In the 1980s and early 1990s, the meaning of postmodernism became a topic of contention. Was it a discrete artistic movement, a structural transformation of modernity as a whole, or merely a convenient synonym for “the period after the Second World War”? Though advocates and critics of postmodernity defined the term differently, they did concur on one point. The evocation of bygone eras that characterized postmodern art, fiction, and film was not to be taken at face value. Postmodern historical fiction, for instance, was not a nostalgic re-creation of nineteenth-century realism. It was rather (if you believed Linda Hutcheon) a playful decentering of positivist epistemology, allowing readers to recognize history itself as a constructed narrative.1 If you preferred Fredric Jameson’s grimmer interpretation, the historical turn in contemporary culture was a symptom of history’s disappearance: the consciousness of historical difference that might have supported nostalgia had vanished, to be replaced by a pastiche of interchangeable retro styles.2

If the large philosophical claims made for and against postmodern historical fiction are now beginning to date, it is not because that mode of artistic production sputtered out, but because it seems to have been subsumed in broader trends as it matured. The frame-breaking gestures and stylistic quotation marks deployed by the “hstiographica$ metafiction$” of John Fowles and E. L. Doctorow were once received as challenges (for good or ill) to the “transparency of historical referentiality.”3 The historical novels that have lately won prizes and metamorphosed into motion pictures are equally self-conscious. But their metafictional layering doesn’t necessarily have the effect of reminding the reader that history is a linguistic construct. Novels like Possession and The Hours use metafiction not to distance the past but to transmute historical representation into something like personal memory.

They achieve this in part by relying on the premise of parallel lives, which entwines historical difference with characters’ private yearnings for a lost past. Actors,
biographers, or critics set off on the trail of characters in an earlier historical period, who turn out to be in some sense their prototypes; an eerie isomorphy emerges between the contemporary and the ancestral layers of the story. Harold Pinter’s screenplay for the 1981 film version of The French Lieutenant’s Woman was one of the earliest examples of this pattern. John Fowles had endowed his 1969 novel with an obtrusively modern narrator, but the parallel between storylines in separate centuries was Pinter’s addition—his way of translating narrative self-consciousness into the dramatic medium. The premise of parallel lives was particularly fertile between 1985 and 1995. A selective list of examples from that period might include Peter Ackroyd’s Hawksmoor (1985) and Chatterton (1987), A. S. Byatt’s Possession (1990), Arturo Perez-Reverte’s The Flanders Panel (La tabla de Flandes) (1990), Tom Stoppard’s play Arcadia (1993), and the film Dead Again (1991), written by Scott Frank and directed by Kenneth Branagh. But it would be hasty to write an obituary for this narrative mode: the recent film versions of Possession and of Michael Cunningham’s The Hours (1998) indicate that stories of parallel lives still attract a substantial audience.

One needs to be cautious about periodizing the genre on the early side as well. Not that it’s necessary to go back to Plutarch: in spite of their title, the Parallel Lives produce an unrelated pleasure; Plutarch compares his noble Grecians and Romans as if they could have been contemporaries, using congruences to point up ethical universals. The genre under discussion, by contrast, takes it for granted that actual repetition of the past is impossible; it attends to apparent echoes only in order to foreground the transmission of historical memory. There is, on the other hand, a real continuity between contemporary parallel-lives stories and gothic tradition. Mid-century psychological gothics like Daphne Du Maurier’s Rebecca (1938) and Alfred Hitchcock’s Vertigo (1958) implied that contemporary characters were possessed by ancestral models who led them to reenact the traumas of the past. Indeed, gothic novels have been playing changes on the notion that the sins of the fathers are visited on the sons ever since Horace Walpole’s Castle of Otranto; it is a favorite gothic way of thinking about history. But ancestral possession carried very different class implications in older works than it does in recent examples. This goes without saying for a writer like Ann Radcliffe, whose Oedipally oppressive villains also embody the dominance of the aristocracy or church. But even in mid-twentieth-century psychological thrillers, the parallel between the present and the past is expressed as a compulsion to reenact a hollow masquerade. The layer of the story hidden in the past dramatizes a set of values that ought to be vanishing; its power to reach from the grave and enthrall middle-class protagonists suggests the covert survival of systematic social distinction in a society that has ostensibly outgrown such things. The protagonists’ goal is to throw off that en thrallment and content themselves with a (presumably natural) middle-class identity. Not surprisingly, these stories reached a broad middle-class audience; Rebecca, for instance, was an important prototype for the large and profitable gothic romance industry.4
When texts from the 1980s and 1990s explore the premise of parallel lives, the resurgence of the past is not felt as a threat. The characters in the older layer of the story are portrayed sympathetically; in fact, the plot shuttles between two different epochs and two sets of protagonists, who receive roughly equal attention. Though events in the contemporary story still eerily reproduce the past, that connection ultimately deepens the living characters’ sensibilities and lifts them out of sordid or humdrum surroundings. This is not to deny that their personal safety may be menaced along the way; in Dead Again and The Flanders Panel, for instance, the discovery of a forgotten crime threatens to turn into reenactment of it. But the danger is now overcome by closer identification with the past, not by an effort to throw off its spell. The contemporary genre’s insistence on this conclusion is measurable by the moral anomalies it is willing to create in order to reach it. As the title of Dead Again might suggest, the film ends happily when the past lives of its protagonists usurp and replace the drab present-day identities that were initially introduced to the audience. Aesthete-murderers who craft a parallel between past and present crimes are the most interesting characters in Hawksmoor and The Flanders Panel; though they initially take the form of detective stories, both novels end by moving back into the villain’s consciousness and celebrating its mysterious persistence across time.

