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## Notes on a Poetry for a New Age of Communications

*Textu*, by Fady Joudah. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2014. First printing: 2013. Self-published.

1. Poetry is supposed to be a flash of inspiration: "a sudden brief burst of bright light or a sudden glint from a reflective surface," to use the dictionary definition. Implied in this is not only the burst of light but also the reflective surface, both of which are prerequisites. The surface norm implies saturation in canonicity, which leads to legitimacy, the order of the print age. The quality of the poetic message—a flash is a point of communication above all, it is nothing if it doesn't signal—depends on the intensity of the light, so that the reader is caught unawares. It is possible to make a virtue of dilution—as in Ashbery's late poetry—by scattering the flashes so languidly that one starts seeking other qualities in poetry, namely loquacity, or lack of surprise. David Kirby's poetry is all of a piece in that it violates the cardinal rule of communicating by image and metaphor and instead relies on breathless ground-digging—a digging that has no end in sight—as a circuitous way around the essential nature of poetry. Haiku is so brief that it barely has a chance to register before it is done with the job and has moved on, leaving not a little angst behind it. Today brevity is becoming rarer because poetry has ceased taking itself seriously: it wants to be a vehicle for expression not surprise. There is so much to express, such sheer quantity, that limitations of textual quantity can be safely ignored—even as artificial limits are in place.

BECAUSE

no touch no lover  
except in the mirror

neuron all lovers betray all lovers  
pray to the mirror

someone's singing in the shower  
glass of glass of glass

2. Fady Joudah's *Textu* enters the scene as a violation aimed at all the violations named above, an explicit refutation of the various ways poetry is being diluted by the masters of prosy expression—or at least this is the first impression. Each poem of 160 characters comes packaged with anonymous intent, as though it were litter from the era of textual overflow, as though the text of the cell phone wanted to assume the guise of the classical text, or poetry itself, valid for more than the fraction of a second it takes to process it. What are we to make of the poet's prefatory statement: "All the poems here were composed on a cellular phone's text-message screen?" This is to take the context of most textual creation today—the throwaway lines that fail to emerge into full-fledged poetry—as more of a foundation than it needs to be. One can imagine 160-character texts composed on a computer screen, which could then be passed off as cell phone texts, so why make a fetish of authenticity? To simulate the attention deficit of digital text-composition? Or is something else being simulated? Or stimulated?

#### REVOLUTION I

The proof's in the putting  
the back nine isn't like the front

Do I know what democracy is  
watching another seek it

Amazing grace  
sweet toothache

3. A further point is the variability of texture between the cell phone text and the classical text on paper (though it is usually written on a well-lit computer screen) as a notation on the quality of desire, whether tactile and feverish, or sedate and cool. In the age of cool, the text is the coolest of disposable artifacts, it is forgivable, it can take liberties wherever political correctness forbids expression of surprising personality. In classical texts—not masquerading as anything but texts, i.e., those published by reputable publishers, edited by editors, and endorsed by authorities in the field—we can take far fewer liberties than we can take in cell phone texts, which are not meant to have a quality of memorability. What, then, does it mean for the poet to try

to convert the lack of memorability into memorability itself, what does it mean to try to cross the barrier from the ephemeral fantasy-land of most day-to-day textual work (from work appointments to casual flirtation to outright treachery or even criminality) to the landscape of poetry, i.e., words put together in correct, deliberate, linear, canonical, fashionable order, resulting in meaning, music, verbosity? Can verbosity—meaning indulgence in metaphor and all the tricks of the trade—be acquired in short spans of time, 160 characters, rather than all the space in the world, as is available to Ashbery, Kirby, et al.? Can we be both private and verbose, and is there a loss if we can't? Should we even try?

#### ARABIC

calligraphy on train tracks  
a pocket-size Quran asunder

sun-bleached rodent skeletons  
my son & I skipping sleepers

listening to whistles  
no train came

4. Do we have fixed ranks and solidarities and badges to go along with our identities, or are we lost soldiers on a field of battle that is forever befogged and where identities are transposable and perhaps even unknowable? Do we communicate as rational entities in pursuit of commonly shared objectives—i.e., the deliberative subjects posited by Frankfurt school theorist Jurgen Habermas—or do we wish to erase our identities with each act of communication—more like what postmodern theorists like Jean-Francois Lyotard had in mind? The great development in the age of the internet is a move in the direction of anonymity, conceived as the residual of all that is virtuous and permanent about us: what is left over is what is intriguing, it is all that matters, it is the only exciting flow when we are composed as rational-minded subjects whose every action and reaction can be predicted by capitalist marketers and the makers of ready-made philosophies. *Textu* wants us to think of the unknowable as our last remaining refuge, it shuns the authoritarian order of even language poetry, which operates according to tyrannical rules disconnecting the observer from the observed. It is the principle of uncertainty applied to the act of composition (which is a far cry from observation-reception): it posits multiple

levels of barriers between creation and comprehension, in order to remove the easy facility of composition when everyone is given equal credit for intelligence and perception.

