

## **The Humility of Thought: An Interview with Friedrich A. Kittler**

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***E. Khayyat***

*EK:* There is a story I heard you tell on a number of occasions—the story of your relationship with Martin Heidegger. When you were a student at Freiburg University, Heidegger was still around, not teaching but interviewing students in his spare time. You were given the opportunity to discuss with him your ideas, but you refused because you had seen many others who walked that very same path, returning paralyzed by the brilliance of Heidegger’s genius. You have also raised many concerns about Heideggerian thought, though, and you vehemently refuse to be labeled a Heideggerian. Now, at the same time, we all know that Heidegger’s words marked your own thought, and in a decisive manner, for that matter, and this too you

This interview was conducted at Gutenberg University in Mainz on May 13, 2011, and was the keynote address of the workshop series “Mapping the World, Mapping Literature: A Global Community of Letters.” I am grateful to Professor Alfred Hornung of Gutenberg University for his support and guidance in the organization of the series that brought together media historians and critics. We lost Professor Kittler about a month after I met him for the last time to show him this final version of our interview. I am infinitely grateful to him for his generosity and friendship.

admit wholeheartedly. Yet you tell us this story, and distance yourself from him intellectually. How are we to interpret this? There is, to begin with, a certain element of humility in it; this I understand. You would like to remain a reader of Heidegger's work, and a reader alone, despite your personal and institutional (one can say also "traditional," perhaps even "political"?) connection with his person in his lifetime and afterward. I understand that the distance you claim is, at the same time, some intimacy—an intimacy that is the exact opposite of that other type of intimacy, the one that belongs not to readers/students but to allies and best friends. Perhaps readers of *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* feel a similar distance, and a similar intimacy, between you and your other "sources"—a distance/intimacy similar to the one we hear in your story of your relationship with Heidegger. And perhaps we can even generalize this point about humility to your work at large?

*FAK:* Once I had the privilege of helping Heidegger dispose of his garbage, if I really need to show some humility, and if you really need accounts of personal contact. So, I will start with the question of humility and Heidegger, as you suggested, and with the garbage. But if you allow me to read between the lines for a second, I have to say that I have difficulty understanding what you mean by my "political" connection to Heidegger. You are probably suggesting, already at the outset of our conversation, that there has to be a relationship between what people have come to describe as Friedrich Adolf Kittler's "reactionary thoughts," on the one hand, and a certain conservatism ascribed to Martin Heidegger, on the other. I can tell you in advance that the kind of "political connection" you mention existed between Heidegger, Derrida, and, for instance, de Man, and perhaps one can read the traces of this political connection in their and also their allies' works. It was Derrida himself, actually, who wrote about "our innocence" in his defense and/or refutation of de Man's conservatism. I would never consider myself a member of a club of innocents, even if I were considered one. The garbage I helped Martin Heidegger dispose of consisted of books, most of them written by my teachers at Freiburg University, and all of them pompously dedicated to Martin Heidegger. Does this sound like humility to you? It does to me. It was a very peculiar humility, and I have to say I am grateful to you for introducing the term *humility* in this way. And I also have to make it clear that one can learn a great deal about this kind of humility from *Being and Time*, which, as you know very well, starts with everyday situations and not with the metaphysical, hyporealistic—in a word, "big"—questions of philosophy as they were introduced long before

Martin Heidegger—let us say, by Plato, for instance. But it is also relying on common sense, recognizing it in one's own way of phrasing things, in one's way of thinking and embracing it. This kind of attitude you can find in Carl Schmitt—since you want me to appear reactionary—who will tell us, for instance, relying on nothing but common sense, that if one wants to think of the political, one needs to go basically to policy. You don't start with the history of states or that of the State. If I were to translate this very particular humility, that is to say, this Heideggerian humility, which found its most marvelous expression in *Being and Time*, into the language of software architecture or hardware engineering, I would have to say that we start bottom-up instead of top-down in designing history.

*EK*: This translation of yours opens up another aspect of the attitude in question. Your literary readings, of Goethe, of Schiller, and of Schreber—readings performed with what you now call Heideggerian humility—seem to rely on such translations whenever possible. By avoiding or crossing out the big questions, they also distance themselves from the traditional literary-humanistic engagement. I am tempted to say your literary criticism appears at times sociological, at times even anthropological. Better still, typically your Heideggerian humility and translations such as these take you to a point of view in-between the humanities and the social sciences. This may be very important today in thinking about the future of comparative literature, for instance, or even of interdisciplinarity in general. Can we say that your literary readings point toward a social scientific scrutiny in this fashion, which then your work would have introduced into the humanities?

*FAK*: If I am talking about software and hardware engineering, I mean it. I am not very happy, I have to say, with your approximation between what I have tried to do all these years and social sciences. In fact, if I have to confess, with the unique exception of Luhman's work, I just hate sociology. Having mentioned Luhman, we will need to speak about love at some point. The logic of the bottom-up approach I am talking about is closer to engineering than describing, to designing than observing. This is because I have read my Nietzsche well. Greek episteme can be taken as a point of departure to understand the point I am making here—not in its European degeneration, mind you. It is very difficult to talk about this without referencing Heidegger. This sense is tragically missing, for instance, in the great historical constructions such as the ones produced by Jacob Burckhardt, certainly in extremely beautiful ways. But then if you look for the Greek

vocalic alphabet in Jacob Burckhardt's big *Kulturgeschichte* [*The Greeks and Greek Civilization*], you will find two tangential mentions of the most dramatic event in ancient Greek history. Greeks were the only people in that world to engineer, if you will, an alphabet capable of notating (*aufschreiben*) vowels in addition to consonants.

