

## **Toil and Trouble: On Work in Christian Bök's *Eunoia***

**by Robert David Stacey**

Whatever else poetry is freedom.  
—Irving Layton

The Oulipian author is a rat who builds the maze from which he  
plans to escape.

—Georges Perec

The winner of the 2002 Griffin Prize for Poetry, Christian Bök's *Eunoia* (Coach House 2001) is currently in its twentieth printing, which surely makes it one of the most successful small-press poetry publications in Canadian history. *Eunoia*'s extraordinary popularity is perhaps especially surprising given that it is a highly experimental text, a procedural work produced in accordance with a set of fixed rules which limit the expressive freedom of the poet and condition the outcome of the work. More precisely, *Eunoia* presents a series of what are called quadruple vocalic lipograms. In a lipogram (*lipo*, from the Greek λειπευ "to leave") the writer compels himself to exclude one or several letters of the alphabet.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by the European avant-garde group Oulipo, a loose collection of writers, artists, scientists, and mathematicians who first came together in 1960 in order to explore the generative possibilities of extreme formal constraints on language, Bök produces a text which, in any given chapter, excludes all but one of the five vowels. Chapter A, in other words, limits its vocabulary to words in which A is the only vowel present, Chapter E employs words containing only an E or Es, and the chapters for I, O, and U follow the same constraint. The writing, writes Bök in the afterword, "willfully cripp[es] 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).

In order to produce the text's available lexicon, Bök read through Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* five times looking for univocal words. He then arranged these words into parts of speech, and then subdivided the nouns and verbs into "topical categories." Or as he puts it in a

moment of self-reflexivity in Chapter I, “I print lists, filing things, kin with kin, ilk with ilk” (58). For the next six years, claims Bök, he worked on the text every night for “four or five hours” until he had composed chapters that were coherent and managed to exhaust his list of words. It was, says Bök, an “arduous task” (“A Few Thoughts on Beautiful Thinking” np).

Though a popular success (by Canadian poetry standards) *Eunoia* has not met with universal approval. Interestingly, it is Bök’s extraordinary effort, the “arduousness” of his task, that has been the focal point in several attacks on *Eunoia* which deem it insufficiently poetic (its language neither “uncanny” nor “sublime”) and which, more generally, reject Oulipian constraint as productive of anything worth reading. Hence, the title of Carmine Starnino’s review essay of *Eunoia* entitled “Vowel Movements: Pointless Toil and Empty Productivity” in which the author couples a not-too-subtle scatological insinuation with his claim that, however ingenious, *Eunoia* remains little more than a verbal exercise. The book, writes Starnino, is “not so much a triumph of ambition as a triumph of stamina.” And he continues, “Maybe, like me, you appreciate the tremendous industry that was needed to turn what is, essentially, a prosodic prank into a book, but respectfully wonder if it amounts to something you want to call poetry” (130). Because it lacks “emotional vigour and intellectual force” (132), offers no fresh “perception[s]” (135), and is, he claims, rather too “silly” (130), Starnino repeatedly emphasizes Bök’s tremendous effort only to deem it “wasted” and “pointless” (135).

Similarly, in *Director’s Cut* David Solway takes issue with *Eunoia*’s procedural poetics and, like Starnino, rejects the text as anything other than a testament to “what can be done when one puts one’s mind to one or another form of Trivial Pursuit” (180). Having earlier wondered whether anyone could imagine “Yeats or Blok or Lorca [...] who were all engaged in *important* projects, playing lipogram” (82), he too deems the poetic experiment “pointless” (181), and suggests that *Eunoia* “leav[es] no abiding impression except that of an encapsulated dexterity and a valedictory question: *Why would anyone want to do this?*” (179). It is because Solway makes no effort to answer his own question that he, like Starnino, remains blind not only to the poetical merits of the text, but to its important place in contemporary Canadian poetry where it stands in contrast to the near hegemony of an often rigourless free verse lyric in the mainstream while simultaneously resisting a poetics of “diminished reference”<sup>2</sup> whose dominance within the more restricted sphere of Canadian avant-garde poetry is hardly less pronounced.

