

## **Theoretical Constraint, Linguistic Copiousness: Reconsidering Section “A” in Christian Bök’s *Eunoia***

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In *Le Voyage en Grèce* (1973), Raymond Queneau contends that the notion of inspiration—that is, the accident via which the act of writing is triggered—is a non-factor in the poet’s work. Queneau avers that the poet “is never inspired because he is unceasingly inspired, because the powers of poetry are always at his disposition, subjected to his will, and submissive to his activity” (qtd. in Motte 5). Queneau’s polyvocal concepts of “will” and “activity” determine the vacuum via which the poet’s own voice is both explored and processed. In turn, the poet’s work reveals a conscious effort to navigate the language in ways that form and inform the poem. The “activity” of writing is thus never triggered by referential language revealed through “accidents” or inspired by a “will” to extrapolate on catalytic events. What Queneau offers as substitute for arbitrary inspiration is a structure in which language engages in an ongoing dialogue with its formal expression. Queneau, moreover, tends to find more liberation in structural innovations than in the misleading quest for external inspiration.<sup>1</sup> Jacques Roubaud, a friend and artistic ally of Queneau, also affirms that artistic freedom is diametrically and dialogically opposed to external accidental inspiration.<sup>2</sup> Roubaud argues that artistic inner freedom can be structured by self-imposed rules. This apparent paradox nevertheless reveals his distrust of naïve traditionalism in poetics and in the tenets of automatic writing.<sup>3</sup> That Queneau and Roubaud would propose such a model for writing is unsurprising when considered against the theoretical backdrop from which they emerge.

Mostly interested in opposing the essentialist hegemony of the literary canon, Queneau and Roubaud are at the forefront of the Oulipo movement founded in 1960 (Motte 5). Oulipo, which stands for “Ouvroir de la Littérature Potentielle,” opposes the “formal indifference” of the “free verse paradigm” as well as “the traditional metrical forms of the New Formalists” (Perloff).<sup>4</sup> <http://jacketmagazine.com/23/perloff-oulip.html> Primarily a “formal quest” Oulipian aesthetics have two principal directions: (1) analysis, that is “the identification and recuperation of older, even ancient

experiments in form” and (2) synthesis, which as an outgrowth of analysis seeks “the elaboration of new forms” (Le Lionnais qtd. in Motte 1-2). Accordingly, for Queneau the core objective of Oulipo’s work is to explore the “potential of literature,” that is “the search for new forms and structures that may be used by writers in any way they see fit” (Motte 2-3). Out of these aesthetic aspirations comes the axiomatic Oulipian “law” that “[a] text written according to a constraint describes the constraint” (Roubaud 42). Constraints, in Oulipian aesthetics, are self-imposed; thus the text is self-generated and exists despite the conventions it may rephrase. Furthermore, one can affirm that writing under constraint liberates the very act of writing from the traditionalism of conventions by “furnish[ing] its own code” (Bénabou 41).

Accordingly, Marjorie Perloff insists on the fact that “the Oulipo constraint is a *generative* device: it creates a formal structure whose rules of composition are internalized so that the constraint in question is not only a rule but also a thematic property of the poem” (emphasis Perloff’s).<sup>5</sup> This “*generative* device,” while implicit in the composition of the text, is centripetal to the interpretive multiplicity it generates. For instance, Queneau’s “seminal” Oulipian text (Motte 3), *Cent Mille Millions de poèmes*, contains ten poems that exist beyond the formal exigencies of the sonnet they employ as template. Interestingly, Queneau does not capitalize “poèmes” in the title of his book. This choice indicates how, by placing the constraint at the center of the writing project, the emphasis is not on the ten poems that emerge out of the writing but on the potentiality of the resulting combinations the poems provide. Thus in Queneau’s text, “each line of each poem may replace (or be replaced by) its homologue in the nine other poems” (Motte 3). The exponential potentiality of Queneau’s text ultimately reveals a vast array of thematic possibilities that would never have existed without the constraint. In this case, the apparent paradox about the liberating effect of writing under constraint is easily resolved by the notion that the constraint allows the passage “from language to writing” (Bénabou 41) and therefore constitutes the agency that allows the inclusion of the theoretical format within the literary format. As such, this model of inclusion is central to Christian Bök’s *Eunoia*.

