Notes on Christian Bök, *The Xenotext*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren’t reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described [here](#), theorized [here](#). All comments and criticism are welcome!)

New Ways of Experimenting with Images in Literature

This is a fascinating project from the point of view of images and writing. Four related topics:

1. Words and images in relation to the conceptual project. This book is “an introduction” to the “conceptual groundwork” of a real-life project, which is a poem encoded in DNA in a bacterium, and another poem that is produced when that poem is read and translated by the bacterium’s cells into a protein. Presumably those actual poems, or the sum total of genetically modified bacteria, comprise “Book 2.” In this sense the images in *The Xenotext* are motivated differently from those in *Crystallography*. Both are “aesthetic” projects (the word Bök uses), but *The Xenotext* is explicitly an introduction to something that exists elsewhere, outside of books and even of human agency. That gives the images in *The Xenotext* a significance that images don’t have in any other work of fiction that I know: they point to real-world correlates in the way that scientific images ordinarily do.

2. Questions of design. The graphics in *The Xenotext* are also more crafted, more polished and well-presented, than those in *Crystallography*. Their professionalism is partly an artifact of the professional chemist’s software that produces them: the ribbon diagrams and charge envelopes on pp. 105-12 are straight from the professional software. (Bök advertises that they were drawn with a supercomputer, but the graphics themselves, without the computing tasks he set, are routinely drawn on personal computers.) In other cases he has chosen fonts, line strengths, and spacing to make diagrams that are both professional-looking and designed. The result is that the QR codes and Conway’s “Life” game cells match well with the diagrams of amino acids (pp. 117, 118), which match well with the star chart that ends the book (p. 147). In *Crystallography*, some images seemed done on Bök’s own personal computer, others were collaged, and still others were photographed from 18th and 19th century sources (or from the internet). There is no such heterogeneity here. I mention this because the uniformity and care of the images in *The Xenotext* brings real, professional science into the book in a way that the poetic text does not. There is real genetics and laboratory work behind *The Xenotext*, but the poems and prose are highly
inflected by Bök’s poetics. The images, by default, are what remain to represent genetic science. (There are minor exceptions, such as the chemical formulae in footnotes on pp. 118-37.) So both in terms of the book’s conceptual (and post-human) project as “living poetry,” and also in terms of the book’s design, the illustrations work as signifiers of science.

3. The dialogic relation of images, diagrams, text. Throughout this Writing with Images project, I’ve been interested in the possibility that visual material might request or require the same amount of attention as text, so images would not function only as illustrations, examples, or ornaments, but would drive, inform, and otherwise direct the reading (This is theorized in Chapter 5.) Very few writers do this, Sebald and other prominent examples includes. The Xenotext comes the closest of any of the texts I’ve seen to accomplishing such an equality of images, diagrams, and writing.

One part of the book in particular creates an unusual sequence of reading, in which an attentive reader, who cares about sense and not only expression, will have to turn back and forth repeatedly, from image to text and back. “The March of the Nucleotides” illustrates how a gene can be written as a poem, and used to produce a protein. Bök begins with a poem, constrained so it makes a spiral pattern, like DNA, and incorporates words that end in the conventional abbreviations for nucleotides (A, C, G, T). A plausible reading order here is:

(1) background (p. 154), (2) description (p. 98), (3) diagram of the gene (p. 81), (4) diagram of the nucleotide molecule (p. 99; this is the least helpful or pertinent), (5) the poem itself (pp. 100-2), (6) the codons that produce the amino acids (p. 103), (7) the computer-generated images of the resulting protein (pp. 105-8), together with (8) their key (p. 104).

Of these pages, only three are text. Four are colored printouts, two are line drawings, and four are formatted text. It’s the most complete integration of images and text I know, provided a reader is trying actively to follow the transcription process. If not, it probably disintegrates by stages into a reading of the poem and a glance at the other pages.

