From Epigrams to Tweets

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Abstract

Motivated by the paradox that communication technologies that require short forms of writing are both globally popular, but widely criticised, this paper seeks to locate such writing in an historical context. This paper explores the relationship between short forms of poetic writing, which have provided a foundation for subsequent forms of writing appropriate for contemporary media platforms including Twitter, Mobile Phones, Social Media and Email. In particular it examines the epigram, and epigrammatic styles of writing, drawing parallels between them and the short forms of writing required for Tweeting and Texting. It focuses particularly on the legacy of the Roman poet, Martial, whose work influenced many other writers in the English canon, but also draws attention to the popularity and influence of epigrammatic style and form in other languages and cultures.

Keywords

The short messages or micro-blogs of Twitter, and other instant messaging technology – including online Instant Messaging (IM), Short Message Services (SMS) or text messages on mobile phones, and much email communication – are frequently discussed as "new" forms of writing. This positioning of short message writing as new is largely made with reference to the characteristics or qualities of the technology that carries the writing, and which enables and requires specific use of language to fit technologically imposed boundaries and limitations.

Twitter requires that each short message or Tweet be no more than 140 characters, while SMS (Short Message Service) texts for mobile phones initially imposed a character limitation of 160 characters, although this requirement has been overcome by technological developments that allow for longer messages to be sent. Nonetheless the screen size of even the most sophisticated mobile

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phone effectively enforces limitation on the length of text messages, acting as a technological disciplining or constraint of the author. Similarly, Instant Messaging (IM) or Chat, the short messaging platforms that are available via popular applications such as Facebook, Google, Skype, and now available as an added application for many devices, also favours brevity due to the limitations of the chat window size. While email has no such limitations, the tendency of email to be short and to follow the stylistic conventions of the short forms of writing used in other technological systems has been recorded by contemporary researchers in an empirical study of message length of email. Gentile et al argue that,

> The impact of text-based SMS and IM has however been such that where restrictions to use are in place, alternatives are sought that obtain the same benefits. Individuals in such environments often adopt the same communication patterns in alternative media, e.g., both desktop-based and mobile email usage often follow the same pattern. (46)

In public critiques of these "new" forms of textual communication some commentators argue that the brief short form writing of the technological platforms of Twitter, mobile phones and email are responsible for a corruption of language. For example, in a media report that typifies this position Shakespearean actor Ralph Fiennes blamed social networks websites such as Twitter for "dumbing down" the English language. "We're in a world of truncated sentences, soundbites and Twitter," he said. "[Language] is being eroded – it's changing. Our expressiveness and our ease with some words is being diluted so that the sentence with more than one clause is a problem for us, and the word of more than two syllables is a problem for us ("Actor Ralph Fiennes blames Twitter for dumbing down the English language").

The opinion that short text messages are evidence that society is in linguistic decline has been expressed for some time in media reports which collectively have provided enough sources for a minor field of study (Carrington; Thurlow). From analysis of more than 100 print media accounts about how new communications technology was adversely affecting literacy, Thurlow argues that the dominant theme in the reports "was an over-riding sense of moral panic about declining standards of literacy" (678). However, recent research, including empirical studies, challenges this view (Drouin and Davis; Kemp and Bushnell; Wood et al.) and indicates that the use of text messaging and tweeting has various effects, many of which are positive in relation to literacy.

This paper offers an additional perspective to the emerging and continuing study of the effects of new communication technology platforms on writing and language. It considers the contemporary short form writing enabled

and required by new technology platforms, with reference to some influential epigrammatic forms of writing. It also considers this short form writing in the context of a broader historic context in which there is a strong and consistent historic drive to produce concise writing as a respected and creative literary achievement.

Rather than condensed – "dumbed down" – versions of narrative or longer form language, tweets and texts conform in significant respects to the tradition of short form poetry and poetics which has shaped written language, in English particularly, and in a range of languages and cultures. Furthermore, short form writing has been especially important in communicating information quickly and publicly, and in making pithy, witty and astute observations about people, current events and everyday life.