My contention is that *Eunoia*, for all its silliness, presents us with an interesting—and possibly more productive—way of thinking about poetry in twenty-first century Canada than do these other poetic modes insofar as it registers as an implicit critique of global consumer culture and its erosion of a meaningful sense of history and social connection, such as is dramatically depicted in Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism; Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. It is precisely with an awareness of the poet's labour that we need to begin this discussion, not only because it leads us to consider the crucial role that an idea of work plays within *Eunoia* and Oulipian aesthetics more generally, but also because a philosophy of work is key to Jameson's own understanding of the historical process, which is of course a Marxist one, but which might be of service to anyone interested in reading contemporary Canadian poetry with an eye to the way it that it speaks, through form as well as content, to the cultural context of its production and reception.

The question of work is never far from any discussion of constraint-based poetics. In fact, the 'ou' in Oulipo stands for *ouvroir*,<sup>3</sup> meaning workshop, thereby making its member practitioners literary *ouvriers*, or "labourers." Thus, in oulipian practice an idea of writing as work displaces a model of poetic inspiration. It is clearly as such a labourer of language that Bök presents himself in *Eunoia*, which in every respect emphasizes writing as an unavoidably *laborious* process. *Eunoia*, writes Bök, "makes a Sisyphean spectacle of its labour" (103). If *sprezzatura* is the name we give to that quality in literary works which suggests an easy or graceful handling of difficult tasks, then *Eunoia* expresses the opposite quality: of difficult tasks accomplished only through agonizing toil. Only sheer willfulness on the part of the author wrests a meaning from the limited vocabulary at his disposal; only his intransigence propels each sentence forward: "A rascal salaams and thanks Allah that a bank can award a man a stash that dwarfs what alms a raj can amass" (18). It is not that the lines fail to sing—in fact, *Eunoia* sings like not much else in recent Canadian poetry—but that this singing takes place under duress, against a countermanding pressure that is registered in the language and structure of the sentences themselves which at every moment announce the effort that went into their production.

Indeed, as Darren Wershler-Henry states in an epigraph, "the tedium is the message" (103). It is an Oulipian truism that even though the constraint is voluntarily imposed by the writer who subjugates himself to its mandate, the constraint, however defined, is never simply an external device, but is precisely a *trope* in the sense that Paul de Man gives to the term when he

insists “that concepts are tropes, and tropes concepts” (23)—which is to say it is a kind of epistemology, the text’s own theory of knowledge, its *manner* of meaning as well as the key to its subject *matter*. As oulipist Jacques Roubaud states, “constraint [...] is at once principle of the writing of the text, its developmental mechanism, and at the same time the meaning of the text” (qtd. in Motte 12). To the extent that constraint as such emphasizes the poet’s practical engagement with words as matter, as stuff, as the bricks and mortar of a poetic construction (as opposed to weightless, transparent signifiers) we should not be surprised to discover that labour and what Jameson calls the “experience of the resistance of matter” (*Political Unconscious* 45), are among the text’s essential themes.

A palpable erotics of work underpins many of the text’s most dynamic passages, many of which deal with primary activities such as building, farming, or in this case, mining:

Pilgrims, digging in shifts, dig till midnight in mining pits, chipping flint with picks, drilling schist with drills, striking it rich mining zinc. Irish firms, hiring micks whist firing Brits, bring in smiths with mining skills: kilnwrights grilling brick in brickkilns, millwrights grinding grist in gristmills. Irish tin-smiths, fiddling with widgets, fix this rig, driving its drills which spin whirling drillbits.

It is a scene into which the eponymous hero of the chapter can’t resist insinuating himself: “I pitch in, fixing things. I rig this winch with this wiring; I fit this drill with its piping. I dig this ditch, filling bins with dirt, piling it high, sifting it, till I find bright prisms twinkling with glitz” (51).

In the above passage, the author as miner discovers “bright prisms twinkling with glitz,” a poetic payoff unavailable by any other means. The fundamental discovery of constraint-based poetics is that the imposition of limits is paradoxically enabling and revelatory rather than restrictive: as Marcel Benabou puts it: “Linguistic constraints...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). Rather than being enslaved by linguistic and formal rules so prevalent and naturalized that they become *unconscious* limits on his craft, the poet of constraint chooses his own limits, but is surprised by the possibilities these limits open up. In this manner does the poet, as Bök puts it in Chapter E, “engender perfect newness” (31).