This essay argues that while Christian Bök is indebted to Oulipo poetics for the construction of his *Eunoia*, there is a multi-layeredness to his own contention that his text is “inspired by the exploits of Oulipo.”<sup>6</sup> Since Oulipian theorists reject the notion of “inspiration,” and since Bök is obviously aware of that crucial fact, this essay asserts that he purposely chose the Oulipian constraint to oppose the claimed political disinvestment found in

Oulipo's work. Such apolitical stance is obviously subversive given Oulipo's roots in Dadaism. Bök therefore re-inscribes the political dimension of Oulipo's poetics in *Eunoia*. Moreover, while Bök maintains that his text is a "univocal lipogram," the poet ultimately perceives the process of writing under constraint as a complex network of linguistic interlinkings that underscores his socio-political engagement with language. Hence, in analyzing the first section of *Eunoia* in terms of its writing politics, one will be able to see how Bök, using an aesthetic of formal constraint, performs and elaborates a poetics of linguistic copiousness. Thematically, Bök's text reflects his concerns with the ways over-technology and unbridled capitalism tend to conventionalize and devalue language. His text further reinvigorates poetry by effecting new portals of original arrangements of referential language that verbalize the challenging constraint of living in seemingly inevitable plutocratic hegemonies.

While this essay tends to disagree with Perloff's rather superficial reading of Bök's *Eunoia*, it nevertheless concedes that the Canadian poet's text partakes in the larger Oulipian tradition of "procedural poetry."<sup>7</sup> Bök's lipogram is "procedural" in the sense that it employs an Oulipian constraint. In *Oulipo Compendium*, the Oulipian bible, Jacques Roubaud defines a lipogram as a "text that excludes one or more letters of the alphabet" (178). The seminal example of lipogram is performed by Georges Pérec in *La Disparition*, which is written without the use of the vowel "e." Following the Oulipian rule that "a text written according to a constraint describes the constraint," Pérec's text is filled with many instances of "disappearances and loss" as well as references to "the disappearance of Pérec's family as a result of the Holocaust" (Perloff). Bök's text, however, reverses the conventions of Oulipian lipograms by using only one vowel in each section.<sup>8</sup> This reversal, while still dialogically linked to Pérec's *La Disparition*, is also indicative of Bök's fundamental detachment from Oulipian influence, which critics like Perloff often fail to acknowledge. The unconventionality of the lipogram is all the more important because it evokes abundance and multiplicity, which, as thematic cores of *Eunoia*'s first section, oppose Pérec's poetics of absence. Hence, while Pérec's lipogram is underscored by formal and thematic disappearance resulting from destruction, Bök's theorization of the lipogram highlights abundance, creativity or "the art of writing"<sup>9</sup> as poetic reaction to destruction.

As Bök states in "A Few Thoughts on Beautiful Thinking," he diverges from Oulipo's political disaffiliation.<sup>10</sup> This opposition is crucial for it displaces Bök's text from the critically-accepted realm of Oulipian poetics in favor of an aesthetic platform closely linked to 'Pataphysics.<sup>11</sup> As defined

by its founder Alfred Jarry, ‘Pataphysics is an “anti-philosophy” or “the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments” (Jarry qtd. in Bök 8). Jarry further suggests that in a pataphysical environment, “reality does not exist, except as the interpretive projection of a phenomenal perspective—which is to say that reality is never *as it is* but always *as if it is*” (Jarry qtd. in Bök 8—emphasis Jarry’s). In that sense, one may assert that section “A” of *Eunoia*, while employing an Oulipian constraint, is a “projection of a phenomenal perspective” as it posits a fictional Hassan, whose economic dominance and social disinterest evoke the values and ideologies that have been historically ascribed to Gospel of Wealth hegemonomies. Hassan’s actualization of “rubber-baronism” is destructive not only for himself, but also for those whose lives depend upon the money Hassan generates and regulates. Bök’s underlying metaphor is that economic dominance and social disinterest inevitably lead to conflict and war.

