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WEAVING TOGETHER TECHNOLOGY AND HAIKU: FADY JOUDAH'S *TEXTU*

Abstract. The article presents Fady Joudah's *Textu* as an innovative combination of poetry (haiku) and communication technology (text messaging). The paper questions the traditional distinction between literature and other media, exploring how digital formats affect the understanding of "text" and the experience of reading. The authors of the article invoke intermedial theory (Lars Elleström, Beate Schirmacher), Roland Barthes' and Gerard Genette's concepts of "text" and "work", as well as more recent notion of cybertext (Aarseth, Eskelinen) to highlight the ambiguous, performative nature of Joudah's poetry in the context of contemporary digital culture.

Keywords: *Textu*; intermediality; text message; haiku; performativity; *technoeology*

O ŁĄCZENIU TECHNOLOGII Z HAIKU W *TEXTU* FADY'EGO JOUDAHA

Abstrakt. Zbiór wierszy Fady'ego Joudaha zatytułowany *Textu* jest nowatorskim połączeniem poezji (haiku) i współczesnej technologii komunikacyjnej (wiadomości tekstowych w formie SMS). Autorki artykułu kwestionują tradycyjne rozróżnienie między literaturą a innymi mediami, badając wpływ formatów cyfrowych na rozumienie „tekstu” i doświadczenie czytania. Artykuł odwołuje się do teorii intermedialności (w ujęciu Larsa Elleströma i Beate Schirmacher), koncepcji „tekstu” i „dzieła” Rolanda Barthesa i Gerarda Genette'a, a także do nowszej koncepcji cybertekstu (w ujęciu Aarsetha i Eskelinen) w celu podkreślenia niejednoznacznego, performatywnego charakteru poezji Joudaha w kontekście współczesnej kultury cyfrowej.

Słowa kluczowe: *Textu*; intermedialność; wiadomość tekstowa (SMS); haiku; performatywność; *technologia*

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1. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Asked about the role of poetry, Fady Joudah, a Palestinian-American poet and physician, quotes J. M. Coetzee: “The masters of information have forgotten about poetry, where words may have a meaning quite different from what the lexicon says, where the metaphoric spark is always one jump ahead of the decoding function, where another, unforeseen reading is always possible.”¹ Indeed, the little-discussed-by-the-academia winner of the 2024 Jackson Poetry Prize is the author of several volumes of poetry, including [...] (2024), *Alight* (2013), *Tethered to Stars* (2021), and *Footnotes in the Order of Disappearance* (2018). In 2013 Copper Canyon Press published an ebook collection of Joudah’s poems called *Textu*, which appeared in print in 2014.

Combining the elements of intermedial and new materialist perspectives, the following article presents *Textu* as a provocative combination of traditional aesthetics, performative poetics and new technologies. In the 21st century, humans are described, if not defined, through their relations to technology. Computers and, as will be shown, mobile phones allow for new forms of “mediated lives”, helping design, conceptualise and “creatively compose together with their users that specific interplay of signs that we call literature”.² Instead of a detailed interpretation of one or several poems, the article explores the material affordances of literature in contrast to a finite “work” (*ergon*) exemplified by the design of the collection. The focus on the interrelational process between subject and object, however, does not equalize Joudah’s poetics with Markku Eskelinen’s postphenomenological model of ergodic literature, which challenges most of narratology and aggressively argues against a content-oriented approach.³ While our reading of Joudah’s poetic strategy challenges the assumed literary whole of an *ergon* and agrees with Eskelinen’s argument that the reader might not detect the “detailed mechanics of the traversal function”,⁴ Joudah’s *Textu* cannot be classified as

¹ Aria Aber, “Fady Joudah: The Poet on How the War in Gaza Changed His Work,” *The Yale Review*, February 28, 2024, <https://yalereview.org/article/fady-joudah-interview>.

² Peter Gendolla and Jörgen Schäfer, “Playing with Signs: Towards an Aesthetic Theory of Net Literature,” in *The Aesthetics of Net Literature. Writing, Reading and Playing in Programmable Media*, ed. Peter Gendolla and Jörgen Schäfer (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007), 16.

³ Markku Eskelinen, *Cybertext Poetics The Critical Landscape of New Media Literary Theory* (London: Continuum, 2012). For a detailed critique of Eskelinen’s cybertext poetics, see Katherine Hayles, “What Cybertext Theory Can’t Do,” *Electronic Book Review*, February 15, 2001, <https://electronicbookreview.com/publications/what-cybertext-theory-cant-do>.

⁴ Eskelinen, *Cybertext Poetics*, 18.

