

Re-Placing the Dialectic: Notions of Compositional Procedure in James Dillon's *German Tryptych*

MICHAEL SPENCER
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

In his book *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century*, Arnold Whittall observes:

fuzzy categorisations will always run the risk of appearing to downgrade the no-less-substantial achievements of composers who work more determinedly in the border regions linking mainstream and avant-garde. In the British context, the outstanding example is James Dillon (b. 1950) whose *Nine Rivers* sequence, begun in 1982 and completed in 1996, is important and potent enough – not least in the way it balances turbulent complexity with impetuous lyricism – to merit book-length study in its own right. [1]

This comment is not so much an indictment of critical pigeon-holing as an indication of the neglect the music of Scottish composer James Dillon has, until recently, suffered in Britain. This issue has been well-documented in the smattering of articles that has appeared in *Contact* and *Contemporary Music Review* over the last twenty years. Yet, without wishing to regurgitate the biographical details which serve as the backbone to every review and interview concerning Dillon, I do think his background is an illuminating introduction to his way of thinking. [FN](#)

He is in many respects an outsider, a Scot in self-imposed exile with deeply disparaging views on what he regards as the 'safety' of the academic conveyor-belt of composers. His influences include Jimi Hendrix, 'alongside such classical interpreters as Artur Schnabel, Glenn Gould and Ali Akbar Khan: "All of them iconoclasts," as Dillon puts it, 'they have developed a vertiginous quality in their playing which somehow emerges from critical readings constructed from within a tradition – what is always in question is their relation between belonging and breaking out – a conflation of contradictory factors.'" [2] Robert Graves, to whose memory *Überschreiten*, the first work in Dillon's *German Tryptych*, is dedicated, is also regarded as an influence, because of his position at the boundaries of a literary tradition that neither accepted nor rejected him, a position that fuelled his creative impetus. [FN](#)

The most obvious influence on Dillon, as far as twentieth century 'classical' composers are concerned, is Iannis Xenakis, a man he finds fascinating because 'we both come from the fringes of Europe and I can see certain links with his work in that sense. There's no doubt that if you are born and bred in Central Europe (or Southern England), there's a tendency to turn culture into something too cosy, which is why figures like Rilke are so extraordinary. They happen almost despite the culture, but of course, they are also wrapped up with the culture as well – it becomes so inextricably interlinked that you just can't disentangle it.' [3] [FN](#) Dillon said this in an interview in 1988, citing Rilke, from whose *Fifth Sonnet to Orpheus* the title *Überschreiten* comes, as another example of the artist caught in a necessary creative paradox. And this is perhaps what makes Dillon such an attractive subject – it is extremely difficult to separate literary influences, the few musical influences, issues of acoustics, philosophical ideas and aesthetic from the compositional procedures and the music itself. He is a composer fixated with the notion of the boundary, yet who persists in keeping that boundary blurred and ambiguous.

In 1986 Dillon was commissioned by the London Sinfonietta to write a work for 16 players (wind, brass, percussion and piano doubling Hammond organ). He saw it as an opportunity to write the first of a tryptych, a musical 'altar-piece', three interlocking tableaux. These three works, written over a period of ten years, comprise *Überschreiten* ('Transgression') for chamber ensemble, *helle Nacht* ('Bright Night') for large orchestra and *Blitzschlag* ('Lightningbol') for solo flute and orchestra. They take as their extra-musical subtext themes of the poets from the German mystical tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Four years prior to *Überschreiten*, Dillon had spoken about the issue of unity in *Contact* magazine: 'Beyond the notion of opposites, however, musical time is explored in terms of coincidence through the beautiful and exciting metaphysics of unity.' [4] Critic Roger Wright goes on:

This hints at a philosophical leitmotif throughout his work – namely the acceptance of an underlying unity in nature, here dramatised (in his wind quintet) and formalised in a dialectic of opposed materials and unity. Dillon's composition is not geared to the creation of beautiful aesthetic objects. [5] [FN](#)

This conclusion proves to be inaccurate – *Überschreiten* is specifically concerned with the notion of the beauty of being. However, it is not the banal, normative definition of beauty to which Dillon refers, but the idea of the 'beauty of being' as an extreme intensity of experience. Peter Nelson explains this in his introduction to the 1996 radio broadcast of the work: 'This intensity is the focal point of a meeting of two strands of thought – the European mystical tradition (from the spiritual/alchemical writers of the eighteenth century through to the present-day counter-rationalist philosophers) and Dillon's concern with the term 'transgression' as it appears in the work of Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault.' [6] [FN](#)

