

“I AM”:

Colin McCahon Genius or Apostle?

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Genius

Genius is a most difficult subject to talk about, seeming as it does to put us in touch with something other than ourselves, something we may never, perforce, be able to understand, while leaving us open, in the process of investigating and proclaiming it, to be read ourselves as tragic overreachers, lacking in true intellectual humility. The easy scholarly path might be to distance oneself from genius, to re-conceive of it dispassionately, hands off, so we might more accurately represent the truth of its object. Or, should that be, its subjects? But just as the closer we seem to approach it the more unknowable it appears, so the more distance we place between it and ourselves the more unknowable genius also seems in its very aloofness. It could be that the question of genius consists in the absence of a relation to knowing. This absence of relation invites at least two different types of evaluation, inexhaustible and contradictory: first there are those who seek to wage war on genius, to chop off its self-conceited head should it appear above the parapet, those who feel threatened by genius and desire ‘to chop down tall poppies’, as we so often say in poppy-less New Zealand; and then there are those who relinquish themselves in front of it, lay down in a stupor of timidity and awe that finally resolves itself in outright passivity. What links these two efforts, in terms of shared rhetorical energy, is sheer intimidation of mind where language, either through exasperation or linguistic lassitude - a sort of stammer of fury or ineptitude - meets its unmaking.

Despite all these problems, I am going to stick with genius, to track it and trace it, to open myself to it (oh, that some of it might rub off!), to discover in each (nearly missed) encounter with it a fundamental inability to know it, completely or objectively, and a fundamental inability to represent it. Of course, my encounter here, so far, reflects that encounter with *Genie*, or genius, which Kant faces on the margins of several of his texts. Genius is a natural endowment, deep, strange and mysterious. We ought not to expect, Kant claims, that genius can explain itself. Kant argues that the genius does not himself know; he has not learned and cannot teach what he has produced. Elsewhere Kant specifies that we are not dealing with a flash of something like inspiration, but rather with the slow and even painful process of improvement.¹ This is why genius flashes, like an instantaneous phenomenon which manifests itself in intervals, and then disappears again; it cannot be turned on at will like a light. All of this — the occasion of luminous self-dissemination, of the violent flash and gaiety of a sudden crisis and loss (but perhaps it is not loss since genius was never sought) of self-knowledge, the invention of the unteachable and unlearnable - for Kant, exceeds the structure of the possibility of all that which belongs to the specifically Germanic. Genius comes from elsewhere, it arises on foreign territory; by extension, it is foreign

I Genius, Kant also says, is the talent capable of “discovering that which cannot be taught or learned” (1974: 234).

2 Genius is linked etymologically with *generare*, or generation as the personification of sexual energy, and *ingenium* as the apex of innate physical and moral qualities of the person who comes into being.

to philosophy, or at least to the German “temperament of cold reflection” (Kant, 1974 [1798]: 233). But if genius is seen to yield to thought, to surrender and annex itself to the strength of philosophy, this must derive from the way it resists substantialization into an entity that would be opposable to thought. In this sense, although deriving from elsewhere, the absence of a relation to knowing that is genius, is something that can be known. While not offering a detailed history of the concept of genius, I shall draw upon a selection of philosophical perspectives to show how genius entails a process of othering that splits the individual from their gift.

Individual or Individuation?

In Giorgio Agamben’s short essay on “Genius”, where he advances a theory of the subject reformulated as the relationship between genius and ‘I’,² the concept of genius represents “in some way the divine essence of the self” (2006: 94). This implies that the human being is not only consciousness, but that an impersonal, pre-individual element also lives inside us to whose spur we must constantly respond. The subject, suggests Agamben, is not an essence but rather a field of tensions that is covered by two joined but opposing forces, moving from the individual to the impersonal and vice-versa. The human being is the result of a complicated dialectic between a part that is impersonal, and not (yet) isolated, and another side marked by individual experience. These forces intersect and they separate out; they can never perfectly merge nor can they completely free themselves from the other. Genius is the most intimate but also the most impersonal part of us: “the personalization of that, within us, which surpasses and exceeds ourselves” (95). Agamben suggests, “To live with genius means, in this way, to live in the intimacy of an alien being” (96).

According to Agamben, we all need to come to an accommodation with genius, “with that inside us which does not belong to us” (98). Let us take the example of the writer: the desire to write signifies an impersonal power to write somewhere inside me. The paradox is that I write to become impersonal. However, by writing I become identified as the author of this or that work, which in turn becomes personalized. Thus, says Agamben, I perforce distance myself “from Genius, who may never have the form of an ‘I’, and even less that of an author” (96). Every effort of my authorial ‘I’ to appropriate genius is destined to fail, for “only a work that is revoked and undone can be worthy of Genius” (96).