Net-literature or digital poetry. Instead, it requires a renegotiation of the often favoured opposition between printed literature and digital art.⁵ Therefore, to expand methodological approach beyond the domesticating technological concerns, we reconsider Lars Elleström's multimodal media model⁶ which generates a theoretical heuristic grid and helps understand a wide variety of textual practices. Applying Elleström's model to digital poetry, Beate Schirmacher argues that both "books and digital devices are technical media of display that offer different ways to engage with the basic media type of text. Although both printed and digital text visually mediates verbal language, they can be considered different basic media types in Elleström's framework."⁷ What we are concerned here with is the gap between digital and non-digital literature on the one hand, and the structuralist inheritance of qualified multimodal media products on the other. Both emphasise a tension between cultural, literary and artistic forms, which becomes more visible in the model's inherent distinction between the qualified media types of literature and non-literature; and between the basic medium of word, composed into a written "text", and a qualified medium as an aesthetic *ergon*. We assume the distinction to be preconditioned by the structuralist text-work dichotomy, repeated in the token-type system and combined with "the technical medium of display", i.e. a screen that displays one or several basic media. Despite striving for an ahistorical multimodal media model of human communication, Elleström's model needs to be reconsidered with respect to the flow and the aesthetic potential of digital communication "intra-acting"⁸ with the reader. Indeed, such a dialogical performance actualises multiple

⁵ Serge Bouchardon, "Towards a Tension-Based Definition of Digital Literature," *Creative Writing Studies* 2, no. 1 (2016), <https://repository.rit.edu/jcws/vol2/iss1/6>.

⁶ Lars Elleström, "The Modalities of Media II: An Expanded Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations," in *Beyond Media Borders*, vol. 1, *Intermedial Relations among Multimodal Media*, ed. Lars Elleström (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

⁷ Beate Schirmacher, "The Digital Transformation of Literature: Intermediality and Poetic Experience in the Digital Artwork *Evolution* (2014)," in *Literature as an Art Form – Evolving Intermedial Literary Landscape*, ed. Asunción López-Varela Azcárate (IntechOpen, 2025), 1.

⁸ Karen Barad's concept of intra-action emphasises the material aspect of literature in a way that shifts the activity of the human subject to that of material agency, against the impact of literacy and the reading metaphor as a metaphor for life. In a similar way, theoretical approaches to ergodic literature de-prioritize the subject's mind for the self-agency of matter, whilst a postphenomenological reading of phenomena as events always starts with the human-technological relations. Cf. Richard S. Lewis, *Technology, Media Literacy, and the Human Subject: A Posthuman Approach* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2021); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

meanings beyond the space of the physical-virtual divide theorised by Barad as “difference” and “diffraction”.⁹ According to Donna Haraway, “Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear but rather maps where the effects of differences appear.”¹⁰

Roland Barthes’ declaration that “the work is held in the hand, the text is held in language”¹¹ emphasises the difference between the physical, tangible aspects of things and the immaterial textuality that belongs to the formless matter and the unstable spatiotemporality of the mind, not to the digital sphere. “Text” “exists only when caught up in a discourse”.¹² It is abstracted from the finished material “work” (media product) which is “mediatised” as a physical object with a material interface in the process of communication.¹³ Both Barthes’ text-work theory and Espen Aarseth’s later theorisation of cybertext are based on the reader’s point of view.¹⁴ Due to the absence of an author, text is considered “an abstract, purely linguistic object, an ‘object in itself’ disconnected from all materiality”¹⁵ and from Elleström’s spatiotemporal and sensorial modalities that influence the reading process. What is missing in Elleström’s theory is the lability of the digital apparatus—e-book readers, computers or phones—resulting not only from a change in “hardware” (from print to electronic devices) but also from the software which has

⁹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 90.

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 70.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 57.

¹² Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, 57. The notion of “text” was extended from any spoken or written chunk of language to both “inter-text” and “con-text” as language was assigned a fundamental role of storytelling and world-making in the “linguistic turn”.

¹³ For Barthes, “work” of art involves wrong-headed thinking about fixed meanings, ownership and repressive ideology, while “textuality” promises a highly indeterminate and exciting sphere of semantic possibilities. Although there are many concepts of “work”, they all depend on the “notions of unity, presence, autonomy, originality and Being”. Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 62.

¹⁴ “The concept of cybertext focuses on the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange. However, it also centers attention on the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure than even reader-response theorists would claim. The performance of their reader takes place all in his head, while the user of cybertext also performs in an extranoematic sense. During the cybertextual process, the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of ‘reading’ do not account for.” Espen J. Aarseth in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 1.

¹⁵ Philippe Bootz, “Digital Transcoding: An Extension of Translation?” *Octaviana. Translating Electronic Literature: Whither Now?* (2023) <https://hal.science/hal-05004634>.

a fundamental role in the organization of the text displayed on a screen. Consequently, the transfer of encoded data into a finished “work” does not guarantee a permanent material representation assumed in Eskelinen’s argumentation, and technological lability might have a significant impact on reading practice.

