Sense without Syntax: The Art of P. Inman and Thomas DeLio

Benjamin R. Levy

Abstract:

In his 1956 essay, "Words into Music: The Composer's Approach to Text," Edward Cone, proposed that a musical setting of a poem directed the possible meanings of the text towards a more specific interpretation. Since then, however, revolutionary movements in poetry and music challenge this paradigm, especially in artistic endeavors that embrace types of indeterminacy in their inner workings. This essay examines the collaboration of Thomas DeLio and P. Inman as one such project, discussing the precedents, contexts, and effects of their artworks. Inman's writing fragments language, questions the meanings of words, and dissolves standard syntax, resulting in an attention on microcosmic and macrocosmic structures, rather than on mid-level connections. DeLio's music amplifies these effects, and rather than channeling the potential meaning of a poem into greater focus, as Cone suggests, multiplies the significant potential of any single moment in rich and rewarding ways.

In his landmark essay, "Words into Music: The Composer's Approach to Text," Edward Cone, proposed a paradigm for the relationship between poetry and music. Recognizing a poem's ability to support multiple interpretations or gradations of meaning, Cone claims that:

> What the composer does, then, when he sets a poem to music, is to choose one among all its forms—or, more accurately, since it is impossible, except by abstraction, to isolate one single form, he delimits one subset within the complete set of all possible forms…. the composer's task is to make the *latent* form *patent* by presenting it through the more specific, inflexible, and immediate medium of music (Cone, 1989, p. 119).

Cone's main concern is with the distortions of poetic design as it is grafted onto musical form: distortions of accent which disturb the prosody or shift emphasis—and implied importance—to other words. His examples are largely grounded in the lyric poetry and common practice musical language of German Lieder, and the way that the syntax of language might adapt to the syntax of musical coherence.

Even as Cone was writing these words in 1956, however, experimental and avant-garde movements in both music and poetry were changing the fundamental relationship between these two arts, and in today's artistic landscape we must reconsider Cone's words. Poetry has arisen that self-consciously embraces not just gradations of meaning, but potentially divergent meanings, or that eschew conventional meaning altogether. Musical traditions have emerged that embrace indeterminacy, open networks of associations, and which are not as inherently 'specific' and 'inflexible' as in Cone's theoretical model. While the lines of these experimental traditions go back decades, I know of no other collaboration which challenges Cone's presumptions so thoroughly and rewardingly as that between P. Inman and Thomas DeLio, and the present essay seeks to further our understanding of their art by placing it into its poetic and musical context.

Many revolutionary movements in music took a reconsideration of language as their starting point, from the Florentine Camarata and the rise of recitative to Wagner's declamatory style and Schoenberg's *Sprechstimme*, the natural enunciation of language was taken as a model for musical inflection. These examples are all grounded in aural experience of language as their starting point, and they took the rhythms and contours inherent in speech as a model for musical characteristics. In more recent art, however, the process of reading or thinking through a text has been as powerful a model as that of the spoken word. There is an element of this in Cone, when

he discusses the repetition of lines or phrases in settings by Schubert and Schumann and states that, 'in reading poetry our consciousness (or perhaps better our subconsciousness) hovers over certain words and ranges both forward in anticipation and backward in memory' (120). These simple acts of mental repetition, while present in the act of reading or ruminating on any poem, are greatly extended, however, in works by Samuel Beckett and Gertrude Stein, authors Inman cites as particular influences.

Beckett and Stein are part of the legacy that Marjorie Perloff has described as "the poetics of indeterminacy," which originated with Rimbaud and extends through the poetry of John Cage. The figures in this lineage are marked by the presence of types of "undecidability" (Perloff, 1981, p. 4) worked into their use of language. Gertrude Stein has long been celebrated for how her writing erodes the traditional meaning of words. Along with William Carlos Williams's praise, quoted in the other essays of this volume, Edith Sitwell observed that Stein was able 'to deprive words of their old smothering associations' and achieve an 'anarchic breaking up and rebuilding of sleepy families of words and phrases' (Sitwell, quoted in Perloff, 1981, p. 81). Stein's self-contradictory or patently nonsensical statements are one method of freeing words from their traditional meanings and introducing the element of uncertainty. Take for example the following passage from *Tender Buttons* (1914), ostensibly describing a shawl, but in which the words and their meanings begin to take on a life of their own:

> A shawl is a hat and hurt and a red ballon and an under coat and a sizer a sizer of talks.
>
> A shawl is a wedding, a piece of wax a little build. A shawl.
>
> Pick a ticket, pick it in strange steps and with hollows. There is hollow hollow belt, a belt is a shawl. (Stein, 1998, p. 325)

While there are some ways in which the sense of the word shawl remains intact (if stretched to its limits—it *could* be worn on the one's head *like* a hat, or wrapped around the waist *like* a belt), a more rewarding train of thought follows the symbolic associations that become attached to this garment. These unpredictable subversions of meaning often seem to follow along the lines of alliteration and rhyme: it becomes wedding and wax; pick it and ticket; and most suggestively, as hat becomes hurt and hollow.

