

The Interior Landscape: Metaphors for Faith and Belief in the Religious Paintings of Colin McCahon

Introduction

For artist Colin McCahon, the dynamic interplay of light and form he witnessed in the New Zealand landscape provided inspiration for the development of a pictorial language the artist has used to communicate the dynamics of his own Christian experience. Through an abstract visual vocabulary of shape, tone, and line which he largely distilled from the natural environment, and painted words and passages taken from the Bible, McCahon presents the viewer with paintings which chronicle his experiences of Christian faith and belief. What is fascinating about his work is that it seems to project such profound content through such minimal means. Virtually relying upon a black and white palette, McCahon is able to communicate with a profound delicacy potent biblical themes that Christians grapple with in life. Avoiding the trappings of the sensuous and the outwardly beautiful, McCahon's paintings manifest an austere aesthetic of colour and form, and a sobriety of content, giving them what could be described as an 'interior' beauty of 'means'. Such treatment reinforces the perception that the works are 'stripped' bare of anything superfluous, and are indebted to a genuine transparency on the part of the artist. This paper will investigate how McCahon's attachment to the New Zealand landscape helped him to articulate a personal 'voice' in his religious works of the 1970s, which at first appear to be primarily indebted to the Bible.

Colin McCahon was a Christian artist who over his career was committed to a visual discourse with his audience which chronicled his own life and relationship with God. McCahon's son William recounts that Colin's life work reflects a "committed Christian perspective and his entire oeuvre is the narrative of his life of spirituality and emotional discovery."¹ In an effort to articulate this spiritual dimension through the medium of painting, McCahon needed to devise a visual vocabulary which would in his words "throw people

¹ William McCahon "A Letter Home" in Marja Bloem and Martin Browne, *Colin McCahon, A Question of Faith*, (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum/Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2002) The Amsterdam Exhibition ran from 30 August to 10 November 2002, moving to New Zealand and Australia from 2002 to 2004. p. 29

into an involvement with the raw land, and also the raw painting.”² To do this would require the distillation of select landscape features into expressive painterly metaphors, and this began with the New Zealand mountains.

Takaka: Night and Day 1948

For McCahon, the phenomena of light and shade which he observed in Takaka landscape provide a significant impetus for *Takaka: Night and Day* 1948. The painting consists of a network of undulating mountain forms which appear to extend toward the horizon in rhythmic alternation. This illusion is made possible by the artist’s use of linear and aerial perspective. While linear perspective is responsible for the illusion of depth in the painting, made possible with the progressive reduction in scale given to landscape features, aerial perspective is used to model palpable mountain forms in tonal contrasts of dark and light through the convention of *chiaroscuro*. In a semi-naturalistic use of colour, sunlit ochre/green mountain forms slowly become cast in richer shadows of darker browns and mauves, representing those parts of the landscape out of reach of the sun’s illuminating rays.

A calmness, if not a greatness, seems to pervade this spectacular mountain vista, emanating an atmosphere McCahon himself described as one full of, “splendour, order and peace.”³ McCahon’s fondness for the New Zealand landscape bears similarity to the Romantic sentiments of 18th century writer Joseph Addison, who in his 1705 publication, *In Several Parts of Italy*, attests that huge Heaps of Mountains, high Rocks and Precipices he witnessed, “...imbued the observer with...a delightful Stillness and Amazement in (their) Soul at the Apprehension of them.”⁴ In 1756 Edmund Burke would refer to such experiences as ‘Sublime’ on the basis that they represented, “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”⁵ However moving and Sublime the natural environment may have been for McCahon, there were other forces at play in the artist’s mind which would see the landscape gradually reduced to its primary expressive elements.

Anyone familiar with the Takaka region of New Zealand will notice that *Takaka: Night and Day* 1948 is more general than it is specific. Devoid of

² Colin McCahon, *Colin McCahon: A Survey Exhibition*, R.N.O’Reilly introduction. Auckland: The Auckland City Art Gallery, March/April, 1972, p. 30

³ Colin McCahon, ‘Beginnings’, *Landfall* 80, Christchurch, NZ: Caxton Press, vol. 20, no. 4, vol. 20, no. 4, December 1966, p. 364

⁴ Joseph Addison, *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy, etc*, London, 1705, p.2.

