We were still in the old house (but already no longer in the old old house), when my daughter, Lauren, who must have been about seven or eight years old, said, ‘Isn’t that the way we used to do things?’ I don’t remember what she was referring to, maybe the use of an old screwdriver or handsaw, at a time when we were generally working with power tools, or a typewriter, but I was struck by her attentiveness to ‘what once was, but is no longer’. I have been to enough seminars on memory with psychologists and neuroscientists to know how many scholars assume that the distinction between ‘was’ and ‘is’ is constituted in language templates anchored in the structure of the brain. Yet what I heard was evidence that the sense of time passing and even a nostalgic sentimentiality about that passage was learned, perhaps sometime between the move from the old old house to the old house. In other words, I leaned toward the idea that the learning of language does much to create the structures of cognition so that different languages, tenses and attentions work themselves out to elaborate different kinds of structure, which consequently cannot be regarded as anthropological constants. In my view, much of the amplitude of tense, duration, rupture and the work of memory that attends to them are learned in and vulnerable to culture.

At the time, in the old house, I was working on what I, in the late 1990s, had conceived as a history of nostalgia. For me, nostalgia was not simply an unexplored phenomenon of modern life long held in condescension and misunderstood but a portal into the historic nature of conceptions about discontinuity, periodization and loss and of different ways of relating to and assembling the past. I was trying to write a history of the practices of memory, which finally emerged in somewhat different form as Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History (Fritzsche 2004), which focused on the French revolutionary period. I argued for the importance of the French Revolution but also for the emergence of drastic description that enabled contemporaries to see things as revolutionary in ways that radically realigned the relationships between ‘was’ and ‘is’. I was interested not so much in the content of memories, whether or not they were exculpatory, admonitory or adversarial, or in the destination of the work of memory: what interested me was the history of the shapes and forms of time (Fritzsche 2013). Exactly what weight to put on the decades around the turn of the nineteenth century (and I would say lots) was secondary to suggesting the overall historical nature of those shapes and forms.

One of the most compelling images I found to guide me was an imaginary history of the walk up the attic stairs. At least in colonial New England, the garret had traditionally been a ‘lumber room’ or a storage place for ‘meal, flour, and dried food stuffs’. Until the hard freezes of winter, the dry heat of the attic was well suited to preserving apples, squashes and onions. William Pyncheon of Salem, Massachussets, for example, noted in his diary at the end of October 1788, that the weather had turned surprisingly, ‘excessively cold’ and that ‘people’s roots were frozen in the garret’ (Nylander 1993: 97). Otherwise the attic was an
unfinished loft where boys and girls were bedded down. One hundred years later, however, the scenery in the attic and the things people did there had changed dramatically. ‘What a museum of curiosities is the garret of a well-regulated New England house’, wrote one novelist, Thomas Bailey Aldrich in 1870:

> Here meet together, as if by some preconcerted arrangement, all the broken down chairs of the household, all the spavined tables, all the seedy hats, all the intoxicated-looking books, all the split walking sticks that have retired from business (weary with the march of life). The pots, the pans, the trunks, the bottles – who may hope to make inventory of the numberless odds and ends collected in this bewildering lumber-room? But what a place it is to sit of an afternoon with the rain pattering on the roof? What a place in which to read Gulliver’s Travels. (Nylander 1993: 14)

The attic, one might remember, was also Jo March’s favourite reading place in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. A few decades in the nineteenth century sufficed to turn parlours and attics into ‘mini-museums, filled with heirlooms, mementos, and souvenirs of family’ (Gillis 1996: 16). The house with old things was not so much the remnant of the past, but its theatricalisation, a ceaseless exchange of scenes and characters, of disappearances and reappearances, an ‘airy structure … open to the wind of time’, in the words of Gaston Bachelard (1994: 54).

