



University of Iowa

International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

10-2-2015

Eternity Kills

Nael Eltoukhy

Panel: The Calling: Writing with Responsibility

Rights

Copyright © 2015 Nael Eltoukhy

Recommended Citation

Eltoukhy, Nael, "Eternity Kills" (2015). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 890.
https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/890

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](https://ir.uiowa.edu). For more information please contact: lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Nael ELTOUKHY

Eternity Kills

I believe that the reason for the common separation between literature and social concerns is related in some way to eternity. Some of the writers—in order to be eternal, to be read in the coming generations—avoid mentioning anything about their social and political contexts in poetry and fiction. They also avoid telling their political positions because political statements are always controversial, and they want to be loved by all of the people, here and there, now and in the future. Literature, unlike politics, has to be eternal. I used to believe in this for a long time.

Eternity, indeed, was the target of the invention of writing. That's why writers cannot avoid thinking about being read after their deaths, but my point is that even politics are eternal. The longing for justice and freedom is so rooted in the history and—unfortunately—will continue to be rooted for a long time to come. What we miss is a smart writing that aims to change the political and social situation but can also tell something about the human being, everywhere and every when.

That was what I was thinking about while the revolution happened in Egypt. Something happened to me which can very easily be described as “the calling” that called us to participate in the revolution. I found myself for the first time writing something political about the security police in Egypt and publishing it as a “short story.” The story was about a kind of philosopher-policeman who was trying to get an answer for his existential question about “the truth,” and tortured prisoners in the police station in order to force them to confess about “the truth.” I wrote three stories like that, which lay between political, satirical, and existential spheres. In those years also I wrote a tweet, in which I said that I became more tolerant toward “social realism” writing and toward any writing which can shake the traditions of the upper-middle class in Egypt. These kinds of writing I rigidly opposed before the revolution.

That tweet was silly and naïve, I admit. Maybe I wrote it just to provoke my friends, the “pure literary writers.” “The calling” that called us was a silly thing as well. It's not rational, and its impact disappears after a short while, but it's also unavoidable to say silly things, to free the naïve, the optimistic inside you and never be ashamed of it. In the moments of calling, when you trust the crowds in the street even more than your own family, you cannot avoid being naïve.

Unlike religious calling, which is associated with eternity and life after death, the calling meant here—the calling of responsible writing—aims to avoid thinking about eternity and to drag your attention to the short moments you live here and now. It makes you reevaluate “silly” beliefs—like believing in the power of people, or believing that writing can make a change, believing in ideas you know are silly but cannot avoid because they help you to move and see different people and help different people to move and see you. And it works sometimes. A huge number of songs and poems were recited in the demonstrations of Tahrir Square in Cairo, and the mask of V from *V for Vendetta* was one of the most inspiring—and cheap—tools used by the protestors.

My formula is: be naïve, but don't be stupid; be optimistic but also realistic; and spend less time thinking about eternity—eternity kills. I know that this is very difficult, and that's why political writing is difficult. That's also why political writing has to be funny, because it doesn't care about its future or its career, it just cares about speaking to people in order to change their lives. Although political writing has a long heritage, it is not aware of it—just like beggars, homeless people, gypsies and prostitutes. The worst thing in the world is political writing that takes itself too seriously.

I am not sure right now where I stand: in the pure literary writing or in the political writing. I never solved this dilemma in my mind. I still avoid mentioning my political views in my novels, but I am open to it. I just haven't found the smartest way to tell it. And I envy the writers who have.