This reality that Hassan’s journey foreshadows is Bök’s political re-inscription that “represents a direct response to [his] own misgivings about the influence of Oulipo.”<sup>12</sup> Such political reinvestment is also a quest for meaning responding to the conventional Oulipian conceptualization of the constraint, which “seems to take precedence over all other literary concerns.”<sup>13</sup> Thus the irony in Bök’s use of Oulipian constraint lies in the fact that it not only becomes a formal constraint, but also a constraint that tends to silence any socio-political concerns opposing plutocratic hegemonomies. The squared structures of Bök’s paragraphs tend to evoke such political constrictions. Here, Bök is able to evoke the theme of constraint through formal organization of his paragraphs. Bök’s brilliant double-entendre in structural commentary is Oulipian by design, but symbolically pataphysical.

Bök’s desire to evade the constrictions that gag creativity and invoke conformity further demands a complete redefinition of referential language. Here, Bök resorts to Oulipian structural innovation by proposing “an as yet undiscovered mode of organization for linguistic objects” (Bénabou 46). To oppose the absurdity of plutocracy as social model that eradicates lower classes and catalyzes worldly conflicts, Bök proposes a “mode of organization” that returns to the ‘pataphysical’ anti-war politics of Dada. The choice of Dada is judicious for the movement rebelled artistically against hegemony in art and barbarism in war, just like Bök’s text responds politically to canonical standardization of language. In alluding to Dada’s nonsensical anti-art language within referential language—another instance of Bök including the theoretical format within the literary

format—Bök reorganizes language in a way that rejects prevailing conventions in poetics. By recuperating Dada poetics and placing them as foundational, Bök reconceptualizes Dada as an updated political commentary on postmodern understanding of linguistic potentiality. Dada is thus re-canonized.

Accordingly, the first section is dedicated to Hans Arp, one of the founders of Dada. Unsurprisingly, Bök evokes Dada as site of “destruction of normal syntax” (Perloff), a “normal syntax” used primarily in the language of hegemonies. Hence, Dada anti-art becomes a countercultural assertion of the necessity of a parareality, a pataphysical world opposing the “craftsman,” whose understanding of language lies in conventionalism and “stagnant art” (Bök, *Eunoia*, 12).<sup>14</sup> The “[a]wkward grammar” of Tristan Tzara’s manifesto becomes Bök’s own damning of traditional verse forms such as “stanzas” and “ballads.”<sup>15</sup> Tzara’s attempts to destroy structured language are echoed in Bök’s own pataphysical poetics which attempt to reinvigorate and re-codify the language of objects that clog the arteries of Hassan’s world. Tzara is therefore compared to a “madcap vandal” whose crafting of a “small black ankh” is not an act of vandalism, but an attempt to revivify language. The ankh, the Ancient Egyptian symbol of life, is used to “spark[s] an *ars magna* (an abstract art that charts a phrasal anagram).” The allusion to Ramon Llull’s computation theory (*Ars Magna*) is important because its mathematical dimension anticipates Oulipo. Moreover, Llull’s theory attempted create knowledge mostly through the use of logic, which opposed the theocratic rule of the times. For these reasons, Llull’s writings were banned or silenced by a form of political “fatwa.”

The mention of the anagram, an Oulipian structure, also suggests permutation and transposition, thus the possibility of new words and new meanings, which is what Bök attempts to perform in this first section of his text. Bök conflates various catalogues of material objects to create meaning and underscore his theme. Yet these new avenues of meaning cannot exist within an oppressive orthodox system in which “[a] law as harsh as a *fatwa* bans all paragraphs that lack an A as a standard hallmark.” Therefore, the reorganization of poetic conventions that Bök proposes at the onset of the section is expected to be silenced just like the “annals and tracts...the dramas and psalms” that ideological radicals like “Kant and Kafka, Marx and Marat” used to challenge social conventions and hegemonies. Moreover, the “*fatwa*” used to gag this radicalism is evoked in the aforementioned squared structure of the paragraph, further enhancing Bök’s ironic use format as theme.