As a consequence, his is a “voluntary” literature, born of an intentionality that finds its correlate in the inevitable purposiveness (to use a Kantian term) of its form. It is in on this count that Marjorie Perloff reads

*Eunoia* as an important alternative to the free verse lyric which dominates the poetic mainstream in both Canada and the United States. For Perloff, such poetry has no distinguishing formal feature other than “lineation as such” (24)—a device which, she claims, is increasingly without a concept, there merely to distinguish the poem from prose, when in fact the poem actually *is* prose, its thought organized in complete sentences and not according to any other principle. One of the points of Perloff’s article is to suggest that *Eunoia*, which is written in sentences organized into paragraphs which form extended chapters, which openly declares itself as prose, is actually richer in poetic devices and musicality and defamiliarized language than most mainstream poetry. And this is quite simply because “the tradition of poetry is a tradition of constraint” (25). What else is a sonnet or villanelle, rondeau or sestina but the willed imposition of a set of restrictive rules which skew language from its ordinary usage, which deform it, and, in doing so, extend the domain of the sayable itself? And we might add, it is because *Eunoia* distinguishes itself from mere saying, from the manner of direct statement still prevalent in Canadian poetry today, that it attains that degree of ‘untranslatability’ which is perhaps a more reliable index of poeticality than syntax as such, if only because it insists on treating poetry as *poesis*, a thing made, and not just a thing said.

Neo-formalists, Solway and Starnino of course share Perloff’s dissatisfaction with contemporary free verse. Starnino’s essay collection *A Lover’s Quarrel* can be read as a defense of traditional form and linguistic rigour, of poetry as a “craft” first and foremost. For his part, Solway, like Perloff, suggests that “modern poetry is now pretty synonymous with free verse” (79) and warns that “some sort of formal component is obligatory if a poem is not to degenerate into a mere rhapsody of impressions or ultralite reflections” (13).

It is interesting, if not ironic, that two critics championing the importance of poetic form should nevertheless fail to appreciate the role of constraint in *Eunoia*, and the peculiar way in which it returns us to the poetic tradition. But both Starnino and Solway are focused on what they perceive to be a more flagrant and serious transgression in *Eunoia*: namely, its failure to *say* anything, its failure to mean. For Starnino, Bök’s sentences are “objects that answer to no anxiety for expression” (132), merely “scoring the instance of their own existence” (132). Consequently, he concludes, the typical sentence in *Eunoia* actually “represents a flight from toil. It’s a sentence that never experienced real struggle because it’s been made to struggle only with Bök’s rules and not with any ideas” (133). Similarly, Solway calls Bök’s verse paragraphs “limpid vesicles or word-sacs that [...] might

have been synthesized by a serious mind into something more complex and meaningful” (180). Contrasting *Eunoia* with the work of the Newfoundland poet Mary Dalton, Solway concludes his discussion by suggesting, “[t]he difference between the work of Dalton and Bök is the difference between language that releases the energies of communication...and language that calls attention only to its own exorbitance (in which lack becomes a form of superfluity)” (180).

By “ideas” Starnino and Solway would seem to mean something more than the term’s customary meaning of a mental notion or conception, something closer perhaps to what Mathew Arnold calls the “high criticism of life” (321) which, together with “high seriousness” (321), defines the “classic character” (309) of the truly great poets and distinguishes their work from the versifications of lesser minds. It is no doubt true that a reader in search of these qualities will be disappointed by *Eunoia* which, because it operates at the extreme limit of an expressive mode of poetry, simply does not aspire to the communication of deep thoughts and personal insights of the sort expected by Starnino and Solway who, like Arnold, tend to evaluate poetry in large part on the basis of its high-mindedness. Of course, as I show below, *Eunoia* really does express something meaningful, even important, but only to the degree that we listen to what its organizing principle and its resultant form and have to say.<sup>4</sup>

However, these critics’ insistence on a sematic “lack” in *Eunoia* goes well beyond claiming that it fails to exhibit a certain kind of philosophical content, and verges on suggesting that the text rejects communication altogether. It therefore needs to be stressed that at no point does *Eunoia* reject meaningful communication as a basic condition. While Starnino may be correct in stressing that “Oulipians [...] are obsessed with the *generative* rather than the communicative possibilities of restriction” (133), it is precisely on the basis of *Eunoia*’s semantic *accountability* that Bök distinguishes his work from the bulk of Oulipian experiments, in which, he complains, “The basic fulfillment of the constraint often seems to take precedence over all other literary concerns (like euphony, meaning, etc.) so that often the results of such an experiment resemble the completion of a rote exercise” (“A Few Thoughts on Beautiful Thinking” np). While “euphony”, arguably, is the automatic effect of the text’s vocalic constraint, “meaning” certainly is not. In fact, it is because the deck is stacked so heavily against meaning, given the constraint, that *Eunoia* presents its work as something more than “empty productivity.”

