runs the risk of becoming purely biographical. This tends to draw the discussion onto arguments about private, interior states of mind, rather than the shared evidence of the paintings themselves, and privileges a kind of authorial intent, which is deeply problematic in the context of McCahon's quotational and sparse practice. By opposing religion and post-modernism, it constructs a false dichotomy that pushes us away from a consideration of the ways post-modernist strategies of quotation have a theological function. Taken together, these structurings promote a *psychological* understanding of McCahon's painting which preempts a *theological* understanding: instead of thinking about god in McCahon's practice, we are prompted to think about McCahon's personal views. It interiorises his religion, and turns it into a matter for private introspection. His faith is

---

<sup>46</sup> Rex Butler, "Victory over Death: The Gospel according to Colin McCahon", Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2012. Accessed on the 20th of April, 2016 from <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/07/25/3553295.htm>.

treated as a spiritual exercise, distanced from religion, and the viewer becomes a disinterested spectator to the theatrical enactment of an internal struggle.

### *Deconstructing the biographical turn*

Still, the paintings do exist independently of any question of the actual beliefs that McCahon possessed at any point. While the particular nature of McCahon's religious beliefs may be of interest to his family, and perhaps any relevant deities, it is not immediately clear why it should be privileged in readings of his paintings. Therefore, in this thesis I will be primarily engaged with the publicly available body of work left to us, and an explication of that body of work, not an explication of McCahon's private mental states. This preference for a reading of the works themselves, that relies on the evidence of the works and not on an attempt to analyse the artist's private intentionality, draws upon the work of Roland Barthes on the "death of the author" which will be further discussed below in the context of McCahon's use of quotation. This is particularly apposite in the case of *I considered...*, given the history of its discovery we are presented with in *The Last Painting* and *A question of faith*.

Barthes' argues that traditional criticism allows the author to excessively dominate readings of their text. The author's intention and psychology should not take priority over the reader's construction of the text. This argument is particularly pertinent to *I considered* given the extent to which previous readings have been dominated by psychological readings of McCahon's despair and doubt, despite the evidence indicating that McCahon's intentionality and personality were at least heavily mediated in the creation of *I considered*, and at most almost entirely absent.

I also lay the ground work for a latter argument that Pound, Johnston, and Bloem's division between "post-modern quotationalism" and religious feeling is overly simplistic, and that a more complex understanding of the way McCahon uses Biblical text indicates that post-modern quotationalism is, rather than in opposition to, at the *core* of the theological operation of McCahon's

work. This is a point that will be later returned to in the context of a close reading of the painting itself.

How can we read the text of *I considered all the acts of oppression*?

The textual evidence of *I considered all the acts of oppression*, when divorced from the intentionalist preference for readings derived from suppositions around McCahon's mental states, does not support a reading that centres on problems of personal faith. It is certainly bleak, a point central to most readings of the painting. Pound, Brown, and Bloem all move from the lamentation's clear despair at the world to a personal despair, fitting with their general trend to explain McCahon's painting by reference to his personal psychology.

Barthes' argues that traditional criticism allows the author to excessively dominate readings of their text. The author's intention and psychology should not take priority over the reader's construction of the text. This argument is particularly pertinent to *I considered* given the extent to which previous readings have been dominated by psychological readings of McCahon's despair and doubt, despite the evidence indicating that McCahon's intentionality and personality were at least heavily mediated in the creation of *I considered*, and at most almost entirely absent owing to his cognitive decline as a result of his dementia.

I also lay the ground work for a latter argument that Pound and Bloem's division between "post-modern quotationalism" and religious feeling is overly simplistic, and that a more complex understanding of the way McCahon uses Biblical text indicates that post-modern quotationalism is, rather than in opposition to, at the *core of* the theological operation of McCahon's work. This is a point that will be later returned to in the context of a close reading of the painting itself.

McCahon's use of Biblical texts, for Butler, evinces an awareness and utilisation of the way those texts are transmitted and retransmitted, and interpreted and re-interpreted, in different contexts and

for different purposes. In his ABC essay, Butler claims that McCahon as a great artist has “a certain nothing or emptiness”,<sup>47</sup> using to Borges’ essay on Kafka, “Kafka and his precursors”, famous for the dictum that great artists create their own precursors, to legitimise this centring of absence. In doing this, he starts to build a synthesis across the forced dichotomy of religious meaning and quotationalism, and the emphasis on nothingness and emptiness precisely describes both several artistic strategies at play in *I considered*, and echoes Altizer’s concern with emptiness as a theological strategy.

These discussions of McCahon’s relationship to god presuppose a certain kind of Christian god, in which McCahon’s faith comes and goes. This is the question of doubt: McCahon either believes, or he doubts, or is tormented by his lack of faith, and so-on. In so doing, it reduces a question of greater theological complexity into a simple binary. There are deeper questions about god possible than his simple existence or non-existence, and deeper questions about the paintings than whether McCahon happened to believe in such a god or not.

A similar opposition between “faith” and “post-modern quotationalism” — that McCahon either uses religious passages in a kind of “meaningless quotationalism” or they are the voice of a prophet — evades the way in which so-called post-modern quotationalism can have directly theological functions. As Butler suggests, McCahon’s use of quotations, and his almost total effacement of an original, personal voice in favour of the re-use of previous texts in his late work, perform an explicitly theological purpose.

In his essay “The Death of the Author”, Barthes attacks traditional notions of authorial and critical authority.<sup>48</sup> The author is given too much power in the way we read texts, so that “criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire’s work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, van

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Barthes, “The Death of the Author”.

Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice".<sup>49</sup> This could be applied to the analysis of Pound, Brown, and Bloem: for them, sometimes it seems McCahon's work is his faith, or possibly McCahon's work is his despair. Barthes draws on the work of John Austin on performative utterances, suggesting that the act of writing is not "an operation of recording, notation, representation, depiction" but rather is a performative act "with no other content [...] than the act by which it was uttered".<sup>50</sup> Barthes posits that we should not see a text as a linear sequence containing a single meaning, imposed by an "Author-God". Instead, texts are a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of meanings, none of them original, blend and clash"; rather than writing functioning as the direct transmission of the authorial voice, we should see it as "the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin [...] the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing".<sup>51</sup>

This argument aims to kill off the author as a locus of critical worship. No longer can a critic act as the high priest of the authorial cult. Now, the reader is given more priority to determine the meaning of the text, a text which now exists independently of the author's will. This dethronement, it emerges, is a way of opening up new possibilities: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author".<sup>52</sup>

Barthes' title, "The death of the author" is almost excessively apposite to *I considered all the acts of oppression*, for McCahon is factually dead before the painting is ever seen. This absolute posthumousness has traditionally been used to freight *I considered all the acts of oppression* with an autobiographical cargo. But, as I argue below, it can be read in another way, as highlighting the absurdity of an intentionalist reading of the painting.

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 145-6.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 148.

Ironically, the specific biographical facts of McCahon's life pose a serious problem for those seeking to apply a biographical, intentionalist reading to *I considered*. The McCahon Trust has tentatively dated the work to 1981-3, to place it in line with the other three works that share formal characteristics and draw upon the text of Ecclesiastes. *The emptiness of all endeavour* is dated to 1980 and was first shown at Peter McLeavey's in August 1980,<sup>53</sup> while *I applied my mind and Is there anything of which one can say, Look, this is new?* were first shown in 1983 at McLeavey's.<sup>54</sup> *I considered all the acts of oppression* is of the same dimensions and draws from the same source - Ecclesiastes - as these two, making it likely it was worked on in series with them. After the 1983 exhibition at McLeavey's, McCahon showed no new work, and it is generally accepted in the literature that he ceased painting around this time.<sup>55</sup>

McCahon broke off painting because he was suffering from a severe mental decline. This was the period in which Brown was working on the first edition of his book *Colin McCahon: Artist*. The manuscript was sent to the publisher in February 1983, and by the time Brown was working on the last chapters, McCahon's "attention span and fading memory often failed him".<sup>56</sup> It is unlikely that McCahon, who had to have drafts of the book read to him, was by this point capable of making new paintings involving large amounts of texts: therefore, in all likelihood McCahon broke off work on this painting in early in 1983, around the time he finished work on the two paintings for McLeavey's. One plausible scenario — although owing to McCahon's privacy in the studio and his declining mental capacity it is impossible to firmly substantiate — is that *I considered* was begun at the same time as the two paintings for McLeavey's, but for whatever reason was not brought to a conclusion for that show, and then was simply never returned to.

---

<sup>53</sup> *A Question of Faith*, 259.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 260.

<sup>55</sup> Gordon Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist / New Edition* (Auckland: Reed, 1993), 216.

<sup>56</sup> Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist*, 209, x.

After the works for McLeavey's were despatched, McCahon continued to speak of getting back to painting, but this was increasingly implausible. By 1984, McCahon was so deep in dementia he disappeared while in Sydney for the opening of *I will need words*, and was found by the police in a public park the next morning. He was only recognised at the hospital when a television item on his disappearance was seen by staff.<sup>57</sup> This point can be seen as marking the end of his career, several years before his death, and the stage at which it starts to become difficult to talk about McCahon as possessing his mental capacities in any meaningful way.

As William McCahon describes it, the family entered his studio in the period following his death in 1987, and discovered the painting in an unsigned and undated state on the floor. Therefore, it is important to remember that there is at least three years, likely six years, and entirely possibly seven years gap between the point at which McCahon broke off work on *I considered* and the discovery of the painting, in an understandably charged atmosphere, by his family. This leads to a set of observations. The first is that it is not clear to what extent we should see *I considered all the acts* as a purposeful object, or the fact of McCahon's breaking off work as intentional. The second is that even were we to see *I considered* as intentional, it is unclear to which period we should assign the intentionality — it is deeply problematic reading back from 1987 to the early 80s when McCahon was working on it.

Were it not for the particular circumstances around McCahon's death — his slow mental decline, his refusal to allow others access to the studio, his family's almost religious reverence for his work — it seems very unlikely we would ever have seen *I considered* in the form it currently is, for the simple reason that it seems that at no point did McCahon feel that in its current form it was a finished object suitable for display and treatment as an art work. McCahon made a habit of dating paintings comparatively early in his process, at the point he felt the painting had taken "positive shape". This was not when they were finished, and he often carried on working on them for months

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 209.

afterwards.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the absence of date and signature suggest this work was at a reasonably early stage in its development. This is common ground across all accounts of the painting: the traditional markers of painterly approval (signing, dating) are absent from *I considered*, and no account attempts to argue that the painting should be understood as substantially complete: (the McCahon Trust phrases it as the painting is “unsigned, undated, and *unfinished*”).<sup>59</sup> This is especially so given that at the point McCahon broke off work on *I considered all the acts of oppression* he was almost certainly in the grips of senile dementia: the failure to continue, while random, was part of a general deterioration. As harsh as it sounds, it is entirely possible that McCahon’s mind simply collapsed as he was working on this painting, and that the work is an index of a man’s mental decay. Trying to discern the mind of the artist is, Barthes would argue, theoretically misguided. It is also, I would suggest, ironically misguided in this instance given the actual facts of McCahon’s mental states.

In this way, it is also possible to see *I considered all the acts of oppression* as a post-McCahon art work. There are two strands to this argument. The first is that it is literally true that it was not until after McCahon’s death that *I considered* was presented as an art object. McCahon did not present it as such while he was alive. The second strand is that it is only because of McCahon’s practice that it is possible to see *I considered* as an art object. Absent that contextualisation, it would almost certainly be read as a naive religious text. Therefore, it was only in a post-McCahon period that *I considered all the acts of oppression* could and did emerge as an object of art world engagement.

Returning to Barthes’ essay on the (metaphorical) death of the author, his emphasis on the performativity of writing is very applicable to the bare and absolutely self-referring performative utterance “I AM” of 1970’s *Victory over Death II*. It is possible to think of the “I AM” of *Victory over Death II* as a performance made by the painting itself, and not by any other actor. One reason, it might be argued, that *Victory over Death II* has to assert “I AM” is that by the traditional standards

---

<sup>58</sup> From *Colin McCahon/A Survey Exhibition*, quoted in Gifkins, *Gates and Journeys*, 77.

<sup>59</sup> “I considered all the acts of oppression”, McCahon Trust online catalogue.

of New Zealand painting, the *Victory over Death II* barely is: barely is a painting and not just a piece of canvas: in this sense it poses similar problems to *I considered*. Fairburn's notorious dismissal of McCahon's work as "celestial graffiti", quite apart from the explicit judgement of quality, contains an implicit judgement of kind, that McCahon's work does not quite deserve the ontological status of "painting".<sup>60</sup>

From a formal perspective, *I considered all the acts of oppression* is even more marginally "painting" than *Victory over Death II*. At the time, house paint and unstretched canvas were not traditional painterly materials. Simple white scrawls on a black ground are not sufficient, by the judgement of most prior painters and critics in the western tradition, to establish an object as a painting. *I considered all the acts of oppression* pushes painterly concerns to the margins, and evades most notions of what being a painting means: the formal means employed are austere, and as Pound notes, the large black space left in the mid-lower left is striking in its emptiness. The text used is a quotation, another self-effacing gesture. The fact the painting is unsigned, undated, and, in the words of the McCahon Trust catalogue, "probably unfinished", suggests that this is a painting whose very status as a painting is marginal, and perhaps exists in a liminal space between painting and non-painting. So in order to make *I considered* a painting, we must make it work hard, we must make it perform. Pound endows a simple blank space, a space entirely possibly left blank simply as a result of McCahon's breaking off of work at that point, with the pathos of an attempt to represent the unrepresentable; Brown treats every slip of the brush, every edit made by a man with a fading mind as a deeply meaningful decision.

These strainings do two things. First, they make it clear the extent to which biographical analysis fails to cope with *I considered*. Even as two capable art historians attempt to bring this painting into direct dialogue with McCahon's life and personal experiences, they find themselves ascribing meaning in ways that defy an autobiographical reading. They look for personal meaning in an

---

<sup>60</sup> A. R. D. Fairburn, "Art in Canterbury. Some Notes on the Group Show (1947)", *Landfall* 2/1 (March 1948) 46-50, 50.

object McCahon never felt was complete; and which, it is entirely possible, he had considered a failure as a painting when he last engaged with it in possession of his full faculties. Secondly, they force the painting to assert and reassert, to *perform* its own existence as a painting. It is a more oblique performativity than the strident “I AM” of *Victory Over Death II*, but it is still performativity.

Barthes states that texts are “tissue of quotations”.<sup>61</sup> *I considered* is entirely a tissue of quotations, and is very obvious about that fact. In so doing, it problematises easy and automatic associations between McCahon’s person and the voice of the painting. Wystan Curnow’s argument that the “I AM” of earlier words is “inescapably” an assertion of McCahon’s being,<sup>62</sup> is echoed by Pound who argues that the texts in McCahon’s late religious paintings are “selected so they might speak for him, and [are] in this sense *his* speech” [emphasis in original].<sup>63</sup> Pound does suggest that there is a “productive ambiguity” about the speaker, but for Pound, this a method McCahon uses to make grand, prophetic statements in the context of secular New Zealand, which could struggle to assimilate them. McCahon, as a personality, remains at the core of Pound’s reading of *I considered*.

There is long chain of transmission and representations that join us, looking at *I considered*, and the original author of Ecclesiastes. McCahon has selected the texts used and written them out. He has drawn them from the New English Bible, a translation made by a committee.<sup>64</sup> The translation of Ecclesiastes was made from the Judaic Masoretic Text, itself a product of repeated copying and editing from a range of prior texts. Within Ecclesiastes itself, there is a tension between the persona of the narrator and the likely actual author - it seems likely that the narrator ruler who accumulates palaces, harems, gardens, and more wealth than any predecessor is a structural device, and not a claim about the actual lived experience of the text’s composer(s). This long chain

---

<sup>61</sup> Barthes, “The Death of the Author”,

<sup>62</sup> Curnow, *I will need words*, unpaginated.

<sup>63</sup> Pound, “Endless yet never”, 3.

<sup>64</sup> Cambridge University Press, “New English Bible”, accessed 20th of April, 2016 at “<http://www.cambridge.org/bibles/bible-versions/new-english-bible/>”.

of speakers, saying and resign the text, disrupts a neat attribution of the text to McCahon, and suggests that the question of *who* is speaking here is more complex than just a question of *how* McCahon is speaking, as Pound tends to do with the concept of “productive ambiguity”.

*How can we read the text of I considered all the acts of oppression?*

The textual evidence of *I considered all the acts of oppression*, when divorced from the intentionalist preference for readings derived from suppositions around McCahon’s mental states, does not support a reading that centres on problems of personal faith. It is certainly grim, a point central to most readings of the painting. Pound, Brown, and Bloem all move from the lamentation’s clear despair at the world to a personal despair, fitting with their general trend to explain McCahon’s painting by reference to his personal psychology.

But it is not, on closer reading, a bleakness that centres on the narrator. The speaking voice does not personally suffer. The suffering occurs to others. The voice “*considers*”, they “*pity*”, they “*reckon*”, they “*see*”, but nowhere do they do *suffer*. There are many biblical texts that emphasise personal suffering: Christ’s cry on the Cross, which McCahon uses in the *Crucifixion according to St Mark* (1947) is one salient example, or, from the Hebrew Bible, the suffering of Job. But Ecclesiastes emphasises the suffering of *others*, not the narrator, and it does so within the framework of justice. It is deeply concerned for the world, and the way that the world contains suffering. The voice talks about the way the weak are oppressed by the strong, and there is no justice, because there is no one to punish the strong and right these wrongs.

The text of *I considered* is an observational text about collective suffering in this world, and it locates suffering as the result of the injustices of this world. The observer sees oppression. They see the tears of the oppressed, and that no-one comforts them, because “strength is on the side of their oppressors”. The dead are happier than the living, and both are worse off than the unborn, who have not yet “witnessed the wicked deeds done here under the sun”. This is a text about the wickedness of the world, and the wickedness and oppression done by the strong to the weak. It is

a critique of power, and the way that the powerful in this world oppress the weak, and the way the world fails to achieve any standard of justice as a result of this. It is, therefore, not just a text about suffering, but a text about justice, and the failure of the world to live up to any standards of justice.

This is another point where the psychological, private interpretation begins to strain: if this painting is about an identifiable person suffering a long, dark night of the soul, why has McCahon chosen to use a multiple-authored, anonymous text which is not about the personal suffering of the narrator, but the collective suffering of the world? If we are meant to find in the text a story about McCahon's own personal, mental and physical decay, why does the text of *I considered...* revolve around the injustices prevalent in society, and the oppression perpetrated by the powerful?

On the basis of the textual evidence, the relation of *I considered* to a traditional concept of the benevolent omnipotent god is awkward. The text is deeply negative, a message underlined by the stark and rough rendering in white on a black ground. There is little hope of redemption, either in this world or the next. The living are pitied, but so are the dead - this is not a story in which we pass through a vale of tears into a better world. The here-and-now is bleak, full of suffering and oppression, and this is not relieved by a promise of post-mortem paradise. But, this is not accompanied by a personal loss of faith: personal faith and salvation does not seem to be at stake here.

### *Death of god theory*

Death of god theory was and is a certain kind of radical theology, a confluence of practices which occurred in academic American theology in the sixties, and then diverged again. This terminology is imprecise, because the body of practice is imprecise and fuzzy. Following that brief confluence, which was crystallised in a *Time* magazine cover story in August 1965,<sup>65</sup> and documented in books

---

<sup>65</sup> See Jackson Lee Ice and John J Carey (ed.), *The Death of God Debate* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 11-12.

like *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*,<sup>66</sup> *Radical Theology and the Death of God*,<sup>67</sup> and *The Death of God Debate*,<sup>68</sup> the “school”, such as it was, continued to move apart, merging into a broader current of radical theology.

McCahon’s practice, and particularly *I considered*, lends itself to an analysis through the specific theological lens of radical death of god theory because where McCahon’s work implicitly engages a shared set of concerns, “death of god” theory does so explicitly. These concerns around the place of religion in a modern society, the failures of traditional conceptions of god to accommodate the traumas of the twentieth century, and the precise and vivid image of the “death of god” are shared between the two bodies of practice, which can be used to illuminate each other. Both bodies of work have at stake these relationships between modernity, modernism and religion; a questioning of traditional notions of god and god’s nature; death and faith; and a critique of traditional concepts of power and sovereignty in the wake of the tragedies of the twentieth century. But they also share a group of processual concerns around quotation, misreading and self-emptying, and it is this processual kinship that is most useful in generating novel readings of McCahon’s work. My emphasis on this aspect of death of god theory distinguishes this analysis from that of Stuart MacKenzie discussed below.

However, in order to use this theory, it will be useful to provide an account of the thought of particular theologians, particularly that of T J J Altizer and Richard Rubenstein. This account focus on the response to suffering, and particularly the response to unjust oppression, before exploring the idea of emptying and kenosis in a theological context, and the way in which this account inverts and acts upon orthodox christian thought in self-similar manner. The New Zealand theologian Lloyd

---

<sup>66</sup> Thomas J J Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966).

<sup>67</sup> Thomas J J Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, (London: Penguin, 1968). This book was originally a collection of essays published in specialist journals like *Theology Today*, *The Christian Scholar*, and *Journal of Religion* before being issued in paperback by Penguin and Bobbs-Merrill.

<sup>68</sup> Ince and Carey, *Death of God Debate*.

Geering engaged with this school of thought almost accidentally, and I discuss his practice as a way of contextualising New Zealand's experiences of the death of god. I also return to Stuart MacKenzie's reading of this school, and argue that the notion of *kenosis* will provide a useful tool to expand death of god readings of McCahon that he does not make use of.