The short messages of tweets and texts can be considered in the tradition of the epigram, that is, they can be regarded as a concise written observation about a person, or current situation, crafted in memorable, figurative language that plays with and uses the complexity of language. Despite the brevity of the form and despite the technological constraints of the medium that conveys the message whatever medium is used, epigrammatic language requires a writer to be precise, concise and incisive in order to condense an idea or observation into as few words as possible. Technological limitations that require the construction of concise messages therefore compel writers to adopt epigrammatic style. In this sense the affordances of both the technology and the writing style are not only compatible, but each requires the other. That is, without technological limitations the short form writing of tweets and texts would be un-necessary and conversely if it were not possible, linguistically, to communicate effectively with short form writing of messages and information, the technology would not be effective.

Epigrams

Initially, epigrammatic writing was a direct result of the limitations and constraints of the technology of early writing, which included the expensive, laborious, even tedious process of carving on stone. Even early developments such as writing on clay or parchment were laborious and time intensive. Progressively technological developments in writing, can be seen generally to correspond to increased length of written communication, so for example, the longer forms of novels, are associated with developments in paper production, ink, typing etc. (Innis; McLuhan; Febvre and Martin; Ong). However, communication often required short forms of writing in order to record and convey messages and information rapidly. While printing allowed longer form writing to develop, communication technology from the telegraph on has required and demanded proficiency and skill in short form writing. The epigram was one of the successful short forms of writing adapted from the earliest

writing, and it has survived and progressed with successive developments in writing technologies.

While there is some imprecision about the definition of an epigram, as a form epigrammatic language is used widely, especially in poetry. Today we find the epigram embedded in many other forms of writing and used in vastly different ways. The epigram and other forms of short, concise poetic language that trace their development to the epigram have influenced and can be found in many literary forms. We are surrounded by epigrams – as headlines, advertising slogans, mission statements, greeting card messages and so on. Text messaging and tweeting can therefore be regarded as the latest in a continuum of short form writing that spans the history and evolution of language from its origins in orality, to writing and all of its technologised formats. Users of the technology are aware of this relationship, as even a cursory exploration of Twitter and other social media sites will show, for example.
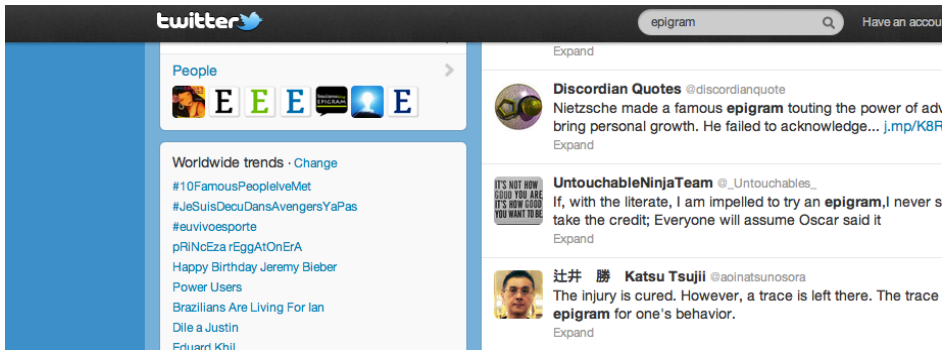
While not every tweet or SMS, or short email, can reasonably be classified as an epigram, those that actively seek to entertain and inform with deliberate attempts at wit, or humour, or savage commentary, could be classified as epigrammatic.

The origin of the epigram is generally attributed to the Ancient Greeks who wrote short poems as offerings to the Gods, and sometimes to show devotion to athletes (Barber, "A Brief for the Epigram"), a use of language, which reminds us that celebrity worship is not new, and nor is writing about it. These short poems were especially used on funerary monuments, with the term epigram derived from the Greek word *epigramma* meaning "to inscribe." The nature of the medium used to create the earliest epigrams determined the limits and length of an inscription, with the task of carving a stone inscription calling for brevity and linguistic precision.

