

The Double-take of Seeing: On Teju Cole's *Small Fates*

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Abstract

From February 2011 to February 2013 Teju Cole posted *Small Fates*, a series of tweets condensing news briefs from Nigerian papers. His main source of inspiration for this literary project was Félix Fénéon's *Novels in Three Lines*, a series of *faits divers* famous for their literary style published in 1906 in the French newspaper *Le Matin*. In his recommendations for the new millennium, Italo Calvino urges literature to "aim at the maximum concentration of poetry and of thought," considering the accelerated lifestyle this "postindustrial era of technology" should bring about. Teju Cole's choice of the *fait divers* as a model for *Small Fates* is particularly interesting in this regard. Just as Cole's microfictions, Fénéon's *Novels in Three Lines* are anchored in the cultural context of mass media and the feeling of acceleration and compression they occasion. As phrased by Luc Sante, Fénéon's writings are narratives "compressed into a single frame, like photographs." The literary effect of Cole's tweets likewise relies on condensation at the levels of length and narrative, which allows for the instant perception of the entire literary work through sight. Their textual density, however, slows down the rapid and distracted form of reading usually associated with digital media.

Résumé

Entre février 2011 et février 2013, Teju Cole a publié une série de tweets intitulée *Small Fates*, un condensé de nouvelles issues de journaux nigériens. Sa source d'inspiration pour ce projet littéraire a été les *Nouvelles en trois lignes* de Félix Fénéon, célèbre série de faits divers publiée en 1906 dans le journal français *Le Matin*. Dans ses recommandations pour le nouveau millénaire, Italo Calvino prédit que la littérature « devra miser sur la plus grande concentration possible de la poésie et de la pensée » étant donné le mode de vie de plus en plus congestionné à « l'ère technologique dite postindustrielle ». Le choix de Teju Cole du fait divers comme modèle pour *Small Fates* est particulièrement intéressant à cet égard. Tout comme les microfictions de Cole, les *Nouvelles en trois lignes* de Fénéon sont ancrées dans un contexte culturel influencé par les médias de masse et le sentiment d'accélération et de compression qu'ils occasionnent. Comme l'écrit Luc Sante, les nouvelles de Fénéon sont des récits « compressés en une seule image, comme des photographies ». L'effet littéraire des tweets de Cole repose pareillement sur la compression au niveau de la longueur textuelle et au niveau narratif, permettant ainsi la perception visuelle instantanée de l'œuvre dans son entièreté. Leur densité textuelle, cependant, ralentit la lecture rapide et distraite habituellement associée aux médias digitaux.

Keywords

Microfiction; Twitter; Fait Divers; Instantaneousness; Textual Density

Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole is more inclined to experiment on social media than most contemporary writers of a certain fame, who are often reluctant to use them or who limit their use to self-promotion. He has conducted several projects on Twitter, among which “Hafiz”¹ and *Seven Short Stories About Drones*. From February 2011 to February 2013 he posted his *Small Fates*, a series of a few thousand self-contained tweets condensing news briefs. The initial project was based exclusively on Nigerian news; he later added a subproject, *Small Fates 1912*, for which he looked for similar news in New York newspapers from 1912 and in Nigerian newspapers from 2012. Other notable literary projects published on Twitter in English, such as Rick Moody’s *Some Contemporary Characters* (2009), Jennifer Egan’s *Black Box* (2012) and David Mitchell’s *The Right Sort* (2014), revive the old practice of serialized fiction in the form of what we now call serialized twitterature (i.e. stories told over several consecutive tweets). For his *Small Fates* Cole chose the opposite approach. As he himself comments, each tweet “needs neither elaboration nor sequel” (“Small Fates”). This difference lies in the fact that *Small Fates* are not modelled on the genre of serialized fiction, of the novel or of the short story but on the peculiar genre of the *fait divers*, which carries a more condensed sense of duration.