William H. Gass examines Stein's use of language in greater depth in his essay, "Gertrude Stein and the Geography of the Sentence." He suggests a procedure that 'treats the elements of the sentence as if they were people at a party, and begins a mental play with all their

possible relationships' (Gass, 1978, p. 115). He also makes an analogy to furniture that can be rearranged in a room and finds that Stein's words can have multiple simultaneous meanings and purposes. Gass traces paths of double entendre, puns, root words that are hidden or implied, but which broaden out into wide networks of associations. In this process, he begins to uncover non-linear "clusters" of meaning through her writing, as it returns to certain images, for example those of domestic cleaning and dirtiness, ultimately relating to a deeply embedded theme of purification.[1]

In a work like Beckett's *Ping* (1966/67, in Beckett, 1986, pp. 149-51), words also shift in their meaning and implications by repetition in different formulations. One set of images revolves around body parts mentioned by the text, another around colors, variously attached to these body parts or to other objects in the room. The slight variations in wording throughout this text seem not to describe changes in the scene, but changes in the narrator's mind, adding a pervasive feeling of doubt to the shifting descriptions. This even extends, at times, to the uncertain function of individual words. "Light" at times modifies the different colors ('light grey almost white') and at times seems to be a purer idea, connected to heat, mentioned several times throughout the text. While the compelling images of the text are all collected around a scene of desperate isolation, the unreliability of the narrative voice means little more can be precisely defined.

While these foundational examples rely on repetition as a device for questioning the consistency of words and their meanings, Inman himself uses repetition infrequently. In his poetry, words come and go without being repeated or contradicted, but simply by slipping in and out of the fabric of the poem. Inman also moves past these precedents in his almost complete avoidance of declarative sentences—which occur in Beckett and Stein, even if only as a foil to the more adventurous turns of phrase examined above. The words of Inman's poems, and the images they conjure or suggest, are unfixed not because they are challenged or questioned by later ideas or propositions, but because they are never fully connected to a stable network of other words and images. The focus, instead, is on an openness, an incompleteness: not only is there is no narrative and no underlying scenario, but there is only the merest suggestion of syntax, which transfers the "undecidability" of the poem to a more fundamental level than in Inman's predecessors.

The opening lines of Inman's poem "sam" provide an example of this. The third line, 'rinsed,' could be read as a verb, connecting back to the previous lines in search of a subject, or as an adjective, looking forward to modify the noun 'initials.'[2] "Initials" and "talk," a few lines later, also have ambiguous status as either noun or verb, and 'stray' as either verb or adjective. Any attempt to parse a sentence through to the first period will inevitably lead to unlikely combinations of subjects and verbs, and the cognitive dissonance involved leads to a continually dissolving syntax, where there are only provisional areas of meaning, and where no single line of interpretation is ever confirmed. Often these even lead to a sense of elision in his poetry, that potentially clarifying words are left absent or erased, perhaps even hidden in the suggestive white space of the margins, as the grammatical units of language seem to slip away into emptiness and restart again mid thought.

The subsequent passage of "sam" exhibits another kind of indeterminacy. Here the pull to connect "re" and "mains" contradicts the delineation of the poem, but does suggest a logical unit: "cat remains." Whether the cat in this unit is staying put or has met with an unfortunate end, however, is ultimately unknowable. Alternately, following the line itself might lead to a viable interpretation of, "cat re" as homophone for the French "quatre." This sort of wordplay is certainly present in Stein, and suggests a logic revolving around the sonic characteristics of words rather than the logical coherence of ideas. Alliteration and assonance link other ideas, for instance, the sounds of the initial words "ink at" reemerge as "in kinds" and "in cat." This play of fragmentation and sound also extends to some of Inman's invented words, for example the second line's "vaud," which could be a fragment of "vaudeville," related by rhyme to baud or laud, or by both fragmentation and sonic resemblance (and poetic context) to Baudelaire. The richness of Inman's poetry rests, then, on a paradoxical effect of his dissolving syntax. As these mid-level connections are abandoned, our focus turns both to the small-scale coherence of sonic resemblances and fleeting, disconnected, or juxtaposed images, and simultaneously to the large-scale identities found in how these images gather in "clusters" and in how the structural patterns of how the words are spread out on the page.

