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The Meaning Revealed at the *N*th Degree in Christian Bök's *Eunoia*

Sean Braune

C HRISTIAN BÖK IS ONE of the foremost Canadian poets of the avant-garde. During a conversation between Bök and Darren Wershler-Henry for *Brick*, Wershler-Henry noted that *Eunoia* is the fastest selling book of poetry since Robert Service's *Songs of a Sourdough* (119). The book's success has left Bök baffled: "I wonder sometimes whether or not people are simply reading it because of its freakish character, passing by it like a carload of vacationers, slowing down to gawk at a two-headed calf by the side of the road" (*Brick* 120). Its success is indeed surprising because of the work's experimental nature and avant-garde status. Experimental literature is typically not commercially fruitful, which makes the success of *Eunoia* all the more surprising. Perhaps Bök is correct when he compares his work to a "two-headed calf" because of its peculiar success. The book's formidable structural constraint requires a gloss or "skeleton key" to assist in approaching and decoding the work. This essay is intended to facilitate such an approach.

The obsessive construction of *Eunoia* is influenced by the textual constraints of the French literary group called the "Oulipo."[1] The Oulipo was a "workshop" where many prominent French writers met to discuss the possibility of producing texts without the aid of "inspiration." Rather than rely on a "lightning bolt" of inspiration to strike, the Oulipians invented mathematical constraints that could produce literature with or without the aid of a writer.[2] These constraints can be seen in the syntactical parallelism, internal rhyme schemes, and the inverse-lipogram[3] of the book's textual structure. Even though the reader stares transfixed by these structures as if observing "a two-headed calf," there is the possibility of a cipher that can decode the various constraints in order to understand how meaning is produced. Although *Eunoia* may appear to be an ambitious literary puzzle, punctilious and fastidious in its composition, there must be a technique or method that can analyze its pieces.

Beyond an essay by Marjorie Perloff,[4] there has been no scholarly work written on *Eunoia*. Perloff's approach is different from mine in that I am attempting to describe how Bök's various constraints produce meaning, whereas Perloff focused on placing Bök's text in proper historical context. My approach is partially inspired by what Bök himself suggests in "The New Ennui,"[5] where he schematically reveals his compositional method for writing *Eunoia* and implicitly hints at the possibility of a cipher that facilitates a more accessible reading of the work.

This approach runs counter to Carmine Starnino's critique of Bök's text in "Vowel Movements." In various ways, Starnino claims that "Bök's system-building . . . makes it impossible for the language to find pleasure in anything other than the sensation of fulfilling its preselected tenets" (30); he "maintain[s] that there needs to be something *functional* about poetic form, and that to endorse *Eunoia*'s constraints as poetry is to implicitly endorse the merit of form as divorced from function" (30). Starnino sees *Eunoia*, with its myriad constraints, as a work suffering from "pointless toil" (30); whereas, I argue that Bök employs his constrained vocabulary to create meaning based on the merits of the narratives he is able to tell. Starnino misses the plot of each vowel-chapter. I argue that *Eunoia* raises epistemological questions regarding the production and creation of meaning. Chapter A and Chapter U demonstrate that the available lexicon allows (or forces) Bök to weave highly racialized narratives (about Hassan in Chapter A and Ubu in Chapter U) or sexualized narratives (about Helen as a sexual object in Chapter E); these narratives raise questions regarding the complicity of vowel prevalence in some racist, racialized, and sexualized depictions of the Other. My reading is aligned with epistemology and claims that *Eunoia* asks questions about the potential narratives told, re-told, and exploited by linguistic tendencies — tendencies that are only revealed when highly constrained forms of writing are utilized to demonstrate the "unconscious" of language-production. When Starnino asks, "How poetically productive . . . are Bök's constraints?" (29), my answer is that *Eunoia*'s constraints are extremely productive because Bök not only synthesizes the constraints but also embeds questions of epistemology, phenomenology, and 'pataphysics within the text to interrogate underlying possibilities and trends in language.

Bök's compositional technique and approach in *Eunoia* has elements of a 'pataphysical[6] schema related to the work of Alfred Jarry, the

French absurdist writer and playwright. Jarry defined his pseudoscience of 'pataphysics as "la science des solutions imaginaires"[7] (*Oeuvres* 669). This 'pataphysical approach is the earliest hint at a cipher of "imaginary solutions" that can decode the constraining structure in *Eunoia*. Jarry places 'pataphysics in an imaginary reality called "ethernity" (*Faustroll* 104). Bök describes "ethernity" as: "an imaginary dimension . . . where the reference of a sign does not describe, but conjures, the existence of the real through the *ur* of simulation" (*'Pataphysics* 34-35). This Jarryesque imaginary reality is akin to the "phase-spaces" of chaos theory, speculative physics, and mathematics. Phase-spaces are imaginary spaces or realities where every rule of reality is predetermined by the mathematician and manipulated in accordance with the dictum of the mathematician's intention. It is in the phase-space of a Jarryesque ethernity where 'pataphysical experiments such as *Eunoia* can occur.