So, for the sake of clarity: while the language is sometimes exceedingly odd, in every instance does the ‘verse’ sentence respect the rules of gram-

mar and the conventions of referential language. “Awkward grammar appalls a craftsman” (12), is *Eunoia*’s first sentence. The text’s paragraphs are not only understandable but, more often than not, thematically unified. Indeed, in at least three of the five chapters, the paragraphs come together to form complete narratives. Chapter A, for instance, tells the story of “Hassan”, a corrupt “Aga Khan”, whose financial improprieties lead to a “tax grab” that “start[s] a war” (25). Chapter E, is a retelling of the *Iliad*, of Helen and the fall of Troy, complete with a Trojan horse—“The best sled ever hewn gets erected. The shell, when welded, resembles the fleetest steed”—yes—“the perfect present” (43). Chapter U resurrects Alfred Jarry’s Ubu Roi to recount the perverse exploits of a gluttonous fetishist and fraudulent politician:

Ubu blurts untruth: much bunkum (plus bull), much humbug (plus bunk)—but trustful schmucks trust such untruthful stuff; thus Ubu (cult guru) must bluff dumbstruck numbskulls (such chumps). (77)

Far from exhibiting an arbitrary arrangement of words, the text even manages within these broader narrative frameworks to produce or at least invoke a variety of recognizable literary *genres*, emphasizing in the process that genres are themselves little more than institutionally sanctioned and historically recurrent constraints, whether formal or thematic. As stated previously, Bök invokes epic, whereby he joins those “versemen” who “retell [...] the resplendent scenes where, hellbent, the Greek Free-men seek revenge whenever Helen, the new-wed empress weeps” (37). True to classical form, there is imbedded within this epic tale a pastoral interlude:

Helen remembers Crete—the Eden where senescent shepherds (les bergers des bêtes) herd bellwether sheep; there, Helen sees the pebbled steppes [...]. Helen treks wherever herdsmen trek. She sees the veldts where ewes, when fleeced, chew the sedges. She sees the glens, then the dells, where elk herds chew the vetch. [...] The creeks wend between beech trees, then end where freshets feed the meres (there, the speckled perch teem; there the freckled newts rest.) The leverets, then the shrews, chew the nettles. The dew bedews the ferns” (47-48).

Besides epic and pastoral, there are instances of elegy: “Moms who sob for lost sons blow conch horns to honor poor fools who, thrown from port bows, go down, down, down (oh no) to drown—lost for good, now food

for worms” (67). There is a repeated use of georgic, not surprising given the text’s emphasis on work:

Scotts from Hogtowns or cowtowns work from cockcrow to moon-down –to chop down woodlots, to plow down cornrows. Folks who work from morn to noon throw down slop to hogs or corn to sows. Most workfolk who sow crops of broomcorn grow corn crops sown from lots of cowflop compost (blobs of poo or globs of goo.) (70)

In the same chapter, there appears also a haiku, with a nod to Bashō, in the abbreviated “frog, pond, plop” (68), while lines like “Ubu humps Lulu’s plump, upthrust rump” (79) indicate a familiarity with pornographic discourse. Finally, we might even want to consider the entirety of Chapter I, given the centrality of the first person pronoun, as a kind of lyrical confession à la Rousseau.

All of this is ignored in the readings by Solway and Starnino who, by quoting only the shortest snippets of sentences, are able to suppress the narrative dimension of the text, while simultaneously obscuring the presence of these other forms and genres. The overall impression left by their articles is of a text that is not only fundamentally inarticulate but radically disarticulated. In misrepresenting *Eunoia* in this fashion, Starnino and Solway—and this is clearly their intention—distance it from a formalist poetic tradition they hold in great esteem, and align it with a mode of poetic composition to which it does not belong and which in their minds constitutes an even greater waste of energy than bad free verse—namely so-called “language poetry,” or what is sometimes termed “disjunctive poetics,” or to return to Steve McCaffery’s more inclusive expression, the “poetry of diminished reference.”<sup>5</sup> It is a poetry in which an indeterminacy of meaning takes precedence over what I have been calling semantic accountability, and where this indeterminacy is the effect of a desire to emphasize the material signifier at the expense of its signified, and to break down customary linguistic arrangements such as grammar and syntax so as to expose the ideological foundations of such conventions. It is a poetry whose central stylistic feature is consequently an extreme version of parataxis, of linguistic chunks whose connections are either suppressed or simply absent. Language poetry is notable for its experiments with the prose sentence, as in the work of American poets Ron Silliman and Lyn Hejinian. The idea behind what Silliman calls “the new sentence” is that while the single syntactical unit may operate more or less normally insofar as it expresses a coherent statement, the units themselves remain discrete, refusing to cohere into larger wholes despite being clustered together in