In the second paragraph of the section, the ankh's life/creation symbolism is silenced in favor of its anagrammatic equivalent "Khan," which evokes the Imam's imperial supremacy. Bök employs a pun on "Agha," which means "leader," to suggest that Hassan is mirror image of Ag(h)a Khan (Bök, *E*, 13). As an imperial leader of finance, Hassan lives in material plentifulness that enforces the "fatwa" he imposed upon those who challenge his hegemony. Stylistically, Bök resorts to another constraint to illustrate this imperial opulence. In "A Few Thoughts on Beautiful Thinking," he insists that "[a]ll sentences must accent internal rhyme through the use of syntactical parallelism."<sup>15</sup> The description of Hassan's hermitage, his "ashram," is underpinned by the constraint. The alliterative continuity established between "a Taj Mahal," "grand parks," "grass laws," "vast as parklands," "Alhambra" and "Valhalla" confer to his "ashram" an imagery of royal grandeur that returns to the sounds of "Agha" and "Khan." Transplanted in the Western world, Hassan's "royalty" morphs into an imperialism that covers his postmodern understanding and implementation of socio-economic Darwinism.

Interestingly, Bök cleverly places these internal rhymes after a dash, whose meaning, here, is doubled. In terms of syntax, the dash allows the connection of parallel imagery. However, the dash also invokes its verbal function and thus hints at inevitable destruction. Later in the paragraph, Bök employs a similar structure with the dash, this time to signify how Hassan, "at a handclap," can order "a bacchanal," a feast of mystical and mythological proportion. Such feast also necessitates servants such as the "Arab lass," whose duty is to "draw a bath" and "wash a man's back." It also requires "Arab lads" who have to "fawn and hang." The syntactical parallelism is inflated by the use of one-syllable verbs, which illustrates their mechanical—and dehumanizing—tasks. Moreover, there is a connotative relation between these one-syllable verbs in which the "a" is always alliterative in each word. Therefore, one may assert that Bök wants to link these internal rhymes with their subservient connotations (for instance, generic "lads" "fawn"). In so doing, Bök is able to evoke "Has-san" in the tasks his servants perform: "draw bath," "wash back" "fawn hang." Amidst this reenactment of a mythological King's court, which copiousness functions as metaphor for Hassan's postmodern economic domination, Bök satirizes the scene by reminding his reader (or Hassan) that small things can generate as much pleasure. Hence, the Arab lads' fawning is equated with a dwarf's fanning. Similarly, the "amaranth garlands" that provide a "balm that calms all angst" are dwarfed by the "naphtha lamp"

whose limited radiance nevertheless produces an equivalent warmth that can also calm.

The constant opposition between destructive opulence and reactionary creativity, prefigured in the Arp inscription, is also present in the way Bök manipulates the language. For instance, his insistence that the “text must exhaust the lexicon for each vowel”<sup>16</sup> is reflected in the way each paragraph “exhausts” internal rhyming to produce social commentary about Hassan’s overemphasis and over-reliance on objects for self-definition. Bök’s “projection of a phenomenal perspective,” is thus anticipated in another thematic constraint: “All chapters must describe a culinary banquet, a prurient debauch, a pastoral tableau and a nautical voyage.”<sup>17</sup>

The third paragraph consequently describes a culinary banquet that highlights Hassan’s disproportionate wealth and disconnection with societal values. The opening sentence uses an ironic pun to illustrate such disproportion: “Hassan asks that a vassal grant a man what manna a man wants” (Bök, *E*, 14). The “manna” invoked in this passage does not come from its proverbial heavens. Instead, the meaning of “manna” is subverted to suggest an empirical and imperial control of the wealth. Here “manna” also seems to replace “many” which would make the opening statement ironical, for when Hassan asks and wants, he has, which is not the same for the masses, those who are economically subservient to him. Bök again employs syntactical parallelism to correlate the verbs of each sentence in order to create a gradation of actions that further highlights Hassan’s lordship. The passage from “asks” to “wants”(doubled) to “gnaws” to “scarfs” and “has” demonstrates how Hassan’s every desire has to be fulfilled. In return, Hassan, in a disinvested philanthropic gesture, will grant “jam tarts and bananas” to a generic “man” whose othering derives directly from Hassan’s imperialism. Bök doubles that image by superimposing both versions of a snack. Whereas Hassan snacks on “*canard à l’ananas sans safran*,” the generic man is “granted” leftovers by the “vassal.” The social model depicted here repositions a (post-)modernized version of feudalism at the forefront of class inequities.

