

# 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

**AOIEAIOUEUEOEUEE  
EIAIUEUEOUOAIAEAE  
AOIOEEUEOUEEAAE  
UIOIEAUOUEUAEUUEE**

**OEOEEAEUEAEUEEE  
AEEAIEIEOIAIOOEE  
IOUEAAEIEEEEE  
AAOEEOUIEEEEEIEE**

**UEIEEIEEIEE  
AIEAIEEAIAUAIEIE  
UEAIEIEAUAOUIEU**

**OUEEAIOEIEIEUEAE  
IEEAEEEEOEAAE  
OOEAAOIOEEEEU**