Scholars in the field of Classical literature have recently begun to review the literary content, value and merits of the earliest epigrams, noting that

> … a new approach towards archaic and classical Greek epigram is needed. This new approach will be successful only if it is no longer dominated by the parameters, assumptions and expectations developed from scholarly work on Hellenistic epigrams. The fact that archaic and classical Greek epigrams are inscribed on certain objects does not reduce their readings to the informative function – one should at the very least leave room for an analysis of the various literary techniques and strategies employed to accomplish this function. Ultimately, what is needed is an interdisciplinary approach; all traceable and definable contexts should be taken into account. (Baumbach, Petrovic and Petrovic 6)

Similarly, when we consider contemporary short forms of writing if we leave room for analysis of "the various literary techniques and strategies employed" different and more nuanced understandings of their content and meaning are possible. This is particularly the case for those forms of writing constrained by the limitations and/or particular affordances of the technological and communicative contexts that they are constructed to fit. Rather than regarding them as evidence of linguistic decline or as evidence of disrespect for language use, they can be seen as adaptations to a new medium that allows the use of language, which conforms to a long-standing practice that can be regarded as epigrammatic.

The Properties of Epigrammatic Style

According to McKail an epigram must have "the compression and conciseness of a real inscription, and in proportion to the smallness of its bulk must be highly finished, evenly balanced, simple, lucid" (*Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology*). This definition could be applied equally to the many other short forms of writing, including the best, most creative text messages and tweets.

Following the Greek tradition, the literary form of the epigrams was adopted in the Roman period when it was substantially expanded as a literary form. Liberation from the constraints of inscription on stone with the introduction of manuscripts and papyrus, which with the labour of copyists made the reproduction of texts possible, also enabled epigrams to be more widely and commercially distributed. Popularised in this way the epigram was further entrenched as a literary form and device.

From the Roman period epigrams have been especially associated with the work of the Spanish born poet Martial, Marcus Valerius Martialis. Martial took as the subjects of his epigrams events and characters of everyday Roman life (Barber *A Brief for the Epigram* 20-28) and directed his writing at a wide audience. Barber argues that Martial was an innovator who "appeared at just the right moment, blessed with just the right combination of skill and bile and swagger" (21), and notes that:

> To the extent that we can pin down the essential spirit and character of the verse epigram as it has come down to us – a poem of pointed commentary, a quick hit of wit, an astringent dose of disabused wisdom, a satirical needle puncturing sanctimony and hypocrisy, a form of elegant malediction – it is Martial's temper and posture we are implicitly calling to mind. (Barber, "A Brief for the Epigram" 21)

Ker, one of Martial's numerous translators, argues that:

> Life was his subject, not outworn mythologies or tragic bombast. And what a medley of detail that life presents! Fops, fortune-hunters and dinner-touters, dabblers and busybodies, orators and lawyers, school-masters, street hawkers, barbers, cobblers, jockeys, architects, auctioneers, debtors, bores, quidnuncs, doctors, plagiarists, hypocritical philosophers, poisoners, jugglers and acrobats, the slave who has become a knight, or the knight without a qualification, personal peculiarities, the faults and vices of fashionable life. He describes a gown or a cup, a picture or a statue, a rich debauchee's banquet, the courses of a dinner, or the produce of a farm, a greenhouse, a triumphal arch, a lion in the amphitheatre, a suburban or country villa, a private bath, a beautiful slave, the noises, duties, and distractions of the town, its topography, the parties, theatres, public games, exercise grounds, the baths and the Saturnalia. (*Martial: Epigrams in Two Volumes* xiv-xv).