Mostly associated with the francophone world, the *faits divers*, which can literally be translated as “miscellaneous facts,” are short narratives of unusual happenings, such as accidents or crimes, which concern the private lives of ordinary people (Dubied and Lits 54). As highlighted by Roland Barthes in “Structure of the Faits-Divers,” what differentiates the *faits divers* from regular news is their immanence. Each *fait divers* “contains all the knowledge in itself” and “refers formally to nothing but itself” (Barthes 187), while regular news require more context and information. They are “micro-narratives of everyday life” (M’sili 33) characterized by an absence of details and explanations. This absence creates a “relation of coincidence” which “implies a certain idea of Fate” (Barthes 193). “Small” in Cole’s title thus reflects both the content and the form of the writings: *Small Fates* deal with “minor” events, which bear an aura of fatality and chance, in the form of short narratives no longer than 140 characters.

In his 1985 recommendations for the new millennium, considering the accelerated lifestyle the “postindustrial era of technology” should bring about, Italo Calvino urges literature to “aim at the maximum concentration of poetry and of thought” (51). Teju Cole’s choice of the *fait divers* as a model for *Small Fates* is particularly interesting in this regard. Cole’s main source of inspiration for *Small Fates* was Félix Fénéon’s *Novels in Three Lines*, first published in 1906, with which he became acquainted through Luc Sante’s 2007 translation. The cultural context of digital mass communication media and the feeling of acceleration and compression they occasion, in which *Small Fates* are anchored, can be paralleled to the one in which the *faits divers* have been popularized. Cole’s project stems from his interest in the daily life of the city of Lagos and it is in the newspapers’ crime sections that he found “a different quality of everyday life” (Cole, “Small Fates”). The *fait divers* seems particularly well-suited for this project because the history of the genre is intertwined with urban environments and the rapid lifestyle and the anonymity the city provides.

When considering Cole’s other writings, it becomes obvious how much his work is connected to the urban environment: the main character of *Open City* (2011), for example, roams the streets of New York and Brussels, while his latest book at the time of writing, *Blind Spot* (2017), collects of juxtapositions of short essays and photographs, each unit bearing the name of a place, usually a city, for a title. In his postscript to this travelogue

1 “Hafiz” is available on this webpage: <https://twitter.com/tejucole/timelines/437242785591078912>

of sorts, Cole comments that it can be read as “the fourth in a quartet of books about the limits of vision” (325). In fact, Cole’s whole oeuvre so far can be analyzed as a continuous rumination about perception at large in the context of the twenty-first century, a distinctly “connected” period (both through digital and transportation technologies). As has been recently noted by a critic, Teju Cole’s “thinking exists between media, suited to our age of interdisciplinary hybridity” (Liberty).

In an essay about Gueorui Pinkhassov’s Instagram account, Cole quotes Robert Frank: “When people look at my pictures I want them to feel the way they do when they want to read a line of a poem twice” and speculates that the same “poetic notion of photography” which “foster[s] the double-take of seeing” is expressed in Pinkhassov’s work (*Known and Strange Things* 156). It seems to me that a similar tension between rapid perception and prolonged attentiveness is at work in *Small Fates*. Just as Fénéon’s *faits divers*, *Small Fates*’ extremely brief narratives are well-suited for the distracted forms of reading encouraged by Twitter (Hayles 63). However, when Cole chose to post his *Small Fates* on Twitter it was to offer its users textual content very different from what they usually see in their feed (“Teju Cole on the ‘Empathy Gap’”). In a Twitter feed showing news reports and cat videos, tweets such as these would appear:



Apart from the fact that they are decontextualized and self-contained, their difference from other content published on Twitter lies in their style and in their textual density, which triggers mental or actual rereadings. Even though the effect of *Small Fates* relies on the possibility of apprehending the entire work instantly through sight due to the brevity imposed by Twitter, their “concentration” or intensity slows down the rapid reading process usually associated with the social medium and the lack of attention it entails.

