

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIAN BÖK

By Brenda Dunn

Christian Bök is the author of Eunoia (Coach House 2001) and Crystallography (Coach House 1994). He also teaches creative writing at The University of Calgary.

BD: *You've just delivered a fairly provocative paper titled "Getting Ready to Have been Postmodern" that challenged not so much Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism in The Canadian Postmodern as the works she used to exemplify her definition of it. Hutcheon also delivered a paper at this conference titled "The Glories of Hindsight." Is there anything you would now amend, or elaborate upon, after hearing her speak?*

CB: I would make no amendments. In the discussion that she titled "Glories of Hindsight," she was uttering several *mea culpas*, I suppose in an effort to forestall subsequent criticisms of her work in postmodernism, and she of course acknowledges that she missed out on opportunities to discuss children's literature, graphic novels, theatrical forms. It seemed to me that these were false targets. I don't think that any critics would object to her having ignored other genres in the discussion of Canadian fiction in a book that's specifically about Canadian fiction. I don't think it's necessary to utter such *mea culpas* about having missed out on these opportunities.

Certainly, other critics can open up space for subsequent discussion of those genres. What I do think that she might have acknowledged is that, in fact, the books that she typified as postmodern required that she conduct an act of academic bad faith. She admits that this definition of postmodernism applies elsewhere in the world but for whatever reason doesn't apply to our own literary history in Canada. She then proceeds to note the most conservative kinds of work as postmodern despite the fact that we have very few cases of work that conform to the definitions used elsewhere in the world. But those works don't get discussed. Even though a handful of critics have criticized Hutcheon's initial studies of postmodernism, her book has nevertheless sanctioned a kind of exuberance among younger critics, who now read, as postmodern, any realistic narrative that demonstrates even the merest degree of narrative aberrancy. I might go so far as to suggest that, since her study, critics have mobilized the term postmodernism in order to appear both topical and engaged but have then gone on to evade any sustained encounter with the truly scary cases of postmodern innovation, thereby ignoring the rare cases of a more experimental genre in order to depict as progressive the many cases of a more conservative genre, and such neglect only aggravates the lack of academic interest in a radical writing that might have, otherwise, become a viable object of study.

BD: *When you refer to the "truly scary cases of postmodern innovation" what direction do you think they're headed in? Is there anywhere left for poetry to go? Will this be the space cleared by challenging The Canadian Postmodern and realist writing?*

CB: Poetry has numerous options for innovation. Recent trends in technologies of communication (such as digitized sampling and networked exchange) have already begun to

subvert the romantic bastions of "creativity" and "authorship," calling into question the propriety of copyright through strategies of plagiaristic appropriation, computerized replication, and programmatic collaboration. Poets have already begun to question, if not to abandon, the lyrical mandate of originality in order to explore the readymade potential of "uncreative" literature, be it automatic, mannerist, aleatoric, or readymade in its literary practice. Such poets have begun to extend modernist principles of both the accidental and the procedural, and such poets have also found new inspiration in the postmodern principles of "conceptual art." We can see many poets beginning to use stolen texts, random words, forced rules, boring ideas, even cyborg tools, in order to mobilize a variety of anti-expressive, anti-discursive strategies that erase any idiosyncratic demonstration of "lyric style." Such activity has become one of the most radical, if not one of the most popular, limit-cases of the avant-garde at the advent of the millennium.

BD: *Do you envision your work (past and present) as resisting or conforming to the current definition of postmodernism?*

CB: I would say that my work almost entirely opposes the normative definition of postmodernism in Canada.

BD: *How do you conceive of your academic role as a critic? What is the job of the critic?*

CB: I think that I have an avant-garde attitude to both aspects of my practice. It is important to be not simply an avant-garde poet but in a certain sense an avant-garde critic. By that I mean that the job of the avant-garde artist in many respects is to find anomalous and epistemologically innovative discoveries within the practice of literature, to try and in fact generate new problems for discovery, and to in effect redefine what it means to be an artist. The job of the avant-garde artist is always to put into play the very definition of what it means to be an artist. The job of the critic, I think, should be likewise parallel in its ends and intentions. The critic should be consequently redefining what it means to be a critic.

