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## INTERCEPTED TEXTS

Fred Muratori

### INTERROGATING WATER AND OTHER POEMS

Philip Fried

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It's a given of post-apocalyptic fiction that sooner or later the survivors forget how and why the apocalypse happened in the first place. There's no room for the past, for memory, when staying one shuffling step ahead of zombies, mutants, and competing human scavengers demands full attention to the precarious present. But it's also a given that someone, while rifling an abandoned home for, say, canned pudding, will eventually stumble across a crumbling magazine or diary documenting the disaster's origins and providing cautionary clues to how things got so irremediably bad. Should a real apocalypse happen—and each day CNN offers evidence that it's well on the way—a lucky survivor might find a tattered copy of Philip Fried's *Interrogating Water* to be a ruefully illuminating discovery, a Yeatsian note of foreboding struck in its very first poem: "Rust and corrosion are everywhere, malfunction / is rife."

In a time of instantaneously transmitted social and news media, we may no longer need artists to be the "antennae of the race" as they were for Ezra Pound in 1934, but Fried's poems demonstrate that a poet's acute receptivity to language in all its cultural and political manifestations can isolate and

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amplify the often unintended messages it conveys, no trivial skill in the rushed, roiling miasma of talking points and reflexive opinionating that constitutes what we call information. Amid this welter of cable TV blather, tweets, press releases, and Facebook flotsam, Fried plucks his controversial subjects—predator drones, capital punishment, climate change—and wraps them in familiar forms, both poetic and what Jonathan Holden dubbed analogical (e.g., letters, lists, prayers, memos) that supply contrasting discursive backdrops for the content, often integrating his own words with text found in pre-existing sources.

In "Prayer to the Small Arms Deity," Fried addresses concealed carry policies through the rhetoric of devotional speech ("O portable and concealed god, barely visible / As a bulge, yet guardian of halcyon skies"), simultaneously highlighting and subverting the religious justifications with which some gun rights proponents advocate for their cause. Borrowing snippets from the King James Bible, "A Checklist" proffers a series of questions, both mundane and ominous, that one might find in the coat pocket of an overzealous Pentagon bureaucrat ("Have you taken hold of the ends of the earth and shaken / out non-state actors?") while "Grammar as Glue" adopts the procedural format of home-assembly instructions, fashioning directions for the creation of American exceptionalism into a set of rhymed quatrains punctuated by couplets on first person usage found in a grammar handbook:

Fasten the Shining City to the Hill,

Ensuring the nuts are secure. With the  
Leveraged Capital  
Rubberband, stretch an elastic liberty  
Until it nearly snaps, from sea to sea.

To intensify the pronoun *I*  
Simply employ the reflexive *myself*.

Passages such as this are typical of Fried's bitterly insightful wit, studded with double-entendres ("Ensuring the nuts are secure") that sometimes withhold their emergence until a second or even third reading. As often as the reader might snort and snicker, the political import behind the humor is no laughing matter.

As evidenced by 2011's *Early/Late: New & Selected Poems*, Fried's political consciousness has long been attuned to the ominous nuances of both mass and specialized discourse, particularly the subtle and not-so-subtle infiltration of military and political vocabulary into widely disparate sectors (*sectors!*) of everyday American popular culture. As we helplessly watch the 2010s surge (*surge!*) toward the 2020s, it can be argued that post-9/11 poetry is giving way to post-post-9/11 poetry as witness and trauma recede to acceptance and despair, or at least to the bitter acknowledgment that we have met the deteriorating national security state and it is us, perhaps not at the jackboot-and-truncheon stage of 1984's Oceania, but within the circumference of that Orwellian nightmare's ceaseless surveillance, warfare, and willful distortions of language. The rhymed tercets of "Today I'm Afraid..." succinctly map the strategy, one that governments have employed since the age of Plato: "In short, portray how we quest for the grail of stability / Through multiple touches, flickering, fast, and satiny / ... For at all costs, we must battle citizen apathy / With the fiery swirl and shimmer of the military."

Fried's "Words at War" provides an instructive example of how once purely functional or "nondescript bits of language" can be seduced or impressed into military service, like unwary 18-year olds in need of direction:

Everyday words, recruited from city and  
town,

trive to be all that they can be. Take *Corner*,  
who loitered with no intent at the intersection  
of surfaces and angles, occupying  
a small space with pure vacancy.

"Ennobled by / a mission" and "Honed by terror to an adrenalin edge," our once-innocent word "...morphs to a miracle / weapon, The Corner Shot ®, that kills at an angle / of 60-odd degrees, around a corner." Fried's insertion of a registered trademark symbol serves not only as a typographical quip but as an edged reminder of the symbiotic relationship between war and commerce, an alliance further satirized in the poem "Catwalk," which describes a surreal fashion show where strutting models display the "Toschino Full Metal Jacket with chain-trim boucle" and the "Zoe Laran Collection Armor Piercing line." Projecting the influence of military technology beyond even the realms of language and business, the poem "Moral Helmets" posits the invention of "a Moral Positioning System / (MPS) to align your firefight decisions / With four or five of the major world religions." As farfetched as that sounds, you have to wonder if DARPA engineers haven't already drafted the schematics.

With the commodification of militarism in everyday life and an increasing desire for technology to do our thinking and acting for us (e.g., Siri, self-parking cars) comes dehumanization, here paradoxically illustrated by its opposite: the

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humanization of corporations established by recent Supreme Court decisions. "Considered Opinion," a villanelle all the more acerbic for its graceful execution, chides the granting of Constitutional personhood to powerful corporate entities:

Corporations divorce, marry, have attitude,  
So why can't they pay to air their sentiments?  
The censorship we confront is vast in its reach.

That informative voices should not be subdued  
In an era of viral chatter, is common sense.  
Yet these sensible citizens are denied free  
speech.

After due consideration we must conclude,  
*Supra* and *Id*, no impediments and hence:  
The censorship we confront is vast in its reach  
When corporate citizens are denied free speech.

Implicit in Fried's poetry is the fear that humanity itself is in danger of becoming ambiguous, indeterminate ("our own image was mirrored deep in the formless"), our ostensible autonomy and free will dissipated by "bureaucracies of vapor." As if to underscore this grim prospect, *Interrogating Water* eschews the indulgence of the poetic *I*, a central Whitmanic or Dantean persona who guides us through a visionary or nightmarish path of self-recognition. Instead, Fried intercepts and repurposes the ubiquitous, untethered vocabulary and rhetoric of the world in which we actually live and lets it coalesce within our individual consciences, hoping to foster states of heightened attention and awareness. If we are destined for a zombie apocalypse, then those of us who occupy "the ironic zone" along with Philip Fried might as well recognize the warning signs while we can still read them.

Fred Muratori's most recent collection of poems, *A Civilization, is forthcoming from Dos Madres Press*. His previous collection, *The Spectra*, was issued by Stockport Flats Press in 2011. He is the Bibliographer for English-language Literature, Theater & Film at the Cornell University Library.