⁵ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the origin of our ideas of The Sublime and beautiful with an introductory discourse concerning Taste, and several other additions*. 1756, Part 1, 7

vegetation, celebrating as it were the geological armature of the land rather than specific details, the painting has been summarised by Rudi Fuchs as consisting of “clear shapes and forms stripped of extraneous detail, not always recognisable as a specific place, but recalling an abstracted general view of certain areas in New Zealand”⁶ Here McCahon was beginning his process of stripping from the land superficial particulars, in favour of generic mountain forms of tonal clarity. In a letter to McCahon in 1948, R. N. O’Reilly similarly expressed that the feeling imbued in such landscapes was one of “familiarity and generality,” though he added that this was a legitimate action on the grounds that he believed McCahon needed to “...use some things to furnish (his) new world.”⁷

North Otago Landscape 1951

In North Otago Landscape 1951, McCahon’s ‘new world’ was starting to get rather flat and geometric, and less indebted to the chiaroscuro which so convincingly modelled the mountain forms in Takaka: Night and Day 1948. Tonal modelling is discarded in favour of a painterly improvisation which echoes the Cubist’s preoccupation with flatness, and abstract invention over naturalism. Tonal contrasts in North Otago Landscape 1951 are not used for the purpose of achieving aerial perspective through tonal rendering on a two dimensional shape, but rather as inscribed skeletal divisions separating one shape from another, be they sections of the mountain face, or the mountain itself from its adjoining sky. This anatomical portrayal of the landscape was partly informed by Charles Andrew Cotton’s book *The Geomorphology of New Zealand*, which McCahon had read and enjoyed. The book has a number of detailed linear diagrams illustrating New Zealand landforms, stripped of all vegetation with a scientific clarity, revealing as it were the geological ‘truth’ of the landscape. Cotton’s diagrammatic brevity resonated with McCahon, who similarly wished to expose a profound ‘truth’ of his own through landscape subject matter.

For McCahon, painting was an endeavour which he took very seriously, and approached with religious zeal. Toward the end of 1943, McCahon was impressed with the writings of Eric Gill on Christianity and the arts. Gill championed the idea that Christian art should be more concerned with ‘truth’

⁶ Colin McCahon, ‘Beginnings’, *Landfall* 80, Christchurch, NZ: Caxton Press, vol. 20, no. 4, vol. 20, no. 4, December 1966, p. 364, in Rudi Fuchs, “Colin McCahon: A Note” in Bloem and Browne, *Colin McCahon; A Question of Faith*, p.20

⁷ R.N. O’Reilly in a letter to McCahon, 26 May 1948, Brown, Gordon H., *Colin McCahon: Artist*, Wellington, NZ: A. H. & Reed, 1984; revised edition, Auckland, NZ: Reed Books, 1993 in Marja Bloem and Martin Brown, *Chronology, Colin McCahon; A Question of Faith*, p. 172

and dedication than with originality and the “exploitation of personality.”⁸ *North Otago Landscape* 1951 has a certain ‘truth’ of its own, depicting a landscape with skeletal brevity, a limited palette and an aesthetic inclination to embrace only those particulars that are essential to the artist. Such particulars can be seen in the linear divisions in the work which attest to the artist’s concern for a sensitivity of inscription. Linear division in the work can be seen to be fluctuating in ‘weight,’ displaying rather complex variations of width, which have an expressive power. The horizon line is a good example of this, with its delicate rise and fall, swelling and shrinking in weight as it expressively transcribes across the upper section of the canvass. Other important particulars for McCahon are the skewed parcels of land themselves, which have been rendered with delicate tonal nuances, highlighting a sense of undulation and changes in painterly temperament.