Now, such curiosities need not necessarily make us Hellenocentric. One of my teachers, Johannes Lohmann, wrote at length on the poetry of the Semitic languages, focusing particularly on the implications of consonant alphabets, with a little bit of ethnocentrism.<sup>1</sup> The language of the consonant alphabet is both practical and singular. It makes space for the most wondrous poetic saying. This is because it requires the knowledge of how to orally supplement the missing vowels. Greeks invented their vowel alphabet for simpler practical purposes, namely commercial purposes. So there is nothing to idealize about this particular development. Yet we can simply analyze the media technical implications of Greek engineering. This is what interests me most in Greek history today in my current research, not their glory. I am trying to figure out what exactly they wanted to achieve with this. You can certainly do such research equally well into Chinese culture, or Arabic culture, for instance. You can look at the history of their notation systems, their numeric systems, their musical notation systems, and try to reconstruct the so-called culture or the shapes it assumes and produces over time, from this very elementary level. This is what I tried to do with the German classic or romantic literature in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. It was around 1985 when ideas began to take form, when I did not yet have ready-made answers and comments for interviews but was genuinely inventing. This is the beginning of media history, not media theory, since media theory had started with McLuhan earlier.

It was difficult, of course; there wasn't much help when I was in Freiburg, for instance. Foucault was a great guide when it came to thinking about what to do with history and words, but then his interest in what I refer to as technical media was very limited. For obvious dramatic reasons, I started with Goethe's *Faust, Part 1*, but for technical reasons I switched to the elementary schooling as it relates to literary tradition in the second chapter. While doing all this, I learned many, many things from Foucault. Yet while Foucault studied his own experiences in the *École Normale*, that is to say in the higher education system, I tried to come down to the level

1. Johannes Lohmann, *Philosophie und Sprachwissenschaft* [Philosophy and linguistic science] (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1965).

of elementary education and initiation into culture. This would be my kind of humility.

In terms of interdisciplinarity, I do not have much to say. Suffice it to say that I consider my work above all historical. I have always insisted, and most of my students and colleagues kindly insisted together with me, that our intentions are strictly media historical, as different from, and sometimes even opposed to, media theoretical. This is not resistance to theory. It is, rather, a suspension of certain modes of thinking, and yes, crossing out, if you will, but also avoiding certain modes of writing, in the name of some necessary humility. And this humility is no Franciscan humility. The point is not engineering some form or another of enclosure, but to make space for a new kind of history by attending to those little things, letters, which in the end are our only legitimate access to culture. If writing has an economy, its fundamentals begin here, with this small currency. I heard a so-called post-colonial literary critic speak of this kind of research dismissively as “fact checking.” So be it. I am not so naïve as to give in to an ideology of facts, to a techno-scientific ideology, if you will, as Derrida would have it. Yet I don’t believe in the legitimacy of a theory of writing that does not analyze the fundamental economy of writing. To be direct, the talk of writing and literature, of their crimes and promises, so prominent in contemporary criticism today—all this is hot air to me.

*EK:* Let me go back to the beginning of our conversation, to my suggestion that your work embraces some sort of social scientific scrutiny. I believe this relates to the way you employ the notion of humility in our conversation. Let’s take Erich Auerbach’s humility, for instance. Auerbach says that Mark’s Gospel “portrays something which neither the poets nor the historians of antiquity ever set out to portray: the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people, from within the everyday occurrences of contemporary life, which thus assumes an importance it could never have assumed in antique literature.” What we witness in the Gospel is “a world which on the one hand is entirely real, average, identifiable as to place, time, and circumstances, but which on the other hand is shaken in its very foundations, is transforming and renewing itself before our eyes.”<sup>2</sup> Correct me if I’m mistaken, but this seems to involve a desire for “learning from below,” hence some sort of humility, perhaps closer to the one

2. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 42–43.

you just referred to as Franciscan. But the other humility is different, you argue. Benjamin Fortna, a brilliant Ottomanist and a historian of education, elaborates on (and perhaps clarifies) the alternative, economic strategy you described as follows: “We should perhaps look at the category of reading as we look at other important markers in human history, such as class, sex, religion. . . . It is also the category that we tend to take for granted as necessary for inclusion into the culturally and politically relevant segment of the population that most historians are concerned with.”<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that what is at stake here is at best a “politically relevant segment” of populations, not Auerbach’s “common people.” And about Saint Francis—you are suggesting that the humility in question, if it still looks like humility, of course, is one that would also avoid a contradiction like, “I am the humblest person on the face of this earth.”