These American moments suggest that the new texture to the past was not the simple result of the French Revolution but part of a much broader, trans-Atlantic configuration of time which depended as much on new knowledge about movements around the globe and about the nature of historical change as it did on political transformations and westward expansion. If at the beginning of the eighteenth century, scholars measured the age of the earth in thousands of years, by the end, they did so in millions of years – indeed tens of millions of years. Georges Buffon, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Georges Cuvier not only extended time backward along an unprecedented scale, but they chopped it up into distinctive prehistoric epochs in which characteristic forms of life were not necessarily present in preceding or succeeding periods. The ‘discovery of time’ was accompanied by the discovery of a new order of difference over time (Rossi 1984), and current events seemed to replicate ancient geological stratification. For many contemporaries, the French Revolution validated the insights of Buffon’s *Les Époques de la Nature* (1778) or Cuvier’s *Discours sur les révolutions de la surface du globe* (1822) which could be applied to the much shorter, but still highly varied, history of human society. The demolition of the ‘old regime’ gave a heart-felt poignancy to the ideas of periodicity which broke apart what had once been assumed: the basic similarity of society in ancient Greece, fifteenth-century Florence or eighteenth-century France. These places became increasingly ontologically differentiated through the advance of chronological supersession as we can see in the displays of natural history museums to this day. Even individual lives were increasingly measured according to revolutions of abrupt leave-takings and sudden arrivals: ‘There is always a time when we possessed nothing of what we now possess, and a time when we have nothing of what we once had’, François-René de Chateaubriand concluded in his acclaimed memoirs in 1811: ‘Man does not have a single, consistent life: he has several laid end to end, and that is his misfortune’ (Chateaubriand 1961: 73). New ways of remembering proliferated in the kinks and folds of these newly mobilised public and personal histories, which made Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s walk up the attic stairs in 1870 so different from William Pyncheon’s in 1788.

Chateaubriand (1768–1848), who as a child lived for a time in a kind of attic, an ‘isolated cell at the top of the turret’ at his father’s Combourg Castle, served me as an excellent guide because his extraordinary memoirs (and other essays on revolution, Christianity and ancient
societies) reflect but also comment on and argue for and against the ‘discovery of time’. Precisely his social position as a nobleman and his political fate as an émigré during the Revolution and his role at once as a democratic and royalist dissenter during the Restoration made him alert to what he considered to be mutable and also irreconcilable in the course of current history.

Chateaubriand’s vocabulary is replete with nautical terms that have an eighteenth-century feel about them, but they act with the revolutionary forcefulness of the nineteenth century. He opened the Essay on Revolutions (1797), which he wrote in English exile: ‘We are sailing along an unknown coast, in the midst of darkness and the storm.’ These maritime metaphors assisted Chateaubriand in describing a totally mobilised landscape in which the jeopardy of shipwreck loomed always on the horizon. ‘No one can promise himself a quiet moment’, he admitted, ‘the friend is now torn from the friend’, the age ‘resounds with the fall of thrones’ (Chateaubriand 1815a: 4–5). But on reflection in the memoirs, which Chateaubriand began to write in 1811, the ‘unknown coast’ became more historiographically sensible. ‘I have seen a world end and a world commence’, he wrote during the wars of the revolution. ‘Old Europe thought it was fighting only France; it did not perceive that a new age was marching upon it’ (Chateaubriand 1902: vol. 3, p. 46). While Chateaubriand eventually returned to France after seven years of exile, he continued to feel like a ‘foreign soldier’:

I am writing, like the last of the Romans, to the sound of the Barbarian invasion. By day I compose pages as agitated as the events of the day; at night, while the rolling of the distant cannon dies away in my solitary woods, I return to the silence of the years that sleep in the grave and to the peace of my youngest memories. (Chateaubriand 1902: vol. 3, pp. 47–8)

There would be no restoration, the old society would not revive: this was Chateaubriand’s message, even as he clung to the old regime, believing even when he witnessed the disinterment of Marie Antoinette from the old Cimetière de la Madeleine in January 1815 that he ‘recognized the Queen’s head by the smile which that head had given me at Versailles’ some 30 years earlier (Chateaubriand 1902: vol. 3, p. 103). It is through his nostalgic bearing that he accounted his losses.