#### TRANSLATION

You live in a dream  
biopsy is set within hours racemes

will bloom inside your flesh  
in LaserJet graphic

or disseminate smudge  
into transfigurines

5. Blogging is an art—or it used to be, since it no longer seems to exist as anything exciting on the internet; it functions according to the principle of rapidity: rapid thought, rapid execution, rapid dissemination of feelings and scattered bits of knowledge. If you think about the subject too carefully, it is no longer a blog, it is an essay instead. Facebook status updates are an art form, since they compel us to abbreviate the forces of nature buffeting us over the long duration of time into mere thought bubbles, valid for a particular moment only: it is an underappreciated art indeed, and too great a level of seriousness, or self-consciousness, will be punished by the judging community. Twitter, to bring us closest to the sensibility of *Textu*, takes this principle of speed to the extreme: 140 characters expected to tell stories (sometimes literally, since fiction is being composed that way now) sufficient unto themselves, not requiring additional information or context. You make of a tweet what you will, the virtue is insufficiency, or what appears as such when thoughts move with such rapidity. To judge, in the digital age, is not to judge, and vice versa.

#### THE ONE

who opened door for wolf now howls  
with eyes that turn to ink

return to leather unbound  
The one who's now fish-bird

bird-fish who now  
some love kills

6. We might think that *Textu* meddles with a twenty-first century defense of poetry by turning this equation of speed on its head, by conveying a quality of extreme depth and gravity and permanence onto the superficial template of the limited-character thought bubble. Its size is the same but perhaps it has ballooned into a monster tent. The more we look at it, perhaps the more we will find. There is every place to hide here, there is deniability, there is ambiguity about intent, just as there was in classical texts. Celebrities keep getting in trouble all the time when they tweet anything authentic, which generally turns out to be the darkness of their souls, all their racist and homophobic and nationalist and xenophobic and paranoiac musings, which in the past used to remain secret. The essence of celebrity was to protect us from the reality of the star, we wanted never to get too close to the immutability of the fanciful construction—but now Twitter and its allied forces have messed up this textual stability, and there is nowhere for the issuer of the tweet to disappear. By making places of concealment possible again, by reintroducing deniability into the equation—are we at our best when we flirt via texts or when texts flirt with us, i.e., the difference between digital and print?—the poet seems to want to establish the rule of authority all over again.

#### SYNCOPE

To be alone with others  
who are each alone is not to be

alone alone Pinocchio wolf  
snow white lies in range of

satellite dish ear-snout  
minstrel show

7. But authority is counter to democracy—or is it? When communication assumes the posture that it is free, that it is cheap to the point of zero cost, that it is utterly transparent and transparently surveilled, and that it has become liberated from the need to deliver anything worthwhile or substantive or philosophical, then communication merges into a new form of authoritarianism, because individuality is rapidly exterminated in such a condition, despite appearances to the contrary. This worry, it seems to me, is what's eating away at the poet in *Textu*, more than any other preoccupation. Are we living in an age of absolute tyranny of communication, where I must be sociable

and confessional and revealing, or take the risk of falling out of the conversation, which is to say, excluded from the predominant form of textuality now known to us? If reading were still prevalent, then it wouldn't be so easy to exterminate those who refuse to reveal. The new authoritarianism comes packaged as a form of liberation from reflection or meditation prior to committing words to paper, prior to textualizing them. When I Text You, I am, on the other hand, committing to the notion that I am creating a disjuncture between the set of responsibilities you hold me to and the set of expressive antics I have conjured for myself. *Textu* appears to make communication—in our preferred new form—costly and disruptive again.