I've always been disturbed by the fact that no matter what kind of object of study is presented to the critic, no matter how disparate its aesthetic sensibilities might be—you could be presented with a Dadaist work or an expressionist work or a conceptual work or a pop art work—nevertheless a critic always responds with an expository essay that constitutes an act of hermeneutic interpretation. All these documents in response to these works look the same, use the same formal sensibilities and the same styles to unpack their subjects when in fact it seems to me that if you've learned the lessons that these artworks are teaching you they will subsequently instill in you a reevaluation of your own critical forms and styles of expression. Ultimately, every work will generate its own unique critical response.

Now I'm a both an academic and creative writer due in part to my interest in trying to understand, in a very dispassionate and analytical way, how I make works of art. But also, I think it's important for a critic to have some sort understanding about the making of art. There's a kind of dialogical interchange between these two domains of my own practice. In order to understand poetry I think you have to be able to use the vocabulary and lexicon of critical theory to appreciate it but by the same token you also have to understand how to make these works in order to generate new theories or showcase the unacknowledged potential in those types of works. It's not enough for an engineer to know how to build a bridge. You have to build a few bridges, and some bridges have to fall down in order to truly understand engineering. The

difficulty I have with many critics who are interested only in literary theory is that there's something very hostile in literary theory towards its object of study. We prefer to supplant it rather than read it.

I'm always surprised by graduate students who will feel satisfied that they understand Mallarme after reading a Derridean essay about Mallarme. In fact, the poetry by Mallarme was the instigation of the essay itself. It embodies a certain kind of problematic for that philosophical disquisition. In a certain sense, you have to go back and read those original works of poetry; it's not enough to read an article about those works of poetry. I think that's a real problem for much of contemporary criticism: it really has a hatred or an anxiety towards its objects of study.

BD: *Does it work the other way? Is there a temptation to clear a space for your work with your criticism?*

CB: Well that's also an important part of being a critic: to lay out a groundwork or foundation for subsequent study to make room for other kinds of writers to occupy a literary canon. To me, the critic's job is to be receptive to the most obdurate and hermetic work that's presented to you. It seems to me that now critics are constantly merely restating the obvious and responding to texts that they know they can read and they know they can teach. I think a critic should be trying to confront those things they don't understand, that they find to enigmatic or too erudite or too opaque or too illegible. The moment that a critic dismisses something as illegible what they've effectively constituted is an ideological category, which means that they do not have to read it. What they're saying is "you don't have to read it, it's not worth the effort. I don't have to teach it, it's not worth the effort." In fact, it's those moments of opacity and intransigence in the work where I think the critic is supposed to rise to the challenge and actually do something about it.

BD: *In terms of bringing important works to the fore, Eunoia actually received a lot of attention. It won the Griffin Poetry Prize in 2002. Did you see that as a goal for Eunoia, to bring experimental poetry into the limelight?*

CB: Students of mine often say that they don't take poetry classes because they think poetry is hard. They don't want to read it and they think of it as illegible. I always try to tell my students that if poetry were hard, no poet would do it because poets are the stupidest, laziest people on the planet. The reason that they're doing poetry is presumably because it's the easiest thing. It's in fact one of the easiest and funnest things. The reason I'm an avant-garde poet is because of all the kinds of poetry I could imagine doing, it's the easiest and funnest to appreciate. Of course that may seem a very strange thing to say especially when these works seem very esoteric or hermetic or obdurate. I would respond that this is only true, as bpNichol once said, if you have forgotten your experience watching Sesame Street when you were a youngster, if you have forgotten the nonsensical character of the average nursery rhyme, if you have forgotten your really sensual engagement with the material experience of language with coloured letter books as a kid. Really, the actions of the avant-garde constitute a reversion to elements of our linguistic encounters that we've otherwise suppressed on behalf of transparent communication. bpNichol I think is, among members of my generation, the most favored poet. It's in part because the work is fun and whimsical and yet extremely intelligent and exciting. In the case of a book like *Eunoia*, I'm responding I suppose to the precedents that have been set by the people I most admire. One of the problems I think of the avant-garde is that it has now