Martial was also known for writing using obscene and insulting language, because as a popular writer he understood that this would increase the readership of his work. More importantly, Martial was an astute self-promoter and prolific publisher, and understood, with the canny sense of both an artist and an entrepreneur, that short form writing was more appealing to a general audience. At the beginning of *Epigrams Book Two*, addressing the book as presented to the reader, he wrote,

> To be sure you could bear three hundred epigrams; but who would bear you, or who would read you all the way through, O book? Learn now the advantages of a compact booklet. The first is this, that I waste less paper. Second the copyist will manage it all in just one hour and so will not devote himself exclusively to all my trivialities. The third point is this: if anyone actually reads you, no matter how bad you may be, you will not be tiresome. The partygoer will read you when his five measures have been mixed, but will finish before the cup placed before him begins to grow lukewarm. Do you think you have taken sufficient precautions by means of your great brevity? Alas, how many people will find you long even so! (Martial, trans. Williams 22)

Imagine then what this fertile mind, with a fondness for gossip, intrigue, scandal and human foibles and a passionate commitment to the literary worth and goal of brevity would have made of the technology available today. An examination of Martial's work indicates that it would be perfectly suited to Twitter Streaming, and there is every indication that he would have relished the opportunity to have an audience of friends of Facebook, loyal followers on Twitter, and a Blog.

A few examples of Martial's work indicate that his subject matter and approach, and in particular his preference for short and pithy writing could be readily adapted to contemporary technology platforms.

> A drop of venom, a little bit of gall.
> Lacking these, my friend, your epigrams lack all.
> > (Ctd. in Barber, "A Brief for the Epigram" 20).

> The rich know anger helps the cost of living
> Hating's more economical than giving.
> > (Ctd. in Barber, "A Brief for the Epigram" 25).

In the work of Martial, as Klopstock, a later scholar and admirer explained,

> Sometimes the epigram is an arrow: it hits the mark with its point.
> Sometimes it is a sword: it hits the mark with its sharp blade.
> Sometimes too – the Greeks loved it like this – it is a small painting, a beam sent out not to burn but only to enlighten (trans. Williams 7).

Martial's work was also a major influence on the literature of his own time, particularly on his friend and contemporary Juvenal, while Juvenal's satirical style in turn influenced Martial's writing. Spanish historians and critics have credited Martial, together with Seneca and Lucian, as one of the founders of the Spanish literary tradition, but his influence was much wider, particularly on English language and literature.

When Martial's work was rediscovered by scholars during the Renaissance (Sullivan 150-54), the choice of subjects provided a model on which to approach writing. His work is acknowledged to have influenced literature from that time. In the English language, Martial's epigrammatic style influenced a wide range of writers – with equally influential writers such as Samuel Johnson, Coleridgehe and Byron (Higashinaka *Byron's Indebtedness to Martial and Catullus*), amongst them. The influential Ben Jonson, renowned for his wit and intellect, was so inspired that his "Epigrams" was consciously written after the style of Martial and he, himself, described it as "The ripest of my studies" (ctd. in Goulding 16). Coleridge's definition of an epigram, which references Shakespeare, is perhaps the most repeated definition of an epigram, and a fine

example. In it, Allan claims, Coleridge "summed up his contemporaries' continuing fascination with these concise and supremely well-crafted verbal constructions" (Allan 72).

> What is an epigram? A dwarfish whole,
> Its body brevity, and wit its soul. (Coleridge, ctd. in Allan 72)

Martial's significant impact on European literature was both wide and enduring. Such was the admiration for the epigrammatic writing that he perfected that he had many English imitators, beginning with the poet Godfrey of Winchester in the tenth century (Byrne 61). From the early thirteenth century, Italian humanists rediscovered Martial's verses and throughout Europe Martial's epigrams became a model of style and structure for many poets. Between 1471 and 1993 at least twenty complete editions of his work and numerous collections of his selected verse were published in many languages.

In the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Martial was read and translated in Italy, France and England. Throughout the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Restoration periods, Martial's influence peaked in England, where he had many translators and emulators amongst writers whose own work has stood the test of time (Doelman 31-46; Higashinaka 45). Sullivan noted that, "Martial, through his English admirers and imitators, affected the development of English verse until it culminated in the wit and polish of the heroic couplets of Dryden, Pope and Augustan verse in general" (149). He further argues that through the popularity and transference of the style and technique of imitators and copyists, notably John Owen, Martial's influence also spread to "the Continent." Many scholars have also traced the impact of the classic epigram, and especially the prolific and populist Martial, on poetics in the Western Tradition to the epigrammatic writing of ancient Greece and Rome.