In the *I*-chapter of *Eunoia*, Bök writes of "disciplining signs with trifling gimmicks" (50). His work succeeds in disciplining the signifiers and sign systems of language to construct meaning within the parameters of the textual constraints he uses. Bök disciplines signs in his own ethernity — within an imaginary realm of the thought experiment where the existence of the "real" in language is shown to be a determinate possibility. Bök's work seeks to find the zero degree of language — where the meaning of the vowel is revealed through its oversaturation or exclusion. By either negating a vowel or negating all other vowels (as is the custom of the lipogram or inverse-lipogram), Bök questions the meaning of the vowel itself.[8] This questioning of the vowel indicates that a presence of meaning is signified by an absence that has the potential to produce meaning in the text.

Bök asserts that 'pataphysics "endeavours to create potential problems in the present so that writers in the future might provide an imaginary solution" (*'Pataphysics* 65). I would like to suggest an "imaginary solution" that can be used as a tool to read *Eunoia*. In Bök's work, every vowel is featured in its own chapter where the available lexicon for that vowel is exhausted,[9] but what about the *N* from the title? If *Eunoia*, as a title, was selected because it includes *A,E,I,O,U*[10] (the titles of the book's chapters), then where has the *N* gone? Is it simply a disappearance?[11] I would suggest that the *N* is not absent from the text but rather signals an ability to signify through its exclusion. The *N* is important to the tradition Bök is working within; he emphasizes this in *'Pataphysics*: "Oulipo

explores the poetic impact of any aleatoric form . . . for example, the random series of digits in the set π or the random series of primes in the set *N*" (72). In mathematics, *N* is commonly used as a variable that denotes an unknown quantity that has the potential to change; "*a polynomial of the nth degree* is an expression in which the variable is raised to the *n*th power and no higher" (Greenberg 14). I would suggest that *N* appears as the underlying semiotic mechanism that powers the vowel chapters; it is the formative structure and the singularity upon which Bök's structure functions. It is the key to an analysis of *Eunoia* that considers how to describe the ways in which the Oulipian constraints produce meaning within the text.

The potential meanings in each chapter initially appear to be "random" and resistant to signification. The textual randomness of *Eunoia* can be seen in terms of a fractal where, because of the meticulous effort Bök uses to construct the text, each sentence and each constraint gradually reveals itself while also implicating other texts and other traditions. This underlying "fractality" of the text follows from the Oulipian interest in the *clinamen,*[12] which is the "decline of the *swerve*"; the "vortex of Pound"; the "spiral of Ubu" (Bök, *'Pataphysics* 43); or, to use my contemporary example, the fractal of chaos theory. I would argue that the *clinamen* is the point in the swerve where *N* can be located and then decoded.[13] If we consider the text geometrically, as a mathematical shape defined not by numbers but by words, then we can locate the borders of each shape and describe the contents (meaning) of each potential meaning. The borders of each shape — i.e., the vowel chapters — are defined by the constraint used and create the "fractal mandala" (*Eunoia* 17) that is the text. The space that fills each shape can be better defined by the symbolic meaning assigned to it by the hidden *N* that is folded into the work like a puzzle piece in a multi-dimensional world.

The frontispiece of the book further supports my mathematical reading. The frontispiece is a geometric symbol called "Vowels Swivel." Bök explains its significance after his acknowledgements: "'Vowels Swivel' is a nested set of transparent geometric solids (each one generated by rotating a given vowel around a vertical axis): *A* (cone); *E* (cylinder); *I* (line); *O* (sphere); *U* (paraboloid)" (*Eunoia* n. pag.). Bök offers this visual clue as a way of reading each chapter; the connotative transparent geometric solids rooted in set theory offer evidence that gestures toward the possibility of "writers in the future" decoding the constraints

of *Eunoia*. Bök reminds the reader that Raymond Queneau, one of the founding fathers of the Oulipo, emphasized the technique of using geometric shapes to connote metaphoric structures: "Every conic curve provides a metaphor for the *clinamen* of a given trope: the elliptical function of abbreviation, the paraboloid function of disquisition, and the hyperbolic function of exaggeration" (*'Pataphysics* 69-70). The cover image of *Eunoia* is similar to the frontispiece in that it transposes vowels into a different symbology of signifiers. It polychromatically represents Rimbaud's "Voyelle" by using colours to replace the vowels of the poem, as dictated by Rimbaud's original: "*A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles*" (qtd. in *Eunoia* n. pag.). With such emphasis placed on the vowels in the frontispiece, the cover image, and each chapter, the absence of the *N* becomes a noticeable void that begs us to ask: Where has the *N* gone?

