I want to take advantage of and even abuse the freedom offered by an unabashedly speculative conclusion to violate the strict protocols of periodicity and nationality adhered to in the preceding four chapters and not only leap forward two centuries, but consider a more geographically diverse range of authors in bringing this book to a close. In terms of time, I am aware of the risks in simply eliding the intervening history of the nineteenth century, particularly because the evolution of the novel, the form with which I have ended my survey of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, accompanied, figured, and, in many cases, celebrated the triumph of the British Empire, with all of its attendant monumental pomp and overweening visions of memorial hegemony. As Thomas Richards writes in The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire (1993), one strand of the Victorian novel imagined “an imperial archive holding together the vast and various parts of the Empire. This archive was neither a library nor a museum…rather…a fantasy of knowledge collected and united in the service of state and Empire.”

Yet this fantasy, like that of the universal library in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was never realized, the imperial archive undermined and eventually doomed by the dissolution that awaited the Empire itself after World Wars I and II. In terms of nationality, the construction, evolution, and demise of a modern conception of memory were not alone a

H. Weber, Memory, Print, and Gender in England, 1653–1759
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British project, but a European and, certainly in the twentieth century, even global one. During the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, Western print culture, exported around the world by a triumphant capitalist and imperialist Europe, played a large role in determining the economic, colonial, and memorial structures that have governed nineteenth- and twentieth-century history. In three short stories by the Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges, two short stories by the Serbian Danilo Kiš, and a novel by W.G. Sebald, a German-born writer who lived most of his adult life in England, I want to describe some of the ways in which the last half of the twentieth century brings to a close the memorial hopes and ambitions articulated in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Since World War II, the memorial dreams set in motion by modern print culture have been critiqued, dismantled, and even abandoned. In On Longing (1984), Susan Stewart suggests how the series of binaries and correspondences between matter and spirit, object and knowledge, material and idea, which celebrated the mystery and power of the printed book during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, can now be collapsed into volumes that call into question “our notion of [the] ‘book.’” She surveys books so delicate that they must sit forever in glass cases, Dadaist books covered “by a forbidding configuration of needles,” a book of black magic bound in human skin: “The volume is horrible in much the same way that the pyramids are horrible: it is a monument to death, . . . The taboo here is the transformation of the living body into the merely material, the doubling of human labor moving spirit into matter. The book has murdered its content.” In our century, we can imagine “the outer limits” of the transformations that govern the book’s physical properties and modes of production.  

However great the anxiety of Cavendish, Milton, Pope, and Richardson as they confronted the challenges of a new technology and surveyed their state as “poor Moderns,” they nonetheless communicate a vigorous belief in and enthusiasm for the book, library, and print trade, all of which seemed to promise so much for writers concerned about their lives in time. Without wanting to ignore or flatten the differences I have delineated between these four writers, their uncertainty, confusion, and even fear in response to a technological change whose consequences they can hardly imagine remain firmly balanced by the excitement all four share in a technology and marketplace that heralded the possibility of a triumphant futurity for the emerging figure of the modern author.

In Borges, Kiš, and Sebald, however, we witness the waning of that enthusiasm and the death of those hopes, the early-modern promises of memorial authority compromised and ultimately betrayed by a Western culture that has become increasingly opaque, self-destructive, and a prisoner of its own narcissistic desires. The twentieth-century authors I examine certainly share the transcendental dreams and impulses that characterize the early-modern appreciation of print culture, but they register the exhaustion of that tradition and the frustration that accompanies the discovery that such dreams are