Genius or Apostle?

In both his aesthetic pseudonymous works, and those ethical and religious writings published under his own name, Kierkegaard reminds us that he speaks without authority. He says in his essay “On My Work as an Author”, “From the very beginning, I have stressed and repeated unchanged that I was ‘without authority’. I regard myself rather as a reader of the books, not as the author” (1998a [1851]: 12). The question of authorship is covered more extensively by Kierkegaard in *The Book on Adler* of which only one chapter, entitled “Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle”, was published during Kierkegaard’s lifetime. It responded to the writings of Adolf Peter Adler (1812-1869), a minor

Danish preacher. In 1843 Adler published a collection of his sermons in which he distinguished between those he had written in the normal manner, and those he had written assisted by what he called the spirit. The following year he was suspended by the Bishop of Mynster and in 1845, following an inquiry, he was deposed. Adler later conceded his revelation was a mistake; but then, to make matters worse, he declared that his sermons of revelation had really been works of his genius. Kierkegaard's writing about Adler is a mixture of sympathy for someone who has suffered at the hands of authority, and frustration with someone who, he claims, is confused. He also understands Adler as a representative of his age, someone who embodies all the contemporary confusion about questions of authority and revelation in the nineteenth century.

Kierkegaard asserts that Adler confuses the categories of genius and divine revelation, or, as he puts it, Adler is confused between the state of a genius and that of an apostle, who is associated with the absolute (the religious) and speaking with (divine) authority. What, then, asks Kierkegaard, is the nature of authority: is it about doctrinal profundity, excellence or brilliance? He thinks not, since the difference between a learner and a teacher is not simply about understanding the doctrine, but also about "a specific quality that enters from somewhere else and qualitatively asserts itself precisely when the content of the statement or the act is made a matter of indifference aesthetically" (1998b [1848]: 175).

Kierkegaard notes that the apostle speaks directly and under inspiration, and hence with authority. The genius has no such authority. First, the genius belongs to the sphere of immanence, the apostle to the sphere of transcendence (174). The original contributions of genius will eventually be assimilated by others, whereas those of an apostle retain forever their startling newness. Secondly, genius is what it is out of its own resources, whereas apostles are apostles by virtue of being appointed by divine authority. Thirdly, the goal of genius is fulfilled in the completion of an immanent work of genius, while an apostle carries out work only in order to fulfil an "absolute paradoxical teleology", or a purpose that transcends the work itself (175). Thus authority is not immanent but transcendent; it is not rational but paradoxical; it is not a matter of content but of otherness or heterogeneity, of coming from elsewhere.

Kierkegaard reverses the traditional view of genius by declaring the apostle to be the anti-genius: qualitatively different, a genius and an apostle belong each in different qualitative spheres of immanence and transcendence. When Kierkegaard defines the genius by what he is by himself (in himself), and an apostle by what he is by his divine authority, he refers to the traditional definition of genius as a passive endowment or gift that has no active component. "Genius, as the word itself says (*ingenium*, the innate, primitivity (*primus*), originality (*origo*), pristineness, etc.), is immediacy, natural qualifications - the genius is *born*" (175). Kierkegaard's genius is only a temporary exception and paradox, while the apostle is absolute. A genius may be paradoxical in his first communication, but the more he comes to himself the more the paradoxical vanishes. The apostle is first and foremost difference: "It is different with an apostle. The word itself (it means 'one who is sent' in Greek) indicates the difference. An apostle is not born; an apostle is a man who is called and appointed by God and sent by him on a mission" (176). This is what Kierkegaard designates as "the paradoxical-religious relation" (181).

3 Kierkegaard declared The Letter of James to be his only love, to which he returned again and again.

In *Philosophical Fragments* (1985 [1844]), Kierkegaard makes a distinction between *philosophy* and *theology* over this question of the transferential relationship to truth. Whereas, in traditional philosophy, a philosopher like Socrates is only the midwife for a timeless and eternal truth, in Christian doxa the truth of a statement lies, not in what is said, but, in the authority of the one who speaks. The truth of Christ's message lies not in any actual content but in the very fact that Christ said it. This is the meaning behind Kierkegaard's insistence, undoubtedly a little strange to our ears, that those who believe what Christ is saying because of what He says, reveal themselves not to be Christian: Christians, on the contrary, believe what Christ is saying because it is said by Christ (93).