reserved the pleasures of the text primarily for its own author. Despite its vaunted support for the productivity of the reader, for the pleasure of these libidinal excesses, of these material and sensual engagements with language, those pleasures are reserved primarily for the writer who probably takes some pleasure or pride in having produced an enigma that will defeat a readership. But that seems to me insufficient. A book should have as many entrances and exits as bpNichol says as is necessary for any reader to read it. I don't expect that every potential reader would necessarily admire all that *Eunoia* has to offer. But even if they don't understand all its theoretical sensibilities, they might nevertheless enjoy how it sounds when read aloud. They might derive some musical pleasure in reading it. They might delight in some of the jokes that appear in it.

My friend Darren Wershler-Henry is also a pretty arch avant-garde writer but nevertheless his books always excite my students when I'm teaching them because they find these delightful nods to their own readership and cultural experience.

BD: *In "The Piecemeal Bard is Deconstructed: Notes Toward a Potential Robopoetics," which was published in Object 2002, you discuss "RACTER" which is an "automated algorithm" that "writes without cognition or intention, blurts out statements that are syntactically orthodox but semantically aberrant" (10). It's a poetry machine. You've addressed the possibility of poets subverting the "romantic bastions of 'creativity'. Are you processing your own automated algorithm? Are you working towards automating your creative process?*

CB: I would love to be able to create a machine or write a program that would write poetry for me. It would be like having a goose laying golden eggs. I would collect the royalties and it would do all the work. I think that would be fabulous.

BD: *Do you think that's coming?*

CB: Absolutely. There will be a future where poets will be appreciated not so much for the kinds of work they generate themselves with their own brains but for the quality of concepts they generate through the use of machines. I say this because it's already taking place in the world of visual arts. An artist can of course be appreciated not for the quality of the work they themselves make; in fact, most artists do not make the work that has their name upon it. But they're the ones who have conceived it, designed it, and generated the conceptual frameworks within which it can be understood. That really is the terrain of artwork, and I'm sure that will be the terrain of poetry if it isn't already or on its way to becoming the case, I'd say that increasingly there will be tremendous pressure on poets to stop writing poetry and start writing software.

BD: *In Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy, Marjorie Perloff talks about the differing tones in each chapter of Eunoia and the tones they take on. She points out, "Eunoia thus differentiates the vowels only to imply, in the end, that there are no hard and fast divisions between their values. Be vigilant, this poetic sequence tells us; don't fall into the sorcerer's trap. Don't let the intricate musical structure and elaborate internal rhyming stanza sequence lull you into apathy" (220-221). How does this compare to your own discussion of the text as a "spectacle of its own labour"? Or Darren Wershler-Henry who says in the afterward, "the tedium is the message"? (Eunoia 103)*

CB: I agree with the sentiments that inform that review of the book. There is also a deep-seated warning in a book like that about a suspiciousness towards the nature of language. I think of language as some sort of gigantic super-organism that uses us as its means of reproduction, and it doesn't necessarily have our interests at heart. In a book like *Eunoia*, there is a great deal of paranoia as well. I joke that the negative capability practiced in that book by me is done so that I become the agency by which the vowels conspire amongst themselves to speak on their own behalf. The vowels in this case may be perfectly inimical to my own intentions or my own authorship.

BD: *There are a lot of constraints in Eunoia, some of them more visible than others. There are a lot of underlying parallelisms that you work with in sentences and syllables. Did you eventually internalize the constraints and become creative within them? Or was that something that you had to keep to the fore as you were working?*

CB: Those constraints are probably a side effect of a whole variety of obsessive-compulsive disorders. They were certainly internalized, but it was not something that was creative. It was hard labour at every turn. While working on that book, it was really an act of endurance. There was no point at which I felt like I was just going with the flow. It was nothing like that. It was hard work—tough slogging at every single point of its production, and that's why friends worried for me during its production. They could see that I was becoming quite absorbed by the vigorousness of this labour, and it was having a deleterious effect on my health or my sanity I suppose.