4. The book’s style and tone. I’ll conclude with some thoughts on the book’s style, because they impinge on the question of constrained writing. It isn’t possible, I think, to agree with reviewers who say things like “his poems echo the strains of the ancients,” or “already these poems feel eternal, as if they’ve been with us since Virgil, since Homer.” The poetry is intentionally cosmic, portentous, and grandiose. Much is written in what Quintilian and Cicero called the “grand” and “ornate” style. But it isn’t at all simply “ancient” or “heroic” in the unironic manner of Virgil or Homer. “Colony Collapse Disorder,” which translates Virgil’s fourth Goergic are especially clearly the product of an early 21st century writer, especially because of the mixture of the stock of 18th century English poetry (“swales” and “swains” and locutions like “he hath leave to cross”), Swinburnean or Coleridgean excesses (“quenching,” “grieving,” “fountainous battlements,” and
“distracted cries” from “damsels”), and contemporary jargon (especially including genetics). The opening section, “The Late Heavy Bombardment,” is a bombardment of stentorian, portentous, hyperbolic archaisms. (“What dire seed must these onslaughts have scattered, like shrapnel, across your cremated badlands”—sentences like that read like a comic book version of Geoffrey Hill.) Both sections are voiced with a combination of fin-de-siècle bombast and postmodern hyperornamentation, and if parts aren’t laughable then you might consider how you’re reading Virgil and Homer, or for that matter how seriously you’re taking the equally cosmic speeches put in the mouths of Marvell characters in movies. (I mean you’re likely not laughing as much as you should at the cosmic speeches of characters like the Silver Surfer.)

(The Virgil material in particular is a curious addition to the book. I haven’t yet read a review that attempts to explain it. Bök suggests Virgil “guided a poet” (Dante!) in the way that he, Bök, guides the reader; he also mentions that a line from the second Georgic was the first to be encoded into the DNA of a plant; and he says in several ways that the fourth Georgic is about absolution and redemption for sending things like bees, and more broadly Nature, “to Hell.” But none of those would seem to justify the inclusion of an eccentric translation of the entire of the fourth Georgic. The insistent demands placed on a reader by the bizarre translation resonate in a curious way with the demands produced by the “poetic primer” of genetics. Both will be difficult for most readers, especially those who haven’t read the fourth Georgic, or don’t remember their college genetics. The disconnected parallel—a long text by a Roman author, and a long series of “primers” of genetics—reminds me of Derrida’s “clanging,” in Glas, between Hegel and Genet: they just don’t belong together, and yet there they are.)

All that is saved from being fairly unremittingly unintentionally humorous by being constrained in many ways. There are at least three kinds of constraints:

(1) Those provided by the conventional labeling in biochemistry: words beginning with “O,” for example, when it is necessary to signify Oxygen; or words ending in A, T, G, or C when it is necessary to signify nucleotides (pp. 100-2).
(2) Those provided by poetics: the virelay, the lipogram, the acrostic, the grimoire, and so forth.
(3) Those added by Bök to echo or elaborate (1) or (2): for example the limitation, in some poems, to words of exactly nine letters (pp. 86-95, 100-2). I think this self-imposed restriction, which he announces on p. 154, is intended to produce a harmony with the three-letter codons (in relation to pp. 100-2) — although of course the steps of the DNA ladder aren’t nine units across.

These molecular, poetic, and aesthetic constraints produce a constantly unpredictable shifting series of warps that cannot easily be assigned to a single voice. The awkwardnesses warp the intended tone, as it does in the English translation of Perec’s La Disparition (A Void), which sounds sometimes like a mockery of 18th century prose, and other times like a tin-eared attempt to mimic
some regional accent or creole. Those unpredictable effects are saving graces. Otherwise The Xenotext would be overrun by its author’s grandiosity. I especially like the weird repetitions he forces himself into in “The Virelay of the Amino Acids,” where he gives himself the task of writing a poem for each of the amino acids, restricting himself to words that begin with the letters of the atoms (Carbon, Nitrogen, etc.). What is weird, and effective, is that there’s no reason why the words couldn’t have been more varied (many words begin with “C” and “N”) but he chooses repetitions at the same time as he imposes repetitions on himself. The result is a language that tries to be both “grand” and “ornate” and is continuously hobbled. It is very effective, and I’m inclined to agree with Marjorie Perloff’s endorsement: “one of the most beautiful poems of our time.”