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“ALL ROADS LEAD TO ‘PERVERBS’”: HARRY MATHEWS’S *SELECTED DECLARATIONS OF DEPENDENCE* (1977)

Abstract: The manipulative change of traditional proverbs into innovative anti-proverbs is nothing new. In fact, the playful rearrangement of proverb halves into insightful or nonsensical creations has been practiced by such aphoristic writers and poets as Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertolt Brecht, Paul Éluard, Franz Fühmann, Marcel Bénabou, Paul Muldoon, and others. The art of scrambling proverbs was practiced in particular by several members of the French avant-garde group of writers and intellectuals called Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle). The American author Harry Mathews (1930-2017) was one of its prolific members who excelled with his enumerative poems based on various patterns of proverb fragments. While he published such *tour-de-force* poetic texts in French, he also wrote a most unique book in English with the title *Selected Declarations of Dependence* (1977). The first part is a love story of sorts based on the 185 words that appear in 46 common English proverbs. Proverb halves are interspersed in this prose, but there are also multiple poetic texts that employ parts of proverbs in certain patters and as anaphora and leitmotifs. The second half is made up of 106 paraphrases of what he calls “perverbes”, i.e., anti-proverbs made up of two proverb halves. It is up to the readers to find which perverb (the English spelling) belongs to which paraphrase. All of this is meant to entertain and challenge readers into becoming active participants in these texts that at times make sense but also remain without any meaning. The entire book is conceived as an intellectual game with its own riddles and perplexities but also its playful humor that should intrigue and delight paremiologists everywhere.

Keywords: American, anti-proverb, avant-garde, Paul Éluard, French, Franz Fühmann, game, German, literature, manipulation, Harry Mathews, Paul Muldoon, Oulipo, paraphrase, perverbe (perverb), play, poetry, proverb fusion, proverb halves, proverb scrambling.

It has long been a commonplace that proverbs are not at all such rigidly structured statements as older definitions of this

verbal folklore genre have claimed. In fact, they are often varied for syntactical reasons, only their "kernel" element is cited (Norrick 1985: 45), or they are deliberately parodied or satirized by word substitutions or short additions that put their supposed wisdom into question. The frequently employed proverbs with their claim to truth quite literally encourage speakers and writers, in agreement with Johan Huizinga's concept of "homo ludens" (1938), to "play" with these preformulated and perhaps too often cited insights into life and existence (Röhrich 1967: 181). This tendency to alter traditional proverbs is nothing new and has been attested in written documents throughout the ages, with William Shakespeare being a master in the syntactical and semantic manipulation of proverbs. But the bard is by no means an exception with Bertolt Brecht, for example, being a more modern author who delighted in contradicting proverbial wisdom (Mieder 1998). But no matter how striking the reformulation might be, it is the interplay of tradition and innovation that adds to the communicative effectiveness of such "anti-proverbs" (Mieder 2004a: 28 and 150-153), as these games with proverbs have been called internationally (for numerous other designations in different languages see Litovkina 2015: 326-327, Litovkina and Lindahl 2007).

The following deliberations will concern themselves with primarily one type of anti-proverb, namely the deliberate mixture of the halves of different proverbs to create sensical or nonsensical statements. The humorous or insightful creations go beyond the two traditional proverbs, but clearly it is part of the game to recognize the two old proverbs involved. An example might be the anti-proverb "Strike while the heart grows fonder" based on the two well-known proverbs "Strike while the iron is hot" and "Absence makes the heart grow fonder". It is important to note that such proverbial play is nothing new (Röhrich 1967: 183-184), with aphoristic writers quite often basing their texts on such proverbial scramblings (Mieder 1999). Collections of anti-proverbs from humor magazines. books of humorous one-liners, and the mass media are replete with such "fun" texts for the entertainment of the reader. In this regard, I delight in mentioning two unique books in my "International Proverb Archives" both at the University of Vermont and in my extensive private library in my country home in Williston, Vermont. Günter Lux had the

splendid idea in the former German Democratic Republic to publish the two fascinating illustrated books *Die Axt im Hause wird selten fett. Ein Smalcalda-Sprichwort-Bastelbuch* (1981) and *Morgenstund ist aller Laster Anfang. Sprichwörter zum Selbstbasteln* (1987). They cite 206 and 256 German proverbs respectively, with each proverb occupying one page in such a way that the page could be cut leaving one half of the proverb on the top and the other half on the bottom. By flipping the pages, literally hundreds if not thousands of anti-proverbs can be constructed, some with new insights, others with absurd statements or absolutely senseless mutations.

Actually, this is meant to have some fun with overused proverbs. This is also the case with a proverbial present that the Swiss advertising agency Woodtli sent out to its customer as a New Year's present. It basically consisted of a round card board disk with the first half of twenty-seven German proverbs being inscribed on a turnable disk while the other halves are inscribed on the outer circle. By turning the inner circle a good number of anti-proverbs can become visible. In a way, this game shows exactly what advertising copywriters do when they formulate catchy slogans based on proverbial structures to add some hidden authority to their messages (Mieder 1985: 37). But as the East German writer Franz Fühmann (1922-1984) reported in 1974, such a device is really not needed in order to add some proverbial life to a party. All that is needed is to divide proverbs into two halves and write them on the front and back sides of a small paper card. After mixing the cards, the players draw two of them and read out the resulting anti-proverbs (Fühmann 1974: 224-225, Mieder 1985). And there really is no end to such play with proverbs. Thus at a party in December of 1979 in Burlington, Vermont, I came across a cocktail napkin with the inscription "Scrambled Sayings" and the following list of anti-proverbs based on proverb halves:

All that glitters is the root of all evil
No fool makes waste
Money is not gold
Haste before you buy
Look like an old fool

One man's drink is a dangerous thing
A little learning is another man's poison

The seven traditional proverbs clearly are "All that glitters is not gold". "No fool like an old fool", "Money is the root of all evil", "Haste makes waste", "Look before you leap [changed to buy]", "One man's meat [changed to drink!] is another man's poison", and "A little learning is a dangerous thing". Whether one or more of these anti-proverbs contain any new wisdom is questionable, but the little napkin could very well have served as a conversation starter at the cocktail party!

What clearly is more interesting is that there are poets who have had their "fun" with scrambling proverbs. The German poet Fred Endrikat (1890-1942) entitled one of his poems "Sprichwörter" (c. 1930), indicating right from the start that he is dealing with proverbs, with his readers quickly noticing that he is scrambling them:

Man darf den Tag nicht vor dem Abend dankbar sein
und soll das Schicksal nicht für alles loben.
Ein Gutes kommt niemals allein,
und alles Unglück kommt von oben.