Structuralist approach to “transcoding” neglects both the multiplicity of codes and the constant changeability of technological platforms or interfaces that can distribute and display “text”. Not only semantic ambiguity, but also innovative media technologies disrupt the stable basis for defining “text” and media types (film, photography, literature). However, the assumption of a “technical medium of display” implies a *dispositif* only as a transparent means of support which results from the separation of storage media from the technical media.¹⁶ In “a truncated consideration of physical reality”, both the text and the code of the cybertextual text-machine, attributed merely with a traversal function, are abstracted and disconnected from physical materiality.¹⁷ Hence, the technical lability beyond the transformation of the code is neglected.

While Barthes later emphasises the poststructuralist understanding of “text” that “explodes, fragments, diverges,”¹⁸ Gérard Genette still favours a fixed, hierarchical classification of literature and other aesthetic media products.¹⁹ His distinctions between fact and fiction, narration and description or

¹⁶ One can argue that Elleström’s “technical medium of display” mirrors Espen Aarseth’s division into storage and interface media. Aarseth favors the concept of a “front-end dispositifs” in cybertexts and “front-end apparatus” to point to the fact that these theories ground on Shannon-Weaver communication model which allows the text to appear transparent. However, Shannon-Weaver model has been critiqued for foregrounding “communication as something that occurs between autonomous — already fully established — entities rather than between relational beings.” Richard S. Lewis, *Technology, Media Literacy, and the Human Subject: A Posthuman Approach* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2021), 30.

¹⁷ Bootz, “Digital Transcoding.”

¹⁸ Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, 106. “The Text is experienced only in an activity, in a production. It follows that the Text cannot stop (for example, at a library shelf); its constitutive moment is traversal (notably, it can traverse the work, several works)” (58). When it comes to the traditional genre classifications, Barthes explicitly states that “the Text does not stop at (good) literature; it cannot be caught up in a hierarchy, or even in a simple distribution of genres. What constitutes it is on the contrary (or precisely) its force of subversion with regard to the old classifications” (58).

¹⁹ In rhetoric, the quality of mimesis lies in its transformative power to create an in-betweenness, i.e. something both similar and different from the source. However, the formalistic approach to literary texts prefers clarity to ambiguity, and Aristotelian unity (completeness) to openness. Matthew Potolsky, *Mimesis* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 39. Categorizing media types in this tradition gives priority to necessity and reason, devaluing ambiguity, openness, chance, potential deception or individual whim.

mimesis and diegesis²⁰ are rooted in the timeless metaphysical substances or essences.²¹ By disregarding both poetry and the practices of situated/participatory reading, Genette relies on the ability of language to transparently or scientifically describe facts (denotation) and on the scholar's ability to systematize general, objective genre indicators that classify qualified media products. The assumed transcendental structures (grammar) are the grounds on which Genette argues for transtextuality. The structures are based on the sameness beyond individual differences, which preconditions all interactions between texts bound to a fixed, abstract space or place, while deferring motion and change to intertextuality. Elleström's intermedial framework expands the category of "text" to three basic media (word, image, sound), arguing for transmediation.²² Still, this thinking remains bound to Kant's transcendental idealism and aesthetics. In short, while Genette's abstract "text" remains untouched by the multiplicity of timely, technical practices of production and consumption, Barthes' "text" problematizes strict classifications between individual media products (tokens) and genres (types). Even though Elleström's model complicates the concept of "text" through four modalities applicable to basic media, „the technical medium of display" leaves no space for the potential lability of the technical apparatus that might remain unnoticed in the readers' semiotic process of meaning-making, in line with the traditional conception of agency limited to the strictly human realm.

²⁰ For Genette, "the ability to constitute a system is precisely the characteristic of any set of signs, and it is this constitution that marks the passage from pure symbolism to the strictly semiological state," Allen, *Intertextuality*, 92. Genette also speaks of "nature" and "essence" to distinguish between "modes" and "genres", limiting "genres" to a literary category, while "modes" "are natural forms" (96).

²¹ Genette's idea of essence is rooted in Aristotelian hylomorphism: material substances are composites of form, matter and immaterial substances which explain the Being of the universe as a harmonized wholeness with a specific rationalised logical structure. Matter is nothing in its own right but an irreducible plurality able to receive different (actual and potential) "forms", so that different objects and phenomena can appear. Some belong to the same category due to an essential "substance" and despite permanent change. On hylomorphism, see David Charles, *The History of Hylomorphism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

²² Elleström defines transmediation as the "repeated mediation of equivalent sensory configurations by another technical medium", Lars Elleström, "Transmediation: Some Theoretical Considerations," in *Transmediations: Communication across Media Borders*, ed. Niklas Salmose and Lars Elleström (New York: Routledge, 2020), 4. For a critical discussion of his model, see Eleni Timplalex and Heidrun Führer, "Claiming an Intermedial Home for Imagination, Memory and Performativity: A Subjective Approach to the Intermediate Stage of Communication," in *Performance and the Representation of Memory*, ed. Frederico Dinis (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2024).