The parallel-lives premise leaves fewer moral loose ends in works like Stoppard’s Arcadia and Byatt’s Possession, which give up all attempt to make the past menacing and instead create tension by letting the double-layered plot generate dramatic irony. The audience sees contemporary characters misled by gaps in the written record and wonders whether they will ever discover the full truth about their predecessors. But all these versions of the parallel-lives story differ from the psychological gothic in refusing to take the oppressive weight of history seriously. The real source of suspense lies in a struggle to remember and re-create a past threatened by oblivion. That conflict is most intelligibly described from a point of view located in the past, which is in fact the point of view that usually gets the last word in these works: the real conflict is the struggle of the dead to transmit their identities to the future.

In a sense this is a return to an older model of historical fiction. Writers of historical novels have long been aware that readers’ fascination with the past is partly composed of a desire to prove that collective memory is stronger than death. As far back as Walter Scott’s Old Mortality, historical novels have hinted at their own resemblance to funerary ritual. In staging spiritual possession and exhumation as redemptive events, works like Possession and Dead Again are perhaps less like Hitchcock than like the spiritualist historical fictions of George Sand and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, which literalized collective memory as physical immortality. But the parallel-lives stories that have sprung up over the last two decades revive the historical novel’s traditional concern with mortality in order to make it a vehicle for contemporary social anxieties—especially anxiety about the declining prestige of culture relative to other forms of social distinction.
The cycle of death and resurrection in these works is also a quest for social status. Though the connection is developed differently in each case, the outlines of a pattern become clear. The protagonists in the earlier layer of the double plot are always knowledge workers, and usually artists. They include, in the works so far cited, a composer, a pianist, an architect, a novelist, two painters, two mathematicians, and four poets. (I’ll have more to say about those interloping mathematicians in a moment.) These characters soon discover that their profession does not confer the expected prestige: because intellectual achievements are trumped by poverty (Ackroyd’s Thomas Chatterton) or gender prejudice (Byatt’s Christabel LaMotte and Stoppard’s Thomasina Coverley), or because the market for culture has shifted under their feet (Roman Strauss, in *Dead Again*, can get paid for film music but not for the opera he wants to finish). Typically they console themselves with fantasies of historical resurrection. LaMotte compares herself to Milton’s phoenix: “And though her body die, her fame survives / A secular bird, ages of lives.”8 Chatterton has a dying vision of the painters and writers who will revive his name in subsequent ages. “I will not wholly die,” he concludes. “I will live for ever.”9

So far this is a familiar Romantic story: the neglected genius acquires immortal life as an influence on cultural history. But the contemporary layers of parallel-lives plots frustrate the expected resurrection and draw out the underlying conflict, which now reveals itself more explicitly as a threat to the prestige of culture. To begin with, the contemporary protagonists tend to be critics, biographers, or artists who restore old paintings, instead of primary producers of culture; they feel themselves epigones, and that fact already suggests some interruption of their predecessors’ legacy. Moreover, they are overshadowed within their own epigonal fields by competitors more at ease with the mass media. The schemes of these competitors often interfere with the immortality sought by the protagonists in the earlier layer of the story: in *Possession*, for instance, the critic Mortimer Cropper steals texts and memorabilia for his own collection, justifying it with a little sermon about electronic reproduction and “the museum of the future.” In *Arcadia*, Bernard Nightingale’s quest to be quoted in articles with headlines like “Bonking Byron Shot Poet” muddies the historical waters and obscures the contributions of less famous nineteenth-century figures who have become more interesting to the audience.10 In some cases, the threat to the immortality of the past also develops fatal consequences in the present. Charles Wychwood, the unpublished twentieth-century poet who is the protagonist of *Chatterton*, suffers from a brain disease that is at least partly professional anxiety. A friend sums up the threat in these terms: “There is no history any more. There is no memory. There are no standards to encourage permanence—only novelty, and the whole endless cycle of new objects. And books are simply objects—consumer items picked up and laid aside.”11 After struggling to refute this claim, Charles loses consciousness and collapses.

The lament is familiar: it sounds a bit like Sven Birkerts worrying about the
future of reading and “deep time” in *The Gutenberg Elegies* (1994), and a bit like Fredric Jameson worrying about the fate of history in *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1990). And in fact recent historical fiction does help illuminate recent cultural theory. It is hardly a closely guarded secret that theorists have lately been anxious about the material and social status of the cultural professions. The parallel-lives genre suggests that the same anxiety may also inform the elegy for memory (or “historicity” or “deep time”) that has lately flourished in various guises in different academic disciplines. By staging the declining value of culture as a threat to earthly immortality, stories of parallel lives remind us that modern conceptions of culture have conferred prestige above all by identifying the cultured individual with processes of historical change. These stories also demonstrate how, as a consequence of that identification, threats to the prestige of culture can be felt as threats to the continuity of history. I propose that recent elegies for historical memory reflect the disappearance, not of history or memory (which so far seem to have survived the 1990s), but of something smaller that was nevertheless of great value to college-educated professionals, and especially to cultural intellectuals. What we have lost is our ability to believe in cultural history as a form of collective immortality.

