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Relays

LITERATURE AS AN EPOCH OF THE POSTAL SYSTEM

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In the relatively short span of time between the introduction of the penny post in England by Rowland Hill in 1840 and the founding of the World Postal Union in Bern in 1874, during which the modern postal system came into being, nothing less than an entire discursive space was, if not destroyed, then at least deconstructed. Within this space, written discourses had circulated insofar as they were translations from the Mother’s mouth, metaphors of The Individual, which continually received Truth at the other end of the postal channel and thus were confined within the orbit of an endless task of interpretation: a space in which discourse could be posted because it existed in the mode of recourse to a transcendental origin. Interpretability, the mode of being for translation, paid the postage for the communicability of such metaphors. The World Postal Union, by contrast, founded discursivity not on the ineluctable precondition of transcendental meaning, but on standards that always preceded the possibility of meaning (prepayment). It closed the circuit of the postal system, producing a communications system of planetary dimensions, the establishment of which coincided with the end of the world—insofar as the “world” is the concept underlying a psychologically teleologicized universe. The World Postal Union thus deprived the private letter, which was the medium of a discourse rooted in the ineluctability of The Individual, Nature, Meaning, and so on, of its “metaphysical foundations” (foundations that turn out to be anything but metaphysical, however, as soon as they are traced back to the real, historically specific rules and practices that constituted the apparatus for their formation and transformation).

The form in which the World Postal Union deconstructed the letter was the postcard, which thematized the letter by making it dysfunctional. The postcard spread the news everywhere that subjectivity, as a product of the letter’s confidentiality, had been addressed to a public audience, and it did so precisely for the reason that it lacked the confidentiality of the letter. The symbols conveyed by the postcard recall an origin not in the voice of intimacy, but in printed matter. The postcard is “a letter to the extent that nothing of it remains that is, or that holds,” or that could gain entry to the archives of the “will to truth”—a letter that is litter. And, as Derrida noted, the postcard “destines the letter to its ruin”—an observation that describes with utmost precision the role planned for it at its inception. Heinrich Stephan’s memorandum on a “post page”—the founding document of the postcard, in a manner of speaking—was distributed to the participants of the fifth conference of the German-Austrian Postal Union in Karlsruhe on November 30, 1865. In it, Stephan conjured up the postcard as a means for overcoming the two-thousand-year history of a medium whose final manifestation was the enclosed letter:

The Brief, German for “letter,” in terms of etymology no longer legitimately can be called “brief.” The classical ideal of epistolary style, brevitas, spelled the doom of the letter itself. This was so because style no longer was a matter of the individual for Stephan, as it had been in Buffon’s time, but instead a matter of a media economy. The postal privy councilor’s media theory implied a rhetoric of materiality. Consequently, a strategy aimed at reforming style—in which the ideal was frankly the telegram—had to undertake the task of transforming the materiality of the letter itself. After all, it seems that the traditional epistolary dispositio and its five parts had been inscribed so ineradicably into the Western soul.
that no amount of pedagogy could relieve the affliction. A cure could be effectuated only by means of a surgical operation that sliced the "digressions [that] afflict both sender and recipient" from the letter and so from the soul as well. Stationery's reduction to an exposed, one-sided card in nine by fourteen centimeter format (which was introduced in Germany in 1873 and would become the worldwide standard in 1878) delivered the people from the history of epistolography because it left nothing of the epistolary dispositio intact except for the petitio and the minimized salutatio and conclusio in the form of the address and return address.

The operation Stephan performed with the postal objectification of the soul was not a painless one. The most agonizing part undoubtedly was the incision that sacrificed the confidentiality of the letter by removing the envelope. In fact, the elimination of the legal-postal construct of individuality initially led to Stephan's failure: the exhibitionism that the postcard was to practice did not in any way escape Stephan's superior, General Postal Director Philipsborn. In 1865, Philipsborn thus rejected its introduction due to the "indecent form of communication on exposed post pages." The nudity of communication, as Philipsborn recognized, would be nothing but the communication of nudity. And indeed: why else had stationery been folded and sealed or concealed in an envelope in the first place, if not to tease the discourse of sexuality from the soul, thus giving rise to its confessions of intimacy—the procedure by which the Western individual had to achieve legitimation in the modern period? Because the material conditions for the confidentiality of the letter had been sites for the production of sexuality, the postcard was synonymous with the exhibition of that sexuality. The postcard was scandalous because on behalf of the economy of information exchange it rejected an intimate mode of speech that had been capable of teasing true confessions from the soul. Among other things, after all, truth was also the result of the limitations on access to the discourse.

