

Writing Exercise: Transposing nouns

OK -- this is taken exactly from Nick Bantock's *The Trickster's Hat*. Like many of his exercises, this is all about chance operations. Of course you could choose other texts than the ones presented here.



Transposing Nouns

Back in the 1920s, the Surrealists developed a number of art and writing games devised to break up predictable thinking patterns. They declared that as society's nature is to herd the mass imagination down predictable lines, the artist's job is to find ways of avoiding those well-worn grooves.

This exercise, among others, springs from the same well as those early Surrealist mind-shuffling techniques. The results can be hilarious, ridiculous, and profound—often all at the same time.

As you do this exercise, let go of the desire to make things reasonable. Let the nonsense flow, then watch as it re-forms into its own left-handed rightness.

INSTRUCTIONS

Take the book you are currently reading, or any other close at hand, and open it at random. Select a short paragraph approximately three or four sentences long, and underline all of the nouns. (I suggest you do it lightly in pencil so that you can erase the graphite with ease.)

Now pick another, completely different kind of text, whether it be a magazine or a washing machine manual, and select a similar-sized paragraph. Repeat the process, underlining all the nouns.

Next, copy the two paragraphs into your notebook, but as you do so, transpose the nouns from the first paragraph, in the order in which they appear, to the other paragraph.

Here's an example:

Paragraph 1 (novel):

He hurried through a narrow street of medieval houses, their top stories jutting out over the road, keeping rain off the walkers below, until he reached the cobbled quayside. To his left was the river. The tide was high and the moored boats gyrated violently on slate-colored water. Gerry's cottage was at the end of the row of houses, the smallest dwelling, separated from the pub by a narrow road.

Paragraph 2 (artist's diary):

The night was profound. It was impossible to distinguish things, save a powdery phosphorescence close to my head, which strangely perplexed me. I smiled when I thought of the Maori stories about the Tupapaus, the evil spirits which awaken with the darkness to trouble sleeping men. Their realm is in the heart of the mountain, which the forest surrounds with eternal shadows. There it swarms with them, and without cease their legions are increased by the spirits of those who have died.

Once you've transposed the nouns you get these new paragraphs...

Paragraph 1 (altered):

Night hurried through a narrow things of medieval phosphorescence, their top head jutting out over the Maori, keeping stories off the Tupapaus below, until he reached the cobbled spirits. To his left was the darkness. The men was high and the moored realm gyrated violently on slate-colored heart. Gerry's mountain was at the end of the row of forest, the smallest shadows, separated from the legions by a narrow spirits.

Paragraph 2 (altered):

The he was profound. It was impossible to distinguish street, save a powdery houses close to my stories, which strangely perplexed me. I smiled when I thought of the road rain about the walkers, the evil quayside which awaken with the river to trouble sleeping tide.

Their boats is in the water of the cottage, which the houses surrounds with eternal dwelling. There it swarms with them, and without cease their pub are increased by the road of those who have died.

Read both paragraphs out loud. Even with the oddness and things like incorrect plurals, the paragraphs have a curious rhythm.

Now join the two paragraphs and delete any words you don't want. You can correct tenses and plurals and add punctuation, but you can't change the order of the words.

You may get something like this:

Night hurried through narrow medieval phosphorescence, jutting out over the Tupapaus below, until he reached the cobbled spirits. To his left was the darkness. The men were high, and the moored realm gyrated violently on slate-colored hearts. Gerry's mountain was at the end of the row of forest, the smallest shadow separated from the legions by a narrow spirit. It was impossible to distinguish streets, save houses, which strangely perplexed him. He smiled when he thought of the rain—about the walkers, evil quayside, which awakens with the river to trouble sleeping tides. Their boats in the water, the houses surrounded with eternal dwellings. There it swarms with them, increased by those who have died.