The "fractal mandala" of *Eunoia* is constructed through the strict textual constraints Bök employs and also through the narrative told with the restricted lexicon. Whereas each vowel is featured in its own chapter, *N* is symbolic through its absence. I consider the lone consonant as a symbolic placeholder that outlines the "borders" of each fractalic narrative produced. Like the Mandelbrot set in chaos theory,[14] every fractal is defined by equations that stipulate the rules for the fractal being mapped. Thus, *N* can be found at the point in each chapter that summarizes the thematic elements of the chapter's plot. Typically, in *Eunoia*, this "thematic summary" is encapsulated in italicized sayings or words that are coded in another language. The evidence for this is threefold: 1) by using another language, Bök is allowing himself more authorial play within the constraints by utilizing a richer linguistic lexicon; 2) the use of other languages allows him to organize the "plot" of each chapter around an inverse-lipogrammatic saying that is itself coded in another order of complexity; and 3) the italicized sayings emphasize the *clinamen* ("swerve") in the plot of each chapter — a swerve that acts as either the turning point or moment of epiphany. Bök utilizes different levels of complexity in his constraints: 1) the primary linguistic constraint (the inverse-lipogram); 2) his stated structural rules of composition;[15] 3) the resulting *clinamen* of the plot (the unexpected stories that are told in each chapter); and 4) the symbolic *N* that codifies each *clinamen* (statements in languages other than English that thematically epitomize the narrative contents of each chapter or advance the plot).

The only way to find N is to systematically move through the text, vowel chapter by vowel chapter, in search of the hidden variable (the mathematical consonant N) that contains the meaning of the text while simultaneously working to pull the inverse-lipogram together. The unknown nature of N, acting as a mysterious puzzle piece, resonates as a clue that hints at a deeper understanding lurking beneath the surface of the written words. There is precious little space to talk about the significance of the repeated events in each chapter; therefore, this essay will focus on the textual evidence that produces meaning when the unknown variable becomes "known."

Chapter A is, as Bök describes it, conical — in this case hierarchical, a top-down social structure. *Eunoia* begins with the most powerful character (Hassan, an Agha Khan) and ends with the lowest character on the social scale (Ubu, a plumber); hence, the book begins at the peak of the cone and ends at the downward curve of the paraboloid. The protagonist in Chapter A is "Hassan Abd al-Hassad" (13), the maharajah of an Arab country; he is on the top of the class system. Hassan is an excessive ruler as indicated by the descriptions of the lavish culinary banquet. When Hassan throws a "bacchanal" (13), it is most certainly a "gala ball" (13) with "Kalamata shawarma, cassabananas and taramasalata . . . calf flank . . . lamb shank . . . gravlax and sprats, crawdad and prawns" (14) adorning the dinner table. There is nothing about Hassan that is not ostentatious. Marjorie Perloff is quite right in asserting that Hassan "evokes an alien, often exotic East" (36). Hassan's associations construct stereotypical binaries of East/West and Old/New. Edward Said suggests that the Orient alternates "in the mind's geography between being an Old World to which one returned, as to Eden or Paradise, there to set up a new version of the old" (58). Hassan becomes a racialized and culturalized depiction of an Oriental "maharajah." What is so unsettling about the results of Bök's experiment with the letter A is that the available vernacular allows him to construct a stereotypical representation of the Other. Hassan becomes connotative of a "mythic old" — the same kind of mythic old that Said argues is the imaginary conception of the Orient in Western culture. When Hassan invests on the NASDAQ — the Occidental "New" — he loses a portion of his fortune in a "NASDAQ crash" (23).

The tension between the Oriental Old and the Occidental New is the conflictual set that equals the *N* in this chapter's significatory equation:

> Hassan brags that a crackajack champ at cards lacks what knack Hassan has at craps. A cardsharp, smart at canasta, has a scam: mark a pack, palm a jack. (A cardmatch can act as a starchart that maps *fata arcana*). A shah hazards all cash, stands pat and calls. A fatal pall wracks a casbah. (18)