The power of the institutions that had governed knowledge of the human soul and its sexual secrets in the nineteenth century was based on a monopoly on advance information. And because of this, the discourse of the postcard, which in principle was addressed to everyone, appeared to be immoral (even if no one actually read it, it was still a "communication legible for everyone"). Philipsborn's condemnation therefore was a belated effect of the postal system of 1800. Because the sexualization of souls had been a logic of address (see Kleist, see Brentano), the postcard, legible for everyone, brought about the desexualization of these souls. And this was precisely what constituted its immorality. The postcard, which is a publication, in Joyce's perceptive eyes, dismantled the difference between an obscure, feminine discourse—that is, Nature itself—that was addressed exclusively to the civil servants of the spirit and a clear, masculine discourse that spoke the truth, insofar as it was a translation of the first discourse, and was addressed to the world as literature or philosophy. The texts of postcards thus were inaccessible to a hermeneutics of the soul: they were "open and radically unintelligible."

Stephan's proposal of 1865 could be summarized as follows: as a postal technique, the soul no longer was up to the standards of a modern (which is not to say "postmodern") postal system. The reservations about the postcard thus hardly come as a surprise: people were very fond of the spiritual welfare that folded stationery and envelopes assured them. In his memorandum, Stephan himself had counted on an "initial shyness [of the public] with regard to public communication," which would have to be overcome. And in fact, after the introduction of "correspondence cards" in the territory of the North German League, the Imperial Post Office indeed received requests that postcards be provided with adhesive flaps.

While the days of modesty were numbered, but not yet over in Bismarck's League, the telegraphmatic reform of epistolary style—which Stephan had conjured up only per analogiam—was taken quite literally in Vienna. "Because the flowery language, inscriptions, assurances of the most undivided esteem, etc. that are at once unavoidable in a letter are repulsive," Emanuel Herrmann (it probably was no accident that he was a professor at the Military Academy in Vienna-Neustadt) made an appeal in the Neuen Freien Presse for the acceptance of "cards in the format of a normal envelope" as mail, provided that "they contain no more than twenty words, including the address and the signature of the sender." With this postcard," Herrmann wrote, "we would create a kind of postal telegram, which, with the exception of the speed of its dispatch, would share nearly all the advantages of telegrams . . . . one could limit oneself to unavoidably necessary expressions, as has long been the custom in telegrams. We would soon possess a special language of telegram let-
ters, which could compete boldly with that of Tacitus. In contrast to the situation in Germany, the demand for discursive abbreviation, or the renaissance of the classical Latin brevitas, thus found a receptive audience in Austria. On October 1, 1869, the “correspondence card” was introduced there (although without the limitation to twenty words Herrmann requested) by Department Councilor Baron von Kolbensteiner, who later became director of the General Post and Telegraph in the Austrian postal administration and, incidentally, also had participated in the Karlsruhe conference of 1865.

In Germany, by contrast, the postcard did not see the light of day in the world of media until Bismarck had performed his services as midwife. Philippsborn, who had tried unsuccessfully beforehand to prevent a meeting between Stephan and Bismarck, retired in May 1870—Bismarck already had proposed Stephan to the king as the new director of the General Post. Now nothing stood in the way of introducing the “indecent form of communication on exposed post pages.” Correspondence cards were officially accepted as mail by a general decree of the chancellor on July 1, 1870. (In practice, they had been allowed since June 18.) Once the denuding of the discursive sphere of intimacy not only had been achieved but actually was enjoying tremendous success—after the “initial shyness of the public” had been surmounted—the only hope remaining for the salvation of humanity’s spiritual welfare was to transfer the action of folding (after its material disappearance) to the symbolic realm. Where the area protected by the confidentiality of letters left off, the domain of intelligence agencies began.