2. THE *TEXTU*

The heterogeneous media type of “literature” bridges the spatiotemporal distance between the participants in communication facilitated by printed books or technological devices (“technical media of display”) that can also transmit and display non-literary “texts”. Apart from creating a separate fictitious world, literature as a qualified media type is traditionally actualised in and by a specific materialised technology (paper and print). As a whole (*ergon*), Joudah’s *Textu* appears as a stable, controllable form of an object, even though media technology foregrounds a shared agency with humans. Already the framed “text” engages the reader to combine the embodied experience with the materiality of media products as qualifying contextual information, independent from genre markers and the material affordances that influence communication. The specific affordances of electronic devices—a cell phone or an ebook reader—not only encourage haptic interactivity with the digital through the physical space, but also bring a new form of the “text’s” materiality to the fore, namely data stored in files on magnetic hard drives.²³ This results in the possibility of different page and poem layouts in the printed and the electronic versions of *Textu*. Due to the ebook’s reflowable formatting within the software used to access data, the reader can adjust the electronically coded layout to the chosen device. Consequently, the conventional features of the technical medium of display associated with a printed book or a volume of poetry, i.e. the stable format of a page or the fixed pagination and versification, are lost in the digital media: the ebook version of *Textu* or website version(s) of individual poems from the collection, e.g. “The Mind in State”. The latter cannot be evaluated with reference to the reader’s phenomenological experience and memory.²⁴ With this in mind, we point to Barad’s argumentation that what appears as “‘distinct’ agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is,

²³ Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (MIT Press, 2008).

²⁴ Due to the link between the motor-sensory experience of materiality and the cognitive “content” processing, Morineau et al. show that an ebook does not provide external indicators to memory in the same way that a printed book does. Thierry Morineau et al., “The Emergence of the Contextual Role of the E-book in Cognitive Processes through an Ecological and Functional Analysis,” *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* 62, no. 3 (2005): 329–48, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2004.10.002>.

agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements".²⁵

In "Note to the Reader", the publishers draw explicit attention to the plasticity of the ebook,²⁶ encouraging the reader to adjust the settings of the device in a way that shapes the sensorial and the semiotic modality of the object on the screen in line with the author's intended visual coding. The invisible, material and technological affordances of the ebook's abstract data-structure influence not only the perception of the text's layout as a unity on which any interpretation is grounded, but also how the reader participates in the embodied spatiotemporal experience of a "work-text". Communication between the co-constituting relations changes not only in the ways of conveying information, but also in rhetorical mode that shifts the hierarchical and persuasive relation between the author and the "receiver" to one that emphasises a mutual constitution of subject and object through an intensified activity. This activity does not stop with changing the size of the page and the layout of the text but extends to conceptualizing this "formal" or externalised haptic activity as "agential cuts" intra-acting with the process of meaning-making, including the differentiating between different text types. As digital technology challenges the stability of a page, a book and para-, peri- or epi-texts, the idea of an objectively pre-existing materiality (basis of media specificity) and the analytical stability of structuralism have to be given up.²⁷ Consequently, the settled oppositions, e.g. art and non-art, copy and original or media and life, are at stake.

Following Genette's logic, however, it would be the same "text" whether one read Joudah's *Textu* in a paper version, as an ebook displayed on any electronic device, or in fragments, i.e. individual poems on websites or online platforms. The same is true for the para- and peri-texts of *Textu*'s printed and electronic versions. They act as an institutionalized, historically constrained frame for presenting bibliographic information that creates the whole of the "work" for the reader. Functioning as the "outside", the para- and peri-texts

²⁵ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33 (italics in the original).

²⁶ "Note to the Reader" is enclosed in the ebook, but is absent for obvious reasons in the printed volume. Also, the epigraph from Shakespeare is not included in the printed version.

²⁷ Jarkko Toikkanen, "Intermediality and Medium Specificity," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Intermediality*, ed. Jørgen Bruhn, Asun López-Varela, and Miriam de Paiva Vieira (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91263-5_13-1.

evoke expectations about the “inside” (“content”) of the “work”.²⁸ In Genette’s model, the way the scientifically abstracted “textuality” is combined with the (inter-)subjective reading experience remains an open question. The model also neglects Barthes’ experience of a text’s activity called in posthuman terms “vibrant matter”²⁹ which can be extended onto text’s construction, production, materiality and spatiotemporal context.

At first glance, the printed version of *Textu* is “a slim volume only slightly larger than a cell phone”.³⁰ Thus, the haptic materiality of this format already underlines the similarity between poetry and text messaging on the level of communication. The title points to “text” and its Latin root, *texere*, which can be associated with Aarseth’s “textons”,³¹ the textile metaphor of “weaving” as well as Derrida’s “récits” and “folding”³² or Ingold’s “enmeshment of lines”.³³ All notions propose an open manifold of things, signs and semiotic levels that combine a performative doing with the technical apparatus (hardware and software), and a semiotic process in a broader spatiotemporal context of Barad’s performative ontology.³⁴ At second glance, the suffix -u indicates divergence from the plain “text”. In informal written communication (texting/instant messaging), “U” or “u” is an iconic, homophonous sign for “you”, the recipient of a speech-act or a text message. It underlines the intimate performative relation between the speaker and the listener. At the same time, -u in *Textu* can be interpreted as Peircean indexical sign for Japanese haiku, one of the shortest forms of poetry and an ambiguous media type known for its brevity, sensuality and reliance on imagery to convey layers of meanings.³⁵

²⁸ Derrida argues that only when a récit is recognised, the “law of genre” can work through the logic of an example to revive the whole. Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 221–52.

²⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

³⁰ Julie Swarstad Johnson, “*Textu* by Fady Joudah,” *The University of Arizona Poetry Center*, February 14, 2015, <https://poetry.arizona.edu/blog/textu-fady-joudah>.

³¹ Aarseth, *Cybertext*.

³² Derrida, *Acts of Literature*.

³³ Tim Ingold, *Lines. A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007).

³⁴ Karen Barad criticises the traditional concepts of individuals, things, or substances as composed of fixed and determinate qualities. Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs* 28, no. 3 (2003): 801–31, <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>.

³⁵ According to Bowers, “haiku do tell a story and paint a vivid picture, leaving it up to the reader or listener to draw the meanings out and complete them in the mind’s eye.” Faubin Bowers, *The Classic Tradition of Haiku: An Anthology* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1996), viii–ix.

3. TEXT MESSAGE AND HAIKU/POETRY

Both text messages and haiku imply private, immediate reading as a form of communication and open, fluid (“cyber”) space accessible from anywhere as long as one has got the means to connect to the virtual network. Both text formats apply strict formal rules determined by aesthetic or economic constraints. Traditional haiku consists of three lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables respectively, although modern variants modify the traditional “cultural codes” of counting syllables.³⁶ A typical text message, in turn, is limited to 160 characters including spaces. What is more, both text-formats imply the detachment from the body’s “here and now” to connect with the otherness of a “there” that exists “nowhere”. This sphere is traditionally related to the mental space of the mind in which content comprehension takes place, and to the technological space of the internet that makes content transmission possible.

Textu is the outcome of combining texting with poetry writing: “All the poems here were composed on a cellular phone’s text-message screen. The Textu poem has only one hard rule: that it be exactly 160 characters long, specific to text-message parameters. The Textu poem also suggests a meter in character, not syllable, count.”³⁷ Joudah’s poetics is viewed as intertwinement of traditional metric rules,³⁸ typical of poetic genres, with the modern practice of direct, informal communication influenced by technological and economic affordances. One of Joudah’s interviews echoes the collection’s epigraph: “The *character* count is a direct descendent of the byte and bit, our most cellular basic unit of digital expression today, of manifestation in popular communication. Character count is a foot or an *iamb* of our time. I am not trying to upend language. I was using means already in heavy usage.”³⁹

³⁶ Haiku is defined by specific standardized semantic patterns, also called “modes” or “traits”. Official guidelines for modern haiku writers institutionalize these rules as qualifying criteria. “Good haiku avoid subjectivity; intrusions of the poet’s ego, views, or values; and displays of intellect, wit, and facility with words.” “Submission Guidelines and Policies,” *Modern Haiku*, 2024, www.modernhaiku.org. Lost in this approach is the performative, suggestive, dialogical language to which attentive readers respond.

³⁷ Fady Joudah, *Textu* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2014), xi.

³⁸ Instead of counting beats or combining stressed and unstressed syllables, the performative aspect of writing poetry can be considered “as simply other ways of spacing out the world”. Nigel Thrift, “Space,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2–3 (2006): 140, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406063780>.

³⁹ Todd Fredson, “At the Algorithmic Rabbit Hole: An Interview with Fady Joudah,” *Matter: A (Somewhat) Monthly Journal of Political Poetry and Commentary*, March 31, 2015, <https://mattermonthly.com/2015/03/31/at-the-algorithmic-rabbit-hole-an-interview-with-fady-joudah> (emphasis ours).

While syllable counting and patterning marks the pre-digital-era haiku writing, today's private communication (text message) is frequently limited to a specific character count. Hence, electronic communication and economic pragmatism construct the specific affordances of various media products by blurring the traditionally conceptualized lines between the physical and the virtual, private and public communication, or "form" and "content". Joudah names explicitly individual, technological and social conditions as environmental spatiotemporal affordances that explain the shift in literary convention. His inspiration comes from observing that people spend a lot of time texting, an activity he himself is not oblivious to:

I found myself playing with the language while sending texts to friends, and then it dawned on me, as one of them quipped about my poetic texts, why not harness my anxiety about not being able to write longer poems, due to time constraints, clinic and home, into the art of the short poem through the medium of text message.⁴⁰