The only prominent Jewish thinker in the loose grouping was the Rabbi Richard Rubenstein. In his volume *After Auschwitz*<sup>69</sup>, he emphasises that the Holocaust is the fundamental issue for Jewish theology. Both the "myth of the omnipotent God of history" and the "election of Israel" become untenable positions in the aftermath of the Holocaust.<sup>70</sup> It is not enough to say that there is a sovereign god who *disapproves* of the social order existing on earth - because, if there is such a god, how could he allow such a horrific thing to occur? Mere disapproval from an omnipotent god seems impossible to stand for, in the face of such horror. Similarly, it seems that the fact of Germany's predominant Christianity did not prevent the death camps. It is on this fundamental breach with orthodox theodicy that Rubenstein constructs his understanding of Judaism as a religion no longer reliant on the existence of god as the moral underwriter. Altizer also emphasises this breach in his essay "The Holocaust and Theology of the Death of God", where he claims that inasmuch as the Holocaust was an ultimately evil event, the traditional providential god can only be accepted if providence is itself evil. He goes on to suggest that one of the challenges facing and motivating his theology is an attempt to articulate a theology that does not erase the Holocaust.

For these writers, the phrase death of god allowed them to think through the self-negations and disappearances of the sovereign god that seemed to be required to deal with the erosion of traditional understanding of god's function as an absolute moral basis. This erosion was perceived to be the result, on the one hand, of the horrors of the holocaust, global war, and the dangers of nuclear warfare, and on the other by the increasingly secular nature of western society. The notion

---

<sup>69</sup> Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992).

<sup>70</sup> "After the experiences of our time, we can neither affirm the myth of the omnipotent God of history, nor can we maintain its corollary, the election of Israel. After the death camps, the doctrine of Israel's election is in any event a thoroughly distasteful pill to swallow". Ibid, 20.

of the sovereign used by these writers can be illuminated by the political historian Ernst Kantorowicz's work on the political theology of the middle ages, particularly his 1957 book, *The King's Two Bodies*.<sup>71</sup> Kantorowicz's argument that the ideological underpinnings of sovereignty lay in theological conceptions of kingship became a key tool used to critique notions of god as a just sovereign. Traditional concepts of the sovereign position them as a guarantor of moral order and an enforcer of justice, but for the radical theologians of the 1960s, this position was deeply flawed. How could earthly sovereigns like the genocidal Nazi regime be posited as just? How could the heavenly sovereign, the Christian god, be a just god as he presided over the genocides of the twentieth century? A radical critique of sovereignty was required, and for these thinkers, the idea of the death of god provided that radical critique.

These tensions mirror the tensions found in the prior literature on readings of *I considered all the acts of oppression*, where the text of the painting's focus on what appears to be irredeemable suffering and oppression in the lived experience of the world, and an accompanying need to reconcile this with traditional ideas of Christian faith and a predilection for biographical interpretation, results in an implication that the painting should be read as expression of a loss of faith in god. The excluded middle here is a reconsideration of traditional ideas of the nature of god, and it is in this direction that I argue *I considered all the acts of oppression* moves, a direction mirrored by that taken by the death of god theologians.

The way that Altizer and Rubenstein resolve this tension, and dispense with the omnipotent sovereign god, is through the idea of the death of god. The term itself derives, ultimately, from the late 18th century German philosopher Georg Hegel, and was developed in a variety of ways in the 19th century by various strands of post-Hegelian German philosophy. Ludwig Feuerbach,<sup>72</sup> and

---

<sup>71</sup> Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study In Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

<sup>72</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (Edinburgh and London: Ballantyne and Hanson, 1881).

through him Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels,<sup>73</sup> treated the disappearance of god from European life as a primarily materialistic phenomenon driven by the advent of modernity and the triumph of capitalism as an economic system. Nietzsche, however, approaches the problem from a primarily philosophical point of view, emphasising the way in which the “death of God” can act as a critique of orthodoxy, and a *philosophical* reaction to modernity.<sup>74</sup> In the 1960s, Thomas Altizer developed the slogan of the death of god into a radical critique of Christianity, and proposes that we should precisely celebrate the death of god, a death that was worked out through god’s *kenotic*, or self-emptying, gesture of incarnation and humiliation upon the Cross.

In Altizer’s case, the death of god is shorthand for a set of arguments about the historical phenomenon of Christianity, the relationship of Christianity and society, and the nature of Christ’s Incarnation. The death of god is an *historical* phenomenon. Altizer’s thesis is that god *dies*, that there is an historical and theological moment where god dies, where the sovereign immanent god empties himself out, through the Incarnation, into Jesus Christ. For Altizer the Incarnation is a process of self-emptying and self-extinction, through the becoming human - the em-body-ment - explicit in becoming Jesus, that culminates in the death, the absolute extinction, of god.

Altizer’s account of the Christ-story is self-consciously heterodox, and self-aware of its own status as a revisionist understanding of the Christ-story. It is, therefore, important to understand the traditional role of god and Jesus in the Christian narrative. The events of the fall, incarnation, salvation are radically redefined in Altizer’s theology in a process of dialectic negation, and therefore it is through the recapitulation of that dialectic that it is easiest to present those events. Particularly important is the way in which the sovereign transcendent god is *emptied out*, which requires a somewhat technical discussion of the nature of god before Altizer’s “absolutely negative” understanding of Jesus can be grasped, and the full import of his claims understood.

---

<sup>73</sup> Karl Marx and Friederich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976.)

<sup>74</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. Oscar Levy trans. Thomas Common, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche: The Joyful Wisdom* vol. 10 (New York: MacMillan, 1924) 151.

In the orthodox Christian tradition, there is a very clear narrative of the death of god. It is the Incarnation narrative, which is central to orthodox Christian beliefs around salvation. god incarnates, becomes human, and then suffers, and dies on the Cross. god must suffer and die to ensure the salvation of men.

For orthodox Christians, it is not in dispute that god, *in the person of Christ*, dies. It is the death of Christ on the cross that allows for the salvation of the faithful despite their sinful nature.<sup>75</sup> Christ offers himself as a sacrifice - god offers *himself* up as a sacrifice to himself - and dies on the Cross at the hands of men, and in so doing washes away our sins: "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow".<sup>76</sup> But Christ's death is not final, given his resurrection on the third day, and in so doing prefigures the resurrection to come and exemplifies the orthodox Christian promise of life eternal. (It is this doctrine of the physical resurrection of Christ that Geering struggled to accept.)

An orthodox Christian reading of the text of *I considered all the acts of oppression* would position it in the interregnum between the Fall and the Incarnation. The text becomes evidence of the fallen nature of the world, where humanity experiences the pain of exclusion from the earthly paradise, and does not yet enjoy the promise of posthumous salvation through Jesus Christ. This narrative seems problematic: the god that condemns people to suffer, not just in life but in death, because they have the misfortune to be born prior to the birth of Christ seems a cruel god. It is also not a reading that the composers of the text, who themselves lived prior to the birth of Christ, would accept, and nor is it one that Jewish readers would now accept.

---

<sup>75</sup> The precise nature of the salvific operation of the Crucifixion is one of the areas of dispute between Christian denominations. I have tended to follow Altizer in taking a reformed stance, but there are other views within orthodoxy.

<sup>76</sup> Isaiah 1:18.

The varying interpretations of Ecclesiastes are an example of the way that the orthodox narrative is a narrative constructed in a historical process, and is not the only possible narrative. It is an orthodox reading of the Biblical text, but orthodoxy is a social construct, and the societies that constructed orthodoxy were patriarchal, racist, sexist, and classist societies. This narrative places the emphasis on the Fall as the exercise of god's sovereign authority to punish a sinning man, and the Resurrection as a triumph of the sovereign god in saving sinning man. It is also a narrative that moves god's sovereignty from himself to man - but not to all people: the shift in Genesis "ye shall be as gods", and "shall have dominion over the earth" to "lordship over women", and onward represents the successive narrowing of the scope of sovereignty to a smaller and smaller group of people, and the expansion of the Law as a tool of oppression. We can see this as a process that provides religious justification for patriarchal, racist, sexist, and classist orderings of society.

Altizer radically re-positions the narrative so the emphasis is on the *death* of god. For Altizer, god's death *is* "the gospel, the good news, the glad tidings" that "the Christian is now called to proclaim".<sup>77</sup> The Incarnation story becomes the story of the death of the sovereign god through a process of self-emptying inversion, or *kenosis*, and the question of the nature of Christ is radically transformed. The incarnation, Altizer explains, is "is a total and all-consuming act: as Spirit becomes the Word that empties the Speaker of himself, the whole reality of the Spirit becomes incarnate in its opposite."<sup>78</sup>

There is a structural self-similarity: not only does god humble, reverse himself, but the texts themselves are humbled and reversed through Altizer's re- and mis-reading of them. They are both held still and preserved in their form, and yet their meanings are reversed and restructured in such a way as to present a radically different, but still Christian, account. The Incarnation and Crucifixion, rather than providing an affirmation of god's omnipotence, immortality, and triumph,

---

<sup>77</sup> "But the message that the Christian is now called to proclaim is the gospel, the good news or the glad tidings, of the death of god", Altizer, *Gospel of Christian Atheism*, 15.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 68-9.

becomes a story of humbling, suffering and death, yet it remains a foundational story, still the “good news” of the Gospels.

Like Altizer, the New Zealand theologian Lloyd Geering struggled with the centrality of the resurrection. In Geering’s case, he was simply unable to hold to the physical resurrection of Christ.<sup>79</sup> This failure became a major point of contention in the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand in the 1960s, eventually resulting in a heresy trial. There are two aspects of Geering’s thought that are particularly relevant to this thesis. The first is that he was influenced by and aligned with, almost accidentally and as a result of the actions of his theological opponents, the American death of god scholars.<sup>80</sup> It is interesting that the death of god school of thought was widely enough known in New Zealand that a popular controversy such as Geering’s heresy trial could align along those fractures. A biographical analysis of McCahon’s personal theology which does not confront the death of god directly seems likely to be ignoring a major controversy he would have been heavily exposed to in the 1960s.<sup>81</sup> Secondly, Geering’s theological struggles were not a crisis of faith, in the sense that Geering did not struggle with a question of belief in the physical resurrection; for him, it simply did not happen, and this cleared the way to move on to more interesting questions about the role of god in a secular society.

An important distinction needs to be made here between the between on the one hand the notion of the death of god and on the other the notion of the private loss of faith. Within this chapter, I have characterised the work of authors like Bloem and Pound as prioritising a private loss of faith, and suggested that the death of god can act as an alternative understanding of *I considered all the acts of oppression*. This argument can only function if that clear distinction is made and justified. It

---

<sup>79</sup> Lloyd Geering, *Geering and God 1965-71: The Heresy Trial that Divided New Zealand* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2014), 2.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>81</sup> There are only two such studies published that I am aware of: Stuart MacKenzie’s article for *Antic*, and Geering’s own work on McCahon. Johnstone’s essay for *Gates and Journeys* comes tantalisingly close, but I think her reliance on Gregor Smith veers her away at the last moment.

can be argued that the death of god is simply a melodramatic metaphor for a whole wave of individual losses of faith. In this case, it is not particularly compelling to argue that *I considered...* engages the notion of the death of god. All that would be saying is the same thing Bloem, Pound, and Brown have been saying all along, but in more poetic language. The radical theologian William Hamilton addresses this issue, and argues that to reduce the idea of the death of god to such terms is to “trivialize” it.<sup>82</sup> The death of god is not “merely private, subjective, psychological”.<sup>83</sup> Rather, it makes claims about the external, shared world, the “world of reality”.<sup>84</sup> Hamilton admits this is a bold, perhaps arrogant, stance, but it is necessary to carry through the full radicalism of the claim. Hamilton’s argument demonstrates that there is a distinction between these two notions, and it is this distinction that I rely on in arguing that, contra to the personal faith reading, there is an alternative reading which engages a broader social context.

With this theoretical background, can we then read this painting as being about the death of god? If, instead of assuming that this is a painting about McCahon’s mortality - his relationship to both god and death - and instead read it as about the relationship *between* god and death, this becomes a viable prospect.

#### *Prior theological discussions of McCahon and the death of god*

I am not the first author to bring McCahon into the context of the death of god. This section discusses Zoe Alderton and David Khan, two prior authors who worked on the edge of this issue, and Stewart McKenzie, Michael Grimshaw and Arryn Snowball, three prior authors who have

---

<sup>82</sup> William Hamilton, “Questions and Answers on the Radical Theology”, in Ice and Carey, *The Death of God Debate*, 213-241, 219.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

directly engaged McCahon and the death of god. I give an account of their work, and explain where I think it leaves space for further development.<sup>85</sup>

Alderton recently wrote a book on Colin McCahon's work — *The Spirit of Colin McCahon*—, which drew on a combination of theological and communication theory.<sup>86</sup> While her theological work was novel and innovative, the choice to frame McCahon's work as a failed attempt to communicate a set of spiritual and ecological messages is baffling in its naivety. It is hard to integrate that style of analysis with an art historical approach that values ambiguities, complexities, and resists evaluating practices as "successful" or "failed".<sup>87</sup>

In his essay "Celestial Lavatories", Stuart McKenzie does bring in the concept of the death of god.<sup>88</sup> McKenzie attempts a synthesis between the notion of McCahon as a religious and Curnow's argument that McCahon is an "outsider looking in"<sup>89</sup> who uses Christianity as a kind of esoteric knowledge. We should see McCahon as playing the relevant "language game"; "rather than picking over the corpse of Christianity, his work is better regarded as participating in the on-going manoeuvres of theology".<sup>90</sup> I agree with McKenzie as to the second part, but I think that it is

---

<sup>85</sup> Sitting somewhat outside the mainline of inquiry discussed here, a recent PhD thesis at the University of Canterbury, David Khan's "Figuring Desire: Psychoanalytic perspectives on the discourse surrounding Colin McCahon and Ralph Hotere", looks at the discursive field surrounding McCahon's practice through a Laconian psychoanalytic lens. Khan argues that the discourse around McCahon is dominated by the motif of doubt, and in particular *McCahon's doubt*. Khan traces this figure back through a range of authors, eventually ending with Charles Brasch. Khan's thesis is useful for documenting in great depth the figure of doubt; however, in this work and particular in this section, I would prefer to move away psychoanalytical questions of doubt and faith towards more explicitly theological questions. David Khan, "Figuring Desire: Psychoanalytic perspectives on the discourse surrounding Colin McCahon and Ralph Hotere", (PhD thesis, University of Canterbury, 2015.)

<sup>86</sup> Zoe Alderton, *The Spirit of Colin McCahon*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2015).

<sup>87</sup> Alderton, *Spirit of Colin McCahon*: "visual rhetoric is the best way to account for McCahon's failures", 6, "the failure of his work to bring spiritual enlightenment", 76, "another persuasive case study of failure is the audience reaction to *Teaching Aids*", 179, "the general misunderstandings and failures that plagued McCahon", 241.

<sup>88</sup> Stuart McKenzie, "Celestial Lavatories", *Antic* 6 (November 1989) 35-47.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*.

precisely in the act of picking over the corpse of Christianity that McCahon participates in theological discourse.

This theology of McCahon is then developed by reference to Soren Kierkegaard and Mark Taylor.<sup>91</sup> Kierkegaard is used to present an essentially existentialist reading of McCahon, where the “Absolute Paradox” of the incarnation prompts a mediation on the opposition between reason and faith, and the basically unreasonable, preposterous nature of faith.<sup>92</sup> Mark Taylor’s work on the relationship between the *logos* (i.e the Word) and god is then used to present an “incarnational” theology that focuses on god in the world. As I will show in chapter one, this approach derived from Altizer is a useful starting point. I wish to extend McKenzie’s work in three ways: firstly, to emphasise the radical possibility of the “corpse of Christianity”, secondly to contextualise radical theology in the wake of the horrors and secularisations of the twentieth century, and thirdly to bring this apparatus more directly to bear on McCahon's practice.

Arryn Snowball’s 2012 thesis, carried out at Griffiths University, approaches the final series of paintings that Colin McCahon carried out, including *I considered all the acts of oppression*, and argues that rather than a biographical reading of the paintings as a matter of personal faith or doubt, we should instead opt for a theological reading of these paintings.<sup>93</sup> Snowball discusses McKenzie’s “death of God” article, but prefers to develop a line of nihilistic argument to explain McCahon. I share a distrust of the generally prevalent autobiographism that Snowball delineates, but I do not find his shift into nihilism convincing, and I would rather remain with more explicitly theological arguments longer than he does.

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 38-9.

<sup>93</sup> Arryn Snowball, “Delineating Nihilism: Colin McCahon’s last paintings” (doctoral thesis, Griffiths University, 2011).

McCahon — or, rather, the reactions to McCahon —, is used by Michael Grimshaw to develop a history of contextual theology in New Zealand. He emphasises the commentaries for, he says, “too often ‘we’ [i.e. scholars of religion] step outside our professional ability” in discussing the primary texts of the paintings themselves.<sup>94</sup> Instead it would be more fruitful to use the professional skills of the religious writer to discuss the reactions of critics and commentators in order to develop that contextual theology, one which emphasises the role of Lloyd Geering as a radical theologian in the New Zealand scene. For Grimshaw, McCahon is a device to talk about theology with.

Grimshaw, MacKenzie and Snowball’s work seems to have had little impact on the field of McCahon studies. In foregrounding the death of god as a conceptual tool for reading McCahon, they have, I think, identified a key motif and a key theoretical field. However, almost no further work has developed this angle. This may be due to the relative marginality of their positions with New Zealand art history - a dramaturge, a religionist, and an Australian painter are unlikely to set the direction of the discipline.<sup>95</sup> Similarly, it is possible that their concerns are not, strictly speaking, art historical concerns. Certainly, Alderton’s communication-theory is deeply unsuited to contemporary art historical modes of understanding, and Grimshaw explicitly renounces any discussion of the paintings themselves; and we might wonder whether, in reverse, perhaps many art historians feel themselves unable to follow a theological line of argument through to the extent required to go beyond the introductory work done by McKenzie and Snowball.

But there is also the problem that they complicate McCahon’s practice on an axis that it was not expected to be complicated on. Instead of an opposition between faith and doubt, secular and religious, these approaches explode that binary, deconstruct that structuralism, and instead put forward a difficult and complex ambiguity. The difficulty of fitting these arguments into the schemas of prior arguments may be one reason for the lack of further work in this line.

---

<sup>94</sup> Michael Grimshaw, “Believing in Colin: ‘A Question of Faith’ from ‘Celestial Lavatory Graffiti’ to ‘Derridean Religious Addict’.” *Pacifica* 18 vol 2 (2005)175-197, 176

<sup>95</sup> However, MacKenzie’s article was published in *Antic* during the period it was edited by Tina Barton (who curated the Auckland Art Gallery show *After McCahon* around that period as well).

In this thesis, I will draw on the work of these three scholars. However, I intend to develop an argument which extends the death of god angle of attack into a broader discussion of the role of these revisionary arguments in a range of post-McCahon practices.

*Reading I considered all the acts of oppression as a formal object after the death of god.*

Returning to the physical painting itself, this section discusses the formal and painterly strategies used in *I considered* in the context of the death of god. In decentring McCahon's personal psychology, this textual reading of *I considered* draws on Barthes' decentring of the author as well as drawing upon Altizer's decentring of god. If Barthes talks about the god-Author, Altizer deals directly to the godhead, and in surprisingly similar terms. Altizer's decentring of god works through the core process of *kenosis*: the self-emptying of the immanent god into the world. This process, which Altizer uses to address the dying of god, is one that rhymes with some of the strategies at play in *I considered*.

There are three important emptyings and reversals at play in *I considered*. There is most obviously a physical, formal emptying. There is the way that the text of the painting is ostentatiously a quotation, a repetitious echo. And there is the way the painting returns to and empties out the prior language established in McCahon's work. Taken together these reversals and emptyings provide a processual parallel to Altizer's method, and reinforce the political and theological movement away from a reliance on orthodox understandings of the nature of god.

*I considered* is barely a painting. It has emptied itself of almost all the painterly concerns that comprise the canons of western painting. It is not pictorial, replacing even the faintest gesture towards representation with a blank black expanse, a radical rejection of painting's prior role as depiction. It does not succeed in the traditional formal categories of Western painting. *I considered...*'s use of line is crude and mechanical: a rough, amateur scrawl and faint scratchy lines being the sum total of the design of the painting. The use of colour is not impressive.

McCahon relies on a simple black ground and a plain white, producing a simple monochromatism. Compositionally it is almost absurdly simplistic: a very elementary grid coupled with the rough scrawl of the Biblical text are the compositional tools used, and they are used in a plain, austere manner. There is no attempt to construct depth of any kind, to develop any sort of dynamic tension across the plane of the image, to engage in any of the traditional strategies of creating compositional interest. These are gestures of effacement, self-emptying. They depart from the illusionistic creation of an alternative world within the painting, a deep space controlled and created by the exercise of the artistic will.

Beyond this visual abandonment of painterliness, it has abandoned the traditional signifiers of painterly authority. In the Western tradition, these markers consist in things like stretched canvases covered in oils, with signatures, dates and frames. Instead, *I considered...* is unframed; it is unstretched; it is painted with acrylic paint. Unsigned, undated, unfinished, it is lacking three key distinguishing marks of a finished painting. It is so far emptied that it is only marginally a painting, only marginally an art object - a painting after the death of painting and the death of the painter. It is barely distinguishable from the detritus of the studio, an emptied-out, worldly, *kenotic* object.

Instead, *I considered* is a shallow, non-representational canvas, one that lays bare its own status as a node with a web of texts. The artist as creator is almost entirely absent in this stripped back and emptied out painting. Because the painting speaks entirely with another's voice, it effaces authorial self-expression in favour of quotation, a gesture reinforced by the lack of signature and date. This moves away from an assertion of the identity of the speaker and instead centres the act of speaking. The de-centring of the authorial identity is underlined by the fact that the text is drawn from transcribed and re-transcribed sources, translated by committee, excerpted into a radically difference context from any previous usage.

The re-appropriation and transfiguration of a traditional Christian text is a similar processual gesture as that enacted by Altizer's theology. Like Altizer, McCahon radically alters the way we

read a text we would previously have attributed the deepest orthodoxy to. As Barthes would have it, it is necessary to kill the author to free the reader; given that McCahon's author is god, here it seems that McCahon kills god.

