

Harry Mathews in *Oulipo Compendium* (2nd ed., 2005) writes of the perverb thus:

Invented by Paris Review editor Maxine Groffsky to describe the result when crossing proverbs. If we join the first part of “Red sky at night, sailor’s delight” to the second part of “It never rains but it pours” we obtain the perverb “Red sky at night, but it pours”. The remaining parts yield a second perverb, “It never rains, sailor’s delight”.

The perverb should not be confused with the frequently encountered (and often amusing) parodied proverb (“Every drug has its day”¹). It is only derived from proverbs that can be divided into substantial halves which can then be recombined.

Before its adoption by Oulipo, perverbs appear (as ‘anticipatory plagiarisms’) in Wilde’s play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and the film *The Philadelphia Story* (1940, dir. G. Cukor): “The course of true love is paved with good intentions.” (From “The course of true love never runs smooth”² and “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”³)

Sometimes both perverbs from a given pair of proverbs yield felicitous examples: the proverbs “The early bird catches the worm” and “A rolling stone gathers no moss” together make “The early bird gathers no moss” and “A rolling stone catches the worm”. The latter is perhaps the more striking image.

Exercise From each perverb, recover the original pair of proverbs from which it was formed:⁴

Every cloud has its day.	A bird in the hand, sailor’s delight.
Man proposes, but you can’t make him drink.	Strike while the sun shines.
Beauty is the best policy.	A fool and his money is a friend indeed.

Mathews in *Selected Declarations of Dependence* (1977) also uses paraphrases to distance the perverbs a step further from their source proverbs. Mathews’ explanatory example:

“The sky was clear except for the fog rising to the east -- fermentation from the oak bog” is a paraphrase of the perverb “Every cloud from little acorns grows.”⁵

Mathews’ poem *Shore Leave* comprises three stanzas, each constructed by grafting halves of proverbs to a fixed matrix of demi-proverbs:

All roads lead to good intentions;
 East is east and west is west and God disposes;
 Time and tide in a storm.
 All roads, sailor’s delight.
 (Many are called, sailors take warning:
 All roads wait for no man.)

All roads are soon parted.
 East is east and west is west: twice shy.
 Time and tide bury their dead.
 A rolling stone, sailor’s delight.
 “Any port” —sailor take warning:
 All roads are another man’s poison.

All roads take the hindmost,
 East is east and west is west and few are chosen,
 Time and tide are soon parted,
 The devil takes sailor’s delight.
 Once burned, sailors take warning:
 All roads bury their dead.

Here are the proverbs used as a basis for Mathews’ poem, the fixed ‘demi-proverbs’ being underlined:

All roads lead to Rome
East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet⁶

¹ Pursuing the canine theme, there is also Dorothy Parker’s “You can’t teach an old dogma new tricks.”

² Spoken by Lysander in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act 1 Sc. 1, l.134

³ St Bernard of Clairvaux, c. 1150: “L’enfer est plein de bonnes volontés et désirs” (hell is full of good wishes and desires). An earlier saying occurs in Virgil’s *Aeneid*: “facilis descensus Averno” (the descent to hell is easy).” John Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667) has “Easy is the descent into Hell, for it is paved with good intentions.” As Max Beerbohm wrote, “Hell is paved with good Intentions, but Heaven is roofed with the best.”

⁴ See e.g. <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/proverbs.html> for English proverbs.

⁵ “Mighty oaks from little acorns grow” - Great things may come from small beginnings – and “Every cloud has a silver lining.” The latter derives from Milton’s *Comus: A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle* (1634). For the former, see www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/247100.html

Time and tide wait for no man
 Red sky in the evening sailor's delight.
 Red sky in the morning sailors take warning:
All roads lead to Rome

Exercise Choose a matrix of demi-proverbs as the basis for your own perverbial poem, stanzas being variations on the same original matrix of demi-proverbs as in Mathews' *Shore Leave*.

Another technique Mathews uses in the book *Selected Declarations of Dependence* is to use a perverb to make a micro-story. Thus *Time and tide save nine*:

His amiability in lending the justices the presidential yacht nearly led to disaster: with the entire Supreme Court on board for its annual picnic, the ship was caught in a violent summer storm and run against a sandbar. There, already foundering, it risked being broken up by the surf and wind. By good luck, in that very hour ebb changed to flood, and before further harm was done, the rising ocean lifted the boat and its august cargo into the milder waters of Chesapeake Bay.

Exercise Write a similar short story prompted by a perverb of your choosing.

Marcel Bénabou in *Locutions introuvables (Impossible Sayings, 1984)* creates new and useful proverbial expressions by means of grafts between existing ones in a perverbial fashion:

He wears his heart on his tongue⁷ (He's generous in his speech)
 To pull the chestnuts out of swine⁸ (To go to extraordinary lengths for what one wants)
 To kill the goose between two stools⁹ (To make do with whatever is at hand)

Bénabou also invented new proverbs by joining the rhymed endings of verses in a poem. For example,

Days and hours, failing powers

derives from a pair of lines in T.S.Eliot's *Dry Salvages*: 'Consequence of further days and hours,' and, in the following stanza, 'Pride or resentment at failing powers.' (From the same poem, one also has "The emotionless pass for devotionless" and "Among the breakage a slow leakage.")

Bénabou in *Un Aphorisme peut en cacher un autre (Aphorisms: the Russian Doll effect, 1980)* gives a handy three-step guide to do-it-yourself aphorisms, here adapted into English by Ian Monk in *Oulipo Compendium*:

1. Make a list of typical constructions, for example:
 - A is B made visible
 - A is the mother of B
 - There is no A without B
 - There is a time for A, a time for B, and a time for C
 - A wise, B foolish.
 - An A is an A, but a B is a C
2. Pick appropriate words following these guidelines:
 - (i) Near synonyms e.g. love/friendship, joy/happiness
 - (ii) Antonymy e.g. love/hate, soul/body
 - (iii) Rhymes, assonances and alliterations e.g. mother/lover/other, luck/ duck, revolution/revelation/resignation
 - (iv) Common pairs e.g. crime and punishment, pride and prejudice
3. Combine 1. and 2.:
 - Love is hate made visible
 - Crime is the mother of punishment
 - There is no pride without prejudice
 - There is a time for revolution, a time for revelation, and a time for resignation
 - Soul wise, body foolish
 - A mother is a mother, but a lover is another.¹⁰

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⁶ Two things are so different that they can never come together or agree. First line of Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Ballad of East and West" (1889).

⁷ "Wear one's heart on one's sleeve" and "Hold your tongue" – Proverbs 21:23 'He who guards his mouth and his tongue, Guards his soul from troubles.' Proverbs 10:19 'When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.' Proverbs 18:21 'Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.'

⁸ "To pull the chestnuts out of the fire" (to rescue from difficulty) and "Pearls before swine" - Matthew 7:6, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: 'Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces.'

⁹ "To kill the goose that lays the golden egg" from Aesop's *Fables* no. 87 and "To fall between two stools"

¹⁰ Actually the example chosen by Monk instead of "another" is a rhyme with a duck.