Hassan loses his hand to a con artist with a hidden jack; this foreshadows his financial (and moral) bankruptcy after the NASDAQ crash. However, the *N* from Chapter A is revealed during the plot's *clinamen*: "*fata arcana*." "*Fata arcana*" is the feminized form of "arcane fate" in Italian (the masculine form is *fato arcano*). Following Said's analysis of the Orient, it is difficult not to consider "*fata arcana*" as an association of the same sort of mythological perception of the Orient as an idealized, romanticized world constructed on the basis of "imaginative geography" (54-55). If the Western world "*creates* the Orient, the Oriental, and his world" (Said 40), then we have to ask (as Bök seems to) how much of Western rhetoric utilizes "*a*" as the dominant vowel? The East is constructed as "Other" through political projections that formulate an "imaginative geography" of "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike" and "different" (40) citizens. It is this same colonialist rhetoric that grounds Hassan's characterization in the *N* that is the symbolic marker of "*fata arcana*." If a "cardmatch can act as a starchart" (the word "starchart" also relates to the "imaginative geography" of the Eastern Oriental and his/her culture), then we can consider *fata arcana* as alluding to Hassan's fate as decided by the chance of cards. Fate is what charts Hassan's destiny; he is a gambler and a believer in kismet. The chance of the cards determines the progression of Hassan's characterization and eventual demise.

This can be demonstrated by Hassan's character progression: the NASDAQ crashes, he loses what seems to be all his money, and he starts a war motivated by vengeance (confirmation of Hassan as a racial stereotype). It is possible that the choice of "*fata*" suggests a more familiar word: *fatwa*. By starting a war, Hassan confirms the stereotypical Western characterization of the Oriental Arab. Hassan's tale is dominated by both fate and chance through the foreshadowing of the rigged

card game, his failure on the stock market, his "fate" as an Arab aggres-
sor toward Western rhetoric, and ultimately, his own death. Hassan
dies as he "gasps a schwa, as a last gasp" (30) — as the cycle of fate and
chance is brought to a close. Thus, *N* allows the Occidental New to
triumph over the Oriental Old.

Chapter E is cylindrical in form: the action of the narrative takes
place on two planes of space-time (present/past) that are connected by a
lateral tension. Plane 1 is the plane of modern times (the present). Here
we meet "He" who "pens fervent screeds" (31) and sells them to news-
papers in a chronologically contemporary plane of reality. This plane is
contrasted to plane 2, the plane of mythology (the past) where we meet
Helen (of Troy). We are reminded that "Westerners revere the Greek
legends" (33), for they provide the sort of autotelic foundations offered
by mythology that charts reality for those living in the present reading
newspapers penned by "He." As we learn of the pressures of Helen's
life, we learn that she "frets," "feels depressed," "feels neglected," "feels
tense"; her only escape is in prurient debauches where she seeks "lewd
revelment" (34): "She sheds her velvet dress; then she lets repellent men
pet her tender flesh. Her lewdness renders even these lechers speech-
less" (36). Helen wilfully objectifies herself largely because she already
feels like an object; she does not feel whole. She is a mythological vessel
upon which Westerners from the present plane of space-time project
their desires. Essentially, she is the archetypal model of femininity; as
such, she has little connection to anything that might be called personal
identity. Helen (and the chapter itself) has no "*I*"; she is "selfless;" she
"defers" (46). Her unknown remainder is outside herself. Her *N* (which
constructs the lack of an "*I*" in her characterization) also codifies the
cohesiveness of meaning within the chapter. The *N* can be found in
veiled form at the chapter's end: "*elle régne éternellement*" (49). Helen
will "reign eternally" as one of the original prototypes of femininity.
Though she "seems sexless; nevertheless, men esteem her pert svelteness
(her slender legs, her perfect feet); she represents perfectness; hence,
we never see her defects" (49). Helen seems "sexless," even though she
is sexualized, because femininity is never present. Lacan argues that
femininity is created by a projection of masculine desire toward an
"object" that returns notions of an ideal (78). This ideal fills the lack
in the presumably masculine viewer, (the nameless "He" Bök refers to),
but it does nothing to address the lack within the viewed (in this case,

Helen). Her *N* is also a motivational impetus within the present plane of space-time because the "He" from the beginning muses about Greek mythology; thus, Helen does "reign eternally." (She exists in both planes of space-time simultaneously, experiencing an internal lack within her own subjectivity while she provides a mythical cohesiveness within the present plane of space-time.) As we saw in Chapter A, Hassan represents the mythical old in the present; in Chapter E, Helen is the mythical old of the past.

The *I*-chapter is linear; its linearity is demonstrated by the words on the page and the act of writing itself. The *I*-chapter is logically the first chapter in first person. This is the chapter of the "I-sigil" (58) where "*I*" loses its meaning that denotes identity and becomes indicative of a commentary on nihilism. The *N* in this chapter is found at its end: "*NIHIL DICIT, FINI*" (58), meaning: "he says nothing, end" or "nothing says." As a society, we put faith into the "*I*" as a sign (or a sigil) that can symbolize our own phenomenal existence and give it absolute meaning. By emphasizing the *I*'s loss of meaning through its repetition and oversaturation, Bök demonstrates the inability to signify the meaning of "life" through the symbolizations offered by language. The repetition of "*I*" forces it to lose its position as a signifier of subjectivity, as a transcendental signifier, or as Lacan would say, as the sigil that "props us up" (80).

