Painted Poetry and Cross-Medium Collaboration in 20th Century Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

This thesis shows that painted poetry collaborations, or cross-medium collaborations, were a defining part of New Zealand’s literary and artistic histories during the 1950s–1970s. As a product of the deep-rooted sense of isolation felt by individuals living in New Zealand, cross-medium collaboration both forged a sense of connection with fellow creatives and provided a flexible tool for negotiating the often paradoxical demands placed on artists and writers during this time. As the pressures of nationalism and modernism shifted and developed during the 60s and 70s, cross-medium collaboration similarly adapted to address the new challenges facing poets and painters.

In Chapter One, I discuss the collaboration *The Wake*, by Colin McCahon and John Caselberg. I use this work as a case study through which to explore the conflicting nationalist and internationalist pressures placed on New Zealand artists and writers in the 1950s. Building on the centre-periphery model of Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, and Eric Hayot, I discuss the ways in which cross-medium collaboration offered a flexible tool for peripheral creatives. In *The Wake*, painted poetry is key in creating ambiguity through apostrophe, thus answering multiple calls for art and literature at once.

Chapter Two is concerned with the progression of pressures placed on New Zealand artists and writers into the 1970s. I use *Malady* and the *Malady* series by Bill Manhire and Ralph Hotere as an example of the developments in cross-medium collaboration. These works demonstrate a distinct break away from the limiting models of centre-periphery modernism in the 1950s, with Concrete Poetry utilised as a key strategy to achieve internationalism in more of a network model of influence.

In Chapter Three, I discuss *Te Tangi o te Pipiwharara* (*The Song of the Shining Cuckoo; a Poem by Tangirau Hotere*), a painting which clearly demonstrates the development of McCahon and Hotere’s earlier ideas of simultaneous nationalism and internationalism. In this chapter I propose *Te Tangi* as a work signaling the onset of bicultural New Zealand through its parallel
cultural narratives and use of te reo Māori. This final work demonstrates the possibilities of cross-medium collaboration to negotiate cross-cultural concerns.
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**Introduction**

The frequent collaboration between New Zealand artists and writers in the 1950s–1970s resulted in the production of artworks that pushed at the boundaries of textuality and visuality. Painted poetry, a type of what I term cross-medium collaboration, is a prominent feature of the work of significant artists such as Colin McCahon and Ralph Hotere. It is clear that the progression and identity of New Zealand art has been strongly shaped by the prominence of poetry and the written word, to a greater extent and in a more specific way than elsewhere around the globe. My thesis will propose that the reasons behind this collaborative focus was a sense of isolation by artists and writers on the cultural periphery, which encouraged an approach to art and writing that allowed the simultaneous negotiation of conflicting pressures of nationalism and internationalism. I will argue that the flexibility and versatility of the cross-medium collaborative approach allowed for the continued negotiation of modernist concerns as they developed throughout the second half of the twentieth century. By examining three key works — *The Wake*, the *Malady* series, and *Te Tangi o te Pīpiwhararua (The Song of the Shining Cuckoo; a Poem by Tangirau Hotere)* — in dialogue with one another, I will additionally demonstrate the value of adopting a cross-medium approach to literary and artistic criticism. My thesis explores the extensive

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1 Throughout my thesis I use the term ‘modernism’ in an expanded sense of the term — to refer to the specific period during the transition from the 1930s–1960s cultural nationalist modernist phrase of Curnow to the more pluralistic phrase of post-nationalism, post-Curnow, or “post-Baxter” (Wedde 1985, 44).
ramifications of painted poetry as it developed in New Zealand, through use of a critical approach that similarly breaks down the boundaries between literary and art historical studies.

The cross-medium collaboration that occurred in New Zealand in the second half of the twentieth century was a fascinating phenomenon in its specificity to Aotearoa. Arguably, nowhere but in New Zealand did the collaborative creation of painted poetry play such a central role in the development of a nation’s art. Of course, around the world works that crossed the boundaries of writing and painting were numerous. For example, Jamie Hilder writes “…several figures involved in concrete poetry held parallel positions within visual art. Daniel Spoerri wrote concrete poems and was also a member of the Nouveaux Réalistes group in France in the sixties; Emmett Williams wrote concrete poems and published one of the largest anthologies of concrete poetry while maintaining a strong presence in the Fluxus movement; and Dieter Roth and Öyvind Fahlström both produced visual work while also experimenting with language” (2016, 151). Other artists from this period, such as Michael Goldberg, incorporated language into their art and shared close friendships with poets. Goldberg’s painting Sardines features in Frank O’Hara’s poem “Why I Am Not a Painter” (1957) and includes the word “SARDINES” in the bottom quarter of the canvas. Wordplay was also key element of the work of the Synthetic Cubists, who frequently turned to newspaper clippings and other forms of writing in the creation of their art. Yet these cases of cross-medium art and poetry were usually isolated, created without significant collaboration, and never rose to prominence as the defining artistic style of any nation. Text often featured in such paintings as a complementary component rather as the sole subject matter, unlike in McCahon and Hotere’s art where large-scale poems dominated the canvases. Collaborative works such as these have defined the course of modern art in Aotearoa.

While McCahon and Hotere helped to shape the cross-medium nature of the New Zealand art and literary scene, their approach was also indicative of the broader proximity of art and literature in New Zealand. Francis Pound describes the curious quality of New Zealand cultural history when he writes: “McCahon the painter writes in Landfall, a largely literary site —
the prime literary site of its period, in fact — while Curnow, the literary figure, writes in a *Yearbook of the Arts in New Zealand*, a site more given to art than to literature. Let this stand, for the moment, for the inextricability of the literary and painterly endeavor” (2010, xviii). Poets and painters not only explored a range of alternative creative avenues, but collaborated in the creation of cross-medium art.

Numerous reasons have been put forward in an effort to explain this focus on cross-medium collaboration in New Zealand art and literature. One key avenue of thought is that the isolating conditions of New Zealand life led to the growth of close relationships between artists and writers. Peter Simpson argues that The Group in Christchurch, for instance, banded together “for mutual support”, forming close personal relationships and focussing on collaboration (2016, 1–4). Simpson adds that for McCahon in particular, “his friendship with poets and their affinity for his work” was “the key source of…[his] interest in words” (2001, 8). Simpson’s arguments align closely with the perspective of Bill Manhire, who attributes the formation of creative groups to New Zealand’s “thin atmosphere” and the scarcity of similarly minded artists and writers to connect with. Manhire argues that in the United Kingdom, “arts practitioners…[didn’t] need the other arts to feel…[they were] part of something bigger,” while New Zealand’s small community of writers and artists led to the formation of cross-medium groups (2017). This concept of the New Zealand isolation is summarised neatly by Pound, who writes: “Poet and painter alike felt *themselves* to be islands” (2010, 42). These perspectives explain the origins of cross-medium collaboration logically and neatly.

However, what these accounts do not fully explain is why such cross-medium collaborations then went on to shape the course of New Zealand artistic and literary history. In an increasingly globalised world that continuously presented new sets of challenges to artists and writers, why did painted poetry persist as a major art form for so long, and achieve such prominence? What prompted New Zealanders to continue to band together, even when succeeding individually was a perfectly valid and popular option?
As the pressures of modernism developed throughout the second half of the 20th century, so did the demands placed on writers and artists in order to ‘succeed’ on simultaneously local and global scales. The versatility of cross-medium, collaborative art provided New Zealand painters and poets with a useful tool with which to achieve both the local nationalism and global developments that were demanded of them.

In his introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (1960), Allen Curnow focusses on the concept of a national identity coming to formation through poetry, on writing as a vehicle for the representation of New Zealand “self” (21). He argues that the “best” of local verse resulted from the move away from colonialism and towards embracing New Zealand as an “island nation” of its own (19): “it is this vital discovery of self in country and country in self, which gives the best New Zealand verse its character” (21). These ideas reflect the nationalism that would go on to define much of the poetry — and painting — of Aotearoa. In order for a work to be successful, cultural nationalists believed, it should be preoccupied with local content and a distinct sense of what Pound later termed “New Zealandness,” or art that is recognisably and specifically from New Zealand (2010, 3).

Internationalist trends placed an additional set of demands on New Zealand painters and poets. Franco Moretti (2000) and Pascale Casanova (2004) both argue that peripheral nations like Aotearoa looked to the world cultural ‘centres’ such as England and the United States for direction and inspiration in the development of modernist literature. This model of influence is frequently adopted when discussing the stages prior to the modernist nationalism of the 30s through to the early 60s, as local writers and artists tried to imitate the cutting-edge work being produced overseas. The first cross-medium collaboration my thesis will examine, *The Wake* (1958), provides an example of this type of imitation. Simpson writes that McCahon wanted “to give expression to ideas about painting stimulated by his recent overwhelming exposure to the world’s art,” referring to the artist’s visit to the United States that directly preceded his creation
of the work. The use of abstraction and Colour Field tendencies provide two key examples of this American influence in *The Wake*.

I will expand upon the centre-periphery model of influence by arguing that imitation was a desire inherent in global modernist transactions, building on Eric Hayot’s argument in “Chinese Modernism, Mimetic Desire, and European Time” (2012). Hayot argues that the taking of inspiration from central modernist nations was part of the inherently mimetic condition of modernism itself. Peripheral nations imitated central ones “in order to gain recognition…as an equal” (2012, 5). At the same time, writers and artists in centres of cultural capital imitated peripheral nations, yet this influence was not treated in the same way due to the unequal power dynamics within the literary exchange system (2012, 4). In Hayot’s model, imitation therefore becomes a condition of all modernism. In a New Zealand context, the pressure to imitate was a central concern that shaped much of our twentieth century art and literature.

The simultaneous demand for nationalism and internationalism placed New Zealand painters and poets in a difficult and paradoxical situation. How were artists and writers to achieve both the local referent celebrated by the Curnow school and the global modernist style that international movements demanded? Pound acknowledges this predicament, noting that the foreign was both wanted and unwanted by New Zealand artists in this regard (2010, 75). Simpson adds: “New Zealand artists in this era [had a tendency] to model themselves on what was happening in London, Europe and occasionally the United States, and to bring these imported models to bear on the physical and social realities of their own time and place, a daring fusion of imported modernism and home-grown nationalism” (Simpson 2016, 8). This “daring fusion” has also been termed “the strange conjunction of the national and international” (Evans 1990, 208). Both of these phrases succinctly capture the sense of duality present in New Zealand art and poetry of the mid-twentieth century, but fail to communicate the difficulties involved in attaining such fusions and conjunctions.
It was cross-medium collaboration that allowed artists and poets like McCahon and Caselberg, and Hotere and Manhire, to successfully negotiate these conflicting pressures of nationalism and modernism. The flexibility and versatility of painted poetry provided artists and poets with a powerful tool with which to address the difficulties presented to them. Of course, such difficulties did not remain identical over the course of 1950s through 1970s; each of the works I examine in the following chapters utilises cross-medium collaboration to negotiate significantly differing sets of concerns. In *The Wake*, Caselberg’s poetry helped McCahon to create layers of ambiguity that simultaneously answered conflicting calls for modernism and tradition, internationalism and nationalism. In the *Malady* series, Manhire’s poetry allowed Hotere to connect with the Concrete Poetry movement and challenge the iconic and symbolic, as well as painterly and linguistic, boundaries between systems of signification, resulting in a rejection of the canonical. The Concrete Poetry movement occurred in several countries, including Russia, Paris, Italy and Switzerland, resulting in a more widespread and web-like system of emulation than the binary centre-periphery model that strongly defined *The Wake*. Tapping into this movement by emphasising “the visual appearance of the text” and “shaped, typographically complex, visually self-conscious” poetry allowed Hotere and Manhire to negotiate centre-periphery pressures by following an alternative route of influence (Drucker 1996, 39–40). Finally, *Te Tangi* demonstrates the way in which cross-cultural collaboration was used by McCahon to propose a vision of a bicultural Aotearoa through use of wordplay, thematic parallels, and symbolism. I will draw on O’Brien’s insightful 1997 examinations of Hotere’s use of text in what he terms “word-paintings” (27), linking the painter to both overseas modernist artists (35) and to Colin McCahon directly (41).

It is only by examining a range of cross-medium collaborations such as these that a full understanding of the significance and impact of the genre can be assessed. The three case studies which I have selected each provide significant examples of the operation and impact of cross-medium art and poetry in strikingly different ways. Overall, their differences emphasise the
flexibility and importance of painted poetry as a sub-genre of New Zealand modernism in its ability to negotiate conflicting pressures and break down boundaries between creative forms.
Chapter One: Apostrophe, Ambiguity, and Tensions of Signification in

The Wake

*The Wake*, produced by Mc Cahon in collaboration with John Caselberg, provides my first case study of the importance of cross-medium collaboration in New Zealand art and literature. In this work, painted poetry provided a way to negotiate the conflicting pressures of national and international demands through the dialogic mode of apostrophe and by combining contrasting verbal and visual systems of signification. Mc Cahon created an intentionally fluid work, using ambiguity as a key artistic tool.

The painting itself comprises a large-scale painted poem spread across sixteen large-scale unstretched canvases, strongly reminiscent of the work of the Abstract Expressionists and Colour Field artists. It was produced directly following Mc Cahon’s trip to the United States where he viewed many acclaimed modernist works. Several elements of *The Wake* reflect this recent influence, including the abstracted or non-objective background, the large scale, immersive quality, and the lack of obvious subject matter. Yet throughout the work numerous references to the New Zealand landscape anchor *The Wake* in a location removed from the cultural ‘centres’ of the world: the brooding and earthy tones of paint conjure a sense of the “Kauris” (35) and “subterranean gloom and wet” (51), explicitly described in the locally referential poem. It is this written text — coupled with the abstract or non-objective art — that allowed Caselberg and Mc Cahon to achieve the national demand for New Zealand voice alongside an international modernism.

The poem in question, also titled “The Wake,” in itself contains dual elements of local and global culture. The poem was initially gifted to Mc Cahon by Caselberg, whose close friendship had already resulted in several collaborations and shared ideas. “The Wake” is elegiac in style and based on the death of Caselberg’s Great Dane, Thor. Although Thor and his death are addressed
throughout the poem, the work also focusses on describing the New Zealand landscape, evoking a strong sense of place while also drawing upon European classical and mythological imagery. McCahon’s painted version of the poem features the large-scale, handwritten text characteristic of his cross-medium artworks. This handwriting style heightens the grandeur and drama of the artwork, supporting the emotional content of the poem.

The poem itself both evokes an imported European tradition and unsettles that tradition, doing so partly through its rhythm that alludes to, but also breaks from, familiar structure. “The Wake” follows a vaguely iambic pentameter structure, which provides a basic sense of structure and order to the nine stanzas. Lines of fully iambic pentameter appear on occasion throughout the poem, such as “Upon the subterranean gloom and wet” (51), “And shaking-portalled as your own no yet” (79), and “Reverbatory engines of his heart” (99). These lines ground the poem, actualising the iambic pentameter that the rest of the writing alludes to but never quite attains. In these non-iambic lines iambic pentameter is either spread onto the following line or not quite met at all, such as “At Fairymeadow, learning nostril- wise,” (68–69) “Whom yesterday he honoured,” (20), and “The chemistry of glacier / teeth, the fresh,” (94–95). Divergences such as these occur throughout “The Wake”; fully iambic lines are few and far between but constantly alluded to. This sense of iambic pentameter echoes the forms of the European poetic tradition, harking back to Shakespeare’s sonnets and the work of other canonical English poets.

In his language, too, Caselberg emulates the grand, lofty writing of the English and European tradition, whilst maintaining a strong connection to the New Zealand present. For example, the line “Grief, thee I’ll wive,” 107 uses traditional poetic language to describe his lamentation. Caselberg’s constant inclusion of classical texts and constellation names reinforces this sense of Romantic imagery: “Dante’s Hell,” (17) “Sirius, Dog-Star,” (9) “Antares, / Fomalhaut, Vega, Cross and Centaur,” (21–22). These phrases all build upon a sense of tradition

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2 Throughout my discussion of “The Wake” in its written form my numbering system will refer to the line numbers of the poem itself, without reference to the artwork panels.
and European culture as the poem progresses. Yet Caselberg also deliberately moves away from Europe and toward New Zealand. His references to “kauris,” (35) “Taranaki,” (97) “Greenstone,” (122) and the “Tasman” (123) connect the language explicitly to the local land. In this sense, Caselberg marries traditional poetic form and content with specifically local New Zealand subject matter and Māori language. The two styles of writing contrast with one another, creating a combination of cultures and images for the reader.

Further evidence of Caselberg’s European focus is found in his emulation of the work of poets such as John Milton, William Butler Yeats, and Gerard Manly Hopkins. For instance, compare the following extracts from the poem with lines from *Paradise Lost*:

> Th’infernal Serpent; he it was, whose guile
> Stird up with Envy and Revenge, deceiv’d
> The Mother of Mankinde, what time his Pride
> Had cast him out from Heav’n, with all his Host
> Of Rebel Angels
> (Milton 1952, 34–38)

> Below his smoking brows, obeisance
> to a Sun-
> Stoked continent’s ravishment of
> scents, being
> Sea-stung in earshot of the ocean’s shattering
> (Caselberg 1958, 70–74).

The syntactic similarities between the two passages are striking: both contain long, enjambed sentences with multiple subordinate clauses and frequent nature-based, hyphenated phrases.
Caselberg’s lines of verse (such as “Sun-/ Stoked” and “Sea-stung”; or “Star-stabbed tui-throated,” 102) also echo similar constructions by Yeats (“The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,” 2004, 1). The work of Gerard Manly Hopkins, too, is reflected in such hyphenations: comparing “The Windhover” to “The Wake” reveals numerous parallels. In both cases the poets hyphenate unexpected alliterated and assonated combinations of natural imagery. Caselberg’s “Snow-splashed basalt body” (96) seems to undeniably emulate the “dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon” of “The Windhover” (2011, 24). Overall, Caselberg’s emulation of writers such as Milton, Yeats, and Hopkins imbues his work with a strongly pre-modernist feel, emphasised by the high poetic style and grand, sweeping language.