For discourse, postcards represented enemy territory. Thus, the “art of secret writing” prescribed for the military and diplomats in such situations found its “application on imperial postcards” in 1875. Avé-Lallemant, a police officer and author of the renowned History of German Knavey, wrote that the number of postcards used would “still increase tremendously if postcards, by their nature and properties, did not lack the confidentiality of the letter, upon which the use and usefulness of the mail is principally founded.” The readers of the illustrated family magazine Der Hausfreund (and it was probably not entirely an accident that it was precisely these readers) then learned that this “drawback” easily could be remedied “by the use of a simple cipher script.” A demonstration was furnished with, of all texts, the “Traveler’s Night Song,” in which friends of Der Hausfreund were supposed to practice deciphering subjectivity:

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lvsvh rbbvd xzfwvbd
zik hly
zd rbbvd nzfwvbd
ifflvhvik ul
arlc vzvdv yrlty
uzv mevxvvdz iynvzvxd zc nrbuv
nrhkv dlh srbuv
hlyvik ul rty.
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This is cipher as plaintext. After all, it hardly could be made more clear that Goethe’s empire was not of Stephan’s world. What was meant as the salvation of humanity’s spiritual welfare merely confirmed its irretrievable loss once more. And it did so for the simple reason that statement operations performed within a formation of statements established by the historical a priori of the media cannot in turn reneg on that formation; revision itself was subject to that a priori and perpetuated its effects. The echo of an original voice, its tone and breath—unregulated by any meter—disappeared beneath a simple exchange of written characters, marking the point of no return for the salvation of souls after the fashion of nature poetry in the year 1780. Thus, the events that were postcards and the World Postal Union within the realm of discourse crossed out and surpassed the intentions of the soul-guarding policeman. And it hardly seems accidental that Avé-Lallemant stumbled onto this particular poem, which celebrated the invention of the motherly voice as the secret of subjectivity like no other. Avé-Lallemant’s “cipher script” was supposed to “preserve the confidentiality and peace of family life,” and thus, in its application to the “Traveler’s Night Song,” did not preserve just any secret, but the secret of family life itself. By citing the psychogenic lullaby of the Mother, the proposal for saving the soul by means of cryptography cited the origin of the soul itself—and in the same stroke placed that origin beyond reach in the past perfect of history. The intimacy of linguistic companionship prior to all articulation that the Mother’s voice had endowed melted away in the heat of an intimacy endowed by the code manipulations of intelligence services. The secret of the latter did not lie beyond the
The task of salvaging meaning on imperial postcards thus was assigned not to the discipline of hermeneutics, but to a cryptoanalysis born in war. According to Ave-Lallemant’s account, the “enciphered letters of spies” that fell into his hands during the German-Danish War had delivered the model for intimacy on postcards. As a means for making the postcard’s message the consoling promise that the silencing of speech would be a peaceful rest, the application of military cryptography thus was among the spiritual duties of a ministry that meanwhile had seen the strategic military value of lullabies. In its application on postcards, the “Traveler’s Night Song” was psychological warfare and nothing else.

On July 1, 1870, Stephan introduced the postcard in Germany. The French declaration of war ensued on July 15, and by July 24, Stephan had mobilized a field postal system and turned it into an instrument for realizing his plans for a new mass medium: “Since almost everyone remaining behind had a friend or relative with whom he or she corresponded among the troops going off to war, the field-service postcard made its way into every segment of the population and thus made propaganda for ordinary correspondence cards as well.” So that the war might initiate a modernization drive in the discursive practices of the masses, Stephan had his “field-post correspondence card” distributed to the troops free of charge [see Figure 7]. Henceforth, the postcard proved to be a “invaluable means” for achieving the homeland’s omnipresence and for bearing the consolation of the motherly voice—as the ultimate definition of the homeland—to the farthest front. By December 1870 alone, ten million field-service postcards had been mailed, defending the souls of the German armies’ soldiers, souls whose military value was beyond question—as far as its influence on fighting morale was concerned. Consequently, the true calling of the field post assigned by Stephan referred to the same “breath” that sustained the “Traveler’s Night Song”: “It [the field post] is the voice with which the individual soldier speaks to his loved ones at home.” Beginning in 1870–71, it was on the battlefields of war that Elihu Burritt’s programmatic demand achieved fulfillment: “to make home everywhere.”

And once the Franco-Prussian War had helped to bring about the postcard’s mass-media breakthrough, not only in Germany, but [Figure 7] in occupied France as well (the first French postcards were put in circulation by Rosshirt, the “Administrator of Posts in the occupied French territory.”