*FAK:* One thinks of contradictions such as the one you formulated when one thinks about Saint Francis, but there are others. Despite all his fascination with humility, certainly Auerbach misses, and dramatically so, the point of notation systems and cultural differences between languages and scripts. I don’t understand how this could happen. But it happens everywhere, all the time. I don’t understand how people can be so ignorant about the little elements that structure their lives, like letters or numbers, notes in general. Perhaps you could find an answer here in Mainz. You’re right about Fortna; I have to check out his work. Being a serious person, a historian, he indeed clarifies. And if we are to follow this thought in the direction you offered, and think about comparative literature, on the one hand I am fascinated, first of all, by the proposal to go outside the European and North American mainstream of literature; on the other hand I am rather full of fears regarding competence or linguistic know-how. And even before that, the worst kind of academic books in my eyes are books on, let us say, the history of Chinese literature written by people who have no idea whatsoever about the actual history of notation systems of the Chinese language. That is so often the case. This is imperialism in its actual form—to assume that there is such a thing as a universal grammatology behind all cultures of notation, which enables us, examiners, to deem all forms of notation on the same plane and call them “writing” in advance, and then go on to think

3. Benjamin C. Fortna, “Learning to Read in the Late Ottoman Empire and Early Turkish Republic,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 21, no. 1–2 (2001): 40.

of some world literature a la Goethe. This is why the question of “writing,” in all its Derridean glory, for me, would be a question to cross out.

*EK:* Actually, Derrida made similar claims, not about writing in general but about literature. He is quite insistent in a number of his works on how literature should be considered a modern European phenomenon, a phenomenon of the European 1800s/1900s—with all due respect, he adds, to Greek and Latin poetry, and certain non-Western oral traditions. Another critic whom you adore, Jacques Rancière, was recently quite direct about this matter: literary history, he tells us, cannot be the history of some absurd, abstract concept of writing.<sup>4</sup> I think this historical sensitivity about literary institutionality has become quite the norm, at least in the United States. Perhaps in media history, the attempt to cross out the big question of writing translates into a rethinking of writing, taking its lead from this strictly historical account of literary production?

*FAK:* I too have deep problems with the possibility of this kind of free-floating world literature shifting and switching between Istanbul to Frankfurt, Cairo, and Paris. The question can be posed in a different way, though. Why do we call the totality of written texts by the name of *literature*? Let's try to answer in an old-fashioned way. As you know, the word derives from the Latin *littera*, a letter in the alphabet. In Greek, its equivalent, *to gramma*, could be enlarged to become *grammatike technē*, which is initiation to literacy and singing, or live poetry, as Nietzsche has it. This too *littera* inherits from *to gramma* and comes to mean the totality of written texts, whether in verse or in prose. So it looks like a genuine translation, right? Now Heidegger has taught us that in the history of being and saying, every translation has been dramatic.<sup>5</sup> Heidegger's example: Greek *lógos*, meaning speech and reason, the words spoken as well as the relations that hold them together, turns in Latin translation into a binary opposition between *oratio* and *ratio*, speech and ground. The knowledge of poets or rhetors, and that of philosophers or scientists, can no longer hold together but must drift into separate fields. In section 1447b of his *Poetics*, Aristotle comes up with a shocking observation that can help us understand this better. He says, up to his day,

4. Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 40, for instance. See also Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 3–31.

5. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, Band 2 (Pfullingen: Verlag Gunther Neske, 1961), 458–80.

a word designating both poetry and prose did not exist, and their distinction itself is anonymous, without name. What does that mean? This means that in the history of saying, the name *litteratura* started an epoch. It introduced a proper name for a place where there was only an empty space that even Aristotle did not dare to fill. This is what Goethe's world literature dared to formalize even further historically. Now, scripts and writing systems are media technologies, and I would go so far as to say that they are the very beginning of media technologies. When Turing proposed the computer architecture, he meant it, quite naïvely, as a writing system of mathematical symbols. Writing systems can be globalized, but poetry, if I may stay as reactionary and conservative as I am deemed to be, poetry is another thing, but definitely not the opposite.

Many have misunderstood what I meant by "technical media." There is a difference between writing and Writing, between writing-systems and Writing. Poetry has to do with language. And language is no medium, no technical medium at all. I think Heidegger's beautiful saying about language, that language is the house of being, is true. And this implies that language, in a very elementary sense, is above all morality, spoken as a flower of our mouth, as Hölderlin has it. It is very difficult to leave this house of being. Certainly it has been done; at least historically we have great amount of evidence that it has been done. Joseph Conrad is one example, Vladimir Nabokov is another. They both switched their mother language for the language of their choice. Orhan Pamuk is yet another example—he didn't have to switch languages. Yet these are above all *moral* issues, it seems to me. This is to say that Nabokov and Conrad did not really universalize or globalize their way of saying or their thought and being. They simply converted to a way of being that happens to be the one we are familiar with today. The thing is, one cannot look at the flower of the mouth as one looks at a technical medium. When you see the difference, you see what world literature is all about, and what it proves and exhibits. Now computing, too, involves a language; it has its own morality of sorts, on top of its technical media, that is. We are familiar with this morality, too. But one cannot see this without being able to program one's own computer. Once I met a young professor of German literature, who addressed me during a lunch break at a conference. He told me, "Mr. Kittler, you are wrong. You always tell us that in order to understand the computer age one has to be able to program one's own computer. This is silly," he said, "Computers are like cars. You don't have to understand the internal mechanics of a car in order to drive it. Look at me," he said, "I am a professor of German literature without ever having written



a poem.” And I told him that if this was the case, he was no scholar of German literature.

*EK:* I understand perfectly your requirement to be familiar with computer programming in order to be able to make sense of our age, morally and otherwise. Yet I am also curious to hear what you have to say about the talk of our day, in Germany as in the United States, on the Arab Spring, for instance. While evaluating the events, some even refer to your work, describing a technological movement thanks to which people are finally connected to each other and are mobilized.