Yet it is not quite as simple as this, for despite His absolute personal authority, Christ is also only an empty vessel for the Word of another. In other words, Christ only possesses authority because He carries the higher transcendent Word of God. It is in what He transmits and not in Christ Himself that His power lies. Or, to use Kierkegaard's own distinction, Christ is not so much a genius as an apostle. This seems to pose a dilemma, for while the authority of Christ lies not in what He says but only in His personal authority, He only retains this personal authority insofar as He transmits directly and without mediation the Word of God. What then lies at the impossible intersection of these two sets - Christ's life and His teachings? How may we think together these two elements that at once exclude and necessitate each other?

Practical Religion

The second chapter of The Letter of James, especially verses 17-21, was Søren Kierkegaard's favorite passage of Scripture. "Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works" (James 2: 18 King James Version).³

For Kierkegaard, this was an important parable about the reading of scripture. Taking up the metaphor, he argued for an understanding of God's word as a mirror in which one should observe oneself and not merely as a doctrine, "something impersonal and objective". For,

if you want to relate impersonally (objectively) to God's Word, there can be no question of looking at yourself in the mirror, because it takes a personality, an I, to look at oneself in a mirror ... while reading God's Word you must incessantly say to yourself: It is I to whom it is speaking; it is I about whom it is speaking (1990 [1851]: 43-44).

I want to suggest that this statement of Kierkegaard's is critical to Colin McCahon's understanding of his own painting, and is also an effective mechanism for considering how his use of biblical quotations in painting can be conceived autobiographically. I shall endeavour to weave all these themes together through an examination of a series of works by McCahon entitled *Practical Religion*, in particular the subgroup based on The Letter of James.

The most elemental feature of these works is their form. These paintings, now popularly known as scrolls, are crayon and wash texts on blank wallpaper stock.

According to McCahon scholar and biographer Gordon H. Brown, "The scrolls were all produced in 1969, most during August or September" (2003: 3). McCahon eventually completed 72 scrolls that were hung together edge to edge to create an installation at the Barry Lett Galleries in October 1969, of which *Practical Religion*, containing instructions for everyday life drawn from The Letter of James, was a subgroup.

In terms of art historical tradition, McCahon's paintings also allude to the visualization of oral sequences of words and sentences painted on a scroll, frequently found in Renaissance paintings.⁴ McCahon's choice to illustrate (or appropriate?) The Letter of James is as unusual as Kierkegaard's appreciation of it was. In the seventeenth century, Luther had dismissed the Letter as "an epistle of straw", and it was far from popular in the twentieth century – often rejected as lacking unity (Williams, 1965: 92). This raises another point about the *Practical Religion* subseries, the question of its address. The key to understanding James is the rhetorical figure of *paraenesis* or *protrepsis*, an exhortation that employs traditional ethical teaching and consists mainly of short sayings and commands. James is full of these: "Do not deceive yourselves, my friends" (1: 16); "Only be sure that you act on the message and do not merely listen" (1: 22); "Come close to God, and he will come close to you" (4: 8). The Letter begins with the stereotypical traditional epistolary form of opening (of X to Y), "From James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Greetings to the Twelve Tribes dispersed throughout the world" (James 1: 1). The question of address raises the question of authorship and, in the case of McCahon's painting, the question of the appropriation of another's (James's) address. This address, in using words of another, implies a certain self-absence. When McCahon calls up speech, or at least a voice, we might say that his is an avowal, in the sense of the root of the English word *avow* - to call to one's aid the voice or speech of another.⁵ The *advocate*, another word from the same root, is called to speak in place of the other, to lend his or her voice to the other's cause. I want to argue that this process is embedded in the selections from The Letter of James which McCahon chooses to illustrate.

As the body is dead ... (1969), a painting on hardboard, draws upon James 2 (not 3 as McCahon incorrectly suggests in the upper right corner), verses 16, 18 and 26, from a section that looks at the relation between faith and action.⁶ I want to reflect upon the two texts in the lower half of the painting. The wider textual context for the phrase is verse 18:

But someone may object "Here is one who claims to have faith and another who points to his deeds." To which I reply: "*Prove to me that this faith you speak of is real though not accompanied by deeds, and by my deeds I will prove to you my faith*" (James 2: 18 New English Bible, emphases added).