Northland 1962

Northland 1962, takes a further step toward flatness resulting in a painting which at first appears on the precipice of total abstraction with its stark contrasts of flat shapes. If it was not for the horizontal ochre line which sits at the base of the large dark quadrant shape in the right hand side of the painting, it would be difficult to conceive a landscape at all. This line effectively separates the quadrant shape from the underlying dark rectangular rectangle, signifying a relationship between mountain and plain. *Northland* 1962 displays a preoccupation with simple geometries, as McCahon has almost reduced the landscape with schematic concision to the level of a diagram, where mountains are represented by quarter circles, and the landscape plain to a rectangle. This interplay of curved shapes, alongside rectilinear shapes, or as McCahon would often say when describing his work, “straight lines contrasted with curved ones”, would stand as an axiom which would underpin much of his compositional structure in later works.⁹

Two additional domed shapes also can be seen in *Northland* 1962. One of these is painted in a subtle grey and is positioned in the lower left foreground, while the other is an ochre/orange and is positioned in the top of the frame. The dramatic tonal difference between all three domed shapes appears to indicate the degree to which they are illuminated by the sun. The large lighter tone dome at the top of the painting appears to reside behind the central dark dome, creating a strong tonal contrast, and a degree of visual tension. One cannot help but feel in looking at the work that something more dramatic than light and shadow is being staged in this enigmatic and mysterious landscape which omits so much detail. Here perhaps is an example of what Clive Bell would call

⁸ Gordon H. Brown, *Towards a Promised Land; on the life and art of Colin McCahon*, 2010, Auckland University Press, p. 30

⁹ Gordon H Brown, *Towards a Promised Land; on the life and art of Colin McCahon*, 2010, Auckland University Press, p. 34

Significant shape. Significant shape was an expression coined by Bell to describe the way that abstract elements could be seen to “...stir our aesthetic emotions.” through their “significant form.”¹⁰ For Bell, what makes such form significant is that it transmits to the viewer, the emotional sentiment felt by the artist.¹¹ We are told by William McCahon that the emotional sentiment experienced by Colin in the Northland paintings was that of an artist wishing to paint God. According to William, the metaphor of the quarter circle, which appears on three occasions in Northland 1962, was a means the artist used to represent God. William writes, “The basis of this metaphor is drawn from Exodus 33:22 in which God, having agreed to show himself to Moses, said he would show him not the whole of his body or his face but his ‘less bright’ or ‘back parts’.”¹² The arc as used by McCahon is a quarter segment of a circle, and represented by analogy, the part of Himself, God reveals to mankind. ¹³ Without this ‘inside’ knowledge, one may be forgiven in not ‘getting’ the message McCahon intended for the viewer. However, with, and without this explanation, a strong abstract presence exists in these shapes, which communicate something of substance to us by their very compositional arrangement, and tonal treatment.

McCahon’s paintings were for much of his life misunderstood by an audience largely clinging to a Nineteenth century artistic mindset. Expressing his frustration with this predicament, McCahon once remarked, “No one seems to know what I’m about, it amazes me, no one seems to know that I’m painting Christ.”¹⁴ To overcome this dilemma, McCahon came to the realisation that he “would need words,” to assist in conveying meaning to an audience less receptive than himself to the virtues of a Modernist Vocabulary. Yet even when McCahon does return to the use of words in his paintings, it is with the sensitivity of a landscape painter; someone who understands how the elements of light and form, tone and shape can shift in their expressive temperaments.

¹⁰ Clive Bell quoted in “Diane Collinson, “*Aesthetic Experience*” in Oswald Hanfling, eds. *Philosophical Aesthetics; An Introduction*, The Open University, 1992, Oxford. p. 145

¹¹ Clive Bell quoted in “Diane Collinson, “*Aesthetic Experience*” in Oswald Hanfling, eds. *Philosophical Aesthetics; An Introduction*, The Open University, 1992, Oxford. p. 146

¹² William McCahon “*A Letter Home*” in Marja Bloem and Martin Browne, *Colin McCahon, A Question of Faith*, (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum/Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2002) The Amsterdam Exhibition ran from 30 August to 10 November 2002, moving to New Zealand and Australia from 2002 to 2004. p. 32