BELIEVE

or disbelieve the massacre  
took size & place it doesn't erase

the prerequisite preceding terror  
Catastrophe

is not always evidence-based  
Also erasure

8. If we encounter a stranger in "real life," we expect strangeness—not in the sense of bizarre behavior, but in the sense of making us rethink what makes us whole, what gives us our sense of stability and well-being. The stranger performs this function for us—of making us see our own normality—simply by being who he is. He does not need to put on an act. In the age of digital communication, the stranger has ceased to perform this essential role of grounding ourselves in our own true norms. The stranger has become truly a stranger. This is a bizarre—and unexpected—development not foreseen by the creators of the internet who must have expected a rise in tolerance due to the sudden close proximity of formerly far removed peoples. The stranger has become a stranger, when I text you and when you text me, because your and my strangeness—the lack of familiarity—is itself the constant subject of discussion. I approach you through my quality of difference from you. I approach you because I am not who you are. Thus the excess of free and easy communication has made fantastic strangers of us all, because deliberation—the construction of a self-image or barriers to full disclosure—has been taken out of the equation of social exchange. What *Textu* wants to do is to reform

our strangeness in ways that return us to our ground norms, because true tolerance—it would seem to be the presumption throughout this text—comes only from knowing the other as other, and not as mirror of our projected self.

#### A WORD IN ARABIC

sends you a word returns you  
or leads you to the spring

& brings you back thirsty  
You can tile the ocean floor

plaster heaven  
69 is 78 or 87

9. What happens to alienation—in the economic and political sense—when texting is a form of self-validation, as is every form of (digital) communication, and when reading is an act relegated to quaint idleness, not the active, feverish, enraged, burgeoning atmospherics of its digital replacement? Can I be alienated from anything—my labor, my community, my image—when I have been authorized as the sole author of my worth? The link between economic worth and personal worth has been severed, which means that no one has any measurable economic worth anymore, which also means that politics in the conventional sense is impossible. This is the true deliverance the digital form of communication has accomplished, unmooring us from the necessary feelings of alienation that arise when thought proceeds from strangeness and servility and slowness. What is the role of conventional dialectics in *Textu*? Does it take an explicitly political dimension? I would say that the presumption behind the book is an act of surrender to digital hegemony, so there is a split notion here, an ambiguity which itself constitutes a dialectic of form: the book wants to be more than what it is, yet knows it cannot be; the book refuses to take a political position with regard to alienation, but knows that its very surrender is an act of alienation (from which proceeds revolution, to use that most censored of all words).

#### CONSCIENCE

When we learn how an infant in the womb  
sleeps precisely in a parent's pose

say with fist closed  
pillowing the temple

What will become  
of the poem

10. *Textu*, in the end, is not a sheath of text messages emanating from a well-known author to his readers or fans. It is not a reinscription of failed textual sobriety at a moment of forgettable digital passion. It does not have a beef with the solidarity implied in the magic of digital communication— instant and global and universally valid or invalid in a single moment of consumption—and it does not quarrel with au courant notions of liberal tolerance and diversity. It does not intend to be cute by intentionally unintentionally revealing what is not meant to be revealed if any notion of privacy holds, it is not a spillover compilation of private texts (to a presumed beloved, or even a larger audience). It does not try to start a fight on behalf of poetry as something qualitatively other than prose, undiluted and sacred, and it does not seek to project a philosophical defense of art as a precondition of rationality. It takes a neutral stance toward the rise of confession as performance, value as nothingness, and the market as mindfulness. It asks us to ponder, with each perfectly executed 160-character poem—though some of the ones with an explicitly political stance extend into two or three or four iterations of the character limit, as though to throw up the hands in frustration—what is not left over, what is not residual, for surely, in the perfection of this form of communication, nothing is left over, nothing interesting for us to ponder ourselves as subjects of our own agency and making remains to be known. It asks us to consider if texting was where the text was meant to end up anyway once all of us acquired the means to acquit ourselves of professional soundness. It asks us to question deliberative Habermasian thought while we become knowing participants in our own annihilation as omniscient market participants in global liberal capitalism, because only in this (unironic) complicity can we begin to find shreds of our unknowability. These are not minimalist koans à la Robert Creeley, this is not conceptual artistry defined by abrupt line breaks and half-finished traces of mystical thought, this is simply an unironic iteration of the format of the text that inscribes us within the new argument for the self without textual foundation.

TEXTU

Your spine a river into the forest  
can't tell the neurons for the trees

I light & light  
you up with sound profile

threading the image habit  
of pleasure