This may help explain why so many contemporary stories of parallel lives, in attempting to shore up that belief, return in particular to the period between 1780 and 1880. The belief in historical immortality that seems now to be waning developed in that period. By subordinating universal standards to the idea of historical change, Romantic historicism hollowed out older ideas of fame. “No human monument,” Johann Gottfried von Herder observed, “can endure intact and eternal, for it was formed in the stream of generations only by the hands of a certain time for that time.” This is more than an empirical observation that reputations fade and monuments crumble; the point is rather that no monument or ideal can hope to be as fundamental, as absolute, as change itself. But in scaling the fate of Ozymandias, historicism also opened up new forms of immortality. One could wager the future not on immutability, but on flux. If writers and thinkers were agents through which history worked its changes, they could imagine themselves as unacknowledged legislators of the world. They would acquire immortality not primarily through fame, but by becoming part of the ceaseless transformation that is history. The more perfectly they crystallized the spirit of their own passing age, the more directly they served history’s eternal logic. To call this identification with collective perpetuity “immortality” is not necessarily a figure of speech. Observing that several Australian societies assign immortal souls to legendary ancestors but not to each member of the tribe, Emile Durkheim argued that the notion of personal immortality originated by reifying “the perpetuity of the life of the group”—a theory that also goes some distance toward explaining aristocrats’ insistence on interring their dead under cathedrals and pyramids. Heaven is a figure of speech for a symbolic appropri-
ation of collective permanence—a passion, perhaps older than the idea of the soul itself, that since the nineteenth century has expressed itself as identification with social change.

If identification with change had only allowed writers to fantasize about their own immortality, its significance would have been limited. But nineteenth-century philosophies of history taught a broader public to experience the same identification and the same sense of eternity. Auguste Comte’s religion of humanity encouraged believers to feel a correspondence between the stages of historical development and the phases of their own lives; a ritual calendar in which each month corresponded to a different stage of history retraced the analogy each year. (September, for instance, becomes “Gutenberg, or Modern Industry.”) The subtler and more widely practiced religion of culture also fostered emotional connections to vanished ways of life. Those connections, after all, were what distinguished the nineteenth-century ideal of culture from mere cultivation or taste. Culture was not just one among many forms of social prestige; through historicism, it claimed to encompass and transcend them all. Recall the mathematicians who interposed themselves in that list of composers, painters, and poets. Recent stories of parallel lives are not necessarily about “culture” in the narrow sense of the fine arts. But neither are they about “cultural capital” in the broad sense Pierre Bourdieu assigns that phrase, which expands to include all forms of symbolic authority and educational attainment. Accountants (no matter how highly credentialed) do not become protagonists of parallel-lives narratives; but mathematicians can (in Stoppard’s Arcadia) because they are understood to make discoveries and thereby embody history. We see in this genre the persistence of a particular kind of cultural distinction that amounts to identification with history as a horizon of difference and change.

Here I part company from thinkers who have argued that culture derives its cachet from nationalism or from attempts to regulate a national vernacular. Bill Readings, for instance, sees transnational corporations as the main force dissolving the ideal of culture in the late twentieth century; reasoning backward from that observation, he concludes that the nineteenth-century ideal of culture created prestige by identifying the individual with an organic national tradition. What this argument doesn’t sufficiently acknowledge is the close affinity between the nineteenth-century ideal of culture and the cosmopolitan classicism that immediately preceded it. Though classicism was widely appropriated for nationalist purposes (as in the French Revolution), even then the prestige it conferred was rooted in its claim to transcend national identity. The nineteenth-century ideal of culture retains a similar aspiration, though instead of embodying universality in an ostensibly permanent classical ideal, it defines it as consciousness of historical difference. The cultured individual becomes a temporal cosmopolitan, not by grasping the eternal but by appreciating the singular and ephemeral. “To him,” as Walter Pater put it, “all periods, types, schools of taste, are in themselves equal. In all ages there have been some excellent workmen, and some excellent work done. The question
he asks is always:—In whom did the stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period find itself?"18

This mode of appreciation, which values art for its representativeness, is ultimately a way of using art to condense and master historical time. By encapsulating the distinctive character of their periods, artworks make it possible to survey the eternal succession that is history. To experience that succession, and retain it in the summarized form of “culture,” is to possess immortality. That at any rate is what Pater hints in his description of Leonardo’s La Gioconda. Like the historicist aesthete, she retains a residue of all the ages she has seen, without belonging to any one of them.

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

Pater goes on to explain that “the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life” is the modern equivalent of the ancient “fancy of a perpetual life.”19

Culture thus promised immortality to its consumers as well as its producers. The cultured reader’s claim to have been “wrought upon by . . . all modes of thought and life” paralleled the writer’s claim to embody the spirit of his or her age. Both were ways of identifying with the eternity of history itself, which was grasped, not as an overarching teleology or a principle of eternal recurrence, but in the ephemeral singularities that distinguished an infinite series of different historical forms receding into the past. As Carolyn Williams remarks in a study of Pater’s “aesthetic historicism,” these disparate historical moments are unified only through the critic’s retrospective gaze, and only because that gaze is treated as analogous to personal memory: “This structural analogy between personal memory and historical retrospection . . . places the aesthetic critic beyond historical time, even as he bends his attention to the absolute particularity of things in time.”20

Though consumers were ostensibly expected to invent historical consciousness for themselves by collecting and comparing works from different periods, they were in fact surrounded by guides that could abridge the process. One of the triumphs of nineteenth-century art is its trick of simulating historical depth by evoking the styles of vanished periods. Nineteenth-century works often explicitly teach their readers or viewers how to feel stylistic difference as immortality; this is how Keats’s evocation of Miltonic style in “Hyperion,” for instance, is related to Apollo’s deification by Mnemosyne at the end of that poem. Apollo becomes a god of song who is distinctively modern (and therefore immortal) precisely by internalizing the “names, deeds, gray legends” of the past.21 The form of the artwork, as well as the
process of production and reception, could thus provide an occasion for identification with collective eternity. In this essay, I’ll refer to that identification as “cultural immortality,” and to the social status it confers as “historicist culture.”

