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LITERATURE

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Scarcity Poetics: Christian Bök's *Eunoia* and the Economics of Literary Value

Abstract. Christian Bök's Canadian bestseller *Eunoia* (2001) is an ideal study in how the romantic notion of *literary value* actually abides *economic* theories. *Eunoia* is a collection of five prose-poems each written using only one vowel grapheme (A, E, I, O, or U). These arbitrary *material* production constraints work just like economic sanctions, artificially inflating the scarcity—and hence value—of the text, both commercially *and* literarily. Discourse analysis of surrounding debates reveals that detractions and praises alike abide the same basic supply-and-demand logic: e.g., economic theories of (relative) marginal utility, as applied by Lee Erickson in *The Economy of Literary Forms* (1996). Building on Erickson's thesis of how publication media costs shaped literary form and content, on Mary Poovey's history of literary value's origin in economic value, and on other efforts to combine literary study with economics, this essay applies economic theory to a rare opportunity to generalize the relation of literary material, form, and content. Conclusively, *scarcity poetics/tactics* are not just unique to Eunoia, but fundamental to all literary form. *Eunoia*'s extreme manipulation of linguistic materials isolates the general mechanism by which literary value is produced.

Keywords: literary value; economics; scarcity; Bök; avant-garde.

[P]oet[s] now […] have to become scientists or economists […]
(Bök 2008a, 8)

How is value extracted from the raw pre-linguistic materials comprising literature? How are inkblots and sounds transformed into valuable material forms, so-called literary forms?

Canadian poet/scholar Christian Bök's formal experiments are a provocative study in these basic yet overlooked literary-economic questions. In *Eunoia* (2001), language is

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not, firstly, a referential vehicle, but is *matter*—building blocks. *Eunoia* has five chapters, each a univocalic lipogram on its titular vowel (A, E, I, O, U): e.g., "Writing is inhibiting. Sighing, I sit, scribbling in ink this pidgin script. I sing with nihilistic witticism, disciplining signs with trifling gimmicks" (Bök 2001, 50). This vocabulary, though arranged for meaning, was not *selected* for its meanings but for its material features, using an arbitrary organizing principle. In the subsequent process of sentence arrangement, grammar and sense-making are also reduced to arbitrary operations. Seemingly backwards, this writing method reveals the matter-organizing central to all texts. Thus Bök's work and its surrounding debates isolate the general relation between matter, form, and value. *Eunoia* attracted *both* commercial success and literary value, and this material aspect ignited debates about literary value—not just *Eunoia*'s but generally. Hence the book's valuations are indexed to *Eunoia*'s material form, allowing generalizations about matter's role in literary evaluation. *Eunoia* exemplifies how material forms inform the value-signs (prices, praise, etc.) assigned to literary products.

Though often obscured and romanticized, literary value in fact conforms with basic economic theories. *Eunoia* achieves commercial *and* literary value alike because Bök manipulates supply and demand by imposing artificial scarcities on his product. Just as advertisers use *scarcity tactics* such as "limited" offers, fake "deals," and paywalls to inflate prices, so do Bök's lipograms choke the supply of writerly resources to inflate poetic value. This *scarcity poetics* proves not peculiar to *Eunoia* but general to all poetic form.

While literary scholars have combined economics before, their economics is usually minimal and biased (e.g., Woodmansee and Osteen 1999; Seybold and Chihara 2019). Thus despite its origin in economics which helped professionalize literary study (Poovey 2008, Ch. 5), "literary value remains one of the most problematic issues in literary studies" (Braz 2014, 174)—because it has been studied in the wrong way. Value is an *economics*. *Eunoia*'s debates show that literary value is not semiotically unique; rather, literary value-signs are, like prices or any other signs, subject to differential effects equivalent to market effects. Even as Bök and various critics strongly disagree over which literature is valuable, or elevate words over price tags, they all tacitly agree on the basic *economics* of value generally, even if they don't call it that (especially for ideological reasons). Whether they acknowledge it or not, literary scholars, too, are engaged in a discursive marketplace, brokering, extracting, and processing literary materials into market-legible signs of *valuation:* consumables like this essay. *Eunoia* epitomizes the material basis of that economic process.

1. Marginal Utility and the Scandal of Dual Commercial-Poetic Value

As a bestseller in Canada and the UK, by "2007 *Eunoia* had sold an estimated 20,000 copies […] compared to 200-300 copies total for an average book of Canadian poetry" (Mancini 2012, 221n18). By 2010, it had "26+ printings" (Percy 2010, 108) and by

2015 had "sold over 35,000 copies in North America, and another 10,000 in the U.K." (All Lit Up 2015). While *Eunoia* was not, as Bök inflates, "the first book of poetry ever to appear on a bestseller list" (Bök 2013, 12) nor "the most successful book of poetry in Canadian history" (Bök, in Dobson 2009), it was reportedly "the fastest selling book of poetry [in Canada] since Robert Service's *Songs of a Sourdough* [1907]" (Braune 2009, 134); and, even in 2022, remained on Chapters Indigo's "Top 10 Canadian Poetry" list alongside books from icons like Leonard Cohen, Margaret Atwood, and Gord Downie, all dwarfed only by Rupi Kaur's *milk and honey* (2014), whose Instagram-driven sales topped 3 million (Chapters Indigo 2022; Mzezewa 2017).

This commercial success is surprising for any poetry book, but especially an avant-garde experiment: "I would never have expected it to go on to enjoy a public forum that's as large as it is" (Bök, in Dobson 2009). Lipograms are ancient (Perec 1998), but *Eunoia*'s are indebted to the Oulipo (Ou*vroir de* li*ttérature* po*tentielle*—"Workshop of Potential Literature"), a club of writers and mathematicians founded in France in 1960. The Oulipo replaces classical and Romantic notions of inspiration with experiment and research, designing mathematical rules to test the formal limits of language. One rationale for this is that all writing is already under constraint anyway: formalizing constraints thus frees writers from unconscious biases. As co-founder Raymond Queneau said, "The classical playwright who writes his tragedy observing a certain number of familiar rules is freer than the poet who writes that which comes into his head and who is the slave of other rules of which he is ignorant" (qtd. in Bénabou 1998, 41). Bök (2002b) echoes: "no rule can be undermined by pretending that the rule does not exist" (67).

The materialist trifecta of this Oulipian aesthetic (which goes against many ideals about poetry); commercial success (which is seldom the measure of poetic value); and the fact that Bök reportedly toiled five hours a day for seven years to produce *Eunoia*, has made it the object of heated debates: "People either really, really love it or really, really hate it" (Bök qtd. in Percy 2007, 117). As one Amazon.com reviewer vents, "This man has been eating, drinking, and breathing while good people starve and suffocate […] And what has he made from all this […]? Carbon dioxide, fecula and other waste products—including this book" (Crow 2004).

The public voice of disdain has been Montréal poet Carmine Starnino. He penned an influential negative review, and has sparred with Bök over the years,[1] most dramatically in "The Cage Match of Canadian Poetry" debate in 2009. Organizer Micheline Maylor said,

> the future of Canadian poetry lies at the heart of this conversation […]. The poets represent two polar ends of the aesthetic and theoretic spectrum. They are the taste-makers of Canadian poetry. Their opinions will dictate who, why and how Canadian poetry will develop in the

[1] E.g., Bök 2008b; and Bök 2007, with reference to Starnino's comment posted on Mlinko 2008.