Epigrams and Commonplace Books
Furthermore, the influence of epigrammatic style extended well beyond poetry into other forms of writing in Europe. The widespread use of Commonplace Books is also evidence of the popularity and effectiveness of short form writing in English and in other European languages. "Commonplacing" also has its origins as far back as the Eighth Century BCE (Barber, "A Brief for the Epigram" 10) but became especially popular in the post-Renaissance period in Europe (Moss; Havens; Allan 35-46).

Throughout the early modern period commonplace books provided repositories for arranging notes, excerpts, drawings and objects. Regarded as aids to memory and storehouses of knowledge, they were part of a pedagogic tradition related to rhetoric and the art of memory that dated back to the classical period (Dacome 603).

This practice of gathering a variety of material was regarded as so important that the production of commonplacing was adapted from scholarly and literary use to become an integral part of educational practice. Heath also notes the connection between the practice of commonplacing and epigrammatic writing, but goes further to make a strong argument for the academic essay as a legacy of the epigram in the tradition of Martial ("Rethinking the Sense of the Past: The Essay as Legacy of the Epigram").

Significantly, the production of Commonplace books borrowed elements of epigrammatic style, while preserving many of its qualities and characteristics. The importance of Commonplace Books in the development of writing styles, conventions and content therefore carried with it critical aspects of epigrammatic writing. Allan observes that as late as the Georgian period in England in the compilation of material for commonplace books,

> … epigrams in particular remained much the most popular form of extract at this time. Such preferences are easy to explain. For epigrams supplied what commonplacing itself had always sought – namely compact distillations of wisdom that were thought-provoking in content and unmistakably elegant, even downright ingenious, in form (*Commonplace Books and Reading in Georgian England* 142)

The relationship between the practice of commonplacing has been acknowledged as analogous to the use and production of various social media sites by Danzico (12-13), although the analogy between the epigrammatic style frequently used in commonplacing was not extended to tweets and texts. Therefore, when we examine and analyse the form and content of contemporary short form writing we can see the residual effect and the legacy of the tradition of epigrammatic writing. In much the same manner that innovations in other areas of human activity are said to become diffused, epigrammatic style, form and content, have been constantly diffused and adapted into written forms of language, but remain as foundations for writing and writing style, whatever the platform the text is produced for, and on.

The Epigram Beyond Europe
While the importance of Martial and the epigrammatic tradition can be observed in Europe, the influence of epigrammatic approaches to writing are also present in other cultures where the epigram has related forms. The Japanese Haiku is perhaps the best known of these, having contributed an important, influential and popular format for short form writing. Like the 140 character of a Tweet and early SMS messages, the Haiku's strict short form demands creativity, imagination and linguistic dexterity. As a literary form it is amongst the most popular. Today in its adapted English form it remains popular and influential, especially as it has proved adaptable to new media