**FIGURE 7.** German and French versions of Stephan’s “field-post correspondence card.”
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The founding of the World Postal Union was practically unavoidable. Because it constituted the quintessence of the modern postal standard, the postcard implied the elimination of the world. It was the virus of the world postal system: it forced old postal districts to adopt the norms of the world post and thus to succumb themselves.

The postcard was the first information carrier of the postal system to be conceived on the basis of a standard format from the outset. Stephan’s memorandum of 1865 already had foreseen postage that was valid "regardless of distance," the stamp was to be printed on the card, and a standard format and address ensued with its introduction. "Such a post page," Stephan wrote, "will now be conveyed by the postal system free of charge, since the postage was paid with the form’s purchase. . . . Nothing is paid for the form itself." In principle, the postcard was therefore nothing but a stamp that could be written on; it reduced the materiality of communication to its bare economy. It was a stamp that paid postage for nothing but itself—the stamp’s self-postage. The message of a medium with a materiality consisting of self-reference to its own standards thus was the discursive system of that medium itself. Boundless testimony for this fact was given by postcards that bore an address identical to the return address and thus annulled the distance they factually crossed. Such a postcard, for example, was mailed in Chemnitz on May 24, 1878; the first of its six addresses sent it to Alexandria, and from there it went on to Singapore, then to Yokohama, then farther on to San Francisco and New York, and from there to its sixth address, which was at once its return address: a certain Ludwig Ploss in Chemnitz [see Figure 8].

The “round-the-world postcard,” which anticipated the “empty orbiting of the world” that according to Virilio travelers were to experience in the age of jet airplanes, celebrated the elimination of the world because the distance it effectively had covered in circling the globe added up to exactly zero. But it was precisely this and nothing else that made the round-the-world postcard a “witness to the performance capacity of the world postal service.” The postcard’s message was the World Postal Union. In accordance with a resolution passed at the World Postal Congress in 1878, all postcards on earth continued for decades afterward to bear the impression UNION POSTALE UNIVERSELLE.

Every conceivable caption on a postcard thus could be only a postscript.
to this message. According to Derrida, Joyce's *Ulysses* transformed the universe of the ancient *Odyssey* into the very same union: “a whole game of postcards perhaps suggests the hypothesis that the geography of trajectories around the Mediterranean Sea in *Ulysses* might well have the structure of a postcard or the design of a map that traces postal messages.”

When a medium with a message of self-reference to its own discursive system emerged, the letter was sent to its ruin. The postcard is the final misuse of love letters. And this is above all due to the fact that its origin was not the psychogenic voice preceding all letters as a transcendental requirement, but printed matter. In 1865, Stephan’s plan to unleash the postcard on the world of media had fallen through, but the dispatch of exposed printed cards—the so-called “advisements”—in fact already had been permitted in the Prussian postal district since June. Two years later, the General Post Office issued a regulation on the subject, ruling that the dispatch of exposed cards at the reduced rates for printed matter was inadmissible in those cases “when the cards contain any additions or alterations of content after printed completion, with the exception of place, date, signature, etc. Check marks at the margin for the purpose of directing the reader’s attention to a particular place, however, shall be permitted.”

This minimal exception to the general ban on handwritten postcards gave two Leipzig book dealers, Friedlein and Pardubitz, a brilliant idea: they drafted a “Universal Correspondence Card,” the reverse side of which was printed with twenty-eight sequentially numbered questions and statements [see Figure 9]. Every single one of these cards, which were indeed truly “universal,” thus represented a consummate occasion register. The purpose of this register, however, was not to give guidance in writing, as had been the case for the Baroque *artes dictaminis*, but to make writing unnecessary. Opposites such as the receipt of a document and its absence, arrival and departure, birth and death came together on the card as it is possible to do only in language. The universal postcard referred to a given fact of life only on the condition of its contingency: things might just as well have been different. In a discursive order such as this one, where things were expressed by placing legally permissible “check marks” by the appropriate number, congratulating someone on a wedding meant no more than not sending “condolences on a sorrowful occasion.”