> upcoming decades. […] Starnino and Bök are Canada's very own Pound and Eliot. […] (qtd. in Cope 2009).

Bök believes poetry should be experimental art *and* science, embracing technology to innovate and maintain relevance. Starnino is conventional, valuing poetry for emotive expression and insight. Hence his review "Vowel Movements" (2002), dismissing *Eunoia*'s Oulipian aesthetic as a worthless formal exercise: "Bök's plying of vowels into complete sentences can't also be said to realize itself as poetry simply because of the feat. […] [Forms] do not, on their own, produce poetry." Content is valuable, not form or process: "good sonnets" are not "celebrate[d] […] for their perfect adherence to […] constraints" but "for the satisfying way the poets have exploited those constraints to convey meaning." Sentences like "Goofs who goof off go off to poolrooms" (Bök 2001, 63) say nothing (Starnino 2002).

However, Starnino's concern goes beyond *Eunoia*. As "Cage Match" moderator Kit Dobson says, "You write in that review that your qualm is not with *Eunoia* itself, but with admirers" (Dobson 2009). Starnino affirms: they "were basing the identity of the book completely on its formal character" which became "aggressively marketed as intrinsically valuable" (in Dobson 2009). The cocktail of literary overappraisals and commercial overvaluations compelled Starnino to issue his market correction: *dispraise*.

Yet, Starnino says commercial and poetic values are unrelated: "sales [don't] mea[n] anything when it comes to poetry. What does it matter if 200,000 people buy Christian Bök […]? How does it speak to the quality […]?" (in Dobson 2009). Yet Starnino describes literary value in financial terms: "My concern is whether the language pays its way on the page" (in Dobson 2009). Lipograms *under*pay. Citing an 'E' section on embezzlement, he implies Bök does the literary equivalent:

> Take a sentence like "When French jewelers embezzle De Beers, the stern execs there never detect the embezzlement; hence the theft seems perfect." [(Bök 2001, 96)] There's no doubt that sentence represents […] an extraordinary technical challenge. If judged as poetry, however, […] it's been made to struggle only with Bök's rules and not with any ideas (Starnino 2002).

Thus "it makes no sense to put an *appreciative premium* on the difficulty of a literary constraint" because "a constraint should never be *appreciated* as an object of artistry in its own right" (Starnino 2002, italics mine). In the debate, Starnino extends his complaint to the whole avant-garde for "extend[ing] free credit to everyone" (in Dobson 2009). Like a central bank cautious not to overprint money, Starnino (2002) implores us "[t]o give credit [only] where credit is due." This means "prais[ing] Bök as an artisan" but not *over-crediting* such work as "poetry" to devalue the currency of Poeticness itself.

Thus even as Starnino (in Dobson 2009) elevates poetic value over sales value, his fears show poetic value to be an economics: "[H]ow many […] people who bought the

book […] actually read it?"; "This is the danger with, I think, using these tokens of [commercial] success as a way of assessing […] what [poets] do". What does it endanger? The value of *poetic* tokens of success. Starnino is stewarding the poetic economy because "celebrating poetry means celebrating the rarity of it, the scarcity." Starnino (2002) "appreciate[s]" Bök's "skill" and "industry," but warns that "[c]raftsmanship […] is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the writing of poetry," thus doubting "if it all amounts to something you'd want to call poetry." If poetry is reduced to reproducible templates, then access to enough labour power will suffice to produce poetry. Mechanically reproducible art loses its transcendent "aura" (Benjamin 1935) to become "fungib[le]" (Kvas 2020, 67), indexed no longer to a timeless absolute but to *the market*. Starnino upholds the absolute and cheapens *Eunoia* by comparison: "[Bök] is so impatient for instant success" but "I fully expect not to have readers in this lifetime"; "if you sell 100,000 copies of *Eunoia* but it's unread fifty years from now" then it has no "quality" or "possible immortality" (in Dobson 2009). Yet he (2002) invokes mechanical reproduction in another guise—*repetitiveness*—to devalue *Eunoia*'s contents:

> the reader's urge to *credit* the hard grind of Bök's experiment *wears off* at about the same time as the experiment becomes nothing more than a *series* of *easy* occasions to flaunt the discovered plasticity of language […] [O]ur astonishment at the fact that, yes, Bök can actually do this *disappears* as we watch Bök do it *over and over again*. (italics mine)

In short, "once the form exhausts its […] spectacle, what's left to demand other than that we read it again and again? […] 'Lush shrubs bud' is a decent alliterative phrase. But so what?" This valuation of *diminishing returns* is textbook economics. As Lee Erickson (1996) explains, *marginal utility/value* (μ)

> is the satisfaction gained by an individual from an additional unit of a thing […] Will, for example, a second apple have as much value as the first […], especially in the context of other available choices? […] [I]n general […] each subsequent […] unit […] will be worth less than the previous. (9n10)

This has driven the booms and busts of literary forms and innovation. In general, if "a literary work offers on the first reading a certain pleasure, which usually diminishes with each subsequent rereading" then diminishment rates drive

> aggregate […] market […] demand both for individual literary works and for genres. The more a work or a genre provides intense immediate pleasure for readers, the more likely it is to be a bestseller; the more it can stand up to rereading without its reading pleasure being diminished, the more readers think of it as a classic and as part of the literary canon. (10)

This is Starnino's (2002) position exactly. *Eunoia*'s repetitiveness (*non-rarity*) is not "poetically productive" enough to sustain long-run re-readability: "You can't ask read-

ers to credit a poem for manufacturing […] preprogrammed music." Poet/critic David Solway (2003) echoes: "If it survives, it will do so merely as a curiosity"; it "leads absolutely nowhere," its "pleasure is over once the performance is done" (179-80). By contrast, timeless art implies high, nondecreasing μ. In any case, literary value is an economics like any other. If for Starnino "poetry means […] rarity" and "scarcity" (in Dobson 2009) then had *Eunoia*'s constraints produced more rarity (less repetition) they could have warranted his accreditation.

And yet, *wasn't* it rare? As I'll discuss, *Eunoia*'s high appraisals derive from its extreme rarefication. While Starnino impugns its formal repetitiveness as non-rare, *Eunoia* bothers him mostly because its success (in others' eyes) seemingly threatens the conventional poetic-credit system itself. Relative to *other* literary works, *Eunoia* may satisfy a condition of rarity (quantity), yet not of good poetry (quality), attracting acclaim not because it is good, but *only* because it is rare—rarity "purchased by lots of very hard work" (Starnino 2002). Starnino doesn't fully grasp that "goodness" is never just an intrinsic quality but shifts relative to extrinsic quantities (Kvas 2020, 66γ & 69δ).