Fénéon’s Telegraphic Literature

The brief narrative form of the *fait divers* became particularly widespread in the French-speaking press from the second half of the nineteenth century on. This popularity resulted from the concurrent phenomena

of urbanization, technological advances and extensive mechanization, which provoked numerous accidents (Hamon 8). Introduced at that period, the telegraph allowed information to circulate almost instantaneously for the first time in history. The rapid transmission of information through the telegraph and the telephone, reinforced by the daily periodicity of the newspaper, created a faster relation to the news (Schuh 76). Consumed on a massive scale from the nineteenth century on, mostly by urbanites, the daily newspaper needed to create a feeling of constant change to justify its quotidian consumption (Luhmann 21-22), which, incidentally, effected a faster way of reading.

Fénéon's short briefs (1,220 in total) were published anonymously from May to December 1906 in the section entitled "Nouvelles en trois lignes" of the French newspaper *Le Matin*. This newspaper, the first issue of which came out on 26 February 1884, was modelled on *The Morning News*, a Parisian newspaper published in English. The originality of these two papers, both of which were launched by an American businessman and editor, Samuel S. Chamberlain, lay in the fact that the bulk of their information came through the telegraph, which was introduced in France in the 1870's (Bellanger 309). *Le Matin*, more than any Parisian newspaper in French at the time, took advantage of this new technology (Bertrand 108) and proclaimed itself the "newspaper of telegraphic information, universal and true" ("Au lecteur"). The words "Le Matin" of its title, surrounded on each side by drawings of telegraph poles and attached to drawings of telegraph cables, seemed to come directly through the wires. Its full title read: *Le Matin: derniers télégrammes de la nuit* ("Le Matin: the latest night telegrams").

Since only one message at a time could be transmitted through a telegraph line, the efficiency of telegraphic communication relied on the length of the transmission; moreover, telegraphic companies charged for their service by the number of words (Hochfelder 74). Journalists therefore reported to their newspapers with the fewest possible words, which altered the processes of gathering and presenting news and led to the development of a telegraphic style, characterized by brevity. *Le Matin* thus published short articles only, among which Fénéon's *faits divers*, which could not exceed 135 typographic signs (Grojnowski 148). Cole published his *Small Fates* on Twitter, an online platform primarily used for sharing news and opinions, by condensing Nigerian newspaper articles and briefs into tweets. Twitter is a platform originally defined by its 140-character limitation. This constraint is historically related to the fact that Twitter was created to enable groups of people to communicate efficiently via SMS. 160 characters was the SMS carrier limit and the founders wanted to leave 20 characters for the username (Panders). Although Twitter has recently doubled the number of characters allowed, many users stick to the previous constraint, which shows how much the 140-character limitation is engrained in the identity of this social medium.

Fénéon's *Novels in Three Lines* and Cole's *Small Fates* have to comply with the formal constraint of brevity imposed by the context of their publication and related to efficient communication through a new technology. If, as famously put by Marshall McLuhan, "the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (8), then the similarity between the message of the telegraph and of the contemporary digital mass media, including social media such as Twitter, is manifest. Neil Postman's remark that the telegraph "moved history into the background and amplified the instant and simultaneous present" (71) deeply resonates with the current digital age.

In “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin differentiates the ephemeral nature of information from the longevity of literature:

The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time (90).

Following this distinction, *Novels in Three Lines* and *Small Fates* occupy an ambiguous position. In Fénéon’s and Cole’s hands, each *fait divers* becomes a hybrid form, at once information and story. Each piece constitutes an ephemeral work of literature that is replaced daily in the case of Fénéon’s *Novels in Three Lines* and is even more rapidly supplanted by new posts in Cole’s followers’ Twitter feeds in the case of *Small Fates*. As phrased by Julian Barnes, just as all *faits divers* Fénéon’s news briefs were “read for a quick smile or breath-intake or head-shake, and then forgotten.” However, it is because of their characteristic style that Fénéon’s *Nouvelles en trois lignes* have been deemed worthy of being saved from falling into oblivion by the French writer and literary critic Jean Paulhan, who included them in *Oeuvres*, a posthumous collection of Fénéon’s works published in 1948. Cole’s *Small Fates* are more easily accessible through a similar phenomenon of collection and re-publishing by readers and via online articles.² They are difficult to retrieve directly from Twitter because Cole has not used a hashtag to identify these publications, thus contributing to their ephemeral nature.

