

Before Starting Over

BRIAN KIM STEFANS was born in Rutherford, New Jersey in 1969. He has published several books of poetry, most recently *What Is Said To the Poet Concerning Flowers* (Factory School, 2006). Other books include *Free Space Comix* (Roof, 1998), *Gulf* (Object Editions, 1998) and *Angry Penguins* (Harry Tankoos, 2000). *Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics*, a book of experimental writings that both explored and described the nexus between digital technology and poetry, appeared from Atelos in 2003. He is an internationally recognized digital artist and has run the website *arras.net*, devoted to new media poetry and poetics, since 1998.

Before Starting Over

SELECTED WRITINGS AND INTERVIEWS 1994–2005

BRIAN KIM STEFANS



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham PDO, Cambridge CB1 5JX United Kingdom

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First published 2006

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 9.5 / 13

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ISBN-13 978 1 84471 058 4 paperback
ISBN-10 1 84471 088 2 paperback

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For my father

Notes and Acknowledgements

The first chapter of this book is comprised of six short reviews that appeared in *Boston Review* over the past four years. I am greatly thankful to Matthea Harvey, whom I first approached about writing for *BR*, and to Timothy Donnelly for being a sharp editor. I've combined the published versions of these reviews with parts that were cut out due to space or other reasons.

The chapters on Asian American poetry, digital poetry, and the one titled "Life and Contacts," are assemblages of academic, journalistic, editorial and "poetics" style writing. My hope is that the quick transports between these various approaches to discussing poetry—some of which might seem too informal for a thick book such as this—will demonstrate the virtues of each mode. I haven't gone back and revised the essays to take out those moments where I am either repeating myself—there are a few set phrases that appear in a few of these writings, on the order of Ezra Pound's tag from Spinoza "the intellectual love of a thing consists in the understanding of its perfections"—or cite the same piece of writing more than once to make the same point. Most of these writings were "occasional"—these infelicities are testament to my struggle to be original.

My thanks to Steve Evans, on whose website *Third Factory* two of these pieces appeared, and to Michael Scharf, who commissioned "When Lilacs Last in the Door" for his column "Metromania" in *Poets & Writers* (though it never appeared there—the editor though my piece too "cheeky"). Thanks also to Louis Cabri and Nicole Markotic for including me in the "open letter" issue of the Canadian Journal *Open Letter*, David Buuck and Yedda Morrison of *Tripwire*, Chris Reiner of *Witz*, Patrick Durgin of *Kenning*, Keston Sutherland and Andrea Brady of *Quid*, Jordan Davis and Marcella Durand at the *St. Mark's Poetry Project Newsletter*—several of these essays found a home in these publications. John Tranter

of *Jacket* has been especially generous in accepting some of my writings, and I regret not being able to include in this collection my “open letter” about Martin Johnston, but I really consider it more of a sketch at this moment and hope to get back to Johnston at a later date.

Aaron Levy was kind enough to invite me to speak at the Slought Foundation on archiving digital poetry, while Jennifer Moxley and Steve Evans have invited me twice to read and speak in Orono, Maine, which I really enjoyed. For some reason, my primary outlet for my ideas on “digital poetry” has been interviews—my thanks to Erika Weitzman, Monica de la Torre, Sylvia Egger and Giselle Bieugleman for their interest and good questions. Thom Swiss at the Iowa Review Web should also be mentioned in this regard. The longish essay “Privileging Language” was commissioned as a short response by Noah Wardrip-Fruin which I turned into the spiel you read here.

For several years, I was an active reviewer for *Publishers Weekly*. I began to surreptitiously post some of my unedited, longer versions of the *PW* reviews on my blog, *Free Space Comix*, and on the Buffalo poetics listserv in an effort to announce the publication of new books—most of the “little reviews” were little more than extended blurbs—and occasionally to attempt a more critical approach. Four of the sixteen (the longest ones) were not written for *PW* and appear here for the first time.

The “Silliman Commentaries” chapter might be the most unusual section of the book, but I thought to include five of these entries since a great deal of my writing over the past years has been for the internet, either for listservs such as Buffalo Poetics or ubuweb, or for my blog. From one perspective, it might seem an indulgence to include these pages, but from another, this is really the tip of the iceberg of all the kibitzing I’ve done online. I think these “commentaries”—which, for a week at least, got a lot of experimental poets discussing the merits of “Skunk Hour”!—form an argument that is coherent, both stylistically and intellectually, and thus available to a reader not up to speed on all that’s happening on Silliman’s Blog. My remarks above, along with scattered remarks throughout this book about the problems of reading American poetry with a “fresh eye” beyond presumed lineages or clans best sets the stage for this chapter.