Brown argues in his essay for *The Last Painting* that in order to read a McCahon painting, we must first know McCahon's other paintings. McCahon has a language, and through building up knowledge of a McCahon's practice we can build a richer, deeper understanding of any given painting of McCahon's. And, certainly, there is a benefit to drawing on our awareness of the trajectory and depth of McCahon's practice: we can see that there are certain recurring motifs and concerns within McCahon's painting, and we can build analyses across them. *I considered all the acts of oppression* sits clearly within McCahon's preoccupations: text, white on black ground, religion, un-stretched canvas. To the extent that prior, more ostensibly richer, paintings of McCahon's establish thematic grounds that can usefully inform our readings of this painting, Brown's argument is helpful. But in importing depth and richness it runs the risk of obscuring the icy emptiness, and the *absence* of meaning, that is a core part of *I considered...*'s formal operation.

The tension in this late work is that while those rich, deep knowledges are part of what is brought to the painting by viewers, the work itself is radically simple. McCahon's prior language is held open and emptied in such a way as to be both consistent and radically different: we still have the religious text, the scrawl, the presence of god and death that defines a work like *King of the Jews*, but they operate in pared-back, stripped away manner that challenges easy assumptions carried over from default readings of such earlier paintings.

This reversal is acknowledged by Brown, who uses it to argue for a change in McCahon's personal beliefs: the deeper, richer knowledge can be used to discover that McCahon's mind, body, and faith were failing, that he was coming face-to-face with death. This is an explicitly temporal and biographical reading: the paintings provide evidence for McCahon's mental states, and the way

those states change over time. I am not attempting to replace that reading with another reading showing a change in McCahon's beliefs over time, or even a reading that shows a change in claims made on the evidence of the paintings themselves. Instead, *I considered all the acts of oppression* offers an opportunity to revise our understandings of the prior work in the context of a reversal, a swerve, which maintains a consistency with the previous paintings while still reconfiguring the meanings and readings possible. Again, this is a similar gesture of reversal as embodied both in Altizer's theological process and in his theological claims.

Using the theological apparatus built up in the preceding matter, we can now, instead of reading this as a painting about McCahon's personal loss of belief in god, read it as a critique of *an* idea of god. As I have shown above, much of the literature of this painting - and McCahon's oeuvre as a whole - emphasise his relationship to both death and god. Indeed, Wystan Curnow goes on from that relationship to arrive at the claim that McCahon deals with "the death of god", a claim that he leaves unfortunately and frustratingly vague.<sup>96</sup> For Curnow, this is an emotive statement, framing a mood prevalent in McCahon's late paintings. It has been my argument that it is also an *analytic* statement, a statement describing both a process and a theological claim. *I considered...*'s religious stance is not simply a personal, internal, psychological stance: it is a theological position, and a public, political position. If, formally, McCahon's actions encode a post-structuralist play with quotation, meaning, and misreading, these actions echo the work of Barthes and Altizer, who both also, in their own ways, kill god. And like Altizer, McCahon kills god in order to engage with dual problems of the nature of god, and the problems of suffering in the world.

*Summing up the theology of I considered all the acts of oppression*

Whether or not McCahon's faith was stuttering and failing; whether or not he left the canvas bare and stark intentionally or simply failed to return to the studio, an old alcoholic losing his memory and his personality; the shared public evidence of *I considered all the acts of oppression* prompts a

---

<sup>96</sup> Curnow, *I will need words*, unpaginated.

deep engagement with the notion of the death of god, and Altizer's argument that this death was achieved by the humbling self-reversal of god's nature. If, as Butler argues, McCahon has "a certain nothing or emptiness", then we should look deeper at that emptiness, and engage with it on its own terms as an emptiness. We find that the painting is making political, theological arguments about emptiness, justice, and god, not just psychological, personal testimonies.

There are, therefore, three central claims we can make about the theological freight of *I considered all the acts of oppression* at this point. Having abandoned, in the light of the historical difficulties and with the advantage of Barthes' attack on the death of the author, the excessively biographical readings of this painting advanced by authors like Bloem, Brown, and Pound, we can explore a broader range of interpretations.

First, this painting directly attacks the problem of suffering in the world. In so doing, it further makes it hard to sustain a reading of *I considered* which revolves around private, interior considerations of "faith". Secondly and consequently, this painting adopts an ambiguous attitude towards the nature of god. However, this is not a "crisis of faith" in the sense that it does not follow that an internal psychological drama conducted within the mind of the painter is played out on the canvas. Instead, following on from the public problems of suffering there is a difficult set of questions about god's role in the world, a set of questions that the rabbi Richard Rubenstein confronts in another context and is thereby prompted to challenge the nature of god.

Thirdly and finally, the formal tactics at play in this painting echo the tactical plays made by post-modern theologians like Altizer and critics like Barthes. This is a sort of recursive tactic, where the form of the argument enacts the content of the argument. In the case of *I considered...*, the painting itself empties itself out, is itself a ambiguous, problematic object with a troubled relationship to broader canons: the canon of McCahon's work, the biblical canon, the canon of Western art history. These are the tactics of quotation, emptying, querying and reversal at play in Rubenstein and Geering, but especially Altizer, and in making use of them *I considered all the acts*

*of oppression* causes itself to re-enact the structure of those theological arguments. In Part Two, I will return to this argument from structural similarity.

Taken together, *I considered...* adopts a public, political attitude towards suffering, a questioning attitude towards the nature of god, and embeds that radical, revisionist attitude towards god in the structure of the object itself.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter I have provided an outline of previous scholarship on *I considered all the acts of oppression* and detailed problems with the biographical assumptions embedded within many of them. I have then advanced an alternative reading drawing upon a range of theoretical precursors and theological texts.

In the next two chapters, I will move away from a focus on one individual work of McCahon's, and will instead look at the relationship between McCahon's practice and legacies, and the work of two post-McCahon artists: Imants Tillers and Michael Stevenson.

I will return to Butler's quotation of Borges on Kafka to the effect that great artists create their precursors in the context of Harold Bloom's work on the anxiety of influence. Bloom's argument that later artists are under a constant baleful influence caused by their predecessors, and that the solution to this tension is through wilful misreading of their precursors, echoes Altizer's work. The concept of *kenosis* provides a structural bridge to Bloom's work, while in their shared location between structuralism and post-structuralism, modernism and post-modernism, and theology and literary studies useful cross-pollination occurs. Colin McCahon is both ostentatiously influenced and influencing, and I will use Bloom to look at the rhetoric of McCahon as *influenced*, particularly in the relation to arguments about New Zealand's political and economic place in world systems, and at the rhetoric of McCahon as *influencing* within those systems. Michael Stevenson's work investigates these rhetorics and concepts. The Australian artist Imants Tillers' work will be

considered within the context of Wystan Curnow's text *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'*.

Curnow acts as a critical bridge between McCahon and Tillers, while Tillers himself appropriates the work of McCahon, and examines a range of shared topics.

## Chapter Two

### Space is the face of a gigantic clock

*Q. Do you think that the art world constitutes a kind of global family?*

A. Not one that I'd want to be a part of.<sup>97</sup>

#### *Introduction*

In my first chapter, I laid out an alternate reading of McCahon's last painting, *I considered all the acts of oppression*. In this chapter, I will examine the way that the New Zealand artist Michael Stevenson engages with the works of Colin McCahon, and the readings of McCahon's work, that form a significant part of New Zealand's art history, and in so doing generates a set of alternative readings of those works and that art history.

Ideas of 'influence' and 'distance' play core roles in the work and critical reception of Colin McCahon and Michael Stevenson, and are discussed in the following sections. In McCahon's case, the accounts of influence and distance focus on McCahon's distance from, and therefore belated influence by, European modernism. In Stevenson's case, the accounts of influence and distance recapitulate those concerns with distance from, and belated influence by, European modernism, and in Stevenson's case there is an explicitly self-referential concern within his practice for those problems of influence and distance. Stevenson also develops a conception of influence and distance as existing within cultural, economic, and political structures, a conception which reflects back onto McCahon's practice and alters our understandings of his place in the Nationalist mythography.

---

<sup>97</sup> Tessa Laird interviewing Michael Stevenson, in Gwyneth Porter (ed), *LOG 11* (Christchurch: Physics Room, 2000) 14-16, 14.

I start by looking at the ways McCahon has been described as ‘influenced’ by overseas artists and movements. There is a reoccurring literature describing the encounter between McCahon and modernism, and I will explore the way this literature emphasises distance, belatedness and misreading. This description of the literature focusses on the discussion of McCahon’s adoption of modernist motifs, especially cubist motifs. Across a range of authors, from early orthodox writers like Gordon Brown to later, revisionist writers such as Robert Leonard, there is a trope of McCahon’s belated, distant encounter with modernism, and a consequent misreading and distortion of the artistic strategies at play in modernism. We can see these readings as “post-McCahon” objects, which exist subsequent to the work of Colin McCahon.

In order to place these discussions into the context of New Zealand understandings of distance, I offer a short history of the idea of ‘distance’ in discussions of New Zealand culture. I also provide a discussion of the way those narratives of distance *from* can be critiqued, particularly within the context of economic understandings of the world-system and core/periphery relations. After that, I return to more traditional art historical work and discuss the practice of Michael Stevenson.

Michael Stevenson is a Berlin-based artist. Born in 1964 in provincial New Zealand, he studied fine arts the University of Auckland in the eighties, and developed a painting practice in this country before moving overseas, first to Melbourne, and then to Berlin. Stevenson’s later practice is primarily research-driven and installation-based, and often involves the production of artists books.<sup>98</sup> It features a recurring engagement with certain themes and methods, and a recurring cast of collaborators.

It may seem somewhat arbitrary to choose Stevenson as one exemplar of the post-McCahon artist, tied to McCahon not by any clear symmetries but by a collection of tangential and oblique connections. This is intentional; I am not, as Harold Bloom would have it, interested in the

---

<sup>98</sup> I am grateful to Sophie Davis for discussions with her on the subject of Stephenson’s publications, which formed part of the subject matter of her Masters thesis, “Re-reading the Artists' Book: Tracing the publishing practices of Ruth Buchanan, Michael Stevenson and Frances Stark” (University of Canterbury, 2016).

“wearisome business of source-hunting”.<sup>99</sup> Instead, I want to establish the material underpinnings that tie McCahon, as a distant artist produced by a certain kind of society, one defined by a certain core/periphery relationship, to a latter artist both reflecting on and influenced by the earlier artist and society.

Stevenson was clearly very directly influenced by McCahon early in his career, in his paintings of small-town New Zealand such as those shown in the Christina Barton curated *After McCahon*. Later projects come to the relationship with the prior artist more obliquely. *Genealogies*, a collaborative show with the American artist Mike Brower at the Govett-Brewster, engaged with the explicitly Freudian aspects of influence, and embeds those issues in the physical space of New Zealand art teaching. *This is the Trekka* brought together a range of artefacts and signifiers from pre-reform New Zealand’s economic and cultural history in order to present a narrative about how they related to each other; texts in the catalogue, particularly the essay by the sociologist David Craig, provide a useful theoretical exegesis of this project, one that draws together the economic role of the periphery and the cultural role of the periphery. Finally, *Art of the Eighties and Seventies* makes plain the extent to which narratives of distance, mediated through economic pressures, still remain even after the deconstructive work of the 80’s. Read together, McCahon and Stevenson’s practices, and the writing that surrounds them, can be seen to form a continuum of investigation into style and influence, distance and modernity, and the way those three concepts tie together and interrelate in New Zealand’s history. Stevenson’s ongoing investigations therefore begin to recast the work of Colin McCahon, and the underlying substructural features which contextualised that practice, within a succession of alternative, revisionist readings.

### *Influence*

---

<sup>99</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

This section discusses two revisionist theories of influence. The first is that of Harold Bloom in the “influence” trilogy - 1973’s *The Anxiety of Influence*,<sup>100</sup> 1975’s *Map of Misreading*,<sup>101</sup> and 1982’s *Agon*.<sup>102</sup> In this trilogy, Bloom aims to give an account of the way that influence operates in poetic history and practice. The second is that briefly outlined by Michael Baxandall in the “Excursus against influence” in *Patterns of Intention*. In the section following, I will then argue that the discussions of McCahon’s style as influenced by overseas modernists reflect both Bloom’s theory of influence in the way that they presuppose a belated, anxious response, and Baxandall’s theory of influence insofar as McCahon can be seen to draw upon and repurpose the resources made available by prior artists, rather than simply being “pushed” by them.

Bloom’s trilogy on influence, while not entirely internally consistent (as his thinking shifts and develops across the course of it) shares a central object of investigation, a broad thesis, and a methodological approach. The central object of investigation is ‘influence’, which is understood to be the way in which one poet self-consciously relates to those poets who have gone before. The broad thesis is that this self-conscious awareness of the work of prior poets imposes an intolerable burden on the late coming poet, who must struggle against, and eventually escape, this burden. The tool that the later poet uses to defeat, in a minor manner, this precursor’s influence, is misreading. Bloom’s theory of poetic influence is ultimately founded on that practice of misreading.

Bloom attempts to rescue the concept of influence from a mechanical analysis of poetic fashions. For him, that is a “wearisome industry of source-hunting, of allusion-counting, an industry that will soon touch apocalypse when it passes from scholars to computers”.<sup>103</sup> This is too simplistic, too easy an analysis. A trope in Bloom’s criticism of this period is the seizure of a traditionalist term, and the radical reconfiguration of that term into a completely different meaning. This trope is one of

---

<sup>100</sup> Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*.

<sup>101</sup> Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

<sup>102</sup> Harold Bloom, *Agon*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>103</sup> Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 31.

the ways that Bloom's criticism both partakes of the anxiety of influence and the revisionary impulse. As Mary Orr emphasises, Bloom's argument embodies precisely the strong misreading that he puts forward as the key to modern poetic practice.<sup>104</sup>

Bloom wishes to rescue influence from triviality, and seeks to make a deeper argument: that influence is the way that the relationship of poets to other poets constitutes poetry. The study of poets is to be premised on the study of the *relationships* between poets. Again, these relationships are not to be understood as the literal relationship between poets - the interpersonal, biographic details of the poets do not interest Bloom - but rather it is the relationship between *texts* that is at the heart of Bloom's theory. In fact, for Bloom, there "are *no* texts, only relationships *between* texts".<sup>105</sup> This assertion goes beyond merely positing, in a structuralist manner, that terms are given meaning by their relationship to each other, and asserts instead the radical dependence of any given text on the universe of previously existing texts.

Bloom's analysis of influence argues that it is overwhelmingly deleterious. This process, whereby the poet is initially overwhelmed by the influence — the inflow — of previous poets, and must then struggle to overcome this influx, means that modern poetry is defined by a continual coming-after, a lateness, a failure to be the first. Bloom then uses the traces of this struggle embedded in the text — or, rather, the traces of this struggle that *constitute* the text — as an analytical tool. Poems are the sites of conflict between earlier and later poets, and this conflict *is* the poem itself.

Bloom goes on to place these structural relations into a temporal frame, and by doing so both psychologises and historicises them. Influence ties together poets in a way that embeds them in a psychological and historical network. Both the psychological and historical embedding of poetic texts mean that it is possible meaningfully and productively to talk about poets coming before and after, not just as a coincidental biographical accident, but as part of their poetic identity and output.

---

<sup>104</sup> Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: debates and contexts* (Cambridge, Polity, 2003), 65.

<sup>105</sup> Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 95.

This psychological analysis goes on to draw heavily upon Freud, and the Oedipus motif. By analogising the poetic family to the Freudian family, he suggests that, in the same way that your parents give you complexes and psychoses, your *poetic* parents give you complexes and psychoses. Bloom explicitly exploits the Freudian term “family romance”: for Freud, to understand a person you have to understand them in terms of their family background. Similarly, in order to understand a poet, you have to understand them in terms of their influences, their genealogy as a poet, and the psychological impact of this family romance on the poet’s work.<sup>106</sup> Bloom’s psychology, like Freud’s, has its origins in pathology. His analysis is an analysis of a dysfunctional state, a dysfunction driven by post-Shakespearean English-language poetry’s crippling structuration around influence relations.

This is a narrative of decline. The process of influence is not one of growth then decline: we do not have a series of cumulative achievements, where awareness of influence leads to greater heights, before overwhelming the latecomers — a Vasarian story of invention, perfection, then mannerism. Instead, Shakespeare, who is in Bloom’s estimation the greatest poet in English, sits entirely outside this problem, in an antediluvian era, “before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness”<sup>107</sup>. As soon as influence becomes the central term in poetry, it inexorably leads to the decline, the *fall* of poetry.

Baxandall’s account, given as “an excursus against influence” in *Patterns of Intention*, is not as grindingly pessimistic. Like Bloom, Baxandall opens up the patterns of action, although Baxandall avoids the sharply antagonistic metaphors of power, struggle, and dominance that Bloom relies upon. In Baxandall’s process, the earlier artist does not just act upon the latter, but the latter also upon the earlier. He uses a metaphor of the billiard ball, suggesting that where prior theories of influence tend to treat the earlier artist as a cue ball that knocks another ball, another artist, we

---

<sup>106</sup> Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 94.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

should instead think of the complex shifts of relations between a whole billiard table of balls, that are knocked and set in motion, opening and closing possibilities for later shots. We might better see the later artist as being provided with a set of resources they are able to draw upon, and later artists as being able to magnify or shrink the importance of earlier artists through their choice of 'influence'.<sup>108</sup>

What Bloom and Baxandall share in their accounts of influence is a wariness towards simple models of flow. Where Baxandall prioritises the later artist's agency, and suggests that the prior artist become in some respects a resource upon which the later artist can draw, Bloom emphasises the grip that the earlier artist has on the mind of the later; but together they articulate a complex set of interrelations between artistic works, a set of relationships that ran back and forth, and not in one direction alone. And both theorists emphasise the importance of revision and misreading to the workings of artistic influence. This emphasis on the interrelationships between artists, and the important of revision and misreading, will become significant in the context of Stevenson's relationship to McCahon.

### *Modernism, distance and the McCahon historiography*

As discussed in the Introduction, McCahon's painting practice developed through his life, as he encountered and drew upon a range of sources and influences. This section looks at one particular key shift: the adoption of modernist, with a particular emphasis on *cubist*, stylistic traits, in the context of narratives of transmission of artistic knowledge from Europe. I will show that descriptions of McCahon's encounter with modernity, and cubism especially, emphasise notions of belatedness and distance in that encounter. I then discuss the ways those notions of belatedness and distance relate to Baxandall and Bloom's theories of influence.

---

<sup>108</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986) 58-60.

McCahon wrote in 1966 that “when out for a Sunday visit with the family, I discovered Cubism”. When he does so, he finds that Cubism’s “discoveries” have already been assimilated into the environment he lives in: from interior decoration to architecture. Yet McCahon is still shocked by coming into contact with the pure, original source in the pages of the *Illustrated London News*; “to see it all as it was in the beginning”. He claims that he becomes “at once” a Cubist, and a real Cubist, not one who only understands the “watered-down translations offered by architects, designers, and advertising agencies.” This passage from McCahon packages up the central elements of the narrative around McCahon’s encounter with cubism - and by extension, modernity. There is the shock followed by the conversion, the recognition of the debased translated forms of prevalent modernity, the mediation of this encounter through print media, and — although this is not made explicit it is implicit in the chronology of McCahon’s life — the belatedness of this encounter.

Gordon Brown quotes this passage extensively in his *Elements of Modernism in Colin McCahon’s Early Work*, and argues that the autobiographical claims embedded here are deceptive, for detailed reasons of chronology and residencies: where McCahon gives the impression this encounter occurred in 1929, in all likelihood it actually happened some years later in 1937-38. McCahon is an unreliable narrator with regard to his own practice and life. Instead of taking the claims at face value, particularly the dates, Brown argues we should understand that McCahon is projecting back into his youth his later conviction that cubism can stand for the most-up-to-date modernism available in inter-war New Zealand, both in his own personal practice and in the broader discourse that surrounds him.<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> Gordon Brown, *Elements of Modernism in Colin McCahon’s Early Work*, (Wellington: School of Art History of Victoria University of Wellington, 2003) 10-11.

Rather than whole-heartedly leaping into Cubism Brown argues that McCahon's practice in the late '30s and '40s engaged with Cubism "superficially",<sup>110</sup> or on "limited terms",<sup>111</sup>. This notion of a limited, late, mediated engagement with Cubism continues throughout Brown's account of McCahon: his interaction with Hans Hoffman's theories is "second-hand" via Toss Woolaston's notes on Flora Scales rendition of Hoffman's teaching; Brown places great emphasis on establishing when and where reproductions of European modernist works, and of what quality (colour, method of printing, size) were available to McCahon, stressing the importance of the mediation of print;<sup>112</sup> and finally through the repetition of the simple chronological fact that McCahon is working a decade after Hoffman, some twenty years after Picasso and Braque, and thirty to forty years after Cezanne.

Brown does not seem to see this lateness and distortion as a problem, but in Robert Leonard's catalogue essay for *Headlands* this lateness and distortion of modernism becomes explicitly inherent in, and damaging to, New Zealand artists. McCahon comes in at the head of Leonard's history, because McCahon is at the head of every history of New Zealand painting - after all, as Wystan Curnow is quoted saying, he "invented painting in New Zealand".<sup>113</sup> First he argues that New Zealand is belated, and only receives modernism at length, through intermediaries: "illustrations and 'translations'".<sup>114</sup> This is where McCahon comes in, taking lessons from an "elderly woman with a walking stick and crutch" who had one "partied with the cubists" in Melbourne.<sup>115</sup> For many of our artists, distance is a torment that leads to "deeply confused understandings of modernism in art".<sup>116</sup> But while McCahon remains deeply provincial, and often

---

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>113</sup> Robert Leonard, "Mod Cons", in Robert Leonard and Bernice Murphy with John McCormack, Cheryll Southern and Cliff Whiting, *Headlands: Thinking Through New Zealand Art* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992) 161-173, 166.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 165.

makes paintings that are “all wrong in terms of how the textbooks say a cubist painting is supposed to work”,<sup>117</sup> he still succeeds at inventing painting in New Zealand. Indeed, according to Leonard, it is precisely this freedom to experiment and misread, and the artistic strength to carry these experiments to fruition, that characterises McCahon as a seminal artist. Therefore, while the lateness and provincialism is inherent in McCahon’s practice, the damage is not. In this way McCahon is both core to, and yet atypical of, New Zealand art history.