Überschreiten takes as its starting point the upper harmonics of a low E. From the outset, however, this strange harmonic sound-world is constantly under threat (from the piano and tam-tam in the opening bars, and from the gradual introduction of 'inharmonic' pitches in the wind and strings). This starting point is re-voiced eleven times throughout the work with an emphasis on going 'beyond the borders' ostensibly set out by the original harmonic structure. It is this process of going 'beyond borders' that remained Dillon's primary concern during the creation of the *Tryptych*. In an interview with Michael Alexander, Dillon presented the following argument:

In his *Minima Moralia*, Adorno defines dialectical thought as 'an attempt to break through the coercion of logic by its own means.' In the *Tryptych*, I replace the dialectic itself, or at least attempt to break asunder the normative urges embedded in such logic. The notions, assumptions and ideas behind these works are on different levels and reflect in some sense Rilke's ideas of 'transgression': a suggestion of always transcending the immediate; from local events to the larger and higher levels of a work, sections are crossing over other sections... [and] the whole work is moving beyond itself. [7] [FN](#)

Clarification of Dillon's ideas about the compositional process depends on what he means by 'dialectic' here. One definition of dialectical emphasizes the logic of formal reasoning as a key factor. Dillon seems clearly to be dissatisfied with any idea of strictly logical – or 'normative' – processes of composition. Rather, his reference to Rilke's concept of 'transgression' suggests that his interpretation of dialectic is closer to the nineteenth-century one propounded by Hegel, in which contradictions merge themselves in a higher truth, or unity, or beauty, which includes them and grows out of them. If one thinks of dialectic in this sense, Dillon's compositional process in the *Tryptych* seems to represent a form of double interrogation, on the one hand, of the 'civilised' metaphysics associated with form (proportion, balance, symmetry, order), and on the other, limits or

borders. Indeed, the 'transgressive' approach is precisely the way in which he works constantly with 'contradictions' – techniques which the previous use of material in the piece do not predict. He creates an entirely new kind of overall unity, which grows out of the dialectical process and is not in any way pre-determined by a planned form. The limits/borders he is transgressing are set by his initial overall plan for a work, which is quite rigorous. It may include, for example, as Alexander illustrates in his article with reference to *helle Nacht*, graphic plotting of timbre, tempi, dynamics and contour.

This view of Dillon's work suggests that the quotation about Adorno and Rilke should be interpreted to mean that Dillon is 're-placing' (as in re-situating) the dialectic rather than 'replacing' it with something else. It should not be inferred that the composer simply intends to replace one set of values (the dialectic) with another (the transgressive), but that both are possible ways of perceiving material. He is 're-situating the dialectic' from a position where the composer's creative urges are interacting with the pre-determined logic of previous musical forms to one where they are actually creating a new form out of the process of constantly contradicting traditional logic and going beyond boundaries. The crossing of boundaries in his work is like an endless spiral which can be traversed section by section, or can be viewed (from outside) as a large structure. By identifying where the boundaries lie in the material (that is, musical material) the composer can, for example, start formally from an acoustic level (where the boundaries, for example, might be the traditional expectations associated with musical material – the range of an instrument, the 'expected' form of a work, the 'expected' pitch system and its treatment) and can then intuitively begin to modify those boundaries. The introduction of inharmonic pitches into a musical passage defined by a particular harmonic spectrum as in sections of *Überschreiten* is an example.

Such characteristics of Dillon's music reinforce the notion that Dillon – as most of his interviews over the years have also confirmed at some point – is not at all interested in a 'Dillon style'. This is because 'style' is associated with pre-ordained notions of patterning, which Dillon regards as inauthentic. In discussion, he concedes that his work must inevitably include characteristic traits which are unconscious influences on his compositional process. His system of composing (or rigorous planning) opens up possibilities that are taken up by intuition, where intuition is 'leaping in the dark to open your eyes and ears'. As Robert Graves puts it, 'intuition is a memory of the future'. This intuitive, yet carefully planned, approach leads Dillon to develop very different rationales for exploring and using the musical material available to him than those which that material appears to offer, at least as traditionally perceived. Thus, for example, he is likely to eschew the 'obvious' musical rationale involving scalar sequences and harmonic patterns and pursue instead entirely different ways of relating sounds to one another, such as creating pitch aggregates based on the frequencies (in Hertz) of harmonic spectra, pulse patterns based on the average mean of attacks within a specific duration, and creating large-scale structures where different types of musical material in different tempi are ordered by a system of ratios. He would, I suspect, stress that this is permanently unsettled position. The *Tryptych* is a warning against the repression of 'civilising' behaviour, normative definitions and the loss of rigorous thinking.