FIGURE 9. Friedlein-Pardubitz “Universal Correspondence Card.”
Total entropy governed the speech acts possible in the technology of postcards, that is, the possibilities for transforming the "printed postcard into a genuine correspondence card." The only information a "check mark" provided was that every other number had been equally probable. When what you say means only that you are not saying something else, then you are not saying very much. Which says nothing against the fact that no human speech meant anything more. In a story by Borges, a provincial governor, poet, astronomer, and chess player sets out to write a novel: instead of deciding on one of the various possibilities for the plot's development, he simply plays out all of them at the same time. Every chapter of this Garden of the Forking Paths is a Universal Correspondence Card with check marks by all the numbers.

Yet the General Post Office initially refused to allow anything to be said on postcards at all. On the grounds that check marks would "endow printed matter with the character of a letter," it simply prohibited literature altogether. After all, literature had not functioned in any other way in 1800: as a printed text that every single feminine reader was allowed and supposed to hallucinate as a letter personally addressed to her.

Yet despite such obstacles, the Friedlein-Pardubitz Universal Correspondence Card came to be the prototype for the "Whizz Bang" or "Quick Firer," the British Field Service Post Cards that were sent off by the millions during the First World War. Form A.2042 reduced the entropy of war as a source of information almost to zero [see Figure 10]. The field-service postcard established a prestabilized order of salvation for the world in which sickness was possible only as a prelude to recovery, wounds only on condition of their treatment, and there was only one place you could go: home. "Where are we going?" a Romanticism homesick for its Mother had asked, only to answer, as if the destinies of people were determined by a transcendental Field Service Post Card: "Home, all the time." In 1914, Romantic optimism certainly no longer was transcendental, but rather was an effect of the first communication to be mechanized by preprinted forms. The standardization of the utterable via postcards was simply the only economic form possible for discourse under the conditions of a battle of matériel. Even the normal field-post letters contained nothing but an endless litany of optimistic stereotypes. And how could it have been otherwise: when asked why he had not wanted to

![The Postcard](image)

**FIGURE 10.** British Field Service Post Card ("Whizz Bang" or "Quick Firer").

...tell the people at home what the war was really like, Robert Graves responded: "You couldn't: you can't communicate noise." Once the world became noise, the absolute grounds (or groundlessness) of information, everything that was utterable, became a postcard text: referenceless.

The flood of field-service postcards during the war of 1870-71 and the flood of their civilian successors in the founding years of the German Empire did not make the Friedlein-Pardubitz Universal Correspondence...
Card obsolete, but instead brought to full fruition the possibilities inherent in the principle of printed matter’s conversion into private matters. Paper manufacturers produced printed cards for every situation that might conceivably require a private letter, cards that could be transformed into personal greetings by filling in the blanks. For example:

Have ___ most heartfelt congratulations on the celebration of ___ birthday tomorrow! Birthdays are milestones on the road of life! May it be granted to ___ that ___ be able to look back on many, many more of the same in a spirit of gladness. Where would ___ rather linger in spirit than with ___? ___ wish for ___ with heart and soul that the kind heavens grant all ___ wishes the fulfillment that ___ noble heart so fully deserves. Spend the day in untroubled joy and think of ___ loyally devoted ___.

The occasion register no longer was represented by a single card—as it had been with Friedlein-Pardubitz and its military adaptations—but instead by an entire postcard repository containing appropriate cards for every occasion, which once had been only a number to be checkmarked. With the advent of this postcard repository, the age of technological replicability had dawned for the repository of ideas of 1800.

In the form of preprinted postcards, Kleist’s poet’s dream finally came to fruition. The postcard repository, after all, contained not only greeting cards, but also “idyllic descriptions of the natural beauty that the traveler enjoys . . . meters above sea level.” For ten pfennigs, anyone could become a Kleist in 1880. Postcards put descriptions of nature in circulation that gained pseudoreference only by the insertion of geographical names and specifications, exactly as Kleist had inserted the signifiers “Rhine,” “Main,” or “Elbe” into one and the same description of a river valley as the occasion required. These handwritten reproductions, which had simulated the productions of “the most exuberant fantasy” in the years 1800 and 1801, merely were substitutes for the World Postal Union and its media yet to come. “Swift as an arrow, the ___ flows on from ___ in a straight line, as though its goal already were in view and it must in no way be detained, impatiently set on its course. But a vine-planted hill, the ___, steps into its path and curbs its onward flow,” and so on. Such was the straightforward text of a postcard that had had the status of printed matter from the outset. The printed postcard “deconstructed” Kleist’s postal “training for the authorial profession” by inverting the dis-cursive strategy of Romantic correspondence. While Kleist’s letters to Wilhelmine von Zenge had attained the status of printed matter ten years before it became a separate category of postal material (and then only in Bavaria) by passing through a postal chain of translations from the Mother’s mouth, the postcard took the opposite historical route: starting out as printed matter, it gradually conquered the domain of the handwritten text in order finally to become a phenomenon of the voice as the medium of the homeland. The printed postcard turned Kleist’s letter inside out like a glove: the latter’s objectivity—the handwritten text’s global status as printed matter—was the former’s subjectivity. Its “idyllic descriptions of natural beauty” were standard texts, just like Kleist’s descriptions of the Rhine valley. Kleist’s letters to Zenge defined Romantic authorship as the absence of a World Postal Union. And therefore they reappeared as postcards after 1874.