The movement from “culinary banquet” to “prurient debauch” echoes the corruption of moral values that unbridled capitalism entails. In the sixth paragraph, Hassan’s court is transposed into a bar where the lord witnesses scenes of drinking, harassment and prostitution (Bök, *E*, 16). Such scenes seem to be consequences of the “*fatwa*” of the first section. Censorship and intellectual hegemony coupled with economic constriction and oppression inevitably lead to debauchery, to the decline of this microcosmic civilization. By the seventh paragraph, even Hassan himself has been corrupted by

the very model he governs. Bök here employs the sonic resonance of “smack” (Bök, *E*, 17) which final “k” sound is echoed throughout the paragraph to suggest the drug’s gradual numbing effect on Hassan. Hence, “tabac,” “spark,” “flashback,” “slack,” “dark,” “back,” “aback,” “damask,” and “cracks” culminate in the final image of “cataclasms” which internal doubling of the ‘k’ sound is both sonically and thematically disruptive. With “cataclasms” Bök sonically and thematically foreshadows Hassan’s fate, the ultimate disruption in man’s life.

Accordingly, the eighth paragraph details Hassan’s ultimate rejection of his own cultural heritage (“a mass at Sabbath, a fast at Ramadan”) in favor of western capitalism. Symbolized in a crap game in which all cheat to get richer (Bök, *E*, 18), this cultural disaffiliation represents another form of disruption announced in “cataclasms.” This, Bök suggests in the alliterative connection between the opening “sacral tasks” and the final “amass.” The thematic continuity that “amass” permits overlaps into the following paragraph in which, to recuperate his loss at craps, Hassan reinstitutes a form of feudal system, a “Magna Carta” (Bök, *E*, 19). Helped by a politically grafted “taxman,” Hassan becomes an economic overseer, whose method of taxing bears intimations of commercial globalization. More importantly, imbued with the underlying expansionist endeavors and manifest destiny of his new “*terre d’accueil*,” Hassan becomes a worldwide land speculator, an economic colonizer.

Thus begins the “nautical voyage” that Bök promised in his poetic constraint. Here, however, the nautical voyage becomes a naval battle for the control of sea commerce (Bök, *E*, 25). Positing “bark” and “raft” against “catamarans as fast as narwhals,” Bök describes how the war machinery benefits the plutocrats in times of economic growth. In the following paragraph, Hassan supervises a war camp peopled with fighters like the generic man of the banquet who becomes the sacrificial lamb for Hassan’s prosperity. In this passage, Bök recuperates the theme of a banquet, except that in this war camp, soldiers eat “bran mash and lard, spam hash and salt, ballpark franks and flapjack stacks” instead of lamb, gravlax and canard. The meat is processed and canned, which symbolizes the way depersonalized soldiers are sent to war unprepared for its dehumanizing horrors and equipped only with “a backpack, a knapsack, and a packsack.” The alternate internal rhyming of “pack” and “sack” allude to the fact that in the trenches, these nameless men are only protected by sandbags and defined by their packsacks. The namelessness of men is further evoked in the repetition of generic names like “A campman,” “A packman,” and “A watchman” which open each of the last three sentences. The parallelism between



these sentences converges in the evocation of their helplessness on the warpath, returning these men to their primitive nature.