A final note of thanks to Aaron Kunin for giving this manuscript a read and suggesting excellent cuts, to Chris Hamilton-Emery for accepting this unwieldy tome for publication and help spiffing it up, and to Rachel Szekely for her love and support.

Introduction

Poems almost always have something to do with their own time, even if as a concerted reaction against it, but to extend one's impression of what a poem is doing, and how it is doing this relating, has been, for me at least, a way of getting past the surface features of writing and, and by extension, my own *reading*, which is both formed and hindered by the interpretive paradigms of the day and is a manifestation of the *habitus*—in Bourdieu's term—in which the poem operates as a cultural object or process. Nothing is very obvious in poetry and yet time seems to make things them so—the genius of Blake and Hopkins, and the centrality of Stein, for example. Why not force the issue?

This is a strange time in American poetry: not only critics, but often writers are overly anxious about the literary heritage of their own productions. Sometimes a single aspect of a poet's practice will place her too easily in a "lineage" or other sub-current of the master literary narrative, and readers will choose, even be encouraged, to read the poet as a symptom of, or argument for, this constructed past, regardless of whatever synthetic aspects—those parts that the writer absorbed from a unique and wide range of reading and experience, not to mention the peculiarities of will as it has marshaled words to express it—are in the poem. Poets are usually aware that they are bringing all sorts of ideas into their work that had never been put together in quite that way before, but a fresh eye seems hard to come by: anything noticeable as an *innovation* in poetry becomes an instant candidate for a *symptom* of some history of innovation. One concludes that it is only the truly *aberrant*—that which strikes radically against its own time—that can truly escape this cycle, but few writers are courageous, ingenious or downright crazy enough for that (and those that are we will probably never hear about).

I don't see the map of English language poetry and its unfolding history as an adequate homology for the map of all the trajectories of

class, race, and sexuality as they manifest in the world, even if limited to a single country like America. Very few of us read widely enough—into the past, or across the many languages of the present—to describe such a poetic culture with the full confidence that the distinctions we draw between poets and types of poetry are adequate as distinctions that can be drawn in culture as a whole. As an obvious example, the politics and money/class issues as they exist in the visual art world are entirely different than they are in poetry, so to say that poets who continue to derive their primary impetus from the modernist break—as signified by Duchamp for example—are the good guys because they refuse to become “mainstream,” and those that derive from a historically nuanced understanding of the history of poetic form are “retroactive,” is absurd since so much of the most successful, recognized and written about visual art of the past decades derives from this very Duchampian tradition.

There is a further irony, in that “retrograde”-seeming visual art—at least in terms of technique—such as that of Odd Nerdrum or Lucian Freud, is beginning to appear fresh: not a contradiction of the modernist tradition but reacquaintance with the pleasures of certain uses of paint and the line. I am not sure that any poets have had quite the right measure of skill, charisma and sense of urgency to pull off this particular synthesis of traditional methodology (bordering on kitsch) and *contemporinity*, that quality of playing a lively, central role in how a culture talks to itself. I suspect that cinema (and, to a degree, Surrealism) is to be credited with really expanding this field for painters, since even in avant-garde feature films such as *Mulholland Drive* a fairly classic sense of framing and composition is at play. Cinema hasn’t done enough for poetry.

I’m one of those deluded people for whom poetry was my entire life for several years when I was younger, so to have a poem neglected because it is a vote for the wrong party, or stupidly praised because it is a vote for the correct one—is pretty depressing. Traditions, if they exist at all, must be livelier than that, and I do hope to discover an Odd Nerdrum in the pages of *Poetry Chicago* someday, if only to win a gentleman’s wager. I don’t claim to have my finger on the pulse of poetry—for all of my work in digital technology, for example, I’ve never claimed that only artists who deal in digital technology are relevant to today. I have a Hegelian (or Manichean) bent that has been borne out somewhat by recent developments in the arts—i.e. the more “digital” became the valorized quality, the more attractive all things analog began to appear.

But I like to keep my eyes open, with the goal of seeing something that not only challenges my ways of thinking but denies my ideas entirely. I like having opinions, but whenever possible I've tried to err on the side of the positive, simply ignoring things that seemed to me largely bad or wrong-headed. Nonetheless, being an internet junkie for some years, and a kind of a literary "activist" in general, I've strayed more than a few times from this general approach.