Die Peitsche liegt im Weine.
Die Wahrheit liegt beim Hund.
Morgenstund hat kurze Beine.
Lügen haben Gold im Mund.

Ein Meister nie allein bellte.
Vom Himmel fallen keine Hunde.
Dem Glücklichen gehört die Welt.
Dem Mutigen schlägt keine Stunde.
(Mieder 1990: 32)

Hansgeorg Stengel (1922-2003), another German poet, gave his *tour-de-force* poem the title "Extempore" (1969), perhaps thereby signaling that he is mixing up these proverbs without any particular plan. Somehow one is reminded of the games already described where the proverbial chips can fall wherever they may:

Wo man hobelt, kräht kein Hahn,
grober Klotz ist halb gewonnen.

> Was sich neckt, ist alt getan,
> wie gebettet, so zerronnen.
>
> Blindes Huhn sieht mehr als zwei,
> steter Tropfen kommt von oben,
> Aug um Aug verdirbt den Brei,
> Ende gut ist aufgeschoben.
>
> Gottes Mühlen beißen nicht,
> keine Rose hat zwei Seiten,
> wenn sie auch die Wahrheit spricht.
> Guter Rat krümmt sich beizeiten.
>
> Frisch gewagt, fällt selbst hinein,
> unrecht Gut will Weile haben.
> Morgenstunde höhlt den Stein,
> wer zuletzt lacht, liegt begraben.
> (Mieder 1990: 113)

But this is not just a German phenomenon, as the quite modern poem "Symposium" (1995) by the Canadian poet Paul Muldoon (born 1951) illustrates. He plays primarily with proverb halves, but he also includes a few proverbial expressions. The title of the poem seems to suggest the empty chatter that might just take place at yet another cocktail party at a scholarly conference, where segments of sentences seem to fill the room without any cohesive message being expounded:

> You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it hold
> its nose to the grindstone and hunt with the hounds.
> Every dog has a stitch in time. Two heads? You've been sold
> one good turn. One good turn deserves a bird in the hand.
>
> A bird in the hand is better than no bread.
> To have your cake is to pay Paul.
> Make hay while you can still hit the nail on the head.
> For want of a nail the sky might fall.
>
> People in glass houses can't see the wood
> for the new broom. Rome wasn't built between two stools.
> Empty vessels wait for no man.
>
> A hair of the dog is a friend indeed.
> There's no fool like the fool

> who's shot his bolt. There's no smoke after the horse is gone.
> (Sobieski and Mieder 2005: 173)

Careful reading of this unique sonnet (!) reveals that Muldoon actually breaks the mold of cutting proverbs into halves and randomly rearranging them. He only picks one of the proverb halves in each case and ignores the other halves. That is innovative enough, once again resulting in some statements that make some sense, but the poem in its entirety presents a chaotic picture of a gathering of unconnected voices.

What these remarks thus far have shown is that the intentional variation, manipulation, alienation or perversion of proverbs is nothing new – not even the amassing of parts of proverbs into poems of sorts. This deliberate play with proverbs has been practiced by aphoristic writers for centuries, with Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Kraus, and Gerhard Uhlenbruck coming to mind as impressive German practitioners of this entertaining and thought-provoking art form that is so prevalent that one can speak of a genre of "proverbial aphorisms" (Mieder 1999 and 2010). It is well known, of course, that France has a long tradition of aphoristic writing as well, and so it should not be surprising that there has been a modern preoccupation with proverbial aphorisms – often as anti-proverbs – there as well. The French author, critic, and linguist Jean Paulhan (1884-1968) had kindled the interest of linguistically inclined intellectuals in proverbial matters with his intriguing essay on "L'expérience du proverbe" (1913) in which he explains how he learned to understand and use Malagasy proverbs while spending some time on the island of Madagascar. As he made progress with acquiring the knowledge of the native language, he realized that there was something missing until he also mastered the proverbial language. He understood proverbs as signs that play an important role in verbal communication (Syrotinski 1989: 13-55). With this interest in proverbs in mind, the French surrealist Paul Éluard (1895-1952) even founded the short-lived journal *Proverbe* (six numbers between February 1920 and July1921) that published papers questioning the meaning of words and phrases by way of innovative manipulations and alienations (Baudoin 1970, Siepe 1977: 45). A few years after the experi-

mental journal had folded, Paul Éluard and his friend Benjamin Péret (1899-1959) published a small collection of "152 proverbes mis au goût du jour" (1925) that were not traditional proverbs but rather surrealistic one-liners based to a considerable degree on them, i.e., they played with proverbial language to create anti-proverbs. Here are but a few examples together with English translations by Ela Kotkowska (2004/2005):

> Une maîtresse en mérite une autre. (no. 2)
> One mistress deserves another.
>
> Il faut rendre à la paille ce qui appartient à la pouter. (no. 5)
> Render unto the mote that which is the beam's.
>
> Quand un œuf case des œufs, c'est qu'il n'aime pas les omelettes. (no. 13)
> If an egg breaks an egg, it must not like omelettes.

While these examples make somewhat sense, there are also others where the proverbial transformations appear to be without any rhyme or reason but just arbitrary substitutions that render the underlying proverbs into surrealistic word combinations (Genette 1993: 53).

Be that as it may, this play with proverbs became an essential part of the literary production of the French avant-garde literary society Oulipo (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*) that was founded by Raymond Queneau (1903-1976) and François Le Lionnais (1901-1984) in 1960 at Paris. Its small group of members dedicated to experimental writing was committed to overcome any type of structural or stylistic restrictions and created texts that pushed language to its very limits. They are by no means easy to comprehend (if at all), and they require active work on part of the readers to decipher what often seems to make no sense. Above all, their usually short writings are a game to be enjoyed and to be meditated upon. They also show, of course, what can be done with language once any linguistic constraints are overcome. Warren F. Motte has described this fascinating *modus operandi* in the valuable introduction to his book *Oulipo. A Primer of Potential Literature* (1986):

Scriptor Ludens, Lector Ludens

> The Oulipian text is quite explicitly offered as a game, as a system of ludic exchange between author and reader. [...] The key word is exploration [... that] demands the reader's participation, refusing on behalf of the latter any possibility of passivity toward the literary text. [...] Thus, to the concept of potential writing corresponds that of potential reading. [...] Serious and playful intent are not mutually exclusive in the Oulipo's ludic spirit: they are, on the contrary, insistently and reciprocally implicative. [...] At its heart is the belief that play is central to literature and, in a broader sense, to the aesthetic experience; in this, Oulipians fervently concur with Johan Huizinga, who asserted that "all poetry is born of play," extending his argument from poetry to culture itself. (Motte 1986: 20-22)

This at times contrived play with language that could involve writing texts where all words lack a certain vowel or where certain phrasal units are manipulated according to mathematical patterns does in fact require active readers who might well be discouraged by this unconventional writing. This can also happen with those texts that are based on "perverted proverbs" or in French "perverbes" (proverbes pervertés), a term that is sometimes used for the more common "anti-proverb" (Villers 2014: 236 and 418).