Qualifying text message as literature or an aesthetic media product blurs the tension between the ephemeral everyday "information reality" and the poetic language. It shifts the artist's concern from the traditional, eternal "beauty and truth" to intimate feelings and banal information exchange. Thus, to qualify the aesthetic value of a text message, a new institutionalised discourse is needed within the modern techno-economic sphere, one that goes beyond the definition of digital poetry within the frame of "the ephemeral dimensions of their screen-readable manifestation and the perennial dimension of their program".⁴¹ The issue of qualifying aesthetic process was taken up in *The Guardian* in 2011 by Carol Ann Duffy and followed up by Isabel E. Kaplan in *The Harvard Crimson*.⁴² While Duffy highlights the similarity between poems and text messages, arguing that "[t]he poem is a form of texting... it's the original text,"⁴³ Kaplan believes that an average text message seems to be a common information exchange rather than a poem. Pointing to the ambiguity and the virtual space of language, Duffy believes

⁴⁰ Angelique Jamail, "Textu by Fady Joudah: A Lyric in Brief," *Sappho's Torque* (blog), March 22, 2014, <https://sapphostorque.com/2014/03/22/1454>.

⁴¹ Philippe Bootz, "The Ephemeræ of Digital Literature," *Neohelicon* 48, no. 1 (2021), 7–22.

⁴² In considering texts that are not established in the literary discourse as scientific approaches, we consciously echo Joudah's aesthetic practice.

⁴³ Isabel Kaplan, "Poetry as Texting," *The Harvard Crimson*, October 24, 2011, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2011/10/24/text-poetry-original>.

that poetry is “a perfecting of a feeling in language—it’s a way of saying more with less, just as texting is.... It allows feelings and ideas to travel big distances in a very condensed form.”⁴⁴ Thus, she qualifies a text through the receiver’s “feeling in language”. This view not only implies a qualitative shift to “theatricality”⁴⁵ but also binds “texts” into an ongoing flow of inter-related acts of communication. The epi-textual discussion in *The Guardian* and *The Harvard Crimson* strives to establish a new expressive potentiality of poetic language by challenging the convention of separating pragmatic information from aesthetic works defined by their non-pragmatic functions (*l’art pour l’art*).

4. BETWEEN SHAKESPEARE’S SONNET AND A STAGE

The aforementioned “Note to the Reader” is followed in the ebook edition of *Textu* by an epigraph from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 59 which directly addresses the reader: “Show me your image in some antique book,/ Since mind at first in character was done!” Playing with the ambiguity of “image”, “mind” and “character”, the quote touches upon the tensions between image and text, content and form, the materiality of the media product and the immateriality of the mind. The epigraph makes the reader aware of the materialistic character of words as platforms (signifiers) for meaning (signifieds). As a polysemantic sign, the word “character” also points to performative language. Understood as a verbal sign in written language or a text message, it actualises the virtual realm of possibilities. Similar tension can be observed between originality and repetition, human and actor (mime) or individuality and otherness. What is more, “character” fuses Shakespeare’s rhetorical and performative endeavours, indicating his innovative contribution both to the Renaissance drama and the development of the English sonnet. In the context of theatre, the word “character” connects the performative skills of a human actor with an individual set of features that makes one person or thing distinct from others.

⁴⁴ Kaplan, “Poetry as Texting.” In contrast, Algadher explores the interrelationship between twitter and haiku. Hessa Alghadeer, “Digital Landscapes: Rethinking Poetry Interpretation in Multimodal Texts,” *Journal of Arts and Humanities (JAH)* 3, no. 2 (2014): 87–96.

⁴⁵ Teemu Paavolainen, “Fabric Philosophy: The ‘Texture’ of Theatricality and Performativity,” *Performance Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (2017): 172–88, <https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2017.2264>.

Both the epigraph and the poems in *Textu* explicitly underline the concept of performance and theatricality, staging different poetic voices in dialogues. The portmanteau title of the collection (*Textu*) and the titles of individual poems (e.g. “The Mind in State”) are metacommunicative hints that a performance is in progress. In this light, the title of the collection frames a stage for the performative act and foregrounds the virtual manifold of symbolic meanings that the reader can actualise in practising judgemental perception of signs. The contextual environment that influences the language is a result of an individual interpretation. It is guided by the tradition and the institutionalized discourse theorized by C. S. Peirce as the process of semiosis.⁴⁶ Based on the complex sign system, the concept of representation as a mediator between a subject and the world is now foundational for the intermedial studies.⁴⁷

As far as Elleström’s semiotic modality is concerned, the repeated visual pattern of three two-line stanzas in most of *Textu* poems can be seen as consistent with the memory-enhancing cyclicity of Shakespeare’s sonnets. However, there are phenomenological and cognitive differences and inconsistencies that attentive readers when getting aware of them might consider as another ground for reflecting on the virtuality of meaning-making. For instance, Joudah’s poems are shorter and each of them has a title but no rhyme. While some poems are visibly longer, they consequently repeat the adopted convention: “All but five of the poems appear as sets of three couplets and most contain about thirty words, including the title.”⁴⁸ Formal exceptions within the created rhythmic “whole” involve two prose poems, i.e. “The Mind in State” and “Martyrdom”, through which *Textu* intensifies the tension between the traditional aesthetics of poetry (manifested, among others, in visually recognisable layout) and modern poetic form that minimises its contrast to everyday language. Thus, the combination of poetry and text message in *Textu* both evokes and challenges the idea of the art’s or the medium’s obsolescence within a dynamic flow of repetition and difference as well as the conventional verbo-visual units recognised as poems in a self-contained manner.