Before Starting Over

“Poet-Critic”

I haven't found the term “poet-critic” very useful since it suggests that one could tack on hyphenated nouns endlessly to the phrase for every new activity that a poet might engage in (though I like the ring of “poet-programmer” since it's a relatively new and confusing creature). A “poet-critic” is really not new, and most neologisms in criticism are bad (such as “poethics”). I think there could be a richer community of critical writers on poetry, people who are interested in creating flexible, lively terminology for further discussion and not keywords for academic roundtables, though there is often a fine line between these two categories. I think some poets could write very great criticism if they found a way of being excited about the language of criticism itself, but also about the drama of the critic in the world (searching for one's own “lettre du voyant”). My sense is that the listserv critic would be a more interesting phenomenon were people more careful with their prose styles in emails; of course, since much of that writing is considered ephemeral, it's understandable that many are not willing to take this extra step, and so I wonder if the listserv, rather than increasing our communal interest for extra-poetic verbiage, has in fact been detrimental to “criticism.” Impatience and a sense of wonder might be the two best qualities of a critic, though neither is very useful without a decent prose style. I guess, in the end, I would be interested in critical writing that had a theatrical bent, animating the entire stage of critical and cultural activity and how we work within it, shedding an optimistic light on the state of affairs while also providing a sense of urgency and focus.

Published in *Kenning* 13, 2002

I. Six Reviews

Tan Lin 'BlipSoak01'¹

Many of us are familiar with the trippy, innocent elation that a first encounter with the waves of digital detritus that Google searches and 600 pieces of email on Monday morning inspire: effects of morose-wit seem intrinsic to the simple relating of one's latest spam intake, offering a buzz-sawed cross-section of the world that ranges from telescoped views of all the naughty parts of the body to the relatively lofty concerns of mortgage refinancing and (with the profit) subsidizing the royalty of insolvent African states. Harnessing this torrent of "found" language for the sake of user-friendly postmodern—and I guess "post-Language," for those with the Bloomian humor—effects has been in the sights of not a few poets over the last decades, the starting gun having popped long before the dot com beast slouched toward Babel.

Tan Lin seems to have gotten there before most of us: his first book, *Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe* (1996), glided along on meters that seemed as if Gerard Manley Hopkins' dapple-dawn-drawn falcon had gotten stuck in John Yau's English-as-a-Stammered-Language Slurpie machine. Take this passage from "Talc Bull Dogface":

Lu Hsun chews geisha cup. Giesha spits cup. Clouds form on back
like worms
in planetarium. How is tap-dancing nightingale distinguish
from cleaning rag? Sofa silkwork choo choos to camera. Bamboo
ready
to baby poo nudie shade. Lu-lu jade dude pingpongs really
Rovely. The knees crumple like newspapers. Can't push on
courtyard gardens in hardness. The purse snaps. God snap mouth.

The energy here isn't ecstatic so much as scattershot. The poem makes a bid for total compression that ends up taking in as much as it severs off; the aural effects are serial rather than counter-pointed, the alliteration

cloying in a way that Hopkins' is not. But like Hopkins, Lin wants almost every syllable to pop in some way, either through flawed reduplication or the harsh foregrounding of consonant sounds, and to have the line draw itself across the page quickly, impatiently, challenging the ear to assimilate its bounding prosody. So much for dry formalism.

Beyond its corrupting relation to the lyric, what appears to be happening in "Talc Bull Dogface" is that the poet is treating his writerly output like a text-dump, organizing his words according to some hidden, reptilian algorithm—in this case, an attention to lots of internal off-rhymes ("nightingale / distinguish") and the "l"/"r" switches that mark the Chinaman in the clinamen—until they glow with radium-like intensity. In this poem, as in *BlipSoak01*, you can make what you want of the "I," and whatever fictions surrender themselves in the mélange of language is more-or-less ok. (One poem in *Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe* starts "to take heroin as a sleeping pill to follow a crack / hit with a snort of smack," but that Peter Laughner moment was probably brought to you by Intertextuality Unlimited rather than any scouring of Lin's diary.) That, indeed, is the chaos of the information highway: the vulnerability of language to programs, bugs and electricity, the digital equivalent of paper's vulnerability to flame (or the famous to gossip columns). "There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing, / Like the clashed edges of two words that kill," wrote Wallace Stevens in kinder, analog times; Lin seems to suggest that two words can do the trick, but if you have a willing database and enough paper, why don't you use a hundred just in case.

Lin has since professed a desire to shake off the trappings of the "avant-garde"—linguistic difficulty, the suspicion of beauty, all manners of formal estrangement—and create poems that are "relaxing." Readers of the outré avant-garde journals over the past few years—*Conjunctions* and *Tripwire*, for example, and even *Boston Review*—have come across excerpts from a project called "Notes for an Ambient Stylistics." These run-on, never entirely uninteresting but hardly *gripping* paragraphs, were the exact opposite of the neon-punk effects he sought out in *Lotion*:

I continue to believe to this day that she was a terrible liar in person, although I am probably lying to myself, and of course this is the main reason I fell in love with her after we had ended things, and this is the main reason I still, years later, remember her voice when I am on the telephone and am lonely and am waiting for someone on the other end of the telephone to tell me they love me. One can wait for years to hear a beautiful lie like that.