what resemble paragraphs.<sup>6</sup> It is a more extreme version of Gertrude Stein's paratactical technique in something like *Tender Buttons*, though that work is often cited by language poets as an influential model for their own practice. I wonder whether it is not actually "the new sentence" that Starnino and Solway have in mind when they attempt to present *Eunoia* in terms more appropriate to a certain kind of language poetry than to the poetry of constraint.

Language poetry, which in Canada has not been the organized force it's been in the United States, nevertheless has been an important influence on the work of many experimental poets here since its emergence as a coherent poetic practice—albeit as a practice of incoherence—in the late seventies. Steve McCaffery, for instance, is considered one of its earliest Canadian practitioners, in such works as *Panopticon* and *The Black Debt*, and one of its primary theorists via several essays collected in his *North of Intention: Critical Writings, 1973-1986*. The epithet "language writing" has been used to describe the work of poets Erin Mouré and Karen Mac Cormack, and is a term Marlene Norbese Philip uses to describe her own work in *She Tries her Tongue*. Similarly, the varied production of the various poets of Vancouver's Kootenay School of Writing—especially the work of Jeff Derksen and the earlier Lisa Robertson—clearly demonstrates an indebtedness to the theory and practice of the "new sentence." There are many other poets whose work might be usefully linked with the ideas and practices of so-called language poetry—one need only look at the recent publication of Mercury Press's *Shift and Switch: New Canadian Poetry* to add another dozen names to this list—but my point here is simply to indicate its importance within Canada's more radical poetic circles.

In her essay on *Eunoia*, Marjorie Perloff makes the interesting argument that free verse is especially responsive to the needs of globalism because its "absence of rules" makes it more easily translatable into other languages, and she quotes the oulipist Jacques Roubaud as saying that "the passage of free verse across frontiers is metrically duty-free" (24)—unlike, say, soft wood lumber. But for Fredric Jameson, who is likewise interested in the effect of globalization on the forms of literature, it is *language poetry* that registers its effects more than any other form of contemporary writing. In fact, Jameson goes so far as to read language poetry—which so often (as in the case of the Kootenay School writers) makes global capital its primary target—as the poetic *symptom* of globalization and postmodernism in its negative connotation as the cultural condition wrought by global capital's assault on meaningful connections between people, their time, and their social space.

As Jameson sees it, the problem with language poetry is that it is merely recapitulates at the level of literary form the schizophrenic disjunctions of postmodern culture at large. Focusing specifically on language poetry's deployment of the new sentence, Jameson complains, "If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the breakdown of the signifying chain," we are left with only "a series of pure and unrelated presents in time" (*Postmodernism* 27). The effect of this randomization is a loss of identity since no individual nor collective subject can predicate itself on, or recognize itself in, these fragments. And this process is part of and further perpetuates what Jameson sees as a postmodern tendency to spatialize all discourse, so that history itself ceases to be imaginable as a process of social and material change *in time* and becomes something resembling a collection of objects in space: a set of artefacts or images or frozen moments.

It is to this transformation that Jameson refers when he speaks of a postmodern "crisis in historicity" which specializes in producing a subject no longer capable of thinking historically:

The crisis in historicity now dictates a return [...] to the question of temporal organization in general [...], and indeed, to the problem of the form that time, temporality, and the syntagmatic will be able to take in a culture increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic. If, indeed, the subject has lost its capacity [...] to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but 'heaps of fragments' and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory. (25)

My point here is not to impugn language poetry which is both more varied and more politically self-aware than Jameson realizes<sup>7</sup> and which, if nothing else, insists on a kind of difficulty, a theoretical complexity, that is extremely valuable in the current climate of sound-bite simplicity. (As Lisa Robertson has written, with great aplomb, "It's too late to be simple" [76].) My point is, rather, to show how *Eunoia* seems to answer Jameson's call for a way of writing that embodies a resistance to the "crisis in historicity." For, it is precisely the loss of some *formal* capacity to "render" history in the works of contemporary culture that both underlies and brings about this "crisis." For Jameson, it is not simply an idea of history that has been displaced, but the possibility of its *figuration* in works of literature—what is at stake is not an abstraction, but a legible, material sign of history within the text. Whatever "thinking historically" might entail, its semantic viability

ity depends on the establishment of some formal principle, some trope, without which no mediation between text and the world outside the text were possible.