The essays for the survey exhibition *Gates and Journeys* contributed several typical texts to this discourse, reciting all the themes of distance, modernity and influence. Tony Green juxtaposes European sophistication and stylishness with “home-grown originality”,<sup>118</sup> and characterises McCahon as a modernist, admittedly one that is not immediately “in touch with overseas art scenes and networks”, a unusual modernist “with a seriousness and intensity all of his own”, and struggling in a “very particular environment”.<sup>119</sup> Wystan Curnow draws a similar line in his essay for *Gates and Journeys*. McCahon’s “provincialism” might have slowed him down, but in the end it allows him to reach more interesting answers.<sup>120</sup>

We have already seen, in Chapter One, the way Francis Pound treats this matter in his essay for *Colin McCahon: The Last Painting*. Here, McCahon is a modernist, but because he is painting in the second half of the twentieth century, he is affected by a sense of belatedness, a feeling of “nothing new left to do”.<sup>121</sup> Beyond the chronological and post-modern aspect of this belatedness, there is also a spatial aspect: “the feeling of a person gazing from the outside, from the periphery, from a country physically separated” by distance from the “centres of modernity”.<sup>122</sup>

---

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>118</sup> Tony Green “McCahon and the Modern”, in Gifkins, *Gates and Journeys*, 27-40, 29.

<sup>119</sup> Wystan Curnow, “McCahon and Signs”, in Gifkins, *Gates and Journeys*, 41-54, 40.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>121</sup> Pound, “Endless yet never”, unpaginated.

<sup>122</sup> Pound, “Endless yet never”, unpaginated.

All these art historians, despite their other methodological disagreements, agree that McCahon is belated and misunderstanding. He lags behind cubists working in the metropolis, a lag that is driven by distance. McCahon is distant, so he receives his knowledge about Cubism and modernity through the fallible intermediaries like Flora Scales and Mary Cockburn-Mercer, poor-quality reproductions, and unreliable articles. Consequently, they argue that he distorts and misunderstands, picks up the 'wrong end of the stick' and runs with it, misreads and mistakes modernism, and transforms it into a provincial practice that still manages to dominate our isolated, distant cultural discourse.

The ideas of influence and distance turn out, here, to be surprisingly close to each other. Therefore, ideas developed in the analysis of one can be profitably read across into the analysis of the other. Having outlined Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence and the way he uses misreading as a flawed but necessary response to later artists' problem of belatedness above, and Baxandall's notions of influence as a complex, multi-dimensional process, we can begin to bring that into dialogue with the McCahon historiography.

The accounts of McCahon's practice, given above, are in some ways consonant with Baxandall and Bloom's theories of influence. The trope of the misreading, belated provincial can easily be read within the framework of Bloom's notion of the anxiety of influence. Coming the other way, when Curnow and Brown discuss the ways that McCahon uses modernism, and uses his position as a later, distant artist to arrive at interesting results, they seem to make use of Baxandall's claims about the resources being made available to later artists as part of art historical development. But equally, we can emphasise the way that within Bloom's account, distortion and misreading develop a liberatory potential.

Bloom's theory, which involves the almost wholesale abandonment of authorial intent and agency, can be related to Barthes' essay on the death of the author discussed in the previous chapter. Both

writers operate within a post-structuralist, perhaps deconstructivist, tradition, and Bloom can be seen to build upon Barthes' earlier work. In the subsequent chapter which discusses Imants Tillers these questions of the relationships between earlier and later artists, and the role of the authorial or artistic intent, will be returned to, while the problems of relating McCahon and Stevenson form the end of this chapter. But before we reach that point, we have to traverse distance again, this time in a succession of broader guises.

### *New Zealand and Distance*

“there are five wharves.

To-day the port is quite full.”<sup>123</sup>

Thus Allen Curnow's description of the port at Lyttelton, a “little artificial port with five jetties” where “overseas shipping waits to be loaded with the primary products from which the Dominion derives its wealth”.<sup>124</sup> It is this point that it is “natural” to begin “the study of the birth, life, and growth of a nation now nearly 100 years old”. *Not in Narrow Seas* was one of the first essays of explicitly Nationalist poetry and thought. It is striking, in retrospect, that it defines New Zealand so heavily by reference to overseas trade — indeed, literally taking it as the starting point for a discussion of New Zealand. Lyttelton may be the place that Canterbury's first four ships arrived, but it is also the place from which wool, mutton carcasses, and butter depart for the foreign market.

In order to define New Zealand, we start at the liminal place of the port, looking down from the Port Hills onto Whakaraupo, a long narrow mouth opening out into the Pacific. We go up the hill with the settlers, who “climbed to the hilltop and looked out over 100 miles of plain”, and we travel back out with the mutton and wool. Curnow discusses elemental forces of nature, but he ties them back to the “bondholder over the seas”: he places New Zealand in the context of distant trade, an isolated

---

<sup>123</sup> Allen Curnow, *Not in Narrow Seas: Poems with Prose* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1939.)

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

nation tied to the world by ten-thousand mile apron strings. And when he returns to the problem of culture, his cynical remark rounds out the problems of distance, trade, and culture that I wish to discuss in this section and this chapter: “[a]ttempts are being made to establish a culture similar to that which Europe has taken 1,000 years to build; but the real ambitions of this people are naive enough - ‘a radio, perhaps a car’ ”.<sup>125</sup>

In this section, I will provide a short account of the notion of distance in New Zealand’s cultural and economic thinking, centred around two key sites. The first is the economic distance at stake in New Zealand’s long distance trade, and the second is the “cultural” argument of distance. These sites stake out the problem of distance, and the way it exists at the origins of the national identity, on a cultural level, and finally, on a technological and economic level. Within these discourses, whether New Zealand is posited as (traditional) *far* or (revisionist) *near*, the dimension of distance is a core concern.

I will also briefly discuss two key Australian texts that deal with the problems of distance: Geoffrey Blainey’s *The Tyranny of Distance* and Terry Smith’s “The Provincialism Problem”.<sup>126</sup> These texts mirror the New Zealand experience in certain respects, and Smith’s essay presages my later discussion of influence. “Our Sea of Islands” by Epeli Hau’ofa offers an important counterpoint to the Eurocentric assumptions embedded within much of the literature on distance, and I consider James Elkins’ discussion of the possibility of breaking from these terms, before concluding that while the terms should not be accepted uncritically, they retain the potential to be used in a critical manner, which I attempt to do in the remainder of the chapter.<sup>127</sup>

---

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>126</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia’s History* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966), Terry Smith, ‘The Provincialism Problem’, *Artforum*, vol. 12, no. 1 (September 1974), 54–9.

<sup>127</sup> Epeli Hau’ofa, “Our Sea of Islands”, *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6, no. 1, (Spring 1994), 147–161.

There are geographic and economic analyses of New Zealand's distance. The idea of New Zealand as fundamentally economically remote dates back to the earliest days of the New Zealand state.<sup>128</sup> This argument was transformed, like the New Zealand economy, by the invention of the refrigerated ship, which allowed meat and butter to be easily shipped to European, and particularly British, markets. This transformation was driven by the European demand for protein. For the 1920's economic historian, J B Condliffe, the effect of the refrigerating process was "almost equivalent to bringing New Zealand within a short distance of its markets".<sup>129</sup> Beyond the New Zealand pastoral economy, this also had dramatic effects on Britain which became dependent on "distant lands" for the "very means of her existence".<sup>130</sup>

Belich argues in his *Paradise Reforged* that as a result of refrigeration New Zealand became closer, in some respects, to London than Manchester or Leeds, as "London's town supply district".<sup>131</sup> The classical New Zealand economy of 1890-1972 — based around the refrigerated export of meat and dairy products to the United Kingdom — facilitated and accompanied a general tightening of British control, both economic and social. New Zealand meat could arrive in better condition at the docks in London than meat from Yorkshire. This leads to the New Zealand economy simplifying, increasingly focussing on providing protein to the London market. And consequently, New Zealand is knit back into the fabric of British life: distance no longer isolates, it binds. New Zealand remains peripheral, but is no longer distant.

---

<sup>128</sup> For instance, an early Cantabrian, Thomas Cholmondely, wrote a pamphlet in 1852 discussing the settlement of New Zealand. Cholmondely was a well-connected and wealthy member of the aristocracy, who had ties to senior members of the Canterbury Association. His pamphlet on the new colony focussed on the Canterbury settlement, as a sort of case study. He titled this piece *Ultima Thule* — the furthest Thule. Thule was a Roman by-word for the most distant island imaginable. Part of his political argument revolves around the effect of distance on the nascent New Zealand colony: the difficulty of return to the mother-land and the worries that the English wool-market will not always be open to "the utmost corners of the earth" (p 147). Cholmondely, *Ultima Thule; or, Thoughts Suggested by a Residence in New Zealand* (London: John Chapman, 1854).

<sup>129</sup> J B Condliffe, *A Short History of New Zealand* (Christchurch: I M Isitt, 1929) 158.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, 185.

<sup>131</sup> <sup>131</sup> James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the year 2000* (Auckland: Allen Lane, 2001) 30.

Departing from these comparatively straightforward social science analyses, the suggested effects of New Zealand's distance on New Zealand's culture are varied. Similarly, this discourse developed from the early Nationalist discussions, like *Not in Narrow Seas*, through qualified, ambiguous texts like 1961's lecture series *Distance Looks Our Way* to self-consciously revisionist readings like Francis Pound's essay for 1992's exhibition *Distance Looks Our Way / La Distance Mira Dacia Nosotros*, and his book *The Invention of New Zealand*.<sup>132</sup>

Certain nationalist critics argued that the distance provided the necessary insulation to allow the growth of a national culture<sup>133</sup>. Contrarily, others, like the *Listener* editor M H Holcroft, suggested that this distance has a deleterious effect on the literature of New Zealand: "added to this social awkwardness is the intellectual solitude of those who do their work twelve thousand miles from the central scene of literary activity in the British Commonwealth" (that is to say, London).<sup>134</sup> In this reading, distance isolates New Zealand, and therefore isolates New Zealand authors and artists, turning them into hermits.

Against this occasionally simplistic notion of absolute distance, is also possible to think of New Zealand as a *close* place. In fact, a strain of writing in the 1960s strenuously argued — as a counter to much nationalist writing of the previous quarter-century — that New Zealand is *insufficiently* far from the metropolis to develop a culture of its own: instead, New Zealand was condemned to exist as a pale provincial culture. The historian Keith Sinclair, for instance, in his contribution to *Distance Looks Our Way*, uses Samuel Butler's claim that "the world seems very small when one can get around it in three months" to argue that "we have been exaggerating the

---

<sup>132</sup> Francis Pound, *The Invention of New Zealand: Art and National Identity 1930-1970* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009)

<sup>133</sup> "the best of our verse is marked or moulded everywhere by peculiar pressures — pressures arising from the isolation of our country" Allen Curnow, quoted in Pound's excellent discussion of the topos of distance in New Zealand nationalist thought in *The Invention of New Zealand*, section 11:2, 39.

<sup>134</sup> M H Holcroft, *The Deepening Stream: Cultural Influences in New Zealand* (Christchurch: Caxton, 1940) 55.

country's remoteness".<sup>135</sup> We are not as distant as we think, and we are not as isolated as we consequently claim. We are not isolated: we are merely late and second-hand.<sup>136</sup> As a result, we are provincial: our culture is neither unique, a product of a self-confident community standing on its own, nor is it as vigorous and advanced as the culture of the metropolitan core. New Zealand is trapped in a half-way house, unable to reach independence and unable to engage with the mainstream of cultural development

Holcroft combined his argument that New Zealand was too isolated with this provincialist worry to suggest that New Zealand is trapped in a cultural no-man's land. Notwithstanding the 12,000 miles separating New Zealand from London, notwithstanding that "everyone says we are isolated [...], we are not isolated enough"<sup>137</sup>, we are bound up in the modern world, tied up in a complex civilization full of louder voices - Fleet Street, Hollywood - that drown out New Zealand's. And the consequent prospect of an "attenuated Bloomsbury" repulsed Holcroft as a "spurious culture" lacking authentic roots in the national life<sup>138</sup>.

Francis Pound's essay in the catalogue for the 1992 exhibition of New Zealand artists at the Seville Expo titled, simply, *Distance Looks Our Way / La Distancia Mira Hacia Nosotros* returns to the book of that name, and offers an "brief archaeology of the metaphor" at hand, a metaphor that the show attempts to "undo".<sup>139</sup> Pound returns to distance in his book *The Invention of New Zealand*, where he locates the invention of distance in Nationalist criticism of the '20s and '30s. *Landfall* the journal

---

<sup>135</sup> Sinclair, "Life in the Provinces", 37.

<sup>136</sup> Sinclair, "Life in the Provinces", 39.

<sup>137</sup> M H Holcroft, *Timeless World: A Collection of Essays* (Wellington: Progressive Publishing Society, 1945) 12.

<sup>138</sup> Holcroft, *The Deepening Stream*, 45.

<sup>139</sup> Francis Pound, "Distance Looks Our Way" in Mary Barr, ed., *La Distancia Mira Hacia Nosotros: 10 Artistas de Nueva Zealandia / Distance Looks Our Way: 10 Artist From New Zealand*, (Whanganui: Sargent Gallery, 1992), 21-30, 21.

and “Landfall”, the title of the journal, both reinscribe this topos, Pound argues, in the way that they position New Zealand as isolated islands in a broad, empty, remote sea.<sup>140</sup>

No matter the valence or the magnitude of the effect, the problem of distance remained a key term. Whether it is Sinclair arguing that its reality was much exaggerated, or Holcroft bemoaning the lack of prophylactic isolation, or indeed Holcroft bemoaning distance’s solitude and alienation, or Pound arguing that distance was merely a fictive social construct, all these arguments presuppose that distance is a useful avenue of attack into problems of New Zealand culture.

As New Zealand agonised over distance, similar discussions were occurring contemporaneously in Australia. *The Tyranny of Distance* by Geoffrey Blainey expounds a similar theory of the priority distance, arguing that “distance was a central and unifying factor in Australia's history”<sup>141</sup>, an idea as “revealing [as] Frederick Jackson Turner’s ‘frontier theory’ is [in] the history of the United States”.<sup>142</sup> Blainey’s choice of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis is revealing, in that both theories erase complex interplays of gender, race, and power in favour of comparatively simple “birth of a nation” narratives.<sup>143</sup>

Another Australian text, Terry Smith’s “The Provincialism Problem”, directly confronts the problem of artistic production in a place distant from the “centres” of artistic endeavour. The Australian artist is trapped within a provincial world-system that centres around the New York art world. (The New York artist is also trapped in this system, but occupies a comparatively privileged position.) The New York art world is able to determine the progress of the avant-garde, and the way in which artistic value will be judged: they are not just rule-following, but *rule-generating*.<sup>144</sup> The Australian

---

<sup>140</sup> Pound, *The Invention of New Zealand*, 40-50.

<sup>141</sup> Blainey, *Tyranny of Distance*, iix.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, ix.

<sup>143</sup> Gordon Morris Bakken and Brenda Farrington (eds), *The Gendered West: The American West* (New York: Routledge, 2013) ix.

<sup>144</sup> Smith, “The Provincialism Problem”, 56.

artist who is lucky enough to make it to the centre from the periphery, even if he (Smith's artist is invariably a "he") manages to pick up a currently fashionable style, will find on his return to the periphery that, despite his ability to impart some novelty to the local art scene, he was never quite "in on" the style's original motives, and will be therefore be unable to generate new work within its structure.<sup>145</sup> He may return to the centre, but will find that the centre has moved on in ways he is unable to follow, and he ends up a hybrid, suffering a series of crises, trapped between his own peripheral provincial lateness and distance, and a desire to keep up with the centre's process and development. This structuring of the art world is negative. It mirrors the US's financial, economic, and political power. It debilitates and should be resisted; but here Smith moves from descriptive to normative to prescriptive, and it is unclear to what extent his prescriptions will be successful.

Returning to New Zealand, it is important to be careful with terms, and it is particularly important here because it is easy to slip into unconscious Eurocentrism and erase non-European ways of thinking about place and space. In this chapter, when I have talked about New Zealand as a distant place, I have been using two primarily pākehā notions. The first is *New Zealand*: as a political and linguistic entity, New Zealand is a product of pākehā geographies and state-making. The second is *distance*: when I discuss New Zealand's distance, there is an implicit *distance-from*, and the distance-from is distance from Europe or America.

These are not the only ways to understand the oceanic geography of the Pacific. In his essay "Our Sea of Islands", Epele Hau'ofa inverts traditional, Eurocentric descriptions of the Pacific. Rather than societies that are "too small, too poor, and too isolated" to succeed in the modern world, Hau'ofa argues we should see Oceania as a broad, expansive estate, expanding beyond the confines of the island into the ocean, under water and into the heavens.<sup>146</sup> He compares the two phrases "islands in a far sea" and "a sea of islands"; the first belittles and reduces, the second

---

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands", 151.

empowers and expands.<sup>147</sup> Hau'ofa argues that this belittling is not coincidental. It is a choice made by those involved in “aided development” and “Pacific Rim geopolitics” in order to isolate and control the Pacific.<sup>148</sup> This is a powerful argument, and a counterweight to Blainey’s glib assertions of “distance” and isolation.

Should we then abandon these terms of “distance” and “periphery”? When James Elkins attempts to “settle” the terms of “centre” and “periphery” in his project on world art history, he runs through a series of reasons to reject centre and periphery as a way of discussing art history, for their misleading, colonial, patronising, and Eurocentric overtones. He then goes on to mount a defence of centre and periphery as key terms in art history, claiming that arguments which entirely discard them “effectively continue the very imbalances their authors [are] so concerned to critique”.<sup>149</sup> By abandoning the idea of centre and periphery, we give them up as ways of critiquing Eurocentricity. In the New Zealand context, it is hard to avoid finding Elkins’ argument convincing. To abandon centre and periphery — or, as they tend to show up in the New Zealand context, distance and isolation — is not only to abandon a way of understanding New Zealand’s economic and political development, but also to abandon one of the most important structures that is shared between nationalist and internationalist, modernist and post-modernist, traditional and revisionist art histories. Further, it is my view that given the strong structural similarities between centre/periphery and distance, and earlier/later poets and influence, there is an opportunity to make use of Bloom, and through Bloom’s generalisation of the structure of influence, further theoretical approaches. These theoretical approaches will, hopefully, lead to novel discussions of New Zealand’s art history, and historiography.

---

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 152.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 159.

<sup>149</sup> James Elkins, “The Terms Western and Non-Western”, at <http://www.jameselkins.com/index.php/experimental-writing/255-the-terms-western-and-nonwestern>, accessed 23/4/2015.

Therefore, when I use the terms “distance” and “New Zealand”, I am aware of their status as constructed, political terms, and I do not aim to naturalise or further reify them. Part of my aim in this chapter is to establish that where some writers use “distance” as a kind of given, a simple *fact* that exists before political and artistic agency, it is instead a fact constructed *by* political and artistic agency, and a fact that can be critiqued by artistic agency.

*Deconstructing Distance Through A World-Systems Lens.*

Refrigeration is a conquest of distance, according to Belich: but refrigeration’s primary conquest is the conquest of time.<sup>150</sup> Refrigeration prevents decay, suspending the passage of time within the confines of the chilled space. By doing so, it allows the transport of perishable foods across a great distance, and across comparatively great temporal spans. Time and space interlace, and movement on one axis produces movement on the other.

The idea of distance implies the idea of distance *from*. Even where later writers abandon the explicit directionality of distance, there still remains the residue of travel from periphery to centre. These ideas, of the centre/periphery relationship, were integrated into a broader conception of the world-system by Immanuel Wallerstein.<sup>151</sup> Wallerstein built on the work of Fernand Braudel, the French historian who had brought the Annales School historiographical project to a high peak in his succession of deep and broad studies of the European and Mediterranean world.<sup>152</sup> I use these works, and the work of Franco Moretti, to allow us to begin a critique of the notions of distance, and illustrate how these structures of distance are in fact parallel to structures of influence.

---

<sup>150</sup> James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the year 2000* (Auckland: Allen Lane, 2001) 30.

<sup>151</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *World Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.)

<sup>152</sup> Embodied in three major projects - on the Mediterranean — *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, trans. Sian Reynolds, 2 vols, (London: Collins, 1972-73); the early modern European economy — *Civilisation and Capitalism, 15th–18th Centuries*, vol. 1, *The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible*, trans Sian Reynolds, (London: Collins, 1981) vol. 2, *The Wheels of Commerce*, trans Sian Reynolds, (London: Collins, 1982) vol. 3, *The Perspective of the World*, trans. Sian Reynolds, (London: Collins, 1984); and France — *The Identity of France*, trans. Sian Reynolds, 2 vols, (London: Collins: 1988-90).

These studies took as a key premise the *longue durée* (the long term) — and began with a systematic investigation of the underlying structures of history that support the *histoire événementielle* (the history of events). For Braudel, these underpinnings extended from the soil upwards, through a succession of more sophisticated, wide-ranging structures: the farm to the village to the region to the nation, in one sequence; or the weekly produce market to the monthly fair to the intercontinental trade; or barter to monetary exchange to the high finance of bills of exchange. These systems — of trade and travel, agriculture and movement — underpin and structure the lives of kings, popes, and emperors that ostensibly constitute history. Braudel argues that these systems are tied together into an over-arching set of continental and inter-continental networks, a stance that Wallerstein expanded into the concept of the world-system. For Wallerstein, the present capitalist world-system is a way of structuring the global economy — and, by implication, societies — for the benefit of the capitalists of the core. Wallerstein uses the concept of core regions — wealthier, more industrialised, more developed — against the concept of the peripheral regions — poorer, agricultural, less developed.

Centre-periphery analysis can, if we look at it simply, result in a diffusionist model of modernity and distance: modernity occurs first in the centre and then diffuses outward. In a crude way, we can say that the core becomes modern, and this modernity then flows out to the periphery. However, this model is excessively simple, and ignores the fact that the capitalists of the core exploit the periphery, and in order to continue exploiting the periphery, maintain the periphery in its peripheral state (in precisely the same way that the periphery maintains the core as the core). Further, the core and the periphery are not merely syntactically and economically structurally binary: they are historically co-dependent, in that the creation of one directly requires the creation of the other. The core calls forth the periphery as peripheral, and therefore the periphery is as modern as the core. The entire world-system is modern, not just the parts of the world-system that most ostentatiously claim modernity.