Lies, the deception of surfaces, along with “boredom” and the beauty of things entirely forgotten, have since become recognizable Tan Lin themes, like bureaucracy for Kafka or the sea for Melville. Perhaps what is more distinctive is his manner of courting these aesthetic properties without ever seeming to raise his voice, inhabiting a tone of disinterest while never failing to follow the course of his own mind, a trick he might have learned from John Ashbery (cf. “Now one must / Find a few important words, and a lot of low-keyed, / Dull-sounding ones” in “And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name,” a sort of anthem for this disposition).

BlipSoak01 begins with a prose introduction (“Beauty is over-appreciated; boredom is not”) in which Lin distinguishes his new work from “most literature and especially poetry,” which he characterizes as “fundamentally false forms of excitation and dread.” The introduction runs down the right-hand pages with an occasional phrase or word exiled to the left-hand page, followed by a series of quick rev-up pages (hints of the countdown that start each of Yong-Hae Chang Heavy Industries’ Flash movies here) made up of words in huge sans-serif type that are missing some, but not necessarily key, letters. One of them goes like this:

T H I S
W A S
S A M L D

This creates a sort of optical illusion—clearly we want to see the phrase “this was sampled,” but if we add those two key letters to the last word, what about the huge gaps in the first two lines? Even beyond the marshalling of this ludic visuality, a sort of homage to the useful dysfunction of electronic storage and retrieval is paid in the invocation of “sampling,” which was a form of capturing small bits of audio and re-using it in loops and sequences that thrived in the days before iPods and mp3 compression made capturing (and pocketing) entire symphonies a pedestrian affair. But what, one might ask, in the spirit of Magritte, is being sampled here, the letters or the phrase?

This sort of shuttling of reading between the “text” and the atomized bits that make it up—letters, and behind them, chains of os and 1s—animate this book, which is a testament to what the layman can do with a passing acquaintance with Quark. The poem’s couplets start on the left-hand page like any normal poem, but rather than break and flow to the

next line when they reach the margin, they continue over to the right-hand page, which otherwise would be entirely blank. But they rarely are: the left-hand pages function as a factory for curious miniatures, hanging strays from the idiosyncratic and, indeed, dysfunctional system of page layout. Page 243, for example, has just the words “glue / effer- vescent noodles,” which could be an exile from of Ashbery’s “Europe” in *The Tennis Court Oath*. Other bits of text *not* produced in this fashion (there is an interesting interaction between fragments produced by accident and those that Lin, one supposes, “made up”) and the seemingly random appearance of numbers that evoke either CD tracks or track lengths—“06” and “16:07” for example—place the scene of this poem, in my mind at least, somewhere within the depths of a CD-R that has either been incorrectly burned or—in the spirit of Japanese audio artist Yasuanao Tone and “glitchworks”—has been wrapped in Scotch tape and put back into the player.

Lin’s technique is not collage, in which the bleeding edges of the assembled fragments scream out as loudly as the content, but a sort of all-over mixture of numberless untraceable sources, a mixture that can run from the atomic—the letter, the dash, the diacritical mark—to the word and phrase with little of the poignant estrangement of the source text (or ironizing of its tone) that occurs in, say, Ted Berrigan’s *Sonnets*. Lev Manovich’s description in *The Language of New Media* of how the digital “composite” took over from film’s reliance on the edit is useful here:

Rather than keying together images from two video sources, we can now composite an unlimited number of image layers. A shot may consist of dozens, hundreds, or thousands of image layers. These images may all have different origins—film shot on location (“live plates”), computer-generated sets or virtual actors, digital matte paintings, archival footage, and so on.

The splice—both connection of, and break between, two streams of images—is replaced by the composite; an entire movie can be made without a single “cut” and yet be the product of several hundred shoots. If a poet opens herself to all varieties of personal writing, “found” writing, accidental or purposeful productions of computer algorithms (such as those programs that turn your web page into the language of Snoop Dogg), and anything else that swims into the laptop’s ken, then one could potentially layer an infinite number of distinct texts into a poem, in the fashion of a sort of poor-man’s *Finnegans Wake*, or, indeed, in an “ambient” and decidedly non-avant-garde (read: “threatening”) version.