In one of the consecutively numbered publications of the "Bibliothèque Oulipienne" that appeared as small pamphlets, Marcel Bénabou (born 1939) has a bit of "fun" with what he calls "Locutions introuvables" (undiscoverable, untraceable proverbial expressions). What follows is just one example of his playful method: The title "Les œufs et la poule" indicates the subject matter, and by starting the first group of invented proverbial phrases with "Mettre tous ses œufs ..." and the second group with "Tuer la poule ..." his readers will most likely think of the well-known proverbial expressions "Mettre tous ses œufs dans le même panier" and "Tuer la poule aux œufs d'or". Juxtaposing these phrases with Bénabou's phrasal inventions with his accompanying definitions will doubtlessly result in humor and perhaps more than that, at least at times:

> *Les œufs et la poule.*
> Mettre tous ses œufs en Espagne: s'entourer de précautions inefficaces.
> Mettre tous ses œufs en poupe: prendre de gros risques.
> Mettre tous ses œufs dans le plat: utilizer toutes ses ressources.
> Mettre tous ses œufs aux corneilles: tenter sa chance.
> Mettre tous ses œufs dnas le jardin de quelqu'un: être indiscret, s'imposer, être importun.
>
> Tuer la poule dans le plat: attendre le denier moment pur s'acquitter d'une tâche indispensable.
> Tuer la poule devant les boeufs: faire un exemple.
> Tuer la poule sur le feu: agier de façon précipitée.
> Tuer la poule dans la bergerie: agir avec dissimulation.
> (Bénabou 1984: 147)

About ten years later Marcel Bénabou published another "Bibliothèque Oulipienne" pamphlet with the title *Rendre à Cézanne. Locutions se rapportant à un seul peintre* (1993) that clearly alludes to the proverb "Render unto Caesar that what is Caesar's." This time he took standard proverbs and substituted key words with the name of famous painters and then provides interesting accounts that justify the substitution. Here is one of the shorter ones:

> *Au pays des aveugles, les Brown sont rois.*
> Ford Madox Brown (1821-1893), proche des préraphaélites, est demeuré longtemps comme le modèle des peintres surévalués: méconnu la plupart des connaisseurs, mais porté aux nues par quelques ignorants. Il est juste cependant de noter que cette situation s'est aujourd'hui modifiée, et que Brown jouit désormais d'une reputation bien meilleure.
> (Bénabou 1993: 10-11)

This and other texts like it indicate that the "preverbes" can also be telling statements that become clear as one reads the accompanying texts that show an impressive knowledge of art history.

Following this "Bibliothèque Oulipienne" publication in the same year was François Caradec's (1924-2008) *105 proverbes*

liftés suivis de quelques proverbes soldés (1993) of but thirteen pages. But there is an important two-page preface explaining that many of the old proverbs in proverb collections are not understood any longer today and that they need "un sérieux 'lifting'":

> Comment un jeune Français peut-il comprendre un précepte de saine morale tel que "Qui vole un œuf vole un bœuf", alors qu'il sait que les œufs se vendent généralement par boîtes de douze et qu' "il ne faut pa smettre la charrue avant les bœufs" alors que les charrues ne sont plus tirées par des bœufs, mais par les tracteurs? Ne comprendraient-ils pas mieux si on leur disait:
>
> > Qui vole un vélo vole un auto.
> > Il ne faut pas mettre la charrue avant le tracteur.
>
> Le langage cuit lui-même a besoin aujourd'hui d'être réchauffé au four à micro-ondes, et les proverbes d'être liftées. C'est ce que nous avons fait pour un certain nombre d'entre eux, en espérant que cet example sera suivi. (Caradec 1993: 6)

François Caradec need not have worried, since this type of rejuvenation of traditional proverbs via their change to anti-proverbs is as popular today as ever in almost all modes of communication, especially in proverbial aphorisms, advertising slogans, newspaper headlines, memes, and the Internet. Here are but a few of his examples:

> L'homme ne vit pas seulement de pain Poilâne.
> Il ne faut pas réveiller le député qui dort.
> Les chiens aboient, la caravane du Tour de France passe.
> Autres temps, autres faits de société.
> La critique est aisée, mais l'Oulipo difficile.
> (Caradec 1993: 8-9 and 13)

The last text is telling insofar that it is indeed easy to criticize the linguistic play of the Oulipians, but it is at times also quite difficult to decipher their innovative proverbial messages as sensible statements. But again, it deserves to be mentioned that such proverb manipulations are not as "new" as the members of Oulipo seem to think. What is of importance is that these French

intellectuals play with proverbs just as people of all walks of life have done for a long time for various reasons, from mere linguistic play to serious and necessary changes of old proverbial wisdom as the worldview of modern societies change. No wonder that new proverbs are becoming current as well, something to which paremiologists need to pay much more attention (Mieder 2012). Many of them did in fact start as anti-proverbs based on established proverbs and their structures, but in a relatively short time they can become new proverbs in their own right, as *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (2012) edited by Charles Clay Doyle, Wolfgang Mieder, and Fred R. Shapiro can attest.

