Belles-lettres, in the Age of the Internet

some creative musings by Ahmed Ayman Ahmed

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a *faux pas* (French) is an "embarrassing or tactless act or remark in a social situation."[1]

I write at night. Two lights are on in the entire apartment. Everyone else is either asleep or too engrossed in other activities of equally dubious nature. I write to the regular mechanical hum of something which goes entirely overlooked during the day and to the rhythmic beating of a clock in another room, which one learns to drown out with sufficient practice. In short, I am surrounded by the peace and quiet that one can find neither in the morning nor the afternoon, multiplied tenfold.

I don't quite remember when I made the leap from simply reading for hours into the night to writing on my own, but I do remember that it was done in a tiny journal notebook. In no particular order: poems, short descriptions, the faintest outlines of stories, sketches, scribbles, and the first four chapters of a still-unreleased trilogy were all scattered across the pages of a little, lined journal. It wasn't anything more than sporadic bursts of inspiration that went as soon as they came, but it was enjoyable enough for me to make the second biggest mistake an adolescent boy could possibly make: to start writing more, and more permanently.

The yellow, lined paper of a notebook was thus, at another point which I do not quite remember, bartered in exchange for the clean white, dull, gray and bright blue of the Google docs screen, decorated with a barrage of symbols that would be incomprehensible had one not spent their entire life being initiated into their meanings. Instead of an eternally dull pencil,

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[1] Simpson, J. A., Weiner, E. S. C., & Oxford University Press. (2010). Faux pas. In *Oxford English Dictionary* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press. https://www.oed.com/

fingers were relieved to settle on a keyboard and mouse, which broke the quiet of the night too often.

When I began writing online, I, for some reason, decided not to name a single one of my documents. I hadn't been giving them titles on the notebook anyway. Eventually, after three years of writing on-and-off at late and inconvenient hours, I ended up with a screen filled with consistent rows of "untitled document" interspersed with high school assignments. After racking up enough of those, I made the second biggest mistake an adolescent boy can make: I decided to read through the past three years' "untitled documents" that had never been graced with a second glance, let alone a second draft, and I decided to give them all titles.

I came out convinced that, should anyone else read through that Google docs library, they could reasonably diagnose me with severe and genuine schizophrenia.

It was an uninterrupted stream of faux pas-es written down, to remain engraved on some server, somewhere until the end of time, or until the server busts. I learned one thing from reading through the first three pages (always three pages, never more, never less) of half a dozen stories I could no longer remember the endings to, revisiting monologues that I had decided to write down for inconceivable reasons, suffering through poems, half-completed diary entries, and dialogue scenes so terrible they made me understand why people at different points in history came together for public book burnings. I learned that just like one should not say everything that comes to mind and risk a blunder, neither should they *write down* everything that comes to mind. Not even fifteen percent of it.

If I had to name another thing that I learned from the trauma of parsing through the uninterrupted thoughts of a 14-15-16-year-old, it's that maybe you need to stumble sometimes (sometimes very severely, some of those untitled documents were horrendous) to get somewhere. It may have taken me three years of agony to get here, and maybe in three years I'll be looking back on this same piece with the same agony, but what matters is that by reflecting on these pieces, re-reading them, and mentally correcting their most terrible deformities, one is able to get a point of reference for where one stands today. What's more, one gets to look at what one wrote yesterday, compare it to what you scribbled out three years ago, and extract some kind of satisfaction from seeing that what one is penning– or keying– is, at the very least, painless to read.

I, for the moment, have managed to convince myself that I did get somewhere with my writing after all. Writing (very) short stories can now be called a hobby of mine that other people sometimes seem to somewhat enjoy. Since they do, I am convinced that, in some way, I may have gotten better. On the other hand, I'm equally convinced that the only thing I've gotten better at is misusing French words by putting them in places where they do not belong. It's got to be one of the two.