By calling this form of distinction “historicist,” I mean that the social claim it makes depends on a premise that began to be widely accepted only in the late eighteenth century: that the manners and incommensurable standards of distinction developed by different societies are all equally ephemeral. This premise underwrites a bracketing of both contemporary and classic models, and leaves consciousness of historical difference and change as the only unchanging absolute. This definition of “historicism” is admittedly broad; it is meant to stretch from Herder to the most nominalistic and skeptical strains of contemporary practice. I think that breadth of definition is necessary if we want to think critically—and self-critically—about the way historicism underwrites its own peculiar kind of cultural distinction. Methodological questions that make a great deal of difference in the writing of history make less difference to its social standing. It doesn’t particularly matter, for instance, whether the underlying processes of change are conceived in cumulative or dialectical terms. La Gioconda’s absorptive gaze is not especially dialectical, but since the dialectic preserves what it transforms, it can also suffice as a vehicle for immortality. Nor does it matter—for the purposes of cultural distinction—whether immortality is imagined to rest on a material or ideal basis. As we will see, Marxist and idealist versions of history lend themselves equally well to fantasies of cultural immortality. It does matter, on the other hand, that history is understood to involve an irreversible process of supersession. That is what makes it necessary to replace eternal models with cultural memory; since the past that La Gioconda knew can never return in the same form, it “lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.”

The distinction at stake in stories of parallel lives is definitely linked to historicism. One of the notable features of this genre is its interest in the history of science—paleontology in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, mathematics and thermodynamics in *Arcadia*, paleontology and marine biology in *Possession*. This is a way of asserting breadth, to be sure. But it is also a way of narrowing the definition of culture by making clear that what counts as culture is not a generalized aesthetic sensibility but consciousness of historical difference (whether in the arts or in the sciences). The threat to culture, moreover, is expressed in these stories as a threat to the belief that participation in history makes one immortal. The sciences of change—paleontology and thermodynamics—become in this connection double-edged. As regions where discoveries can be made, they evoke a possibility of immortality. But the discoveries themselves suggest a danger of obsolescence or extinction.

Though *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is not itself a story of parallel lives, the interplay between its protagonist and its knowingly modern narrator serves many
of the same purposes. Charles Smithson, Fowles’s protagonist, feels himself a “poor living fossil”: “the enormous apparatus rank required a gentleman to erect around himself was like the massive armor that had been the death warrant of so many ancient saurian species.” At this point, the narrator intervenes to make clear that fossilization threatens not only the nineteenth-century aristocracy, but any class that defines itself by values other than wealth—including both “the tender humanists who begin to discern their own redundancy,” and the scientists who invented the computer that is making those humanists redundant. The real threat is not technology, but the “pursuit of money,” which fuels evolutionary change. “The scientist is but one more form; and will be superseded” (234). In spite of the bleakness of Fowles’s language, the analogy to evolution is ultimately consoling. It suggests that “what dies is the form. Matter is immortal. There runs through this succession of superseded forms we call existence a certain kind of afterlife” (233). Historical consciousness is thus in the end confirmed as the one principle that resists and transcends the leveling power of commerce.

The rhetoric of evolutionary succession in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* gives its protagonist a documentably nineteenth-century vocabulary for worrying a twentieth-century question: Can knowledge workers still locate themselves in the main line of cultural “evolution”—or are they now dead ends, throwbacks, living fossils? In *Arcadia*, immortality is even more explicitly the problem. Bernard Nightingale is a literary critic who has published a flashy but dubious claim about Byron:

**Hannah:** If Bernard can stay ahead of getting the rug pulled till he’s dead, he’ll be a success.

**Valentine:** Just like science . . . The ultimate fear is of posterity . . .

**Hannah:** Personally I don’t think it’ll take that long.

**Valentine:** . . . and then there’s the afterlife. An afterlife would be a mixed blessing. “Ah—Bernard Nightingale, I don’t believe you know Lord Byron.” It must be heaven up there.23

The exchange is more than a joke about a researcher’s fear of being proved wrong in heaven. The uneasiness it evokes is central to the comedy of Bernard’s character: a scholar who fails to believe in the permanence of his subject, he instead chases the transitory fame of talk shows and tabloid headlines, frankly out to grab whatever he can before death. If Bernard believed in the dialectic—vaster than empires and more slow—that is supposed to underwrite the prestige of his class, he might conceivably look forward to being corrected as an immortalizing sublation. But he lacks faith in that sort of afterlife, and instead frantically converts history to celebrity, as if it were a currency losing value. Though Bernard is a comic butt, the declining value of that currency is a threat the play takes seriously.