The sentimental, lofty style of “The Wake” aligns it with the Neo-Romantic movement occurring in New Zealand during the 1950s. Originally associated with the arts emerging from Britain during and surrounding World War II, the Neo-Romantic movement celebrated natural beauty and sensitive depictions of humanity in a way that recalled late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century Romantics. Recurring themes of Neo-Romanticism included “spirituality, idealism, imagination, intuition, individualism, feeling and sensitivity, escapism, mysticism, naturalism and nationalism” (Wight 2011, n.p.). The majority of these themes are present across the works of New Zealand artists like Hodgkins and writers such as Cresswell and Caselberg (Bell 2017, n.p.). In D’Arcy Cresswell’s The Forest, European concepts such as angels are incorporated within the landscape of Aotearoa (1952). Similarly, sentimentality and European tradition feature abundantly in “The Wake,” defining the work and closely aligning it with Louis Johnson and James K. Baxter’s view that young poets had become increasingly preoccupied with “exploring an international identity” (Jensen 1996, 96). In the case of Caselberg, this international identity meant a return to the traditions of Europe, and the sentimental values that strongly defined much of its poetry.

As Neo-Romanticism was by definition both new and traditional, adopting a Neo-Romantic style allowed Caselberg and McCahon to answer the simultaneous demands of poetry
and art. In terms of poetry, Neo-Romanticism offered Caselberg a way to achieve both the traditional, Euro-centric quality admired and emulated by early New Zealand writers, as well as a new modernism by setting the poem in New Zealand and departing from traditional forms like iambic pentameter, wholly classical subject matter, and even English language in some lines. From a painterly perspective, McCahon’s inclusion of a Neo-Romantic poem achieved a similar sense of duality. The traditional yet new quality of the poem imbued his work with important connections to the European tradition and New Zealand nationalism, allowing him to answer the demand for local referent. At the same time, his departure from Neo-Romanticism and Nationalism in his strongly modernist painted background answered the pressure to follow the latest international trends in modern art. A fascinating tension is thus created between the old and new in both the poem and in McCahon’s painted series of panels.

Critics would later condemn McCahon’s combination of Caselberg’s seemingly old-fashioned poetic style with the avant-garde innovation of his Colour Field background. Peter Leech wrote that the “introduction of a narrative in The Wake is a flawed gesture,” arguing that it caused the work to “veer…unhappily between crude sentimentality and over-elaborated mythologising” (1980, 21). In this regard McCahon’s brooding, avant-garde painting was seemingly contradicted by a poem that harked back to a more conservative tradition of representation. Yet it was this unorthodox juxtaposition that lent the work its unexpectedly striking quality. New Zealand viewers eager to see representations of local land and experience could find it in Caselberg’s explicit mentions of Aotearoa, while those concerned with modernism and the avant-garde had McCahon’s Colour Field painting to consider. In each case, local and global demands were met. But in each case, local and global demands were also challenged by the inclusion of elements usually not combined in such a way. Just as Caselberg’s poem retained both local and global references, so did the broader series of painted panels.

Caselberg’s New Zealand Neo-Romantic style of poetry was one heavily criticised by Curnow, who disapproved of poetry that turned away from his personal idea of realism. Curnow
described the best of New Zealand verse as being “marked or moulded” by pressures unique only to the New Zealand experience, separate from the type of poetry being produced in England, and fully embracing “island nation” life instead (1960, 19). In his introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse, 1923–45*, Curnow wrote that New Zealand poetry should be “a real expression of what the New Zealander is and a part of what he may become” (1945, 14–15), a description that seemed to suggest the level of “social relevance and accessibility” described by Jensen (1996, 97). John Newton adds that “An insistence on fracture, fallenness, gloom — a modernist décor, sanctioned helpfully by Eliot — is offered by Curnow and his masculine cohorts as the pledge of a generation seeing truly, because no longer blithely or sentimentally. Projecting one affect to chase out another, the nationalists claim discovery of ‘a reality prior to the poem’” (1999, 91). Romanticism, or the Neo-Romanticism of Caselberg, were overly “sentimental” to Curnow (1987, 49).

Yet Curnow’s preference for realism and criticism of myth is not as binary as the poet’s argument suggests. Newton highlights the constructed nature of Curnow’s ‘realism’, writing that “This local actuality which the nationalists discover, then, is [also] mythical” (Newton 1999, 91). We are presented with two competing myths attempting to convey an authentic sense of New Zealand experience. Later, Baxter would describe Curnow’s vision as “the myth of insularity” (1978, 53), arguing that a “nationalist strait-jacket…was being imposed on an exciting new poetry of more universal concerns” (Caffin 1991, 404).

In addition to misrepresenting myth as truth, Curnow was criticised for simply being “behind the times” with his ideas (Roberts 2003, 229). Erik Schwimmer, member of the Wellington Group poets, dismissed Curnow’s approach to literature as “never widely believed in by New Zealanders.” Schwimmer argued that New Zealanders had long since grown past Curnow’s idea of nationalism and become global in their outlook, with a “vivid” “consciousness of the internationalisation of culture” (1951, 66). He further stated that “the period of preoccupation with the specific New Zealand experience is past” (1951, 69).
“The Wake” provides an example of a new type of poetry in Aotearoa, one which took elements of traditionalism and placed them into a unexpected, fresh contexts. Far from being “behind the times,” Caselberg took a fresh approach to poetry that moved beyond Curnow’s somewhat binary perceptions of literature. The Neo-Romantic style of “The Wake” took elements of traditional poetry and repurposed them for new, modernist aims. Neo-Romanticism was old fashioned in the sense that it re-adopted elements of Romanticist poetry, but was also striking and original in its recontextualisation of content. Qualities which would have once been considered too poetic were given new life under the modernist umbrella. In this regard, Caselberg was very much taking a new approach to poetry rather than an old one, and moving past the hang-ups of the Curnow school of thinking.

**Use of Apostrophe and Ambiguity**

Throughout “The Wake” Caselberg employs apostrophe as a key rhetorical device, creating a dual sense of absence and presence that allows Caselberg to answer the competing calls for traditional poetry, local referent, and global modernist development. Shifts in addressee connect the words of “The Wake” with the painting’s painted elements, which similarly shift in geographic location in an oscillation between local and universal. By including text and apostrophe in his painting, McCahon demonstrates how writing can be utilised in art to negotiate the nationalist and internationalist demands placed on New Zealand poets and artists in the mid-twentieth century.

Apostrophe in poetry performs multiple functions. Poets directly address inhuman objects as though they are capable of hearing and comprehending their words. Jonathan Culler argues that by seeming to imbue inanimate objects with the potential to respond, “the apostrophizing poet identifies his universe as a world of sentient forces,” in which a relationship is adopted between poet and the “you” or “thou” of the poem (1977, 61). In “The Wake,” readers are made aware of this relationship from the poem’s very first word — “your” (1). The elegiac poem
becomes defined according to the format of the poet’s address to another. In “The Wake,” Caselberg directs his mourning to a variety of audiences: his deceased dog, God, stars, trees, and “Grief” (107). In each case they are addressed as though independently animate and present.

Culler additionally notes the way in which elegies like “The Wake” replace “an irreversible temporal disjunction, the move from life to death, with a dialectical alternation between attitudes of mourning and consolation, evocations of absence and presence” (1977, 67). In “The Wake,” these alternations are heightened by the additional shifts between addressees, timelines, and locations. While the subject matter often seems to anchor the poem in a classical, European setting, regular references to Pacific locations challenge our perception of where the writing takes place. “Adelie Land” (5) initially seems to establish a connection to Antarctica, which is later displaced by the “Kauris” (35) that can only indicate New Zealand, then again by the mention of “Fairymeadow” (68), an Australian location which conjures a similar sense of locality. By combining the tradition of apostrophe with these shifting, new locations, Caselberg continues to bring the old and new into often conflicting dialogue within his poetic elegy. The here and now of New Zealand is made to stand in contrast with the subject matter of classical Europe, and an apostrophic writing style that dates back millennia.

Apostrophe’s inherent qualities of absence and presence build on the ambiguities and geographic shifts of the elegy. Culler discusses how apostrophe displaces the temporal sequence of events described in poetry “by removing the opposition between presence and absence from empirical time and locating it in a discursive time.” Rather than time progressing temporally “from A to B,” apostrophe instead creates “a play of presence and absence governed not by time but by poetic power.” In “The Wake”, Caselberg based his writing on an event in empirical time — the death of Thor — but through apostrophe located the event in discursive time instead. Culler’s “play of presence and absence” is thus created, in which Thor is addressed in present tense, in the “discursive time” of “The Wake” (1977, 67). While Thor is dead and absent in
empirical time, Caselberg makes him present by invoking him, even as this invocation also acknowledges his absence.

This simultaneous absence and presence emphasises the other aforementioned tensions and dualities of the poem by creating a sense of overarching displacement of time. Just as Thor is made to be simultaneously departed and present, so Caselberg combines outdated, faraway literary traditions with the here and now of a modern New Zealand literature and art. The use of apostrophe in Caselberg’s poem creates an overarching sense of temporality. Culler describes this as “a timeless present” resulting from the immediacy of the poet’s address to the subject matter (1977, 66). In “The Wake,” Caselberg creates a sense of the ‘now’ separate from the actual timeline of Thor’s life and death. This temporality adds a level of ambiguity to the poem, anchoring it neither in the past nor present. On a broader level, this ambiguity aided Caselberg and McCahon in their quest to achieve a work both local and global, traditional and modernist. By creating a work that avoided being anchored in any single category, the conflicting demands placed on New Zealand artists and writers could begin to be negotiated.

The sense of ambiguity, and absence and presence, in “The Wake” is further heightened by the range of other beings and objects addressed through the use of apostrophe. Inanimate objects (“stars,” 20; and “trees,” 34) are spoken to in the same way as personified emotions (“Grief,” 107) and metaphorically animate beings (“God,” 1). Multiple categories of addressee are brought into parallel, with varying degrees of animation already associated with them. Thor thus becomes linked and contrasted both with the natural imagery of the earth, and the more ethereal concepts of a personified Grief and God. Thor’s death becomes the bridge connecting these realms.

These shifts of addressee are mirrored by the background tones chosen by McCahon. The panels directly addressing Thor (3, 7, 13, and 14) all share a dark palette, with white on black text and gloomy shades of colour. However, those panels addressing alternative addressees (5, addressing the stars; 6, addressing the trees; and 11, addressing “Grief”) all share a light, ochre-
dominated colour scheme, with black text instead of white. This consistent association of Thor with darkness and natural, emotion-based subjects with light create a strong visual and thematic divide within the poem. By using dark pigments alongside the Thor passages, McCahon creates a visual association of the departed with the darkness of the grave or perhaps an afterlife. In this way, McCahon connects Caselberg’s text with his paint in a highly symbolic and meaningful way, drawing the two art forms together and resulting in an inextricable pairing of word and paint.

The prominence of apostrophe in “The Wake” holds additional significance for the relationship between Caselberg and McCahon as collaborators. An inherent quality of apostrophe is the act of animating something absent through imbuing the addressee with subjectivity. In collaboration, particularly collaboration between individuals separated geographically, a strikingly similar act of animating the other comes into play. By creating a painted version of Caselberg’s poem, and imbuing that poem with the tones and emotions of his painting, McCahon seeks to animate the voice of his absent friend. Just as Caselberg forges a simultaneous absence and presence of Thor, so can McCahon be said to create an absence and presence of Caselberg in his painting.

The shifting nature of apostrophe as a rhetorical device allowed Caselberg to negotiate the conflicting demands placed on New Zealand poets at the time. Caselberg could achieve not only a connection to classical poetic styles, but the local referent that a modern audience increasingly desired. Caselberg’s poem achieved both traditionalism and modernism, and brought important specificity and nationalism to an otherwise abstract or non-objective painting.

Visual Strategies and Tensions of Signification

The multiple shifts and levels of duality present within the poem “The Wake” are echoed in McCahon’s painting, through systems of signification that contrast and clash with one another. The tension between text and paint is one of the most immediate and prominent features of the work, as viewers must negotiate reading the poem while viewing the painting. As
each medium requires a different method of interpretation, viewers must mentally shift between systems of understanding in order to engage with the entire artwork. Just as Caselberg’s apostrophe animates the dead, McCahon animates Caselberg’s words in responding to them through the competing presences and absences of visual and verbal signifying systems.

The interpretation of Caselberg’s text in *The Wake* relies upon a system of signification similar to that of images, but one maintaining key systematic differences. According to Charles S. Peirce’s theory of signs, interpretation of signs into objects relies upon the presence of the interpretant: the reader’s or viewer’s understanding of the sign. Albert Atkin uses the apt example of a molehill (sign) being a signifier for moles (object), reliant upon our ability to translate the sign into the object (2013). This basic process can be applied to *The Wake*, which contains tension between two forms of sign — paint and text.

In the case of text, Peirce’s system primarily operates on a symbolic level. When “Sirius” (9) is mentioned in Caselberg’s poem, the word itself is non-Engglyptic: it does not physically resemble the constellation to which it refers. Instead, the word acts as a symbolic sign for the constellation, reliant on language as the interpretant. Readers apply their knowledge of language as a tool to translate the symbolic sign (“Sirius”, 9) into object (constellation).

Painted images, however, frequently operate in subtly different ways to written language. For example, a depiction of a horizon line (which, as I have argued, may be represented throughout *The Wake*) acts as an iconic sign for an actual horizon. The line visually resembles the object it represents (Huening 2006). Viewers need not put much effort into interpreting the sign; once we identify McCahon’s vertical lines as a horizon, the two become almost one and the same upon viewing.
These systems of signification become further complicated when ideas of abstraction and non-objectivity are introduced. In a stark movement away from Caselberg’s Neo-romantic, traditional style and explicit local referent, the painted background of *The Wake* is entirely composed of abstract or non-objective washes of colour, shapes, and splatters of paint. In panel 1, for example, washes of green, orange and peach provide the background layer of colour, with splodges, splatters and strokes of black added over top (fig. 1). Further additions of white squares and rectangles add a geometric element to the panel, emphasising the capitalised title letters reminiscent of McCahon’s *I Am* series. The overall effect is haphazard yet coordinated through limited use of colours from an earthy palette. Each of the panels follows this style, with some variation from canvas to canvas.

![The Wake](image)

**Figure 1:** Colin McCahon. 1958. *The Wake: Panel 1*. Ink and monocoat on canvas. 1785 x 1265mm. Hocken Collections.

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3 In *The Wake*, only the panels containing text are numbered by McCahon. Thus for the purposes of my discussion, I will refer to the panels by their number in the sequence, rather than the number given to them by McCahon.
McCahon's panels can be termed abstract in the sense that by using natural colours such as greens and browns McCahon seems to conjure the landscape which is being described by Caselberg. McCahon could be alluding to the land by depicting heavily abstracted hills and bushland. This theory seems particularly likely in panels such as eight, where the horizontal division of the canvas seems to strongly allude to a literal horizon line dividing earth and sky (fig. 2). Either way, the allusion to land or water would render these backgrounds abstracted, rather than non-representational.

Yet equally plausible is the possibility of a non-objective, Colour Field influence. During his trip to the States prior to painting this artwork, McCahon would undoubtedly have viewed paintings from the Colour Field movement, which may be emulated in *The Wake*. Indeed, the
lack of specific visual referent makes this theory very plausible. The large scale of the canvasses also suggests that McCahon intended an immersive viewing experience similar to those created by the Colour Field artists overseas. If this is the case, the paint shifts from being a signifier to the signified: the backgrounds are not representing another object, rather, the paint itself is the object.

These two potential readings of the background paint result in an additional level of ambiguity mirroring that within the poem. Once again viewers are left uncertain of the location of the work — does McCahon anchor the work in New Zealand through abstracted local landscape, or does he locate the work in a more international and modernist non-objective space? The resulting work is both located and dislocated, nationalist and internationalist simultaneously.

The tensions between systems of signification are heightened by McCahon’s varying proportions of poetry-to-painting per canvas, which are occasionally abandoned entirely in favour of pure paint with no text. While text is at the forefront of panel 1 in the large, capitalised title, panels 2, 4, 10, 12, 15 and 16 are almost entirely preoccupied with oil painted forms. These non-verbal panels vary from containing large washes of colour to more detailed scribbles and dots, with a recurring image of long, vertical lines present in almost all. Such lines perhaps allude to the vertical layout of printed poetry and would later reappear in McCahon’s waterfall series as well as Hotere’s abstract art. Juxtaposing these vertical lines are the horizontal divisions in panels 2 and 14, which similarly echo the physical lines of ocean and sky, as well as the layout of printed words on the page. This latter allusion is reinforced by the unstretched and unframed canvasses, which remind viewers of loose book pages. Across all of the panels, McCahon’s swathes of paint similarly vary from large washes of colour (panel 8) to more intricate patterns of dots and shapes (panel 6).

In the case of panel 6, McCahon’s dots are reminiscent of the forms used throughout his series of kauri paintings, produced in the years leading up to *The Wake* (fig. 3). Abstracted and
constructed using lines and circles, McCahon’s kauri series was tied explicitly to the New Zealand landscape. His reference of similar forms here is perhaps in response to Caselberg’s inclusion of the term in his poem: “And you, trees, mute cypress-hooded / Kauris” (34–35), a connection between poetry and paint that ties the two elements together. McCahon uses dots behind this section of the poem in a subtle act of connection to his earlier art.