*FAK:* Your reading of my work turns out to be quite political. Perhaps my work is political to the utmost, as you tell me. Fine. But do I have anything to say about the Arab revolutions? Mobilizing is not my job—this is what I have to say first—and it never was. For some, this makes my work apolitical, on top of being reactionary, that is. But only computers are connected to computers, and this is a simple fact. Yet I also have to tell you that Derrida, who on many different occasions spoke about democracy and literature, how they were dependent on each other, also whispered into my ear on those occasions, always half-jokingly, that democracy could not have emerged on the horizon without the personal computer. So, no, I do not believe that freedom is right around the corner, nor did Derrida. Of course, you see that this praise of the computer age, whatever that might mean, even in the context of Arab revolutions, has to do with Facebook—and when I say this, I don’t mean the company alone, as you know; I mean the discursive grounds upon which faces and words come together to orchestrate a certain experience of visibility, a certain relation to faces, to reading and writing, to words and images, et cetera—congratulating itself for having proven that it is, and has always been, the *telos*. Many media theorists today, and not only in mainstream media, say such stupid things, in Germany as in the United States. This is why I would like to describe what I do as media history and not as media theory. I see the title “The Poetry of the Revolution” in your program; I’d be more interested in that.<sup>6</sup>

I also believe that the computer age will come to an end, just like the age of scrolls came to an end and the age of the book, of codex. I need to add that I owe a lot to Derrida even for such statements, that is for sure. Perhaps it is also true that I took my lead from his very particular his-

6. The reference is to the lecture by Muhsin Musawi on the Arab Spring and literature.

toricism. He also insisted, on many different occasions, that *Of Grammatology* was a book of history through and through, which is how I still read it today. But this is also the reason why I don't think that Derrida's work cast a shadow on my work, as it frequently does on the work of many Derrideans of our day. This is to say, in a certain sense, I hate the pretension of humility of the humanities, including my own, if I may go back to the issue of humility. I was never into the kind of intellectual engagement which involved disguising one's own knowledge behind the name of an author, looking for, and then speaking, one's "master's voice," as it were. This was the critique Jacques Lacan addressed to his own students who were protesting his dismissal. Mobilizing wasn't his job, either. He accused his audiences of not wanting to listen, of looking only to understand. This kind of false humility, having to speak, and write one's own thoughts behind somebody else—I wanted to overcome this, and I think it took me many years to do so. I remember—this was already in Berlin, probably ten years ago or so—when I went to my seminar on the alphabet, with the Bible in hand, to read the letters of Paul. And taking Chapter 14 in the First Letter to the Corinthians, I told my students that I did not want anything resembling interpretation; that I wanted no education about the theological or critical reception of Paul's letters; that we were in an open field battle with Paul. We had to decide whether he was relevant or not, whether he was right or wrong. We took his words for granted.

I think this was the end of my humility. And just a few years later, I gave a lecture on Jesus as a media revolutionary, and then another one on Paul translating Hebrew knowledge into Greek knowledge. This concerns the transition from a consonant alphabet to a vowel alphabet, in order for everybody in the Roman Empire to be able to read what he had to write. In Chapter 14 of the First Letter to the Corinthians, the question is how to understand someone who speaks in tongues. There are many kinds of *phone* in the cosmos, but none of them is *aphonon*. If you read it in Greek, it is quite obvious. In German translation, it is all lost. Usual translations will translate the *aphonon* as meaninglessness. Yet no language, be it barbaric, is completely meaningless. But the point is not about meaning but about vocalization. *To aphonon* literally means "the voiceless" or "the unvoiced," and it is the word Aristotle uses in his *Poetics* for characterizing the consonant as opposed to the vowel, *to phoneen*. Paul's concluding remark would thus read as follows: nothing in this world is purely consonantic (except *Yahweh* perhaps, but the tetragrammatic *God* is not mentioned). This discussion on vowels and consonants is so heavily connected to Greek cul-

ture that there is no way one can miss the implications. It was initiated by pre-Socratic thought and poetry. It must have come to Paul via his Greek teachers. This is an illustration of my open field battle. It is my own battle with Paul, but at the same time, it was a battle fought between Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew.

*EK:* What about the “political connection” we talked about a few minutes ago? You told us that Heidegger, Derrida, and de Man were closer to each other than to you in their politics. Why do you distance yourself from these figures when it comes to politics? And from what exactly do you distinguish politics?

*FAK:* These are difficult questions. Well, first, you should allow me to be somewhat autobiographical. I was born in what was then known as East Germany. So I remember the days in the aftermath of the war; I remember the Red Army. I also remember the cultural and academic atmosphere of the time, at least through my parents. I was very young and did not have scholarly interests, I think, but I knew very well that I could not have had a decent university education there, which is why my parents fled to the West. It was in the West, when I was about sixteen, that I first read Martin Heidegger. So my initiation into philosophy and the “West” was quite an event, one that marked my life forever, it looks like. This was long before we all were almost forced to read Adorno. In time, I learned to look back to the “East” in a different light, and, yes, especially after I was given a healthy dose of Adorno. After my writings became somewhat popular, one weekend I was invited to the Vienna Secession, the famous palace. And there some kind of a critical inquiry took place, or perhaps it was more like an inquisitional questioning. The most horrific question posed to me was, “When did you betray Adorno and go to Heidegger?” I had to smile and say, “Sorry, but I read Heidegger when I was sixteen, I read Adorno only ten years after that. How could I have possibly betrayed Adorno?” Perhaps, though, I am the embodiment of such betrayal. This is why I also told you that I do not consider myself innocent. I would have never written about Heidegger and de Man and *our* innocence. The opinion that Adorno was mother’s milk for my generation, and Heidegger the gift/poison, was widely spread in those days. I believe this opinion made me somewhat shy about my indebtedness to Heidegger. Derrida helped me seriously in overcoming my shyness. When I, as a young teacher, invited him to Freiburg to give a lecture, he accepted, but also added that he would never come for me, just