Moreover, the revolution did not just divide one world from another, the lesson of periodisation, but positied the principle of historical change, the lesson that ruptures would continue to manifest themselves so that that the present would be antiquated just as had the past: ‘Ever the revolution recommences’, he wrote in 1832 with the effect that in the shadow of the French Revolution, Chateaubriand made the world look completely different by scattering across its face the ruins of people (Chateaubriand 1902: vol. 5, p. 306). He was fascinated by the wrecks of old empires in Rome, Athens and Jerusalem, yet he also recognised the wrecks of the present, Louis XVI’s France, of course, but also Danton’s or Robespierre’s, where, when he returned from his London exile early in 1800, the walls were still ‘smeared’ with ‘Republican inscriptions … already grown old: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, or Death’ (ibid., vol. 2, pp. 155–6). In Canning’s London where ‘new buildings … cover up memorable events’ that had taken place but 30 years earlier – the ‘old meadows’ now constituted Regent’s Park (ibid., vol. 1, p. 187) or even in the forests of a brand New World, where the young traveller, who confidently believed he would find nothing old or decrepit, stumbles across abandoned mounds littered with ‘fragments of vases and various utensils’ (Chateaubriand 1828: vol. 1, p. 181). ‘What nation was this?’, he demanded, ‘What revolution has swept it away?’ (ibid. 157). It was with the eyes of an archaeologist that Chateaubriand came to see the world revealed as disenchanted so that this revolution had forever made things after-revolution.
The effect of the French Revolution was to dramatise the world history that Chateaubriand assembled in his essays and commentaries. He often held out the itinerant nature of all things so that the writer’s fantastic detonation of the French Revolution across all of time and space actually naturalised it in overarching the operations of endless rhythm of return and departure: rise and fall. Indeed, in the Génie du Christianisme (1802), he argued that ‘God created a world that was at once old and new’ (see Sainson 2005: 57), the ‘scathed oak’ and scarred rock were manufactured ‘marks of antiquity’ that lent the original state of nature its charm (Chateaubriand 1856: 136–7), the old man was manufactured in order to cringe at the adolescent (Vial 1963: 7). Yet it seems very clear that the French Revolution and not the Creation was the point of origin of this mobilised landscape of ashes, rubbish and dust. Chateaubriand’s writings themselves are scarred with the unprecedented force of 1789, which ruptures any ongoing cycle of rupture, of degeneration and rejuvenation, decay and advance. In particular, for Chateaubriand, what marked the quickened, chaotic time of the post-revolutionary era was the ongoing production and the ceaseless effacement of ruins. This is in fact the driving power behind the production of the memoirs themselves. The precedent in the cycle of ruination is deployed to indict the self-sufficiency of the present. The unprecedented in the ancient cycle is allowed to emerge to dramatise the new quality to destruction.

Chateaubriand’s melancholy possessed a special intensity whenever he contemplated the possibility that the monuments of the past might no longer remain visible in the future. If the ‘scathed oaks’ or the scarred rocks of history were to disappear, creatures would live in a perpetually simulated present that offered no notice of other lives and other ways. The distinction is well drawn in A Letter from Rome, written in 1804 after his final break with Napoleon. There are two kinds of ruins, Chateaubriand maintained, ‘the one the work of time; the other of man’. In the first instance, ‘nature acts in unison with time’, so that the crevice that appears is quickly filled with the nest of a dove and the rubbish that gathers is enwreathed with flowers. Human ruins, by contrast, are out of joint with time. They are the ‘effect of calamity’ rather than of time, a violence that leaves the scene of devastation ‘without any reparative power’ (Chateaubriand 1815b: 18–20): and this calamity can be given temporal specificity. ‘The old men of former times’, and here Chateaubriand reflected on the society of his childhood, ‘were less unhappy and less isolated than those of today: if, by lingering on earth, they had lost their friends, little else had changed around them; they were strangers to youth, but not to society’. It is all different ‘nowadays’, that is, since the French Revolution, ‘a straggler in this life has witnessed the death, not only of men, but also of ideas: principles, customs, tastes, pleasures, sorrows, opinions, none of these resemble what he used to know. He belongs to a different race from the human species among which he ends his days’ (Chateaubriand 1902: 38–9). Chateaubriand makes a claim for the special weight of this time, ‘nowadays’, which depart from the models of the past, however much these models continue to bear on Chateaubriand’s thinking. And what was particularly calamitous about the French Revolution was not so much that it destroyed worlds and created ruins – killing a king or washing up émigrés such as himself on foreign shores – but it destroyed the monuments of the past. Chateaubriand’s readers are taken again and again to the Abbey of Saint-Denis, outside Paris, where in August 1793 the royal tombs were plundered and the bones of kings smashed and thrown into a rubbish basket (Chateaubriand 1856: 524–5, 730–31). To take away ‘the bones of their fathers’, he wrote in another context, ‘you take away their history’, you rob them ‘of the proofs of their existence and of their annihilation’ (Chateaubriand 1902: vol. 1, p. 231). It was the ruin of the ruin that distinguished the destruction of modern people from the destruction of eternal time. Later, Victor Hugo would push the point further; in Notre Dame de Paris, he observed that it was
fashion and good taste that threatened Notre Dame more than natural erosion or political and religious struggles.