In contrast to the varying backgrounds, McCahon’s hand-painted text remains relatively consistent throughout the panels. Titles are capitalised (such as the panel numbers, the poem’s title on the first panel and the bottom of following panels), and the poem itself is written in McCahon’s looping, linked handwriting. This handwriting essentially changes only in size and colour, varying in scale and from black to white.
It is the instances of interaction between the text and background that add a strongly internationalist, modernist element to the work. In panels 5 and 14 the script becomes partially obscured by the background, and in other panels the background colour seems to emphasise particular words. The title, for instance, is framed by white, and in panel 9 the words “glacier” and “ocean” are also outlined in white. In making this decision, McCahon opens up a dialogue between the two elements, breaking down the boundaries of signification between the two.

In making this artistic decision, McCahon once again chooses to create a relationship between poetry and paint in which the two operate in dialogue with one another. This interaction between the background and text blurs the boundaries between text and image, and demonstrates McCahon’s interest in exploring the potential for text to act as a visual object. This approach to textuality and visuality lends the work a strongly avant-garde feeling, aligning it with modernist developments happening in the international realm.

At the same time, the local elements of the work are strongly emphasised. New Zealand referent is created and reinforced throughout the poem by consistent use of direct and indexical references to local places and objects. This creates a nationalistic theme that allowed Caselberg and McCahon to answer the call for distinctly New Zealand poetry and art. Caselberg’s frequent use of indexical signs connects the poem inextricably to geographical place. Atkin writes that the sign is an index when “the constraints of successful signification require that the sign utilize some existential or physical connection between it and its object” (2013). For example, words such as ‘you’ and ‘here’ are indexical in that they rely on the knowledge of who or where is being referred to. In “The Wake,” “your” (1), “you” (20), and “Here” (91) perform this indexical function. The apostrophic indexical signs “Your” and “you” frequently address geographical features like stars and trees, geographical features that are often anchored to specific locations such as Australia and New Zealand. The word “Here,” (91) is also dependent upon Caselberg’s prior identification of New Zealand or Australia as location. Throughout the poem, these
indexical signs rely on the meaning provided by the objects — language is dependent on geographical place to bring sense and location to the writing.

Yet at the same time, indexicals such as “Here” (91) are inherently ambivalent. Roman Jakobson describes these words as “Shifters” and writes “the general meaning of a shifter cannot be defined without a reference to the message” (1971, 131). Furthermore, Shifters “combine both functions [of symbols and indexes] and belong therefore to the class of INDEXICAL SYMBOLS” (1971, 132). Indexical symbols shift meaning according to the context in which they are placed. “Here” (91) could equally refer to either New Zealand, Australia, or elsewhere; it is only within the context of the poem that we can guess which country it indicates. This ambivalence makes indexicals very useful in the negotiation of demands of nationalism and internationalism. The flexibility of Caselberg’s words allow both a local or a global reading. Indexicals’ flexibility makes them the perfect tool for designing a poem — and an artwork — that responds to these conflicting pressures.

The inclusion of both textual and visual systems of signification in *The Wake* creates an additional level of tension for viewers. While the eye seeks to interpret the background imagery by decoding the language of visual representation, the text consistently brings the eye forward, demanding a linguistic method of interpretation. In combining these systems of signification, McCahon resists easy immersion into either art form. The work becomes neither painting nor poem, but a new combination of the two that places equal importance on the reading of both elements.

McCahon’s personal interest in Egyptian culture suggests a broader underlying preoccupation with the intersection of visual and verbal forms of communication. In 1966 McCahon wrote briefly on his own connection with Egyptian iconography, describing the Otago landscape in relation to Egypt: “Otago has a calmness, a coldness, almost a classic geological order. It is, perhaps, an Egyptian landscape” (363). The artist then went on to link his religion with that of Egypt: “I first became aware of my own particular God, perhaps an Egyptian God”
(364). This alignment of Egyptian culture with the landscape strongly suggests a similar theoretical alignment underpinning McCahon’s art. Like hieroglyphics, McCahon’s paintings fuse image with language and imbue highly abstracted images with meaning. For instance, McCahon, like the Ancient Egyptians, consistently reduced forms of water and land down to simplified and abstracted horizontal line-based forms (Allen 2010, 438–9). The papyrus-like canvasses of *The Wake*, unstretched and hanging freely, further strengthen the connection between McCahon’s art and that of Ancient Egypt. While McCahon cannot be said to be working within the hieroglyphic tradition, this connection demonstrates his broader preoccupation with systems of communication that combine the visual and verbal.

Throughout *The Wake*, Colin McCahon negotiates local and global demands through use of ambiguity and competing systems of signification. Yet there is not one sole method of negotiation used throughout the work; rather, each of the sixteen panels offers a slightly different combination of representational and non-representational poetry and painting — in some cases poetry omitted entirely. I will demonstrate this variation through close analysis of panels 4, 5, 6, and 8. These panels contain differing balances of poetry and representational and non-representational painting, the geographical location of which frequently shifts and becomes ambiguous. Through these shifts between panels McCahon demonstrated the numerous ways in which nationalist and internationalist tensions could be negotiated through inter-art collaboration. *The Wake* thus becomes a work offering not one solution to the dual demands placed on writers and artists, but several.

**Panel 4**

Throughout *The Wake*, McCahon demonstrates how text and painting can be combined in order to negotiate global and local artistic demands through ambiguity. At times, however, McCahon also explores the impact of *removing* text from the canvas when viewers would otherwise expect
to find it. In panel 4, McCahon isolates the medium of painting, demonstrating an alternative method of negotiating artistic pressures to the panels which also include text (fig. 4).

Panel 4 comprises thick, curved lines descending horizontally and dominating the canvas. The interior of this outlined shape is filled with a field of ochre paint, occasionally smudged and overlapping with paint from the surrounding fields. McCahon uses black and blue tones in a rough, smudged style to fill the areas of canvas on either side of the shape, creating an overall sense of a golden body of colour emerging from a blue and black background. The divisions of The Wake into panels are echoed in the further division of panel 4 into three separate plains of colour.

Without the presence of text, immersion into the painting as the sole medium becomes more straightforward. A single type of visual sign — the icon — is presented, creating a simpler
process of interpretation for viewers. No negotiation between creative forms is needed here, just the alignment of sign with object. In this case, the object is likely a waterfall. Although the waterfall image had not yet come to dominate McCahon’s work, over the years following *The Wake* the simple, vertical lines would form an entire series of repeated iconography. Works such as *July Waterfall* (1965; fig. #) contain strikingly similar imagery to panel 4, with the same blue and black, uneven application of paint on either side of the water. It is therefore highly likely that the same subject matter provided the basis for both of the works.

The poetry of the previous panel provides additional support for this reading. Caselberg describes an “Avalanche” (5) and the “oceanwards / flight of the river” (7–8), conjuring imagery of vertically descending bodies of water. These, of course, echo the tears of grief shed by the poet following Thor’s death. It is therefore thematically logical for McCahon to immediately follow this section of the poem with a canvas devoted to waterfall imagery.

In panel 4, McCahon was able to fully explore the concept of simultaneous nationalism and globalism through painted image alone. Although lacking the additional layers of meaning previously contributed by Caselberg’s text, McCahon creatively answers both the call for local referent and the international demand for innovation. In depicting a waterfall, McCahon ties his work to the local landscape and bodies of water introduced in the preceding panel of text, as well as to the tears of the New Zealand poet. These references all serve to anchor the work in a geographically local setting, whilst tying in with the importance of land and water to the people of Aotearoa. A sense of distinct New Zealandness is conjured through Caselberg’s poetry and McCahon’s abstracted painting, meeting the demand for local referent and landscape.

At the same time, however, McCahon’s work departs the explicit local referent by creating a waterfall — and horizon lines — that could be located anywhere. The waterfall’s placement can easily be read as ambiguous, less a part of the local New Zealand landscape and more an international symbol of bodies of water and all they represent. In addition to this global reading, the painterly style of this panel strongly reflects the international movements of Colour Field art.
and abstraction. Like Rothko, McCahon breaks his canvas into rectangular shapes, filling each with immersive planes of colour. In fact, the waterfall shape itself could similarly be viewed as a purely geometric feature of the panel. The ambiguity of the form would easily allow for a non-objective reading, creating a link to the Abstract Expressionism and Colour Field art from the same period. By intentionally creating a panel which was open to interpretation, McCahon allowed himself to answer both local and global mandates.

**Panel 5**

Panel 5 provides an excellent example of the way in which McCahon created tension between systems of signification through the combination of large-scale poetry with non-objective painting (fig. 5). In this panel, the background imagery is composed of non-representational washes and smudges of paint, predominantly in an earthy palette of ochres, blues, and black. McCahon does not appear to be abstracting any discernible subject matter. In contrast with this non-objectivity, the second stanza of Caselberg’s poem brings an explicit subject matter to the canvas. In this section of the poem Caselberg addresses “Sirius” (9) and the “Cold Stars” (20), focussing predominantly on European imagery (“Dante’s Hell,” 17) and classical astronomy (“Fomalhaut, Vega, Cross and Centaur,” 22). The stressing of each syllable in the spondees of lines like “Dog-Star, stab night-long” (9) and “fond-wombed throat-hurt” (13) creates an intensity that mirrors the speaker’s own grief. The enjambment of lines aids in this halting, disrupted style far removed from iambic pentameter. The intensity and specificity of the poem detracts from the focus on the background, in this case becoming the centre of attention for viewers.
The poem and background do not operate entirely separately, however. In many parts, the text literally smudges into the background, blurring the distinction between poem and painting. “Lights as if the blind uprooting” (11) and “As Dante’s Hell” (17) provide two clear examples of this smudging: McCahon uses a heavier hand to apply the paint and allows for the bleeding of the ink into the oils. At times the background, too, seems to verge on becoming text: the large black smudge beneath “yesterday” (23) seems to almost conceal a blackened-out word, drawing the attention of the eye away from the poem and toward the background paint instead. The two elements of the work compete for attention, creating an unstable trajectory for the eye when viewing the work. Viewers must decide whether to read the poem traditionally, from top left to bottom right, or whether to firstly pay attention to the areas of black smudging, which visually command the canvas. If the smudges are decided upon, a tension then arises between signifying
systems: should the marks be interpreted as abstracted imagery, or as objects in their own right — paint for paint’s sake? An array of complexities is thus introduced by the blurring of poem and paint, and additional levels of ambiguity created.

Few other connections between the two art forms can be found in this panel. The background seems neither to depict the content of the poem, nor to provide an overall atmosphere relating to constellations or the night sky. In this panel background and poem operate in contrast rather than connection, creating a challenge for viewers seeking to interpret each element.

In this case, the language component of the panel provides an example of Peirce’s symbolic sign system: Pierce writes “Any ordinary word, as ‘give,’ ‘bird,’ ‘marriage,’ is an example of a symbol” (1955, 114). Readers interpret the words of the poem as symbols for objects in order to attain comprehension. The process required to understand the written element of the work is relatively simple and straightforward; it is the coupling of Caselberg’s language with McCahon’s painted background that makes the interpretation process more complex. The tension lies not in competing systems of signs, but in the contrast between the sign (Caselberg’s poem) and the object (McCahon’s paint). Representational art usually aligns with Peirce’s definition of iconic signs. For example, portraits are iconic due to their sharing of specific properties with their objects (Johansen 2002, 51). This iconic signification system was what viewers expected from traditional European forms of art, but which was challenged with the advent of modernist abstraction and non-objectivity. When the representational element is removed, as in panel 5 of The Wake, the expected system of signification becomes confused. Rather than depicting an object, the painting itself becomes the object. Discerning whether the painting is operating as a sign or an object thus becomes the first main task of the viewer.

This tension imbues the panel with a simultaneously local and global element by meeting the demands of both conservative New Zealand poetry critics and international art movements. The specificity and European content and style of Caselberg’s poetry met the demands of a
relatively conservative local readership, accustomed to traditional rather than avant-garde writing. At the same time, however, McCahon departs from this specificity altogether in his non-representational background. He creates a painting that taps into the new developments in modernist painting overseas, rather than solely pandering to demand for local artistic referent.

This tension between the local and global reflects and reinforces the broader dynamics of the work. Like the other panels of *The Wake*, panel 5 is filled with elements that constantly seem to shift in meaning and compete for attention. Tensions between specificity and non-objectivity, between systems of signification, and between the written and the visual all reflect and reinforce the overarching tension between nationalism and internationalism throughout the work. By exploring and extending these tensions, McCahon creates a work that is geographically flexible and capable of negotiating the paradoxical pressures placed on him as an artist.

### Panel 6

The next canvas offers a different method of negotiating local and global concerns. Panel 6 combines poetry with abstracted, rather than non-objective, painting, a difference which impacts the functioning of the entire canvas (fig. 3). As this shift from the previous panels illustrates, viewers must continuously re-negotiate their readings of the artwork as they progress from panel to panel.

The background of panel 6 features numerous spots of varying sizes, scattered predominantly on the lower right-hand side. Although in isolation this background would similarly appear to be non-objective, considering the spots in relation to the poem reveals something different. Caselberg mentions “Kauris” (2), a word emphasised by being placed on a line of its own. As mentioned earlier, this word immediately suggests a connection to McCahon’s own series of *Kauri* paintings, which he created between 1953 and 1957, the years directly preceding *The Wake*. Throughout McCahon’s *Kauri* series, the trees are reduced down to abstracted lines and circles, the latter dotted haphazardly around the canvas. *Kauri Trees* (1954,
fig. 6) clearly exemplifies the prominence of the circle form in McCahon’s depiction of the trees, which abstracts them into their essential shapes and tones.

The connection between these shapes and the circles in panel 6 of *The Wake* is undeniable. In panel 6, then, McCahon’s abstracted background becomes iconic, sharing a key visual property (circular form) with its object (the kauri tree). Viewers face a different type of tension than in the preceding panel: here, they must negotiate the tension between the iconic background and the symbolic poetry. In linking his visual imagery to the New Zealand landscape, McCahon manages to include a subtle local referent whilst retaining a strongly modernist abstraction, answering both nationalist and internationalist demands at once.

An alternative reading of McCahon’s painting is a non-representational one: viewing the circles simply as circles, rather than abstracted kauri trees. This reading results in a negotiation between representational poetry and non-representational painting, similar to in panel 5. The possibility of these two readings — kauri trees versus circles — imbues the work with further ambiguities. If the painting is read as representational then it engages with the older artistic
tradition of abstraction; if it is non-representational then it aligns the work with more avant-garde painterly developments.

In this instance, Caselberg’s poem aids McCahon in achieving the duality of nationalism and internationalism. In the panel 6 stanza, Caselberg uses apostrophe to directly address the trees and kauris that McCahon depicts: “And you, trees, mute cypress-hooded / Kauris” (34–35). The inclusion of a Māori word anchors the text in Aotearoa, temporarily providing readers with a fixed location in which to place the poem. It also nudges the viewer into seeing the painting as depicting an abstract representation of kauri trees. More broadly speaking, the word connects *The Wake* to the local landscape, improving the likelihood of positive local reception by critics looking for New Zealand referent.

**Panel 8**

Panel 8 offers an alternative method of negotiating local and global concerns (fig. 2). Although similar to panel 6 in its coupling of poetry with abstract painting, the ambiguities of panel 8’s imagery are notably different. The choice of a horizon line as subject matter imbues panel 8 with a level of ambiguity that differs from preceding panels. McCahon’s horizon is both local and global: local, in that the poem has already centred the work on New Zealand, and global, in the inherent universality of horizon lines. Horizon lines can be found anywhere around the globe, intrinsically coupled with the concept of looking into the distance, away from one’s current location. Unlike the kauri trees of panel 6, panel 8’s horizon line is simultaneously local and global, able to answer calls for nationalism and globalism at once. In this geographical shift, McCahon echoes the same shifts between locations and time periods found within Caselberg’s poem.

The background of panel 8 features washes of earthy colour, divided horizontally into two sections. The blurred divide seems to suggest a literal horizon line, especially due to the prominence of such imagery in McCahon’s work in the years before he painted *The Wake*. In his
landscape work leading up to *The Wake*, the artist frequently divided canvases in this way, such as in *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury* (1950, fig. 7). In such earlier works, which are completely preoccupied with earth and sky, we find the same halved canvases as in *The Wake*. This visual echo allows us to identify the panel 8 division as a similarly abstracted horizon line.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 7:** Colin McCahon. 1950. *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury*. Oil on canvas. 885 × 1165mm. Auckland Art Gallery.

McCahon’s choice of visual subject matter reflects the content of panel 8’s poetry, which deals chiefly with the sky and constellations: “Orion strides the firmament” (86); “Scorpio’s red heart” (88); “But stars explode” (90). The inclusion of a horizon line reflects this focus on the sky, visually supporting the content of the poem. In this sense, both painting and poetry are thematically linked in the cohesive presentation of subject matter.

Yet Johansen points out that types of signs such as paintings can also become ambiguous. McCahon’s painted horizon, for instance, is both an icon in its shared visual properties with its object, an index in the way in which its form is defined by its object, and a symbol due to the necessity of the viewer needing to “read” the image in order to understand it (1988, 499). This multiplicity of signification creates a complex viewing process for audiences. Shifts between
image and text, and methods of interpretation, reinforce the pre-existing ambiguities of the work. The geographical shifts within the poem are reinforced by the shifts between image and text.