helle Nacht, the centrepiece of the *Tryptych*, transforms the assertive clarity of *Überschreiten* to a new plane. It takes as its inspiration Holderlin's translation of Sophocles's *Antigone*. Dillon pursues the idea of the transgressive as intensively as possible on every level. This intense pursuit, almost as consuming as the 'dark light' of Antigone's burial, inevitably means that the actual material is extremely fragile, not least because articulation and the modes of playing are so detailed: they constantly push the boundaries of technique. However, the macrolevel is also problematic (as Alexander observes in his article): how does one maintain the whole element of surprise and change over a large time-span, when, by nature of the transgressive aspiration, the form must remain elusive? The answer to this would seem to lie in Dillon's intuitive method of working, where the notion of meaning is generated at a detailed level by the endless 'sieving' of material – and yet there is a unifying principle, which eventually creates the wholeness of the work, and which was conceived in the original plan.

This process of intuition working within a nevertheless unifying principle seems to me to be a clear example of what Holderlin (quoted by Steiner) [8] identifies as the essence of the creative process: the 'irreconcilable tension' between 'the work's identity to itself and its transformations in the

process of expression and reception'. As Steiner points out, this model of creative action 'anticipates precisely Roger Sessions's location of the source of musical composition in a composer's experienced immediacy of 'irreconcilable levels of energy'.' [9] Indeed, it is likely that Dillon would be sympathetic to both Holderlin and Sessions. All three are aware of the struggle to come to terms with the notion that ultimately all art is artifice: the composition entails an element of violence and diminution, fulfilment and abstraction. Specifically, Dillon is questioning levels of order, what it means if these levels co-exist, whether they become something else. This is not so far removed aesthetically from John Cage's position, yet the means and methods of aspiration are seemingly worlds apart. This raises the notion of the matrix of notation for Dillon: the peculiar energy bound up in actually committing the work to paper (and here it could be argued that Cage's fascination with graphic notation is a naïve approach to the issue of levels of order). Notation contains the work and energy of the composer; it is another barrier that has to be overcome, another boundary to be transgressed, to open up a space the composer intuitively exists but cannot be certain about. It is not merely a transcription; it is inextricably linked to the fabrication of the music itself. Dillon believes that mensural notation is one of the most treasured gifts from the European tradition. The possibility of revelation of multi-dimensional temporal zones is a by-product of the notation itself. For him, the extreme slowness of working not only allows the possibility of circumspection, it makes the granular quality of each individual note more real. [FN](#)

The concluding part of the *Tryptych*, *Blitzschlag* for solo flute and orchestra, takes its inspiration from the German mystical poet Jakob Boehme who, like Holderlin, was fixated with the mystical aspects of Christianity and their relation to the transgressive aspects of Greek myth and tragedy. In comparison with the first two parts, *Blitzschlag* had a longer gestation period, because of commissioning problems, and Dillon feels that this actually allowed him to approach this final thunderbolt with a 'bloody-minded' return to the issue of transgression in working out the detail of the various sections of the work. By this he meant more direct attention specifically to the expansion of boundaries within the piece, in contrast to *helle Nacht* where this effect had been achieved more indirectly. The directness of his approach to transgression of boundaries in the piece is vividly indicated by the title *Blitzschlag*. Dillon was influenced in selecting this title by an article by Foucault on the notion of transgression in the work of Bataille, in which he described the concept of 'transgression' as a lightning bolt:

Perhaps it [transgression] is like a flash of lightening in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity. [10] [FN](#)

