

One of my main goals as a teacher is to help students "get over themselves" in the poem--that is, to shift the focus in writing away from the poet's self and intentions and onto what is happening with the words on the page.

One strategy for disabling the ego involves engaging vocabularies and syntaxes that come from outside the self altogether. My favorite exercise for this right now is the cento, which requires you to compose a poem constructed entirely from sentences found in another source or (as I usually practice it) from other sources. An assignment I often give myself is to compose a cento from the *New York Times*, using at least three different articles and avoiding politics. If you do this exercise, look for articles and/or sections of the paper that are likely to pique your interest content-wise (for me these would be articles and blogs on science, philosophy, nature, the arts), but as you read look beyond content for any sentence that pulls at your ear and imagination--that has the potential, in context, to reflect your own sensibility. Another approach would be to choose a single large work, like *Middlemarch* or *Moby Dick*, with the requirement that you draw from the beginning, middle, and end of the book. As you pull out your sentences, take far more than you will be able to use, drawing from anything that catches your eye as potentially useful, and put them down on your page out of order. If you are using more than one text, it's good to put the sentences into conversation with each other by mixing them up.

An exercise adapted from one my friend Michael Mejia has used in prose is to choose a text you really love (probably, in this case, a poem) and compose an entirely new poem from it, using only the original poem's words, and using them all. I haven't tried this one myself--it sounds very difficult.

A final strategy is the erasure poem: choose a page of poetry or prose and erase almost all of it. What you leave behind is your poem. Jen Bervin has done this with Shakespeare's sonnets in her little book *Nets*, and Ronald Johnson erased *Paradise Lost* to create his long poem, *Radi Os*. My own efforts have been more modest, focused again on the *New York Times* and on the writings of Antarctic explorers like Shackleton.

With all of these, you shouldn't have to worry about copyright as long as your poem is genuinely transformative, a new work, but do credit the original(s), mostly because it's polite to do so but also because things are more interesting that way.

CentO Pantoum (from a blog by Errol Morris)

Katharine Coles

We know there is a *real world*. It is not *in us*.
The image and the name of the object encounter each other.
Our brains are just big lumps of electric jelly,
Also splotches of ink on a page.

The image and the name of the object encounter each other.
It doesn't matter what's in our heads—
Also splotches of ink on a page.
But we will pass over this for the time being.

It doesn't matter what's in our heads.
The trunk in the attic clearly involves something else,
but we will pass over this. For the time being
It is a looking glass in which you see yourselves.

The trunk in the attic clearly involves something else.
Try to recover something about the world.
It is a looking glass in which you see yourselves.
Resemblance is not reference nor is it denotation.

Try to recover something. About the world
There are Newtonian “explanations.”
Resemblance is not reference nor is it detonation.
It is not in our brains. It is. In the world,

There are Newtonian “explanations”
For the precession of the perihelion of Mercury.
It is not in our brains, it is in the world.
Necessity is also involved. We will pass over

The precession of the perihelion of Mercury;
People don't suddenly become other people.
Necessity is also involved. We will pass over
An animal which must feed upon grass.

People don't suddenly become other people.
The theory of a mistake has obtained widely.
I have constructed a time machine and I go back,
An animal which must feed upon grass.

The theory of a mistake has obtained widely.
Our brains are just big lumps of electric jelly.
I have constructed a time machine. Go back.
We know there is a *real world*. It is not *in us*.

Note: The italics in the first and last lines are Morris's. The other italicized lines are sentences Morris quotes in the original *New York Times* Opinionator Blog, "What's in a Name, Part 3," published May 3 2012. These lines, respectively, are from Magritte, Sojourner Truth, Captain Cook, and *Austral English and OED*.