The following paragraph, a subverted “pastoral tableau,” describes the law of the jungle as a way to illustrate the history of combat. Whereas in the jungle there is a natural animal hierarchy, in Hassan’s plutocratic orthodoxy one finds a similar sense of determinism. Therefore, from primitive hunting to war with swords and axes, Bök outlines a history of genocides which atrocity and dehumanization are encompassed in the onomatopoeia that circumscribe the seventeenth paragraph: “*whack, whack*” and “*swack, swack*” (Bök, *E*, 28). By resorting to onomatopoeia to correlate his perception of meaningless war, Bök suggests a linguistic wasteland in which words can no longer express meaning. Ultimately, Bök’s “projection of a phenomenal perspective” culminates in the image of “[a] mad labman at a lab” (Bök, *E*, 29) who has just invented “an anthrax” to be used in a biological war. The movement from primitivism to hypertechnology, an evocative illustration of the western doctrine of progress, still cannot save Hassan from his death. Victim of a bio-chemical reaction to the gas he helped create, Hassan is the penultimate tragic hero. He dies as a result of the metaphorical disease he generated. In fact, one may assert that the singular use of the letter “a” throughout the section imitates sonically the extended “last gasp” that Hassan releases.

Hassan’s persona stands for the promises of economic opportunities that the West promotes. Bök’s ability to create a parareality through an original reorganization of referential language makes his text primarily pataphysical. Yet, one cannot evade the Oulipian constraint which Bök adapts to convey his social commentary. Essentially, his sound poem performs at both formal and thematic levels what the theoretical framework of Oulipo demands. Hence, Bök’s ability to use form as idiom and theme makes *Eunoia* a unique contribution to both pataphysical poetics and sound poetics. Again, if the Oulipian “act par excellence” is the creation of a structure and the proposition of new modes of organization for linguistic objects (Bénabou 46), then Bök’s lipogram is such structure. More importantly, Bök proposes new codes of organization for linguistic objects as well as new codifications of both linguistics *and* objects. Bök’s lipogram is an exhaustive catalogue of physical objects that make, shape, inform and ultimately destroy Hassan. His metaphorical death is the result of a linguistic gradation that re-appropriates referential language to suggest a thematic parareality. Finally, the exceptionally dense sound poetry that Bök navigates in *Eunoia*’s first section reveals a poetics of linguistic copiousness that supports in sound what both theoretical and literary formats demand.

The constraint that Bök imposes upon the text succeeds in describing the constraint, as outlined in the fundamental Oulipo law. If one accepts that the “A” section is a written performance of a long “last gasp,” then one may affirm that the ultimate constraint that Bök was trying to describe through his formal constraint was that language, like man, is mortal.

## Notes

- 1 See especially Motte’s “Introduction,” 1-5.
- 2 In *The Oulipo Compendium*, 41.
- 3 François Le Lionnais also states that “the goal of potential literature is to furnish future writers with techniques which can dismiss inspiration from their affectivity” In Bök, *Pataphysics*, p.67. Such a “rule” will become central to Oulipian aesthetics.
- 4 Henceforth, all references to Perloff’s essay, “The Oulipo Factor: The procedural Poetics of Christian Bök and Caroline Bergvall,” will come from the internet version of the article, at <http://jacketmagazine.com/23/perloff-oulip.html>. The article was initially published *Textual Practice* 18.1 (2004): 23-45. It was then republished in her work *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, and Pedagogy* (2004). I provide a bibliographical entry for the work.
- 5 See note 1. The italics are Perloff’s.
- 6 From “A Few Thoughts on Beautiful Thinking,” 125.
- 7 See note 1.
- 8 It is worth noting however that Pérec, in *Les Revenantes*, uses this reversed model of the lipogram, where only one vowel is used in each section.
- 9 In “A Few Thoughts on Beautiful Thinking,” 125.
- 10 In “A Few Thoughts on Beautiful Thinking,” 126.
- 11 In 2002, one year after the publication of *Eunoia*, Bök published *Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science*, which seems, more aptly, to describe his own poetics.
- 12 In “A Few Thoughts on Beautiful Thinking,” 126.
- 13 In “A Few Thoughts on Beautiful Thinking,” 126.
- 14 Henceforth, all references to Bök’s *Eunoia* will be indicated by the initial *E*.
- 15 See also Perloff’s brief analysis of Tzara’s presence in the poem.
- 16 In “A Few Thoughts on Beautiful Thinking,” 125.
- 17 In “A Few Thoughts on Beautiful Thinking,” 125.
- 18 In “A Few Thoughts on Beautiful Thinking,” 125.

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