While the Oulipians were French, there was one American in the group, namely the American novelist, poet, essayist, and translator Harry Mathews. He was born on February 14, 1930 in New York City, attended Princeton University in 1949, transferred to Harvard in 1950, and graduated in 1952 with a B.A. degree in music. He then moved with his artist wife Niki de Saint Phalle to Paris, but the couple and their two children Laura (born 1951) and Philip (born 1955) divorced in 1960. He subsequently married the writer Marie Chaix with whom he lived since 1972 in Paris, Key West, and New York until his death on January 25, 2017. After befriending the Oulipian Georges Perec (1936-1982) in Paris in 1970 (Mathews 2003: 86), he was beginning in 1973 "for decades sole American member of Oulipo, the quirky French literary salon where authors and mathematicians practice what they call constrained writing: forcing themselves to follow contrived formulas – for example, using specific words or leaving out certain letters. (Oulipo is short for 'ouvroir de littérature potentielle,' or 'workshop of potential literature'" (Roberts 2017; see also Tillman 1989: 10-11). Applying intricate mathematical patterns to some of his literary constructions, he developed "Mathews's algorithm: a set of rules that, applied in a prescribed order to a set of data, produces a particular result, no matter what the data may be" (Mathews 2005: 183). He explained this method in great detail in his essay "L'Algorithme de Mathews" (1981), stating that "from the reader's point of view, the existence in literature of potentiality in its Oulipian sense has the charm of introducing duplicity into all written texts" (Mathews 1986: 126 and 2003: 301). Part of the reader's challenge or joy is to figure out the linguistic signs that Mathews

employs in his playful or contrived texts. "He takes semiotics out of the seminar and makes it live as fiction. [...] Language, in all of its many-meaninged, ambiguous, tragicomic potential, is itself his subject matter" (Stonehill1982: 107).

There is then no doubt that Harry Mathews was a "literary maverick" whose "intellectual games" with language result in a challenging "multiplicity and ambiguity" (Leamon 1993: ix). His strategies and games with language are enigmas for readers who find themselves perplexed by the infinity of possible conclusions about what it all might just mean (Mottram 1987: 159-160). Most likely influenced by such French surrealists as Paul Éluard and Benjamin Péret and his fellow Oulipians. Mathews turned to proverbs in his collection of French poems published as *Le Savoir des Rois. Poèmes à perverbes* (1976) that was published as the fifth number of the "Bibliothèque Oulipienne". The title signifies that he will be changing proverbs into "perverbes" or anti-proverbs. The permutational "game" that Mathews is playing in these poems is well explained by Warren F. Motte, the well-informed editor of *Oulipo. A Primer of Potential Literature* (1986):

> These texts are based on the principle of the "perverb" [English spelling of "perverbe"], a form which juxtaposes the first part of a given proverb to the second part of another: most of the poems in *Le Savoir des Rois* consist of a series of perverbs, each constituting a verse. Several things become apparent, even from this skeletal description. The ludic aspect of the exercise is suggested by the name "perverb"; the latter in turn, granted its phonetic and graphic form, which truncates and juxtaposes the words "pervert" and "proverb," emblematizes the function to which it refers. That function is itself clearly combinatoric, and when an entire poem is composed of perverbs, a second-order combinatoric system is elaborated, insofar as the various half-proverbs may recur within the text according to a given pattern. Finally, the proverb is a privileged locus for transformational play.
>
> If proverbs do offer such a fertile field for transformation, it is undoubtedly because they are so easily recognizable. That is, a certain sort of transformation, one

> that explicitly points to itself as such, relies on the identification of the hypotext within the hypertext. In the case of the perverb, the hypotext is constituted by the two initial proverbs, the hypertext by the perverb which result from them. Proverbs are easily recognizable and, paradoxically perhaps, almost transparent semantically: through use, their semantic aspect tends to erode. This, too, can be exploited in transformation. (Motte 1987: 95)

But here then is an example of Mathews's permutational poetics based on perverted proverbs. It is called "Du mouvement des roses" and has as a two-line motto "On revient toujours / Malheureux en amour". These two proverb halves, based on the proverbs "On revient toujours à ses premières amours" and "Heureux en jeu, malheureux en amour" are repeated as leitmotifs in each of the twelve stanzas that contain numerous other fragmented proverbs. Its beginning goes like this:

> Jeux de mains comme les rivières dans la mer!
> Plaisir d'amour ne dure qu'un instant, et Dieu pour soi!
> L'amour ôte l'esprit à ceux qui en ont et rentre par la fenêtre.
> Dans le royaume des aveugles, à ses premières amours.
> (Tant va la cruche à l'eau que bon mari.)
> L'homme propose, malheuereux en amour:
> L'enfer des femmes fait danser les marrons.
> Savoir dissimuler? Chagrin d'amour dure toute une vie.
>
> Jeu de mains fait danser les marrons:
> Plaisir d'amour ne dure qu'un instant? Il rentre par la fenêtre!
> L'amour ôte l'esprit à ceux qui en ont (et bonnet blanc),
> Nature est mère à ses premières amours:
> "A vaillant cœur, bon mari!"
> Rien ne sert de courir, malheuereux en amour!
> L'enfer des femmes, *c'est il se fait ermite*;
> Quand le diable est vieux, chagrin d'amour dure toute une vie.
> (Mathews 1976: 89)

And on and on it goes for ten more stanzas in this fashion without any particular rhyme or reason (Güell 1999: 263-264). It is not even clear what the title of this *tour-de-force* perverb poem is

meant to signify since roses do not appear anywhere. Or are "roses" here metaphors for proverbs that are moved around? As one begins to read this long text the missing proverb halves are recalled, and one is eager to read on to discover them. Clearly Mathews is activating the reader to go on a paremiological trip of sorts. In any case, as one reads this long poem, one is perhaps reminded of standing in front of Pieter Bruegel's "The Netherlandish Proverbs" (1559) oil painting in the art museum at Berlin with its minute illustrations of over one hundred proverbs and proverbial illustrations (Mieder 2004b). Part of the "fun and game" is to identify as many of the proverbial scenes and their verbal background as possible (Dundes and Stibbe 1981) and this is what Mathews seems to be intending with his verbal collage of numerous halves of the French proverb repertoire.

With the other poems along this line included in this book, Mathews certainly established himself as the "perverbes" poet par excellence. They obviously cannot be dealt with here in detail, but a literary-minded paremiologist with a solid command of the French language could still make a considerable research project out of this "Bibliothèque Oulipienne" publication. Suffice it to add a somewhat different proverb poem by Harry Matthew that he included with the title "Insomnies" in his collection of *Écrits français* (1990). It is comprised of eight four-line stanzas, each with three lines beginning with "La nuit" and ending with "tous les chats sont gris". In this manner the two halves of the proverb "La nuit, tous les chats sont gris" frame the rest of the messages, with the entire poem giving the impression that during insomnia everything is blurred into a greyish matter. And true to his proverbial method, a few random proverb halves also appear. The poem starts like this and continues for six more stanzas:

La nuit, jeux de vilains;
La nuit, tous les vices;
La nuit, tout se remplace,
Plaisir d'amour ne dure qu'un instant, tous les chats sont gris.