2. Artisanal Rarity: *Eunoia* as Early-1800s Business Model

Literary value has never been distinct from economic value: "the concept of literary value [is] tied to the realm of economics in the 18th century" (Nethersole 2007, 79); and "the very notion of *aesthetic value* depended on a development within economic writing" (Poovey 2008, 287–88). This will contextualize why *Eunoia*'s economics consist with Erickson's observations about the relation of literary forms to printing costs. Even if timeless poetic value (canonicity) means high μ (re-readability), demand for re-readable literary forms was not always high: *timelessness was not valued at all times*. In his late-1700s, early-1800s British dataset, Erickson (1996) finds that

> when the cost of books is high, readers will prefer a work in a literary form which will provide the most pleasure upon rereading and has the most satisfying verbal texture [high μ]. Conversely, when the cost of books is low, readers will care less about the pleasure of prospective rereadings and prefer a work in a genre that gives the most immediate pleasure [low μ]. (10-11)

In short, the preferred μ for books was proportional to cost, and a book's market success is not just about sales (as Starnino simplifies) but readers: the *literary* quality *they* demand. Not only are literary and commercial value-signs both economic, they are inextricable. Erickson considers the evidence of poetry versus prose: "Cheaper printing stripped poetry of its cultural preeminence and its mnemonic force," whereas in other years "[t]he greater cost of books generally encouraged poetry at the expense of prose" (19-20). This was because

> [t]he labor that is required by the constraints of meter and rhyme and that produces the greater local density of a line of poetry […] was more than proportionately rewarded, apparently because readers, able to afford fewer books than before and forced to read those few more often, demanded a verbal texture that would provide more pleasure upon reading and re-reading. (20-21)

For example, "by 1830 almost all publishers refused to publish poetry" but only two decades earlier "[r]eading poetry was […] a fad in genteel society" and "[a]lmost all books were read and bought by the wealthy" (26, 23, 24). In the early 1800s, given high printing costs, writers and publishers could justify printing fine quasi-artisanal products—high-quality in both "verbal texture" *and* printing—in small print runs at higher prices per unit. By contrast, as printing costs decreased, and as literacy, demand, and competition increased, there was less reason to invest lots of money and time to produce expensive books for a wealthy few. Economies of scale enabled disposable novels or leaflets to be read only once but *en masse* (Erickson 1996, chap. 1).

As publication costs remain low today (especially digitally), the economics are not *so* different: "Back in 1922 […] the figures quoted [for a book deal] haven't changed much in 100 years" (Samson 2020); and "[t]he pay rate for short fiction in magazines has been stuck at ½¢ to 10¢ per word since the 1920s" (Doctorow and Schroeder 2000, 8). Indeed, "[w]hy […] do so many poets in Canada write novels? Both Jane Urquhart and George Elliott Clarke […] acknowledge […] market forces" (Dobson and Kamboureli 2013, 1). Bök concurs: "When people don't get funding, they may feel pressure to alter their […] aesthetic practice" (Bök 2013, 17). For Clarke, his agent convinced him to write novels because they're "how we make our bread and butter" and can be adapted for film; for Urquhart, "it's entirely related to the marketplace […] The novel is the money-maker" (in Dobson and Kamboureli 2013, 177, 180, 64). By contrast, Bök quips, "[W]e can barely give away poetry for free! A piece of paper with a poem written on it is almost worth less than a blank sheet" (Bök 2013, 21). This also explains why *Eunoia* is not really a "novel" yet was marketed as one. Bök's prose-poem narrative "chapters" are short stories at best, yet a cover blurb clearly states "*Eunoia* is a novel" (Bök 2001, cover). This exponentially expands the book's market while still keeping it eligible for poetry prizes, which it won. In doing so, it not only restored "credibility" to (experimental) poetry (Reed 2016, 2) but "probably" saved its publisher from the fate of numerous small-press bankruptcies and "a near-collapse of the Canadian literary publishing system" that same year (Wershler 2016, 233–34)—thus lending irony to Starnino's concerns about *Eunoia*'s commercial success being a threat to poetic credibility.

Hence such larger contexts confirm why *Eunoia* was an "anomaly" but also help *explain* the anomaly. For two centuries, poetry never recovered its market share from prose; with the exception of niches like rare books, it seems the conditions for overvalued artisanal poetic novelties have passed. Yet did *Eunoia* successfully emulate them?

Erickson's first axis (publication costs) may be less relevant today, even if the quaint readers of poetry still prefer paper (as was true for *Eunoia*). But if in today's digital

market a printed book is quasi-artisan, print alone is yet not enough for scarcity poetics. However, Erickson's second axis (verbal texture) is poeticness itself. *Eunoia*'s verbal texture is so *material* as to function like *paper* texture: it exposes language as material media. So, as a commodity, a copy of *Eunoia* was no more pricey than any paperback, e-book, or fast-food order; but as a *literary* text, *Eunoia* was, like a handcrafted rug, *extremely* expensive. Artisanal excellence unfailingly frames *Eunoia*, packaging and all: "A triumphant feat, seven years in the making" (Bök 2001, cover). As Mancini (2012) notes, "It is not so significant that a labour legend about this book exists" but "that such a high proportion of all notices and reviews of the book retell the legend" (226). The legend is not empty advertising, then, but reflects how self-evidently the book signals its labour-value. As Stacey (2008) says, "the sentences themselves […] announce the effort that went into their production" (66). Bök achieves this *value-signal* by manipulating the economics of his *verbal* materials. He cannot control the book market or the economics of print media, but he can offset these setbacks via artificed scarcities. By ensuring the book's content was materially taxing to produce, Bök's alphabetic sanctions render it precious. So, even if *Eunoia* was not leather-bound or hand-etched on gilded leaf, selling to aristocrats for the equivalent cost of a laptop, it used *linguistic material* itself to warrant a comparable markup. It achieved the "verbal texture" of higher-μ literature *and* sonic and jocular content to *also* satisfy "the most immediate pleasure" of lower-μ bestsellers (Erickson 1996, 10), thus becoming "that rare thing: poetry that people who aren't poets care about" (Darren Wershler, qtd. in Tamburri 2013). *Eunoia* then played the cheapness of mass publication to its advantage, as to the consumer *Eunoia* remained no more expensive than similar products, yet because it was so *evidently* expensive to produce, seemed like the best deal: "The method is exacting, the result is easy to read" (Jaeger 2009, 52).

3. *Relative* Marginal Utility, Risk, and the Avant-Garde Business Model

It follows that for scarcity poetics to work well, the poetry must *also* be rare relative to *other* products. This is *market differentiation* and *relative* marginal utility (μ_R): how a product stands out among competitors. Whereas μ measures use-values across prospective uses (re-reading the *same* book), μ_R measures use-values relative to *comparable* use-values (reading multiple *books*) (cf. Erickson 1996, 8–9). In an *oversaturated market*, similar products are prevalent, so achieving μ_R is hardest.

Bök displays a keen grasp of such concepts, albeit in his own terms:

> Last year I was on a [prize] jury and had to read 120 books of poetry. […] Only twelve deserved to have trees killed […] I would be hard-pressed to legitimate the value of the remainder. They seemed to be totally disposable […] [T]he publication of a book has become […] inexorable (Bök 2013, 21).

Likewise, the product lifecycle begins with grant applications where, as poet Erin Moure explains, "[Y]ou have to be clear […] what is going to make that [juror]'s fifteen minutes spent with your file different than 90 per cent of the other[s]" because they'll "read two hundred applications" but "hand out only fourteen grants" (in Dobson and Kamboureli 2013, 94). Bök thinks this process only worsens market saturation: "Despite the rhetoric […] to fund the most innovative […] writing, such agencies are more likely to fund the most competent versions of the most mediocre aesthetic[s]" (Bök 2013, 11).