In New Zealand's case, it is not just that New Zealand becomes modern at the same time that the core does. It is that New Zealand has never not been modern, to reverse Latour. New Zealand, as a political, social, and cultural project is a product of modernity. New Zealand does not become modern: New Zealand's very becoming is modern; and New Zealand's modernity is tied Britain's modernity. In *Distance Looks Our Way* Keith Sinclair argues that the historiography of New Zealand neglects that core fact, preferring to focus on the more obvious issue of distance. A "far greater influence" that distance is the fact that New Zealand was settled during a period of "immense technological and scientific progress".<sup>153</sup> Not distance, but change is the central matter for New Zealand, and change has been inherent in New Zealand society since the outset. The settlers arrived alongside the "steam engine and investment capital".<sup>154</sup>

The historian James Belich argues that the Industrial Revolution was, to some extent, fuelled by the colonial expansion — or, if fuelled makes too strong a causal claim, Belich uses the Braudelian concept of the *conjuncture*, the simultaneous occurrence of linked, reinforcing phenomena.<sup>155</sup> In Belich's telling, the provision of raw resources by the periphery — timber, cotton, food, wool — allowed for the take-off of the Industrial Revolution to proceed in the core.<sup>156</sup> Here, to separate out New Zealand as somehow "belatedly" participating in modernity is to miss that New Zealand is a fundamental part of modernity, that New Zealand is both a *product* and a *cause* of modernity. To separate out the Industrial Revolution of the core from the extractive economies of the periphery is to ignore the deep entwinement of the two.

However, when we come to look at modernism, the arguments become more difficult. The ostentatious claim of modernity may be what constitutes modernism, and perhaps modernism does

---

<sup>153</sup> Sinclair, "Life in the Provinces", 37.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>155</sup> James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 9.

<sup>156</sup> James Belich, "Response: A Cultural History of Economics?", *Victorian Studies*, 53, no 1, (Autumn 2010) 116-121, 117-8

originate at (or near) the core and flow outward. Certainly, the canonical histories of modernism would give that impression: the capitals of modernism are the capitals of capitalism. The University of Canterbury has on its books a first year course titled “Picasso Who? An Introduction To Modern Art”. Similar courses are taught the world over. But the Sorbonne does not, in response, have a course titled “McCahon Who?”. In an early issue of *Antic*, Julie Ewington recalls seeing Rudi Fuchs (who would later stage *A Question of Faith* as director of the Stedelijk) take the microphone in a forum on regionalism at the 1982 Biennale of Sydney and declare “[t]here is only one centre and it is Europe”.<sup>157</sup>

Like influence, distance runs one way between the core and periphery. We find that distance and influence are surprisingly homologous concepts. Where the periphery is distant from the centre, the later artist is influenced by the earlier. Certainly, it is through distance that influence operates in the periphery (and, conversely, through influence that distance operates). When New Zealand writers write about distance, we find they are often really concerned with influence. And in their writing about McCahon, we can see that the notions of distance and influence are closely tied: the adoption of modern motifs is tied to the distance that they travel, and the shaky links that tie McCahon back through time and space, from New Zealand in the ‘40s and ‘50s to pre-war Paris.

Franco Moretti brings Wallerstein’s world systems theory into literary history, and uses it as a way of understanding the histories of the novel of the nineteenth century. His paper “Narrative Markets, ca. 1850” uses data from lending libraries for a quantitative analysis of the material underpinnings of the novel in Europe. Moretti makes a series of statements: most importantly for our work here are the observations that “the smaller a collection is, the more canonical it is” and that the comparatively core nations of the UK and France read very few works in translation compared to

---

<sup>157</sup> Rudi Fuchs at the Regionalism Forum at the 1982 Biennale of Sydney, as quoted in Julie Ewington, “Past The Post: Postmodernism and Postfeminism” in *Antic One*, eds. Susan Davies, Priscilla Pitts and Elizabeth Eastmond, 21.

the more peripheral nations.<sup>158</sup> Moretti takes these facts and argues that the novel is part of a centralisation of literary endeavour — particularly compared to other forms, like the ballad or the early modern short story — and that this centralisation is centred around the cities of Paris and London (as are the canonical histories of art). Peripheral literatures do not follow the French or British path on a time delay: rather, they are “forced into a different road (a narrower road)” in a “development of underdevelopment’ in the literary field.”<sup>159</sup> This image, of the “development of underdevelopment”, closely echoes the arguments that Terry Smith and Wystan Curnow make about the provincialism of the Australian and New Zealand art worlds respectively.

### *Stevenson and the ghost of McCahon*

In this section I will outline a series of connections and conjectures between the practice of Michael Stevenson and the legacy of McCahon. Michael Stevenson’s early work dealt directly with the thematic and formal elements of Colin McCahon’s practice. I draw on the theoretical work of Harold Bloom and Michael Baxendall to illuminate this use of McCahon’s practice, and the way it informs our understanding of both McCahon and Stevenson.

In Stevenson’s early painting practice, he directly confronted the legacy of McCahon’s formal and thematic concerns. These paintings were shown in two key survey exhibitions of New Zealand art in the late eighties and early nineties: *After McCahon*, curated by Tina Barton at the Auckland Art Gallery, and *Distance Looks our Way*, which travelled around New Zealand and to the Seville Expo. Stevenson’s practice can be seen as mediating between two core concerns of late twentieth century New Zealand art history: the legacy of McCahon, and the legacy of distance. To make this discussion more concise, I will take as typical of this series of work one specific painting by Stevenson: *The One God Gospel Hall, Browns Bay* (1988).<sup>160</sup>

---

<sup>158</sup> Franco Moretti, “Narrative Markets, ca. 1850”, *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 20, No. 2 (Spring, 1997), 51-174, 154.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, 173.

<sup>160</sup> Michael Stevenson, *The One God Gospel Hall, Browns Bay*, 1988, oil on board, 500 mm x 700 mm.

*The One God Gospel Hall* is a simple, direct painting. Formally, it shares certain key features with McCahon's practice. It is black and white, it is painted in a naive style, it flattens out the picture-plane (a "superficial" reaction to, or "distortion" of cubism, as Brown or Leonard respectively would have it), it uses text, and it uses a non-traditional support. Thematically, it draws upon McCahon's provincialism, his tendency to depict regional New Zealand localities, his religious obsessions, and his use of Christian language and imagery. Clearly McCahon is not the only influence at play here. Lawrence Aberhart's photography is one quotation; Robin White's paintings of regional New Zealand with their emblematic inscriptions "MANGAWEKA", "MAKETU", are another.

But the McCahon references are so ostentatious, and the degree to which Stevenson's painting draws upon, amplifies, and indeed simplifies McCahon's practice to produce an almost parodic response is unmistakable. But at the same time that Stevenson draws upon McCahon, he distorts him. McCahon is not just a small-town bible-basher. McCahon is not Uncle Frank; yet seen through the lens that Stevenson offers, those aspects of McCahon are played up. The imagery is even more literally provincial than McCahon ever offers, the religion more strident and evangelical, the painting clumsier.

This painting can, therefore, be said to exist almost entirely as a reaction to McCahon. It is impossible to imagine Stevenson's paintings of small town New Zealand without the precursor of McCahon; it is not just that the style and the subject matter draw so heavily upon McCahon, it is that without McCahon these paintings simply would not make sense. In order for them to be legible, they have to be read in the context of McCahon. In this sense, they are influenced by McCahon in the sense that both Bloom would intend — for the paintings are in thrall to McCahon inasmuch as McCahon dictates the form and content of them — and in the sense that Baxandall would intend — for the paintings make use of McCahon's practice as a kind of resource that can be mined for meaning and novelty.

The 2000 collaborative show *Genealogy*, at New Plymouth's Govett-Brewster Gallery, centred Freudian notions of family and influence. In one room, Stevenson displayed early works of his own and his sister's, and works by his parents, in the context of a *faux* art classroom. (His parents had both attended Elam, before moving to Inglewood in rural Taranaki.)<sup>161</sup> Stevenson also fabricated four School C portfolios. (School C, or School Certificate, was one of the precursor high school qualifications to NCEA.) The folios were ostensibly attributed to four well-known New Zealand artists, peers of Stevenson's. In another room, the American artist Steven Brower showed his father's paintings, and a wooden structure resembling a scale model of a family home, but a decrepit, ramshackle home.<sup>162</sup> The catalogue was a carefully constructed artefact that picked up on themes implicit in the exhibition, depicting a set of "family trees", rather like the Alfred H Barr Jr diagram depicting early modernism, to place Stevenson into a lineage of artists.<sup>163</sup> On the one hand Baxandall's notion of influence as providing resources seems almost excessively literal here, when the artists have quite simply plundered their families' back-catalogue for content. On the other, this show is deeply Bloomian gesture which places the "family romance" at the centre of the artistic process, and reaffirms the idea that there are no artworks as such, only relationships between artworks. The artists absent themselves, and instead represent their selves and their practices via works made by others, and juvenilia so heavily influenced by others as to seem to have been made by others. Stevenson and Brower seem to suggest that these inter-textual displays of artistic and familial relationships can substitute for the explicitly personal.

The lineages Stevenson traces back to the centres of European and American artistic production are long-winded and obscure: as he explains in contemporaneous interview with *LOG* :

---

<sup>161</sup> Michael Stevenson and Steven Brower, *Genealogy* (New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster, 2000).

<sup>162</sup> Robert Leonard, "Michael Stevenson and Steven Brower: Genealogy" (review) at <http://robertleonard.org/michael-stevenson-and-steven-brower-genealogy/>, accessed 25/4/2015.

<sup>163</sup> Alfred H Barr Jr, "Hand-drawn chart illustrating the development of modern art, c. 1936", Museum of Modern Art, at [http://www.moma.org/learn/resources/archives/archives\\_highlights\\_02\\_1936](http://www.moma.org/learn/resources/archives/archives_highlights_02_1936), accessed 18/7/2015.

My parents were taught by Lois White, who was taught by Archie Fisher, who came out from England to run Elam [University of Auckland's art school]. He ran the joint according to where he came from, which was the Slade school. He was taught by Augustus John.<sup>164</sup>

In this sense they recall the long-winded and fragile path that ties McCahon to Cockburn-Mercer and Scales to Andre Lhote to Picasso and Braque. The interviewer responds: “do you want to feel connected, as opposed to out-on-a-limb?”, a question which Stevenson immediately places in the context of New Zealand's art history and *Headlands*, suggesting that the proscribed, traditional forms of nationalist art making that *Headlands* sought to deconstruct remain dominant. For Stevenson, *Genealogy* is also a show about locating New Zealand's, and New Zealand art's, place in the world. He locates both his own practice and the broader New Zealand art world within that larger world both through the artistic lineages he traces, and the family lineages he displays.

Baxandall argues that influence operates almost in reverse. The action of the later artist not only alters their position with respect to the earlier artist, but alters the position of the earlier artist with respect to the broader field of play. Here, Stevenson's interventions both engage McCahon's practice, and alter the way that we look back at it. In both *Genealogy* and *After McCahon*, Stevenson presented an image of the precursor artist — explicitly McCahon in *After McCahon*, and a generalised precursor function in *Genealogies* — and having done so used that presentation to change the way we think through those precursors. In *After McCahon*, Stevenson's crude provincialism challenged our understanding of McCahon's painterly and thematic concerns. *Genealogies* makes the process through which we position Stevenson and McCahon next to each other itself problematic, and hints at a broader discussion of what influence means in a small, perhaps distant nation, a discussion that emphasises McCahon's own positioning as influenced.

*This is the Trekka* (Figure Two) formed the New Zealand exhibition at the 2003 Venice Biennale, which was the second New Zealand presence at the Biennale, following on from Jacqueline Fraser

---

<sup>164</sup> Stevenson, interview with Tessa Laird in *LOG 11*.

and Peter Robinson's 2001 presentation. Michael Stevenson was the first Pākehā artist to represent New Zealand. The New Zealand presence at Venice followed on from the substantial increase in arts funding introduced by the incoming Labour government in 1999/2000, and like all national pavilions at Venice, inherently exists within the context of nationalist politics. For *This is the Trekka*, Stevenson presented a large installation that brought together a cluster of objects associated with the pre-1984 New Zealand economy. The central objects were the eponymous Trekka, a New Zealand import-substitution automobile project primarily based on a Czech engine and chassis; the Moniac, a post-war analog economic modelling computer; and three large signs: one above the Trekka revolves between "New Zealand Made" exhortation and "CSSR" - the initialism of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic; another showed the initials of the key arts funding body, Creative New Zealand, while a large wall of cardboard boxes presented New Zealand butter branding.

The central conceit of the show was the representation of artefacts of a prior era of the New Zealand state in the context of the Venice Biennale. The trade fair atmosphere Stevenson evoked played against the origins of the Biennale in the fairs and expos of the early nineteenth century, and suggested a link between artistic exhibition and economic advertising. Within that space, Stevenson particularly emphasised the bureaucracy and official control inherent in the pre-1984 economy, where import licensing and export boards brought international commerce into a close embrace with the machinery of government. Alongside that close embrace between industry and the government embodied in the analogue stocks and flows of MONIAC, the Trekka, and the butter boxes, Stevenson displayed evidence of the close embrace between the arts and the government in the Creative New Zealand sign, and indeed in the very fact of his presence at Venice as a representative of New Zealand.

That earlier New Zealand that Stevenson presented had a particular place within the world-system. It was not entirely peripheral, because it was a high-income economy with a technical base deeply integrated into the political core. Yet when this integration came to the economic sphere, it

maintained New Zealand as a producer of animal protein. As Belich puts it, New Zealand became a London farming district. New Zealand was economically dependent on the core, and was held in that economically dependent state by refrigeration's conquest of distance, a conquest symbolised in *This is the Trekka* by the stacked butter boxes. The cultural consequences of this core/periphery relationship were further explored in the catalogue.

As with *Genealogy*, a carefully curated publication sat alongside the physical exhibition.<sup>165</sup> The publication contained, alongside the official apparatus of national presentation acknowledgements and gritudes, a collection of texts and images dealing with the Trekka, the Moniac computer, and New Zealand's cultural, sociological and economic existence in the latter half of the twentieth century. The accompanying essays position *This is the Trekka* against that joint backdrop of cultural and economic life, a stance most fully articulated in David Craig's contribution.

David Craig is a sociologist of development, and a longtime collaborator of Michael Stevenson's. In *A Secret History of Australian Art*, Rex Butler describes attending a 1997 Brisbane panel discussion relating to the IMA show *Power Corruption and Lies*.<sup>166</sup> When one of the panellists spoke, they outlined an increasingly paranoid, but deeply reasoned and impeccably-sourced theory of the development of Western art as the purely overdetermined global clash of capitalist and communist modes of productions. After the fact, the panellist revealed he was in fact an Australian National University doctoral student in healthcare development in Vietnam, who has been put up to this performance by Stevenson.<sup>167</sup> While Butler gives no name, it seems clear that the doctoral student involved was Craig, who was at that point writing such a thesis, later published as *Familiar*

---

<sup>165</sup> Michael Stevenson, *This is the Trekka* (Wellington: Creative New Zealand, 2003). While I do not have the space to go into detail on Stevenson's use of publications and the book format, the above mentioned thesis by Sophie Davies covers this extensively.

<sup>166</sup> "Power, Corruption & Lies — Various artists", Linda Carroll, 1997 <http://www.artdes.monash.edu.au/non-cms/globe/issue7/pcltxt.html>

<sup>167</sup> Rex Butler, *A Secret History of Australian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 2002) 21.

*Medicine: Everyday Health Knowledge and Practice in Today's Vietnam*.<sup>168</sup> (Butler, incidentally, suggests that in his work, Stevenson is implicitly highlighting the comparatively centrality of Australia compared to the even more absolute distance of New Zealand.)<sup>169</sup>

The essay Craig contributes here “(Post-) Fordism, (Neo-) Trekkism: or, the cultural contradictions of late provincial modernism”, is, as the name suggests, an argument both about modes of production and cultural provincialism, and sits at one conceptual core of Stevenson’s project.<sup>170</sup> Of the art-theoretically inclined texts in *This is the Trekk*, Craig’s text frames Bill Sutch’s recontextualised speech, and provides a transition to Alan Rodgers-Smith’s paranoid apocalypticisms.<sup>171</sup> As with the Brisbane performance, there is a degree of ventriloquism at play here, in the way that Craig is being used to articulate a set of concerns at play in *This is the Trekk*, while still allowing Stevenson to maintain a degree of cool and distance. And while not as far as with the Brisbane performance, Craig still maintains a slightly over-heated and slightly paranoid affect, pushing his material to the limits.

In the essay, Craig argues that New Zealand, as a result of its peripheral status, because of the tyranny of distance, never “achieved the economies of scale and modernist formal and expressive confidence realised in the capitalist core”.<sup>172</sup> Craig draws extensively upon Wallerstein’s terminology and thesis, although does not make it explicit in the text itself that that is one place where the ideas might originate. However, he is clearly indebted to world-systems theory for much of the underlying economic argument. Instead, New Zealand developed a protectionist economy,

---

<sup>168</sup> David Craig, *Familiar Medicine: Everyday Health Knowledge and Practice in Today's Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002).

<sup>169</sup> Butler, *Secret History*, 23.

<sup>170</sup> David Craig, “(Post- ) Fordism, (Neo- ) Trekkism: or, the cultural contradictions of late provincial modernism”, *ibid*, 41-61.

<sup>171</sup> Bill Sutch, “The Importance of the Arts Today”, *ibid*, 62-72, and Alan Rodgers-Smith, “The Lost Apocalypse”, *ibid*, 81-98.

<sup>172</sup> Craig, ““(Post- ) Fordism, (Neo- ) Trekkism” 45.

import-substitution, and “the regional grotesque”.<sup>173</sup> New Zealand did not have “Fordism”, a mode of production that centred around the highly organised and efficient modernism of the production line. (Except in agriculture.) New Zealand had what Craig calls “Trekka-ism”, a sort of home-spun, cobbled together provincial economy, sitting alongside a cobbled together, provincial, arts community. Both the economy and the cultural system that developed alongside it remained fundamentally vulnerable to the “structural ebb and flow of real global capital and cultural traffic.”<sup>174</sup>

Although Craig never comes out and makes it explicit, Colin McCahon is the central type of the provincial grotesque. He is the New Zealand artist who mediates between the second-hand modernism available to him via reproductions, infirm teachers, and lecture notes, and the regionalist imperative. He is the New Zealand artist who, as Brown, Curnow, Green and Leonard agree in their own ways, engages with modernism on a limited, regionalist, provincial, superficial manner to produce a sort of hybrid. This hybridity is at the heart of Craig’s notion of the economic forms of production prevalent in New Zealand; McCahon is the Trekka-ist artist par excellence.

In his 2006 project *Art of the Eighties and Seventies*, Stevenson returned to this terrain of distance and periphery. *Art of the Eighties and Seventies* was a project carried out in conjunction with the Museum Abteiburg of Moenchengladbach, and one of the forms it took was a large, glossy, exhibition catalogue-style publication.<sup>175</sup> For this project, Stevenson considered a collection of modern American art owned by the Count Panza, which formed the object of protracted and eventually unsuccessful negotiations with respect to a possible acquisition by the museum. (In an oblique gesture of parody, the publication was modelled after the form of a catalogue put together to memorialise the art collection that never entered the Museum Abteiburg.) On the dust jacket of

---

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>175</sup> Michael Stevenson, *Art of the Eighties and Seventies* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver — Archiv für Actuelle Kunst, 2006).

the publication, the unnamed voice that speaks in promotional copy on books states that “The artist, Michael Stevenson, born in New Zealand in 1964, first engaged with developments in art and culture from the other end of the world.” Suzanne Titz, the museum director, writes that Stevenson

received his own training as an artist in New Zealand and hence far removed from the world’s most important art centers. He therefore had to learn about the art of the sixties and seventies and the discrepancy between this and the conventional principles he himself was being taught solely by virtue of his own curiosity and from what scarce resources were at hands [sic].<sup>176</sup>

This passage mirrors the descriptions of Colin McCahon back in the public library in Dunedin, watching the McCahon family leaf through the *London Illustrated News*, or in a Melbourne studio learning from a disabled hanger-on. The New Zealand artist is again made *distant*, and this distance mediates through *influence*.

Within the large, handsome publication another essay by David Craig (“The aircraft carrier, the paddy field, the late modern institution: how neo-liberalism and Post Modernism eroded public institutions from the global periphery to Moenchengladbach”) returns to the problems of artistic production and social modes of production.<sup>177</sup> As befits the shifted physical format, and move away from a folk-manufacturing aesthetic implicit in *This is the Trekka* to the rarified aesthetic of contemporary collecting, the language shifts, away from the slightly breathless and folksy phrasing of “Post-Fordism, Neo-Trekkaism” to a more explicitly academic and formal register. Craig’s essay for *This is the Trekka* speaks as if *from* New Zealand and *by* a New Zealander, befitting the nationalistic goals of the Venice Biennale, but in *Art of the Eighties and Seventies*, he moves to a more descriptive, global position. In this way, arguably the text recapitulates the notions of centre

---

<sup>176</sup> Suxanne Titz, “Preface”, *ibid*, 7-11, 8.

<sup>177</sup> David Craig, “The aircraft carrier, the paddy field, the late modern institution: how neo-liberalism and Post Modernism eroded public institutions from the global periphery to Moenchengladbach”, *ibid*, 77-99,

and periphery, and the different voices appropriate to each, that are explored within the show and the essay itself.

Again, Baxandall's metaphor of the artistic billiard ball, moving through a complex array of other balls and re-scattering them across the field of play, seems apposite here. Stevenson (and Craig) move through an ostensibly distant art history in an oblique, ricocheting manner. As they move through this discursive field, they interact with and alter that field, and the way we understand it. This alteration is almost overly literally embodied in the titular reversal from 'art of the seventies and eighties' to *Art of the Eighties and Seventies*, but Stevenson's repositioning of the art of the eighties and seventies is more thorough-going than that.