The premise of parallel lives permits writers to acknowledge, but symbolically resolve, that threat. On the literal level of the plot, traces of cultural history that seemed to be permanently obscured by social or economic prejudice are recovered and recorded. This already suggests a promotion of cultural over social and economic sources of distinction. The structure of the double-layered plot also affirms
culture specifically as immortality: people who died long ago possess their cultural descendants and live again through them, proving that history is still a process by which the future transforms and partially resurrects the past. Characters who champion the mass media and/or electronic reproduction may delay and complicate the process of rebirth, but they pose that threat only so that it can be overcome.

In Possession, for instance, two contemporary researchers reconstruct (and reproduce in their own persons) the personal and literary relationship between Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash, nineteenth-century poets. Their efforts are threatened when Mortimer Cropper, an advocate of electronic reproduction and of the “museum of the future,” secretly opens a grave and appropriates a box containing a letter from LaMotte that was never delivered or read. In an ironic reversal of his commitment to electronic publicity, Cropper plans to keep the letter as a private possession. But the contemporary researchers are able to interrupt the grave robbery and turn it into a resurrection: the letter is opened, part of LaMotte’s identity that seemed irretrievably lost is recovered—and assimilated, as it happens, by a researcher who turns out to be her biological descendant.

In short, the parallel-lives genre reassures readers who fear that their investment in culture is losing value, by staging a plot in which the contemporary threat (diminished social status) is overcome by the original source of status (identification with the permanence of cultural history). But the genre’s literalization of cultural immortality as exhumation and resurrection is by no means naïve; it reveals a frank understanding of the fantastic aspect of the original desire. For this reason, the most thoughtful examples of the genre often end by returning to the past to take a lingering look at some detail that failed to be preserved and reproduced. The postscript to Possession, for instance, reveals that a second message, from Ash to LaMotte, went astray in a way that will hide it forever from the intended recipient and from historians. In the final scene of Arcadia, nineteenth-century characters spill over unobserved into preparations for a twentieth-century costume party; the play ends with two couples waltzing in Regency dress, on the same stage in different centuries. The image itself proposes that history is immortality: historical consciousness (in the form of costume drama) seems to guarantee the eternal recurrence of each moment of experience. But the waltz equally dramatizes an emotional connection between the two nineteenth-century characters, which the audience knows will be destroyed when one of them dies in a fire to take place after the curtains close. The twentieth-century characters who are waltzing never learn the full truth about that nineteenth-century relationship, and are not themselves lovers. The visuals, in short, evoke a longing to believe that cultural history immortalizes experience, while the facts of the plot deny it.

It is not surprising to find the same anxieties about the value of historicist culture in contemporary cultural theory. What is is slightly surprising is that theorists are just as willing as novelists and screenwriters to represent this change as a threat
to immortality. David Simpson has remarked that the desire “to speak with the dead”—in Stephen Greenblatt’s now-famous phrase—is a central animating principle in contemporary criticism, and especially in the celebration of local knowledge he defines as “the academic postmodern.” “What are the autobiographies, the anecdotes, the conversations, the photographs (in even the most skeptical biographies), and the local knowledges . . . if not variations on the effort at giving life to what is otherwise threateningly (if also safely) dead?” For Simpson this is evidence both of academics’ professional investment in the interminability of historical interpretation, and of their longing for a worldly efficacy that interminable discussion seems forever to defer. The novels and works of criticism that revive the dead address both needs at once by proving that after all “literature is life, and life is literature.”25 While I entirely concur with Simpson’s thesis, I think it is possible to enlarge it. For though the desire to speak with the dead subsumes within it a number of specifically professional imperatives, it is at the most general level no less than a reaffirmation of cultural immortality. And it can be found not only in the disciplines of history, anthropology, and literary studies, but in films like Dead Again and in works of popular criticism like Sven Birkerts’s The Gutenberg Elegies (1994), that address an educated but not necessarily academic audience.

Birkerts argues that the transition from print to electronic culture entails drastic phenomenological changes, of which the most uncanny is a flattening of time itself. One function of print culture was to “keep alive the dangerous and exhilarating idea that a life is not a sequence of lived moments, but a destiny.” Reading thereby made it possible to move from “the idea of time as simple succession” to the experience of “deep time.”26 That last phrase is borrowed from John McPhee, who used it to suggest that the time latent in rocks is so remote from the scale of human life that it immobilizes mortality: “You free yourself a bit from the boundaries of human time. And then in a way you do not live at all, but in another way you live forever.”27 Birkerts’s descriptions of reading imply that the cultural time latent on the printed page performs a similar transformation:

When I am at the finest pitch of reading, I feel as if the whole of my life—past as well as unknown future—were somehow available to me. Not in terms of any high-definition particulars (reading is not clairvoyance) but as an object of contemplation. At the same time, I register a definite awareness that I am, in the present, part of a more extensive circuit, a circuit channeling what Wallace Stevens called “the substance in us that prevails.” (84)

The passage begins by proposing that reading allows the reader to step out of the flow of time to contemplate her own life as a timeless object. This is a kind of personal immortality, and indeed the next page goes on to say that reading makes one’s “soul” present to oneself. But reading also gives one access to a circuit that seems to be “more extensive,” both because it is collective and because it extends backward and forward in time. That circuit “channels” (in a sense somewhere between
spiritualism and radio) a tacitly communal “substance in us that prevails.” Birkerts’s discussion of “deep time” thus turns out to involve an equation between culture and collective immortality like the one implicit in parallel-lives stories. And, like the authors of those stories, he suggests that electronic communications threaten to interrupt immortality (though he also appropriates the electronic “circuit,” interestingly enough, as a metaphor for historicist culture).