¹³ Marja Bloem and Martin Brown “*Chronology*” in *Colin McCahon; A Question of Faith*, p. 199

¹⁴ *Colin McCahon, A Question of Faith*, p. 50

Waterfalls

In addition to his interest in landforms with their varying light and shade, McCahon also discovered the power of the New Zealand waterfall. McCahon produced a series of paintings called the Waterfall paintings, one of which is Waterfall 1964, which display a bright white stream of cascading water ‘falling’ through a black background. McCahon saw the waterfall as a powerful symbol of Christ’s generosity to humanity, and saw in the natural phenomena “a sacrament of light issuing from the land recalling the blood shed by Christ in his Passion; Christ becoming the earth.”¹⁵ McCahon’s white strokes of paint such as we find in Waterfall 1964, have been described by Gordon Brown as a form of “symbolic shorthand,”¹⁶ which extended the landscape motif into a symbol of spiritual truth. For McCahon, a good painting should have a generosity and integrity about it, passing something truthful onto the viewer. Aware of the needs of an audience, McCahon once remarked, “People go to paintings to find truth. There is always a big dose of truths in good painting.”¹⁷ Perhaps a painting by McCahon which can be seen to display one such ‘big dose of truths,’ is Victory Over Death 2 1970, which impregnates written texts with the expressive interplay of shape, line and tone, attending earlier discussed landscape motifs. It is through such means that McCahon is able to articulate a personal ‘voice’ to accompany the ‘silent’ motif of Biblical inscription.

Victory Over Death 2

In Victory Over Death 2 1970, McCahon creates a painterly fusion of landscape motifs, with written text, combining the expressive power of non-discursive elements such as tone, and shape, with the discursive element of text. The painting approximates a letter, to be read by the viewer both literally, and metaphorically. A literal reading reveals a series of quotations taken from the New Testament on the subject of Christ hanging on the cross at Calvary. One such quote is stationed on the lower left of the large white I. It reads, “The light is among you still, but not for long. Go on your way while you have the light so that darkness may not overtake you.” Similarly, on the RHS of the letter I is painted, “the light is among you... While you have the light, trust to the light, that you may become men of light.” The words ‘light’ and ‘dark’ appear extensively in the Bible as metaphors for God, and Satan respectively. McCahon takes the metaphors a step further though when he appoints

¹⁵ William McCahon “A Letter Home” in Marja Bloem and Martin Browne, *Colin McCahon, A Question of Faith*, p. 32

¹⁶ Marja Bloem and Martin Brown, “Chronology” in Marja Bloem and Martin Browne, *Colin McCahon, A Question of Faith*, P. 202

¹⁷ Agnes Wood, *Colin McCahon; The Man and the Teacher*, 1997, David Ling Publishing Limited, Auckland, p. 121

significance also to variations of tonal rendering attending the painted letterforms in *Victory Over Death 2*.

Two capitalised groups of letters can be seen to exist on either side of the painting. On the left hand side, the word AM, appears very subtly, evading a casual glance due to the fact that it is painted in black against a black ground. Barely visible, this word can be understood by considering its accompanying passages from the Gospel of John chapter 12, where Christ predicts his death, and expresses to his audience, the solemnity of the task ahead of him. Black colourings in paintings have a long history of association with subject matter which is solemn, gloomy, or negative.¹⁸ McCahon's shadowy AM could be seen to depict the supernatural shadow of death itself. John in chapter 12, recounts Christ's words, "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour."¹⁹ McCahon once told his students that "all great art has death as its subject."²⁰ In what could be understood as a painterly austerity, McCahon's barely visible word signifies more than it rightfully should. The virtual illegibility of the word beckons the viewer to look again, to pull focus in the obscurity, and explore this stubborn ghost of a word, wondering what it means, and why it is there.