A window shot out with a bb gun
This writhes

Every evacuation lays like a topography cantilevered
By heroes of rust

I fall in love and a diamond on her quit suggests
I fall in love, oh, day in the bleachers

JFK passes through Texas
I don't dictate the slips

that must be inside
inside must be incarnate and left

_____of not listening
_____over water,

Of given and glistening, the geishas remove the gentleman's pants
I merge from this form, yellow warblers necks like writing on a
stone

Greeting cards left on the table inside the outlines of a football
field
The sound of a radio tapered and slender as candlesticks in the
kitchen before he awoke at night

"The surface is beautiful because it can be forgotten one moment at a time," Lin writes in the introduction, and the lines quoted above progress "one moment at a time" and are, indeed, eminently forgettable, at least for moral edification, concise imagism, and all those other good, poetic things people like. The couplets are like a measure that is entirely variable, like Williams' three-steps in his later poetry, but also has a renga-like quality, in that the first half of the couplet calls out for a response, but one that doesn't offer closure so much as a continuation of its own effects, a sort of mirror-life after the linebreak. The couplets also provide a method for Lin to promote a practice of reading as a sort of *parsing*—one often scans the second half of a couplet strictly to record the differences (punctuation, vocabulary, and other formal aspects) from the first half, reducing the act of reading to a light existential discipline like the bean-counting in Camus (or yoga in New York). This seamlessness is amazing, considering the cuts implicit in the bizarre juxta-

positions within single lines—“yellow warblers necks like writing on stone” is practically textbook Surrealism—and the stray poem-lets that the right hand page collects, as a sort of parrallel thread, for later consumption—for example “gentleman’s pants / ke writing on stone.” (Indeed, this poem runs through many such jams in the flow, at one point breaking off into four columns of text, at another only letting in single letters and bits of words, forcing the reader to change reading strategies, to read up, down and across, but never breaking with the basic formality of the couplet.)

BlipSoak01 is a splendidly living and colorful surface that celebrates the quickness of modern life while also relishing the ability to change the channels, to control and “sample” the thousand broadcasts—to accessorize one’s consciousness. Thirty years after Raymond Williams’ *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* comes the long poem that acknowledges television as central to cognition, to one’s self as a negotiator of *flows*. But Williams’ ideas were predicated on the idea of one “central” transmitting station; as we know, there are now millions, in the form of websites, cable stations, streaming audio and video, and spam. Add to this the presence of software such as ProTools, Flash and Final Cut that allow us to remix these streams, and one’s own hard-drive becomes a transmitter to *oneself*. The heavy theory which American Modernism’s concern with the American long poem has produced—which numberless New Sentencers, not to mention Clark Coolidge and Bernadette Mayer, have already relegated to “what’s the big fuss” status, at least in terms of page count—today seems the literary equivalent to the Diet of Worms arguing about how many angels fit on the head of a pin: our Luthers, proliferating like Richard D. James in the “Windowlicker” video, are the writers of “flarf,” of Google-poems, of paragraphs assembled by Perl-scripts and other web software, who are able to muster *Canto*-length works in a matter of weeks, days, even hours. Lin’s poem is the freshest, most innovative addition to this range of works, though there is no doubt he would eschew the association.

This information free-fall, or “blip soak,” within the comfort of one’s home implicates any sort of experimental poetry predicated on a conflicted, hall-of-mirrors consciousness—think of Michael Palmer in *Notes from Echo Lake* or any of the recent “ellipticist” poets—to the degree that the gravity that is suggested in more carefully paced, seemingly autobiographical (and often *Nouveau Roman*-ish) work is revealed as a *hoarding* of language. That is, the fragmentary lyric poet manipulates the market of comprehension by simply keeping things back, pointing

to the store of words, sentences and insights and intimating its wholeness, but letting out bits of information at a controlled drip. Lin, for whom the word "soul" is just a good bad pun on the capitol of Korea, simply opens the doors: no jams, no voice, no narrative, as if his entire example of mastery were to whip the poem into form without breaking a sweat, yet another sign of the legacy of the New York School. It is a sort of poetry you could run your eye across while doing something else, such as listening to Eno's *Thursday Afternoon* with Warhol's *Empire* playing on the DVD, all while scooting a mouse pointer across one of turux.org's semi-automated abstractions. Indeed, the idea of art as domestic accoutrement could also be one of Lin's themes; he likes stylish things, as the Euro-fab silver and orange of the cover type suggests. This is poetry as domestic accessory—what could be more soothing?

Published in *Boston Review*, October/November 2004.

Notes

- 1 Lin, Tan. *BlipSoak01*. San Francisco: Atelos, 2003.

Christian Bök 'Eunoia' ¹

In the introduction to *Information Arts*, Stephen Wilson's copious catalogue of people who work on the borders of science and the humanities as they are traditionally defined, Wilson surprises the reader with a pop-quiz on whether they can differentiate the projects that are being pursued by people who call themselves "artists" and those who describe themselves as "scientists." Among the projects are the following:

Researcher J.T. developed a method of using genetic engineering to encode messages in bacteria.