La nuit, on jette l'écorce.
La nuit a ses premières amours.
La nuit fait danser les marrons –

> L'amour ôte l'esprit à ceux qui en ont, et tous les chats sont gris.
> (Mathews 1990: 343)

Such poems are isolated examples of Mathews's permutational art that also spilled over into the prose texts and novels of this prolific writer (McPheron 1987), who is "well known in certain literary circles but largely unknown to the general reading public (Leamon 1993: ix). This unfortunate situation is primarily due to the fact that most readers do not react favorably towards experimental literature like that practiced by the Oulipians and other modernist writers who search to engage them as active participants in their creations. Little wonder that Harry Mathews quintessential "perverb" work, i.e., his novel, if one can call it that, *Selected Declarations of Dependence* (1977) remains quite neglected. Uninitiated readers opening this compendium of prose and poetry based to a large degree on perverted proverbs will most likely be perplexed, frustrated, confused, and more, but if willing to "stick with it" and take up the challenge of reading something truly unique, they will eventually be richly rewarded by this avant-garde, experimental, and permutational literary creation of close to two-hundred pages. There is much to be discovered in Mathews's perverb creations based on "combined proverbs permuted until the mind is dizzied and the meaning transmogrified: 'Every cloud is another man's poison'; "The road to Hell is paved with rolling stones'" (Anonymous 1977: 67).

The reviews that appeared shortly after the publication of *Selected Declarations of Dependence* (1977) with the small Z Press in Calais, Vermont (republished by Sun & Moon Press in 1996 at Los Angeles) did not exactly help to spread the good word. Susan Shafarzek dedicated but ten lines to it, stating that the book "includes a novella and a collection of 'Proverbs and Paraphrases.' Mathews is one of the most interesting experimental prose writers in this country, and his work is not to be missed" (1977: 2488). The obvious question of "why?" is answered in a more telling review by A. Ross Eckler: "The book is based entirely on a group of 46 proverbs. Its first part contains a story written solely out of the words in the proverbs (a form of lipogrammetry), its second part supplies 106 brief anecdotes illus-

trating perverbs (respliced halves of proverbs, as 'the early bird gathers no moss'). As the perverbs and their anecdotes are randomly scrambled, the reader can have the fun of matching them up. The book concludes with a clever parody of 'This is the House that Jack Built' based on the words in the proverbs" (Eckler 1978: 49). This is quite to the point but fails to mention that poems also play a major role in this work. In a third review by an anonymous author it is important to note that here the title of the book takes on somewhat of a meaning:

> Is this a New York School grammatical farce, replete with ripped-off proverbs and 80 camp "doggie" drawings differing only in value, not content? Yes and no. [Axel] Katz's dogs give away the game. Mathematical theme and variation is its name. Suppose the given were a structured repertoire of meaning (proverbs). Suppose they were randomly cut and pasted. What new fictions might result from the rearrangement of sense? Subtract, add, substitute, reveal. Mathews, poet and author of three novels, derives whole stories from a limited word structure. Experimenting with abstractions, he transforms narrative meaning and finally genre (fiction into poetry), demonstrating the shared dependencies between. (Anonymous 1978: 1602)

Finally, there is also David Lehmann's longer review that is part of his discussion of five literary works from the late 1970s. Stating that this book "has not yet received its critical due," he offers the following comments:

> Mathews is one of our great experimentalists, and *Selected Declarations of Dependence* is a magnificent feat of verbal gamesmanship, providing conclusive evidence of his ability to create a proliferation of texts from the least promising of origins, to harness the generative power of language through the agency of applied mathematical principles. The book's *donnée* is a set of well-worn proverbs, forty-six of them, that supply the "theme" for an apparently inexhaustible number of variations. Capitalizing on typos is one way of renewing a dead metaphor, as Mathews shows in such "Snips of the

> Tongue" as "The toad to help is paved with good intentions." A more reliable method involves the equivoque, and arcane form in which the first half of any given line couples with the second half of the following line. Mathews calls the results he comes up with "perverbs." (Lehmann 1980: 147)

Realizing that his literary creations challenge readers used to making sense of what they are reading, Mathews provided a helpful "Foreword" to his *Selected Declarations of Dependence* in 1989 that agrees with what the earlier reviewers had said:

> *Selected Declarations of Dependence* is based on a set of forty-six familiar proverbs, used and abused in various ways:
>
> The forty-six proverbs provide the entire vocabulary of the opening story, "Their Words, For You."
>
> The sections called "Perverbs and Paraphrases" explore the narrative implications of the crossed proverb or "perverb".
>
> (Two suitable proverbs yield two perverbs – for example, "All roads lead to Rome" and "A rolling stone gathers no moss" supply, when crossed, the perverbs "All roads gather no moss" and "A rolling stone leads to Rome.") The perverbs that gave rise to the so-called paraphrases have been listed randomly in order to leave the pleasure of making appropriate connections to the reader.
>
> (Matthews 1977 [1996]: 10; page numbers in parentheses will refer to this later edition)

Pleasure might also be substituted by anxiety or vexation, because the match-up of the paraphrases with the perverbs are to a certain degree unsolvable, forcing readers to put the book aside but maybe picking it up again to find resolutions. This is what makes active readers as Mathews envisions them, as can be seen from his comment in an interview with Susannah Hunnewell in 2007: "The expectation is that books are supposed to reach conclusions that bring all things that have been going on to an end so the reader can stop thinking about them. I avoid conclusions,

not just to frustrate readers but to make them realize that they're going to have to take the book for what it is – a piece of writing that exists on its own and whose essential interest is its process. Isn't that the way life is, after all? No conclusions, no escape, until the very end" (Hunnewell 2007: 86). Let me add here that I wish I would have known this statement when I first read this "perverb book", because it would have explained to me that I was supposed to feel unresolved!

