

What's new?

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What Ezra Pound meant when he exhorted writers to “make it new” is hard to say. But whatever he may have meant, the phrase has come to be the de facto motto of literary modernism. And it's become the basis for many a poorly conceived idea for a poem or story or essay. Really, can any writer ever make anything truly new?

When I was a child, too young really, to remember any of this, my dad read to me every night for weeks The Busy Bulldozer, a Little Golden Book featuring a bulldozer bought in response to my apparent obsession with the real bulldozer I could see every day from our apartment window as it demolished the charred ruins of our town's only hotel. At the conclusion of the story, I would go to the high windows, look out and tell the bulldozer, “Good-night.” Through the good offices of my mom, I know this story and I still have the well-used and now coverless Busy Bulldozer, the first book in my personal library.

I tell you this, reader, because at that early age—before age three, I was already being schooled in the art of narrative. Many stories would be read to me and told to me over the years. So by the time I thought I might want to try a story of my own, I had dozens, possibly hundreds, of models in my head. How, then, could there be anything like “new”? I was already grooved into an imitation that stretched back well beyond my childhood, as far back as The Iliad or the Bible or any other text, beyond those, in fact, to the oral stories told around campfires or in caves.

The Cat in the Hat came out in 1957 as I entered the second grade. It would be a while, though, before Dr. Seuss made his way to the coalfields. By the time I read The Cat in the Hat I was a college student, but still not aware of novelist John Gardner's contention that *a stranger comes to town* is one of the foundation plots of world literature. Would it matter if that stranger happened to be a cat?

Not only is “making it [truly] new” not possible, I'd suggest it's not desirable either. If you believe as I believe that literature is a conversation between ourselves and our fellow writers both living and dead, then newness isn't the point. Continuation, amplification, elaboration seem more to the point, more what our shared enterprise is all about.

Essayist Scott Russell Sanders has spoken eloquently on this question: When his father died, he knew he wanted to write something about that man. Most all of us share this impulse to memorialize our loved ones in words. But, as Sanders would have it, this is very familiar territory. If a person's father hasn't died, he surely will. To add to the literature of dead fathers requires something of us writers. It requires that we add to the literature rather than retread already well-worn paths. In this way, a writer is not making something new, but is entering into the realm of the familiar and taking himself by surprise in his exploration. Sanders' essay, “The

Inheritance of Tools” does just this. It brings a fresh element into a memorial for his father.

One way to imagine our role as writers in this world of preexisting and contemporary writing is by thinking of conjunctions: *and, but, or*. As we read, we are confronted by a writer’s ideas and images and we may find ourselves mostly in agreement—but not entirely, or maybe left feeling there’s more to the question than has been raised. So we offer our “and”. Or we may find ourselves somewhat resistant, and so more willing to say, “but” as the impulse of our own story, essay or poem. And “or” would be offered as a full alternative to what we’ve read.

I don’t believe we regularly think these questions through from the tops of our brains, but I do think as both readers and writers, we are exploring them all the time. That participating reader I’m so fond of needs to be constantly testing her feelings and her ideas against those presented by the writer. This response is going to happen no matter what—even if the response occurs on the subconscious level. It’s still happening, and however we choose to write about pretty much any subject, we will not be making something new but building on to a huge and rickety structure, that of our literary past and present.

None of us can honestly imagine he or she has just dropped into the pond of literature from empty space. We have been swimming in that pond since we had that very first story read or told to us. It’s up to us to read and listen and learn the shape of our very big pond, an ocean in fact, if we are to find a place in there where we can make a meaningful contribution.