Researchers C.E. and U.W. bred a line of mice with a special proclivity for eating computer cables.

Researcher J.M. developed a computer display that could visualize the underlying intellectual structure of a group of articles and books.

Researcher H.S. developed a "fertility bra" that used the pheromone receptors to flash indicators when the woman wearing it was in a fertile period.

Researchers at M.R. developed a device that is sensitive to hugs and can react to things it hears on the television. ²

Genetics is one of the newest—and certainly most contested—areas of science, and both projects involving them above seem invested in some aspect of military technology—spy messages in the first instance, infrastructural subterfuge in the second. The "fertility bra" has resonances with the television bra of Nam Jun Paik and the free love vibe of the sixties, the device "sensitive to hugs" sounds like some advancement on Sony's Aibo dog, and the AI project that translates texts into visual images—imagine a Pollackesque mural that represents the informational strands of Joyce's *Ulysses* or *The Whole Earth Catalogue*—the crazed dream of a techno-fetishist, some Blake of the bitstream. Nonetheless, it

is only the first two projects which are being pursued by “artists”; the last three are in the province of “science,” and are perhaps even getting government funding under that category. As Wilson goes on to argue in this huge book—which covers so many artists that he can barely expend more than a few pages on even the most accomplished—the border between “science” and the “arts” is breaking down, something that has been said before, of course, but never in the midst of such a populated community. A movement seems afoot.

Christian Bök fits easily among this new category of artists, not because he is employing machines to do his writing or is attempting to make his poetry “respond to hugs” or chew through cables, but because he has probably, more than any poet today, attempted to set up strict guidelines for how his poetic writings are to be pursued. These guidelines are informed by poststructuralist notions of “recombinant” linguistics—in which letters and words are recognized as molecules that behave differently in variable environments—and an interest in what he would term “robot aesthetics,” which is an imagining of how an artificial intelligence program might complete a poem were it to be fed a complex algorithm that it couldn’t betray.

Bök hails from Toronto, which, not surprisingly, is the home of the “Toronto Research Group,” a project that Steve McCaffery and the late bpNichol pursued in the seventies to investigate, with Tel Quel-ish intensity (McCaffery introduced Derrida to the North American avant-garde), the many varieties of book arts, visual and sound poetics, and even cartoons. Bök is probably best known in the States as a sound poet; his speed-metal version of Kurt Schwitters’ normally 42-minute “Ursonate” clocks in at just under 20, and his own “Cyborg Opera” has both wowed and, occasionally, distressed audiences with its unsettling—”grotesque” in the Rabelaisian sense—interpretations of electric razors and atom bombs. He’s created entire books out of Lego blocks—one recently sold in New York for several thousand dollars—and invented a language for a race called the “Taelons” for a Gene Roddenberry spin-off of Star Trek; several websites, none of his creation, are already devoted to the language, which, among other things, has no past or future tense, but relies entirely on moods of hope and nostalgia to express these specificities.

Bök has published one previous collection of poetry, *Crystallography*, which was heavily influenced by the Canadian poet Christopher Dewdney, who used to publish books of poetry with titles like *A Paleozoic Geology of London, Ontario*. *Crystallography* also has a scientific slant,

supplying a myriad of beautiful analogies between the structure of language and that of crystalline molecules like the amethyst and diamond. It even has a section called “A Hagiography of Snow,” in which the poet scolds scientists for trying to name the stars since—like naming snowflakes—it is a practice which “stems in part from the unfulfillable desire to perform a mathematical paradox: the attribution of cardinality to every element in an infinite set.” Clearly, Bök views language as a field of infinite possibility, of numberless configurations that can create their own meanings (as syntactic shapes or societal echoes) regardless of their standard usage in spontaneous expressions (such as “speech”). Faced with the limitless options posed by this aesthetic model, the writer required a sturdy plan, one beautiful in itself, and he executes it most successfully in “Eunoia,” (which comprises the first five chapters of the book that shares its name).