Be that as it may, Harry Mathews also explains in this informative interview that in *Selected Declarations of Dependence* he gave himself "the task of writing a story using the one hundred and eighty-five words that were found in forty-six proverbs. This is a forbiddingly small vocabulary. It was hard to know what to do with them. Then I started putting words together and a few words would lead to a sentence and then eventually it became a sweet love story" (Hunnewell 2007: 83). Of course, he mentions nothing about the interspersed perverb poems that appear to exist of randomly listed texts placed helter-skelter among the prose. Yet again, if he intends to get his readers thinking and enjoying the mere play with these forty-six proverbs, then he certainly hits the mark. As Frederick Ted Castle has observed proverbially, "Left to itself, the mind and hand of Harry Mathews will make up a story often 'out of the whole cloth,' often taking a particular locution as a text, or rather, of course, as a pretext. Harry might be able to write a whole book out of the phrase 'out of the whole cloth' – I almost hesitate to suggest since he might take up the gauntlet and run with it. Indeed, as I often say, never count your chickens until your milk is spilt. a perversion of folk wisdom which is, needless to say, open to many a jibe and thrust" (Castle 1987: 119-120).

But enough of this, for the time has come to have a look at the forty-six proverbs that Harry Mathews selected for his absolutely unique book, one that undoubtedly deserves the Oulipian designation! Coy or sly as he is, he has not provided his readers with a list, and here then it is in which I have arranged the proverbs alphabetically according to keywords:

1. A *bird* in the hand is worth two in the bush.
2. The early *bird* catches the worm.

3. In the kingdom (land) of the *blind*, the one-eyed is king (are kings).
4. Once *burned*, twice shy.
5. Render unto *Caesar* the things which are Caesar's.
6. Many are *called*, but few are chosen.
7. Lucky at *cards*, unlucky in love.
8. It's raining *cats* and dogs.
9. When the *cat*'s away, the mice will play.
10. Every *cloud* has a silver lining.
11. Too many *cooks* spoil the broth.
12. Let the *dead* bury the dead.
13. The *devil* takes the hindmost.
14. Every *dog* has its day.
15. You can't teach an old *dog* new tricks.
16. Let sleeping *dogs* lie.
17. *East* is east, and west is west, and never the twain shall meet.
18. A *fool* and his money are soon parted.
19. Never look a *gift horse* in the mouth.
20. What *goes* up, must come down.
21. The *grass* is always greener on the other side of the fence.
22. You can lead a *horse* to water but you cannot make it drink.
23. Half a *loaf* is better than no bread.
24. *Look* before you leap.
25. *Man* proposes, God disposes.
26. One man's *meat* is another man's poison.
27. A *miss* is as good as a mile.
28. Great *oaks* from little acorns grow.
29. You can't make an *omelet* without breaking eggs.
30. Any *port* in a storm
31. It never *rains* but it pours.
32. The *road* to hell is paved with good intentions.
33. All *roads* lead to Rome.
34. *Rome* was not built in one day.
35. When in *Rome*, do as the Romans do.
36. *Six* of one or half a dozen of the other.
37. Red *sky* at night, sailor's delight; red sky in the morning, sailors take warning.

38. *Sticks* and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.
39. A *stitch* in time saves nine.
40. A rolling *stone* gathers no moss.
41. Leave no *stone* unturned.
42. Never give a *sucker* an even break.
43. You can't *take* it with you.
44. *Time* and tide wait for no man.
45. Never put of till *tomorrow* what you can do today.
46. It's an ill *wind* that blows no good.

From a paremiological point of view it would be of interest to know how Mathews came up with this list. It definitely includes well-known proverbs that belong to the paremiological minimum of English proverbs (Haas 2008), and it should be noted that he included such modern proverbs as "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence" and "Never give a sucker an even break" (Doyle, Mieder and Shapiro 2012). But it must be stated that "Six of one or half dozen of the other" and "Leave no stone unturned" are proverbial expressions. It is also surprising that Mathews included two "bird", two "cat", three "dog", two "horse", two "man", two "road", three "Rome", and two "stone" proverbs because the repetitions of these nouns placed even more limitations on the different words from these proverbs that he could use in his *Their Words, For You* story. But all of this was, of course, his decision, and it can be assumed that "their words" of the title refers to the words of the proverbs. Here then is the first chapter of this fascinating short novel with the prose section being made up of the words of the proverbs and the following poems being comprised of proverb halves (scrambled or fused proverbs) called perverbs (Villers 2010: 12-13). One wonders how readers, uninitiated by the list of proverbs presented above, might have reacted to all of this:

> Another morning, another egg. The sky was up early. It had rained all night: to you and me sleeping, the storm was a delight. In the east, morning clouds are building a kingdom of red and silver. Time for you to get up! Come into the kingdom of morning delight and come as king! Come into the omelet of morning delight, and come as egg!

You can't make an omelet without breaking half a dozen of the other. Take six eggs … Eggs are things – eggs were things: have an omelet. Have a little bread with it too. Cat! Come on Cat, you old dog, have little bread till it's bone time.

You're looking good today. What of going down the road to the port? No – you propose old-stone-gathering at the water side, and going into the water when the tide comes in.

You go with me down fences that teach the intentions of the men that dispose of the grass. A horse waits at a fence; another rolls on the grass, breaking wind. (Good for the horse – one should break wind when one has to, putting it off does no good.) At the side of the road dead grass is burning, old sticks and grass, burning silver in the morning. The road is a delight, with water on one side, oaks and grass on the other; and the grass leads away to another water. In the oaks you once gathered bird's eggs from moss.

From the road you can see the port, the old port paved with stones, paved with bones. Sailors gather in it at night, gathering on the night side of the port looking for the tricks and stitches of love.

God disposes
Red sky at night,
Man proposes
Sailor's delight

When the tide is coming in, sailors can drink and sleep. In the morning all leave on the early tide. Not all: a few go on sleeping.

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" sailors 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 sailors' delight.
Once burned, sailors take warning:
All roads bury their dead.

All roads have a silver lining;
East is east and west is west in a storm;
Time and tide are as good as a mile.
East is east and west is west – sailor's delight.
(East is east and west is west, sailors take warning!)
All roads are worth two in the bush. (12-16)

Reading just these pages it becomes clear that Mathews presents an "ingeniously crafted language game, played out within carefully defined limits. […] It is not life or reality or experience but language that creates the story" (Everman 1986: 465-466). Readers have to take the leap into this contrived world of words and halves of proverbs, perhaps best without looking for any definite answers to what it all is supposed to mean. Welch D. Everman in his enlightening essay on "Harry Mathews's *Selected Declarations of Dependence*: Proverbs and the Forms of Authority" (1987) provides as good an interpretation as possible, and before going on to some additional examples, it is cited here at some length:

> The source of Mathew's declarations is the proverb, that commonplace bit of conventional wisdom which seems to belong to no one and everyone. Proverbs are cultural clichés, secondhand language. In a sense, of course, all language is secondhand, but the proverb is a special case, because it is prepackaged. As a cliché, the proverb is a phrase or sentence that functions as a unit, as a sign in its own right, a sign that everyone understands immediately, without the need for thought and interpretation.