What is particularly interesting about how Dillon sought to achieve lightning bolt transgressions in the work is that he set himself the problem of going beyond the expected boundaries of a traditional form. *Blitzschlag* is, in effect, a flute concerto. As before, the initial raw material for *Blitzschlag* is the upper partials of a low pitch, in this case D. What is significantly different from the previous two tableaux is the overtly gestural treatment of the initial material. Here, one of the ways the notion of the transgressive is reconsidered is in the juxtaposition of the extremely virtuosic solo flute writing (similar in the use of extended techniques and rhythmic virtuosity to *Sgothan* for solo flute, and indeed any of his earlier solo works) with an orchestral writing that is less detailed on the microlevel than *helle Nacht*. The flute's entry and continuous interruption of the orchestral tutti acts as an unexpected lightning bolt throughout the work (*Blitzschlag* bars 176-177, bar 269). The various ensembles within ensembles of the orchestra are also given material which constitutes mini-lightning bolts, cutting across 'expected' conventions (*Blitzschlag* bar 140). On a structural level, the normative expectations of concerto form are immediately vanquished by the placing of a lengthy flute solo (I hesitate to use the word *cadenza*, because of the associations of that word), after which Dillon indicates in the score a *fermata* of ten seconds or more, with the words 'absolute stillness – like a false ending'. [11] This destabilises the overall form and the presumptions any listener may have about the traditional concerto-form in relation to this work. [FN](#)

Another interesting feature of *Blitzschlag* is how Dillon does in fact continue the strategy previously used in *helle Nacht* of embedding in the work material from the previous one(s). Michael Alexander suggested at the end of his article (which was written before *Blitzschlag*) that this would be an almost insurmountable problem for Dillon, because the constant commitment to 'going beyond boundaries' would 'dislocate and dismantle [the embedding of material], so that such traces which have been previously set up will become destroyed objects.' [12] Dillon does, however, embed material from *helle Nacht* in the last tableau: it opens with an intense *divisi* string section which uses (*Blitzschlag*, bars 81 - 93) material (in augmentation) from rehearsal figure 12 of *helle Nacht*. How does he succeed in re-using material in this way and yet remain true to the transgressive philosophy? This question has a wider reference. Another form of it might be: how can Dillon justify passages in this work which may sound to the audience as though they refer to other composers – for example, Mahler [13] – or 'standard' musical forms and 'gestures'? Dillon's answer is that the listener needs to listen to such apparently referential passages in a completely 'decontextualised' way – that is, that their apparent reference to other musical contexts is not relevant. Their significance consists only in their relationship to the rest of this particular work, and the dialectical tensions from which they emerge within this work. [FN](#)

In his article, Alexander places the onus on Dillon to resolve the complex web initiated by *Überschreiten* and exploded in *helle Nacht* with what was, at the time, the unwritten conclusion to the *Tryptych*. I believe that Dillon successfully resolves the issues through the gestural treatment of the material without losing sight of the philosophical precept behind the three works. Traditionally, the definition of 'dialectic' is one in which the possibilities of intuition/creation are constrained by acceptance of what appears to be possible using the common perceptions of the nature of musical material (harmonic systems, scalar systems etc.). These perceptions limit the range of thinking one can do about the relationships among sounds. What Dillon does is 're-situate' this perception of musical creativity by making it just one of several equally potent ways of thinking about composition, as opposed to an over-riding one which limits the possibilities. It is not necessarily a unique displacement of the dialectic but, I would argue, the musical results are unique in the context of contemporary British music.

Footnotes

[1] Arnold Whittall, *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: 1999): 388. [Back](#)

[2] Michael J. Alexander, 'The Changing States of James Dillon', *Contemporary Music Review* 13/1 (1995): 65-84. [Back](#)

[3] Richard Toop, 'Four Facets of the New Complexity', *Contact* 32 (1988): 4-50. [Back](#)

[4] Roger Wright, 'James Dillon', *Contact* 24 (1982): 20-24.

[5] Wright, *ibid.*: 20-24. [Back](#)

[6] Peter Nelson, 'Hear and Now (BBC Radio 3)' (Uncatalogued SMIC, 1996). [Back](#)

[7] Alexander, 'Changing States': 65-84. [Back](#)

[8] George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (London, 2001).

[9] Steiner, *ibid.* [Back](#)

[10] Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression' (1963) in Botting and Wilson, eds., *Bataille: A Critical Reader* (Oxford, 1998). [Back](#)

[11] James Dillon, *Blitzschlag* (London, 1996): 7. Dillon's scores are published by Peters Edition. [Back](#)

[12] Alexander, 'Changing States'.

[13] James Dillon, *helle Nacht*, rehearsal figures 48-49, double basses (London, 1987); Dillon, *Blitzschlag*, bars



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