“Eunoia”—the word means “beautiful thought” and is the shortest word in English to employ all of the vowels—might be his response to this aesthetic dilemma. Written over seven years—the time it took Joyce to write *Ulysses*, in fact—“Eunoia” is a “universal lipogram,” in that it restricts itself to the use of only one vowel per chapter—there are, of course, five—such that the “a” chapter can only use words like “banana” and “and” (but not “the”), the “u” chapter words like “pluck” and “but” (but not “and,” “or,” or “the”). Each chapter is dedicated to an artist whose name fits within the parameter—Hans Arp, Rene Crevel, Dick Higgins, Yoko Ono and the Chinese artist Zhu Yu (infamous for eating a cooked baby in a performance) are the honored dedicatees. As he writes in his afterword, there are other “subsidiary rules”:

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 (although a few words do go unused, despite efforts to include them: *parallax*, *belvedere*, *gingivitis*, *monochord*, and *tumulus*). The text must minimize repetition of substantive vocabulary (so that, ideally, no word appears more than once). The letter Y is suppressed.

He writes that “the text makes a Sisyphean spectacle of its labour, willfully 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.” Bök treats the vowel like the physicist sending

an electron into a sheet of lead to see what sparks fly, an odd mixture of an utter manhandling of the materials (words don't naturally group themselves, even in the best lines of poetry, by the vowels they contain) and strict monkish adherence to the properties of language as they are observed under pressure.

The first paragraph of "Chapter I"—of course, there can be no "you" in this work—gives one of the more eloquent evocations of Bök's take on the art of writing:

Writing is inhibiting. Sighing, I sit, scribbling in ink this pidgin script. I sing with nihilistic witticism, disciplining signs with trifling gimmicks—impish hijinks which highlight stick sigils. Isn't it glib? Isn't it chic? I fit childish insights within rigid limits, writing schtick which might instill priggish misgivings in critics blind with hindsight. I dismiss nit-picking criticism which flirts with philistinism. I bitch; I kibitz—gripping while criticizing dimwits, sniping while indicting nitwits, dismissing simplistic thinking, in which philippic wit is still illicit.

The reader discovers one thing quite quickly: that it is straining on the eyes to read so much type that hugs up against each other, as the "stick sigil" of the letter "i" compresses the text block, making it possible to get more words on a line. The use of the "i" gives Bök a stage to perform his lyrical self-creation—a persona part Faust, part Jim Carrey's Grinch. One of the pleasures of this poem is how it approaches the aforementioned themes from the angle of each letter, such that in "Chapter A" we see the art of writing—absent the "i"—linked to a series of esteemed predecessors (Perec, of course, appears in Chapter E):

Awkward grammar appalls a craftsman. A Dada bard as daft as Tzara damns stagnant art and scrawls an alpha (a slapdash arc and a backward zag) that mars all stanzas and jams all ballads (what a scandal). A madcap vandal crafts a small black ankh—a handstamp that can stamp a wax pad and at last plant a mar that sparks an *ars magna* (an abstract art that charts a phrasal anagram). A pagan skald chants a dark saga (a Mahabharata), as a papal cabal blackballs all annals and tracts, all dramas and psalms: Kant and Kafka, Marx and Marat. A law as harsh as a *fatwa* bans all paragraphs that lack an A as a standard hallmark.

Like works of literature from Browning's *The Ring and the Book* through the nouveau roman on to Geoff Ryman's 253, the same "subject matter" is approached from several subjectivities; Bök's desire to find the most perfect use of all of the "a" words also gives us—this is no joke—the "a"s

distinctive take on the art of writing. Perhaps more obviously, Bök himself learns a little about himself as much as the letters, as if the word-lists that he constructed to write “Eunoia” were Rorschach inkblots that mirrored his own subconscious. In the “i” chapter, he is the smug, sarcastic mad scientist while in the “a” chapter he adopts a more global, allusive approach—dismissing Kant (for his transcendental ego) and Marx (for his material dialectics) in the process.

Indeed, Bök was very careful to make “Eunoia” a work of literary quality in a conventional sense; he denies himself a plethora of avant-garde tactics—parataxis, fragmentation, visual poetics, etc.—that would have made his pursuit easier. Every sentence is complete, and they all tell a story or explain an idea. One of the more clever sections is the retelling of Homer’s *Iliad* from the perspective of Helen:

Bells knell when the keep gets levelled; then Greek rebels cheer when Helen enters her Greek temple (the steepled glebe where jewelled steeples shelter her ephebes); there, the reverends bless the freed empress. The Greek sects revere her gentleness, her tenderness; hence, these prefects help her seek self-betterment. The zen seers tell her: ‘greed begets greed—never be self-centred: be selfless’. She defers. Her deference seems reverent. The empress kneels, then keens her vespers. The pewter censer spews the sweetest peppered scent. She feels refreshed; she feels perfected.