The extra-terrestrial references throughout the poem, such as “firmament,” “Orion” and “Scorpio” provide further examples of this ambiguity. These words are both culturally located within the Western tradition and yet refer to the universal human experience of looking up at the night sky. As McCahon’s horizon forms are both local and universal, so too are the references to the sky and constellations throughout Caselberg’s poem. In this way, McCahon demonstrates how cross-medium collaboration allows for an ambiguity of signification which in turn contributes to a simultaneous locality and internationalism of art and poetry.

McCahon sought variation throughout The Wake, at times creating balances between text and image and at other times abandoning the textual element in favour of complete visual abstraction. What becomes increasingly clear is that McCahon could not deal with these competing pressures through a single, simplistic approach. Instead, The Wake demonstrates how a multi-faceted response is necessary to successfully create a work ambiguous enough to negotiate local and global demands. McCahon’s series of canvasses, each presents a specific balance of text and image able to be read as both national and international. He did so by making his paintings oscillate between text and image, European tradition and local New Zealand referent, abstraction and non-objective art. At a time when the pressures placed on New Zealand writers and artists were both demanding and paradoxical, McCahon identified painted poetry as a tool with which to secure a new approach to art making. As a result, The Wake is both a nationalist painting and a display of global modernism and avant-garde experimentation.
Chapter Two: *Malady, the Malady Series and Concrete Poetry*

*Malady* (1970)

The *Malady* series by Ralph Hotere and Bill Manhire exemplifies the way in which cross-medium collaboration was used to address the pressures of modernism as they changed throughout the 1960s and 70s. The original book, and the series of paintings that followed, utilised the combination of abstract or non-objective painting with Concrete Poetry as a technique to achieve both local referent and international significance. By engaging with Concrete Poetry, Manhire and Hotere broke with the binary centre-periphery model of modernism that had defined much of New Zealand’s literature and art in favour of a more international framework instead.

From its outset *Malady* and the *Malady* series were based on the act of cross-medium collaboration. “Malady” was written by Manhire and gifted to Hotere, who then contributed images to accompany the text in the published book. The poem comprises a series of repetitions of the words “malady,” “melody,” and “my lady”, placed in various arrangements chiefly based around a column formation. Hotere’s painted contributions to the book similarly reflect the column image — he created long, vertical strips of paint on opposing pages to Manhire’s text. Following this initial collaboration, Hotere went on to create a series of large-scale paintings preoccupied with the same repetitions of the words “malady” and “melody” in varying arrangements.

*Malady’s* avant-garde focus on visual language ties it to the international Concrete Poetry movement. Manhire described his poem as a “concrete/pattern poem”, referring to the way in which the text is arranged in long columns of repetitions, or occasionally scattered across the page or in isolated, single lines (Quoted in O’Brien 1996, 22). The visual effects of the words are favoured over any sense of narrative. Although the linguistic meaning of the words is an important part of the work, the treatment of the text as a concrete, visual element is equally
important; according to Manhire “there’s a point where… [the familiar word] empties of meaning altogether and simply becomes patterned marks on paper or canvas” (Quoted in O’Brien 1996, 23). Hotere’s contribution of painted columns reinforce this visual element as both text and painting mirror one another in form. Readers are encouraged to view the text as well as read it, appreciating the formation of larger shapes on the page.

The tension between reading and viewing was a key component of the Concrete Poetry movement. Kenneth Goldsmith writes: “While concrete poetry employs visual means, it’s the tension between textuality and visuality that gives the work its punch, making it successful poetry” (2008, 196). In Malady, textual and visual elements compete for attention and demand separate methods of interpretation. In the poetic component alone, tension between interpreting the text as image or language adds dynamism and complexity to the work.

Malady’s cover provides an immediate example of this visual treatment of language (fig. 8). Rather than consisting of one title, we are presented with multiple iterations of “Malady” descending in a column from the top of the page to the bottom. Embossed on the page, the repetitions range from barely visible to darkly imprinted. In this regard, the Concrete Poetry concept of language as visual art is at the literal forefront of the work. If language were simply treated as language, one iteration would have been sufficient to perform the function of the title. Instead, Manhire and Hotere immediately launch into a visual exploration of the column form that will go on to dominate the following pages. The embossing draws attention the physical treatment of the words, emphasising their tangible nature.
By engaging with the Concrete Poetry movement, Manhire made a distinct break with the traditions of centre-periphery emulation that had preceded him. Poetry such as “The Wake” had frequently been caught up in the pressure to imitate the world cultural centres of England and the United States “in order to gain recognition… as an equal” (Hayot 2012, 5). By framing their local modernisms as the only universal art, nations such as England and the United States placed pressure on other nations to imitate their distinct artistic style, or else run the risk of appearing un-modernist. However, the Concrete Poetry movement presented an alternative to this binary model. Developing across a range of countries, including Russia, France, Italy and Switzerland, Concrete Poetry had a strongly international focus.
Across his broader series of paintings, Hotere maintained the focus on Concrete Poetry through consistent use of “Malady” as primary subject matter. Like The Wake, the Malady series revolves around a typewritten poem, combined with painting in an act of cross-medium collaboration. In fact, Manhire and Hotere worked together in a strikingly similar fashion to McCallon and Caselberg — Caselberg wrote “The Wake” poem for McCallon to adapt in paint; Manhire typed up “Malady” before giving it to Hotere, who turned the poem in an artist’s chapbook (Manhire 2017). This exchange extended to a broader collaborative relationship between Manhire and Hotere, similar to the friendship between McCallon and Caselberg. Yet in terms of poetic style “The Wake” and “Malady” could not be more different: none of Caselberg’s sense of grand, sweeping tradition can be found in “Malady”. Rather, Manhire is preoccupied with minimizing language, exploring wordplay, the significance of similar sounds, and the treatment of words as objects on the page.

I have previously argued that a key reason behind the prominence of cross-medium collaboration in twentieth-century New Zealand was the sense of isolation commonly felt amongst writers and artists during this time. The continuation of such cross-medium collaboration into the 1970s suggests that this sense of isolation was still present in the creative climate. Despite the increasing interconnectedness of global modernism, new technology and more efficient systems of transportation and communication, individuals like Manhire and Hotere still felt isolated from bustling, global cultural hubs, just as Caselberg and McCallon had. Manhire states “There weren’t enough of them [artists and writers] to build communities . . . those who were doing adventurous or avant-garde things were even fewer,” (2017). Thus, cross-medium collaboration offered both a sense of solace and a flexible tool for negotiating the pressures still facing poets and painters.

Like The Wake, Malady uses both text and image to engage both local and global themes. The Wake combined New Zealand nationalism with international modernism: McCallon referenced the local landscape in his abstract art and Caselberg’s poetry, but left this
interpretation ambiguous to allow for a more internationalist reading of his avant-garde art. In a similar way, *Malady* also combines international themes alongside local specificity. The international qualities of the work are the most immediately apparent, as they compositionally define both the poetic and painted aspects of book. Hotere’s painterly elements strongly drew upon global avant-garde art movements such as minimalism and abstractionism. In his contribution to the work, Hotere added long strips of abstract or non-objective paint on opposite pages to Manhire’s text. O’Brien has commented that these strips seem to “elaborate” on Manhire’s poetry, providing a visual element to accompany the poem (1996, 21). These strips combined washes of watercolour and darker, more defined lines of varying thicknesses. It is likely that these columns are non-objective in nature, as they do not clearly represent any particular subject matter. However, it is possible that Hotere intended the strips as an abstract representation of Manhire’s columns of text: the painted and written columns mirror one another on several pages of the work, and Hotere seems to be emulating the descent of the repeated words. Whether Hotere’s columns are abstract or non-objective, their style draws heavily upon the developments of the international art world such as abstractionism and non-objectivity. By tapping into these trends, Hotere aligns *Malady* with the global and modern.

Whilst being connected to international art movements, *Malady* also retains an important linguistic link to specifically local culture. “Malady” and “melody” are homophones when spoken in the New Zealand accent, but not in the accents of the Anglophone world cultural ‘centres’ — England and the United States. Without the New Zealand accent, the key words of the poem cannot operate as homophones, and a key element of the work thus becomes disabled. Local context is therefore crucial in order to understand the full effects of the work.

The poem’s dependency on the New Zealand accent signalled a shift away from the received pronunciation (RP) that poets of Allen Curnow’s generation generally adopted, and the placement of greater emphasis on the significantly differing New Zealand vernacular (Gordon and Deverson 1998, 35). Although subtle, Manhire’s reliance on a different type of New Zealand
accent, one previously considered uncultured, suggests a severing of ties to outdated tradition of
emulating England. Instead, Manhire proposes a new type of poetry, one intrinsically anchored
in contemporary New Zealand culture rather than relying on no longer relevant cultural models.
Manhire combines this focus on the local contemporary with an internationalist engagement
with newly emerging ideas surrounding the intersection of poetry and visuality. In this sense, the
local referent of *Malady* is much more subtle and abstract than in *The Wake*: it exists purely in the
oral or aural qualities of the work, rather than in the vocabulary of McCahon and Caselberg’s
“Taranaki” (35) and “Kauri” (97). Only when spoken — either out loud or within the reader’s
mind — does the importance of local accent become evident. Arguably it is also only when
considered in an international light — in comparison to the accents of Britain or the United
States — that the local New Zealand accent is revealed. In this sense, the local and international
aspects of the work are both important and necessary for this work to be read.

Just as *The Wake* comprises numerous panels, each containing specific balances of text and
painting, so does each page of *Malady* contain a different arrangement of Concrete Poetry and
visual imagery. Like McCahon, Manhire and Hotere create a range of different balances between
systems of signification, challenging the perceptions of viewers across numerous sets of poetry
and paint. Later, Hotere would introduce elements of Colour Field painting and geometric
abstraction to the series, exploring in greater depth the possibilities of language as a visual object.
I will demonstrate the first stages of this experimentation by closely examining select pages from
*Malady*, before assessing Hotere’s later paintings in more detail.

Page 4 of *Malady* presents the first of Manhire’s stanzas arranged in the vertical column
structure that would go on to define the book and series of paintings (fig. 9). Like on the cover,
“malady” is repeated in a long column, produced in identical typewritten copies. Unlike the
cover, the pages of the book are non-embossed, and the page 4 column is located on the left-
hand side of the page rather than in the centre. Although subtle, this shift in location of the
column provides an example of the way in which Manhire began to play with the physical positioning of the words on the page. Importance is placed on their visual qualities, rather than their individual meaning as language, tapping into the basic principles of the Concrete Poets. On the opposite page, Hotere’s painted column mirrors the positioning of the text. Paint and poetry literally oppose one another, suggesting that both elements can perform the same visual function on the page.

In addition to the parallels between image and text in *Malady*, there are strong visual connections between the patterns of the words on the page. The column arrangement ties the visual experiments together; even when the patterns diverge into scattered or minimised formations the column form is constantly alluded and returned to. Manhire creates a sense of
contrast between his basic vertical arrangement of text and the numerous other patterns that diverge from it. For example, page 5 only contains three iterations of “malady,” descending down the page but then ceasing abruptly, like a column structure cut short. The irregularity of this formation is emphasised by the full-length column on the opposite page. On page 7, vertical repetitions are abandoned altogether in favour of one single, capitalised iteration of “MALADY.” Yet even in this case we are reminded of the basic, column structure by Hotere’s long strip of paint which descends on page 8 (fig. 10). This tension between column-like forms and departures from it continues throughout the book, creating a sense of formal unity alongside experimentation. Viewers are encouraged to consider the Concrete Poetry as a visual element that can be manipulated in a myriad of ways.

Two instances of freeform handwriting do exist in Malady, breaking away from the printed font — the poem’s title and Manhire’s name at the bottom of the inner cover, and “DESIGN:
Ralph Hotere” at the bottom of page 22. In each case the writing was produced by hand, Manhire’s in thick calligraphy and Hotere’s in a finer, inked style. Neither of these phrases operate as part of the poem itself — they are thus neatly separated by function as well as means of production. These instances of handwriting provide an important link to McCahon’s style of free-flowing, painted letters, which both Manhire and Hotere were well aware of and working in dialogue with. That only a small proportion of Malady is created in the same style of McCahon, however, demonstrates their desire to move away from the earlier artist’s work and produce poetry that responds to the technological developments of their own modern time. McCahon’s influence is acknowledged, but does not dominate the concepts and visuals of Malady.

On page 10 Manhire departs from the column structure dramatically, experimenting with the ability of the typewriter to ‘scatter’ text on the page (fig. 11). In this further exploration of the visual possibilities of language, Manhire aligns his poem more strongly with the Concrete Poetry movement: he demonstrates his interest in the full potential of poetry as a visual object, able to be flung around on a page much in the same way as the Abstract Expressionists flung paint. The word “melody” makes its first appearance here, not united in neat formation but typed in seemingly haphazard arrangement across the available space. Occasionally groups of three iterations align themselves in a short column, referencing the arrangement of the repeated word “malady” on previous pages, but the overall effect on this page is one of randomness. In this regard Manhire seems to be playing on the idea of “melody” as a musical term: the scattered arrangement suggests the positioning of musical notes on a stave. Manhire’s awareness of the dual meanings of his words further reflects the methods and goals of the Concrete Poets. The repetitions of “melody” are both repeated symbolic references to the idea of music, and iconic references to physical musical notation. Simultaneously, the poem’s arrangement is limited by the typewriter; Manhire creates a sense of carefree, whimsical language, but cannot escape the identical appearance and order of each repeated word.
Hotere’s accompanying line art, too, takes on a distinct element of disorder in this part of the book, creating a thematic connection between poetry and paint. The lines of the previous pages had overlapped closely, united, with only the occasional stray line sitting outside of the column form. Page 9, however, contains five vertical bodies of paint, all separate from one another (fig. above). The overall effect is of a deconstructed column, seeming to mirror the looser arrangement of text on the opposite page. If the paint has been enlivened by the “melody” of Manhire’s new word, then these pages exemplify the book’s close correlation between image and writing.

On pages 17 and 18 Manhire continues to explore the possibilities of Concrete Poetry and typewriter technology (fig. 12). Page 17 presents the vertical line of text once again, with a column of capitalised “MALADY” repetitions descending down the left-hand side. Instead of mirroring this text on the opposing page with Hotere’s abstract painting, however, Manhire uses text to form another column on page 18. Other than being constructed with the word “MELODY” rather than “MALADY”, this second column is identical to the first. On the
following page these two columns seem to move closer together — now occupying the same page — the capitalised letters reinforcing the sense of intensity as the “MALADY” and “MELODY” threaten to merge (fig. 13). The final page’s single utterance of “my lady” appears calm and quiet in comparison, subdued in lower case letters. It is uncertain whether the implied romantic love of “my lady” provides context for the previous onslaught of text or is simply a conclusion to the chaos — the idea of love as the inevitable result of malaise and music. It is Manhire’s arrangement of the text as visual object that creates this sense of heightening intensity throughout Malady.

Figure 12: Pages 17–18 of Malady (1970). Bill Manhire and Ralph Hotere.
The important shift from painted poetry to Concrete Poetry that occurred between *The Wake* and *Malady* reflects the developments in technology which took place during the twelve year gap between the two works’ production. Following the Second World War poets such as Charles Olson became interested in the use of the typewriter to make more of the possibilities of word-positioning on the page. New technologies impacted both the speed and style of communication, in turn influencing the progression of Concrete Poetry (Hilder 2016, 39). In *Malady*, the typewriter was of particular importance, as Manhire initially typed the poem himself before giving it to Hotere. The freedoms and limitations of the typewriter shaped the layout of *Malady*, allowing for new exactitudes of text which could not be easily achieved by hand. Manhire’s columns of text repeat not only the word itself, but the formation of the letters themselves. By comparison, *The Wake’s* loose, flowing, clearly hand-painted text conveys the mark of the artist much more. Caselberg’s words become McCahon’s as they transfer from the
original typescript to the canvas. Although this same transaction occurs later throughout the
Malady series, Hotere creating numerous painted versions of the poem, Manhire’s initial
typewriter font is continuously maintained. The link to the technology fuelling the work’s initial
production is never severed.

*The Wake’s* focus on Concrete Poetry is indicative of a shift in systems of influence for
New Zealand writers and artists. The influence of cultural centres had previously shaped the
development of New Zealand creative output, resulting in works such as “The Wake” which
were strongly European in style and theme. While Caselberg sought a degree of nationalism in
his inclusion of local referent, his poetry was largely based on the poetic forms and content of
traditional, canonical works. As I have discussed, this influence reflects the broader centre-
periphery model of modernist influence, where writers and artists from ‘ peripheral’ nations
looked to Britain, and later the United States, for influence and approval.

The Concrete Poetry movement, however, which *Malady* is so strongly influenced by, did
not stem from one central nation at all. Rather, the Concrete Poetry movement emerged from
numerous peripheral locations instead — Brazil, Switzerland, and Germany (Hilder 2016, 148).
Concrete Poetry was, in fact, so far removed from central locations that it operated without
major central artists being aware of its existence. Goldsmith describes his first encounter with
Concrete Poetry as a discovery of “an entire history of textuality and visuality that I never knew
existed”. He writes “Nowhere, in my dead-center position of the New York art world, had I ever
heard of this stuff…Here was a history…that I — and seemingly the entire New York art world
— was totally unaware of” (2008, 194). By engaging with this movement, Manhire thus enters
into a new system of modernist influence. The centre-periphery dynamic is discarded in favour
of a new, periphery-periphery transfer of ideas that did not rely upon cultural ‘centres’ for
validation.