DeLio has described his approach to setting Inman's texts as one of extending, heightening, or pushing forward the ideas and processes seen in the poetry to their extremes. We can come to a better understanding of the fruits of their collaboration if we approach DeLio's settings through certain concepts already seen in Inman's poetry: the avoidance of syntax and

the resulting shift of focus on micro- and macro-scale structuring, fragmentation and elision as aiding this dissociation from traditional forms of meaning, and finally, the cultivation of a plurality of meanings or interpretations through this indeterminacy.

Like Inman's over-punctuation, unconventionally short line lengths, and the spatial positioning of his poetry on the page, DeLio's music is often sparse and fragmentary, with events widely removed from one another in time. While this music can be seen as drawing on the austerity of Webern or Feldman and the pioneering use silence by Cage, DeLio's compositions remain quite distinctive. Silences in this music radically separate events from one another, hindering any reified connections between individual moments and thwarting the suggestion of anything resembling a phrase. These silences create space, but unlike Cage's silences—which are often taken as invitations for embracing the environmental sounds around us—DeLio's silences are invitations for reflection on the sounds presented, scrutiny of their details, and imaginative consideration of their potential. When the words of the poem are intelligible, DeLio's use of silence and fragmentation augments features of the poetry itself. The sense of elision, or drifting into a stream of thought *in media res*, is magnified, as if we are privy to a thought in the process of formulation, turned over in the mind in different ways, but never becoming fully fixed. When combined with Inman's convincingly wordlike sounds (e.g. "vaud" discussed above, which may seem like a word in the process of formation), this effect is heightened still further.

In DeLio's settings a whole range of levels of intelligibility coexist in a multidimensional space. In the most extreme types of fragmentation, the words of Inman's poetry are transformed, stripped of their comprehensibility as language, and rendered as pure sonic material—once again, a tendency found in the poetry itself. Many of the works feature contours of phonemes, which are chopped up at variable speeds, dynamics, and pitch levels. These are often recombined, resulting in a kind of granulated glissando between the different speeds and pitch levels (for example, in the opening minute of his compositions *aengus* or *amounts.to.*).[3] And yet the constituent parts of the words are always present, and more intelligible words can emerge from a texture made from their substance. A similar effect seems to take the noisy sounds of vocal production—the friction between tongue, lips, and teeth, for example—and derive a texture of smacks, clicks, and whispers, as can be heard after the second minute of his composition *sam*, interspersed with more intelligible readings.[4]

DeLio's settings also reflect the indeterminacy and multiplicity of meanings in Inman's texts by containing different treatments of the text within the piece. Thus the idea of a single narrative voice, which was so critical to Cone's model of compositional text setting, is fundamentally challenged and upended from the start. In the opera/installation *sam*, for example, the music draws on the readings of two narrators, one male (myself) and one female (Tina Darragh). Both of us recorded several readings as source material, sometimes isolating single words, sometimes running lines together into the units we each felt were natural. This already created multiple forms of the poem, each with different timbres, inflections, and emphases, leading to various interpretive possibilities. In the more recent opera/installation, *aengus* (and the related network of pieces, *inents* and *Song: "aengus"*), the number of readers has grown to six, but even the works that only draw on Inman's own reading (for example *amounts.to* and *Foxrock, near Dublin*) have this sense of inherent plurality.[5]

The use of timbre in the electroacoustic processing of these readings furthers the impression of multiplicity. On a first listen to a piece like *amounts.to*, Inman's more intelligible readings seem to have characteristic treatments, ranging from faint and distant to more clearly present. DeLio has a large repertoire of different kinds of reverberation which help create these effects. Careful listening, which the silences in the music allow, often reveals, however, that these sonic identities are not fixed, and the treatment of individual words varies slightly different even within readings, growing more or less distorted, removed, or emergent. In the moments when multiple, overlapping treatments intersect around the same text, for example in the opening of *sam*, the use of timbre highlights the multidimensional nature of each individual word, as the different sonic presentations seem to emanate from equally varied conceptual spaces. The types of reverberation, then, are more immediately understood as spatial effects rather than different characters or consistent voices, and in this way, DeLio's careful use of timbre parallel's Inman's use of sound—in the absence of syntactic, phrase- or sentence-level meaning, it is timbre that refocuses our attention on both the small scale individuation of moments and the large-scale suggestion of space.

