

The Literary Facebook: Notes on the Possibilities of Literature in Internet Social Networking

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Can social networking be a source of literature? This article posits that there is a possibility of Facebook and Twitter becoming a medium for literary expression. While many contemporary Filipino writers consider time spent on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to be “a waste of time,” a growing number of writers have begun looking at the possibilities of the “status update” as a form of literature, akin to the haiku, that is very much a form dictated by the Internet age.

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While I was grappling for things to say in my presentation on Facebook and what it means for literature in general and writing in particular for Taboan 2010—The Second Philippine International Writers Festival in Cebu City, Philippines, the Palanca-winning playwright Glenn Sevilla Mas told me that I was “the poster boy” of my generation: my life was an open book on Facebook by choice, the paragon of the Socratic notion of “the examined life” in the Internet Age. In confession, I am what you would call a Facebook mainliner, a heavy user, an addict—something that nevertheless has affected my literary existence in more positive ways than anything else.

Almost every day, the first thing I do in the morning is to check my Facebook account. On Facebook, I can do several things that makes this online site quite unique for the way it conveniently puts together

in one basket the varieties of Internet existence: check my email, check my calendar for upcoming events to attend, give birthday shout-outs to friends, chat, blog, upload pictures to my online albums, check the links to videos and Internet articles shared by friends, and get acquainted with the relatively interesting minutiae in the lives of linked friends via their notes, photos, and little missives on what they're doing which we call on Facebook as "status updates." In the course of a typical day, I would probably post around twenty of my own status updates, which are mostly variations of little observations, information about things we are currently doing, rants, witticisms, and quotations from books or movies or songs. This does not include the replies to subsequent comments done by Facebook friends.

So, yes, Glenn is right. I *am* the poster boy of my generation: I live on Facebook, and Facebook, for the most part, is my life under an Internet microscope. So much so that even my offline dramas eventually find their way in, and are eventually magnified to the rest of the world like an online equivalent of a *teleserye*. I once got famously dumped in Facebook—and my Facebook friends got wind of it first at the moment the "relationship status" of my partner of five years changed from "In a Relationship" to "Single." I remember that day too well: I got a barrage of text messages from everywhere, even from Spain, Australia, and the United States, asking me if I was okay. I was walking down the road headed somewhere, and the messages at first confounded me—until it dawned on me: something was happening on my Facebook page, and so I caught a quick tricycle trip home to find out that, yes, I was suddenly single.

This drama reminds me of a quip: nothing is ever official about our lives these days, unless it is announced on Facebook. I once told a friend that if somebody would just bother to put together all my status updates, that would virtually constitute my autobiography.

I must be painting a horrid picture now of Facebook, especially for those of you who are quite concerned about the intrusions to individual privacy this website seems bent on warping or destroying. Believe me, I too am concerned about that—and there are privacy settings in Facebook that actually allow you to filter who views specific status updates or incriminating pictures and what-not, away from the prying or disapproving eyes of stalkers and ex-lovers and bosses and HRD heads.

But I must admit there is now a significant shift occurring in the way my generation views the blurring of the lines between the private and the public. Somebody once called my generation as the

Confessional Generation, taught in the ways of public dramas by Oprah Winfrey and Jerry Springer and Kris Aquino. These days, there are things that we want to say where we never hesitate to share in a public space like Facebook. A decade ago the very same idea would probably have us recoiling from the sheer horror of oversharing—oversharing information, even such simple, mundane, or useless things such as, “Ian is eating eggs and bacon for breakfast.”

But the most fascinating thing you soon find is that, contrary to expectations, most people actually respond to most of the “mundane things” reported in status updates, even the eggs and bacon one had for breakfast. Adam N. Noinson, in “Looking At, Looking Up or Keeping Up with People?: Motives and Use of Facebook” (2008) in the published proceedings of the *26th Annual SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* identified seven unique uses and gratifications in people’s utility of status updates, which included social connection, shared identities, content, social investigation, social network surfing and status updating.

What is Facebook, and how has it exactly enthralled most of the online world? Simply put, Facebook is a social networking Internet site—and for the uninitiated, that simply means it allows you to have a personal page crammed with information about you that you want to share ostensibly with the world. This page is linked in intricate ways to the personal pages of other people who happen to be your friends or acquaintances of varying degrees. It is a virtual community where things happen—conversation and connection foremost among them.