It is because it furnishes such a formal principle that *Eunoia* merits serious consideration, especially so since it tends to circulate, anomalously, within discussions of postmodern poetry in Canada. Whether or not we completely agree with Jameson's reading of language poetry, we can perhaps still appreciate the manner in which *Eunoia* opposes an art of "the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and [...] aleatory" which he associates with postmodernism, and to see that difference as politically significant. Warren Motte notes that "the Oulipian exercise" as a whole might be read "as a sustained attack on the aleatory in literature, a crusade for the maximal motivation of the literary sign" (17), but this intentionality is even more to the point in *Eunoia*'s semantically accountable version of the lipogram in which the poet's struggle with the self-imposed constraint is explicitly a syntagmatic pursuit of meaningful communication. Anticipating the kind of contrast I am insisting upon here, Bök writes:

*Eunoia* [...] retrenches an economy of meaning that its constraints might have otherwise challenged (hence, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets might find this work disappointing for its inability to depart from the prison house of grammatical, referential speech. ("A Few thoughts on beautiful Thinking" np))

It is precisely its progressive movement connecting one part to another to form meaningful wholes that makes it possible to read *Eunoia* as a counter to the spatialized disarticulations of the postmodern. To put this in terms more familiar to the argument I have been developing: not only is *Eunoia* "a work", in the sense of being a purposive, formed object, and not only does this form make explicit an anterior act of "working upon," that is to say, the author's appropriation and transformation of nearly intractable materials, but it is also most decidedly a kind of "working-through," the carrying out of a temporal, end-oriented process. If, as Bob Perelman contends, "[p]arataxis is the dominant mode of postindustrial experience" and one of the chief "marks of the postmodern" (313), then the will to (narrative) continuity in *Eunoia* needs to be understood in that context.

What makes this working through, this carrying-out, fundamentally historical (in a way that language poetry, however else it may be said to be political, is not) is *not* that this struggle for meaning and connection takes place—something that can be said of all narrative—but that it takes place under conditions of duress. If I stress duress, it is simply because the his-

torical process itself might be understood, following Jameson, as “the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity” (*Political Unconscious* 19). History, in other words, is a struggle *within* limits—“the realm of Necessity”—*against* those same limits, an attempt to open up a “Realm of Freedom” by transforming the very ground upon which this struggle takes place. We see how this process is curiously literalized in *Eunoia* which is nothing if not an attempt to transcend limitation from within rigidly imposed limits. Indeed, Georges Perec’s observation that the poet of constraint is “a rat who builds the maze from which he plans to escape” (qtd. in Starnino 135) might well be used to sum up the historical condition itself.

No less than literature as whole, *Eunoia* therefore embodies a search for freedom, but freedom of a decidedly non-transcendent kind. We recall that the Oulipian justification of constraint is that its “violent aspiration” produces the possibility of an otherwise unattainable freedom for the author. But this obviously can never be a freedom *from* the constraint, but only *through* it. As the grounds upon which the claim to freedom is to be staked, the constraints themselves can never be transcended. This observation has a particular resonance with a Marxist understanding of historical process which will return us, finally, and in a very concrete manner, to the question of work in *Eunoia*. In the section from *Capital* dealing with the dialectics of Necessity and Freedom to which Jameson alludes, Marx distinguishes between “absolute” and “contingent” freedom. The realm of “absolute” or “true” freedom, he writes, “actually begins only where labour which is in fact determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases” (qtd. in Jameson *Political Unconscious* 19). In this sphere of actual material production, only a “contingent” freedom is possible. “Beyond it,” says Marx, “begins [...] the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis” (19). Like *Eunoia*’s own constraints, the realm of Necessity is not therefore simply a stage *before* the realm of absolute Freedom, but is its enabling precondition, the very “basis” or ground upon which and from which the realm of Freedom “blossom[s] forth.” Paradoxically, this ever-anticipated state can only be brought about through the very activity that defines the realm of Necessity *as* contingent and unfree: work. It is work as a process of transformation, of appropriating and reshaping material nature, which brings the one realm to the threshold of the other and which connects the present to an as-yet-unrealized future. An idea of history as process is impossible without an idea of work because only work can bring about an end to its own necessity.

