

# TALES OF THE NEW CREATION



by [PETE PETERSON](#) on JANUARY 13, 2014

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*“I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things it will never know any names for and then has to close its eyes again. I know this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it. And I can’t believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us. In eternity, this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don’t imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try.” – Marilynne Robinson, Gilead*

“Traditional” is a word that often comes with negative baggage these days. We too often equate “traditional” with “old-fashioned” or “out of date.” It’s a word too quickly applied to things we consider to have passed beyond their true relevance; things moving quickly toward irrelevance.

Traditional publishing. Traditional music. Traditional education. Traditional family. Traditional values. You get the idea.

But in the essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” T. S. Eliot argues that the word “traditional,” especially as applied to art, is not a negative label in any way, but is instead a positive and even desirable one. He says that “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.” He argues that art is, by necessity “traditional,” that new works are predicated upon the old, each new poet standing upon the bones of the dead. He’s telling us that tradition is important, and to be “traditional,” is not to be old-fashioned or conservative or rote, but to be informed by and to stand upon the long history of literature and creation that has come before.

There is, perhaps, nowhere that this is more apparent than in poetry. Dante, Milton, and Eliot himself are each formidable poets taken alone. If *Paradise Lost*, for instance, were

the only piece of poetry you'd ever read, you might still consider it a masterwork of thought, language, and imagery. But you'd be missing half the story, because when a work like Milton's is taken in its full historical and artistic context, it's elevated to far greater power by virtue of the foundations on which it stands—foundations like Virgil, Homer, Ovid, Isaiah, and Job.

Works like *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* are strewn with allusions to the works of elder poets and writers. They are packed with references to myths, legends, historical figures, and events that we've all but forgotten.

Eliot has said that while the immature poet imitates, the mature poet steals, building into his work bricks fashioned by his forebears. This is true of all art. It draws its power from context, requiring a knowledge of tradition in order for us to fully appreciate its current implications.

Now—I'd like you to imagine that we are living, as Marilynne Robinson suggests, in Troy, within an epic poem. I want to suggest that the world, our world, is itself a work of art, and that our very lives are paintings and poems, frescos and songs, all founded on that which has come before us—all rooted firmly in tradition. The world we inhabit, right now, the rooms we sit in, the walls around us, the sunlight coming in through the window, this all makes up the great work of an age.

So what might that have to do with the New Creation that the Bible promises us will come? What if we are, at this very moment, the tradition and context out of which that new work is about to be forged? Is it possible that we are the tradition and foundation—the metaphors, the symbols, the nearly forgotten tales—waiting to be written into the great work of an age yet to come?

I'm going to come back to that suggestion, but before I do, I want to change direction for a moment. I've mentioned Eliot and his essay about the importance of tradition, of the importance of the past in literature. But I want to talk for a bit about the opposite end of the spectrum. What about the importance of the future?

Great stories exist, not merely within the boundaries of their "presentness," but often beyond it. What do I mean by that? Well, Tolkien is a great example.

The *Lord of the Rings* has a very clear sense of tradition. It has its own sense of the past, both within the story, and within the structure and language that author uses to tell it. Tolkien is famous for the extensive history he built as a foundation for his tales and

languages. Some make the case that he was more concerned with his imagined history than his imagined story. In Tolkien's case I don't know that you can separate the two, and that's one of the reasons I love his stories so much. His writing on the other hand owes its form to myths and Old English legends, epic poetry like Beowulf. Taken all together, that's the story's past, the tradition it's built on. And indeed, the Lord of the Rings could scarcely exist without it.

The "present" of the story is the tale it tells, with which I assume you are all familiar.

But it's the story's future, its end, that I'm interested in here.

It ends as many great stories do, not with finality, but with a new beginning. The Third Age of Middle-earth has passed away, and the Fourth Age has begun. But Frodo and Gandalf don't simply end, do they? They sail away to Valinor, the Undying Lands, beyond the boundary of the story proper. We're left on the shore, left to wonder. We're left with wonder. When we turn the last page of the Lord of the Rings, it's hard to escape the feeling that the story is still going on somehow, even though we aren't privy to its details.