> But, of course, the proverb is a very special kind of cliché, for it bears within itself a formidable authority. Proverbs offer advice, but to use a proverb is not to speak with one's own limited authority. It is to speak with the authority of the entire culture which adopted the proverb as an expression of its collective wisdom. [...]
>
> Mathews's explorations in *Selected Declarations of Dependence* are designed to maintain the discourse of proverbs but at the same time to undermine their collective authority by carefully dismantling them, perhaps in hopes of making them say something new. [...]
>
> "Their Words, For You" is, indeed, a story built from the fragments of dismantled proverbs, and yet the words come together again and again on proverbial structures. The text generates many new proverbs, constructed from bits of old proverbs and sharing their traditional form but without their built-in authority. "Playing the fool is a delight fools cannot have." "Love disposes of cats and kings, but a good stitch never parts." Mathews also uses larger "pieces" [poems] of proverbs to create new proverbial combinations and permutations:
>
> In the kingdom of the blind, few are chosen.
> In the kingdom of the blind, sailors take warning.
> In the kingdom of the blind, unlucky in love.
> Many are called, but the one-eyed man is king.
>
> These are declarations of dependence because the author and the texts depend on the words the culture has offered in its proverbs. In fact, *Selected Declarations of Dependence* is only a special case in the general field of writing which is always dependent on language as a given and, more particularly, on a given discourse within that language. (Everman 1987: 149-151, also 1988: 72-74)

These are insightful observations to be sure, but when Welch Everman claims Mathews's "text generates many new proverbs" he should better have spoken of "perverbs" or anti-proverbs. As is well known, some such new creations based on traditional proverbs and their structures can become new proverbs, but Mathews's texts would have to become much better known and

more widely disseminated for that to occur with his playful inventions. And yet, Keith Cohen is correct in stating that when with some of these perverbs "a sudden revelation of possible profundity occurs, the result is hilarious, since one realizes that the perverb has been created entirely haphazardly. The aura of eternal verity hangs onto each segment, through a kind of proverb intertextuality, even though the words themselves are fairly ordinary" (Cohen 1987: 182).

While some of the "perverb" poems don't follow any discernible pattern except for fusing halves of proverbs randomly together, there are also poetic texts where the same proverb half begins each stanza as a type of proverbial anaphora:

> *Every cloud blows no good.*
> You can't make an omelet in a storm.
> *Red sky at morning waits for no man.*
> *Time and tide gather no moss.*
>
> *Every cloud, sailors take warning.*
> *"It never rains"? – twice shy.*
> *It's an ill wind that has its day.*
> East is east and west is west, but it pours.
>
> *Every cloud wasn't built in a day.*
> All roads in a storm.
> *Red sky at night, but God disposes.*
> *Time and tide have their day.* (18-20)

There are seven more stanzas along this line to follow, with Mathews obviously delighting in the creation of these often senseless permutations. And yet, some of the perverbs do make sense under certain circumstances, showing that sense can come from nonsense in such linguistic games. What is not clear is why Mathews italicizes some of his perverbs and others not.

Another structural pattern that he employs in stanzas is starting lines one, two, and four with the same proverb half and line three with another proverb half, while the fifth line is completely different. Here are two of four stanzas of such a collage:

> *The early bird waits for no man.*
> *The early bird gathers no moss.*
> *A bird in the hand is soon parted.*

The early bird gets what you can do today.
  Red sky at morning gets the worm.

The early bird is soon parted –
The early bird is on the other side of the fence!
  A bird in the hand is twice shy.
The early bird leaves no stone unturned.
  A rolling stone gets the worm. (24)

Then again Mathews might take the first half of the proverb "The road to hell is paved with good intentions" and compose a four-stanza poem where all lines begin with the same proverb half:

The road to Hell gets the worm.
The road to Hell gathers no moss.
The road to Hell leaves no stone unturned.

The road to Hell from little acorns grows.
The road to Hell is paved with rolling stones.
The road to Hell waits for no man.

The road to Hell takes the hindmost.
The road to Hell has its day.
The road to Hell spoils the broth.

The road to Hell has a silver lining:
The road to Hell wasn't built in a day.
On the road to Hell, do as the Romans do. (50-52)

But he might also take the two "horse" proverbs from his list of forty-six and arrange their first halves according to the same pattern, completing them with randomly selected proverb halves:

You can lead a horse to water without breaking eggs.
  You can lead a horse to water, but do as the Romans do.
  A gift horse is always on the other side of the fence.

You can lead a horse to water and never the twain shall meet.
  You can lead a horse to water, but God disposes.
  Mighty gift horses from little silver linings grow … (70)

Finally, here are three nine-line stanzas that show the complexity of such *tour-de-force* proverb permutations with proverb halves. Each starts with "You can't make an omelet", each has lines beginning with "One man's meat" and "Too many cooks" as well as two or even three lines starting with "Half a loaf". Each stanza also ends with the proverb half "spoil(s) the broth" as a leitmotif:

You can't make an omelet with good intentions:
Too many cooks are better than no bread.
One man's meat, as good as a mile,
Once burned, spoils the broth.
Too many cooks are worth two in the bush –
You can't make an omelet on the other side of the fence.
Half a loaf is better than two in the bush –
Half a loaf in the storm!
It's an ill wind that spoils the broth.

You can't make an omelet – but few are chosen:
A fool and his money are better than no bread.
One man's meat gets the worm –
Look before you spoil the broth!
Too many cooks take the hindmost.
One man's meat is greener on the other side of the fence.
Half a loaf is better than no silver lining.
Half a loaf is better without breaking eggs:
Man proposes, and spoils the broth.

You can't make an omelet, and God disposes.
One man's meat is better than no bread.
One man's meat is worth two in the bush.
(Sticks and stones spoil the broth.)
Too many cooks, twice shy.
Half a loaf is better than the other side of the fence.
Half a loaf is as good as a mile.
Half a loaf has its day.
Many are called, but spoil the broth. (76)

As the readers compare all of these perverbs, they will delight discovering those that make at least some sense, as for example "Look before you spoil the broth!" with its authoritative exclamation mark added to underscore its truth value. And yet, if I may say so, when the perverb narrative "Their Words, For You"

with its poetic interludes comes to an end on page 85, readers most likely need a well-deserved break.