Anxiety about immortality is as widespread on the cultural left as it is in costume dramas or in Birkerts’s culturally conservative elegy for reading. When academics on the left reaffirm cultural immortality, they tend to do so by idealizing scholarship’s power to rescue otherwise forgotten and silenced voices—a realization particularly noticeable in the growing subfield of historical studies devoted to the reconstruction of “memory.” The concept of collective memory is not new, but recent academic discussions of the topic seem to form a distinct project dating from the 1980s, indebted in particular to Pierre Nora’s seven-volume collection *Les lieux de mémoire* (1984–92). In his influential introduction to that collection, Nora argues that the proliferation of recording technologies and historical archives has marginalized “memory,” which now survives only in gestures and habits, unspoken craft traditions, intimate physical knowledge, ingrained reminiscences, and spontaneous reflexes.” This argument, which identifies tradition with the body and with subjectivity, might appear to have conservative implications. But as Kerwin Klein has pointed out, it has received a surprisingly positive reception from historians interested in ethnic and postcolonial identity who have interpreted Nora’s concept of “memory” as “a form of counterhistory that challenges the false generalizations in exclusionary ‘History.’”

This strange alliance becomes easier to comprehend if one interprets recent academic interest in collective memory as a reaffirmation of the social status conveyed by historicist culture. The ostensible opposition between history and memory collapses in practice, because (as Nora stresses) memory no longer exists as living tradition but only in *lieux de mémoire*—“sites” of memory fragmented and fossilized by history, ranging from Proust’s *madeleine* to the defunct revolutionary calendar. The boundary between memory and history is thus illusive; it functions mainly as a rhetorical strategy for repackaging history. The boundary that Nora actually cares about falls between a conception of history as the electronic transcription of events (“the concreteness of the recording, the visibility of the image”) and a different aesthetic centered on *lieux de mémoire*—fossils that both represent and partly redress the obsolescence of memory by revealing the past’s double existence as corpse and as eternity (8).

*Lieux de mémoire* are fundamentally remains: the ultimate embodiments of memorial consciousness in a history that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it. What brings the notion forth is the deritualization of our world—which produces, manifests, establishes, constructs, decrees, and maintains by artifice and by will a society fundamentally absorbed
in its own transformation and renewal, by its very nature valuing the new over the ancient, the young over the old, the future over the past. Museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders—these are mounds marking the edge of another age, illusions of eternity.31

This is a dirge for historicist culture. It expresses anxiety not about the loss of a particular (simpler or more gracious) way of life but about a marginalization of “eternity” as such by the people who produce, establish, construct, decree, and maintain the present. It also evokes an inherent opposition between eternity and capitalism (emblematized particularly by electronic media); compare, for instance, Andreas Huyssen’s claim that “capitalist culture with its continuing frenetic pace, its television politics of quick oblivion, and its dissolution of public space in ever more channels of instant entertainment is inherently amnesiac.”32

Nora’s response to this threat closely resembles the way recent stories of parallel lives respond to the evaluation of historicist culture: he seeks out fragments of the past that were never fully incorporated into their own age, and which therefore have the potential to wake to a second existence in the present. The fragmentary quality of these lieux de mémoire represents the contemporary crisis of memory, while their rebirth in the present symbolically resolves it. As a paradigmatic example, Nora offers the revolutionary calendar: an attempted intervention in collective memory that qualifies as a lieu de mémoire because it failed to endure as a living tradition, and so could return for a second life in scattered allusions to Thermidor or Brumaire—half memory, half object of historical study. More than anything else, “this dual identity” defines lieux de mémoire: “moments of history are plucked out of the flow of history, then returned to it; no longer quite alive but not yet entirely dead, like shells left on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.” Announcing that these fossils form “an unconscious organization of collective memory that it is up to us to bring to consciousness,” Nora defines a program for historians that closely resembles the imperative to exhume unopened letters and consummate unconsummated relationships that drives the detective protagonists of recent historical fiction.33 Neither group is really concerned with living memory: they go in search of what was stillborn, and give it belated life, in order to experience history’s partial triumph over its own obsolescence.

The politics of Nora’s project are open to debate; though it has been welcomed by the postcolonial left, it is “in its French context,” as Klein notes, “more nearly a conservative plain about the fragmentation of French identity.”34 For a less equivocal example of left cultural theory, one might turn to Fredric Jameson, whose central theses about postmodernity can be understood as materialist formulations of the anxiety other writers have expressed in terms of memory or deep time. Jameson defines the problem as a “crisis in historicity”—that is, a crisis in our ability to perceive “the present as history.” The very facility of stylistic periodization in postmodernity makes it difficult for works of art to defamiliarize the present or to repre-
sent its relation to the past. According to Jameson, postmodernity “has forgotten how to think historically” because capital has finally succeeded in commodifying time itself, congealing historical difference into retro style.35

Though Jameson formulates the crisis in insistently material terms, he too represents it as a threat to immortality. Postmodern amnesia is a problem because history is necessary “for the resurrection of the dead of anonymous and silenced generations.” Since it is “the retrospective dimension necessary for any vital reorientation of our collective future,” this ritual remembrance of the dead also guarantees the future vitality of the community—which, as Durkheim would point out, has always been the rationale for funerary rituals.36 Of course, Jameson is talking about politics. But for Jameson, the point of political interpretation is really to do what funerary ritual does in religion: to reaffirm the continuity of collective existence. This theme was already central to _The Political Unconscious_ (1981):