The shift away from centre-periphery thinking evident in *Malady* is likely due to a
significant transition in the New Zealand poetry and art scene in the 1960s and early 1970s.
During this period, the Curnow-esque approach to writing had lost considerable speed, with increasing numbers of poets and artists criticising, rather than celebrating, the outdated mode of thinking which he represented. Rather than turning to England or the United States for poetic and painterly guidance, New Zealanders began expanding their outlook to encompass a range of cultural influences. Susan Stanford Friedman’s web-like system of influence is therefore more appropriate for examining this period in time. Friedman argues that a network model provides a more appropriate lens for viewing modernist influence, because centre-periphery models were no longer “sufficiently global” (2012, 501). Peripheries were no longer limited to turning to the centre for inspiration, but frequently drew upon one another instead.

This periphery-periphery relationship is evident in Manhire’s keen interest in the Scottish journal *Poor Old Tired Horse*. This journal demonstrates Manhire’s awareness of Concrete Poetry, as its editor, Ian Hamilton Finlay, was a keen contributor to the movement. The journal contained a collection of poetry, photography, and visual art, and was largely preoccupied with the intersections between the three. Its content was international and multilingual, featuring work from not only Scotland but Switzerland, Germany, the United States, France, and England. It presented an image of modernist art and poetry that was not limited by geographical boundaries or traditional cultural hierarchies. In drawing inspiration from this journal, Manhire demonstrated an alternative model of international influence where peripheral nations could draw on each other, instead of central nations alone. The similarities between Scotland and New Zealand — both Anglophone colonies of England — reinforce the sense of two smaller nations with shared experiences linking together to create an alternative route of discussion and creativity. In each case, a breakdown of the boundaries between text and image is utilised as a tool for modernist progression and the presentation of new ideas.

Manhire’s interest in the pronunciation of the English language may have been aided by the international and multilingual qualities of *Poor Old Tired Horse*. The journal’s wide range of works from a variety of locations emphasised the myriad of accents and dialects within the
English language. At times the journal’s content was written entirely in other languages, such as Nicole Rabetaud’s French Concrete Poem with illustrations by John Furnival (1965, fig. 14). In this work, variations of the phrase “sky of blue water” are arranged in varying patterns around the central statement “ABSENT pour cause de MALADIE” — ‘absent due to sickness’. This particular poem is striking in both its visual similarities to “Malady” and its conceptual ones, providing a clear link between the journal and Manhire. Furthermore, this poem demonstrates the way in which Concrete Poetry was highly international and often reliant upon language and accent for meaning. Like Malady. Concrete Poetry therefore offered a particularly useful model for writers and artists seeking to reconcile nationalist and internationalist impulses.
This poem is published alongside works from a wide range of countries, emphasising not only the idea of English being spoken in a multitude of accents, but the idea of languages intersecting and overlapping within the genre of Concrete Poetry. Just as the movement did away with ideas of cultural superiority of England and the United States, so did it do away with any related hierarchies of language or pronunciation. Poets such as Manhire would have read such journals and been exposed to a new way of approaching language and art, one that was not limited by the expectations facing McCahon and Caselberg. It is not surprising that a strong interest in accent, language, and visual art emerged from Manhire’s exploration of this journal.

In particular, Manhire admired the wordplay and Concrete Poetry of the journal’s editor, Ian Hamilton Finlay (Manhire 2017). While Finlay’s work often leaned toward the written rather than the visual in collections such as The Dancers Inherit the Party (1962), Poor Old Tired Horse 24 provides photographic evidence of his poetry verging on visual art, in Concrete Poetry sculptures at the Brighton Festival (1967). The links between Finlay and Manhire’s work are distinct, in particular their shared sense of wordplay and preoccupation with slippage of meaning. In Finlay’s “Sailor’s Cross,” for instance, the words “seas” and “ease” are arranged on a hexagonal board (fig. 15). With no clear start or end to the poem, viewers’ eyes dart around the poem in attempt to make sense of its scattered layout. Similarly, “Purse-net Poem” focuses on the similar sounds of the words “seiner” and “silver”, arranged at opposing ends of a sign-like board similar to that of “Sailor’s Cross” (fig. 16).
Figure 15: Ian Hamilton Finlay. 1964. “Sailor’s Cross”.

Figure 16: Ian Hamilton Finlay. 1964. “Purse-net Poem”.
The link between poems such as these and Manhire’s *Malady* is not hard to identify. In both works, grid structures are filled with repetitions of language, which appear simplistic but ultimately achieve more complex poetic outcomes — a poetic system that was very popular across the genre (Hilder 2016, 165). Carl Andre additionally highlights the way in which these grids were produced automatically by mechanical typewriters, a fact which emphasises the close correlation between the structures of Concrete Poetry and the new technology which it was produced on (1981, 12). Manhire’s close engagement with the sub-genre of grid poetry, and his broader involvement with Concrete Poetry as a whole, provides evidence of the shift from a centre-periphery to network model of influence occurring in the second half of the twentieth century.

Focus on visual poetic form in addition to thematic content was a crucial element of the movement away from traditional poetry and toward new genres like Concrete Poetry. Jahan Ramazani writes: “*How* a poem says what it says is no less essential to its identity as a poem than *what* it says. Indeed, in many a poem the main idea—I love you, I mourn my loss, I am in awe of nature—isn’t especially original: it’s the linguistic, formal, and imaginative freshness and vividness that make many a poem” (2016, 121). Manhire adopts this approach in “Malady” by placing importance on the sense of linguistic wordplay and visual qualities of the text on the page. To use Ramazani’s terms, “Malady” takes a relatively unoriginal “main idea” (love’s precarious balance between malaise (“malady”) and harmony (“melody”)), but uses “linguistic, formal, and imaginative freshness” to address the idea in a new way. This approach to poetry is far removed from Caselberg’s “The Wake”, which placed original, highly personal content within a relatively traditional poetic style.

Using language as fuel for avant-garde artistic structures was also a central aim of the visual artists of this period, such as Hotere. Hilder writes that “the post-conceptualist artists of the mid-to-late seventies sought to accentuate the power of language to present itself as *image* and to
transmit meaning beyond its semantic character” (2016, 155). In the case of Hotere, this is the exact approach he adopted in the creation of *Malady* and the later *Malady* series. In the initial book, Hotere reinforced the visual, image-like qualities of Manhire’s poem by reflecting their forms in his painted columns. By providing painted mirror-columns on opposing pages, Hotere suggested that Manhire’s text was operating in a similar way to his images. Implicit in this connection is the idea that perhaps poetry could be understood in the same way as painting — viewed, as well as read — just as painting could likewise be read as well as viewed.

The *Malady* Series

If *Malady* questioned the ways in which Concrete Poetry and avant-garde painting might interact in a book format, then Hotere’s *Malady* series continued the exploration in a new, canvas-based form. Over the years following his and Manhire’s initial collaboration, Hotere produced a full series of *Malady* works, each of which presented lines from the original poem within a range of varying designs. The words from “Malady,” the typewriter font, and the column structure frequently used in the book are all utilised by Hotere across his paintings. The continuation of these elements reinforces the connection between *Malady* and the *Malady* series; just as Hotere’s paintings were placed in the foreign format of Manhire’s book, so too were Manhire’s words relocated to the realm of painted canvas. In each instance, the elements provided by each contributor remain distinct and equally prominent visually. Gordon Collier offers a concise description of the series in *Landfall*, following his viewing of the series’ first public showing:

Ten of the paintings show vertical listings of either ‘melody’ or ‘malady’ alone. A couple incorporate ‘my lady’. A small number use a cross- and/or circle-motif as a central structural feature. Five combine ‘melody’ and ‘malady’ on the one surface,
vertically, diagonally, or as a border or internal frame—in these pictures the words are visually in a state of tension, one with the other.” (1970, 418–421)

In Hotere’s minimal, reduced approach to subject matter present in this series, he aligns himself with the formal approaches of the Late Modernist period (1985, 28–31, 63).

Examined individually, key works from the series demonstrate the extent to which Hotere merged Concrete Poetry and cutting-edge modernism in the creation of the *Malady* series.

*Black Painting V* [from ‘Malady’, a poem by Bill Manhire] (1970, fig. 17) exemplifies the way in which Hotere sought to extend the concepts of the poem into a painted format. The connections with the book are clearly translated onto the canvas in this work: on the left-hand side a column of typewriter-style repetitions of “MELODY” descend as they did in *Malady*, while on the right-hand side a series of thin lines form their own column, also as they did throughout the book. The same sense of text and image mirroring one another as in *Malady* is repeated here, with the two aspects of the painting composing each half of the painting. By preserving these key elements from the original text, Hotere also continues the exploration of ideas surrounding Concrete Poetry and the boundaries between painting and poetry. Viewers face the same contrast between the written column on one side, and the purely visual column on the other. The dual function of the poem is also maintained: the words are both performing as vessels of meaning and concrete, visual elements on the canvas.
At the same time, *Black Painting V* exemplifies the key differences between the original book and the painted adaptations: the paintings are canvas-based rather than paper-based, black backgrounds replace the white paper, “MELODY” might look typewritten but is hand painted by Hotere, and the painting is of a much larger scale than the original, A5 book. By making these changes Hotere does not just continue the exploration of *Malady*, but extends it into new territory. These key changes are found across the entirety of Hotere’s *Malady* series, each painting
containing slightly differing balances and tensions between the written and visual constituents, just as each pair of pages did in *Malady* the book.

The shift from book to canvas format is perhaps the most obvious new element of Hotere’s *Malady* series, but one which carries important implications for the direction and ideas of the work. In the original *Malady* book, emphasis is placed more on the literary element than the painted element; readers automatically draw the association between the book format and poetry more so than the book format and painting. Hotere had to make his paintings fit into an unfamiliar format, one designed for the presentation of poetry rather than the large-scale abstraction he was accustomed to producing. The book format encourages a literary approach to interpretation: readers expect to see poetry, and thus automatically interpret Hotere’s painting as a complementary addition to Manhire’s text.

By adapting Manhire’s poetry into his painting, however, Hotere became free to explore his ideas within a medium where the painted element takes precedence. Viewers automatically approach painted works on canvas with an art-centered frame of mind, anticipating the need to interpret the work visually rather than in terms of reading. This shifts the focus from text, as in *Malady*, to Hotere’s painting. Viewers must decide how the text functions as part of a painting, rather than how Hotere’s paint might illustrate Manhire’s typed poem. A similar set of signification tensions thus come into play as in *The Wake*: Hotere’s non-objective background operates as an object in and of itself; it does not depict anything other than black paint on a canvas. Manhire’s words, however, work as symbolic signs for different emotional states. Readers apply their knowledge of language as a tool to translate the symbolic sign (“MALADY”) into object (sickness or malaise). However, a key difference between *The Wake* and the *Malady* series is that the latter employs text within a Concrete Poetry capacity. By treating words as visual components in and of themselves, the words take on the role of object as well as sign. They are both signifying an object, and being an object (marks on a canvas).
The shift from the white paper of *Malady* to the black canvas of the *Malady* paintings adds another dimension to these issues of signification and language. Across the series, Hotere consistently bases his work on a simple black background of paint, upon which line work and Manhire’s Concrete Poetry are placed. Often, Hotere will utilise the black background to play with our ability to perceive the text, making the repetitions of words vary in their degree of visibility. In *Black Painting V* for instance, every second “MALADY” in the left-hand column of text is faint and difficult to see, almost blending into the black background itself. The eye is immediately drawn to the lighter, more easily visible repetitions of “MELODY,” only later noticing that there is a second layer placed in between the lines of the first. In this regard, Hotere can be understood as experimenting with the visual possibilities of Concrete Poetry and pushing at the boundaries of signification systems. In *Black Painting V*, readers immediately skim the easily visible repetitions of “MELODY,” perhaps not immediately realizing that a second layer of repetitions are placed in the spaces between the first. The more easily visible words operate chiefly as signs — viewers instantly recognise them as words, and so interpret them automatically as such. The harder to see words, however, threaten to vanish into the black background. Rather than read these words, viewers are more likely to assume they are part of the non-objective background. Hotere therefore shows how visual elements such as colour can impact the way in which words function. Additionally, he suggests that there is a symbolic equivalence between melody or malady and blackness, typically representing despair, but also open to interpretation as a tone of neutrality and absence of colour.

On a separate level, Hotere also demonstrates the way in which colour can impact the order in which poems are read. When all the words of the poem were presented in the same shade of black on the white page, viewers could easily read the entire poem, probably reading from the top to bottom of the page. However, when half of these words become more obscured than others, the tendency shifts to reading the lighter words first, as they are the ones which immediately pop out. By making half the poem harder to read, Hotere alters the structure of the
poem itself. This directly demonstrates the profound effect of visual elements on Concrete Poems.

We see this same experimentation with colour and blackness occurring throughout the Malady series. In Black Painting VII from MALADY a Poem by Bill Manhire (1971, fig. 18) the same interplay between immediately visible and harder to discern words is carried out, in a centralised column of “MALADY” repetitions.

Figure 18: Ralph Hotere. 1971. Black Painting VII from MALADY a Poem by Bill Manhire. Acrylic on canvas. 1780 x 710mm.
Similarly, *Black Painting XII from “Malady”, a Poem by Bill Manhire* (1970, fig. 19) is clearly defined by a border of blue “MALADY” repetitions, but less clearly focused on a cross shape that almost vanishes into the background. The words which fill and help to define this central shape are, in fact, of the exact same shade as the background itself, only made visible by the contrasting shade of the cross background. In every case the same interplay between sign and object is carried out, with the tensions of interpretation creating a dynamic viewing experience. These are not paintings of rest; rather, the eye and mind are constantly attempting to negotiate these tensions between the visual and written elements. These tensions reinforce the way Hotere positions his work in an indeterminate position between nationalism and internationalism, or that whether we see it as one or the other depends on which element we focus on.

![Image of Black Painting XII from “Malady”, a Poem by Bill Manhire](image_url)

*Figure 19: Ralph Hotere, 1970. Black Painting XII from “Malady”, a Poem by Bill Manhire. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas. 1775 x 915mm. Hocken Collections.*
In this regard the Malady series of works are strikingly similar to The Wake. In McCahon’s work, viewers faced the decision of reading Caselberg’s poem or viewing the abstract or non-objective, highly immersive background and solely painterly panels. The two elements of The Wake — text and painting — competed with one another, causing a tension that largely defined the work as a whole. By creating text that threatens to blend into the background painting entirely, Hotere creates a new type of tension between the two elements, not by emphasizing their differences like McCahon, but by closing the visual gap between the two. The statement here is clear, and very much in line with the ideology of the Concrete Poets: that language can function as a powerful visual tool and in this way be used to explore a myriad of new and exciting artistic and literary avenues. The tension between sign and object that existed between McCahon’s poetry and painting can also exist within poetry itself: Concrete Poetry encapsulates both the roles of writing and image in Hotere’s paintings.

Of course, in translating Manhire’s text to a new format, Hotere did not preserve the same method of production as the poet. Hotere hand painted extracts from “Malady” when creating his series of paintings, in emulation of Manhire’s typewriter font instead. Although on a surface level the effect is the same — mechanical repetitions of the same serif font — the meaning behind the method of production makes Hotere’s painted text significantly different from the original typed poem. Manhire utilised the typewriter as a form of new technology that allowed for nearly identical repetitions — perfect for the creation of grid-poems like “Malady”. The technology additionally allowed for greater flexibility in terms of arranging poetry visually, such as on page 10 where “melody” is scattered around the page. In reproducing the same font in paint, Hotere achieves notably different effects.

On one level, Hotere creates a visual and symbolic connection to the typewriter technology that created “Malady”, and more broadly speaking fueled the Concrete Poetry movement. He emulates the same sense of mechanization and tapped into the treatment of language as visual. His painted font operates as an indexical sign which points to the typewriter
— its presence is implicit, marked by the style of text created, even if its presence is imaginary. In many ways this process is the same as the one in Malady: we view Hotere’s painted text as though it actually were the large-scale typewriting that it looks like. No real changes occur on this level.

However, Hotere does not simply replicate the same typewriter process as used by Manhire. By painting the letters by hand, Hotere loses the element of new technology and identical, mechanized repetition so intrinsic to typewriter poetry. The sense of mechanization present across the Malady paintings is artificial, handmade. Within this knowledge there is a new tension: while Hotere could have utilised the freedom of the brush to re-version Manhire’s poetry in any style he chose, he instead replicated the same sense of order and constraint that Manhire’s typewriter mandated. It is an indexical sign which points to an imaginary object other than the one which created it.

An alternative reading of Hotere’s font is provided by Manhire, who argues the letters emulated the “[stenciled] place names on export produce: destinations on wool bales and things like that. Lots of New Zealanders have seen those stenciled letters — often pointing elsewhere — in freezing works, in wool stores, in orchard packing sheds, down at the wharf” (Quoted in O’Brien 1996, 28). In this case, Hotere similarly is reproducing a mechanized text with the intention of emulating the same sense of mass production and technology as the typewriter. Yet Manhire’s interpretation allows for an ambiguity of locale that aligns itself neatly with the subtle tension between internationalism and nationalism within Malady. Just as packing shed crates are simultaneously local in their contents and global in their destination, so is the Malady series: local content wrapped up in international modernist packaging. Manhire’s statement that the letters are “often pointing elsewhere” neatly summarises this tension. In this regard Hotere’s work can be said to utilise cross-medium elements in a similar way as McCahon: in order to create a level of ambiguity that both anchors the work in New Zealand and allows it to be international in its modernist elements.
The limits which Hotere placed on himself in the creation of these mechanized repetitions of words stand in stark contrast to the lack of constraints facing McCahon in The Wake. Unlike Hotere, McCahon added a strongly personal element to his work by painting the poem in his own unique, characteristically looping and whimsical handwriting. In this sense, Hotere’s series seems to represent the progression in art and literature toward adopting new technology and mass production. By choosing mechanized type production over more organic, free-flowing writing, Hotere fully embraces the origins of both Malady and the modernist movements occurring at the time. In addition to this, Hotere’s mechanised type appears to eliminate all trace of the individual artist, unlike McCahon’s highly personal, flowing handwriting. This impersonal element can be viewed as a further effort to create a global, ambiguous work, rather than one anchored to New Zealand through close connection to the artist.