Despite the constraint of journalistic writing, Fénéon managed to infuse his *faits divers*, published in a newspaper whose editors explicitly decided to exclude fiction, more particularly the serialized novel (“Au lecteur”), at its heyday at the time, with literariness. He told stories under the generic constraint of the *fait divers*, making them an exception rather than the rule for the genre. The French word “nouvelle” in the original title means both “news” and “short story.” It is to reflect the double meaning the *faits divers* takes in Fénéon’s hands that Luc Sante chose to translate the title “Nouvelles en trois lignes” as “Novels in Three Lines” (vii). Many of Fénéon’s *faits divers* were most likely the product of his imagination as the rapid delivery that was required by the periodicity of the newspaper was incompatible with the time-consuming labor of collecting information and it was customary to invent *faits divers* to meet a deadline at the time (Dubied and Lits 21). Cole wished to explore this ambiguity in his *Small Fates*: “I like to flirt with straight reportage, or the appearance of straight reportage. Each tells a truth, a whole truth, but never the whole truth (but this is true of all storytelling)” (“Small Fates”).

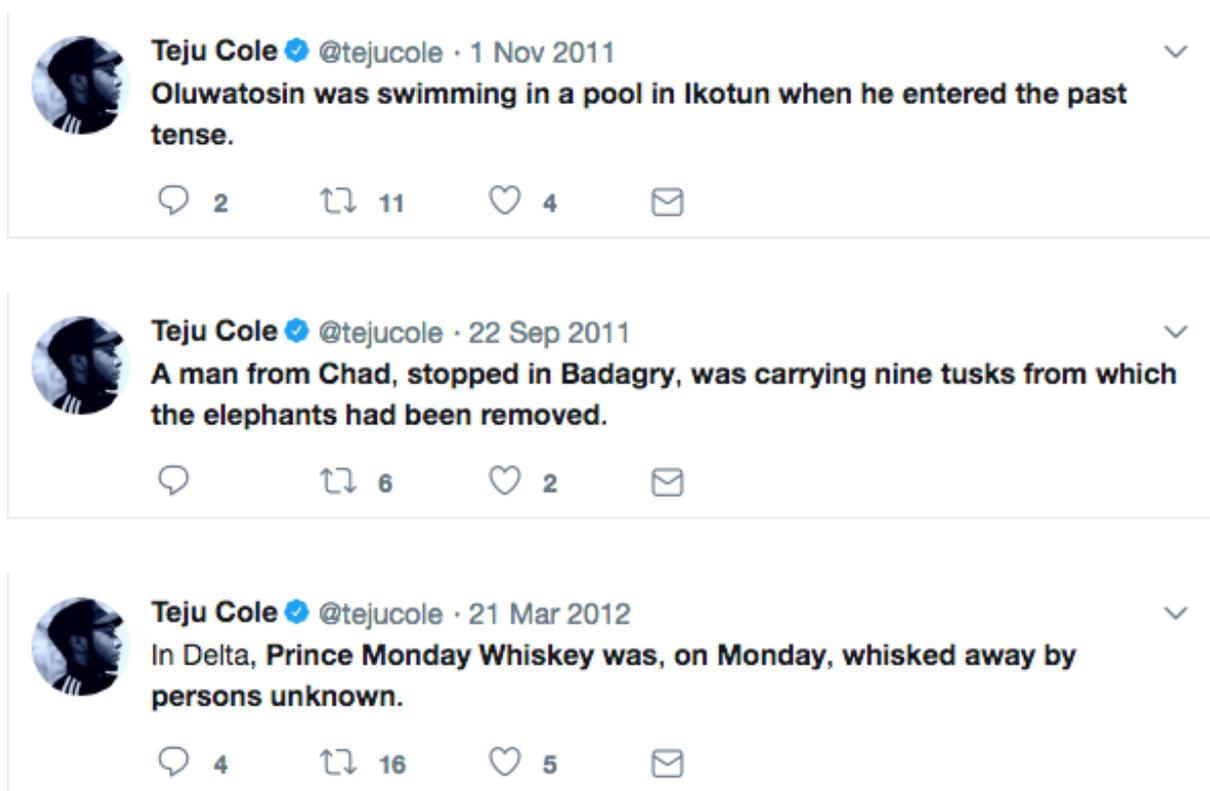
Just as Fénéon’s *faits divers*, Cole’s briefs are peppered with irony and dark humor and provide a subjective perspective on the world. His self-contained descriptions of thefts, murders, rapes and private catastrophes undoubtedly have a political resonance. They seek to depict the current situation in Nigeria and to “reveal