In his essay "The New Ennui," Bök writes that *Eunoia* "makes a *Sisyphean spectacle* of its labour, wilfully crippling its language in order to show that, even under such improbable conditions of duress, language can still express an uncanny, if not sublime, thought" (103; emphasis added). Every chapter begins with a short exposition on the constrained act of writing, but the myth of Sisyphus is specifically influential in the *I*-chapter: "I climb cliffs . . . still, I risk climbing, sticking with it" (55). Albert Camus writes, regarding Sisyphus:

> His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing *nothing*. . . . As for this myth, one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over. (116; emphasis added)

In this excerpt from Camus, we see the emphasis placed on the word "*nothing*." Sisyphus's task of pushing the stone is summarized by "*NIHIL*

DICIT, FINI"; the task of pushing the boulder is a thankless, purposeless task that castrates Sisyphus's ability to signify outwards (to communicate) and limits his symbolic meaning to a completely self-directed purpose. We could imagine Camus adopting a similar mantra of "*NIHIL DICIT, FINI*" to exemplify the intention of existentialism: to acknowledge the nothingness of being.

"*NIHIL DICIT, FINI*" also encapsulates the act of writing under Oulipian stringency; it is a representation of Bök's paranoia regarding the project. As Bök says in his own words; "I thought at first that the text would be minimally comprehensible but grammatically correct, and, as it turned out, there appeared these uncanny coincidences that induced intimations of paranoia. A kind of conspiracy was at play, I think, in the language" (*Brick* 118). These paranoiac underpinnings of lipogrammatic play can be summarized by the limitations dictated by the text's Oulipian constraints. Bénabou claims that linguistic constraints, "for their part, granted their arbitrary exigencies, directly create a sort of 'great vacuum' into which are sucked and retained whole quantities of elements which, without this violent aspiration, would otherwise remain concealed" (43). Bök's primary constraint, the lipogram, is particularly unsettling because he reverses it; he produces an inverse-lipogram. (Typically, in lipogrammatic texts, the chosen letter is absent from the text — the *E* in the case of Perec's *La Disparition*, for example — whereas in *Eunoia*, all other vowels are absent.) By inverting the traditional methodology of the lipogram, Bök has effectively created a text that is more dangerous, more experimental, and more prone to failure — something akin to "Evil Knievel writing poetry" (Bök, *Brick* 118). This "great vacuum" that literary constraint produces is a vortex that hints at a text's hidden meanings while at the same time operating as an organizational force — a sort of literary event horizon that undermines traditional laws of narrative. This "great vacuum" that Bénabou mentions is akin to the *clinamen* or the missing "*N*" that signifies the meaning of the constraints used in relation to the narrative structure in *Eunoia*. Perec argues that the "suppression of the letter, of the typographical sign, of the basic prop, is a purer, more objective, more decisive operation, something like constraint degree zero, after which everything becomes possible" (107). What is ironic about Bök's use of the inverse-lipogram is that by negating all other vowels and oversaturating the *I*-chapter with "*I*," he questions the existence of "*I*." He questions whether

or not the "*I*," as a signifier of subjectivity, has ever been able to fulfill its intended purpose. After the protagonist's battle against the sea, his climb up a cliff to hide from the tempest, and his meal in the inn where he muses about his existence, Bök ends the chapter by equating "*I*" with nothingness. Perhaps this realization solidifies the concept of the "degree zero" of the inverse-lipogrammatic constraint.

The *N* in the *I*-chapter contains the fear of death and worrisome concerns regarding the meaning of life. If life is a Sisyphean struggle, then why bother enduring it? And if writing a book like *Eunoia* is a Sisyphean struggle — Bök goes so far as to call it "truly nightmarish" (*Brick* 117) — then why bother writing it? Sisyphus arguably accomplishes "nothing": he repeatedly pushes his boulder to the mountain's peak but never manages to achieve the activity's desired end. However, "nothing" is still "something." "Nothing" acts as a semiotic foothold within the symbolic; it connotes a phenomenal lack of meaning, but identity (the *I*-sigil) does not require meaning to attach itself. It requires the eventual promise of meaning, and even if this eventual promise is a type of Sartrean nothingness, the act of propelling the boulder (or of writing *Eunoia*) and the promise of meaning (the resultant *clinamen*) are what can potentially negate the nothingness offered by nihilism. Bök supports this with his own restrained enthusiasm regarding his text: "*Eunoia* is just an act of athleticism, a crushing endurance test" (*Brick* 118). By ending the chapter with "he says nothing, end" or "nothing says," Bök is giving narrative form to his fears of the absurdity of his own Sisyphean compositional struggle.