By contrast, the 'loud' declaration I AM, is Christ's announcement of victory over sin and death. This statement stands as a proclamation of eternal power, and conquest over the powers of darkness. The picturesque capitalisation of these words, extending from the base to the top of the painting, echoes earlier mountainous forms in such works as *Takaka: Night and Day* 1948, and *Northland* 1962. When reading this statement, it becomes apparent that there is a noticeable authority attending the letter I, which seems to surpass its purely literary significance. This authority may be seen to result from a combination of the letters shape, placement, and tone. The shape of the letter is wider than any other appearing in the painting, increasing its perceived stability. It appears centrally in the painting, achieving a high compositional status, and the vivid white rendering on the letter also illuminates the paintings black ground like a shaft of "falling light"²¹, separating the darkened AM, on the left, from the more visible lighter toned Am on the RHS of the painting.

¹⁸ E. H. Gombrich, *Art & Illusion: A study in the psychology of pictorial representation*, 1960, Phaidon Press Limited, Oxford, p. 316

¹⁹ John 12: 27, *Zondervan NIV Study Bible*. Fully rev. ed. Kenneth L. Barker, gen. ed, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002

²⁰ Agnes Wood, *Colin McCahon; The Man and the Teacher*, 1997, David Ling Publishing Limited, Auckland, p. 46

²¹ From a statement by Colin McCahon statement printed on the invitation to his exhibition at the Barry Lett Galleries, 1 November 1971, in Gordon H Brown, *Towards a Promised Land: On the Life and Art of Colin McCahon*, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 2010, p. 12

In addition to this formal reading, the central I can be interpreted as having a spiritual significance on a number of levels. Firstly, it is the spoken noun I, of Christ's divine declaration I AM, which he made before the high priest recorded in the Gospel of Mark 14: 62. Secondly, it bears a remarkable similarity the white vertical line of falling water, and by extension, the "sacrament of light", in *Waterfall* 1964, which McCahon saw as "a powerful symbol of Christ's generosity to humanity." Thirdly, the verticality and colour of the letter, also bears similarity to the representation of Christ's body on the cross, featuring in *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross* 1966. In this work, fourteen panels depict the journey of Christ from his condemnation, through to the laying of his body in the tomb. Each panel articulates a period of Christ's suffering in the Calvary drama, via the repositioning and treatment of a variety of dark and light shapes, and accompanying white lines. The white lines themselves are waterfall motifs which depict Christ, set in a landscape surround. The only panels which display single white lines in a vertical orientation are numbers 11 and 12, which according to Catholic Liturgy, represent Christ's body nailed to the cross. In addition to this, the white lines in panels 11 and 12 virtually bisect each panel symmetrically in much the same way the central white I of *Victory Over Death 2* divides the darkened AM, from the lighter toned AM.

Surrounding these capitalised letters, are numerous smaller Bible passages expressively written in white paint. The variations of tonal strength manifest in these passages encourage the viewer to imagine the words are charged with vocal expression. This is due to the tonal scale, and linear 'weight' attending the words, most likely resulting from the variation in pressure McCahon applied to his brush as he wrote. One such example can be seen in the lower statement on the on the left of the central I. It reads, "The light is among you still, but..." The word 'light', and the preceding letters 'st' of the word 'still' are noticeably whiter than the other words in this partial quotation. By virtue of analogy, McCahon's various tonal treatments of these words appoint to them a degree of audible expression. As the words, and parts thereof, vary in tone, so too can we imagine shifts in their spoken emphasis analogously varying in volume and intensity. The fluctuating 'weights' of linear inscriptions attending *North Otago Landscape* 1951, with their tonal undulations and variations of painterly temperament, now reappear in *Victory Over Death 2*, as visual anomalies in typographical consistency. At another level, these changes can signal for the viewer by analogy the alternating emotions of victory, and foreboding Christ experienced in his own spirit as he spoke these words to his disciples.