² See Cole, Teju. “‘I Don’t Normally Do This Kind of Thing’: 45 Small Fates.” *The New Inquiry*, 13 Aug. 2013, <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/i-dont-normally-do-this-kind-of-thing-45-small-fates/>; Pearce, Matt. “Death by Twitter.” *The New Inquiry*, 14 Oct. 2011, <https://thenewinquiry.com/death-by-twitter/>; Biblioklept. “Read 45 Small Fates from Teju Cole.” Biblioklept, 13 Aug. 2013, <https://biblioklept.org/2013/08/13/read-45-small-fates-from-teju-cole/>. *Small Fates 1912* have reappeared in *Tales of Two Cities: The Best and Worst of Times in Today’s New York*, a 2015 anthology of contemporary writing on New York City.

a whole world of ongoing human experience that is often ignored or oversimplified” (Cole “Small Fates”). Contrary to Fénéon, however, Cole is not constrained to stick to journalistic reportage and can take more stylistic freedom. It is to highlight this difference that he chose to name his series “Small Fates” rather than *faits divers* (“Small Fates”). He sometimes uses techniques such as repetition and the format of the definition to create narratives which hardly resemble the traditional *faits divers* but constitute minimal narratives:



He also regularly engages in word play to create witty narratives:



Closer to the constrained writing of poetry (in prose) than to journalistic reports, *Small Fates* are dense narratives which can be rapidly perceived but cannot be understood at once.

When the Verbal Neighbors the Visual

Short prose pieces about urban life written by contemporaries of Fénéon have recently been analyzed under the concept of “metropolitan miniatures” by Andreas Huyssen. Published in “large urban newspapers and magazines serving a rushed and distracted readership” and deliberately short, metropolitan miniatures, first practiced by Charles Baudelaire in his *Le Spleen de Paris: Petits poèmes en prose*, sought to express the feeling of acceleration and compression that urban existence occasioned (3). “Metropolitan miniatures” strived to convey visual perceptions of urban life and to assert the aesthetic specificity of literary language in the context of the emerging new media of photography and film (5). At the same period, Ezra Pound articulated the central principle of Imagism around the concept of “the image,” i.e. “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (356), thereby advocating for an economy of expression. Referring both to visual and verbal arts, the image is a concept that, as Jane Goldman has remarked, “collapses strict generic categorization, and ushers in a period of exploding old genres colliding with new” (21). Short forms have existed for centuries, in the form of the aphorism or the epigraph, but it would seem that the new media ecology and the rapid experience of perception it offered has influenced their popularity in Modernism.