BD: *What about your earlier work? In Pataphysics: The Poetry of an Imaginary Science you describe Crystallography as an “act of lucid writing which uses the language of geological science to misread the poetics of a rhetorical language. Such lucid writing does not concern itself with the transparent transmission of a message...instead lucid writing concerns itself with the exploratory examination of its own pattern” (4). This is visually a very engaging text—it's meant to be looked at. To use your words it's a “painterly use of language” even though it's also a book of fractals. How would you compare the process in Crystallography to Eunoia and their mutual desire to examine their own patterns?*

CB: I use that phrase “lucid writing” in response to the title itself, which quite literally means lucid writing. The word “crystallography” suggests a metaphor like lucid writing, and I suppose the works in that book are not designed to be perfectly transparent. I would probably equate lucid writing with a kind of lucid dreaming, the moment when you're dreaming and you know you're in the dream and its reality is subsequently undermined and showcased to you as a falsehood. I think that is what's going on in the book itself. There's a self-consciousness at play about the work. I'm attempting to be awake while dreaming, trying to be self-conscious of the process of writing while writing.

BD: *It's also the moment when you are in control.*

CB: Yes. You can control the work. To me the book is entirely about that kind of aesthetic control. It's a very Apollonian kind of document. It's an attempt to apply very neoclassical principles about scientific rationalism to a whole set of poetic practices. I'm trying to write

poetry that's as meticulous and perfect as any crystal pattern, for example. These poems are tiny little crystals, and *Crystallography* exploits this very extended conceit in an elaborate metaphor that poetic language is a kind of crystal. Now, I really don't subscribe to this, except as a pataphysical "as if" statement. I'm just behaving as if it was the case, and I'm happy to critique the metaphysical suppositions that underpin the premises of that book. That's why the next book had nothing to do with crystals. It doesn't revert to any kind of lyricism or anything. I always joke that *Crystallography* is the book that has too many sides in it, that it's the one that's ridden with affect whereas a book like *Eunoia* diluted or deleted much of my own self-hood.

BD: *Lyric and experimental poetry are often discussed as being at odds with each other. Do you have a sense of this?*

CB: They are at odds, for very good reasons. The problem with lyrical poetry nowadays is just that it is not learning to be bored with itself. Innovation is an important value in every other art form except in literature. It's very difficult to compete favorably against the merits of other art forms because literature has now absolved itself of this necessity to actually make epistemological contributions. It used to be that if you were referring to an aesthetic movement, you were referring to a movement that would probably be both a visual art movement and a writerly movement. So when we refer to the Symbolistes, we're referring to a whole class of paintings and music and poetry. All those artists were in dialogue with each other and mutually influenced each other's practice. When we refer to surrealism, we're referring, of course, to a painterly movement and a literary movement. It's only as of the mid-twentieth century when these avant-garde coteries fracture into disparate genres of art that writers stop learning from the visual arts. And the visual arts have nothing to learn now from the writers. Brion Gysin says quite famously that now literature is about fifty years behind painting, and that's still very true. Anything that a visual artist is doing right now is far more radical in its aesthetic sensibilities than I think anything that a poet could do. Poets have nothing to say now to those artists. They are not influencing them. There's no dialogue taking place. When we refer now to an aesthetic movement, it is not necessarily an all-encompassing aesthetic sensibility that covers several genres of the arts, but it in fact now just refers to one, usually a visual arts movement.

BD: *What about in Xenotext¹? This is another interdisciplinary work that's going to marry poetry and science. In "After Language Poetry" you talked about poets needing to "learn the exotic jargon of scientific discourses just to make use of a socially relevant lexicon...poetry may no longer express our attitudes so much as it processes our databanks" (1). Is this the intention for Xenotext?*

CB: It's one of the intentions. I'm very dismayed, for example, that literature, poetry especially, has made no effort to respond to the most important cultural activity of the species. Science in all of its forms constitutes our most important cultural activity, the one that has now had the greatest impact upon the future of the species. And yet, it is the discourse which poetry regards as the least poetic, as a discourse that does not even have to be addressed and can be effectively ignored.

¹ Xenotext is a project wherein Bök proposes to encode a short verse into a sequence of DNA in order to implant it into a bacterium" and then "document the progress of this experiment for publication" see "Publishing the Unpublishable/ubu editions 2007".