However, we must remember that McCahon once remarked that all of his work is autobiographical, “telling us where (he) (is) at any given time”, 22 and so perhaps these alternations of tone reveal the artist’s and by extension, also the viewer’s struggle of faith in times of shadowy doubt. The passage, ““This voice spoke for your sake, not mine,”” appears in the centre of the painting, validating the providence of God to the struggling believer. The late Leonard Griffith appeals to such a faith which itself wrestles honestly with doubt rather than silences it. He writes, “ Faith is an undulating journey that traverses not only the mountain-tops and level plains but also deep valleys from which the certainty of God seems to have vanished. The weather of the mind and spirit varies, ranging from sunlight through dense fog to pitch darkness, and there are times we stumble through that darkness unsure that anyone or anything is there.”23

Making ones way optically from the darkness of the left side of the painting to the brighter right hand side, one can see something of Griffith’s mountain-tops. The capitalised A, and its adjoining M, have a mountain sensibility about them given their pinnacle like configuration. The enclosed upper triangular space of the letter M could similarly be viewed as a region of sky between two mountain peaks, reinforced by the white smudging in the its upper LHS which takes on the appearance of mist or cloud, both of which one could expect to find in the mountainous regions of the New Zealand landscape. This small triangle of space has an ethereal, if not even a spiritual quality about it, recalling the cloud paintings of Carl Gustav Carus, who viewed the sky as “an image of the infinite.” 24 McCahon may be giving us his own view of the infinite here; an infinite which remains as large as the viewer is willing to immerse themselves in an experience of “the raw land, and also the raw painting.”25

Summary

As it has been shown, the paintings of Colin McCahon attest to the artist’s passion for the New Zealand landscape, with its mountainous geography cast in light and shadow, and his commitment to the development of an iconography which he would use to ‘voice’ his own ‘interior landscape’ of Christian faith and belief. Through an increasingly abstract reworking of landscape elements,

²² William McCahon, New Zealand Herald. 30th August 2002: Section A12, p. 13 in Jan White, *Antipodean Translations: Colin McCahon and His Topoi(1) of Belief*, Columbia: Jun 2006. Vol. 20, Iss. 1; pgs. 4, 7

²³ Leonard Griffith, *Barriers to Christian Belief*, 1962, London, Hodder and Stoughton, P. 22

²⁴ Lyn Gamwell, *Exploring the Invisible: Art Science, and the Spiritual*, Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 2002, p. 4

²⁵ Colin McCahon, *Colin McCahon: A Survey Exhibition*, R.N.O’Reilly introduction. Auckland: The Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972, p. 30

and an embrace of written scripture, McCahon was able to develop an expressive metaphoric language of visual motifs, which he used with artistic economy, in the words of R. N. O'Reilly, to "furnish [his] new world."

This paper has variously focused on the motifs of light, mountain forms, the waterfall, and letterforms, as employed by the artist in such works as *Takaka: Night and Day* 1958, *North Otago Landscape* 1951, *Northland* 1962, *Waterfall* 1964, and *Victory Over Death 2* 1970, with increasing metaphoric measure. In these works, McCahon displays an emerging aesthetic of austerity and brevity while still maintaining a sensitivity to the expressive potential of shape, tone and line. In *Victory Over Death 2* 1970, McCahon's variously inscribed Biblical texts appear to be 'clad' with the atmosphere of the New Zealand landscape. Letterforms are rendered with expressive visual treatments of shape, weight, and tonal variation, akin to the interplay of light on the landscape armature.

On the other hand, McCahon can be seen to have replaced the delicately hued plain of *Takaka: Night and Day* 1948, with the formalism of a black 'field', in *Victory Over Death 2*, yet perhaps this is the appropriate choice of surfaces for a painter who would use words. Naturalistic colour becomes less important to McCahon than does the symbolic values of dark and light, to which he assign the colours black and white and their varying tonal increments. Gordon Brown put it well when describing McCahon's economy of means, remarking, "A painting will rely on a few, usually highly simplified, elements to carry the artist's message."²⁶ McCahon's messages are in the paintings themselves, and it remains the privilege of us as viewers to continue to investigate their painterly armatures as we reflect upon our own 'interior' landscapes.

²⁶ Gordon H Brown, *Towards a Promised Land; on the life and art of Colin McCahon*, 2010, Auckland University Press, p. 14

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