IN THEORY: THE DEATH OF LITERATURE



An intelligent feature in *The Guardian* by Andrew Gallix on Tuesday 10 January. The

topic – “we’ve heard it all before” – [Link].

“We come too late to say anything which has not been said already,” lamented La Bruyère at the end of the 17th century. The fact that he came too late even to say this (Terence having pipped him to the post back in the 2nd century BC) merely proved his point – a point which Macedonio Fernández took one step backwards when he sketched out a prequel to Genesis. God is just about to create everything. Suddenly a voice in the wilderness pipes up, interrupting the eternal silence of infinite space that so terrified Pascal: “Everything has been written, everything has been said, everything has been done.” Rolling His eyes, the Almighty retorts (doing his best Morrissey impression) that he has heard this one before – many a time. He then presses ahead with the creation of the heavens and the earth and all the creepy-crawlies that creepeth and crawleth upon it. In the beginning was the word – and, word is, before that too.

In his most influential book, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Harold Bloom argued that the greatest Romantic poets misread their illustrious predecessors “so as to clear imaginative space for themselves”. …

(I like the Morrissey/Smiths reference, though it gives away Andrew’s own

contemporary past! see below *)

This is a variation on my argument about *actuality* and the contemporary past – that we overemphasize the flow of time in our notions of history, forgetting that the past lingers, mutates, haunts, and constitutes our very being. This is *the archaeological*, the vitality of ruin, the impulse to arrest entropy, the shock of the old, when nothing happens twice, because it has already happened before (was this one of those wonderful aphorisms from Theodor Adorno?).

See my recent comments on the new translation of Laurent Olivier's wonderful *Sombre Abîme du Temps* [Link], and my own forthcoming book *The Archaeological Imagination* [Link].

The past is all around us.

The implications apply also to any authoring or design –

Innovation and creativity are mostly about recycling, remixing, reworking.



Dryburgh Abbey, by Scott’s tomb.

*

Cemetery Gates – Morrissey – lyrics from “The Smiths – *The Queen is Dead*” (1986)

A dreaded sunny day

So I meet you at the cemetery gates
Keats and Yeats are on your side
While Wilde is on mine

So we go inside and we gravely read the stones
All those people all those lives
Where are they now?
With the loves and hates
And passions just like mine
They were born
And then they lived and then they died
Seems so unfair
And I want to cry

You say: “ere thrice the sun done salutation to the dawn”
And you claim these words as your own
But I’ve read well, and I’ve heard them said
A hundred times, maybe less, maybe more

If you must write prose and poems
The words you use should be your own
Don’t plagiarise or take “on loans”
There’s always someone, somewhere
With a big nose, who knows
And who trips you up and laughs
When you fall …