Statistics show there are millions of people now engaged in Facebook. Facebook released statistics for 2010 which tells us that there are now more than 400 million active users of the social network worldwide, more than 35 million of which update their status every day, contributing to more than 60 million status updates total each day. While the United States leads the pack with the most users, the Philippines ranks eighth with 10,647,100 users as of last March. (The only other countries in Asia in the list include Indonesia at third and Turkey at fourth.) In Internet parlance, that’s a lot of captured eyeballs.

Imagine then the possible ways Facebook has had impact on the various aspects of the writer’s life, as well as his or her readers.

I turned to several Filipino writers who happen to be active users of Facebook and emailed them—through Facebook—two questions: [1] How do you use Facebook as a writer? [2] What do you think Facebook mean for readers?

Quite a few replied to my query. The poet Cesar Ruiz Aquino immediately replied with the kind of literary teasing typical of his writings: “Seeeeeeeecret! It means E.T.-real reality. Look in Facebook & you may see/ Someone who’s camera-ready-rie,” while the poet Lawrewnce Ypil wrote: “I don’t really think Facebook has changed or affected the way I write.”

The rest of the responses give the full spectrum of the writerly examination of how social networking has, in one way or other, affected the literary life of the Philippine writer.

CRISTINA PANTOJA HIDALGO, *fictionist and essayist*: I can only speak for myself. How do I use Facebook as a writer? [1] I post Notes which are really new short and not-so-short essays of mine, and which really should go into a blog I thought I’d begin keeping, but have never gotten around to; [2] I post announcements about new books (both my own and those of other writers) or old books I’ve rediscovered; or articles I find interesting; [3] I read other writers’ notes which are usually essays too, or poems, even stories—mainly these are writers who are my personal friends, or writers whose work I already know and am interested in. What does Facebook mean for readers? I’m sure the answer will depend on the reader’s age, profession/occupation, cultural background, etc. For me it is a quick, easy way to access interesting material (both international and national) that would take too long to find and which I don’t have the time or energy to look for myself; and a fun way to keep in touch with other writers—both friends and strangers—and find out what they’re doing. I imagine that one source of satisfaction for many readers is the opportunity Facebook affords for instant response, interaction, etc.

STAN GERONIMO, *fictionist*: “I don’t expect Facebook to improve my writing. But it does have a supplementary function. It wires you to a whole network of writers in the literary scene. It has never been easier to converse with authors you’ve only seen in anthologies before. This doesn’t directly aid our craft, but writing is not just about skill, it is also about contacts and having a wide network of editors, mentors, resource speakers, publishers, and professors who contribute to our work.”

YVETTE TAN, *fictionist*: “I mainly use Facebook to stay in touch with friends but I find that it’s useful for work as well, since I’ve scheduled interviews and also have been contacted for them via Facebook.

Depending on how a writer uses it, Facebook can give readers a different insight on the writer—this time as a real person instead of a blank entity that wrote the words on a book’s page.”

ADAM DAVID, *fictionist and graphic artist*: “I don’t really use Fezboobs as a writer like how [poet] Angelo Suarez—theoretical ponderings and maybe conversation—and [fictionists] Iwa Wilwayco/U Eliserio—networking drive to reap enough peeps for financial mileage to get books printed—use it. It DEFINITELY has a use, mainly as a networking tool, but it requires a certain blurring of the writing with the selling-of-the-writing that I’m not quite ready for just yet. I’m actually still very allergic to that notion as it fosters that particular malignant malaise we call ‘the Cult of Personality.’ Fezboobs has more meaning for me as a reader, *mos def*, especially with the various Fan Pages available for subscription, not to mention the actual writers/artists that you can maybe connect to as a Friend. The things I get out of these networking efforts are the regular updates that are pertinent to their production, and also the fact that I get to indulge on my own weakness for celebrity culture and our addiction to the blurring of their public and private personas with my own seemingly little less-than-important life narrative.”

