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The Wonderful World of Zakaria Tamer

Just like the all-seeing lord of the underworld, Zakaria Tamer is able to see the secrets which make an ordinary person's onerous life even more arduous, and the misfortune and misery which make a marginalised waif's even more tragic. For him, whether directly or circuitously, all these secrets can be traced back to the structures of state-backed, ideological violence. From war to rape, or from slander to a parent simply threatening a child, behind every act of aggression, there stand intentions justified by beliefs. The majority of these beliefs are based upon all manner and degree of prejudices and social institutions. These are suited to a brain that does not think. It is for this reason there is no institution which Tamer would not topple, nor any authority, whether secular or religious, to which he would not deliver a smack with one of his mighty fists. Each of his stories is an assassination.

And so it is no wonder that Tamer's books are nowhere to be found in bookshops in many Arab countries. His satire's sharp blade slashes our harsh reality in two, revealing the morbid nature of the despotic institutions which exist along the entire length of our social hierarchy. This writer has been attacked from all angles, but the main accusation made against him has been that he holds nothing as sacred. Not only does Tamer choose not defend himself against such criticism, but instead he welcomes it with the utmost joy and gratitude.

Tamer takes his motifs to the level of the archetypal so that everything he touches turns to transparent, primordial images. The reader's soul is immediately possessed by his images of a world of brutality, horror and humiliation, the gallows and the forbidden. But whilst this X-ray reveals a world and a life governed by perverse logic down to the marrow, in the same way, and with the greatest affection, Tamer also writes about human kindness – where it exists. Innocence, kindness and tenderness are, for him, sacrosanct. He nurtures stories of between one and five pages because he is most economic in his use of space. His words, in the strict organisation of their fixed symbols and exchangeable images, express what for others would require whole books.

There is plenty that can be deemed scenic in Tamer's stories – virtually all could serve as a ready-made script for a short film or sometimes even a feature film. In the Western world, which is so focused upon the promotion of attractions for mass consumption and trendy hits from *exotic* lands, narcissistically partial to its own cultural accomplishments, and often laden with contempt for a Middle East which largely lags behind, the fact that nobody has made at least a film omnibus of Tamer's most dramatic stories might be attributable to the fact that few have thought to peer deeper into the works of an Arab satirist who, above all, has not written a single novel.

Tamer is absolutely unpredictable in terms of plot. He leads his stories logically in a *technical* sense, but nobody can foresee which thought he will strike with at the very next moment! With one swift move, from a situation consisting of bare reality, he transports his characters to a world of fantasy, then from the most fantastic of places he casts them back into reality without any notice, and we do not sense anything

artificial in this whatsoever. Nor does the reader notice when he is entangled in a magical web of Tamer's traps and, only when reaching the end of the story, does he realise, as if in an amazing dream, that he has been taken far beyond everything he could have hoped for. That which has been known over the last thirty years as magical realism, for which Latin American writers are most deserving, has been produced quite spontaneously since the late 1950s by a pen writing from right to left – that of Tamer.

The strength of Tamer's expression means that, despite their often morbid subject matter, his books are jealously guarded and repeatedly read, in much the same way as with stories by Poe, Čapek, Andrić, Borges and Bierce. Above all, Tamer's allegories can be compared with *Fantastic Fables* – a comparison which only serves to honour Bierce, a man who is three-quarters of a century older and has been celebrated for more than a century. Entirely coincidentally, he can also be linked to this American *troublemaker* through a certain cynicism, a preference for morbid outcomes and virtuoso dialogues.

Already in his first works, Tamer exceeded all his compatriots with the prodigious density of his prose expression and the purity of his style, which has not been surpassed in Arab literature to this day. To a great extent, his linguistic expression is reminiscent of the simplistic but also succinct language found in fairy tales, fables and holy scriptures. He creates symbols out of everything his magical pen touches, his vocabulary is sifted through seven sieves, his sentences are quick and as clear as teardrops, his paragraphs are short, his expression is classical and strict but also modern, engineered out of typical symbols verging on the cliché. There is not a trace of the usual linguistic exhibitionism which Arabs are so easily addicted to. Consequently, all Tamer's texts are linguistically perfectly transparent – so clear and pure that the very act of translating it engenders a solemn feeling in the soul, just like the reverence felt in the presence of some sort of great, unexpected truth.

Still lively and with an agile mind, having already entered the ninth decade of his life, Zakaria Tamer continues to write his unique satirical short prose and political commentary. Nowadays these are printed less frequently in the Arabic-language newspapers published in Europe. Instead, offering passionate support to the Syrian anti-regime movement that began in Spring 2011 (naturally its liberal rather than clerical-extremist wing), he uploads them onto his Facebook page under the symbolic name Mahmâz (= the spur).

Translated by Edward Alexander