*Art of the Eighties and Seventies* is a deconstruction — quite literally, as Stevenson presents a model of the museum's ruins — of the politics of the art of the sixties and seventies. Stevenson implicitly presents a set of alternative readings of the collection and architecture involved in the Panza project: the book itself is a doppelgänger of the Panza catalogue. Through the device of Craig's essay, Stevenson repositions the museum as a public institution, and the work contained (or not) therein, into problematised fields of economic, geographic, and ultimately geopolitical inquiry, and the changes that took place in those fields through the course of the seventies and eighties. The Panza collection becomes part of a broader conversation, and as a result the way we look at it changes.

This is also the case with *This is the Trekka*. As I argue above, while Colin McCahon is not directly engaged here, as he is in the earlier period of Stevenson's painting, he is clearly the archetype of the provincial, nationalist artist, corresponding to the provincial, nationalist economy. Part of the effect of *This is the Trekka* is to change how we think about and with the New Zealand economy, and the New Zealand cultural economy, of the pre-neoliberal era. As we change how we think about distance, nationalism, and provincialism we change how we think about a painter who had a

career defined by “distance”, nationalism, and provincialism. In this manner, Stevenson, while influenced by McCahon, also influences McCahon, and our understanding of McCahon.

### *Conclusion*

The notion of the “post-McCahon” has, in this chapter, helped us to explore linkages between the work of Michael Stevenson, the historiography of Colin McCahon, and broader notions of distance, influence, and economic geography.

In the next chapter, I will return to the death of god theology introduced in Chapter One, and the theoretical constructs introduced in this chapter, and consider how they can be used to explicate the relationship between McCahon and Imants Tillers.

## Chapter Three

### Locality Fails: Imants Tillers and Wystan Curnow<sup>178</sup>

#### *Introduction.*

There used to be a large painting by Imants Tillers in the first gallery off the atrium of the Auckland Art Gallery. It is a very large painting, three metres high and nine long.<sup>179</sup> (In fact, it is slightly larger than McCahon's *Victory Over Death 2*, which is 2075 x 5977 mm.<sup>180</sup>) When I went to look up the precise dimensions of this painting, I used the Auckland Art Gallery's online catalogue system.<sup>181</sup> In order to demonstrate to the user where to enter the title of the work, the date, or the name of the artist, the system displays a light grey placeholder text. For the artist field, this place holder reads simply "e.g. McCahon", a quiet demonstration of the extent to which he dominates New Zealand's art history. But I was searching for a painting by Tillers, and as I started to type "Tillers", it overwrote McCahon's name. The act of searching for Tillers erased McCahon's name in a sort of digital palimpsest.

There is something appropriate about this relationship, for the painting I was looking for, *Paradiso* (1994), has the effect of a palimpsest itself. It layers a series of images upon each other: early Mondrian abstract in pink and blue, a Shane Cotton plant, a crucifixion, a Gordon Walters koru painting, McCahon's, predominantly drawn from the later abstracts, and more. For an Australian artist, it is a painting which displays a startling knowledge of New Zealand art history: is the juxtaposition of Shane Cotton, a young Ngāpuhi artist who was exploring issues of appropriation of Māori motifs and intercultural relations, with Gordon Walters' koru a deliberate wry comment?

---

<sup>178</sup> Imants Tillers, "Locality Fails", in Butler, *What is Appropriation*, 139-144.

<sup>179</sup> Imants Tillers, *Paradiso*, 1994, oilstick, gouache, and synthetic polymer paint on canvas boards, 3000 x 9000 mm.

<sup>180</sup> Colin McCahon, *Victory Over Death 2*, 1970, synthetic polymer on unstretched canvas, 2075 x 5977 mm.

<sup>181</sup> Auckland Art Gallery, "Advanced Collection Search", accessed at <http://www.aucklandartgallery.com/explore-art-and-ideas/advanced-collection-search>, 2/3/16.

But it is the direct confrontation with McCahon which is most striking to the New Zealand eye. *Paradiso*, like the other paintings from the diaspora sequence, *Diaspora* (1992, Figure Three) and *Izkliede* (1994) exists at a scale and configuration which immediately recalls the physical presence of McCahon's *Victory Over Death 2* and *Practical Religion: The Resurrection of Lazarus Showing Mount Martha* (1969-70).<sup>182</sup> A large part of the imagery across all three paintings is drawn from McCahon's practice. Taken together, the three paintings are evidently paintings *about* McCahon: these are post-McCahon paintings.

Two texts by Wystan Curnow can be used as lenses to look at the relationship between McCahon's practice and a post-McCahon practice. The two primary Curnow texts I will discuss are *I Will Need Words*<sup>183</sup> (1984) and *Imants Tillers and the Book of Power* (1996),<sup>184</sup> paying particular attention to the structural and thematic similarities between the two texts, and offering a critique (drawing on Grant Kester's essay, *The Device Laid Bare*) of some of the theoretical claims made in these texts. If Imants Tillers is a post-McCahon painter, Curnow is a post-McCahon writer. The way that Curnow constructs Tillers exists in the wake of the way Curnow understands McCahon.

#### *Imants Tillers through the eyes of Wystan Curnow.*

Wystan Curnow has appeared before in this thesis, in both Chapter One and Chapter Two. However, at this point, as I begin to engage with these two core strands of text, it is perhaps helpful to present a short precis of his life and career in order to situate him both within New Zealand's art history and broader cultural history. In this I am deeply indebted to a recent MA thesis by Thomasin Sleight at Victoria University.<sup>185</sup> Wystan Curnow is the son of Allen Curnow, the author of *Not in Narrow Seas* and other core Nationalist texts. He was born in 1939 in Christchurch, although his

---

<sup>182</sup> Colin McCahon, *Practical Religion: The Resurrection of Lazarus Showing Mount Martha*, 1969-70, synthetic polymer on unstretched canvas, 2075 x 8070 mm.

<sup>183</sup> Wystan Curnow, *I Will Need Words: Colin McCahon's Word and Number Paintings* (Wellington: National Art Gallery, 1984).

<sup>184</sup> Wystan Curnow, *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998).

<sup>185</sup> Thomasin Sleight, "Neither Here Nor There: The Writing of Wystan Curnow 1961-1984" MA thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2010.

family moved to Auckland when he was a child; as a child, in both Auckland and Christchurch, his family was embedded in the local “cultured” set. They knew, for instance, Colin McCahon as a family friend. Curnow studied English Literature at the University of Auckland, graduating with an MA (first class) in 1963, before going on to do post-graduate work at Pennsylvania, and returning to teach English Literature at Auckland from 1970. *I Will Need Words* was written in the early eighties, at the height, as Sleight notes, of the arrival of the first wave of critical theory in New Zealand, and for Curnow a “period of intense engagement with post-structural theory”,<sup>186</sup> while 1996’s *Imants Tillers and the ‘Book of Power’* was written during Theory’s imperial phase in the early to mid-90s.

Curnow’s account of Tillers in *Imants Tillers and the ‘Book of Power’* will be used in order to introduce the work and career of Imants Tillers. This book provides both a detailed account of Tillers’ career and practice to that date, and places it within an elaborate theoretical superstructure. Curnow’s account of McCahon is, unsurprisingly, reasonably consistent across both texts; what is more striking is that the accounts of Tillers and McCahon are also surprisingly similar.

Imants Tillers is a Latvian-Australian artist. Born in 1950 in Sydney, he grew up speaking Latvian, and he studied architecture at the University of Sydney 1969-1972, although he has never practiced as an architect. He worked as an assistant to Christo and Jean-Claude, and then, as Curnow quotes Donald Brook, an art historian and critic, writing at the time, he became “a real artist” by a “matter of election”.<sup>187</sup> The arbitrary and religious overtones of “election” are intended: for Brook, Tillers’ swift emergence represented a break with prior, slow and grinding artisanal processes of artistic formation. Instead, as Brook and Curnow have it, Tillers swiftly sprung onto the scene in 1973-4.<sup>188</sup> From this point on, he continued to show extensively, both in Australia and

---

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, 138.

<sup>187</sup> Curnow, *Imants Tillers* 11.

<sup>188</sup> Having a solo show in 1973, then showing at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Victoria, and by 1974 representing Australia at the Sao Paulo Biennale in Brazil. Ibid.

elsewhere, including at the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (1986), the New Zealand National Art Gallery (1989), and the Latvian National Museum of Art in Riga (1993). While in Australia, he collaborated with the painter John Nixon in running a nomadic artist run initiative, *n-space*.<sup>189</sup>

*Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'* is a long text. It runs to some 100 pages, once the plates and prefatory matter are accounted for. It is a text which is dominated by its structure, a structure that I have tended to follow in outlining the argument of the book. First Curnow discusses Tillers himself, his own biography and narrative; then a description of the 'Book of Power' is given, through sections titled "The Canvasboard", "The Stack", "Making like a Painter", "The Fear of Texture" and so-on. As the section titles suggest, this is an analysis that starts with the most literal supports of Tillers' work and works its way through the physical materiality of the painting object towards a theory of the paintings. Following this, Curnow discusses the "subjects" of the 'Book of Power: the subject of the artist, the subject of appropriation, the subject of the decentered self, the subject of coincidence, the subject of origin. The 'Book of Power' is a part of Tillers' method of working, whereby each "painting" is composed of numerous parts, which are individually numbered and thereby form "pages" within the 'Book of Power'. The 'Book of Power' becomes a sort of atomised catalogue raisonné, operating at the level below that of the "painting". The 'Book of Power' also forms part of the title of Curnow's book, *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'*, the book itself being assigned a number within the ongoing sequence. In this way, *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'* is both *about* and *part of* the 'Book of Power'.

Tillers' characteristic, mid-career practice revolves around the production of a series of canvasboards, which are then organised into larger works. A work like Te Papa's *Diaspora* (1992) is typical of this physical and conceptual structuring. It is captioned in 'Book of Power' as:

---

<sup>189</sup> Curnow, *Imants Tillers*, 20.

*Diaspora*, 1992, oil stick, gouache, synthetic polymer paint on 228 canvasboards, Nos. 34000-38183, 404.8 x 914.4 cm, Collection: Museum of New Zealand, Wellington, Photograph: Steve Green.

This captures the structural multiplicity of Tillers' practice. On the simplest level there is one work, which is now owned by Te Papa.<sup>190</sup> However, it is possible to look at this work as being composed of parts: the canvasboards that are individually enumerated (228 parts, in fact). These parts are then components both of the work *Diaspora*, but also of the larger on-going sequence, the 'Book of Power'. The canvasboards are all numbered sequentially, so that there are three tiers of composition. The lowest level is the level of the boards themselves, the middle level is the level of the larger works they form, and the highest level is the ongoing sequence of canvas boards that comprises Tillers' ongoing oeuvre.

These parts are typically displayed on the wall in an arrangement that basically follows the usual mode of display of paintings in the western tradition. However, at other times Tillers has displayed the collections of canvasboards stacked, in a gesture which, while recalling the minimalist gestures of Carl Andre, can also be placed in the context of Tillers' fellow Australian (and sometime gallery-mate) John Nixon's insistence on the three-dimensional physical reality of the paintings he constructs. Curnow suggests that one advantage of this mode of construction is purely practical. The modular nature of the paintings simplifies transport, both to and from the studio, but also around the world. A 1983 show in London was, according to Tillers, sent from Australia via air mail.<sup>191</sup>

Tiller's painting is characterised by the appropriation and recreation of paintings and parts of paintings by other artists. This pillaging is carried out at an industrial scale: both in terms of the range of artists drawn upon and in terms of the extent to which it forms the bulk of Tiller's visual vocabulary. In Curnow's book, an appendix is dedicated to listing the identifiable sources for Tillers'

---

<sup>190</sup> Styled the Museum of New Zealand in *Imants Tillers and the Book of Power*.

<sup>191</sup> Curnow, *Imants Tillers*, 25.

work (a physical instantiation of the “wearisome industry” of source hunting that Bloom denounces). There are 222 different artists listed in the 15 year period covered, between 1981 and 1996, ranging from Shane Cotton to Frida Kahlo, from Pierre Bonnard to Sigmar Polke.<sup>192</sup>

One of those artists is Colin McCahon, who is arguably first among equals in terms of importance to Tillers’ practice during the 1986-96 period. McCahon provides the framework for Tillers’ major show at the New Zealand National Art Gallery — the only show of this period which he chose to enlist in the ‘Book of Power’. He is the source for much of the visual material for a large number of paintings, both directly and indirectly (directly in the straight appropriation of material, indirectly in ways like the use of Fiordland in *Hiatus* (1987) or the quotations from Shane Cotton or Gordon Walters in *Paradiso* and *Izkliede*), and he supplies a set of conceptual preoccupations and procedures. The conceptual preoccupations and procedures that Tillers draws from McCahon include McCahon’s concern for the relationship between a European voice and a tangata whenua/ indigenous perspective, the use of numbers as a structuring device, the incorporation of text as a painterly cue, and indeed the quotational strategy as a whole. If Tillers was solely interested in McCahon as a source of formal material, it might be possible to argue that his relationship to McCahon was primarily an ironic form of quotationalism; however, the extensive range of Tillers’ borrowings suggest a deeper, more sustained engagement.

Curnow argues that Tillers’ use of McCahon is tied to an investigation of peripherality. For Curnow, it is part of a general set of changes in centre-periphery relationships in the 1980s.<sup>193</sup> Curnow situates that change in the growth of authority of the Sydney Biennale, which, interestingly, was the venue for both 1984’s *I Will Need Words* and Rudi Fuchs’ declaration in 1982 that “[t]here is only one centre and it is Europe”.<sup>194</sup> McCahon is even more peripheral than Tillers, and so Tillers’

---

<sup>192</sup> Curnow, *Imants Tillers*, 137-9

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

<sup>194</sup> Rudi Fuchs, Regionalism Forum at the 1982 Biennale of Sydney, as quoted in Ewington, “Past the Post: Postmodernism and Postfeminism”.

integration of McCahon's work into his practice is a way of de-emphasising the importance of "fashionable artists", in favour of those "beyond the pale" of the art world.<sup>195</sup>

*Tillers and Stevenson: shared problematics of distance and influence?*

Rex Butler notes, in his *Secret History of Australian Art*, that the paranoia of globalisation embedded within a performance like that given at the Institute of Modern Art by David Craig can be analogised to Imants Tillers' dictum that "locality fails". Yet, Butler goes on to say, Stevenson is adopting that stance from an even more extreme distance from the centre, a location where even the peripheral Tillers becomes comparatively central.<sup>196</sup> For Butler, Stevenson and Tillers share concerns around the periphery/centre relationships; and there are other ties, most obviously around the direct relationship to McCahon. While simply playing join-the-dots is trivial in the small New Zealand art world and even in the larger Australian art world, there is an interesting collection of overlaps. Tina Barton curated both Tillers and Stevenson into the show *After McCahon*, as mentioned above, and Curnow has written about both Tillers and McCahon, while Rex Butler has written extensively on all three.<sup>197</sup> Within the theoretical spaces of the art world, these three artists cluster together, and some art writers move in similar circuits.

Tiller's interest in integrating the exhibition — in the form of the show at the National Gallery, which was assigned a number in the 'Book of Power'; and the book — in the form of Curnow's book, which also received a number in the 'Book of Power'; directly into his practice can be thought of as part of a broader set of strategies around ensuring that his work can and will "travel". In this sense, the book and the exhibition are both tools for helping art to travel. They are ways for an artist to send their work to other places, either directly, in the form of the touring exhibition, where art

---

<sup>195</sup> Curnow, *Imants Tillers*, 36.

<sup>196</sup> Butler, *A Secret History of Australian Art*, 23.

<sup>197</sup> Butler, *A Secret History of Australian Art*, 21-30 (on Stevenson), Rex Butler, *Colin McCahon in Australia* (Wellington: School of Art History, Victoria University of Wellington: 2010), Rex Butler, "Introduction", Rex Butler (ed), *What is Appropriation: An Anthology of Critical Writing on Australian Art in the '80s and '90s*, (Brisbane: IM & Power Publications, 1996) 13-48, this publication also reproduces Imants Tillers' "Locality Fails", 139-144.

objects are physically sent to a succession of destinations, or in a more abstract manner, in the way that the book represents an artist's work, both conceptually and, through illustration and description, directly. Like Tillers, Stevenson also uses exhibitions as delegates: for example, his showing of *This is the Trekka* at Venice was almost literally ambassadorial, and explicitly played with that role of national representation.

Tillers and Stevenson have both produced several artists' publications. Starting with the catalogue for *Genealogy*, Stevenson went on to make a practice of producing publications which exist in that zone between book, catalogue and art object: *Genealogies*, *This is the Trekka*, *Art of the Eighties and Seventies*, and others, while Tillers was involved in the production of *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'*, and integrated it into his sequence of numbered works, itself a metaphorical "book". Tillers's use of the book as a kind of surrogate through which his work can travel echoes Stevenson's use of the publications *This is the Trekka* and *Art of the Eighties and Seventies*, which represent the show itself to audiences unable to physically attend the exhibition itself.

Distance, and the way that artistic practice in the periphery is constrained and influenced by it, is a shared concern between Tillers and Stevenson. In the most literal sense, Tillers' use of airmail to freight a show to London is a way of emphasising the physical transportation involved in showing work from the periphery in the artistic centre. On a more metaphorical plane, Michael Stevenson's decision to fabricate his publication *Theory of Flight* from air mail paper was a similar gesture towards the role of distance in peripheral practice.

For both Stevenson and Tillers publications become a way, as I have argued above, of letting their work travel. But they are also a way of letting others speak for them: the voice of the essay in an artists' publication exists in a complicated relationship with the artist's own voice. Michael Stevenson feels that David Craig is able to articulate something in a way that it is beneficial to put forward alongside his own work, and similarly, Tillers uses Curnow to advance a set of claims about Tillers's own work. But at the same time, Tillers and Stevenson retain a distance from the

claims set out in the texts that appear in “their” publications: it would be broadly seen as naive to treat Craig or Curnow as simply mouthpieces for Tillers or Stevenson, or the reverse. In Tillers’ case, this multiplicity of voices sits alongside the multiplicity of voices and texts within his painting. In both practices, this device is a way of complicating simple ideas of artistic univocality, by presenting multiple voices that speak with a degree of authorial and artistic authority.

Alongside investigations into distance and voice, both Tillers and Stevenson are engaged into explorations of the relationship between earlier and later artists. This exploration is clearest in Stevenson’s earlier bodies of work, like the early “McCahon” paintings and the show *Genealogy*, but later projects like *Art of the Eighties and Seventies* and *This is the Trekka* are also engaged in archeologies of influence. Tillers’ central tactic is the appropriation of the work of prior artists, a tactic which relates directly to the mimicry of *Art of the Eighties and Seventies*, or the facsimiles of *Genealogy*.

#### *Reading Curnow’s McCahon and Curnow’s Tillers together*

In reading *Imants Tillers and the ‘Book of Power’*, it becomes increasingly evident that there are close theoretical ties between Curnow’s work on Tillers and Curnow’s work on McCahon. Partly, this is a direct consequence of Tillers’ close and ongoing appropriation from McCahon, which establishes a logical tie, but more broadly, it is also owing to a shared milieu of authorial and critical interest. Therefore, in this section I will discuss the ways in which it is possible to read across and between these two texts.

*I will need words* is a short text. In the original catalogue, the text runs to some seven pages. It was originally written for the 1984 Biennale of Sydney satellite show of the same name, which presented a Colin McCahon survey in Australia for the first time. It was not the only text that Curnow wrote about McCahon in this long, extended eighties. It sits alongside 1977’s “Thinking about Colin McCahon and Barnett Newman”, 1991’s “Colin McCahon: The Shining Cuckoo”, and

1988's "McCahon and Signs", Curnow's text for *Gates and Journeys*.<sup>198</sup> *I Will Need Words* focuses on the late works of McCahon, particularly those paintings that predominantly consist of textual and numerical motifs.

McCahon is a diverse artist, and Curnow argues at the start of *I Will Need Words* that he could have curated a McCahon retrospective of landscapes, or abstracts, or word and number paintings. He chose to go with word and number paintings, although he acknowledges that many of McCahon's paintings fall across several of these categories. This diversity is contraposed to the fact that "death has been this artists overriding subject"; he is always coming "face to face with the death of God".<sup>199</sup> Curnow goes on to situate McCahon within a historical period, placing him within a generation of painters falling in "an interlude ... between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art/ Post-Painterly Abstraction".<sup>200</sup> But, Curnow argues, McCahon is not really one of these painters (who tend to reside in less peripheral locations, like California or New York) and is the "most compelling and original of them all" for, not just his use of words and numbers but also, the way he uses them.<sup>201</sup>

He then embarks on a reading of McCahon's I AM (1954) and I AND THOU (1954) in terms of the name and being of god. For Curnow, McCahon is here playing with identity and voice, and the shifts between the painterly and heavenly voices. The preoccupation with identity and voice serves as a bridge to a discussion of the difference between words as arbitrary signs and images, a distinction which is used to punningly play across the letter forms T and I and the image of the cross: forms which are "yoked (joked) together", a pun that presages material in *Imants Tillers and*

---

<sup>198</sup> Wystan Curnow, "Thinking about Colin McCahon and Barnett Newman" and "Colin McCahon: The Shining Cuckoo", all in Robert Leonard and Christina Barton, with Thomasin Sleigh (eds) *The Critic's Part: Wystan Curnow Art Writing 1971-2013* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2014) 83-88, 231-252, respectively, and "McCahon and Signs" in Gifkins, *Gates and Journeys*, 41-54.

<sup>199</sup> Curnow, *I Will Need Words*, unpaginated.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

the *'Book of Power'*.<sup>202</sup> McCahon, Curnow suggests, soaks his work in this kind of “cross-referencing (pun intended)”.<sup>203</sup>

Moving on from language games, Curnow goes on to discuss the role of the sequence in McCahon's work, talking about the way that numbers gain meaning from their position within a sequence, and the paintings create meaning through sequence. After this, Curnow introduces McCahon's engagement with indigenous culture, particularly Māori, before returning at the end of the text to McCahon's use of monochromaticism, placing this within a specifically religious context.