That today standard descriptions of nature are rare to say the least, of course, due to something everyone knows: they were replaced by the mass-produced commodities of a particular media technology that the nineteenth century brought forth and that brought about the end of the Gutenberg Galaxy in the channels of the postal system: photography. In 1879, the royal Bavarian court photographer Alphons Adolph invented a photographic picture postcard that was reproducible in print. In addition to standard postage, standard format, and standard text, there now was a standard picture, as well. With the advent of the picture postcard, visual memories departed from the human soul, only to await people thereafter on the routes of the World Postal Union. The picture postcard opened up the territory of the World Postal Union as an immense space of forgetting, the object of which was the world itself. As early as 1859, photography’s merciless triumph over the world had been celebrated by the Boston author and doctor Oliver Wendell Holmes, who radically proclaimed its authority in matters of stereophotography by equating the mental eradication of the world with the physical. Once the usefulness of things had passed on to photographic images, things themselves could disappear:

Form will be separate from substance in the future. In fact, the substance in visible objects is no longer of much use, unless it serves as a pattern for creating form. Just give us a few negatives of a noteworthy object photographed from various perspectives—we need nothing more. Then tear
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the object down or light it on fire, if you want to. We might have to forgo some luxury perhaps, since the color is lacking, but form and light and shadows are the most important thing, and even color can be added and will possibly be fetched from nature by and by.54

The annihilation of things was the photographer's living and his service. That the mass medium of the picture postcard had taken the place of memory and experience was clearly recognized in 1898 by a German photographer who praised it as a new source of revenue for his colleagues in an article in the professional journal Das Atelier des Photographen: "We have struggled to offer the public photographs that are truly beautiful, and indeed we have come so far that there are presently a large number of people who prefer, in place of several large folios rendering a few of the town's main features, to buy an entire series of these postcards, which they do not plan to send, but to include in their album as their own, desirable memories."55

If personal memories turned into picture postcards, they did so because the postal epoch of human communication, which had allowed literature to function as a letter and letters to function as literature, had been followed by a postal epoch of phantom communication via the industrial mass production of printed matter. This epochal caesura was something a telegraph battalion lieutenant had to learn about from personal experience in 1901. In May and in civilian clothes, he had set out with a young lady for a bicycle ride to Werder, where he had his picture taken, lady and bicycle included. His bad luck started when the photographer added his keepsake photo to a collection of pictures he sold to a dealer. The latter was so taken by the lieutenant, lady, and bicycle that he delivered ten thousand copies of the picture to the Wertheim department store in Berlin. Thereafter, not a day went by when the pitiable lieutenant was not haunted by the visitations of his keepsake picture in dozens of copies.56 Since Henry Fox Talbot invented the negative, original and private visual memories always have been reproductions and thus might potentially flood the boulevards in massive quantities. At the same time, Kleist's case reveals that the originality of memory, as it was vouched for and glorified by literature in the cult of authorship, already had been a reproduction, even in the original. The originality of difference or repetition thus became an event in media history long before Derrida. That history left behind traces in which the destinies of media can be read and in which the end of history always was on the way: Heinrich von Stephan's postcard addressed to Heinrich von Kleist.