FELISA H. BATACAN, *fictionist*: “If I really think about it, it’s useful for someone based overseas like myself to keep track of what’s happening in the Philippine literary scene. For example, when someone launches a new book or project, or when there’s a call for submissions, etc. It’s always nice to see what people are doing, especially those you know or admire. And it’s also great when you realize someone shares your interests—for example I just reconnected with an old schoolmate who also makes jewelry. We’ve been discussing techniques via e-mail and that has been a learning experience for both of us. Some might suggest it helps to build community among writers, although I suppose I’m not around the site enough to get a solid sense of that. As both a writer and a reader, it’s also useful from time to time to see what other people are reading, watching, listening to—or eating! I’ve gotten the occasional great book, film, music or restaurant tip this way. Usually they’re things I wouldn’t normally choose to check out on my own. But because I respect a certain friend’s judgment, I’ll do so and find something new (to me, anyway) and it turns out to be fantastic.”

SUSAN LARA, *fictionist*: “I go to Facebook the way I’d go to a coffee

shop where I'm likely to meet friends, particularly friends who write and love to read. I'd like to know what they're working on now, what they're reading, what they think of a new book or movie, or simply how they're doing. It's an easy way to keep in touch and catch up with friends. I love reading poems posted by friends, offering my two cents worth on them, and sharing essays, poems, links to reviews, etc."

ROLANDO TOLENTINO, *fictionist*: "I use it as a repository of columns, additional readership, and a virtual formation of community of readers and authors. By the very characteristics of Facebook, it is a social networking site—to read up on authors and friends, their personal statements, etc. which they might not have the chance to do with traditional media, or even just the limits of physical time and space."

CARLJOE JAVIER, *fictionist*: "As a writer, I have been corresponding with other writers and editors, building a base, and really seeing what other people are thinking based on the kind of material that they post on Facebook. There are a lot of brilliant ideas that can be found in Facebook Notes, and ideas that can inspire one to write. What does Facebook mean for readers? There are a lot of things, like finding things online, via being fans or other things, that they would not have been able to find via traditional marketing and the shelves of bricks and mortars stories. Further, based on personal experience, it's a great way for readers to connect with writers. It has happened on several occasions that people who have read my book have looked me up on Facebook and added me as a friend. They get to interact with writers, ask questions, keep updated (like in Twitter) with the writer's projects. There are a lot of fun dynamics to be observed in Facebook. I think that readers get the better of it because writers, seeing the lack of marketing on the part of a lot of publishers, turn to the net and utilize things like Facebook fan pages and the like."

GIBBS CADIZ, *critic*: "I use Facebook mainly as an extension platform for my blog/writing. It widens readership, contributes to online traffic and jumpstarts discussions/feedback that are often distinct from what the posts normally generate in my blog (no anonymous comments on Facebook, after all—so the tone/flavor are different, at the very least). Other than that, I'm not much of a Facebook user. I'm unable even to update my shout-outs for days/weeks on end."

VISCONDE CARLO VERGARA, *graphic novelist*: “Honestly, I haven’t paid much attention to the possibilities of Facebook as a creator because, honestly, I’ve not been very comfortable with hard-sell, which is what I imagine other creators engage in. It’s only recently, when I created fan pages for Zaturannah and Queen Femina, that I’ve been able to provide a venue where I can communicate to my readers, albeit assuming the personas of these characters. If you check the fan pages of these two characters, the fans are more active in making casual comments, a kind of interaction I rarely get in my own profile page. So, in that sense, I’ve been using Facebook as a stethoscope. What is the collective pulse of my readers? From time to time, though, I do promote a few things through my status updates. I rarely use the Notes feature, which could have been a great alternative to my personal blog. But I still prefer my blog when posting lengthy pieces.”

MERLIE ALUNAN, *poet*: “I’ve not thought too much about Facebook and writers. I imagine it’s the same way other folks, say salesmen, use it, a way to get in touch, a way to bother each other, or help, or, as you and I have been doing, hollering for help. I’ve had requests for workshops in Facebook and someone has asked me if I’d be willing to take a look at his works. Nothing heavy, though. I’ve not played any of those games, and I don’t think I ever will. The way Facebook allows you to search for ‘friends,’ I imagine any reader would be able to get in touch with a writer, making them less of a mystery, more accessible.”