And yet, the second half of *Selected Declarations of Dependence* with the title "First Derivations" confronts them with perhaps an even greater challenge. The verbal game of guessing (deducing) traditional proverbs from paraphrased statements is well established. I have played it at parties in Germany as well as the United States. Usually someone brings a list of the paraphrases and people will try to come up with the proverbs behind them. Richard Lederer presents a section of examples in his book *The Play of Words. Fun & Games for Language Lovers* (Lederer 1990: 219-223), with tree typical examples being:

> Integrity is the superlative strategy.
> *Proverb:* Honesty is the best policy. (221)
>
> Individuals who make their abode in vitreous edifices of patent frangibility are advised to refrain from catapulting petrous projectiles. (222)
> *Proverb:* People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.
>
> Refrain from enumerating the denta of gratuitous members of the Equidae family.
> *Proverb:* Don't look a gift horse in the mouth. (223)

The hidden proverbs are relatively easily found here, but Harry Mathews now wants readers to discover his more complex perverbs behind his prose paraphrases (Loberer 1996: 2). He is kind enough to give an example at the beginning:

> *Perverbs and Paraphrases*
> "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." (86)

But now the challenge starts, for this is not just reading perverbs any longer but rather recalling those that fit certain paraphrases. Since honesty is the best policy, let me admit that I had to to give up eventually. Scholars who have dealt with this matter had the same reaction. Thus, Keith Cohen writes that "it is exceedingly difficult to derive the original perverb from the paraphrases. One paraphrase that I was able to decipher is 'Are acorns bitter?!

Don't you remember when we were camping and some fell in the soup?' – from 'Little acorns spoil the broth.'" (Cohen 1987: 183). There are 106 paraphrase stories divided into four groups of which each is followed by a list of possible perverbs to which they might be referring. That narrows it down somewhat! In any case, here is one that Welch Everman (1987: 151, also 1988: 74) solved:

> He had won forty thousand francs at trente quarante, forty thousand dollars at chemmy, and after the casino closed, forty thousand pounds in a private poker game. Yet when I suggested he celebrate and have some champagne, he did not even answer but raised hs eyes to heaven and cut the deck. (110)
> *Perverb:* Lucky at cards, but you can't make him drink. (122)

Daniel Becker (2012: 4) solved this one:

> Two colossal representations of the Trinity had been raised on the Via Appia Antica, the second immediately outside the city gates. (136)
> *Perverb:* Six of one lead to Rome. (144)

And here are three of the "perverbial" riddles untied by David Lehmann (1980: 148):

> In ordinary circumstances his verboseness was less than dangerous. But compounded by a generous desire to share with his audience every detail of his money-making scheme, it produced a lecture so interminable that captain and officers fell asleep and failed to notice the clear portents of the ship's impending doom. (108)
> *Perverb:* It's an ill wind that blows with good intentions. (122)

> In another version of the Polyphemus myth, the blinding with the lighted stake is part of the ritual enthronement of the Cyclops in his royal functions. (118)
> *Perverb:* Once burned, the one-eyed man is king. (122)

> Max smashed the truncheon across the bridge of my nose. Tony screwed the slabs sandwiching my right hand a

> notch tighter. They were approaching the point of permanent damage. I just kept grunting out the truth: I had spent thirteen hours with Phang, but there had been no way to administer the poison – in all that time he had not once raised to his lips as much as a glass of water or a cup of tea. (142)
> *Perverb:* Sticks and stones may break my bones, but you can't make him drink. (144)

May others try their luck at his vexing game, but as I said, I gave up after having solved at least a few more of these perverbial conundrums.

For the paremiologists, there is one more section interspersed among all of this – perhaps to relax the readers! – and that is "Snips of the Tongue" (124-128), where Harry Mathews tries his hand at more traditional anti-proverbs that are simply formed by letter or word exchanges or, as he would have it, by "slips of the tongue". Since there are not many, they are reproduced here entirely:

> Once burned, twice snide [shy]
>
> Every drug [dog] has its day.
>
> The road to help [hell] is paved with good intentions,
>
> Never pull [put] off tomorrow what you can do today.
>
> When in Rome, do as the Trojans [Romans] do.
>
> Half a loan [loaf] is better than no bread.
>
> Every crowd [cloud] has a silver lining.
>
> One man's meat is another man's person [poison].
>
> Look before you leave [leap].
>
> A snitch [stitch] in time saves nine.
>
> In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is kinky [king].
>
> Too many cooks spoil the dwarf [broth].

These anti-proverbs are actually quite original since with but one exception they do not appear in the largest collections of such

intentional variations of proverbs. Mathews's "Never pull off tomorrow what you can do today" comes close to "Never pull off tomorrow what you can pull off today" from 1971 (Litovkina and Mieder 2006: 235), but his "Look before you leave" was recorded by me from a newspaper in 1981 (Mieder 1989: 274, Litovkina and Mieder 2006: 205). It is highly doubtful that the journalist was influenced by Mathews's anti-proverb from 1977, showing that polygenesis of such anti-proverbs does occur. But Harry Mathews might have been surprised to learn in any case that his text is about twenty years older. We have recorded it in our *Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (2012) as early as from 1958 on a poster urging drivers' caution in lane-changing: "Squeeze plays are preventable / Look before you leave" (Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro 2012: 150).

In conclusion then, let it be said that Harry Mathews's unique *Selected Declarations of Dependence* (1977, republished 1996) is a remarkable treasure trove of anti-proverbs or "perverbes", as the French Oulipians and subsequently the French paremiologists like to call them. Manipulating traditional proverbs is nothing new, but Mathews created a literary work based on such intellectual plays with them. It is a challenging book to be sure, but it is a delight to readers interested in the play with language. It is a shame that the book has not received any attention from paremiologists thus far, and I hope that this introduction will change this. After all, the innovative transformations of traditional proverbs are part of cultural, folkloric, historical, and literary studies (Mieder 1987 and 2008). Surely Harry Mathews would agree that "familiar proverbs, used and abused in various ways" (Mathews 1977 [1996]: 10) continue to be part of oral and written communication in the modern world, and whether it is *homo ludens* or more specifically *scriptor ludens* or *lector ludens*, let's keep playing with proverbs while realizing that proverbs as such will undoubtedly continue to *play a role* in modern life.

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