Part of James's reply (italicized) is quoted by McCahon, and it is this very verse which, in giving the views of an unidentified objector, is ambiguous. McCahon gives the response to the unnamed objector. We need to ask who is the person speaking? Who is the objector? Is he speaking as a friend or opponent of James? Could the person speaking (objecting) be James himself, or James projecting himself? The words McCahon adopted from the New English Bible, "To which I reply", are not to be found in the Greek original. That is, there is nothing in the

4 For instance, in Jacobello del Fiore's 1421 *Justice between the Archangels Michael and Gabriel*. In Renaissance painting a scroll often identified its bearer as an Old Testament Prophet. The inscriptions on these scrolls were often legible, especially when the individual was associated with a familiar text, such as the 'Ecce Angelus Dei' of St John the Baptist. In many cases the writing was illegible or false, for example fictive Hebrew. A scroll also often signified speech and sometimes emanated from the speaker's mouth while a codex signified writing. The most familiar example of visualized speech is the dialogue between Gabriel and the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation. See Sparrow (1969) and Covi (1986).

5 Voice is a multi-semantic notion with divergent meanings. The grammatical category of voice refers to the speaker of an utterance, the implicit or explicit 'I' supposedly speaking. It also refers to the form in which this subject speaks, the register. In the analysis of narratives, the concept enables us to address the question 'Who speaks?' and thus almost automatically entails the question of intention. With its connotation of bodiliness the term voice brings to mind Jacques Derrida's critique of the preference for voice over writing in *Of Grammatology*. For a discussion of the voice of prophetic suffering in McCahon see Pound (1993: 3-12).

6 Colin McCahon, *As the body is dead ... (James 3: Practical Religion)*, 1969, acrylic on hardboard, Private Collection, Auckland, [cm 1625].

7 Colin McCahon, *A word with you ... (James 5: Practical Religion)*, 1969, conte crayon on wallpaper stock, Private Collection, [cm 56].

Greek to make it clear that a change of speaker is intended, which would imply that James speaks the words of the objector, too.

The phrase reproduced in capitals from verse 16 at the bottom of the painting is similarly fraught with ambiguity. The wider textual context for this phrase is:

My brothers, what use is it for a man to say he has faith when he does nothing to show it? Can that faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is in rags with not enough food for the day, and one of you says, "Good luck to you, keep yourselves warm, and have plenty to eat", but does nothing to supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So with faith; if it does not lead to action, it is in itself a lifeless thing (James 2: 14-17, emphases added).

"Good luck to you ..." is a voice projected by the voice of James on to one of us, you or I. In some way we are made to say this phrase: "one of you says" it tells us. But it is also a phrase that comes from the outside, that is uttered by James and in turn avowed by McCahon in his painting. McCahon, too, makes us speak the phrase by putting it in quotation marks. In both examples, the question 'who speaks?' is thus foregrounded through the problems of trying to project McCahon's voice into the textual space of the painting, and our own imbrication as reader/spectators in its saying. In a sense, the 'who speaks?' is doubly removed, for the voice is lifted from its original reference in the New English Bible which already contains a shadowy interlocutor - whether that be the objector, or ourselves or ultimately, of course, God.

McCahon's work also raises important methodological questions. What does it mean to represent the voice in painting, silently, pictorially? How can the word (or the Word) be sent to sight? Where is the site of that sending? How might we hear the voice with our eye, or with our 'I'? McCahon's work implies a shift of both the voice and its signs towards the figural. It explores the connection between voice and motifs of visual representation, where the voice is manifested in the syncopes of the figurative mechanism, the signs that mark the space between saying and inscription. His choice and painting of text strains towards the moments where the force of the voice shows itself to the gaze, and where it reveals the things that allow us to hear a voice in painting. These works struggle with, and through, the attempt to make the force of the voice visible. This struggle is also reinforced by the way the words are painted: how the section referencing the living deeds of faith is placed above the horizontal line we might take to represent the earth's surface; how the capital "P" of "Prove" and the word "accompanied" are given special painterly emphasis. Even through its very materiality, McCahon's painting in this instance can be understood as a theoretical object that interrogates the relations of convertibility between saying and seeing. This relation is heightened in those of McCahon's paintings which take the word as their subject matter.