Short forms’ privileged relation to visual means of expression was already observed in the eighteenth century and is mentioned in Lessing’s *Laocoön*. The experience of verbal arts, he remarked, is close to the experience of visual arts when the text is so brief that it can be perceived all at once (93). The names chosen to designate short writings (“sketch,” “snapshot” and “flash fiction”) can also be considered as indicative of short forms’ affinity with visual arts (Botha 215). This resemblance lies in the fact that in literature length and temporality are strongly intertwined, or as put by Gérard Genette:

The temporality of written narrative is to some extent conditional or instrumental; produced in time, like everything else, written narrative exists in space and as space, and the time needed for “consuming” it is the time needed for crossing or traversing it, like a road or a field. The narrative text, like every other text, has no other temporality than what it borrows, metonymically, from its own reading (34).

Since they differ in time needed to decipher them, short texts and long texts offer different experiences of reading. In a very brief text, cohesion (that is, “all factors leading to the perception of textual unity and its particular significance”) is achieved through immediate sensory perception because of the little space the text occupies; in a lengthy text, on the other hand, cohesion is inferred progressively (Zumthor 77). At the beginning of the twentieth century, this visual quality of brief texts was exploited to create an aesthetic of instantaneousness in literature by Apollinaire, Cendrars and the Futurists, for instance.

In his introduction to his translation, Luc Sante describes Fénéon’s writings as narratives “compressed into a single frame, like photographs” (vii). It is tempting to surmise that this quality of Fénéon’s writings attracted Teju Cole, who is also a photographer, has written extensively on photography³ and who considers looking at other people’s photographs as “reading others’ images” (*Known and Strange Things* 156).

Of course, there is no such thing as instant perception whether it is perceived by the human senses or by

³ See, for example, his column in *The New York Times Magazine*.

the lens of a camera. As put by Cole in an essay from *Known and Strange Things*: “There are no instantaneous photographs: each must be exposed for a length of time, no matter how brief: in this sense, every photograph is a time-lapse image, and photography is necessarily an archival art” (165). However, Cole’s *Small Fates* carry an indubitable feeling of compression (or of near-instantaneousness). This effect is in fact a matter of scale. “Reduction and elaboration,” Richard Kostelanetz remarked, “though superficially opposite, are similar in one respect: Both techniques attempt to transcend the range of time/space scales of traditional art, thereby making the reader more aware of perceptual duration” (18). Cole’s brief texts “transcend the range of time/space scales” of the traditional short story by being significantly shorter than the (current) norm. They can thus be analyzed as small-scale (or miniature) forms of writing.

Just as for the aesthetic of instantaneousness, miniature art’s aesthetic effect strongly relies on sight:

Compression is possible only where perception is immediate or nearly so. The appreciation of form through touch likewise involves a time factor. As far as other senses are concerned, those of taste and smell have never been sufficiently developed in man to admit of pointed brevity. At best, the emotive stimulus of taste and smell is gained by association. No, the happy hunting ground for *multum in parvo* is through the eye and mind, among mathematical formulae and symbols, in the concise and epigrammatic forms of poetry, and in the miniature forms of visual art (Zigrosser 11-12).

In literature, diminishments of scale can take the form of micrographia (miniature books and minute writing), analyzed by Stewart (37-44), but also of microfiction through extreme brevity, often associated with wit and wisdom (Grant). Smallness can demonstrate great mastery for, as highlighted by Stewart, “while the materiality of the product is diminished, the labor involved multiplies, and so does the significance of the total object” (38). Therefore, brevity is often arduous to achieve. It is the customers’ frustration and the stagnation in number of users that has recently prompted Twitter to expand the length limit to 280 characters (Pardes). It is thus safe to say that it takes a longer time to write *Small Fates* than to perceive them. As Cole explains in a series of tweets from January 2013 revealing his writing process, the composition of each tweet took about 15 minutes on average and 30 minutes at most⁴.