These two texts are both responding to post-structural theory, although one appears at the beginning of the process of Theory's arrival in New Zealand, and the other at the height.<sup>204</sup> For instance, Curnow's pun in *I Will Need Words* between yoke and joke (on page 6) is almost comically stylistically Derridean, as is the consequent discussion of the /I/, je/I, one/un/on distinctions in English and French.<sup>205</sup> Yet underneath this stylistic post-structuralism the analysis in the rest of that paragraph operates on linguistic, structuralist lines. In his discussion of the signifier and signified, Curnow adheres to pre-post-structuralist devices in his uses of the Saussurean doctrine of the arbitrary sign, a Peircean notion of the index/icon/symbol trinity.<sup>206</sup> He does suggest that McCahon moves between (to use Curnow's vocabulary) the arbitrary sign and the image (i.e. the icon/index in Peirce's work) in a punning manoeuvre. But this is not a post-structuralist argument so much as a semiotic or structuralist one; it is constructivist rather than deconstructionist. Similarly, when Curnow discuss McCahon's numeral series and says that they “extend McCahon's exploration of number signs by presenting them in their essential linguistic

---

<sup>202</sup> Curnow, *I Will Need Words*, unpaginated, c.f. the almost identical passages starting “McCahon's yoking (or joking) together...” from Curnow, *Imants Tillers*, 113.

<sup>203</sup> Curnow, *I Will Need Words*, unpaginated.

<sup>204</sup> Sleigh, “Neither Here Nor There”, 121.

<sup>205</sup> Curnow, *I Will Need Words*, unpaginated.

<sup>206</sup> Robert Burch, “Charles Sanders Peirce”, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), accessed from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/peirce>.

context: the base ten sequence”, the underlying theory is a structuralist theory in which terms gain meaning through their relationship to other terms (i.e through the structure of language.)<sup>207</sup> A post-structuralist reading might question what it means to say numbers exist within an “essential” context; indeed, a post-structuralist would probably be wary of the word “essential” itself. This is particularly so coming only paragraphs after it is claimed meaning is made “clear” by words “locked into contexts which allow us to distinguish differences”, another deeply structuralist argument.<sup>208</sup>

Late in *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'*, Curnow brings up a Kenneth Baker article on Sigmar Polke (Polke being one of Tillers' on-going sources) in which Baker gives a (misquoted) version of a remark Wittgenstein made about rule-following in mathematics. Curnow uses this quote to suggest that one “example would be the rule which enables the reader to derive a narrative from a simple 1-14 sequence of numbers.”<sup>209</sup> We can see a similar treatment of the sequence of natural numbers 0–9 in *I Will Need Words*, specifically on page 7. This is of course drawing on the discussion in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* of the problems of sequence — i.e how do we *know* that when we come to 2, 4, 8, ... we should next say 16?<sup>210</sup> Wittgenstein isn't really interested in the question of what story (in the sense of narrative plot) we might tell about a sequence of 14 numbers; instead, he is interested in how we understand mathematical operations. If anything, for Wittgenstein the sequence of numbers 1-14 is quite the opposite of simple, and in many ways Wittgenstein is questioning how and if we are able to construct any narrative at all from that sequence.

There is something slightly unusual in coming across this lump of Anglo-Austrian philosophy in a text ostensibly heavily inflected by continental post-modernism. It is a reminder that art writing

---

<sup>207</sup> Curnow, *I Will Need Words*, unpaginated.

<sup>208</sup> “Ferdinand de Saussure”, in Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer (eds) *Encyclopaedia of Cultural and Social Anthropology*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 882.

<sup>209</sup> cf. Curnow, *Imants Tillers*, 136.

<sup>210</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, trans G E M Anscombe, P M S Hacker, Joachim Schulte, *Philosophical Investigations*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 150, cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, eds G H von Wright, R Rhees, and G E M Anscombe, *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967).

tends not to fall neatly into philosophical schools. But it is also a disjuncture that recalls the problem of the “sub-contractor” model of art writing that Grant Kester critiqued in “The Device Laid Bare”. Wittgenstein is made to stand for a proposition — mathematical anti-realism, in this case — and then that proposition is set alongside the work of Imants Tillers, as if this will explain the use of numbers in Tillers’ (or, through Tillers, McCahon’s) work. Why or in what sense Tillers’ or McCahon’s numbers are anti-realist, or why Wittgenstein (who was not primarily a philosopher of mathematics) is best placed to elucidate this problem, or, indeed, why we should prefer Wittgenstein’s theory of number in general to Gottlob Frege’s, or L.E.J. Brouwer’s, or David Hilbert’s, is not made clear.<sup>211</sup> Curnow does not have the background in philosophy of mathematics to seriously interrogate Wittgenstein’s claims (or, rather, Kenneth Baker’s account of Wittgenstein’s claims) and, as Kester suggests is a likely consequence of this kind of situation, “because the art critic or historian can typically claim no substantive expertise in the area of theory they invoke, this material often comes to function as a kind of master discourse”.<sup>212</sup> This is not to suggest that Curnow’s overall argument is deeply weakened by this problem, but it is hard to see what Wittgenstein contributes to our understanding of McCahon and Tillers.

Interestingly, in making those arguments against Curnow’s reading of both McCahon and Tillers, I have therefore altered my understanding of both artists. Despite the fact that the key passage advancing Curnow’s position and the passage that I found problematic was drawn from *Imants Tillers and the ‘Book of Power’*, yet having constructed my argument, because Curnow freely moves arguments back and forth from one to the other, I was also equally able to translate my objection. This is, I think, a nice illustration of the way in which, while clearly Tillers and McCahon have different practices, because for Curnow they can both be approached in terms of what I shall very loosely and all-encompassingly refer to as post-McCahon criticism it is possible to reason across and between these practices.

---

<sup>211</sup> To name certain prominent philosophers of mathematics.

<sup>212</sup> Kester, *The Device Laid Bare*.

The way it is possible to apply terms and analyses from McCahon to Tillers and back again prompts another consideration of the action of influence and temporality. Curnow first wrote about McCahon in 1961,<sup>213</sup> at which point he had known the artist for some ten years. He continued to write about McCahon reasonably consistently up until the publication of *I Will Need Words*. Therefore, when Curnow came to write about Tillers, he did so against the backdrop of an ongoing engagement with one of Tillers' major influences. This can be seen in the body of *Imants Tillers*. There are major chunks of text which derive, as in the yoke/joke passage, from earlier writing on McCahon. But this influence does not just run to the passages which deal explicitly with McCahon. When Curnow discusses the demise of the centre, essence, and god, he is in some ways recycling the metaphor he used in *I Will Need Words* of "the death of God". We can therefore suggest that one of Tillers' major interpreters, an interpreter specifically sanctioned by the decision to issue *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'* with a numbering in the 'Book of Power', interprets Tillers through the lens of Colin McCahon. It is not just a matter of Tillers being influenced by McCahon; it is that a major author on Tillers is deeply influenced by Colin McCahon, and as a result, the narrative that is constructed around Tillers is a narrative that draws heavily upon McCahon.

The death of god motif appears as an minor but pivotal motif in both texts. In *I Will Need Words*, McCahon "comes face to face with the death of god".<sup>214</sup> In *Imants Tillers* we find that, "in the 1960s, the author's 'death' was already old news, his demise coinciding with the passing of those other fabulous figures of the Centre: God, Self, and Essence"; this demise is an essential preface to the post-modern, post-structural work both of Tillers and Curnow himself.<sup>215</sup> In both cases the death of god functions as a transgressive marker that signals, in McCahon's case, the seriousness and existential honesty of McCahon's late work, and in Tillers' case, the demise of prior certainties and prior authorities. Yet in both cases this bold, almost absurd claim is dealt with surprising cursoriness; if McCahon comes "face to face with the death of god", surely this should prompt a

---

<sup>213</sup> Thomasin Sleight, "Chronology", in Leonard and Barton, *The Critic's Part*, 456.

<sup>214</sup> Curnow, *I Will Need Words*, unpaginated.

<sup>215</sup> Curnow, *Imants Tillers*, 95.

deeper, theologically rich reading of McCahon's painting? And if Tillers' work comes after the death of God, Self, and Essence, the engagement with McCahon — a painter who is often depicted as godly, selfish, and essential — surely becomes a fraught and problematic endeavour, prompting sustained interrogation of what it means to engage with McCahon after the death of god? Not, as Curnow prefers to do, primarily forming the jumping-off point for a discussion of the grammar of the shapes T and I in the shared vocabulary of Tillers and McCahon.

### *Theoretical Considerations*

We have the death of god from Chapter One; we have the theories of peripherality and influence from Chapter Two; and in this chapter we have two post-structuralist readings of two artists, Colin McCahon and Imants Tillers. Is it possible to tie these loose ends together? And having done so, can we take that solution back to the work of Colin McCahon and Imants Tillers? In this section, I will use the work of Derrida to build a bridge between post-structural theory and radical theology, before expanding that analysis into a more general theory of revisionism that can be used to look at the particular theoretical structures discussed throughout this thesis.

For Derrida, negative theology occupied an important place as a kind of precursor, or cousin, to that term “deconstruction”, and therefore bore it a complex and murky relationship. In his essay “Sauf le nom”, Derrida confronts negative theology directly, describing it as a way of talking about god “call[ed] apophasis [l'apophasis], according to the voiceless voice [la voix blanche], the way of theology called or so-called negative”<sup>216</sup> (square brackets in original). This “apophasis” Derrida continues, “is a declaration, an explanation, a response that, taking on the subject of god a negative or interrogative form (for that is also what apophasis means), at times so resembles a

---

<sup>216</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Sauf le nom (Post-scriptum)”, *On The Name*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 35-88, 35.

profession of atheism as to be mistaken for it.”<sup>217</sup> He ties this to deconstruction: the negative method of theology is, he says “strangely familiar”, for the deconstructionist theorist.<sup>218</sup>

Negative theology, as Catherine Keller defines it, is “the way of negating in speech that which can be said of an excess, the infinity that escapes speech.” Negation is both a fundamental term and at the same time deeply confusing. The term “negation” is, here “a hopelessly misleading term”, with its connotations of solipsism and destruction when it is, rather, “nothing but the negation of a reification, a false positive, an ontotheological idol.”<sup>219</sup> Still, it is undeniably by negation that negative theology proceeds, even if the negation is in the admirable service of dethroning an “ontotheological idol” - in the same way that while Altizer relentlessly insists that the death of god is good news, is a liberating and joyful fact, it remains a morbid claim.

As a historical method, it has several prominent antecedents, but it is particularly associated with the radical gestures of post-modern theology, and the death of god theologians can be seen as the apotheosis of negative theology. It is that metaphor of the death of god that Keller directly queries when she asks:

What am I saying?

That postmodern theology is nothing but the hospice for a dying God?<sup>220</sup>

The use of the term hospice here, in a self-consciously post-modern move, derives from Derrida’s punning discussion of the interrelationship between “to host” and “hostility”, and his portmanteau term “hostipitality”. Keller further queries the hospitality of theology to other disciplinary queries, bringing in a second Derridean term as she asks whether “the hospitality of theology depends now upon its autodeconstructive - not self-destructive - contemplation, that of a cloud of unknowing in

---

<sup>217</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014) 27.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid, 27.

which it minds its own complex constructedness”<sup>221</sup>. This notion, of a “cloud of unknowing in which it minds its own complex constructedness” is a complex and paradoxical image, reminding the reader of the extent to which negative theology works by the working out of negation, the self-awareness of this negative procedure, and, as a consequence, the difficulty of grasping the resulting process and claims.

Bloom’s theories of influence can then be brought into a direct dialogue with both Derrida and Altizer. During the 1970s, Bloom was part of a group of post-modern scholars at Yale who positioned the work of Jacques Derrida for an English-speaking audience, alongside Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman.<sup>222</sup> Bloom’s theology draws from Jewish and Christian thought, and tends to be negative and critical, as well as taking a critical stance towards god. By using methods of theological critique that are similar to the “via negativa”, Bloom makes similar moves to those of Derrida’s. The ways in which this deconstructive movement relates to negative theology (and radical theology more broadly) have proved a fruitful area of discussion, as evidenced by the work of Catherine Keller quoted above.

Bloom’s first presentation of this structural relationship is via Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and explicitly frames the precursor function as the creative deity and assigns the other characters in the poem varying roles in this psycho-drama. In Bloom’s reading of Milton god is the “dead but still embarrassingly potent and present ancestral poet”<sup>223</sup> while Satan/Adam are modern poets with existences defined by their relationship to the deity. However, because Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence is reliant on the *function* of god not on the *being*, it is possible to abstract away from the 17th century English Protestant god of *Paradise Lost* that is first used to demonstrate the theory, and in particular away from any question of belief in the actual existence of god. This

---

<sup>221</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>222</sup> See Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1979).

<sup>223</sup> Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 20.

process of abstraction is used by Bloom to extend the theoretical reach first beyond Milton, and then beyond those poets having a direct relationship to Milton, to a very broad range of Romantic poets, and finally to the whole tradition of post-Shakespeare English-language poetry. In particular, Bloom's broad precursor function (that is to say, the abstracted author figure who comes before) can be seen as a way of presenting a highly stylised Abrahamic deity.

Further, given that we can understand Bloom's theory as primarily a set of functional relationships between terms, it is possible to generalise his theory beyond poetry so that we can use it to analyse processes of influence in art history. We can also apply Altizer's critique of a similar set of structures to Bloom in order to revise Bloom, and extend his theory into different areas.

Structurally Bloom and Altizer's arguments are very similar, and methodologically, as I hope I have shown, both emphasise negative, revisionary processes. But a key difference is that whereas Bloom is fundamentally pessimistic and sees no way of escaping from the continual baleful influence of the earlier poet or, rather, sovereign god, Altizer offers an escape route. Bloom does suggest that there are certain revisionary ratios whereby the later poet acts to extend or alter the original poet, but these are simply desperate rearguard actions, where Altizer offers an ongoing escape. And Altizer ties his theological, or theoretical, construct much more tightly to historically contingent and specific events and processes than Bloom does. It is because of this more detailed consideration of the creative possibilities that revisionary impulses offer, and his more detailed analysis of the process through which they work, that Altizer can be used to extend, revise, misread Bloom in a way that opens Bloom's theory up into a much more useful tool for the consideration and reconsideration of traditional narratives of art history.

The escape route that Altizer offers is precisely that of revision: it is the embrace of revision. It is the emphasis of the absolute nature of revision. It is also an absolute misreading: Altizer manages to misread Christian orthodoxy in such a way as to entirely turn orthodoxy upon itself, and does so, not by a wilful misreading, but by the last of Bloom's revisionary gestures, apophrades, the holding open of the later self so as to suggest that the later's revisionary nature was inherent in the

precursor, taken to such an extreme as to absolutely empty the later self. It is a double gesture, where both orthodoxy and the sovereign god are emptied out totally. In this gesture of demise, we can see a liberatory potential where we embrace the demise of the earlier poet, where the later poet exists in a further, absolutely kenotic relationship to the precursor. We maintain Bloom's insistence that there is no poetry but the relationships between poetry, and the absolute dependence on the later poet on the earlier, but we evade the easy degradation that Bloom assumes by the allowance for a sufficiently radical reconsideration of the previous poet. It allows for a refreshed look at contemporary practice which doesn't assume inherent superiority of prior poetry.

At this point, we have constructed a set of theoretical tools: we have Bloom's notion of *influence* and misreading or revision, and Altizer's notions of the death of god and *kenosis*. However, following Grant Kester we need to be aware of the relationship of those tools to the contexts within which they arise, and the specific claims and processes which they articulate. Altizer is a theologian, and we are moving away from purely theological work. Bloom's theories work themselves out in the context of literary criticism, and as we take them out of this context, we strip them of that context — and inasmuch as Bloom claims that poetry is the relationship between texts, this excision from the web of texts that constitutes Bloom's context can be seen as an excision from the theory itself. This does not mean we can not do so, but it means we need to be careful as we do so.

Can we take this structural homology further? In Chapter Two, I discussed the problem of centre/periphery relationships. These structures can be compared to the problem of influence in Bloom's telling: indeed, this is one way of understanding the effect of Moretti's argument, that the permanent underdevelopment of literature embodies the anxiety of influence. Likewise, Terry Smith's paper on the provincialism problems hints at the difficulty of an entire artistic community permanently positioned as the belated, late-coming artist, and the way this causes a widespread, pervasive anxiety. Where Craig suggests that New Zealand developed a sort of provincial

grotesque, we can see the echoes of Bloom's ideas of the diminishment of poetry as a result of the dead hand of influence.

But, given the material substructure, we cannot simply pivot to a revisionist reversal of the economic effects of being on the periphery. While it is possible to suggest that, like god, the *artistic* dominance of the centre was killed off in the sixties (although it would be an optimistic argument) it is not possible to make that same argument for the economic dominance of the centre. The argument for the notion of the death of god is founded in a set of shared, public changes to society. We do not have such a set of shared, public changes that suggest a clear, revisionary narrative in the economic sphere.

This problem points us towards the fact that we must be careful when arguing across and between these theoretical constructs. Each construct has different characteristics, both in terms of how the theoretical structure operates and what the underlying factual basis is. There are structural similarities but to expect absolute symmetry is unrealistic and misleading: the shared characteristics are a starting point, a place to begin reasoning from.

### *Reading Diaspora*

In this section, I describe one major work of Tillers, 1992's *Diaspora*, and make use of some of the earlier theoretical discussion in order to help unpack the ways Tillers engages with McCahon and structures of distance and influence. I do not attempt to provide as full or as detailed an account of *Diaspora* as I did for *I considered all the acts of oppression*.

As is typical for Tillers' paintings, the material support for *Diaspora* is a grid of canvas boards. This very fine-grained and regular grid is a visible underlay to the subsequent painting, and forms the first and most basic element of the compositional tools used by Tillers. Over this grid, another series of grids emerge out of the arrangement of the imagery, creating a busy, fragmented surface that resists cohering into either a unified plane, fictitious depth, or balanced composition. The vast

bulk of the imagery is drawn from Colin McCahon's practice: of the 228 boards, all but sixty are predominantly covered in motifs appropriated from the work of McCahon. In the upper left, "how is the hammer of the whole earth cut asunder and broken" stutters across, repeating itself in lurid reds and bone whites. Underneath, McCahon numerals mingle with an eastern orthodox icon, and a row of roman numerals marches across. A group of four Baselitz heads occupy the middle right, while in the upper right, a sequence drawn from a McCahon *Stations of the Cross* — the roman numerals I-XIV, fills the upper sixth of the painting. Inscriptions slur across the surface of the work: "an there is a constant flow of light into the pure land" / "I AND THOU" / "this compounds and solidifies evil" / "RIGA" / "kotahi te manu"...

Clearly, some of the inscriptions are taken from McCahon, while others are taken from other artists, or refer, like RIGA and DIASPORA, to events and places relevant to Imants Tillers himself. In this case, the reference is to his Latvian heritage. Imants Tillers, as a Latvian Australian, has a personal and cultural experience of ethnic cleansing and oppression in the immediate post-war Soviet sphere of influence followed by long term totalitarian rule. Curnow gives us Tillers quoting a Latvian leader: "Latvia was a child of sorrow [...] Latvia was a child of great pain".<sup>224</sup> *Diaspora* situates itself within those explicitly diasporic experience of expulsion and oppression, making use of the apocalyptic language of McCahon: I AND THOU, How Is The Hammer Of The Whole Earth Split Asunder...

Tillers is using McCahon's material in a way which both respects and shades the meaning of the quoted source. As Curnow puts it in relation to McCahon in *I Will Need Words*, Tillers is being "a scrupulous editor", carefully not to "quote out of context".<sup>225</sup> This is true in two senses: firstly, Tillers is using McCahon's words in a way which rhymes with McCahon's usage. But secondly, Tillers is using McCahon's words in a way that rhymes with prior use of those lines from before McCahon. The diasporic connotations can be linked, beyond McCahon, to Jewish experiences of

---

<sup>224</sup> Curnow, *Imants Tillers*, 47.

<sup>225</sup> Curnow, *I Will Need Words*, unpaginated.

dispossession and oppression. Tillers moves beyond a simplistic notion of quotation from one singular prior author to emphasise the extent to which McCahon is himself quoting, and ties this multivocality to a range of experiences of suffering and oppression going back through history.

In Chapter One I argued that *I considered all the acts of oppression* could profitably be put into a dialogue with Rubinstein and Altizer's discussions of the problems of faith in the post-war.

Rubinstein and Altizer argued that in the aftermath of the holocaust (in particular) it became almost entirely indefensible to cling to the notions of the election of Israel, or a beneficial omnipotent providence. This argument echoes the lamentation embedded within *I considered all the acts of oppression*, where the narrator weeps over the injustices perpetrated by the powerful on the weak, and the lack of any retributive justice.

In *Diaspora*, Tillers has taken similar Old Testament language and imagery from McCahon's late practice, and explicitly drawn out and emphasised the political and social overtones that are often submerged in biographical readings. He has applied them to explicitly catastrophic injustices. And, as a result, it re-adjusts the way we look at those late paintings of McCahon's. As Baxandall argues, the movement of one ball through the field of play interacts with and alters the positions of the other balls: both the later and the earlier artist are altered as a result of the action of influence. In McCahon's case, having been presented by Tillers with what amounts to a reading of the late McCahon as embodying a vehicle for political and social anguish to be expressed, it becomes very difficult to go back to looking at those late paintings as purely personal crises of spiritual faith. In particular, it now simply makes even more sense to read *I considered all the acts of oppression* as a public statement, not a private testament.

This manoeuvre, in which Tillers' work *imposes* a reading upon works like *I considered all the acts of oppression*, is one that Harold Bloom would recognise, and describe within his theory of influence as the *misreading* that strong later poets must impose on earlier poets in order to carve out a space to operate. In the same way that Altizer misreads orthodox theology, and in the same

way that (as Leonard argues) McCahon misreads and misunderstands modernity, Tillers is both forced to and able to misread McCahon. However, where Bloom would see this as imposing a continual diminishment of artistic ability, Altizer allows us to think of this as perhaps opening up new possibilities. The precursor artist can be deconstructed, and this can be the starting point for new ways of understanding not only the later artist, but the prior artist. In this case, Tillers' *Diaspora* reflects back on to the McCahon tradition and challenges it to engage beyond simply private feelings of doubt or belief.