platforms through which haiku are sent to mobile phones or email, and shared on social media sites.
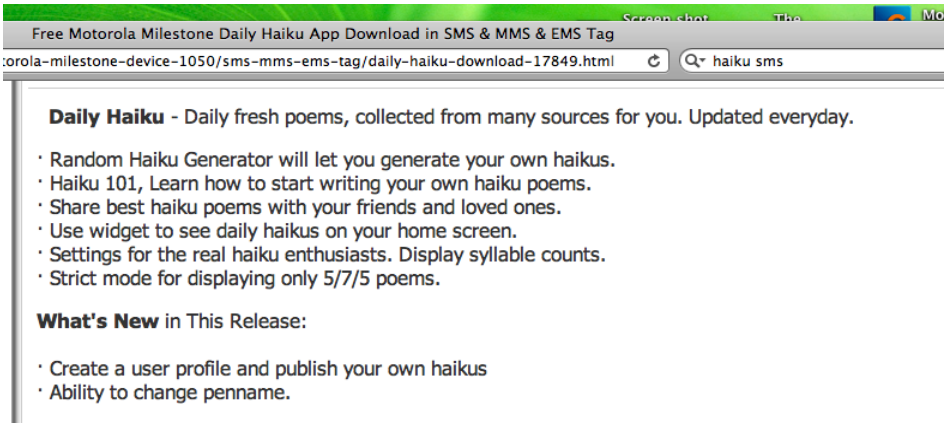
And
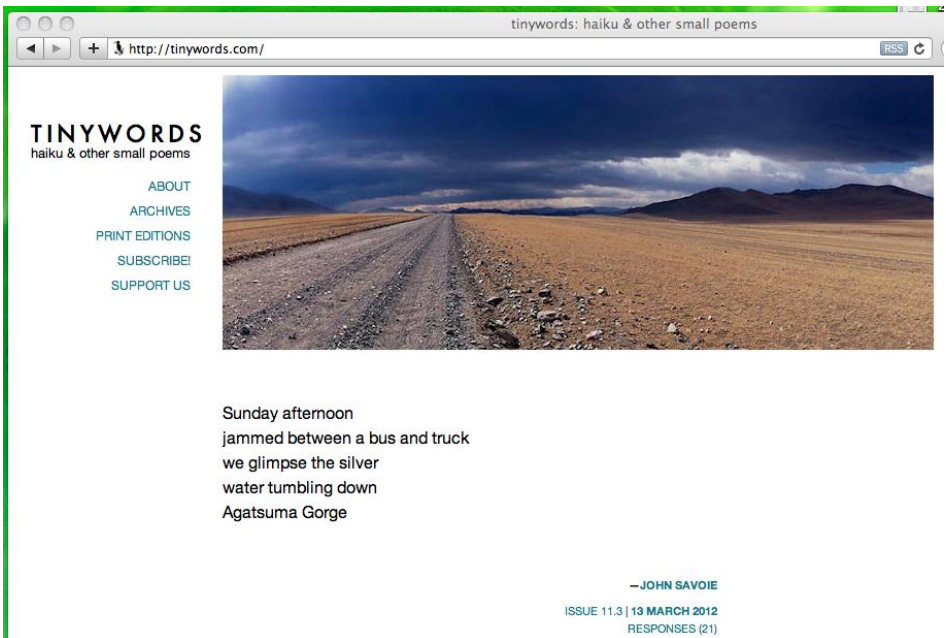
The Ghazal, a poetic short form popularised from the 6th century, is one of the principal forms of poetry in Indo-Perso-Arabic cultures. In its written form the Ghazal shares many of the characteristics of the epigram, even though it owes

little, if anything, to the traditions of epigrammatic writing that influenced and produced short form writing styles in European languages, especially English. However, much of the work of Rumi, described as the most popular poet in America (El-Zein 75; Barber, "Rumi Nation" 177), is in the Ghazal tradition, but also conforms to epigrammatic stylistic conventions, especially in translation. The appeal of the style and its adaptability for new communications technology platforms is reflected in the numerous applications and services that deliver Ghazals to mobile phones and email via the Internet. For example,

Ghazal Sms collection Urdu, Hindi, Pakistani & Indian culture

AdChoices ▷

Christmas Sms
Cool Sms
Decent Sms
Diwali Sms
Double Meaning Sms
Dreams Sms
Dua Sms
Eid Sms
Encouragement Sms
Exam Sms
Fathers Day Sms
Flirt Sms
Forget Sms
Friendship Sms
Funny Jokes
Funny Questions
Funny Sms
Get Well Sms
Ghazal Sms
Good Morning Sms
Good Night Sms
Heart Sms
Hindi Urdu Sms
Independence Day Sms
Information In Sms
Inspirational Sms
Insult Sms
Islam Sms
Islamic Wazaif
Kiss Sms
Long Sms
Love Sms
Marriage Sms
Missing You Sms
Mix Sms
Mobile Articles
Mothers Day Sms
Naughty Sms
New Year Sms
Pakistan Sms
Pashto Sms
Pathan Sms
Punjabi Sms
Puzzle Sms
Quotes Sms
Rain Sms
Rakhi Sms
Ramzan Sms
Relationship Sms
Remix Sms
Romantic Sms

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Daikhtay Hain Yeh Aziat Gawara Ker K

Daikhtay Hain Yeh Aziat Gawara Ker K..!!