wanted to see Heidegger's restaurants in town. At one point during the lecture, I was thinking it was Derrida speaking, yes, but he sounded more like Heidegger than Heidegger himself. I think I expected him to present another version of Heidegger as gift/poison story. But he knew as well as I did that Adorno was no mother's milk. I was the only one in the audience to be shocked by Derrida's wholehearted embrace of Heidegger, believe it or not. Thus begins my strange membership in the club, while I cannot claim innocence on *our* behalf.

*EK:* Can you elaborate on this a little more? It looks like you are pointing to something you find disturbing in Derrida's, Heidegger's, and Adorno's works? You spoke about Derrida casting a certain shadow; Adorno is no mother's milk, and about Heidegger—about Heidegger, the least you say is that he is not innocent, right?

*FAK:* Okay. I was never against Heidegger but have definitely always been against a certain Heidegger slang, very fluently spoken in the sixties and seventies in Germany, a slang that almost paralyzed Heideggerian thinking, by keeping to his terms, by letting the master's voice echo—which even Derrida mimicked from time to time. Because I wouldn't imitate Heidegger, all the way to his stylistic ways, it probably took me longer to lead his strong influence come down to paper. But my open field battle with Paul, my reading of Paul that I have just described to you, and its relation to what I have referred to as the most brilliant moment of Greek thought, are Heideggerian through and through. So in my heart, I stuck to Heidegger. Perhaps there is no other philosopher I read with pleasure and enthusiasm, except for young Hegel. What I do not understand, what is still a riddle to me, is the obviousness of Heidegger's, let us say, "reactionary thoughts"—his piety, for instance, as Derrida explained frankly, or his involvement in national socialism—and for instance the case of Jacques Lacan. And more generally, how is it that these Jewish philosophers discovered Heidegger for themselves and also learned to love and to hate him (with the great exception of Hannah Arendt, who never stopped loving him)? But Marcuse and Löwith, for instance—I ask myself, what was their motivation? My first professor, when I was studying philosophy, came from a very ancient German Jewish family. Karl Marx belongs to the same family. He was—and remains—the best reader of Heidegger's work, and he admired and honored Heidegger personally, too. He tried to be a friend to him. Heidegger was a little arrogant, but not too much. And yet he never

gave up teaching Heidegger's work, torturing us with one close reading after another. What did all this mean? How could he admire and honor Heidegger, more than I did, and know him better than I did? I think this made me a bit scared of Heidegger. I have a few answers to these questions, but perhaps it's not my place to put them forward. Let me leave this topic with this insinuation. This level of knowledge and concentration has been lost at Freiburg University, where many unholy compromises between Heidegger and Adorno have been tried; under the signum, both work, and they work well together. Both are writing on nature and ecology and against industrialism, very superficial point. Heidegger at least knew about technology and physics, and some mathematics. But Adorno had no idea, nor had he interest in them. If I were to be more brutal, I would have said that Adorno strikes me as someone who never read seriously anything written before Immanuel Kant. He had looked at Heraclitus for Hegel, for sure, and some Plato probably had reached him when he was a young student, but he had almost no idea about medieval philosophy and the great scholastic tradition, which were absolutely crucial for Heidegger. In a forthcoming book, I analyze the most unfortunate translation of Greek philosophical lexicon into Latin, following, again, Heidegger, but in a different direction. It was impossible to make philosophical statements in the Latin because there is no article at all. On the other hand, Greek philosophical operation is to substantivize every part of a saying. Between, *metaxy*, in Aristotle becomes *metaxy*, the in-between, and it is the first concept of media. It is not technical media, it is not physical media—air, water, and so on—but it's media. It's in-between the object, the thing, heard or seen, on one side, and me, or my ears and eyes, on the other. And *tomethexis* is Aristotle's coinage for this relation. This is a harmless example. The scandal provoked by *Being and Time* was Heidegger's new translations—for instance, *das Warumwollen of Dasein* is a simple translation of Greek *hou heneka tinos*, that for which a thing is made, is for, that for which it lives and strives. So here we have another open field battle, Heidegger's battle, with Rome, with what he knew best and perhaps loved best. A battle against poor translation. He was at war with himself—this is what I wanted to say—and this was no simple conflict but an open field battle. Perhaps this is what I learned from him, and better than many of my friends and colleagues, some of whom perhaps did not hear the call to arms because they thought they were not soldierlike, if you will, or because they were innocent.

*EK*: It looks like we will never leave this war zone . . .