Apart from McCahon, the major source of visual material that Tillers has relied upon in the production of *Diaspora* is Central and Eastern European. From this, we can see the beginnings of a critique of periphery/centre embedded within Tillers' work. *Diaspora*, like Hau'ofa's "Sea of Islands", flips the geographic script and begins to create a conversation amongst the spaces categorised as being at the margins. *Diaspora* does not offer any particular immediate solution to the problems of the provincial artist. It is not able to offer those solutions. Instead, it offers a space of dialogue which undercuts the pretensions of the "centre" to dominate and control periphery-periphery contact, and values peripheral voices, like Colin McCahon, on their own terms. As I suggested above, while there are structural homologies between our experiences of distance and our experiences of influence, there are also differences, and these differences are particularly stark in the context of the neoliberal world system.

Is it possible to reconcile the reading of *Diaspora* as an emotionally charged painting engaging with religious material, and a reading of *Diaspora* as a post-modern, post-structuralist, de-constructivist critique of art world systems? I would argue that this dichotomy is simply another form of the false dichotomy I critiqued with regard to *I considered all the acts of oppression*. By engaging radical, deconstructive theology, it is possible to derive insights into the structural capacities of that charge, and to think about the forms of political and poetic theology that are embedded in our lives and historiographies.

## Conclusion

### *Metes and Bounds*

“McCahon is dead: mythmakers, on flimsy evidence divulge hitherto unrecorded sayings and stories, as befits his new role as a “master”, while critical theory often seeks to usurp his lifework with hypothesis overriding the paintings to make itself the object of study.”<sup>226</sup>

This short statement by Gordon Brown, written not long after McCahon’s death, sets out the metes and bounds of McCahon scholarship as Brown saw them. I have not attempted to reveal any novel anecdotes, but by broadly defining a spectrum of practice and objects reaching back to / *considered all the acts of oppression* as post-McCahon, and engaging that spectrum through a series of theoretical structures, and using that spectrum of practices and objects to reflect back upon those structures, perhaps I have trespassed upon the second part of Brown’s prohibition.

There was once a custom, in certain English villages, of walking the bounds of the parish once a year: this was called beating the bounds. The young boys of the parish were brought along, so that the knowledge of the boundaries would be passed on to the youngest possible bearers, who might live the longest. This custom appeals to me as a metaphor for the simultaneous production and transmission of knowledge, for the way that memory is an active process. This thesis is a form of memory, both a production and a transmission of knowledge. It is not a static, passive repository or reflection of some sort of really existing facts: it is an attempt to generate knowledge by doing. Perhaps this attempt to generate knowledge by doing crosses the bounds of Brown’s conception of scholarship, but part of the expansion of academic practice is the crossing of previous bounds.

The beating of the bounds established what *was* the parish, by establishing what was not. Brown establishes what he see as the appropriate bounds of McCahon studies by defining what it is not.

---

<sup>226</sup> Gordon Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist*, x.

In some respects I have done something similar. I have adopted a narrow and often critical focus on McCahon scholarship; I am not interested in researching one specific motif or theme that McCahon dealt with; I have adopted a skeptical, sometimes radically negative, attitude towards orthodox readings of McCahon; I have not talked *just* about McCahon's practice, or McCahon's place in New Zealand society, or McCahon's influence on later artists, or the ways McCahon was influenced, or the historiography of McCahon's religion. And in my adoption of Kester's *The Device Laid Bare* as a kind of precautionary warning to be careful in my use of theoretical material extrinsic to the discipline, I have also set myself bounds and limits.

But this does suggest the ways that I have attempted to *expand* the historiography of McCahon by developing it in the direction of the post-McCahon, and to *deepen* it by bringing novel and sustained theoretical attention to those aspects I have discussed. In this conclusion, I re-traverse the core strategies I have adopted, and in what ways they could be further extended, either methodologically or in scope.

#### *Contributions to the field and possible further developments*

In Chapter One, I advanced a primarily theological approach to *I considered all the acts of oppression*. This theological approach drew upon the work of radical American and New Zealand theologians, and some theologically inclined scholarship on McCahon. But there has been surprisingly little richly informed theological scholarship on McCahon, particularly in the context of radical and post-modern theological approaches, and what scholarship there has been has tended to be from outside the discipline and to have received comparatively little attention within the discipline. By arguing that prior work on McCahon, and particularly on *I considered...*, over-emphasised biographical readings, and drawing attention to the problems with an intentionalist reading of the painting, I opened up space for a reading which proceeded on the evidence of the painting itself, without excessive reliance on the personality of Colin McCahon. In so doing, I have demonstrated the possibility of a sustained and detailed art historical reading of one painting drawing upon a radical theological tradition.

While I focussed on a painting which is arguably “post-McCahon”, a space exists to extend a rich and considered theological approach back into earlier periods of McCahon’s practice. This analysis should, as I demonstrated in Chapter One, be one which moves beyond easy oppositions of religion and post-modernity. There is also an opportunity to develop a theological approach that is not centred in European Christian practice and theory. McCahon’s own painting practice engaged with a range of religious traditions, each one of which offers a vantage point for a consideration of his work. In particular, and drawing upon the atheistic connotations of death of god theology, the way McCahon’s work draws upon non-theist elements in Buddhist practice would be one promising angle. Similarly, McCahon’s relationship to Māori religion would be a deep and rewarding area for exploration, if informed by the wealth of post-colonial theology available. And, while I have argued against a biographical interpretation of McCahon’s painting, it might be possible to critically analyse the religious positions adopted by and around McCahon (within a more accurate historical theology of the mid-twentieth century) and use that critical analysis to engage with McCahon’s painterly practice. There would be a particularly interesting space where it was possible to bring James K Baxter, Lloyd Geering, and Colin McCahon into dialogue.

The work of Michael Stevenson has consistently engaged questions of influence, genealogy, and national identity within the context of cultural and economic provincialism. This is not a highly novel argument. Indeed, to a great extent this avenue of attack has already been advanced by Michael Stevenson and those associated with his practice, particularly David Craig, and therefore large parts of my argument in Chapter Two relies on developing that work into a more explicitly art historical context. However, by drawing out and clarifying the way that Stevenson’s work can be seen to engage the practice of Colin McCahon, I have placed those conversations into a specific place in New Zealand’s art history. I have also made explicit the implicit comparison between cultural and economic provincialism embedded in the work on Stevenson by authors like Craig and Rex Butler, and supplied a more sophisticated theoretical apparatus, drawing on the work of Harold Bloom and Michael Baxandall, with which to think through this comparison.

It would be possible to continue this interdisciplinary approach to embed McCahon's practice within a spectrum of New Zealand artists who engage with problems of distance, influence, and modernity. In this thesis, I have concentrated on the post-McCahon era, but there is no reason that this approach could not be extended back into the pre-McCahon. Certainly, James Belich's arguments about the Pākehā ethnogenesis and the "great tightening" in the 1890-1930 period suggest profitable opportunities for contextually informed art histories of that period. This could usefully build upon works on New Zealand's twentieth-century art history, like Francis Pound's description of New Zealand nationalism, but engage those descriptions within a broader economic and geographic context. Moretti's insight into the development of the novel in Europe, which draws upon the work of Braudel and Wallerstein as a theoretical context, and makes use of quantitative data, is both a model which could prove fruitful, and a useful analysis in its own right. Can quantitative tools drawn from sociological analysis, like that used by Moretti, offer insight into problems of provincialism, influence, and distance in the New Zealand context? In doing so, as Kester argues, it would be important that this work remains solid both as art history and within the framework of the "host" discipline. This problem of inter- or trans-disciplinarity poses challenges, but also, as I hope I have shown in my discussion of Michael Stevenson and David Craig, opens up broader conversations.

Finally, in Chapter Three I advanced an explicitly theological and deconstructivist analysis of the work of Imants Tillers, particularly *Diaspora*. Wystan Curnow's book, *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'* was used to read through into the practice of Tillers, and I discussed Curnow's methods and suggested certain aspects that were problematic in light of Kester's discussion of the "sub-contractor" model of art writing. Knitting together the strands of theory, historiography, and artistic practice, this chapter returned to material introduced earlier in the thesis, and suggested a way of thinking across a collection of theoretical structures which were then used put forward a novel reading of Imants Tillers' painting *Diaspora*, and to contextualise that reading against the way those theoretical structures allow us to further think through *I considered all the acts of oppression*.

I continued to advance the argument that an approach which centred both the theological and the deconstructive was both novel and valuable, particularly in returning *I considered all the acts of oppression*. However, owing to the limits of space, it was not possible to engage Tillers' practice beyond a few key works and one particular art writer.

Throughout this thesis, I have been interested in the ways we can make use of the notion of the post-McCahon to think about the work of later artists who follow on thematically from McCahon, the historiography of McCahon, and certain objects with a more direct link to McCahon. This chapter opens up a range of further possibilities for ongoing work: exploring the notion of the post-McCahon more broadly across a larger span of time and place; extending the specific theoretical concerns of this final chapter to a wider range of objects and practices; and modelling a certain kind of deconstructive approach which draws upon a negative, revisionist attitude in order to open out new spaces for critical thought.

## Bibliography

Alderton, Zoe. *The Spirit of Colin McCahon*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2015.

Altizer, Thomas J. J. and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. London: Penguin, 1968.

Altizer, Thomas J. J. *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966.

Auckland Art Gallery, "Advanced Collection Search", accessed at <http://www.aucklandartgallery.com/explore-art-and-ideas/advanced-collection-search>, 2/3/16.

Bakken, Gordon Morris and Brenda Farrington (eds), *The Gendered West: The American West*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Barnard, Alan and Jonathan Spencer (eds) *Encyclopaedia of Cultural and Social Anthropology*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author", in *Image - Music - Text*. Fontana: London, 1977.

Barton, Christina. *After McCahon: Some Configurations in Recent Art*. Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1989.

Barr, Mary, ed., *La Distancia Mira Hacia Nosotros: 10 Artistas de Nueva Zealandia / Distance Looks Our Way: 10 Artist From New Zealand*. Whanganui: Sargent Gallery, 1992.

Baxandall, Michael. *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986.

Belich, James. *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Belich, James *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the year 2000*. Auckland: Allen Lane, 2001.

Belich, James. "Response: A Cultural History of Economics?", *Victorian Studies*, 53, no 1, (Autumn 2010) 116-121.

Blainey Geoffrey. *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History*. Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966.

Bloem, Marja and Martin Browne, *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2002.

Bloom, Harold. *A Map of Misreading*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Bloom, Harold. *Agon*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Bloom, Harold, Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction and Criticism*. New York: Continuum, 1979.

Burch, Robert. "Charles Sanders Peirce", Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), accessed from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/peirce>.

Butler, Rex. *Colin McCahon in Australia*. Wellington: School of Art History, Victoria University of Wellington: 2010.

Butler, Rex (ed), *What is Appropriation: An Anthology of Critical Writing on Australian Art in the '80s and '90s*. Brisbane: IM & Power Publications, 1996.

Butler, Rex. *A Secret History of Australian Art*. Sydney: Craftsman House, 2002.

Braudel, Ferdinand. *Civilisation and Capitalism, 15th–18th Centuries*, vol. 1, *The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible*, trans Sian Reynolds, London: Collins, 1981, vol. 2, *The Wheels of Commerce*, trans Sian Reynolds. London: Collins, 1982 and vol. 3, *The Perspective of the World*, trans. Sian Reynolds, London: Collins, 1984.

Braudel, Ferdinand *The Identity of France*, trans. Sian Reynolds, 2 vols, (London: Collins: 1988-90).

Braudel, Ferdinand. *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, trans. Sian Reynolds, 2 vols. London: Collins, 1972-73.

Brown, Gordon. *Colin McCahon: Artist / New Edition*. Auckland: Reed, 1993.

Brown, Gordon. *Elements of Modernism in Colin McCahon's Early Work*. Wellington: School of Art History, Victoria University of Wellington, 2004.

Butler, Rex. "Victory over Death: The Gospel according to Colin McCahon", Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2012. Accessed on the 20th of April, 2016 from <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/07/25/3553295.htm>.

Cambridge University Press, "New English Bible", accessed 20th of April, 2016 at "<http://www.cambridge.org/bibles/bible-versions/new-english-bible/>".

Carroll, Linda. "Power, Corruption & Lies — Various artists", 1997 <http://www.artdes.monash.edu.au/non-cms/globe/issue7/pcltxt.html>

Cholmondely, Thomas. *Ultima Thule; or, Thoughts Suggested by a Residence in New Zealand*.  
London: John Chapman, 1854.

*Colin McCahon: The Last Painting*. Auckland: Peter Webb Galleries, 1993.

Craig, David. *Familiar Medicine: Everyday Health Knowledge and Practice in Today's Vietnam*  
(Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002).

Curnow, Allen. *Not in Narrow Seas: Poems with Prose*. Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1939.

Curnow, Wystan. *I Will Need Words: Colin McCahon's Word and Number Paintings*. Wellington:  
National Art Gallery, 1984. unpaginated.

Curnow, Wystan. *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'*. Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998.

Derrida, Jacques. *On The Name*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.

Elkins, James. "The Terms Western and Non-Western", at <http://www.jameselkins.com/index.php/experimental-writing/255-the-terms-western-and-nonwestern>, accessed 23/4/2015.

Ewington, Julie. "Past The Post: Postmodernism and Postfeminism" in *Antic One*, eds. Susan Davies, Priscilla Pitts and Elizabeth Eastmond.

Fairburn, A. R. D., "Art in Canterbury. Some Notes on the Group Show (1947)", *Landfall* 2/1 (March 1948) 46-50,

Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans. Edinburgh and London: Ballantyne and Hanson, 1881.

Geering, Lloyd. *Geering and God 1965-71: The Heresy Trial that Divided New Zealand*, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2014.

Gifkins, Michael (ed.), *Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys*. Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1988.

Gregor Smith, Ronald. *The Doctrine of God*. London: Collins, 1970.

Grimshaw, Michael. "Believing in Colin: 'A Question of Faith' from 'Celestial Lavatory Graffiti' to 'Derridean Religious Addict'." *Pacifica* 18 vol 2 (2005)175-197.

Hau'ofa, Epeli. "Our Sea of Islands", *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6, no. 1, (Spring 1994), 147–161.

Holcroft, M H. *The Deepening Stream: Cultural Influences in New Zealand*. Christchurch: Caxton, 1940.

"I considered all the acts of oppression", Colin McCahon Trust online catalogue, accessed 20th of April, 2016, <http://www.mccahon.co.nz/cm000169>

Ice, Jackson Lee and John J Carey (ed.), *The Death of God Debate*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966.

Kantorowicz, Ernst. *The King's Two Bodies: A Study In Medieval Political Theology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

Keller, Catherine. *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

Kester, Grant. "The Device Laid Bare: On Some Limitations in Current Art Criticism", in *e-flux* 50, at [http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-device-laid-bare-on-some-limitations-in-current-art-criticism/#\\_ftn4](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-device-laid-bare-on-some-limitations-in-current-art-criticism/#_ftn4)

Khan, David. "Figuring Desire: Psychoanalytic perspectives on the discourse surrounding Colin McCahon and Ralph Hotere". PhD thesis, University of Canterbury, 2015.

Laird, Tessa interviewing Michael Stevenson, in Gwyneth Porter (ed), *LOG* 11. Christchurch: Physics Room, 2000. 14-16.

Leonard, Robert and Bernice Murphy with John McCormack, Cheryl Southern and Cliff Whiting, *Headlands: Thinking Through New Zealand Art*. Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992.

Leonard, Robert. "Michael Stevenson and Steven Brower: Genealogy" (review) at <http://robertleonard.org/michael-stevenson-and-stein-brower-genealogy/>, accessed 25/4/2015.

Leonard, Robert and Christina Barton, with Thomasin Sleigh (eds) *The Critic's Part: Wystan Curnow Art Writing 1971-2013*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2014.

Marx, Karl and Friederich Engels. *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*.  
Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976.

McKenzie, Stuart. "Celestial Lavatories", *Antic* 6 (November 1989) 35-47.

Mascall, E. L., "The Doctrine of God", *Religious Studies* 7 no. 1, March 1973. 72-73.

Moretti, Franco. "Narrative Markets, ca. 1850", *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 20, No. 2  
(Spring, 1997), 51-174,.

Nietzsche, Friedrich, ed. Oscar Levy trans. Thomas Common. *The Complete Works of Friedrich  
Nietzsche: The Joyful Wisdom* vol. 10. New York: MacMillan, 1924.

Orr, Mary. *Intertextuality: debates and contexts*. Cambridge, Polity, 2003.

Pound, Francis. *The Invention of New Zealand: Art and National Identity 1930-1970*. Auckland:  
Auckland University Press, 2009.

Rubenstein, Richard. *After Auschwitz*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992.

Sleigh, Thomasin. "Neither Here Nor There: The Writing of Wystan Curnow 1961-1984". MA thesis,  
Victoria University of Wellington, 2010.

Smith, Terry. 'The Provincialism Problem', *Artforum*, vol. 12, no. 1 (September 1974), 54–9.

Snowball, Arryn . "Delineating Nihilism: Colin McCahon's last paintings". Doctoral thesis, Griffiths  
University, 2011.

Stevenson, Michael and Steven Brower. *Genealogy*. New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster, 2000.

Stevenson, Michael. *This is the Trekkia*. Wellington: Creative New Zealand, 2003.

Stevenson, Michael. *Art of the Eighties and Seventies*. Frankfurt am Main: Revolver — Archiv für Aktuelle Kunst, 2006.

Wallerstein, Immanuel. *World Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, trans G E M Anscombe, P M S Hacker, Joachim Schulte. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, eds G H von Wright, R Rhees, and G E M Anscombe, *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1967.

## Figures

Figure One: Colin McCahon *I considered all the acts of oppression*, c. 1981 - 1983, synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas, 1964 x 1810 mm.

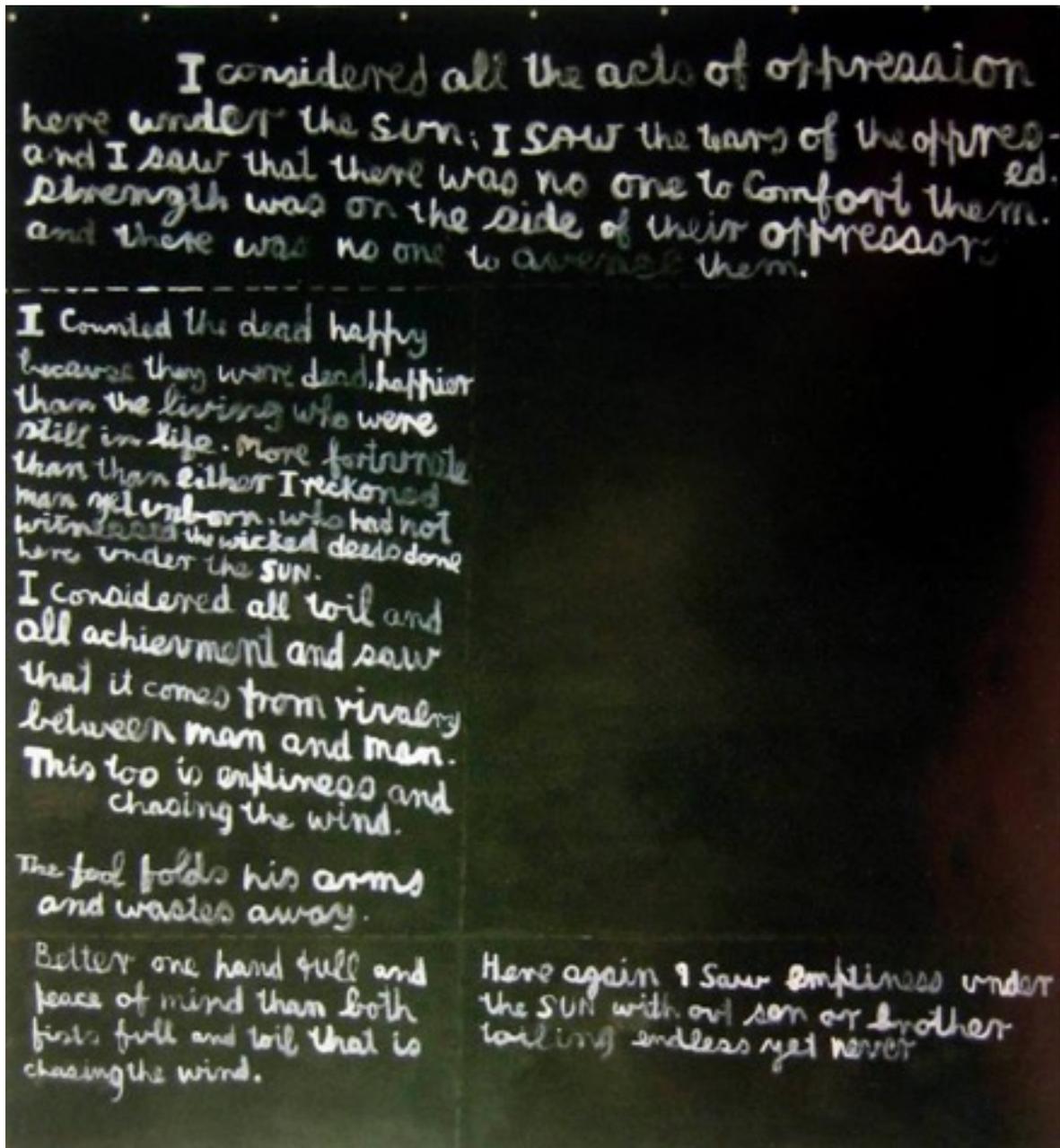


Figure Two: Michael Stevenson, *This Is The Trekkie*, installation shot.



Figure Three: Imants Tillers, *Diaspora*, 1992, oil stick, gouache, synthetic polymer paint on 228 canvas boards,, nos. 3400-38183, 3048 x 9144 mm. As depicted in *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of Power'*, no. 5000.