While Bök's market analysis is accurate, "mediocre work typically prevails" does not entail that the culture is uniquely "impoverished" (Bök 2013, 16, 25); rather, it merely observes that like anything else most poetry on average will be just average. Still, Bök (2008a) is correct that "radical" innovations, then, are by definition "limit-cases," lying at the extremes (2). If "[a]rt is really just an exalted species of garbage" from "a prior […] economic activity" (Bök, in Voyce 2007, par. 53), then most poetry will be trash unworthy of exaltation:

> [W]e can't write and contribute to [poetry's] quantity, if we're not […] willing to contribute to its quality. […] There's such a plethora of information […] that to add one more poem to that pile seems to be almost inconsequential […] How do you make an impact[?] (Bök, in Dobson 2009)

Similarly, alluding to Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes* (*One Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*), Bök asks "why […] add an extra sonnet when […] a hundred trillion […] have gone unread" and when poetry must compete with all media, from videogames to "porn" (in Dobson 2009)? As Bök's friend, poet/adman Kenneth Goldsmith (2011) advises, "[L]ike a logo, a poem should be instantly recognizable" (55). What could be more logographic than the alphabet? The very first page of *Eunoia* is a 3D logo made of vowels.

Clearly, μ_R is central for Bök—and the avant-garde. Bök (2013) vowed "a standard […] avant-garde wager" that "each of my books would be radically different" (23). Yet avant-gardism and aesthetic risk have always been defined by financial risk (Erickson 1996, 189; Goux 2006, 96–97). After all, *risk* has *value* if more to lose means more to gain. In the debate, Bök says "poetry is supposed to […] take [aesthetic] risks," but after a spectator challenges him, his usage changes: "Well, I have to dispute that I didn't take a risk by writing *Eunoia*. I didn't receive any funding at all for it" (in Dobson 2009). Likewise, Bök "was gratified to realize that the work invested in *Eunoia* had finally paid off" only when "the [$40,000] Griffin Prize […] showed that my poetry wasn't a complete waste of time" (2013, 22).

In short, aesthetic risk is just as much the risk of *not getting paid*, i.e., for risky art investments, as it is about risking aesthetic compromises. While money, language, and art have always been semiotically intertwined (Shell 1993, 180, 187; 1995, 5), self-awareness of art as an institution (and thus, rejection of art's socioeconomic "autonomy") was *the* defining distinction of avant-garde art (Bürger 1984, 20–27, 49).

While initially this meant "correcting the debased tastes of the bourgeoise" (Betts 2013, 17), meta-aesthetic awareness exposes the economic relativity of such value, thus enabling direct manipulations thereof (as epitomized by Warholian commercialism and Conceptual Art). The point of rejecting tastes, then, is to cultivate new ones, to capture a larger market share: "artistic denunciation[s] […] merely contest one culture in the name of another" and thus "fulfil the traditional role of a cultural avant-garde […] to keep the […] game functioning" (Bourdieu 1984, 251). As with any product, "secur[ing] a *profit of distinction*" for symbolic/"linguistic products" means "exploit[ing] […] [*marginal*] differences" (Thompson 1991, 18). Hence, aesthetic risk is simply the *economic* "tension between risky values and certain values" generally (Goux 2006, 96).[2] Avant-gardism's valorization of *endless* novelty, then, is both "ultra-modern" and "ultra-classical" because it rejects the past only to invest "on the long term"; its futures wax "eternal" as they purport to be the risk*iest:* maximum risk portends infinite payoff (Goux 2006, 96, 97; cf. Betts 2013, 254–58). Like the "gamble" of "early adopters" in market innovation cycles (Bicknell 2007; see Rogers 2003), avant-gardism risks "initial unacceptability" on the wager that its art will maximize payoffs if it "transcends present conditions" to establish *new* present conditions (the next big taste) to attain "its maximum audience in the future" (Betts 2013, 254). Indeed, as a Princeton encyclopedia now pays credit, "*Eunoia* set the standard for, and reanimated work in, constraint-based poetics" (Greene and Cushman 2017, 79–80). In short, the avant-garde, too, is just another promise of timeless dividends. Its wager is like Faust's or Pascal's (or Jobs' or Musk's): be mediocre and risk irrelevance, or risk eternal ruin for a stake in immortality. As the millionaire poet Fifty Cent said, "Get rich or die tryin'."

Such is Bök's follow-up to *Eunoia*, the Xenotext Project, into which he invested over a decade and untold sums. Bök attempted to encrypt a Greek myth into the DNA of an extremophile he romanticizes as immortal. For Bök, the wager was zero-sum: "If I pull it off, I get to be one of the great poets of the 21st century. If I don't, then I'll just be a loser" (qtd. in Tamburri 2013)—and "I write to win" (Bök 2013, 23). This is not Bök's only instance of classical nostalgia: "There is no poem of noteworthiness about the moon landing," whereas "[h]ad the ancient Greeks ridden a trireme to the moon, there would be a twelve volume epic poem" (Bök 2008a, 7). Likewise, *Eunoia*'s Chapter E retells *The Iliad.* What could be more overdone? Yet Bök *makes it scarce* by embargoing the alphabet in an *avant*-classic bait-and-switch. Critics take at face value Bök's Oulipian advertising that he "criticiz[es] traditional notions of inspiration, voice and originality—notions that have upheld the Romantic metanarrative of the writer as an individualistic hero of liberating knowledge" (Jaeger 2009, 51). But commentators' (and Bök's own) incessant pufferies of his "originality" (e.g., Wood 2011, 22), genius (e.g., even by detractors like Solway 2003, 180), and "heroics" (Betts 2013, 259), along with his invocations of a muse (whether it be a bacterium or "the vowels" [Bök 2002a]), show that he is not

[2] Translations of this and other French texts are mine.

so radically different from neoclassicism and Romanticism as his avant-garde branding presents. As Betts (2013) affirms, "the revolutionary mandate of avant-gardism […] has indeed come to a close" and is "already nostalgic"; thus "[w]hat has remained […] is the romanticism of the avant-garde artist" as a "once revolutionary rebel" (252, 256). In this context, where the avant-garde is increasingly indistinguishable (20-23, 258), all that can maintain its distinction are its relative margins of distinguishability itself: its perceived "novelty" (254). As a result, "the term has become functionally synonymous with […] advertising lingo" (254). As Bök reflects, "Innovation in art no longer differs from […] manufactured obsolescence […] justify[ing] advertisements for 'improved' products"; yet "nevertheless, we have to find a new way" (in Voyce 2007, par. 8; cf. Bök and Wershler-Henry 2002, 109–10). If, "[i]n the mock manifesto of 'Chapter E,' Bök both mulls and mocks the idea that technical innovation amounts to […] cultural rebellion" (Burt 2007, 235), the conjuration of same through the avant-garde brand, and through market differentiation, remains a winning strategy.

Thus, in dispraising *Eunoia* as low μ, Starnino discounts the equal import of μ_R, because he misapprehends the full implications of his other marginalist logic. When he says valuable poems are rare and implies quality diminishes with quantity, he already implies that valuable poems must also optimize μ_R. Both μ and μ_R follow the same concept of relative value. Thus, while Bök and Starnino disagree on *which brands* of poetry are valuable (Lyrical, Conceptual, etc.), their economics of valuation are the same. Both poets prize rarity, scarcity, and novelty, and depreciate repetition, overproduction, or "exhaust[ed]" forms (Starnino 2002; Bök 2008a, 8) in favour of outliers portending "immorta[l]" value (Starnino, in Dobson 2009; Bök 2015, 151).