The same can be said of the Chronicles of Narnia. In both these cases, it's as if the storytellers have led us just so far along a road, showing us sights and marvels along the way, and then on the last page of the book, the author plants a signpost, as if to say to us that the story goes on that way, just over that hill, and there are untold tales that we will never know because, sadly, we must follow another road back into our own world, into our own present.

We love to mourn the end of a good book don't we? We love to imagine what might be if only the author had kept on writing. There's something wonderfully tantalizing about the idea that the authors of our favorite books might have further stories to tell us if only they were still alive to do so. But all we're left with are the signposts left behind to point us toward things we can only dream of.

These "signposts" are important. Personally, spiritually, culturally, they mark the ways we've come and the ways we hope one day to go. And I think the well-built signpost endures, becoming in time like an eroded marker left by a long-forgotten civilization. The well-built signpost may even become a tradition.

Flannery O'Connor wrote hundreds of letters in her lifetime. They're collected in a book called *The Habit of Being* and they provide a fascinating document of a sharp and gifted

mind. Only days before her death at the age of 39 she wrote the following words to a friend: “Don’t know when I’ll send those stories. I have felt too bad to type them.” She died a few days later and those untold stories went with her.

I can’t help but sit back sometimes and imagine what they might have been like. She left that letter behind her like a signpost planted in the road, as if to say: “the stories go on, but I, for the moment, cannot.” I think that’s why that death feels so wrong to us. Death ends a story that we know is meant to go on. When someone dies, we’re left to stand on the shores, and we wonder.

We wonder because death is itself a signpost, an Ebenezer stone, a cairn, a marker left to map the way from dust to dust, testifying to the length, breadth, and depth of the Curse. But if we look closely, we can see more than merely an endpoint. We must see instead an arrow. The signpost does not announce the journey’s end; it proclaims the destination lying a bit further along the road.

And these signposts we leave behind, whether stories, or civilizations, or individual lives, are becoming, every moment, the legends and poems and monuments—the traditions—out of which a future age will draw a new masterpiece.

N.T. Wright has said that “all Christian language about the future is a set of signposts pointing into the mist.” You see, we are standing every day in the presentness of a story, of an epic. It’s going on all around us. It’s full of characters major and minor, good and evil. It’s full of wars and miracles, love and hate, great beauty and terrible suffering, and it’s so big that none of us can comprehend its full measure.

We live in the present story built on the bones of the dead. And just as the hope of Abraham and Israel led to a new covenant in Christ, ushering in a new age of human history, so is our own hope, our own story, the foundation of a greater work yet untold. Because in this story, in our story, the Author isn’t dead, the Author hasn’t retired and turned in his pen. He’s got stories left to tell. He’s planted signposts all over the world, down through the Ages, that tell us the finale is still up ahead, “soon to be released,” as it were. You and I are the tradition out of which the Author is building something new, an epic for the age to come.

The job of the artist in the present is to reach backward into tradition with one hand, anchoring himself there in order to reach forward into the mist with the other—then he closes his fist, taking hold of all he can, and brings into his present a new signpost and

plants it firmly. If he does his job well, that signpost may one day become the anchor onto which other artists will cling and reach even further.

As Eliot said of art, a new masterwork does not simply do away with the traditions out of which it's born. New work is built on work that has come before it and it is interpreted in that context. Jesus says very much the same thing in Matthew: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill them."

In Christ, the old is not merely done away with. Creation is not swept away and forgotten. It is instead redeemed. In Christ, the things of earth will be put to new use, considered in new ways, in light of new information. The old does not merely pass away, it passes into and is redefined by a new way. As Christians, this is our hope. It's fundamental to what we claim to believe.

What we create in this present world, what we do, who we love, and how we live, will all one day be the context for God's New Creation. We are the tradition out of which the epics, folk-tales, legends, art, and songs of ages to come will arise. And that means that what we create here and now matters. Our food matters, our stories matter, our architecture and music and poetry all matter. It means that the world itself, its trees, its canyons, its vast oceans all matter. All Creation waits to be redeemed, to be bought back by its true Master and considered with fresh eyes in the light of new information.