As a way of demonstrating just how significant I think this problem is, when I ask poets what their favorite canonical poem about the moon landing is, there is no such document. There is no poem of noteworthiness about the moon landing, and yet this is our greatest achievement as a species: to actually transport a dozen human beings to another planetoid. It's the first indication of our potential to actually exceed the terrestrial limitations of our evolution. And yet, it has never been addressed by a single poet. Had the ancient Greeks ridden a trireme to the moon, there would be a twelve volume epic poem in response to this extraordinary achievement, and it's for this reason that I think that poets have lacked a tremendous amount of social relevance. It's the fact that they do not address some of the most important aspects of our cultural heritage. It seems to me that science is a very important part of our cultural condition. I think now it will be incumbent upon poets to range as far as they can outside the catechism of their training in order to be able to do something new. It's certainly true in other art forms that if you've been trained as a painter, there is some presumption that after art school, you're going to be learning a whole variety of new skills that range far outside the catechism of your training within the art school; that you're going to be using materials heretofore uninvented, that you're going to be addressing processes and modes of creation that are heretofore inconceived, that you actually have to engage with a whole range of cultural conditions that have nothing to do with art. For the poets, their training has stultified their imaginations, and consequently it's very hard to think about what to do next as a poet. There's no desire or demand to engage with discourses outside of literature: to learn math, to become a computer scientist, to study something that would otherwise be very difficult for a poet to learn in an effort to actually gain that expertise that would typify a kind of renaissance-like set of skills of one who can do multiple things well in multiple disciplines.

BD: *Is this relationship reciprocal? You're going to be collaborating with a scientific community for a work like Xenotext. It will be necessary to employ someone else's hand to produce this work. How does that shift your role as an author? How does it affect the scientific discipline?*

CB: It doesn't affect my role as an author at all. I'm entirely responsible for the production of the work. In a certain sense, the scientist is just another medium that I get to exploit and use in the same way I might use a piece of paper or a pen. When people object to the fact that artists don't actually make the artworks but employ people to make the artworks for them, that just means that medium has now been transferred to a whole pool of labour that is now being exploited or manipulated in the same way that the artist might otherwise have manipulated a paintbrush. Now your medium is your use of somebody else's labour. That constitutes the medium, the arrangement of these parts and skilled workers in a complex choreography of activity, which will be produced as artwork. I think that's what going on here. Similarly, I'm trying to write a book that would effectively last forever, and the use of these scientists is a way of augmenting my own skill set.

Moreover, I am of course hoping that whatever results are produced will have some scientific merit, that there will be something of scientific interest as an outcome of this work. I'm trying to write a poem that will cause the organism to in turn write a poem in response. The poem that it writes in response will take the form of a protein. I'm hoping that protein will have some scientific significance, that there might an interesting way in which its folded, or that it has curious chemical properties or perhaps even pharmaceutical properties that might be worthy of

further study. The sequences of genetic nucleotides that I would use to compose this poem would in fact be patentable and worthy of public interest. There is, I suppose, a dialogic interaction between these two domains. I'm trying to exploit the scientist for literary purposes in the hope of course that the poetry will generate something of scientific interest.

BD: *So you're hoping to have a poetic effect on the scientific community.*

CB: Absolutely.

BD: *You're making the most of available technology in your work, and you've talked about the use of technology as a means of committing an act of poetic innovation in an era of formal exhaustion. Are we in an era of formal exhaustion?*

CB: Absolutely. Poetry does not know what to do next. You know you're at the end of history when all the good ideas have been tried. You know you're at the end of the history of music when everything from silence to screams has been tried. All we can do now is recycle and recombine and re juxtapose. When everything has been done before us, you know you're at the end of history. The notion of what to do next is a very real problem for poets of my generation and younger. There's a sense of atrophic finality to artistic activity. That's not to say that new things can't be done; it just means that the avenues of exploration are not so obvious as they have been in the past. It's not immediately obvious what to do next, and for a lot of poets if we were to point down possible roads of exploration, they wouldn't want to go down them because it would threaten the ontological certitudes of their own poetic practice. It would threaten what it means for them to be poets. For example, if I were to say the job of the poet now is to engage with vocabularies that range far outside poets' literary training, that means they now have to become scientists or economists and participate in an entire milieu of experience that is way outside their own area of interest and expertise. But I think many poets would be very intimidated by those pathways, and I think many would just prefer if they could walk backwards and trod the path they've already laid out for themselves.