The cultural anachronism of the “zen seer”—one is reminded of Pound’s “frigidaire patent” in the “Homage to Sextus Propertius”—contributes to an engaging portrait of a woman who has a peculiarly contemporary brand of self-motivation. There is something significant in the switch to a female perspective in this seven-year long effort that resulted in under a few thousand words, as if the chapter of Modernist epics—many of which devolved into sets of internal codes—were being closed with a finger wagging at Wagnerian-scale solipsism. Among the more boisterous and pornographic of the “debauch” passages is from “Chapter U”:

Ubu hugs Ruth; thus Ruth purrs. Ubu untucks Ruth’s muumu; thus Ruth must untruss Ubu’s tux. Ubu fluff’s Lulu’s tutu. Ubu cups Lulu’s dug; Ubu rubs Lulu’s buns; thus Lulu must pull Ubu’s pud. Ubu sucks Ruth’s cunt; Ubu cuffs Ruth’s butt. Ubu stuffs Ruth’s bun (such fun). Ubu pumps Lulu’s plush, sunburnt tush. Ubu humps Lulu’s plump, upthrust rump. Ubu ruts. Ubu huffs; Ubu puffs. Ubu blurts: push, push. Ubu thrusts. Ubu bucks. Cum spurts. Ubu cums.

There is an implicit pornography in “objectifying” the letter as one

would objectify a sexual organ—the vaginal glyph of the “O” (the title of Pauline Reage’s infamous erotic novel), the phallus of the “I.” But only Bök has been able to show what happens when the libidinal economy of deconstructive poetics—in which words spiral paragrammatically out of each other—and the limited lexicon of the letter “U”—root sound of numberless English-language obscenities—clash, meld with each other and, well, hump.

Eunoia, the book, has several poems outside of “Eunoia” itself, such as one that exhausts all the words that have no vowels but the letter “y”—it starts “syzygy pyx / gyp / gypsy / pygmy gyms”—and an homage to the letter “W” dedicated to George Perec, the Oulipian master whom Bök seems compelled to excel. But it is “Eunoia”—with its ease of readability and extremity of method—that poses the largest question to poetry, both of the “avant-garde” and more lyrical traditions, which is why they haven’t generally responded to the larger cultural movement of “information aesthetics” that have occupied much of the art world. Has the split between the “avant-garde” and the “mainstream” been mended by this research-oriented stance?

Ironically, Bök’s poem, which was intended to suggest the output of a selfless algorithm, actually resembles a program itself—the strictness of its guidelines approach the strictness of a low-level, “forgiving” scripting language (like Javascript), and its recycling of themes is not unlike the recycled functions of object-oriented languages like Java and C++, in which the same code can be used for different ends. It is also the most passionate (if coldly so), inventive, and counter-intuitive response to the cultural vectors that digital technology have set in motion; whereas many artists are moving toward randomization, variability, collaboration, and the cult of infinite possibility, Bök spent seven years pursuing the most elegant, though hardly final, solution to a simple linguistic problem, in the meantime making a work that occupies a freakish yet masterly position on the historical timeline and is one of the first great poems of the twenty-first century.

Published in *Boston Review*, Summer 2002.

Notes

- 1 Bök, Christian. *Eunoia*. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2001.
- 2 Wilson, Stephen. *Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science, and Technology*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003.

Kevin Davies 'Comp.'¹

Published last fall, *Comp.* is already enjoying a reputation among readers of “alternative” poetry as a book that is both humorous and political, informed and elegant yet colloquial and engaging, with little or none of the suspicious misgivings—that the “moment has passed,” that the syntax/society homology is no longer relevant, or that cultural capital accrues as readily around experimental work as that of the “mainstream”—that have greeted much recent writing in the Language vein. Davies, a native of Canada but a resident of New York since the late 1980s, published his only other full-length book, *Pause Button*, in 1992. While his style has changed somewhat since then, both books share a heightened concern for a heterogeneity of expression, an Olsonian interest in the line by breath (or at least in the various freedoms and maximal rhetorical gestures), and a pinpoint accuracy of tone and reference—which justifies the long wait between the two.

Indeed, as many younger poets show renewed interest in the lyric—whether it be elliptical, “new,” or even surrealist (most notable in West Coast poets such as Jeff Clark and Garrett Caples)—*Comp.*, which is both recognizably lyrical and yet rigorously unsentimental, is a breath of fresh air, though in basic technique it differs little from the volume of nine years ago. There are probably several reasons for this positive reception, not the least of which is the incredible sense of humor that Davies brings into his poetry. This humor is never entirely glib or self-satisfied—if Davies has a New York School, it is that of Frank O’Hara’s “meditation in an emergency” mode that cracks its teeth on the news of the day. And yet it is more geared toward a positive, communal experience of disgust with the social world than, say, the work of Bruce Andrews in *I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up (Or, Social Romanticism)*, where “negative capability,” the free fall among meanings without search for a moral core, is distinctly aligned to a program of counter-socialization.