An additional way in which Hotere also drew upon international artistic trends was through the size of the Malady works. All of Hotere’s paintings are large in scale, exceptionally so when compared to the small book the project was based on. Black Painting XV, from ‘Malady’ a poem by Bill Manhire (1970), for instance, hangs at 915mm wide and 1777mm high — a scale not out of keeping with the rest of the series. This increased size allowed Hotere to take his and Manhire’s exploration of Concrete Poetry and visuality to new levels, tapping into the possibilities of Colour Field painting and similar ideas of immersiveness. In the mid-century Colour Field movement overseas, artists explored the ability of non-objective, large-scale washes of colour to create immersive experiences for viewers. While the key artists of this movement, such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still were renowned for their use of colour, it is likely that Hotere’s minimal black canvasses were partly inspired by their concept of large stretches of single tones. Hotere developed this concept further than the Colour Field artists, however, through his addition of Concrete Poetry. The result is one of guided immersion: the field of black invites the viewer to contemplate the pure experience of the colour while the text continuously pulls the eye back to the surface and suggests meaning which can be attributed to
the blackness. In this sense, Hotere’s painting resists immersion by forcing the viewer into a constant visual oscillation between image and text. In a small, book format, this same sense of magnificence and immersion simply could not be achieved; Hotere’s enormous canvasses are all-encompassing in a way that is impossible for the printed page.

In terms of this immersive function, The Wake operates in a strikingly similar way as the Malady series. In the earlier work, McCahon emulated the work of the Abstract Expressionists and Colour Field artists in his large-scale canvases composed of washes and abstract applications of paint. Like with the Malady series, viewers of The Wake negotiated the tension between being immersed in the abstract or non-objective background and reading the poetry laid over the top of it. In the Malady series, however, Hotere treats the poetry less as a separate element of the work than McCahon did, choosing to almost merge the two into one single, black layer. Viewers can easily ignore the repetitions of “MALADY” or “MELODY” as their tones fade so subtly into the background, becoming immersed in both text and background colour.

In both cases, however, the immersive background paintings adopt meaning according to the poetry written over the top of it. In “The Wake,” the background of panel 6 appears to be composed of non-objective paint washes, circles and marks. It is the reference to the “Kauris” that forges the connection between the abstract circles and a local referent, providing the background with a subject matter and meaning. Once that connection is made, panel 6 ceases being an immersive, non-objective panel and becomes instead an immersive, abstracted forest scene. In a similar way, the words “MALADY” and “MELODY” seem to imbue Hotere’s black backgrounds with a new sense of meaning. “MALADY” seems to add a tone of depression and melancholy to the black background, creating an experience of contemplation and despondency. Where “MELODY” is the repetition of choice, however, Hotere’s black backgrounds seem to adopt a tone of harmony and serenity, less a pool of negativity and more a peaceful, contemplative space.
Hotere’s explorations of language and colour opened up a new connection between Concrete Poetry and visual art which not only McCahon and Caselberg, but Manhire, had left relatively unexplored. Though McCahon — like Hotere — relies heavily on black and white throughout his oeuvre, he does not fully explore the correlations between colour and language choice. In Hotere’s work, this connection is thoroughly investigated. Hotere creates repetitions of “MALADY” and “MELODY” in varying colours — numerous shades of black across all panels, as well as some use of other colours such as blue in Black Painting XII — in order to fully explore the effect of such colours on the tone and connotations of his Colour Field paint. This is an aspect of the Malady series which directly connects writing and painting, and which could not have been explored without Hotere and Manhire’s direct collaboration.

Hotere’s experimentations with Concrete Poetry and avant-garde painting were not limited to the reproductions of Manhire’s writing as it was originally composed, however. While Hotere never changed the words themselves from “Malady”, he frequently altered the shapes and layouts of the poem, creating his own works of Shape Poetry. In Black Painting XII, for instance, Hotere refigures the word “MALADY” into a cross form, and in Black Painting XV he places both “MALADY” and “MELODY” into an X shape. These explorations of form further echo the work of the Concrete Poets, who similarly experimented with the shapes of word groups. The international element of the poetry itself therefore continues to be extended past the initial Malady project, by Hotere as well as Manhire.

The poetic developments across the Malady series of paintings demonstrate a distinct shift in thinking toward a more network-like global model of modernist influence. Rather than turning to cultural centres such as England and the United States, as McCahon and Caselberg had done, Hotere and Manhire looked to the Concrete Poetry developments of smaller, peripheral nations instead in proposition of a more truly international system of influence. Although cross-medium collaboration helped Manhire and Hotere to negotiate both local referent and global modernism as The Wake had done, the Malady series marked a distinct shift in priorities from the earlier
work. No longer concerned with centre-periphery emulation, Manhire and Hotere instead sought to connect with a global network of creative experimenters and explorers.

Combining visual art and writing allowed a greater and more complex exploration of the possibilities of Concrete Poetry than either medium could have afforded alone. In *Malady*, Hotere’s columns of paint alongside Manhire’s typed columns of words encouraged consideration of the relationship between poems and paint, and the ways in which they can interact with each other conceptually. In Hotere’s *Malady* series of paintings, the line between the two mediums increasingly blurs. Text is not only treated as visual object, but is formed into new shapes and verges on becoming one with the Colour Field backgrounds.

*Malady* and the *Malady* series additionally demonstrate the development of avant-garde ideas toward the relationship between writing and painting. As modernism progressed through the second half of the twentieth century, artists and writers of conceptual works began to further question the proximities between the two mediums. Through their collaboration, Manhire and Hotere helped to expand this field of investigation by being part of an international conversation and engaging in New Zealand-specific debates like accents and colonialism.

The collaboration between poets and painters during the second half of the twentieth century thus served a multitude of purposes. In the case of *The Wake*, painted poetry allowed McCahon and Caselberg to negotiate the dual demands of both global modernism and local nationalism, creating a work of both ambiguous universal themes and specific Aotearoa referent. As the concerns of New Zealand painters and writers developed, however, Manhire and Hotere demonstrated how cross-medium collaboration could also be used to respond to new concerns. Their book and series of paintings pushed at the boundaries of Concrete Poetry and painting, exploring new areas of avant garde art and writing and examining cross-disciplinary boundaries in a new, unique way.

In the *Malady* series, Manhire and Hotere took significant steps forward in the development of New Zealand modernist poetry and painting. The importance of the New
Zealand English accent, rejection of local landscape as subject matter, and contribution to the Concrete Poetry movement all contributed to the turning point that was *Malady*. The series contained a distinct and intentional shift from landscape to language, questioning and altering ideas of where true New Zealand identity lies. Yet what is strikingly absent from these key cross-medium collaborations is the Māori language, the language most specifically locatable in New Zealand. The *Malady* series offers a limited vision of Aotearoa as a bicultural nation heading into the future. It would take a later collaboration between both Hotere and McCahon to bring this important element of New Zealand culture into the forefront of our art.
Chapter Three: *Te Tangi o te Pipiwharaua* and Cross-Cultural, Cross-

Medium Collaboration

*Te Tangi o te Pipiwharaua* (*The Song of the Shining Cuckoo; a Poem by Tangirau Hotere*) (1974, fig. 20) illustrates a further extension of the potential for cross-medium collaboration to further encompass bicultural and bilingual collaboration. *Te Tangi* demonstrates the way in which McCahon drew inspiration from Ralph and Tangirau Hotere, utilizing ideas of Māori culture and language to fuel a new type of cross-medium collaboration. *Te Tangi* combines not only poetry with painting, but te reo Māori with English, Māori heritage with Western modernism, local culture with global art movements, and spoken and written forms of communication. In this way, *Te Tangi* is something of an apex of mid-twentieth-century painted poetry in Aotearoa: it combines all the advances made by McCahon and Hotere in the field of visual language and collaboration, but also includes the important additions of explicit Māori culture and language.

*Figure 20: Colin McCahon. 1974. Te Tangi o te Pipiwharaua (The Song of the Shining Cuckoo; a Poem by Tangirau Hotere). Oil on unstretched canvas panels. Assembled to form 1770 x 4710mm. Hocken Collections.*
This chapter will assess *Te Tangi* as the culmination of McCahon and Hotere’s key concerns, as well as examining the artwork’s forays into the new areas of biculturalism and use of numbers. By adopting a cross-cultural collaboration, McCahon was able to create a work that provided a new vision of a bicultural New Zealand society. By aligning Māori culture with European, as well as waiata with modernist art, McCahon negotiated the paradoxical pressures for artists to be both local and global, traditional and new. In *Te Tangi*, he created a work that exemplifies and extends the key role played by collaborative painted poetry in New Zealand art.

**Bicultural New Zealand and Te Tangi**

By the 1970s, the profile of modernist Māori art and writing in New Zealand had risen significantly. Kobena Mercer writes that “the dynamics of inter-cultural exchange went through significant shifts during the 1940s and 1950s” (2006, 8). In a New Zealand context, these shifts took the form of Māori decolonisation and the establishment of Māori modernism in the arts (Skinner 2016, 51–53). In some cases, this Māori modernism involved the transfer of traditional Māori symbology to a modernist context, such as in the work of Robyn Kahukiwa and Selwyn Muru. Muru’s statement that “the creative avenues leading from traditional Māori art are still open for the artist to explore” demonstrated a key principle behind this approach: rather than enter into the visual language of Western artists, Māori people could seize the unique angle that their cultural background afforded them (quoted in Vincent 1964, 27).

In other cases, however, Māori artists chose to enter into avant-garde art movements and to produce work with little or no noticeable ties to their Māori heritage. For artists like Hotere, artistic modernism provided “access to a discourse of universalism and a means to challenge the binaries of indigenous/modern and tradition/modernity” (Skinner 2016, 53). Whether artists tapped into traditional art as subject matter or moved away from it like Hotere, Māori modernists pushed at the stereotype of the indigenous artist. By the 1970s, Māori artists and art held a significant place within bicultural New Zealand society.
At the same time, Māori modernism became a site of contention when non-Māori artists were seen to have wrongfully appropriated aspects of Māori culture. Artists like Gordon Walters would in the 1980s become embroiled in debates over the usage of Māori elements in paintings by Pākehā artists and would be criticised for misappropriation. Māori critic Ngahuia Te Awekotuku criticised Walters’s art, stating “I am mortified by the deliberate, and, I think, quite promiscuous and irresponsible plundering of Maori motifs—designs, forms, myths, and all those areas that pakehas have done” (Quoted in Eastmond and Pitts 1986, 48). Jonathan Mane-Wheoki aligns Awekotuku’s argument with that of Rangihiroa Panoho (1995, 10). Panoho similarly criticised Walters for “distancing…[Māori material] from its cultural origins” (1992, 130). Mane-Wheoki further acknowledges writers on the other side of the debate (1995, 10), such as Michael Dunn, who dismissed the Walters criticism as “mean-spirited attack[s],” exacerbating the divide between the fans and critics (1992, 54).

Misappropriation was not the only concern felt by Māori artists and art critics in the second half of the twentieth century. Skinner highlights an important predicament facing Māori artists, the same predicament that Rebecca Brown describes in relation to modern art in post-independence India (2016, 54). Brown identifies the paradoxical struggle of creating art that is both indigenous — that is, preoccupied primarily with local subject matter and the “truth” of native culture — and modern, or focused on embracing more universal subject matter and utilising supposedly pure form. Hayot similarly discusses the struggle faced within Chinese modernism: the problem of seemingly have to imitate Western modernism “in order to gain recognition…as an equal” (2012, 5). By framing their local modernisms as the only universal art, nations such as England and the United States placed pressure on other nations to imitate their distinct artistic style, or else run the risk of appearing un-modernist. Non-Western art thus became synonymous with art that was old fashioned and non-modern. When coupled with the pressure to create ‘authentic’ local work, a seemingly impossible to navigate set of expectations were created for artists and writers. Brown summarises this paradox by asking “How to be
simultaneously modern and Indian, if the former demands an articulation of the universal and the latter requires an attention to the local? How to catch up while still maintaining and building a national identity?” (2009, 1–2).

As I have already outlined, these are questions which faced both Māori and Pākehā New Zealand artists struggling to negotiate national and international artistic pressures. However, these tensions become even more complex when the artists negotiating them face the additional complexities of Māori traditions and identities in a Euro-centric art world. In this chapter I will argue that cross-medium collaboration offered a useful solution to these paradoxical tensions, particularly when a key concern of the art was cross-culturalism, or Māori song coupled with Western-style modernist painting.

*Te Tangi* is a work which exemplifies the potential for cross-medium art to negotiate these tensions. The work itself consists of five unstretched canvases, divided horizontally into smaller sections and centred on large-scale Roman numerals numbering I–XIV. McCahon returns to his characteristic washes of paint in divided sections and hand-painted numbers and letters. His colour palette is also familiarly dominated by black, whites, and earthy tones. In *Te Tangi* the numerals take centre stage, with less space given over to poetry: lines in te reo Māori are placed at the top and bottom sections of the canvasses. The waiata, sharing the same title as the artwork, is not the key visual focus of this work, but signals the work’s concern with cross-cultural negotiations.

“*Te Tangi,*” the Text

The waiata of *Te Tangi* was in itself the site of complex collaborations and cross-cultural discussions. Initially shared by Tangirau Hotere with his son, Ralph, it was sent by Ralph Hotere to McCahon as a gift for use in a painting. Cilla McQueen describes the way in which Hotere would read the text aloud, “in his soft voice, smoky, no edge to it,” engaging with its oral
qualities (2016, 91). The written copy which Hotere transcribed and sent to McCahon was the one ultimately included in the painting. It read:

Te Tangi o Te PIPIWHARARUA
TUIA TUI
TAHIA TAHIA
KOTAHI TE MANU I TAU KI TE TAHUNA
TAU MAI
TAU MAI
TAU MAI
(Ralph Hotere to Colin McCahon, n.d.)

In his letter Hotere also provided some “rather inadequate” translations into English:

The Song of the Shining Cuckoo
TUIA TUI
TAHIA TAHIA
One bird has landed on the sandbank
It has landed
It has landed
It has landed

Hotere added that the key idea of the waiata was that of spirits resting “on a sandbank in Hokianga harbor” on their way to Te Reinga, their departure point. He added “I hope you can use it somewhere,” much in the same way that Manhire offered his words to Hotere (n.d). This
communication in itself provided the basis for a cross-medium collaboration, in which Hotere stepped into the new role of supplier of text, instead of painter.

The collaboration continued when McCahon similarly crossed mediums himself, writing his own translations with the help of his wife Anne. The changes made to Hotere’s version are notable. In his letter to Caselberg, McCahon writes: “You note Ralph didn’t try to translate TUIA TUI I did a lot of work on it & now feel I’m something near the meaning, and with Annes suggestion I feel more confident”. The McCahons translated “TUI” as “to sew, pierce, thread, join together,” and questioned Hotere’s translation of the spirits resting. McCahon wrote: “I do wonder if Ralph is right about the Spirits resting? I feel it could be birds coming back in the spring not going north”. Ultimately, the version which the McCahons decided to send to Caselberg was:

Glow and tell no, Glow
pierce us and join
us together

Bird, alight on the beach
alight …[illegible] friend, alight
alight here & rest.

(Colin McCahon to John Caselberg, and others, May 20, 1975).

They accompanied this final translation with the note: “‘Tangi’ here could well be made ‘grief’, but meanwhile song is good & leaves the story more open to interpretation.”

McCahon then sent the waiata, with Hotere’s translations as well as his own, to Caselberg for further input. He asked his friend “Here with all the material — what do you think?”. While Caselberg’s reply is unknown, it is likely the poet’s contributions helped to shape McCahon’s
later understanding of the waiata. This lengthy process of collaborative translation demonstrates the way in which the painting remained a site of collaboration even after its creation in 1974.

Like “Malady”, “Te Tangi” is a song reliant upon wordplay, packed with multiple meanings of words and overlaps of similar sounds. This focus, coupled with the strong visual elements of the work, also connect Te Tangi to the broader modernist movements of Concrete Poetry and Conceptualism. Like a lot of modernist poetry, “Te Tangi” focusses on the sounds and malleability of words, rather than their straightforward meaning alone. A waiata of this nature is highly appropriate for a painting that is likewise based upon pluralities of meaning and ambiguities.

An example of this wordplay is the numerous overlaps between words and repetitions of similar sounds. The most obvious of these repetitions is the ‘T’ sound, defining the overall sound of the waiata in the words “TUIA” (2), “TUI” (2), “TAHIA” (3), “KOTAHI” (4), (my emphasis), “TAHUNA,” (4) and “TAU” (5–7). Within the vowel sounds, too, there is a lot of repetition and overlap. Hard ‘U’ sounds repeat throughout the waiata, particularly between “TUIA” (2), “TUI” (2), and “TAHUNA” (4). Similarly, the ‘I’ sounds of “TUIA” (2), “TUI” (2), “TAHIA” (3), and “KOTAHI” (4) contribute to the rhythm and overlaps within the lyrics.

As the words’ aural similarities to one another are stressed, so too are listeners encouraged to consider their levels of cross-over and dual meanings. For instance, the word “TUI” (2) refers to the action of sewing, threading, or binding together, a translation that McCahon picked up on when he wrote “pierce us and join / us together” in his version (Moorfield, n.d.). However, the word also bears close resemblance to ‘rūi’, the name of the native bird. In a waiata focused on birdsong, this layering of meaning is almost certainly deliberate.