If one attends only to the surface debate, this synthesis may surprise, given the duo's rivalry. But Bök and Starnino (Coke and Pepsi) are just players in the same game. The debate is as much about selling poetry as judging it. And the fact that they (and others, I'll discuss) think of literary value in economic terms—and for a book whose valuation is indexed to its scarce matter—reveals literary value to be an economics. Indeed, their economics even align with a sociological study of literary value: "Just as […] participants value textual *surprise* and *discovery*—elements within […] a poem that […] diffe[r] […] from the sheer mass of its moments—they also value poems for […] distinguish[ing] themselves from other works […]" (Broad and Theune 2010, 125). In short, poetic value is *intra*- and *inter*-differential: μ and μ_R.

In the end, *Eunoia* threatens idealists like Starnino (2002) because its scarcity poetics prove that it doesn't *matter* "if it all amounts to something you'd want to call poetry." It shows literary value to be about supply and demand, just like anything; manipulating matter and scarcity is good enough to produce value. As we'll see, this is the basis of all poeticness.

4. Currencies of the Lit-Crit Marketplace: Pseudo-Economics, Meaning, Rhythm, etc.

What about literary critics? They have stakes in this market too. But scholars' preference for "ideological critique" of political economy, instead of economic theory, misreads the economics of literature and their own roles within it.

To understand why, we must first recognize that discourse *is* a "linguistic market" (Bourdieu 1991, e.g., 37, 39, 55; Rossi-Landi 1975, 139) or "literary stock market" (Hume 2017, 145), subject to "language inflation" (Rausser, Simon, and Zhao 2015, 114), "price[s]" (Delany 1999, 295), and "boom[s]" and busts (Hume 2017, 145, 156; Frye 1990, 18). As Bourdieu (1991) observes, "Utterances receive their value (and their sense) only in their relation to a market, characterized by a particular law of price formation" (67). For example, the laws of μ and μ_R: "the rarity of distinctive marks" relative to "common" language "*worn out*" by overuse (63-4). To pretend otherwise is itself a market effect: e.g., "The defenders of Latin […] often talk as if the language […] could have some value outside the market, by intrinsic virtues […] but, in practice, they are defending the[ir] market" (57). The "special language[s]" of Literature and its critical "professionals" are no different: "The struggles among writers over the legitimate art of writing […] produc[e] both the legitimate language, defined by its distance from the 'common' language, and belief in its legitimacy" (58-59). Bourdieu (1995) calls this "*illusio,* the collective belief in the [economic-linguistic] game, and the value of its stakes, which is both the condition and the product of the […] 'literary mechanism'" (276). In other words, to discourse about *Eunoia* is already to compete in its valuation. As Deshaye (2013) observes, "The differing opinions [about *Eunoia*] help to create controversy, and […] controversy is promotional" (204).[3]

Invariably, such competitive appraisals "impose the criteria of appreciation [i.e., 'pricing'] most favourable to their [e.g., writers' and critics'] own products" (Bourdieu 1991, 67). This reinforces the illusion of art's autonomy within an "anti-'economic' economy of pure art" which is nonetheless "oriented to the accumulation of symbolic capital, a kind of 'economic' capital denied but recognized […] and capable of assuring […] 'economic' profits" (Bourdieu 1995, 142). Bök and the (Canadian) avant-garde are a superb case in point. The scholars theorizing and promoting the work are just as often, insularly, the (mostly white, male, tenured) poets themselves: e.g., Gregory Betts, Charles Bernstein, Bök, Jeff Derksen, Craig Dworkin, Kenneth Goldsmith, Donato Mancini, Steve McCaffery, Ron Silliman, Brian Kim Stefans, Darren Wershler….[4] It is ironic to read "Avant-garde writing […] has never enjoyed much […] prestige among the literati of this country" (Betts and Bök 2018, 4) within a prestigious volume curated by two "avant-garde" literati, especially when the avant-

[3] Testifying further to the economic influence of such debates are blog posts and magazine articles: e.g., Barwin 2009; Godkin 2010; Harrison 2010; Fiorentino 2005; Taylor 2009; Woodman 2009.

[4] E.g., see Wershler-Henry 2008.

garde's purported distinction is (was) its nonconformity to mainstream values. Clearly, this reaffirms Betts' (2013) own observation that such a distinction has become moot (20). Bök, meanwhile, is a relentless theorizer (and aggrandizer) of his *own* artwork. His books always include a paratextual key outlining the victory conditions underwriting his own success. As Attridge (2023) observes, "without Bök's note explaining the additional constraints of *Eunoia*, few readers would appreciate them" (99). Yet, some constraints are "disingenuou[s]" (Wood 2011, 24–25), inviting *over*-appreciation. For example, Bök's (2001) afterword states, "'Eunoia' is the shortest word in English to contain all five vowels, and the word quite literally means 'beautiful thinking'" (103). The implicit constraint Bök overcame was to mine for the perfect word to brand his product. But in fact, that word's provenance is complicated; it was neither firmly "in English" nor meant "beautiful thinking" until Bök said so (McGann 2009, 139–40). Worse, it is not "the shortest": that would've been *iouea*. Even then, "IOUEA Is Not Unique" (Various authors 2003, 48) and there are "*thousands* of [other] words which embody each of the five vowels […] once only" (Thorpe 1998, 37). By suppressing such unbeautiful facts, Bök's self-imposed *criteria of appreciation* inflate the perception that this word—and the product it brands—are singularly precious. For example, one scholar devotes an article to praising the special "pataphysical" value of the *n* of "eunoia" (Braune 2009). Hence, while the critical impulse is to contextualize (in *Eunoia*'s case, with the Oulipo, avant-garde, and pataphysics as per Bök's own writings [e.g., Marcoux 2011]), understanding the *economics* of literary value requires a meta-critical distance: to view such critical operations as *mechanisms* or *currencies* of the linguistic market. Otherwise, we pander to the criteria of appreciation of the market we seek to analyze.

This market is everywhere evident. Robert Stacey (2008), to counter those who depreciate *Eunoia* on the basis of its semantic and poetic deficits, must hasten to appreciate *Eunoia* as having "meaning", "value" and, above all, "poetry" (68, 65, 77). But he mustn't merely rebalance the books (his *Eunoia* and Starnino's *Eunoia*), but recover them to a position of "semantic *accountability*" (69)—or, in Starnino's (2002) words, of "linguistic surfeit" to which meaningful, valuable poetry is "indexed." Hence Stacey's *Eunoia* must be "*richer* in poetic devices," "*more* productive," and must yield a "poetic *payoff*" tied to a "*more* reliable *index of poeticality*" (66-68, italics added; cf. 76). Yet how does Stacey realize such a surplus of semantic and poetic currency? On the material basis of scarcity and labour, of course: Bök "wrests […] meaning from the limited vocabulary at his disposal" (66); his work has value because he "works hard" to *earn* it (77). Others concur: "the chapters mean more because of what is excluded" (Braune 2009, 149); "success […] comes" from "realiz[ing] that […] the letter E, for example […] is not necessary" (Gray 2010, 15); "constraints" and high-μ "plot twists" enable "the unique quality" (Stefans 2017, 172); its "literary quality" depends on "den[ying]" literary "tactics […] that would have made [Bök's] pursuit easier" (Stefans 2006, 18). Detractors recognize this too: *Eunoia*'s "language […] calls attention only to its own exorbitance (in which lack becomes a form of superfluity)" (Solway 2003, 180). By the

same token, stock in unconstrained *free verse* is contrasted as *over*valued, its $\mu_{(R)}$ reduced by overissue (Stacey 2008, 68; Perloff 2004, 24).