Only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential mystery of the cultural past, which, like Tiresias drinking the blood, is momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak, and to deliver its long-forgotten message in surroundings utterly alien to it. . . . These matters can recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story . . . only if they are grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot.37

A revenant who represents historical difference as wisdom from beyond the grave, Tiresias is in this passage a bit like Pater’s La Gioconda—though admittedly, a Marxist critic’s identification with historical time is not interchangeable with an aesthete’s. Jameson is on his guard, as a matter of course, against any reification of history as “culture” one could acquire. But this does not mean that he scorns cultural immortality: it means only that he understands what it is. Since Jameson frankly acknowledges a desire to overcome death by identifying with “a single great collective story,” he doesn’t need to disguise that desire as a celebration of reading, or of somatic memory. But he has as much reason as Birkerts or Nora to be troubled by a decline in “the mystery of the cultural past,” because Marxist literary interpretation still needs to show that superseded social forms speak to the present, not in spite of but (herein lies the mystery) because of their contingent specificity.

This is a need that Marxism shares with other forms of historicism. It’s true that there is a utopian impulse in Jameson (and of course in Marx), but “the mystery of the cultural past” he describes does not depend on any particular eschatological premise. It requires only that apparently dated social forms be understood to carry—precisely in their “deadness”—an urgent message for the present. Jameson says that this is possible only if social forms “are grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot,” but the word _unfinished_ concedes more than at first appears. In principle it says only that the story is not over, but in practice Jameson does not pretend to know whether (let alone when or how) history will end. It seems possible that Tiresias will have to keep drinking the blood in order to recast his message for
a potentially endless succession of ages. Moments of the past are “grasped as vital episodes,” then, not in the sense that they are subordinated to a determinate teleology, but only in the sense that their contingent specificity is redeemed through an (ever-changing) relation to the present. In the same way, the future that explodes our own age’s ephemeral assumptions will presumably immortalize them and give them meaning in the very act of situating them as a characteristic “episode” of its own history. In short, the consolations of cultural immortality are promised not just by the “memory” industry, or by Marxism, but by historicism itself. If we wanted to avoid making this promise, historicists would have to become not more but less nominalistic. If one could discern universal standards or stable teleologies, the idiosyncrasies of a particular historical moment could (by comparison) be revealed as blind alleys and digressions. But since the appetite for collective permanence is too strong to be denied altogether, the more one subordinates universals to the process of change, the more one tends to imply—in practice—that every historical moment is eternalized through its singular relation to the future that transforms it.

In short, I don’t see any way to break the link between historicism and what I’ve called “historicist culture”: the social status conferred by a connection to eternity, glimpsed paradoxically in the ephemeral and local. But I also don’t see any urgent need to break that link. My attitude here is analogous to John Guillory’s attitude to canon formation. One wants to ensure equal access to cultural capital, but it would be a quixotic project to attempt to abolish cultural capital altogether by insisting that people refrain from making judgments about literature—or, in this case, from seeking immortality in historicism. The problem posed by recent defenses of immortality arises not from the rhetoric of immortality, but from historicists’ reluctance to acknowledge their investment in it. Unacknowledged aspirations can become sources of defensive distortion, because perceived threats to the aspiration have to be translated into a threat to something else. Recently, historicists’ anxiety about the depreciation of their investment in cultural immortality seems to be generating an apocalyptic narrative about a threat to time itself. Birkehrs’s elegy for deep time, Nora’s narrative about the disappearance of memory, and Jameson’s account of a crisis in historicity are symptoms of this displacement. There is, at any rate, a great deal of textual evidence inside these theories to suggest anxiety about cultural immortality, and not much evidence in the world outside them to suggest that the flattening of time and history they describe is actually taking place.

Consider the best version of the argument, which in my view is Jameson’s. The flowering of the parallel-lives genre has special relevance here, for though its protagonists share Jameson’s anxieties, the genre itself tends to refute his thesis of a postmodern crisis in historicity. Jameson’s evidence for that crisis included the observation that the historical novel and the costume film have “fallen into disrepute and infrequency”; an observation that went to print just as both forms were entering a prolonged boom in sales and prestige. Moreover, the historical novels of the late
1980s and 1990s were notably clear-eyed and materialistic about historical difference. Sally Shuttleworth has pointed out that “the retro-Victorian novel” is extremely careful “to offer a broad materialist picture of Victorian culture” rather than a mere “drama of ideas” (262). One could add that historical novels relying on the parallel-lives premise are particularly good at representing “the present as history.” Their constant shuttling between centuries often makes the present look stranger than the past. Of the charges one might level against fiction written in the last two decades, the claim that it “has forgotten how to think historically” seems to me one of the least plausible.

Contemporary cultural theorists have used crises of “deep time” or “memory” or “historicity” to explain the devaluation of culture. I have suggested that causality is more likely to be flowing in the other direction: theorists perceive a crisis in historicity because the prestige of cultural immortality has been declining. But this leaves a question unanswered: if we have not forgotten how to think historically, why is the prestige of identification with cultural history declining in the first place? That question deserves more discussion than I can give it here. But one clue lies, I suspect, in the villainous role historical fiction and cultural theory have lately accorded electronic media of communication (especially film and television). I prefer to bracket Birkerts’s claim that those media differ from print culture in profound temporal ways. The jury is still out on that question, and this is not the place to decide it. But it is clear that technologies for the reproduction of sounds and images have, if nothing else, changed the reception of older cultural forms. It is not just that electronic media have cut into their audiences. More important, the visible momentum of mass culture makes it difficult for the public to believe that the stylistic evolution of poems (or plays, or paintings) still represents something important about the course of history. The prestige of those cultural forms depended as much on a belief in their synecdochic relationship to history as on the sheer size of the audience. But that belief was showing cracks in the 1960s, and by the 1990s it had altogether disappeared.