⁴⁶ Peter Skagestad, “Peirce, Virtuality, and Semiotic,” *Philosophy and Cognitive Science* 19 (1998): 47–52, <https://doi.org/10.5840/wcp20-paideia199819356>.

⁴⁷ In contrast, Karen Barad rejects any form of representationalism as it distinguishes between word and world. Instead, she suggests the theory of performance. For her, “matter is agentive, not a fixed essence or property of things.” Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 136–37.

⁴⁸ Swarstad Johnson, “*Textu* by Fady Joudah.”

5. FRAGMENT VS WHOLE

The traditional close reading is emphasised when poetry websites publish a single poem, e.g. “The Mind in State”. They create a material, visual frame that self-referentially stages itself as an “art space”, underlining its “self-contained existence”.⁴⁹ In so doing, they reduce the semiotic virtuality of signs and the performative ambiguity of the “text”. Akin to the material paratext of a book, recognizable genre markers are provided by website names: *poets.org*, *poetrying.wordpress* or *poetryfoundation.org*. These names are performative speech acts that institutionalise the display of individual texts within the genre of poetry. In the same vein, the websites reconstruct formal synchronic stability by “adjusting” the visual layout of the poem and imposing fixed versification. What is lost with the publication of “The Mind in State” on *poets.org* is the virtual space that blends Joudah’s poems with Japanese haiku, modern text messages and the cyclicity typical of Shakespearean sonnets.

However, the unstable digital materiality of websites cannot be ignored. Different actualisations of “The Mind in State” use alternative spellings that change the virtual frame of semiosis.⁵⁰ These variations might be qualified as unintended “mistakes”. However, a fault in the internal code may easily lead to translation errors in the “work” that might eventually diverge from the author’s “original” or abstracted “text”. In the age of “the digital revolution paradigm”,⁵¹ the source code that produces verbal “characters” remains mostly concealed from the viewer. Additionally, the impact of the language’s material modality is no longer solely evaluated against the individual author’s skill (*techne*), due to editing and technological mode.⁵² The material modality and the affordances of the technical medium of display are

⁴⁹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 66.

⁵⁰ For instance, “mountain wool” is changed to “mountian wool” and “tongueless moon” to “tongueless mood” in “The Mind in State” published at *poets.org*. These variations influence the readers’ reception and interpretations, as the mountian wool might refer to a specific wool obtained from the old primitive species of sheep, while mountain wool evokes a performative metaphor that blends natural forest with the material texture of wool. The “tongueless mood” can trigger associations with Heidegger’s discourse on the mood. Spelling variations point diagrammatically to the complex network of people, materials, and events that otherwise remain hidden in the textual production and layout presented to the reader.

⁵¹ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: When Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 6.

⁵² Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002).

operative modes that influence the habit of “consuming the content” beyond any cognitive intention of the sender’s mind. The invisible, complex materiality demands a *techneology*, i.e. a fusion of artistic skill and technological affordances that influence the “text” as a “work” and a multimodal media product.⁵³

Consequently, the reading experience of a single poem differs when it is published as an isolated unity from reading it in relation to the whole volume and the book format, which enhances a sense of stability with the value of permanence that goes hand in hand with the idea of a finite *ergon*. The collection stages the poems in an open relation between interiority and exteriority, linking the process of seeing/imaging physical and virtual space with a broader context. The conceptual metaphor of “stage” underlines the performative act of seeing and making-see in the sense of experiencing and reflecting, both of which make potential “things” visible.⁵⁴

6. FINAL OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSION

While the structuralist concept of intertextuality might help tracing various source texts or media products,⁵⁵ Joudah’s poetics actualised in *Textu*

⁵³ *Techneology* concerns the dynamic intra-action between material affordances, human practical doings and theoretical understanding. It combines the ancient concept of *techne*, the human skill in elaborating different materials, with *mechane*, the development of supporting tools on which electronic media products now rely. In this sense, techneology “emerges from the dynamic interplay between the richness of a physically robust world and human intelligence as it crafts this physicality to create meaning,” Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 33. The implied understanding of virtuality preconditions “the dual nature of technology, in which human action and the social context in which the action takes place both shape technology, while simultaneously technology influences human actions and social structures.” Kevin Crowston and Sandra Sieber, introduction, to *Virtuality and Virtualization*, ed. Kevin Crowston, Sandra Sieber, and Eleanor H. Wynn (New York: Springer, 2007), 2.