I think a symptom of this now is a desire on the part of lyrical poets who recognize that they've exhausted their own practice to exploit and adopt many of the strategies of the avant-garde, many of its formalistic and aesthetic sensibilities for lyrical purposes. So now we have a class of poetry very unhappily being described as *post-avant*, which won't surrender lyrical attitudes but will try to exploit whatever formal innovations the avant-garde has generated so far. To me, this is probably a less productive strategy, to merely marry through synthesis two disparate regimes in the arts in order to produce something that would in effect be a kind of diluted version of these polarities, a kind of protoplasmic mysogynation of these two vastly different milieus. It's not going to produce a mutant hybrid that will evolve into something completely different; it will in fact showcase the degree to which both the avant-garde and the more traditional lyrical sensibilities have exhausted their potential. By mixing them together, what we do is reduce text now to this protoplasmic textuality that has nothing at stake. It's just random text, interfusion of every kind of style. It's a thin gruel by comparison to something in which there really is something at stake.

BD: *Do you at this point have a working definition of postmodernism?*

CB: It's thoroughly informed by Lyotard. The avant-garde has typically, whether it be modernist or postmodernist, made attempts to confront the problem of the sublime and the challenges it poses to literary endeavor. The job of modernists was typically to make the ineffable presentable, to present to us something that would otherwise be regarded as inconceivable, something that could not be thought nor expressed; we will try to make it expressible. The postmodern is actually presenting us with something that is insoluble rather than ineffable. They're going to show us what is conceivable but now forthrightly unrepresentable. They constitute two kinds of responses to the sublime, to the difficulty of grasping a plausible reality that exceeds our own conception. It's very challenging I think for the avant-garde to showcase these kinds of problems, and really what's at stake is to problematize a kind of aesthetic attitude which doesn't deal with this particular problem. Realist writing and lyrical writing don't confront the sublime. They're not concerned with the problems that language itself poses upon our own notions of what's conceivable and what's presentable. It presumes that things are conceivable and presentable to us when in fact there is so much evidence to suggest the contrary. But in order to continue doing those kinds of work you have to ignore that particular problem. The avant-garde has typically not ignored that problem. It's constantly trying to wrestle with it, but the problem is in effect ineffable, insoluble. That's what it's showcasing to us.

BD: *Do you speak, in this case, particularly to the Canadian avant-garde?*

CB: Well, I do in the sense that most of the books we discuss as though they were postmodern in Canadian literature seem to owe much more to the modernist sensibility. If they were written eighty years ago, we would immediately recognize them in their context as modernist. But they are kind of a time-delayed modernism that is taking place in an era of postmodernity in Canada. Those works that we would otherwise think of as postmodern anywhere else on the planet are the ones that we've ignored. The problem now in order to make the correction, the act of redress, to suddenly go back and reread the works that have otherwise been neglected and showcase them as actually representing what would otherwise, elsewhere in the world, be postmodernist: it's too late because now the very category of postmodernism is *démodé*. It's so obsolete now. There's already an awareness amongst my clan of poets and people younger that the technological and socioeconomic conditions of modern life are now different. They are producing new structures of feeling that have nothing to do with the obsessions of that prior set of generations. There's a whole new variety of works that await that we can't adequately classify as postmodern. These constitute new confrontations with the sublime. I've suggested some of them, a world in which poets will increasingly write for an inhuman audience. You start writing for machines, animals, clones, and robots. There will be new kinds of sentients that will share our cultural activity or will become the prosthesis of our cultural activity. It already seems implicit in the behavior of people who are using the internet not merely to disseminate or publish their work but actually to generate work. Those kinds of artworks and poetries were inconceivable before the invention of this device, and that's going to create a whole variety of new aesthetic sensibilities, which may in fact not be immediately recognizable as postmodern and may in fact require a new definition.