

Writing in Confinement: from Draft to Manuscript

*May Telmissany**

When I began to visualize the novel that I would push for publication in 2020, I was struck (and almost in total disbelief) by the news coming from China and Europe about the pandemic. That was in February 2020. I was on my way to Cairo to spend the wintertime away from the freezing Canadian weather. By that time, I almost finished the third part of what seemed to have become a Canadian Trilogy (three novels in the pipeline). In Cairo, I put the third part aside and delved into the first part which was underway a few months before the pandemic erupted. In the meantime, a second part began to materialize as a serial detective novel. By the end of the spring 2020, thousands of words were waiting on the computer, in three or more different files, without specific or final title, shape, or structure. Three files waiting to be born in book format. No direct connection between the protagonists across the trilogy; however, the events are all set in one geographical space, Canada. The first part is now published under the title *Everyone Says I Love you* (Shorouq, 2021) and stamped with Covid-19 ambiances; part of the third novel is set in an imaginative future post-Covid-19; and the draft of the second novel is growing steadily in the face of the unknown. For more than a year, the news of the pandemic came as if they were messages from the universe, at a time when I was pursuing writing, and struggling to stay

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connected to the three projects for as long as possible. Creative writing usually eluded me and lingered in the indeterminate zone called “the draft.” I never brought a writing project to an end except with great difficulty; this time it seemed to me that the world was changing clearly and rapidly, and me too. I was mainly afraid that all future works, those that were still in the science of the unseen, would remain incomplete, with no potential readers and no horizon of expectation. I mostly feared the annihilation of the desire to write (and convincingly to publish) as humans decline and perish, suddenly and in great numbers.

By December 2020, I had joined a group of Canadian writers and friends who met weekly on Zoom to discuss their prose over a glass of wine. As I write now, two members of the writing group wittingly named “*Apéritif littéraire*,” finished a novel in French and one of them started a short story collection. As for myself, I finished the first part of my Canadian trilogy in March 2021. This time I did so with a lot more ease and determination and submitted the manuscript to my publisher in May 2021. When the novel came out in July, I considered it a record. From the day of its inception to the day of its publication, only 20 months have passed. While the entire world was mostly sitting under the sword of Damocles, I was happily and increasingly writing novels.

No reasonable explanation comes to mind when I think of this sudden explosion of creativity except that the pandemic had a profound effect not on my writing style *per se* but rather on my writing habits. Over more than 30 years of creative writing, I have never practiced the daily writing routine like disciplined writers do. Was I suddenly inspired by the emergency of finishing a project before the occurrence of a virus attack? Or death? I guess this could be one of the potential explanations. However, I know from a practical and realistic perspective that my writing habits were transformed by the gift of time. Instead of writing creatively in the time interstices allowed by my job as a university professor, I was capable of “finding” time on a regular basis, chasing a project, and creating enough space for it to grow and come to completion. The “job” was still time-consuming; teaching and fulfilling administrative tasks online became overwhelming; and daily tasks remained equally challenging despite my expert knowledge of online and hybrid teaching and learning. Nevertheless, working from home, and in Cairo for that matter, was beneficial in my case. Despite the hustle and bustle of the city, Cairo remains to date my favorite writing space, allowing me to practice regular and disciplined writing activities and research. Against all odds, between February 2020 and July 2021, I travelled back and forth from Canada to Egypt

three times, every time spending a few months in Cairo. I seized the opportunity to be in my hometown to write, and the opportunity to be back to Ottawa to polish my writing.

The ability to manage time was enhanced by the social void and the global sense of urgency generated by the pandemic. Suddenly, the world around me became quieter. Confinement helping, silence pushed words and characters out to the light. In the meantime, life occurs. I contracted the virus in April 2021, in Cairo, a few weeks before I had an appointment to take the first dose of the vaccine. That was a wake-up call; not that I feared death, but because I wanted to finish the three novels first. The virus was a nuisance. Loss of smell and taste, extreme fatigue, total lack of energy, and solitude in my Cairo apartment knocked me down for almost two weeks.

As I was taking medication and closely monitoring my health situation, I kept thinking that I was running out of time. That was my biggest annoyance. Being out of time. And becoming dependent on my entire body not only on my two hands, my two eyes, my brain, and my computer. I kept picturing the writing files as if they were lifeboats drifting in some sort of a tumultuous ocean where I was infinitely drowning. On my third week of home confinement, I slowly came back to life and the first thing I thought I should do was to start envisaging titles. I wrote down lists of potential titles for my trilogy. All had some connection with the concepts of time and space or the lack thereof. Then I had an epiphany: if writing is important to me to the extent that I became obsessed with finishing my novels, I might as well call it a day and confess that I live to write. Not to teach, nor to go to work every day. Despite the joy and fulfilment these activities might bring, I live for another purpose. My true journey is not biological, and therefore it cannot be threatened by death or any menacing viruses; my true journey is the one I take alone, throughout the hours and days of confinement, from draft to manuscript. The pandemic, as devastating as it might have been and still is, was an occasion to meditate on why I should protect myself from this dreadful virus, and how I can cope with its uncertainties (different types of vaccine, detrimental impact on economy, restrictions and regulations, transmission rates and social distancing habits, etc.). During the Covid-19 weeks of house confinement, I was blessed with time out of time. This was when I fully realized that I always had something to say to the world, and that I always wanted to say it in writing. Nothing else matters, really.