Moreover, it was the French Revolution of 1789 that cast Chateaubriand into the difficult, unwelcomed role of émigré. The émigré came upon new, unexpected perspectives. It allowed Chateaubriand to see others as ‘stranded in the present’ as he himself was. When he encountered American Indians in his travels through the United States in 1792 he found himself. North of Albany, along the Hudson River, Chateaubriand stumbled on ‘a sort of barn’ in ‘the midst of a forest’. He peered inside and found ‘a score of Savages’, ‘their bodies half bare, their ears slashed’, but also a ‘little Frenchman, powdered and frizzed’; he was ‘making the Iroquois caper to the tune of Madelon Friquet’ – this was ‘an overwhelming thing for a disciple of Rousseau’ (Chateaubriand 1902: vol. 1, pp. 218–19). Instead of hearing the ‘shouts of the Savage and the braying of the fallow-deer’, Chateaubriand walked through the Adirondack forests only to make out ‘the habitation of a planter’ which lay just beyond ‘the hut of an Indian’ (Chateaubriand 1828: vol. 1, pp. 123–4). By the time he made his way down the Ohio River, Chateaubriand had grown weary at the sight of new settlers pressing into Kentucky from Virginia. In ‘wilds where man [once] roved in absolute independence,’ he asked, ‘will not slaves till the ground under the lash of their master … will not prisons … replace the open cabin and the lofty oak’. Chateaubriand recognised the poignant signs of destruction in the New World: the tragic figure of the Indian who ‘is no longer a Savage in his forests, but a beggar at the door of a factory’ (ibid., vol. 2, p. 101). And Chateaubriand identified his own fate with that of the Indian: both he and they had suffered a historical defeat and were condemned to live amidst the ruins of what once had been a noble existence.

In a flash of recognition, Chateaubriand on the Ohio River approached the Indians on the far shore as fellow victims of historical transformations that had destroyed traditional habitations. Colonialism and mercantilism stood as the confirmation of the obsolescence of both the nobleman and the ‘noble savage’.

Although Chateaubriand despaired over the humiliations endured by the American Indians in this first American century, he ultimately fixed his identity to his status as a fallen nobleman, as an émigré who belonged neither here nor there, as a ‘foreign soldier’ or ‘shipwrecked mariner’. ‘I shall continue to relate my shipwreck’, he concludes, a continuation which was the 30-year work of the memoirs from 1811 to 1841. ‘I believe in nothing except religion’, Chateaubriand announced at one point, and so ‘I distrust everything’ (Chateaubriand 1902: vol. 2, p. 95). In the affairs of this world, he was a non-believer: he made an awkward republican in America, cut a poor figure as an émigré in England and infuriated his fellow legitimists during the Restoration. He repeatedly described himself as a swimmer in the course of events who refused to try to reach the banks on either side despite turbulent conditions. ‘Each age is a river that carries us off according to the whims of the destiny to which we have abandoned ourselves’, he explained.

There are those (the republicans) who cross it headlong and throw themselves onto the shore opposite. The others are perfectly happy to remain where they are, without plunging in. Trying to move with the times, the former transport us far from ourselves into an imaginary realm; the latter hold us back, refusing to enlighten themselves, happy to be men of the fourteenth century [at the end of the eighteenth] (quoted in Barbéris 1976: 107–8).

For his part, Chateaubriand preferred to remain castaway. Wreckage swirled around the swimmer, who abandoned any attempt to gather up the debris and found solace in hanging on to this or that piece. ‘It will depend but on myself to knot together again the two ends of my existence, to blend far-distant periods, to mingle illusions of different ages’, he wrote.
Indeed, the dislocations of the Revolution provided Chateaubriand with a kind of thematic coherence: he described his delivery as an infant to a wet nurse as ‘my first exile’, compared life changes to ‘revolutions’ and referred to his well-paged memoirs as his ‘orphan’ (ibid., vol. 1, p. 17; Conner 1995: 1). (The very idea of ‘my orphan’ suggests how identity was shaped by loss in the modern era).