Many of the reverberative environments that DeLio creates, however, are striking and unique. Rather than trying to enhance the naturalistic space of the reading by adding "warmth" or "life" to the sound, DeLio is often trying to call attention to its artificiality. In some renderings, he does this by cutting off the decay of the reverberated sounds, creating an echoing

environment that somehow lacks one of its most characteristic features, and highlighting the technical process. At other times, DeLio puts a sound through different types of reverberation, repeatedly, filtering out partials after each pass. The result is often a metallic sound, sometimes bearing a resemblance to the later stages of Alvin Lucier's *I am sitting in a room*. These also create an artificial space that is deliberately unnatural, though an assemblage of familiar elements. The resulting balance of pitch and noise, moreover, makes these treatments multifaceted, and pregnant with potential connections to many of the other fragmented vowel and consonant sounds discussed above. One of the most captivating features of DeLio's settings is the way in which sounds are continually recombined in unlikely ways—traversing the virtual geography of different synthetic spaces.

I have been treating these works as connected, not only by their common composer and poet, but because there are common sound types found across these works, and a common feeling of space. Indeed, DeLio has said that he responds to Inman's texts differently than from other poets he has set, for example Paul Celan or Mallarme. Craig Dworkin finds common threads or wordings across Inman's oeuvre (Dworkin, in Inman, 2014, p. xxiii-xxiv), and DeLio's settings, too, have a certain number of interrelationships. This permeability introduces the largest scale of indeterminacy found in these works: an indeterminacy of genre. DeLio regularly composes "parallel" structures, presenting each text setting in multiple formats, for presentation as sound installation, in concert, or on recording. Likewise there are parallel settings of the same text under different titles, as in the opera and song versions of *aengus* and *inents*, and finally, as shown above, there are certain parallelisms in sound and style between settings of different texts. If the openness of these projects, then, seems to be a radical redefinition of genres, one might do well to remember the grammatical origin of opera, as the plural of opus. Indeed, these works are inherently pluralistic, and it is in this aspect where we find the most pronounced difference from Cone's thesis. Rather than looking for music to channel or direct the meaning of the poem, here the musical treatment ramifies potential meaning, refocusing us on the multiplicity of connections, and therefore on process and perception rather than on syntax, on a sense of space and on ways of being, rather than an articulation of anything more concrete. While Cone's maxim that 'Ultimately there can be only one justification for the serious composition of a song: it must be an attempt to increase our

understanding of the poem' (123) may remain valid, with the work of DeLio and Inman, we must shift the entire locus of our understanding.

Notes

[1] See pp. 92-95, esp. 92, "These meanings have no serial order. They are *clustered* like grapes." See also p. 85, footnote 7, where Gass agrees with Allegra Stewart on purification, writ large, as the "central subject" of *Tender Buttons*.

[2] See Delio/Inman essay in this volume for a reprint of the first page of "sam."

[3] For a recording of *amounts. to.* (version 1) see DeLio (2003); for *amounts. to.* (version 2) see DeLio (2013a); for *"aengus"* see DeLio (2013c); for *Song:"aengus"*see DeLio (2013d).

[4] For a recording of *"sam"* see DeLio (2013b).

[5] For a recording of *Song: Foxrock near Dublin* see DeLio (2013e).

References

Beckett, Samuel. *Collected Shorter Prose 1945-1980*. London: John Calder, Ltd., 1986.

Cone, Edward. *Music: A View from Delft*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

DeLio, T. (2003). *amounts. to.* (version 1). In *Music / Theater: New Dimensions*. Baton Rouge, LA: Centaur Recordings.

DeLio, T. (2013a). *amounts. to.* (version 2). In *Thomas DeLio: space / image / word / sound/.* Salisbury, MD: Neuma Records.

DeLio, T. (2013b). *"sam"*. In *Thomas DeLio: space / image / word / sound/.* Salisbury, MD: Neuma Records.

DeLio, T. (2013c). *"aengus"*. In *Thomas DeLio: space / image / word / sound/.* Salisbury, MD: Neuma Records.

DeLio, T. (2013d). *Song:"aengus"*. In *Thomas DeLio: Selected Compositions, 1991-2013.* Salisbury, MD: Neuma Records.

DeLio, T. (2013e). *Song: Foxrock, near Dublin.* In *Thomas DeLio: Selected Compositions, 1991-2013.* Salisbury, MD: Neuma Records.

Gass, William H. "Gertrude Stein and the Geography of the Sentence." In *The World Within the Word*, 63-123. New York: Basic Books (Reprint of Alfred A. Knopf, 1978).

Stein, Gertrude. *Writings: 1903-1932*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1998.

Marjorie Perloff. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

P. Inman. *Written: 1976-2013*. Introduction by Craig Dworkin. Manchester: if p then q classics, 2014.