Where some scholars use meaning as currency, other scholars trade in different currencies, but all still subject to the same economics of scarcities and marginal utilities. Brent Wood (2011) assigns value to *Eunoia*'s rhythms insofar as they have been "barely acknowledged in critical appraisal to date" (9), consist of "rarely if ever encountered" combinations that compel "interest" rather than "monotony" or "simplistic repetition" (24, 32, 10; cf. 27), and because "metrical verse […] has become rare" and "poetry not composed with […] rhythmic pattern will not encourage repeated reading or listening" (10). Dworkin (2020) echoes: "the book […] corrals the variety of sounds […], rather than a monotonous repetition" (16). Perloff (2004) implies the same—"Don't let the intricate musical structure and elaborate internal rhyming of the stanza sequence lull you into apathy"—and, in a perfect example of *illusio*, inflates the avant-garde wager: "*Eunoia* may seem […] like a mere language game, but it['s] […] a game where everything is at stake" (38). Clearly, despite Wershler's claim that *Eunoia*'s "tedium is the message" (in Bök 2001, 103), it's the *premium* that's at stake, and it depends on more than tedious monotony. Tellingly, though, most commentators simply pay *descriptive* tribute, reciting promo-like samples and reaffirming verbatim the scarcity poetics of Bök's *criteria of appreciation* (e.g., Braune 2011, 202–4; Burt 2007, 235; Clemens 2017, 59; Edmond 2019, 232–33; Farrier 2019, 114; Garza 2020, 41; Gibbs 2011; Goldman 2011; Katz 2018, 148–50; Lapprand 2020, 120; Ølholm 2017, 380–81; Rosenthal 2022, 249; Senitt 2019, 109; Stout 2016, 616–21). This inflates into deifications of Bök's "master[y]" (Henry 2004, 37) and "superhuman" output (Yale 2008, 113); his "Sisyphean" constraints (Bök 2001, 103) hyperbolize into the "Herculean" (Vaidyanathan 2017, 2095; cf. Mancini 2012, 226, 228).

Yet, curiously, critics also glorify the bestselling *Eunoia* as an anti-capitalist venture. Stacey (2008) argues *Eunoia* is a "critique of global consumer culture" that "resist[s]" market relativizations of meaning (66, 73-4)—and yet, only on the basis of the aforesaid scarcities that it exploits: "it is because the deck is stacked so heavily against meaning, given the constraint, that *Eunoia* presents its work as something more than 'empty productivity'" (Stacey 2008, 69). In any case, why would Stacey have to offset Starnino's (2002) *de*valuation ("Empty Productivity"), just as Starnino offset Bök's *over*valuation (and as Mancini [2012], in turn, devalues Stacey's reading as "complacently celebrat[ory]" [224]), if literary evaluation itself were not a negotiation: a relativistic marketplace? Similarly, Mancini (2012), even as he impugns Stacey's argument as "too programmatically liberal-Leftist" (224), nonetheless argues for the same ideology, praising *Eunoia* for denuding "ordinary wage-work as […] exploitative brutality" (226). But why, for academics, is Bök's poetic work so specially praiseworthy for showing what anyone could read from a banal stack of paystubs? Could it be because the *non*-"poetic" work that Bök's poetic work is variously valued for critiquing, and *de*valued for embodying, has little value on this literary-critical market? Wood (2011), recognizing work in itself won't sell for literary coin, worries

that readings of *Eunoia* as work "ha[ve] inadvertently drawn attention away from the work's actual poetic qualities" (22). This was Starnino's anxiety as well. As Solway (2003) echoes, insofar as Bök "traffics in" pure labour power, i.e., "what can be done when one puts one's mind to one or another form of Trivial Pursuit," "there is no poetry in Bök" (180, 202n11).[5] Such devaluations of mechanically reproducible literary forms extend back at least three hundred years: Joseph Addison likened "anagramming to mining" and "lipogramming to slave-rowing a galley" (Kvas 2020, 68). So, clearly, there is a class dimension to *Eunoia*, but because of the economics of its perceived form of work. Hence, even as Mancini (2012) recognizes this (i.e., "*Eunoia* is [both] celebrated" and "attacked as a form of work" because its "labour […] gives the poem […] unimpeachable value" but Bök's "aesthetic" is seemingly "pointless" or "unproductive" [228, 230]), he himself nonetheless extracts value from *Eunoia* on the same basis of labour, albeit insofar as he thinks it *ideologically* counters the market logic of labour evaluation. The problem is, the economics of linguistic value are not merely ideological; they're economic: scarcity and $\mu_{(R)}$ are not exclusive to one form of political economy. Ignoring this fact—and the fact that such ideological critiques themselves are subject to the economics and *illusio* of a linguistic market—leads to nonsensical economic analyses. For example, Marcoux (2010) argues *Eunoia*'s "poetics of linguistic copiousness" and "abundance" critique the "unbridled capitalism" and "plutocratic hegemonies" which "devalue language" (Marcoux 2010, 89). Yet clearly *abundance* in itself, as we have seen, may merely result in diminishing returns. And why would maximal poetic productivity *counter* unbridled capitalist productivity? Such *abundance*, like the need to find *Eunoia* "more productive" (Stacey 2008, 66) or "extremely productive" (Braune 2009, 135), isn't an analytical assessment so much as a blanket appraisal: it's just a dollar-sign of literary value, signaling like-minded critics invested in the same *illusio*, that *Eunoia* (and their essay about it) is a good worthy of exchange. The same applies to words like *capitalism, hegemony,* etc. Such usages, like *meaning* and *rhythm,* are just other linguistic currencies which, however fast-selling on the lit-crit market, tell us little about the actual economics at play. That's why Stacey (2008) can even financialize his so-called anti-capitalist poetic value: "the author as miner discovers 'bright prisms twinkling with glitz,' [(Bök 2001, 51)] a poetic payoff unavailable by any other means" than "the imposition of limits," i.e., scarcities (67). Clearly Stacey is the miner, too. The passage echoes Bök's first book, *Crystallography* (1994), which fetishizes words as precious gems. So, if *Eunoia* produces an abundance of value based on its scarcity economics, does that make *Eunoia* capitalistic, not anti-capitalistic? Neither/nor. "Ideological" critiques of "capitalism" are just ill-equipped to analyze what they pretend to. In the meantime, critics overlook how *Eunoia* shows *literary value* to be an economic value-sign like any other—even as their economics of extraction prove exactly that.

[5] For further detractors, see Mancini (2012), 227ff.

For, scarcity economics inform not only such scholars' arguments, but their purposes for producing them. While there are many diverse ways of evaluating literature, and not all deal explicitly with valuation, our interpretive choices and products become measures of what we value. Simply put, we don't write just anything; we write about (we produce) what we believe is worth writing about.[6] The same applies for literary criticism generally: if we did not assume it on some level to be worthwhile, then why not allocate our scarce energies elsewhere? This economic principle—*opportunity cost*—is applicable to any activity: the "cost" of doing something is what else we give up to do it. Hence why a critical product must prove "*Eunoia* really does express something meaningful" and is "worth reading" (Stacey 2008, 69, 65)—lest it claim no worth, either. Or, inversely: Starnino must debit *Eunoia*, but to the credit of himself and his favoured brands. Bök (2013) says "a book is more like a thick calling card" (21) because they're used more for marketing than reading. The same applies for literary criticism. Are those essays *really* about critiquing capitalism—or, accruing capital for academic funding and jobs?