We are surrounded by the mettle out of which God will one day form a new Heaven and a new Earth. This world, our present, is the iron out of which something bigger and bolder is being wrought. So if I write a story, I want it to point out into that mist where the Author of my faith is laboring over things that my mind cannot yet fathom. If I build a boat, I want it to leave someone with a longing to sail it, because that longing is pointing toward undiscovered shores in the distance.

In everything, I hope to leave signposts that will point toward the world to come. It's not my job to define that world. It's my job to leave behind the bricks and mortar with which the master will one day build new wonders. It's my job to leave the Ebenezer stone, to erect the signpost that points and says "It's that way, just over that hill, and we've only a little while until we see it."

Each work of art, no matter how small or how meager, each act of love, each child, each sunrise, these are all traditions pointing to the way things were and signposts pointing to the stories we will one day tell. They are the nouns and adjectives and verbs, the

metaphors, allusions, and similes of books waiting to be written. We can't write them yet, because we haven't been there, we haven't seen the new country, we are the old tradition waiting to be called into new meaning. The Author isn't done with this old place. He's got big plans. Leave signposts.

A couple of months ago I watched a documentary called "I Think We're Alone Now." Do you remember Tiffany, the singer in the '80s? The documentary is about two Tiffany stalkers, one of whom is named Kelly. Kelly is hermaphroditic, a person with the physical traits of both genders. Kelly's parents divorced when she was a child and they had joint custody of her. When she stayed with her mom, she was made to dress like a girl. When he stayed with his dad, he was made to dress like a boy. As an adult, I don't think Kelly has any idea who he or she is. Her story is profoundly sad. Kelly's an alcoholic, a drug addict, a lonely, broken person with shifting ideas of who she is and who loves her and who she can love. As I watched, I wanted so badly for someone to tell Kelly that brokenness and pain and confusion don't have to be the end of her story. That moment, of course, never came. The credits rolled, and I went to bed wrecked by an ache, wrecked by way I saw the Curse played out in Kelly's life. I couldn't sleep, and so I got up and wrote this signpost. It's called "For Kelly."

When you stand naked  
In front of the mirror  
And you see in your flesh  
A terrible question wrought  
And you cry and ask:  
"Who will love me?"  
And you scream demanding:  
"Who has done this?"  
When you plug up your ears  
To keep out the silence,  
Strain to hear the voice  
That knows your beauty.  
For you are a living symbol  
Of all that must  
(and shall)  
be amended.  
I carry my portion of our curse  
Where no one can see,

But you, like a prophet,  
Live yours, wrestle it,  
As we avert our eyes.  
You expose the division  
In the heart of creation.  
And in your pain,  
In your twisted flesh,  
I am reminded  
Of the world to come,  
Wherein nature  
Shall be untangled  
Then raveled once more  
In its best and truest  
And final form.  
Know, too, that your own  
Shall be whole;  
The unanswered question  
Knit to your bones  
Shall be supplanted  
By an exclamation  
and then—  
Your glorious body  
Shall proclaim the end  
Of all divided things.

I use this as an example. It's built on that which has come before it—a movie, which was in turn built on Tiffany's music, which was in its turn built on something before that. And each of those previous creations have reached into the mist and pulled something back, have planted their own signposts pointing the way of the human soul and its longings and aspirations, and now, with this poem, I have added my signpost to theirs, hopefully pointing farther and higher toward the unseen destination that lies around the bend.

The world needs to know that the road is taking us somewhere. Pain and loneliness and suffering and hatred will not have the last word. What is the Cross if not a signpost on which is written "Come this way. Come over this hill?"

The Author is fast at his work. He's leaving signposts, and he calls us to leave them too. Tell the world it matters. Remind the world that it's one day going to be remade. It's going to be rewritten into the epic of the universe, the ballad we will sing in the streets.