Chapter O is spherical like the letter while also implying a void or a vortex. Considering the previous chapter's emphasis on nihilism, the possible relation between *O* and *0* indicates a further reference to nullity. This nullity is the nothingness related in deistic mythologies. Sisyphus's "scorn of the gods" (Camus 116) becomes this chapter's underlying schematic organization as the vowel *O* produces meanings from its available lexicon of gods and godheads. Marjorie Perloff rightly asserts that "*O*, as Bök presents it, is the language of the *book*, of *school* and of the *Word*. *God* is also an *O*-word . . . The *Word* has never been taken more to heart" (37). The "Word of God" becomes the "*N*" that collapses the inchoate meaning of the chapter and solidifies it:

> Monks who vow to do God's work go forth from donjons of
> monkhood to show flocks lost to God how God's word brooks no

crooks who plot to do wrong. Folks who go to Sodom kowtow to
Moloch, so God drops H-bombs of horror onto poor townfolk, most of
whom mock Mormon proofs of godhood . . . No Song of Solomon
comforts Job or Lot, both of whom know for whom gongs of doom doth
toll. Oh, *mondo doloroso*. (60)

Mondo doloroso is Italian meaning "painful world." Chapter O is a chap-
ter that critiques the Word of God and other words that are associated
with God. The "Word of God" can be considered the spectrum of
formative mythologies that provide inadequate foundation for subjec-
tivity in a reality that is threatened by its own nihilistic dissolution (its
own pain). Chapter O moves through different mythological forms, act-
ing as a survey of myth; at the same time, it exposes relations between
different myths. We move from God, Sodom, Moloch, Solomon, Job,
Lot, to modernity's myths in commodity culture: "Porno shows folks
lots of sordor — zoom-shots of Bjorn Borg's bottom or Snoop Dogg's
crotch" (61), to the myth of stardom promised to bright-eyed hopeful
girls: "Blond showfolk who do soft porn go to boomtowns to look for
work on photo shoots" (62), to cultural mainstays such as musical-myth
as seen in "Woodstock" and "Motown" (62). This movement, listed here
as Bök himself ordered it, interrogates the relations between seemingly
"sacred" forms of myth, such as the Word of Scripture, and the secular-
ized "religion" of commodity culture. That the movement is natural and
rhythmically aligned with Bök's narrative constraints raises questions
about the stability of traditionally sacred texts. To place "Snoop Dogg's
crotch" in such close proximity to "Job or Lot" (60) undermines the
sacred status of religious terminology while at the same time raising
questions regarding the relations between what we buy and what we
believe.

    From commodity culture, Bök moves to the stability offered by
geographical location to the *I*-sigil of subjectivity. From "London" to
"Moscow," from "Boston" to "Morocco," not to mention "Kowloon" and
"Oporto" (65), Bök moves across the globe criticizing the seeming stabil-
ity these geographical signifiers offer while at the same time managing a
ludic contrast to the earlier items found in the survey. Chapter O levels
belief, and, when looking for its "*N*-bomb" (75; emphasis added), we
can consider the oversaturation of mythical references (in every facet of
life from the spiritual to the geographical) as questioning the stability
of the Word and its words. With Chapter O's originary *N* being "*mondo*

doloroso," we can move outward and see how God's textual relation to these facets of the Word constructs a "painful world" that amplifies the spurious distance between commodity culture and the symbolic values associated with popular culture.

The primary impetus of Bök's inverse-lipogram is the epistemological question of meaning or the interrogation of the different ways in which mythologies are formed. In Chapter A, Hassan charts his life mythically, and this results in the war between the Occidental New and the Oriental Old; in Chapter E, Helen is mythologized and sexualized in contemporary history; in the *I*-chapter, subjectivity is called into question by the challenge of a thankless task that hints at the nothingness underlying existence; and in Chapter O, Bök demonstrates how the Word is constructed in relation to mythological narratives.

Chapter U, the paraboloid, is the lowest and most "common" of the vowel-chapters. *U* is rendered obscene through the character Ubu, a plumber who "*Kultur* spurns" (77). The available vernacular in Chapter A allows Bök to compose an Eastern world surrounding the stereotypical character of Hassan; in Chapter U, the available lexicon depicts Ubu as a racialized black man, as "savage." Frantz Fanon argues that "what is often called the black soul is a white man's artifact" (14). Judging by the words used to describe Ubu and his reality, specifically "Ku-klux cults kung-fu punch Ubu" (80), it becomes evident that Ubu is rendered as a black savage (otherwise, Ku-klux cults would not want to kung-fu punch him).