Scholars' misunderstandings of literary value emerge largely from the misconception that economics = capitalism. This leads to the kind of fanciful economics epitomized by Steve McCaffery's influential essay "Writing as a General Economy" (1984). McCaffery is a professor/poet who mentored both Bök and Stacey at York University in the 1990s. Reading *Eunoia* and McCaffery's essay in Stacey's seminar in 2010 led me to interrogate the relation between economics and such "literary economics" during the next fourteen years.[7] McCaffery's economic theory emerges from the Language Poetry movement of the 1960s-70s. These poets strove to produce anti-capitalist poetry by voiding it of meaning-making, which they equated with money-making (e.g., Bernstein 1984, 139). In his essay, McCaffery theorizes such poetry according to Georges Bataille's notion of *general economy*. In contrast to the socially *restricted* economy studied by economists, general economy vaguely resembles ecology or physics, encompassing energy transfer as a whole.[8] For Bataille, all traditional economic analysis and activity depends on denying this principle that, in *general*, all "accumulation [is] only a delay"; "energy finally can only be wasted" (1991, 23, 11). General economics is thus predicated on excess and loss. Bataille's central image is of the potlatch, a practice of wealth redistribution found in various indigenous cultures. Most dramatically, this ritual can manifest in the destruction of goods: "The Indians […] would set fire to their villages or break their canoes to pieces" or "throw ['copper bars' that 'are worth a fortune'] into the sea or shatter them" (Bataille 1991, 68). However, the purpose of such "waste" is often to nullify an obligation (debt) to a competitor

[6] For further discussion of how activities and products become variant forms of money (yardsticks of value), see Zelizer 1995 and Bandelj, Wherry, and Zelizer 2017.

[7] My dissertation is forthcoming from the University of Alberta. My essay "Writing as a Generic Economy" (Kvas 2020) was titled in response to McCaffery's.

[8] For much better physical approaches to economics, see works in thermoeconomics and econophysics: e.g., Georgescu-Roegen 1971; Kümmel 2011; Pokrovskii 2018; Chen 2015; Chakrabarti, Chakraborti, and Chatterjee 2006; Deutscher 2008; and Vopson 2020.

and/or to increase the social status of a chief. Indeed, such practices are hardly unique to the peoples whom Bataille exoticizes: a rich capitalist "dispenses" wealth at a lavish banquet but in doing so also "shares" and "displays" it (cf. Bourdieu 1984, 55). Hence the wealth isn't "wasted"; it is exchanged for signifiers of social status. Indeed, Bataille later admitted, in a sneaky endnote, "Potlatch cannot be unilaterally interpreted as a consumption of riches" and thus "give[s] the principles of 'general economy' a rather ambiguous foundation" (193n24). So, not only are Bataille's central notions of "waste," "wealth," and "worth" underdefined and subjective (at worst, leading him—and McCaffery—into Stalinist anti-humanism),[9] but he is like an accountant who, looking only at the debit side of a transaction, and protracting his ledger to all of space-time, grandiosely concludes, like Zeno's Paradox of Motion, that credit and growth are illusions. Even if true "in general," this principle can tell us little, in the end, about any particular economics. Nonetheless, McCaffery adapts Bataille's theory wholesale to argue that Language Poetry is a kind of potlatch, predicated on infinite loss rather than (capitalist) accumulation. Inevitably, McCaffery merely proves the impossibility of his own quest. He cannot succeed in exorcising value, nor can he produce literary criticism about a poetics of non-value without procuring a value for it. For example, he interprets Charles Bernstein's poem "Ig ak abberflappi. mogh & hmog ick pug eh nche ebag ot eb v joram Imbrp" as "non-semantic material ensembles that yield no profit," thus yielding a semantic profit for them (McCaffery 2000, 215; cf. Pound 2011, 11–12). This is because, in Bourdieu's terms, to engage in the game is already to contribute to its *illusio*. In economists' terms, Language Poetry's notions of utility and value are misconstrued. While liberal arts folks like to vilify economists as cold Benthamites, utility in economics is not an *a priori* absolute; it's whatever gets optimized (or sub-optimized). Just as not deciding is still a decision, so is not opting for something still an optimization. So, by not optimizing for meaning, Language Poets merely optimize for meaninglessness, rhythm, musicality, etc. These "non-values" become their currencies of value, exchangeable for interpretative profits like McCaffery's. Wherever McCaffery (2000) finds "a non-utilitarian, hedonistic pleasure derivable from the non-productive consumption of [a] text" (216), he merely abides a utility function optimizing for the production of said pleasure. Marginal futility would just be marginal utility in negative form. Tellingly, the Language Poetry movement was short-lived, and McCaffery later renounced his revolutionary optimism for poetry, as did Bataille (Betts 2013, 74, 258). As Kreiner (2013) concludes, "the politics of form inherited from the historical avant-garde," as epitomized by Language Poetry, are "antiquated" and "hopelessly inadequate" for understanding political economy (36; cf. 105ff).

[9] See Bataille 1991, 147–68, esp. 149–51. McCaffery's (2000) call that "we must avoid a humanization of the reader who is not to be anthropologized as a 'person'," although dressed in trendy deconstructions of human subjectivity, hinges on Althusser's critique of "the emergence of a humanist stance among Marxist intellectuals after 1956 (the time of Kruschev's [sic] denunciation of Stalin)" (27-28n28). These are the same "anti-Stalinists" Bataille (1991) defends against with anti-humanist apologia based in general economy (149-50).

Nonetheless, literary critics still freely apply such pseudo-economics as though they were viable. Sloane (2013) analyzes *Eunoia* and other poetry as Bataillean garbage (99)—thus extracting a literary utility for it, falling into the same trap as Bataille and McCaffery. Mancini (2012) does the same as he valorizes *Eunoia*'s "labour" as "unproductive" and "absurd" (226). Stacey (2008) distances *Eunoia* from Language Poetry to counter detractors who misclassify it as meaningless (75, 61), yet still clings to the ideal that such poetry, by its very form, is anti-capitalistic (73) and, in the end, politicizes *Eunoia*'s form in the same vein (73ff). Jaeger (2009), too, tries to have it both ways, arguing that *Eunoia*'s materialism abides Language Poetry while its "coherent" content/concept also transcend it, but that this "dematerialization" nonetheless "critique[s]…socially reified assumptions about value," i.e., "the cultural legitimation of art or text as *product*, as commodity" (51, 48)—so, the same politics as Language Poetry, after all.

Ironically, then, for critics pre-committed to ideologies about poetry's form and function, it doesn't matter what form a poem takes. As a result, one can just as arbitrarily argue oppositely: e.g., *Eunoia* may materialize labour, but such an artisanal (yet so-called Bataillean) expenditure's lack of "economic necessity" makes it indistinguishable from the "conspicuous consumption, squandering, and […] luxury" characteristic of bourgeoisie art (Bourdieu 1984, 55). My point is, the fact that *Eunoia*'s labour can be (and is) variously praised as productive, praised as *non*productive, and *dis*praised as nonproductive (or as *too* productive of the same form), merely illustrates the basic market dynamics of appraisal. Hence, lost by the echo chamber's circulation of currencies of "ideological" critiques of political economy, are actual economics.