The presence of the voice in these paintings does not only have to do with a sequence articulated in words or sentences on the scroll or painting that might be read, but it resides in the moments in which a given sentence or formula was pronounced. Let me offer a few more examples from *Practical Religion*. "A word with you ...", from James 4: 13-17, begins one scroll.⁷ The voice (of James? of McCahon?) ascribes again a voice for you and I: "you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go

off to such and such a town and spend a year there trading and making money” (13, emphasis added); and “What *you* ought to say is: ‘If it be the Lord’s will, we shall live to do this or that’” (15, emphasis added). The Letter of James also thematizes the question of speech, the importance and the dangers of the tongue. It is not by chance that in the first scroll I referred to, at the bottom of the text separated out from the rest, we find the verse: “So with the tongue. It is a small member but it can make huge claims” (James 3: 5).⁸ Two scrolls, based on the text from the Letter, look at the consequences of uncontrolled speech. “And the tongue is in effect a fire” (6), “Out of the same mouth come praises and curses” (10) (James 3: 6-12 and 10-12).⁹

It is also significant that an important painting like *Victory over Death 2* (1970), which I cannot discuss here, has recently been read, with its monumental ‘I AM’, as intensifying “the uncertainty that surrounds the figure of the written ‘I’ in McCahon’s art” (Smythe, 2004: 28). While not labelling it as such on the canvas, McCahon was careful to note in his Survey Exhibition catalogue that this painting “belongs to the *Practical Religion* series - a simple I AM at first. But not so simple really as doubts do come in here too. I believe, but don’t believe” (1972: 29).¹⁰

(Auto)biography

McCahon’s work has long been studied from an (auto)biographical perspective, relying on the artist’s own statements to analyse his paintings. Until recently, the figure of the painter Colin McCahon may have profoundly affected critical response to his work, perhaps even straight-jacketed it. “My painting is almost entirely autobiographical — it tells you where I am at any given point, where I am living and the direction I am pointing in”, claims McCahon (26). I am intrigued by the notion of McCahon somehow ‘destining’ or ‘programming’ his fate, how his work is actually about this destiny or destination and how it both predicts and creates for itself a future. This is, indeed, close to the idea of religious prophecy (and thus can be linked to McCahon’s subject matter), but this sense of fate or destiny cannot be separated from the day-to-day machinations of actually creating an artistic reputation in a small settler culture with a nascent art market. Again, the point here is that this sense of destiny is not to be thought of as somehow contrary to McCahon’s religious beliefs (either in the sense of a will-less predestination or a lack of Christian charity), but is absolutely the expression of them. In other words, McCahon’s religiosity and his art-world manipulations should not be seen as opposed: the two are absolutely the same thing. It should also be clear that I do not find McCahon’s actions, in a moral sense, reprehensible in any way.¹¹

As the first stage of this investigation let me briefly examine the actual specifics and mechanics of the production of McCahon’s reputation; how he systematically set about to do all the things possible that would ensure his work’s future, to diminish his rivals, etc. In the early 1940s McCahon worked in relative obscurity and had little in the way of a media profile. However, during 1947 and 1948, McCahon’s public profile swung to the opposite extreme, as he consciously organized a medley of one-person shows at various locations throughout the entire country: Dunedin’s Modern Books, the Lower Hutt Public Library, the Helen Hitchings Gallery in Wellington, Amalgamated Studios in Auckland, numerous

8 Colin McCahon, *My brothers not many among you ...* (James 3: *Practical Religion*), 1969, water-based crayon and wash on wallpaper stock, [cm 63].

9 Respectively, *What a huge stack of timber...* (James 3: *Practical Religion*), 1969, conte crayon on wallpaper stock, Private Collection, [cm 79]; and *Out of the same mouth come praises ...* (James 3: *Practical Religion*, 1969, charcoal and traces of watercolour on wallpaper stock, Private Collection, [cm 960].

10 Another painting which does contain the inscription is the equally monumental *Practical Religion: The Resurrection of Lazarus Showing Mt Martha* (1969-70). See my discussion of this work (2003: 11-27).

11 My itinerary is selective and I am drawing upon the copious detail of a recent superbly researched PhD thesis on McCahon by Richard Lummis (2004).