Fanon suggests that "when it comes to the case of the Negro . . . he has no culture, no civilization" and no "historical past" (34). This can be seen in Ubu's characterization as a sculptor of junk "*für Kunst und Glück*" (77); he constructs his own missing cultural and historical past. The *N* of Chapter U can also be found in this moment: "Ubu shuns *Skulptur*: Uruk urns (plus busts), Zulu jugs (plus tusks). Ubu sculpts junk *für Kunst und Glück*" (77). The German suggests that Ubu sculpts junk "for art and luck," but the German words have multiple meanings. *Kunst* can be both "art" and "ability," and *Glück* can be both "luck" and "happiness." It is possible that Bök is suggesting an antidote to "*NIHIL DICIT, FINI.*" The only "happiness" available to the nihilist can be the "art" created by his/her "ability." Perhaps, this "art" is the only way for the artist to "*régne éternellement*" (49). However, Ubu is no artist. To follow Fanon's logic, we can consider the "junk" that Ubu sculpts

as connotative of the stereotypical "black soul" forged by the white man. The question is, who is the artificer of Ubu's "black soul"? The constraints, or Bök?

The anaphoric, choppy sentences of Chapter U are reminiscent of what Fanon writes regarding pidgin dialects: "The Negro loves to jabber, and from this theory it is not a long road that leads to a new proposition: The Negro is just a child" (27). The constrained lexicon that Bök uses to tell the story of Ubu is limited to a language that seems remarkably pidgin-esque. The manner in which we learn of Ubu — "Ubu does this," "Ubu does that —" reduces the possibility of complex narrative and limits the extent of Ubu's reality. Ubu is rendered childish in a manner that seems startlingly reminiscent of Fanon's analysis of pidgin language as it defines the Negro. In the *I*-chapter, Bök himself writes, "Sighing, I sit, scribbling in ink this pidgin script" (*Eunoia* 50). In both Chapter A and Chapter U, Bök demonstrates how the **lexicon available** from his constrained writing technique effectively communicates highly racist and colonialist depictions of Hassan as the Oriental Other and Ubu as the savage child. There does seem to be a "conspiracy . . . at play . . . in the language" (*Brick* 118) that allows Bök to tell these specifically colonialist stories. The implications of this "linguistic conspiracy" are difficult to consider, as Bök also admits: "The correlation between the content of the story and its vowel seems utterly uncanny" (*Brick* 118). The stories Bök tells about the vengeful Hassan, the sexualized Helen, and the "black soul" of Ubu are apparently unintentional results of the constraints. This suggests that the "conspiracy" uncovered is embedded in the available lexicon and the potential meanings it produces. The frightening implication of this is that hegemonic discourse may possibly be a "natural" bi-product of white Eurocentric English.

The depiction of Ubu is primitive in every way. Ubu even has a love of sodomy: "Ubu sucks Ruth's cunt; Ubu cuffs Ruth's butt. Ubu stuffs Ruth's bum (such fun). Ubu humps Lulu's plush, sunburnt tush" (79). This sexual depiction is certainly the crudest in the text and it, yet again, confirms a "savage" disposition in Ubu. However, this debauchery is underpinned by an absurdist tonality. The anaphoric repetition of the name "Ubu" at the beginning of each sentence (77) emphasizes the name and makes it the predominant word of the chapter. The name Ubu can be traced back to the father of French absurdist theatre (and later the inspiration for the surrealists), Alfred Jarry. Jarry wrote the

play *Ubu Roi* in 1896; when it was staged at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, it caused "an uproar, was violently booed and violently applauded" (Wright vi). The play, which famously begins with the word "Merdre"! (Jarry, *Ubu* 31), was the pinnacle of absurdist theatre and introduced the term "Ubuesque" as a synonym for absurd behaviour (Wright vii). Perhaps, Ubu's love of sodomy in *Eunoia* gestures at the textual tradition of "merdre" originally found in the Jarry play.

By tracing the genealogy of Ubu back to Alfred Jarry, the problem of finding and making "meaning" in life can be seen as one of the dominant thematic elements of *Eunoia*. The repeated concern about the absurdity behind existence — especially in Chapters I and U — also haunted Jarry. He famously (or notoriously) adopted the persona of his character Père Ubu and became, as described by Gide, "a strange kind of clown, with a befloured face, a black beady eye, and hair plastered down on his head like a skull-cap" (qtd. in Wright vii). In Jarry's transformation into and performance of Père Ubu, he became his own Sisyphean spectacle, carried out day to day. Jarry put so much effort into his "performance of Ubu" that he became eclipsed by the character; he became his own literary creation. This is the ultimate fear of *Eunoia*, as well — that the work will collapse into pointlessness. Jarry's life succumbed to its own nihilism when he died at the age of thirty-four due to the excesses of living as Ubu. Gabriel Brunet said of Jarry, "He offered himself as a victim to the derision and absurdity of the world" (qtd. in Wright ix). In the end, by personifying a symbol of the world's absurdity, Jarry succeeded in articulating the "nothing" espoused by nihilism. For a writer like Christian Bök, who sings "with nihilistic witticism" (*Eunoia* 50), the possibility that his work will be perceived as absurd is quite likely. It is easy to be fooled by the seemingly chaotic literary technique that Bök uses and to call it "absurd." However, we should remember Bök's opening warning in Chapter A: "Awkward grammar appals a craftsman" (12). Bök is surely a craftsman. By ending the *I*-chapter (the chapter that reveals Bök's own Sisyphean literary concerns) with "*NIHIL DICIT, FINI*," he seems to be alluding to the absurdity of Ubu. The author's fear of "saying nothing in the end" is similar to "awkward grammar" for a craftsman. To "say nothing" and then "end" would be an Ubuesque fate — the fate of a nihilist who is destroyed by his own lack of meaning. This would be the same fate that befell Alfred Jarry.