Chateaubriand’s self-apprehension as an émigré or ‘orphan’ enabled him to be more attentive to rupture and dislocation, provided him with new perspectives from which to witness and made it possible for him to conceive of assembling or reassembling the various parts of his life. It also extended to make him conscious of the destabilisation of the authority of his sightfulness. He fretted constantly about the unfaithful nature of his memory. The work of meditating over ‘the wreck of empires’ was impaired by the fact that the meditator himself considered himself to be a wreck, what with ‘his lukewarm hope, his wavering faith, his limited charity, his imperfect sentiments, his insufficient thoughts, his broken heart’. For Chateaubriand, memory was a slight impression that crumbled at the touch into ‘dust and ashes’ (1815b: 23). It was so feeble that the ‘unforgettable’ ended up crushing the ‘not-yet-forgotten’. After seeing the spectacle of Niagara Falls, for example, Chateaubriand realised with horror that he would never again experience either the memory of earlier waterfalls or encounter later waterfalls except in terms set at Niagara, which ‘eclipses everything’ (1902: vol. 1, p. 229). ‘My memory constantly counterposes voyages with voyages, mountains with mountains, rivers with rivers’, he explained. ‘My life destroys itself’ (quoted in Richard 1967: 110). This was so because past memories governed present experiences and later encounter erased previous recollections. Chateaubriand anticipated Walter Benjamin, who remarked that memory was not the sure ‘instrument for exploring the past’ but more resembled the ‘theater’ of the past, a ceaseless exchange of scenes and characters (1978: 25). In this sense, souvenirs called forth the instability of representation as forcefully as they recalled the otherness of the past.

Chateaubriand described his memoirs as an edifice, ‘which I am building up out of ruins and dead bones’, but the effacement of those ruins and bones would have caused the disintegration of the self (1902: vol. 1, p. 189). If the self was a wreck, its integrity would be threatened by the wreck of the wreck, the ruin of the ruin. Exile was thus constitutive of Chateaubriand’s identity.

The notion of exile is central to my reading of how Chateaubriand located himself in the period of post-revolution. His nomadism corresponded well to a century that devoured biographies and autobiographies, thousands of itineraries which lost their way. One exile, Mme de Fars Fausselandry, proclaimed the nineteenth century a ‘century of memoirs’ already in 1830, on the first page of her own autobiography. Indeed, the French Revolution generated an outpouring of memoirs equalled only by the survivor literature of the Second World War, notes Marilyn Yalom (1995: 10–11). The spectacle of dispossession lingered well into the twentieth century. Portraying his own royalist family circle, Philippe Ariès recalled that ‘the passages that were read to me were either touching statements of loyalty or declarations of the happiness to have lived back then’ (1988: 12). Yet the particular misfortunes of the exiles resonated with a much wider range of readers for whom ‘hybrid chronicles that track[ed] the convergence of an individual destiny with national destiny’ corresponded to a general sense of displacement in what quickly became known as ‘the age of revolution’ (Yalom 1995: 10).

Chateaubriand thus introduces the general theme of dislocation in time and space. Exile, displacement and diaspora have become central categories in the work of anthropologists, literary critics and historians. A veritable publishing industry has grown up in response to the work of Anthony Giddens (1991) and Ulrich Beck (1993), examining the post-traditional aspect to late modernity in which individuals have been largely ‘disembedded’ from
social milieus, such as region, religion, ethnicity and even family; find less applicable the experience that those milieus had attempted to transmit; move about among a variety of social settings; and quite self-consciously construct for themselves morally autonomous life trajectories. Arjun Appadurai refers to this condition as ‘modernity at large’ (1996). James Clifford, for example, cites the wonderful example of the anthropologist Amitav Ghosh. Over the course of fieldwork in small village outside Alexandria in the early 1980s, Ghosh expected to find a ‘settled and restful people’. As it turns out, however, he found quite the opposite: ‘The men of the village’ – and it is the men – ‘had all the busy restlessness of airline passengers in a transit lounge. Many of them had worked and travelled in the sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf, others had been in Libya and Jordan and Syria, some had been to the Yemen as soldiers, others to Saudi Arabia as pilgrims, a few had visited Europe’ (Clifford 1997: 1–2). Even their parents and grandparents had travelled since last names betrayed origins in the Levant, Turkey and Nubia. Born in India, trained in England and having worked in Egypt, Ghosh himself embodies the transnational mobility he studied. In similar fashion, in The Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy (1996) reveals a much travelled Atlantic Ocean where the back-and-forth movement of slaves, former slaves, labourers, writers and musicians over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has created a distinctive modern black culture that is not African, not American, not British, not Caribbean, but insistently diasporic. The image of the transit lounge or the concept of the ‘black Atlantic’ indicates that place and identity are as much the result of displacement as they are of stasis. Home is not just a location from which one takes leave and to which one might return, it is a place very much in motion. In this context, Chateaubriand’s shipwreck, his lives ‘end to end’, his travel to America and his exile in England, his suspicions about identity and duration, looks much more familiar.