FAK: Well, you ask me about politics. The only kind of politics I am interested in is military politics, to begin with. In fact, this is the only thing I can think of when one says politics. And I am not alone in this. For Foucault, war is the *Warumwollen* of politics. And you can think of Levinas, of course—yet another Heidegger!—and what politics and war meant for him. I have some other ideas, about which I am about to start writing—I have been thinking about love, too, as I told you before, but this is a different matter. What I wanted to say is, Heidegger was not alone in his battle, either. Yet another illustration would be Goethe, and now I will refer to an article I have not yet written but would very much like to before it is too late. It is on Goethe and Christian holidays. The epos *Reineke Fuchs* starts with Pentecost as a spring festival without any reference to resurrection. Remember the famous *Osterspaziergang* in *Faust, Part 1*, where Faust describes people going to the blooming fields, outside the walls of the city? There Faust says they are celebrating the resurrection of the savior. Because, he says, we have been resurrected ourselves, from small dwellings and houses, from the night of churches. Resurrection becomes a spring celebration, a festival. In the case of Christmas—I have actually written an essay on this one—one should remember how, in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, the Christian feast of Christmas turns into a family- and mother-based relationship between parents and children. Parents, for the first time in European history, don't receive gifts from their children, but children get all the gifts they want from their parents. Young Wilhelm Meister is given a puppet theater, and this is the beginning of his career in the theater. You can really see here how the nuclear family replaces the bigger family of earlier times. But we are digressing now; what matters is that Goethe turns, in his battle of words, the Christian values into bourgeois values. My teachers in German literature have, of course, commented on all these matters, especially on *Faust*. But no one ever talked seriously about their implications or significance. This is Goethe waging a battle against the old Protestant religion. To what end, and what is the outcome of this, who wins, and what does it mean to win such a battle? I am sure you would like to ask me these questions. But I am not interested in them, or, let us say, I am more interested in the media historical side of things. Perhaps media historical findings can lead to other conclusions.

At any rate, reading and writing, these two elementary cultural techniques, have stayed constant since time immemorial, and what happens to them happens to people, at least to some people, as you suggested. They have produced one of the greatest divides in European history, between East and West, between Greek letters and Latin letters. And this line of

divide has always been the bloodland. This borderland where the wars between Hitler and Stalin took place, from Finland all the way to Greece—this would be a very formal but helpful first way to think of what one can possibly take writing to be historically, and what its historical link to war is, of course. Just think about Lenin’s so-called script revolution, and keep in mind that after having been baptized in the Orthodox Church in Kazan, Lenin was taken by his mother to the Lutheran church in Kazan the next day to be baptized again, so he became a crypto-Protestant, which is to say he learned to love and hate the old Protestant religion. You already know Lenin’s rise to power and his contact with Germans. He wanted the new state eventually to switch to Latin letters, to Latinize the scripts across Russia. It started with Central Asia, where most people, when asked about their ethnic preferences, chose to be Muslims—very interesting story, but we don’t have time for this now. Muslims switched to Latin script from Arabic script under this new language policy, and Lenin in the meantime had gotten rid of some old letters in Russian, planning to replace Cyrillic letters with Latin in due time. This writing revolution by Lenin was going to be just the foreplay. He had other plans. He wanted to abolish gender, for instance, and in his addresses used *Товарищи* (comrades), which is masculine but was meant to address both men and women. Such Soviet values developed and were internalized very well. They survived the thirties with some challenges, and were in place until Stalin was literally silenced by the German attack. Stalin kept away from microphones after the German attack, perhaps not knowing what to say. Having been brought up by Orthodox priests, he was more of a crypto-Orthodox, loving and hating the Orthodox Church. When he finally got to the microphone, under the shock of the German attack, Stalin started his address with *Граждане! Товарищи!* (Citizens! Comrades!). But then, as if to make it clear that, from then on, he would explicitly replace Communist values with traditional Russian values, he added *Братья и сестры!* (Brothers and sisters!). And Russians and their priests loved it. Anyone who knows these stories will understand what I mean when I say that the war between Croatia and Serbia was surely a war of letters. Questions of war, of violence, of scripts, of gender . . . When the Soviet Union dissolved, the global Latinization was at its peak; now look what is happening in the next century.

*EK:* Speaking of Central Asia and its language politics—isn’t it astonishing that the planned Leninist Latinization of Soviets starts there, and among Muslims, who were encouraged to abandon the Arabic script?

*FAK:* Lenin and Stalin were not the first players in this politics of language. Ilminsky was one madman, and certainly in beautiful ways, too, whose influence reached all the way to Japan. The Orthodox Church of Japan was founded by one of his disciples. In both Lenin and Stalin, you have a bit of Ilminsky. He wanted to address people in their own languages, for which purpose he had to literally invent for them languages—beginning with creating alphabets, primers, dictionaries, all the way to grammar books—and systematically disseminate what we today call print cultures. All this, in the final analysis, was to convert them. He had to teach people the languages into which he could then translate the Bible. Analyzed so far only from a positivist perspective. There is much to work on there, tremendous open questions, just like those around Stalin's Academy of Sciences, where the brilliant works of Komogorov or Markov Junior and Senior have so deeply influenced information theory and computer design, and almost without any hardware basis. But as I said, in both Lenin and Stalin, you have a bit of Ilminsky.

*EK:* What does that mean? I can see the connection with Stalin, with difficulty I have to admit, but how about Lenin?

*FAK:* Well, I spoke about Lenin's mother being a German, Lenin being a crypto-Protestant, et cetera. But you should also know that Lenin's father worked closely with Ilminsky. Lenin's slogan "National in form, socialist in content" was a version of Ilminsky's slogan "National in form, Orthodox in content"—a somewhat inverted version, one has to admit. The Leninist case for the Latinization of Arabic script had two motives. First, Lenin, too, wanted to challenge the alternative, Islamic education in Arabic script and hence defection to Islam—the good old, Ottoman-style education, about which you should know more—and hence appeared just as anti-Muslim as Ilminsky; but then he also argued that Ilminsky's missionary work had made it almost impossible to continue the humanitarian/humanistic effort. It could no more be with Russian letters, which would implicate conversion and Russification and create animosity; nor could it continue with Arabic letters for obvious reasons. So Latinization almost naturally appeared as the only solution, or this is how the Leninist case was legitimized around 1917, I believe. But the implementation took time, of course, and I think the real transition took place in the early 1920s.

