Killeen as a canoniser

Killeen's oeuvre, it might be claimed, is somewhat marked or occasionally marked by Walters from the early seventies on. But also, and just as truly, one might say that from the early seventies on, Killeen's oeuvre marks Walters' oeuvre, marks and re-marks it for our attention. This, which I would call the 'Walters effect' in Killeen, and which Bryson has called throwing 'a cordon around a corpus of precursive work', is what the discipline of art history would call 'influence' -- a rather magical and hence unanalytical notion.[1]

One may say Killeen's work 'cites' or 'speaks' Walters, or that it 'donates' or 'presents' him -- it is a kind of retrospective donation. It is significant, in this regard, that the painter Julian Dashper, so he tells me, first 'got onto' Walters' work through Killeen's work: through the Walters effect, or the citation and presentation of Walters, in the work of Richard Killeen.[2]

The Walters effect in Killeen's work is also, it might be said, the mark of a 'buying', an exchange of 'property', a taking for oneself, and an offering or donation for public scrutiny, of the 'effects' of Walters. It is a proclamation of worth. Killeen's painting, in so 'presenting' Walters, acts like those saints in Renaissance altarpieces who 'present' the donor of the altarpiece, and so usher him towards the sacred space, the heavenly gallery...

Killeen's Walters marked work shows also, as all such canonical choices do, a kind of economic decision: a choice of this artist over that. One might consider the saying, 'I don't buy that' -- meaning I do not subscribe to it, or believe in it. Killeen, as his paintings make clear, *does* in this sense buy Walters.

To be 'influenced', as they say, is not just to appropriate or to succumb to the idiom, the stylistic peculiarities, the forms and the contents of that painter who 'influences' you. It is also a 'buying', in which you pay homage. It is an exchange

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[1] 'Then there is the notion of influence, which provides support -- of too magical a kind to be very amenable to analysis -- for the facts of transmission and communication; which refers to an apparantly causal process (but with neither rigorous delimitation nor theoretical definition) the phenomenon of resemblence or repetition, which links at a distance, and through time -- as if through the medium of propagation -- such defined unities as individuals, oeuvres, notions, or theories.' Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1974, p. 21.

[2] Julian Dashper, conversation with the writer, 3 August 1989.

in which that work from which you might seem only to 'take', is *paid*, in the form of homage, and so gets what it needs. It is fair exchange, not theft.

Nor are all of these moments in which one may say Killeen's work 'cites' Walters, 'speaks' him, 'donates' or 'presents' him, entirely detachable from the fact that some of Walters' works have been literally presented by Killeen on the walls of his own house. (Consider again, for instance, the Walters drawings owned by Killeen, which have, in their triangulated comb motifs, responded to Killeen's combs and grids.) **[fig.157]** But Killeen's own paintings, too, I would say, are a presentation of Walters. Killeen's paintings too represent a 'buying', a 'taking' and 'giving', an exchange of 'property', a taking for oneself, an offering or donation for public scrutiny, and a proclamation of worth.

Of who gets to be 'recalled', of who gets the payment of 'homage', it might be said that it is not independent of their authorial intention, labour, skill. If we were to ask which artists come to be an 'influence', which come to be those which others work 'on the basis of', this might be the answer, perhaps: those whose work offers, as if on purpose, the most to the most -- offering to the maximum available audience the maximum complexity and intensity of ideas and feeling.

> *Perhaps the desire to write [to paint] is to launch things that come back to you as much as possible in as many forms as possible. That is, the desire to perfect a programme or matrix having the greatest possible potential variability, undecidability, plurivocality, etc., so that each time it returns it will be as different as possible. This is what one does when one has children -- talking beings who can always out talk you.*
> *(Jacques Derrida,* The Ear of the Other,*)* [3]

The 'original' artist is not simply a replete richness, an achieved plenitude, to which those 'influenced' later come to be attached, as if by accident, as a (mere) supplement or parasite. Rather, the original work desires and demands notice -- it says: 'Look at me: grant me my novelty, my richness, my power: be recognised by me: be re-made by me and re-make me, be influenced by me: make me survive.'

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[3] Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, English edition, edited by Christie V. McDonald and translated by Peggy Kamuf, Shocken Books, New York, 1985, p. 158.

The 'original' is, as Derrida would say, 'already indebted to its coming translation' by others; and it already demands it.[4]

It may be useful then, to think of the so-called 'follower', the so-called 'influenced' artist, as the translator of the 'original' artist. 'The task of the translator', as Derrida has it, 'is precisely to respond to this demand for survival which is precisely the structure of the original text. To do this... the translator must neither reproduce, represent, nor copy, the original, nor even, essentially, care about communicating the meaning of the original. Translation has nothing to do with reception or comunication... the translator must assure the survival, which is to say the growth, of the original. Translation augments and modifies the original, which in so far as it is living on, never ceases to be transformed and to grow'.[5]