GERRY ALANGUILAN, *graphic novelist*: “Although I joined Facebook primarily to get in touch with old friends and classmates, I’ve come to use it to network with fellow comics professionals for industry news, jobs, trends and so forth. I also use it as a way to talk about and promote my work. People who appreciate the work I do find me in Facebook and get in touch with me there, and I manage to convert old friends and classmates into readers of my work. As a fan myself, I’ve managed to get one on one conversations with people whose work I like. Facebook really allows this kind of interaction now, which hasn’t been really possible before.”

LUIS KATIGBAK, *fictionist*: “As an editor, I often use Facebook to contact writers, pitch ideas back and forth, and assign stories. As a writer, I sometimes use it to contact sources and get information and

quotes for a story... Also: connecting in general with other writers (reading and responding to their Notes and updates), and checking schedules of writing-related events. Readers can keep track of the activities of favorite living authors (in my case, Dan Rhodes, Jonathan Carroll, etc.), connect with people who share similar tastes in literature, and again, keep abreast of events like lectures and launches and even secondhand book sales."

JOHN BENGAN, *fictionist*: "It's a great and quick venue to share a draft to a few friends, maybe let them see and comment on what we've been working on. Although I'm talking about other people here and not really answering the first question. In my case though, maybe coming with a clever status message, I guess, helps me find a good line or two for an actual story. I get to read other people's works a lot through Facebook, so maybe that helps me as a writer? I see a lot of my FB friends posting their own poems and short short stories just to share them, not necessarily for comment, although sometimes they do get feedback. So, I don't really know what Facebook means for most readers, other than that it's another place to continue the act of reading. It may seem really trivial at first, Facebooking, but let's face it most of us are addicted to it. So at least we get to still read posts tagged to us, or to our friends, while we're stalking. It's quick publishing and instant readership! The quality of what you get to read on FB though is another issue. It may still come down to who your friends are."

FRANK CIMATU, *poet and journalist*: "I stalk other writers at least with their statuses and activities. I look at the links the writers want to share and also I find it more convenient and much easier to post links and find things that I want rather than with my blog. So Facebook has become another virtual scrapbook for me. As always, dealing with people, I don't really mind if they love or hate what I post but I do listen to what they say. Journalistically, I have written a lot of stories through Facebook. I learned that 'walling' is better because people you haven't 'walled' actually gave the better replies. I am not so fastidious about friends that I friend (although I try not to get politicians) because they can be potential readers."

EDGAR CALABIA SAMAR, *fictionist*: "Facebook is the *only* social networking site I actively use these days (I quit Friendster and Multiply; haven't tried Twitter, Hi5 et. al.)—and as a writer, I use it

primarily for that—networking. I’ve met a lot of people online via Facebook who were initially readers of my novel (most of them high school students); they told me that they searched for me online and were eventually led to my Facebook profile. Thus I use this to keep connections with fellow writers, readers and potential buyers of my books (yes, I’m no longer ashamed of that; I realized if I don’t want my books bought by many, why bother to have them published at all, right?). I think Facebook is important for readers (I am obviously a reader, too, and I try to introduce other novelists in my *Atisan Novels* blog, which I promote heavily here on Facebook), especially of contemporary literature, for them to get a sense of the dynamism in current literary production—that they can interact with writers; dead authors of textbooks past will soon have to give way to new writers who make use of technology, the Internet, and most of the time, Facebook, as platform of self-advertisement. Online presence I think is very important for writers at present, especially because most of their readers (i.e., literate) access this technology almost on a daily basis—and how often do these people actually visit a (non-online) bookstore in a week, in a month, in a year?”

KENNETH YU, *fictionist and publisher*: “As a writer, I’m able to connect with other writers around the world. Virtual networking, I guess. Though I’m not that ‘talkative,’ it’s nice to just lurk and see what more outgoing writers are up to via their Wall. Some of these writers write about their creative processes; it’s always interesting and informative to see how others come up with their tales; I simply take what I can learn from the experiences of other writers. On a lesser note, I use Facebook too to plug what pieces of mine get published, but since I don’t get published often, that’s rare. As a reader, I would think Facebook is very helpful. Since other writers update their statuses, one is always kept abreast of their latest published stories. If the tales are online, they’re easy to find and read. Ditto for publishers and editors who also let the public know about their latest releases. It’s like, or rather, it is, a live, updated feed of what pieces have been most recently released, a real boon for readers.”