Textual shortness in itself is insufficient to create an aesthetic of the miniature in literature, which requires closure and self-containment. By definition, a *fait divers* is a compact, immanent narrative that concentrates on one event: “everything is given within the fait-divers; its circumstances, its causes, its past, its outcome; without duration and without context, it constitutes an immediate, total being which refers, formally at least, to nothing implicit” (Barthes 186-187). In addition to a shift in scale and to self-containment, the aesthetic of the miniature requires a particular internal organization of the literary work, or as highlighted by Marc Botha: “In successful microfiction *scale* and *intensity* operate in tandem: as the scale of the work decreases, so its intensity increases, reflecting the aesthetic logic of the aesthetic maxim, *multum in parvo*, or *more in less*” (209, his italics). In the last part of my article, I examine the internal organization of *Small Fates* and how they

4 @tejucole. “The last fate (snake in an apartment) went through 8 drafts and took about 15 minutes. That’s about average for me.” Twitter, 8 Jan. 2013, <https://twitter.com/tejucole/status/288711416767184896> and @tejucole. “But often I’ll start with one concept and completely change it halfway through. Some fates go to 20 drafts. The longest took 30 minutes.” Twitter, 8 Jan. 2013, <https://twitter.com/tejucole/status/288712345000226818>

foster a double-take of seeing.

Brief but Slow

In *Trop dire ou trop peu*, Judith Schlanger relies on McLuhan's distinction between hot and cold media for her reflection on literary density, ideal length and its effects on the reader. Hot media give too much information and therefore require less participation from the audience, while cold media are "high in participation or completion by the audience" because the little information given has to be filled in (McLuhan 23). Following Schlanger's idea, Cole's *Small Fates* can be described as "cold writing." As previously mentioned, the genre of the *faits divers* concentrates on one particular event and is incompatible with the description of events extending in time. There is an intimate relationship between narrative speed and narrative gaps. In order to create a faster narrative progression, some information has to be left out, which results in a dense but economic narrative. The rapid narrative rhythm of *Small Fates*, therefore, often accounts for their density:



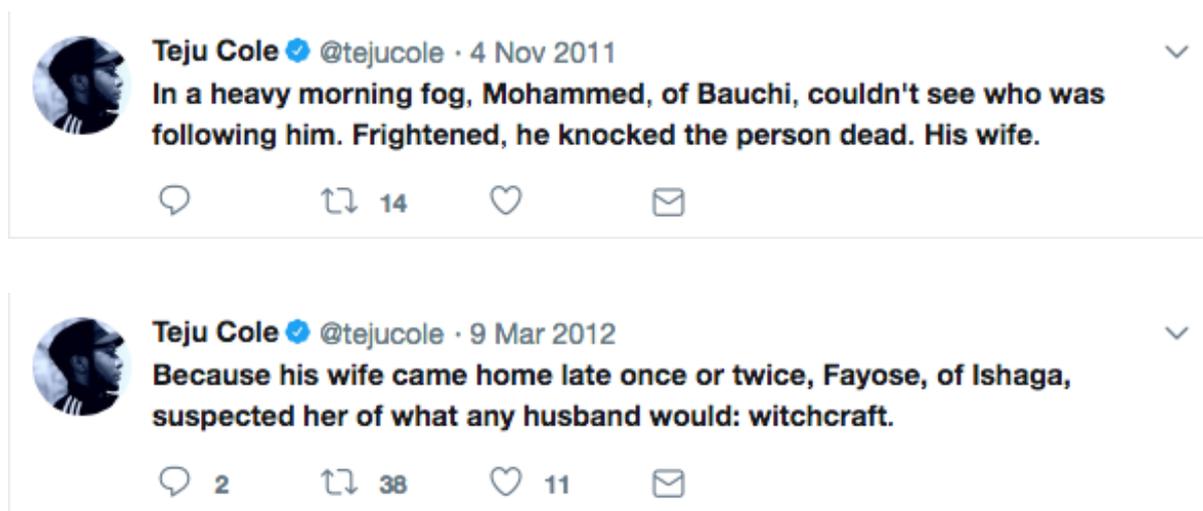
The "cold" nature of *Small Fates* is sometimes the result of incompleteness or ellipsis, "the deft excision of what the reader expects, but does not need, to be told" (Kelly 240). Consider the following "small fates," for instance:



From the information given in these tweets and although this is not explicitly expressed, most readers would straightforwardly conclude that the 75-year-old pilgrim fell from the building in Mecca and that Alawiye has

been killed by the policeman. In each case, the omitted information must be mentally filled in by the reader. The process of completion when reading “cold writing” requires a mental or an actual rereading of the micronarrative. Once the whole tweet is perceived through the eye, the reader must, if s/he wishes to understand it, go through the tweet again to search for the unsaid and fill in the necessary but absent information. This laconic quality of the *faits divers* has been exploited in francophone literature and inspired writers such as Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*), J.M.G. Le Clézio (*La ronde et autres faits divers*), or, more recently, Ivan Jablonka (*Laëtitia ou la fin des hommes*) to dilate a *fait divers* into a novel.

In addition to word play and ellipsis, Teju Cole sometimes uses the narrative device of surprise endings:



The largest part of these *faits divers* has an expositional function as defined by Meir Sternberg: it sets the scene and provides the necessary information for the understanding of what follows. Their endings produce an effect of surprise to create irony in the first case, and humor in the second. In both examples, important information (the fact that Mohammed knocked his wife instead of an assailant and that what the husband suspected his wife of is witchcraft) is withheld until the end of the tweet. These surprises are crucial for the narrative since they constitute the point of the *fait divers* and determine its interest or tellability, i.e. the narrative’s worth of being reported.

Along with suspense and curiosity, surprise has been put forward by Sternberg as one of the strategies for sustaining the reader’s interest in the narrative. Since the efficiency of surprise depends on the sudden disclosure of information, the temporal dynamic of surprise is punctual rather than durational (Baroni 296). It is no wonder then that surprise endings are particularly efficient in microfiction, since it “is so rapidly read that the reader doesn’t have time to react upon and anticipate the ending before it occurs, but so easily grasped that the reader can instantly ‘reread’ the entire story in a flash once the ending is perceived” (Nelles 97). Surprise endings have a retrospective function: they provoke a shift in the understanding of the narrative and induce a reconfiguration of the story as a whole (which Sternberg calls the dynamics of recognition). It is thus necessary for the reader to go back to the beginning of the tweet containing the surprise ending and practice an actual or a mental rereading of the narrative.

Conclusion

Very short fiction, also called “microfiction,” “flash fiction” or “quick fiction,” has recently regained in popularity. It is often said to be particularly well-suited for our accelerated digital age and particularly fitted for our short attention spans. Indeed, microfiction is rapidly consumed and characterised by a “focus on the *time of the experience of the text*,” i.e. a quick experience of reading (Kelly 240, his emphasis). Each of Cole’s *Small Fates* can be said to be characterized by speed at the levels of reading time, story time and narrative time as they require little time to be read, focus on one event, and are narratively fast. Paradoxically, the speed of *Small Fates* slows down their understanding. The “cold” or laconic nature and the surprise endings of *Small Fates* often trigger a rereading (or several rereadings, depending on their complexity). Once the whole tweet is perceived through the eye, the density of the prose makes it necessary to go through the tweet again to search for the unsaid or to reconfigure the narrative in order to understand it. These rereadings are catalyzed by the shortness of the writings, as the reader can rapidly reread the whole tweet. *Small Fates* therefore slow down the rapid reading process, which is usually associated with our accelerated age and the lack of attention this acceleration entails. As anticipated by Italo Calvino, digital media call for a simultaneous need for acceleration and intensification. In this sense, Cole’s *Small Fates*, modelled on Fénéon’s *faits divers*, is a literary project particularly well-fitted for the digital age. As Nicholas Royle remarks, quick fiction is not only about speed, but also “about that slowing down of perception that Viktor Shklovsky associated with the defamiliarizing power of art” (29). Like the miniature art of painting, Cole’s microfiction requires craft from the writer and attentiveness from the reader to be fully understood.

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Bio

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