Once memories circulated as picture postcards that could be sent anywhere on the globe for ten pfennigs, traveling itself became unnecessary. Agencies such as the International Picture Postcard Bureau in Weimar (where Wilhelm Meister's educational travels apparently had been entirely forgotten) could assume that burden. Around 1900, that office hired a world traveler "who is beginning a trip around the world planned to last 4–6 months, on which he will send artistically made postcards with views of the mailing location from 40 of the most interesting points in the world to submitted addresses. The price is set at 10 marks for the entire series."57

At the moment that travel became obsolete in the age of the World Postal Union, writing lost its monopoly on the exchange of information. Text had been degraded to the form of a universal inscription of the world that continued to exist only in the form of free-floating visual memory in the channels of the postal system. The text on picture postcards took over the precise function that supplementary handwriting had performed in Kleist's letters or on printed postcards it provided the photo with a pseudoreference. Only the caption that no postcard lacked (initially it appeared only on the front, later on the back as well) gave the photo its meaning.58

The claim to possession of memories made with the help of picture postcards was correspondingly uncertain. Because possession had to be demonstrated with the inscription of an address or return address, and since picture postcards were anything but legitimate legal identification, identity itself was fundamentally threatened by the bona fides of those who wished to link it to a personal history. The sailor W. B. Murphy—whose profession traditionally had a bad reputation with respect to credibility—provides evidence of this with the shipwreck he suffers in the opinion of Leopold Bloom. Murphy tries to prove his story about cannibals in Peru with an eyewitness account using, of all things, a picture postcard showing—according to the caption—Indians in Bolivia: "Mr. Bloom, without evincing surprise, unostentatiously turned over the card to peruse the partially obliterated address and postmark. It ran as follows:
Tarjeta Postal. Señor A. Boudin, Galeria Becche, Santiago, Chile. There was no message evidently, as he took particular notice. Consequently, it is not only the discrepancy between the story’s Peru and the picture’s Bolivia, but also that between the sailor’s name and the “fictitious addressee of the missive which made [Bloom] nourish some suspicions of our friend’s bona fides.” Bloom’s method of securing evidence disengages the place pictured on the card from the story and identity of its owner and thus appears to be the photographic negative of Sherlock Holmes’s detective work in “The Five Orange Pips,” which reconstructed a history from the relationships between place, sender, and recipient.

“One never knows who belongs to whom, what to whom, what to what, who to what,” Derrida wrote in the margin of Murphy’s postcard. “There is no subject of belonging, any more than an owner of the postcard: it remains without a designated addressee.”

Who is not familiar with Bloom’s gesture, turning a postcard around for a glance at the caption? As long as the caption remains unfound, the visual memory in the picture remains silent: a dream image that remains indecipherable. Once memories had photographic carriers, they no longer were available to literature as signifiers. Thus, for example, Kafka’s literary texts can reflect images only as uncaptioned picture postcards. And these transport images that cannot not be remembered, what they mean is lost on the way from sender to addressee—the glance no longer can come to rest upon them. Uncaptioned picture postcards glide past the glance without leaving a trace in the memory of the observer. They are the positive form of forgetting.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Telegraph: Land and Sea

In 1800 and 1801, Kleist’s repository of ideas had circulated nothing but postcards that defined authorship and imagination as historical supplements for the World Postal Union. Nine years later, postal discourse—and therefore literature—had the alternative, according to Kleist, of choosing between the dispatch of postcards and a new communications technology: telegraphy. The options Kleist presented for postal discourse in the Berliner Abendblätter in October 1800 contained the situation in nuce that would dominate all writing in the 1870’s as the alternative between a World Postal Union and an International Telegraph Union. The Project of a Cannonball Postal Service and its (probably fictitious) reply unfurled nothing less than the future discursive order after Samuel Thomas Sömmering had presented the first electric, or electrolytic, telegraph to the Munich Academy of Sciences in 1809: “It has been recently invented in order to expedite communications from the four corners of the globe, an electrical telegraph; a telegraph that by means of an electrophorus and a metal wire can transmit messages with the speed of thought, or, better said, in less time than chronometrical instruments could measure.”

Although his source was a report on Sömmering’s invention in the Nuremberger Korrespondenten on August 16, 1800, it seems as though Kleist had read Sömmering himself. The latter’s memorandum, after all, does indeed speak of the impossibility of determining the velocity of an electric impulse chronometrically: “In calculating the velocity at which the electrical agent moves, my limited experiments have indeed not been sufficient to observe even a single difference, whether the communications cables were one foot in length or several thousand.” Sömmering’s tele-