So the “the tedium” really is “the message.” If work has something to say, practically and symbolically, in *Eunoia*, it is because it serves as an index to a belief in the future as the projected goal of human labour. The same may not be said for language poetry which generally speaking valorises the play and pleasure of the moment at the expense of work and the future. In his essay “Language Poetry: From Productive to Libidinal Economy,” Steve McCaffery quotes Georges Bataille’s comment that “Work corresponds to the care of tomorrow, pleasure to that of the present moment. Work is useful and satisfactory, pleasure useless [...]. These considerations put economy at the basis of morality and at the basis of poetry” (McCaffery 152). Language poetry, explains McCaffery, proceeds by reversing this priority so that it purposefully expends itself a unproductive and unrecuperable “expenditure.” It’s always ‘now’ in a language poem. Its very rationale for the rejection of grammar and narrative is that these “homologiz[e] the capitalistic concern for accumulation, profit, and investment in a future goal” (McCaffery 151).<sup>8</sup> Along these same lines, I would simply say that *Eunoia* reverses this reversal and that its treatment of work homologizes an historical conception of the future as the goal of human work—which is far from being a capitalistic concern insofar as it is always a good time to buy a Toyota. By which I mean to say: in the world of around-the-clock shopping and the two-minute news cycle it is also always now. Read in this context, *Eunoia* suddenly appears old-fashioned, conservative, even nostalgic in its harkening back to an idea of work as material transformation that is increasingly under erasure in a Canadian economy that is increasingly post-industrial and non-resource-based.

It might be asked where in all this *Eunoia* might be seen to depict or even homologize the collective subject of history. If the problem with post-modern culture is that it produces subjects without history, might *Eunoia* embody the opposite problem, that of history without a subject? Undoubtedly, the text is light on subjectivity, and lacks the author-effect that is sometimes (misleadingly) called a “voice.” The text’s one lyrical subject, the “I” of Chapter I, is hardly an ontological reality, being something more akin to an industrial by-product, and the text’s various characters—even the workers whose activities literally make up the text—are not historically situated. (In any case, the real protagonists of *Eunoia* are characters of another sort, the graphemes A, E, I, O, U.) Even so, one wonders whether a collective subject of history might not be implied in the text’s *generic* operations. Tzvetan Todorov writes that genres are the “meeting place” between an abstract “general poetics” and “event-based literary history” (“The Origin of Genres” 201) which is to say they are themselves human-

made institutions which mediate history. But they are “meeting places” in another sense as well, insofar as genres are literary conventions and conventions are convenings;<sup>9</sup> they are participatory events recurrently drawing together writers and readers. In this way, the will to genre in *Eunoia* is itself a will to history and community and is apiece with the text’s many allusions, a few of which have been discussed here. Together, these generic markers and inter-textual references express indirectly what the individual chapter dedications to dadaist Hans Arp, surrealist René Crevel, concrete poet Dick Higgins, artist-activist Yoko Ono, and the radical Chinese poet and performance artist Zhu Yu make explicit: that *Eunoia* both recognizes and enacts a form of community based on a shared sense of literary history, even as its form speaks more generally to literature’s capacity to register and enable historical thinking as such.

It is doubtful that critics like Starnino and Solway would be swayed by these arguments in favour of the importance of *Eunoia*. “Whatever else, poetry is freedom” for Starnino and Solway who, like Irving Layton whose work they so rightly admire, share an idea of the aesthetic predicated on the sovereignty of the imagination. Theirs is an aesthetic that might incorporate and transform the world but is never simply subject to it; it is fundamentally, a hypothetical space, and in this respect it transcends historical considerations. But for the poet of constraint, the aesthetic is something different. It is a more limited realm; it is grounded, contingent—a space of “necessity” in the Marxian sense—and so not absolutely free. No wonder Solway and Starnino simply can’t see *Eunoia* as poetry. But maybe we can appreciate the political value, today, of an aesthetic that does not simply take freedom for granted, but works hard to achieve a measure of it—an aesthetic in which freedom *as a problem* is built in, as it were. And if, as in the case of *Eunoia*, that achieved freedom, however limited and contingent, is exercised in terms that privilege meaning and meaningful connection at a time when both are so clearly under duress, then we have an even greater reason to see the text as far from “pointless toil.”