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4 When discussing the written waiata text my line numbers will refer to those in the copy Hotere sent to McCahon.
Although never articulated on its own, ‘tahi’ is repeated throughout the song as part of the words “TAHIA” (3) and “KOTAHI” (4). The meaning of ‘tahi’ is both the numeral ‘one’, and the sense of oneness (Moorfield, n.d.). It is appropriate that this word is repeated throughout a text focused on the song of one bird, and in a painting chronicling the stages of the death of the one key figure of Christianity. The repetition of the ‘ones’ is extended into the Roman Numerals that dominate the canvas, most of which feature at least one ‘I’. McCahon’s painting provides a visual echo of the repeated sounds of the waiata.

Further examples of the interconnectedness and wordplay of “Te Tangi” is in the word “tangi” itself, present in the poem and also in the author’s name — Tangirau. Not only individual words, but larger phrases in “Te Tangi” also share striking aural similarities with other Māori phrases. “TAHUNA” (4), for instance, sounds very similar to ‘tahua’, meaning the space in front of a meeting house (Moorfield, n.d.). This is an appropriate allusion for the song to make, as it was sung as a welcome chant on Northland maraes, likening the arrival of visitors to the pīpīwharauroa’s flight (Caselberg 1977, 405).

The wordplay of “Te Tangi” exists not only in terms of sound and meaning, but visually. By repeating the letters ‘T’ and ‘I’ throughout the text, Hotere’s poem appears largely composed of vertical and horizontal lines. In this sense “Te Tangi” shares visual similarities with “Malady”: both works combine similar looking (as well as similar sounding) words in repetition. In each case individual words seem to merge into one another, as much a visual play on the appearance of language as an aural or thematic one.

The waiata’s allusion to the tūī carries significance beyond the meaning of the poem. In addition to its distinctive black and white feathers, the tūī is known for its imitation of other birds’ songs (Moorfield, n.d.). By connecting the tūī to the waiata’s pīpīwharauroa, it becomes clear that the two birds each share a tendency to borrow or imitate: the tūī copying other birds’ songs, and the pīpīwharauroa sharing the nests of other birds (Hugh Robertson and Heather Barrie 2001, 140). The allusions to these two birds takes on additional significance when
considered in relation to the collaborators of Te Tangi. Like the tūī, Hotere’s Māori ancestors adopted the language (or song) of European settlers. By contrast, McCahon’s European background aligns him with migratory pīwharauoa: after European settlers arrived in New Zealand they can be viewed as sharing the land, or nest, of the indigenous Māori people. This reading of the text additionally supports the repetition in the work’s title — Te Tangi o te Pīwharauoa (The song of the shining cuckoo…). Just as the song of the tūī repeats the songs of birds like the pīwharauoa, so does the title of the painting repeat the song’s title. It is apt that within a work based around the repeated word tui — to connect, to tie together — there exist so many layers of meaning that can easily be connected.

Te Tangi, the Painting

Te Tangi is a work that utilises visual elements of abstract or non-objective paint to create a secondary dialogue alongside Hotere’s waiata. McCahon utilises the dual systems of signification in his work to propose two separate narratives — one written, one painted — both operating separately and in conversation with one another. Like in The Wake and Malady, cross-medium collaboration allows for a deeper and more layered approach to meeting the demands facing New Zealand artists and writers.

The painting which resulted from the collaborations between Tangirau and Ralph Hotere and McCahon retained close connections to the waiata, every panel featuring lines from the text, abstracted imagery, and the overall colour scheme that reinforced its subject matter. The aforementioned minimal palette and use of horizontal, rectangular forms creates an immediate feeling of unity across the panels. This unity is reinforced by the large-scale Roman numerals which dominate each of the sections, numbering 1–14. Additionally, the waiata itself, squeezed into spaces at the tops and bottoms of the panels, ties the canvases together with its hand painted te Reo text. A final string of black dots unites the panels, wavering in a long, horizontal line.
Te Tangi is a work visually preoccupied with muted grey, creams, yellows, and blacks, which take on a second layer of significance when considered in relation to the written waiata lyrics. Across McCahon’s oeuvre abstracted landscapes usually adopted the colour scheme of that landscape — muted greens, browns, and blacks predominate across his earlier works. In the case of Te Tangi, it is not unreasonable to assume that the similar colour scheme relates to the beach setting of the text, conjuring a sense of a stormy sky over pale sands. The soft greys and creams could easily be representative of an overcast beach scene, with the sole pīpīwharauroa making its way across the sky. Caselberg agrees with this reading, writing that the references to horizons is specific to New Zealand landscape (1977, 405). The waiata provides a connection to this coastal location with its reference to “TAHUNA,” or sand dunes. By implication, the horizon lines dividing the panels then become representative of the horizon seen from a Northland beach. In this sense, the text both specifies and inhabits the landscape, informing our understanding of its contents.

Yet there is a second possibility which explains the precise shades of colour used, and their ratio to one another, with greater accuracy: that McCahon based this palette on the plumage of the grey warbler or riroriro. This connection is not an unrealistic one to make, as the riroriro’s nest was the main place where the pīpīwharauroa laid its eggs (Robertson and Heather 2001, 140). Additionally, the two birds each feature in different variants of the same Māori proverb: “I hea koe i te tangi o te pīpīwharauroa?” (Where were you when the shining cuckoo sang?) (Keane 2007, n.p.) and “I whea koe I te tangihanga o te riroriro, ka mahi ka māui?” (Where were you when the riroriro was singing, that you didn’t work to get yourself food?) (Keane 2015, n.p.). In each case, the songs of the birds provided Māori people with a signal to begin planting food for the upcoming spring and summer months (Keane 2015, n.p.). These sayings were usually directed at lazy individuals who didn’t help the community at this time of year.

Taking these numerous connections into consideration, the use of the riroriro’s plumage as inspiration for the colour palette of Te Tangi is logical. The bird’s feathers share the same
predominance of light and dark grey as the painting, with the creamy underbelly and flecks of yellow as seen in *Te Tangi*. *The song of the shining cuckoo* implies the song of the riroriro, the provider of nests and the pipīwharauroa’s survival. In this case, too, the waiata forms an important connection to the painting, both informing it and helping to create a distinct link to the New Zealand location. It is the painted poetry that allows for this layer of ambiguity, tying references to both the landscape and native birdlife into the painting itself. It is likely that McCahon intended both readings to be possible, with a similar sense of the ambiguity present in the landscape of *The Wake*.

The string of dots across the panels provides an interesting instance of such ambiguous painting. In relation to the text, the dots take on the appearance of birds in flight, an interpretation which McCahon himself intended. He wrote: “I’ve painted the bird flying through the panels”, indicating that the dots represent the flight path of one bird, rather than several (Colin McCahon to Peter McLeavy, Oct 13 1974).

At the same time, the arrangement of the dots may allude to the musical notation of the shining cuckoo’s song. Olsson describes the popular “production and employment of scores” in the avant garde art of the mid-20th century, a popularity particularly evident in the areas of Concrete Poetry and sound poetry (2016, 486). In this regard, McCahon’s string of dots may be tapping into this language of musical notation and Concrete Poetry, visually implying the song of the bird. Either of these interpretations are supported by my aforementioned theory of the colour scheme relating to the riroriro, which would continue the work’s theme of abstracted bird symbology.

A similar ambiguity lies in whether the work is indeed abstracted at all, or whether it is largely non-objective. Considered in isolation, these dots appear non-objective, chiefly serving to unite the panels together. If not for McCahon’s specification that the dots represent a pipīwharauroa, viewers could easily assume the work contained no objectivity at all. As in *The Wake*, a tension is therefore created as viewers must decide whether the background content is a
sign (abstracted imagery) or object (non-representational paint on a canvas). For the purposes of this chapter I will continue to discuss McCahon’s painting as intentionally ambiguous, or with dual and simultaneous readings.

The similarities between *Te Tangi* and *The Wake* are numerous and demonstrate the way in which McCahon continued to pursue his interest in the tension between local content and global style. In terms of content, both works share the theme of grieving and death, although this is made less explicit in *Te Tangi*. The later work draws upon the Māori belief that spirits, often closely associated with birds, journeyed up the North Island to Te Reinga. Caselberg writes that McCahon may have personally heard the call of the *hokioi* cuckoo, a bird which was specifically identified by some Māori groups as “a presager of death”. He continues to argue that McCahon intended the lines “TUIA TUI” as a call for the dead to assemble (406), a call which Caselberg suggests is directed at the spirits of Mason, Baxter, and Brasch (1977, 405–408). If McCahon indeed created *Te Tangi* with these individuals in mind, then the literary aspect of the work is further strengthened.

Yet McCahon’s exploration of death extends beyond Māori tradition, engaging with Christian understandings of death as well. Knox writes on the importance of the fourteen Roman numerals, and their signifying of the fourteen stations of the cross. She notes that the numbers “seven and ten [are] privileged: the former as a holy number…and the latter a fallen cross” (1990, 161). By evoking the narrative of Christ’s death and rebirth alongside Māori themes of the afterlife, McCahon creates a dialogue between the two cultural traditions. The painted text is of particular importance in this regard, as it creates a distinct separation between the two narratives — the Māori beliefs represented through writing and abstracted imagery, and the European represented with numerals. But, equally importantly, the Māori words and Roman numerals allow for the intermingling of traditions, in the visual repetitions of forms. The I and T letters in the waiata evoke the Roman numerals I and X, or the fallen cross. In *The Wake*
McCahon’s exploration of death was embedded in European poetic tradition; in *Te Tangi*, McCahon shifts his focus to New Zealand and the dual belief systems operating in the postcolonial present.

When painted by McCahon, the straight lines of the ‘T’s and ‘I’s engage in a new layer of dialogue with their new surrounding imagery. The vertical lines seem to echo the same forms in the Roman numerals labelling the painting’s sections, and, more broadly speaking, the long, narrow canvasses themselves. The effect of these mirrored lines is the creation of an artwork of rigidity and structure. McCahon’s overall layout of rectangles and lines is reflected in the very text of the poem he subtly incorporates. In comparison to these straight lines, the free-flowing trajectory of the bird in flight appears whimsical and liberated from the confines of geometric structure.

The repetitions of visual elements throughout *Te Tangi* additionally create a sense of symbolic interchangableness. Just as the Roman numerals all offer different visual combinations of the same essential symbols, so are the words and sounds of Hotere’s waiata a combination of the same sounds with small differences. For example, the numeral IV can easily be reversed to form IV, and the words “KOTAHI TE MANU I TAU” are almost exactly anagrammatic of “KI TE TAHUNA / TAU MAI.” This interchangeability reinforces the sense of wordplay throughout the work and demonstrates McCahon’s awareness of the possibilities of language and numerals as visual objects as well as symbols. The boundaries between texts becomes visually blurred, as McCahon presents two alternative accounts of death and the afterlife as separate narratives with numerous shared elements. Just as the T from “TANGI” is visually referenced in the fallen Ts, or X numerals, so is grief of the waiata referenced in the grief of Christ’s death.

Yet in terms of content there are little to no discernible connections between the stages of the cross and the stages of the waiata, creating a distinctness of the two cultural narratives. Despite sections of the waiata, such as “TUIA TUI / TUAI TUI” being included in the same
section of the painting as the roman numerals themselves, any connections to the corresponding stage of the cross is either distant or non-existent. To use this same example, the phrase “TUIA TUI” has no immediate correlation to the second stage of the cross — Jesus accepting the cross. Similarly, the lines “TAHIA TAHIA / KOTAHI TE MANU I TAU KI TE TAHUNA” (One bird has landed on the sandbank), are visually aligned with stage VI of the cross — Veronica wiping the face of Jesus. But in terms of content and wordplay, any correlations between these two snippets of narrative appear purely coincidental, especially when compared to the strength of McCahon’s clearly deliberate visual parallels throughout the painting. The two narratives do not overlap in terms of content in the same way that they do visually: McCahon chose to present the two stories in parallel rather than intermingling them more fully. What this separation of content achieves is a distinctness of narratives and cultures, that continues to preserve the two cultural elements of the painting. The two narratives are in dialogue with one another and provide two separate accounts of death and the afterlife — however, their content does not intermingle with one another and wordplay is minimized. In making this decision, McCahon promotes a bicultural vision of New Zealand; he does not seek to meld together all elements of Māori and European culture.

Visually, the most immediately evident similarity between Te Tangi and McCahon’s earlier work is the panel structure. While the five panels of Te Tangi result in a less imposing work than The Wake, they still create the same sense of immersiveness. Additionally, the panel structure provides a strong sense of linearity, much in the same way as is created by the pages of a book. As in The Wake, McCahon’s free-falling, unstretched canvasses mimic the leaves of a book, encouraging the viewer’s action of reading. In Te Tangi, the use of numbering reinforces the sense of linearity. I will later discuss the ways in which this prominence of numbering plays a significant role in the work.

The use of Colour Field stretches of single tones in horizontally divided sections further aligns Te Tangi with the international Colour Field movement and the works of artists like Mark
Rothko. In fact, *Te Tangi* takes this influence one step further than *The Wake*, which contained several panels of abstract or non-objective imagery breaking the Colour Field washes. *Te Tangi*, by comparison, contains very little imagery other than highly abstracted birds and horizon lines. Instead, the paintings overall preoccupied with the flat washes of colour. This distances McCahon even further from the New Zealand tradition of specifically local subject matter.

At the same time, however, McCahon maintains tensions between the elements of global modernism and local New Zealand referent. While his painting in *Te Tangi* is global in the sense that it ties in with Colour Field and Abstractionist developments, it is also specifically local in the subject matter it represents. If my argument is correct, the colour scheme references the plumage of the riroriro, a native New Zealand bird. This reference, in conjunction with the other native birds referenced in the poem and represented in the string of dots, provides a solid thematic connection to Aotearoa.

My alternative reading of the subject matter of *Te Tangi* — a series of abstracted landscapes — also connects the work to New Zealand. Throughout McCahon’s oeuvre he consistently returns to abstracted landscapes, usually taking the form of horizontal lines representing literal ones. The knowledge of his history of symbology, coupled with the earthy colour palette, make this alternative reading also highly likely. The waiata’s location of the “TAHUNA,” or sandbank, further supports this interpretation of the background as abstracted local landscape.

The inclusion of te reo Māori and Māori tradition further connects *Te Tangi* to Aotearoa. As in the *Malady* series, the language itself provides a key to anchoring the work in a specific place. The spiritual traditions which the language evokes additionally connect the work to New Zealand. At the same time, the Christian narrative maintains the international connection already forged through the modernist painting. It is the blending of, or tension between, these two belief systems threaded throughout the work that provides an additional level of specificity to New Zealand. Nowhere else in the world does the interaction between New Zealand European and
Māori cultures occur on the same scale as in New Zealand. *Te Tangi* is a painting of the two dialogues that have shaped our nation in unique parallel with one another, separate but intertwined.

As in *The Wake*, McCahon thus creates a tension between global modernism and local specificity, which is negotiated through the use of painted poetry. The modernism of the abstraction, Colour Field style, and movement away from traditionally isolated creative mediums all connect *Te Tangi* to cutting-edge international developments. At the same time, the te Reo Māori painted waiata and local subject matter maintains a strong link to Aotearoa.

Previously, I have argued that McCahon created a distinct boundary between the elements of text and image in his work. McCahon painted *The Wake* as text laid on top of the abstract background. The two elements, text and image, largely operate separately from one another, as poetry and painting. *Te Tangi*, however, demonstrates McCahon’s increasing awareness of the potential for text to function as image. The first example of this treatment of text as a visual object can be found in the positioning of the waiata’s title. Rather than placing the title first, with the rest of the text following, McCahon positions the title on the central, third canvas. A traditional method of reading is therefore ineffective here: in order to read the text from start to finish, one would need to subvert the expected order of the canvases, and read in the order 3, 1, 2, 4, 5. This subversion demonstrates McCahon’s willingness to play with the expectations of poetry, treating the different elements of the text as visual objects which can be shifted around the panels more freely than in the logically ordered *The Wake*.

Immediately this subversion of the waiata’s order creates a tension with the Roman numerals across the work. The numerals number the stations of the cross, representing the fourteen stages of Jesus’s condemnation, crucifixion, and burial. Knox writes: “The use of numbers as signifiers for the stations provides the narrative structure of the numerical sequence with a specific and religious narrative signified, or content” (1990, 170). Alongside this specifically Christian narration (beginning on the first canvas) is the Māori waiata about the
afterlife (beginning on the third), the two stories operating in dialogue with one another. While the viewer can read both stories in parallel — as the first stage of the cross is on the same panel as the first line of “Te Tangi” — the placement of the waiata’s title disrupts the flow of both texts. The tension created by McCahon is therefore not just thematic but practical: should one ‘begin’ the artwork from the central canvas containing the waiata’s title, or from the left-hand canvas containing the numeral I? No clear guidance is provided by McCahon, leaving the audience to negotiate these parallel cultural accounts on their own.

Of course, the numerals additionally reference McCahon’s earlier work, such as *The Wake*, where they signified the order in which the canvases should be viewed or read. The first stanza of “The Wake” was marked by the Roman numeral I, for instance. In *Te Tangi*, viewers face the tension between reading from the song’s title on panel 3, or from what McCahon labels as the song’s title, on panel 1. The use of numbers to create tension in painting was an idea beginning to be explored throughout modern art and poetry. On Kawara, for instance, provides an example of a fellow artist exploring the boundaries between numbering systems and visual imagery. Like McCahon, Kawara uses numbers as his central subject matter, as in his *Today* series. These works are more minimal than McCahon’s, preoccupied solely with a date on a plain background, but they similarly challenge viewers’ preconceptions of the role of numbering systems in modern painting.