Derrida has made it clear that translation is not a mere transcription, but a writing -- a 'productive writing called forth by the original text'. Let us translate Derrida's 'writing' as 'painting'. The painting, in calling, like the inscription on McCahon's *John in Canterbury*, for the 'answering hark of a hearer' and someone 'to speak', is calling for that ear, that mouth, which will hear it and echo it -- and in the dramatics of so doing, in a masterful act of public relations and advertisement, it is producing that mouth and that ear. 'Already', as Derrida would say, 'the original is indebted to its coming translation'. The work "calls for the complement or the supplement, or as Walter Benjamin says, for that which will 'come along to enrich it'."[6]

And this situation is exacerbated, and made all the more dramatically clear, I would say, in Gordon Walters' case, the case of one who withheld his work for so long, who did not exhibit between 1949 and 1966, and who dared not exhibit his abstractions of the 1950s until 1974, knowing that there would be for them as yet for no answering hark, that their just and necessary demands could not yet be met. Walters' work was waiting for the right conditions for its survival. Today's conditions. Those conditions are now, in the post-Nationalist time, and visibly so in the art of Killeen.

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[4] Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, p. 153.

[5] Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, p. 122.

[6] Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, p. 153.

Walters' fifties work had maintained for decades its potent silence. Certainly, it did not flagrantly call up its audience, as did the work of the Nationalists, and the work of McCahon, in particular. It did not create its own followers in the act of bewailing its lack, in the act of inscribing all over its surface its own wretchedness, and its exile. It did not bewail, in self-inscription, the lack of an 'answering hark'. It did not self-inscribe itself as 'a landscape with too few lovers'. It did not, as did McCahon's work, inscribe addresses to the spectator it required: 'Do you believe this?'; and 'You too/and you/you too my friend'. Yet it announces its own presence, even if not in the 10 foot high, billboard-sized letters of McCahon, saying I AM.

Walters' work announces its own legibility, its own clarity, and yet too its own polyvocality, its incommensurability, its ungraspable nature, as its elements, each so clear, refuse to keep still, and to form a final apprehensible whole. And this is not just in his 'op art'-like works, where it is most obvious. It is, I would say, a fundamental principle of his oeuvre. In the gouaches of the fifties there are already those games with positive and negative, where there is certain reversability, an undecideability as to which is figure and which ground, so that the work remains fertile, open, unfinaliseable -- unfinished, in a sense, calling for an endless recreation by its viewers. And later, in the better known Koru Series, the means, though extremely reduced -- bar and ball, black and white, horizontal and vertical only -- nevertheless produce an irreduceable and ungraspable effect, which finds a clearly answering hearer in Killeen's Combs series. And in Killeen's Grids on aluminium. And, if less obviously, in Killeen's cut-outs.

The painter's retrospection, then, as much as the retrospectives of critics and curators, may re-issue or re-shape the canon. Nor is the canon only an imposing, ecclesiastical edifice, casting its shadow on the as yet uncanonised figures below. It is, in a sense, the creation of artists, it also, as Bryson has pointed out, 'emerges retroactively, in the tropes of homage (submissive or subversive) in which it comes to be located'.[7] Those artists who in some way imitate a work, in highly evaluating it, or in putting it up for their critique, place it in the canon, or place it more firmly there, just as much as they do who reproduce, display, buy, illustrate, anthologise or otherwise allude to it.

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[7] Norman Bryson, *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, p. 213.

The power of the canon, as Bryson remarks, may also be seen arising from below, in the whole gamut of citation. Nor is this a matter only of the host of 'minor' followers -- those who merely echo their masters and mistresses, or those who traduce them, making pallid what was once vivid, or turning an originary pathos to bathos or worse -- as does say Nigel Brown with McCahon. It may happen -- and happen with all the more power -- in the case of an artist like Killeen, who is no *mere* follower. The better the artist, one might say, the more highly regarded, and the more different and independent the artist from that artist to whom he or she refers, the more effective the act of homage and critique.[8]

This, then, is my claim: Walters' work effectively stays 'in mind', in paint, in the paintings of Killeen -- in translation, as it were. As Walters' work would require and would wish... (We have seen, in our quotations from Rowe, Ross, and Keith, how one effect of Killeen's Combs and Grids is to precisely to bring Walters to mind.)[8] And conversely, one might go so far even as to measure Killeen's development as an artist by his long trek away from McCahon, as from the rejected country of origin which nevertheless leaves its mark, and by his long progress towards that solitary eminence on the horizon, an eminence as yet insufficiently noticed by others: Walters.

And yet this would be, in the end, to exaggerate the importance of both Walters and McCahon for Killeen, too much to succumb to Bloomian heroics, in making of them Founding Fathers. They are both but part of the (irrecoverable) intertext in which Killeen operates and is operated.

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[8] Ian Wedde is another reviewer who gets the Walter's/Killeen connection to press. 'The spectre of... Gordon Walters flew across the room during the recent Richard Killeen show.' Ian Wedde, 'The portable workout', *Evening Post*, 15 September, 1988. Also, a *gallerist* may mark connections, and so precede the historian in making a historical point. In a group show at the Sue Crockford Gallery, for instance, 17 October - 4 November 1988, a Killeen cut-out, *Black White left right* (1981), was hung beside three Walters paintings, each titled *Untitled*, of 1987. The similarities between the Walters works and the Killeen, unspoken except by the telling and deliberate act of juxtaposition, were striking and much remarked.