## Notes

- 1 The most famous of these works is certainly Georges Perec’s 1969 novel “La Disparition,” [*A Void*, in English] a full-length work in which he suppresses the letter E, the most ubiquitous letter in the French language.
- 2 The term, used by Steve McCaffery in his seminal “Diminished Reference and the

Model Reader" (*North of Intention* 1986, 2000), refers to any number of language-centred writing styles in which an indeterminacy of meaning is the desired effect. "The works here proposed do not reproduce a world according to the logic of the referent. They flatly refuse that reproduction, and presenting themselves first and foremost as material entities [...] they command a textual space as a lettered surface resisting idealist transformation" (17). There is a political value in such opacity, since when "[t]he referent no longer looms as a promissary value [...] the text is proposed as the communal space of a human engagement" (20). But McCaffery himself casts some doubt on the liberative potential of such writing when he notes its reliance on "a closed model of the reader whose functional capabilities are rigidly prescribed" (27).

- 3 "li" and "po" stand, respectively, for "*littérature*" and "*potentielle*."
- 4 Not surprisingly, given this emphasis, Arnold tends to disapprove of the highly stylized, artificial poetry of the Augustan period. Concerning the poetry of Dryden and Pope, for instance, he doubts "whether such verse proceeds from men with an adequate poetic criticism of life, from men whose criticism of life has a high seriousness, or even, without that high seriousness, has poetic largeness, freedom, insight, benignity" (321). The absence of such qualities, he suggests, is in direct proportion to the emphasis placed by these poets on the need for "regularity, uniformity, precision, [and] balance" (321)—in other words, on precisely the degree of *constraint* they imposed on their freedom of expression. Though refreshingly sensitive to the need for structure in poetry, Solway and Starnino reflect a similar distaste for artifice and rule-conscious or rule-driven expression. And given that "a governing conception or principle; the plan or design according to which something is created or constructed," is among the primary definitions of "idea" provided by the *OED*, one is tempted to counter their argument that *Eunoia* entirely lacks for ideas with the suggestion that it is, on the contrary, *all* idea.
- 5 For an extended discussion of "disjunctive poetics" see Peter Quartermain's *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (Cambridge UP, 1992). By "language writing" I mean a body of texts and approaches that include those of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school of (mostly) American poets but extends beyond that group to include a variety of works wherein a crisis in communication is staged.
- 6 For more on Silliman's poetic theory see his essay "The New Sentence" in *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof, 1977).
- 7 For a credible defense of the new sentence and other kinds of language writing in light of Jameson's critique see Bob Perelman's "Parataxis and Narrative: The New Sentence in Theory and Practice" (*American Literature* 65.2 [June 1993] 313-324). Perelman begins by pointing out that Jameson's depiction of language writing is reductive, ignoring the variety of reading experiences its various forms make available. On the subject of the new sentence, Perelman argues that far from reproducing a passive acceptance of the irreality and disconnectedness of global consumer culture it "encourages attention to the act of writing and to the writer's particular position within larger social frames" (316). If language writing such as Silliman's traffics in parataxis, he explains, it is only because his awareness of "the broken integers produced by capitalism is inseparable from his commitment to the emergence of a transformed, materialist society" (316). The irony, concludes Perelman, is that both Silliman and Jameson are trying to fight "reified parataxis" (323), but the latter simply underestimates the strategic value of de-narrativization in this struggle.
- 8 Interestingly, in the earlier essay "Diminished Reference and the Model Reader," McCaffery notes that it is one of the aims of language-centred writing to "restore writing and reading to a re-politicized condition as *work*" (italics in original 17). Though his emphasis in later writings is less on work than on dispersal, waste, and expenditure—on libidinal discharge rather than productive labour—McCaffery's initial description of language writing as a work-centred practice does indicate a possible area of compatibility between constraint-based poetics and language writing.

- 9 Ellen Lambert writes: "Convention [...] means a 'coming together.' Without a common centre of feeling, conventionality confers no true participation, only a facade of sameness" (xiii).

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