Bök's work is ambitious. It is Sisyphean in its ambition. I have argued that his work is not a discordant collection of vowel-chapters that discipline the sign and mean nothing. Instead, the chapters mean more because of what is excluded from each of them (i.e., the other vowels). It is this exclusion that is hinted at by the symbolic *N*, which appears in the word "eunoia" but does not have its own chapter. Bök's Oulipian attention to detail gives meaning, significance, and cohesion to a work that ultimately denies paranoid fears of absurdity and becomes the work of a "craftsman" (12). *Eunoia* is the work of a literary visionary who seeks to create poetry that opens the doors to the possibilities of linguistic innovation.

Notes

[1] Oulipo stands for l'Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle.

[2] Bök discusses the evolution of the Oulipo from 'pataphysics in *'Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science.*

[3] The "lipogram" is one of the Oulipo's most popular constraints. It is the act of writing a text with a missing letter, which Bök varies in *Eunoia* by using only one vowel per chapter.

[4] See Perloff's "The Oulipo Factor: the Procedural Poetics of Christian Bök and Caroline Bergvall" from *Textual Practice.*

[5] "The New Ennui" appears directly after "Oiseau" in the 2001 Coach House Books edition I am using.

[6] Jarry insisted that the name of his pseudoscience be written with an apostrophe at its beginning.

[7] "A science of imaginary solutions."

[8] In the same way, the Oulipians believe that the constraint used to create any given text speaks more about the constraint than the narrative produced.

[9] Bök writes, "I read through the dictionary five times to extract an extensive lexicon of univocal words containing only one of the five vowels . . . I then spent six years, working four or five hours every night after work, from about midnight on, piecing together a five-chapter novel in which each chapter exhausts this restricted lexicon" (*Brick* 118).

[10] Bök selected the word "*eunoia*" as the title because it is the shortest word in the English language to include all five vowels (*Eunoia* 103).

[11] The "*N*" as a disappearance would make some sense because of George Perec's Oulipian text *La Disparition* within which Amaury Conson tries to find his missing friend, Anton Vowl.

[12] The *clinamen* has found renewed interest in recent years. Originally called the "*clinamen atomorum*" in Lucretian atomic theory (where it functioned as the "swerve" created during the collisions of atoms, giving birth to the natural world), the concept has resurfaced as an inspiration for Oulipian writers and has been written about by theorists such as Michel Serres and Harold Bloom. See Motte, Introduction 19.

¹³ In my own email correspondence with Christian Bök, he said regarding my reading of the "*N*" as a point on the *clinamen*, "I confess that, while I too have regarded the N in the title as a kind of 'clinamen' that erupts among the vowels, I have not deliberately attributed any specialized significance to the consonant — but I do not dispute that, perhaps, the letter takes on a unique status beyond my own intentions" ("Re: Question about Eunoia").

¹⁴ The Mandelbrot set is graphed with constraints that are not textual but mathematical: take a plane in phase-space and let a location be the "origin," then choose another location that can be a "key point." The mapping begins when a point is allowed to "jump" around on the plane between the "origin" and the "key point." The "jumping" occurs in accordance with a mathematical rule. The "key points" change, but the "origin" does not, and a Mandelbrot set is subsequently mapped. For more information on this, and for the math behind the rule, see Edward Lorenz's excellent resource *The Essence of Chaos*, specifically pp. 163-167 and appendix 2, pp. 194-195.

¹⁵ Bök mentions his "rules" here: "All chapters must allude to the art of writing. All chapters must describe a culinary banquet, a prurient debauch, a pastoral tableau and a nautical voyage. All sentences must accent internal rhyme through the use of syntactical parallelism. The text must exhaust the lexicon for each vowel, citing at least 98% of the available repertoire . . . The text must minimize repetition of substantive vocabulary (so that, ideally, no word appears more than once)" (103-04).

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