*EK:* So you are suggesting that what brings together Ilminsky, Lenin, and Stalin is Christianity, which crystalized in the face of preliterate Central



Asians and Muslims? And, of course, there is the transition from Ottoman script to Latin script in Turkey around the same, which, if I am not mistaken, was a key issue for Stalin's later policy to stick to the Cyrillic alphabet in Central Asia. Among the motives behind the decision was to cut Central Asia from Asia Minor, and in the final analysis from Europe. But what do you make of the Turkish case, then, in the midst of all this—the shift from a centuries-old writing system and its neighboring systems of notation, of reading and writing, and of education?

*FAK:* It sounds a bit radical when you put it this way, but yes, I believe the problem appears to be Christianity. I would also think of it, for instance, as poor translation, in the sense I described. About Turks: unfortunately, I am conservative or reactionary in this linguistic or alphabetic regard, too. I am able to read French, English, Latin, and somehow Greek, but that's all. I forgot my Russian origins when I was six years old. Then I had to learn Russian in the eastern part of Germany. And if I may get a bit personal, I was asked in Dubrovnik, former Yugoslavia, which languages I could speak and read, and I said French, Russian, and English. I said these are the languages and the scripts of the three victors of 1945. And, for instance, if you ask me now why I don't speak Italian, that is because they were our allies. Turks, too, happened to be our allies at one point, so I don't speak Turkish, either. But yes, this is an altogether different case. It has to do again with war and a very peculiar politics of violence. I just want to say that this Turkish takeover of European technology was not the first time in Turkish history. Ottomans didn't invent artillery but took it from Europe in the fifteenth century. The relation between the Ottoman Empire and European technology was a long-standing one and probably mutual, too. When Suleiman the Magnificent left his tents behind after his defeat at the gates of Vienna in 1683, he left his coffee sacks behind him. Prince Eugene of Savoy was absolutely enthusiastic about this spoil, so much so that he drank coffee every day and every night without realizing that the coffee he drank was wonderful because it was mixed with hashish. We could also talk about Turkish musical instruments that were introduced first in the military music of European armies, et cetera. To put this another way: we must think about the overall path that led to this decisive transfer of media technology, the Turkish shift from the Ottoman script to Latin script. The German-Ottoman alliance during and right before World War I brought about much destruction to the entire Muslim world, and in a variety of ways. One can simply remember the declaration of the first global jihad in the history of Islam,

which was devised by Turks and Germans together, signed by the Ottoman sultan. There is also the Armenian genocide. The Armenian language was never Cyrillicized by the Russians, nor was it Latinized, for that matter. This too is a rather complicated matter, but the reason why I'm mentioning all this is to come to this important statement: for the Turkish case in general, I should say that we were—and still are—in this together, for better or worse. And ours is not a club of innocents. I wish I could say the same thing to my Israeli friends, but they wouldn't understand. The book you gave me yesterday, by Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express*, is a wonderful analysis of these two trajectories, of Turkey and of Israel.<sup>7</sup> He doesn't speak about scripts, being a serious historian. But you do?

*EK:* I have to remind you how, at the end of World War I, the Ottomans and Germans fought against each other, and at stake were the Central Asian oil fields—a race for Baku.<sup>8</sup>

*FAK:* Really? And who won?

*EK:* Well, I am afraid the Turks won, whatever that might mean. But if we may, then, go back to your battle, and Heidegger's too, for that matter—with yourself, as you suggested. In all this, Greeks seem to play a role, and their scripts, of course. It was quite difficult for me to make sense of your "Greek turn," if I may call it so. I have found some answers in this interview so far, and yet I hope you don't mind my asking: How could the author of *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* turn to Greece all of a sudden? What is it exactly that you seek to discover in Greece, and why look for anything at all in Greece? Are you, like Heidegger before you, engaged in an effort to address the problem of poor translation, of Greek philosophical lexicon into Latin?

*FAK:* Well, to be telegraphic and very crude, it is my deep conviction that all that we do at the university begins not with the likes of stupid Cicero but with the Greeks, and with their vocalic alphabet. The unholy alliance between the Roman Empire and the church, which reigned over Europe until Luther's days and Gutenberg's invention, obscures our access to these

7. Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

8. McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express*, 318–39.

beginnings, for sure. I'm speaking about the origin of Greek science in the so-called pre-Socratic times. I refrain from speaking about the end of Greek thought with the ethics of Socrates and his crazy school. Once again, mobilizing is not my job. Americans would have us believe that they invented computers, which is not true, of course; it was an Englishman named Alan Turing. Rome would have us believe that Christians invented the world, but it was a Hellenistic development. After Alexander's great conquest, the whole of the eastern Mediterranean was Hellenized. In Greece herself, in Russia, in Bulgaria, they still write, in the final analysis, with Greek letters. Greeks are very much with us, for better or worse. And it is perhaps one of the characteristics of the imperial takeovers of Greek ways that they tend to conceal their debt. But, please understand that here I am interested in technology, what we can today, retrospectively, define as media technology. My latest books are often misunderstood. People seem to wonder how Kittler turned from Goethe to Aristotle or the pre-Socratics. My answer with regard to Aristotle is quite simple. I try to describe the notation systems of the 300s BC. I'm really interested in the way young Greeks were introduced to syllables and the letters of their language and script. In Aristotle, especially in *Metaphysics*, all this comes back as a theory of language. The latter has been known for a long time. The former, how young Greeks learned how to write and read, has been studied in the 1910s by some low-standing German professors and has been forgotten since then. Besides, these first scholars were positivists. I try to get to as many fragments as I can through archive research, basically reading Egyptian papyri, trying to see the coherent contours of a system out of them. This should compete with the research on the notation systems of 1800/1900. So far, I have not lost my path but continued it. Perhaps my ideas about discourse networks can change dramatically—I may be born again, which has happened numerous times before us, as Foucault, Heidegger, and Nietzsche proved for us. But yes, to speak of such technology is to speak of an arithmetic from Phoenicia, together with the figures of the alphabet, and of geometry from Egypt, an astronomy from Babylon, from Baghdad. But what interests me most is the alliance of mathematics with music in the Greek notation system in its development. The very basis of ancient, pre-Socratic Greek culture was this alliance between music, or musical theory, and mathematics. The twenty-four letters for the sounds of the language soon turn into numerical, mathematical signs. Alpha suddenly becomes one, beta two, gamma three, and so on and so forth, all the way up to nine hundred ninety-nine in the first system. One century later, about 500 BC, out of this phono-

logical and mathematical innovative system emerge letters as elements of musical scores. Otherwise, Aeschylus could never have sent his tragedies to Sicily by ship without going himself and training everyone. Take the Greek guitar, for instance. If you tune it in the mathematically correct way, it sounds fine. If you mistune it, then every child can tell you that it doesn't sound fine. This is in line with what Hans-Jörg Rheinberger called the epistemic things, or technical wonders.<sup>9</sup> So I am interested in those first things that were capable of calculating and producing beauty. I am interested in the "empty forest that feels like the violin," as the poet puts it. Acropolis is a different story, but you should keep it in mind. Is it too farfetched to call the goddess Aphrodite in order to explain this sense of beauty, of form and love? To be even more specific, then, my return to the Greeks has to do with the question of what Aphrodite meant for Homer, Sappho, and Sophocles. So my Greek turn was a shift from the historical study of warfare and its technology to the history of love.

*EK: Are we heading toward another History of Sexuality?*

*FAK:* Yes and no. This is the most difficult thing for me to talk about, especially now that you mention the Foucauldian implications. But I will try. Like many Germans before me, starting with Friedrich II, whom Nietzsche called the first European and who accidentally was crowned as king here in Mainz, I have some problems with Christianity, but in favor of the fact that every living being, be it plant or animal, has been begotten by the lovely union of female and male. So the answer to the question I have formulated cannot be found in Foucault. Both the question and the answer would appear a bit too reactionary from a Foucauldian point of view. As a matter of fact, I take his account of *aphrodisia* as total nonsense because *aphrodisia* of Greek tradition is univocally the heterosexual relationship between one female and one male begetting by *gamos* children and new generations. This is really difficult to summarize, but it gives the possibility of understanding the singularity of Greek culture, and the multiplicity of their gods and goddesses. I am currently working on a new project, perhaps a last big project, titled *Gods and Scripts Around the Mediterranean*. This again will be a bottom-up approach and not a top-down approach used by cultural studies, according to which first come gods, and then the

9. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *Toward a History of Epistemic Things: Synthesizing Proteins in the Test Tube* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

state, and then sub-state organizations, and finally the family and the individual. We, on the contrary, will begin with the writing systems—I mean notation systems, which include musical and mathematical notation—and look at whether these systems and the power to access them—the right to different forms of literacy—had any influence whatsoever on the representations of the sacred. Heidegger, precisely at the end of World War II, tried to learn Chinese to translate Laozi into German, instead of studying Greek thinkers, that is. He gave long interviews and talked at length with Japanese friends whom he invited to discuss the old-fashioned culture of cherry blossoms and Japanese poetry. This all has to do with love, and definitely with polytheism. With the fact that there are many gods and goddesses. In Japan as in Greece. Okay, to sum up, like many Germans before me, including Friedrich II, Nietzsche, and to a certain extent Heidegger, I am after love that is fundamentally anti-Christian. Is this possible? Or am I too naïve? I don't know. We discussed how media technologies can be and are indeed globalized, alongside a particular morality. We are, of course, not so happy that this globalization is so all-invading. One can easily see the connections between the destruction of the writing system of the Ottomans, the atomic destruction in Fukushima and Nagasaki, or the First and Second World Wars, and this globalization. It is impossible for us mortals to leave our house of being, and when we assume we can, like Goethe, we find ourselves producing the actual form of imperialism. But perhaps we can talk about one final possibility, and this is what I want to do. Let us put aside everything else. Let it suffice to say that I talked about Aphrodite, and this obviously is a nonliterate way of dealing with one another, and it has a history longer than literacy and literature. You know that in Germany, this *Gedächtniskultur*, and memory studies in the United States, is almost always linked to the question of trauma and the Holocaust. I would propose, on the contrary, to base our understanding of *Gedächtniskultur* on the fact that nobody can really remember his or her orgasm.