Group shows in Christchurch. Although these venues might seem inauspicious to us today, this frenzied exposure was a remarkable feat in the cultural context of the day, and McCahon's stock accordingly rose. He was taken up as the critics' *cause célèbre* and these exhibitions generated over 19 published critical responses, including those from A.R.D. Fairburn, James K. Baxter, J.C. Beaglehole, Rita Angus, Louis Johnson and Charles Brasch. At this early point McCahon's art was visited and sustained by some of New Zealand's most articulate voices. McCahon's ascendancy was meteoric, and the volume of writing his work provoked was unprecedented. This was even more remarkable in that the arts scene of the time was devoid of even the most rudimentary infrastructures that might aid any aspiring career-minded artist. The making of McCahon as a figure of national notoriety also had much to do with his intimacy with Charles Brasch, most obviously in Brasch's capacity as editor of *Landfall*. But Brasch also took on McCahon as a talent in need of fostering, mentoring and financing. Not only did he regularly buy works directly, he also facilitated commissions, gifted money and financed McCahon's trip to Australia in 1951. The activities of the writers who helped put McCahon on the map are well-documented in the archives and the critical literature.

McCahon has often been characterized, and increasingly mythologized, as a victim of widespread critical and *ad hominem* hostility particularly at the outset of his career. In contrast to these sentimental accounts of the artist's heroic struggle it would be more profitable to establish how the impediments, and at times negative response, in fact contributed to the discursive invention and institutionalization of McCahon, how the negative talk might have helped a prominent profile.

Profanation

Let me now see if I can bring my various threads together. What holds together Agamben's reformulation of the subject as a process of individuation between 'I' and Genius, Kierkegaard's distinction between a genius and an apostle, and McCahon's insistence upon practical religion and his worldliness as a sign of his genius, is that they all involve a mediation between the sacred and profane. Before proceeding any further, it is necessary to distinguish here between secularization and profanation. Secularization is a form of displacement which leaves basic forces intact; for example, the secularization of theological concepts of politics simply shifts heavenly power to an earthly form but leaves intact the nature of that power. Profanation, on the other hand, implies a neutralization of that which is profaned. Once it has been profaned, that which was separate and untouchable loses its aura and is returned to use. Sacer (sacred) is, in Latin, that which is separated, put aside, subtracted from common usage and, in opposition, profane is that which escapes this separation (etymologically *pro fanum* means before, or outside, the temple). To profane something signifies touching the sacred in order to liberate it. Agamben notes: "To profane signifies opening the possibility of a special form of negligence, which ignores the separation, or rather, makes a special use of it" (2005: 85).

One of those special uses, I have attempted to argue here, is art or more precisely painting. Within the destining or programming of a career, the authenticity of a work of art is reduced to an institutional framing, and to a signature whose reference is precisely the possibility of commodification. As we have seen, the circula-

tion of McCahon's painting cannot do without myths, prophets, paymasters and priests explaining and interpreting it, and I fear that I may have become just one more in that long line. This is not to deny that commodification may incorporate within it the paradox of reflexivity. The problem that the work undergoes as its condition of existence (the impossibility of avoiding the art system) becomes, or can be read as, the theme of the work, its destiny. In this sense, McCahon's work is about its self, its own fate, as it attempts to mediate between the spiritual and the practical, the sacred and the profane. This is why, in a version of ventriloquism, we find McCahon taking on a voice, to lose his own voice, to find it again. As Agamben has reminded us in an interview:

when your life becomes a work of art, you are not the cause of it. ... at this point you feel your own life and yourself as something 'thought', but the subject, the author, is no longer there. The construction of life coincides with what Foucault referred to as '*se deprendre de soi*' (2004: 613).

Foucault's phrase is difficult to translate; it has all the connotations of 'to shake free of the self', 'getting rid of oneself', 'detaching oneself from oneself', 'unlearning oneself', 'taking oneself out of oneself'. Genius is an issue here precisely because it evades our grasp and takes us out of ourselves. As Agamben has noted, "when we love someone we don't really love his genius, nor his character (and even less his "I"), but we love the special way he has of eluding both of these" (2006: 9).

Despite, but also because of, his best intentions, McCahon himself cannot fall outside of the structure of passage from the profane to the sacred and the sacred to the profane, nor can his work. So we might say that McCahon's work falls between Jean-Luc Nancy's two precepts regarding the contemporary Christian framework: "The only current Christianity is one that contemplates the present possibility of its negation"; and "The only current atheism is one that contemplates the reality of its Christian roots" (Nancy, 2001: 113). This is the exceptional place that McCahon occupies in terms of the religious today. It is an exceptional place less in terms of the question of the religious than in terms of the religious as a question.¹² Let me conclude, then, by suggesting that McCahon was no apostle, despite his aspirations to be one, but he was perhaps a genius.

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¹² See my discussion of McCahon's relationship to the religious as an example of "what Derrida has identified as 'religion without religion', a philosophical discourse that would articulate the structural possibility of the religious without professing a determinate, orthodox faith" (2003: 27).

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