⁵⁴ Elleström’s model of communication uses the metaphor of an intermediate stage. It interlinks the outside with the cognitive spatiotemporality and enables “the transfer of cognitive import from a producer’s to a perceiver’s mind” on the basis of a “function rather than an essential property”, since “virtually any material entity can be used as one [media product].” Lars Elleström, “A Medium-Centered Model of Communication,” *Semiotica*, no. 224 (2018): 281, <https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2016-0024>.

⁵⁵ “Whether by the attribution of literary influence, or the identification of literary sources and analogues, or the ascription of traditionality, or the allegation of plagiarism or copyright violation—or, indeed, by any of a host of other ways of construing relationships among texts—the recognition that the creation of literary texts depends in significant part on the alignment of texts to prior texts and the anticipation of future texts has drawn critical—and ideological—attention to this reflexive

intertwines different poetic genres and language registers by playing with compatible and incompatible codes, calculable and incalculable connections to create something new in terms of political and ethical rhetoric. Drawing from Eastern traditions of Japanese haiku and Arabic poetry,⁵⁶ the poet entangles various lines of cultural history into a complex knot. His *technological* aesthetic integrates “otherness” in a way that theatrically stages a space for unexpected knots of virtual lines. Joudah puts together an assemblage⁵⁷ of socio-historical cultural textuality beyond the physical-virtual divide to integrate “texts” into the larger “inter-textual” system beyond normative conventions.

The instability of modern communication caused by changes in everyday language and technical media of display used in online and offline modes is indexically foregrounded in Joudah’s poetics and in the tension between the ephemeral “informational content” of a text message and the traditional expectations about poetry. Thus, Joudah’s poetics responds to the fluid understanding of spacetime, in which space always remains under construction in the process of being⁵⁸ and allows the poet and the audience to intra-act virtually, enfolding the writer’s “I” with the reader’s “you”. It revises the traditional stable identity of “work” and “text”, rooted in the otherness of the inside-outside dichotomy of “text” and “context.” Elleström’s intermedial model assumes that the “text”’s basic features can be transmediated into qualified media products (“works”) either via analogue or digital technologies. By contrast, Joudah’s *technology* consequently questions the ideas that timespace is closed; “content” (image) exists prior to “form” (or the technical medium of display) and leads to a finite, closed media product; and

dimension of discursive practice.” Richard Bauman, *A World of Others’ Words: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Intertextuality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 1.

⁵⁶ Joudah translated, among others, *The Butterfly’s Burden*, a collection of poems by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and *Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me, and Other Poems*, a collection of poems by another Palestinian author, Ghassan Zaqtan. Fredson, “At the Algorithmic Rabbit Hole.” Aldoory and Alkurdi place Joudah in the context of Arab-American poets who use their writings as means to impose cultural dialogue. They also argue that “the image-centered technique of Haiku poetry ... can better echo the rapid changes of the contemporary age caused by massive capitalism and terrorism.” Arwa Hussein Aldoory and Shireen Hikmat Alkurdi, “Voicing Identity in Textual Poetry,” conference paper, April 2019, 64, <https://web.ttu.edu.jo/conf/docs/dc4.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Assemblage theory focuses on the processes of “territorialization” (spatialisation and coherence) and “deterritorialization” (dissolution), and on *agencement*, from French “a construction, an arrangement, or a layout” rather than “the union of two things”. Thomas Nail, “What Is an Assemblage?” *SubStance* 46, no. 1 (2017): 22, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sub.2017.0000>.

⁵⁸ Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005).

that the transparent transfer of meaning is the goal of successful communication and interpretation. The demanding background outlined above reduces mimesis to the imitation or translation of “texts” finalised into a self-contained “work”.

Text messages are not only a form of pattern and organization that turns “texts” into qualified media products. Combining informal communication with poetry, *Textu* instead suggests an alternative hermeneutic that provokes a shift towards new forms which are not reducible to a form-content hierarchy, a *l’art pour l’art* aesthetic, tracing structuralist patterns or establishing final pragmatic ends. In the open, fluid poetic text-type, Joudah strives to create a space for inspiring reading that draws from many sources beyond the limits of the digital age and contemporary Western culture. *Textu* evokes a specific poetic space in a performative ontology which affirms multiplicity and “coexisting heterogeneity” that can be experienced as “the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist”.⁵⁹ Considering Karen Barad’s performative ontology, Levi R. Byrant best summarises our observations: “Might we not get further in conceiving things as plastic, as fields of capacities and powers that can be creatively actualized in a *variety of ways* under different interactions? Bodies, things, are not defined by their properties but by their *capacities* or powers, and we never have a fully or fixed inventory of those capacities.”⁶⁰

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⁵⁹ Massey, *For Space*, 9.

⁶⁰ Levi R. Bryant, “Phenomenon and Thing: Barad’s Performative Ontology,” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 30 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/030.e11>.

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