Similarly, Ian Hamilton Finlay’s poem “fisherman’s tea” in *Poor Old Tired Horse* (1967, 6) explores numbers from a more poetic viewpoint. The poem consists of three repetitions of “2 2 2 /t t t,” presenting readers with the tension between the numeric or audible meaning of the ‘2’. McCahon’s engagement with similar ideas surrounding numeral symbolism demonstrates his willingness to treat language and flexible and experiment with its capacity for manipulation.

Further examples of McCahon’s treatment of text as object can be found in panels 2–5. In these panels the lines of poetry are extra faint, painted in thin grey lines on dark grey or black backgrounds. On panel 3, for instance, the words “TAU MAI” are written at the very bottom of
the canvas on a strip of black paint, threatening to vanish into the background entirely. In this aspect of the work, a distinct parallel to the *Malady* series can be drawn. In Hotere’s art, too, text frequently blended in with the black background, only becoming discernible to viewers upon very close inspection. The effect in Hotere’s work is the same as in McCahon’s: a blurring of boundaries between the textual and visual elements of the painting. Separate systems of signification become less distinct, and it becomes harder for the viewer to distinguish between text performing the role of writing, and text performing the role of a visual object.

These examples of McCahon treating the text as object align the work more closely with the Concrete Poetry movement. In *The Wake* McCahon placed the poem over the painting in an essential transferal from the book page; in *Te Tangi*, however, McCahon manipulates the visual form of the words and alters their appearance for visual effect. This progression from essential transferal of text to experimentation with text demonstrates a growing awareness of the visuality of language in McCahon’s oeuvre.

The presence of a more visual approach to text, in terms of both the numbers and the aforementioned textual experimentations, aligns *Te Tangi* with the Concrete Poetry movement and artworks like the *Malady* series. Hotere had only started producing this series a few years earlier, and it is likely that McCahon would have viewed items from the collection. The similarities in the approaches to visuality across the *Malady* series and *Te Tangi* demonstrate the way in which McCahon was working in dialogue with the younger artist. McCahon not only borrowed the waiata of his work from Hotere, but also engaged in the same visual ideas and treatment of language.

The capitalization of text in both works provides an immediate visual connection which aligns both with the Concrete Poetry movement. The choice to capitalise is not functional, but rather achieves a purely visual effect. The capitalised letters in *Malady* align the work with industrial and manufacturing type, connecting the series to ideas of mass production and new technology. In *Te Tangi*, the capitalisation similarly does not serve a linguistic purpose, but a
visual one: McCahon creates letters which allude to the Roman numerals they are placed alongside in their predominantly straight, rather than curved, lines. The capitalisation in this case also heightens the chant-like nature of the waiata, providing viewers with a visual clue as to the way in which the song would be sung. On an intertextual level, the capitalised letters pay subtle homage to Hotere, whose Malady series was defined by such lettering style. The connection between artists is strengthened in the visual reminder of the waiata’s origin.

The sharing of not only text, but language, imbues Te Tangi with a further element of the experimental and new. Rather than paint an English translation to the waiata, McCahon chose to retain the original Māori language in his art. This was a decision that McCahon had already made frequently throughout his oeuvre, with works like The Lark’s Song (1969, fig. 21) demonstrating his keen interest in painted Māori song and poetry. The result of these bicultural works was a coupling of local culture and indigenous language with the modernist painting trends of the Euro-centric art world: old and new, brought together in a collaboration that was cross-cultural as well as cross-medium.

Figure 21: Colin McCahon. 1969. The Lark’s Song. PVA on wooden doors. 1630 x 1980mm. Auckland Art Gallery.
This inclusion of te Reo Māori had several ramifications for the work, the first being the increasing public recognition of New Zealand as a bicultural nation. Previously, the demand for a local referent or ‘voice’ frequently relied upon a European version of this voice: early landscape paintings frequently oversimplified and romanticized Māori culture (Pound 2010, 134), and even in later art their representation was continually littered with problematic cross-cultural issues. Poetry, too, saw European writing vastly dominating national anthologies, with focus paid to Western rather than Māori authors. Māori poetry did not appear in a major New Zealand anthology of verse until 1960, when Curnow featured a small number of poems in *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*. Curnow emphasised “the propriety of including them, for the first time, in a New Zealand anthology” (20).

Curnow’s anthology signalled a shift in thinking that occurred during the 60s and 70s, in which the presence of Māori art and literature dramatically increased in New Zealand. Melissa Kennedy argues that “The Māori Renaissance is the most significant literary movement since cultural nationalism…[one that] asserted a separate nationalism within a bicultural nation”. Kennedy writes that the Renaissance’s key ideas of “continuity with the pre-European past, coequality in the bicultural present, positive cultural difference, the secure possession of a distinct world outlook, and special status derived from priority of the land...have considerably influenced non-Māori New Zealand fiction” (2016, 2777). Non-Māori writers such as Baxter became known for their inclusion of Māori culture in their poetry and contributed towards the nation’s move towards biculturalism.

In the visual arts, too, the Māori Renaissance saw non-Māori artists such as McCahon adopting elements of te Reo and Māori culture into their work. McCahon began including Māori elements in his paintings from the 1960s onward, with paintings like *The Lark’s Song* not only featuring, but focusing on, te Reo Māori text. Like *Te Tangi*, *The Lark’s Song* investigates ideas of birdsong, waiata, and collaboration, the text taken from Matire Kereama’s *The Tail of the Fish*: 
Maori Memories of the Far North (1968) and Peter Hooper’s poem of the same title. By devoting the entire canvas to text, and making most of that text te Reo Māori, McCahon challenged the expectations of viewers in terms of visuality and textuality, but with what language viewers expected to see.

In Te Tangi, McCahon continued to challenge the assumption of English as the primary language of New Zealand, and New Zealand art and poetry, commonly held by viewers at the time. The only English language included in this work is the second half of the title — (The song of the shining cuckoo; a poem by Tangirau Hotere) — and even this appears in parentheses, secondary to the Māori title. In the art work itself, only te Reo Māori is present on each of the five panels. In making this decision, McCahon presents a challenge to viewers accustomed to an English-dominated literary and artistic world, continuing the principles of the Māori Renaissance.

McCahon actively recognises the biculturalism of New Zealand society, by both collaborating with Māori poets and artists, and asserting that their language is an equally valid marker of place as English. If anything, Māori language provides a more authentic connection to New Zealand, in the sense that English is a global language, while Māori is specific to New Zealand. Thus McCahon creates a truly specific local referent by writing in te Reo.

The presence of te reo Māori in Te Tangi also demonstrates recognition of Hotere’s Malady series. Both works rely on spoken language for their local referent: Malady relies on the New Zealand accent, while Te Tangi relies on a waiata. In each case the concept of spoken language is central to the artwork, providing an alternative to the European tradition of written poetry.

On a more conceptual level, McCahon achieves biculturalism through the simultaneous alignment of two belief systems. As I have argued previously, McCahon creates a dialogue in Te Tangi between Māori and European conceptions of the afterlife. The Māori belief that spirits, associated with birds, ascend New Zealand and depart at Te Reinga is represented in Hotere’s waiata, and the abstracted string of birds (or one bird in multiple positions) representing the pīpīwharauroa. At the same time, McCahon references the biblical story of Christ’s death on the
cross, using Roman Numerals to represent the fourteen stations of the cross, imbuing the work with Christian symbology. Zoe Alderton writes: “McCa hon presents the journey of birds along the beach and souls in the footsteps of Christ as a mechanism for healing the rifts of traditions” (2013, 278). Indeed, by presenting Māori and European belief systems alongside one another, McCahon demonstrates how they can exist in harmony and synchronicity. Neither belief system interferes or challenges the other. Rather, both come together in a collaboration of cultures representative of a bicultural nation.

McCa hon’s inclusion of traditional Māori culture alongside European religion and Western modernist painting results in a work capable of negotiating Brown’s paradoxical problem. Embracing cross-cultural, cross-medium collaboration allows McCahon to create artwork that is simultaneously modern and indigenous, even though “the former demands an articulation of the [perceived] universal and the latter requires an attention to the local” (Brown 2009, 1–2). The collaborative element of the work is a crucial element of this negotiation. Hotere and his father provided the waiata, thus offering the gift of cross-culturalism to McCahon. The value of this gift demonstrates the way in which collaboration — in particular cross-medium and cross-cultural collaboration — allowed artists to answer a range of conflicting pressures facing New Zealand artists and writers.

The key objection to this reading is not hard to predict. McCahon could easily be accused of combining Māori material with international, Eurocentric painting in order to achieve a sense of what Graham Huggan terms “the postcolonial exotic,” or “global commodification of cultural difference” (2001, vii). Indeed, McCahon’s inclusion of indigenous cultural content can be compared to the appropriation of Māori elements in the work of painters like Walters and Theo Schoon. The key element of difference in McCahon’s approach to art lies in the collaborative relationship he maintained between himself and Tangirau and Ralph Hotere. McCahon’s painting was based around a gifted waiata — McCahon did not seek out Māori material to complement his Euro-centric artwork. Rather, he designed the work entirely around this
tentative balance between Māori and European culture. It can be argued that *Te Tangi* offers not an exoticization, but a vision of compromise, co-operation, and intercultural and inter-art collaboration.

By creating a work that is based on these balances and tensions, McCahon proposes a method of “maintaining and building a national identity” (Brown 2009, 1–2). McCahon does not continue with a European artistic tradition that excludes Māori art and artists, nor does he relegate the Māori presence in his art to the role of the solely traditional. Rather, Hotere’s father’s waiata exists as a modernist element that also pays homage to the heritage of Māori culture. In creating a painting of this kind, McCahon proposes a new type of co-existence of cultures that both recognises the past and engages with modern creative and cultural developments. A bi-cultural co-existence is argued for, in which Māori poetry and European art can come together in the same way that Ralph and Taingirau Hotere and McCahon did themselves. The national identity that McCahon proposes is therefore one of biculturalism and creative collaboration.

The cross-culturalism of the work was inherent in the very act of translating Hotere’s waiata into English. Even though the English version of the song was not ultimately used in the painting, the process which Hotere, the McCahons, and Caselberg went through established their interest in cross-cultural engagement. Wedde discusses the process of translation in his introduction to the *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*. He argues that an additional layer of translation occurs when interpreting Māori text into English, due to the shift from a largely oral, public, and musical culture to a written, private, and literary one (1985, 25). This is the same process that occurs in *Te Tangi*, as the origins of Hotere’s waiata were oral and musical. As Wedde describes, once translated into English on paper the form of the song shifted to a more private and literary culture.

Yet McCahon also subverts this expected process of translation. In *Te Tangi*, poetry, which is often a more internal and private creative medium, becomes visual and public instead. Visual
in the sense that the words are treated as images, and public in the sense that *Te Tangi* was displayed in the open where people were openly invited to view it. In this sense, aspects of both Māori and European song, poetry, and art become intermingled. This plurality of function similarly demonstrates McCahon’s breaking down of cultural barriers and proposal of new types of and uses for art.

*Te Tangi* is an artwork which complicates areas of crossover between painting and poetry, by introducing the important element of cross-cultural collaboration. In their earlier artworks, both McCahon and Hotere had explored the ways in which cross-medium collaboration allowed for a negotiation of multiple pressures placed on artists and poets in mid-twentieth-century New Zealand. Yet neither *The Wake* nor the *Malady* series had engaged with the important issues of biculturalism or Māori culture. In *Te Tangi*, McCahon recognises not only the importance of incorporating bicultural narratives in his art, but the potential for biculturalism, mediated through painted poetry, to become a tool to negotiate modernist demands.
**Conclusion**

It might be argued that the importance of painted poetry to New Zealand art of the late 1950s through 1970s cannot be attributed to any one isolated cause. As Simpson writes, “It is always, to some extent, a mystery why talent suddenly coalesces at a particular place and time, flaring into something unexpected and extraordinary, as it did in London and Paris around the time of the First World War, or in New York around 1950, or in Christchurch in the 1930s and 1940s” (2016, 9). However, throughout my thesis I have argued for a likely cause: that painted poetry emerged as a response to the isolation felt by artists and writers in Aotearoa, so that they could more easily negotiate the conflicting pressures of nationalism and internationalism facing New Zealand art and poetry. Even when these conflicting pressures developed, altered, and changed shape over the years, the flexibility of cross-medium collaboration allowed local poets and artists to continue to negotiate new demands. The rapidly evolving pressures of modernism within a New Zealand context could consistently be met by highly versatile combinations of image and text.

My examinations of *The Wake*, the *Malady* series, and *Te Tangi o te Pīwharara* (The Song of the Shining Cuckoo; A Poem by Tangirau Hotere) illuminate the various ways in which painted poetry addressed the evolving concerns of modernism and New Zealand art and writing. Each art work offers a specific combination of text and image and raises a different set of ideas and concerns within the wider discourse of modernism: *The Wake* combines abstracted landscape with Neo-Romantic poetry in order to negotiate the conflicting calls for modernism and nationalism, *Malady* places Concrete Poetry over minimal black backgrounds in reflection of New Zealand’s move away from nationalism and toward a more global outlook, and *Te Tangi* introduces cross-
cultural collaboration in a work which proposes a bicultural modernism through the use of text and image.

Examining each work individually and in dialogue with one another has allowed for a greater understanding of the various ways in which cross-medium collaboration has functioned since the 1950s. By combining poetry with painting in The Wake, McCahon was able to meet the demands for both a nationalist and internationalist New Zealand art. The local aspects of the work included abstracted New Zealand landscape and specific references to “Kauris” and other local places and things such as “Greenstone” and “Tasman” allowing Caselberg and McCahon to answer the call for local Nationalism that pressured artists and writers at the time. Simultaneously, The Wake was able to meet the international demand for avant-garde modernism by containing highly abstracted or non-objective painting in a large-scale, Colour Field style.

Caselberg and McCahon deployed shifters and tensions between systems of signification to produce a work that was ambiguously either nationalist or internationalist, and thus could flexibly answer both demands.

Hotere and Manhire’s Malady and Hotere’s later Malady series evince changes in New Zealand art and literature and nationalist and internationalist pressures between the late 1950s and the early 1970s and the ways in which cross-medium collaboration allowed for their negotiation. The Malady series retained several key links to The Wake. Shared elements — such as the tensions between systems of signification, and simultaneous global and local referent — align the works and demonstrate the trajectory of influence from McCahon to Hotere. At the same time, the Malady series showcases the broadening of international influences, such as the Concrete Poetry movement, and the shift away from the demand for obvious local referents in New Zealand art. The Malady series takes McCahon’s ideas surrounding painted poetry further, pushing at the boundaries between image and text in an important breakdown of art forms and media. Overall, the Malady series demonstrates both the progression of cross-medium collaboration into the 1970s, and the way in which it could be used to address changing
modernist concerns regarding the breakdown of boundaries between textuality and visuality, painting and poetry. The versatility and flexibility of cross-medium collaboration are emphasized in Hotere’s effective utilization of McCahon’s techniques within a new context.

Finally, Te Tangi demonstrates the way in which collaboration was not always a direct line of influence from A to B, but rather could involve a complex network of collaboration.

Returning to McCahon, but incorporating material from Hotere and his father Tangirau, Te Tangi is a work which moves its content into the biculturalism of late twentieth and twenty-first-century New Zealand. McCahon develops his ideas of visual poetry and cross-medium collaboration considerably from his earlier work, producing in a painting which is multi-layered in symbology and cultural references. In Te Tangi, McCahon ultimately demonstrates how different systems of signification can be used together via cross-medium collaboration to create a richer, more layered work in which multiple languages, meanings, and traditions can co-exist. The Roman numerals, story of Christ, and Māori narrative involving birdsong is coupled with the mix of non-objective and abstract art work to imbue the work with layers of meaning and importance. Breaking down the boundaries of isolated creative forms through collaboration allowed for a similar breakdown of isolated cultural spheres.

My thesis represents one of the few forays into the study of cross-medium collaboration present in New Zealand academia today. While a substantial amount has been produced on the areas of New Zealand painting and New Zealand poetry in isolation, the areas of connection and blurring between visuality and textuality have remained largely unexplored. Some writers such as O’Brien have completed valuable work in this area, but texts such as Out the Black Window have focussed more on the cross-medium work by particular artists in isolation, rather than cross-medium collaboration as a New Zealand-specific phenomenon in itself. Hilder writes: “Literary scholars…often lack the lexicon to consider the work within its visual context, and art historians and critics…often lack the literary knowledge to deal with the status of the work as poetry”
The value of adopting a cross-medium approach to study lies in demonstrating that painted poetry supported and enabled new modes of New Zealand poetry and new kinds of negotiations of the local and global — as one of New Zealand’s most influential poets of the second half of the twentieth century, Manhire got his start through collaboration with a painter.

By considering these issues from a cross-medium standpoint, my thesis has examined painting and poetry in comparison, considering the interplay of words and image, and the importance of the collaborative element itself. Taking this approach has allowed me to uncover a complex web of themes, symbols, and avant-garde experiments uniting these works of painted poetry and distinguishing them from one another. While it is impossible to prove the reasons behind the prominence of cross-medium, collaboratory art in twentieth century New Zealand art, I have explored the significance and ramifications of this trend. I believe my explanation — that the versatility and ambiguity of painted poetry allowed isolated artists and writers to continually address the shifting concerns facing them as creatives — certainly explains the continued success of such artworks in Aotearoa. The collaboration between poets and painters between the 50s, 60s, and 70s was motivated by — and contributed to — the fusion of the local with global modernism, even as what counted as “local” or “international” changed considerably between the 50s and 70s.
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