From their replies, we can make several common observations about Facebook’s role in our lives as writers:

1. Facebook is a tool we use for networking with fellow writers, which also enables us to share content—our stories, essays, and

- poems in progress—which always lead to helpful feedback.
2. Facebook is also a chance to recapture a community of people who share your interests—especially helpful for those who are expatriates.
 3. Facebook is a platform that helps humanize the writer to his or her reader, and allows interaction between the two.
 4. Facebook is a tool for marketing one’s work—your published story in a magazine, your new book, your new play, and others.
 5. Facebook is a virtual scrapbook, a repository or an extension of one’s writings.
 6. Facebook is a tool you can use to get the pulse on what your readership is looking for.
 7. And, finally, Facebook is a platform for various writing projects, a place where you can pitch ideas with writers and editors.

But I am primarily concerned with Facebook as a literary end-product, or, if I may dare say, “Facebook as literature.” Can there be such a thing? Can Facebook *be* literary? These questions occurred to me when I observed that even when Facebook is often described as “a waste of time” which should be better off spent finishing our next novel, most of the things that I do on Facebook—aside from the casual surfing from one personal page to the next—is actually *writing*. I observed the same thing with other writers in my network as well. Sometimes, this takes the form of sharing poetry and flash fiction in the Notes section of Facebook.

But the writing endeavor that is most closely associated with Facebook is the status update—that 420-character “message” following your name that asks you to express whatever is in your head—be it a casual observation, a rant, or whatever—that is immediately shared, from the moment you touch the publish button, to the rest of the world.

This is a possible, unexamined mine for literary expression. Of course, in ordinary, non-literary hands, they can be equally vexing in their gibberish, ungrammatical hellishness. But in the hands of seasoned writers, they become something else—a window to a literature in a hurry, a miniature literature.

Anne Trubek, in her online article “The Art of the Status Update,” identifies four kinds of status updates: [1] the **Prosaic**—which describes exactly what the author is doing (i.e., “Ian is writing an article”); [2] the **Informative**—in which the author uses the status update as a medium for sharing information (i.e., “Ian wants you to

read this essay on Facebook status updates as a form of literature”); [3] the **Clever or Funny**—which is fairly self-explanatory and might say something like, “Ian thinks McDonald’s slipped a tiny circus, complete with clown car, into his cheeseburger”); and [4] finally the **Nonsensical**—in which the author indulges his most poetic sensibilities (i.e., “Ian wishes he could float into the darkness with the stars”), or something else.

It is this “something else” that fascinates me more, and over the past few months, I have increasingly thought of Facebook status updates as the Internet-age evolution to two old literary forms—the drama and the haiku.

When I say drama, I mean the canned and popular variety that has governed our fascination via serialized *komiks* and radio dramas and television soap operas—episodic tales of fascinating twists and turns that people follow, often religiously. I’ve since found—especially in my own experience—that status updates satisfy that old craving in Facebook form. In detailing dramatic moments in our lives, we tell a story, we tell a narrative. And people actually follow these moments that you post about as if you are their own version of a Facebook reality show. You will know this because everywhere you go, there is always bound to be a friend you haven’t seen for some time who is still privy to these twists and turns in your status updates—and wants to know more. This is heaven for the writer with exhibitionist tendencies. But many of these writers are also aware that while they tread the fine line of privacy, their Facebook life is only a concentrated focus of only one or two aspects of their real lives. One writer friend once told me that in many ways his Facebook profile is a character that he has forged based on aspects of himself—but it is not him *him*. “It is a character for the Role Playing Game or RPG that is Facebook,” he said.

Let us examine another literary possibility of the status update...

Trubek defines the possibilities of the status update in three ways: “First, there is the question of form. Facebook requires your name to be the first word of every update. Relentlessly first-person, the status update is akin to a lyric poem, dominated by the speaker, the ‘I.’”

She also posits: “Another defining formal quality is length. Several of my friends remark that the status update is haiku-like in its strictness about brevity. The poet Troy Jollimore compares the status update to an epitaph, and notes that ‘we might think of one’s epitaph as the very last status update.’”

