

FIVE TRANSLATIONS OF ARTHUR RIMBAUD'S "VOYELLES"

by Christian Bök

The following is a series of different approaches to translating a single poem—Rimbaud's "Voyelles," given below—all of which are set to appear in the upgraded American edition of Christian Bök's *Eunoia*, due for release this fall. We include explanatory notes by the author.

Voyelles

Arthur Rimbaud

**A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles,
Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes:
A, noir corset velu des mouches éclatantes
Qui bombinent autour des puanteurs cruelles,**

**Golfes d'ombre; E, candeurs des vapeurs et des tentes,
Lances des glaciers fiers, rois blancs, frissons d'ombelles;
I, pourpres, sang craché, rire des lèvres belles
Dans la colère ou les ivresses pénitentes;**

**U, cycles, vibrations divins des mers virides,
Paix des pâtis semés d'animaux, paix des rides
Que l'alchimie imprime aux grands fronts studieux;**

**O, suprême Clairon plein des strideurs étranges,
Silences traversés des [Mondes et des Anges]:
—O l'Oméga, rayon violet de [Ses] Yeux!**

“Vowels” is a semantic translation of “Voyelles” by Arthur Rimbaud, preserving the rhyme scheme of the original, while enforcing the rigorous, syllabic contours of the alexandrine line.

Vowels

Christian Bök

**A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: the vowels.
I will tell thee, one day, of thy newborn portents:
A, the black velvet cuirass of flies whose essence
commingles, abuzz, around the cruellest of smells,**

**Wells of shadow; E, the whitewash of mists and tents,
glaives of icebergs, albino kings, frostbit fennels;
I, the bruises, the blood spat from lips of damsels
who must laugh in scorn or shame, both intoxicants;**

**U, the waves, divine vibratos of verdant seas,
pleasant meadows rich with venery, grins of ease
which alchemy grants the visages of the wise;**

**O, the supreme Trumpeter of our strange sonnet—
quietudes crossed by another [World and Spirit],
O, the Omega!—the violet raygun of [Her] Eyes....**

“Veils” is a homophonic translation of “Voyelles,” preserving, from the original, the sequence of the sounds, but not the meanings of the words—the two poems sound alike when read aloud.

Veils

Christian Bök

**Anywhere near blank rage
you veer, oblivious.**

**Jade array, calico azure
evanescent talents.**

**Unaware, corrosives flow
to my shackled hand.**

**Key bombing an auto tour
to paint her colour.**

**Gulfs of amber contours
evaporate the tint.**

**Linseed glass or oblong
freezing dumbbells.**

**Upper pressing cashiers
do deliver verbals.**

**Dance the clear, elusive
rinse of paintings.**

**Icicle fibre meant divine
daymares varied.**

**Pity paid to see my dynamo
poised to rid us.**

**Cool chimes, a primal green
for studios.**

**Spur my clear plan astride
a stranger.**

**Cylinders versus diamonds
a decision.**

**Hollow, my gray ovule does
decide you.**

“Phonemes” is a homovocalic translation of “Voyelles,” preserving the sequence of vowels from the original, while replacing all the other components of the poem with different consonants.

Phonemes

Christian Bök

**Phantoms, infernal,
without refuge or return—phonemes.**

**We will hark if such
resurgent souls ordain a dreamt verse:**

**A (offspring of perfect
murders, so unseen that stranglers**

**fulfill no crime, and thus
mourners must call the unjust schemes**

**overdoses); E (charmed
slumber that engulfs the sleepers,**

**cradled by dreamlike
Sirens who sing mankind, forlorn themes);**

**I (corrupted archangel,
shriven when mercy redeems**

**all shadowy spectres
who plunder shipwrecked believers);**

**U (the Sphinx, beheld
by disciples, then by infidels:**

**a riddle that grieves
a king; a truth that crippled minstrels**

**must bewail in epics,
like staunch martyrs whom Furies spurn);**

**O (untempted Saint,
who lends this typewritten utterance**

**its fervency
—an endless cycle of perseverance).**

**O, how the Bards
abolish symbols, when the letters burn....**

*“Vocables” is a perfect anagram of “Voyelles,” permuting the lexicon of letters from the original.
(I suppose that this poem owes a debt of gratitude to the “Sonnagrams” of K. Silem Mohammad.)*

Vocables

Christian Bök

Eternal, you beguile love or ruin—vocables.

Jejune vassals quote ten codas in reliquaries:

**A (the ceaseless verses at occult monasteries;
requiems of dust, bound to nebulous particles:**

**Embers of gold); E (graven urns in sanctuaries;
brass bells, unsold, decreed priceless for our canticles);**

**I (a senseless verse—a spell, garbled in pentacles;
choruses, deemed perverse in desolate nurseries);**

**U (a universe, expressed as a murmur of tides,
all its perplexing maxims, exquisite suicides;
dim minds, transcended by vivid, hexadic prisms);**

**O (a vesper, stressing serenades or solitudes;
a clever muse, to generate endless interludes).
O, my elegiac ode, ends in paroxysms...**

“AEIOU” literalizes the referent to the title of “Voyelles” by removing from the original everything that is not itself a vowel (including consonants, punctuation, and letterspaces).

AEIOU

Christian Bök

AOIEAIOUEUEOEUEOEE
EIAIUEUEOUOAI AEAE
AOIOEEUEOU EEEAAE
UIOIEAUOUEUA EUUEE

OEOEEAEUEAEUEEEE
AEEAIEIEOIA IOOEE
IOUEAAEIEEEEEEE
AAOEEOUEIEEEEIEE

UEIEEIEEIEE
AIEAIEEAIAUAIEIE
UEAIEIEEAUAOUIEU

OUEEAIOEIEIEUEAE
IEEAEEEEOE EEEAE
OOEAAOIOEEEEU