

How Do I Love Thee? Count 140 Characters

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As literary coincidences go, it might not carry quite the same cosmic portent as Halley's Comet appearing in the month of Mark Twain's birth. But Monday happens to be both World Poetry Day and the fifth anniversary of the moment when a young American software designer named Jack Dorsey sent out to the world the first message using the service that soon became known as Twitter.

The ambrosial stuff of poesy it was not, except maybe to Dilbert fans: "inviting coworkers."

But the confluence of these two events — both having to do with humanity's deep and sometimes uncontrollable need to communicate — is occasioning a fresh outpouring of opinion about the future of Twitter as a vehicle for real creativity, not just for entertaining train wrecks like Charlie Sheen's.

For much of Twitter's life, the idea that its 140-character stricture could be a crucible for a new kind of ambitious writing has been, more than anything else, a punch line. The 2009 publication of "Twitterature" — a book in which 80 works of Western literature are boiled down into Twitter messages ("Laertes is unhappy that I killed his father and sister. What a drama queen! Oh well, fight this evening.") — didn't help matters.

But there's evidence that the literary flowering of Twitter may actually be taking place. The Twitter haiku movement — "twaiku" to its initiates — is well under way. Science fiction and mystery enthusiasts especially have gravitated to its communal immediacy. And even litterateurs, with a capital L, seem to be warming to it.

For two years, John Wray, the author of the well-regarded novel "Lowboy," has been spinning out a Twitter story based on a character named Citizen that he cut from the novel, a contemporary version of the serialization that Dickens and other fiction writers once enjoyed.

"I don't view the constraints of the format as in any way necessarily precluding literary quality," he said. "It's just a different form. And it's still early days, so people are still really trying to figure out how to communicate with it, beyond just reporting that their Cheerios are soggy." (Mr. Wray's breakfast-food posts are, at the very least, far funnier than the usual kind: "Citizen opened the book. Inside, he found the purpose of existence expressed logarithmically. From what he could tell, it involved toast.")

The linguist Ben Zimmer said he thought the growing popularity of the service as a creative outlet could be ascribed to the same "impulse that goes into writing a sonnet, of accepting those kind of limits." But he admitted that his favorite Twitter literature in

recent weeks has not been exactly Shakespearean: the wildly profane and popular Twitter musings that purported to be by the Chicago mayor-elect, Rahm Emanuel, but whose real author was recently revealed to be the rock journalist Dan Sinker.

“The deeper you got into it,” Mr. Zimmer said, “the more novelistic it became, and it was really compelling. It’s almost impossible to see it working in a traditional novel format. But as a Twitter creation it was hilarious, and worth every word.”

Calling all bards! Week in Review asked four poets each to write a poem within Twitter’s text limit of 140 characters — title and author name not included. Share your own verse on Twitter using the hash tag #poetweet.