Bök (2002a) acknowledges that "*Eunoia* […] retrenches an economy of meaning that its constraints might have otherwise challenged (hence, the [Language] poets might find this work disappointing […])"; still, he insists that *Eunoia* was "a direct response to my own misgivings about the influence of Oulipo upon my work," namely the group's apoliticism. However, my analysis has shown that Bök doesn't politicize Oulipian constraints so much as economize them for his own self-interest. While the Oulipo, too, valorized constraints that were most challenging (Motte 1998, 11), they were interested in constraints in the first place as "research" into the mathematics of literature (Queneau 1965, 322; cf. Roubaud 1998, 41–42). By contrast, Bök's emphasis on constraints as "athletic and acrobatic" hula-hoops (Whitell 2008) overshadows his experimental concerns in favour of market-legible benchmarks for *winnings*, *success*, and *value*. At times, this leads to "disingenuou[s]" inflations (Wood 2011, 24–25).

5. Conclusion: The Generality of Scarcity Poetics

But, whatever their ideologies or disagreements, poets and critics define *poeticness* in economic terms.

Producing words based on scarcity alone will not guarantee valuable output. Starnino (2002) is correct that "poetry will not be the inevitable product" of poetic algo-

rithms. That is why most poets do not try to produce scarcity directly. They think they want to produce (valuable) *poetry*, not scarcity. Yet *Eunoia* proves literary value is a matter of relative rarity. If poetic language were just any *common* thing, what would *differentiate* it? Just as "the devaluation of the common language […] results from the very existence of a literary language" (Bourdieu 1995, 60) so does the common language enable the elevation of a literary language. Bök did only what *all* writers do: mine common linguistic resources for uncommon ways to rarefy common things. Stacey sums it up perfectly:

> *Eunoia* […] openly declares itself as prose, [yet] is actually richer in poetic devices and musicality and defamiliarized language than most mainstream poetry. And this is quite simply because "the tradition of poetry is a tradition of constraint" [(Perloff 2004, 25)]. What else is a sonnet or villanelle, rondeau or sestina but the willed imposition of a set of restrictive rules which skew language from its ordinary usage[?] […] [I]t is because *Eunoia* distinguishes itself from mere saying, [and] from the manner of direct statement still prevalent in Canadian poetry today, that it attains […] a more reliable index of poeticality […] because it insists on treating poetry as *poesis*, a thing made, and not just a thing said (Stacey 2008, 68).

Again, it is not only *Eunoia* that deploys *scarcity poetics*. *Eunoia* just renders uncommonly visible what's common for all poetry: poetry *is* scarcity poetics. Poeticness (Erickson's "verbal texture") is an economic "index" of scarcity, textual material, a thing made.

Two decades after *Eunoia*, Bök sells poetry books like *The Xenotext* and *The Kazimir Effect* in handsewn limited editions. Bök also sells *Nickel Linoleum*, a series of images of *coins* (Canadian nickels), as digital files that also *are* crypto-coins (Non-Fungible Tokens): poems whose scarcity is algorithmically regulated. Bök says "poetry is a kind of coin-collecting" and "even the pricing […] [is] part of the poem itself"; "I wanted, of course, these works to be priced poetically" (Crypto Writer Talks, 2022, 0:25:42-0:31:22). They sell for a "nickel" of Ethereum—about $150 USD. *Each*. Bök is no longer only an 1800s artisan; he seeks an even better business model: the Fine Arts. In doing so, Bök invests in an avant-garde tradition long intertwined with commercialism. This has included explicitly "financial" art: e.g., conceptualist Daniel Spoerri's "writing out […] checks payable to cash at ten deutsche marks each, and selling them as art for twenty deutsche marks apiece" (Shell 1995, 85). Bök's nickels and vowels are no different.

In 1975, when psychologists set up two jars of identical cookies, one fuller, one emptier, test subjects preferred cookies from the emptier jar and rated them more highly (Worchel, Lee, and Adewole 1975). Bök's experiments do the same with *readers* and *words*. But it's not just Bök. To seek the Literary is already to choose scarcity. The very terms *literary* or *poetic* presume for textual materials a difference beyond "ordinary" text or materials. As Nethersole (2007) observes, "cordoning off certain texts into a canon on the basis of so-called 'value' […] partition[s] the field of 'letters'

into literature (lower case) and *L*iterature (capital L)" (81). Likewise, Tallis (1995) notes, "The very process by which a work is perceived as literary […] depends upon its being […] located within a comparatively narrow universe of discourse" (28). But literary scarcity goes beyond either canonicity or discourse. "Literature" is by definition a scarce subset of all written materials, but these in turn define a scarce subset of all *materials*. Wellberry (1990), explaining the post-hermeneutic turn epitomized by Friedrich Kittler's work in media studies, observes that "[a]ll media […] require a material channel" such that "[a]s soon as we conceive of literature as medially instantiated, then we must view its meaning as the product of a selection and rarefaction" (xiv). Nathan Brown (2017), like Stacey, reminds us that "poetry, as making [*poesis*], is a practice of material construction," and argues further that it should be analyzed *as* material structures (11). That is because "the materiality of language is predicated upon the transformation of [what Gilles Deleuze calls] 'non-language material'" (26). Things like "ink" and paper "fibers," even on "submolecular scales" (1), are all parts of the "subgraphemic dimension of writing operating prior to signification" (10). My point is, the *economics* of such materials must be understood as part-and-parcel of this semiotic transformation; and literary value, therefore, is based in pre-literary materials. As soon as we interpret the shapes and molecules, splayed across pages, as "writing," and that writing as "literature"—instead of, say, as Bök observed, "garbage"; or, tellingly, as part of a "trashy" genre—we have already refined them with a symbolic denomination. Counterintuitively, then, to understand literary value, literary scholars must unsee their own "literary" framework. To reify materials as "literature," "poetry," etc., and interpret them on that basis, is already to set those *things* apart with an elevated appraisal. "Literary" value then becomes skewed or inscrutable, artificially obscured from the broader workings of valuation. By contrast, *prior* to the *literary*, would-be literatures are material structures like any other, subject to formal constraints and economic forces. It is only when purveyors vie to attract value-signs for such materials through marginal differentiations that they may indeed become exchangeable for a "literary" currency, i.e., in contradistinction to a "non-literary" one. For Russian Formalists, this distinction lay in literary forms and rhetorical devices (as in Stacey's explanation). For postmodernists such as Reader Response theorists, literariness became subjective, leading to a rejection of any firm distinction (Abrams and Harpham 2009, 128); but, statistical evidence has supported the formalist view (Miall and Kuiken 1999; Jacobs and Kinder 2018). By contrast, my study shows that literariness is inextricable from economics. When it comes to assigning and maintaining value for the thing we want to call as "literature," our definition of "literariness" is less important than the distinction itself. In that sense, there is no contradiction that in theory there is no essentially "literary" discourse, but that in practice some language objectively exhibits more recognizable "literary" patterns than others. Without such material differences, relative scarcities, there would be no "literature" to symbolize as such.

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