!

Baaton Baton Mein Bicharnay Ka Ishara Ker K

Khud Bhi Roya Woh Bohut Hum Say Kinara Ker K

!

Sochta Rehta Hon Tanhai Mein Anjam-E-Khuloos

Phir Usi Jurm-E-Mohabbat Ko Dobarah Ker K

!

Jagmaga Di Hain Teray Shehar Ki Galiyan Mein Nay

Apnay Her Ashk Ko Palkon Pay Sitara Ker Kay

!

Daikh Laitay Hain Chalo Hosla Apnay Dil Ka

Aur Kuch Rooz Teray Sath Guzara Ker K

!

Aik Hi Shehar Mein Rehna Magar Milna Nahin

Daikhtay Hain Yeh Aziat Gawara Ker K..!!

Like 90

Submitted In : Ghazal Sms
Submitted By Malik Zulqarnain From (+923459088223)
Characters : 499 | Sms Length : 4 | Views : 1820

Similarly, while Chinese classical poetry has its own long tradition (Lévy, trans. Nienhauser), many of its popular and influential forms are short and epigrammatic in style and approach. For example, Tang poetry, of which the work of celebrated exponents Du Fu (Tu Fu) and Li Bai (Li Po) had significant influence beyond China, notably in Vietnam, Korea and Japan, and later influenced the work of Western writers such as Ezra Pound. As in epigrams, in Tang poetry there is a similar reliance on repetition, alliteration, the use of imagery and, above all, brevity.

The Malay "pantun," a four-line form of verse, derived from the oral tradition, also demonstrates the value placed on short form writing. According to Krishnavanie Shunmugam

> The pantun is the most outstanding form of poetry in the collection of Malay oral literature. Winstedt in his introduction to Pantun Melayu states that 'no one can estimate the mental scope of the Malay without an understanding of the pantun, the love verse and lampoon of the Indonesian peoples.' (25)

In a similar manner to Martial's use of the epigram to record and comment on the rich and varied life of ancient Rome,

> The rural Malays of the past created pantuns to express an endless range of emotions. Pantuns were used to give advice, to poke fun, to outwit one another with verbal excellence, to make advances to someone, to satirize, to express sadness, disappointment and so on (26).

Epigrammatic approaches to writing can be located in many, and perhaps most, languages, and suggest the universal appeal of writing that is brief, clever and incisive. The global success of technologies that enable short forms of text is perhaps more attributable to the existing and established practices in human language that favour epigrammatic expression than to the affordances of the technologies. That being so, the enthusiasm for communications technology that requires, and encourages, short form writing, and which allows both authorship and audience to proliferate is not surprising, nor is it negative.

The epigram and equivalent epigrammatic forms of writing in all cultures have been so influential because they are effective, useful and appealing. Unlike longer stories, epigrammatic language is quickly recalled and can be relayed with a high degree of accuracy. Brevity of language has the advantage of being able to travel well and quickly, as there is less detail to lose. The short, concise and clever language of the many styles of writing that conform to epigrammatic style is recognisable in the one liner, the quip, the joke, news headlines, advertising and more recently in SMS texts, Twitter comments and social media posts.

When we read clever, pithy language in the form of an SMS, Tweet or email it is the result of technology enabling the use of language for commentary and communication in a way that is appealing and accessible within specific technically defined boundaries. However, the language used and the writing conventions it encourages and requires are informed and influenced by the long history of written language, and its development from even longer oral traditions. As such, contemporary short form writing used in new technological platforms, rather than being new, belongs squarely in the tradition of epigrammatic writing.

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