It was not logically necessary for the marginalization of particular cultural forms to discredit the whole idea of cultural history, but the twentieth-century divide between high culture and popular entertainment seems to have forced many observers to draw that conclusion. In schools and universities, students learn to approach works in older media as emblems of a historical period, and thereby of cultural history in general. A poem is defined in advance as a historical document, whether or not it chooses (like “The Wasteland”) to remind its readers of that fact. Television and moving pictures, by contrast, until lately appeared to have no history—or at any rate, no history that could be a vehicle for culture. So when mid-twentieth-century audiences stopped pretending to care about high culture’s studied simulation of a dialectic, they may have concluded, not that modernism had misdescribed the course of cultural history, but that immediacy was more important than culture.
The historicist turn in contemporary fiction and drama springs in part from writers’ recognition that the audience has stopped caring about the dialectic of style in older media. Since formal experiments that sought to construct and embody a new Zeitgeist were no longer conferring prestige, plays and novels turned in on themselves to represent the project of historicist culture (instead of acting it out as avant-gardism). The parallel-lives premise, which puts historicist culture in jeopardy in order to rescue it from oblivion, is one way of representing that project. But it is not necessarily a defensive gesture; the same plot premises that look like a turn inward in the genres of fiction and drama can look, in the context of film, like a newly aggressive assertion of that genre’s right to possess and distribute historicist culture. Consider the evocation of noir style in films like *Chinatown*, *Dead Again*, and *L.A. Confidential*. These films posit an audience that knows something about the history of the genre and thereby achieve an effect of mystery that comes not just from their plots (which uncover bodies buried more or less deeply in the past), and not just from the chiaroscuro they borrow from mid-century film, but from the parallel between these evocations of lost authenticity on the levels of plot and of style. The detective protagonist can be all the more weary because we sense he has been on the job a long time; the shadows that surround him begin to evoke the passage of time. The allure of these works comes, in other words, from their ability to suggest that they contain within themselves the history of their genre. That project echoes the reassertion of historicist culture implicit in the parallel-lives premise—and sometimes, for instance in *Dead Again*, coincides with it.

Roman Strauss, played by Kenneth Branagh, is a European composer made up to look strikingly like Laurence Olivier. His reincarnation as a plastic artist (and his eventual recovery of lost social status) are triumphs over the journalists and film directors who hounded him in postwar Los Angeles, but the evocation of Olivier also implies that film now contains within itself the temporal depth that constitutes culture. Kenneth Branagh’s physical transformations (from successful European composer to exiled, jailed composer to gawky, earnest American gumshoe) have a similar double function: they evoke anxiety about the decline of historicist culture but reassert that culture in the form of historically savvy film (fig. 1).

This is the kind of work that for Jameson suggests a chilling postmodern shift from the history of substance to a history of empty style. It is true that the novels and films produced over the last two decades have not always grounded their evocation of historical difference in substantive social detail. Celebrations of postmodern narrative as a radical decentering of history are for that reason too sanguine. But nineteenth-century historicism also had its substantive and its purely stylistic aspects. *Dead Again* should be compared not to Stendhal or Scott but to Keats’s “Hyperion,” which invokes Miltonic style for many of the same reasons *Dead Again* invokes Hitchcock. For a contemporary Scott, one could look to Byatt or Fowles. What differentiates recent historical fiction from its nineteenth-century predecessor is not a shift from social substance to style, but mainly a sense in recent works that histori-
cal consciousness and memory are themselves under siege. That sense of crisis produces the characteristic double-layered plot, where history appears to die and be reborn. But that death need not be taken literally; it may only reflect the necessity of rebuilding a nineteenth-century system of cultural distinction that lost value when the twentieth century stopped taking its official high culture seriously.

Notes

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7. Here I am borrowing Bourdieu’s model of class as a composite category, made up of distinctions articulated and postures adopted within multiple interacting “fields” (for instance, the field of culture, a subset of the larger field of social distinction); see Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production; or, The Economic World Reversed,” in The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature, ed. Randal Johnson (New York, 1993), 29–73.
11. Ackroyd, Chatterton, 150.
12. The most candid explorations of this anxiety have focused specifically on the academy: for instance Bill Readings, The University in Ruins (Cambridge, Mass., 1996). But by articulating the crisis as a conflict between market ideals and the ideal of culture, they imply (I think correctly) that similar conflicts are felt by knowledge workers located outside of educational institutions.
17. Readings, The University in Ruins, 89.
22. John Fowles, The French Lieutenant’s Woman (Boston, 1969), 230. Though Stoppard and Byatt also declare common cause with scientists, it is possible to find some parallel-lives stories, like Peter Ackroyd’s Hawksmoor (New York, 1985), that employ an older strategy of pressing science into service as historicist culture’s Other.
23. Stoppard, Arcadia, 74.
24. For analogous gestures in recent historiography, see Ann Rigney, Imperfect Histories: The Imperfect Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism (Ithaca, N.Y., 2001), 130–42.


41. Jameson sensitively dates the disappearance of “modernist history” in *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, xi.