There is a certain conceit to the notion that we are all exiles or the idea that dispossession provides the thematic unity to modernity. Chateaubriand as an orphan only takes us so far. There have been a series of massive re-solidifications, which have, to switch metaphors, corralled in much of Appadurai’s ‘modernity at large’. Both the catastrophes of the two world wars had the effect of remaking the history of the preceding decades into the sentimentalized homes that were subsequently then lost. Old photographs ‘before the deluge’ verge on the pastoral (Friedrich 1972). 1968 and 9/11 may have had similar effects. Modern times have created any number of containers of memory, which resist easy dissolution. In Liisa Malkki’s study of Burundian (Hutu) refugees (or exiles) in Tanzania, Purity and Exile (1995), for example, the refugees in the town conform very much to the ways of being embroidered in the transit lounge or the black Atlantic. They worked hard to assimilate, to speak Swahili, to procure Tanzanian identity cards and to receive government benefits. They hardly talked about the murderous past in the midst of negotiations and business deals. But when Malkki went to a refugee camp, about 200km from the town, she found something completely different, an ‘extravagant self-consciousness’ about being Hutu (Malkki 1995: 197). In the camp, which occupied a space that had been cleared out of the forest, a dark, dense, towering mass surrounding the perimeter, hundreds of people who spoke as if with one voice which recollected an obsessive, violent history of the subordination and suffering of the Hutu people and outlined a future of redemptive return to a purified Hutu nation. They were exiles, but felt deeply attached to the idea of a Hutu home, which they lived in the mythic history they embroidered. Malkki reminds us that the town does not necessarily or logically supersede the camp, as the camp does not displace the fact of the town.

A final guide. In her acclaimed travelogue of pre-war Yugoslavia, Black Lamb and Grey Falcon, Rebecca West includes a scene, which suggests the strong affiliation between the experience of loss and attachment to the nation. On her visit to Sarajevo just before the start of the Second World War, West entered a graveyard. Not far from the cemetery gates she saw ‘a new grave, a raw wound in the grass’. It is the likely consequence of a military skirmish
because ‘a young officer’ stood at its edge. ‘He rocked backwards in his grief, though very slightly’, she observes. All at once, ‘he tore open his skirted coat as if he were about to strip’, but just as quickly ‘his hand did up the buttons’. In this brief gesture, as the still uniformed mourner avoided giving way to private grief, West recognized the ‘discipline’ of the soldier who understood and accepted loss in the name of the nation. ‘His hand did up the buttons’, although it was tempted to cast off the uniform. ‘This was a Slav, this is what it is to be a Slav’, West concluded: ‘He knew only that in suffering or rejoicing he must not lose that control of the body which enabled him … to defend himself and his people’ (West 1943: vol. 1, p. 390).

There is no mistaking the enormous pain of the individual, who then, on second thoughts, accepted the demands of the nation and the redemptive commemoration it offered the dead. The officer chose to see the ‘raw wound’ as a site of national memory. This recognition is not imperative or unconditional, we know the soldier wavered and ‘rocked backwards in his grief’, but it is compelling because it gives collective meaning to individual suffering and restores ‘discipline’ and ‘control’. West herself is, of course, in control of the scene, but she sets it to reveal how national history is made at the side of the grave and how gravesites replenish national history. In the face of loss, the soldier stepped back from the new grave to embrace the epic of the nation. But he did waver, as Chateaubriand repeatedly did, and he could have stripped off his uniform and entered a less fearsome, less judgemental, more easy-going world, embraced perhaps by Malkki’s town, which is not cast in the terms of the cry of ‘liberty or death’ which echoes in the camp. There is movement in both directions, toward the grave or back into town. Each enables, and each disables.

References


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