And finally: “Another quality of the status update is that it is

temporally defined. 'Update' suggests one is always writing about the just-arrived present, and assumes a reader's familiarity with the past (something that can be updated). DeSales Harrison, a professor at Oberlin College, sums up the temporality of a status update as: 'the form equidistant from sky writing and the tattoo.'

The poet Allan Popa has a problem with this, though, when he decried Facebook, in an email, as a waste of time spent on the fleeting, the hurried, and the fetish of the now: "*Yun nga lang, sa palagay ko, panibagong kaagaw sa panahon at atensyon ng mambabasa ang Facebook. Nakatutok ang aktibidad dito sa pangkalahatan sa 'pangmadalian,' 'ang ngayon-lamang' at 'ang mabilisan.'* Pero ang sinumang seryosong mambabasa ay kakayaning malabanan ang pwersa nito para mas mapahalagahan ang mga bagay na 'nananatili,' 'pangmatagalan,' at 'mabagal' na siyang naibabahagi ng karanasan ng pagbabasa ng panitikan. Sa bagal naipapadanas ang tagal at talaga ng panahon. (It's just that, in my opinion, Facebook is another of those that rob the reader's time and attention. The activities here are generally focused on the 'ephemeral,' 'the whatever's-present' and 'the hurried.' But any serious reader will be able to fight against this force in order to give value to the things that 'remain,' 'will last,' 'are not hurried' — which the reading of literature is able to share. In this slowness do we experience the time's length and fate.)."¹

The essayist and fictionist Rowena Tiempo Torrevillas (personal communication, January 2009) also weighs in on these very possibilities, and she wrote in an email to me:

This is a truly timely topic, Ian. You and many others ... are realizing the tremendous potential for reaching an audience unimaginable before our time: instantaneously, and with geometrically expanding numbers.

The downside of social networking in its present form is its mind-boggling triviality. How many 'friends' have we blocked simply because they have the compulsion to announce to the world at large what they ate for breakfast? (Sheesh, I keep expecting a 'status report' to arrive from one of these get-a-life-already deadbeats saying, 'I have constipation.' And then, one hour later, 'Yehey! I POOPED!')

A frequent poster has this diarrhea need to boast about the books he's reading, name-dropping his current literary crushes with a self-congratulatory eagerness that I find both pathetic and annoying...but at least his pretenses at literary discourse are a relief from the usual snoringly autistic posting of 'I will go to bed now.'

The terseness of the Facebook format should encourage pithy utterances; but instead, as you know, the bulk of what we wade through it pure dreck.

Thus, for me at present. Facebook is 90% a waste—and a waster—of time. Its only virtue for a writer is that one's words, thrown into that void of unknowing, do sometimes get caught...and held, and maybe even thrown back with a new spin added to the toss of language. As with you, I think.

The 17th-century Japanese (Tokugawa dynasty) game of linked verse, from

which the haiku originated, was far more disciplined and profound. But who knows? —The romance of time has added its patina of glamour to those 17-syllable observations on fish soup and cherry-blossom petals.

Maybe Facebook will lead to something akin to the haiku, transcending its essential ephemerality. As long as it remains participatory, it's a marvelous vehicle. But I fear the lines of words, thrown like fragile cables from writer to reader, are lost in the clutter of cyberspace.

I doubt it, though. This is my conclusion to my thought that the brevity of Facebook postings might someday produce a haiku-like interchange between writer and reader. I do doubt it. My thanks for your thoughtfulness, Ian, and for making me think, too. Cheers, Weena.

I am partial to the notion that Facebook is a “waster of time,” as described so by Popa and Torrevillas, which points to the much-described addicting aspect of the website, as attested to by John Bengan. (The clinical psychologist Michael A. Fenichel has coined the term “Facebook Addiction Disorder” to describe this, although sufficient literature on this has yet to be fully considered.) But I also think that the time is not yet right, or ripe, to dismiss the literary possibilities of Facebook—especially the status update—as something that has no gravity for serious consideration, as something fleeting that is the child of momentary whimsy, as Popa describes it. The “bulk of pure dreck” that Torrevillas describes is true, given cursory examination of status updates in general, but this is true for most of everything that we consume in living culture, even in literary publishing. Torrevillas, however, does end her observations with a hopeful, although still doubtful, view of the literary possibilities of Facebook, given “the patina of time” and “practice towards ephemerality.”

I remain hopeful that there is such a possibility because I do see status updates—by writers as diverse as David Rankin, Susan Orleans, and Margaret Atwood—in Facebook and also Twitter that strike me as dealing close with a literary sensibility. Can it lead to literature? In the game of popular literature, it has led to eventual book publication for Justin Halpern whose Twitter page “Shit My Dad Says” proved so popular, the book deal followed.

In a 2011 conference, the Canadian author Margaret Atwood had this say about Twitter as literature:

A lot of people on Twitter are dedicated readers. Twitter is like all of the other short forms that preceded it. It's like the telegram. It's like the smoke signal. It's like writing on the washroom wall. It's like carving your name on a tree. It's a very short form and we use that very short form for very succinct purposes. There is a guy out there who is writing 140-character short stories—I just followed him today ... but that's the exception. It's sort of like haikus [and] prose....

I would say that reading, as such, has increased. And reading and writing skills have probably increased because what all this texting and so forth replaced was the telephone conversation....

People have to actually be able to read and write to use the Internet, so it's a great literacy driver if kids are given the tools and the incentive to learn the skills that allow them to access it.

The New York *Times'* Randy Kennedy also reports about *Lowboy* author John Ray who uses Twitter to do a serialized novel in Twitter about a character named Citizen. He writes about the challenges of the format as a creative writing tool: "I don't view the constraints of the format as in any way necessarily precluding literary quality. 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." In the same news item, Kennedy quotes the linguist Ben Zimmer who described the "growing popularity of the service as a creative outlet" as springing from the same "impulse that goes into writing a sonnet, of accepting those kinds of limits."

I have observed something similar in Twitter status updates though that has led me to believe that there may indeed be literariness that can be gleaned in the short bursts of expressions we post on social networks. In 2010, just in time for the Philippine Independence Day celebration on June 12, a group of writers who do primarily speculative fiction came up with the challenge of writing revisionist historical fiction in the 140 characters allowed for a Twitter post. The efforts were conveniently grouped together by the hashtag² #RP612fic, eventually becoming a virtual anthology of speculative fiction—featuring stories that were grounded in a common convention: a limitation in the number of characters used.

My own entries in this Twitter project were experiments in brevity, something I welcomed as a literary exercise in form, and I was aware of the fact that I gave the same amount of effort that I give long-form writing in the telling of my stories. Consider the following:

The old cardinal's voice broke through the February air over the radio. "Please come. Come join us," he pleaded. But nobody came.

The crowd was lively, and the little woman was about to cast her candidacy for Congress in this town. Suddenly, a gun shot rang.

Marcela did not like the red cloth as she sewed the flag. "What if I made this pink? Wouldn't it be fabulous?" she said.

"Dear Paciano. What was I thinking? A depressing novel about a guy who goes

home? I'll write a romance novel instead. Love, Pepe."

"Where's Lapu-Lapu?" the angry conquistador snarled as he stormed the beach with his men. The guide blinked. "You mean, the fish?"

"Tell me you love me," Emilio said. "But I don't love you," said Andres. Emilio sighed, "Then you leave me no choice. You die."

"Okay I will marry you," the young Imelda smiled. The young politician was happy. She said, "Imelda Aquino. Does that sound okay?"

"Transfer it to June 12," Diosdado gravely said. "My 17-year old daughter wants me to take her shopping on July 4, that's why."

My effort³ and that of the others soon made me remember and consider a possible grandfather to status updates taken to the heights of literary practice. Ernest Hemingway reportedly once wrote a very short story that consisted of just the following: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." *Six words*. And they contained a universe of meaning and the narrative demands of fiction, evoking as much as a regular story could.

Who's to say status updates cannot do the same?

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NOTES

¹ Translation from the Filipino by Edgar Calabia Samar.

² A "hashtag" is a tagging convention utilized by Twitter users for grouping posts by various users that dwell on similar topics or issues. This can be recognized by a short one-word category name following the pound sign. The hashtag makes it easy for users to follow a Twitter "conversation," enabling them to read and respond to "tweets" by other users that they don't even "follow."

³ These pieces of "lit-tweets" subsequently published as "Alternate History" in *Philippine Speculative Fiction 6*, edited by Kate Osias and Nikki Alfara in 2011.

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